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Queer/Tango/Theory: Gendered Semiosis, Dancing the Binary, and Dancing on Out

Luna Beller-Tadiar

Welcome: Vignettes

Valencia, 2019, a queer tango festival: I had a first dance with [—], a transman I did not know. While I began with a typical "lead or follow" gesture, he offered only a leading position, and, intuiting that he wished to wholly occupy a "traditional" leading role, coded masculine, I stepped wholly into an extremely "feminine" mode of following: qualities I did not articulate at the time but might now gloss as extreme permeability and a kind of steady softness, an extreme availability and willingness I rarely, if ever, deploy while dancing with cis, straight men. Feeling increasingly sure of my intuition, noting the assertion in his lead, I melted a little further into his arms, softening the muscle tone in my chest, letting each lead reverberate through my body. Though we did not speak of it then, he later confirmed that our dynamic had given him something desired but not always offered.

Buenos Aires, 2018, a "relaxed" milonga, full of feminist green bandanas: I am dancing with a butch leader whose musicality has me enthralled. Her embrace is soft, a light touch; her lead is an invitation, not an assertion. At some points, on a crowded and chaotic dance floor, I feel our embrace is an oasis, the eye of a storm. At others, playfulness takes over: she's doing goofy footwork that goes against all salón-style aesthetic norms of anguished dignity, we're laughing, and then she's led me into it, too—steps that are totally non-standard but nonetheless comprehensible. At another point, she gives me the lead, but still interjects, playfully adding in steps that I did not lead, catching the music where I did not—it throws me off at first, as I don't have the same fluency she has, am less agile in the informational give-and-take. But it's a mode that invites reciprocation, and while I remain timid about straying while following, I begin to feel I can take my time, attend to my own musicality in a new way.

Paris, 2022, a queer tango festival: I dance with an androgynous someone I haven't seen since before the pandemic. We're delighted to see each other, a little nervous to dance after so long. Very quickly awkwardness is pushed out of the way by what feels like banter—a brusque but amiable back-and-forth, moments of whiplash, stealing the lead from one another, quick steps that feel like jokes we're both in on. We end each song laughing, and go back grinning to our seats.

Welcome to queer tango, you might hear me say some Saturday on 13th Street, where I've been teaching at New York City's Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Community Center. Scenes like these reverberate in my body, echos not yet communicable to new faces. I give a two-minute history to the absolute beginners, flagging tango's roots in Ríoplatense folklore; Afro-diasporic forms; working-class immigration; and colonial European respectability; and then noting that "queer tango" as such has been around for about three decades; that Buenos Aires's Mariana Docampo and Augusto Bailizano are two of its founding figures; and that there exists an international and fairly

Luna Beller-Tadiar is doctoral student in the department of Media Culture and Communication at New York University.

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tight-knit circuit of small communities and festivals in, for example, Paris, Berlin, Valencia, and of course Buenos Aires. The first few times I taught, I would also say the following: *There are at least two ways to do queer tango. One is to take what is gendered about tango and… fuck with it. The other is to attempt to avoid gendering the dance. It doesn't make sense for me to teach you the gender norms just to mess with them, so…* (I don't add that Judith Butler says there is no subject before gender). These days I skip this. I attempt to teach in ways already inflected by a queer tango vision, emphasizing listening, mutual agency, dialogue; constantly switching roles; and giving a different imagination of what roles are, what it might mean to take on a role. And yet this first version of queer tango, which takes up what is gendered in tango writ large, was crucial to the way I encountered queer tango, and remains key to what I understand to be its world and its possibility. And so, when I teach queer beginners for whom tango is an unknown, far from Buenos Aires where tango sounds the air, I wonder when or if they will acquire a sense of tango's larger world, that rich earth in which queer tango, so stubbornly, has grown.

The above Valencia vignette comes out of that earth, where highly gendered qualities must be learned before being purposefully kinesthetically deployed, to less normative ends; and in the Buenos Aires scene the blurring of the usual qualities and responsibilities associated with a role, as well as softness, butchness, and play, grow from and signify against the same—even as, in both these cases, our meanings and modes are also in dialogue with queer lifeworlds that exist far beyond the tango *milonga* (Buckland 2012, 5-6). These vignettes and my commentary prefigure an explanation of what I mean by this first vision of queer tango, queer tango as taking up gendered aspects of tango—which is also a way of giving one possible answer to that central question asked by scholars, practitioners, and curious over-hearers alike: *what's so queer about queer tango?* My own version of an answer involves a focus on tango as a semiotic practice, on its existence as a communication system of relatively standardized signs and protocols for signing, which can be trafficked in and disrupted in a variety of ways. In the Paris vignette, salient is a feeling of dialogue via role-switch; but in my other two examples, too, how and what we communicate is central to our dance and its difference from some other kinds of tango. This focus is a key methodological move and, I hope, a key theoretical contribution.

In recent years, queer tango has become the subject of quite a bit of historical, sociological, and ethnographic work,[1] yet the transformation queerness has wrought on the functioning of the dance itself often remains underexplored; this is precisely where I aim to contribute. Additionally, I contribute a queer practitioner's view—an alternative to some circulating heteronormative analyses (but more on that later[2]). In what follows, I argue that tango consists in large part of a body-to-body semiotic practice which can be analyzed politically, and that differences at the level of embodied semiosis, actual and metapragmatic (i.e. people's conception of their own meaning-making practice (Silverstein 1976; Urban 2006)), are a crucial part of the dance's political inflections. In particular I point to a normative (gendered, colonial) "binary" model of tango that trains relational gender roles, and to the devaluation and effacement of the feminized labor of interpretation at the center of sexism in tango. I claim that queer tango, at its best, intervenes in these formations not necessarily by "removing" gender but rather by reconfiguring and repurposing forms of *gendered bodily address* through a less monologic, more dialogic mode of semiosis. While normative tango might be analyzed as a kind of obligatory, relational, deeply embodied, but generally disavowed drag, I see queer tango as a collaborative "gender laboratory."[3] I speculate that *queer tango is a semiotic-corporeal gender technology that the queers have hacked*, a technology redeployed as a queer corroborative practice that makes possible ways of being and moving together otherwise (Fortuna 2018[4]).

On Method

I offer this essay in the first sense of the word (*essai*), and as both a scholar and a queer tango dancer. It is accordingly mostly a theorization born from ethnographic, scholarly, and theoretical source material, and, at its limit, partially a speculative manifesto meant to not only comment on, but also take part in the collective and (as I see it) self-theorizing project of queer tango. My particular take

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joins existing semiotic work that is increasingly enfleshed and multi-modal, work which does not take a disembodied idea of language as its model, but rather moves away from naturalized divisions of kind (such as "music" versus "language," or, for that matter, Cartesian dualisms of body-matter and mind-idea) to analyze social signs across modalities as part of an "integrated expressive system," always inseparable from cultural interpretive practice (Faudree 2012).[5] This kind of (Peircean-derived) semiotics offers useful precision in attending to the *how* of the creation, perpetuation, contestation, and deviation of social meaning in communicative acts. In this essay, then, I attempt to think semiotically about a system of motion, and to use this semiotic work to think granularly about the contributions of queer tango as a relational and embodied practice.[6] I see this methodological approach as both immanent to tango and as one of the main theoretical contributions of this article. Tango, after all, has a remarkable power to facilitate precise communication between strangers' bodies. It is a dance that is language-like in its mechanism: almost every motion involves an act of communication between two bodies, a communication which is separable from the visible "steps" either body might take; more complex movements are buildable from combinations of signs, such that communicating new movements is possible; and sequence is a matter of improvisation within constraint. And so, while tango certainly involves ephemeral affects, unruly bodies, and washes of situated feeling, it also involves a specific system of relatively standardized, reproducible, functional signs which account for much of its "how." Without wanting to flatten a transnational practice that exists in innumerable variations, I am precisely interested in tango's systematicity, its specificity as a kind of technology, as a relatively reproducible process that effectuates something in particular. And I am concerned with varying (implicit) metapragmatic understandings of tango semiosis that affect the way it is danced. This is the interest in schematizations.

Underlying my schemata, however, are participant observation, existing ethnographic work (Liska (2017), Savigliano (1995), McMains (2018)), and conversation. In particular, I draw from an intensive period of semi-ethnographic participant research conducted in Buenos Aires from May to August of 2018, which was funded by a postgraduate fellowship[7], and from informal participant-observation at queer and straight tango venues alike in the USA, France, Spain, Germany, and Canada from 2018 to the initial time of this writing in 2021. I also draw from numerous public and private conversations with queer tango dancers,[8] in Spanish and English, including the public "Chamuyo Queer conversatorio" (conversation session) organized in-person in Spain in 2019, and again online internationally in May of 2020. These conversations were facilitated discussions around topics in queer tango with dancers in the international community. In the online 2020 version, I acted as a co-organizer and lead Spanish-English interpreter; we held four 2-3 hour sessions over the month of May; and over fifty people from Argentina, Mexico, the US, and Europe (primarily Spain, France, Germany, and Austria) participated, including key dancer-organizers, my handful of fellow queer tango scholars, and many others. To the geographic scope: queer tango, like Argentine tango generally, has many local deployments but for historical and economic reasons is fundamentally inseparable from its transnational circulation and community.[9] And queer tango in particular, due to its small population, is importantly sustained by international festivals and an international community of people that do in fact know each other.[10] Thus while my most extended participant observation is centered in Buenos Aires in 2018, the (queer) tango I discuss here is one that exists in these circuits of exchange between Buenos Aires and the European and North American Global North.

Finally, I would be remiss not to offer a word about my own position in this landscape, a position which has shifted significantly over the years. I arrived in Buenos Aires in 2018 just after finishing my BA in Literature, a young, queer, non-white, primarily US-raised foreigner with near-fluent Spanish, an open-ended art/research fellowship, and a question about the queerness of queer tango. I took a few notes, and mentioned my research here and there (for example, as a caveat to a teacher I took private lessons from), but mostly I lived in this world and was transformed by it: the idea of "research" was a supplement to the twin burning curiosities of a new tango dance-learner and a young queer seeking the queers, and it was primarily this double engine that moved me, during my fellowship months as well as in the following years of being institutionally unaffiliated (before an eventual entrance into a PhD

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program). While I remain a foreigner in Buenos Aires, I have returned over these six years not as a researcher but as a friend, a dancer, a student, a performer, a translator, and, due to malleability of accent and idiom, an often quite incognito foreigner; at the international level, I am by now squarely part of queer tango, a colleague, friend, or acquaintance to fellow organizers, teachers, and dancers across the aforementioned locations. My access, platform, and theoretical habilitation are deeply imbricated in and enabled by the US Academy. I hope to write, though, with no pretensions to ethnographic authority, but only as a situated thinker for whom these are vital social worlds.

In what follows I orient the reader with a generalized corporeal-semiotic schematization of tango; track its corporeal-semiotic shifts across and as different political inflections; and then move to specifically queer interventions in this corporeal-semiotic system.

Argentine Tango, Social Dance

Argentine Tango[11] (henceforth just "tango") is often represented as a dance of exoticized passion and heightened (hetero)sexuality. In a foreign (North-Atlantic) imagination, shaped by a colonial conception of otherness, it is a titillating spectacle, full of over-the-top dramatics and feeling. Marta Savigliano, in her now classic *Tango and The Political Economy of Passion* (1995), provides a thorough analysis of this imagination.

Meanwhile, I deal here with tango as a practitioner's dance, which, while certainly involving such colonial and gendered imagination, is often very un-spectacular, and very internal. While tango's spectacle certainly plays a role in practitioners' experiences of it,[12] many will nonetheless cite what happens in and between bodies as what is most potent and interesting about tango. When surveying the dance floor in Buenos Aires, the most common compliment I heard was that a person "had a beautiful embrace," this usually expressed in a tone of spontaneous, heartfelt appreciation. "Beautiful" ("lindo"[13]) here was clearly a haptic quality, not a visual one. This is just one example of the way these things that happen in and between bodies are often not visually available, especially to a non-practitioner. This article is interested specifically in tango as a social dance, which is to say as a practitioner's dance. Thus I focus on the corporeal-relational aspect of tango, on the signs and sensations passing between bodies. Such a focus does not disavow the work of power, of a gendered, racialized, or colonial "gaze," but rather seeks sidestep the hegemony of the visual to understand how such power plays out at the level of the kinesthetic and the corporeal.[14]

Basic Schematization

It seems necessary to orient the unfamiliar reader with a minimal schematization. As a social dance, Argentine tango is danced in an event called a "milonga," which is usually held late at night and includes the possibility of drinking, eating, and talking in addition to dancing. Established milongas often recur weekly or monthly in the bar, club, or community center that has been temporarily transformed for the occasion, and admit a mix of newcomers and regulars. Stepping onto the dance floor requires the formation of a couple. Typically, strangers will use the *cabeceo*, or eye contact and a slight movement of the head, to find a partner. The act of forming this temporary couple is itself an arena of intense non-verbal social (and especially gendered) negotiation, which I will but flag here. Once a couple comes together, they embrace, usually chest to chest, though sometimes in an "open embrace" that leaves some distance between torsos. From this embrace the dance can begin. A couple will dance the set of three or four songs, called a *tanda.* After, they will typically separate, return to their places, and repeat the whole process of finding a partner to dance the next *tanda.*

There are no standard choreographic sequences in tango, except as a pedagogical tool; nor is the dance rigidly tied to the music. Yet there are complex figures, long pauses, and a vast range of

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musicality. As a result, many observers unfamiliar with tango assume this dance is choreographed. And while many tango *shows*, unlike social dances, are indeed choreographed, even in these most of what is danced needn't be.[15] This is because tango consists in part of a corporeal code of communication, shared by all who dance it. In theory, two complete strangers from anywhere in the world, so long as they had sufficient fluency in tango, could meet for the first time at the start of the song and dance what is danced in a show.[16] As musicologist and ethnographer Mercedes Liska writes of her experience following, "when being led my attention could waver in class because all that was required of me was to respond to how the movement was being marked" by the leader (Liska 2017). Indeed, improvised shows and even impromptu meetings are common at tango festivals with multiple prominent teachers, who might be paired off at random. This common code shared by strangers makes possible extreme precision in improvisation, which in turn allows for significant freedom to invent.

Binary Tango and Code: Close-Reading a System of Motion

What I would like to call 'binary tango' is an idealized schematization that takes its cue from an extant and quite hegemonic conception of how tango works, and is thus an ideal towards which one is compelled to aspire. (Again, I am speaking of the hegemony *within* the international social dance community, not the exotic stereotype of tango-as-spectacle that circulates in global popular culture). Much like binary gender, there exist many versions, inflected by a variety of other social factors[17] (a few of which I discuss later), and, as Judith Butler explains, everyone constantly fails to live up to their idealized roles—and yet, in an imperfect way, this schema really is operational (1990). At the same time, while general enough to span significant variation, what follows is not transhistorical. Its details might be traced, first, to the European uptake of tango at the turn of the century, which aimed to rationalize, moralize, and civilize the dance, including in its gendered roles, and which inscribed this version into the first-ever tango manuals (Liska 2017). More recently, it may be traced to an attempt to recreate mid-20th century practices in the Buenos Aires 1990s, and then the rise of increasingly analytical and somatic approaches to tango in the 2000s (Liska 2017). It is also tied to the contemporary hegemony of the more "respectable" salón style, as emblematically enshrined by the competition category "Tango de Pista" in the Mundial de Tango (world tango championship), held annually by the government in Buenos Aires for the past two decades; for tango professionals, doing well in this competition is a major career marker and frequently a jumpstart for international touring (Morel 2009).

In this binary ideal of tango, there is a strict division of gendered labor. "The woman" follows, "the man" leads, and these are fundamentally different. The man is responsible for determining the steps of both partners, which need not match. It is up to him to direct both his own body and that of the woman. It is up to the woman to execute the steps transmitted to her. This is the fundamental structure, seldom challenged in hegemonic tango. Layered on top are various other exigencies, which, while still very ingrained, are more easily nuanced or contested: that the man's body must transmit stability, protection, assertiveness, and strength, both to his partner and to whoever may be watching; that the woman's body must transmit receptivity, style, and grace, again to both her partner and to any audience. But the fundamental organizing principle of tango is that two (gender) differentiated bodies connect to each carry out their different functions in a single dance, which is the dance of the *pareja*, of the couple they form, the dance of them together.

This is the starting point, but we can get much more detailed. What are these different functions? How are steps communicated? Tango relies on a touch-based channel of communication between bodies. The leader sends force vectors of varying direction and intensity through zones of shared contact—primarily the chest, but also all parts of the upper body that touch (and only the latter in the case of open-embrace). These signs, though they pass to and from the upper body, are primarily about the action of the lower body: the direction of the hips and the steps of the legs. Thus a vector of rotation from the leader's chest should lead the follower to twist her hips. A vector of translation in

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space (such as forward or backward) should cause her to take a step of analogous size and direction. The problem of having two legs to account for and only one chest to signal with is resolved through a foundational convention: only one leg bears a person's weight at a time.[18] The other leg, called the "free leg," is free to move; signs to step apply to this leg. It is the leader's job to know which leg the follower is on at all times, in order to know which is the free leg he is addressing.

Because of the foundational importance of this convention, the first sign that dancers learn is the sign for a weight shift. Leaders initially learn to send this sign by shifting their own weight while in the embrace with the follower; what the follower feels of this weight shift (through the embrace) is supposed to indicate that she should shift her own weight mimetically, in the direction modeled by the leader. Later, leaders learn to detach the sign from the action it supposedly derives from, and can send the conventionalized feeling (force vector) of a weight shift without actually shifting their own weight. I wish to highlight this phenomenon for a moment, for this possibility—of sending the feeling of a weight shift without actually shifting one's weight—is illustrative of why I insist on a model of tango as a communicative code, as something akin to a language: the sign of weight shift has been decoupled from the actual action it stands for in a supposedly purely indexical mode—it has been turned into symbol, an agreed upon convention. The force vectors I am calling signs are not "natural," accidental, or inevitable by-products of the leader's body movement; rather they are conventionalized and purposefully evinced.

That the leader sends conventionalized signs should help clarify the work of the follower. Tango does not function through the force of one body, by the leader physically or forcibly moving the follower (or, at least, it no longer does[19]). The aforementioned vectors of rotation and translation are quite iconic (they resemble the desired vectors of the follower's lower body) and, by virtue of being force vectors sent through touch, do have some practical force. However, they are not applied "by" the leader "to" the follower, and in any case are much too small to actually move a body. Furthermore, as discussed, these signs are not transparently iconic, but more abstractly conventionalized, and so too is their perception. The follower must perceive-comprehend these vectors, which already requires significant labor and skill (in the tango world this is referred to as having a good *escucha*, or "listening," and is, I'd argue, akin to being able to auditorily parse the words of an (initially) foreign language). Then she must amplify and translate these vectors *to* her lower body and *into* the particular motion that the vector-sign indicates. Thus in multiple senses of the word, this work is the work of *interpretation.*

So, to sum up: the leader sends force-vector-signs from his upper body to the follower's; she must comprehend and interpret these vectors into steps; and this is, at a communicative level, how tango is danced. While most dancers may not think about tango in such schematic and technical language, the system I have sketched (pronouns and all) represents, I believe, a fairly standard implicit understanding of how tango works, and, furthermore, a fairly accurate depiction of how people actually endeavor to dance it. However, not all aspects of this system are equally emphasized in various pedagogical and social spaces. As a result, ideological variations—akin to what linguistic anthropologists call "language ideologies" (Irvine and Gal 2000), here particularly metapragmatic understandings—actually produce differences at the technical level of the dance.

Sexist Tango

The devaluation of the feminized labor of following is perhaps the single most insidious and potent engine of normativity in tango dance. In the more sexist understandings of this binary schema, the labor of following is ideologically—but not actually—disappeared. The dance continues to depend on this feminized labor, but the leading man is able to imagine himself as the sole source of what occurs. When the dance is smooth, which is to say that she executes the steps he intends accurately and almost instantaneously, this is natural; it is *his* leading that works. When there are problems, however, it is the

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follower who is 'bad' or not 'letting him' ("dejáte llevar," goes the common imperative). The sexist ideology of this division is made even more obvious when men leaders ask women leaders to lead them despite never having made an effort to learn to follow. When something goes wrong, they often give unsolicited advice about how to lead better, completely unaware that it is their inability to follow that has caused the problem. I encountered this situation frequently as a female-presenting leader across locations, and have found this to be a shared experience in both anecdotal conversations and the various Chamuyo discussions; Liska's informants, too, noted that men assigned blame to women by default[20]. Clearly in both these scenarios there is an assumption of a woman's ignorance and incompetence, regardless of the role she takes. But notice, too, that in both there is a depreciation of "what women do" in tango, that is, following. The labor of following is itself feminized, and, like many other kinds of feminized labor (care work, reproductive labor, emotional labor) discounted.

In the most egregious instances such sexism can significantly change the dancing—men who believe the woman's role is little more than to be a 'danceable object'[21] literally try to push women around, bypassing the semiotic system above. The more forceful "marca" ("lead," but literally "marking") of the older "milonguero" generation in Buenos Aires can go this way (which is not to say it always does[22]). For a different example, in 2018 I was in a private lesson that a well-respected local (Buenos-Aires-based) male teacher was giving to a male foreigner. The teacher's dance advice to the foreigner: "pretend the woman is not there." Here was a perfect example of what Maria Lugones calls the "necrophilic" dynamics of sexist tango.[23] Which is to say that even a less physically aggressive sexism can be equally insidious. The binary schema as usually taught already potentially involves a very stark, and almost cartesian division of labor: the man thinks and speaks; the woman listens and executes. When the woman's labor is furthermore naturalized and so erased, this binary model becomes almost machinic. Rather than as a dance partner, the woman is understood as akin to a machine that will produce certain outputs for certain inputs, unconsciously and automatically. In cartesian fashion, man is the ideal thinking subject; woman is unthinking matter. A European and colonially inflected politics of (elite) gendered respectability is absolutely present here. Liska recounts how tango arrived in Europe as an "exotic" product in the early twentieth century and was "sanitized" into a codified form that equated bodily techniques with (gendered and raced) morality; this "sanitized" tango was then taken up by Argentinian middle- and upper-classes as a symbol of national identity (Liska). In this way, much of the modern tango that has been codified and gets taught is rife with colonial norms. My term "binary tango," inasmuch as it points to the gender binary, is absolutely intended to evoke the colonial history of this formation. While the vibrancy of tango in Buenos Aires is manifest in its diversity—famously, dance style changes by city neighborhood—the binary tango schema I describe hews most closely to the kind of tango present in those milongas that most obviously imitate a golden age of Europeanized aristocracy: milongas with formal dress-codes (dresses, heels, suits), set in a ballroom ambience, playing strictly "golden age" tangos, with enforced or implicit spatial separation of women and men, and clear gender roles within and around the dance. Furthermore, this is the tango that is most rarified and hierarchized, thus most easily sold as a commodity, and so this model is also what underlies the tango most often exported and consumed abroad.

Feminist Tango

Argentine feminism was in full, visible force during my fieldwork in Buenos Aires. Massive protests, such as the 8A protest (8th of August, 2018) filled the city streets with the green bandanas of the campaign for abortion rights that had become a symbol of Argentine feminism generally. The feminist tango forces created an improvised street milonga in the middle of the protest. Dressed in our abortero green, we danced in the rain, holding each other close under the shelter of umbrellas. We ducked into tents set up on the pavement; we spilled into pizza places, soaked and euphoric, passing green glitter from cheek to cheek.

The combined and interrelated forces of queer tango specifically and Argentine feminism generally have increasingly contested the more sexist models of tango. There are more and more women

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teachers, and more women who know how to lead. The terms "leader" and "follower" already mark a shift from the still extant use of "man" and "woman" to name the roles, and other, alternate terms, such as "conductor/e/a, conducida/o/e" and "el/la que guía, el/la que sigue," also circulate.[24] More profound, perhaps, is a recent push to shift the language of "llevar" and "seguir" ("lead," but also "carry"; "follow") towards "proponer" and "interpretar" ("propose"; "interpret"). Teaching that a lead is in fact a proposition, for a follower to accept or not, is a way of re-visibilizing that disappeared labor. So is the use of the term "interpret" to describe what a follower does.

In addition to making visible feminized labor, a feminist consciousness also recuperates a more nuanced version of the binary schema. In 2019, I took a class in Berlin with a young female teacher from (and based in) Buenos Aires who dances both roles, but operates in mainstream, rather than queer, tango spaces. "Feminism changed everything," she said, when I mentioned it. Earlier, in class, she told me: "You have to give information back." I've briefly mentioned that, within this binary schema, part of the leader's role is to know which leg the follower is on at all times. The emphasis here is usually on his sensitivity, but as this teacher was telling me clearly, it is less talked about, but absolutely crucial that the follower communicate this fact *to* him. Just as he can sign a weight shift without shifting weight, so she can shift weight without manifesting that shift in her upper body—which is to say, without communicating it to her partner. Here, the roles of "listening" and "speaking" are already a little less binarily distributed than as initially described.

Queer Tango and Feminist Tango

So is queer tango just less sexist tango, with the added flexibility of "mismatching" the genders and their roles? First of all, as I hope I've shown, a "less sexist" version of tango is already significant; it marks not a superficial but a deep shift at the level of movement and communication—deeper perhaps, even, than some mere substitution of identities. Second of all, a less sexist tango *is* one of the accomplishments of queer tango specifically. That this tango is called "queer" and not just "gay" indexes an aspiration that exceeds the consolidation of "empirical" identity categories—and while popular usage of the word has been significantly bent towards the latter, I believe its presence here still speaks to an intentionally subversive counter-discourse, as well as people whose gender and sexuality have become catalysts for a certain politicization. "I studied this logic [of tango] as a torta, a lesbian woman who attempts to reject the exercise of the tyrannies of learned male forcefulness on another through the dancing of the tango," writes decolonial feminist Maria Lugones (2012, 54). While she is not writing under the sign of "queer tango," her understanding of the dance's functioning is informed by a politicized sexuality—and it quite comprehensively prefigures the "feminist tango" I am referring to. Indeed, one of the key roots of queer tango in Buenos Aires was Mariana Docampo's class for women, held in a lesbian feminist bar; her 2005 queer tango manifesto, born out of that space, outlines a lesbian-forward, feminist-queer political vision (Docampo 2015 [2005]). Arguably, a queer tango led by lesbians has long been a stronghold of feminism in tango, a site where its alternative figuring of the dance might grow a communally-backed weight, develop a "symbolic density."[25] Even in 2018, the meetings I was able to attend of the then-recently-formed Feminist Tango Movement or MFT ("Movimiento Feminista de Tango") in Buenos Aires were invariably spearheaded by queer women, most of who also participated in specifically queer tango spaces. This group has since grown in size and influence on tango culture within and beyond Argentina.

Thus while queer tango remained marginal for a long time in the larger tango world (and largely still does today), even its marginal existence provided a cognitive opening.[26] Furthermore, it helped create a growing population of female leaders (McMains 2018). The combination of these two aspects —not to mention much explicit activism by many queer dancers—helped to denaturalize the tight association between gender and role in tango generally, and facilitated further feminist takes on the relation between roles.

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"Queer" tango, then, rather than simply "gay" tango, is arguably a feminist tango. Reciprocally, "feminist tango," even in heteronormative contexts, has queer tango as part of its condition of possibility, avowed or otherwise. And yet as we return to a technical analysis of the dance I wish to argue that queer tango goes beyond "a less sexist" tango in its disruption of the hegemonic schema. In what follows I identify a few key interrelated aspects of this disruption, namely: 1) the element of role-switching 2) the intentional implication of gender and 3) a more dialogic mode of semiosis. I will explain each of these individually and then as what I think is their most significant form, in combination.

Role-Switching

Role-switching is perhaps the most obvious choreographic contribution of queer tango, but is often taken to be nothing more than the sum of its parts: one person leads, and then the other. However, role-switching disrupts the binary dynamics of the two differentiated roles in a way more profound than simple inversion. First of all, to experience two relational arrangements with the same person shifts the feeling of each; it is not the same to lead someone before and after they have led you. For example, even if we stick to a rather typical role distribution of qualities, I might lead and experience your version of softness and receptivity, then follow and experience your version of firmness and assertiveness. The positions, which have a tendency to feel like identities (as we will discuss shortly), become facets. Even if a couple returns to one arrangement primarily, the possibilities of the other inflect this return. Second, when a couple switches roles mid-dance, this switch is not discrete, not an on/off switch of states. For a moment, who is leading and who is following is not so determined; dancers occupy a gradation, a mis-match of qualities and forces, even as the language of tango, which they have learned as relying on this binary separation, continues to operate. Some queer dancers are especially compelled by this interval, and seek to explore and extend it. And while only some have converted this space into an arena of an intentional "movement research,"[27] I think most queer tango dancers have at least glimpsed its possibilities on the dance floor.

Since the rise of queer tango, some straight dancers have also decided that role-switching is compelling, and have created role-switch classes and even festivals that are separate from the label "queer." While these spaces are indebted to their (often disavowed) queer tango precursors, their existence helps highlight the next main aspect of queer tango that I've mentioned, because it is an element that they lack and that many queer spaces contain: the intentional implication of gender.

Gender/Roles

As should be apparent from the above discussion on "binary tango," tango as hegemonically taught and practiced is rife with gender. We (dancers/practitioners) train in particular ways of moving and of sending and receiving signals that are experienced as highly gendered.[28] To return for a moment to the discussion of a near-machinic understanding of tango semiosis: it is important to note that this sexist binary is insidious and difficult to contest because, as we've seen, some version of the binary schema *is* in fact a technical part of the dance, especially as usually learned and practiced. Furthermore, for followers, reaching a level of skill in which the clunky, slow, and effortful act of thinking (which initially mediates between feeling a lead and following it) seems to disappear is a desirable and often pleasurable state. I heard men taking a pedagogic stance towards women followers say "don't think"; but on the other hand, in conversations with women who said they preferred to follow, I often heard variants of "I don't want to think." Thus many followers and leaders alike understand the follower's role to be that of intense, trained receptivity to the point of (virtuosic) automaticity.

This model—of intense, trained receptivity—while it often perpetuates that disappearance of feminized labor, is, I think, actually correct; it accurately portrays part of what is happening.[29] Leaders and followers alike, in learning tango, remake their perception and reaction to its codes in ways their roles

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require. To borrow some vocabulary from Charles Peirce (via Paul Kockelman's explication), to learn a role is to shift one's *ultimate energetic interpretant*, one's disposition to act in the face of certain signs, in a way that can sink below the threshold of conscious reflection—just as a skilled musician may no longer think about every muscular motion necessary to sound a note the way they may have needed to in an earlier stage of learning[30] (Kockelman 2007). In hegemonic tango, those roles are so tightly tied to cisheteronormative ideas of gender that this amounts to a training in gender. Women-followers learn receptivity, sensitivity, and supportive corroboration towards their male partners; men-leaders learn assertiveness, clarity, and authority towards their female partners. Furthermore, dancers learn to embody these qualities in part through specific kinesthetic direction: "The woman must envelope the man," said one Buenos Aires-based teacher who taught private classes and self-identified as teaching "the most traditional" tango. In her view the leader must stand straight and rigid and the follower lean forward to connect; he is "penetrating," she is "round" and "receiving." "Man has a style; woman has a personality," she told us. "A good follower adapts." Another teacher, an Argentinian man based in France, talked about the "mistake" of having a limp wrist while leading, a quite directly symbolic (if perhaps unconscious) prohibition of (gay) effeminacy. (Interestingly, one of the most prominent, skilled butch leaders in Argentina often dances with a limp right wrist). In general, direction in classes can involve muscle tone, balance, adjustment to the embrace, ways of the foot meeting the floor, dynamics of reaction, placement of the ribs, hips, spine, weight, and more, and these directions are very often keyed specifically to leading or following. There is certainly no single consensus about how to dance each role (or how to teach it); the aforementioned "most traditional tango" teacher's view is far from the only one in Buenos Aires, where tango is a living culture that changes significantly by neighborhood; in the public tango university (CETBA), I was taught that the two torsos must meet in the middle. But even in their variation, most tango spaces, and not just classes, in their binary and heterosexual arrangements, develop gendered kinesthetic norms that become inseparable from "good" dancing—norms whose absence can be disruptive to the flow of the dance.[31] These, then, are not superficial qualities, but practical semio-kinesthetic habits exercised with and towards a partner, through which something in particular is accomplished: dancing tango.

There is plenty more to say about specific mechanisms for (re)producing gender normativity in tango (and others have said much of it[32]): we could discuss, say, gaze, clothing, footwear, the briefly alluded-to dynamics of non-danced interaction in the milonga, and so on. I've focused here on the internal, sensorial and corporeal-relational elements of this gender-field, however, because I think these aspects, while of central importance for most tango-practitioners, constitute the level at which sociological understandings of tango generally fail to penetrate, and also the level at which gender normativity's entrenchment can seem incontestable to sociologists and dancers alike.

Queer Tango as Gender Lab

In tango, then, we train our bodies to inhabit extremely gendered roles with other bodies, near-automatically and virtuosically. In fact, it is precisely the gender-saturated nature of normative tango that makes queer tango not only necessary, but possible. This leads me to one of my key propositions: *tango is a corporeal gender technology that the queers have hacked.*

It is not by accident that it is gendered practices that have "queer" offshoots (see "queer ballet" or "queer salsa" for other examples). As should be clear by now, tango does not simply apply to already existing male and female subjects: it creates them, or rather allows them to create themselves through training and repetition. If this all sounds a lot like Butlerian gender performativity, that's because, in my interpretation, it is (Butler 1990). As illustrated in the previous section, tango is rife with—and, arguably, significantly constituted by—precisely that "stylization of the body" that creates the effect of the gender it would ostensibly "express" (Butler 1988). Yet tango is also an additional layer that overlays the day-to-day of normative gender performance: it is a heightened, exaggerated, and quite specific occupation of gender in the contained fantasy space of the milonga. Almost none of the

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cisheterosexual men and women strutting around in their suits or gliding along in their tango skirts and heels dress—or act—this way in the rest of their daily lives.[33] And yet, as Butler says of the "mundane" social actors who "come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief," many of them take immense pleasure, and also pain, in what they understand as an affirmative exercise of their "natural" masculinity or femininity (1988). As I understand it, normative tango is a kind of obligatory, relational, deeply-embodied, but generally disavowed drag.

Queer tango, on the other hand, avows this drag. Queer tango denaturalizes, but, for many of us, does not do away with, gender. For some queer dancers it is precisely the chance to relationally embody gender that is part of the thrill—as it is for many cisheterosexual dancers. Yet the use we make of this gender technology is quite different.

First of all, in light of the extent to which dance roles *really are* gender roles, the significance of taking on a role other than the one expected of you becomes a little more apparent. Liska mentions that some straight women in Buenos Aires reported an unsettling "loss of femininity" when attempting to learn to lead (2017, 95). In my experience this is quite common; especially if they already dance tango in their expected role, many cis, straight dancers find taking on the "other" role to be a startling and even unpleasant experience. (Some eschew it all together: "I think I would have to go to therapy for a long time, first," said a long-time woman follower in New York about learning to lead). But for queer dancers, such masculinization or feminization, rather than unsettling loss, can be an experience of possibility, expansion, and for some, gender affirmation or even euphoria. Juliet McMains quotes a German gender-queer dancer named Alex Gastell who says "dancing the leading role was my first big break with gender norms on a more bodily level," and says this experience helped them to experiment with gender outside of tango as well (McMains 2018). I and many of my friends would have similar stories. And queer dancers I heard speak in the various Chamuyo conversations also cited tango and its gendered roles as a catalyst or a medium for questioning and experimenting with gender.

Crucially, however, because these are so obviously and so physically relational roles, this experience of gender is not an individual one. Gender is not what we do unilaterally, but what we do *with* one another (and in this way, is certainly bound up with sexuality, though not in any simple way). "One is always "doing" [gender] with or for another, even if the other is only imaginary," writes Butler (2004, 1). Crucially, in tango, the other is extremely and bodily present. In this way, taking on *either* role *with* and *for* someone who is *not* your cisheteronormatively sanctioned pairing can also be highly significant. Liska, being responsibly self-reflexive in her ethnographic work, talks about her and other straight women's initial discomfort when dancing with women for the first time in the queer milonga, even while doing their "own" role (following). Once again, I counter this with the queer exhilaration of taking on a gendered role with and for the "wrong" partner. By way of example I offer the seemingly straight-tango-adjacent thrill of performing femininity *with* and *for* a woman or non-binary person who in turn wishes to occupy a masculine role *with* and *for* you. This thrill might seem superficially like that of regular tango, but is internally radically different. To explain why I will take a detour back through tango semiotics.

Queer Semiosis, Queer Corroboration

My proposition is this: sexist tango is monologic; queer tango, at its best, is truly dialogic[34]—and specifically so in a way that dialogues on gendered relationality. To explain this, I will map these divergent models semiotically. In its sexist form, tango is understood *by the participants* as something like a Saussurian monologue: each signifier (a force vector from the leader) leads instantaneously and automatically to a signified (a movement done by the follower) (Saussure 1996 (1916)). So goes the idea behind "dejáte llevar," or "don't think"; so goes the machine-like model of the woman-follower. In contrast, I suggest that the implicit metapragmatic conception in queer

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tango is closer to the model of the Peircean triad, which is a social process of meaning-making that, unlike a Saussurian sign, takes place in time. Here, a sign (a force vector) points to an object (a movement-idea); the sign gives rise to an interpretant (the follower's movement), which itself points back to this object (Peirce 1955). The crucial difference here is that, in this second model, meaning is made in process and in relation. The sign does not have total authority over what it means (the object); rather, the interpretant confirms, negates, or, most probably, slightly shifts that meaning. So, for example, let's say I as leader try to transmit a twist and a back step (an "ocho"), and the follower twists and begins, but does not take, this back step. In a sexist, monologic model, somebody here is wrong: the follower simply failed to execute my step, or I failed to fully sign it. In a triadic, processual model of meaning making, however, the follower's interpretant actually shifts what it is that I signed—perhaps I transmitted a partial step after all. If so, then that re-calibrates our code going forward. I adjust the amount of force that I imagine means "full" or "half" or even "quarter" step.[35] Likewise, if the follower senses that their interpretant was unexpected, they may also recalibrate their reception. In a situation of mutual listening, our shared code is a site of mutual negotiation—which also allows it to grow.

Arguably, all "good" tango requires mutual listening, and versions of the dance sufficiently sexist or colonial so as to be monologic are simply "bad" tango (this, however, is an argument to be made). And yet the how and why of mutual listening in queer tango seems significant and particular. So how and why do we get this dialogic semiosis? As previously discussed, "a less sexist tango" already begins to shift the process of communication between bodies, emphasizing slightly more mutual modes of speaking/listening. The training ground of role-switching, too, shifts this process significantly. Practice with both roles is practice in both bodily "speaking" and bodily "listening"—as well in the ability to sense when one's partner wishes to shift from one activity to the other. It can augment sensitivity to one's partner's danced subjectivity. And dwelling in the moment of switching roles expands one's sense of the possibilities of mixing elements of each, of ways of dancing that do not predetermine who is in charge at all times, nor what (qualities, forces, feelings, etc.) each body is expected to contribute. And, in addition to these, many queer people bring another practice into tango, and this is a long history of nuanced, embodied, gender-relational reading.

In societies hostile to them, such as those of the West, queer people have had to develop ways of seeing and affirming modes of being and desiring that would otherwise be illegible; often this relies on a traffic in gesture. The "evidence" of queer life, as José Muñoz writes, is "ephemera": "For queers, the gesture and its aftermath, the ephemeral trace, matter more than many traditional modes of evidencing lives and politics" (2009, 81).[36] Whether defensively, as in a young Muñoz "butching up" an effeminate walk, or proactively, as in the "cool look of a street cruise," queer people attend to the ways moving bodies spill over the lines of normative comportment (65). Furthermore, devoid of or banished to the edges of the cishetero script, queer people have practice in improvisation, practice in not just reading but co-creating bodies and desires beyond established categories. In Muñoz's reading of the performer Kevin Aviance, Aviance's multiply gendered gestures open up a space of possibility for other bodies in the gay club where white hypermasculinity is the norm. But possibilities are not only passively received by seeing gesture; they are realized and extended via responsive gesture. In a chapter that blurs distinctions between dance and sex, Juana María Rodríguez writes about queer co-production of erotic meaning, where gesture again plays a crucial role: "Through the widening of her eyes, the femme recognizes and (re) produces the butch cock. She endows it with desire and substance as an act of affirmation and validation" (2014, 124). This is, as Rodriguez puts it, an instance where "performative interpretation is allowed to intentionally restructure the limits of the body and of pleasure" (125). In my own experience, such "performative interpretation," or what I would call "queer corroboration," is not only a bedroom activity, but is rather a general communal practice, a mode of attention and attending. In the best of my own lived experience of queer community, gender—as a catchall for a way of being, and especially of being with and for others—is emergent, not assumed, and, crucially,

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willingly corroborated. "She just… holds my gender so well," said a nonbinary transmasculine person to me about their queer friend. There is a fine-grained attention to how another wishes to be read, and an attempt to adjust one's perception, and thus one's action, to that perhaps not even articulated wish. *In the "you" of my address (spoken, bodily, affective) I make a place you might wish to inhabit.*

I suggest that this queer corroborative sensitivity is part of what makes possible a different kind of tango semiosis—and that this semiosis, in turn, gifts back a particularly potent version of this gender-relational practice. To return to Rodríguez's "performative interpretation," I reemphasize that following is the work of interpretation. And in the Peircean semiotic model above, each partner's response is, precisely, an "interpretant" of the previous one. In a dialogic tango semiosis interpretation is present in both roles; each partner listens, responds, and co-creates meaning with the movement of their body. And while in the semiotic schemata above I focus on the communication of steps, I hope it is clear by now that there is much more meaning passing between tango-dancing bodies than that of choreographic sequence. Indeed, queer dancers do not have to radically depart from the choreographic norm, or even the roles of leading and following, to be exercising a queered communication. To borrow some vocabulary from Roman Jakobson, what is being constantly dialogically calibrated is not necessarily the steps per se, something like a referential "content," but rather the "how" of that communication that forges a relation between and as addressor and addressee. We might return to the opening vignettes, then, with this in mind: *Is your lead an assertion, and will I corroborate it, make myself permeable to your firmness?* (first vignette). *Is my lead a challenge, or an in-joke, and will you complete the repartee?* (third vignette). *Is your lead an invitation, and will I emphasize my decision to take it? Will I meet your softness with willingness? Will I meet your play with play?* (second vignette). *What* are our respective roles and *how* do we perform them for each other? Fluency with tango's already-gendered codes allows for purposeful non-standard deployment. The gender 'comfort' in queer spaces cited by many queer dancers is not about a complete removal of gender, but rather about the suspension of normative binary assumptions that leads to an infinitely more nuanced *read* of a person's particular positioning in a gendered field, a read guided by an attention to their desire. This is a mutual practice, both serious and playful. It is the practice at the base of the aforementioned queer thrill of performing femininity *with* and *for* a woman or non-binary person who in turn wishes to occupy a masculine role *with* and *for* you—and many other less nameable ones besides. And it is fundamentally embodied. "Tango lets you live it," said a participant at the 2019 Chamuyo queer festival. When embodied communication becomes sensitive to negotiation and deviation, we are able to find ways of moving together that make the nebulous and non-standard formations we might call "gender" into relational realities, make them "real"—or at least as real as the collective hallucinations of 'man' and 'woman.' This is what I mean when I say that "tango is a gender technology that the queers have hacked."

Maybe It's Gender, Maybe It's Maybelline

Having said all this, I think it important to note that some queer dancers claim to be uninterested in, or even hostile to, gender. In the Chamuyo conversations, one Spanish queer organizer emphasized the pleasure of taking up a gendered role (following "as a woman" in skirt and heels for part of the evening, leading "as a man" in pants and flat shoes for another), and another Spanish queer organizer directly contested this, critical of reproducing heteronormative roles at all. In a conversation with a queer teacher and organizer in Buenos Aires I met relative indifference to the roles as gendered; her priority seemed to be to remove all sexist ("machista") dynamics from the roles. In these and other cases, it seems pleasure in dancing is focused on the feeling of (ungendered) connection with another. But while not identical to the pleasures of gender affirmation or of gender play, this pleasure in a connection not determined by gender is in many ways of a piece with what I have described. Once again it is about the ability to connect in ways unanticipated by cisheteronormatively gendered codes.

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Ultimately, then, an ungendered or anti-gender take is still about the expansion of affective-relational possibilities, which is, I think, the real offering of queer tango.

Conclusion, and a Note on Colonialism

A narrow focus on queer tango semiosis, and especially in its couple form,[37] leaves out much else of tango's richly complicated embodiment. A book length work like Liska's *Argentine Queer Tango* (frequently referenced here) does a much more comprehensive job of accounting for the many socio-historical forces at play on any given dance floor. While I cannot do it all here, however, I do wish to re-emphasize the colonial legacy—and neocolonial reinforcement—of precisely the binary tango that queer tango most directly contests. Inasmuch as queer tango gets claimed as a European or US American innovation, an enlightened intervention to the problematic sex-gender politics of a "native" dance, this is not only historically inaccurate and blatantly ideological, but also profoundly ironic. Yet it also makes sense, because colonial ideology and neocolonial market dynamics continue to cast all that is Argentine as "raw" material that can be "refined" into an acceptable modern product—just as it did in the period of European "sanitization" that helped bring us binary tango. Thus, as Savigliano rightly argues, passion—and, connecting the dots she lays out, I'd emphasize, gender—are the desired and reviled "raw" of a Euro-American tango industry.[38] Of course, the immense irony here is that this "raw" gender has been deeply shaped by European prescriptive gender formations. And yet the logic remains: in the colonial other is a reserve of emotional humanity to be tapped into at will by the metropolitan subject who, in his civility, has repressed his own.[39]

In this way, as Savigliano comments and I think my own analysis can corroborate, queer tango can participate perfectly well in the general neocolonial dynamic of international tango (Savigliano 1995). Certainly, "queer" has been increasingly conscripted to assimilationist agendas such that, as Clare Croft notes in the introduction to *Queer Dance*, "claiming queer's non-normative possibilities requires different work in the twenty-first century" (2017, 9; see also "pinkwashing" and "homonationalism"). Yet I hold out, as Croft does, for "queer" as anti-normative critique, as embrace of heterogeneity, and as "a force of disruption that simultaneously draws on historical genealogies of queer and freshly imagines "queer" in the contemporary moment" (2017, 9, 2)—and, as evidenced by new queer tango organizing in Buenos Aires like "Tango Degenerade" (Marisol Cerrini Madrid and Maikel Dobarro 2018), "Milonga Disidente" (2018), or "La Fuga," (2021-present, Dobarro), which explicitly call for a "dissident" queer tango, I am not alone in this insistence. For to give up queer tango as a colonial imposition or extraction strategy is to join triumphant colonial commentators in erasing the central importance of queer and feminist organizing within Buenos Aires, the local queer cultures that made it possible, and the networks of solidarity that do exist between queer people across locations. Furthermore, to claim that queer tango represents a new kind of "sanitization," stripping tango of its messy erotic power in the name of "political correctness," as some scholars have done,[40] is not only profoundly ironic given the history of a shaming hyper-sexualization of queer people, but, to this queer dancer, largely laughable. To cast queer tango as a de-gendered, de-sexualized version of tango is to reinscribe a heteronormative understanding of erotic and relational possibility as obligatory and heterosexual,[41] and to miss, as I hope I've shown, what is in fact a dense process of negotiation and mutual desire. In queer tango, dancers do take a "risk"—not the risk of predator and prey (as Savigliano sometimes names it), but the profound risk of opening one's (gendered) being to the co-creation and corroboration of another.

Finally, if parts of the picture I paint of queer tango seem utopic, this is not due to individual invention but rather to a purposeful drawing out of (what I find to be) the most radical tendencies already present within it. The schematization I offer is in many ways an argument that, under the sign of "queer," queer tango dancers are collectively, and in a deeply embodied way, theorizing

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relational possibilities. I present this essay—which is an attempt to distill an ongoing collective conversation through my own articulation—as one more theoretical offering. I add it to the mix.

Notes

Though I do not claim to represent the views of others, the thinking in this article was made possible in community, danced, spoken, and otherwise. Especially important were long conversations and many dances with my dear friend Maikel Dobarro, as well as with Marisol Cerrini Madrid and Aramo Olaya. Thanks to Phi Lee Lam and Soledad Nani for sharing dance with me. Thanks to all the participants of the 2020 online Chamuyo conversations, as well as to my fellow organizers. Thanks to Sarah Wilbur, whose class finally provided the occasion for a draft of this long-brewing work, as well as two anonymous reviewers for generous feedback. Thank you to Lily Chumley, Moira Fradinger, and Paul Kockelman for academic inspiration and support at various stages. All mistakes and shortcomings are of course my own.

1. See Mercedes Liska (2017) for a very thorough ethnographic and historical book-length study on queer tango; see also Juliet McMains (2018) and Kathy Davis (2015) for sections of books that treat queer tango specifically. My fellow queer tango dancer-academics tend to be more specifically interested in the problematic I focus on here, i.e. the kinesthetic-semiotic significance of the "queer" in queer tango, perhaps because this is a problematic central to the collective practice of the queer tango community. See, among others, the writings of Arno Plass and Aramo Olaya.

2. In general, I invite the reader specifically interested in queer tango to attend to the footnotes. (As we know, a lot passes through the backchannels.)

3. I shared this phrase, "tango as gender laboratory," in the online, international community discussions organized by Chamuyo Queer in May 2020. Itself born from my experience and conversation in queer community, it became a focusing phrase for more conversation between me and Maikel Dobarro. Maikel transformed it into an ongoing workshop that they teach at the Universidad National de las Artes Extensión, which has been rich space for its practical experimentation and transformation. Which is all to emphasize that, for practitioners, queer tango "theory" and "practice" are, at least, recursively related.

4. Victoria Fortuna uses the phrase "moving otherwise" in the context of Argentina in her book by the same name. She writes: "Moving otherwise names how concert dance—and its offstage practice and consumption—offers alternatives to, and sometimes critiques, the patterns of movement and bodily comportment that shape everyday life in contexts marked by violence" (2018, 4).

5. See work on qualia, such as that of Nick Harkness and Lily Chumley, or work on improvisation and music (for example, Sawyer 1996). See Faudree 2012 for a more extensive review of other relevant examples. Additionally, see Ruth Leys for a critique of turns to "the body" that end up reinscribing cartesian dualisms of body and mind that they supposedly counter.

6. For another example of a semiotic engagement with dance by a scholar who takes movement seriously in its own right (rather than as derivative of language) see Sally Anne Ness (2008), whose work has been enabling for this approach.

7. The 2018 research was supported by a Robert C. Bates Post-Graduate Fellowship via Yale University. I am grateful for that support.

8. While a comprehensive thank-you list would be exceedingly long, I'd like to mention being particularly indebted to many long conversations of thinking together with Maikel Dobarro, as well as with Marisol Cerrini Madrid and Aramo Olaya. All mistakes and shortcomings are of course my own.

9. The history of tango is inseparable from its transatlantic crossing, as Liska's summary of "sanitization" can attest (Liska 2017). In a contemporary frame, however, this transnational existence remains. The very first day I arrived in Buenos Aires, a stranger I danced with at my first-ever milonga asked me if I knew several people he knew in New York, where I had just arrived from. Prominent teachers from Buenos Aires often go on tour to Europe, the USA, Russia, and Turkey, to name a few; students from all these places often travel to Buenos Aires to dance and learn. Given the geopolitical,

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neocolonial economic inequality, it is economically necessary for local (Buenos Aires-based) teachers to cater to international audiences, at home or abroad.

10. Mariana Docampo (2015) recounts how correspondence between herself and organizers using the term "queer tango" in Germany was a key moment of encouragement for her to continue her organizing and teaching work (Tango Queer Buenos Aires). Soledad Nani regularly spends months in Europe and Russia on tour as a key part making a living and sustaining her work in Argentina.

11. "Argentine Tango" remains the usual English-language designation, but tango is more properly identified as a *Rioplatense* dance, originating in the area around the Rio de la Plata, which divides Argentina and Uruguay.

12. Savigliano argues that "The sexual politics of tango cannot be split from the presence of the spectator, a male/colonizing spectator," and writes: "No matter how hard I try to isolate the tango couple from the gaze, the colonizer's viewpoint (either performed by himself or by his admirers) slips into the dancers' intimate scene" (1995, 77). Indeed, in the history of tango that she and others recount, steps, postures, embraces and so on were modified to fit colonial (visual) frameworks of respectability, exoticism, and so on (1995; also see Liska 2017). Which is all to affirm that corporeal-kinesthetic experience is necessarily inextricable from social imaginaries forged at geopolitical scales.

13. In 2018 in Buenos Aires an Argentine dancer commented to me that in the US and France "people embrace as an excuse to dance, but here [in Argentina] people dance as an excuse to embrace" ("abrazan como excusa para bailar, pero acá bailan como excusa para abrazar"). Comments about having a "beautiful embrace" were also frequent in conversations in France and in the USA, but much more likely to occur if I was having these conversations in Spanish, versus in French or in English. My hypothesis here is that this is indicative of differences in value systems that correlate with language-based community—which is to say even those who decided to learn Spanish as part of their journey into tango have a markedly different understanding of tango than those who did not.

14. "Visual" and "corporeal-kinesthetic" are, of course, interrelated aspects of coherent phenomena (see footnote 12 for an example from Savigliano's work), though the former tends to be privileged as a site of analysis in and for Western (conceptions of) knowledge.

15. For example, at a *tango escenario* (stage tango) class I attended in Buenos Aires in 2023, we studied a choreography, but this still consisted of moves to be led and followed via the same basic communicative system used in a social dance setting.

16. Well, except for some of the more extreme aerial tricks of *tango escenario/tango fantasia.*

17. Especially class, generation, and geopolitical location. In Buenos Aires particularly different neighborhoods and publics imply quite different versions of tango. Tango there remains (or has re-emerged) as a living, and so constantly transforming, practice. Abroad, reified, (auto-)exoticized, and colonial notions of rigid "Argentine tradition" are invoked for various purposes—as they are in Argentina, but abroad they are less vividly contested.

18. This is true formally, that is at the level of code, and frequently actually as well, that is with respect to where the weight really is. Crucially, however, these are separate phenomena, as I will discuss momentarily. Furthermore, because good dancers have precise control over the *transition* of weight between legs, in reality plenty of the dance happens in this in-between space.

19. Again, there are always exceptions, but certainly by the time of my fieldwork in 2018 it would have been difficult to find a teacher in Buenos Aires or abroad who taught that leading meant physically moving the other body. Even the (now vintage) typically more forceful concept of the "marca," or mark, registers the lead as an indication. However, for a more deeply diachronic look at tango, see, again, Mercedes Liska (2017). In 2008 in Buenos Aires, men were still expected to lead, but, says Liska, "a stronger female presence in tango was mediated by the search for a consensus that reduced feelings of bodily discomfort; or example, instead of marking with his hands, the male began indicating movements less aggressively with his whole body."

20. "As one woman put it: "if there's a car wreck, the problem is the woman driver. It's just the same in the *milonga*" (Liska 2017).

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21. "*Un objeto bailable.*" This phrase comes from a France-based Argentine tango teacher I knew, though he was not endorsing, but describing, an observed attitude of many male leaders.

22. I was in a group class with a well-regarded straight teacher in the studio she co-runs in the center of Buenos Aires, someone who is also quite respected by the queer community. She briefly gave the history of the transition from the "milonguero" style to a softer, more "salón" contemporary style. She defended the "milonguero" style's clarity, saying it was pleasant to feel such surety, versus the vacillation that can sometimes come with a lighter touch, and also emphasized that this system worked because the women really followed, really waited for the lead. In her understanding, *both* partners were really paying attention to the other, and this is why it worked.

23. For more on the "necrophilic" dynamics of sexist tango, see Maria Lugones's (2012) excellent article, "Milongueando Macha Homoerotics: Dancing the Tango, Torta Style (a Performative Testimonio)." I will note, however, that, as a dancer, I understood the practical use of this advice ("pretend the woman is not there") perfectly well, even as I recoiled from its implications.

24. "driver/conductor/leader; driven/conducted/lead" and "the one that guides/the one that follows"

25. Argentine feminist Rita Segato writes that one of the conditions for a community, especially one that can resist the neoimperialist encroachment of capitalism, is that "there must be symbolic density, which is generally provided by a particular cosmos and religious system" (2018). Mercedes Liska writes of "students who, *in the absence of a rebellious discourse*, blamed themselves for not meeting the canonical choreographic demands" (2017, 93, my emphasis).

26. Liska says that her initial interest in queer tango was partially because it seemed to constitute a turning point in the tango world; men and women who had never been to a queer milonga nonetheless discussed and debated its existence widely (2017, chapter 3).

27. There has been a proliferation of somatic-based tango investigations in queer tango (and in tango generally), especially in Europe—a phenomenon that could be its own essay. One only needs to look at the class schedule of, say, the Berlin Queer Tango festival around 2019 for evidence.

28. For more on the social and semiotic creation and significance of qualities, see anthropological work on qualia and qualisigns, especially that of Nick Harkness and Lily Chumley (2013, as well as individual works).

29. Part of the problem here is the legacy of cartesian dualism in hegemonic conceptions of knowledge and/as agency generally. Under this epistemic regime, receptivity is not itself considered knowledge nor agency.

30. I am thinking of Ruth Leys' (2011) discussion of the Libet experiment taken up by Brian Massumi, in which she points to commentary by other researchers that Massumi does not address: "As these researchers pointed out, skilled pianists are not consciously aware of the innumerable movements their fingers must make during a performance, but this does not make those movements unintentional or negate the fact that the pianists intended to play the music" (2011, 455). Leys points out that the model of minutely "conscious" manipulation of one's own body, which follows from a cartesian conception of body and mind, far from the normative case, is an unusual and even "pathological" situation (2011, 456). See also Harkness (2017) for detailed ethnography of the intersubjective shaping of bodily technique in the setting of vocal pedagogy.

31. And, again, the more the concern with "good" dancing, the more aspirationally elite the space, and the more in keeping with the colonial norms of respectability, and the more relevant to the transnational commercial circuit where "good" tango is a commodity and its "good"-ness is its scarcity, and so value.

32. See Savigliano (1995), Davis (2015), McMains (2018), and Liska (2017), for example.

33. Those unfamiliar with tango might be jarred to see the women in heels, long skirts, tight tops, and aristocratic airs don pants and sneakers at the end of the night and go take the city bus home.

34. Like the rest of this essay, this thought comes from experiencing many queer dances and having many queer tango conversations. However, this particular insight on the dialogic is especially indebted to the playful, disruptive dancing of Soledad Nani, one of queer tango's most recognized and beloved women leaders. While she is far from the only dancer to practice a more playful, dialogic

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tango, she is one of its path-makers, and dancing with her amounted to a potent expansion of my sense of tango's possibility. Juliet McMains, whom I cite in this article, seems to have had a similar experience and drawn similar, if less semiotically diagrammed, conclusions. By way of foreshadowing her experience with Nani, she mentions another dancer at the queer milonga, Valentina, who is an excellent follower with liberal interpretation: "all leaders are accustomed to having to follow the follower when cues are misread, but Valentina clearly understands 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… [she] reminds me that following is always an active choice… [she] turned a monologue into a playful dialogue" (McMains 2018). I would note that such an active-dialogic mode of following continues to gain traction, especially in a younger generation of queer tango dancers in Buenos Aires, and would give Maikel Dobarro and the spaces they organize as a potent example.

35. Queer tango is not the only tango to admit this kind of adjustment. In modernized versions of *tango salón*, courtly aspirations (and, in a disavowed way, I'd guess, feminist critiques) have led to a chivalrous model in which "a good leader adjusts"; he prides himself on being able to make any follower feel they have made no mistakes ever, no matter how disordered or inaccurate her dancing. But of course *he* (and the other leaders) know that it is his skill that makes the dance function. Meanwhile, the follower is not conceived of as able to consciously return signals; only the leader thinks. Thus, while this model and the above may look similar, ultimately this one remains one-sided.

36. "Ephemera are the remains that are often embedded in queer acts, in both stories we tell one another and communicative physical gestures such as the cool look of a street cruise, a lingering hand-shake between recent acquaintances, or the mannish strut of a particularly confident woman" (Muñoz 2009, 65).

37. While the couple form is potent, it is not at all the extent of tango's sociality. The dynamics of the dance floor as a whole are very significant, and a lengthier version of this essay would tie to the larger queer *milonga space* to theories of queer worldmaking.

38. As Savigliano writes, "Gender differences and sexual orientation thus enter into the compound of interests that make tango attractive, even for the sake of undoing them" (2010, 140).

39. The colonial dynamic is profoundly gendered one, as numerous anti-colonial feminists have shown (see, for example, the work of Neferti Tadiar). In fact, one part of the feminized labor of following I did not get to here is precisely its emotional aspect. I will but suggest that gendered and colonial dynamics are inextricable in queer tango. For a compelling example, see Mariana Docampo's vignette on gendered colonial vampirization of affective energy in her book, *Tango Queer Buenos Aires* (2018).

40. Despite their object's explicit opposition to this viewpoint, many prominent scholarly interpretations of queer tango, done by outsiders to the community, remain largely grounded in heteronormative understandings of relational possibilities. As, perhaps, intuitable from the idea that queer tango is "same-sex" tango, they are unable to go beyond an understanding of queer tango as the absence of the most obvious forms of heteronormativity—forms which supposedly constitute the dance's compelling power. See, for example, Kathy Davis's claim that "for those who do desire the experience of passion in tango, the ideological commitment of queer tango toward disconnecting tango dancing from gender and partner choice may, paradoxically, curtail rather than enable it" (2015, 152). For a more complicated example, see Marta Savigliano's presentation of queer tango as "safe," "prudish," "lame," "unmarked by heterosexual tensions," "puritanical and chaste," and, potentially, not taking "the tango risk" and so "settling" (2010). She does not fully endorse these descriptions, marking them as the view from a "trained tango eye, steeped in heteronormativity and the macho cult," but neither does she offer much of an alternate one (143). Her final gesture to queer tango's "erotic possibilities expand[ed] into the outside of heteronormativity, and other ways of 'being with,'" is consistent with the argument made here, but remains largely unsubstantiated—from within the framework of her essay, it is difficult to imagine what this could possibly mean (143). Thus the necessity of scholarship from queer tanguerxs.

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41. It's worth asking to what extent the "risky" heteronormative eroticism supposedly lost in a queer version of tango is just a culture of coercion (at the risk of provocation: some would call this rape-culture). In any case, Maria Lugones is once again a great corrective here. Against the "necrophiliac" desire of macho tango, one which does not understand anything about following, Lugones writes: "I think there is something interesting, rather, in being aroused by the response, by the willful being-with-you in the moving, often anonymously, in a brief encounter" (2012, 55). This is very much related to what I've referred to as queer corroboration, and is an erotics of mutual—which should not be confused with "identical" or "same"(sex)—desire.

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