

Argentine Tango in Cincinnati:  
An Ethnographic Study of Ethos, Affect, Gender, and Ageing  
in a Midwestern Dance Community

Dissertation

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## ABSTRACT

This ethnographic case study of Argentine tango dancers in Cincinnati provides an in-depth understanding of how a transplanted traditional practice both evolves within, and adapts to, a new location, and – at the same time – catalyses the creation of social networks and liberated constructions of self in a new cultural context. Using Lave and Wenger’s framework of a “Community of Practice” (CoP), I study the development of ethos, displays of affect, and address the role of gender and age identities.

The members of the Cincinnati Argentine tango CoP, although diverse in many ways, share a desire to devote much of their leisure time to an expressive embodied activity based upon a cultural export. The community created by the midwestern tango dancers is the product of a shared interest in a “foreign” cultural form and a desire to learn, rather than one formed with the aim of producing virtuosic public performers; such groups proliferate in cities across North America. Indeed, so common are such groups that they are regularly taken for granted and yet are central to the lives of those involved.

The fact that Argentine tango ostensibly presents as an exotic cultural form when performed in the Midwest is not insignificant. In recent decades, folklorists have interrogated the concept of authenticity and increasingly found that studying how cultural exports develop in and adapt to new locations can be highly productive. In fact, it is largely because of tango’s imported status that this Cincinnati CoP becomes such a fertile environment for investigation. Through their election to study an “imported” dance, these myriad Midwesterners gain access to an arena in

which they can fashion themselves in an activity that demands extensive conscious dedication. Over time, the ways in which they involve themselves in the dance and its concomitant community (through, for example, their manner of learning, the events they choose to attend, their modes of interaction with others, the partners they prefer) become signifiers for multiple and complex aspects of identity. At the same time, the dancers collectively cultivate a communal and multiplex ethos which governs ideas regarding acceptable attitudes, aspirations, and comportment within the group. This ethos can be understood as an adaptive localised rendering of what Ana Cara describes as “tanguicity”.

Conducting participant observer ethnographic research amid the Cincinnati Argentine tango CoP for more than a year - and deploying an alternative approach to conventional interviewing which I have termed “insider interactive enquiry” - has allowed me to understand the characteristics of tanguicity as it manifests in Cincinnati, and observe how it underpins the relationships these midwestern dancers form both with each other another and with the tango tradition. I therefore anticipate my dissertation will be of interest not only to folklorists, but also to scholars in other disciplines, including those who study dance, cultural adaptation, group dynamics, affect, gender, and ageing.

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I'll end this section with one almighty shout-out to my mother, Brenda Hopkin, for everything ... not least her indefatigable assistance with proof-reading.

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## Fields of Study

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract .....	i
Acknowledgements .....	iii
Vita .....	v
List of Figures.....	vii
Introduction .....	1
Chapter 1: Argentine Tango in USA and the Cincinnati Argentine Tango "Dance-Scape" .....	43
Chapter 2: Norms, Values, Ethos (Cincinnati-Tanguicity Part 1: Tango Ethos) .....	82
Chapter 3: Affect (Cincinnati-Tanguicity Part 2: Tango Essence).....	138
Chapter 4: Gender.....	198
Chapter 5: Ageing.....	261
Conclusion.....	305
Works Cited .....	314



## LISTS OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Ten Principles of Impeccable Tango Floor Craft .....	92
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## INTRODUCTION

I begin this introduction to my dissertation, “Argentine Tango in Cincinnati: An Ethnographic Study of Ethos, Affect, Gender, and Ageing in a Midwestern Dance Community”, with a presentation of my subject and an overview of the issues which have guided my research. I review a selection of relevant dance-related folkloristic scholarship, then outline some of the analytic and interpretative frameworks and concepts that have been important to my work. An account of my methodological approach, which is based upon participant-observer ethnographic research, follows, along with a summary my own experience of dancing Argentine tango (since that is what has allowed me to assume the participant role during my investigation). I move on to a more general discussion of ethnographic practice and of some established modes of going about it, before describing my own approach to this form of research, along with some personal reflections on the process. There follows an outline of the content of the chapters in this monograph. I end with some notes regarding my use of my interview transcriptions, fieldnotes, interviewees’ names, and tango-specific terms, plus a list of the transcription conventions herein deployed.

## **Presentation of Subject and Relevant Issues**

This ethnographic case study of Argentine tango dancers in Cincinnati provides an in-depth understanding of how a transplanted traditional practice both evolves within, and adapts to, a new location, and – at the same time – catalyses the creation of social networks and liberated constructions of self in a new cultural context. Using Lave and Wenger’s framework of a “Community of Practice” (CoP), I study the development of ethos, displays of affect, and address the role of gender and age identities.

The members of the Cincinnati Argentine tango CoP, although diverse in many ways, share a desire to devote much of their leisure time to an expressive embodied activity based upon a cultural export. The community created by the midwestern tango dancers is the product of a shared interest in a “foreign” cultural form and a desire to learn, rather than one formed with the aim of producing virtuosic public performers; such groups proliferate in cities across North America. Indeed, so common are such groups that they are regularly taken for granted and yet are central to the lives of those involved.

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which they can fashion themselves in an activity that demands extensive conscious dedication. Over time, the ways in which they involve themselves in the dance and its concomitant community (through, for example, their manner of learning, the events they choose to attend, their modes of interaction with others, the partners they prefer) become signifiers for multiple and complex aspects of identity. At the same time, the dancers collectively cultivate a communal and multiplex ethos which governs ideas regarding acceptable attitudes, aspirations, and comportment within the group. This ethos can be understood as an adaptive localised rendering of what Ana Cara describes as “tanguicity”.

Conducting participant observer ethnographic research amid the Cincinnati Argentine tango CoP for more than a year - and deploying an alternative approach to conventional interviewing which I have termed “insider interactive enquiry” - has allowed me to understand the characteristics of tanguicity as it manifests in Cincinnati, and observe how it underpins the relationships these midwestern dancers form both with each other another and with the tango tradition. Clearly, when contemporary Cincinnatians take up Argentine tango, various forms of cultural adaptation are taking place. One involves the dancers’ perceptions regarding Argentine tango and its accompanying mores. Another entails the ways in which practitioners modify elements of their existence (such as their daily routines, their manner of personal presentation, even certain ideas about themselves and others) to better incorporate the dance into - and reflect its position as part of - their lives and their selves. During the many interviews I conducted with members of the Cincinnati Argentine tango community, I often posed questions which were intended to elicit how my interlocutors had experienced - consciously or otherwise - these processes of change,

then to consider the rationale behind such changes and reflect upon their ramifications. The dancers' responses to these enquiries often resulted in their articulation of impressions and ideas that pertain to a range of subjects which have frequently claimed academic attention in recent years, among them meaning-making, sociability, affect, gender identity, and age identity. I therefore anticipate my dissertation will be of interest to scholars in a range of disciplines, including those who study dance, cultural adaptation, group dynamics, affect, gender, and ageing. My own primary disciplinary affiliation is folklore and I hope that my work will be of interest to my colleagues in this field, not least because – as I make clear in the next section – the body of existing folkloristic dance research is, as yet, slender.

### **Folklore and Dance Literature - A Selective Review**

In 2009, the *Journal of American Folklore* (JAF) published a special dance-themed issue, co-edited by folklorist Katherine Borland and dance scholar/ethnomusicologist Sydney Hutchinson and entitled “Latin American Dances in Transnational Contexts”. In her introduction to the volume, Hutchinson notes that vernacular dance practices have rarely been the subject of the sustained scrutiny by US based folklorists despite early and esteemed precedent; no less a figure than Franz Boas often devoted himself to their study (2009). As one third of the triumvirate which oversaw the launch of the American Folklore Society in 1888, Boas is considered one of the founding fathers of US folklore. Indeed, the very first issue of the JAF contained an article he had written about the songs and dances of the Kwakiutl native people of British Columbia (1888). Yet the corpus of folkloristic dance research generated over the ensuing near-century and a half is less than abundant. In addition, most of the work published – at least until recently –

consists of straightforward presentations of the movement practices under examination, along with information about any accompanying music/sounds (see, for example, Hague 1915, Densmore 1947, and Kapler 1967). The past several decades have seen a change in this scholarly state of affairs. As Borland noted when participating in a 2017 panel discussion about the ethnographic investigation of dance and other movement-based activities, over the past several decades, folklorists have used dance as a lens through which to explore aspects of performers' national and/or ethnic identity (see, for example, Nájera Ramírez 1989, Kapchan 1994, and Borland 1995).<sup>1</sup>

By its very existence, the editorial collaboration of Borland and Hutchinson at the helm of one of the folklore discipline's leading publications is an acknowledgement of salience of dance studies scholarship to folklorists. Borland is explicit in acknowledging the debt she owes in this regard in the issue's preface (2009a). In particular, she singles out the work of dance ethnologist Deirdre Sklar (1991, 2000, 2005) and highlights the ethnographic utility of Sklar's concept of "kinaesthetic empathy". Kinaesthetic empathy is an approach in which the ethnographer strives for greater understanding of what a performer feels and experiences when enacting a movement or movement sequence, through maintaining a vigilant sensibility of their own physicality. As Borland notes, Sklar argues that dance practices provide:

clues to the underlying ideas and values embedded in culturally choreographed movements, ideas that may not be evident through observation alone. More than just revealing the meanings of dance, the concept of kinesthetic empathy is

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<sup>1</sup> The event at which Borland made this observation was a panel discussion titled "Dance, Movement, and Ethnography". This event was organised by myself in my then-role as president of the OSU Folklore Student Association and took place on November 3, 2017 in room 311 of Denney Hall which is located on OSU's main campus in Columbus.

valuable because it underscores how complex and multifaceted the attainment of cultural knowledge is (376).

Borland also describes how the issue's origins lie in a 2006 American Folklore Society conference panel entitled "Diasporic Moves in Latin American Dance". The panel resulted in, Borland writes, an "increased appreciation for the importance that dance, as an embodied form of expressive culture, has in identity formation, group maintenance, and pleasure" (2009a). These matters all receive attention from the authors featured in the volume, who variously discuss how cultural, sociological, and political factors at a macro level can have an impact on dancers' embodied practices at a micro level. For example, Joyce M. Bishop examines how a Michoacán ritual courtship dance provides young males with a means of reaffirming their membership of their native community following periods spent as migrant workers in California and "thereby resolving, if only briefly, the ambiguities of their transnational lives" (2009:391). Sandra Garner explores why attempts by migrating Mexicans to use Aztec dance in their places of relocation as a means to forge connections with local indigenous peoples meet with only limited success (2009). Borland's own contribution to the edition concerns the New Jersey studio-salsa scene in which, she writes, dancing ability is disaggregated from ethnic or racial inheritance, allowing the dance to become a forum for "virtuosity and competitive display, as well as for romance and high-level collaboration between partners" (2009b:488). The result is a culturally diverse dance community that - despite adhering to highly gendered structures (with male dancers typically "leading" the dance moves and women "following" their marks) - offers a space for women dancers in particular to revel in expressive freedom. Borland's findings correlate with many of

my own observations of gender roles and dancers' reactions thereto in the Cincinnati Argentine tango scene.

Argentine tango itself is the subject of the JAF special edition's other article: "Entangled Tangos: Passionate Displays, Intimate Dialogues" by Ana C. Cara (2009). In the piece, Cara reflects on "tanguicity", a hard-to-define term – sometimes translated as "tango essence" or "tango ethos" - which builds on the idea that vernacular expressive forms become encoded by the prevailing spirits of their native communities. Those who are drawn to tango are drawn by the values and ideas which are encapsulated in the dance as well as by the dance itself, and these values and ideas then shape how dancers show up in all areas of their lives, not just those which ostensibly involve tango. As Cara puts it, tanguicity "embraces the many social, historical, geographical, and cultural dimensions that have made tango possible, indeed necessary, in the lives of Argentines for more than a century" (439). In other words, that the dance was created by lonely and mostly male immigrants visiting brothels where they hoped to find company, music, human touch, and intimacy is not simply the stuff of history, but continues to have relevance today. Cara goes on to argue that different manifestations of tango - namely "home tango", as danced by family and friends or in Buenos Aires *milongas*, and "culturally exported tango", which usually manifests in the form of choreographed stage shows catering to foreign audiences - are less mutually incongruous than they might initially appear. Instead these forms:

feed and respond to each other, and both emerge from a common cultural source. Export tango capitalizes on the externalized "explicit, explosive, passionate, provocative"<sup>3</sup> aspect of this tradition. The home tango internalizes these dimensions, producing over the decades since its mid-nineteenth-century inception a more intimate, playful, and secret but no less contestational or intense rendition of tango. (2009:439)



In other words, despite their very different “target audiences”, for Argentines both of these tango forms are redolent with tangüicity.

Not surprisingly, Cara’s article has proved very useful to my own work. In particular, I have appreciated her articulation of the concept of tangüicity. As I will show, the Cincinnati community has developed its own version of tangüicity – “Cincinnati-tangüicity” - which, although adapted to a new location, remains infused with elements of original Argentina tangüicity. As I explore in Chapter 2, this Cincinnati-tangüicity manifests in the norms and values which govern the midwestern community. It is also shapes the nature of the positive affect that attracts Cincinnatians to the dance and which is the subject of the third chapter of this monograph. More generally, my research – which is an examination of a site to which the dance has been imported - contributes to an understanding of how export tango, though transplanted, continues to be connected to its cultural source.

Beyond that issue of JAF, other iterations of folkloristic dance scholarship which have been especially useful to me include another article by Katherine Borland, this time in a collaboration with Sheila Bock (2011). In the piece, Borland returns to “the salsa dance scene in the culturally diverse municipalities of Northern New Jersey”, while Bock draws on fieldwork conducted amid belly dancing “white women in Central Ohio” (1). The authors argue that in both contexts, dance provides a tool for “self-fashioning” which provides “the dancing subject” a means of liberation “from restrictive and disciplinary identity categories” (1). Argentine tango has been used to

similar ends in Cincinnati, as I demonstrate in particular in Chapter 4, which is an exploration of dancers' performances of gender.

The 2001 double edition of *Western Folklore* on the theme of "Communities of Practice: Traditional Music and Dance", co-edited by Paul Jordan-Smith and Laurel Horton, was also of great value to me, not least because it introduced me to the concept of the Community of Practice which has been central to my understanding of the group at the heart of my study.<sup>2</sup> I will discuss this concept in depth in Chapter 2; briefly, however, a Community of Practice is a group of "people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Wenger-Trayner 2015).

As with the "Latin American Dances in Transnational Contexts" issue of JAF, the seeds of "Communities of Practice: Traditional Music and Dance" were planted during the annual American Folklore Society conference. More specifically, panels which took place during the 1998 and 1999 iterations of the conference, along with one at the 1998 meeting of the Midwest Society of Ethnomusicologists, were the precursors to this volume (Jordan-Smith and Horton 2001:103). All three of the panels in question were organised by Lucy Long, whose doctoral investigation into "the development of a dulcimer music tradition in the Beech Mountain area of north-western North Carolina and the role of folkloric music collectors in that development"

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<sup>2</sup> Three years after they co-edited the special issue of *Western Folklore*, Horton and Jordan-Smith co-authored another work of folkloristic dance scholarship which appeared in the *Journal of American Folklore*. "Deciphering Folk Costume: Dress Codes among Contra Dancers" is a discussion of the ways in which contra dancers' choice of attire can be interpreted as semiotic system capable of complex communication on a range of issues, including political ideology (2004).

includes some study of dance (1995:1). In their introduction to the volume, the two guest editors explain that the articles contained within the volume - which are all focussed on practices originating in the British Isles - engage with the ways in which:

self-consciously constructed communities create and enact their connectedness through their modes of participation, their repertoire and style, the contexts and textures of performance, and the rhetoric they use in describing themselves. (Jordan-Smith and Horton 2001:103)

In addition, the articles deal with the relationships that exist between the various music and dance forms under examination and “historical continuity, [...] traditional genre, the place of *communitas*, and the strategies used in constructing the envisioned ideal” (103-4). They also aim to demonstrate that “satisfactory performance of physical movement” is by no means the only way in which dancers derive a sense of meaning from their involvement in whichever dance group; rather, “participants often see their dancing as a component of their personal identity, philosophy, and lifestyle choices”. As a result, experiences “off the dance floor may rank in importance with those on the dance floor” (107-08). Many of these or similar points were raised by my interlocutors during my conversations with them.

The first article in the “Communities of Practice” special issue is “Embodiment and Community” by Rebecca Sachs Norris. Sachs Norris makes a convincing case that the body - through its “capacities for learning and communication” as well as for experience and expression - plays a vital role in forming communities (118). She also argues that being able “to hold one's own” in a communal dance activity results in an “experience of community”, though cautions that this feat is generally achieved only after practitioners have spent a considerable amount of time in one

another's company working on movement (119). This is a matter which I also discuss, primarily in Chapter 5, which is devoted to the topic of ageing.

The "Communities of Practice" special issue also includes Burt Feintuch's interrogation of the word "community". The term is, he avers, overused, before highlighting some of the problems created by the associated concept. He then lays out a set of criteria for the limited circumstances in which he feels the term might legitimately be applied. A community worthy of the name is, to his mind, a group whose members are connected in almost all aspects of their lives and who are significantly obligated to one another. Although I appreciated Feintuch's argument, I found his conceptualisation of community to be overly stringent and so it is not reflected in my use of the term throughout this monograph. As already indicated, my conception of community in this monograph is based upon with the Lave and Wenger notion of a Community of Practice which is referenced in the title issue of *Western Folklore* under discussion.

Paul Jordan-Smith's contribution, entitled "About That Swing: 'Sleaze' Dancing and Community Norms at River Falls Lodge", is the next article in the volume. In it, he details what took place within a group of South Carolina contra-dancers when some of its number began to practise a version of the dance which involved "extremely close body contact and sometimes sexually suggestive movement as well" that caused others to feel discomfort and consternation (187). Through a process of collective negotiation, the group avoided a potential rift and instead reached a consensus as to what constituted acceptable behaviour on the dance floor, which was then codified in the form of "two lists of community norms - 'Contra Tips For Newcomers' and

‘Contra Courtesies (a.k.a. Tips For Experienced Dancers)’ (191). I will also discuss community norms (in Chapter 2) albeit from a very different angle, since their development was not due to any kind of rift regarding bodily contact.

Although the essays which appear in the “Communities of Practice” volume appear “to address only a narrow range of subject matter”, its co-editors argue that “the points made by the contributors are not confined to a single ethnic tradition or even to the single cadential genre of music and dance” (Jordan-Smith and Horton 2001:104).<sup>3</sup> My own reading through the volume bears out the truth of their claim. I will repeatedly return to many of the works I have mentioned above in the chapters which follow. In particular, I appreciated how their scholarship demonstrated how members of dance communities can come to intensely experience liminoidal *communitas*, i.e. the sensation of being strongly connected with others as a result of shared involvement in a non-mandatory activity and regardless of the modes of social stratification that would ordinarily govern interaction (Turner 1974).

These publications by folklorists, along with contributions by scholars from other disciplines (not least political theorist and anthropologist Marta Savigliano’s seminal 1995 *Tango and the*

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<sup>3</sup> The “Communities of Practice” *Western Folklore* special issue includes two more articles which have less direct relevance to my own work. One is a piece about Scottish social dancing by Catherine A. Shoupe. Shoupe focuses on three different dancing venues in the Fife region of Scotland. Each attracts a distinct clientele who come to identify both with the locale itself and with each other. According to Shoupe, “a person’s pathway to involvement and subsequent understanding about the meaning of her or his participation in such groups” is influenced by four features: the geographic context, the social context, the performance context (i.e. style and repertoire), and the psychodynamic context (i.e. the sense of *communitas* generated by the dancers collective involvement) (128-29). The other article is by Laurel Horton who writes about how the communal bonds felt by members of dance communities can be strengthened when they share in non-dance related activities.

*Political Economy of Passion*) support Sydney Hutchinson's claim that dance ethnographies are able to "illuminate social formations that might otherwise remain invisible" (2009:379), and bear out Borland's assertion that as "specific dances and dancers create and recreate practices based on lived experience, the resulting cultural scenes accrete new dimensions of meaning" (2009: 377).

I demonstrate that the group of Midwesterners which I chose to study - a group whose members may be disparate in many ways but who are connected through their involvement in Argentine tango dancing in Cincinnati - collectively form a cultural scene that is indeed rich in dimensions of meaning and which can therefore be the subject of interpretation. My hope is that my work here will shed light on the social formations that make this group cohere and function through the attention I pay to its members' navigation of the complex social relationships engendered by the dance form, and how the dance also leads to ongoing and dynamic fluctuations in how they think about themselves and others.

### **Analytic and Interpretative Frameworks and Concepts**

The analytic and interpretative tools which I have applied to this data are qualitative and interdisciplinary. In addition to using relevant folklore research, I draw on narrative analysis, performance theory, semiotics, affect theory, and on ideas produced by dance and age studies scholars. Given the diverse nature of the scholarship from these various fields, I have elected to present the relevant literature as and when it becomes pertinent, rather than attempting an exhaustive review at this point. Here, then, I will instead briefly summarise the value of these

distinct areas of research vis-à-vis my work, before moving on to a selective review of folkloric dance scholarship.

Narrative analysis is useful for understanding how people represent their experiences, how they position themselves and their interlocutors, and how they use metanarrative commentary to reflect on personal, social, historical, and cultural circumstances. The scholarship of my advisor, Amy Shuman - including her publications dated 1993 and 2005, along with those she co-authored with Carol Bohmer in 2004 and 2008, as well as the various narrative courses I have taken under her tutelage - have been invaluable in developing my understanding. Performance theory is founded on the idea that cultural expressions – including such expressions as gender identity – do not exist as static forms but are instead made manifest in the moment through process, practice, and repetition, and can act to create or alter a reality; the work of Judith Butler has been especially useful to me here (1990). Semiotics is concerned with how meaning is made and conveyed through the use of signs and signifying practices and is especially useful for understanding how people communicate indirectly through gesture, reference to objects, and performance (Besnier's 1990 article titled "Language and Affect" provides a useful overview of this area of study). Affect theory provides methods for analysing non-linguistic forces, including emotions, attitudes, and other embodied interactive modes of experience (as is demonstrated by the various contributions to the 2010 volume edited by Gregg and Seigworth). Dance studies promotes critical thinking regarding how dance intersects with power and social dynamics, and approaches the body as a site of communication and negotiation; dance is therefore viewed as a means of accessing perspectives on broader social issues that might otherwise remain hidden

(see, for example, Albright 1997). Age studies scholars aim to challenge culturally pervasive pessimistic notions about growing older and posits that many of the negative factors commonly associated with the process (such as isolation, loss, disability) have less to do with biology than with race, gender, class, and other factors that influence social position and access to resources (see, for example, Gullette 2004).

More generally, my work is informed by previous scholarship regarding leisure activities. Victor Turner's idea of the liminoid, to which I have already briefly referred, is relevant here (1974). The liminoid is allied with Turner's more famous conception of the liminal, i.e. that which characterises the betwixt and between stages of ritual processes, such as pilgrimages. While liminal phenomena tend to arise during experiences which are socially or in some other way mandated, liminoidal experiences occur during activities which have voluntarily been undertaken, such as leisure activities. As Deflem puts it:

The liminoid originates outside the boundaries of the economic, political, and structural process, and its manifestations often challenge the wider social structure by offering social critique on, or even suggestions for, a revolutionary re-ordering of the official social order. (1991:16)

During liminoid phenomena, which can be experienced by individuals as well as by groups, the participants are: "privileged to make free with [their] social heritage in a way impossible to members of cultures in which the liminal is to a large extent the sacrosanct" (Turner 1982:52).

As Turner notes:

liminoid is more like a commodity - indeed, often *is* a commodity, which one selects and pays for - than the liminal, which elicits loyalty and is bound up with



one's membership or desired membership in some highly corporate group. One works at the liminal, one plays with the liminoid. (Turner 1982:55)<sup>4</sup>

In addition, and as Noyes makes clear, because liminoid experiences are: “freely chosen, and capable by their complexity of absorbing attention fully”, they become “increasingly central to individual identities; the more sustained and participatory, the more compelling” (2014:160).

Part of what makes the Argentine tango flavour of liminoidal phenomena so compelling for the Cincinnati dancers is that it allows them to an arena in which they can continually strive for improvement, so much so that I have identified this as an element of “Cincinnati-tanguicity” regardless of whether tanguicity is understood in the sense of “tango ethos” (discussed in Chapter 2) or “tango essence” (the subject of Chapter 3). This ongoing drive for betterment is also a characteristic of those “professional amateurs” whose rise is documented by Charles Leadbetter and Paul Miller (2004). As Leadbetter and Miller explain in their 2004 report entitled *The Pro-Am Revolution*, Pro-Ams are those who spend so much time and energy on their chosen hobby that they have collectively blur the borders between the hitherto well-established, distinct categories of “amateurs” and “professionals”. They write that the:

twentieth century was shaped by the rise of professionals in most walks of life. From education, science and medicine, to banking, business and sports, formerly amateur activities became more organised, and knowledge and procedures were codified and regulated. As professionalism grew, often with hierarchical organisations and formal systems for accrediting knowledge, so amateurs came to be seen as second-rate. Amateurism came to be to a term of derision. Professionalism was a mark of seriousness and high standards.

But in the last two decades a new breed of amateur has emerged: the Pro-Am, amateurs who work to professional standards. These are not the gentlemanly amateurs of old – George Orwell’s blimpocracy, the men in blazers who sustained

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<sup>4</sup> Italics in original.

amateur cricket and athletics clubs. The Pro-Ams are knowledgeable, educated, committed and networked, by new technology. (2004:12)

Many of the Cincinnati dancers can certainly be described as “knowledgeable, educated, committed”, and even “networked, by new technology” since, for example, many learn from videos shared on YouTube and similar platforms, and hear about the events that they choose to attend via social media communications. However, they do not, on the whole, truly fit the Pro-Am model since very few aspire to become tango professionals on any level, or expect to attain a standard at which their being so would be feasible. Instead, it is the gradual and seemingly never-ending process of refinement and development – possibly punctuated by the occasional breakthrough – which motivates their ongoing participation in a whole range of tango-related activities, which I describe as “Tango World”.<sup>5</sup>

When considering the vast panoply of leisure activities to which US residents can devote their free time and other forms of resources, many could be categorised as being primarily underpinned by the pursuit of goals (as with, for example, ballroom dancers on the competition circuit); others by the building of collections (such as philatelists); and still others by the unfussy exuberance of the moment (which, I am told, is often true of contra dancers). While it is surely possible that a person *could* apply one or all of these approaches to Argentine tango too, my interviewees did not seem to do so. Instead, the driving force behind what, for many, was their

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<sup>5</sup> I will refer to Tango World many times over during this dissertation. I use the term as a short-cut means of referencing a person’s involvement tango-related activities including, of course, dancing with a partner, as well as being at a tango event but not dancing, physically preparing to go to a tango event, and anticipating one’s attendance at such an event.

primary leisure time activity was the access it gave them to what I describe as the “zone of perpetual improvement”.

## **Methodology**

My primary methodology has been that of reflexive participant observation ethnography. I began my research in the summer of 2017, shortly after receiving IRB-exemption status from The Ohio State University’s (OSU) Office of Responsible Research Practices. During the year that followed - and thanks in no small part to the award of a Folklore Fellowship from OSU’s Center for Folklore Studies - I carried out the bulk of the fieldwork on which this dissertation is based. Over that period, I spent much of my time in the Cincinnati area, where I participated in a range of tango activities, conducted numerous formal interviews, and also engaged with the community and its members in more casual ways. For example, several of my interlocutors generously extended to me the use of their guest rooms and facilities (at low or no cost); as a result, I was able to interact with these particular dancers in ways which might not have been possible had I encountered them only in the role of a researcher and/or a fellow “Tango World” inhabitant. The intensive phase of my fieldwork lasted from June 2017 until May 2018, since when I have maintained contact with my interlocutors, continued to conduct the occasional interview, and to sporadically involve myself in Cincinnati’s Argentine tango community.

The fieldwork which I have carried out has yielded a significant body of raw material. I have conducted extensive formal interviews with close to 50 members and former members of the community, and have participated in and documented a similar number of events. My

documentations all include fieldnotes which contain detailed descriptions of the interview situations or dance activities in question, as well as my personal reflections. In addition, they usually include photographs, as well as any other relevant data, such as: marketing materials; videos, including those I have recorded at events, and those found at links shared with me by my interviewees (often featuring dancers and/or music whom they especially admire); and a variety of texts. For example, one dancer kindly gave me access to her private tango journal. Another wrote an essay in which he related the story of how he came to tango and his subsequent involvement with the dance. All of my interview documentations also include audio recordings of the interview, along with full transcriptions of those recordings' contents. This substantive collection of data has provided the primary source material for this dissertation.

### **Concerning Methodology: Argentine Tango and Me**

In naming reflexive participant observation ethnography as my primary mode of research, I signalled that I am myself a practitioner of Argentine tango. This may therefore be an appropriate point at which to outline my own relationship with the dance.

When one pursues Argentine tango as a social pastime, being asked how long one has been dancing is a common dance-floor occurrence. When I am posed that question, I usually respond by saying “not long enough to be able to dance and talk at the same time” whilst silently thinking “long enough to know that that question is not useful” - for the enquiry is rarely productive, regardless of whether it is made in an effort to gauge a dancer's level of accomplishment or of their commitment. For example, it could be that one respondent had taken their first lesson a

decade previously but since then, say, had only participated in any form of tango activity once or twice a month on average. Meanwhile, another respondent might only have taken up Argentine tango eighteen months previously, but since then had studied for several hours daily and attended at least two social events a week. Yet, were the former of these two dancers to respond “ten years” and the latter “a year and a half”, their answers might be accurate in one sense, but they would give no indication of the intensity of their involvement. Even so and despite my awareness of the question’s inutility, I nonetheless found myself wanting to ask it of my interviewees as I embarked on my fieldwork and I imagine this is due to the innate human impulse to categorise. I decided that a solution to this predicament would instead be to ask my interlocutors what they considered their “tango age” to be. As I would immediately go on to explain, one’s “tango age” is a rough estimate of the time one has been dancing on a reasonably regular basis, accounting for any prolonged gaps in one’s practice.<sup>6</sup>

For my own part and at the time of submission of this dissertation in the autumn of 2019, I am around six and a half “tango years” old. I took my first lesson towards the end of 2005, just before I moved to Buenos Aires to set up as a freelance radio producer. For the next three years or so, Argentina was my primary place of residence. However, I only danced regularly during the

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<sup>6</sup> I acknowledge that tango age is an imprecise measurement. Michael Wizer - who gave his tango age as 25 at the time of our interview - spoke of his experience of the dance at 25 tango years of age, compared to how he had experienced it when he was merely 15 tango years old. He said: “You know, if your 15 years was in New York City or in Buenos Aires or in Amsterdam and you were dancing five nights a week, then okay, your 15 years means something different than 15 years in Cincinnati or Columbus or wherever. But if you’re not dancing four times a week, if all you’re dancing is once a week out socially - and let’s say I’m even talented, and let’s say I can appreciate things fast - it’s going to take 25 years to know some of the things. I can think back ten years ago and I did not know them. I can see that. I mean, it’s really clear.” However, despite its undeniable limitations, I have found that enquiring about tango age is more useful than simply asking “how long have you been dancing Argentine tango?”.

early part of my time there. I quickly decided that I did not like the *milonga* “scene” (in this context, “*milonga*” refers to an Argentine tango social dance event; the same word also describes a rhythmically distinct subgenre of tango music) and when I ran out of money to pay for private lessons, my interest in the dance rapidly dwindled. When I moved from Argentina to the USA in 2010, I lived initially in a California ashram and then on a farm in rural south-central Kentucky, and if there was any Argentine tango dancing happening near either of those locations, I did not know about it. My next stop was Las Vegas. I moved there for a job, stayed for almost two years, and began to attend the occasional local Argentine tango event at some point during that time. Around 10 days before my stint in the Nevada desert ended, I happened to have one of those rare but transporting dance floor encounters in which everything came together perfectly. This “peak experience” - a concept associated with the work of psychologist Abraham Maslow and to which I shall return in Chapter 3 of this monograph - rekindled my enthusiasm. As a result, when I arrived in Columbus, Ohio, a few weeks later to enrol at OSU as a doctoral student, I sought out dancing opportunities with a hitherto uncharacteristic eagerness. This led to my gaining a local practice partner. However, beyond my sessions with him, satisfactory close-to-home dancing opportunities appeared to be thin on the ground.

I began to look further afield and discovered that a number of cities within a few hours’ drive of Columbus - among them Cincinnati and Cleveland in Ohio; Ann Arbor and Detroit in Michigan; and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania - organised workshop weekends led by invited expert professional teachers, so I started to make excursions to take advantage of these opportunities. Whenever I visited Cincinnati, I was struck by both the friendliness and the dance floor competence of the

people I encountered there. Hence when it came time to choose my fieldwork site, that city seemed the obvious choice.

Currently, I typically dance a couple of times a week with my practice partner. Sometimes I also attend events put on in the Columbus area by a local group of dancers which has grown considerably during the time that I have been living here. I continue to travel to attend weekend workshops when resources permit. I also do some supplementary exercises to aid balance and develop technique at home alone. For a number of reasons - not least the late hour at which they usually start - I do not go to many *milongas*, though I did attend a number in the course of conducting my fieldwork on this project. For the majority of the time I spend dancing, I take the (traditionally female) follow role. However, in an effort to improve and become a more “complete” dancer, I also attempted to learn the lead role (which is traditionally performed by men) and I discuss this further in Chapter 4.

This background of Argentine tango-dancing has allowed me to adopt the participant observer methodological approach throughout my ethnographic research. That said, I am conscious of the fact that my experience of the Argentine tango - be it social, kinetic, somatic, or any other form - is mine alone and so I have striven to avoid suggesting insights or drawing conclusions that are not also implicated through other means.

### **Concerning Methodology: Approaches to Ethnography**

Using ethnographic investigation as a methodological approach is a mainstay of folklore scholarship. Over the past several decades, reflexive assessments have become a recognized means of evaluating the value and limitations of such research. This came about, in part, as a result of the shift in disciplinary perceptions which led - from the 1960s onwards - to folklore increasingly being understood as process rather than as product. Whereas folklorists had previously tended to study largely context-less texts, they now became interested in those who shared the texts and the circumstances in which they did. One corollary of this so-called “performance turn” was that scholars became aware that the presence of an ethnographer must surely have some bearing on the process under examination, and the fact that this was so should be acknowledged in any ensuing publications. Another contributing factor to the rise of reflexive assessments was the “crisis of representation” which pervaded all disciplines for which ethnography was a primary methodology during the 1980s and 90s. The edited volume *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* was one of the key works which precipitated that crisis (Clifford and Marcus 1986). Its contents make clear that ethnographies neither are, nor ever could be, neutral and so how ethnographic investigation is represented is a matter of vital importance. In addition, publications from folklorists in both the public and academic realms demonstrated how their work could potentially have social, political, or other ramifications that might not always be positive (see, for example, Baron and Spitzer 1992, Ritchie 1993, Abrahams 1993, and Shuman 2005).



Various permutations on the theme of ethnography have been developed with the aim of addressing some of the issues which are inherent in this methodological approach. For example, reflexive ethnography involves the ethnographer acknowledging their place in their work and the inevitable partiality of their understandings. Folklorist Elaine Lawless suggested that “reciprocal ethnography” would be a yet more appropriate approach. She developed this concept after producing a book about a group of Pentecostal women preachers based on several years of fieldwork (1988). Following its publication, Lawless learned that some of the women who featured in the book disputed her interpretations. As a result, Lawless developed a methodology that involves taking the views of one’s interlocutors into consideration when presenting one’s analysis of any gathered data (1992). As Lawless states, scholars would do well to remember that “our interpretations are not the ‘last word,’ that our interpretations are not necessarily the right or insightful ones” (1992:310). In addition, she advised her fellow folklorists to ensure that any dialogue they had with their interlocutors regarding their interpretations should be carried forward “into the published work” (306). Doing so would leave the reader apprised of differing viewpoints so that “they may agree, disagree, or be left pondering, or not caring, and so on” (306). Exact approaches to reciprocal ethnography vary according to the researcher, the consultants, and the context, but all involve seeking the feedback of one’s interlocutors on one’s findings and interpretations, and ensuring that this feedback is represented in some way in the final manuscript.

Reciprocal ethnography is sometimes also called “collaborative ethnography” (see, for example, MEB 2000 and Lassiter 2005); however, since all ethnography is collaborative in some ways, I

prefer the term “reciprocal” when referencing a back and forth of views between researcher and consultants that is documented in a final text. Even so, reciprocal ethnography does not fully address the central problem which led to the crisis of representation, namely that ethnography is always a concoction of partial perspectives and partial truths. As James Clifford puts it in his introduction to *Writing Culture* any text based on ethnographic research is always - to a greater or lesser extent - partial and results in a product that invents culture, rather than truly represents it (1986:2).

### **Concerning Methodology: My Approach to the Ethnographic Process**

So what nature of invention characterises this dissertation? Certainly, my exploration has been guided by my own interests and the views and interpretations expressed herein are mine. I would describe its contents as collaborative and somewhat reciprocal in that I sought the views of my interlocutors regarding my ideas and often modified my analyses as a result, which I then noted in the text. In addition, in a few cases when a matter under discussion was especially sensitive, I gave my interlocutors the opportunity to amend how I had presented them in the text so that they could feel fully confident of retaining anonymity. However, as yet and largely because of time constraints, I have not given anyone in the Cincinnati Argentine tango CoP the full manuscript, or even single chapters, to read though I plan to do so in the future.

At some point in the midst of writing this monograph, I had lunch with a fellow folklore PhD candidate. We talked about our respective dissertation experiences and my colleague mentioned that her aim was to do as little fieldwork as possible in order to accelerate the completion of her

doctorate. Of course, I could well understand why she would choose such a route, however - and as I said to her - I found the writing up of my research to be relatively painless precisely because of the fieldwork I conducted. I had so loved interacting with and interviewing the Cincinnati dancers, hearing about their tango trajectories, and listening to their responses to all my enquiries. As a result, revisiting those encounters via the interview transcriptions and my fieldnotes while I wrote this monograph was continually inspiring.

When I embarked on my dissertation research, I was already a relatively experienced interviewer; I had worked as a radio producer for over a decade and had also been professionally involved in a number of oral history and fieldwork-based projects. In that time, I had learned that my most successful interviews (in terms of yielding promising content) were also the ones during which my interlocutors seemed interested and enthusiastic. In fact, I feel like I need to fall a little in love with my interviewees in order to feel that the conversation has gone well. I mention this in part because it seems to be pertinent in and of itself, but also because it is indicative of one of the biases that influences much of my professional output: to paraphrase a colloquial British idiom, I like everything in the garden to be lovely.<sup>7</sup> In other words, whenever I have a choice, I

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<sup>7</sup> The original phrase is in the present tense, i.e. “everything in the garden is lovely”; a common alternative version is “everything in the garden is rosy”. According to the online version of the Oxford English dictionary, the expression was first used in the title and refrain of a music hall song composed by J. P. Harrington in 1898. The piece was written for and popularized by the British music hall singer Marie Lloyd (1870–1922). (Information accessed on 2018-08-28 via <https://www-oed-com.proxy.lib.ohio-state.edu/view/Entry/76724?redirectedFrom=“Everything+in+the+garden+is+rosy”>.)

choose to work on projects, or approach subjects in such a way, that will allow me to focus on matters positive.<sup>8</sup>

This preference certainly influenced my choice of dissertation subject and research site.

Argentine tango is an optional pastime, therefore those who practice it do so because they want to and therefore, presumably, enjoy it. As I noted much earlier, my pre-existing familiarity with the Cincinnati Argentine tango community, and the fact that I had had only had pleasurable experiences there, strongly influenced my decision to base my investigation there. In addition, the general standard of dancing there was good, especially given the relatively small size of the community. This, of course, made the participation aspect of the participant observer ethnographic research all the more enjoyable. I am happy with the decisions I made in terms of topic and location and can report that I did indeed fall a little in love with everyone whom I interviewed for the project. I am endlessly grateful to each and every one of them for all that they shared with me.

Other potentially relevant aspects of my ethnographic persona include my being a white, British woman somewhere in the middle of the range of ages of those in the community I studied. As a dancer of Argentine tango, while I am not a complete novice, neither am I anywhere close to being advanced (if pressed, I would describe myself as being “beginner-intermediate”). These

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<sup>8</sup> One of the members of my committee - not unkindly - described my ethnographic persona as being like Pollyanna. According to the Merriam-Webster online dictionary, a Pollyanna is “an excessively cheerful or optimistic person”. Pollyanna is the name of the “optimistic heroine created by Eleanor Hodgman Porter (1868–1920), American author of children's stories”. Accessed on 2019-11-24 via <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Pollyanna>.

facts influenced my perspective, the questions I asked, and the topics in which I was interested, just as they surely also affected the view my interlocutors formed of me and their responses to my enquiries. I found that having some semblance of pre-existing relationship with many members of the community prior to embarking on the research was helpful. It certainly made requesting interviewees fairly straightforward. It also meant that - at least terms of my own perspective - my investigation felt less “opportunistic” than might have been the case had I alighted upon a research topic and location to which I had no previous connection. Regarding how my immigrant status may have affected matters, I think it led to my being less acutely aware of class and other social distinctions among the Cincinnati dancers than would be true had my research site been in my native England and I am not sure this was a disadvantage. My not being a highly competent dancer was probably useful in that it prevented my interlocutors viewing me as any kind of authority on Argentine tango (and therefore potentially deferring in some way to ideas I expressed as a result).

I am naturally curious and rarely shy, so coming up with questions to ask was not a problem. Before each interview, I went through what I called my “protocol spiel” which included my reminding my interlocutors that if I asked them anything that they could not answer or did not want to answer, they should let me know because it was not their responsibility to try to respond to such questions. Rather, it was my responsibility to raise subjects which they could talk about. In addition, I told them that if they said anything that was off the record, it would remain off the record, and that they could let me know if anything was off the record at any point, including after the interview’s completion. (This contrasts with the journalistic practice in which reporters

are generally obliged to omit anything signalled as off the record ahead of time but not if the interviewee requests for the status to be retroactively applied). If I felt it would be especially useful to refer in some way to the off the record material, I presented a version to the interviewee in which I had disguised the content so that no one involved could be identified. I would then ask if they were satisfied that the revised text was sufficiently anonymous; if not, would any further changes make a difference? Otherwise, would they grant me permission to use the material?

During my professional life to date, I have developed an approach to interviewing which some might consider idiosyncratic. My style is very conversational and often involves my sharing quite a bit about myself. It even includes my posing what many might view as leading questions from time to time. However, I have generally found that my interviewees have no compunction about challenging any ideas I present, should they feel moved to do so, precisely because of the relaxed nature of our interaction. Given my status as a participant in the Cincinnati Argentine tango community, I have used the term “insider interactive enquiry” to describe this mode of investigation. During my fieldwork, adopting this insider interactive enquiry made the process of interviewing seem very easy and less stressful for either party than might otherwise be the case. In addition, and no less importantly, it seemed to yield rich results, as I hope is demonstrated by the data excerpted in this monograph.

Occasions on which I might refer to my own experience during an interview might include those when I otherwise seem unable to formulate a succinct question. I will describe several instances of this taking place during the analyses chapters. A case in point, covered in Chapter 4, is my

recounting how much I appreciated tango offering me an opportunity to perform my femininity as a means of eliciting if my interlocutors had experienced anything similar vis-à-vis their own gendered identities. The same was true when I wanted to ask if the dance had affected my interviewees' age identities or perceptions regarding the age identities of others – a line of enquiry which generated the data upon which Chapter 5 is based. While I was happy to learn if people felt the dance kept them fit and so on, that was not really what I was trying to get at. I therefore began prefacing the subject by talking about a show I had seen performed at the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, OH, a few months into my fieldwork process.<sup>9</sup> The piece was called *A Thousand Thoughts* and subtitled “A Live Documentary by Sam Green and the Kronos Quartet”. On the Center’s website, the blurb about the performance read as follows:

Don’t miss this Wex-commissioned collaboration that tells the trailblazing string ensemble’s story through cinema, live narration from filmmaker Green, and live music by Kronos! Directed by Green and taking an approach familiar to fans of his projects presented here (like *The Measure of All Things*), *A Thousand Thoughts* charts Kronos’ 45-year history, from their early days in San Francisco to their acclaimed status today. Look for interviews with Kronos collaborators Philip Glass, Tanya Tagaq, Wu Man, and others in this dynamic evening that will give you fresh insights about the nature of live performance and the power of art to change the world.<sup>10</sup>

Something in the show struck me as especially apposite when it came to my interest in ageing and age identity as experienced by and among members of the Cincinnati CoP. I therefore started to describe it during interviews, albeit in rather rambling fashion, in order to clarify the nature of my enquiry, as is illustrated by the following verbatim interview excerpt:

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<sup>9</sup> The performance date was January 25th, 2018.

<sup>10</sup> I copied and pasted this text into my electronic diary when I was adding the performance to my schedule. I did not note the webpage details at the time since I was not anticipating referring to it in a way that would demand a citation note in the future.

So this is a really difficult question to ask because I don't know quite exactly what I'm getting at, but I'm kind of asking how dancing Argentine tango here affects how people relate to themselves as ageing entities. And by ageing, I'm not saying how it relates to somebody feeling like they're old or anything. It's more about – so a little while ago, I went to see this documentary about the Kronos Quartet and it was kind of half documentary and half performance, so the Kronos Quartet were on stage but at the same time, we were seeing them talking on the screen behind and that had been filmed and edited beforehand. And then there was the creator of this performance who was also on stage and he was adding some narration. Anyway, so there are three guys in the Quartet who must be in their – I don't know, I would say, probably in their 70s or close to. And they've just been joined by a new cellist - I think their previous cellist became ill or something. And this new cellist is very young, she must be late 20s, early 30s. And in the film, she said “before I joined the Kronos Quartet, I always looked at people in terms of age. I would say ‘this is an old person’, ‘this is a middle-aged person’, ‘this is a young person’. Since I've joined the Kronos Quartet, I don't think like that any more. I just am interested in the music that people bring to the table”. And I wonder if something like that is going on in the dance, because you see people dancing with people of all different ages and I'm wondering if it affects how people feel about themselves as an ageing entity, look at other people as ageing entities, kind of eliminates ageing as an issue, or exacerbates it?

Despite my clumsy choice of words and unpolished phrasing, this approach produced some rich responses.

As I have already indicated, I thoroughly enjoyed conducting fieldwork within the Cincinnati Argentine tango CoP, but that does not mean that the process was without challenges. One problem I encountered early on concerned the logistics of conducting participant observer ethnography. Although it is a common research methodology, I quickly realised that it was often hard to observe when one was also participating. More specifically, whenever I was dancing, my focus would be on my lead, and to simultaneously attempt to maintain awareness of all that was going on around me from my rather limited perspective as a follow was beyond me. As a result, I chose to switch back and forth between participation and observation. I was lucky in that many



of my interviewees had accumulated hours of watching tango events unfold and were kind enough to share much of what they had noticed in the process. In fact, their descriptions often proved to be central to my growing understanding of the Cincinnati Argentine tango CoP.

Another area which I found difficult to navigate was working out what it was appropriate for me to attend and what was not. I was not concerned about the open events which I could have attended as a participant regardless of whether I had been doing fieldwork, but those that I sat in on purely as an observer were a little more tricky. In the case of group classes, I requested permission ahead of time from the relevant teachers who in turn checked with their students, and that was all pretty straightforward. However, there was one semi-private group class which took place on some Sundays and which involved two of the Tango Del Barrio teachers working with six or eight students. The event – which was affectionately known by its participants as the “*soirée*” – had been instigated some years previously by a number of dancers who wanted an opportunity to go into certain aspects of Argentine tango in greater depth and. I very much wanted to attend at least one *soirée* but felt awkward about inviting myself along, even though several of the regular participants had said it would be fine for me to do so. In the end, I emailed one of the teachers about it and wrote that:

inasmuch as I can, I would like this ethnographic research project to be based on my participant-observation - so I would hope to participate in whatever activities are appropriate for me to involve myself in as part of the process - as well as extensively conversing with others and seeing how they navigate the tango realm. However, although I am a keen tango student, I'm only too aware that my dancing experience is limited so I wouldn't want to overstep boundaries. I think basically what I mean to say is that were I to ask to participate in something that might strike community members as being unsuitable for my involvement or even simply my observation, please don't hesitate to let me know.

In the end, I attended the *soirée* on two occasions - once as an observer and once as a participant.

Several years ago, I was in the audience for an excellent “Ethnography Panel” organised by OSU’s Center for Folklore Studies.<sup>11</sup> It featured four graduate students talking about their research including Bishal Karna (Karna was then a PhD candidate and is, at time of writing, an Assistant Professor in the Religious Studies department at Nazareth College in Rochester, New York). Karna’s presentation was about the fieldwork he had conducted in a number of north American Zen Buddhist centres and during it, he commented that any time one conducts ethnographic research to learn about a particular community, one also learns about oneself. I was often reminded of the truth of his remark during my own fieldwork. On more than one occasion, I was forced to recognise aspects of myself and my situation of which I might have preferred to remain ignorant. Such was the case when I addressed some of less appealing aspects of Tango World, including asking female interviewees about their experience of not being asked to dance. Whenever I raised this subject, I had to confess that I too had felt the ignominy of sitting at the edge of the dance floor as one *tanda* after another went by without receiving a single invitation.<sup>12</sup> I hate admitting - even to myself - that this happens to me, and because I have little staying power in such situations - three “invitation-less” *tandas* is about as much as I can stand - I have largely been able to convince myself that it does not. But as I asked other women to talk about finding themselves in such situations, I realised that to pretend I had no personal knowledge of being in that position myself - even if only by omission - would be, at the very least, un-

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<sup>11</sup> The panel took place on March 24, 2017.

<sup>12</sup> A *tanda* is a set of three or four songs. The playlists of many tango dance events comprise of a series of *tandas*.

generous. So yes, I did have to own up to knowing exactly what it was like to be in that situation, and to recall some of the thoughts that have raced through my mind whenever it has occurred, such as “How can I arrange my face so as not to look forlorn? Where should I look if I cannot bring myself to look directly at any leads? How much longer can I take this? Why is no one asking me to dance? What is wrong with me?”

As it turned out, once I overcame my reluctance to talk about such experiences, I found that describing them to others for comic effect was marvellously therapeutic. For example, the day after I left a crowded *milonga* close to tears because of my failure to garner a single invitation - and yes, I do realise how pathetic that sounds - I arrived rather late at an intermediate Tango Northside class. It was led by Michael Wizer and Julie Barnett, Patricia Paz was there as a special guest, and five or six other students were present. Over the course of the class, several people enquired as to whether I had attended the previous night’s *milonga* and, on learning that I had, asked if I had enjoyed it. No, I said, each time explaining why. At the end of the class, as we were all changing out of our dancewear, there arose an informal group conversation during which I was asked again about the *milonga*, this time by a woman, L. Again I confessed I had not danced at all. As per my fieldnotes, L then said:

“But I heard it was really crowded”. “It was”, I confirmed. “But if it was so crowded, how come you didn’t dance?” asked L. I fake-sulked and looked put out and said in an exaggeratedly grumpy voice: “I know there were loads of people there but still no one asked me”. Michael said L would have got dances, she was “a force of nature”. And this was sweet. He wasn’t necessarily saying she’d have got dances because she’s so brilliant, she just would have made it happen. Anyway, people were laughing in a friendly way and I realised that each time I talked about it, the sting lessened.

I found there to be other comic aspects to my fieldwork. In particular, I noticed how passing comments from interlocutors could leave me either feeling utterly indignant or absurdly flattered by turns. For example, one man commented to me that since I attend events in Cincinnati as a single woman, I must relate to the frustration other single women had mentioned to him regarding not being asked to dance. As is now a matter of record, I do relate to this, but I was somewhat outraged - albeit in a rather tongue-in-cheek manner - that this man would assume that such was the case. By contrast, when another man - NE - was describing about how he chose whom to invite to dance, I asked if age played any part in his decision. He said it did not and continued to describe a woman, R, who occasionally attended local tango events. R is a female dancer who is much older than NE. She lives elsewhere but periodically visits Cincinnati because her son and his family are based in the city. NE said that he would “always make a point of dancing” several *tandas* with R whenever he spotted her because he enjoyed partnering with her and she with him. He went on to say that he would invite R even if “you [meaning me] may be sitting there and then V and a bunch of younger women”. NE’s comment delighted me. To have been mentioned in the same breath as V, who is both much younger than I am and also very good-looking indeed, significantly boosted my ego.

Lest I run the risk of sounding too full of myself, I will point to one more interview exchange which provoked in me quite the opposite effect. My interlocutor was a man called BA and we chatted for almost two hours. Early on in our conversation, BA commented that he thought I had a “very nice embrace”. “Oh thank you,” I said smugly. Well over an hour later, he said something along the lines of having noticed that very often “the more beautiful the woman is, the

worse her embrace is”. Admittedly, he did add there was not a direct relationship between the two, but by then any puff of pride generated by his earlier compliment had evaporated.

One other aspect of my research which struck me as amusing came out of the fact that I generally felt wholly sympathetic towards every interviewee regardless of what they shared with me, with sometimes contradictory results. For example, one man told me about an unpleasant experience he had had some months previously:

I was at a workshop somewhere, not in Cincinnati, but wherever it was, there was a woman there from Oklahoma, and we were doing *boleos*. And I had never seen her before. I had no idea what level she was at. So I was trying to lead her in a *boleo* and we tried, I tried, I tried, I tried. I said “can I do something in order to this?”. She said “yeah. You can lead me in a *boleo*”. “Okay” [laughs]. I know [the speaker is reacting to my horrified expression]!

My reaction to the man’s account was to be appalled by the woman’s behaviour and thoroughly supportive of him. However, on another occasion, a similar incident was described to me but this time from the woman’s perspective:

So I was in this class, and this guy, he was like “right, you need to turn like this, and then you need to step here, and then turn back, and step over there” and I said “I will if you lead it”.

In that case, my response to the woman’s account was that the man’s behaviour had warranted the interviewee’s curt rejoinder. Admittedly the two accounts are not directly inverse to one another - in the man’s story, he was asking how to improve, whereas in the woman’s narrative, her partner was being didactic. Still, my ability to shift quite sincerely from one perspective to the other probably relates to my propensity “to fall a little in love” with all of my interviewees.

## **Chapter Outline**

My dissertation consists of this introduction, followed by chapters 1 to 5, and a conclusion. In Chapter 1, I present an overview of the history of Argentine tango within US, followed by a short description of the dance and how it differs from its near namesake, ballroom tango. I then offer an account of the development of Cincinnati's Argentine tango "dance-scape" and describe various components that constitute its contemporary scene.

Each of the remaining four chapters are devoted to the themes that have emerged as most relevant over the course of my research. In Chapter 2, I investigate how tanguicity-as-tango-ethos emerges in Cincinnati through an elucidation of the values and norms that govern the city's Argentine tango community and which in turn form the group's ethos.

My discussion of tanguicity continues in Chapter 3, although now with tanguicity-as-tango-essence as the prevailing interpretation as I examine what draws Cincinnatians to, and keeps them involved in, their local Argentine tango community. I approach this subject via an investigation of affect. The academic rise, so to speak, of affect research began in semiotics, wherein affect was taken to be the sign indicative of the signified (Besnier 1990). Since then, scholarship on the subject has expanded across multiple disciplines, with the concept of affect becoming increasingly integrated with the study emotional states as well as with states of being that go beyond emotion. Dance scholar Susan Kozel describes affect as "one of the most intriguing, ubiquitous and elusive concepts of our intellectual climate", one that is "so very hard

to define because much of affect exists at the edges of language and reflection” (2017). She goes on to write that:

Affect accounts for the push and pull of the wide spectrum of intensities that we experience as physical beings. Often reduced to emotions, affects are more than one person’s feelings. Affects encompass a range of materialities, endogenous and exogenous to one’s corporeal being. Affects exist in fields. They exist in part as potential, and are always in exchange. Affect radiates across climate and built environment, anticipation and memory, somatic states and inorganic matter. (2017)

In other words, affect may be based in emotion but goes beyond emotion, and accounts for all manner of bodily states including those provoked by relations between bodies and other matter both tangible and intangible. Elsewhere, feminist scholar Sara Ahmed uses affect theory to investigate how the pursuit of happiness is directed towards objects, with family being the object with which she is primarily concerned (2008). Ahmed argues that happiness involves intentionality in that people imagine certain objects will make them happy and so direct themselves towards them. Here, I present the tango dance and the tango community as related objects and investigate how dancers’ expectations of both - guided by their own previous experiences, the accounts of others, and other sources – influence their own involvement in Tango World.

Chapter 4 is rooted in Judith Butler’s theory of gender as a social construction made manifest only through repeated performance of the self (1990) and addresses how Argentine tango inflects dancers’ relationships with gender identity. I focus on how practitioners’ negotiated involvement in the dance - a highly gendered form by any account - causes them to consciously alter how they perform their gendered identities both inside Tango World and beyond. My data suggests that

dancers find this process to be largely, though not exclusively, one of empowerment. As Butler argues, gender is performative; in Cincinnati, the gendered roles of tango are open to play and display, and both involve and challenge the fixed gender roles assigned in more traditional contexts.

Like gender, ageing is both a biological fact and a social construction, and in Chapter 5, I investigate the impact which the practitioners' involvement in the dance has had on their age identities. Just as tango is recognized as a gendered dance, it is - at least in north America - also frequently connected with advancing age. The success of the New York production of *Tango Argentino* - the so-called "Big Bang" of a show which is credited with triggering the current widespread popularity of Argentine tango in the US and which I write about in more detail in Chapter 1 - was explicitly credited to the show's "seasoned, mature performers" (Farris Thompson 2005:266). Most stateside tango communities typically slant older than is the case with many other local dance scenes, such as those related to clubbing or salsa. After all, unlike many movement-based activities that privilege the stamina, flexibility, and strength of youth, Argentine tango is not overly-taxing on the body. Movements are generally conducted at a walking pace and are rarely flashy. In fact, what is most prized is a body capable of moving smoothly, of expressing a refined musical sensitivity simply, and of maintaining a soft, responsive and connected embrace with their partner throughout. Accordingly, my focus in Chapter 5 is on the ways that Cincinnati tango dancers describe their attitudes towards age and ageing as having been affected by their involvement in the dance and its concomitant community. Philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy describes humans as possessing singular differences;



acknowledgement of one's own singular differences and those of others allows for a mutual inclining in ethical engagement (2000). Dance historian Ramsay Burt argues that dance performances featuring older dancers or multigenerational casts offer an opportunity for this process to take place and thereby counter dominant narratives of loss and decline (2016, 2017). With these ideas in mind and guided by the reflections of my interlocutors, I argue that a dance in which people literally incline towards each other to adopt the characteristic tango shared-axis stance can transform negative ideas regarding ageing.

In the conclusion to this dissertation, I discuss how studying a community vernacular practice can provide insights into matters that ostensibly seem to have little to do with the practice itself, but which instead address diverse matters of fundamental import to the lived experience.

### **Notes Regarding Interview Transcriptions, Fieldnotes, Interviewee Names, and Terms**

Throughout this dissertation, I have drawn extensively on, and include numerous excerpts from, my transcriptions of the interviews which I conducted over the course of my fieldwork. I have also included passages from my fieldnotes. To aid clarity, I have sometimes made some non-substantive revisions to the texts in question. A number of my interviewees were non-native English speakers. Whenever I have extracted text from a transcription of an interview with a non-native English speaker, I have prefaced the excerpt with the triangle symbol: Δ

I have largely avoided using the names of my interlocutors. However, as and when contextually appropriate, I have made an exception whenever the person's name is a matter of public record,

as is, for example, the case with the board members and teachers at Tango Del Barrio, the Cincinnati non-profit organisation which has been at the heart of my research. Otherwise, I have replace the names of my interviewees with two letters; these letters bear no relation to the actual names of the persons whom they signify and, for the purpose of maintaining the anonymity of my sources, are not always consistent within the monograph. As a further precaution, whenever I have included material of a conceivably sensitive nature within this work (for example, when referring to delicate personal information disclosed by my interviewees, or to comments made regarding others) I have excluded and/or obscured any potentially identifying factors regarding the interlocutors in question, as well as of any other persons mentioned. I have also done this with material which my interviewees expressed concern over sharing; in addition, in such cases, I asked them to explicitly approve the ways in which I have presented their words. If there had been cases in which approval was not given, I would have excised the material from the dissertation; however, this did not arise.

In the text, I have italicised any foreign words which are not in regular use in English, including many tango-specific terms which are, of course, often in Spanish. I describe the meaning of these tango terms whenever they first appear in the manuscript - sometimes in the body of the text and sometimes in footnotes, depending on the context.

Throughout this monograph, I repeatedly reference the two tango roles using the words “lead” and “follow” since these are the labels that most often occur in common parlance in Argentine tango settings in the USA. However, these terms do not give an accurate representation of what

each role incorporates (as I explain in more depth in Chapter 4). In addition, I have often used masculine pronouns in association with the lead role and feminine pronouns in association with the follow role; however, it is often the case that women dance as leads and men dance as follows so I would like to clarify that the objective underlying my use of gender-normative language is linguistic simplicity and does not denote any manner of ideological position on my part.

Except when quoting material from non-British textual sources, I have used British English terminology, spelling, and grammar conventions throughout this monograph.

### **Transcription Conventions**

The transcription conventions I used when typing up the contents of my interview recordings - and which therefore appear in the excerpts from those documentations which appear in this monograph - are as follows:-

Square brackets [ ]	indicate a note from the transcriber.
Rounded brackets ( )	indicate a conversational aside.
Hyphen -	indicates an interruption of thought or conversation.
Ellipses ...	indicates a trailing off of speech and/or a pause.
Three slashes ///	indicate people speaking over one another
Three question marks within square brackets [???	indicate that transcriber cannot understand something said
<u>Underlining</u>	indicates emphasis

## CHAPTER ONE

### Argentine Tango in the USA and the Cincinnati Argentine Tango "Dance-Scape"

I begin this chapter with an overview of the history of Argentine tango within the United States. There follows a short description of the dance and how it differs from its near namesake, ballroom tango. I then offer an account of the development of Cincinnati's Argentine tango "dance-scape" and describe various components that help constitute the contemporary scene. Along the way, I introduce some of the key figures, organisations, and venues which I have encountered during my research.

#### **A Brief History of Tango in the USA**

When tango initially ensnared the north American popular imagination in the early 1910s, the dance had only recently travelled beyond its fabled origins amid the newly-arrived immigrants eking out a living on the fringes of Buenos Aires (Farris Thompson 2005:235; Cooper 1995).<sup>13</sup> Tango's first port of call beyond its native land was - thanks to migrating musicians and dancers - Paris, where it quickly became the latest vogue. The acclaim it received in the fashionable French capital meant that the dance soon became popular in other parts of Europe, and then the USA. In the course of such globetrotting, the "suggestive contorsions" [sic] which had

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<sup>13</sup> Throughout this monograph and unless indicated otherwise, I use the word "tango" to refer primarily to a dance form. However, besides describing a dance form, "tango" also encompasses interrelating genres of music, poetry, song lyrics, and argot.

characterised the earliest form of the dance on its home turf faded and tango instead became, according to anthropologist Suzanne Maria Azzi, “decent” and “stylized” (2005). The international fervour generated by this more decorous - though still risqué by many standards of the time - incarnation of the dance form led to its being re-embraced back in Argentina, although now by upper class *porteños* in the heart of Buenos Aires.<sup>14</sup> These wealthy young men and women inhabited a very different milieu to those frequented by tango’s down-at-heel originators on the city’s periphery. Over time, a new style developed in Argentina, known as *tango de salon*. *Tango de salon* eschewed the exaggerated steps and adornments typical of the earlier local incarnation, though such features continued to characterise the dance when performed by the residents of less affluent barrios. As Buenos Aires played host to the so-called “Golden Age” of tango - namely the 1920s through the 1940s - these various strands of the dance interwove, evolved, and flourished, as did the music and poetry composed specially for the form (Azzi 2005).

### **About Ballroom/American Tango**

During the same period, and independent of that which was taking place thousands of miles to the south, dancers in the USA were developing their own interpretation of tango. In time, this stateside reworking of the form came to be known as “ballroom tango”. In fact, for a good part of the twentieth century, ballroom tango (or “American tango”, as it is sometimes called) was the only style of the dance to be widely performed in the US. It was added to the official ballroom repertoire in 1931 and, as such, formed part of a regulated dance milieu which is largely focussed

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<sup>14</sup> The word *porteño* (*porteña/porteños/porteñas*) refers to a person from the port city of Buenos Aires.

upon preparation for, and participation in, competitions (Marceau 2005). Performances of ballroom tango have reached wide audiences across the US in recent years thanks to the popularity of such shows as *Dancing with the Stars*.<sup>15</sup> However, it is a quite different beast - not least in terms of such fundamental matters as how, where, why, and to what music it is typically danced - from the type of tango with which I am concerned in this dissertation and which I describe as “Argentine tango”.

As with all of the official ballroom dances, ballroom tango has standardised steps and training which are determined by two institutions, USA Dance and the International Choreographed Ballroom Dance Association.<sup>16</sup> Ballroom tango has evolved according to an aesthetic governed by - as dancer, choreographer, and instructor Yvonne Marceau, puts it - “the need to be noticed by the judges among a large group of dancing couples” (2005). Ballroom tango dancers typically perform predetermined sequences for an audience, and their desire to keep said audience captive means that making movements that are “bigger, faster, and clearer than those around them” is a primary consideration (2005). Other characteristic features of ballroom tango include “a staccato style” that involves the display of sharp actions which “accelerate explosively from stillness to vigorous action” and back again; an embrace in which “the woman locks her left elbow or forearm with the man's right arm so that her left hand is underneath, rather than above”; and a mandate that any accompanying music must be in “4/4 time” and “played at 33 bars per minute” (2005).

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<sup>15</sup> *Dancing with the Stars* is a show produced by the ABC network. As of September 2019, 27 seasons have been broadcast. (Information accessed on 2019-09-05 via <http://abc.go.com/shows/dancing-with-the-stars/episode-guide>.)

<sup>16</sup> As of November 4, 2019, the website address of USA Dance is [usadance.org](http://usadance.org) and the website address of the International Choreographed Ballroom Dance Association is <https://www.icbda.com>.

## About Argentine Tango

By way of contrast, Argentine tango - at least in terms of how I have encountered it in Cincinnati (as well as in other cities in the USA and beyond) - typically manifests as a vernacular social form of patterned movement and is much more closely related to the dance as it blossomed in Buenos Aires during the aforementioned Golden Age than it is to the American ballroom style. In fact, despite its relocation, what I am calling Argentine tango seems very similar to the form which Ana Cara describes as being “danced intimately among family and friends or in the numerous *milongas* (tango dance halls) in Buenos Aires” today, and which she labels “home tango” (2009:439).

Argentine tango is far less formal than ballroom tango and is typically improvised in the moment rather than being choreographed. Though it can be practised to a wide variety of musics, it is common to find that many, if not all, of the pieces that make up an Argentine tango event’s playlist were specifically composed for the form, often during that Golden Age. The chosen recordings frequently date from the latter part of that era too. A typical Argentine tango event’s playlist is usually made up of a series of three or four song sets. These sets are known as *tandas*. By convention, the songs that make up a *tanda* are by the same composer and are performed by the same orchestra in roughly the same tempo. In addition, each *tanda* is dedicated to one of the three rhythmic styles characteristic of Argentine tango: *tango* (which is built on a 2/4 time signature), *vals* (built on a 3/4 time signature), and *milonga* (which has a 2/2 time signature and a distinctive syncopated bass line). One further important difference between the Argentine and

ballroom tango forms is the fact that in the former, the primary person a dancer aims to please is their partner.

More generally, one can say that Argentine tango is largely a vehicle for an extemporised and social movement-based activity rather than for a choreographed virtuosic display. Of course, this does not mean that competence is not important, but that judgement of competence is not necessarily based on how someone looks as they dance - or at least, not exclusively so; in fact, the most highly prized aspect of tango in a milonga context is generally also that which most tenaciously defies outward show, namely the quality of the connection established and maintained between a couple. This connection is rooted in the sensate communication made possible by the embrace and which can act as a catalyst for an intangible sense of intimacy or, as Cara puts it, a “silent, seemingly invisible—some would say ‘secret’—dialogue between dancers” (2009:452).

### **The Revival of Argentine Tango in the USA**

That there is an Argentine tango community in Cincinnati today, as well as in many other cities around North America, seems largely due to the repercussions of an event which took place on June 25th, 1985. That was the day on which the *Tango Argentino* stage show first appeared in New York City. Its debut performance proved to be a theatrical “Big Bang” which led to a stateside “boom” in Argentine tango that continues to this day (Farris Thompson 2005:266).



The physical trajectory which preceded *Tango Argentino*'s first appearance in the Big Apple echoed that which had ushered in the United States' first taste of the dance some 75 years or so before; prior to its Manhattan opening, *Tango Argentino* had played to capacity audiences and dazzled critics in Paris. New York theatregoers quickly became every bit as enthusiastic as their Gallic counterparts and so after the production's initial run at the City Center Theater on West 56th Street was complete, the show moved to the Mark Hellinger Theater on Broadway where it opened for an extended run in October 1985. The reasons for the show's success were, art historian Robert Farris Thompson writes, obvious: "people savoured the mixture of music and text, singing and dance, in what was self-evidently one of the richest offerings of national talent on the planet" (2005:266). As Farris Thompson rather poetically puts it "like light from a star, the steps of 1940s Buenos Aires at last lit up North America" (2005:266).

The forces behind *Tango Argentino* were all Argentine born. They included producers Hector Orezzaoli and Claudio Segovia and dancer Juan Carlos Copes; Copes and Segovia choreographed the show (Parker 1986). Copes - along with his performance partner of many years, Maria Nieves - also headed a cast that consisted of seasoned tango professionals, each of whom had honed their skills in the barrios of Buenos Aires. Accompanied by songs created by some of the genre's most famous composers, the *Tango Argentino* performers used dance to present a history of the tango form. The result was revelatory, as evidenced by this account by The New York Times' dance critic Anna Kisselgoff:

Like many others who have never been to Argentina, I too had received my image of the tango as a ballroom dance from the movies or from parodied versions in theater and dance productions. The tea-dance version – with its swoop-and-dip image or its cheek-to-cheek slinking variant – was what one had

in mind. Nothing could have prepared the lay audience for the entangled legs, the brilliant kicking and brisk footwork, the twists of the marvelous Argentine dancers on view in "Tango Argentino." The lizardlike languor associated with the tango's seductive aura gives way here to something very different. The tango, we see, has a highly codified dance vocabulary open to numerous stylistic interpretations. (1985)

*Tango Argentino* would go on to enjoy “overwhelming international success” over the course of several world tours, resulting in “dancers from Seattle to Seoul” getting “caught up in a tango craze” (Aloff 1999).

### **The Development of Cincinnati's Argentine Tango “Dance-scape”**

A decade on from *Tango Argentino*’s triumphant stateside debut, a book entitled *Tango: The Dance, The Song, The Story* appeared in shops (Collier et al, 1995). Published by Thames and Hudson – a British press well-known for its richly illustrated books about the arts - *Tango: The Dance, The Song, The Story* is large, lavish, and clearly intended for a popular audience. Its contents include sections that trace tango’s history, development, and international popularity. In its back pages, there are listings for “International Tango Centres”; under the USA locations, Cincinnati is the only city named that is not part of a major American conurbation (201-202). It is also the only inland city besides Chicago. The entry refers simply to “The Cincinnati Tango Society” and offers a telephone number for anyone wishing to find out more (202).<sup>17</sup> This reference, combined with the anecdotal evidence of some of my interlocutors, suggests that the Midwest’s Queen City embraced the dance form comparatively rapidly in the wake of the *Tango*

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<sup>17</sup> The name of the listed organisation seems to have fluctuated over the years. I have also seen it described as “The Argentine Tango Club of Cincinnati” and the “The Cincinnati Argentine Tango Society”.

*Argentino* Big Bang. That it did so seems to be largely thanks to the efforts of the social dance teacher and historian Richard Powers, about whom I first heard from Michael Wizer.

Michael Wizer is one of the Cincinnati Argentine tango community's longest-standing members and early on in my interview with him, I asked him to tell me the circumstances of his introduction to the dance. It came about, he told me, shortly after he arrived in Cincinnati from Pittsburgh to undertake a psychology internship at the Children's Hospital in 1992. Wizer remembered that at that time:

there was very little tango in the United States, there was very little tango in North America and there was a man, Richard Powers, who was teaching dance at the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music. He was a dance historian as well as a dancer, and he had established a dance troupe that was called The Flying Cloud, and they travelled all over the world and the dancing that they did was called "vintage dancing". And what defines a vintage dance? A vintage dance is a dance that was being danced, something like more than 40 years ago. So if you were a vintage dancer, you would dance things like Viennese waltz, or foxtrot, or schottische, or the animal dances from the ragtime United States. And so I, just by chance, stumbled upon the vintage dancers and I liked the way they looked; just simply, I liked that people were having so much fun, and so I joined the vintage dancers. And then there was sort of a splinter group that was into tango - and the reason that tango existed at all in Cincinnati was because Richard Powers would have a vintage dance week one week every summer - he had done it for maybe five or six years before I came to Cincinnati - and for at least the last few of them, he had invited Nora Dinzelbacher. Some of the vintage dancers were dancing tango and so I danced vintage dance a little while but then when I discovered tango, I liked it better.

According to various biographies I found online, Nora Dinzelbacher - also known as Nora Olivera - is one of the USA's longest-established Argentine-born tango instructors. She has been

teaching in the States and elsewhere around the world for more than four decades.<sup>18</sup> After settling in San Francisco, California, in 1988, she co-founded the Bay Area Tango Association (“the oldest Tango Association on the west coast of the US” according to the Association’s Facebook page) and the annual “Nora’s Tango Week” tango festival in 1998. At the invitation of Richard Powers, Dinzelbacher visited Cincinnati several times in the late 80s and early 90s to teach during the Vintage Dance Weeks that Powers organised, as evidenced by a notice printed in the *Cincinnati Enquirer* on June 14, 1992 (i.e. the year that Michael Wizer arrived in the city). The notice is headed “Troupe Steps Back in Time” and reads as follows:

Historical dance surges every year around this time, when the Flying Cloud Academy and Vintage Dance Troupe present Vintage Dance Week, five days led by an international slate of teachers.

Flying Cloud troupe director Richard Powers is presenting a concert of historical dance on June 24, featuring dances of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, at UC’s Corbett Auditorium. Special guests include British singer Ian Whitcomb and Nora Dinzelbacher. (Munson)

Richard Powers is now a full-time instructor of contemporary social dancing and dance history in Stanford University’s Dance Division, but from 1971 to 1992, Cincinnati was his base.<sup>19</sup> He taught at the city’s Conservatory of Music from 1984 until he left Ohio shortly after Wizer first arrived there. In an email communication with me, Powers confirmed Wizer’s recollection of his having established a group of dancers dedicated to reconstructing a wide range of historical social dance forms. It was called the Flying Cloud Academy of Vintage Dance. This troupe was

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<sup>18</sup> The sources of my information about Nora Dinzelbacher were two websites – one called “In Scenes”, the other “Nora’s Tango Week” – along with the Bay Area Tango Association’s Facebook page. I accessed these sites on 2018-07-18 via <http://www.inscenes.com/tangoscene/noraint1.htm>, <http://www.tangoweek.com/noras-bio/>, and [https://www.facebook.com/pg/bayareatango/about/?ref=page\\_internal](https://www.facebook.com/pg/bayareatango/about/?ref=page_internal) respectively.

<sup>19</sup> I accessed Richard Powers’ CV on 2018-07-18 via <http://richardpowers.com/PowersCV.htm>.

active when the *Tango Argentino* show toured to Cincinnati, performing there for the first time in May 1988 (Lyman 1988). It is possible that the show's ongoing popularity prompted Powers to include tango instruction as part of the intensive dance workshop weeks that he organised each summer - and therefore to extend invitations to Dinzelbacher - though he did not mention this being the case in his correspondence with me.

At the time that Powers introduced Argentine tango to his vintage dancers, Cristina Gutierrez and her husband Lawrence Brown were active members of the group and I spoke with both of them by 'phone early in January 2019.<sup>20</sup> Gutierrez told me that what had drawn the couple to participate in Powers' vintage dance initiative was that he taught not only the steps of any given dance, but also about its history and the culture in which it had developed. According to Gutierrez, Powers mostly focussed on European dances that "you could learn in one night". It quickly became clear, however, that Argentine tango demanded a more extensive commitment. As Gutierrez put it:

The way people move and the way they feel the beat in Argentine tango, it's so completely different to any kind of movement in Europe and the USA. It blew our minds. There was a lot of freedom to combine things in different ways, and the woman gets choices and to have her own style.

Many of Gutierrez and Brown's fellow vintage dancers seem to have been similarly transported by their first taste of the dance, and so they formed the splinter group devoted to its practice mentioned by Wizer. Although its members had already been meeting informally for a year or

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<sup>20</sup> These conversations took place on 2019-01-09 and over the following few days, Brown kindly sent me copies of some of the documents he had kept from his dancing years, including newspaper articles, pamphlets, and flyers.

more, the group's official launch took place on September 6, 1991, as documented in a handwritten text made at the time. Brown shared a copy with me and it reads as follows:

The Argentine Tango Club of Cincinnati

We the Undersigned, have on this date established the Foundation of the aforementioned Club, which shall operate pursuant to the following objectives:

1<sup>st</sup> Its members shall meet regularly to engage in the performance of the Tango dance in its original Argentine format, including its multiple variations and embellishments ...

2<sup>nd</sup>: From time to time, social gatherings shall take place, during which the execution of said dance will constitute one of the main sources of enjoyment ...

3<sup>rd</sup>: The Club shall strive to establish contacts with other similar organizations that may already exist or be created in the future in other cities of these United States ...

4<sup>th</sup>: The Club has the intention of periodically engaging the services of professionals in the art of teaching the intricate steps and contortions that are characteristic of this elegant and passionate dance form and ...

5<sup>th</sup>: Eventually ... the members intend to travel to the fair land that saw the Tango flourish, namely the Argentine and its Capital City Buenos Aires, and there to visit the places where it may be assiduously danced by the experts as well as by the general populace ...

So it shall be ...

Given in this Queen City of the West, Cincinnati, on September 6<sup>th</sup>, 1991.

Over 30 signatures follow.

Michael Oppenheim, a tango aficionado from Buenos Aires then living in Cincinnati, was the author of text, Brown told me. However, both Brown and Gutierrez were of the opinion that the driving force behind the group was a man called Dennis Fausz. Certainly, it is Fausz who is

listed as its “founding member and director” in a notice published in the *Cincinnati Enquirer* in April 1993 (Gotta Join). (The notice goes on to give information about regular Thursday night tango classes at the University YMCA, 270 Calhoun Street, Clifton, and a forthcoming tango weekend workshop consisting of classes and an evening dance conducted by Fabian Salas and Cynthia Zebergs.) I found a further reference to Fausz on a webpage entitled “Tango Teachers and Dance Studios”.<sup>21</sup> The relevant text states:

Dennis Fausz helped found the Cincinnati Argentine Tango Society back in 1989 and was instrumental in its successful development. He was a splendid and encouraging dancer who helped lead the practicas and organized formal workshops. Dennis brought many fine teachers to Cincinnati and hosted them while they were here, including Fabian Salas, Rebecca Shulmann, Michael Walker and Luren Bellucci, and Lorena Ermocida. Dennis Jacob Fausz passed away on October 31, 2009 at the age of 60 in Edgewood, Kentucky.

During the early and mid 1990s - including the years immediately following Powers’ departure from the city - Fausz, Gutierrez, Brown, and other members of the Cincinnati Argentine Tango Society were active proponents of the dance. They put together a schedule of regular classes and also organised special events which usually involved visiting teachers. However, over the years, the passion these “early adopters” felt for Argentine tango faded, as did the Cincinnati Argentine Tango Society/Club itself. Even so, that initial group, spurred by the efforts of Richard Powers, sowed the seeds for Cincinnati’s contemporary Argentine tango community. As one of my interviewees put it, its members formed the local *guardia vieja* (“old guard”) of the dance.

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<sup>21</sup> I accessed the “Tango Teachers and Dance Studios” webpage via [http://www.tangocincinnati.com/local\\_teachers.html](http://www.tangocincinnati.com/local_teachers.html) on 2018-11-28. The “Tango Teachers and Dance Studios” page is part of a website owned and maintained by Brown, the overall title of which is “Tango Cincinnati”. Despite its name, the contents of the Tango Cincinnati website are eclectic; in addition to further tango-related sections (which appear under the headings “Tango Terms”, “Tango Links”, and “Tango Beginnings”), there are also pages devoted to reviews of restaurants in the Cincinnati area and “Early Music”.

Inasmuch as I could ascertain, none of the surviving members of that initial band of Cincinnati Argentine tango devotees continue to actively pursue the dance today. Of the people I spoke with, it was Michael Wizer who had the longest history of involvement with the dance in the city. However, when he joined the Cincinnati Argentine Tango Society/Club, it had already been active for several years. Moreover, his first stint with the group only lasted about a year since, once his internship at the Children's Hospital ended, he returned to Pittsburgh to complete his doctoral studies in psychology. Wizer was to move back to Cincinnati in 1995 and several years after than he would begin organising local tango activities himself. In the meantime, however, another figure in the history of Cincinnati's tango dance-scape came to prominence: Virginia Malton.

Although Virginia Malton passed away in May 2011, hers was a name I would hear over and over again during the course of my fieldwork. Gutierrez told me that Malton had been instrumental in "keeping everything going" once the initial group's enthusiasm waned and before fresher forces arrived on the scene. Another interviewee described Malton as "the bridge" between the early dancers and "what happened later". Besides being a committed *tanguera* and teacher, Malton was also - Gutierrez observed - excellent at navigating the various "divisions and politics" that might otherwise have ruptured the young community.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> The words *tanguero* or *tanguera* refer to a tango dancer (or singer) and are modified according to gender. These terms belong to the lexicon of Argentine tango expressions which have been adopted internationally.



I learned about Malton's tango trajectory largely through interviewee recollections as well as some communications I had with her widower, Andy McClintock. According to McClintock, Malton was "a natural dancer" who became interested in Argentine tango after seeing a performance of *Tango Argentino* during its stint at Cincinnati's Riverbend Theater in 1988. Malton went on to study with professionals in New York, Miami, Montreal and Europe. It is not clear exactly when she became an instructor of Argentine tango herself, but McClintock remembers that she taught often at various locations in and around the city. These locations included Malton's condominium; the couple's apartment; the Step 'N' Out Studio in Covington, Kentucky; and on the University of Cincinnati campus. She also taught in venues in Columbus, and Louisville and Lexington in Kentucky. In addition, Malton followed the precedent - set by Powers and maintained by the Cincinnati Argentine Tango Society - of inviting professional dancers to the city to give concentrated series of workshops. Besides Nora Dinzelbacher, the instructors who visited Cincinnati during the tango community's formative years in the city included such highly celebrated *tangueros* as "Nito and Elba".<sup>23</sup>

During the decade following *Tango Argentino*'s arrival in New York City, taking classes with visiting teachers was one of the few ways that tango enthusiasts in the USA were able to learn and improve. The World Wide Web was publicly launched in 1991, but it would be many years before users could access anything like the abundance of internet-based resources that are available today (*Encyclopedia Britannica* 2017). Michael Wizer's description of his early years

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<sup>23</sup> The dance partnership of Nito Garcia and Elba Sottile began in 1973. Since then, the couple have taught Argentine tango in locations all around the world and continue to be much in demand. Garcia, who was born in 1935, was recently described in the *New York Times* as "an emissary from the golden age of tango" (Macaulay 2017).

involved in tango therefore provides an interesting first-person account of what it was like to set out to become a competent Argentine tango dancer - and help others do the same - during this period.

When Wizer returned to Pittsburgh in 1993, his relatively brief initial taste of Argentine tango in Cincinnati had left him hungry for more. However, he found the Pennsylvania city to be completely devoid of any kind of tango activity. Yet his ardour for the dance was so strong that although he was himself still grappling with its elementary movements, he decided to launch himself as a teacher a mere ten months after he had attended his first tango class. When I asked if this early assumption of a pedagogical role was motivated by a desire to build a tango community, Wizer's response was emphatic: "Yes, yes. Because I thought it was incredible. I thought it was an amazing thing, so I just wanted people to enjoy it as much as I did". Wizer went on to tell me that most of what he practised and taught at that time was "made up" and that he "had to imagine what was the right way to do things". Every few months, he would travel to New York City to study with some of the few professional tango teachers permanently based in the States at that time – most regularly with Daniel and Maria Bastone. Only then could he verify if what he had been doing was right or not. As he put it: "I'd go talk to Daniel and then I would learn his way of doing it and his way of thinking about it, but I was routinely making wrong choices".

In August 1995 Wizer returned to Cincinnati to take up a permanent position as a psychologist. For the first several years, Wizer rented an apartment from - and was neighbours with – Christina

Gutierrez and Larry Brown. Despite the couple's encouragement, Wizer was initially cautious of stepping on the "turf" of other teachers who had already established themselves locally, such as Dennis Fausz and Virginia Malton. He did lead the occasional workshop in Lexington, Kentucky, and would also periodically invite an experienced tanguera friend of his, Brigitta Winkler, to the city so that she could give private lessons both to him and a selection of his tango friends.<sup>24</sup> During 1997, however, Wizer began to rent studio space at the same Step 'N' Out studio in Covington, Kentucky, where Virginia Malton taught, and offered one or two classes each week. Initially, Cristina Gutierrez assisted him during lessons, but by the early 2000s, Nuria López-Ortega had taken over as Wizer's regular teaching partner.

Originally from Spain, López-Ortega's relationship with Argentine tango began in 1997 when she was a graduate student at Cornell University. After receiving a doctorate in applied linguistics, López-Ortega secured a faculty position at Miami University. As she prepared to relocate to Oxford, Ohio - where Miami University is based - she had made enquiries about local opportunities for dancing Argentine tango. As far as she could ascertain, nothing seemed to be happening in Oxford itself, but someone gave her Wizer's name and suggested she get in touch with him. Since Cincinnati is only around 40 miles from Oxford, López-Ortega contacted Wizer. They arranged to meet and went on to establish both a strong friendship and long-standing dance partnership.

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<sup>24</sup> Winkler is a German dancer who began practising Argentine tango in the early 1980s. (Information accessed on 2018-07-18 via <http://www.brigittatango.de/bio.htm>.)

López-Ortega's teaching partnership with Wizer and her growing involvement in the Cincinnati tango scene, were - at least in part - what prompted her decision to move to the city at the end of 2001 and to commute from there to Oxford.<sup>25</sup> Shortly thereafter, she and Wizer set up "Northside Tango". (Northside Tango was the precursor of Tango Del Barrio, the organisation which has been my primary field site; its name references the Cincinnati neighbourhood in which Gutierrez, Brown, Wizer, and López-Ortega all lived.) I asked López-Ortega if she could remember discussing the Northside Tango venture with Wizer around the time of its launch; for example, had they had any kind of vision of what they hoped they might achieve? López-Ortega responded:

I used to say that I was a "tango angel" because really, Michael was the one who took care of all that. I basically just tagged along, you know. He would plan the classes. I would do a lot of advertising, I would do the flyers. Of course, everything was very small scale. We didn't have a webpage or anything like that. Everything was like, you know, on paper. I remember making copies and putting them up in coffee shops (...). But it was Michael's business, and I was just his teaching partner really. And I would organise the *milonga*. We had a *milonga* here, around the corner from where I live, which is right across from where the tango studio has been for the past few years before we moved to College Hill.<sup>26</sup> So we were in the neighbourhood. We started to be seen, to be known by other people, and we had classes. We had a *milonga* once a month, which is really the "First Saturday *Milonga*".<sup>27</sup> And I ran it for 17 years pretty much until last year when I stopped doing it.<sup>28</sup>

Wizer's recollection of that period aligns with that of López-Ortega:

For the first eight years, I would just rent studio space on a couple of nights a week. I think I was always teaching two nights a week and then having a *práctica*

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<sup>25</sup> Some years later, López-Ortega took up a position at the University of Cincinnati.

<sup>26</sup> At the time that I interviewed López-Ortega (August 17, 2018), she continued to live in the Northside neighbourhood. Her home at that time was within a block or two of the location on the corner of Knowlton Street and Hamilton Avenue which housed Tango Del Barrio from 2013-2017.

<sup>27</sup> The First Saturday *Milonga* continues to be a fixture of the Tango Del Barrio calendar although it now goes by the name of "*Milonga entre Tango y Tango*".

<sup>28</sup> López-Ortega stopped organising the First Saturday *Milonga*/*Milonga entre Tango y Tango* during 2017.

probably on Wednesday night, and then two *milongas* a month, or at least one, and I did that for eight years.<sup>29</sup> It was my business. Nuria was my partner for that (...) and that happened in, like, four different locations.

Other than the initial Covington Step 'N' Out venue, the locations in which Wizer taught during this period were all in the Northside neighbourhood. They included a room within the Hoffner Lodge, a handsome red brick three storey building topped by a turret and located on the southwest corner of Hamilton Avenue and Moline Court, and the first floor (the second floor in US English) of 4046 Hamilton Avenue above a restaurant called Django Western Taco (which has itself since relocated a few blocks up the street). As Wizer's tango enterprise moved from one property to another, it also grew, attracting more and more students of varying abilities and pedagogical needs. As it did so, its name went through several permutations. For example, one of my interviewees remembers the organisation being called Tango Del Barrio del Norte when he started taking classes in 2002 (Tango Del Barrio del Norte roughly translates as Tango of the Northside Neighbourhood).<sup>30</sup>

By the mid "aughts", Wizer realised that the Argentine tango enterprise which he had founded was getting too big for him to manage on his own. "I could see that I wasn't going to devote the energy to it that it was ready for," he told me, "and so then I started to invite people". Wizer began by asking a few of the city's more advanced dancers to either teach classes or to act as teaching assistants. (Because Argentine tango is a partner dance, instruction is easier if two

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<sup>29</sup> A *práctica* is an informal tango gathering that is designed to provide an opportunity for people work on improving their dance. (Although the correct Spanish spelling of the terms includes an accent over the "a" in the first syllable, that accent is not always present when the word is used in locations where Spanish is not the native language).

<sup>30</sup> Another interviewee told me that the first time he heard the phrase "Tango Del Barrio", it was used as the name for Wednesday evening *prácticas* which Wizer and Lopez-Ortega organised.

teachers – or one primary teacher and a teaching assistant – are present, since the lead and follow roles can then be demonstrated simultaneously). Wizer then decided that transforming his outfit into a non-profit organisation would be a good route forward and so he asked his newly acquired pedagogical colleagues to serve as its official board directors. With their support, Tango Del Barrio was formally established as a 501c3 organisation on April 1, 2008.

### **Tango Del Barrio**

On the homepage of its website, Tango Del Barrio describes itself as “Cincinnati’s premier Argentine Tango venue” and “a non-profit, welcoming community of those devoted to sharing the spirit, skills, history, and enjoyment of Argentine Tango as a social dance”.<sup>31</sup> The organisation has served as my primary research site throughout my fieldwork in two ways. First, almost all of my interlocutors are - or, at least, have been at some point - involved with the organisation in some way, either as current or former board members, teachers, students, participants, or a combination of these various roles. Secondly, for the majority of my time spent “in the field” at Argentine tango events, I was at one or other of the two physical locations Tango Del Barrio has inhabited during the time I have known it.<sup>32</sup>

When Tango Del Barrio formed, Michael Wizer was its board chair and his directorial colleagues were - at least as far as anyone remembers - Julie Lessard, Nuria López-Ortega, Jake and Ella Moskovich, Chuck Reder, Tony Seta, and Debby Vigna. Of this original group, I have

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<sup>31</sup> Information accessed on 2018-07-20 via <https://tangodelbarrio.com>.

<sup>32</sup> When I initially visited Tango Del Barrio in August 2014, it was located on the top floor of a former mortuary in the Northside neighbourhood. From November 2017 onwards, the organisation has been based above a wine shop in College Hill.

interviewed everyone but Lessard who - as far as I have been able to ascertain - no longer dances.<sup>33</sup> Four of the original members - the Moskoviches, Reder, and Seta - remain on the board of Tango Del Barrio to this day. The Moskoviches - a married couple – are originally from the Ukraine. They have lived in the US since the 1970s and have been in Cincinnati for the bulk of that time. They began studying tango in the early 2000s and started teaching shortly after joining the Tango Del Barrio board; they usually teach together. Tony Seta came to tango in 2002 after some years of dancing salsa. Besides serving as a teacher, Seta has been Tango Del Barrio's treasurer since it became a non-profit. Chuck Reder is a native Ohioan who has lived in Cincinnati since he moved there as an undergraduate during the 1960s. He took up Argentine tango circa 1999. For some time in the early 2000s, he served as Virginia Malton's teaching assistant. He went on to establish a long-term dance partnership with Debby Vigna, the other original board member, with whom he went on to teach for many years. Vigna only left the board in 2017 ahead of her relocation to Boulder, Colorado, at the end of that year.

Debby Vigna was the first person I interviewed in connection with this project. She told me that her Argentine tango journey had begun in 2000, shortly after she and her husband moved to Cincinnati from New Jersey. She began assisting Wizer in classes in 2003 (or thereabouts) before becoming a teacher in her own right. As mentioned above, she often worked in partnership with Reder and became a very active member of the community. When I asked Vigna to share some of her memories of the early years of Tango Del Barrio, she told me that at

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<sup>33</sup> Lessard was introduced to Argentine tango by Nuria López-Ortega. The two met when Lessard was a student in one of López-Ortega's classes at the University of Cincinnati. According to her LinkedIn profile, Lessard was an "Assistant Tango Instructor" at Tango Del Barrio from 2007-2011. (Information accessed on 2018-11-28 via <https://www.linkedin.com/in/julie-lessard-027b12a9/>).

the time that the organisation became a non-profit, it was located in the studio at 4046 Hamilton Avenue. In the early days, she remembered:

we had just two couples teaching at the beginning and then, in time, four couples. So it started to grow, and it grew as a non-profit in that space. So we figured with the classes and our community, we were going to need a bigger space.

I asked Vigna about how Tango Del Barrio was funded, for example, “was it receiving grants?” I wanted to know. Vigna responded in the negative and added “we don’t make much as teachers. It’s semi-volunteer”. Such money as did come in, she told me, was largely derived from the fees charged for classes and other activities, as well as from renting out their studio space to other parties when it is not being used by Tango Del Barrio.

At the time of my first visit to Tango Del Barrio in August 2014, the organisation’s base was the “bigger space” mentioned by Vigna, to which it had moved in July 2013. Its studio was on the top floor of 4138 Hamilton Avenue, a former mortuary. This would be the third Northside location that Tango Del Barrio and its precursors would inhabit during an association with the neighbourhood that lasted from 2002 until 2017, at which time moved once again, this time to the adjacent College Hill area of the city. That Tango Del Barrio had such a long association with the area was largely due to the fact that Northside had been Michael Wizer’s base since his permanent relocation to the city in 1995. When I asked why he chose that neighbourhood, he responded that it was because he had found it to be:

diverse, funky, bohemian, very creative. It was the gay neighbourhood. And it was very affordable so a lot of the artists and musicians could own places or set up studios.



In the interests of research, I signed up to participate in a walking tour of the area that was organised by the Cincinnati Museum as part of its “Cincinnati Heritage Programs” initiative. The tour, which was listed as being of “Northside - Cincinnati's Early Suburb”, took place on the morning of August 26, 2017 and was led by Jay Kathman. Over its course, I learned that the neighbourhood is one of Cincinnati’s oldest communities, having been settled around 200 years ago, primarily by Irish and German immigrants. During the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the area was a busy hub for transportation, shopping, and industry. Many of the attractive residential houses that line its streets today were built during that period and were typically situated on lots that were only around 20-25 feet wide. The narrowness of those lots precluded the possibility of later adding garages and, as a result, when the car rose to prominence during the 1950s and 60s, the area went into a period of decline. These days, Kathman observed, Northside is considered rather “hip” but is not yet fully gentrified. Kathman also informed the tour group that Northside has, over the course of its history, had a reputation for being a “tolerant” neighbourhood, though he was not sure exactly why. Perhaps its standing in that regard is related to events which Kathman recounted and which actually involved the 4138 Hamilton Avenue address. Well before Tango Del Barrio moved to that location, the building had served as the premises of the Charles Miller Funeral Home. According to Kathman, the funeral home was one of the neighbourhood's “important commercial assets” for many decades. The events in the story he shared about the place apparently took place at some point during the late 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries when Mr Miller had befriended some Roma people who were passing through the area. Sadly, one of the Roma children died whilst the group were in the vicinity, and Mr Miller took care of the burial and made no charge for his service. The

child was buried in the nearby Spring Grove cemetery and each year to this day, descendants of the Roma group return to pay their respects and to express their ongoing gratitude to the funeral director.

As I stated earlier, 4138 Hamilton Avenue was where I had my own first encounter with Tango Del Barrio. It took place on Friday, 16<sup>th</sup> August 2014, i.e. a few days after I arrived in Columbus from Nevada in order to embark on a PhD programme at OSU. On that day, I travelled down to Cincinnati to participate in an evening workshop which launched a weekend of activities led by guest teacher Florencia Taccetti.<sup>34</sup> I recall little about the class, but I do remember immediately liking the physical space in which it took place. The studio felt light and spacious, despite the fact that only its west facing façade (overlooking Hamilton Avenue) had any windows. It occupied around 1000 square feet and was equipped with a sprung wooden floor ideal for dancing and which, I later learned, had been installed by the organisation's members. The studio's walls were cream-painted and adorned with images of tango dancers - including poster-sized portraits of some of the professional dancers who had made teaching trips to the city in the past and who were therefore known by many members of the community. In addition to the studio itself, the organisation's unit included a sizeable lobby area. Toilet and parking facilities were shared with other occupants of the building, including Future Life Now (a holistic wellness centre) and Caracole (which, according to its website "provides HIV prevention and testing

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<sup>34</sup> Taccetti is an Argentine-born tango teacher and performer. She has been based in Minneapolis since 2000 and is a member of the University of Minnesota's affiliated dance faculty. (Information accessed on 2018-09-10 via <https://apps.cla.umn.edu/directory/profiles/tacce001>.)

services for the community and affordable housing & case management for individuals & families living with HIV/AIDS”.<sup>35</sup>

During the four or so years that Tango Del Barrio was based at 4138 Hamilton Avenue, the organisation consolidated its standing as Cincinnati’s “premier Argentine tango venue”. In November 2017, it moved once again to yet another Hamilton Avenue address, namely 6110 Hamilton Avenue. These premises are around three miles north of the former location and fall within the boundaries of the College Hill neighbourhood rather than in Northside. 6110 Hamilton Avenue is part of two-storey commercial block which flanks the east side of the street. West North Bend Road lies to its north and Elkton Place to its south. The store-fronts along the ground floor of this strip are occupied by a range of businesses including a coffee shop/restaurant called the “College Hill Coffee Company and Casual Gourmet”; a branch of “H&R Block”, a hair salon; a jeweller’s; a diner-style establishment called “Bacall’s Cafe”; “Silk Road Textiles” which describes itself as “a premier retailer of ethically-traded fine fabrics and yarn from around the world”; and Marty’s Hops and Vines, a wine and beer shop-cum-bar-cum-restaurant.<sup>36</sup> Tango Del Barrio’s studio is situated directly above the latter and it is not at all uncommon to see Cincinnati *tangueros* having a drink or getting a bite to eat or buying a bottle of wine to take with them before heading upstairs. It is also not unusual to hear snatches of the live music performances that Marty’s regularly hosts intermingling with the tango tracks being played over the Tango Del Barrio sound system.

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<sup>35</sup> I accessed the information about these two organizations on 2018-09-10 via <https://futurelifeforall.com/questions-holistic-health-center/> and <http://caracole.org> respectively.

<sup>36</sup> I obtained the quote about Silk Road Textiles on 2018-09-12 via its website at <http://silkroadcincinnati.com>.

Some members of the Cincinnati Argentine tango community commented to me that they find the facilities at the College Hill property to be superior to those of Tango Del Barrio's previous home. There are, for example, more lavatories, as well as enough space alongside them for a changing area. Moreover, these facilities are no longer shared with any other occupants in the building.<sup>37</sup> The new location also has a full kitchen, plus a car park that is far larger than the one adjacent to its previous home. In terms of floor space, the new studio occupies around 1600 square feet and its ceiling is also much higher than was the case at 4138 Hamilton. In common with its former address, Tango Del Barrio's current studio only has windows on the west facing façade and therefore they too overlook Hamilton Avenue. However, they are so high set that one cannot easily look out of them. Since Tango Del Barrio took up occupation, the studio's walls have again been painted cream and a pale wooden sprung floor has been installed. On the downside, there is no sizeable lobby in the current location.

Of course, relocations are not the only changes to have affected Tango Del Barrio since its formation. The line-up of its board, for example, has undergone many permutations. Even so and as indicated earlier, a number of its current directors have served in that capacity since the organisation's inception. The current chair of the organisation, Lynn Schmitt, joined the board a year or so after Tango Del Barrio became a non-profit, but she only took on the leadership role around 2010/2011. (This was after Wizer had stepped down from the position and following a

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<sup>37</sup> While all of this is true, I personally do not like the fact that these toilets are accessed directly from the dance floor in the new venue, whereas in the previous location, they were situated beyond the lobby and across a corridor.

period in which Vigna had occupied the role as an interim measure.) She took on the chair role at Tango Del Barrio reluctantly. When her fellow board members initially approached her, they asked if she “wanted” to take on the role. She declined since the requisite duties were too much like those she had to perform in her day job as a Senior Human Resources Director with Procter and Gamble (the international consumer goods corporation which is headquartered in Cincinnati) for her to contemplate the position with much relish.<sup>38</sup> However, when her colleagues returned to her, this time asking “would” she do it, she agreed, since she recognised that her professional experience meant that she was singularly well-equipped to take on the responsibility. After all, at Procter and Gamble, she devoted much of her time and energy to bringing disparate groups of people into alignment so that they could work with one another effectively; being the chair of a non-profit’s board seemed likely to demand she do much the same.

Having agreed to take on the role, Schmitt got to work:

I came in and said “we have to do a purpose statement” and they kind of rolled their eyes but they went along, you know. It’s like “if you want me to do it, this is how we do it. I can’t lead the organisation if I don’t know where you want to go”. So we did that, and we’ve come back to it.

Schmitt kindly shared with me the text of the Tango Del Barrio purpose statement.<sup>39</sup> It reads as follows:

#### Our Mission

Tango del Barrio provides a home for people to learn and dance Argentine Tango in the Cincinnati area by providing class instruction and social events (milongas

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<sup>38</sup> Schmitt retired from Procter and Gamble in June 2015.

<sup>39</sup> Schmitt sent me the text of the Purpose Statement by email on 2019-01-14.

and practicas) so that we build interest and skills in a growing and vibrant Cincinnati tango community.

#### Our Vision

- We provide ongoing technical and instructional skill growth in Argentine Tango for students of all levels as well as for our instructors.
- We sponsor and underwrite guest instructors to bring technical excellence and fresh and varied perspectives to a regional Argentine Tango community.
- We manage our resources to be able to invest in ongoing Argentine Tango outreach and teaching.

Overall Schmitt sees her main duty as chair to ensure that - whenever a decision must be made - the board reaches a consensus regarding a way forward; it is not her goal to determine what a decision should be.

Besides Schmitt, the Moskoviches, Reder, and Seta, the board of Tango Del Barrio during the period of my fieldwork also included Marty Gooden, Jud Kilgore, and Barb Macke. Gooden has been a tango dancer since 2007 and a tango teacher for the past several years. He lives near Dayton, OH, where he is a psychology professor at Wright State University; he was the only African-American board member.<sup>40</sup> Jud Kilgore is a fairly new dancer who was, until the summer of 2018, a teacher in the Newport, Kentucky school system. However, he is currently living and working in Shanghai along with his Turkish-born wife, Bilge, and so is “on sabbatical”. Barb Macke is a retired University of Cincinnati librarian who has - with her husband - been studying Argentine tango since 2010.

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<sup>40</sup> As I complete this dissertation in November, 2019, Gooden is no longer a Tango Del Barrio board member. However, according to the the organisation’s website, the board has acquired a new member by the name of Monica Toro. I accessed this information on 2019-09-07 via <https://tangodelbarrio.com/mission/tango-del-barrio-instructors/>. I have met Toro – a Colombian-born dancer - a number of times at Tango Del Barrio events but I have not interviewed her (as yet).

Since its inception, Tango Del Barrio has typically offered two or three courses each term. When I began my fieldwork in the summer of 2017, the course roster included a beginners' class - "Tango FUNdamentals" - on Monday nights; a Tuesday night class - "Tango Elements" - for dancers who had completed the beginner level but not yet progressed beyond that stage; and "Tango Topics" - a Thursday night class - for dancers with more experience. However, as of September 2018, "Tango Topics" was absent from slate of classes because of a lack of qualified teachers.<sup>41</sup>

Tango Del Barrio's offerings are not limited to classes. They also organise a number of other regular activities such as *prácticas* and *milongas* as indicated in the following text which I copied from Tango Del Barrio's website in September 2018:

Wednesday Night Practica  
Wednesdays • 7:30 – 10:00 pm  
All levels and visitors welcome!  
Practice your class material or just dance and socialize at this casual, unguided session  
ONLY \$7

1st Sat — Milonga Entre Tango y Tango  
First Saturday of each month • 9 pm to 12:30 am  
Regular DJ: Jake Moskovich (with occasional guest DJs)  
Golden Age of Tango music selections with occasional Nueva/Alternative Tandas  
\$12 (\$5 for full-time university students)

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<sup>41</sup> For many years, "Tango Topics" was taught by Debby Vigna and Chuck Reder. As Vigna prepared to move west, Reder began working with Bilge Kilgore and together they offered Tango Topics during three terms the autumn of 2017. However, Bilge Kilgore is currently in Shanghai with her husband and evidently Reder has not found a suitable replacement. When I checked the Tango Del Barrio website on 2019-11-05, I noticed that a couple of one-off classes were listed under the Tango Topics heading and were to be taught by the Moskoviches. One was scheduled for October and one for November. (Information accessed via <https://tangodelbarrio.com/classes-2/>).

3rd Sat — Milonga del Barrio Norte  
Third Saturday of each month • 9 pm to 12:30 am  
Rotating DJs  
Music varies depending on the DJ  
\$12 (\$5 for full-time university students)

New Dancer Milonga  
2nd Friday of each month • 7:30 to 10:00 pm  
Regular DJ: Chuck Reder (with occasional guest DJs)  
Music: Danceable and recognizable “Guardia Vieja” and “Golden Age” selections, with explanations and information regarding names of orchestras, structure of tandas, order and types of music, and the use of cortinas.  
This event is designed specifically for dancers who have been studying tango for 2 years or less. Hosts Chuck and Lynne create a supportive environment for learning the protocols of social tango and meeting other new dancers.  
\$10 (free for first-time attendees)

Happy Hour Milonga  
Occasional Fridays • 6:30 pm  
Watch for announcements via Tango del Barrio emails!  
\$10 (\$5 full-time university students)<sup>42</sup>

The other key activity that Tango Del Barrio also organises on a semi-regular basis are weekends of workshops taught by invited Argentine tango professionals. These weekends – which generally take place between two and four times a year – tend to follow a similar format: they get underway on the Friday evening with a workshop (sometimes followed by a *práctica*; then two or three workshops are offered on both Saturday and Sunday afternoons; in addition, there is a *milonga* on the Saturday night at which the visiting teachers will give a performance. In terms of cost, the individual workshops are usually \$30 and there is an option for participants to sign up for all the Saturday and Sunday workshops in advance and pay a discounted fee of \$160. A further discount of 20% is offered to full-time students.

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<sup>42</sup> Text copied on 2018-09-10 from <https://tangodelbarrio.com/events-2/>.



## **Beyond Tango Del Barrio**

So far in my survey of the development of Cincinnati's contemporary Argentine tango scene, I have focussed on Tango Del Barrio and its precursors because of the central role the organisation has played in my research. However, whilst the non-profit has been, and remains, a major force in the Cincinnati Argentine tango community, it is not the only one. A number of people who have never been officially involved with either Tango Del Barrio or its antecedents have nonetheless played vital roles in the development of the city's Argentine tango scene. They include Patricia Paz, David Koucky, and Valerie Allendorf.

### **Beyond Tango Del Barrio: Patricia Paz**

Patricia Paz is a native of Buenos Aires. She is a trained dancer and physical education teacher. She made her first trip to Cincinnati in 1995 at behest of her brother, who was then working as a professor of Spanish literature at the University of Cincinnati. He invited Paz to come to the USA in a professional capacity as he wanted her to give some tango lessons and performances at a university event. Once in Ohio, Paz was struck by how the Midwesterners she encountered seemed "crazy to learn Argentine tango". Over the next few years, she returned to Cincinnati to teach several times, staying longer with each visit. In 2000, after meeting her future husband at a local salsa event, Paz relocated permanently to the Cincinnati area and offered regular tango activities - including classes and *milongas* - for well over a decade. This included a period in which she gave classes as part of a regular Tuesday evening tango event at a restaurant/bar called

the Corinthian which is located in Cincinnati's Clifton neighbourhood. Many of my interlocutors became acquainted with Paz at that venue.

In 2012 Paz took on a full-time position as a physical education teacher in a local school. This role consumes much of her time and energy and as a result, her public tango presence (so to speak) has diminished in recent years. Currently, she organises only the occasional event close to her home in Florence, Kentucky. Although Florence is only about 15 miles from central Cincinnati, these events do not attract many of the Ohio city's dancers. That said, quite a number of my interlocutors have taken private classes with Paz in the past and some continue to do so.

During my fieldwork year, I attended several events organised by Paz. For example, I took part in a three hour "Argentine Tango Beginner Boot Camp" at the Florence Ritz Ballroom Dance Studio on Saturday, August 26, 2017 and the following day, I visited an iteration of her then-semi-regular *Milonga La Dominguera* ("Sunday *Milonga*"). Although the *Milonga La Dominguera* usually took place in Florence, on that evening it was held at the Tango Del Barrio studio (the one at 4138 Hamilton). I believe the venue change came about because Paz had arranged that this particular *milonga* would feature live music by the Redwood Tango Trio. The Redwood Tango Trio is a California-based ensemble which consists of a keyboard player, a violinist, and a bandoneonist. Their visit to Cincinnati was part of a Midwest tour and I suspect that Paz elected to use the Tango Del Barrio location to ensure that their appearance attracted a decent turn-out.

### **Beyond Tango Del Barrio: David Koucky and Tango Tuesdays**

As mentioned above, many of my interlocutors became acquainted with Paz when she was teaching as part of a regular Tuesday evening tango happening at the Corinthian restaurant/bar. These Tuesday Tango events were instigated by David Koucky.

Koucky first took up the dance in 1997 shortly after moving to Cincinnati from Montana, following his divorce from his first wife. At that time, Paz was on one of her extended visits to the city and was teaching in a YMCA located at 270 Calhoun Street, just to the south of the University of Cincinnati's main campus. (This was also the venue where Power's vintage dancers had met). Koucky learned of Paz's classes through an ad in a local community paper and "being new in town and having nothing better to do", he decided to "stop in". He had already been practising tai chi for many years and found that, as with martial art, Argentine tango demanded that one be sensitive to the "feel of how you contact another person". Paz's classes, Koucky recalled:

opened me up to the Argentine tango world and since then I've been taking lessons with just about everybody else and dancing in the community for the past 20 years, slowly getting the hang of it.

As part of his immersion, Koucky began to amass recordings of tango music - which were much less easily available during the late 1990s and early 2000s than they are now. This growing music collection, along with his desire to play a part in cultivating the local Argentine tango community, led to Koucky organising and deejaying informal dances. In order to stage these events, he sought out Cincinnati bars and restaurants equipped with dance floors and which were

run by managers who would allow him to use their facilities for free (presumably on the basis that the dancers would be likely to avail themselves of refreshments over the course of an evening). After trying out several locations, he settled into the regular Tuesday evening slot at the Corinthian and invited Paz to teach a class ahead of a *práctica* session for which he provided the music. This event was well-attended for a number of years until a series of setbacks - including the introduction of a pool table which caused the venue to become far noisier than it had been, as well problems with parking and music licensing - led to its cessation for a period.

Koucky later returned to the Corinthian and I visited him a couple of times there during my fieldwork. He offered instruction in tango along with his wife and fellow dancer Jeannette Berauer and continued to play tango music. However, he did not publicise the event, nor did he promote himself as a teacher. In addition, Koucky told me that one of the Corinthian's owners had recently passed away and he was unsure whether the remaining parties would hold on to the location. All in all, the future of the Tango Tuesdays seemed uncertain when Koucky and I were last in touch.

### **Beyond Tango Del Barrio: Valerie Allendorf**

While Paz and Koucky were less visible within the Cincinnati Argentine tango community during my fieldwork year than they had been in the past, Valerie Allendorf's energetic participation continued to grow. Not even an accident - which led to her badly breaking her foot and spending several months in a rehabilitation facility and which excluded the possibility of her dancing for an extended period - seemed to slow her organisational endeavours.

Allendorf's dancing trajectory began in 2008 when she "retired" from the job she then held and signed up for some ballroom lessons.<sup>43</sup> However, she found she was not well suited to ballroom because as she was "not interested so much in the glitter and competition". When she heard about an Argentine tango workshop led by a visiting teacher, Luciano Mares (whom Patricia Paz had invited to the city), she signed up and "immediately fell in love with tango". She evidently took to the dance with the same energy and commitment that continues to characterise her involvement. She began to attend classes at Tango Del Barrio, then newly re-formed as a non-profit, and soon thereafter began to organise Argentine tango events herself "because there wasn't enough tango in town" to satisfy her. Her first such undertaking was the establishment of a regular *milonga* which she called "Argentine Tango Salon with A Twist". This event now takes place at Tango Del Barrio though this was not the case when it first started and Allendorf stressed that several Tango Del Barrio teachers went out of their way to help her institute the event not least by advising her on suitable venues.

Allendorf's interest in the dance was further fuelled when she met Marcela Duran, who came to Cincinnati "for a special workshop or two". Allendorf recalled that it took her "a nanosecond to realize that she is one of the best in the world". A native of Rosario, Argentina, Marcela Duran is an internationally renowned Argentine tango performer and teacher. For many years, she partnered with Carlos Gavito in *Forever Tango*, an "exciting and passionate Argentinian dance

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<sup>43</sup> Although Allendorf described the step as a "retirement", she has since worked in other positions and, at the time of this dissertation's completion, continues to do so.

revue”, which has enjoyed “many sell-out seasons in Europe, the USA and Canada” (*Forever Tango*). Duran now lives in Lexington, Kentucky, with her family. Her husband, Luis Bravo, is the producer of *Forever Tango*. He is also a racehorse enthusiast - hence the bluegrass home.

Allendorf told me that she and Duran became “immediate close friends”, and, after about a year - during which Allendorf and a few others would regularly make the eighty-something mile journey to Lexington to take private lessons - Duran started to come to Cincinnati instead and “has been coming ever since”. Allendorf took on the role of organising and managing Duran’s Cincinnati engagements. Besides private lessons, these engagements include group classes, *milongas* that Duran deejays and where she joins in the social dancing, and various special events. For example, over the course of my fieldwork, I attended several days or weekends of workshops at which Duran co-taught along with Oscar Casas. Casas, like Duran, is Argentine-born, USA-based, and a well-known and popular tango instructor and performer. In addition, Allendorf and Duran have organised visits from many of *Forever Tango*’s cast members. Not all of the events that Allendorf arranges feature Duran and/or her associates, though most do. Allendorf told me that organising “for Marcela and helping to build a broader tango community is an absolute joy”.

The public activities that Allendorf has set up over the course of my fieldwork have all taken place at Tango Del Barrio and there is a great deal of overlap between the community members who attend Allendorf-organised events and those put on by Tango Del Barrio. That she and the non-profit share a mutually supportive relationship is evidenced by the fact that both entities

promote events organised by the other in their public communications such as via Facebook posts, other web-disseminated information, and newsletter emails. For example, on the webpage where Tango Del Barrio lists its own regular *práctica* and *milongas*, the following text is also included:

O T H E R   E V E N T S at TDB  
Argentine Tango Salon with A Twist! by CATGal/Valerie  
DJ Marcela Duran with occasional Guest DJs  
4th/5th Saturdays: Watch for Valerie's emails or check back for details  
9:00pm – late / Tango del Barrio studio  
for info: 513 608 9362, [valerieallendorf@icloud.com](mailto:valerieallendorf@icloud.com)<sup>44</sup>

### **Beyond Tango Del Barrio: Tango Northside**

Before closing this chapter, I must mention a Cincinnati Argentine tango venture of relatively recent standing. It is called Tango Northside and it is run by Michael Wizer.

Wizer stepped down as Tango Del Barrio's chair around 2010 or 2011 and he resigned as a board member in 2015. The end of his involvement with the organization that he founded was precipitated by disagreements which arose between Wizer and his board colleagues regarding a number of fundamental issues, including teaching strategies and music selections. He set up Tango Northside during 2017 and, in a blog post on the then-newly launched Tango Northside website, dated January 2, 2018 and headed "Why Tango Northside?", Wizer explains the

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<sup>44</sup> The Tango Del Barrio website also used to offer information about activities organised by Patricia Paz and David Koucky although when I checked their site on 2019-11-05, I could not find any such references.

rationale which prompted his new endeavour. Before he does so, however, he pays court to the older organisation in the opening lines of his post:

Last night I enjoyed the New Year milonga at Tango Del Barrio. What a lovely scene and lovely social environment. There is no such thing as tango in the absence of a tango community and Cincinnati has a tango community thanks to TDB.<sup>37</sup>

Wizer then outlines that his aim in setting up Tango Northside is to disseminate “aspects of the art of Argentine tango that are not fully realized” elsewhere in Cincinnati. He continues:

I love and appreciate the TDB community. But my work as a tango teacher, organizer, and art/culture ambassador is not done: there are yet aspects of the dance and the music that I want to pass on, show, and bring to others. What are these things? They are not easy things to speak about simply because they are about aesthetics. And aesthetics is both hard to talk about and also, as the saying goes, “beauty is in the eye of the beholder.”

In the remainder of the post, Wizer makes clear that the main issues that concern him involve how practitioners feel and direct their attention as they dance, the music to which they move, and their physical technique.

In establishing Tango Northside, Wizer was aided by Julie Barnett, a former Tango Del Barrio board member. The pair have often taught together on previous occasions. On 11 September 2018, I received an email headed "Tango Northside announcement" and signed by Wizer and Barnett which read as follows:

Hi Tangueros

It is a big deal to try to start a new tango school in Cincinnati being that we already have one that has been vital for more than 10 years. We think we have something to add regarding our teaching approach, class offerings, practice sessions, and dance evenings. So here we are!



Most significantly, we have a permanent space: 1569 Chase Avenue, at the corner of Hamilton and Chase in Northside. It is central to Northside and in the restaurant and entertainment district. It is charming and intimate.

This fall, we are starting with four offerings:

An introductory class called Discover Argentine Tango. A 6-week class on Tuesday evenings and part of a year-long program. It begins Tuesday September 18th.

A class for people who have been dancing for two years or more. Called Tango for Milongeros. The upcoming class is a 6-week series on Sunday nights focussing on walking, rocking steps, and rhythm variations beginning on September 23rd.

On Thursday evenings we have our Tango Dojo. This is a time and place for focussed tango practice, intended to be different from an informal dance venue. Members of our teaching team will be there to assist people. Around the mid-point we will offer una chuchuria (a small trinket), a small tango detail for people to work on if they want to. And there will be a structured dance period at the end of the evening : short tandas with switching partners. It starts September 21st. Come check it out.

And once a month, the third Friday of the month, we will have a formal milonga. Our first one will be Friday October 19th.

One year on, Tango Northside's calendar of events remains similarly robust.<sup>45</sup>

There is overlap between those who attend Tango Del Barrio events and those who take part in Tango Northside's activities (which seem to be scheduled, inasmuch as is possible, so as not to conflict with those of the older organisation). In addition, some of the more experienced dancers whom I met at Tango Del Barrio, particularly those who learned directly from Wizer, serve as

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<sup>45</sup> When I checked the Tango Northside website on 2019-11-05, I noted that it continued to offer evening classes on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Sundays, and holds at least one *milonga* each month.

teachers at Tango Northside classes or assist in other ways. If any animosity exists between the two organisations as a result of divergent opinions, it is a private matter. Wizer continues to attend some Tango Del Barrio events and when he launched Tango Northside, details of his new initiative were added to the same Tango Del Barrio webpage that already provided information about the activities put on by Paz, Koucky, and Allendorf.<sup>46</sup> In other words, although Wizer's departure from Tango Del Barrio may have been precipitated by disagreements, both he and those in charge at Tango Del Barrio seem to have worked hard to remain amicable.

## **Chapter One – Closing Thoughts**

These, then, are the various elements that constitute the greater part of the Cincinnati Argentine tango community today. As indicated earlier, most of the events which I attended in order to carry out my participant observer fieldwork took place at the Tango Del Barrio venue, the majority having been organised by the non-profit itself or by Allendorf. However, I have also attended a couple of the Corinthian Tango Tuesdays, several events led by Patricia Paz, and one Tango Northside class. The aggregate of this ethnographic research forms the basis of the chapters which follow.

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<sup>46</sup> This webpage on the Tango Del Barrio site was headed "Local/Regional Events". I verified that details of Tango Northside's events had been added to the page on 2018-09-12 via <https://tangodelbarrio.com/regional-events/>. When I checked the site on 2019-11-05, the page was no longer active.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Norms, Values, Ethos (Cincinnati-Tanguicity Part 1: Tango Ethos)

In the previous chapter, I presented an overview of the history of Argentine tango within the USA, followed by an account of the development of Cincinnati's Argentine tango "dance-scape" and some of the components that constitute its contemporary scene. I now move on to the first of four chapters in which I present analyses of my fieldwork data to address specific themes.

My focus in this chapter is how tanguicity emerges in Cincinnati through an elucidation of the values and norms that govern the city's Argentine tango community. These values and norms in turn generate the group's overall "tango ethos", which is – as Cara points out - one definition of tanguicity (2009:38).

#### **Barn Raisings, Argentine Tango, and the Need for Community**

In the early autumn of 2017, Lynne Schmitt, as chair of Tango Del Barrio's board, was issued with a "Notice to Vacate" from the organisation's landlord, City Center Properties. At the time, the non-profit occupied part of the top floor of the former mortuary located at 4138 Hamilton Avenue (as described in the previous chapter). The notice was dated 5 September 2017 and asked that the organisation be out by 17 November 2017.

Although the lease termination was unexpected, new premises were secured by mid-October and when the organisation moved to its new home at 6110 Hamilton Avenue at the start of the

following month, its agenda of activities appeared to be almost completely unaffected by the upheaval. That this was possible was in no small part thanks to the various forms of assistance provided by a large proportion of the Tango Del Barrio community throughout the relocation process. For example, several members apprised the board of potential alternative premises, including the venue that was eventually chosen.<sup>47</sup> Many more undertook aspects of the manual labour made necessary by the move, such as packing boxes, and hauling furniture. In addition, a word of mouth plea for help led around 15 to 20 dancers to show up during a weekend late in October to help lay the floating wood floor that would transform the new venue into a place fit for dancing. Under the guidance of Tango Del Barrio board member and long-time *tanguero* Chuck Reder - who has worked for many years as a builder and carpenter in and around Cincinnati - this crew of largely unskilled volunteers installed the “laminated engineered wood flooring with a maple top layer over a sound attenuating under-layer” within a matter of hours.<sup>48</sup>

I first learned about this collective floor-laying effort via an email from another of Tango Del Barrio’s board members, Barb Macke. I had written to Macke on October 30, 2017, asking how Tango Del Barrio’s moving plans were going and could I do anything to help? A couple of days later, she responded, telling me that the new studio was “coming along” and that:

the new dance floor is down, thanks to an incredible crew of volunteers who showed up, self-selected into work groups and got the job done! We have a complicated couple of weeks ahead since we have activities going on in both places (Salsanatti has a big workshop in the old studio this weekend) until November 13. But things are going well.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> The board was informed of 6110 Hamilton Avenue location by Barbara Tallmadge who had taken yoga classes at that address.

<sup>48</sup> Reder confirmed the information about the flooring by text to me on 2019-01-18.

<sup>49</sup> Macke sent me this email on 2018-11-01.

While I was sorry to have not personally participated in the floor installation, I heard more about what happened on the day in question from several people who had been involved. One of them told me he had not only assisted with the floor's laying but had also been present when the flooring materials were delivered:

Chuck [Reder] and Jake [Moskovich] and I were there to meet the truck that brought the floor. There were 50 packets or 40 packets of flooring, each weighed about 50 pounds. We had to carry those upstairs. And, you know, this was a lot of work for three old guys, right?<sup>50</sup> So we're hauling this stuff up and along comes a young man who was – I don't know if he was homeless but he was cadging cigarettes (...). So I said to him as he was coming along, "would you like to make some money? I'll give you a buck and a half for each one of these you carry upstairs", and he said "Sure". So I wound up paying him and saving my back!

Regarding the installation itself, Reder masterminded the activity and under his guidance several other community members - including Jake Moskovich and Reid Sikes - directed smaller teams across the expanse of the room. Some of the volunteers stayed throughout the effort, while others came and went as their personal schedules permitted. At some point, I was told, Lynne Schmitt arrived "with beer". With so many people pitching in, the floor was down in about four and a half hours; it was like, one of my interviewees exclaimed, "a barn-raising".

When that interlocutor lighted upon the simile of "barn raising" to describe the floor installation at Tango Del Barrio's new studio, you can imagine my delight. A "barn raising" is, after all, an

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<sup>50</sup> I am not sure of the exact ages of the men named, but believe they would all have been in their 60s or early 70s on the day in question.

established part of the north American folklore canon, so much so that several pages are devoted to the subject in Simon Bronner's *Encyclopedia of American Folklife*. The entry begins thus:

Barn raising refers to a social occasion usually involving a community effort of men erecting a barn and women providing a communal meal and other support. The significance of raisings as community events became noticeable in the nineteenth century as they grew steadily in size as well as importance to the farm or agricultural community. As Americans expanded westward through the nineteenth century, the increasingly imposing barn structure became a symbol of growth and abundance on the nation's landscape and the accessibility of individual property. [...] The task of raising [...] took as many as one hundred men working cooperatively [...]. The community typically created a festive family atmosphere around the laborious event, featuring large communal meals, sometimes including liquor and cider [...]. Although the image of the rugged, independent pioneer building his home by himself was common in American popular iconography, the visual culture of the barn emphasized a spirit of community, generosity, and mutual support in a rapidly expanding nation. (2015:71-72).

As Bronner goes on to outline, the practice of barn-raisings diminished due to the rise of mechanical equipment, the professionalisation of the farm construction industry, and the introduction of individual fire and disaster insurance. The result was that outside of "agrarian groups holding on to values of mutual aid" such as Amish settlements, barn raising became unnecessary since:

the farmer did not need the community for his success or, in the event of disaster, recovery. The farmer, increasingly reliant on monetary capital, was not rewarded for providing social capital (i.e. helping neighbors). (2015:72)

By contrast, Tango Del Barrio survives because of an ethos rooted in the understanding that all can play a part in keeping the community alive and vibrant. The board and a handful of participants frequently donate their time and expertise to teach - or assist in - classes, publicise events, balance the books, and conduct market research. Many more members may not take on

such distinct tasks, but nonetheless play less concrete roles. In fact, so many of my interlocutors - no matter their level of dance competence - described feeling a sense of responsibility for maintaining and regenerating the group that it reached a point that such expressions became notable only by their absence.

This feeling of obligation may in part be because Argentine tango is an intrinsically sociable dance and not simply because it is partner-based. Yes, it certainly does take “two to tango”, but beyond that, there is an expectation - almost an imperative - that regardless of whether one arrives at an event as half of a couple or not, one will dance with many different partners throughout its course. For example, at *milongas*, a pair of dancers will typically stay together for the duration of a *tanda* (which usually consists of three or four songs) then separate during the *cortina* - the short interlude of non-tango music that distinguishes one *tanda* from the next - before returning to the floor with someone different. Assuming a sufficient number of dancers is present, it is not uncommon to spend hours at a *milonga* without dancing with the same person twice. This readiness to seek out multiple partners is also cultivated within Argentine tango classes wherein teachers typically ask that students rotate throughout the lesson’s duration; “followers, move on one” is a frequent cry. While there are occasions when a pair of dancers may choose to stay together, these are the exceptions rather than the norm.<sup>51</sup> As a result, a healthy Argentine tango community needs a critical mass of dancers in order to survive. Of

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<sup>51</sup> One common reason why a couple might choose to stay together during a tango event is shyness on the part of one or both of the dancers. Another is the desire to work on something specific together. Recently, I noticed that one couple, who normally rotate, chose to stay together throughout a series of afternoon workshops. When I later enquired as to why, I learned it was because both of them were suffering from a cold and they did not want to pass on the infection to anyone else in the community.

course, if that mass were to include some advanced dancers, so much the better, but less expert members along with newcomers who are committed to learning and improving (or who may potentially demonstrate such commitment in the future) are also of vital importance.

## **Tradition and Ethos**

Tradition is one of the folklore discipline's core concepts, one to which folklore scholars have repeatedly returned, aiming to tease out precisely what it is that makes a tradition a tradition. In fact, wrestling with the meanings, applications, and implications of the term is itself acknowledged as a tradition within the discipline (see, for example, Glassie 1995, Noyes 2009, and the "Introduction" to Cashman et al 2011). Recent evaluations usually allow for at least three basic understandings of the word, namely:

(1) the process by which cultural goods come to persist through time or exist across physical or virtual space (i.e., the passing-on or passing-around as implied by the word's Latin etymon, *tradere*), (2) the stuff passed on or around in the above manner, and (3) a category of cultural goods (see number 2) not natural but constructed by a particular community. (Kaplan 2013:124)

In other words, "tradition" can refer to a process, a product (often with a concomitant sense of ownership), and/or an ideological construction.

Dorothy Noyes includes those "three traditions" in her comprehensive 2009 survey of pertinent literature, then adds a fourth: namely "the transfer of responsibility for a valued practice or performance" (Noyes 2009:233). The "responsibility" which Noyes describes is an expansion of the understanding of the term that is "tied to the famous Hymes-Bauman definition of performance as 'the acceptance of responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative



competence” (248) and refers more specifically to the responsibility for tradition-bearers to transmit both the knowledge and the metaknowledge about the tradition in question in order for it to continue. As she writes:

Performers may hope to hand on their knowledge to inheritors authorized by blood or formal affiliation, but above all they look for those who will be willing and competent to do the work. (248)

At Tango Del Barrio, I certainly found this to be true of those who might be considered its tradition-bearers, i.e. the tango instructors and other advanced dancers. However, I also found it to be true of those whose level of competence largely excluded them from passing on much by way of knowledge about the dance itself. Despite their lack of expertise, many of these effectively “non-tradition-bearing” community members were also on the look-out “for those who will be willing and competent to do the work” because the local tango ethos requires that they do so. In addition, and inasmuch as they were able, these people would pass on metaknowledge about the dance, its concomitant community, and the community’s ethos as it manifests in Cincinnati. Their motivation in doing so was often prompted by fears - which my interlocutors frequently explicitly expressed - of a future in which there were too few dancers to sustain the community; and/or insufficient new dancers to maintain its vitality; and/or of the potential for the community to develop a different sort of ethos - perhaps one less friendly and welcoming - than they felt it to have currently. As a result, most of my interviewees indicated feeling some measure of individual responsibility to ensure that such eventualities did not come to pass. While those who expressed such sentiments included some of community’s longer standing members, they were also voiced by some of its relative newcomers whose tango age was two years or even less. In other words, the burden of maintaining the community was felt by

many and the related sense of responsibility was as much about getting bodies on the floor as it was about passing on dance skills and etiquette. Whilst Tango Del Barrio's teachers and some of its more advanced participants certainly do their utmost to ensure that the latter takes place, many more assist in sustaining the overall "community of practice".

### **Communities of Practice**

As with the concept of "tradition", folklorists have also long pondered on the term "community" and what parameters need be in place for use of the word to be appropriate. In an article published in 2001, Burt Feintuch suggests some guidelines for the legitimate deployment of the word. His motivation in writing the piece, Feintuch explains, was the exasperation he felt on hearing the term being repeatedly used by his fellow folklorists to describe those who gathered together to perform in revivalist music sessions. To collectively label the participants of such events as "communities", he writes, is "too facile". What is missing, he goes on, is "the combination of continuity and obligation that are vital elements of community". Instead, Feintuch defines community as being about:

more than what happens in one, occasional sphere of interaction. To be in community is to participate in a web of connectedness to others that continues beyond special events. (2001:149)

In other words, the members of a true community share multiplex relationships, i.e. they are connected to one another by a good deal more than a shared involvement in a regular music jam. Feintuch goes on to describe hearing about the existence of such complex networks from old people when he was conducting fieldwork in rural south central Kentucky during the 1970s. Feintuch's interlocutors recalled growing up as part of dense social networks in which the

communal dances that periodically took place were held as “peak events” by the people involved, but these same people were also ones who “shared your religion”, “monitored your children”, and made themselves available “when you needed a hand to raise your barn” (150). The communities Feintuch heard the Kentuckians talk about existed in the past, not the present, and Feintuch admits that the contemporary community that conforms with his conception is more often envisioned than actual.

Instead of pondering on the extent to which the body of people amongst whom I conducted my fieldwork met the criteria for community outlined by Feintuch, I instead turned to an alternative conception - actually the same one referred to in the title of the special issue of *Western Folklore* in which Feintuch’s article appeared - that of the “community of practice” (CoP).

The term “community of practice” (CoP) was invented by social anthropologist Jean Lave and social learning theorist Etienne Wenger in 1991. They came up with the phrase in the course of a larger treatise in which they argued that most of the learning experiences that humans undergo throughout their lives are the result of involvement in participatory social activity rather the outcome of individual response to abstract instruction (which is mostly what takes place in classrooms). The “participatory social activity” typically consists of a group of “people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wenger-Trayner 2015). One of Lave and Wenger’s key points regarding CoPs is that they are partly constituted by “legitimate peripheral participation” wherein those new to a social

learning environment are gradually inculcated with the knowledge and skills necessary to be able to fully participate in the group's activities.

A CoP consists of three key elements: a domain, a community, and a practice. The “domain” is the shared interest around which a community coalesces (Wenger-Trayner 2015). The “community” is what forms when a shared interest in a domain leads to people engaging with one another in activities and discussions, sharing information, helping one another other, and generally “building relationships that enable them to learn from each other” and caring about “their standing with each other”. And the “practice” denotes the activity which takes place that distinguishes this type of community from, say, a “community of interest” that consists of “people who like certain kinds of movies, for instance” (Wenger-Trayner 2015). In other words, the members of a CoP are practitioners, and their practice involves a dynamic shared repertoire of resources (including “experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems”) that need “time and sustained interaction” to be absorbed (ibid). This practice leads to a CoP's members acquiring a “shared competence” which distinguishes them from other people (ibid).

### **The Tango Del Barrio Community of Practice**

Tango del Barrio is Cincinnati's premier Argentine Tango venue. We are a non-profit, welcoming community of those devoted to sharing the spirit, skills, history, and enjoyment of Argentine Tango as a social dance. To become a well-rounded dancer, join us for classes, practicas, milongas or special events. NO EXPERIENCE NECESSARY – all are welcome.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Information accessed on 2019-01-30 via <https://tangodelbarrio.com/>.

That statement is prominently displayed on the homepage of Tango Del Barrio's website. In it, the words "classes", "practicas", and "milongas" are all hyperlinked to further webpages which offer information about each activity. All of the listed activities offer opportunities for communal learning and practice. The fact that they take place on a regular basis and consistently attract participants has allowed Tango Del Barrio to become the hub of a vibrant CoP dedicated to Argentine tango.<sup>53</sup>

In terms of its classes, Tango Del Barrio offers courses that cater to students at various levels of competency. They usually run for eight or ten weeks, consist of one lesson per week, and are typically offered three times a year, beginning in September, January, and April. Shorter supplementary courses are sometimes scheduled at other times, such as during the summer months. Tango FUNdamentals is the organisation's entry level course. It introduces "beginners to the basic elements of Argentine tango & music" and focuses on "giving new students content they can use on the dance floor", such as walking as part of a couple in time to the music. The next course - one level up - is called Tango Elements, in which students learn to do "ochos, simple turns & more while paying particular attention to the proper technique of performing these elements in a dance with a partner", before moving on to more advanced figures like turns,

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<sup>53</sup> Incidentally, the Cincinnati Argentine tango CoP is by no means unique in being structurally underpinned by its schedule of classes and other social events. Many CoPs - not least any number of dance-based CoPs - are similarly sustained.

sacadas, barridas etc.”.<sup>54 55 56 57</sup> Tango Del Barrio has also, for many years, offered a “Tango Topics” course which is designed for “intermediate to advanced dancers” and which focuses on “series of related elements or techniques designed to improve and expand your social dance”.<sup>58</sup> However, unlike Tango Del Barrio’s other two courses, Tango Topics does not have a set curriculum. As a result, while it is certainly possible for students pay in advance for an entire term (as they do in the case of Tango FUNDamentals and Tango Elements), they can also choose to attend Tango Topics on a drop-in basis.

Since Argentine tango is a comparatively difficult dance to learn, a student who completes all three of Tango Del Barrio’s typical roster of classes, one after the other, is unlikely to have attained a high level of competence. Some dancers repeat the first two courses several times over in order to improve their grasp of the material taught. Nonetheless, all participants in all courses - including novices participating in Tango FUNDamentals for the very first time - will find themselves repeatedly encouraged to take part in other Tango Del Barrio activities such as the organisation’s Wednesday Night Practica and New Dancer Milonga.

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<sup>54</sup> The source for the quotes about the classes is the Classes page of the Tango Del Barrio website, accessed on 2019-01-30 via <https://tangodelbarrio.com/classes-2/>

<sup>55</sup> An *ocho* “is a step where the leader leads the follower to make a figure of eight shape”, either forwards or backwards, with her feet. *Ocho* means “eight” in Spanish. (Denniston 2007:200).

<sup>56</sup> A *sacada* is a step in which one member of a tango dancing couple appears to knock the supporting leg of their partner out of its position. In fact, it is an optical illusion. The word comes from the verb *sacar* means “to take out” in Spanish. (Denniston 2007:202).

<sup>57</sup> *Barrida* means “sweep” in Spanish. In tango, a *barrida* takes place when one dancer uses their foot to “sweep” the non-supporting leg of their partner to a new position.

<sup>58</sup> Information accessed on 2017-08-14 via accessed on 2019-01-30 via <https://tangodelbarrio.com/>. As mentioned in Chapter 1, Tango Topics was absent from the regular roster of classes for one year beginning in the autumn 2018 due to lack of available teachers.

The Wednesday Night Practica takes place on a weekly basis. It runs from 7.30-10 pm and is designed to give dancers an opportunity to "practice your class material or just dance and socialize at this casual, unguided session"; all "levels and visitors" are welcome.<sup>59</sup> The New Dancer Milonga was instigated some years ago by Debby Vigna and Chuck Reder and was, as its name indicates, created especially for beginners, specifically those "who have been studying tango for 2 years or less". It takes place on the second Friday of each month and, like the *práctica*, runs from 7.30-10.00 pm (which is quite a bit earlier than Tango Del Barrio's other *milongas*). The *raison d'être* of the New Dancer Milonga is to provide "a supportive environment for learning the protocols of social tango and meeting other new dancers".<sup>60</sup> Accordingly, its playlist (which is usually compiled by Reder) features "danceable and recognizable 'Guardia Vieja' and 'Golden Age' selections". Explanations and information "regarding names of orchestras, structure of tandas, order and types of music, and the use of cortinas" is also provided.<sup>61</sup>

Tango Del Barrio's two other regular *milongas* do not explicitly cater to new dancers (though they would surely be welcomed should they choose to attend) and they take place on Saturday nights, usually starting at 9 pm and continuing until the early hours of the following morning. The first Saturday of each month is reserved for the "Milonga Entre Tango y Tango" (Milonga Between One Tango and Another). Its regular DJ is Jake Moskovich who plays "Golden Age of

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<sup>59</sup> *Prácticas* and *Milongas*, Tango Del Barrio website, accessed on 2019-01-30 via <https://tangodelbarrio.com/events-2/>

<sup>60</sup> *Prácticas* and *Milongas*, Tango Del Barrio website, accessed on 2019-01-30 via <https://tangodelbarrio.com/events-2/>

<sup>61</sup> *Prácticas* and *Milongas*, Tango Del Barrio website, accessed on 2019-01-30 via <https://tangodelbarrio.com/events-2/>

Tango music selections with occasional Nueva/Alternative Tandas".<sup>62</sup> On the third Saturday of the month, it is the turn of the "Milonga del Barrio Norte" (Northside Milonga), at which the music selection is determined by "rotating DJs".<sup>63</sup>

The other main form of activity which Tango Del Barrio organises is the workshop weekend. A workshop weekend typically begins on Friday evening, runs through to the late afternoon of Sunday, and features invited professional teachers who lead a number of classes on different themes within that timeframe. The workshop weekends take place on a semi-regular basis - generally two to four times each year - and although the costs involved in staging these events usually result in Tango Del Barrio incurring a financial loss, they are considered a vital component of its agenda of events. As one of its board members explained to me:

For us, they're really important because we don't even have very advanced classes, so for some of our dancers who reach a certain level, there is nowhere else to go unless they travel, and not everybody is able for a variety of reasons to travel, as you know, so that is by far the most important thing.

Attendance at the various Tango Del Barrio activities varies widely. Of its regularly scheduled events, the Wednesday Night Practica tends to draw the greatest number of participants, often with around 30 dancers or more present. The New Dancer Milonga is also usually well attended with up to 20 participants (though occasionally as few as four or five). The other *milongas* currently attract between ten and 25 dancers on average. As far as the classes go, the organisation requires that at least two people sign up for a class to go ahead. The largest enrolment in a recent

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<sup>62</sup> *Prácticas* and *Milongas*, Tango Del Barrio website, accessed on 2019-01-30 via <https://tangodelbarrio.com/events-2/>

<sup>63</sup> *Prácticas* and *Milongas*, Tango Del Barrio website, accessed on 2019-01-30 via <https://tangodelbarrio.com/events-2/>



FUNDamentals course was over 20, though it is rare for all enrollees to be present on any given evening; it is more typical for there to be ten or so in attendance. For Tango Elements, the sign-up has recently ranged from zero to ten participants. When Tango Topics was happening, the average number of dancers present was 15. The weekend workshops generally draw 20-30 dancers.<sup>64</sup>

### **The Tango Del Barrio Survey**

Sometime in 2015, well before I began my dissertation research, I received an email from Tango Del Barrio requesting that I complete a survey (my contact details were on the organisation's database because I had previously signed up to receive its regular e-newsletter). I had visited Cincinnati to dance on only three or four occasions when this missive arrived but I was already fairly enamoured of the place and so, whilst I do not recall the exact questions posed in the survey, I do remember feeling alarmed by what I took to be their import, namely that the Cincinnati Argentine tango community might be threatened by insufficient attendance. I therefore - and this is unusual for me when it comes to surveys received via e-newsletters - took great pains to respond thoroughly and to offer what I hoped were useful suggestions regarding how to increase participation.<sup>65</sup>

As my fieldwork got under way, I learned more about what had led to the dissemination of that survey. Concern regarding poor turnout at the Wednesday evening *práctica* - now the most

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<sup>64</sup> These attendance numbers given to me by Lynne Schmitt in an email dated 2019-04-19.

<sup>65</sup> I made clear that the ideas I proposed were skewed by the fact that I lived in Columbus rather than Cincinnati and as a result, I was more invested, for example, in the workshop weekends than in single classes.

popular of Tango Del Barrio's regular offerings - were the precipitating factor. "We had alternated between having a class before the *práctica* and not having a class", board chair Lynne Schmitt told me, "and people were generally confused". Apparently the *práctica* would sometimes not begin until around 9 pm because a class scheduled earlier in the evening would overrun. Another board member, RD, also felt the atmosphere of the *práctica* was not as inviting as it could be:

RD                                I kept saying "we need to have wine, we need to have wine", a little wine, a little cookie.  
Rachel Hopkin                Wine for everything in my opinion [laughs].  
RD                                Wine makes everything better. Wine makes everything better. So we deployed the survey which of course came back: "yes, we'd love wine and cookies and chips" or whatever, and that became sort of a standard, and then *práctica* got to be really, really fun, and crowded because people saw it as more of a social thing. Used to be just bare tables, no water, no food, no nothing. Then when we started serving a few pretzels and a little wine and water, people were socialising more. It makes people socialise.  
Rachel Hopkin                Yeah. Yeah. It changes the vibe considerably.  
RD                                Yeah, they feel like "oh, I can sit and chat with somebody for a few minutes". Otherwise you come in, "nobody's dancing with me, better leave", but if you have a glass of wine or a glass of water and some pretzels ...

Mary Henkener, one of the CoP's longer standing members, volunteered to compile the questionnaire. Having spent much of her career as a market research professional for Procter and Gamble, she was well qualified for the task. Once Henkener had devised the questions in consultation with the board, Tango Del Barrio alerted the recipients of their newsletter to its existence via the email that I received. It was dated July 13, 2015 and began with the words "Tango Del Barrio Survey ... Tango del Barrio is looking for YOUR help!" and continued as follows:

A short 10 question survey has been sent to our mailing list. Please help TdB grow as an organization and improve the quality of your experiences at Tango del Barrio.

YOUR feedback is important in planning new classes and structuring existing events--- practicas, milongas, music events, and workshops.

This is YOUR opportunity to say what you are thinking---what would you like to see offered or changed???

This is an anonymous survey, please feel free to express your honest opinion!

If you have not received the survey, please check your SPAM box as it may be there. Otherwise, let me know (reply to this e-mail) and it will be re-sent.

Tango del Barrio Board THANKS YOU IN ADVANCE for your time to do the survey. Your comments and suggestions will help Tango del Barrio improve experiences and help meet your needs in the future!

The survey responses were gathered and collated by Henkener in due course, and once their content had been assessed and summarised, the Tango Del Barrio board held a meeting to discuss the results. It took place on October 2, 2015 and board chair Lynne Schmitt was kind enough to share with me the notes she took at the time. From them I learned that in regard to the *práctica* - the activity which had triggered the survey – it was determined that the event should adhere to a consistent schedule, beginning at 7:30 pm and continuing until 10:00 pm; that boxed wine, water, and light snacks should be provided; and that it be emphasized that the purpose of the event was to give dancers the opportunity to work on their skills rather than treating it as some kind of less formal *milonga*. As a result, the floor is now divided - by way of a row of tables and chairs - into two areas during the *práctica*, one of which is specifically for the practice

of discrete steps and sequences, the other for general dancing. “Attendance has steadily built since we made these changes”, Schmitt said.

Although the survey was primarily designed to address attendance at the *práctica*, the scope of its questions was not restricted to that event. Another area of discussion concerned the music played during *milongas*: should it be more varied, for example? Or should they try having *tandas* that consisted of three songs instead of four? Apparently, no clear consensus was reached on those points, and the music selection and *tanda* length is largely down to the discretion of whoever is deejaying. Another issue that was made clear by the survey responses, however, was that Tango Del Barrio had “a lead problem”, i.e. at most of its activities, leads were outnumbered by follows at a ratio of around 1:2. As a result, Schmitt laughingly told me, it became apparent that Tango Del Barrio did not need “to do anything to attract and retain follows”, but it did need to “attract and retain leads” and I will discuss that area in more depth in Chapter 4. More generally, the purpose of the survey was to generate ideas regarding ways to “build the community”, Lynne Schmitt told me. There is currently talk of implementing a follow-up questionnaire or of conducting focus group discussions with the same goal in mind.

### **The Tango Del Barrio Ethos**

In a recent article, Gary Alan Fine notes that within “self-conscious communities” - a term that aptly describes the Cincinnati Argentine tango CoP - “arenas of action, social relations, and collective pasts shape the creation of folklore” (2018:11). Fine goes on to note that in such groups “participants recognize the existence of other group members, the boundaries of accepted

behavior, the existence of traditions, and the salience of shared affiliation (2018:11). In a related vein, Paul Jordan-Smith observes that many CoPs develop “a characteristic behavioral ‘style’” (2001:186). With regard to the contra-dancing group that is the focus of Jordan-Smith’s article, the elements of style that he identifies include “ways of expressing energy, variations on and embellishments of standard figures, and modes of personal display” (2001:186).<sup>66</sup> My observation of the Tango Del Barrio CoP bears out the truth of the claims of Fine and Jordan-Smith. The community’s participants collectively exhibit a number of recognisable behaviours, approaches, and postures, which manifest both on and off the dance floor, and which can be considered its characteristic “style”, or, to put it another way, its “ethos”

### **The Tango Del Barrio “Ethos”: Eclecticism**

One element of the Tango Del Barrio style which manifests on the dance floor - in the form of steps, sequences, and styles of embrace - is eclecticism (albeit an eclecticism that is bounded by concerns regarding such matters as safety and space). There is, for example, no mandate - tacit or otherwise - which requires that participants hold one another in a close embrace, as opposed to an open one. Nor is there any directive that if a couple does choose the close embrace, they must adopt a shared axis *apile* stance - wherein both lean into the chest of the other for support - rather than each maintaining their own axis. Instead, within the community as a whole it is understood that there is no single “right” way to dance Argentine tango. Many of its members have studied with a wide range of teachers - both under the auspices of Tango Del Barrio and elsewhere - and,

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<sup>66</sup> One can therefore understand the word “style”, as used in this context, to be a means of collectively referencing the numerous identifiable modes of presentation, activity, and interaction which characterise how the members of a given community put their interest in a particular domain into practice.

in fact, giving the Cincinnati dancers a means to experience a range of different approaches to Argentine tango as a social dance is part of the organisation's *modus operandi*. Otherwise, it might run the risk of promoting a constricted vision of what the dance is or can be. As one senior dancer put it when commenting on the process of learning to tango:

It kind of blows people's minds when they work so hard to do it the "right way" under one person's tutelage, and then they go under another person's tutelage and the things that they believed were really the right way to do it turn out to be not the only right way. So what's happening to North Americans who are learning tango, they're learning an incredibly broad form of the dance, which makes you a little crazy, whereas in Buenos Aires originally, you just had to dance like the other people in your neighbourhood danced. You didn't have to care about changing your style unless you're going to switch neighbourhoods, whereas now you sort of need to be able to alter your style. If you're going to be a complete tango dancer in North America you've got to dance three or four different ways, and that is really hard.

I noted a similar attitude, albeit expressed from a different perspective, when I asked another longstanding member of Cincinnati's tango scene what she looked for in a tango instructor:

I don't like a teacher who teaches a particular style of the dance or a particular technique of the dance and kind of projects the idea that that's the "authentic tango". Shortly after I started learning the dance, I went to Las Vegas for a festival, and they had about eight or nine really master teachers and boy, you learned right away that tango is many things. They were all masters, but they all had their own style, their own philosophy, their own way of approaching the dance, which I loved – having this diversity of teaching. One class I was in was with Fabian Salas, and he's trying to teach a different way of doing turns for a *vals*, and somebody in the class is saying "well, but we learned it in a different way. It's like this" and this student was challenging the teaching of something different.<sup>67</sup> And Salas said "well, you know, I don't take away from that. That is a way you can do it. I'm asking you to look at something different here. And if you don't, there's a class next door that maybe you'll be happier in" [laughs]. So I thought "that's the point". Right from the beginning, it's like "be open".

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<sup>67</sup> Salas is a well-known Argentine tango dancer, teacher, and choreographer.

Both of the above quotes come from dancers who have been formative in the development of Tango Del Barrio and they, along with other senior figures, have influenced the community as a whole to be receptive to different ways of dancing tango. This understanding is further enhanced by the range of visiting teachers which the organisation invites to give workshop weekends who again exhibit many different approaches to the dance. These many forms interweave and evolve on the dance floor according to competence, physicality, experience, preference, mood, music, and the many other factors that distinguish one individual's performance from another.

### **The Tango Del Barrio “Ethos”: Individuality**

Ray Cashman, Tom Mould, and Pravina Shukla write in their “Introduction” to the 2011 collection of essays (and festschrift to Henry Glassie) titled *The Individual and Tradition* that in order to interpret, generalise, and draw conclusions “folklorists gather information from specific individuals because tradition is enacted only through an individual's act of creative will” (2). At Tango Del Barrio, the overall sense of openness regarding the dance discussed above frees local dancers to adapt it according to their individual circumstances and contexts. For example, there are many tango steps that are based on the follow rotating around the lead who remains largely static in the centre point. One dancer explained to me that although he can execute such a figure just as he has been taught to do it, he prefers to “cheat the step a little” by adjusting his embrace and the position of his feet according to individual circumstances:

Some follows have longer arms or have more flexibility in their torso, some have long legs and some have short legs, and so you adjust somewhat in there to figure out what works. You're still doing the step, but maybe your footwork is a little bit different, or maybe you don't put your foot as far back, but you still give the feeling, that kind of stuff. And, you know, it's knowing how to properly do it and then knowing how to make sure you fit into a proper mould in your adjustment.

Some of my interlocutors also described inserting steps, patterns, or movement ideas from other dances or motion-based activities in a way that evoked Claude Levi-Strauss's *bricoleur* (1962), i.e. the "crafty recycler who constructs new possibilities out of available handed-down raw materials, meeting present needs" (Cashman et al 2011:4). The *bricolage* that results speaks to the intertextual nature of tradition. Richard Bauman describes intertextuality as the "relational orientation of a text to other texts" (2004:4); i.e. that which takes place when something is entextualised, decontextualised, then recontextualised, and the purpose those changes serve. Most folklore scholarship regarding intertextuality, including that of Bauman, focuses on verbal genres, but if one employs the term "text" in the broader Geertzian sense, it also has salience when studying other forms (as in, for example, my own 2017 study of croissants and tradition) and so can be productively brought to bear on the study of dance. Several of my interlocutors recounted how, in the process of bringing their own individual stamp to their dance, they take movement forms entextualised elsewhere, and recontextualise them as they dance Argentine tango. One woman, who has a background in ballroom and ballet, told me "I trick people because I can incorporate things that aren't really tango" and to illustrate, she described how, during the evening prior to our interview, she had added some aspects of rumba to her dancing when she was partnering with one of the Tango Del Barrio community's less advanced leads. She said she did it in order to enliven her dance floor experience. "It looked like a tango," she said, "but it was rumba timing. Slow quick quick slow". Another interviewee recounted coming



up with an “Electric Slide” version of tango.<sup>68</sup> He found that playfully combining elements of Electric Slide with Argentine tango helped him to deal with stresses occurring in other areas of his life. This same dancer also told me that he and his regular practice partner also developed “Bumper Tango” - a play on the idea of bumper cars - wherein he leads them to bump into other couples on the dance floor to humorous effect.

### **The Tango Del Barrio “Ethos”: Principles of Floor Craft**

The couple who devised “Bumper Tango” practice it only occasionally, only within the informal *práctica* setting, and ensure that the targets of their “bumps” are only those community members whom the pair feel confident will enjoy the joke. In other contexts at Tango Del Barrio, bumping into others whilst dancing would be considered a *faux-pas*. That this would be so is made clear in the “Ten Principles of Impeccable Tango Floor Craft” outlined by Daniel Boardman (see Figure 1), copies of which are placed on the tables that encircle the floor at Tango Del Barrio’s New Dancer Milongas for attendees to read and take them home if they so desire.<sup>69</sup> Most of Tango Del Barrio dancers adhere to the Ten Principles because doing so corresponds with the organisation’s “house style”. That said, I am not sure that all community members are necessarily familiar with Boardman’s specific delineations, since most of the points he makes are part of the general *modus operandi* in many Argentine tango communities and simply make good

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<sup>68</sup> The “Electric Slide” was a dance created to accompany the 1982 hit record “Electric Boogie” featuring the Jamaican-born singers Marcia Griffiths and Bunny Wailer. According to dance scholar Katrina Hazzard-Donald, it consists of “simple movements, no calls, and one fairly simple syncopated, off-rhythm quarter turn to organize the dance” (2009). The dance remains “a party and club favorite today” (Belnavis 2016).

<sup>69</sup> An online search indicates that Boardman’s “Ten Principles” are shared in a number of other north American tango communities. For example, I found reference to them on several US-based Argentine tango community websites, including one based in Salt Lake City, Utah, and another in Albuquerque, New Mexico. (Accessed on 2019-02-01 via <http://www.wasatchtango.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/FloorCraft.pdf> and [https://www.abqtango.org/Documents/Articles/FloorCraft\\_DBoardman.pdf](https://www.abqtango.org/Documents/Articles/FloorCraft_DBoardman.pdf) respectively.)

sense from the point of view of safety and courtesy. For example, one of Boardman's exhortations is to "Look before backing up" and continues:

Never step backwards against traffic blindly. Likewise, avoid other movements that cause you or your partner to suddenly occupy space behind you in line-of-dance because the dancer behind you may have already begun advancing into that space.

Another concerns "No parking" under which Boardman writes:

Standing and chatting with your partner between songs is fine, but keep an awareness of when the couples around you start dancing again and move accordingly. If the other dancers have begun to dance and you wish to continue your conversation, simply step off the floor so you don't obstruct them.

Other Boardman Principles, while still pertaining to safety and courtesy, hint of the potential for some to get so carried away dancing that they cause disruption. For example, his Principle No. 3 is "Avoid passing":

Tango is not a race. If the dancer in front of you is advancing more slowly than you would like, alter your dance so that it is more circular and less linear. Learn to dance well and happily without much forward advancement.

While Principle No. 6 is "Don't monopolize the space":

There are many styles of tango. Some require a relatively large amount of floor space; some require a minimal amount of floor space. All styles are fine under the right conditions. If a floor is crowded, dance small, not taking up any more space than any of your fellow dancers. If the floor is not crowded, and you are so inclined, dance large.

And Principle No. 7 is "Avoid dangerous moves":

Certain moves, such as high in-line boleos, can be dangerous on a crowded floor. Save them for less crowded conditions.<sup>70</sup>

At Tango Del Barrio, elements of Argentine tango etiquette – including those outlined in the “Ten Principles” – do sometimes fall by the wayside. This could come about as the result of a dancer’s ignorance or a lack of competence, in which case the infraction would not be considered grave. However, should a person’s heedlessness of protocol be perceived as wilful disregard of the “right way” to behave, that person would effectively be contravening an important aspect of the Tango Del Barrio CoP’s way of doing things and would risk becoming a target of opprobrium. By way of illustration, one longstanding member spoke disapprovingly of “pretentious dancers”; when I asked for clarification, I was told that “pretentious dancers” are those “more experienced dancers” who assume “a bit of status in their attitude” and “take up more space and take liberties with floor craft at the regular *milonga*”. Another interlocutor referred to dancers whose moves are more geared towards performance than the social *milonga* space allows and which “cause problems in the flow of the dance”. While another spoke disdainfully of those who ignore the line of dance and instead “showboat” in the middle of the floor.

It is the lead who largely governs what steps are taken, where, and at what speed, so it might seem that the Ten Principles of Floor Craft - with the exception of Principle No. 8 (“Don’t talk, dance!”) - are largely directed towards that role. But follows can just as easily disrupt the dance

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<sup>70</sup> The word *boleo* comes from the verb *bolear*, “to throw”. It is the result of a quick change in the direction of movement of the lead’s torso. This results in the follow’s free leg starting out in one direction and then quickly switching to the other direction according to the movement of the lead’s torso.

floor through how they execute their steps and embellishments. Take the example of the *boleo*. There are various types of *boleo*, but all involve the lead prompting the follow's free leg to go in one direction and then abruptly in the other direction, resulting in a whip-like motion. When a lead prompts a *boleo*, the size, height, velocity, and direction of the follow movement response should be proportionate to the cue. Nonetheless, it is not unknown for a follow to strive for the highest high kick they can muster rather than performing the *boleo* in a manner accordant with the cue and mindful of what is going on on the dance floor around them.

Figure 1 - Ten Principles of Impeccable Tango Floor Craft.<sup>71</sup>

## ***Ten Principles of Impeccable Tango Floor Craft***

*by Daniel Boardman CCIM*



1. **Maintain a lane.** When danced socially, tango is danced in strict circular lanes with couples advancing around the room in a counterclockwise direction (called "line-of-dance"). There may be one or more concentric lanes moving simultaneously. Once in a lane, avoid changing lanes during the dance.
2. **Look before backing up.** Never step backwards against traffic blindly. Likewise, avoid other movements that cause you or your partner to suddenly occupy space behind you in line-of-dance because the dancer behind you may have already begun advancing into that space.
3. **Avoid passing.** Tango is not a race. If the dancer in front of you is advancing more slowly than you would like, alter your dance so that it is more circular and less linear. Learn to dance well and happily without much forward advancement.
4. **No parking.** Standing and chatting with your partner between songs is fine, but keep an awareness of when the couples around you start dancing again and move accordingly. If the other dancers have begun to dance and you wish to continue your conversation, simply step off the floor so you don't obstruct them.
5. **Never zigzag.** Cutting in and out of line-of-dance is very poor form and disturbing to the dancers you are cutting in front of. If you choose to dance in the center of the room, remain there throughout the song. If you dance in a given lane, finish the dance in that same lane.
6. **Don't monopolize the space.** There are many styles of tango. Some require a relatively large amount of floor space; some require a minimal amount of floor space. All styles are fine under the right conditions. If a floor is crowded, dance small, not taking up any more space than any of your fellow dancers. If the floor is not crowded, and you are so inclined, dance large.
7. **Avoid dangerous moves.** Certain moves, such as high in-line boleos, can be dangerous on a crowded floor. Save them for less crowded conditions.
8. **Don't talk, dance!** Talking while dancing is bad form, reveals the dancer's lack of presence in the moment, and is distracting to other dancers. Save the conversation for when the music stops. Teaching or correcting your partner is particularly inappropriate at a milonga. Save it for a practica.
9. **Dance with the room.** Endeavor to dance with an awareness of all of the dancers around you. Do not allow gaps in the line-of-dance in front of you to form as this will cause a pileup of dancers behind you. When the music begins, start dancing when the majority of other dancers do.
10. **Ask before merging.** Before stepping onto a crowded dance floor, if you are a leader, make eye contact with the leader whom you wish to enter the floor in front of. The leader should understand your request and indicate his assent with a nod or wink, and you may then enter line-of-dance.

## **The Tango Del Barrio “Ethos”: Norms and Values**

Boardman’s “Ten Principles” articulate many aspects of what is considered to be “best practice” on the dance floor itself, but there are also expectations regarding comportment around the dance floor that also form part of Tango Del Barrio “ethos”. These “floor-adjacent” modes of right behaviour may not appear as written lists on the tables of New Dancer Milongas, but they are passed on and absorbed in other ways. As such, they offer evidence of Wenger’s assertion that the concept of practice within any CoP involves both “the explicit and the tacit” and “what is represented and what is assumed” (1998:47). For example, during an interview I conducted with a pair of regular Tango Del Barrio dancers, the organisation’s CoP “has mores and it reinforces its mores and it punishes people who don’t have the mores”. When I said I was curious to know “how those mores get established”, my interlocutors shared their ideas:

PK I think the people who come all the time for years and years and years, they just kind of, through gravity or whatever, you know, their ethos kind of has permeated.

WW Well, we’re lucky that, that the people who were kind of the really experienced dancers at the time were more than generous, I would say, with everything.

PK They were very generous, yeah.

WW And they also had an inclusive rather than exclusive point of view.

Over the course of my fieldwork, I identified a number of elements - which manifest both in attitude and action - that constitute the Tango Del Barrio “mores”. The elements, which often interweave and overlap with one another are: commitment to improvement; eschewal of dance floor hierarchies; selective and careful exchange of feedback; understanding the importance of

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<sup>71</sup> Again, I am not clear of the original provenance of this text. I accessed the copy presented here on 2019-01-31 via <http://www.wasatchtango.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/FloorCraft.pdf>

volunteer effort; and - as mentioned in this chapter's opening paragraph - the collective responsibility for maintaining the community's vital critical mass. I am not suggesting that all members follow all of these mores all the time, but I did notice that there was a consistency in the ways in which my interlocutors expressed views on how one should behave at Tango Del Barrio. These mores – which I shall hereafter refer to as “norms” or “values” since these words better adapt to application in the singular - are therefore forces which shape the tango ethos as it manifests within the Cincinnati CoP.

#### **• Tango Del Barrio's Norms and Values - “Commitment to Improvement”**

As discussed in the introduction, many dancers in the Cincinnati Argentine tango CoP place a high value on the fact that their dance practice allows them to spend a good deal of their leisure time in a “zone of perpetual improvement”. Committing to improving one's own dance competence, and respecting others who do the same, ties in with the fundamental idea that a CoP is “formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavor” (Wenger-Trayner 2015). As a distinctive feature of the Tango Del Barrio community, this commitment to improvement manifests in various ways.

One such way pertains to class and workshop situations and involves dancers effectively refusing to enable incompetence on the part of their partners. For example, imagine a class's instructors were teaching the participants a particular sequence of steps; they would give verbal directions and also repeatedly demonstrate the sequence, often in slow motion and broken down into sections; the participants would then have a good idea what the resulting series of movements

should look like if performed correctly; however, ideally, the follow will execute the desired steps ONLY if the lead has cued them appropriately. Now, tango is a challenging dance and for a lead to send a single coherent message to the follow often involves multiple parts of his body working independently (chest, shoulders, hips, right arm, left hand, and so on); if he fails to make the right movement with any one of those body parts - and the difference between a movement being “right” or “wrong” can be very subtle - then his cue is likely to confuse the follow. If the follow persists in not carrying out the required sequence because she deems it to have not been correctly led, it can be extremely frustrating for the lead who is doing his utmost to do everything he has been instructed to do. And yet, if the follow does not want to enable incompetence on the part of her lead, her refusal to move as desired should continue until the cue is clear. One female dancer told me she was known for being particularly resistant to imperfectly led cues: “There are jokes men tell about me here that I can be very difficult. If I don’t feel it, I just don’t go there”. She went on to comment that she knew that some women were less exacting because, she conjectured, they feared causing offence. But, she said, how “does one ever learn if you are constantly enabling them, right?” In other words, if a follow were to execute a sequence regardless of its being adequately led, she would effectively be facilitating her partner’s incompetence. That said, there is no doubt that if a follow persists in not executing an expected - if not properly led - move, fraught interactions can ensue. Even so, Tango Del Barrio’s teachers will often explicitly remind follows in their classes not to enable leads’ incompetence despite the potential for uncomfortable encounters.



It is not only follows who can enable incompetence. Leads can cultivate insensitivity in follows if, when faced with a partner who fails to respond to a well-executed cue, they choose to “over lead” in order to make their intention clearer. For example, they might exaggerate the twist of their torso and/or use their arms to move the follow into the desired position (one of my interviewees described this latter tactic as “Kroger-ing” in reference to the way customers push supermarket trolleys). Again, at Tango Del Barrio, over-leading is discouraged but nonetheless sometimes take place.

Another manifestation of the Tango Del Barrio CoP’s commitment to improvement involves the community’s more advanced dancers making a point of seeking out those less experienced than themselves with whom to dance, especially those who have demonstrated dedication towards bettering their skills. Many of the senior dancers in the community, for example, choose to attend Tango Del Barrio’s monthly New Dancer Milonga in order to do this, since part of the reason why the event exists is so that newer community members have the opportunity to work with more accomplished practitioners.

The more senior dancers within the Cincinnati CoP can present as either leads, or follows, or both, since a number are able to perform both roles competently. However, it is often the case that the power to undertake the deliberate support of less advanced dancers is more a province of the men than the women, since many of the female dancers in the Cincinnati CoP are less inclined to invite men to dance than vice versa (this is true of many Argentine tango communities). As a result, it was during my interviews with the more advanced male dancers

that I heard more about this deliberate seeking out of less skilled dancers. In fact, the way that several of them spoke about doing so reminded me of the practice of tithing. For example, when I asked one man whom he typically invited to dance, he said that there were certain people with whom he danced regularly including “the people that I socialise with even outside of the dance” and “the people that I really think are good dancers”. And then, he said:

I usually do a percentage of the night with people that are less experienced because I very much remember when no one would look at me, so, yes, there’s a healthy community portion of the night.

Unless they are brand new to the community, it is important that the less advanced dancers have demonstrated the aforementioned commitment to improvement in order to be sought out by their more advanced colleagues. As one senior *tanguero* put it: since Tango Del Barrio does its best to make learning the dance available to the majority - with relatively low entrance costs, which are reduced still further for students, and with the organisation striving to ensure gender balance where possible - “in most cases, if people want to be better dancers, it’s not going to be that onerous”. As a result, in the case of dancers who do not seem to be working on their skills, my interlocutor said he did not “feel obligated to endure torture on their behalf”. In a similar vein, another popular male lead in the community observed to me that:

There are some people who come here to dance but they’re not willing to work on the dance. I get tired of that. And usually the people who don’t work on the dance are the ones who are difficult to dance with. I mean, I know people who’ve been dancing 10, 15 years, they don’t work on their dance and I’d rather not dance with them. It can be physically, er, more than difficult. It can wear me out to the point that I don’t want to dance any more for the whole evening. But if I know that it’s somebody who really tries and takes classes, I don’t care if they’re a bad dancer. If they’re trying, then it’s worth working with them and encouraging them.

Someone else told me that he could only think of one person whom he made a point of not asking to dance. He said: “She comes every once in a while, but she never takes a lesson and she’s just ... it’s painful. If she made an effort, it would be different”.

Although it is more common for advanced male dancers to encourage less experienced females by asking them to dance in the Tango Del Barrio CoP, women can also encourage less able leads. For example, a number of them would not ordinarily ask a man to dance but choose to do so in the case of novice leads for this very reason. And there are other ways in which a follow can encourage a lead in his learning trajectory. One lady told me that when she began attending Argentine tango classes, she initially wanted to dance only with better leads, but as she learned more about the Tango Del Barrio CoP style, she changed her approach:

When I first started, I was so inexperienced that I didn’t really want to dance so much with the newer guys because I couldn’t understand their leads at all. And so I really wanted to dance with the experienced ones, and the teacher said “try to dance with them too because it’s hard for them”. And so I remember what he said, and I thought “yes, I want to do that”.

Another woman, a very accomplished dancer, told me of a situation which had taken place during a tango event that she had attended.

Δ There was this guy. He wanted to ask someone and this lady kind of rudely - she’s not from our community but somewhere else – and she rudely told him “no” because he was just a beginner or something like that. And then he sat down and I felt so bad and I just went to him, and I said “hey, do you want to dance?”. So we started dancing and he was just walking, just walking, nothing else, and just straight walking, but I felt like one. I could feel he was enjoying the music, and I was too, and we were on the same beat. And he was really tall, by the way. For me it’s really hard to dance with someone tall because I’m really short. But it didn’t feel uncomfortable.

I should mention that I myself learned to be more generous as a dancer through my contact with members of the CoP during my fieldwork. The excerpt below comes from my interview with one of the community's more accomplished follows. We had been discussing things we liked and disliked in terms of tango teachers and I mentioned sometimes becoming frustrated during classes in which the bulk of the instruction was focused on the lead, with little given to the follow to work on other than to execute a comparatively easy move over and over:

Rachel Hopkin        Then you spend the whole class doing a backward *ocho* or something. And it's like, "okay, I'm sure I could be improving the way that I bring my foot in, but there's a limit to how much I can do with this", you know.

PK        It's interesting because I've heard other women express that frustration. I don't know why that hasn't bugged me as much. I feel like I have a desire and an obligation to develop my leads because they're such an investment and such a resource, and so I am willing to put up with some stuff that is not that great for me if I think it's developing the leads.

Rachel Hopkin        That's a very nice way to think about it. And I'm going to nick your attitude and take it for myself.

PK        Yeah, I mean, their job is different and hard. So I'm willing to nurture. I'm willing to nurture. That's what I think of that.

Rachel Hopkin        That's very nice.

PK        It's kind of my "mum attitude" about it.

Rachel Hopkin        I feel kind of embarrassed and ashamed that I didn't think like that.

Since I participated in that exchange, I have kept my interlocutor's perspective in mind whenever I have found myself in lead-centred class environments.

The Tango Del Barrio CoP's commitment to improvement, which manifests in the form of advanced dancers helping those less competent, seems to work primarily to the benefit of the community's relative beginners. Alas, those who have progressed beyond elementary level can feel neglected by comparison. Because of factors mentioned previously - including follows often

outnumbering leads and female discomfort with inviting men to dance - it is usually the women who bear the brunt of this neglect. Several of my female interviewees mentioned finding the Tango Del Barrio community spectacularly welcoming when they first entered it, but less so after they had completed the basic classes. Having advanced beyond those elementary stages, they would often find themselves sitting on the side-lines of the *milongas* or *práctica* that they attended for long stretches of time, ignored by the good leads who had previously made a point of inviting them.

This phenomenon of mid-level (in terms of dance competence) women being passed over in terms of being invited to dance was so marked that one of my male interlocutors described them as occupying a “no man’s land”:

Let’s say you have beginner women, and then you’ve got good women, and then you’ve got the excellent women. And the excellent women tend to get asked to dance, and then the men feel sorry for the beginner women, so they tend to ask the beginners a lot. But if you’re like in “no man’s land” – and I’ve seen it - you don’t get asked to dance. Like if you go to a *práctica* and watch the men – we know everybody, so if there’s a new face, a beginner, you feel like “oh we’ve got to make them feel welcome ‘cos they’re new and they don’t know anybody” so you’ll see the men gravitate towards them. They’ll ask the beginner women to dance, especially if they’re a teacher, and they’ll gravitate towards the really good dancers, and the women in between get slighted. I have seen it a lot.

Reports from interviewees substantiated the existence of this “no man’s land”. For example, here is an excerpt from a conversation I had with one female dancer:

Δ BB So I came with a friend for the first time, yeah. And, yeah, it was very, very nice, it was wonderful. The beginning was excellent.  
Rachel Hopkin Okay. Oh, so then it became less welcoming?  
BB Yeah.  
Rachel Hopkin How did that happen?  
BB I don't know ...

Rachel Hopkin           Hm

BB     It's not that it's not welcoming. I don't always feel comfortable. [...] But in the beginning, it was very welcoming.

Rachel Hopkin           This is something that tons of people have said. I think they work so hard on welcoming beginners and because there's always more follows than leads pretty much, they'll concentrate on the new people, and they'll concentrate on their "old people" [i.e. the most advanced dancers], and there's that middle bit that's more problematic.

BB     And unless the middle people work really hard to get to a better place and become a super dancer, they're going to be there all the time. I do realise that.

When I mentioned the "no man's land" idea to one of Tango Del Barrio's female board members during a casual chat, she asked me "are these women coming to classes?" in a manner that struck me as slightly defensive. I realised that for the most part - as far as I knew - they were not, but that they were not was not necessarily because of lack of desire to improve. For example, another woman who described how her positive first impression of the community had diminished over time also described how extenuating circumstances had prevented her ongoing regular participation; she lost her long-term job and was unable to secure an equivalent position thereafter:

I was in and out of jobs and I didn't have a lot of money. I was trying to keep my house. So I didn't have money. So it came to the fact that I didn't have money for lessons. And I feel like you tend to get a little snubbed if you don't take lessons on a regular basis and I understand that, you know. I just didn't have that money.

Conversely, other female interviewees mentioned taking classes - regardless of whether they felt they were getting much benefit from them - as a deliberate strategy to increase the number of invitations they received at other events. One, for example, takes regular private lessons with a non-Tango Del Barrio teacher, but found that her reception at Tango Del Barrio's *práctica* and

*milongas* improved only after she also made an effort to participate in the organisation's group classes:

Δ KX Because before that, they would not accept me [chuckle].

Rachel Hopkin Oh really? So you would turn up and nobody would kind of ask you to dance? [KX indicates non-verbally that this was the case.] Yes, that's very common. Did that put you off at all? Did you stop going? Or?

KX Er, I just – probably my wish to continue was stronger than that and I just thought that I need to develop a kind of strategy to overcome it, so I started just to take classes, needed I or not. I started to go to classes not only to learn but to make myself familiar to people and they would know me, I would know them.

KX's strategy was successful and her experience clarifies the point regarding Tango Del Barrio being welcoming to beginners: it is if the beginners are brand new to the community and/or are taking classes as part of the community. Less advanced follows who are not visibly taking steps to improve their dance tend to receive fewer invitations. And if those less advanced dancers who do not appear to be working on their practice have the audacity to expect to dance with good leads, they run the risk of being construed as "freeloaders".

I learned about tango freeloaders during my conversation with a married pair of dancers. The following text comes from the transcript of my interview with them:

AP Freeloaders in tango are people who don't want to put in their time and they immediately want to jump onto the good dancers, and they're snobs and they don't want to dance with people as good as they are. [...] Nobody likes that. That's against our ethos. [...] They don't have a sense of generosity towards the newer dancers, the newer dancers who warrant nurturing, who are – if they're courteous and making an effort - the ethos of our community is everybody helps them. And Cincinnati's weird that way.

LB Everyone dances with essentially everybody.

AP Everybody dances – if you're in good conscience making an effort – so we've had, we've had "outsiders" come in who are like "well, where I came from, only the good dancers can dance with good dancers and I'm a good dancer" to the

point where they will refuse the newer dancers. That's just not how we do it in Cincinnati. That's how they do it in San Francisco///

LB ///Apparently that's the way they do it in San Francisco.

AP But that's just like – we're the nice Midwesterners.

AP and LP said that none of the community's regular and semi-regular attendees could be counted as freeloaders - rather, the term seemed to be reserved for people who showed up at Argentine tango events only occasionally. In addition, they told me that they only knew of female freeloaders and were not even sure that male freeloaders could exist in tango, since a male beginner has to put in so much work to be able to lead at all.<sup>72</sup>

#### • **Tango Del Barrio's Norms and Values - "Eschewal of Dance Floor Hierarchies"**

A little earlier, I described how KX talked disdainfully about those who think "only the good dancers can dance with good dancers". Her comment pointed to another of the community's central mores: at Tango Del Barrio, it is expected that good dancers will dance with their less advanced colleagues not simply as a facet reflective of the CoP's commitment to improvement but because it is courteous to do so. Again, because of the imbalance of leads to follows, not everyone benefits equally from this more, but it exists nonetheless.

Most members of the community never - or hardly ever - turn down an invitation to dance, no matter who issues it. Because of it being so much more common for men to do the inviting, the majority with whom I spoke on this matter were women. A few of them added that they would

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<sup>72</sup> I should also add that the couple were only able to name one person whom they had encountered within the Tango Del Barrio CoP to whom they felt they could apply the "freeloader" label. I had never met the person they discussed in this context.



only refuse if the invitee were obviously drunk, or danced in a manner which might cause injury to themselves or others on the dance floor. This willingness to dance with anybody who asks is so strongly embedded in the Tango Del Barrio community ethos that it can result in complacency, as transpired during the following exchange with SN, a man who was about six tango years old when we spoke:

SN It was a long time before someone actually turned me down for a dance, a really long time.

Rachel Hopkin Where was that? Was that here?

SN Yeah. But it was from an outsider.

Rachel Hopkin It must have been.

SN It was a shock [laughing], you know, after dancing for, like, four or five years, then all of a sudden: “what? You don’t want to dance with me?”

On a related note, particular admiration is reserved for the community’s experienced dancers who make a point of dancing with everyone. Here, for example, is an excerpt from my interview with the same couple whom I quoted at the end of the previous section:

LB You could hear an argument saying that, you know, “if I go to a *milonga* and pay this money, I should dance with who I want to dance with”.

AP No, that’s not the way. There is kind of a combination of, you know, it is a voluntary activity///

LB ///It’s kind of a balancing act that goes on.

AP Yeah.

LB But, erm, [names two of the community’s most advanced leads], they dance with everybody.

Rachel Hopkin Yeah. Yeah. And I like it how people are looking to see who doesn’t have a partner.

AP And [names another advanced dancer] is really good about that. I admire the fact that if some woman is sitting by herself, he will ask her to dance. He’s really good about that.

Rachel Hopkin [To AP] But you’re also good, because I know times that you’ve kind of like offered LB [the husband of AP] when you’ve seen somebody else is sitting out.

AP That’s how it should be. [...] Did you know that I offer you [laughs]?

LB I didn’t. No.

AP You’re quickly snapped up, by the way.

Rachel Hopkin        Yeah. It's when he's about to dance with you and you're seeing that somebody has maybe been outside for a dance. I'm talking more about during workshops.

AP        I know, but it's only fair. But also the idea that "I'm too good to dance with beginning dancers" is not a Cincinnati concept, but I think it's definitely a concept in other communities.

Those communities that seem to espouse a more hierarchical approach are not thought well of within Tango Del Barrio CoP, as evidenced by the comments made by LB and AP in the earlier excerpt where they say "That's how they do it in San Francisco". In another example, a woman told me of her experiences dancing in locations away from Cincinnati:

You can go to Seattle and nobody will dance with you [...] or Portland, which to me sort of defeats the purpose. And that happened in Louisville. I went down with J and D to the tango festival. And J danced with me, and someone else did, but to me, I would want to dance with new people. It's like "why do you want to dance?". And the Louisville group has come up to our *milongas* and I always crack up, because our guys are very outgoing. All of them, they go out of their way to dance with dancers who are new to the community and they're very open to that. But these Louisville girls come up - there was like ten of them or eight of them - and they bring a bunch of guys. Our guys dance with all their women, and their men just sat there and would only dance with them! And I'm thinking "how about something new and different here, guys?"

Another of my interlocutors is a tango professional who travels widely but who spends a lot of time in Cincinnati because of its welcoming atmosphere. She told me Δ "something happened here that the people is so friendly" then compared the Cincinnati CoP with that of another city where she had recently spent time [this woman is, I estimate, in her fifties]:

A couple of months ago, I went to the West Coast to dance in a very open-minded place, Seattle. The people do not mix. Young people dance with other young people and so, because all the community is young, nobody invited me to dance. So I moved to the bar where the girls were, they were getting dances. No dances. So I think that even in places where you think the people are more open-minded, they are more conservative. They want to just dance with the people that they know.

Cleveland - perhaps because of its relative proximity - was mentioned several times in relation to this topic. One dancer said she had gone there for a “tango marathon” but no one wanted to dance with her.<sup>73</sup> Δ “I felt like outsider,” she said. Another dancer mentioned having had a “very bad” experience in Cleveland but then qualified her comment: Δ “Not ‘very bad’. Correct it. So they were not really warm. I don’t know. Maybe it is because Cleveland is more cosmopolitan area”. Another said they had found the Cleveland’s tango community to be “very cliquish” but added that she had only been there for a night or two and therefore “shouldn’t extrapolate too much from that”.

All this said, I must also acknowledge that not everyone finds the Tango Del Barrio community to be instantly warm and friendly when they venture into it. However, when my interviewees described having received a negative early impression, their first contact had usually taken place some years previously and so perhaps this was something that had changed more recently. In fact, it could be that that change was brought about by those who had initially felt somewhat ignored and determined that others should not go through the same experience. For example, one lady told me about the first time she and her husband went to a Tango Del Barrio *milonga*. It was in 2011 or thereabouts, and the couple had been learning for about a year:

MU We probably picked a bad *milonga*. Two of the long-term community members were leaving, but we didn’t know that, and we went to this *milonga* and it wasn’t very friendly. No one talked to me, no one asked me to dance, not even the teachers that I’d seen in class. What I realise now is that they were more preoccupied with this couple that were leaving probably. I said “this is stupid. I’m

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<sup>73</sup> A tango marathon is an event that usually takes place over several days during which multiple *milongas* are offered at various times of day so that participants can dance for many hours at a time.

not doing this” [laughs]. You know, I am very straightforward, so I just said “heck with this”.

Rachel Hopkin        Absolutely. Yeah. No. I’m kind of intrigued by this because I find the community here very, very friendly.

MU     And they are, yeah. [...] I think I’m partly responsible [laughs].

Rachel Hopkin        Yes [laughs in agreement].

MU     Well I am sort of an obnoxious outgoing person.

Rachel Hopkin        I don’t think you are [laughs].

MU     I am. But I do, I mean, I wasn’t as in my younger days as extroverted but when I became more involved in the community, that was one thing that I really felt was important. Mainly because I had been dissed and I thought “you know. I don’t want people to feel that way”. And so I always make an effort - every time we have a *milonga* or *practica*, someone walks in that I don’t know - to introduce myself, to try to introduce them to someone else. [...]

Rachel Hopkin        Well, I definitely think that whatever you’ve done, whatever’s happened////

MU     ///And it’s sort of has changed.///

Rachel Hopkin        ///it’s filtered down because, I mean, I found it incredibly friendly. And I’ve been to – I don’t go to that many tango things, but like, here, this and when I went to Austin, Texas, it’s the only other place that I went where people were kind of like seeking me out because I was new.

Incidentally, MU was consistently named by other interviewees as being one of the community’s most welcoming members.

### • Tango Del Barrio’s Norms and Values - “Careful Feedback”

Many of the people whom I interviewed said that they largely or completely avoid giving any form of critical feedback to their partners. That they choose not to do so may seem to be at odds with the commitment to improvement discussed above. However, no matter how well-intentioned or how gently they are delivered, critical comments can easily provoke hurt feelings, indignation, and/or anger. In addition, they are often ineffectual since diagnosing the cause of a couple’s issue is not easy, even for the minority of members who are adept in both roles.

Sometimes, each dancer will think the other is at fault, whether or not they say so out loud. Other

times, both dancers blame themselves. In many cases, there are usually things that both could do - or avoid doing - to improve matters and but they need more experience to learn what those are.

In my own case, learning not to give feedback is part of the tango journey, and it seems I am not alone in this, as the following exchange between myself and another female dancer illustrates:

Rachel Hopkin        Often in the workshops, you have that little break where you can kind of like “so, how did that go?” And sometimes something hasn’t worked out and I’m always making suggestions. But my suggestions are always wrong. They’re always wrong.

YR        To your partner? I can relate to that [laughs].

Rachel Hopkin        Do you find it easy to give constructive criticism to whoever you’re dancing with?

YR        I’m real – it’s easy for me to give my opinion but, like you said you’re always wrong, I have found that at least 50% of the time after nine years, I’m incorrect.

Both YR and I have made concerted efforts to rein in our suggestions, not simply because we are so often wrong, but also because within Tango Del Barrio, it is generally considered to be “not good form” to make such comments. One interviewee spoke with admiration of another woman in the community; this woman was an advanced dancer, but her spouse was not, and of the wife my interviewee remarked:

She never criticises him. She knows he’s learning, and she always loves to dance with him, and she doesn’t criticise other people either, because she understands what it means to be a beginner.

However, there are a few limited situations during which offering feedback on one’s partner’s performance may be acceptable. Generally these occur during designated tango-learning events - i.e. classes, *prácticas*, and workshops - and only when a dancer has been specifically asked to

comment and/or if she/he feels their partner might be open to suggestion. As one interlocutor told me:

I don't feel it's appropriate to give someone feedback unless I'm asked for it, especially at a *milonga*. Also, I am not such a great dancer myself, nor am I an experienced teacher of tango, so it would be doubly, even triply, inappropriate. Nevertheless, I have occasionally asked in a gingerly and circumspect way, if I could suggest something, and if encouraged, I have done so. If this were a policy, I would sum it up as: "sometimes at *practica* but only if asked, and never at a *milonga*".

Some interviewees described strategies they have developed to improve a situation without risking impugning their partner's approach. Again, they would only resort to such ends during learning-based activities, not during *milongas*. One approach involved one member of the dance couple stating that something appeared to be awry but only with reference to their own experience. YE, a female dancer who was less than three tango years old when we spoke, was one of my interviewees who had adopted this tactic:

Δ Normally I would say "this does not feel good to me" or "I really cannot put my finger on it but right here, I'm not feeling good". Sometimes I would suggest that they maybe give me a different support with their hand or give me more space to do my rotation. And if that doesn't fix the problem, then I would ask the teacher and say "I'm not feeling great here". And I always make it about myself. I'm like "I don't know, I'm not stable. I lose balance. I don't know what's going on".

Another strategy I heard about was offering encouragement regarding a positive aspect of the partner's dance in the hope that it might alleviate another issue that was more problematic. For example, one follow explained to me how she works with overly cautious beginner leads. Rather than saying "You're too slow. You're too hesitant", she says Δ "You want me to go there? Send me to fly, fly".

Even Tango Del Barrio's teachers take great care when giving feedback. In fact, in all the classes at which I was present, I was struck by how much encouragement students were offered - much more time was spent on affirming their efforts than on correcting their errors. And when correction was necessary, a careful approach would be adopted. During an interview, one of the instructors described his approach to giving criticism in a group class situation:

I will try not to single somebody out. If I notice something going wrong, rather than just directly correcting the person, I will make the correction to the whole class and not single out the person. [...] Everybody can benefit by the criticism. It doesn't have to be directed at one person. It should be just out there for everybody to understand. If they don't feel like they're making that mistake, fine, they can feel good about it. And if they feel they are making that mistake, they don't have to feel criticised.

#### • **Tango Del Barrio's Norms and Values - "Volunteer Effort"**

Another important Tango Del Barrio CoP more is that members volunteer their time and energy for the benefit of the larger community through, for example, attending events which they would otherwise skip in order to even out lead/follow imbalances or to encourage novices. A number of my interviewees said they participate in courses they have already taken in order to offer the newcomers a better experience of the dance than they are likely to achieve with other beginners. These volunteers also seemed to go out of their way to be encouraging towards the students - in other words, they maintained the Tango Del Barrio ethos of taking care when giving feedback, as is borne out by the following excerpts taken from fieldnotes I made while observing several different classes. In the notes, I refer to the volunteers using the letters L, R, and S:

I hear L telling a male student "everything you're doing is great, but you could really be doing a little bit less".

R is working with a beginner follow. I note that he seems to be super-smiley and friendly in a way that he's not normally.

I feel there's quite a bit of reassurance talk going on. Both Ella [Moskovich, who was teaching the class with her husband Jake] and S are giving one young man a lot of "tango talk therapy". They both end up saying "he's so easy to dance with" and laughing together. "But it's true" adds S. The man seems very pleased.

Although L, R, and S were some of Tango Del Barrio's more experienced *tangueros*, less advanced dancers also helped out in classes. One man told me that after taking Tango FUNdamentals and Tango Elements himself, he continued to help out at these beginner courses for a further three years:

The same class [laughs]. I could teach it. Tony and Julie were teaching it and I had the whole class memorised because I took that class like ten, ten to twelve times. And it's been like that. I mean, I'm subbing right now on Thursday class because they're always short on leads and so usually I don't turn them down. [...] I like being supportive. I mean, I really like the community, I like the people, and I just, you know, I feel I need to be supportive.

The presence of these volunteers can lead to a form of collective teaching, for although each course is officially led by two teachers, the assisting dancers frequently ask questions that are designed to elicit further information or clarify a point for the sake of the attendees. Sometimes they also add their ideas about the topic which is being discussed by the instructors. One of the occasions on which I observed this collective teaching take place was during a Tango FUNdamentals lesson that took place in January 2018. The instructors were Grace de Guia and Marty Gooden, and around eight students were present. Three volunteers also attended - Z, L, and Y - all of whom were advanced dancers in the Tango Del Barrio community. The following excerpts come from my fieldnotes and exemplify how this collective teaching worked:

Marty says to make sure the lead and follow are "contra body" - i.e. shoulders facing towards each other - "to help keep the connection". Z asks him to show the same thing in another step.



To clarify, Z was not asking Gooden to demonstrate being contra-body in another step for her own benefit; she wanted him to do so in order to make what he was talking about it clearer to the students. Similarly:

Y asks Grace to talk about how she is maintaining her distance to Marty. She says she feels his hand in her back and makes sure there is no space between his hand and her back. Y asks another question which I can't hear but I think must relate to how the follow should position her chest with respect to the lead's chest. Grace answers "keep your heart to his heart" and says one of her coaches once told her "always keep your heart towards your partner". Marty adds that both sides need to contribute to the embrace from each side of their own bodies i.e. the left and right sides of the body.

Later in the class, students were introduced to pivots. Pivots are a fundamental tango move. They usually involve the follow being led into a position so that her entire body is balanced upon the ball of one foot, and then the lead moves in such a way that she rotates while still balanced on that single point of contact with the floor. This is how the pivot was introduced during this class:

It's a very important step, Marty says. To pivot her, his whole body turns, not just his arms. Grace then says that for the follow, all weight is on one leg and her arm must remain dense (i.e. not floppy). L queries – she thinks she's the one doing the pivoting rather than being turned by the lead. Z asks for some more clarification: "here you're stepping back, collecting and rotating your frame". Y adds that the move Z's just described means he gets out of the way so she can pivot. Grace says keep the weight on the ball of your foot. Marty repeats that it's important for leads to get in the habit of leading with the entire torso rather than just using arms. Z says "and if you do that [i.e. lead only with arms] to some follows they might slap you". Marty agrees, laughing: "some have more of emotional response. The point is you're not driving a truck, you have a human being in your arms and the best way to guide her is to use the torso". Z asks is that what L meant when L said she felt like she was pivoting rather than the man her? I.e. that the lead's inviting her to pivot rather than actually making her move in a circular way himself? L says there are different ways to do things [i.e. inconclusive response]. Marty clarifies that nothing he does is without the agreement of his partner, it's all invitation.

A little later, when Gooden and De Guia offered instruction on how to exit from the pivot, there was a further opportunity for collective teaching:

Marty explains “I step and invite her forward and when I do, I pivot her toward me”. Y adds “and you’re changing weight, right?”. Does Marty respond? I don’t think so. When he demos again, Y says “you need to let the leads know that they have to change weight”. Z adds another option. And then Marty goes through it again to make sure he’s not confused himself. Marty says “try this and we’ll walk around and see how it works”.

Since at least one or two volunteer dancers are present during virtually all of the Tango Del Barrio classes, the new students learn not only about tango dancing technique, but also about how volunteer effort underpins this tango community. As was the case with the man (quoted above) who said he helped out at every beginner class for three years, the novice dancers learn that giving of oneself for the benefit of the whole group is part of the community’s ethos. LL told me he helped out during the Monday, Tuesday and Thursday classes for several years precisely because of the example set by those volunteers who had helped during his initial classes:

When I started at T-D-B, it was a huge anomaly. There is one class every four or five years, a beginner class, where there’s more men than woman, and in my class there were more men than women when I first started, so they had to bring in our T-D-B folks. And the women that came in - especially S - if it wasn’t for her, I’m not sure I would have lasted as long as I did, because she was so beautiful and encouraging and wonderful to dance with. I mean, just every time I did something, she was “oh, you’re really great”. And I don’t think she was doing it in a patronising sort of way, she was just “yeah, you’re doing really well”. And, I just, I felt like, you know, this was really crucial for the continuity. And then I saw in the subsequent classes that people from the community showed up to help the newbies out. So I think it’s really important. And most of us do it willingly because we want to have more people to dance with.

**• Tango Del Barrio's Norms and Values - "Collective Responsibility for  
Maintaining the Community's Vital Critical Mass"**

The final Tango Del Barrio more which I wish to cover here is the one which I highlighted at the very start of this chapter; namely, the assumption of responsibility for the maintenance and regeneration of the group, even by those whose tango-dancing competence is rudimentary. The dancers who spoke of volunteering at beginner classes, despite having only just completed the courses themselves, provide one example of how this manifests. There are others.

Dorothy Noyes states that when a tradition bearer passes on a tradition, it is not simply a "communicative transaction" that occurs, but also a "transfer of responsibility for a valued practice or performance" (2009:233). Every performer she has ever encountered, she writes, acknowledges that the tradition they maintain is at bottom neither:

a badge of pride or an inheritance to display but a job that must be done. Performers may hope to hand on their knowledge to inheritors authorized by blood or formal affiliation, but above all they look for those who will be willing and competent to do the work" (2009:248).

What I found at Tango Del Barrio was that even the community's newer members are on the lookout for others "who will be willing and competent to do the work" despite the fact that they themselves can as yet pass on little by way of knowledge or skills regarding the dance. Almost all of my interviewees - from the relative beginners to the very experienced - expressed feeling some sense of obligation in this regard. Many were also able to offer concrete examples of how this feeling of responsibility had influenced their own actions, including through their participation as volunteers in various events, as detailed above, and in other ways. TC described

how he and his wife, MU, started to consciously work towards maintaining and regenerating the community a year or two after they started learning to dance. TC and MU are the couple who had the unfortunate first experience of a Tango Del Barrio *milonga* where the focus was on the couple who were about to move away:

TC M's an educator and she feels a kind of responsibility for making people feel welcome and feels badly when people are sitting and ignored. I like to do on-boarding too. I work in the beginner classes. I like to on-board people. I like to make them feel comfortable. I like to make them feel welcome. I understand how difficult it is, and so my heart kind of goes out to them, because we know if you don't them over the hump quickly, they're gone [claps hands]. I've seen a lot of, you know, 25 people in a beginners' class and maybe two or three move on, so the attrition rate's not good.

Rachel Hopkin And did you kind of communicate to the people in authority at Tango Del Barrio that there might be more they could do to embrace beginners?

TC Yeah, I think so, I think so. And we just sort of took that role, I mean, helped to take that role. I was always helping in the beginners' classes and got to know the people, which I love doing. And B was always trying to, you know, create a welcoming – you know, as much as she could.

Rachel Hopkin Uh huh. Uh huh.

TC ///It didn't happen right away. I think it was just over time as we, as we developed our own skill sets and saw people coming in. And she just naturally wants to make people feel welcome, so I think it's just part of her nature.

Another interviewee told me that her sense of responsibility had evolved over time as she “got more and more involved in the community” and then reflected on how that had come about:

I think the people we were closest to were also people that were very interested in the regeneration of the community, that group, we got more close, you know, we just identified with them more. So I think that was part of it too. I mean, they sort of were always saying nice things and encouraging people and sending people, so I think that's, you know, just sort of, you know, you just want it to, to succeed.

One experienced dancer and organiser of tango events told me that:

I think we have somewhat of an obligation to continue promoting or developing the community, just so it doesn't disappear, and so in that sense I think there's a responsibility to the community. The community is very amorphous.

How strongly my interlocutors felt the responsibility varied from person to person. Some professed to feel it unequivocally, others were more circumspect. One member, whose tango age was about 15, said his sense of responsibility had declined in recent years after a number of his suggestions for building community - such as staging some events away from the Tango Del Barrio studio - were rejected. As a result, he said "I don't necessarily feel the same obligation to the tango community". Even so, he continued to proffer such ideas and also watched out for beginner dancers because he remembered how difficult he found it when first learning the dance. He mentioned one newer dancer in particular whom he often saw at *prácticas*:

When he first started, there were people who would come in and tell him "okay, you need to put your foot here, move your body this way". And I'm like "does that feel comfortable? If it doesn't feel comfortable, don't do it that way" [laughs]. And so when he asks me for advice on something, I'm there to answer. But I'm also there to say "you've got to find out how you feel comfortable in that step and do it that way", which not many people did when I was starting. But beyond that though, yeah, if I see a new lead doing something wrong, I may step in and help them out.

Many other interviewees also described their feeling of responsibility manifesting in ways that involved encouraging newcomers. One told me:

I have noticed that for every 20 students, you get about one who stays. And I've always tried to encourage people at the stage where they've had basic training and they can maybe do a basic *ocho* but they can't do much. And they need to feel that they can dance with people who are not going to make them feel small or intimidated in any way. And I've seen people drop out at an alarming rate really, and that's a problem. So anytime I've met these people, I've always tried.

When the sense of responsibility takes hold varies. Some felt it almost immediately, for others it took longer. Several of the board members spoke of assuming it only once they took on official roles within the organisation. One, for example, put it this way:

Well, if I'm part of this, then I want it to work, period. I took it on immediately when I signed up with Tango Del Barrio [i.e. agreed to become a board member]. I mean, if I sign onto that role, then I'm part of it.

Not everyone with whom I spoke professed to feeling this sense of obligation, which often caused me to query them further, as is demonstrated by the following exchange which I had with a dancer who was just over two tango years old at the time that we spoke:

VF     Erm, in terms of responsibility, I don't really feel any, since I don't consider myself that good of a dancer. I think in order to uphold that responsibility, I would have to be sort of skilled or experienced at tango and capable of teaching it to others.

Rachel Hopkin     Although even just by being present and you carrying on working on it, you're sustaining the community.

VF     Erm, yeah, in a way.

Rachel Hopkin     I guess that might not be your motivation, but you are. You're not seeing it as, er ...

VF     It's a very tiny responsibility.

Rachel Hopkin     Okay. Okay.

VF     Erm ...

Rachel Hopkin     If you're not feeling it at all, you don't have to say that you are [laughing]///

VF     ///Well no, I mean, it's good because it's not something I see as a responsibility. I mean, it's something, just by being present, it's something that I want to do because I like the people in tango.

The following excerpt from my interview with a lady who had been involved in Cincinnati's Argentine tango CoP for many years ran along somewhat similar lines:

Rachel Hopkin     Do you feel any sense of responsibility towards maintaining, cultivating, regenerating the local tango community?

LQ     Erm, yes, but I don't do anything about it.

Rachel Hopkin Well, you do, because you go to things. I mean, I appreciate that's probably for you but, I mean, critical mass is what a community needs.

LQ Yeah. Yeah.

Rachel Hopkin But you don't do anything else? Hang on, that's not quite true because I'm pretty sure I've seen you turn up at something with a dish in your hand.

LQ Oh, yes. That was my other way of ingratiating myself with the Tango Del Barrio people.

Rachel Hopkin So you bring food to the potlucks, er, the *milongas*. Do you bring them to all *milongas*?

LQ No, I sort have a thing about doing it at a holiday. And I always do desserts.

Rachel Hopkin Right, it looked like a trifle-y kind of thing.

LQ Yes, I did a trifle. I've done several actually and then I broke the dish. And the trifle went all over.

Rachel Hopkin [gasps].

LQ It was at the old Tango Del Barrio and I brought everything up in the elevator and it had the trifle in a basket that didn't have high enough sides. And it was just awful. So I'm telling Y this [Y is another member of the Tango Del Barrio community] and I'm thinking - and I had found this trifle dish at Goodwill for like \$4. So I thought "I'll never find another trifle dish". I like to make trifle. It's so easy.

Rachel Hopkin It's very English.

LQ Yes. And you really have to have a trifle dish. So I thought "okay". I broke down, I got on Amazon, I bought the trifle dish, and this package arrived and it said it was from Y and I thought "well she could be selling stuff on Amazon" so I opened it up and it was lovely. The next day another trifle dish arrived [laughing].

Rachel Hopkin She sent you a trifle dish. Oh that is so sweet, what a lovely story.<sup>74</sup>

By contrast, some dancers explicitly stated feeling the responsibility very early in their involvement. One, who had studied ballroom dance before she came to Argentine tango a couple of years ago, said she felt that way:

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<sup>74</sup> LQ finished her story by telling me that she kept Y's trifle dish and returned the Amazon one. Recently, though, she had found another \$4 trifle dish in a charity shop so she now has two again, though she added "who needs more than one?"

because it is a great community. It's a relaxing community. You know, dancing – it gets your endorphins going which makes you happy. You – mentally – it helps your endorphins mentally. You've got the physical part of it, but then you have the social part also, depending on your social abilities and what you want (...) How many things that you do have all three? You know, the mental the physical, and the social part involved in it that you can do all year? So yeah, I try to get people involved and we'll sometimes go out in bars, dancing, and people, the women, mostly, say: "wow, that was really great. Where did you learn that? How did you learn that?" And, you know, we'll give out the information, and 19 out of 20, they don't show up. Occasionally you might get one. We say it's not expensive. Yeah, you can go to Arthur Murray [a company which has franchises all over America that offer ballroom dance classes] and spend 1000 or 2000 dollars - from what I understand - on the first package you sign up for, or you can go to somewhere like Tango Del Barrio where you start out with a group lesson for \$10. And again, they really try to get you to come into the community by making sure that the numbers are equal, and I will tell you that I have not seen that at all on the ballroom side.

Another relative newcomer to the Tango Del Barrio community gave a very long sigh when I asked her if she felt any responsibility for maintaining the community, then answered as follows:

Δ WF I do, of course, yes.

Rachel Hopkin How quickly did you take on that feeling?

WF Well, good question [laughs]. I can tell you: for instance, I go outside of our community, and when I go outside of our community, you come to new studio, and you want to be, to feel welcome. So how people will feel you welcome? They will come to you and say "hi. How are you? Where you are from?" and invite, and invite you to dance. This is very nice, I feel, very nice. So in our studio, I know people and if somebody new come, I try to do this, so that is why I think I feel responsible for, for our community. [She mentioned experiencing other communities as a newcomer and not feeling welcome]. So, yes, I feel responsible for our community because I want people who come to Cincinnati – because people come to Cincinnati, like, from Europe; they have business trip and they dance tango and they come to our community -and I want them to feel good.

Rachel Hopkin Well, for what it's worth, I come here because it feels good.

WF Oh, this is very nice, very nice.

Rachel Hopkin Well, no, you're very nice, that's why I like it here.

WF [laughing] Okay.



Another person with whom I spoke was already an accomplished *tanguera* when she had moved to Cincinnati a few years previously and became involved with Tango Del Barrio. She said felt the responsibility within a few months of participating in the community's activities. "That quickly?" I asked. I was surprised. Yes, she confirmed, then continued:

Δ Because when you think something is really nice, you want to keep that. I always think it's kind of like meditation. It makes you feel better. It makes you, erm, almost like a better person in your life. You want to share that (...) you want it to keep going and growing. It's maybe even selfish kind of because otherwise you won't be able to dance.

There are many more excerpts from interviews that I could insert here to illustrate this point further, but I will restrict myself to just one more exchange. My interviewee was a woman and her first experience of Argentine tango had taken place around two years earlier when she signed up for Tango Del Barrio's FUNdamentals course:

Rachel Hopkin      Do you feel any sense of responsibility to the community? You know, a feeling of needing to show up in order to keep the numbers up or anything like that? Or encouraging//  
YY      ///You know what? Erm, I'll answer that in a different way. Showing up; no. Well, I show up if I want to go. I don't show up because I feel a, you know, that I need to do that. Erm, however, when they moved to the new spot, I felt very compelled to go help put the floor in, like, because I know that that's a big project and it takes a lot of hands, and more hands lead to little jobs. I mean, we knocked that out in a day.

## **Chapter Two – Closing Thoughts**

So I end this chapter back where I began it, with the laying of the floor at Tango Del Barrio.

In laying out their concept of a “community of practice”, a key point that Lave and Wenger make is that such groups are, at least in part, constituted by “legitimate peripheral participation”.

Legitimate peripheral participation refers to the manner in which those new to a social learning environment are gradually inculcated with the knowledge and skills necessary to be able to fully participate in the group’s activities (1991). I certainly saw evidence of this taking place within the Cincinnati CoP. There, newcomers are gradually apprised by their peers of longer-standing of the tradition of Argentine tango dancing as it is understood and practised in Cincinnati.

The interviewee whom I quoted at the start of this chapter describing the floor installation as being like a barn raising went on to comment that what he had loved about the whole floor laying effort “was the spirit of community and the spirit of pitching in”. Even those who knew nothing about floor installation or carpentry or any kind of practical task of that sort were able to do something useful for the community. Similarly, even those who know little about Argentine tango, can help to keep the imported dance tradition going by ensuring that others join, remain part of, and adopt the norms, values, and overall ethos of the Tango Del Barrio community of practice.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Affect (Cincinnati-Tanguicity Part 2: Tango Essence)

This chapter is the second of the four in which I analyse aspects of the data gathered during my fieldwork in order to address specific themes. In the previous chapter, I considered how tanguicity emerges within the norms and values that characterise Cincinnati Argentine tango CoP and which in turn shape the community's overall ethos. In this chapter, manifestations of tanguicity continues to be a central concern, but my approach is now guided by the interpretation of tanguicity-as-tango-essence. Tanguicity-as-tango-essence is all that which ensures that dancers keep returning to Tango World and I aim to tease out of what it consists through an investigation of affect. More broadly, my aim is to offer insights into the role affect plays in the promulgation of a tradition in the form of a leisure activity that is founded upon an imported expressive cultural form. In doing so, I draw on Sara Ahmed's conception of objects which are "sticky" with positive affect.

#### **Affect and Affect Theory - a Brief Overview**

Although affect research has gained academic traction only in the past few decades, its origins are often traced to the ideas of the Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677).<sup>75</sup> Spinoza

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<sup>75</sup> Texts which link affect theory to Spinoza's ideas include: Hansen 2009; Liljeström and Paasonen 2010; Murphie 2010; and Seigworth and Gregg 2010.

eschewed the dualistic Cartesian view of the mind and body as being distinct from one another, and instead paid attention to *affectios* about which he wrote about in *Ethics*, his *magnus opus*. *Affectios* are “states or conditions of a body’s reaction to another body’s affecting it” and incorporate “both how our body reacts to being affected” and how our mind puts such reactions into words, often in the form of descriptions of emotions (Dockstader N.D.). According to anthropologist, Thomas Blom Hansen, one of Spinoza’s key arguments was that “human beings could set themselves free from religious passions and the illusions of divine law” by accepting that these *affectios* were what governed “relations between people, and at the same time insisting on tempering the passions and guiding the intellect through reason” (2009).

During the late twentieth century, there was a flowering of interest in Spinoza’s ideas, in part due to the appreciation for his work displayed by the influential French thinker Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995). The renewed esteem for the seventeenth century polymath was part of a larger academic trend wherein “the body, the senses and other non-discursive forces in social life” received greater attention than had previously been the case (Hansen 2009). The concomitant rise in affect scholarship is evidenced by the wealth of publications devoted to its study which have appeared over the past several decades emanating from a wide range of disciplines (including animal studies, anthropology, dance studies, gender studies, geography, literature, media studies, medicine, psychology, religious studies, and semiotics). Despite (or because of) the abundance and breadth of this work, what exactly is signalled by the word “affect” evades succinct definition and how it is understood can vary according to disciplinary context.

According to Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, co-editors of *The Affect Theory Reader*, affect is:

the name we give to those forces - visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally *other than* conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion - that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension, that can likewise suspend us (as if in neutral) across a barely registering accretion of force-relations, or that can even leave us overwhelmed by the world's apparent intractability. (2010:1)<sup>76</sup>

Affect, they state, resides in:

those intensities that pass body to body (human, nonhuman, part-body, and otherwise), in resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds, *and* in the very passages or variations between these intensities and resonances themselves. (2010:1)<sup>77</sup>

Marianne Liljeström and Susanna Paasonen offer a more concise explanation in their introduction to another edited collection, this one titled *Working with Affect in Feminist Readings* (2010). They state that the study of affect emphasises “the carnal ways of being in, experiencing and understanding the world that are fundamentally relational and productive” (2010:1).

Elsewhere, Donovan Schaefer, a religious studies scholar, describes affect as “the flow of forces through bodies outside of, prior to, or underneath language” (2015:4). Schaefer adds that affect is an external indication of something taking place within which is beyond conscious control, which can only sometimes be described in words, and of which we may not even be aware.

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<sup>76</sup> Italics in original.

<sup>77</sup> Italics in original.

Guided by these scholars, I understand affect to reference non-linguistic embodied forces that are produced by interaction, and which can manifest in various different ways, including as emotions, thoughts, attitudes, expectations, as well as in forms of meaning-making experience that cannot easily be labelled.

### **Affect, Folklore, and the Body**

As mentioned above, the proliferation of publications about affect is a mark of the increased academic interest in the body which, in turn, was fuelled by concerns that “a broad range of intellectual concerns are bypassed or even lost if focusing solely on the semantic and symbolic” (Liljeström and Paasonen 2010:1). Within the folklore discipline, that trend resulted in a number of somatically-inclined works, such as Katharine Young’s 1993 edited volume *Bodylore*, the sense-rich ethnographies of Kathy Neustadt (1992) and Dorothy Noyes (2003), and the dance-themed editions of *Western Folklore* and *The Journal of American Folklore* described in the Introduction to this monograph (Jordan-Smith and Horton, eds., 2001; and Borland and Hutchinson, eds., 2009). However, some folklorists, notably Jeana Jorgensen, lament that the corpus of body-based folklore research in existence today remains slender.

Jorgensen was the keynote speaker at the 9th Annual Ohio State University/Indiana University Folklore and Ethnomusicology Student Conference which took place in Columbus, Ohio, in 2016. The conference theme was “Embodied Expression: The Body in Academia, the Field, and In-Between” and in her presentation, Jorgensen questioned US folkloristic interrogation of the body and embodied practices. Despite notable exceptions - including the works mentioned above

- Jorgensen argued that evidence of real engagement was hard to come by and narrow in scope when it did appear. In a manner that parallels (and is probably related to) the paucity of folkloristic dance scholarship, Jorgensen contended that the body's "primacy" had rarely been recognised.

Given that this chapter is about affect, the embodied experience - as conveyed via the relevant accounts of my interlocutors - is primary. Of course, their descriptions and interpretations of such experiences are word-based, but they are evocative nonetheless. In addition, many of the questions I raised that prompted such responses were influenced by my own affectual awareness. Many of my interviewees spoke in some depth of the somatic impressions they have received in the course of their involvement in Tango World - how they had been affected, in other words.

## **Tango World**

I have already referred to "Tango World" several times in this dissertation and, as mentioned in the Introduction, I use the term to reference involvement in range of tango-related activities. These activities naturally include dancing with a partner. They also include being at a tango event but not dancing: for example, in the case of a *práctica* or *milonga*, one could be seated at one of the tables that rim the dance floor watching the couples floating by; or perhaps deciding who to invite to dance; or waiting for an invitation; or checking one's phone; or conversing with people close by; or helping oneself to the drinks and snacks that are usually served at such events; or standing on the side-lines; or spending time in the bathroom/changing room. In addition, Tango World encompasses physically preparing to go to a tango event (for example, by

selecting one's outfit and shoes, applying makeup, and other modes of personal preparation); as well as organising and anticipating one's attendance at such event.

### **Positive Affective Value and Sticky Objects**

The area of affect theory which I focus on in this chapter concerns how affect influences the ways in which people choose to interact with elements of the world around them. Feminist scholar Sara Ahmed has written extensively on this theme. She describes these elements as “objects” and I shall follow her lead. The object with which I am concerned is Tango World and all that it embraces. Through an exploration of affect, I investigate what it is that causes practitioners to initially enter Tango World and - perhaps more importantly - what keeps them resident in its realm, despite the many challenges of the dance and the etiquette that surrounds it. As a result, this chapter offers a case study of the role that affect plays in the promulgation of a tradition.

My analysis of affect and Tango World is founded upon a number of publications by Ahmed that deploy affect scholarship to explore how certain objects are associated with happiness and other emotions generally considered as positive (see, for example, 2008, 2010a, 2010b, and 2014). Therefore, before I discuss any of my research data, I wish to provide an overview of Ahmed's ideas in this regard.

Ahmed argues that people imagine certain objects - such as family - will make them happy. Because happiness “is promised through proximity” to such objects, people then direct



themselves towards them (2008:11). Objects associated with happiness then become social goods which accumulate “positive affective value as they are passed around”, becoming “sticky” in the process (2010a:29). Affect is therefore, Ahmed declares, “what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects” (2010a:29).

Since we judge an object to be good or bad according to how it affects us, affect necessarily involves a process of evaluation (2010a:31-32). But how an object affects us is a complex matter - after all, our tastes are not “a matter of chance” but are influenced by numerous factors, including our disposition in the moment that we encounter the object and the evaluations of others regarding the object (2010a:35). Regardless of what has influenced our judgement, once we have determined an object to be good, we intentionally turn our bodies towards it and aim to keep close to it so that it can affect us in a positive way (2010a:32). In the process, we also become affected by whatever surrounds the object, as well as whatever is behind it - i.e. “the conditions of its arrival” (2010a:32). Recalling contact with a happy object can trigger the experience of pleasure; on the other hand, realising that one is feeling pleasure can end that feeling (2010a:33). When we experience good feelings without obvious cause, we seek objects to associate with them.

For some, even if proximity to the happy object does not, in fact, result in happiness, their associative expectation leads them to repeatedly seek out the object, despite empirical awareness of its failure to deliver on its promise. As Ahmed notes:

Certain objects are attributed as the conditions for happiness so that we arrive ‘at’ them with an expectation of how we will be affected by them, which affects how

they affect us, even in the moment they fail to live up to our expectations. (2008: 11)

Ahmed's largely focuses on objects which have a widespread reputation of being happy, because she is interested in what happens to those who are not made happy by them. She argues that when we take pleasure from objects which are generally deemed to be happy - or assume that we will do so - "we are aligned", but when we do not, we become alienated. Ahmed describes those who refuse to feign being positively affected by a society's happy objects as "affect aliens" and they are her chief concern (2010a:37). For example, what happens to those who decide that the family is not an object of happiness in societies that effectively dictate that is? Their refusal to toe the party line means that they themselves become disruptive objects of unhappiness. Ahmed offers various examples of how affect aliens manifest, including as "the feminist killjoy", "the unhappy queer", "the angry black woman", and "the melancholic migrant". Ahmed argues that "affect aliens" often unmask the injustices previously hidden by the romanticisation of particular objects - feminist killjoys unimpressed by knights in shining armour, for example, or immigrants whose melancholy persists even after they have been granted citizenship within a new land.

Of course, the discipline of folklore has its own problems with romanticisation (Abrahams 1993). The same is true of Argentine tango, as evidenced by some of its numerous cinematic representations. Cultural historian Richard Martin describes how tangos performed by silent movie star Rudolph Valentino helped to link the dance with the "Latin lover" in the popular

mind of north Americans (1995:195).<sup>78</sup> In the more recent 1992 film *Scent of a Woman*, Martin notes that the blind former military officer Frank Slade, played by Al Pacino, is dysfunctional in almost all areas of his life but tango. There are, Slade says “no mistakes in tango”. When Pacino and Gabrielle Anwar take to the floor to perform to Carlos Gardel’s famous “Por Una Cabeza”, what results is a “dance of uneducated, unseeing instinct: its nexus is lust; its animation sexual” (Martin 1995:175). A few years later, Sally Potter’s full-length feature, *The Tango Lesson*, became an art-house hit (1997). The film presents a somewhat fictionalised – it is never clear to what extent - account of the British film director’s real-life infatuation with the dance and her partnership with Argentine *tanguero*, Pablo Verón, whom she recruits as her teacher. Potter and Verón appear as versions of themselves in the film and - inasmuch as there is a plot - it is driven by the tempestuously amorous relationship that they go on to share on screen. The implication is that any two people who dance tango together with any degree of commitment must surely become romantically involved with one another before long.

I hope to avoid romanticising tango here, but I am interested in what causes practitioners of Argentine tango to view it as an object sticky with positive association.<sup>79</sup> So if I write of the “romance” or “passion” that the dance can evoke, it will be because I am referencing or contextualising statements made by my interlocutors, or used within my source texts. To be sure, “passion” and “passionate” in particular are terms which are frequently associated with tango, so much so that they appear in the titles of several of the scholarly works that I cite here - including

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<sup>78</sup> The films in which Valentino performs tangos are *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1921), and *Blood and Sand* (1922).

<sup>79</sup> It is hardly unique for a folklore scholar to focus on happy, sticky objects. A good proportion of the folklore scholarship which exists today is the result of research which has been similarly inclined.

*Tango and the Political Economy of Passion* (Savigliano 1995), “Entangled Tangos: Passionate Displays, Intimate Dialogues” (Cara 2009), and *Dancing Tango: Passionate Encounters in a Globalizing World* (David 2014). What I want to examine, though, is more specifically what it is that causes the embodied experience of performing tango, or of socialising around tango, or of any other aspect of Tango World, to so positively affect the practitioners of the dance on an ongoing basis that they persevere with the practice, even though they may also have negative tango-related associations. My interlocutors - i.e. the members of the Cincinnati CoP - generally feel affectively “at home in” - as opposed to “alienated by” - Tango World. After all, it is because they associate it with positive affect that they are members of this CoP. As Ahmed notes with regard to the connection between affects, objects, and group formation, groups “cohere around a shared orientation toward some things as being good, treating some things and not others as the cause of delight”; accordingly, the “social bond is always rather sensational” (2010:35).

### **Tango World as Object of Positive Affect: Initial Appeal**

So how does Tango World enter the consciousness of prospective dancers as a happy object? Or, at least, an object to which they are drawn? With what is it associated? What expectations does it produce in those who consider it?

For all but a couple of my interlocutors, their initial entrance into Tango World involved a conscious choice and close to the start of each interview, I would ask when, why, and how they

had entered that world (usually just after I had enquired as to their tango age).<sup>80</sup> For some, Argentine tango itself was the very specific draw. For many others, the dance itself was less decisive, and sometimes even almost incidental. For example, quite a number of interviewees described being initially drawn to Argentine tango because it presented an opportunity to socialise with partners and/or friends. In other words, the partners and friends were the compelling “happy object” rather than the dance. This was true for two married couples in the Cincinnati CoP. MU & TC and YZ & ZZ were friends long before they went to tango and ZZ remembered that it was MU who first suggested that they do so. As he recalled, she said something along the lines of:

“T and I have got a Groupon for tango lessons, we thought it might be fun. Do you want to go in? Cos it’s for four”. And we said “yeah, why not?” you know. And I was 64, I guess, when we started, so this was not on the radar at all. It was quite by chance that we – we never thought of studying dance, we never thought of studying tango. I thought of tango as something for glamorous athletic young people and not for old people [laughs]. So it was completely unexpected.

MU herself remembered knowing nothing about tango at the time. It was more a case of:

“Oh tango. That sounds like fun”. Plus it was very close. I mean it’s five minutes away and it was cheap. Like, I don’t want to spend hundreds of dollars going to a dance studio.

Another interviewee described a similar experience. Both she and her husband are Turkish and they have lived in a number of countries due to his job with Procter and Gamble. Their first taste of tango took place when they were based in Switzerland. They lived in Geneva, which was home to a large Turkish community, and had many friends:

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<sup>80</sup> The exceptions were the people I interviewed who were born in Argentina and raised in a culture infused with tango.

Δ So one of our friends, she had said that “you know, I want to learn tango in a group”. And everybody said “okay, find a place, let’s do it”. She never believed that anybody would come. So she found a place. The teacher was a Turkish guy, lived in Switzerland for a long time. He was teaching tango just in downtown and she had sent an email. And I asked my husband and he said “are you serious?”. “Yeah, why not? It’s a nice socialising thing”. I had no idea about tango, by the way, but “it sounds nice and why not?”. And we were, in the beginning, seven couples.

The Cincinnati Argentine tango CoP includes a not insignificant number of people from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Block countries and this is often true of tango communities. In fact, one dancer in Utah - whom I do not know but who had somehow heard about my research - emailed me and introduced himself by writing:

I travel some with my work and have danced in most larger cities in the U.S. (from Boston to San Diego and Seattle to Miami...and most cities between...including Indianapolis, Cincinnati, Louisville, Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Louis, Kansas City, Detroit (Ann Arbor,) Toledo, etc.).<sup>81</sup>

He went on to write that, in his opinion, “the character of tango dancers is relatively similar, not only in the Midwest but across the country” and that one element of this shared character was that there “seem to be a disproportionate number of Russians (or other Eastern Europeans) everywhere I go”. Certainly, I interviewed a number of dancers who had immigrated to the US from that region of the world and noted that many of them described being raised a culture in which social dancing was a part of everyday life. Some also recalled that the music which often accompanied this dancing was similar to traditional tango music. This was the case with BT, who is originally from the Ukraine. She told me that for her, the music was part of tango’s initial appeal:

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<sup>81</sup> Christensen, Mark. Personal email to author. 2017-09-03.

Δ BT I always loved the music. I mean this music is something - or very similar music was something I heard growing up. My father, my parents liked to dance, they danced socially. In Russia, people would get together and they wouldn't just go out to dinner to eat, they would get together with friends and they would eat and dance, so they would go out to a restaurant and there was always music to dance to, so the music appealed to me.

BT's husband NE, also Ukrainian (and whom I interviewed separately), concurred:

The Argentine tango music is in a minor key, soulful, speaks very much to Russian, Eastern European culture. Same sort of mood, same sort of feelings (...) And a lot of Argentinian musicians were immigrants from Russia and Poland. If you take a look into the musicians and names, even current musicians – there's Italian, obviously Spanish, but a lot of them have Eastern European heritage names.

NE, like his wife, stressed that dancing was a part of his native culture:

Δ There wasn't a lot of way to entertain ourselves when we grew up (...) and we would often wind up mainly dancing. And then the dancing, that cultural thing for us getting together was even in high school.

Growing up within a culture in which music and dance were important was also mentioned by another interviewee, DL, who is an African-American man from Washington D.C.:

If you take a look at the African-American community, music, singing, dancing, they're a really important facet of our cultural tradition. And so I grew up within that culture (...) in a community where that was highly valued. So I grew up singing. I grew up, you know, being about how well I could sing, how well I could dance. And it was a measure upon which you were judged socially competent. So if you could dance, it was something that you could regard as a mark of pride and distinction. In fact, the better you could do it, the more popular you were, the more towering influence you could have amongst your peers. So, so I grew up within that sort of social milieu.

For certain other interviewees, however, it was the fact that dance had *not* been a feature of their earlier lives which made the idea of learning Argentine tango attractive. Among this group were

a number of people whose entrance into Tango World had been precipitated by the loss of, or separation from, a partner. KX, who is originally from Russia, told me about her experience:

Δ First when I lost my husband, I needed to keep myself busy, and I started to look for something to keep me busy, and I tried different things. I did figure skating, I would belly dance, I did Zumba, and then I thought “well, why not to do ballroom?” And I started [but] I didn’t enjoy those ballroom dances for some reason. Then I thought “well, why not try Argentine tango?” It was something fresh, something I didn’t know nothing about, absolutely [laughs], no names, no music, no movements. So I went to the class and then there was something that I liked. I liked that I’m socialising, because I needed people around me to keep my mind off certain things [laughs] and so that was a very good point, because our community is very friendly and I’ve always been welcomed.

At the beginning, KX told me, the social aspect of the Argentine tango milieu was what most attracted her. However, as she went on to clarify, it was not that she had wanted to have people to talk with; instead, she:

Δ wanted to be among people, the same like when you’re in Europe. You walk on the street and you are among people and you feel like you’re among them. Here you don’t have it, so at the beginning, I went there because I was among people [chuckle].

Another woman, RJ, told me that the suicide of her husband had “catapulted” her into the dance:

That the summer after he died, I remember just being flat out, head in hands, and I said to my mum “I can’t, I don’t think I can go on”. And then I just, I really did say a prayer, and I said “Help. I don’t know what to do”. And the word “dance” just came to my mind. And I thought “oh”.

RJ did not immediately start looking for local places to dance but when her daughter - who is a ballroom dance instructor – decided to sign up for a course with Patricia Paz, she asked her mother to accompany her:



[My daughter's] husband didn't want to dance, and so I thought "okay, fine. I'll go". And that was my accidental lesson. I had no idea [laughing] why we were doing it. It was so complex. I just felt like I was stumbling along for her.

SN's entry into Tango World took place several years after the passing of his spouse:

My wife had passed away in 2008 and I'd gone through a pretty long grieving period where I really just didn't feel like socialising much, and about the third year, I was like kind of itching to connect with people. And so I got into tango primarily because I'd read that it was a social dance and I thought, you know, "this is what I've been looking for. I need to get out and reconnect". And people will tell you that – who know me – for me to take up a dance, learn a dance, is totally out of character for me, so it was kind of like a new start.

HS, who is originally from Vietnam, described the events that led to his taking up tango in a short essay that he sent to me ahead of our interview:

Δ In Feb 2005, my wife got killed in a car accident and left me with 3 young daughters. Sad, depressed, and confused, I sought clarity from God for my life. Essentially, I gleaned from the spiritual experience that I must go on and live a life more fully and more in the moments. That was how my life journey and Tango intertwined.

HS enrolled in a yoga retreat and there met a woman who was then part of the Cincinnati tango community, and she encouraged him to attend a class. As HS told me during our interview:

Δ I was lonely, so I said "Hey, that's a way to meet people and have a good time", so I went down and I started coming and taking a couple of classes here and then I just did it, just go down, and overcome my fear.

In the case of several other interviewees, it was the break-up of a relationship - rather than the death of a partner - that triggered their involvement in tango. CJ told me that he took up the dance after moving to Cincinnati following a painful divorce. He found out that Patricia Paz was offering classes at the "Calhoun YMCA" and so "being new in town and having nothing better to

do - I stopped in”.<sup>82</sup> CJ was already a long-time practitioner of Tai Chi which is, he told me “an art that involves a great deal of touch sensitivity” and realised that tango was another movement form that placed:

significant importance in touch and sensitivity and feel of how you contact another person. So thinking “well, nothing to lose. Even if I stink at this, it’s good practise for the Tai Chi ” - that may be the reason I stuck with it even though it’s a daunting task to try to learn to lead.

CJ, who has studied the history of a number of different dances, also pointed out that the protocols that govern many social dance environments can ease the often awkward process of meeting new people:

I think that the addition of etiquette at the dance, whether the modern tango or the vintage traditions, it produces an artificiality that actually makes communication and sharing more possible. (...) Those artificial elements break the ice.

PH came to tango after separating from her partner of 11 years, although in her case, it was hunger for a new experience, rather than the desire for social interaction, that prompted her involvement:

It was sort of like a rocky relationship, and one day I woke up and I just decided to part with this person and that just caused me to look for different things to do. It wasn’t so much about meeting people because I had a lot of friends. It was just about doing things with myself – just experiencing other things, exploring other things. (...) I was going to a gym that advertised Argentine tango and so I decided to start tango.

Although LL’s initial taste of tango came when he took some lessons with his wife, she quickly “decided she didn’t like it” and they both stopped. Over the following years, however, LL

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<sup>82</sup> As mentioned in Chapter 1, this was the University YMCA and it was located at 270 Calhoun Street in the Clifton area of Cincinnati.

continued to be intrigued by the dance form, so much so that he went to see the *Tango Argentino* stage show twice. Then, after around twenty years of marriage, he and his wife decided to divorce. “The very, very first thing I did was start tango again”.

The desire to meet - or be among - unfamiliar people and the thirst for novel experiences are not, of course, restricted to those who have recently experienced the end of a relationship. VF told me that “really wanting to try something new” led him to first to salsa and then, by accident, to tango (he stumbled upon the latter when attending what he thought would be a salsa event, having mixed up some dates). For a while, he took both tango and salsa classes until he eventually decided he preferred tango over salsa and “sort of stuck with it”.

The social aspect of tango was not the initial draw for V (though it later became part of its appeal). For GK, on the other hand, being in close contact with others was precisely what she was seeking. Her tango journey actually began with her taking a single lesson in another movement form, Biodanza, during a trip to the UK:

I did that class and I ... had a self-realisation moment of – it just awakened everything that was me, that is me. And Biodanza really is a dance of communication. It’s a dance where you look into somebody else’s eyes, and you look into everybody’s eyes and you reveal yourself and you let yourself be revealed, and there’s no judgement, just the movement. But I couldn’t find it here

in America. (...) America's not touchy-feely-lovey because there are too many risks involved with being affectionate.<sup>83</sup>

When she chanced upon an Argentine tango show whilst at a conference, GK recognised that it shared many characteristics with Biodanza, not least because both forms, she told me, involve two people “communicating intimately in public”. As with Biodanza, GK observed, Argentine tango allows you “to be close to someone, to be in an embrace with someone”:

I just remember approaching somebody, a stranger, and we were able to look into each other's faces, touch each other's hands, and connect, and there was no fear or judgement, so I think that's what I love the most about the tango.

Argentine tango's apparent capacity for cultivating intense intimacy was also what captured YY's attention. It happened when she was watching a video about Emotional Freedom

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<sup>83</sup> According to the Biodanza Association in the UK:

Biodanza is not something that can be explained in words. It needs to be danced and experienced. (...) Rolando Toro Araneda, the creator of the Biodanza system, was once asked in an interview, ‘How would you describe Biodanza? Is it a physical therapy? A system of growth? A creative exercise?’ Here's what he had to say, ‘Biodanza is more than all of these! It addresses the totality of the human being. It doesn't separate people into fragments. Biodanza has many therapeutic effects, but these are not the goal. The word Biodanza has two parts, bios (life) and danza (meaningful movement). So Biodanza is the possibility of dancing our own lives, of bringing music, rhythm, harmony and emotion into our communities and personal lives. Biodanza is different from conventional dance because it's a guided discipline that stimulates specific aspects of human potential, such as creativity, affection, vitality, and so forth, through different sets of movement to music exercises’.

I accessed this information on 2019-04-12 via the Biodanza Association's “History of Biodanza” webpage (<https://www.biodanzaassociation.uk/history-of-biodanza/>).

Technique (EFT) which featured an interview with Dr Christiane Northrup.<sup>84 85 86</sup> Towards the end of the video, YY told me, the interviewer comments that she has heard that Northrup found her “passion later in life, and that’s Argentine tango”, and Northrup responds:

“Yeah. And I know what you’re thinking. Another woman over the age of 60, going in, showing up at a dance studio. How embarrassing! It’s the last thing they need”. You know, she was kind of making fun of herself. And, anyway, [the interviewer] says “How about you close us with a tango?” And I saw this video with this woman, every bit of late 60s, mid to late 60s, dancing this dance with her eyes closed, and just her partner, and being so present. They were just so present. (...) When you hear about Argentine tango - you don’t think of this, you think of Dancing with the Stars, right? So when I saw this, I was like “What is that?”. And he’s just so tender and loving to her and, you know, there’s nothing provocative or out of line going on. It’s truly two people enjoying the moment with each other in a very respectful way. And I was like “Yeah, I want that”. (...) And I typed in “tango Cincinnati” and Tony and Julie were teaching a class that next week. I paid my \$80 so I wouldn’t back out [laughs] and I showed up and that’s it.

While intimacy seems to be an important aspect of the tango encounters described by GK and YY, it does not necessarily seem to be of a romantic nature. A few other interviewees, however, told me that their perception of the dance as romantic was key to its allure. GL, for example, had

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<sup>84</sup> According to the “About” page of her website, “Christiane Northrup, M.D., is a visionary pioneer and a leading authority in the field of women’s health and wellness, which includes the unity of mind, body, emotions, and spirit. Internationally known for her empowering approach to women’s health and wellness, Dr. Northrup teaches women how to thrive at every stage of life”. I accessed this information on 2019-11-10 via <https://www.drnorthrup.com/about/>.

<sup>85</sup> The video, distributed via YouTube, is called “Tapping World Summit 2015: Dr. Christiane Northrup and Jessica Ortner”. It was published on 2016-11-11 by ASL Productions. I accessed it on 2019-04-08 via <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LMOA8vm75Gs>.

<sup>86</sup> According to Pinar and Aslan:

Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT) is a kind of practice of energy psychotherapy consisting of cognitive and somatic components that are used to improve personal negative emotions and related emotional and physical disorders. Stress hormones are secreted in the brain when a person is stressed, the amygdala and other responsive cerebral segments are activated. If the stress can not be effectively coped with, the physical and psychological consequences that will become chronic in course of time. There are essential steps to follow in EFT; firstly person create a setup sentence for sending a message to the emotional body (subconscious) and then twelve meridians of energy end point (acupressure points) is tapped on. There are different protocols for application purposes. EFT can be performed in psychological and physical areas, which are very common in children and adults, and there is not reported of any adverse effects in randomized controlled trials. (2018:11)

tried various other movement forms, none of which had stuck, when he started taking tango classes. He was able to persevere with tango because he found it to be “simply more romantically satisfying”, with music that was “lyrical”, “melodic”, and “emotionally evocative”. I was interested by GL’s remarks and, having only limited knowledge of other dance forms myself, I commented that “I would have thought there were lots of dances that are romantic”:

GL Not even close.

Rachel Hopkin Really? What’s the bit that makes it romantic? Is it the way people hold each other? Is it the steps? Is it the music? Or?

GL All of the above. Yeah. So you know, if you just listen to the music, you know the amount of lyricism in the music is deeper. I mean there’s incredibly beautiful jazz that’s as romantically beautiful as tango, but it’s not really a dance form. It doesn’t really go with a dance form. So the awareness - like if you just listen to something called Di Sarli, like the awareness of creating a beat that works for dancers combined with a melodic line, and then certain kinds of complexity in the instrumentation makes it so ridiculously satisfying and intriguing for a dancer. So, like, I’ve been dancing to the same songs for 25 years.

In terms of his tango age, GL was the one of the oldest members of the Cincinnati CoP’s with whom I spoke. DK was the youngest; at the time of our interview, she was only just over one tango year old, but like GL, the romance of tango was what attracted her:

I like to read historical romance novels set in England, in the aristocracy. And there would always be these nice beautiful balls, and they would go in horse and carriages. It was really beautiful. And they were partner dancing, you know, and so I’m like “Oh, that is so beautiful, romantic” and all of that made me really like the idea of horse and carriages, partner dancing, beautiful gowns, you know, dresses, and I just thought “oh, that is so beautiful” [laughs]. (...) Then I somehow along the way found out about Argentine tango here in Cincinnati so I got on [the Tango Del Barrio] email list. And so they kept emailing me for maybe almost a couple of years. When there were new classes, they would email the program, you know, the newsletter, and so finally, as I was reading and it said “no partner required”, I thought “I don’t have a partner so I can try that”. And I thought I would just try one little lesson, erm, class, and I came and I loved it and so I’ve been doing it ever since.

Of all my interviewees, DK's vision of Argentine tango – as she articulated it to me - seemed to have been the most romanticized. However, when she encountered the reality of dance, courtesy of Tango Del Barrio beginner tango classes, it came - of course - with none of the trappings that had featured so strongly in her imagination. There were no carriages, no beautiful gowns, no fancy balls. Instead, there were novice dancers awkwardly holding one another while making clumsy approximations of the demonstrated steps under unforgiving bright lights. Even so, DK “loved it”.

Sara Ahmed writes that we:

arrive at some things because they point us toward happiness (...) the judgment about certain objects as being ‘happy’ is already made (...) In other words, we anticipate that happiness will follow proximity to this or that object. (2010a:40-41)

The motivations to take up Argentine tango, as described in the accounts above, make it clear that whatever it is which allows beholders to perceive the dance as a happy object – and therefore to approach it - varies greatly, and only a few were drawn by the patterned, aesthetic movements of the dance itself.

### **Tango World as Object of Positive Affect: Not About Sex**

At the time that we talked, DK - the lover of Regency romance novels – told me that she was in her early fifties. She mentioned her age because it had become an issue for her when it came to dating:

As you get older and you get to be, like, my age, certain ways that you could easily meet people, erm, those ways kind of disappear a little bit. And it’s okay,

you know, but it's a little bit different. And so it's like trying to relearn: okay, you know, here's an obstacle, so how am I going to go around that obstacle? And so since Argentine tango, I really would love a partner who can do Argentine tango. I think it's beautiful. So I consider myself at Tango Del Barrio, learning, learning. Because there's no one really there, but I consider it learning, and then I will go forth and go out to different places, you know, in tango. So I've already planned. I'm going to start by going to Kentucky, I'll start going to Chicago in the spring and I'll start going to Montreal, Canada. And I'm going to start going to those places regularly - a festival here and a festival there, yeah, and you know, it's like, okay, somehow, I will run into somebody and they will cross my path.

DK was the only one of my interviewees who explicitly told me that she was hoping to find an intimate relationship partner via tango (perhaps that goal was not unrelated to her gloriously romantic vision of the dance). By way of contrast, some of the people whom I interviewed were single at the time that we spoke and said they had no interest in finding a partner in the local CoP, not least because were they to do so, their entire involvement in Tango World could be jeopardized should their relationship founder. I also know of several people in the Cincinnati community who started relationships with people they met in Tango World, while others had separated from their partners. One of my interviewees mentioned that a long-time tango teacher friend of hers joked that "he's probably ended as many relationships as he's helped through tango". In terms of my other interviewees, some entered tango as part of a couple and remain as such; some embarked on their tango journey alone, only to be joined later by their pre-existing partners; and some long-time residents of Tango World were in committed relationships of even longer standing with partners who simply had no interest in dancing. In other words - and at least inasmuch as my interviewees were willing to share - neither the promise of sexual adventure nor the procurement of an intimate partner seemed to be a major motivation behind entry into Tango World. This may be just as well since, as tango scholar Melissa Fitch points out:



the amount of concentration required to actually do the improvisational social dance is substantial. One lapse of attention can be quite painful. There is little mental energy left over for seduction” (2015:108).

And yet Argentine tango is often associated with passion and sex, at least among those who do not dance it themselves. This association may well be underpinned by its brothel origins. It is certainly fuelled by Hollywood depictions, as discussed above, and via other mass media forms (Fitch 2015). Among the common descriptions of Argentine tango are those which equate it with “sex on the dance floor”, “sex with your clothes on”, and “vertical sex”.<sup>87</sup> Most of my interlocutors were familiar with such characterisations, but the number who professed giving any personal credence to such depictions could be counted on the fingers of one hand.<sup>88</sup>

I myself detest these phrases and so I found myself often wanting to know my interlocutors’ feelings about them because I wanted to be assured that I was not alone in my abhorrence. I would usually approach the subject by saying something like: “I’ve come across various descriptions of tango that equate it with sex, such as ...” and then reel off the various expressions. Then I would say some permutation of: “I wondered what you thought about those and whether there might be any other way that you would describe the dance?”. The majority of my interlocutors were similarly disdainful of such associations, as is indicated by the following sampling of interview excerpts:

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<sup>87</sup> On 2019-04-15, a Google search using the terms “tango” and “sex on the dance floor” yielded 95,300 results; one using “tango” and “sex with your clothes on” yielded 8080 results; and one for “tango” and “vertical sex” yielded 3050 results. Meanwhile, a search for [“tango” AROUND(10) “sex”] - i.e. “sex” within ten words of “tango” - yielded 28,000,000 results.

<sup>88</sup> Tango is also sometimes called a “three-minute love affair”, which was slightly more popular; nonetheless, it was still far more often rejected than embraced.

XT I think those descriptions are a little trite. It's a little silly. I think it's limiting in terms of the scope of the dance. People come in and if they think it's like "ooh, sexy time", it's not [laughs]. It's not. It can be, but it's also an extremely difficult dance and I think it's a mistake for people to come in thinking that that's what they're going to get. I think staged tango has influenced those kinds of ideas a lot because they really do amp up the fireworks for the sake of the spectators.

QA I wouldn't think so. I would think not. It's an embrace, it's a hug. I think there's a fondness, a fondness. It doesn't mean sexual, it doesn't mean any of that, but there's a fondness, or taking care of each other. Certainly I've had some sensual *tandas*, but it's the exception.

PK I've heard of those descriptions. They don't match my perception. I would describe it as intimacy with some people, intimacy. Not all the time. With a really good dance, it can be very intimate. That's probably the best way to describe it. And physically pleasurable, but still not sexually arousing.

MU I've heard those too. But I don't associate it quite that way, because I think there's a big difference between sexuality and sensuality. Our culture is so sexually oriented but I think sensuality is more interesting in some ways. I mean sexuality's great, but I think that sensuality takes maybe more intelligence or more depth of feeling, erm, it's bigger in a certain way, to me. And not too many people understand that. [Sensuality] is deeper and more meaningful in some ways, because it can happen between anybody, and doesn't have to be two people of the same age or whatever. (...) You have this warm, sensual feeling just because of the kind of person they are and that they, they emanate that and they put that out. And you feel just very tender to them.

LP I never feel attracted sexually to anyone I'm dancing with. I feel good, but I don't think of sex when I'm dancing because I'm so focused on the choreography and so I'm trying to be right in the moment, and that's what tango does, it brings you right in the moment.

RJ The media's so messed up anyway. They don't get anything right, so why would they get that right? And they want to make sex out of toothpaste, so why wouldn't they do it about this? I tell people it's a healing dance.

Δ IL I don't feel like a love affair. Uh-uh. I don't feel anything sexual. I am not looking for this and nobody ever tried to expose me to that. Equal partners. Equal partners that are just enjoying the same things, the same music, because, you know, next tanda there will be another music and then it will be different. Different movement, different energy, it will be different. It will be not like this movement with this particular person. (...) The Argentine tango started, if you

read the history, like two men dancing together and spend some time, so originally there was no sexual thing in that.

JC Well I don't even know why ... I mean, if that was the case, why would you go to a *milonga*? Why would you accept a dance with a man you'd never met before. Get over it [laughs]. You know, we love to move our bodies. We have a desire to make music. We have a desire to make art. This is part of our spiritual makeup. And we have a desire to bond and to touch. And that's why you know dancing, I think, partnership dancing can be so encompassing and so addicting.

FJ The erotic element is far less than one would imagine. For the leads, if you're thinking hot thoughts, your feet don't work. What the lead is doing is what they call very right brain, very thought generated. You are driving a car in heavy traffic.

DL I would say that those sort of notions have certainly helped to popularise tango, but very quickly, if [a person decides] to take up the dance, they are soon disabused of that notion [laughs] because the difficulty that is involved in learning, sex is the last thing on your mind [laughs].

Rachel Hopkin I know. I said to somebody "if it's vertical sex, then for the first kind of three or four years, it's really vertical bad sex" [laughing].

## **So What Makes Tango World Sticky?**

If Tango World is therefore not, in fact, gummed up with the promise of sex in one form or another, what is it that makes Argentine tango so "sticky" for its committed practitioners?

Examining elements which contribute to the adherence of positive affect to Tango World offers a means of understanding why the Argentine tango tradition persists within this Cincinnati CoP, despite the many challenges that the dance presents. I have grouped the elements which I identified into the following categories:

- Peak Experiences
- Connection, Communication, Intimacy, Touch
- Focus and Forgetting
- The Zone of Perpetual Improvement - Complexity, Creativity, Improvisation
- Music

- Steps and Sensations
- Feeling and Expressing the Self

### • **The Sticky Nature of Tango World: Peak Experiences**

The ways in which committed practitioners of Argentine tango are affected by their involvement in Tango World varies. Whether it is the dance itself, or the community and companionship that accompanies it, which primarily attracts them is not fixed. However, I did notice that for a sizeable proportion of those with whom I spoke, their recall of an occasional and utterly exceptional dance experience, and their yearning to replicate that “peak experience”, was part of what kept them inside Tango World.

The term “peak experience” was made popular by psychologist Abraham Maslow (1964). It refers to “an ecstatic state characterized by euphoria and feelings of interconnectedness” (Peak Experience, 2015). While not all of those with whom I spoke had (yet) undergone tango-related peak experiences, those who had spoke of them with reverence. One dancer, BV, is himself a psychologist. He recounted how the peak experience has manifested for him on the dance floor shortly after I asked my standard question about sex-saturated descriptions of Argentine tango:

I’ve probably only experienced it probably four times, and it was wasn’t clear that that was what I was experiencing when I was in it, and I just thought “whoa”. And it’s kind of hard to describe what it was. I kind of lost my sense of time. And it was so remarkable, you are not really feeling anything. You know, you don’t really feel your body. It’s like you and that person are just, are, are moving in sync. Everything that you do, that person is in lock step with it. And that is such a remarkable feeling, that it defies sex. (...) It defies most of the kinds of things you experience on a day-to-day basis.

The first person to actually use the term “peak experience” during my fieldwork was only the second person whom I interviewed. DB is one of the Cincinnati CoP’s most competent dancers and he used the phrase in response to my asking him to describe if there was any particular way that he wanted to feel when he was on the dance floor. His response was as follows:

The ultimate is to dance with someone and it becomes effortless (...) that I feel I can do no wrong. And that’s a very pleasing thing. And if it just seems like no matter what I lead, they understand it and they do it, that can be a really great experience. That’s kind of the peak experience.

Like DB and BV, other interlocutors who described peak experiences indicated that they involved a high level of kinaesthetic communication which had less to do with any particular steps than with a multilayered and complex but fluid interaction between two people moving meaningfully to the music, flowing through time and space in a state of shared synchronicity. And what is made clear by the accounts of those who *have* known such happy coincidences of so many different elements is that peak experiences are very hard to describe. WW, for example, was around ten tango years old at the time of our conversation:

I think it was roughly five years ago or so, I danced with a woman from Columbus and it was just, it was transporting. I don't know, I don't know how it happened or what it was but it was just one of those things that, you know, you start dancing and 15 minutes later you say “whoah!”.<sup>89</sup> Yeah. Yes, so that was just, that was one of those things that once you experience that: “I want more of this” and that was really when it kind of clicked.

When I asked WW if he could be more specific about what had made that dance so exceptional, he said:

WW So as a lead, you are always thinking about what I was going to do, how was I going to do it? Saying “okay, so what am I going to do next?” or “how am I

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<sup>89</sup> WW uses the phrase “15 minutes” to refer to a *tanda*, which usually consists of four songs.

going to get out of this and into the next thing?”. And that was, I think, the first time that for the entire tanda, it just didn’t occur to me. It was transporting. I use the word transporting but it was, er, things just flowed. You know, it just kind of evolved. It was really, it was really [strong breath], you know it was one of those “gasp” moments after. It was really neat. Yeah. And that has happened several times since then with other dancers.

Rachel Hopkin        Okay. But only several times? Because that’s suggesting only a handful of times in 10 years, which isn’t very much.

WW    Erm. Yeah. I would say it’s not very much.

BT told me that her first “sublime” tango experience took place when she was dancing with Virginia Malton, who was performing the lead role:

Δ I had no idea what she did and how she did it and I remember that moment thinking “Oh my God, how am I – I have no idea what my feet are doing, but they’re doing something and it feels great and I love it”. So it was that, I want more of that. It’s a drug [laughing], it’s a drug of sorts.

Another woman with whom I spoke, DK, was less than two tango years old at the time of our conversation. Her account suggested that follows could experience these euphoric high points relatively early in their tango trajectories:

The best dancer that I have ever danced with ever, that I had amazing connection with, is a guy that came up from North Carolina. Oh my gosh. I had never felt anything like that before. It was like I was floating.

I suspect that DK’s North Carolina man was an advanced lead and that his superior skills were part of what facilitated the excellence of her experience with him. However, LL’s description of his first peak experience – which involved a woman whom he met at a New Dancer Milonga – suggests that it is not necessary for either party to be especially advanced:

I asked her to dance. And we came together in an embrace and immediately there was electricity. I mean, it was [makes a buzzing noise]. And I just knew it was going to be an amazing dance, and it was, for both of us. I mean, we both were just like [makes stunned expression]. And so we started to partner after that, and

for a while, we worked together (...) I felt like I could not only be myself with her, but I could experiment without any kind of judgement. And she was also sufficiently advanced, but she wasn't too advanced that I felt like I was boring her. So with her, I always felt very confident about what I was doing, and I have never had that level of experience dancing with anybody else.

When I mentioned the term “peak experience” to LL, he referred to Csíkszentmihályi's concept of flow, with which he was very familiar (1990). Csíkszentmihályi describes flow as the feeling of:

being completely involved in an activity for its own sake. The ego falls away. Time flies. Every action, movement, and thought follows inevitably from the previous one, like playing jazz. Your whole being is involved, and you're using your skills to the utmost. (1996)

When LL described how he had experienced flow with his tango partner, he effectively elaborated on Csíkszentmihályi's concept. The flow one experiences in Tango World, he suggested, was:

a complex flow because it's your connection with a person, your connection with the room and the other people around you, your connection with the music, (...) and obviously with yourself too, right. It's magical and people kind of live for that moment and keep on trying to regain that. And to be able, I think, to be able to do that while executing some technically challenging stuff is just, you know, it's captivating, right?

A number of my interviewees likened tango to meditation, and several connected the two when describing their peak experiences. For TS, for example, who spoke of tango as being "meditation in movement", a peak experience was “this transcendent thing [where] you just disappear into this world of oneness with a second person. It's really pretty cool. It's a spirit thing for me”

Some dancers felt that familiarity with a partner enhanced their chances of undergoing a peak experience. XC said that, for her, they tended to happen when she was dancing with her husband:

He's not professional but because he knows me, because I know him and I can predict the movement, I don't think. I feel the music and I dance. Then I love it really.

However, for others, familiarity was less important. QA told me that he had had "surprisingly fantastic" dances with strangers:

One time in San Diego (...) a *milonga* came on, a really fast *milonga*, and this lady I'd never danced with before, I looked at her, she looked at me, and we had a fabulous *milonga*. And I later learned she was a teacher there but I had no clue who she was, but everything was clicking just right.

And for ZW, an entirely unfamiliar partner actually increased the possibility of a peak experience. His most extraordinary dances, he told me, had "always been with strangers":

And the beauty of it is it is completely unexpected. (...) That's why it's important to dance with a diversity of people, because you [bangs desk several times with hand] never know where it's going to come from. (...) And it's the thing that really makes people give up their marriages; people, they quit their jobs; it's why they give up their lives and they move to Buenos Aires.

### **• The Sticky Nature of Tango World: Connection, Communication, Intimacy, Touch**

As implied by some of the accounts in the previous section, tango-related peak experiences are the exception rather than the rule (as Maslow himself observed, peak experiences are necessarily rare, for were they frequent, they would not stand out as exceptional). In addition, some of my interviewees had yet to experience a dance-floor encounter of such transcendent momentousness.



And yet, despite the rarity of these sublime dances, my interlocutors were demonstrably committed to Argentine tango and its accompanying Cincinnati CoP. What else, I therefore wondered, was causing them to remain so resolutely affixed to Tango World? The answer seemed to lie in a single word which I heard over and over during the course of my fieldwork: “connection”.

As with many other terms signalling affect-rich experiences, what is referenced by the word “connection” in this context is hard to pinpoint. Presumably it means different things to different people. One of my interviewees found it easier to articulate what it felt like to tango without connection “where I’ll be dancing with someone and it’ll feel like they’re in a different room”. What I was able to glean was that experiencing connection involves both partners being present and wholly focused on the moment, the music, the movement, and one another. WA approached the subject like this: “I don’t care about the patterns [of steps] or any of that. I care about the connection, the movement, the breath, the rhythm, the music, the ambience. For me it could just be a walk and that would make me very happy”. WA also spoke about the “excellent connection” of one very sought-after lead in the community. When I asked her to elaborate, she said this man had “listening skills as a lead” and an “ability to work with you, not at you”. She went on:

He’s centred. He knows where his arms and legs are, and his centre. He knows where my arms and legs are and my centre. He knows where the space is between us. Walking with him is a joy but he’s also very skilled at doing the more fun things. And by fun things, I mean - I hate to admit it but I like *ganchos*, I love

*volcadas*.<sup>90 91</sup> (...) But on the other hand, if the person is not experienced but they're completely present and grounded and completely communicative and he just will walk and occasionally do a cross and move through inside outside partner together, and maybe do something rhythmic, that too is a joy.

WA emphasized the importance of her partner being “completely present”. YY also stressed that a fully attentive partner was fundamental to the sense of being connected, and therefore to the appeal of the dance:

Even when you go on a date, people are texting, people are serving us food, right? It is so outside of our waking conscious reality to have another human being be in contact, or even three inches away from us, so you have someone who's smelling your skin, smelling your hair. They can feel your breath. And that attention stays there. (...) There's no other situation socially that we are in, certainly not in a public setting, that that intensity happens.

What also became clear was that whenever connection was present, fully experiencing and appreciating other tango-related affectual aspects became possible, including those involving human touch, communication, and a sense of intimacy.

GY commented that for him, the dance:

connects you with something that you need to get connected to. It's a place you want to go, where you want to reconnect and find that intimacy. And it's a craving. And it doesn't have to be with the same person. It's just the act of

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<sup>90</sup> Earlier in our conversation, I had mentioned to WA that I disliked *ganchos* and found them vulgar. *Gancho*, literally, means hook. In tango, a *gancho* refers to one dancer swinging their free leg around one of their partner's legs - i.e. “hooking” it - and then quickly releasing.

<sup>91</sup> The entry for *volcada* in an online Tango Dictionary reads as follows:

There are many different variations of a Volcada. The word itself comes from the root Spanish word ‘Volcar’ which translates to English as “To Fall”. (...) In short, this is a highly advanced piece of tango vocabulary that requires both lead and follow to have mastered their walk, their own stability, their embrace, before they even attempt this stuff. In short, it is a form of controlled Apilado, (...), which rotates the partnership along a central axial line between the partnership, and as a result of that rotation, the Follower's free leg is allowed to swing freely and ends up in a very controlled crossing of their feet.

(Source: Argentine Volcada, *Tango Topics Dictionary*, accessed on 2019-04-17 via <https://tangotopics.com/topics-dictionary/volcada/>)

dancing draws you back to it. I think that would almost be universal with people. They want to connect with other people.

GY added that the pleasure he takes in tango is, in part, a reaction to being raised within a rather undemonstrative, upper crust family, as well as to the character of US society more generally:

We're just so subdued as a culture, or repressed, or whatever. I mean, that's why I always felt like I was different. I grew up in this sort of blue blood culture and I always just didn't feel at home there, in my culture. So you know, dancing is really fun because you can express things that you, I don't know - it's an exploration of yourself. But it's only with somebody else that you can explore those things and so every dance is kind of a different exploration of yourself and that person.

During a follow-up encounter with GY at his place of business, we were joined by EN, another male dancer in the community, whom I had just interviewed in a bar across the road. In my fieldnotes, I noted that EN and GY: "were openly affectionate with one another. GY kissed EN on the cheek and told me, jokingly, that EN was the only man, other than his sons, whom he would kiss on the lips". In other words, GY has found that Tango World effectively sanctions public displays of affection which he enjoys, and which are otherwise rare in much of contemporary US society.

XT also spoke of the power of closeness - corporeal and otherwise - that tango facilitates:

Because of the physical proximity and the attention that you have to pay to each other, it creates a kind of intimacy within the confines of the dance. Sometimes it carries outward and you can feel closer to some of the people in the community, the dance community than you might otherwise because you have that opportunity to be so physically close, and in our culture you don't have a lot of opportunities to cultivate that kind of connection so, so [tango] offers that.

XT went on to talk about a specific experience she had had in Tango World:

I was going through a really hard loss in my personal life. I was away from my family at the time and I just had a couple of close friends near me - so tango was a place where I could feel comforted even if people didn't know they were comforting me. Just to have that physical contact was soothing.

IU, who works as a bereavement counsellor, described a somewhat comparable situation:

A corporation hired me, they'd had a double suicide, and I went in for the grieving staff. It was so overwhelming. And I came out of there and I called one of my friends and she said "are you okay?" and I said "no". It was just so dreadful for them, and me, and I usually don't absorb the thing but I did that day. So I thought "I have to go up to the beginner *milonga* and DM was there, and he danced with me almost the whole time, and it was like he absorbed all of that pain. And he treated me like I was worth the time."<sup>92</sup>

Long-time community member PK has also observed that for dancers to find comfort in each other's arms - whether or not they explicitly talk about whatever is troubling them - is not uncommon:

I've seen people come to tango after they've lost a loved one and it makes them feel better. I know that the day after Trump was elected, you should have seen *práctica* here. Everybody was literally lined up outside the door at 7.30, like, with their noses pressed against the window, like "let me in!" It was the fullest *práctica* and it was the quietest *práctica* I have ever seen. Everybody was just like "I have to be with other people and I can't talk".

Whether tango dancers talk or not, the connection and touch that are part of Argentine tango make it a powerful means of communication. In fact, many of my interviewees used terms analogous to communication forms to describe the dance. HP said that, to her, tango "kind of feels like a conversation you're having with someone", and BL commented that she saw the

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<sup>92</sup> Some weeks later, I ran into DM and, with IU's permission, I asked if he remembered this occasion. He did recall it and said that he felt that IU was in a bruised and tender state and that he tried to respond to her as best he could. He said he tried to make the embrace as active as possible to allow her to feel his support for her in that difficult time.

dance as Δ “a dialogue. A perfect dialogue. One talks, the other listens. The other talks, the first listens. If there’s no dialogue, I don’t like to dance”. When I pointed out that quarrels and arguments could be construed as dialogues, BL’s retort was Δ “maybe I can talk fast or with more energy, but I don’t argue. The perfect dance is not an argument”.

The fact that Argentine tango is based on improvisation and not on pre-determined steps and sequences is vital to the conversation/dialogue analogy. RZ is a very experienced *tanguera* and she expounded on this theme:

RZ     It’s not a problem to vary what you are going to do at any step, so even though we have set figures that we learn in class and can use, even those can be varied. The idea is to have them as a base.

Rachel Hopkin     So the individual steps are like letters in an alphabet.

RZ     Yes.

Rachel Hopkin     And as opposed to always speaking the same words and sentences, you have all these letters and you can turn them into whatever,.

RZ     Different phrases, like variations off of a theme. (...) There’s give and take and there’s a conversation going on there that no matter what [the lead] says, [the follow has a range of responses], but he really doesn’t know until she actually moves. (...) It’s such a high level of communication. And the idea of this conversation, it’s a two-way conversation. It’s not just about a leader telling you what to do and you’re going “I hear you, I hear you”, you know, it’s actually having a conversation within this moment.

RJ offered another perspective on the dance-as-communication idea:

Everything is energy, so if you walk in a room and someone’s harsh, you back off. But if someone’s embrace is sweet and inviting, then I can mix my energy, I feel safe to do that. And I feel like it’s spiritual for me too, because I pray a lot when I dance, and I, I pray for the person I’m with – just like whatever their need might be, ‘cos we all carry stuff. Like if I’m dancing with EE, who is so awesome, I pray for him, just blessings on his life. And I thank God, And it’s just, there’s a spirit in here that is sweet and loving.

Verbal communication is also an aspect of Tango World and can add to the realm's overall affectual nature, as is indicated by the following excerpt from my interview with LQ. I had asked whether she talked much with people at the tango events and, if so, about what kinds of subjects:

LQ It depends who it is. MM and I talk politics. QQ and I just kind of do social chat and I like him very much.

Rachel Hopkin Do you find, though, that because of the nature of the Tango World - you know, you're looking to dance, you're on the dance floor, it's up and down, up and down - that the level of conversation - it can be really fun but it tends to be quite superficial.

LQ Yeah.

Rachel Hopkin And does that bother you at all?

LQ No. It doesn't. I mean, MM and I, we're both very liberal so it's like ... it's like [laughs] he's my comrade.

YY finds the verbal interactions that relate to her progress as a dancer and community member to be especially valuable, particularly those shared with her by her more regular partners:

You get to this trust zone where you can tell me that I'm doing this or doing that wrong, or "try doing this" or "you're doing that" and you know it's coming from someone who really just wants to improve your dance. And I think we all have that tight bond and trust in one another to say those things to each other.

YY described one particular occasion on which her partner had brought up YY's habit of apologizing many times over during the course of a dance:

I think as women we always over-apologise, but somebody did say to me one time "I want to get through this dance without you saying sorry" and I said "oh!". And it was somebody I respected and cared about and I'm like "that's distracting to them. They don't want to hear it". And they're like "look, everybody screws up. You screw up, I screw up, but we recover and we move on. That's the camaraderie of the dance". And then it became a joke : "I'm not going to dance with you unless you don't say sorry", you know, "if you say sorry, I'm stopping". And he was doing it to break me of a bad habit. That's what I mean. When you're around people like that, you can't help but become a better version of yourself. And that's rare within itself.

RJ also values conversations she has had in Tango World. Ironically, some of those which she remembers with particular pleasure were actually about some of her other and less pleasant Tango World experiences. She spoke with great affection of some of the chats she had shared with her tango-dancing friend. RJ and RM both live in Kentucky and met one another during one of Patricia Paz's Argentine tango courses. When they were both relative beginners, they would sometimes meet up south of the river and then carpool to TDB events. When they arrived, however:

Nobody would ask us to dance, and we would just be so upset. And so we'd go back to the parking lot in Kentucky and talk until 2 o'clock in the morning [laughs]. We talked about - our emotions were like - because we had gotten so cleaned up and wore the right clothes. We bought shoes from Argentina. We fixed our hair. And we went in there and it took all of our nerve to go, and then we sat on these couches but not one man would ask us to dance. And then finally maybe one would and, of course, we weren't good. We had only taken a few weeks of a course. And so we'd talk about the men, about why they didn't ask us to dance, about were we pretty enough, we know we're not good enough, erm, just about why we feel compelled to go somewhere we feel rejected, and violently so [laughs].

Listening to RJ talk about these intense discussions with such humour reminded me of the impassioned teenage conversations I used to have with school friends during the week following a party. We would dissect every last detail of every encounter that had taken place, analysing it for significance, trying to determine who liked whom, and gossiping about any act of "scandal", no matter how tame.

This observation, however, from TX returns us to the theme of tango as wordless interaction:

I think for me, because I can be a little introverted, that it's really wonderful sometimes to be able to participate; you don't have to say word ever. You can spend a whole evening and not talk [laughs] to anyone if that's really where you're at. You know, there's all this non-verbal communication going on in the social context that you can take advantage of if that's where you're coming from.

TX's comment leads on to one further aspect I want to mention in this section before moving on to other affective aspects of the dance. It is an idea I have which relates to the kind of intimacy experienced by Argentine tango dancers. I believe that certain characteristics of the dance, such as the off-to-the-side positioning of the heads and the *apile* stance, make it particularly suitable for people who are shy, introverted, or simply not that comfortable with intimacy. I often mentioned this notion during my conversations; sometimes my interviewees agreed with it, sometimes not. The following excerpt from my interview with QL, a female dancer, is indicative of the manner in which I raised this subject. QL had just been talking about how she liked the intimacy of tango:

Rachel Hopkin        I'm curious to know if you have any thoughts on the nature of that intimacy, and the reason I ask this is because I think if you're in close embrace, it's very intimate in some ways - because you're chest to chest, heart to heart, breath, and so on - but in other ways, it's kind of a very veiled intimacy 'cos you're off to one side, you don't have to look at the person, and so I'm curious if that makes sense to you or it's just not something that you think about?

QL        Er, it makes sense. I tend to dance with my eyes closed, so you're not having that anyway, and it's just the, I don't know, it is the heart to heart thing when you have that wonderful embrace.

Another rather more fragmented example comes from my interview with IK, a male dancer. I had set out the notion, then said that I felt it made tango "a comfortable close intimate dance for people who are not necessarily that comfortable with intimacy". "Very interesting", IK responded, then went on:



IK     ///Is it their way of expressing it when they can't otherwise?  
 Rachel Hopkin     Yeah, right.  
 IK     In almost an anonymous way because they're///  
 Rachel Hopkin     ///Or veiled.  
 IK     Yeah, veiled.  
 Rachel Hopkin     That's what I think.  
 IK     Yeah. It's an expression that they can't – well I think we're just so, erm, subdued as a culture, or repressed or whatever.

Neither IK nor QL dismissed the notion out of hand, although perhaps they were merely humouring me. Certainly some interviewees were unpersuaded, but others were more receptive. JC - who is a professional ballroom instructor - noted that “it's true that in Latin dancing, you would look at each other and that can be intimidating to a lot of people that might not be intimidated by just being close to each other”. And VF's response was positively enthusiastic:

VF     Absolutely. I've experienced this in salsa. I mean, are you aware of the salsa sort of embrace, if you can call it that?///  
 Rachel Hopkin     ///Not really.  
 VF     But your partner's hand's in your hand but you can't put your thumb on top of their hands, and you're sort of face to face.  
 Rachel Hopkin     [Whispering] Oh yeah, I couldn't.  
 VF     And I found that infinitely more awkward than a tango embrace. 'Cos you don't know whether to look at them, or to look away from them. And you're just facing each other for the entirety of the dance and it's just ...  
 Rachel Hopkin     That sounds excruciating.  
 VF     Yeah, I mean, it can be. It can be very hard to get used to.

KD, who described herself as “very shy”, had a similarly affirmative response. She told me that she had recently started taking classes in kizomba and had found the comparison it offered with Argentine tango to be instructive:

So my kizomba teacher mentioned last week after seeing us dancing, she said “kizomba is not like dancing where you're here and the person's there” [indicates both partners are slightly off to one side of each other], but I can do that in tango. So tango really, if you're shy, you can be looking at the chest, or you're looking that way [off to one side], or even if you're close embrace, and their head's here

and you're here [indicating forehead side to forehead side], but you're not like, eergh, you're not, like, eyeballing [laughs].<sup>93</sup>

### • The Sticky Nature of Tango World: Focus and Forgetting

The following excerpt comes from my interview with UM, a female dancer in the Cincinnati Argentine tango CoP. She was talking about reactions of her friends and family to her life in Tango World:

My kids, they're very funny. They call it "oh yeah, that's your secret happy place" [laughs]. My daughter-in-law, she goes "are you going to your secret happy place tonight?". But I was saying this to the beginners actually on Monday, I was helping out in that class. There was a couple, a man and his wife, and they were struggling, you know, but they were having fun. They had smiles. And at the end they said "boy, we're tired. This was really hard work", and I said "Yeah, but could you think about anything else while you were here?", and they said "no". And it's true. When you go there and you're dancing, you really can't think about anything else, troubles or problems or whatever. So it is kind of nice because you just release all of that. And then it becomes your secret happy place.

As is indicated by UM in that statement, dancing Argentine tango demands focus. And like UM, many of my interviewees indicated tango's status as an object of affectual positive feeling for them is fuelled by the focal point it provides. One woman said:

I'm a multi-tasker all the time, and I can go to tango and there's nothing else. (...) I'm doing one thing. I'm focussing. That's the only world there is and why would you bring anything else into it?

Another told me:

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<sup>93</sup> According to the Got Kizomba Festival website:

Kizomba is both a style of music, and a beautiful partner dance, developed in Portuguese-speaking Africa from the late 1980's to early 1990's. Kizomba music, born as a fusion of African rhythms and Caribbean Zouk, is a romantic genre of music generally sung in Portuguese. Kizomba's popularity is growing rapidly around the world. (...) The basics are simple. For those who are currently dancing partner dances such as salsa, bachata, and merengue, Kizomba is a breath of fresh air.

(Information accessed on 2019-04-23 via <http://www.gotkizombafestival.com/what-is-kizomba/>)

I belong to a Buddhist community, and we talk about being present, being mindful, a lot, and so I always bring the parallel, like “I mean tango, this is it, you know, this is the moment”.

Concentrating on the dance means that less attention is paid to other matters. HS works as an insurance salesman. When I asked him if being in Tango World could help mitigate, say, a bad day when he hadn’t managed to please a client, he said:

Δ Tango’s like meditation, like zen, so when you get in here, I focus on more dancing. I don’t worry about my job, what I’ve done. You just be there in the moment, forget about tomorrow, and then it’s fine. And I can go here and have happiness here.

And TJ, who works as a psychological counsellor, said:

Oh my God. There are so many days when I’m like “I just want to go home and bury my head under a pillow” and I force myself to drive down here because when I’m done, I feel rejuvenated. It is a godsend.

In other words, Tango World offers a refuge from life beyond its confines.

### • The Sticky Nature of Tango World: The Zone of Perpetual Improvement -

#### Complexity, Creativity, Improvisation

One Wednesday morning in 2018, I was in two minds about whether to make the two-hour drive from Columbus to attend Tango Del Barrio’s *práctica*. According to the fieldnotes which I wrote up the following morning, the fact “it was midweek and so didn’t have the somewhat festive and freer feeling of the weekend” weighed against the option. In addition, were I to go, my plan would be “to make it an overnight trip and then stay on till Thursday for the Topics Class”, but

that would mean a late journey back to Columbus that same night, and I had an early morning meeting on Friday. In addition, I wrote:

my research and instincts are suggesting that one gets more dances if one also goes to classes, and although I would be going to the class, the class would be AFTER the *práctica*, and I didn't want to come all the way down for the *práctica* and not get many dances.

Yet despite all these issues, I had woken up that morning feeling unusually energetic, so I decided to “seize the moment”. As I was driving down, I realised something that seemed significant in some way: in most cases, I go to tango events less for the pleasure of participating in them than because I hope they will allow me to improve my dancing. In other words, I go to tango events because I want to spend time in the zone of perpetual improvement (the concept which already highlighted in the Introduction and Chapter 2). This realization led me to consider some further aspects of the affective appeal of Argentine tango which intertwine with one another; one is the ongoing challenge that the dance presents to those who stick with it, and the other is the opportunity it affords for creative expression. I describe these factors as being intertwined since being able to creatively express oneself in tango is part of its ongoing challenge.

Both the challenge and the creativity of the dance are due, at least in part, to the improvisatory nature of Argentine tango and numerous interlocutors spoke of being compelled by the complexity of the dance. One long-time *tanguera*, BT, said that she loved the fact that Argentine tango is improvisational because that meant “it never gets boring. There's always something new to discover”. Another very experienced dancer in the community, RZ, told me that part of the

allure of Argentine tango for her was that it did not involve “set figures”. It was therefore a more “freestyle, creative, improvisational dance” than was typically true of the ballroom repertoire with which she was also familiar. “There’s so much depth to Argentine tango,” she said. “I don’t think I ever really experienced that in ballroom. Not that you can’t, but I never got there myself. But in tango, it just keeps getting richer”. WF, like RZ, has studied other dance forms of dance but she too considered Argentine tango to be in a class of its own:

Δ This is wonderful, great dance. Some people dance only tango and I understand why. Because this is so rich. You can find in this dance everything, everything. Whatever you are looking for, you can find in tango [laughs]. Like history – so I cannot tell you a lot of information, but I know that tango emerged in Argentina through immigration. So people, immigrants, who were far away from their homeland, they dance tango. So I have been for, in America – because I am from Ukraine – I will here for what? Twenty-two years? Yeah, and I do miss my country. And tango, sometimes, when you listen music, some songs, they are very, very sad. And it is not necessarily about romance. Some are very, very sad because that somebody who wrote the song, probably that person miss his or her country and [they express] their sadness through tango.

During my interview with another female dancer, KG, she asked me “how many people have said they dance because it’s meaningful?”. Not many had used that actual word, I said, though in many cases they had implied feeling that way. Why did she want to know, I asked. “Because I remember asking someone I admired once why they danced and they said because they’re looking for meaning in life”, she said. If you are searching for the “meaning of things”, KG went on, Argentine tango was a “very good” practice to pursue. What made her say that? I wondered:

Because there are so many layers. There’s so many layers and there’s no other dance that I know of where the embrace is it. I mean, it’s how you’re either in an open embrace or you’re in a closed embrace or you’re embracing even if you’re not touching, but you have to move through that. It’s different from the other dances. The other dances you’re twirling, you’re twisting, you’re connecting, but you’re moving away more. This one is the embrace.

Some of my interviewees explicitly mentioned relishing the learning curve presented by Argentine tango. AQ told me that he was of the opinion that “*milongas* are overrated. I like the learning of things”. Similarly, DB was emphatic that part of what got him interested was simply that he loved learning and he valued the dance’s improvisatory nature:

The basis is just knowing how to move and I’ve always been into movement. I pole-vaulted, I was a diver, I was a trampolinist, so movement was always interesting to me, and moving to music is great. The dances I had tried to learn in the past were about memorising steps and doing silly things, and Argentine tango seemed to make sense somehow.

OS also has a strong background in other forms of movement. When she began attending tango classes, she said:

it was the first time that I’m doing something physical that somebody had to teach me how to do, that I couldn’t get a hold of very quickly. I mean, I grew up an athlete, so throw a racket ball at me, throw – I don’t know - skiing at me. Fine, eventually I’ll learn how to do it and it’s like “Okay” and move on. And this wasn’t that way. This was hard. This was very technique-driven, so being a gymnast, I was attracted to the technique. It just really gave me something for the first time in a long time, something to really work for.

Many experienced dancers of Argentine tango believe that mastering the dance - or at least improving as a dancer - is a lifelong process.<sup>94</sup> But OS pointed out that the learning process can also be full of small and satisfying achievements. The beginner classes that she took provided weekly goals that were “obtainable. Like ‘when he leads this, I want to be able to do that and catch it and not miss it’”. OS found those “little victories” very “fulfilling”. OS mostly dances as a follow. NS had been learning to lead for around six years when I interviewed him. He said the

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<sup>94</sup> I heard this from my interlocutors. It is also a sentiment that is commonly articulated by tango professionals.

“challenge” of the role appealed to him, he said, but the biggest draw for him was the fact that Argentine tango is “an improvisation dance”. When I asked why, he said:

I have kind of a reserved character, personality, and, erm, you want to feel like, when you’re in front of people, like you’re in control of things. And I always thought that improvisation would be good for me. And just being able to be creative about what, you know, what you do with the dance, it was just kind of a way for me to be, like, less rigid.

PZ also highlighted how much she enjoys the opportunities for creativity that Argentine tango affords her:

You can come up with anything. It’s not like just certain steps and “you have to do these and then follow these rules”. I like creating things. And I like creativity. And I like people with that. I mean, it drives you to do things. It gives you energy, at least for me, so kind of like being alive. Like you are not stuck in the same circle, so – and with everyone – like, let’s say this lead does something completely different than this lead with the same music, with the same class.

JR told me that the many years she spent as part of an unhappy marriage had caused her creativity impulse to diminish to the point of non-existence. After her husband died, Argentine tango helped reignite her creative spirit. She remembered that one dance encounter had an especially galvanizing effect:

There was one man who I think was my inspiration. He was so healing for me (...) He was such an artistic dancer and I could follow him, whatever he led. And he said - and now I’m going to say a bad word - but when I said “I’m a beginner”, he said “beginner, my arse”. So that took me [aspirates “shwoo-ing” sound] way up. It was wonderful. And just his confidence and his love for – he said “you’re so artistic”. And it not only helped me to feel good but it helped me to feel like me.

She went on to describe how being inspired by Argentine tango had led to change in other areas of her life. JR works as a counsellor and therapist and decided to devise a curriculum for “grieving people” that incorporated aspects of art and dance. She also took up painting. Because

of tango, she said: “I felt like I had a voice, that I could have self-expression”. JR told me that the creativity the dance unleashed in her was aided by her regular encounters with fellow residents of Tango World, since it seemed to be largely populated by two types of people:

There are the scientists and there’re the artists. And tango mixes them up. There’s a lot of professors who are real left-brainers, and then there are those of us who are either artists or in some sort of counselling which is art, or writers, or radio or whatever you do, you know, that artistic. So I think it’s two fields – art and science, and that is tango in itself. It’s a science and an art.

Over the two or so decades that ML had been dancing, he reached a similar conclusion. Tango World, he observed, contains an unusually large number of:

engineers and scientists (...) particularly with the men. There’s a very, very technical element to tango that causes these very technical and creative guys to meet these women, who may or may not be technically creative, but who are very creative. Everybody in here is extremely creative in other things. They’re artists, they’re authors, they’re poets. I was a chef. They’re inventive creative people.<sup>95</sup>

### • The Sticky Nature of Tango World: Music

The canon of music to which Argentine tango is typically performed is another major constituent of the dance’s sticky allure.<sup>96</sup> Most of the tango events which take place in Cincinnati - as is the

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<sup>95</sup> The views of ML and JR regarding - in broad strokes - the types of people who make up the Cincinnati CoP in particular and Tango World more generally accords with the impression Mark Christensen has gained during the years that he has been dancing tango in numerous locations. Christensen is the person mentioned in the “Initial Appeal” section earlier in this chapter and who had emailed me expressing interest in my research. He wrote that those people who stick with tango:

typically seem to be persons who are musicians or artists or already technically accomplished in some way. They tend to be persons for whom delayed gratification already is a familiar skill. I find that tango communities tend to have a disproportionate number of engineers and architects, scientists, researchers, computer programmers, college professors, economists, physicians, and psychologists, for example. (Personal email to author, 2017-09-03.)

<sup>96</sup> It was actually the music which captured my attention when I took my first tango lesson. I do not remember anything about the teaching, the movement, or the other students, but I recall how I was absolutely entranced by the music, not least because the recordings were of performances which had plainly taken place decades before and were now scratchy with age. I was thrilled by what I perceived as an anachronistic playlist. (I no longer consider these old recordings to be anachronistic in any way.)



case in many tango communities around the world, are accompanied by a soundtrack which, if not wholly, is at least largely constituted by familiar songs performed by Golden Age musicians. Some of the excerpts featured earlier in this chapter have included mention of the music, so I will include only a few more here. BB, for example, told me that she so “fell in love with the music”, she was happy to sit at tango events just to listen to it, while PQ confessed that the music is what “really keeps me going”, and DF described the music as being her “favourite thing about” tango. FG said it a very “soothing” and “healing” effect upon her. XT emphasized the richness of the music: “you can hear the best songs a thousand times and still find something new in them and it’s wonderful”. GL asserted that “the amount of lyricism” in tango music is deeper than in other genres of dance music. BT said: “tango music is incredibly rich. I think expressing it in an improvisational way – it’s sort of a way of expressing oneself which I find interesting”. LS commented that the fact because certain tango songs feature regularly on a lot of playlists, dancing to them became easier because “you know how they go”.

The pleasure taken in the music appeared to increase, of course, when a dancer’s interpretative understanding of it, as expressed through the movement, was shared. XT said that for her, it was essential that her partner be responding to the music:

It’s like we’re both there to dance with each other but also to a song. It’s like if I don’t feel like they’re really hearing the song, or responding to the song, or trying to interpret the song, even if they’ve very limited vocabulary, then it’s not going to be that enjoyable for me. It’s going to be a little bit frustrating, because I’ll be hearing it and feeling it and will want to respond to the music. So that’s a really big important thing.

MU made a similar observation when she told me that the dances she most enjoys are those in which:

I feel that is when I can actually feel the music coming through the partner. My goal is to try to feel that. Like, how is he hearing this? And then connect with that, and dance to that, because it's interesting because they hear the music differently than I do, so it's like learning a new way of listening to that particular song.

To be clear, most members of the Cincinnati CoP do not have sufficient grasp of Spanish - let alone of *lunfardo* jargon - to understand the specific lyrics of tango songs, so how they are affected by the music has much less to do with the texts than would otherwise be the case.<sup>97</sup>

The playlists at the majority of Tango Del Barrio events tend to be dominated by musician-composers active during that era (the 30s to the 50s) such as Juan d'Arienzo, Carlos Di Sarli, Anibal Triolo, Rodolfo Biagi, Miguel Caló, Angel d'Agostino, Osvaldo Pugliese, and Osvaldo Fresedo. Some interviewees also expressed a liking for *tango nuevo* - or “new tango” - pieces.<sup>98</sup> Astor Piazzola is considered the pioneer of *tango nuevo* (sometimes called “*nuevo tango*”) but his compositions are rarely played at social dances. Instead, *tango nuevo* playlists usually feature pieces by the Gotan Project, Carlos Libedinsky (of Narcotango fame), Bajofondo, Otros Aires, and other artists who have risen to prominence since the start of the 21st century. BC - who deejays at some Tango Del Barrio events - described *tango nuevo* as “tango music in the modern

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<sup>97</sup> *Lunfardo* is a form of slang which developed in Buenos Aires around the same time as the tango dance. *Lunfardo* terms often appear in the lyrics of tango songs and in tango poetry.

<sup>98</sup> *Tango nuevo* also describes a development in the dance. According to an internet resource, the dance form of *tango nuevo* came about:

mostly as a result of the structural analysis of the dance by Gustavo Naveira and Fabian Salas. [They] are credited with atomically deconstructing elements of tango, and analyzing how the elements correlated to each other. This resulted in a 'didactic method' that allowed the dancer to 'construct' their own tango via a personal interpretation.

(Information accessed on 2019-04-24 via <http://www.verytangostore.com/tango-nuevo.html>.)

era that still pays homage to original tango” and which he therefore deemed as suitable for dancing. “Tango alternatives”, on the other hand, in his opinion, were not. Tango alternatives, BC explained to me, consist of music that has no relation to tango but which people “are trying to dance tango to”:

It doesn’t work because we all hear music differently. Generally speaking when I hear people’s alternatives, I have to sit out because I don’t know what I’m listening to and I can’t make it work. So if I’m a DJ, I would never force alternatives on people. I’m kind of like real averse to them at this point. But I’m very receptive to *tango nuevo*.

TX shared BC’s opinion of alternative music. When she and I met for our interview, we chatted about the previous evening’s *práctica* - which we had both attended - as I was setting up the recording equipment and, according to my fieldnotes, TX mentioned “that she didn’t completely love the choice of music at the event, which included a lot of non-typical, non-traditional tracks”. Once I turned the recorder on, TX continued talking about the music choices made by the previous night’s deejay:

It seems like almost everyone goes through this. I don’t want to call it a “stage” because some people stay there. And there’s nothing wrong with being experimental and doing things that are maybe a little bit like avant-garde when it comes to tango. But as a general practice, the dance and the music developed together and so there’s a relationship there that you can’t replicate with other music.

When I asked BC (who had not been the deejay at the *práctica* in question) to describe how he went about compiling a playlist, he said the process was “pretty straightforward”:

I have 13 tandas. Nine of them are just straight traditional tango, old school, Di Sarli, D’Arienzo, tango. I have two waltz tandas. One *milonga*, that’s my concession to the group.<sup>99</sup> And one nuevo. (...) Basically I’ve tried to achieve that

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<sup>99</sup> Earlier in the interview, CB had expressed a strong dislike for the *milonga* subgenre of tango music.

[the music] I play is respected and accepted by the broader community. The *tango nuevos* are *tango nuevos*. Some people don't like them at all, many people do. I'm on the side that does, therefore I'll play them.

Like BC, I enjoy *tango nuevo*.<sup>100</sup> However, as he pointed out, some dancers do not. LW, for example, told me that even though she tried Δ “not to be prejudiced with the tango nuevo and all that, it doesn't transmit anything to me. I don't feel it.” And LG was passionately committed to the older tango music canon which, he insisted, was designed for dancing and therefore contains treasures for dancers which they can only recognise if they know the songs very well indeed. When his tango journey began, he had “turned off all music in” his life besides the Golden Age material:

I would play it in the car. I was trying to get the beat and then you try to find the back beat and then, you know, you try to feel how the beat is changing depending on sort of the rhythm and the melody of the song. The main thing about the music is the more it's in your bones, the more you can dance. So my favourite dancer in the world right now is Federico Naveira. Federico Naveira was in his mother's stomach when she was dancing a lot, so when you watch that guy dance, his feeling, the way the music is expressed in his body ... there is not a single European or North American who can do that. Nobody. Without that immersion in the classics of tango, the music will never get in your bones. If it doesn't get in your bones, then you won't be able to feel it in your heart, and you won't even know you can't feel it in your heart.

LW is from Argentina and was raised listening to old tango recordings. That kind of music - which is the only kind she enjoys dancing to - evokes memories of her early life in Buenos Aires:

Δ “I think of when I listen to the lyrics when I was a child [starts to weep a little] ... Erm, I don't know, silly things like your mother, your grandmother, listening to the radio and you are, I don't know, drinking café con leche. Simple things.

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<sup>100</sup> I do not actively dislike the use of alternative music although I concede that it usually harder to dance to for precisely the reasons outlined by CB.

That many events at Tango Del Barrio are now accompanied by a more diverse range of music than was the case in the past is, in part, a result of the findings of the 2015 Tango Del Barrio survey which was discussed in Chapter 2. According to board chair, Lynne Schmitt, some respondents felt that the largely Golden Age playlists were “boring” because although they featured “great music”, it was always “the same music”. Accordingly, most of the events that I attended during my fieldwork were accompanied by a mix of old and new tango music - but still more of the former than the latter - as well as, from time to time, alternative tracks of the kind BC avoids in his own selections.

### • **The Sticky Nature of Tango World: Steps and Sensations**

As my own tango competence has improved over the years, I have noticed that the kinaesthetic quality of certain movements can leave me fizzing with delight. In March 2018, I attended a Tango Del Barrio workshop weekend led by Liz and Yannick Vanhove, a pair of Belgian tango professionals. The theme for one of the workshops was “How to Make Your Dancing More Playful” and I noted in my field journal that:

The “playful” things we are taught includes a move where the lead leads the follow off to one side. It feels very easy and natural and it is fun. This makes me realise there are two kinds of feelings I really love getting just from the movements, rather than through the connection – I mean, I’m getting them led because of some level of connection, but it’s not the connection that’s uppermost in my mind. Anyway regarding the feeling of these steps – there are the ones that make me feel super elegant and the ones that chime in with the playful parts of my personality. This is definitely the latter I feel like a bunny rabbit hopping off to the side. T, in particular likes how I am doing it. I think not everyone has hopped into it but he likes that I do. T is laughing a lot and I laugh because he is laughing so much.

Once I became cognisant that certain movements evoked certain feelings within me, I started to enquire of my interviewees if they had experienced anything similar. As it was not always easy to make clear what I meant, I would often offer myself as an example, as this exchange with NE, a very accomplished lead, illustrates:

Rachel Hopkin        Are there any particular steps that you like to do because they make you feel a particular way? For example, there are certain ones that I like to do, and I can't really explain, but they give me the feeling of being regal, or being a queen, or something. I like those steps. I hardly even know what they are. One of the things is being led to walk at half the speed that the lead is going.

Δ NE    Half speed?

Rachel Hopkin        Yeah, so the lead is doing double time, and that I really like because of how stately I feel. Is there anything like that for you with any of the steps?

NE       Yeah. I think everybody has their own sort of few steps they're comfortable.

Rachel Hopkin        It's not really about comfort, because///

NE       ///No. The reason you chose them in the first place is because you liked them.

Rachel Hopkin        Yeah. (...) Well, I don't choose them, I just wait for them to be led.

NE       No. No. No. Yeah, I understand. But I can lead certain sequences, certain things, okay, and something is appealing about them.

Rachel Hopkin        Can you give me an example of something that you particularly like?

NE       Hm ... well, I like the very traditional sort of *milonguero* turn.<sup>101</sup> I mean, when I lead you, I would lead you back, side, forward, and then come back around, okay?

Rachel Hopkin        Like I'm doing a *molinete*?<sup>102</sup>

NE       Yes, exactly, you do half the *molinete*. You do back side forward and then you pivot forward, so you're pivoting, right, and you come back right in front of me. It's very simple but it can be so sensual. It can be so sensual. It can be so

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<sup>101</sup> According to Carolyn Merritt, the term *milonguero*:

historically carried negative connotations; it referred to a man who lived in the milongas, barely held down or had no job, and in many cases, was supported by a woman or family. The term was appropriated by a sector of *porteño* dancers and organizers in the 1990s to brand a style of tango danced in a close or "chest-to-chest" embrace, featuring a simple vocabulary that stressed rhythmic complexity, and was quite successfully marketed locally and abroad as the "real" tango danced in Buenos Aires' milongas, where the crowded dance floors could not permit a more open frame. (2008:34)

<sup>102</sup> A *molinete* is a very common tango move and involves one partner circling around the other in a "back side forward side back ..." series of steps. It is more typical that follows *molinete* around the leads rather than vice versa.

beautiful. And you can vary it so much. You can change the timing. You can do all sorts of things, playing with music, and that's nice, okay. I like a sequence of steps when I would, for example, I would go on your opposite hand, on our dark side, I would step on that side, and I will take a walk that is very close embrace and I will go that side, I will step with the left hand, and I let you step around, take a couple of steps, and bring you right in front of me again; and I think that's wonderful.<sup>103</sup> It's a feeling of reconnection. And again, depending on the timing and what kind of music it is, you can do it in a very different mood and sort of slow it down a little bit and make the next step very large and something with a bit more, add some, add some drama to it.

Although I found the examples that NE gave hard to visualise, I appreciated how satisfying he found the movements that he described. And despite the clumsy phrasing of my enquiry, other dancers with whom I spoke identified with my feeling of taking special pleasure in certain movements. AL told me that:

I love going to the cross in cross feet. It's a nice feeling and to have the partner do it well is fun too. It's just like [claps hands] - it's one of the things where you just go there. It's kind of a cool power move. It's a good feeling but there's a lot of complexity in that movement and the footwork on the follower's part. And then also the *apilado*, sort of when you take a side step and then step back a little bit and just sort of take a woman off balance, just a little bit. And so if she trusts you to lean in, and just sort of being there together is always fun.

BB told me that she especially likes when a lead cues her to take an *ocho* step in such a way that:

the whole time is yours and the whole space is yours and the whole universe is yours, and you have a choice to stand there for an hour, and he will stand there for an hour and wait for you. Or you have a choice just to make whatever you want to do next. I love that. It's not even freedom, it's just space.

EK said she likes *boleos* because they are:

100% a reaction of my body. I don't think about it, it just happens. And after it's done, I'm like "what just happened". Like M will lead one, I'm like "what? What

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<sup>103</sup> In tango, the "dark side" refers to the 'closed' side of the embrace - i.e. that which is formed by the left side of the follow and the right of the lead.

just? Oh my God, my leg just did something” which is good. That means that my free leg is hanging there you know. So, I like *boleos*. I really like *volcadas* because I’m taken off axis and so that’s the surprise element for me.

Some of those with whom I spoke were not able to think of any specific movements that provoked heightened kinaesthetic pleasure, but instead spoke more generally. PH said that she really likes “sultry kind of slow dances” when danced “with the right lead, because I feel I can really get into the music, but it’s also kind of challenging”. YS said that for her, a “good sound walk” is hard to beat:

If someone can walk me and be connected to me and be grounded and I can feel the floor through their centre, and I can project the floor in my centre and we can have a conversation like that, I love it.

PM, meanwhile, said he especially values good balance and good posture: “I love all the skill in movement that just comes with time. It’s like, you know, becoming a skilled woodworker; you learn your tools, your trade, and each project, you become better and better. Dance is like that”.

### • The Sticky Nature of Tango World: Feeling and Expressing the Self

The final element that maintains tango as an object sticky with positive affect and which I want to discuss here is perhaps also the hardest to describe. It has to do with how the dance can enable practitioners to “feel” more deeply than might otherwise be possible. Sometimes this means the dance allows them to better connect with, and express, aspects of their own character and emotional life; sometimes, it allows them to better connect with and appreciate the same in others. The best way I can clarify what I am alluding to is by offering some reflections from my



interlocutors, including those of JA, which she shared with me just after I had just shown her a book of tango haikus that someone had lent to me (Flajszman 2012):

Just looking at these haikus, there is something that jarred something, and this is an aspect of tango that I think is really wonderful and I think goes back to some of the origins of tango where it was danced by people who were maybe a bit melancholy and missing their homeland and just looking for a connection. Recently a friend of mine passed away and I went to a practice shortly after finding this out and a song came on that made me think of him, that I really did associate with this person. And the person I was dancing with didn't know any of that at all, but I did, and so I just took that dance for myself and did that dance for him. And I think that's something that's really wonderful about tango is that you can have this. There I was, I was in this close lovely dance with this person, but my interior experience was so personal and so private and so meaningful, and that I could have that and still be with this other person and engage in this, it's really kind of incredible. And I felt that it was kind of this way that I could honour this person and still participate in this other thing. It's really kind of amazing. But that the dance allows for that I think is something that's pretty special.

VO told me about an awkward experience which happened when he was with a tango instructor and, with her in his arms, found himself unable to move as the music started. Something about the situation had caused him to think of his ex-wife, from whom separation had been painful:

VO I felt a feeling of the loss of tenderness with the divorce and everything, and I'm standing there dealing with this emotion and [the teacher] gets really mad because she thinks I'm thinking sex [chuckle], but I'm thinking loss and emptiness and I just had a memory of the warmth and tenderness that is in relationships and it just washed through me suddenly, so again, my feet didn't work, my arms didn't work.

Rachel Hopkin Ohhhh. That's so poignant.

VO It's very tango too [chuckle]. The more you understand the music, the more so much of it is about disappointment and loss, estrangement, failed dreams.

BX and his wife had once tried to learn tango together but she had had some medical problems which made the dance unfeasible for her and so the couple abandoned their attempt. Several years after his wife's death, BX decided to try tango again:

The first thing that I noticed about it was there was a lot of pivoting, which is what was holding back my wife, and the first six months I felt really guilty about, you know, after she'd tried to talk me into it and it didn't work out, and then now all of a sudden I'm dancing and, er, there was a lot of guilt to that.

I mentioned that I found it surprising that the pivoting was what had spurred BX's feeling of guilt rather than, say, having other women in his arms:

BX No. No. I had no guilt about holding other women, no. I was pretty much – I was far enough along [in the grieving process].

Rachel Hopkin Sure. That's interesting that it would come from the pivoting, though.

BX Well you have to understand what my, my wife's disabilities were. She had undergone an experimental treatment as a teenager and it, her ankle was fractured, so her leg literally collapsed into her foot. And she did not have any ankle movement. She had chronic pain in her ankles, so for her to pivot was just like impossible. So we could never do it [and] it was like that's where the guilt is. It's just like we could have never done this, taken Argentine tango. She could never do an *ocho*.

LD spoke in more analytical terms. For him, tango offered a means of personal growth:

LD You start to use it as a basis for thinking about your connections to the world. There are adages that we use in our language, you know: "it takes two"; "leading and following", "connection", right? When you start to incorporate those concepts into how you talk and how you think and how you behave, then it now becomes more than just doing steps on a dance floor. You know, it has, it has metaphoric meaning. It has conceptual meaning. It has spiritual meaning, right? You know, my background as a collegiate wrestler had a very similar aesthetic. So wrestling has a metaphor, you know, how we deal with struggle, right? It is very much a part of my view of the world in the same way that dance has become. In fact, they exist in a very interesting tandem because wrestling serves as a metaphor for whenever I'm grappling with something, and dance can as well: so how can I have greater harmony with things that I'm dealing with in life? I can think about it in terms of my dancing metaphor.

Rachel Hopkin Is there anything that you've learnt from the dance that can help you smooth out that wrestling? Can you change a wrestle half way through to a tango [laughing]?

LD [chuckle] Well, you know, as I think about why the dance is important to me off the dance floor, I think about these personal qualities that we have the potential to learn. So we can learn greater patience with ourselves, with other

people, off the dance floor if we're practising it on the dance floor, right? We can learn, I think, greater empathy if we take the time to learn the other roles on the dance floor. So leaders learning how to follow, followers learning how to lead, I think, engenders empathy in ways that I would hope carries over off the dance floor, right? I think that these are values that one could try to apply if they're having circumstances that are difficult to deal with: to what extent can I be more patient? Be more understanding? More empathetic? You know, maybe I need to take a step back and follow, right? As opposed to trying to dictate and lead all the time, right? And those are things that I think can be reinforced from what one learns in tango.

Meanwhile, SH said that tango for him was "really about self-discovery":

Δ It reveals what you have, and it brings out what I have in small ways but slowly it builds up to big things because it's bringing out a lot in me. ... Tango makes me know that I am a persistent person and I can enjoy life. So I don't expect me to be number one dancer right away, just slowly do it, enjoy it, and learning, and enjoy the community, at the same time help out the community.

Others described how tango had led them to a deeper understanding of others. WJ and her husband EL were around 15 tango years old at the time of my conversations with them. I interviewed WJ first; she commented that "You learn things about people while dancing with them that you wouldn't know otherwise after years of knowing them before". So had she discovered aspects of her husband of which she had been unaware, I wanted to know. She responded:

Δ You know, we never or seldom fought, and we'd been married for years, until we started dancing. And it's this need to be right, I think. A lot of us have this need to be right.

When I interviewed her husband a week or so later, I put the same question to him. He said he had not necessarily discovered anything new about WJ, but tango had helped him understand how deeply rooted some of her traits were. When I asked for an example, EL said that:

Δ She likes to be in control of what she does. If she's not, she's not comfortable. She is not easy going to go into something unknown. And when I would lead something she's not quite sure of, instead of going there, she'll freeze.

Another married couple in the community, CX and RT, also began their tango journey together and they too fought during its early stages:

Δ CX In the beginning, yes, we would be mad at each other and all, but now, yes, we are kinder. And if we had a great dance, it's different. The way you look at each other is different. Yes, I can notice it and he notices it too. Because we give ... when you dance tango I think you give each other, erm, you exchange the feelings. And also he gives me way, or gives me – how to say? – chance to show through the dance, and also I give him. So we discover each other and I think I discover myself and he discovers himself during the dance, and you give to each other opportunity to discover that while dancing. It's really interesting.

Rachel Hopkin Can you say a little bit more that? I'm really intrigued.

CX So while I'm dancing with him, if he wants me to do something that I know he's going to like, like *gancho*, you know, sharp *gancho*, I'll do it and I can feel that he loves it, so I give him this feeling so he appreciates it. The same thing with me. You know, if he turns me around and, I don't know, holds me and whatever and I feel so feminine or whatever, and then I appreciate it because he makes me feel that way.

Rachel Hopkin Oh, that's lovely. These little acts of generosity going on within the dance.

CX Yes, that's right, that's right. At the end, we are kinder to each other because we appreciate what we give to each other during the dance. That's why I love it. And my son is 12. He has been watching us and sometimes when we practise here and he comes, and then he "I love it, I love when you guys dance". Because he feels it. He see that something really nice going on between us.

CZ, WJ, and EL all described how tango had impacted their relationships with and/or understandings of their spouses. The following account from NB illustrates that tango can also allow practitioners to gain fresh insights into people with whom they would not otherwise willingly spend time:

NB I think there's probably one or two people who, there's potential for some interpersonal conflict but that I find to be very nice dancers, so ... And it's kind of nice because, because of the dancing, I have access to an aspect of them that I

wouldn't otherwise and so I can appreciate them on that level. It sort of adds dimension to people.

Rachel Hopkin Can you give me any examples?

NB [laughs]. So there's this person whom I find to be kind of difficult interpersonally sometimes, and with whom I've butted heads pretty strongly. He's kind of impossible [laughs] but as a dancer he's very nice. Very nice dancer, like, musical and sensitive and, you know, really attentive to the art form, and so he's not always impossible to deal with [laughing]. You know, he's like, he's sometimes very lovely and warm ... So, there's this kind of arena where we can find, like, peace with each other where it's like, it's all good there, you know, when we're on the dance floor, it's great.

### Chapter Three – Closing Thoughts

In this chapter, I have concentrated on aspects of tango that make it, affectually-speaking, a happy object. However, I am not suggesting that even the most ardent *tangueros/as* find Tango World to be a wholly perfect place. There are many things that can cause affective aggravation: a room that is too hot or too cold, or too crowded or too empty; not receiving sufficient invitations to dance, or being so incessantly invited that there is not a moment to catch one's breath; partners with poor personal hygiene, or with whom there is no connection, or whose embrace is too tight or too loose; uncomfortable clothes or shoes; injurious encounters resulting in, say, a stiletto-stabbed calf or a lost toe nail; unappealing music; or simply not being in the right mood to dance or to be among people. Yet despite the many and varied potential forms of negative affect which could adhere to Argentine tango, they apparently do not; at least, not as far as the members of the Cincinnati Argentine tango CoP are concerned.

It is common to hear about the "passion" that tango engenders in practitioners. Passion certainly seems to be the adjective that sticks most readily to the dance. One could therefore say that

passion, or at least its promise, is what maintains tango status as a happy object to which people are drawn. However, passion appears to be the generic name for the glue that causes people to adhere to Tango World. What I have tried to do in this chapter is uncover exactly what are the ingredients of the glue, what are the specific elements that allow the passion to be so ensnaring. I have concentrated on these positive aspects because my concern in this chapter has been to examine how affective states promulgate the Cincinnati Argentine tango tradition. As I have shown, the positive affects experienced by my interlocutors are complex and multifaceted and are the of each practitioners' unique interactions with myriad elements of the dance.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Gender

The role that affect plays in stimulating and supporting the tradition of Argentine tango dancing in Cincinnati was my central concern in the previous chapter. In this chapter, my focus moves on to gender. More specifically, I investigate how involvement in Argentine tango inflects dancers' relationships with their gender identities. My work in this chapter is rooted in Judith Butler's concept of gender as a social construction made manifest only through repeated performance of the self (1990). I explore how the Cincinnati practitioners' negotiated participation in the dance - a highly gendered form by most accounts - causes them to consciously alter their performances of gendered identity both within Tango World and beyond. My data suggests that dancers find some - though not all - aspects of this process to be empowering. As Butler argues, gender is performative; in Cincinnati's Tango World, gendered roles are open to play and display, and both embrace and challenge notions of gender roles assigned in more traditional contexts.

#### **Gender and Argentine Tango**

In 2015, an article by sociologist Kathy Davis appeared in the journal *Feminist Theory*. Its title was "Should a Feminist Dance Tango?". The question, Davis quickly makes clear, is intended as rhetorical but her aim by posing it is to provoke reflection on "the apparent contradiction

between dancing tango and critical feminist inquiry” (4). Davis then describes the event which prompted her enquiry:

Several years ago, I was having dinner with some colleagues, most of whom were sociologists, philosophers, and a few medical scientists following a conference we had all attended. I had been invited – as usual – to present the ‘feminist perspective’ on the topic at hand. I had attended many such conferences with this particular group in the past, but this was one of the first times that we strayed from our shared academic interests and began talking about other aspects of our lives. Probably as a result of the plentiful flow of wine, I launched into a lively account of my passion for tango. I described my experiences on the dance floor and my frequent trips to Buenos Aires “just to dance”. While most of my colleagues appeared to be mildly entertained by my stories, one sociologist looked at me with undisguised dismay: “But, Kathy...”, he said. “Tango? How can you possibly be involved in something like that? I thought you were a feminist.” (4)

Though Davis was taken aback by her colleague’s remark, it provided her with “an immediate glimpse into the stereotypes that automatically come into play the moment most people hear the words ‘Argentinean tango’” (4). After all, she notes, tango draws on “hierarchical differences between the sexes” (3), and - of all popular dances - it “seems to be the most extreme embodiment of traditional notions of gender and heterosexuality” (5). This despite the fact that, as Davis notes elsewhere, the “origin myth of tango invariably involves two men dancing tango together in the slums of Buenos Aires at the turn of the twentieth century” (2014:131).

So what is it about Argentine tango that makes it “the performance *par excellence* of gender inequality: feminine subservience and masculine machismo” (Davis 2015:5)? According to the US-based, Argentina-born political theorist and dance professor, Marta Savigliano, interpreting



the dance as a display of erotic exoticism is rooted in its *rioplatense* history (1995).<sup>104</sup> The tango embrace, she writes, “is the embrace of dominators and dominated (class-, race-, and gender-wise) struggling with and clinging to each other” (37). That embrace, along with other key characteristics of the dance, influence the common perception of tango as a movement form that is founded upon, and upholds, traditional gender roles.

The tango partnership, of course, typically comprises a man and a woman who perform different roles within the dance. In the USA and other English-speaking nations, the labels for the traditionally male and female roles are “lead” and “follow” respectively. These terms - suggesting male dominance and female reactivity - are problematic and whether they accurately represent the equivalent original Argentinean terms is open to debate. Anthropologist Carolyn Merritt spent several years conducting fieldwork in Buenos Aires during the mid-2000s and observes that translating:

the terminology of tango’s partnership is not only a linguistic but a cultural endeavor. Foreign professionals and scholars have argued that the terms “lead” and “follow” are poor translations of the commonly heard *marcar* (to mark, to show the way) and *responder* (to respond), or *proponer y disponer* (to propose and to decide). During my time in Buenos Aires and in my interviews with Argentines, however, I found that *llevar* (lead) and *seguir* (follow) were just as often or more frequently used. (...) One young porteño professional suggested that *llevar* and *seguir* were the preferred terms in verb form, and that *la marca* (“the mark”) might be used more frequently in noun form. (2012:89)

Vexation about the “lead”/“follow” labels was a recurring theme during my interviews, as it is elsewhere in tango-related discourse. For example, Richard Powers (he who initiated the tango

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<sup>104</sup> *Rioplatense* is an Spanish language adjective that is sometimes used in English language texts. It means of or from the Rio de la Plata i.e. the large estuary that is formed by the Uruguay and Paraná Rivers. Buenos Aires is situated to the west of the Rio de la Plata while Uruguay lies to its east.

community in Cincinnati) outlines two reasons why he has a particular disdain for the word “following” (N.D.). The first is that it carries:

a negative connotation for some people, left over from the early 20th century (the "Dark Ages" of ballroom dance) when the term lead meant "command" and follow meant "obey".

And the second, which Powers also describes as his “main objection”, is that:

it doesn't accurately describe the role. Dancers in this role do not "follow." They interpret cues and signals, with a keen responsiveness that is highly active, personal, musical and creative.

Like many tango dancers, I share Powers' dislike for the “lead”/“follow” terms and in some of my interviews, I even attempted to come up with alternatives, though none were remotely catchy.<sup>105</sup> Despite misgivings, I shall therefore continue to use “lead” and “follow” in this monograph. In addition - and in spite of further misgivings which were outweighed by a preference for linguistic simplicity – I generally use the traditionally gendered pronouns that correspond with the two roles (i.e. lead/he/his; follow/she/her). In any case, the perception of tango as the embodiment of gender imbalance is not a result of the roles' labels. Its very configuration makes it easy prey for such interpretations.

So what is that configuration? The *tanguero* and *tanguera* poised to dance face one another. They embrace: the lead's right arm encircles the follow's torso, he brings his right hand to rest somewhere in the middle of her back, he offers his left hand to the follow who places her right

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<sup>105</sup> Among my not-very-convincing alternatives were “suggestor” and “taker-upper” or “acceptor”, “opener” and “closer”, and “initiator” and “completor” or “finisher”.

hand in it; meanwhile, with her left arm and hand, the follow embraces the man's right arm or shoulder or upper back. Beyond those basic elements, the exact form assumed by a couple's embrace depends on myriad factors, such as the respective heights and arm lengths of the dancers, as well as various choices. Some prefer to dance in close embrace - i.e. with no space between their chests - while others prefer a more open embrace, and still others move fluidly between the two within a single song according to the type of step or sequence of steps they are performing. In close embrace, the follow's head is to the left of the lead's but the exact positioning of the two in relation to one another - whether cheek-to-cheek, or forehead-to-forehead, whether faces turned towards one another or parallel or some other arrangement - again depends both on personal preference and physical practicality (for example, if a follow were much taller than the lead or vice versa, a forehead-to-forehead position would be uncomfortable at best). How any two dancers determine how to embrace varies. Sometimes, once the lead has physically offered himself, the follow can wordlessly negotiate her own placement in relation to his position. Sometimes a verbal exchange is involved (such as "do you prefer close or open?"). Many times, the manner of the embrace is based on each partner's past experience of dancing with the other and their resulting familiarity with the other's preferences.

Beyond the embrace, what else influences the configuration? The logistics of the dance as it manifests on the dance floor. The lead faces the direction of travel. He is able to see the floor ahead of him and does whatever is necessary to navigate his partner safely through it; as a result, most of his steps are in a forward direction. Often he will step directly into the space that the follow occupies and effectively propel her out of it. She, meanwhile, for the most part dances backwards

and cannot see the space into which she is moving. Instead, she focuses on her partner and strives to follow everything that he leads (through the movement of his torso, his shifts of weight and, to a lesser extent, his arms) in an appropriate manner.<sup>106</sup>

The above-described configuration of the tango-dancing couple plays a strong part in establishing the gendered nature of Argentine tango. Another key component of that gendering is the dance's improvised nature. As German sociologist Paula-Irene Villa points out, it is down to the lead to decide what the next movement shall be and to initiate its manifestation - its form, span, velocity, and direction - because only he can see the floor ahead (2011). The follow, meanwhile, has no view of what lies behind her and her movements are performed in reaction to the dictates of her partner. Accordingly, writes Villa, the most prominent difference between the two roles is that the lead is active and the follow reactive. This separation of roles, she goes on, is both complementary and hierarchical, and although:

the concept of a blunt, simple subordination of the woman under the man's macho leadership is certainly inappropriate, and even if the traditional following in a dance does not in any way mean a passive self-abandonment, a different value of the roles is nonetheless detectable. (2011)

Many of my interviewees, male and female, would disagree with Villa's assessment, as I record later in this chapter. Less contentiously, Villa - whose research was conducted amid tango communities in Germany - also notes that Hollywood depictions of tango have enhanced its alignment with gender stereotypes. In film representations, the "macho Latin lover" is a

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<sup>106</sup> Generally speaking, the lead's need to recruit his arms in the process of providing cues decreases in inverse proportion to the competence of both of the dancers involved in an Argentine tango pairing.

dominant character; his female counterparts typically fall into the categories of prostitute, hysteric, or naïf. These characterisations, Villa argues, are not meant to be regarded as: “tangible people in concreto but stagings of subject positions (according to Butler) that are considered to be specific of the tango” (2011).

### **Judith Butler and Gender Theory - a Brief Overview**

Judith Butler first set forth her idea of the performance of gendered subject positions in her 1990 monograph *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. At the time, the perception of gender as a social construct rather than a biological reality was already widely accepted in academia. However, Butler’s innovations on that theme have proven highly influential. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues that not only gender, but also biological sex, are the products of hegemonic forces rather than legitimate taxonomy. Those hegemonic forces have, she contends, imposed a fallacious binary approach to both sex and gender, and have created the concomitant impression of there being heteronormative connection between one and the other. This begs the question, if gender is not tied to biological sex and biological sex is social construction, how do individuals come by - and maintain - their gender identities? Butler’s response is that gender is generated by the repetition of performative acts and is a perpetual performative process. And while individuals are not able to randomly alter genders at will, they can execute minor deviations from prevailing social preconceptions regarding what constitutes standard gendered behaviour.

The conception of gender as performance is salient to my own study since, as cultural studies scholar Melissa Fitch points out, while “all gender may be understood to be performative, in the world of traditional tango it becomes much more so” (2015:96).

### **The Tango Roles in Cincinnati**

What constitutes “traditional tango” is a complex matter, but Fitch uses the term to distinguish tango scenes in which dancers adopt the conventional roles, as per their gender, from Tango Queer events. By such a measure, the Cincinnati group is largely a “traditional tango” arena, since men usually dance the lead and women the follow. There are exceptions but when they occur, they largely fall into the category of “queer” tango as opposed to “Queer”. What differentiates queer from Queer is a matter which Fitch addresses in some depth. Tango Queer, she writes, is a global political movement that developed in the 1990s and which is rooted in queer theory. Tango Queer participants resist “any prescribed notions of gender identity and/or sexuality” (2015:94) As a result, in Tango Queer spaces:

men may dance with men, women with women, women may lead men, may dance either in the role of leader or follower and in many cases, they may even switch roles midsong with a slight cue. (2015:96)

In addition, Tango Queer is not just about dancing, but also about:

fostering intellectual approximations to understanding compulsory heterosexuality and gender construction and exploring ways to engage in cultural transformation [as well as about] demanding a space for alternative representations of nonheteronormative pairings in dance (94)

By contrast, “queer” tango refers to performances of the dance in which the male-lead female-follow model is eschewed for reasons that have little or nothing to do with the pursuit of an

activist gender. Instead, queer tango is usually a pragmatic response to practical requirements, such as the need to balance the number of leads and follows, or - in the case of tango professionals – being able to teach and demonstrate both roles. While a queer version of same-sex dancing is fairly common in many otherwise “traditional tango” scenes in north America, it is often viewed as “practice” or as a “last resort” (Merritt 2012:98).

The Cincinnati Argentine tango CoP as a whole does not promote itself as either Queer or queer, nonetheless some individuals within the community perform in ways that conform with one or the other or both.

### **Dancing the "Other" Role - queer tango**

The Cincinnati Argentine tango CoP includes some members who have chosen to learn the role that does not traditionally correspond with their gender, in addition to the one that does (I know of no one there who solely dances the “other” role). For most, expediency has driven their decision to - i.e. their motivation was queer as opposed to Queer. On the whole, the reasons they have for learning the “other” role fell into three categories: 1) mitigating gender imbalance, 2) developing viability as a tango-teacher, and 3) improvement as an all-round dancer.

Given that male leads and female follows remain the “norm” in Cincinnati, I was intrigued to hear what my interlocutors’ feelings were vis-à-vis the matter of switching roles. FW, a woman who attends many Cincinnati Argentine tango events, regularly dances as lead. She is from the Ukraine and said that in her native country:

Δ We dance all the time. In restaurants, there will be music and people will dance. (...) And it doesn't matter in which country you are, women are more interested [in dancing] than men [laughs]. So I start to lead as a – how old I was? Probably 14. So we did with girls, “okay, you are follower, I'm lead”. We dance Viennese waltz. Then we switch, “you are follow, we are lead”. We just dance and we just change roles because not enough boys. I don't know if even would be enough boys, maybe still natural curiosity would push you to “let's try we to do that”. And I did that a long, long, long time ago, and right now [laughs] I start to dance tango, I see the same situation. More women than men. And I said “okay, I did that before. I know how to lead”. It was not for me like “oh no, I cannot do that. Oh no, it's impossible”. I do not have this barrier.

FW's observation that there are fewer men than women in most dance circles holds true for many of the tango activities that take place in Cincinnati. It is therefore perhaps not surprising that the city's CoP contains more women who lead than men who follow. The fact that women leads are generally more common than male follows may also mean they tend to be more relaxed about role-switching than men. At most of the classes, workshops, and *prácticas* that I attended in Cincinnati, there was usually at least one woman leading, but to see a man following was relatively rare. At *milongas*, dancing the “other” role seemed to generally be less common; even so, I did occasionally see women leading in that context, but I never saw a man following at a *milonga*.

Although gender imbalance prompted FW to learn the lead part, today she often performs in that role because she likes doing so. Talking with FW was very illuminating for me, not least because she challenged some of essentialising gendered assumptions that were implicit in some of my questions and comments. For example, at one point, I equated “femininity” with “elegance”, but FW was quick to point out that elegance was a quality which, of course, could just as readily be associated with male dancers. When I mentioned to FW that despite the pervasive issue of there



being more women than men in many dance communities, some women resisted learning the lead. FW responded by saying that she had talked with a number of tango professionals on the subject, and according to what she had picked up from those conversations, she understood that:

Some people are natural leads. Even if you are a woman, you can be natural lead for some reason. And a man, he can be a natural follower. But some people have equal. Some people can do both without really that bias. I would say that I'm both but I don't know.<sup>107</sup>

WL is another female member of the Cincinnati CoP who regularly performs as a lead. WL is an Argentine tango instructor and so had a pedagogical reason for performing the “other” role. When I asked whether she could compare her experience of the two roles, she said that she found it “difficult to explain the feeling about when I lead. I definitely don’t have the same feeling as when I follow. I think that I feel it more as an exercise when I lead”. Her account therefore substantiates Merritt’s observation that dancing the “other” part is often deemed “practice”, rather than the “real thing” (2012:98).

Like most tango teachers, WL prefers to teach with a partner and a few years ago she asked RJ, another female dancer, to perform as follow to her lead in class. RJ enthusiastically agreed but has since also started to learn the lead part. When I asked her why, she said it was for:

if we were short of men. But I’ve heard it’s also good for your own dance. And also for teaching, because SY [a male dancer in the Cincinnati CoP] asked me if I

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<sup>107</sup> FW did not elaborate on what she meant by a “natural lead” and at the time, I did not think to press her on the point. What I understand the term (and its counterpart, “natural follow”, to reference is that many people seem to have an innate preference for, and an ability to perform, one or other role. Reflecting on FW’s comment made me think of a female dancer in the Columbus Argentine tango community. For several years, this woman danced exclusively as a follow at the various events at which I encountered her. She then evidently decided to learn the lead role and I had the opportunity to dance with her in that capacity (i.e. she led, I followed) about three months after she embarked on that trajectory. I was astonished at how well she led and the progress she had made in such a short time, and made a comment along those lines. She told me that she preferred leading. I now think of this woman as being a “natural lead”.

would teach with him and I agreed to do that, and I think that we want to teach the lead properly.

At the time of our conversation, RJ and SY had not yet started teach together (they were waiting for the refurbishment of a local studio to be completed). Still, I was curious to know what RJ meant when she talked of wanting to “teach the lead properly”:

Well, I said it because SY probably won’t teach it properly, ‘cos he’s a ballroom dancer, and he’s a real kind of a rogue tango dancer, which gets him in trouble. You know, like B [another male dancer in the community with whom she is friends] probably talked about floor craft and etiquette a lot. B gripes about that stuff, and so SY gets in trouble with it. So I wanted to be careful, and I ordered the little cards [which I plan to give to beginners and which say] “stay in your space” and, you know, help people to be courteous, to have floor courtesy while they dance.

As stated earlier, in the Cincinnati Argentine tango CoP, as in many Argentine tango communities, there are fewer men who follow than women who lead. Moreover, even those men who are able to dance as a follow seem to do so less visibly than the women in the community who can lead do. Marty Gooden, the psychologist who founded the Men’s Club, was – of all of my male interviewees - the person who spoke most enthusiastically about dancing the “other” role.<sup>108</sup> He told me that he will “dance with anyone who is interested in dancing, leading or following” and expressed frustration that some of his male colleagues seemed less open to that prospect:

On several occasions, at the start of some *practicass* or *milongas*, I’ve seen as many as six [men] doing nothing, waiting for a woman to show up to dance with. It’s as if the notion of dancing with each other is unthinkable or anathema to them. This might be unfair, but I would say that 90%+ of the male leads that I’ve come across would not even entertain the idea of practicing with other males if I

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<sup>108</sup> With his permission, I have used Gooden’s full name here since I go on to describe gender-relevant issues which relate to the founding (and faltering) of the Tango Del Barrio Men’s Club which, as is a matter of public record, was founded by Gooden.

didn't bring it up. There was a time when I used to ask other male leads more often, however I generally don't push the idea as much anymore because of the resistance. I simply turned my attention towards women who, not surprisingly, were eager to learn how to lead. I've been much more delighted with learning with women. There is an openness that is generally absent among men.

Gooden also expressed irritation that whenever men did dance the follow role, they would often be buoyed by praise for their bravery and/or for being sufficiently secure in their masculinity for doing so.<sup>109</sup> “This characterization” he commented “is ridiculous and reinforces sexist notions that aren't helpful for tango nor for life off the dance floor”. Regarding Gooden’s experience of following, he told me he initially began learning the role to help him “become a better lead”. However, he quickly realised it was “interesting and fun in its own regard”.

As noted in Chapter 2, the Men’s Club is currently on hiatus, not least because it was poorly attended when it was active. Of the people with whom I spoke, ZZ was one of the few who seemed to appreciate the opportunity it afforded him to learn of the demands placed on the follow. He felt that gaining some knowledge of the “other” role was “good for people”. When I asked him to describe more specifically how he had experienced the follow role, he said that he “kind of liked it”, was not very good at it, but found it instructive. For example, he realised the time that it takes to pivot - a tango movement that is very common for follows, but much less so for leads:

As a lead, I tend to be on the beat, you know, I’m kind of musical. I tend to be enslaved to the beat. But I find that some follows aren’t able to pivot fast enough to stay exactly on the beat, and so I tend to get ahead sometimes of people, and I needed to get more comfortable with varying my pace a little bit so that I could

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<sup>109</sup> Gooden’s description made me think about the affirmation men receive for taking on tasks that are traditionally associated with women - such as childcare and housework.

make sure that she was completing her move before I made another move. That was a challenge for me. I need to become comfortable with rubato, so to speak.

TC and LL are two more senior male members of the CoP who very occasionally perform as follows. TC told me that he enjoyed the role and when I asked him to compare it with the lead part, he said:

They're both hard in different respects. I find that I have to completely change my manner of being to be a follow. My technique's not very good, but for me it's such an interesting change to be on the receiving end of the impulse than to be creating the impulse. Very, very different. You don't have to plan as much, but you have to be very receptive.

LL, meanwhile, chose to spend a short time learning how to follow because he had "developed some work around leadership and tango, and thought it was important to be able to experience both sides of that and to know what I was talking about". Did he enjoy following, I asked. His answer indicated not:

I have an incredible amount of respect for what it takes to be a follow. I don't necessarily like it and I'm always weighing whether my time is better spent doing one [role] rather than the other. I think I'm at a point in my leading that [following] isn't overly helpful.

While LL, the other dancers already discussed in this section, and a few further members of the Cincinnati Argentine tango CoP can perform both roles to a greater or lesser extent, most of the dancers in the community only perform one role, the role which complies with their gender identity. For some, this is more due to insufficient resources than lack of interest. TB, for example, is an advanced follow and also a long-time tango teacher. Of the prospect of learning to lead, she said Δ "I find it very appealing, I just haven't spent the time to do it properly". YS is another advanced follow and sometime instructor. Unlike TB, however, she was not drawn to

learn the lead even though she felt that doing so would be beneficial. Learning the “other” role, she said, would increase:

your overall understanding of the dance. But I have just never been interested in that aspect of the dance. I don’t really enjoy it that much, and I’ve found that the follow’s role is plenty and challenging and deep and rich and there’s enough there that I’ve never felt like I’ve wanted to.

Other women in the CoP for whom learning to lead held no appeal included PQ, KC, and LQ.

PQ said she had “absolutely no desire” to take it up: “I don’t want the responsibility” she added, laughing. KC concurred: Δ “I even don’t want to start,” she said, “too much thinking”. LQ, meanwhile, had a little experience of leading because when she first began learning to tango, she attended classes in which it was mandatory for students to practice both roles. Recalling that time, she commented:

We all hated it because we’re flipping back and forth in that hour and it’s sort of like “uh”. And finally I asked one of the teachers “why do we have to do this?” and the answer was “it’s really for the men”.

It is not clear in exactly what way LQ’s early teachers felt that learning both roles would aid the men; was it in an effort to have them gain understanding of following and use that knowledge to improve their lead? Or was it that if women learned the lead, they would take on board how much harder that role is in the early stages of the dance? In any case, LQ confirmed that the experience had increased her compassion for those who take on the role.

I spoke with a number of men who were similarly uninspired by the prospect of learning to follow, among them SN and QA. SN attended some of the Men’s Club meetings, and agreed that learning to follow would have value, but he felt that that value would be “limited” and would

demand an investment of time and energy when he was already “busy enough trying to learn the lead”. He added:

The follow is supposed to be flexible and light and women are built that way.  
Men are not. So it’s really hard for me to be a light follow because I’m a man and  
I don’t move like a woman.

QA shared SN’s point of view. While he certainly appreciated how much work was necessary to become a good follow, he felt that for him to attempt the role would do nothing to improve his lead. QA was around nine tango years old when we spoke and added that perhaps when he had been dancing for twenty years, he would change his mind, but currently he had “a lot to work on just as a leader”.

Before continuing, I should disclose my own position vis-à-vis the “other” role. When I embarked on my dissertation research, I decided I ought to learn to lead. I thought it would aid my investigation and improve my understanding of the dance. I had already made one extremely short attempt just after I arrived in Columbus. It was during a class in which the teachers encouraged students to switch roles. I was game - but only for around 20 exasperating minutes. I simply could not get my poor partners to move in the way I intended, not even to take a single backward step, and that was that. Then, shortly after I embarked on my fieldwork, I re-launched my lead-learning initiative by attending a Beginner’s Boot Camp led by Patricia Paz during the late summer of 2017. Over the following months, I continued my endeavour and attended a number of classes purely in the capacity of trainee lead. However, my progress - always slow - was hampered by my growing aversion to the role and eventually I abandoned the endeavour. Alas, it seems that I share the mindset of anthropologist and fellow Argentine tango dancer,

Carolyn Merritt, who confesses in her 2012 study of Tango Nuevo in Buenos Aires that despite being avowedly a feminist, “in partner dance at least, I am a natural follower” (103).

### **Dancing the "Other" Role - Queer**

As clarified earlier, the dancers described in the previous section who perform the “other” role do so for queer reasons. But the Cincinnati community also includes some dancers whose motivations appear more Queer than queer. In addition, two of the dancers whom I interviewed - WF and KX - had attended some official Tango Queer events. WF is the Ukrainian woman who featured earlier in this chapter and who frequently dances as a lead. At the time of our conversation, she had just returned from a Tango Queer festival in New York and was very enthusiastic:

Δ WF It is not like “I am a man, I lead, and you are woman, you are follow”, no. And I talked to people – one guy, he is from Florida. Compared to me he’s very advanced and in Miami, there are very big community and I ask him “why did you come?”. And he said that in Miami, too many rules: “You cannot do this”. “You cannot do that”. “You have to do only *cabeceo*”.<sup>110</sup> “You cannot come to a person and ask ‘let’s dance’”. “Man has to lead, woman has to follow”. Personally, I like to lead, and I have difficult time because people look at me and ask question: “why do you lead?” [laughs].

Rachel Hopkin So why do you lead?

WF Because we have roles for men and with have roles, gender, gender, gender. “You have to do this”, okay? And “you are a woman, you have to do that”. A lot of rules.

Rachel Hopkin So is part of the reason that you like to dance lead is because you’re saying “don’t put that on me”?

WF No. Not at all. It’s not rebellion. I just like to do it well.

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<sup>110</sup> A *cabeceo* is an invitation to dance which is issued without words, usually in the form of a nod.

At the festival, WF had the opportunity to perform extensively as both lead and follow, often swapping between the roles within a single song, as is the norm at Tango Queer events.

However, in more traditional contexts, including within the Cincinnati CoP, WF sometimes senses that some of her fellow dancers look askance at her fluid approach to the roles. In fact, she believes that some of the male dancers there avoid inviting her to dance as a follow precisely because she so often leads. “It hurts me,” she said, “because some men never, for these three years, don’t dance with me at all”. Perhaps her ease in the lead role causes some to feel performance of her female gender is inadequate. I asked if she had felt a similar kind of circumspection among the women; perhaps some might not want to dance follow to her lead? WF responded with laughter: “No. Women love to be that”, she said.

KX is one of the many women in the community with whom WF frequently dances. Although she only dances as a follow and has no interest in leading, she accompanied WF to the New York Tango Queer festival. I got the impression that she attended the festival for the opportunity to dance rather than being especially attracted by its Queer-ness. She said the event had been “fantastic”. What was so great about it, I wanted to know. Δ “There was something special There was this less discrimination of things. Maybe the fact that they are kind of leader and follows at the same time, so it was very easy. I was probably the only one who was only a follower”.

AW is another female member of the Cincinnati community who often dances as lead. AW is a professional dancer and a tango instructor and when she explained how and why she had started



learning the lead role, her impetus sounded more Queer than queer: “getting rid of the gender roles in the leading and the following is big for me”, she said. She recalled how she and her partner, also a tango dancer, once attended a “switch” class in which participants were asked to perform the “other” role throughout. The experience had a profound effect on both AW and her partner:

It gave us more empathy for the other person and it made us more responsive, more active, in what we were doing. And I think everyone should do that at some point [chuckle], it was awesome.

When she is performing in the capacity of a tango instructor, AW will therefore ask her own students to switch roles. As far as her experience of the respective parts was concerned, WA said that when she follows, she finds that controlling her impulse to do what she wants to do, rather than what she is being invited to do by her partner, can be “very difficult”. Learning the lead role, she said, was:

very challenging, although less so as time goes by. The biggest challenge is a totally selfish one and that is that a lot of my time as a dancer, I was a soloist, and so I’m a space hog, and it’s infuriating to me to suddenly have someone be where I wanted to be [on the dance floor]. And what’s really interesting – we were at a festival two years ago and the gender thing was really off [i.e. more women than men], so I was leading in one of the workshops, and there were several other women leading. And the traffic problems were not the same with all these female leads, and I started to kind of wonder if male leads kind of bulldoze female leads. I mean, that was what it felt like. And I’m really frustrated with the sexism of this dance, so maybe I’m putting that into my experience, but what I found was that when I had two or three other female couples around me, we weren’t bumping into each other. There was waiting. There was this awareness of someone else

moving into the space. There was a feeling of cooperation, whereas most of the time, I feel like “bam”, cutting me off within traffic.<sup>111</sup>

Marty Gooden also indicated an allegiance to the Queer ideal of disrupting gender norms and, in fact, this was partly what prompted his foundation of the Men’s Club (although simply improving dancers’ understanding of and competence in Argentine tango were also important factors). His awareness of the gender-based issues causing problems in tango developed as he began following. In addition to training him physically, his (female) teacher made him aware that:

there are a lot of things that leads do, particularly male leads, that are pretty obnoxious, one of which is this notion that it’s really all about the lead and that followers should be more compliant to what the lead wants, and that followers often get blamed for stuff. And it seemed like the leads were being, erm, socialised in a way that was very consistent with how men are socialised in general. And I thought “okay, this is a problem” [chuckle] and it’s a problem that I thought “I want to change this”. And it made me mindful of the fact that follows are often times not invited to offer commentary during classes, that we rarely are hearing from them unless they happen to be the ones teaching the class themselves, but, you know, if there’s a partnership usually it’s the lead that’s dictating everything.

Gooden is a professor of social psychology who has been teaching undergraduate students about gender biases for many years. Even so, he acknowledged that prior to learning to follow, he had himself sometimes been dismissive of grievances raised by his regular partner, who is a dance

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<sup>111</sup> AW’s comment made me recall my conversation with RJ (excerpted in the section sub-headed **Dancing the "Other" Role - queer tango**) RJ was the female dancer who had mentioned that part of her motivation in learning the lead was so that she could the role properly and ensure her students were learning correct floor craft etiquette since her prospective teaching partner often went “rogue” and failed to adhere to correct dancefloor protocols. In other words, RJ displayed precisely the kind of consideration that AW feels is characteristic of women but lacking in many men.

professional. In other words, he was ignoring her despite her probably being superior in competence. When he realised that he was doing this, he was horrified:

I just said “no. I have to stop this. I have to figure out some way to be the voice that speaks out against it in a way that hopefully gets men to listen”. Now what’s a good way to do that? One way might be to say “hey, be more respectful of follows” and obviously that’s probably not going to be that effective because men traditionally don’t like to listen to other people, certainly not women, in our society. And so I thought: maybe there’s a way that we can get men to pay attention to it if we also put them in the position of following. So how can we create a context where men would want to do this?

Such was the “spirit” behind his decision to form the Men’s Club:

By learning the rigors of what it meant to follow, I thought I might encourage greater self-awareness about their leading ability. If, while following, they were being pushed around or dictated to by one of their fellow male leads, my hope was that they might think twice about themselves and be more motivated to avoid such tendencies when they were leading. Sadly, these aims were never realized.

As that last comment makes clear, the “Men’s Club” was not a success. In part, Gooden believes, this was due to the contribution of one attendee who “sullied” the group’s chemistry; in addition, Gooden believed that some felt that they did not need the Club because they were already competent dancers, or they simply did not have enough time to participate.<sup>112</sup>

Gooden’s concern that some men tend towards a didactic role in tango partnerships, often despite their inferior competence, is warranted. However, and as I mentioned to him, I felt that it was not only men that were guilty of this. I felt that either partner might be inclined to think “if

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<sup>112</sup> Although Gooden named no names and did not give any specific details, I learned from others that the person in question had a tendency to talk at great length and to be abusive. The person is no longer attends events at Tango Del Barrio.

something's wrong, it's not your fault, it's the other person's fault". Gooden responded by saying that based on his experience and observation:

the number of times that a male lead is providing instruction and feedback to a follow, relative to the reverse happening, it's like night and day. And so you should ask where does this person get off, particularly if they're not even an instructor, where do they get off [laughing] offering me instruction, unsolicited, right?

Gooden expressed frustration because, in his opinion, the resistance exhibited by members, especially male members, of the Cincinnati tango group to learning the "other" role diminished the potential for improvement. It curbed the exchange of information which would otherwise lead to greater knowledge and increased competence and which is a distinguishing feature of a Community of Practice (Lave and Wenger 1991).

### **Dancing in Same-Sex Couples**

In a dance community where women sometimes dance as leads and men as follows, it is not uncommon to see same-sex couples on the dance floor. For some, participation in such partnerships can compromise notions about how to appropriately perform gender. This was the case with PL, one of the female dancers whom I interviewed. During our conversation, I observed that "some women don't like to be led by other women". PL agreed and went on to describe her initial response to dancing with another woman. The incident had taken place around three years before and involved a female tango teacher performing as the lead selecting PL as her partner. During their dance, PL remembered feeling "Oh my God. I can't do this. Oh, I can't do this". Nonetheless, she got past that initial discomfort relatively quickly.

PL's account reminded me of an incident which took place towards the end of my fieldwork year, in May 2018, when I was on one of my regular trips home to the UK. During the visit, I attended the England International Tango Festival in Tonbridge, Kent. The event consisted of daily workshops with celebrated tango professionals, plus a number of *milongas*. During most of the workshops, the participants rotated in the usual fashion and follows outnumbered leads. In one of the classes, however, as one of the female follows rotated to a female lead, the follow refused to dance - she did not want to dance in a same-sex couple. It was an awkward situation; it is very rare for anyone to refuse to dance in a workshop context. I volunteered to switch, partly because - at that stage in the class - I was paired with a man who was juggling two follows which meant that I had to share the practise time. In addition, I have learned during my time on the tango circuit that female leads are often excellent leads and I had already been observed that this woman seemed very competent (I was not at all surprised to later learn that she was a dance professional). She was not troubled in the least by the other woman having refused to dance with her. However, I had the impression that the workshop leaders, and many of the other participants, were both surprised by - and disapproving of - the act of rebuff. I began to feel complacent about my own display of open-mindedness in having stepped into the breach until I remembered that only a few years earlier, I too had baulked at the idea of dancing with another woman.

In a culture in which it is rare to have tactile contact with anyone with whom one does not share an intimate relationship, tango already challenges many personal boundaries. And initially, like PL and like the woman in the workshop in England, the idea of going "boob-to-boob" with

another woman - as one of the Cincinnati teachers puts it - was too much for me. I do not remember for how long I maintained this resistance, but it was a matter of weeks or months rather than years. That said, I occasionally still find dancing with another woman a little uncomfortable, but the same can be true when I dance with certain men and I think whatever is awry is caused by a mismatch between our respective bodies. In other words, any dancer can find partnering with another whose body is incongruent with their own - for example, due to a marked difference of height - to be somewhat awkward. For the most part, however, I am now completely comfortable dancing with other women, as were the majority of my female interviewees. Most of them described having danced with women who led better than some of their male partners. MT spoke for many when she said  $\Delta$  “As a dancer, I want to dance with a good dancer. I don’t care whether it’s man or a woman”. One or two, though, were a little less enthusiastic about dancing with another woman. HP observed that the male leads with whom she dances typically “have a very strong upper body” but this is less common with female leads. This physical difference changes the experience for HP, who prefers a strong lead. To her, female leads always feel too “soft and light” for her to be fully comfortable dancing with them.

As stated earlier, it is more unusual to see male same-sex couples on the dance floor and some of my male interviewees expressed active resistance to such pairings. SY, for example, said:

SY     I just don’t like dancing with men and occasionally an instructor will come up to me and be the woman and I hate it. I have this awful feeling and I want it to stop.

Rachel Hopkin             What’s that about?

SY     I don’t know. maybe that I have an abhorrence to male homosexual behaviour, maybe. I don’t know, I never really thought deeply about it, but I don’t like being touched by men.

SY was around eight tango years old at the time of our conversation and evidently his resistance to the idea of dancing with another man persisted, but in some cases such aversion can diminish with time. One woman told me that early on in their dance trajectory, her husband had sworn: “I will never dance with another man”. However, in recent years he has occasionally danced with men. By contrast, DG was actively enthusiastic about such pairings. His perspective on the matter had been influenced by a situation he found himself in many years before. He had enrolled in a class which, rather exceptionally, consisted of around seven or eight male students and only one female:

So if we were going to do the class, the men had to start learning the follow. And two of them became so enjoyable to dance with that it was like I would prefer to dance with them because of the way we worked together. Typically when you’re working with [female] follows, it’s a frustrating experience, you’re walking on eggshells. You don’t want to hurt someone’s feelings. But when it’s guy-to-guy it’s like “look man, stop back-leading on me. Pull yourself together”. We can talk to each other in that way. And that was some of the best dancing I’ve ever done actually, cos there was no longer the gender thing and, you know, the nuanced way of saying “hey, please don’t pull on my back”. You know, guys can just lay it out to each other.

### **The Pleasure of Performing Gender**

During my conversation with a woman, FD, who had been dancing tango for a couple of years, we mulled over our shared apathy towards learning to lead and I commented that one reason why I found it so unappealing was because “I worry about not being feminine enough and I don’t want people to think I’m unfeminine”. FD indicated that she sometimes felt that way too, although she added that “some very feminine women know how the lead”. “Absolutely” I said, “So it’s a nonsense”.

I had a somewhat related conversation via text message with another female interviewee, HJ, a professional dancer who performs both roles:

Rachel Hopkin: Question for you: would you say that you feel less feminine when you are dancing the lead in tango? One of the numerous reasons I'm iffy about attempting to learn is that whenever I try it, I end up feeling kind of butch, which isn't a feeling I much care for. So I was curious ...

HJ: You have an interesting question here. I think the short answer would be no. The longer answer would be maybe. In the past a little bit. I think because for some time now I have consciously de-genderized tango, I no longer think of the roles in that way. When I'm leading well I believe I am engaging in activities ironically that are often associated with the feminine role traditionally. And what I mean by that is I am caring for the follow, I am watching out for the follow for their safety, I am concerned for their comfort and I am listening to their needs, or at least I'm trying to do all these things. These seem like very nurturing acts which we traditionally of course like to genderize and associate with a female role.

As a scholar, I am cognisant that describing anything as “feminine” or “masculine” is, of course, an essentialising move. Moreover, I am aware that in many of my exchanges – including those excerpted above - I used essentialised gender categories. However, as I noted earlier, traditional Argentine tango is considered the *ne plus ultra* of gender role performance. The performance of traditional tango therefore often goes hand-in-hand with the conscious performance of traditional gender, and to consciously perform traditional gender involves drawing on the available repertoire of elements deemed appropriate for that gender. In the Cincinnati CoP, this repertoire is shaped by the general socio-cultural climate as well as by factors particular to Argentine tango. The work of sociologist Harvey Sacks on membership categorisation devices (MCDs) is salient here (1989).



Sacks came up with the concept of MCDs in the course of studying membership category groupings. MCDs, which are in a state of continual construction through interaction, are the rules or tools which govern inclusion within a particular group category. Sacks describes MCDs as being “inference-rich”, meaning that they effectively store “a great deal of the knowledge that members of a society have about society” (272). Järviluoma and Roivainen draw on Sacks’ MCD scholarship to explore gender categorisation and note that “People possess everyday knowledge, which is constantly being refined, about the organization of gendered categories” (2003:70). People can ascribe to multiple MCDs at once; so to present as a woman would be one MCD, to present as a feminine woman would be another MCD, to present as a female tango-dancer who follows would be another MCD, and to present as a female tango-dancer who both follows and leads would be yet another MCD. Describing a “feminine woman” as an MCD does not signify that the term is anything other than a cultural construct. In other words, I am not suggesting that femininity or masculinity are “natural” categories. However, as Järviluoma and Roivainen put it, since “we still have to live with the prevalent use of these categories, we may scrutinize how people use them and create gendered nuances in their everyday lives” (2003:71).

Although I agree that many women who lead do so while simultaneously performing elements drawn from the “this is what we in this culture generally think of as feminine” repertoire or MCD, I still resist the role. I often lament my inability to adequately perform my gender even when inhabiting roles traditionally perceived as “feminine” (the voice in my head tells me that I am too loud, too clumsy, too bossy, and so on); the prospect of taking on a traditionally male role in the form of a tango lead is evidently a challenge too far. In fact, part of tango’s appeal for me

is that my training as a follow develops my capacity to perform a culturally constructed idea of femininity, and offers an arena in which I can display such skills. I was therefore interested if my interviewees derived comparable satisfaction from tango.

Over the course of my fieldwork, I attended a number of workshops at the Tango Del Barrio studio led by Marcela Duran and Oscar Casas, both of whom are respected and popular tango professionals. Most of the talking during these workshops was done by Casas, whose teaching persona is gregarious and entertaining. Duran's style, meanwhile, relies largely on non-verbal forms of expression.<sup>113</sup> Although their pedagogical styles are very different, both teachers emphasize aspects of traditional gender performative practice in their approach to the respective tango roles. During the Cincinatti Argentine Tango Mini Festival, which took place over a weekend in April 2018, I participated in a Duran Casas workshop which bore the following lengthy title:

Tango is...Sharing & Connection; Strange Bedfellows - The Art Of Apilado & Improvisation; Discover the art of Leaning & Shared Axis; Tango is ...D'Arienzo; Tango is ... Pugliese; Movements To Different Orchestras

The class included a section devoted to embellishments for the follow. In my field journal, I noted that as Duran demonstrated the various adornments with her customary finesse, Casas

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<sup>113</sup> Duran's often wordless approach to teaching is a legacy of the ten years she spent as the dance partner of the late Carlos Gavito. Gavito - who was many years Duran's senior and who was also more established professionally at the time that they began working together - required that Duran not speak during their classes because her doing so, he said, caused him to lose his train of thought. As a result, Duran told me that she: "learned how to inspire people through the image, through the dancing, so I didn't say 'knees like this'. I was trying to express almost a stereotype of the dancing. So I was on my toes as much I could. I was everything on the maximum because no explanation. So I developed this kind of way to inspire people through the image, so that even if I don't talk, they say "'oh, maybe I want to dance this'".

provided the narrative. He said that he needed the follow to express her personality, and that embellishments were one way that she could do this. As a lead, as per my fieldnotes, he said his job was:

“to accompany the follow’s personality” and he must “frame her personality “with the gentleness of a gentleman”. A bit later, he emphasizes that a lead’s primary duty is to take care of the follow. “I never put at risk this diamond called woman” is the way he puts it.

In other words, while Duran performed a culturally recognisable form of femininity both in her dancing and in her teaching manner, Casas brought an equally recognisable form of masculinity to his performances.

If all gender is, as Butler contends, performance, then Argentine tango offers its practitioners an arena in which they can revel in rather more extreme performances of gender than they present elsewhere. They can enact facets of their gendered identities - however they conceive of them, whatever elements from the cultural repertoire they deploy - in ways that they either cannot or do not in other areas of their lives. Since I myself value this aspect of the dance, I made a point of raising it in many of my interviews, usually in a rather convoluted manner and using myself as illustration. The way I put it to TY - a woman around 12 tango years old at the time of our conversation - is fairly representative:

Has your involvement in the dance changed the way that you relate to yourself as a “feminine” entity in any way? I’ll give myself as an example. So I’m single at the moment and happy being single. I’m not looking to change that status. But on the other hand, I don’t want to feel completely androgynous. I like feeling that I can be feminine. And one of the things I really like about tango is that – well, I can dress up, but also just in terms of the steps and the movements, I can work to try and make myself look as feminine as possible and when it works, it’s great and I love it, and so it makes me feel good about being a – it makes me feel like a

feminine entity sometimes when otherwise if all I'm doing is sitting at home typing on the computer for hours on end, I can feel like a broomstick or something. And I just wondered if you had anything [like that]?

You will have noticed that my question was peppered with essentialising references to femininity. Nonetheless, though unarguably problematic, such terms (femininity, feminine, masculinity, masculine) used in common parlance offer a heuristic that points to an assortment of familiar culturally constructed gendered ideas and elements. In any case, TY's response to my convoluted enquiry was that she had not experienced anything quite as "distinct" as what I had described but she enjoyed getting dressed up for tango because she mostly otherwise lives "in sweatpants". Her tango wear consists of "cocktail dresses" and too many pairs of shoes to count (at least twenty, she told me). TY was by no means alone in considering the special clothes, shoes, and other forms of personal adornment to be part of tango's pleasure. It was what RQ, an experienced follow and sometime tango teacher, immediately pointed to when I raised the same topic with her. Tango had "definitely" given her the opportunity to enjoy the staging of a feminine performance:

When you go to a *milonga*, you dress up, or you may be putting some more makeup on, and you put your high heels on. You're putting on an act and that makes you feel, you know, a little bit, you know, like a goddess or something [laughing].

Many more of my female interviewees expressed similar views. And even those who were more circumspect were still able to relate to the idea. VC said that tango had helped her to "explore and understand" her femininity which contrasted with her more established sense of herself as a "tomboy":

You know, there were two kinds of toys. There was the machine gun or the Barbie doll. And not that I didn't like the Barbie doll but the machine gun seemed a whole lot more appealing and other people would be like "Ohhh. That's horrifying". So more of a tomboy. And even with tango dancing, with L and J [names two female tango friends], they're like "you have to put on make up" you know, and I'd be like "I look like a racoon".

Nonetheless, she does now put on some lipstick when coming to tango events and has also had eyelash extensions applied. However, like RQ, it is shoes that she really enjoys. She acquired her first pair immediately after taking her first tango class. "They must have been about this high," she said, indicating a four-inch heel. Alas she could not walk in them. The shoes she buys now have two or three inch heels, which is still high considering that outside of tango, she is "a Birkenstock kind of girl".

WU also delights in tango apparel. In addition, WU – who is in her mid-sixties - said that she dancing tango had brought her "this appreciation of the feminine" because when she is enjoying a dance, it is because she feels her partner values her as a woman, even "cherishes" her:

If you sense that, it's like "this is kind of nice" when you're older because it doesn't happen in life very much. Not in our culture. I think in other cultures, maybe. I mean, we were in Italy and they're, like, whistling at you. You could be 90 and I think they'd whistle at you. But in our culture, there's not an appreciation of the femaleness or woman-ness of an older person.

HS also pointed to ways in which tango facilitated her femininity that were unrelated to outfits. She spoke of taking kinaesthetic pleasure in certain movements: "I love to extend my leg and doing some moves that maybe make you look really, really feminine. I invented this one move and I just love it [laughs]". She stood up to demonstrate. The "move" involved her first bringing her free foot slowly up along the inside of her standing leg with the toe pointing towards the

floor. (“You get it up as high up as you can”, she said). Then she brought the foot down very slowly - toes still pointed downwards - but this time on the outside of her standing leg. When her toes came to rest on the floor, her free foot was crossed in front of her standing foot:

and then you turn your body facing the man, and then he releases you and unwinds. It’s so slow, I mean, you can just milk it. So that’s really great. I love that move and I sort of invented it myself [laughs].

As I commented to HS at the time, it was a beautiful movement.

When NM talked of feeling “feminine” while in Tango World, she too spoke of movement as well as of music:

Argentine tango is not mechanical. Mechanical is the robot dance, you know. In tango you have to be more flowing and let’s face it, if you’re in a dance that’s more flowing, you’ll always look more sexy than being in something that’s clumpy or rustic or, you know, out of control. The small movements of flowing and ... I don’t see how you can’t look at yourself as being a little bit more sexually visible – not visible [laughs], what’s the word I’m looking for? More sex appeal coming out more in Argentine tango. In hiking, you want more strength, you’re more clumpy, I want to say. More rustic looking [laughs]. You know, you want to be tough, whereas in the dance, you pull from your feminine side. You want to be more of the gentle, calm, smooth person than the, you know, feminist “I’m tough”.

XC too talked about Argentine tango altering her awareness of how she moved:

Δ After I dance, after I’m at class, my walk changes. I feel my posture changes. And the way that I walk is like, you know, I, erm, point my toes. And I notice that. It’s really interesting, it’s really interesting. And it’s like that if I go in a grocery shop right after the class. I’m more feminine, you know, and my body is more feminine, I notice. “Oh. I’m walking like I’m dancing”. It makes me feminine, yes, because you don’t see a man pointing toes like that.

This line of enquiry also resonated strongly with DJ, who works as a chaplain:

Because of my job, I had to dress almost androgenously. It's like "keep it very gender neutral". And at home I was treated gender neutral because that's just the relationship we had, and so when H danced with me [H is a man whom DJ described as "very sexy"], I felt really different. And I'm in different clothes and I'm in these beautiful shoes, and I walked up to the table afterwards, and E [a female tanguera] was there and she said "you are glowing" and I thought "oh wow" and she said "you got your femininity back". She just said it straight up, and it's true. She didn't know anything about me, and she read it and it was almost instantaneous. That's how I felt, like "I'm back".

Many of the other responses I received from women affirmed that Argentine tango allowed them to stage unusually marked performances of gender and that doing so was often pleasurable.

Some of the men whom I interviewed also related to the idea. EY started attending tango classes with his wife during 2011. He commented that:

Tango is, by its nature, a kind of dashing – I mean, it has dashing possibilities, romantic possibilities, okay? And that's one of the reasons I kind of like it. I kind of like cutting a figure every now and then, or having a dramatic ending. I like that. Leg wraps? I'm all about it. *Ganchos*. I love those kinds of things.

His reply prompted me to ask if dancing tango had made him feel different about himself as a masculine entity - in other words, had it made it easier for him to perform elements from the "this is what we in this culture generally think of as masculine" repertoire. "Oh yeah" he said, then went on:

I love being a tango lead. I love being a tango person. It's made me feel vital and attractive. I mean, I think there's something very gallant about tango, and very positive in the way it projects masculinity. When you're leading someone, you're taking care of them in a way that's not care-giving or you're care-taking. It's good. You're creating a space in which a woman can express herself. It's great. You know, if I'm dancing with you, you're placing your trust in me. You're coming forward and meeting me and saying "look, let's try to do this together" and what could be better? It feels great. As a man, I feel really cool when it's working. I like the way tango empowers you to enact or encounter your archetypal masculinity or femininity, okay? Your archetypal woman nature. And this is interesting to me because there's definitely an erotic dimension to tango but

it's not erotic in the sense of lust or even of desire. It's erotic in the sense of celebrating the archetype. That's how I would put it. So when a woman is out there being a tango follow, it doesn't matter what she looks like, it doesn't matter how big she is or how little, or whatever, it just matters that's she's inhabiting this feminine space and expressing herself in it. And, you know, some people are more glamorous than others, right [laughs]? I'm not glamorous. I'm an old guy, right? But I can still inhabit my archetypal manhood, my archetypal masculinity, and that is – it puts you in touch with something transcendent.

When I put the same question to BR, a very experienced *tanguero* and sometime teacher, he also responded in some depth. He felt that the concepts of femininity and masculinity had been downplayed during the previous several decades. When I asked him to elaborate, we had quite a lengthy discussion which began with BR referring to Robert Bly's controversial 1990 bestseller *Iron John: A Book About Men*:

BR *Iron John* is a very interesting one, 'cos Bly was reacting in part to the struggle to figure out, okay, "if we try to toss out the old roles, then what are we?", and finding that the other roles didn't fit. One of the things about learning to be a lead is - I joke with the people about doing something we did as kids, try to walk like a big tough guy, and people have kind of stopped doing that. You know, you don't see the kids practising being a tough guy anymore, which we did. I'm sure we looked just as silly as anything.

Rachel Hopkin        So just as you're doing it, you're kind of puffing up your chest and broadening your shoulders.

BR        Yes. The way men used to walk. And if you watch Popeye cartoons, you'll see them. [So in tango] I'll get the men to pretend they're that big masculine guy and stick your chest out because this is where you're communicating. If you stick your chest out and act like you're big, you've got a large area to communicate to the follow through and so it's actually the point. I think in dance, there's an artificial element that's put in there that allows people in some sense more freedom to be themselves because of this artificial thing. In the effort to have a sexual liberation and honesty, we got to the point where nobody could stand anybody and there wasn't a way of developing commonalities which led to men and women of my generation somewhat being even more distant than they were when they had traditional roles. Even less easily understood, even less able to comprehend each other.



Rachel Hopkin        So it sounds like you're saying that if you think of these gender identities as a performance, it's like somebody took away your script and weren't left with anything to perform.<sup>114</sup>

BR        Yes. So in the end, there was a great deal of avoidance of the complication which meant avoidance of coming to the understandings that make communities make pairings. But I think that addition of etiquette at the dance, it produces an artificiality that actually makes communication and sharing more possible, and then brings up, to round the question out, the chance for you to play the gallant gentleman. You can be a bit pompous, a bit overblown - just being a bit gallant and being considerate of the women without looking silly, which in the rest of the world, they think you're silly if you're that.<sup>115</sup>

Like BR, EP is an advanced tango dancer and teacher. He said that tango had “definitely” changed his sense of himself as a masculine being, and then went on to tell me about how tango had caused his stance to change in a way that recalled BR’s “tough guy”:

△ Just standing up straight. Just having good posture. Having my chest out from me. Having a woman right next to me against my chest. That's a wonderful feeling. My natural inclination is to fold this way [indicated hunched shoulders]. So we open the chest and then good shoulders and that's very masculine. And you have to do that. You have to show the lead and you have to show the intent and you have to be very clear about it. It has to be, because otherwise my partner is confused.

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<sup>114</sup> I should have said “script and stage directions” rather than just “script”.

<sup>115</sup> The *Kirkus Review*'s appraisal of *Iron John* was published on November 12, 1990 and reads as follows: Strong words about strong and weak men from poet and critic Bly (*American Poetry*, p. 845, etc.). Using as his metaphorical text the Grimm fairy tale “Iron John,” Bly offers “an initiatory path in eight stages” to allow men to recapture a sense of healthy, responsible masculinity. He advocates a male role-model midway between he-man and nerd--a man “in touch with the Wild Man” within. In so doing, Bly condemns the “soft male” so sought after--he says--by many feminists of the 60's and 70's, arguing instead for a return to the “deep masculine.” He lauds the “joyful hunting” of young boys, suggests that a loving clout from father to son can be a useful thing, and recommends the psychic process of Katabasis, or descent, as a complement to the desire for ascent and purity. Such thoughts harken back to traditional ideas of father-son relations, and Bly bolsters his views with references to various ancient mythologies--Celtic, Greek, and older. He also leans heavily on psycho-jargon (“bringing the inner king back to life,” etc.) and seems to have little sensitivity to orthodox religious views of the family. Fortunately, his sometimes pop-eyed beliefs rest on a firm foundation of personal experience, both his own (“I count myself among the sons Who have endured years of deprivation. . .”) and that of the many men who have attended his workshops on “initiation” into the “male spirit.” Tough-minded and bracing, but too workshoppy.

(Information accessed on 2019-09-24 via <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/robert-bly-7/iron-john-a-book-about-men/>)

EP's description prompted me to ask if the sense of masculine self-confidence he was able to cultivate within Tango World extended beyond its confines. "Very much so", he said, "because I'm a firm believer that the first look at any person we see creates an impression, and if I can present myself this way, that's how the rest of the world most likely will see me".

The fundamental importance of the lead being able to clearly indicate his intention to the follow was the first thing that TS mentioned when I raised the matter of tango affecting his sense of himself as masculine entity:

TS As a lead, you have to learn how to lead. That was hard for me because I'm more of a behind-the-scenes kind of person. I'm not a real Alpha male, type A guy, so to lead with more authority. I was very passive. I'm more like a counter-puncher than a puncher [laughs].

Rachel Hopkin So how did you manage to make that crossover?

TS Erm, got yelled at a lot [laughing] (...) It's like "go there. You need to go there". And I'm still kind of soft in that way. I go on a bended knee too much. I'm not always like real decisive, you know, to hit it hard and with strength, but that's slow. [And] the musicality's been really slow in coming but it was important for me to get to the point where I was hearing the music and executing moves which is super hard when you're a lead. You're too conceptual. You're like "oh, where am I going to go next?" and the music's somewhere out there, you know, it's in the distance but you're not really in the music. You're just busy trying to fucking, you know, do something [laughs]. (...) So I think that my passive nature has been groomed up a little bit to become more, erm, more of a, er, erm, leader, you know, I guess.

Rachel Hopkin Can you think of another area of your life where you feel like you may have changed because [you've become more of a leader inside Tango World]?

TS ... I don't know. I can't be specific about that. I think I'm confident knowing that I have this secret world that I can inhabit where my confidence reigns.

SN was another male interviewee who found that tango had countered his natural diffidence:

My family never would have guessed I would have done something like this. It really shocked them. It really helped my confidence, you know, so I'm really comfortable dancing, and I've never learned to dance, I never did it before, so it's a real confidence booster. And, even confidence with women, you know, that's gone up too.

SN therefore made a connection between feeling confident in the dance and feeling confident with women. By contrast, HS said tango had altered his sense of his masculinity because it had made him less forceful:

Δ I went from very pushy hands and now I learn, no – can I be soft? I'm not trying to be totally in control of the follower, but just the ability to execute a move and she can follow me, that gives me a good sense of satisfaction. But very gentle.

MY too found that dancing tango had led him to tone down some of his natural assertiveness, both physically and in other ways:

I am very confident about a lot of things with me, and I deliver it in a less than humble way [laughs]. I mean, I had a joke going with a few friends of mine that we named myself “the tango master” and so, like [laughing]. But what I think I've embraced more in Tango World is that as I've gotten better and able to do stuff, I'm more humble about it. I mean, I will still make the jokes, but especially with new dancers, I think it's easier to get them to feel more comfortable if I don't come in and say “I've been dancing for 11 years”. I don't get in here and say like “I can do about 30 different tricks with you but you're not good enough so I'm not going to do it”. That doesn't instil that same level of love in the dance. So to me that's one part of just being confident enough. But also, sometimes we think of men as being like forceful or domineering, and I think when you try and do that in the dance, you end up being very “push pull”. I don't like “over-leading”. I don't like making someone feel like I'm pushing and pulling them around. So I'm very careful with my embrace, but still strong with my embrace without being overpowering, and so a lot of follows, especially newer follows, are like “yeah, you're very clear”. I mean, I take it as a badge of honour that when I walk into T-D-B, I could dance an entire *práctica* or an entire *milonga*, 'cos there's enough people who say they want to get a chance to dance with me. You don't get to that point unless you're fun to dance with. And so to me, the masculine part of the dance is that I can walk into a room and it's like, er, yes, people want to dance with me. But also, I think knowing your strength is another part to it. And to me that's another – you know.

When I asked IP, a psychology professor, if dancing tango had affected his sense of himself as a masculine entity, he brought his academic knowledge of the subject to bear on his answer:

I talk in my classes a lot about how our identities are defined by social roles, and I am mindful that DL might have a certain number of traits that define who he is based on his gendered identity. I am of the belief that they can inform the dance in real positive ways. Because whoever you're dancing with might, er, want to express themselves in a way that is very traditional, right? So somebody like V [names a very advanced female follow]. She follows in a way that is very traditional, and that conforms with what we expect from a very gendered, passionate, hetero kind of dance. And dancing with V as a lead, it is very hard to not feel that. And as such I'm probably more likely to subscribe to that and conform based on traditional gender roles when I dance with her. In contrast, there's a friend of mine from Kentucky, A, who very much dances in a way that is gender non-conformist. In fact, we will sometimes switch our leading and following. You will not see me dancing with her in a way that suggests this is gender conforming. So I find myself driven by the context of the dance as determined by who your partner is.

I asked IP to be more specific about how these different approaches to gender manifested in his partners. In the case of V, he said that her dance was characterised by a strong *apilado* lean and commented that there “is probably no greater expression of femininity when dancing tango than essentially surrendering yourself to your lead by falling into him”. He also noted that she engaged in gender-specific embellishments, and that “she might hold you in a way that caresses the back of your head”. With reference to A, he said that her personal politics meant that she would not want to take a “back seat to a male lead”. As a result, IP said he would be sure to extend to her “the freedom to express herself in more ways” than might otherwise be the case by, for example, giving her ample time to perform embellishments. I then enquired how IP gauged whether his partners were likely to take a more or less traditional-gender-conformist approach to the dance. He responded:

It's interesting and I might be making an assumption here, but it is pretty apparent to me when I'm dancing with someone - in part by how they might dress, in part by the superficial cues associated maybe with the shoes that they're wearing, how they carry themselves, how they embrace me - whether or not this is going to be traditional or not. So there's the *milonguero* embrace, which is probably the most intimate embrace. Nine point nine nine nine times out of ten, if someone's going to embrace me that way, it's going to be a traditional dance. If someone has more of a salon embrace, it could be one or the other.

Of the male members of the Cincinnati Argentine tango CoP, IP is the man whom I have most often (by far) seen dancing as a follow. Given that - as discussed earlier - it is much less common for men to dance the "other" role than is the case with women, I wondered aloud if he must feel fairly secure in his sense of himself "in whatever way, gendered or otherwise" to be so comfortable performing as a follow in public. IP replied:

Yeah. I would say that. To the naïve dancer who frankly doesn't know any better, they might walk away with the assumption after seeing me follow, they have some very skewed assumptions about me, but it would reflect their ignorance essentially. From what I have observed - males who can lead and follow very well are typically the best dancers.

I agree with DL that dancers who are able to perform both roles are usually the most competent.

Before closing this section, I should mention that while many dancers affirmed that their gendered tango performances had an impact on their overall sense of themselves as gendered entities, this notion did not resonate with everyone. BK was one who resisted the idea. Tango had absolutely not affected him in this way, he said he was the same man now as he had been 15 years previously when he first took up tango:

I already know who I was when I came into this and, you know, was gentleman then, be a gentleman now. None of that's changed. So no. The tango hasn't done anything for me in that regard.

FW, a female dancer who can perform both roles, also pushed back against the idea as well as the implied essentialised gendered norms contained within it:

Δ Sometimes you see a woman dancing with a man, and she doesn't look elegant, she doesn't feel feminine. She looks rough. She is a follower, but she is clumsy. Not elegant. When I lead, I feel I'm a woman, I don't feel like "oh, you are a man". You can lead elegantly. You don't have to be like a truck driver. I don't feel difference between when I dance as a lead and when I dance as a follow.

LW is another woman who dances both roles, although - unlike FW - she experiences them differently. Leading felt more of "an exercise" to her, which was "definitely" not the case when she followed. However, she said she did not feel "feminine" as a follow, and continued:

Δ I think that I'm more male – you know, because of my physical – just because I'm very strong. I do a lot to my house [laughs]. Let me explain this. Of course, I do everything that has to do with the women role, okay? Besides that I work, I mow the grass. I paint the deck. I do everything. This summer I was working in the garden. You know, I was like, "okay" [laughs and makes a bodily gesture that indicates she was working in a strong, full bodied way]. Sometimes I feel, like, I can say that I'm bisexual. Like, I have the man and the woman in that meaning. I'm just so manly so I don't feel very comfortable being so girly. It's not my personality. However, when I dance, I just enjoy that time where a man just leads me what to do and let me express myself.

### **So Is Tango Anti-Feminist? The View in Cincinnati**

At the conclusion of Davis's "Should a Feminist Dance Tango?" article discussed close to the start of this chapter, the author endorses a point made by numerous scholars of dance (including Desmond 1994-5; Eriksen, 2011; Johnson, 2011; Wade, 2011) namely that:

Dancing is invariably embedded in hierarchies of difference and power and, therefore, rarely free of the tensions and antagonisms that are produced by gender, heteronormativity, and differences in class, ethnicity, generation, and national belonging. (2015:15)

Tango-related hierarchies form the basis of Marta Savigliano's influential *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion* (1995). Savigliano argues that the dance puts various power differentials on display, including those generated by sexism, racism, classicism, and imperialism. Savigliano primarily writes about tango in the context of Argentina and her ideas may not be applicable elsewhere. Davis's tango research, meanwhile, is based on her experience of dance communities in Amsterdam and Buenos Aires. Using affect alien scholarship of Sara Ahmed, Davis suggests that Savigliano's work provides an illustration "of how a feminist killjoy might approach tango as a passionate heteronormative performance with colonial overtones" (2015:8). Davis goes on to more generally criticise scholarship:

that privileges the theoretical and normative discourses of feminism and postcolonialism to explain passion while ignoring its most basic ingredient – namely, that people love what they are doing so deeply that they cannot help themselves and have to keep doing it. (17)

The non-hierarchical alternative which she proposes is that scholars use "a more grounded and reflexive approach to passion" which:

uses the embodiment of passion as an affective, sensual attachment with political implications as a site for exploring the contradictions and entanglements, the constraints and the possibilities that are part of any activity which is pleasurably intense and fervently desired, yet unsettling and perhaps even profoundly disturbing.

I have already covered what draws people to tango and keeps them involved – i.e. what constitutes their passion for the dance - in some depth. Davis suggests that dancers use tango to

explore gender-related contradictions. While my own data indicated that tango offered the Cincinnati dancers a medium in which they could explore ideas about, and performances of, femininity and masculinity, they did not seem to feel contradiction. This despite the fact that some of their responses might ostensibly suggest otherwise, including these ones given by female interviewees: “in the dance, you pull from your feminine side. You want to be more of the gentle, calm, smooth person than the, you know, feminist ‘I’m tough’”; and “When I became manager of my department at work and was a mother and was studying, I was so focused and ambitious that I lost my femininity”; and tango “gave me a chance to surrender and not have to control anything. It was nice”. Meanwhile, from the men there were statements regarding the necessity of their taking care of their partners and “creating a space in which a woman can express herself”; in addition, normative masculinity was linked with an A-type, confident, and go-getting attitude. However, these comments were not intended as exclusive, by which I mean that, for example, if EP said that he felt more masculine because tango had improved his posture, it did not mean that being feminine involved poor posture. And while NM may have felt that hiking demanded that she be “tough” while tango-dancing did not, she was nonetheless indicating that she could choose according to the circumstances. And if XC noticed that after a tango class, she pointed her toes as she wandered around the supermarket and thus felt herself to be more overtly performing femininity than was usual, that did not mean she was not a feminist.

In fact, the majority of interviewees did not appear to perceive a discrepancy between their ideas about gender and their dance practice. Rather, it seemed that the dance offered an arena in which they could explore, revel even, in gendered performances. In fact, I often explicitly enquired into



this matter during interviews, especially those I conducted with women. Many of my interviewees were - or had been - high-ranking professionals and not one of them professed to feeling that dancing tango could oppose identification with feminist principles. Only one of them, GR, had even considered the possibility of a such a conflict. GR was around eight years into her tango trajectory by the time we met, but she had once had reservations regarding the dance because of her concerns about gender inequality. I asked her to tell me more, which led to the following exchange:

GR I was, I am very much a feminist. I retired two years ago from Procter & Gamble, but I was in manufacturing management. My education is engineering and human resources, and so I didn't like that the men led [laughs]. And I didn't like the emphasis on women's appearance versus their skills, which I think is part of the culture; that the men asked, you know; just the whole macho part of it. And I got okay with it in large part, I think, because this community is so welcoming and the men in the community are not that way. I mean, they're not macho machismo men. And I played soccer my whole adult life and I said, "you know, following is like playing defence" [laughs]. It isn't "less than". It's a different aspect of the dance and it's like I always played defence in soccer and it's similar to that [laughing].

Rachel Hopkin That's really interesting because I've been trying to think of some other terms, because lead and follow are not good.

GR They're not. And you can't say "men" and "women" because women lead and men follow, so I don't know better terms but to me, they're not evaluative, they're descriptive, like offence and defence [laughs].

Rachel Hopkin I am trying to revolutionise and think what else they could be, like "initiator and finisher" or "opener and closer" which are less kind of, erm

...

GR ... subservient [laughing].

Rachel Hopkin Yeah. They have less problematic connotations.

HP is from Europe. When I asked her if she was troubled by differences between the respective roles, she said not:

Δ It doesn't affect me. I think that the American women in general have such a hard time with it and it's too bad [laughing]. Those comments come up mostly with beginning dancers, and women who say, you know, "well, I'm so used to

rule that I just can't follow", which I think is sort of like this pseudo-feminist rhetoric which I think is so absurd. I really do, because for me, dancing tango is an activity that you do with somebody. You don't do it for somebody, you do it for yourself and you do it with another person. ... And the same way in other aspects of our lives – not as women but as human beings, we surrender. We surrender to many things. We surrender to love. We surrender to gifts. You know, in surrendering, there is a sense of power. (...) If you cannot get over that and you think of that surrendering as being submissive, then you need to choose another dance. It's like saying "oh you follow the president of your company" or "you follow your teacher, therefore you're passive", no. I don't think that's true.

The idea that surrender could be an act of power, of agency, was also expressed by NQ:

You give yourself over. You decide to do that, then you allow someone else to take the lead. And, of course, when it's working really well, it is a collaboration. I am very independent and I like it, and I'm not really interested in becoming a couple in any sense, but dancing with somebody, you give over, and it's fine because it's not going to hurt you. It's safe, it's safe.

LL is an experienced female tango professional. She was familiar with the "the tango is anti-feminist" argument, but she dismissed it:

Δ Some people they say "No. Because of the feminism, I cannot be a follower because I have my own idea of the dance. I cannot follow". But is an exchange, so you follow but also you propose. So it's not like a subordination, it's a dialogue. A lot of times, I modify the dance of the leader and they don't know that we are modifying. For example, I do a movement that is a turn, and instead of, like a crossing back a little, I cross more, so I induce the guy to turn more, more, and he start like a spiral movement deeper. And if he's low energy, I put more, so he needs to give me more.

Like GR, KP had also worked at a high level in Proctor and Gamble before she retired.. She said that her professional career had shaped her sense of gender equality, one aspect of which was:

earning my own money and making just as much, if not more, money than men, and being able to do whatever the hell I want. And so having that financial capability because of my professional career is a big thing. Continuing to develop the attitude that nobody can fuck with you, that just comes with time. So I think that's a function of age and self-sufficiency, but men don't spook me any more at

all, and it's been so long since I've felt that they could dominate me in any way. So when I dance with guys, it's just because I want to. I won't dance with guys I don't want to dance with. And I don't feel any conscious pressure to behave in a certain way. I'm just glad that they pay enough attention to do something entertaining and have a relationship with me.

Up to this point in this section, I have largely been concerned with ideas about the gendered roles and how they are described, both with regard to the actual terminology used – such as, most obviously, “lead”/ “follow” - as well as in a more conceptual sense - following as “surrender” rather than “submission”, for example. I now want to consider how my interlocutors recounted how gendered power dynamics had actually played out for them on the dance floor. Of course, this area is related to descriptions of the roles, but it is not exactly the same. My realisation that there was a difference between these two levels of analysis came about as a result of PK's challenge to my statement that "the role of lead and follow are quite closely aligned with male/female gender norms in a traditional sense". PK said that she did not think the roles were in fact “so traditional”, then continued:

They can be for some people. I think kind of the neurotic ones cling to that, but I find that to be moderately irrelevant among the really good dancers. I think that the word “lead” goes to some people's heads and I think that the word “follow” really pisses off feminists. I don't think of it that way. I think the best description I ever heard was from Fernanda and Guillermo.<sup>116</sup> They're Argentine and they now teach in Boston but I remember Fernanda - who is nobody anybody would want to mess with, male or female - saying “typically the lead prepares the step, and the follow delivers the step”.

I said that to me, PK's account still aligned with “traditional gender roles in some ways” because the formerly common notion that “behind every great man, there's a great woman”. “It's

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<sup>116</sup> Fernanda Ghi and Guillermo Merlo are tango professionals who have visited Cincinnati several times together to teach at Tango Del Barrio.

different”, PK insisted, “I think of it as more of a call and response. I think of it as two pieces of a puzzle. I’m not going to go there with you”.

I interviewed PK fairly early in my fieldwork process. As I went on to discover, her perception of leads and follows as equal partners was one shared by everyone who expressed an opinion on the matter. Because so many interviewees offered similar views on the subject, I shall limit myself to including only a small and representative sample of such comments here. ZP - an accomplished follow - observed that “if I’m not moving, there’s no way the lead will move. So he depends on me. And I depend on him”. And XT - another highly competent dancer - said:

I feel like the follows are actually extremely powerful. The dance doesn’t happen without them and you do have a lot of agency in the dance. It just happens to be that the lead is the person initiating what happens, but the response that you get to that initiation is half the dance.

(Note that XT used the word initiation to describe the lead’s part; “initiator” was one of the alternative names I came up with for that role.)

However, I should add that although all of my interlocutors spoke of tango as being a dance of equals, that beautiful balanced partnership sometimes seemed more ideal than actual experience. I certainly heard from women of instances in which they had danced with leads who did not, in fact, treat them as peers. In the opinion of RZ, a highly respected and experienced female dancer who is comfortable in both roles, such unequal partnerships do not make for good tango:

With some leads, you just get the feeling of – and, in fact, almost literally tell you [laughing], you know “just shut up and dance”, you know [laughing]. It’s like, they don’t want to hear the feedback. They’re in charge: “I’m the leader, and you just do what I tell you, and that’s it”. And you feel that right away. So they don’t

really want to risk in some ways being vulnerable or meeting you in equal kind of relationship, like a conversation of respecting you – for me, respecting me as a woman and as a dancer, that they’re not just pushing and pulling me around, that they’re not just talking all the time and not listening. You feel that right away. So the more they’re willing to meet you, I think the deeper and the more sensitive and the more aware, then the more enriched experience you have from that dance. But the less that they share, the less you’re going to share. You just say “okay. We can just dance for this dance and we’re done”.

IY has also experienced this sort of one-sided dance and said that she felt in some instances, it was the product of a lead bringing too much energy to the role. She recalled dancing with one particular man - G – who:

danced with so much energy, he almost physically forced you into the step rather than showing you the step that he wants. I think that is the only way he can conceive of it. I think some guys can conceive of “if I communicate something, then she will do ...”. One teacher told “if you understand what a man wants, he makes a suggestion. It’s 25% lead and it’s 75% response”. And I think that’s really true, but I don’t think that’s true of G, I think that he does 100% of the lead, and so since I’m not used to that style, it mucks me up. It’s very hard for me to modify myself to accommodate his different conception.

RJ has had a similar experience with a man, E, who used to "dance her" rather than dance together with her. The account she gave included her internal dialogue at the time:

Like in the beginning, he led me and I *ocho*-ed and he just stopped dead on the dance floor, and he said “I did not lead that”, and I thought “oh dear God”. And so I froze, and he’s one of the primo dancers, and I thought “oh God”, you know. And then you look in the mirror and you think “okay, you’re stupid, you can’t dance, and you’re fat” and blah blah blah, and so your head goes through all that girl stuff. And he said “just feel”. And I thought like “are you kidding? I’ve had, like, three lessons [laughs]”. “Just feel”. I have to say that was terrifying. And then he would take his hands and just right down your bare arms go “relax”. Okay, I haven’t been touched by a man in a long time in my bare shoulders, and now he’s doing this saying “relax”. I think the opposite’s going to happen here [laughs]. Now I’m terrified of him and frozen, and so I can’t feel. So it was pretty uncomfortable because I didn’t know why he did that. That I thought he might think that would relax me? But I didn’t really think he thought that. I think he

knew that would make me terrified of him, subconsciously, like the back of his head was actually working that. It's a power move.

RJ went on to suggest that E might have been prompted to make that "power" moves because he is aware of his status as one of the community's more popular leads, "so if you're on the dance floor and people are watching him, he doesn't want to be a fool". However, as RJ grew more confident as a dancer, she reached a point where she was able to negotiate with E about addressing the imbalance she experienced in their dance partnership:

I said "if you would allow me to have equal power, I think we could have a little better *tanda*". And I think it blew his socks off. And he said "well, there's a certain amount of fear in this", and I said "I know" and I said "I fear you and I don't want to fear you. So what I was saying was like "back up the bus". And he said "well I fear you too". Well I knew that but it was good that he said it, and ever since then we're okay, so now we're good, and I just have to be softly open about equalising that power.

So far in this section, I have only offered the views of my female interviewees. Those expressed by my male interviewees were, in fact, similar to those expressed by the women. HY dances and teaches tango and has experience in both roles. Rather than describing the dance partnership as equal, he spoke of both dancers "sharing responsibility". He also told me that he makes a point of telling his students that:

The follow is just as active a participant in the dance as the lead is. In fact, you can kind of think about what the follow is to the lead as an orchestra is to a conductor, right? So people come there not necessarily to see the conductor per se, they're there to hear the orchestra, right? And the lead gives a suggestion but the follow has a variety of things he or she can do to express that suggestion, so there are a whole range of things that they could do in response to this suggestion. "How am I going to do it? What's the speed or the tempo with which I do it?" And I think that for new dancers, they need to understand that as a follow, you're not just passively waiting for somebody to point you in a direction and make you walk. You have ownership in this, you have responsibility, and you are not a second class citizen as a follow.

Like HY, QQ had strong feelings about how the relationship between tango dancers should play out. He said that his “biggest pet peeve in dancing” is people who don’t understand something he feels “vital to tango: that dancing tango’s always a 50/50”. Again, by using the term “50/50”, QQ was offering a slightly different interpretation of the idea of “equal” partners. He then expanded on the theme:

The lead is not moving you. You have to move yourself. And I think most dancers at this level would agree with me, and BR [female tango teacher] harps on this all the time. So the lead, as BR says, “is inviting, and the follow is finishing” [these are two more potential alternative labels for the parts]. Or “the lead is suggesting”. And I remember, I probably had been dancing around two years and a woman came in and we started dancing and she, like many people who come to tango, she had other dance experience so she figured that she would be just a natural tango dancer. And, erm, and usually people that dance other dances are fairly quick [snaps fingers] to catch on. And I was working on two things. Number one, I was working on some subtleties of doing the cross, but I was also working on not bullying people. I remember O [a female follow with whom he danced frequently] used to talk about dancing with somebody and felt like she was a push cart at the Kroger. She was like “he’s Kroger-ing me”. So that was just something that I just wanted to make sure that I wasn’t doing that. So I have a fairly loose style but I expect that when I’m moving, you’re moving with me. You’re moving yourself. And I remember this woman just wouldn’t cross. She goes [raises voice] “you’re not leading me”. And she was yelling at me: [raises voice again] “You just, you are not leading me”. And I didn’t have the verbiage at that point to explain to her that I didn’t think she was right, but I just knew down deep inside that, you know, if I’m moving over here and you’re not moving with me, it’s not because I’m not forcibly moving you. And it wasn’t until BR said those words - she said “no, the follow has to lead themselves. That’s their responsibility to move with you and to stay in front of you”. And so if I’m moving over here, sister, you better do that too. I don’t have to Kroger you over there.

Although every interviewee who addressed the matter expressed understanding tango as - at least “good” tango - as some permutation of an equal partnership, the roles nonetheless require different skills from those inhabiting them. Some of the women were very happy that their

gender identity usually excluded them from being expected to lead. They did not want to have to think about where to move on the dance floor, how to avoid bumping into those around them, or initiate the steps. YL is a very advanced dancer who knows both roles but only performs as a follow:

Δ For me to dance tango is a vacation ... because I don't think. No more in charge of everything. Because the leader leads, but he needs to take care of me, to don't make me crash with other people, to decide the timing, a lot of deciding. So I decide in all my life a lot of things in my life, so dance for me is a break [laughing].

AV also expressed feeling relief that as a follow, she is not required to make constant decisions.

When she began dancing, she said, she:

was looking for balance just by virtue of how my life has gone. I've pretty much had to take the lead to survive in everything. My father and my sister passed away. I became responsible for my mother and my sister's children. And the relationships that I chose, I ended up being the one taking the lead. So, for me, the appeal of tango was to have someone else take the lead, and kind of explore [not leading] because that was not a big part of my life. For me, I ended up the lead in life. I would have loved to have somebody [laughs] take charge and, at least some of the time.

In some cases, it was when I asked my females interviewees if they wanted to learn to lead that they indicated having feelings similar to those of YL and AV. PQ, for example, said "I'm too lazy. I don't want the responsibility". I should make clear, PQ was not suggesting that follows bore no responsibility, but that the matters for which they were responsible were not the same as those which occupied the lead. JJ also said she had no desire to lead; in Tango World - by contrast with many other areas of her life - she can "surrender and not have to control anything" and she relishes that. She then speculated about:



how the leads, you know, experience this, because we experience this surrender, but hell, they're working a tonne. And I think that that's why they go on autopilot sometimes and get 10 or 12 steps that they repeat all the time because they kind of want to enjoy it to and not think about it all the time. So I think sometimes people complain about guys, you know, they do the same things over and over but I do wonder if they're like "my God, it's taken me years to just get these 10 or 12 moves together, connected. You know, I want to enjoy this dance too".

As I reviewed the reactions of my interlocutors to the suggestion – however I phrased it - that tango might be anti-feminist or that it could promote gender inequality, I discerned two recurring themes. One was the idea that following demands surrender and that there is power and agency in choosing to surrender; the other was that the follow is an equal partner in the dance and that a good lead responds to the follow's cues just as a good follow reacts to the lead. I pondered on whether these two views were contradictory. My advisor reminded me that my interviewees viewed surrender as something both positive and powerful; it was not the same as passive submission, they made clear. In addition, "equal" was not understood as "exactly the same" but a complex negotiation which has the aim of achieving some sense of balance within the partnership. Before I close this section, I therefore want to discuss a means of attaining this balance which is called "active following".

I first learned about active following from II, a professional dancer who has studied tango in various contexts. II said that she really only learned to follow as an equal partner once she started practising this form of following - inspired by a couple of teachers whose workshop II had attended in Lexington, KY:

They began their workshop with the words "we teach active following" and I said "yes" in a really loud voice, and they went on to describe that they want to have an equal partnership and the dance is going to be better with an equal partnership,

and what the follow is doing and the lead is doing are only as good as the other one, and the way that they teach is very much with that in mind. So both partners are aware of the partnership and of each other in a way that is not lead-focussed, so it's more of a conversation. I'm going to invite you and I'm going to respond in a way that is active, not passive.

Ideally the lead will in turn respond appropriately to the follow's move.

Whilst experiencing the dance as an equal partnership, as a balanced conversation, seems the ideal, it also demands not only that both dancers know that such a relationship is possible and that both desire to achieve such a relationship, but also that both have sufficient competence to make such a relationship a reality. Follows, on the whole, are not taught to be active from the outset of their training, meanwhile leads tend to be so focussed on mastering whichever step they hope to execute that they have no concentration left over for paying heed to the follow's interpretation. TY - one of the Cincinnati CoP's most sought-after follows - told me that although she feels a follow can be extremely powerful, most follows need quite a lot of experience to realise their power. To fully embody the role, she said:

a follow needs to have good command of her own movement and a decent vocabulary so she has the ability to execute and a sense of what the possibilities are. And she needs time to develop the sensitivity necessary to be responsive. These are requirements to becoming a confident and actively equal partner in the dance.

### **Gender Power Imbalance in the Matter of Who Invites Whom**

In general, then, my interlocutors did not consider dancing tango to be at odds with a feminist stance or to promote gender inequality. However, there were two areas of Tango World in which

gender-related power imbalances did seem to consistently present themselves. One was in the arena of teaching. The other was the utterly fraught matter of invitations to dance.

The imbalance that occurs in the arena of teaching - inasmuch as I have observed and have heard from my interlocutors - applies to some of the professional dancers who visit Tango Del Barrio rather than the Tango Del Barrio-based instructors. I shall, therefore, not dwell on this area here other than to say that whenever outside instructors make the trip Cincinnati to lead a workshop weekend, the visitors are usually a male/female couple; when they teach, it is usually the man

who appears to be in charge of the class.<sup>117</sup> On the other hand, the gender-bound power imbalance that manifests in the matter of who invites whom *is* evident in Cincinnati and, for some of the women at least, it entails their performing the cultural construct that is their gender in a way that is neither pleasurable nor empowering.

In Argentina, the customary mode of invitation (at least outside of “*nuevo*” and other markedly non-traditional tango events) is the *cabeceo*. *Cabeceo* literally translates as “nod” and in tango-speak, it refers to the non-verbal overture through which the man signals his interest in dancing with a woman. He does this using eye contact in tandem with other tacit gestures such as the inclination of the head or the raising of an eyebrow. The woman – who, meanwhile, will have been observing the men in order to spot potential partners – indicates acceptance of the invitation by maintaining eye contact along with, again, other non-verbal signs of assent, such as a brief nod. If the lady wishes to decline, she will avoid the man’s gaze. Meanwhile, if there is a man with whom she wants to dance, she will communicate her interest by making eye contact with him, thereby signalling that she would accept were he to extend an invitation to her. The *cabeceo* approach, which is not restricted to Buenos Aires, is “designed to avoid overt rejection and subtly negotiate an invitation” (Davis 2014:28). Many dancers - Argentine and otherwise - consider it to be an admirably egalitarian approach. However, it is not without problems, not the least of which is that, even with perfect vision, it is often difficult to make out who is looking at whom across dimly lit dance floors.

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<sup>117</sup> As I have commented elsewhere, the tango professionals who are invited to teach at Tango Del Barrio (as well as at other tango communities around the globe) usually work together as couples that consist of a man and a woman. However, regardless of the dancers' respective professional formations and experience, it is almost always the male instructor who leads the class. He is the one who talks first, who talks most, who controls the music, and who organises the class as it takes place - for example, he decides when to ask the participants to stop practising whatever move and to listen to more verbal instruction. For example, if I return to the field notes I made after participating in the workshops led by Oscar Casas and Marcela Duran, I see that I have written:

Oscar is a larger than life character (and he's also just straightforward large – not fat but tall). He dominated the workshops. Marcela barely got a word in edgewise. But actually, that fact meant that I saw her do something that she had talked a little about in our interview – teaching without speaking. I also noted towards the end that this gender thing continued. It was related to Marcela commenting on something about how much follows actually lead, but it was said as if in jest, and people laughed, as if the idea of a woman straightforwardly leading was just out of the question.

Looking back, I feel I need to add a couple of further comments here. First of all, although Duran did not often speak, her presence is nonetheless strong. Also Duran regularly visits the Cincinnati tango community and teaches either on her own or with a male assistant, but either way, it is clear that in those circumstances, she is in charge. Casas, meanwhile, is a less frequent guest and so this being the case, it might be simply a case of courtesy to allow him to effectively dictate the course of the class since the Cincinnati participants have fewer opportunities to learn from him than they do from Duran. However, this male/female imbalance amongst other visiting teachers is very noticeable even though they only visit the community together. For example, I wrote the following in my notes after participating in a day of workshops led by “Tomás and Gimena”.\* The workshops were organised by Valerie Allendorf and took place at Tango Del Barrio in November 2017:

I thought the teachers were very good. I believe they are married, they are certainly a couple. They are both from Catamarca (in NW Argentina), and we found out more about their backgrounds during the *chamuyando* which preceded the milonga. Tomás definitely spoke a great deal more than Gimena. He did have more command of English but I think it wasn't just that. However, she was not backward in stating her views BUT she tended to do so almost always AFTER he had said something first. Also, when sometimes she disagreed with him on teaching points (unfortunately I can't think of any examples) there tended to be some laughter almost as if her doing so was in a very slight way to exhibit some kind of temerity. On the other hand, they were sort of playing that aspect for laughs too perhaps.

And this from my notes following a Tango Del Barrio-organised workshop weekend which took place in March 2018 and was led by Liz and Yannick Vanhove, a Belgian professional tango couple whom I had previously met in Cincinnati during an earlier visit: “Although both teachers talked quite a bit and these were definitely workshops where the woman was given stuff to do, it still seemed like Yannick was more in charge.”

My comment regarding “workshops where the woman was given stuff to do” relates to the other teaching-related gender imbalance that is familiar to many students of tango and to which one of my female interviewees succinctly referred during our conversation: “A lot of times, tango is taught from the lead's perspective almost as though the follow is a piece of furniture or a prop and I absolutely cannot stand that”. Again, this is not a criticism I have heard levelled at any Tango Del Barrio teacher and nor is it something I have felt to have been strongly exhibited by any of their invited professionals - certainly not since I began focussing my fieldwork on Cincinnati nor - from my memory - before then. Even so, I had evidently experienced it sufficiently elsewhere to have noted during a previous visit the Vanhoves had made to Cincinnati: “What I liked is that these two were very good at balancing discussion and teaching so that it focussed equally on men and women”.\*\*

\* Professional tango couples are often known only by their first names. It is also common - when referring to such couples - for the man's name to be placed first, though there are exceptions. More information about Tomás and Gimena can be found at <https://www.tomasygimenatango.com>.

Although the *cabeceo* is sometimes used in Cincinnati, verbal invitations are more common. However, although a good proportion of the women whom I interviewed might seem in many ways to be the embodiment of feminism - independent, highly educated, professionally successful, and so on - the majority said they either never invite men to dance or do so only in limited circumstances - such as with people they know well or with beginners they wish to encourage. Most of the invitations to dance issued in Cincinnati, therefore, come from men and are directed towards women.

I wanted to investigate why this was the case. After all, it was not as if the women would be admonished for issuing invitations. Of the men I interviewed, most said they were flattered when a woman invited them; only one said he would prefer that they did not. In other words, if a woman Cincinnati CoP chooses not to invite men to dance, it seems to be a largely self-imposed restriction. This led me to conclude that although my research had indicated that both women and men felt empowered by many aspects of tango-related gender performances, a significant proportion of the women seemed to be distinctly *disempowered* when it came to the matter of invitation.

The following is a representative sample of the responses I received from female interviewees about whether they routinely - or ever - invite men to dance:

I do not ask. I never ask. I find that, you know, the few times that I have, they always turn me down. I'm very risk averse.

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\*\* Although the Vanhoves' previous visit to Cincinnati took place before I had embarked on my fieldwork and therefore before I was regularly writing up fieldnotes, I already had been making brief notes on all the tango teachers with whom I had the opportunity to study.

My general policy is I enjoy watching other people dance and if someone wants to dance with me, great. But I don't walk across the room to grab somebody, unless they're a brand new dancer.

I don't do it any more. I used to but a couple of times I got, not a rejection but "I promised to someone else" which I understand, or "I'm resting this one" which I also understand. But it's just a few times that it happens and ...

Tango professional Marcela Duran even told me that she had tried to encourage women to take a more proactive approach whenever she *dee-jays* an event. Over the course of the evening, she will explicitly name one *tanda* as "ladies' choice" - meaning that the women have to do the asking.

Although they are outnumbered by their more timid sisters, there are at least some women in the Cincinnati community who do not wait for "ladies' choice" *tanda*. GR, for example, told me there were a "handful of people" whom she feels comfortable inviting because she knows them well. When I asked PK if she asked men to dance, she responded "Uh huh. At the end of the day, what are they going to do? Hit you? Shoot you? No. Worst thing they can do is say "no, thank you" [laughs]. LP said she did not mind inviting men to dance and, in fact, had been encouraged to do so by a former boyfriend: "He goes 'well you can ask the guys'. And I'm like "yeah, I don't want to sit here. I'm going to ask"". And when I asked YY if there were "anybody that you'd really like to dance with but you don't?", her response was "No, 'cos I'd go get 'em if I did".

Although YY feels very comfortable asking men to dance, she was also one of the women I spoke with who described having developed strategies to increase the number of invitations she received:

Just this past *milonga*, I walked up to [names two men in the community], and I said “hey”, I’m like “I know I’m not supposed to do this, but one of you guys needs to ask me to dance some time tonight. I’d love to dance with both of you, but, you know”. And one of them was like “hell with tradition or whatever. Let’s go”. I just went up and said “hey, if you guys get an open spot, I’d love to dance with either one of you” and they could have said “okay” and let it go, and then if I don’t ever get asked, then, I don’t get asked. I didn’t say “dance with me right now” but it’s kind of a way of saying “hey”. I’m letting them know I’m interested. I don’t like to sit there and be like “Oh, I hope somebody asks me to dance”. That’s a terrible feeling.

PK and DF had also devised tactics to increase invitations. DF said that if she were standing or walking past a man whenever a *tanda* was starting - as opposed to “sitting with a group of women” - she was more likely to get asked. PK said that although she felt comfortable issuing invitations within the Cincinnati community - of which she is a long-time member – she preferred not to do so when away from home. Therefore, when she attends tango events in other cities, she strives to appear as “visually receptive” as possible: “I put myself on the edge of the dance floor. I dress as nicely as I can. I smile at everybody. I make every effort to be ‘I’m here, I’m here, I’m here’”.

For the *tangueras* who do not issue invitations and who are without strategies to increase the rate at which they are invited, the sitting, waiting, and hoping can indeed feel - to use YY’s word - terrible. Alas, this experience was no more unfamiliar to most of my female interviewees than it was to myself. The conversation which I had with BB on the matter was one of many:



Δ BB I always struggle to be invited. Which makes me doubt myself, you know, my appearance and my ability to dance. Because sometimes you look at people who dance – not that I’m like a prima donna dancer, I’m not by any chance - but sometimes you see that people who dance worse than you, for the lack of a better word, and they get invited much more often. I actually worked with a psychologist on this issue. And she gave up. Honestly, I worked with her for two years after I separated [from my ex-husband], and the separation issues were done very quickly [laughs] and then we focussed on a couple of other issues, one of which was “why don’t people invite me? Why don’t people like me?” And she worked very hard on these other issues, but this one was the issue that she gave up on. She said “I cannot help you any more”. And so it’s still an issue.

Rachel Hopkin For what it’s worth, I mean, so many of us struggle with that as well, and you come out with all these questions “what is it?”. I mean, I’ve been thinking “have I offended people in the course of my fieldwork?” you know, quite apart from, you know, “do I look like crap?” “am I dancing like crap?”. I’ve now interviewed quite a few people and I will just say that these kinds of self-questioning, self-doubt, they’re pretty universal - unless you’re part of that core group of people who don’t have to deal with it or who always go with their husbands or something, in which case it’s less of an issue. So we’re part of a club [chuckle]. I’m sorry though because it’s not very nice. So how do you think you’re managing to stick with it regardless? I mean, you must – I definitely see you dancing, so you’re not like sitting out all the time by any manner of means.

BB You know what? Sometimes I can sit the whole time. And sometimes I would not even sit down and I would dance the whole, the whole thing.

Like BB, QW was perplexed by the similarly arbitrary number of invites she receives:

It’s frustrating because sometimes you can just sit there and not dance at all, [laughs] bottom line. And frustrating when there are some people that you’ve known for so very many years and they just don’t even give you eye contact. You know, all you want is just a “hello”. Okay. “You don’t have to like dance with me”, but you know. Like there’s one guy there, he used to be a salsa dancer and I used to dance salsa with him, and he switched over to tango. But anyway [tuts], he’ll never, like, never, never - so that’s okay, you know, it’s just the way it is. And it’s probably that way in all dance, but probably a little bit maybe more in tango, maybe.

When I asked QW what made her think such behaviour might be more common in tango, she said she drawn that conclusion mostly from hearsay, and added that she has experienced similar situations in salsa communities:

QW It's totally unpredictable. I remember there was one guy at tango and I just pretty much gave up. I thought, like, "you know, he never asks me to dance". All of a sudden now, lo and behold, one time he did. So what happened that one time? It's harmful for me to have expectations because then I become frustrated. I try to analyse because there's no rhyme or reason involved. We don't know. Unless you ask somebody, you don't know, and that person would need to be honest.

Rachel Hopkin Have you ever asked a lead why?

QW "Why aren't you asking me to dance?" [laughs]? No. But I know one friend of mine, she said "well, so and so doesn't ask you to dance because he thinks you're too tense". Okay. And I acknowledge that sometimes I can be. But then, I think I'm better. The last time he asked me, I thought it went well. Like I felt that I was more relaxed but I don't know because it's hard for me to tell.

In the case of FG, the waiting for invitations which sometimes never materialised eventually led her to drop out of Tango World altogether:

It was like "look", you know, it's all about the men, you know, – there's not enough men. I just got sick of that [laughs], so I became very, you know, "I am woman, hear me roar", or else looking for another excuse as to why I'm not still going to tango.

A dearth of invitations was a subject that LB returned to several times in the "tango journal", which she graciously shared with me. For example, in one entry she wrote:

Wah! Where is a partner? So many great things I have learned, but now I feel empty and incomplete. I look around and see what seems like a room full of couples and then "us." A group of middle aged women clustered together hoping for a dance; unbelievable that I am in this group. I don't mean that I am above this group, just shocking that I am this age and alone. (...) As a single person, I don't feel lonely in my everyday life, but cannot figure out why and how I got here, meaning, sitting alone with no partner. I am frustrated because I cannot improve my dance without a partner, and wonder if I am wasting my time. (...) I hash and rehash this subject with my friend. She and I lament our bad fortune with lack of dance and life partners. We try to give each other hope, and often do, but hope can also frustrate when our dreams never hit the earth. I am not saying we don't have faith, but we really want partners! You don't need to remind me, "Without faith, it is impossible to please God."

KD told me that she stopped going to *prácticas* because of the diminishing number of invites she received. She now only attends *milongas*, but even at those, she sometimes has an uncomfortable time:

People say “okay, the *cabeceo* makes things more equal and more fair”. To me, it doesn’t, because the thing is, in the United States, we are kind of like taught you don’t turn anybody down. So therefore you’re just waiting for men to look at you, you know. And he always knows all he has to do is look at somebody and you’re going to say “yes”, you know. So I feel like if it was that we would say “no”, then it makes it equal, because then we can say “no”, and we may or we may not. But as it is, we’re kind of like at the whim, you know, looking, like: “Please look at me. Please ask me”. And I don’t like that at all. It’s horrible.

Like KD, I find it more or less impossible to look at men to see if they are looking at me - it seems so brazen and so exposed. Like BB and QW, after a bad evening, I wonder why I do not get more invitations. And like LB, I sometimes write about the experience. For example, the following excerpt is from the fieldnotes I made after attending a *milonga* at Tango Del Barrio in February 2018. (The *milonga* was preceded by a concert held in the studio as part of the Constella Festival.<sup>118</sup> Due to the concert’s length, the *milonga* did not get underway until close to 11 pm):

I sat by the piano. I was on a table with [two couples]. Then A and B arrived. I chatted with A for a bit and then she got up to dance with B. Then a guy came up. I thought he was going to ask me, but no, he asked someone else who was part of a couple. Then I was watching X and noticed he danced a couple of times with Y – two *tandas* in a row. The second time he came over to invite Y, I thought he was actually walking towards me. But no. So then I had been sitting down for two *tandas* in a row, and when the third one got underway and still no one asked me, I went home. I felt like crying. It was still raining. And when I was recording my

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<sup>118</sup> Constella Arts is a Cincinnati based arts organization which was founded in 2011 by violinist Tatiana Berman. According to the organisation’s website homepage, “Constella Arts produces interdisciplinary daring performances, original educational presentations, and digital content, along the way changing how people perceive classical music and the performing arts”. (I accessed its homepage on 2019-11-06 via <http://constellaarts.com>). According to another page on the Constella Arts site which I accessed on 2019-11-06 via <https://www.constellaarts.com/constella-festival-2018/>), its 2018 festival ran from February 23 through March 3.

notes the following morning, I felt like crying again. But in the aftermath, I turned my failure-to-be-invited ignominy into a joke with various people and that made me feel better about it.

Alas, the matter of invitation remains an area which - in Cincinnati at least - appears to be disempowering for many women, including myself. Adjacent to the dance floor, we seem to allow this Foucauldian self-limiting to take place that we would not permit in other - and arguably more important - areas of our lives.

#### **Chapter Four – Closing Thoughts**

The issue of gender emerges in a number of different ways within the Cincinnati Argentine tango CoP. It emerges in the very nature of Argentine tango being a dance that is shaped by normative conceptions of traditional gender roles. On a practical level, it emerges in the imbalance in the ratio of male to female dancers, which in turn prompts some of the CoP's members to perform the role that does not conform with their apparent gender identity. It also emerges in the ways in which the dancers use tango as a medium through which to explore aspects of their gendered selves. In terms of the latter point - tango provides a good medium within which to explore of aspects of one's gendered self since it allows for performances that are often more intense and visible than would usually be the case outside of Tango World.

Dancer, feminist, and dance scholar Ann Cooper-Albright notes that a “a responsive dancing body” is well placed to challenge “static representations of gender” even within genres that seem to be imbued by outmoded ideologies (1997:xiii). The body of the Argentine tango dancer is necessarily responsive and is so in a manner which is often gendered – the follow, usually

female, must be sensitive to the mark of her lead; ideally, her movement which will then inspire he proceeds.

In her study of a tango community in Amsterdam, sociologist Kathy Davis questions how the Dutch dancers' performances of gender within Tango World could be reconciled with who they are outside of Tango World (2015). From the data I gathered, it seemed that the Cincinnati dancers were able to reconcile their "tango-ified" gender performances, with how their gender identities manifested in other areas of their lives, even despite potential contradictions. Within Tango World, the Cincinnati dancers might exaggerate characteristics they perceived as masculine or feminine through, for example, their choices of personal adornments, their deployment of certain gestures, or the performance of gendered embellishments. Because of the demands of the dance, they might even develop qualities they felt that they previously lacked - such as, for example, decisiveness or forcefulness - but it seemed that those qualities carried over into other areas of their lives only if it pleased the dancers that they did so. In other words, for members of the Cincinnati Argentine tango CoP, the fact that they were practitioners of Argentine tango did not seem to be at odds with other aspects of who they were and how they lived.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Ageing

In the last chapter, I explored how Cincinnati dancers' engagement with Argentine tango affected their conception and construction of their gendered identities, as well as their attitudes to those identities. In this chapter, I investigate the impact that their dance practice has on their own age identities and their views of others in terms of age. Age identity, also known as "subjective age", concerns the age which individuals perceive "themselves to be, look, and act" (Barrett and Montepare, 2015:57). It refers to a person's subjective experience of their age and the ageing process, and is, explains psychologist Gerben Westerhof, "the outcome of the processes through which one identifies with or distances oneself from different aspects of the ageing process" (2009). I explore how Cincinnati tango dancers have found their attitudes towards age, ageing, and age identity - both with regard to themselves and to others - to have been influenced by their involvement in the dance, as well as its concomitant community.

At the outset of my research, I was particularly interested in learning if and how the dance impacted on two areas of enquiry, namely a) negative perceptions regarding advancing age, and b) the categorisation of self and others according to age. In the course of my investigation, other age-related matters also became relevant, including the idea - put forward by several interviewees - that one "ages into" Argentine tango; as well as discussion of how advancing age

affects Argentine tango competence both positively and negatively. Before discussing my own research, however, I shall review a selection of pertinent scholarship.

### **Age Studies: A Brief Review**

In 2014, a new journal was launched called *Age, Culture, Humanities*. According to its accompanying website, *Age, Culture, Humanities* was created with a mission to promote “cross-disciplinary, critical investigations of the experiences of age, ageing, and old age, as seen through the lens of the humanities and arts”.<sup>119</sup> The journal’s goals are to:

consider age as a category of identity, advance understanding of the aging process and of age differences across the lifespan, interrogate cultural articulations of aging and old age, and generate innovative, engaging scholarly approaches to the study of age and aging in the humanities.

And in its first issue’s introductory column, the editors of *Age, Culture, Humanities* note that:

In recent decades, as inquiry into identity, difference, and cultural value has transformed scholarly practices in the humanities, the power of age to define and divide has frequently been left out of the critical conversation. *Age, Culture, Humanities* seeks to remedy this omission by publishing innovative research that interprets, challenges, and expands the ways in which age, aging, and old age are understood in divergent contexts. (Port and Swinnen, 2014:1)

The establishment of *Age, Culture, Humanities* betokens the growth of interest in the interdisciplinary scholarly realm of Age Studies. Of its founding figures, Margaret Morganroth Gullette - a self-described “age critic” who is currently based at the Women’s Studies Research Center of Brandeis University - has arguably been the most influential (2004:5). Her 2004

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<sup>119</sup> As of 2019-08-12, the journal’s main url is <https://ageculturehumanities.org/WP/>. Its mission and goals are listed on the site’ “About” page, accessed on 2019-08-12 via <https://ageculturehumanities.org/WP/about/>

monograph, *Aged By Culture*, was described by its publisher as an “impassioned manifesto against the pernicious ideologies that steal hope from every stage of our lives”.<sup>120</sup> In it, she writes that Age Studies scholars all study age culture “with the knowledge that the systems producing age and ageing could be different - and that if they were, our experiences of the life course would be too” (2004:102). A central tenet of Age Studies is that culturally pervasive pessimistic notions about growing older - which folklorists have long resisted - must be challenged. As Gullette puts it, “Age is a cause like race and gender— that rightfully allies itself with principles of narrative freedom, economic justice, and human rights” (2004:196). Age Studies scholars therefore argue that many of the negative factors commonly associated with ageing have less to do with the biological process than with race, gender, class, and other factors that influence one’s social situation and access to resources.

In what Gullette describes as the “vast shadowy context of American age culture”, the average U.S. resident contemplating advancing age is far more likely to associate the prospect with loss, isolation, disability, diminishment, frailty, and neutralisation than with notions of deepening wisdom, development of character, greater self-acceptance, or of being appreciated by ever-expanding circles of family and friends (2004:11). In *Aged By Culture*’s opening chapter, Gullette offers one example of how this pervasive pessimistic attitude towards ageing is propagated. She describes an exhibit which was installed at the Boston Museum of Science that invited children to look into a special mirror which allowed them to see a digitally “aged”

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<sup>120</sup> Source for publisher quote: the website of the University of Chicago Press, accessed on 9/24/2018 via <https://www.press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/A/bo3625122.htm>



reflection of themselves. The participants were often extremely distressed by the images with which they were presented. The technology which produced the visions of their future selves evidently emphasized sagging jaw lines, cavernous wrinkles, grey hair, and skin blemishes, rather than evidence of deepened character born from a lifetime of expression and experience (2004:5).

### **Folklore Scholarship on Ageing**

While the gloomy perception of ageing laid out by Gullette may be common in society at large, it is mostly at odds with the fieldwork-based findings of folklorists. Moreover, the existing body of folkloristic scholarship that attends to questions of ageing is not insignificant given that folklorists - both within the academy and without - have long sought out older community members for their extensive knowledge of cultural activities. Within the discipline, elders tend to be understood as being not simply the custodians of traditions, but also as forces which are actively maintaining and regenerating traditions. In addition, folklorists have repeatedly portrayed the lives of elders as vital and fulfilling, and to abound with interests and social connections (Myerhoff 1978; Jabbour 1981; Hufford et al 1987; Mullen 1992; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett et al 2006).

Jon Kay's monograph *Folk Art and Aging: Life-Story Objects and their Makers* (2016) along with the collection of articles which he edited, titled *The Expressive Lives of Elders: Folklore, Art, and Aging* (2018), are two of the more recent additions to the folkloristic scholarship on ageing canon. *Folk Art and Aging* is based on Kay's interviews with five octa- and

nonagenarians for whom the eponymous life-story objects (which include memory paintings, pulled rugs, and musical instruments) facilitate the sharing of personal stories, while the process of creating the items stems potential feelings of isolation and loneliness. The essays included in *The Expressive Lives of Elders* offer case studies of the application of “folkloristic gerontology”. As Kay explains in his introduction to the volume, the term “folkloristic gerontology” describes a subfield in ageing studies which “marshals the theories, methods, and practices of folklore to the research of and service to older adults” (2018:13).

Another recent publication of note here is the 2015 edition of *Midwestern Folklore* dedicated to the theme of folklore as an adaptive response to ageing. In it, editor Simon Bronner observes that although “modern definitions of folklore proclaim that everyone has folklore and folklore is everywhere as part of being human, a closer examination shows that people use forms of folklore strategically at certain times of their lives more so than others” (2015:4). As a result, he suggests a productive mode of enquiry would be to look at how folklore serves as “a living force to effect sociocultural transition, continuity, and separation” in areas affected by the ageing process (2015:4). Both *Folk Art and Aging* and *The Expressive Lives of Elders* examine how forms of folklore can be productively deployed to address such concerns; at the same time, however, they are representative of a broader pattern amongst age-related folklore studies in that they focus on the practices of a particular age group - i.e. the elderly - rather than examining how involvement in a tradition can have an age-related impact on practitioners no matter at what stage in their lives they happen to be.

By contrast, I have deliberately sought the perspectives of dancers across a range of ages on how their understanding and negotiation of Argentine tango has been, and continues to be, affected by their passage through life; as well as if and how it has influenced their ideas about the ageing process - both in terms of their own experience and in terms of how they view others. I should also mention that with regard to my own research, I do not feel comfortable qualifying any of my interviewees as "elderly" or "old"; it was simply that some interlocutors were "older" than others.

### **The Association Between Argentine Tango and Advancing Age**

The Cincinnati Argentine tango community is diverse in a number of ways, including in terms of the ages of its members.<sup>121</sup> I never directly asked my interlocutors their age, though some would tell me. Of those who did so, the youngest person whom I interviewed was in her late twenties, the oldest in his seventies, and I spoke with people from all the decades in between. Even so, and based on observation, I would say that the community contains more members in their fifties and sixties than in their thirties or even forties. In other words, the mean age of the typical Cincinnati Argentine tango dancer is probably higher than is the case for the habitués of the city's salsa or club scenes - and this is true of many other tango communities in the US and elsewhere around the world.

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<sup>121</sup> The community is also fairly diverse in terms of the nationalities and ethnic backgrounds of its members. While the majority of its regular participants are white, it also has African-American, Latin-American, and Asian-American members. In addition, although some members are Ohio-born and bred, the community also includes dancers from elsewhere in the US, as well as immigrants from many different parts of the globe, including Latin America, Asia, and Europe.

As it happens, Tango Del Barrio sometimes rents out its space to a local salsa club, and it was because of this that one of the Argentine tango CoP's younger members decided to study the dance. He had previously been learning to dance salsa and one evening he showed up at Tango Del Barrio for what he believed would be a salsa activity. However, he had mixed up the dates and instead stumbled upon an Argentine tango event. For a while after that, he studied both dance forms and when I asked him to compare their respective scenes, he said:

Tango is a great dance but the music isn't really as exciting as salsa which I'd say tends to appeal to a younger crowd. I know definitely the salsa classes I took were skewed much younger. More like college students.

Like gender, ageing can be viewed both as a biological fact and as a socio-cultural construction, and just as tango is recognized as a gendered dance, Argentine tango is also frequently connected with advancing age. It is worth noting that the impact made by *Tango Argentino* (the show which launched the rediscovery of Argentine tango in the US during the 1980s, as covered in Chapter 1) was explicitly credited to its "seasoned, mature performers" (Farris Thompson 2005: 266). Moreover, it is also worth noting that one of those performers, Maria Nieves, only received headline billing and acclaim as a dancer in her own right - rather than as the partner of choreographer and performer Juan Carlos Copes - decades after she and her *Tango Argentino* colleagues had blazed a trail around the world, by which time she was in her eighties (*Our Last Tango* 2016).

Exactly why Argentine tango is often perceived as an activity for "older people" is probably the result of a confluence of factors. One of them concerns the physical demands the dance typically exacts when performed as a social pastime. Unlike many movement-based activities which

privilege the stamina, flexibility, and strength of youth, Argentine tango is not overly-taxing on the body. Movements are generally conducted at a walking pace and are rarely flashy. As ethnographer Carolyn Merritt notes: although the ageing body tends to draw “attention for its rarity” in other forms of dance, “tango is considered a respectable activity for people of all ages” (2012:9). Accordingly, she writes, it is: “not unrealistic for a person in late middle age to decide, ‘I’m going to learn to tango,’ and do so” (3). In addition, many practitioners report that their desire to do some of the tango repertoire’s more outré and athletic steps diminishes with time; and this is ostensibly not because of a desire to avoid physical exertion, but more because it is often the case that the longer a *tanguero/a* has been dancing, the less interested they tend to be in flamboyant performance. MU described her experience in this regard as “probably very common”:

You learn some basics, then you want to learn a whole lot of fancy steps, like “how can I do this and that?”, *ochos* and *ganchos* and all this crazy stuff. And then, for me, I kind of thought “you know, what’s really the most beautiful is the most basic things”. And so then you go back and you say “you know, I really want to perfect just being able to walk well, really balanced. Just get back to the really beautiful, simple, basic things”.

Similarly, NE, who was around 15 tango years old at the time of our recorded conversation, said that early on in his tango trajectory he had been fascinated by Δ “all these fancy figures and *volcadas* and *colgadas* and all sorts of other stuff”. But gradually, over time, he “drifted back to” dancing more in closer embrace and while he can still find the flashy “show stuff” fun to watch, it does not interest him at all as a dancer.

Like NE and MU, SN (aged six in tango age terms when we spoke) had also developed a “less is more” mode of aesthetic. One of the reasons that he had become wary of the more ostentatious moves was because they so rarely seemed to be performed with any kind of musical sensibility:

There are some dancers and they’re doing great moves, and they’re doing really fancy stuff that I can’t lead at all, but they’re just dancing, and the music is playing in the background. There’s no connection [between what they’re dancing and the music]. And the music might be a *vals*, or something that is really soft and fluid, and it’s like they’re going through all their kung fu moves, and, you know, they’re doing really quick moves, and they’re doing move after move after move, and this is like a really soft song, slow song, and so there’s no relationship.

In fact, some of my interlocutors felt that the most widely-prized qualities in tango - such as a body that is able to move smoothly; an ability to express musical sensitivity simply; a capacity to maintain a soft, responsive and connected embrace; and a quality of mindfulness - often appear to be enhanced by advancing age. WA, for example, commented that she usually prefers dancing with the Cincinnati community’s older members for reasons that had to do with:

this idea of being present. I feel like that is something we grow into as we get older. So I think if you’re an older person and you’re coming into tango new, you might already have that. I see in a way that younger people are learning to be present, so I feel like the older part of the community, the more mature people in the community, they bring that presence. They bring their life experience into the dancing and I think that’s beautiful.

Along with the increasing focus on simpler moves performed well and this idea of presence, another age-related factor may be that the learning process in Argentine tango demands a significant and ongoing investment of time. Bar one or two exceptions, the Cincinnati dancers with whom I spoke all came to the dance as adults and largely practiced it as a hobby. In other words, even the most dedicated members of the community were probably only able to perform two or three hours of deliberate work a week. That is a far cry from the rigorous daily schedules

that many professional dancers adopt in early adolescence and which allows them to accumulate thousands of hours of training before they are even out of their teens (Ureña 2004). All of my interlocutors who had learned other popular forms of dance said that Argentine tango was far more challenging. One former salsa dancer, now a *tanguero* of 15 years standing, said that:

The learning process on salsa is very rapid, so within ten lessons, you're on your way to becoming a really nice dancer. Six months of work in salsa, of dedicated work, you can be a really nice dancer if you approach it well. Tango is seemingly a continuous struggle. It's a far more challenging dance.

LP, meanwhile, is an accomplished ballroom dancer. When I asked her how the experience of learning the ballroom repertoire compared with that of learning Argentine tango, she said:

Oh my God. It's a different animal. Ballroom, once you get it, you understand it. With tango, you have to keep up with that because you've got to feel that frame, you're led by the frame. It's all about the time.

And WA, a professional dancer, made a similar point; she had described Argentine tango as a “dancer's dance” and when I asked her what she meant by that, she observed that there was:

no end to the depth of the dance. Due to the intimate embrace, how physics are used to propel the motion, and the option of cross or parallel systems with the feet, the possibilities are endless.

Even the community's most advanced dancers considered themselves to still be very much on a learning trajectory. BD is one of the most sought-after leads in the Tango Del Barrio community. He was 70 years old when I interviewed him and his tango journey had begun some 18 years previously when he had reluctantly signed up for an eight-week tango course at the behest of a friend to whom he owed “a lot of favours”. Despite low expectations, the dance intrigued him, and he decided: “well, I started this, so I'd better keep on doing it”. Had he - I wanted to know -

reached an end-point as far as his learning was concerned? No, he said, he continued striving to increase his competence: “I don’t intend to either quit learning or quit trying new things”.

LL was around five tango years old when we spoke and told me his initial progress in tango had been aided by - amongst other things - his extensive experience of martial arts, his knowledge of several other dance forms, and the fact that he was a musician. As a result, when he initially attended Tango Del Barrio’s beginner level classes, he advanced quickly and soon “became one of the beginners that people liked to dance with”. Then he hit what he described as the “the proverbial first plateau” which “completely just smacked” him in the face. I wanted to know more about what LL meant by the “first plateau” and he explained that while he was able to execute basic steps relatively quickly, he found improvising on the dance floor - instead of “just doing the same shit over and over” - extremely challenging. I then enquired as to when and how had he progressed beyond that first plateau. He had not yet done so, he said. AQ made a similar observation. He had embarked on his tango journey just under a decade prior to our conversation. I asked him when had he first begun to feel like he was “nailing” the dance. In response, he laughed and said:

That hasn’t happened yet. It seems funny but it’s only been nine years so it’s not that long. So I consider myself intermediate of some sort, somewhere in there, and I would guess most people never get to advanced in tango. It doesn’t matter how many years.

The comments by LL and AQ both convey the idea that “the more you know, the more that you know that you don’t know”. That sentiment was more explicitly expressed by TX, a female



dancer who was around 15 tango years old when we spoke, who commented that “the longer I dance tango the more I realise how much sensitivity and receptivity is required”.

Another contributing element to the association between ageing and Argentine tango may be due to the dance having been recommended as a form of therapy for various health issues, including those which are often associated with increasing age. The health problems on which Argentine tango can have a positive impact include Parkinson’s Disease (Foster et al 2013, McKee and Hackney 2013, Lotzke et al 2015), strokes (Hackney et al 2012), certain cancers (Argentine Tango Therapy Helps Restore Balance for Cancer Patients with Neuropathy), decreased ability to balance (McKinley et al 2008), and loss of brain function (McKinley et al 2005). It has also been shown to be beneficial during end-of-life palliative care (Pethybridge 2008).

No one with whom I spoke said they had taken up the dance specifically for health reasons alone, though it had played a part in the decision of several of my interviewees. NS, for example, said that she had “really bad knees” and had been told that tango was the dance that had “the least effect” on those joints. RM suffers from fibromyalgia which causes pain in the muscles and joints. She took up Argentine tango because it involved less stretching than the ballroom dancing that she had previously pursued. The health-promoting aspects of tango were part of what inspired QP to return to dancing tango after an absence of eight or so years, after a friend sent her a newspaper article headlined “Lonely? Worried about dementia? Argentine tango finds home in Minnesota” (Ode 2017). Although tango music was what most attracted QP to the dance, the

newspaper piece - which described tango as having numerous benefits for body and mind – was what gave her the final impetus to seek out Tango Del Barrio.

In the case of several dancers with whom I spoke, although the therapeutic benefits of tango were not what brought them to the dance, their involvement in the Cincinnati Argentine tango CoP had aided their recovery from health-related challenges. TB, for example, told me that she had:

Δ had issues with my knee for a few years and it was pretty bad and I think had I not been dancing, I probably would have stopped doing a lot of other things that I was doing, you know, from Pilates to yoga. But I never stopped.

Eventually TB had a knee replacement. Once the surgery was complete, her desire to return to tango generated within her an urgent will to recover that she thinks would probably not otherwise have been present.

ZS, an experienced Argentine tango practitioner and teacher, faced numerous health crises after taking up the dance in 2000, including thyroid disease and “two bouts of cancer”. During the periods of illness, ZS had found that:

tango was just such a wonderful support because I really kept dancing and I kept teaching even through chemo and everything. I’m so glad I had the tango and that community because they were very supportive. And, when I’m dancing, I don’t know if I’m dancing five minutes or five hours. It suspends time. So I could just, you know, I could always just totally isolate the moment.

When I asked ZS if she had ever felt let down by her body as it presented her with one health crisis after another, she said not. Instead she was grateful that “the dance was always there for”

her and that her passion for it, as well as her love for her friends in the CoP, meant that she “just felt I wanted to live every day the fullest, and if I’m meant to get through it, I’ll get through it [laughing], if not, I’ll live these days”. I was curious to know how much ZS’s tango activities had been affected by her periods of illness. They had caused her to make some modifications, she said, for example, she couldn’t dance immediately after surgery, but the hardest part had been dealing with the fatigue caused by chemotherapy:

Luckily I only had four treatments, they were like every three weeks, so basically about three months of chemo. So you have ups and downs with your cycle, so I would have to vary a little bit just for my energy, or just, you know, within a couple of days of treatment. But we were teaching, U and I were teaching and I remember after my last chemo – it’s usually the next day, you’re pretty good, it’s then that you kind of go down. So I remember going to a *milonga* [laughing] like the next day. It was a kind of celebrating last chemo [laughing] but it was tiring. But I remember doing that, so at least I felt good enough to go.

In another permutation of “the health benefits of Argentine tango” theme, I should also mention that number of my interlocutors who had taken up the dance for other reasons talked enthusiastically of their increased sense of wellbeing that resulted from their tango practice. OL was 59 years old when I interviewed her and commented that tango “keeps you in shape, gives you confidence, helps you to be your best. I’m in way better shape than a lot of people who are much younger than I am”. Another female dancer in her mid 60s appreciated that tango forced her to work on her balance, flexibility, and - because of its improvisatory nature - challenged her mentally; “all of those things are impacted” by the ageing process, she said. In addition, her involvement in the dance has ensured that she continues to engage regularly in social activity, thereby warding off the threat of isolation which - again - often seems to be exacerbated among older members of the population.

QW said she valued Argentine tango because it was good for her “cognitively”. LP, meanwhile - who was 63 when we spoke and who had trained in various forms of dance including ballroom - commented that:

you can do tango for a long time. Ballroom, I’ve seen people get hip surgery, knee surgery, ballroom is more wearing on the joints, tango is not. You can probably dance tango until you die.

TV, a male tango dancer and long-time yoga practitioner offered a more detailed description of the health-related rewards of tango as he had experienced them. He was in his early 70s at the time of our interview:

As you move through time in the dance, your body is working; you’re watching; you’re calculating; you’re anticipating; you’re solving problems. You’re also essentially speaking to your partner, so there’s that communication. So tango takes all of the bodily strengths and capabilities that develop in yoga and puts them into action, and in the process of doing that, it wakes the whole body up, and it wakes up the mind, and so it’s great for mental health and mental agility, it’s great for balance, it’s great for physical wellbeing. Tango’s a workout, okay? If you’re out there, if you do six or eight tandas, you’re getting quite a workout.

The last factor which I shall discuss here as potentially being part of why Argentine tango is less associated with youth than most other dances is one that was alluded to by the Argentine composer, Gustavo Santaolalla, during a radio interview a few years back. In the US, Santaolalla is primarily known for his film work – he has won Academy Awards for his scores of *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) and *Babel* (2006) - but he is also a composer of tango music and the leader of a contemporary tango performance ensemble. Santaolalla described himself as having been fascinated by tango from a very young age but realised he would need to wait before he could approach the genre himself. He said “I think you need to have some true, heavy experiences. I

mean, you have to have experienced life to be able to interpret properly that genre” (2015).

Santaolalla's observation is not unique. His compatriot, dancer Nelson Ávila - one of the stars of *Tango Argentino* - made a similar statement in 1988 (a time when the dance was out of favour with the younger generation in Argentina):

The young people don't like it because they don't understand it. They haven't lived. But when something wrong happens with your life, or something happy, and you have more experience, then you start to understand. (Quoted by Lyman 1988: E4)

It is unlikely that the views of Ávila and Santaolalla are unaffected by the nature of tango lyrics.

In a recent personal communication to me, tango scholar Ana Cara observes that “understanding the lyrics would enhance the understanding of tango’s appeal to ‘older’ dancers” since “the words speak of ‘Life’ (which one only knows about after having lived a bit)”.<sup>122</sup> However, as she goes on to note: “The interesting thing is that *even though* dancers [in the US] don’t understand the lyrics, tango somehow still “carries” or communicates this dimension to participants!”.<sup>123</sup>

LB, one of my Cincinnati interviewees who has collected tango music for many years, bore witness to Cara’s statements when he observed to me that the:

more you understand the music, the more so much of it is about disappointment and loss, estrangement, failed dreams. I occasionally joke that it makes George Jones sound giddy.

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<sup>122</sup> Cara’s observation was part of the feedback she kindly sent me on an earlier draft of this dissertation in an email dated 2019-10-16.

<sup>123</sup> Emphases in original/

## **Ageing into Argentine Tango**

Quite a number of my interviewees were aware that Argentine tango was often perceived as being more accessible to, and popular among, older dancers; in fact, several of them indicated that they had themselves sought out tango precisely because it seemed to be “age appropriate” to them in some way - although the ages at which they deemed it to become appropriate to themselves varied. BD - who was 70 chronological years and 18 tango years old at the time of our conversation - told me he had always been interested in different movement forms. He had been a swimmer, a rower, a diver, a pole-vaulter, and an acrobat in the past. He had promised himself that on his 50<sup>th</sup> birthday, he would “do a double back flip off the diving board”, but on the day itself, he could not bring himself to do it. When he took up Argentine tango a couple of years later, he appreciated that, although it was physically challenging in many ways, it did not instil fear in him.

DK had different age-related reasons for taking up Argentine tango. She wanted to find a romantic partner and was considering internet dating but “ran into a problem”, which she went on to explain to me:

So next month, next week, I will be 54. That’s the problem I ran into, is that men like younger women, so if I were to say my age, they would expect, like, a person who, when they say they’re 54, they’re expecting a certain look for 54. And I consider myself ageless.

As a result, internet dating no longer worked for her. At Argentine tango events, however, she could meet men “in-person” and that was part of the dance’s appeal to her. Meanwhile, thinking that Argentine tango was only “for old people” caused HQ to avoid the dance for many years: “I

had the mindset that tango was for older people. Now I fit that age but back then I felt like ‘who dances tango?’”. HQ also practiced salsa but found Argentine tango to be a:

more realistic dance for me as I age, because when I go to a salsa club, by and large most everyone is quite young. And so tango’s more age appropriate and something that hopefully I can continue to do for a while.

I do not know HQ’s age but RC also spoke of having “aged out” of salsa and into tango and had been in his 30s when he did so. Salsa, he said, “seemed more of a younger person’s dance” and a “more physically exerting type dance”. He added that:

Salsa dance-work can become kind of like a mosh pit at times, full of elbows, and feet stomping; and there’s some really nice dancers but there’s a lot of really elementary beginners out there, and it just creates rather a chaotic situation which I just grew out of, just lost interest in it, just stopped doing it.

Quite a number of interviewees came to the dance after experiencing a significant life event or transition of the type that can cause an individual to reflect upon the finite nature of their own life-span and affect their subjective experience of ageing (Barrett and Montepare 2015:56). As covered in Chapter 2, four or five took it up in the wake of the death of their partner or spouse, and several more after the break-up of significant relationships. Other age-related precipitating factors included grown children leaving home and retirement. RY, for example, said she took up Argentine tango as a way of “treating” herself shortly after her retirement. And MR enrolled in classes at the point that her:

oldest daughter was going to be going off to college, my second youngest was two years behind her. All I did was clean the house and work in the yard and, I couldn’t see myself keep doing that when I’m not out doing something with them. And I didn’t want to be one of those mothers that’s like “oh my God, you can’t leave” [laughs], you know? I wanted something for myself.

### **Argentine Tango and Ageing - Countering a Common Narrative**

Age is generally understood, according to Gullette, in three prevalent ways: chronological, which relates to the number of years one has lived; physiological, which relates to one's physical fitness and health; and social, which concerns the internalisation of how one is regarded by society which in turn is dependent upon one's perceived age. When the ageing process is framed negatively - as is often the case in US society - the expectation is that beyond a certain point, any increase in chronological age is accompanied by physiological, social, and mental decline. As Gullette puts it, whilst representations of ageing could encourage the inclusion of "ever thicker layers of what it [means] to be an embodied psyche, in culture, over time" (2004:11), instead - at least in the US, folklore scholars excepting - it is more commonly associated with an "insidious decline ideology" (2004:12). Yet over the course of my fieldwork, in a manner which echoes previous folklore scholarship, it became clear that the Argentine tango-related experience of even my oldest interviewees did not correlate with the "getting older is bad" narrative model. Moreover, this appeared to be the case not only regarding their attitudes towards themselves but also towards others.

A number of my interlocutors told me that they had been inspired to take up tango because of witnessing people significantly older than themselves performing and enjoying the dance. YY was one of them; she was the woman in her 40s who signed up for classes after watching a doctor in her mid-to-late 60s dancing at the end of a video about a complimentary healing technique (as described in Chapter 3). UU was another example. UU resisted enrolling in classes



for around five or six years after his wife started taking lessons; having never studied any form of dance previously, he found the prospect of taking one up in middle-age unappealing. The event that precipitated his change of heart took place when he and his family were on holiday in the mountains of northern Italy and visited a church festival. During the early part of the evening, the entertainment was provided by a rock 'n' roll band, but at around 10:00 pm, there was a change in programme:

The rock 'n' roll band finished and what turned out to be a tango quartet started playing and all of the young people took off, and all of the older people in town came out and started doing this dancing. And I thought "holy smokes". It was really pretty extraordinary because it seemed like a very sizeable fraction of the older, not eldest, but older people in town were actually dancing. So after the trip - that was in the summer about 10 years ago - came home, and [my wife] said "would you like to come over and try dancing?". I said "naaah, not really. No". It was 50% yes, 50% no. So she let it drop and she continued up until in the winter and then - the winter classes start again right after January and I decided I would accompany her.

UU's wife, FA, also remembered that evening in Italy. When I asked her about it, she said "it's the same story, but you probably want to hear it from my side". I did, and we went on to have the following exchange:

FA I got up on a dance floor and danced with one of my daughters, and then some short little fat Italian dude – we couldn't really speak to each other, but he asked me to dance. I danced with him. It was perfectly fine. And after that, I think that UU became – I don't think it was so much me dancing with that guy - but the church festival was a big thing, because he saw men of all ages dancing. That seemed to be some sort of turning point for UU, it was some sort of door. It had nothing to do with jealousy of me and this man. I mean, there's no doubt in my mind about that. That is not the point that I'm trying to make, but just seeing this whole context of mums dancing with their daughters, and people that don't know each other dancing together, you know?

Rachel Hopkin Yeah, so it became part of a world as opposed to one specific thing?

FA I think that's a very good way to describe it. It was part of a culture, yes, and he was like "oh".

I estimate that UU was probably in his fifties at the time of that Italian festival experience and it seems that what he saw that evening instilled in him the notion that were he learned to tango, it might enhance the possibility of his future self manifesting in a manner which pleased him.

Other interviewees spoke of being encouraged by the performances of older dancers after they were already established tango practitioners. GD was in his early fifties when he started learning and in his early seventies when I interviewed him. He pointed to the late Osvaldo Cartery - a celebrated Argentine *tanguero* whose nickname was “Pies de Miel” (“Honey Feet”) - as someone who had given him hope for his ongoing involvement in the dance:

Osvaldo can hardly walk, and then gets out on the dance floor and, you know, it's like he's a new man. And I think there is an aspect of that, that you can be in really declining health and still have the energy to get up and dance, and so I look forward to that.

The dancers who galvanise NN's practice are closer to home. He named several members of the Cincinnati Argentine tango community who were a good deal older than he was and whom he observed to be “ageing very gracefully” in a manner to which he aspired.

Many of my interlocutors had noticed that tango seemed to benefit them in various ways - physically, mentally, emotionally - as they aged. RY, who was 66 years old when I interviewed her, is an active organiser of tango events in the Cincinnati area. She told me that she had “more energy now” than when she was younger and put it down to the joy the dance brought to her - both in terms of the physical activity itself, and in terms of the satisfaction she gained from

regularly arranging well-attended and much appreciated tango events. CK was 62 years old when we spoke and he said that the dance made him “feel younger”, not least because of the aerobic exercise it provided. GG was her early sixties and said that Argentine tango had kept her young “in a lot of ways”. GG has two daughters who are both in their early 30s and based in Philadelphia. When she visits them, she often finds herself in social situations in which her daughters’ friends are present and is delighted that these 30-somethings deliberately seek her out; they enjoy her company and appreciate that she has a “pretty young outlook”. In addition, GG said that “one thing that’s huge that tango has really given” her is an excellent sense of balance, as well as enhancing her ability to remain present:

I went with two friends last summer and we did the Inca trail, and they’re both, I would say, much fitter than I. They’re both tennis players; they play, you know, multiple times a week. They were definitely faster than I was on the uphill, somewhat, not hugely. But I was like three times as fast as they were on the downhill, and I think it’s like, it’s like following [in tango]. And it’s like looking at uneven stones, like different heights, and just like being very focussed in the moment. So I was stepping very easily and not expending any energy, not using my quads at all, and it’s like they were, they were a little bit like “I’m not sure about this step” and so they would just get exhausted, whereas I’m just like gliding.

UU was 66 years old at the time of our conversation; she told me that whenever she mentioned that she danced Argentine tango, her disclosure had a distinct effect on those around her. “They look at you like ...” and moved her face into an expression of sly and excited surprise. “You know what I mean?”. BL, who was 59 years old when I interviewed her, observed something similar: being able to say “hey, I’m a tango dancer” caused people, she thought, to look up to her because they knew that Argentine tango was “a challenge dance”. And NE - whom I would estimate to be around the same age as BL (or perhaps a little older) - said that:

Tango is a wonderful thing one can do into way, way, way old age, and that's certainly helped me in many ways to kind of feel more alive. You feel you're doing something you wanted, yes, absolutely, absolutely.

### **Beyond Age in the Cincinnati Argentine Tango Community**

The following excerpt is taken from the transcription of an interview which I conducted with Cincinnati *tanguera*, FF. FF was around 10 tango years when we met, and during our conversation, she indicated that she was around 60 chronological years old. I asked her if her involvement in the dance had affected her sense of self as an ageing entity; in the course of the her response, she told me the following:

There's a guy who dances tango occasionally - he's, I just found out, 31. Anyway, I'm in a film group every Tuesday, and we were talking about movies one time in tango and he's like "how do you see so many movies?". I said "I'm in a film group". So he comes every now and again and we all go to the bar afterwards. And [one time] we were chatting and we had both missed *Dunkirk* and I said "I'm going to go see it in Imax". He's like "May I come with you?" and I'm like "sure!". So Friday night we went to see *Dunkirk*. We went out for two drinks and, you know, it wasn't a date. I talked with him like the same way I would talk with my kids' friends or my contemporary age friends, you know, and he asked me if he could come. But it's like I would probably say the same thing, like "do you want to come?", versus before [I was involved in tango], you're just like "oh, you know, they're not going to want to hang out with a 60 year old woman" you know, male or female.

FF's account made me wonder if being part of Tango World in Cincinnati might make age, and other differences, seem less important than they would be in other realms. FF responded that she had "definitely" found this to be the case.

Age has been shown to be a key means of understanding the self and identifying oneself as a member of one group whilst differentiating oneself from others (Barrett and Montepare 2015:58). Many judgements and categorisations are based upon perceptions of age, which can lead to the stereotyping and othering of people who are - or appear to be - at particular stages of life. (Montepare and Zebrowitz 1998, Prose 2019). In Western societies, ageism routinely leads to discrimination against older people, who then find themselves set apart and defined and understood in “an oversimplified, generalised way” (Minichiello et al 2000:253). In much of society, relational age stratification takes place, with people choosing to share most of their lives with their chronological peers or near peers (Riley et al 1972). That this takes place is a result of “age systems” which regulate modern Western societies. As defined by sociologist and age studies scholar Susan Pickard, an “age system” is a structure:

which consists of a hierarchically constituted mode of governance, operating through the framework of the life course, in which the role of particular ages and their relationship to each other underpins and legitimizes an assortment of material and other inequalities. (...) The central vehicle through which the age system works is that of the life course which plays a key role in organizing individuals and groups into seemingly natural age-based categories.

In other words, age is a common differentiating factor in people’s lives. However - and as is intimated by FF’s description of her cross-generational friendship - within the Cincinnati Argentine tango CoP, such age-related stratification of the self and others seems less pervasive than in many other optional communal situations.

Dance historian Ramsay Burt notes that “social pressure obliges one to be oneself in the age appropriate way society prescribes” (2016). Recently, Burt investigated whether dance can offer

alternative ways of viewing ageing (2016, 2017). Burt's focus is on staged performances by older dancers and choreographers - including Pina Bausch, Trisha Brown, Anna Halperin, Steve Paxton, and Yvonne Rainer - and how they use dance to push back against cultural expectations. At the same time, Burt suggests, these artists are also challenging the notion, widespread in Western societies, that only by fully engaging in the consumer economy can older people offset some of the many presumptive negative aspects of ageing. Instead, their performances demonstrate how people of all different ages can relate to one another through "ethical engagement".

One factor which led Burt to this area of enquiry was hearing Trisha Brown say during an interview that while she was revered on stage, elsewhere people treated her as a "stereotypical older woman", to which she wanted to respond "You fools. I'm intelligent, passionate. How can you assume that is gone in me?" (2016). In other words, Burt argues, Brown wants to be recognised for her singular difference as part of a multitude of others rather than to be subject to the limiting preconceptions of others. In making that claim, Burt draws on the work of the enigmatic French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, especially Nancy's collection of essays *Être Singulier Pluriel* (Being Singular Plural 2000). Within the volume, Nancy notes that "The singular is primarily *each* one, and, therefore, also *with* and *among* all the others. The singular is plural" (emphases in original, 2000:32). Burt interprets Nancy to argue that the multitude that comprises so many singularly different entities is one in which "differences in age, race, gender and other components of identity can be acknowledged in an inclusive and non-discriminatory way" (2016). The resulting mutual recognition and acceptance then becomes part of a process in

which we incline towards and form relationships with one another in ethical engagement. Burt concedes that his view might seem Utopian but is vehement that dance performances do, in fact, contain the potential for imagining Utopian alternatives. Dance, he argues, can provide alternatives to seeking of happiness in material possessions in the hope of disavowing or warding off a culturally constructed fear of loss and instead offer a means of relating with others and adjusting to physical changes of age if and as they present, rather than trying to ignore them or assuming them to be other than they are (2016).

The celebrated Argentine tango dancer and choreographer, Juan Carlos Copes, once commented that:

When I was young and dancing the social clubs, regardless of whom I was dancing with, whether she was lovely or ugly, old or young, when we started dancing and I felt the music, I would have tears running down my face. (Quoted in Parker 1986:64)

In Argentine tango, people literally incline towards each other to adopt the characteristic off-axis *apile* stance. I suggest for members of the Cincinnati Argentine tango CoP, engaging with this dance as vernacular pastime can lead to a metaphorical inclining towards transformed ideas regarding age and age identity. The accounts of my interlocutors and my own observation indicate that age-related stereotyping and stratification is relatively rare. In fact, matters concerning age were noticeably absent during my interviews, including when the subject under discussion was preferred dance partners or the social aspect of community participation. The subject generally arose only when I specifically raised it and even then, the responses I received indicated either that age was simply immaterial, or that the individual's perceptions of other

dancers in terms of others' age identities were confounded - in a positive way - because of their shared participation in tango.

The youngest person whom I interviewed during my research was in her late 20s, and she spoke with particular enthusiasm of dancing with two men in the community - one of whom was around 70, the other must have been close to that age:

They're really light on their feet and their really good dancers, and I think it's like the personality and the physical-ness of it is not, like, shouldn't be stereotyped by like how old you are.

Another young woman in the community, PZ, is originally from Turkey. She moved to the US in 2012 with her American-born husband but began learning Argentine tango several years prior to her relocation Stateside. She said that at events in Istanbul:

You see more young people. Like even early 20s, 30s, and you don't see many older people. Even, like, over 40. I mean, it's not old at all, but I'm saying in, let's say, a tango class or place, you see more younger people than older ones, which was kind of interesting to me. (...) So here, maybe it's just about our community here, I don't know, but it was kind of surprising to me to see, like, people over 50, 60 even, so it was kind of surprising and I thought "wow, these people are really cool, even though they are kind of older. And they are dancing and they are having fun. And it's really nice". Now I don't think about age at all, and they seem young to me.

PS - whom I would estimate to be in his 30s - was one of the people who had told me that the local salsa scene seemed to be much younger than the Argentine tango community. I therefore asked him:

To what extent do you kind of like notice people's ages in this community? You said that you noticed they were older than, at least, the salsa crowd. I mean, how much is that something that you're still aware of?



His response was “Now since I know them, they really don’t feel old. They’re just people that I know”. Another man – who, at 48, still appeared to be one of the younger members of the community – said the mixing of ages was a positive aspect of his involvement in the dance and had led to his considering age as less of a defining factor vis-à-vis other people. It had shown him that “older people aren’t just my mother or a work colleague who I have nothing in common with”.

Most of those with whom I spoke voiced similar opinions, regardless of their age. HU said that, in her opinion, Argentine tango was Δ “a great equaliser because people from different backgrounds, ethnicities, socio-economic, ages, mix in this Tango World, which is wonderful”. DL said that she felt that within the Cincinnati community Δ “age is not a matter. Once the people dance, no matter the age”. And CV told me of a recent dance floor encounter he had had with a woman from out of town who was 67 to his 62:

It was just a beautiful experience. We were, you know, just two people having a wonderful dance so the age thing – yeah, I think the more you get to know somebody on the dance floor, the less you think of the age off the dance floor, and I think it’s more of an education too. Like I never really look at somebody and think of age too much anymore. I never think of age as relevant.

My interviewees’ accounts indicated that the Cincinnati ethos which encouraged everyone to dance with everyone – regardless of many factors, including of age – seemed to reduce the relevance of age off the dance-floor, as well as on. For example, RY said that since she became involved in the CoP, age seemed largely unimportant:

Like, everybody wants to dance with E [a female dancer and tango instructor who is in her 60s]. You know, like she’s a great teacher, she’s a welcoming person, and

it's like, when I look at the younger leads, especially the newer ones, they always want to dance with her.

UH, 66, told me she did not care if she danced with a “guy who's short and fat, or tall and slender, or young” and that “the same goes for the guys”. She offered an example:

We had this guy come through who's an engineer. Erm, he was just here in town for a couple of months. His name was K. Very handsome kid. Young. He'd been dancing three years. He danced with every woman like they were the hottest babe in the world, and he was, like, 25. He wasn't looking around the room for other 25 year olds. He danced with everybody. And you could see that he was enjoying every dance.

FS, who is probably similar in age to UH, made a comparable comment; he said that one of the reasons why he liked tango so much was because “if you're a really good tango dancer, the women really don't care how old you are, and that's, that's a blessing, it really is”.

In many societies, including in the USA, the problem of ageism is gendered. As a means of tackling this issue, sociologist Susan Pickard has drawn attention to the “old Hag”, including through a discussion of Rodin's sculptural depiction of the figure:

The sense of horror and tragedy, of dread and pity we feel in her presence represents the distillation of the age system (which is also a sexist system) and as such defines it. The old Hag appears in many forms but in each case she depicts the deep resistance towards old age that is located in our collective consciousness. (2016:1-2)

According to the older female members of the CoP, however, the old Hag has no place among the Cincinnati tango dancers, and many expressed appreciation for the lack of age discrimination evident there. One woman, BY, who was a year shy of 70 when she spoke, commented that “You can dance with anyone and age is not an issue”. She added that although she had heard it said

that as a woman, “you reach a certain age and you become invisible”, within Tango World this was not the case “because it’s about the dance”. I had the following exchange on the topic with XK:

Δ I don’t know what people think about when they look at me, but when I look at them, I don’t think about their age, I think about how do they dance, how they are what they are when they dance. I don’t care about their age. But I maybe conscious of “yeah, maybe they will not dance with me, I’m too old”.

XK went on to say that although she felt that her age presented no kind of obstacle at Cincinnati tango events, in other locations she sometimes found herself ignored because of her age. PF had also noted a contrast between how her experience in Cincinnati compared with other places in which she had danced:

Δ a great thing about tango, our tango community at least, and many other communities, is that people mingle and age doesn’t matter. You can be a great dancer and you can be 80 and you can be a lousy dancer and be 20, you know.

### **Argentine Tango and Increased Awareness of Age Identity**

For all that age stratification, age discrimination, and age-related stereotyping were not prominent features of Tango World as experienced by members of the Cincinnati CoP, age-related concerns were not completely absent from its confines. A couple of my interviewees told me that whilst the ages, or the ageing, of others were of no import to them, dancing exacerbated their own sense of passing time. BF, for example, was around 18 tango years old when we met and he had noticed that his stamina had declined in recent years. At the same time, though, he also experienced the dance as a revitalising force:

On the one hand, it makes me more aware that I'm slowing down. You know, during the day sometimes, I have no energy for anything, but I'll go to tango and suddenly I have lots of energy. And I expect that to continue.

DL was 48 chronological years and ten tango years old at the time of our conversation. When I asked if dancing tango had affected his sense of time passing or of his age identity, DL responded that he felt he was "racing against time" to improve as much as he could as a dancer:

I believe that I have a few years in front of me to get good. I am thinking in terms of my physicality, my athleticism. I will be 49 in a week. I probably don't have another ten years to get really good. And to get really good, I need to be able to push the envelope athletically. At some point, time will catch up with me and I am not going to be able to progress at an ascent when I'm 60. That's just a fact, right? Now I could probably still get a whole lot better from what I am right now probably for about another five years? But once I'm 55, I'm not going to be able to dance like I could when I'm 48. That's just a fact. At some point your age is going to catch up with you.

Did that mean, I wanted to know, that dancing tango was accentuating DL's awareness of the ageing process. Yes, he said, at least "in some respects". He went on:

I think I'll be able to dance tango as long as I can continue to walk, which hopefully will be far into the future. But there is some excitement that comes from being able to envision yourself still progressing in the dance, that there's a lot to still look forward to in terms of being able to explore new physical dimensions of the dance, that the dance can go in certain directions that are as boundless as your imagination. And when you are in that zone, you wouldn't want something like stiffness in your back to constrain you.

DL was also one of the few interviewees who indicated an awareness of the ageing of others. He described one dancer as looking much older than their age, for example, and commented that they lacked endurance because of their physical decline.<sup>124</sup> Another male interviewee, who had

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<sup>124</sup> Interestingly, several others said that the same dancer provided an example of what they aspired to be as they themselves grew older. (For what it is worth, I also do not think the person in question looks older than their age).

been notably enthusiastic about the mixing of ages within the community, was equally emphatic that:

we are ageing mammals, and cartilage and bone. And all that type of stuff is, while it seems like a non-existent part of this conversation, it really does matter. Those physical capabilities really matter to where you're really going to execute and how you're really going to do these dances. I was watching dancing last night and I was watching some of the older people who, ten years ago, they just moved differently, and now they're moving in a much more lethargic, controlled, way.

A comment made by DS, albeit in tangential fashion, also indicated awareness of the ageing of others. It came about when he was describing the difference between how, as a lead, he experienced "heavy" and "light" follows. With a heavy follow, he said:

you do a lead and they don't respond, so you're kind of like pushing up against them and it's like, it takes a lot of effort because you're, you're kind of almost controlling them because they don't respond fast enough.

By way of contrast, he then named one of the community's youngest female dancers as an exemplar of a light follow. He listed a number of contributing factors, including that this woman was "in good shape", was not overweight, had an excellent sense of balance - and that she was "young". After our conversation, I contacted DS by email to ask how important he considered youth to be when it came to being a light dancer. In his reply, he said that he did "not mean to imply that youth itself was a desirable quality". However, younger dancers seemed more likely to embody some of the characteristics of a light partner, such as strength, flexibility, and speed. On the other hand, he wrote, skill and experience were also necessary, and he went on to comment that:

there are older dancers who are light dancers also: they have the strength, flexibility and quickness, and they have the skills as well. If a follow maintains

her axis, does not break the embrace, and is very responsive to my lead, she feels light to me.

DS's reflections and the others excerpted above are not necessarily indicative of negative perceptions regarding ageing. However, they do suggest that in some circumstances, their involvement in Argentine tango increases their awareness of the ageing process, both with regard to others and to the self. Further illustrations of this came from SN, TC, and HP. SN said he danced with women of all ages and felt blessed that he was rarely turned down. Even so, dancing with younger women could increase his consciousness of his own age:

Sometimes, like with really young women, I wonder if they really want to dance with me or not, because I'm so much older than them. I feel uncomfortable sometimes because I understand they're trying to be nice, but I really wonder how much they want to dance with somebody, you know, that old. And a lot of the time, you can really tell if someone really likes dancing with you, and other times you don't have a clue.

Like SN, TC made no distinction regarding the ages of his partners, but he too wondered about his partners' perception of him in terms of age. Meanwhile HP was one of the community's younger members and her favourite partners were among the eldest leads in the community. That being the case, however, did not eradicate her cognisance of the age gap. She said that she was "very aware that I'm younger than most people there [laughs] which I guess I'm like okay with". In other words, age cannot be entirely disregarded on or around the Cincinnati Argentine tango dance floor.

## **Age, Gender, and the Matter of Invitation**

HP - the young dancer whom I quoted at the end of the previous section – was prompted to take up tango by her parents who had been dancing for several years when they encouraged their daughter to get involved. I asked HP if she ever went to tango events and ended up sitting out more than she would like. Generally not, she said, and added:

HP     I very rarely feel like I've had hardly any dances. Because my mum will complain about "oh I only had two dances" or whatever and even when I feel like I don't have a lot of dances, I'll still have, like, four or five, which is considered a lot for some people.

Rachel Hopkin     Have you any idea what's making the difference between maybe your mum getting two dances and you getting ten or whatever?

HP     I don't know. I don't know if it's an age thing. Could be. Erm, erm ... I think I follow a little better than her, or I could do certain moves maybe that she can't do.

Did HP have any idea why she regularly received more invites than her mother, I wanted to know. Her response was "I don't know. I don't know if it's an age thing. Could be", though she said it might also be because she was a better follow. From what others have told me, HP is a natural dancer and perhaps the same is not true of her mother. As a result, it could be that HP receives more invitations to dance based solely on her kinaesthetic skills. However, I did wonder if ageism was a factor when it came to the thorny issue of invitation.

Only one person whom I interviewed admitted a preference for younger partners and that was a woman, WQ. I had asked WQ if age mattered when it came to her partners, which prompted the following exchange:

Rachel Hopkin     I mean, do you care if you dance with somebody young?

WQ     Oh, not at all. I love it.

Rachel Hopkin        Okay, okay. Or older? Older? I mean, are you looking at the younger men just to kind of like ... [WQ is nodding and I start laughing].  
WQ    I like dancing with the younger men [laughs] to be honest with you. I don't want to dance with an old ...  
Rachel Hopkin        You don't want to dance with a – oh, you're so funny [laughing].  
WQ    I'd rather dance with the younger ones [laughing].

WQ told me that she NEVER invited men to dance, so her preference for younger partners did not have a big impact on the character of the Cincinnati tango scene.

The only other person who came close to admitting that age was a factor vis-à-vis preferred dancer partners was a man, SY, who was just short of 70 chronological years of age when he and I talked. Like many other interviewees, SY told me that one of the aspects of Tango World that he appreciated was that within it, his age did not seem to be an issue. He added that one of his favourite partners is “a young girl” who danced very “smoothly”. He then commented that:

there's a massive gap between our ages. She's probably 22 or something, and I'm not 22 anymore [laughs]. And I don't really feel that I'm an ageing man asking a young girl to dance, I don't feel it. She's just someone to dance with, so I would say that there is no age gap when you're on a dance floor.

But, I wanted to know, did that work other way too? Would SY be equally blithe about the age gap if he were dancing with women older than himself? He replied that, as far as he knew, none of the women in the Cincinnati CoP were older than him. “Okay” I said, “but if you were to dance with a woman in her 60s - and there are definitely women in their 60s in that community - do you think of them as women in their 60s”. “Yeah”, SY said, “I think of them as too old”. SY laughed when he said this, and I was not sure whether he was joking or not. I have certainly observed him dancing with many women in their 60s. But for all that age really did seem less



divisive factor within the Cincinnati Argentine tango community than it is in many other social realms, when it came to the fractious - and indisputably gendered - matter of who gets the most invitations to dance, it did still seem to be a factor, if only in terms of perception and expectation.

The following account is taken from my record of the opening night of the 2017 “Cincinnati Argentine Tango Mini Festival” which took place across a weekend in the April of that year. The event was well-attended both by members of the local community, as well as by dancers from elsewhere. The opening (Friday) evening’s events consisted of a workshop followed by a *milonga*. In the fieldnotes I wrote up later, I commented that, after having been invited to dance for several consecutive *tandas* at the *milonga*, I was ready to leave:

so I went back to the corner table and started putting my shoes on and was chatting with LQ [a Cincinnati-based female dancer] who was at the adjoining table. LQ is older than me by several decades. As I was putting my trainers back on, an out-of-towner came up and asked me to dance. I’d danced with him during the earlier workshop. I indicated I was on my way out but also sort of gestured “another time? Another time?” because I didn’t want to lose the invitation all together. In the meantime, I saw him turn to LQ to ask her instead, but because she was looking down and thereby evading his glance, he immediately moved on. After he left, I gestured to her that he’d been asking her, but LQ misunderstood me and said “oh, I’m invisible”. “No”, I said, “he was asking you, but you were looking away so he’s moved on”. I recommended that she try and catch him later because my impression during the workshop had been that he was a good dancer and she said that she would.

Many invitations in Tango World are, like the one just described, the product of previous contact. I believed that the out-of-towner invited me to dance because we had already interacted with one another pleasantly enough during the class. LQ, on the other hand, assumed that he was asking me rather than her because I was younger than her and closer to his age. She thought that he would not ask her because she was older than him, and they had not hitherto had any interaction

which might offset the age difference. But LQ was wrong; he would have invited her to dance, had she looked in his direction. Perhaps they did dance later on. However, my point is that there can often be a perception regarding the existence of a relationship between age and invitations which may not, in fact, be correct.

LQ was one of the women whom I quoted earlier as expressing appreciation for the lack of ageism in the Cincinnati community. Some of my female interviewees spoke of experiencing, or witnessing, gendered ageism away from Cincinnati. PH, for example, recalled an incident that had taken place in Buenos Aires some years previously when she was visiting one of the city's trendier *milongas* which was frequented by people in their twenties and early thirties:

Δ I was 41 years old and I felt I was pretty young looking but still, when I was in this young crowd, I did feel that men would not take me out as much. So once I was at one of these dances. It was late, it was maybe 3 in the morning, and I hadn't really danced and I was ready to leave, but there was this young couple who sat at my table, a guy and a girl. They were talking and the guy started talking with me and we were talking all of us, and at one point I said "would you like to dance with me?" because it was the kind of *milonga* where things were not as formal. And he looked at me and he said "erm, nah, I don't think so". And the woman said "come on. You should take her out to dance". But he said "ah, nah, just I don't know". I was very self-assured at that point. I said something like "okay, your loss" or something like that. And the woman "come on, take her out". So he took me out to dance and we danced a long time, like more than a *tanda*. And when he took me back to the table, he apologised. And I don't remember what he said exactly but I think he just basically [hadn't invited me earlier] because I was older.

LD also compared another community unfavourably with the Cincinnati CoP:

Δ Something happened here that the people is so friendly. A couple of months ago, I went to the West Coast to dance in a very like open-minded place, Seattle. But the people doesn't mix. Young people dance with young and because all the community is young, nobody invite me to dance. They don't mix and I found other followers that went to Portland, Seattle, other places, and they found the

same. So people in the community here, very friendly. The leaders dance with everyone and make – they welcome every person that got into the room.

BT had also experienced different attitudes when away from home:

Δ BT I think it's a young person's dance in that when you go to dance in Buenos Aires or in some other large communities, however old and unattractive a man may be, they feel totally sort of entitled to go and ask the youngest woman to dance, and it doesn't quite translate. It doesn't work the other way around quite. Oh, we would like to think that it's all about how well you dance but it's usually the younger women get the most dances. Their ability is not as relevant.

Rachel Hopkin Huh.

BT [Laughs]. You look disappointed.

Rachel Hopkin I am disappointed.

BT I think it's that that need for men, all men, to hold a young attractive woman in their arms is satisfied right there. She doesn't have to be a great dancer. I think that alone is often enough. Whereas for women, I think we want to have a good dance.

Rachel Hopkin But would you say there's any sense of, if you are a good dancer, it maybe counterbalances not being the youngest person.

BT It helps some but not always.

As is clear from that exchange, BT was speaking of situations which I preferred to think did not exist. YR had also found that age - which she described as a “superficial” matter - could be a factor in some pockets of Tango World:

YR There is a lot of superficial stuff and there's a lot of group behaviour that goes on that doesn't enchant me in the least. When I go to new cities, things like status and age and all that stuff plays a role. Not with everybody and sometimes delightful things happen, but when you're with people you don't know, it's hard.

Rachel Hopkin But you haven't experienced that here in Cincinnati? In your 'hood.

YR Erm. I think it exists. You know, with some people.

YR's assertion that gendered ageism did sometimes arise in Cincinnati rather surprised me, given how many people had expressed opinions to the contrary. But she was not alone. GR laughingly told me that she: “could write a mathematical equation for who gets asked to dance” based on:

“your personal relationships with the men, the leads”, as well as “your appearance, which is youth, attractiveness, clothing. And your dance skills”. GR said that in her case, the more she improved as a dancer, made an effort with her appearance, and socialised, the more invitations she received. She also mentioned a female friend in the community who had commented to her that:

she felt like she wasn't getting any dances and she said “as I look around the room, it's really interesting, I think I'm the only woman who doesn't colour my hair. And I'm overweight. And I don't dress to the nines”. “But” she said “I think I'm good company. I think I'm a good dancer”. And I think she's very musical, but I think it took her a long time to get the dances that I felt like she deserved.

In other words, and as has been implied by some of the other comments excerpted above, GR felt that her friend was being judged according to a form of value-determination that she believed should have no place on or around the dance floor - i.e. her age and her appearance - and not on the basis of her dance competence which GR deemed as more relevant. PQ also said she had witnessed evidence of ageism in the Cincinnati, although she indicated that it was more the exception than the norm:

PQ I mean, I look and I see these frankly somewhat frumpy older women who are very good dancers and they do dance. But it's still selective for them. I notice who dances with them.

Rachel Hopkin Uh huh. But if one feels really good about one's dance and one feels that one's at a decent level, do you think it could offset, maybe, offset that ageism?

PQ Absolutely. I think that if you are known as a really good dancer, it will offset it with most people. But I can think of a couple of people there that it wouldn't.

Other than SY, the man whom I quoted near the start of this section who (possibly jokingly) said that he would consider women in their 60s to be “too old” to dance with, none of my male interviewees admitted to avoiding asking older woman. In fact, one, NE, said that between:

two women of equal dancing abilities, I would normally choose the older one because the younger woman will typically get more dances anyway. My personal preference is to dance with a more experienced partner and not with the youngest one. Maybe it has to do with the fact that I have three daughters and do not want to appear as a “dirty old man”.

NE’s account makes clear that several factors play into his decision regarding whom to invite, including his assessment of the number of invitations he imagines the woman will receive from other parties. More generally, he prefers to dance with highly competent rather than youthful dancers, not least because of his concern about how he might be perceived were he to appear to favour the former.

### **Regenerating an Ageing Community**

Exceptions notwithstanding, demonstrations of ageism do not seem to be prevalent within the Cincinnati Argentine tango CoP. However, there was one age-related area of concern which seemed to be unequivocally of import across the board: namely, the matter of keeping the community alive.

In Chapter 2, I discussed how many Cincinnati dancers feel a strong sense of responsibility towards the community’s maintenance and regeneration. Part of the way in which that feeling of responsibility manifests in practice is through the (sometimes inadvertently comic) displays of enthusiastic welcome made to any young person new to the community. My attention was drawn

to this matter by PZ. She and her husband are themselves two of community's youngest members and although PZ feels that - on the whole - "age is not a factor" in the CoP, she has noticed that:

when a young person, or a young couple, young follow, young lead, whatever, walks in, everyone's kind of like [assumes shrill almost cat-like tone of voice] "oh, there is someone young". I feel that here in our community. Like they are really, really excited. And most of the time they come to us [ZP and her husband], and they say "hey, there's this young couple. You need to meet with them". They want to keep them there, and I understand. I would like to keep them there too. But when they see someone young, they get so excited.

PZ's description made me laugh, and reminded me that I once witnessed something similar myself. I was at a *milonga* and had been chatting with one of the Tango Del Barrio board members when a young couple entered the room. Immediately, the board member excused herself mid-sentence to go and welcome the pair.

The drive to attract and retain younger dancers within the community also influences the staging of some of its events. For example, although the *milongas* in Cincinnati generally start at 9 pm, the organiser of one of the regular Saturday night dances switched to an 8 pm start. He did this, he told me, because he had noticed that *milongas* were "getting to be an ageing crowd" and he wanted to make his one "accessible to the people who wanted to come early. And so kids like to go out on Saturday night, so they dance for an hour or two, and then go out".

In addition, the matter of age also arose in the mind of one of the Tango Del Barrio instructors when he was considering who to choose as a teaching partner. He said he had:

picked one person who's a young, good dancer. I get along very well with her and I've asked her to teach with me. (...) I think has a great future. She's a good dancer. She understands the dance. And I think that she will become a good

teacher of the dance, so I thought “well, there’s something I can do. I can take her on as sort of an apprentice and” - not that I’m a teacher by training, but I can bring her along and I think she’ll become a good tango teacher.

The first descriptor the man used regarding the person was that she was “young” and so I asked to what extent her youth had influenced his decision. He indicated that the woman’s ability and the fact that he got on well with her were more important factors, though at the same time, he thought that “it should be somebody younger because we need to keep on building a teaching staff”.

WA is a professional dancer and choreographer. She told me that part of why she enjoys spending time in Tango World is because she likes being around “more mature people” who, she felt, enrich the dance because of the experience they bring into it. “At the same time”, she said “we need younger people to continue this community. We need it to be diverse”. Her observation, I think, seems to encapsulate the overall ethos of the Cincinnati Argentine tango CoP vis-à-vis age.

## **Chapter Five – Closing Thoughts**

In her Buenos Aires-based ethnography, *Tango Nuevo*, Carolyn Merritt’s writes that:

While older men have it easier than their female counterparts in this world, nobody bats an eyelash at a grandmother in fishnets and high heels in the *milonga*. I have been asked time and again to reconcile these conflicting statements, and the truth is that I cannot. In tango, I see a world that ultimately favors men and an outlet where mature women may unabashedly revel in their sexuality. (2012:9)

Similarly irreconcilable contradictions arise in Cincinnati also, if only occasionally. Like Merritt, I cannot fully account for them - although I have demonstrated how they are formed from a web of cultural values, attitudes, and circumstances.

Folklorists have already made notable contributions to the body of scholarship that exists about ageing. They have variously looked at such matters as ageing and memory, life history perspectives, the practice of traditional culture in later life, the role of elders within communities, and how elders make sense of the circumstances in which they find themselves (Myerhoff 1978; Jabbour 1981; Hufford et al 1987; Mullen 1992; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett et al 2006). Their work is largely confined, however, to people who fit within a particular age bracket (namely what is considered to be elderly). By contrast, I have investigated perspectives on ageing from people whose dates of birth span six decades. I have explored how a group of people from all different stages of life share the dance of Argentine tango and the cultivation of the community which surrounds it.

There are many social situations which bring people of different ages together and it is often the case that increased familiarity decreases reliance on stereotypes. However, in the Cincinnati Argentine tango CoP, people of different ages are brought together in a physical practice in which advancing age is, for the most part, is often perceived to be an advantage. Many of the community's elders, in terms of chronological age, are also its elders in terms of tango age. Together with their juniors, they have collectively created a community that is based upon an



embodied practice in which differences in age seem to largely be “acknowledged in an inclusive and non-discriminatory way” (Burt 2016).

## CONCLUSION

Over the past several years, I have taught a number of folklore-themed undergraduate courses. Most of the students in these courses do not enrol in them by choice but in order to comply with the requirements of their degree programmes. The vast majority are majoring in STEM subjects. So how to convince them of the value of studying folklore? I have developed a number of strategies, one of which is to explain that forms of folklore can be explored as signifiers that point towards something other than the texts, objects, beliefs, and practices in and of themselves. As a result, even if my students are not interested in folklore per se, learning to be aware of how, when, where, and why people use folklore is a means of gaining insight into what matters to them. Learning about folklore and how to interpret its use may therefore help these students to navigate their future personal and professional relationships. As I explain to them, whatever is signified by the folklore in question might be related to the values and needs of the person's life of which it forms a part. It could also be a mark of their cultural or social background or their current status; of their stage of life; of their relationships and networks; of their occupation; or of their gender, ethnicity, sexuality, or another commonly recognised identity category; or of something else entirely; or - and this is most likely - a combination of factors. The key to presenting a convincing argument as to what is being signified, rather than offering conjecture rooted in assumptions and stereotypes, is - I tell them - to undertake ethnographic research. The uniquely specific material they gather in that process will provide the fodder for the reasoned interpretations which I expect them to detail in their final papers.

It is for much the same reason that conducting ethnographic research on a Midwestern band of “hobby” tango enthusiasts can - I believe - provide information which is of interest even to non-folklorists or those entirely unconcerned by dance, despite it being a group which has coalesced around what is effectively a relocated and recycled tradition.<sup>125</sup> On the whole, folklore scholars - at least historically - have focused upon inherited traditions and Richard Dorson would surely have viewed Argentine tango as practiced by Cincinnatians as fakelore (Dorson 1971). However, more recently, folkloristic research into relocated or recycled traditions (as well as invented traditions) has become more acceptable, with scholarship regarding folk music revivals clearly demonstrating this to be the case (see, for example, the contributions to Rosenberg 1993). Relocated and recycled dance forms have also received attention, not least in some of the publications which I have already cited numerous times in this monograph (such as Borland 2009b, and Bock and Borland 2011). Nonetheless, in a world in which recycling culture is the norm, and where the local can quickly become global before being relocalised, groups dedicated to the performance of such traditions - especially those which make no pretence of virtuosity - still tend to be routinely taken for granted, while the work that goes into their maintenance is largely ignored. But that such groups are generators of cultural heritage is surely undeniable, as is the fact that they are central to the meaning and value of the lives of those involved. As a result, it is imperative that folklorists continue to build the resources necessary to facilitate useful modes of investigations such communities.

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<sup>125</sup> The work more often used in connection with what I am describing as a “relocated and recycled” tradition is “appropriation”. However, “appropriation” contains a number of negative connotations, the investigation and analysis of which fall outside of the scope of this monograph.

Ruth Finnegan's important work *The Hidden Musicians: Music-Making in an English Town* provides an excellent model in this regard. In the book, Finnegan explores the cultural significance of a community of practice dedicated to amateur music-making in the British "new town" (i.e. planned urban development) of Milton Keynes. Finnegan notes that her subject "has many non-musical implications" (2007:327). "Local music", she goes on, "is not just a purist and abstract contemplation of the arts but also has other more mundane associations" (327). While the Milton Keynes' musicians may well be enthusiastic about the musical activities they pursue, at the same time those activities are:

embedded in a whole series of other interests and commitments (...) for as with any other set of pathways in society people make use of the established institutions and symbols in an almost infinite number of directions to suit their own circumstances and aspirations. (328)

Finnegan goes on to discuss some of the non-musical areas of importance afforded by the shared musical involvement, including sociability; relationships; a "channel to a socially recognised position in a relatively intimate setting" (328); "the sense of making a significant aesthetic contribution" (328); cultural continuity and cultural change (329); and the constitution of:

symbolic constructs within which people can create and control the world, providing a continuing thread, often taken up week after week after week, which both creates and differentiates social activity - one arena in which people thus manifest and experience their social reality. (329)

These same areas also emerge as significant corollaries of members' participation in the Cincinnati Argentine tango CoP. The dancers enjoy being constituents of a community which is

devoted to a shared interest, and they want to help sustain and regenerate that community. Establishing and maintaining social relationships is an important facet of establishing and maintaining dance partnerships. Improving artistically through increased dance competence is crucial to how participants derive value from their practice, and they strive to continually improve their skills. The Cincinnati dancers avoid limiting their views of how Argentine tango “should” be performed and instead embrace the multiplicity of possible manners in which it can be danced. The fact that they dance Argentine tango is an aspect of their lives in which they take pleasure and pride.

Finnegan concludes her Milton Keynes study by considering “why music?” rather than some other shared practice. My project’s equivalent question would be, of course, “why tango?”. I believe that at least some of the answers lie in this dissertation’s four analysis chapters. When myriad Midwestern residents practice Argentine tango as a vernacular pastime, they become involved in a processual undertaking which demands extensive conscious commitment. Accordingly, their interest in tango leads to their participation in the social network which surrounds the dance, shapes their aesthetic tastes and kinaesthetic abilities, and both reflects and impacts numerous other aspects of their lives. Just as Finnegan notes that music-making “whether in Milton Keynes or elsewhere has many non-musical implications” (327), so is it that a dance practice has many non-dance implications. Over time, the ways in which the Cincinnati dancers involve themselves in Argentine tango become indexical signifiers for multiple and complex aspects of their identities, aspirations, values, needs, desires, sociability, cultural formation and more. Argentine tango, it seems, can provide a forum in which to practice

performances of masculinity or femininity that might seem inappropriate elsewhere; it can offer a form of intimacy; it can be arena in which concerns about ageing are reduced; it can be a way of re-engaging with the world following loss or change; it can satisfy one dancer's yearning for the beautiful dresses, the fancy balls, and the horse-driven coaches that she has read about again and again in romance novels set in Regency England; it can be and do all these and many other things, depending on the dancer in question and what they seek, need, and bring.

Both the appeal of the dance itself, and the non-dance implications which accompany it, can be understood in terms of tanguicity - the anglicised rendering of the Argentine word *tanguedad* - to which I was introduced through the scholarship of Ana Cara and which has become a recurring theme in this monograph (2009). As I mentioned in Introduction, Cara is quick to point out that explaining what the word actually means is no simple matter. She offers several brief descriptions, including "tango ethos" and - drawing on the work of tango scholar José Gobello - the "essence of tango" (438). With regard to this latter interpretation, Cara goes on to note that folklorists are aware that reducing "cultural forms to their difficult-to-describe 'essential' nature" is a not uncommon occurrence and can be understood as referencing how a community's shared ethos becomes encoded in its vernacular artistic expressions (438). As a result, Cara writes, tanguicity "embraces the many social, historical, geographical, and cultural dimensions that have made tango possible, indeed necessary, in the lives of Argentines for more than a century" (439). She goes on to name some of these dimensions, including the "milonga cultural complex" rooted in a network of tango dance halls (440); the creolization process that involved European

immigrants and other populations present in Buenos Aires during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (440); and traditional tango musicality (442).

Cara is primarily concerned with the entangled manifestations of tanguicity which can be found in both home tango and in export tango. Export tango refers to choreographed staged performances of the dance which, though designed for foreign audiences, nonetheless are redolent with tanguicity. Home tango, by contrast, refers to the more intimate, less flashy, version of the dance which is typically enacted in the social context of the *milonga*. For the initiated dancer, home tango - drenched as it is in tanguicity - is, Cara writes, “an approach to dance that mirrors an approach to life” (455).

As I am not from Argentina, I do not feel qualified to speak to the tanguicity quotient of Argentine tango as performed in Cincinnati. However, during the three decades or so that Argentine tango has existed in this southern Ohio city, a localised form of tanguicity has developed - a “Cincinnati-tanguicity”. It is a Midwestern tango ethos and essence that characterises and pervades the corner of Tango World created and frequented by the Cincinnatians. Perhaps it is more akin to the nomad tango which Cara, drawing on the work of Ramón Pelinski (2000), describes in her article. The term nomad tango was coined to reference “transcultured hybrid forms of tango music” that are “entrenched in local cultures outside of Argentina”. Such forms may lose their “original tanguicity”, Cara quotes Pelinski as writing, but

instead “become enriched with new meanings” (2009:442).<sup>126</sup> To recap, the characteristics which I discerned to be important to Cincinnati-Tanguicity as tango ethos are: displaying eclecticism and individuality on the dance floor whilst at the same time adhering to the principles of floor craft; committing to spending time in the zone of perpetual improvement and appreciating others who do the same; eschewing of dance floor hierarchies; taking care when giving feedback; contributing to the community by means of volunteer effort; and actively taking responsibility for maintaining and regeneration the CoP. Meanwhile, the elements which struck me as fundamental to Cincinnati-Tanguicity as tango essence – and therefore to ensuring dancers ongoing inhabitation of Tango World (or, at least, to the Cincinnati corner of Tango World) – include: dance floor-related peak experiences, both in terms of the motivation provided by the memory of previous such experiences and the hope of experiencing another one; the feeling of connection, communication, intimacy, and touch; the possibility of focussing on the dance to such an extent that all else is forgotten; spending time in a zone of perpetual improvement that is generated by complexity, creativity, and improvisation; tango music; the sensations engendered by the performance of certain steps and movements; and the experience of fully feeling and expressing the self.

The participant observation fieldwork which I have carried out among the Cincinnati Argentine tango dancers has allowed me to see ways in which this Cincinnati-tanguicity emerges within and shapes both the community as a whole and its members, as they in turn shape it. It is evident

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<sup>126</sup> Cara’s article sites page 29 of: Pelinski, Ramón. 2000. *El Tango Nómade*. Buenos Aires: Corregidor.



in the way that they work to perpetuate the Argentine tango tradition in their midwestern city and how certain elements emerge as especially important as they do so. It is evident in the ways that they describe which aspects of positive affect stick, and ensure that they too remain stuck, to the happy object that is their CoP. It is also apparent in their ideas about gender and ageing, as well as in their performances – both solo and collective – of gender and age identity.

The CoP at the heart of my study is not the kind of CoP that is typically studied. When Lave and Wenger formulated their concept of Community of Practice, they did so in the context of studying how professional apprenticeships work as learning models. In the years since they coined the term, the concept has found a number of “practical applications in business, organizational design, government, education, professional associations, development projects, and civic life” (Wenger-Trayner 2015). It seems to have been less used in reference to groups devoted to the study of cultural forms as leisure activities (albeit with exceptions, not least the 2001 *Western Folklore* “Communities of Practice: Traditional Music and Dance” special issue discussed in the introduction of this monograph and which was co-edited by Jordan-Smith and Horton). However, and as I have shown, the ethnographic investigation of CoP which is focussed upon an informal, expressive cultural import can permit greater cognisance of areas that ostensibly seem to have little to do with the practice itself, but which are central to the lived experience and the meaning derived therefrom (including the value members derive from repeatedly returning to the zone of perpetual improvement, as made possible by their relationship with the dance). In addition, I have described my own methodological approach to the study of such groups which is rooted in insider interactive enquiry.

Ultimately, I hope that my work here demonstrates that studying a CoP centred upon a domain which consists of an expressive cultural import adapted to a new environment offers insights that extend beyond the nature of the community, their practice, and the domain themselves. That said, it was, of course, essential that I be familiar with the Cincinnati Argentine tango CoP in order to interpret the data gathered. Again, I must reiterate my gratitude to its members for allowing me to explore the role that Argentine tango plays in their lives and in their sense of self.

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