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Trouble with Tango: conversations across boundaries Argentine Tango and contact improvisation

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ELEANOR BRICKHILL BA

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CERTIFICATION

I, Eleanor Brickhill, declare that this thesis, submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Master of Arts – Research, in the Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Eleanor Brickhill

29 March 2016
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Foreign and technical terms

*milonga*  The name of a social tango event where people go to dance tango: at a milonga, there are usually three kinds of dances: tango, *milonga* and *vals* – *a milonga* (dance) is an early, quick-paced form of tango.

cabeceo  A man’s silent invitation to dance, using his eyes.

*practica*  A place to practice tango.

*nuevo*  New.

tanda  A bracket of three or four songs of either tango, *vals* or *milonga*.

cortina  A short non-tango musical break between *tandas*.

codigos  Tango codes.

*machismo*  Aggressive masculinity.

gauchos  Cattlemen.

*pampas*  South American lowlands.

canyengue  Describes a kind of ‘streetwise quality’ of an early tango.

tango criollo  Literally ‘Creole tango’, in early tango.

tango liso  Tango characterised by simplicity and smoothness.

tango de salon  An elegant, slow and refined tango.

ruffianesque  Saviglio’s term describing a quality of rough working class tango.

milonguita  Term for a young girl who ends up as a prostitute in a tango bar.

compadrito  A street dandy, or ruffian.

milongueromilonguera  Those who frequent milongas and whose life revolves around tango; someone thought to embody tango’s essence.

estilo milonguero  Milongero style, or close embrace.

*El Civico/ La Moreira*  A theatrical ‘ruffianesque’ tango couple.

tanguidad  A sensibility or feeling that tinges everything with nostalgia.

tanguero/ tanguera  A person who is serious about everything tango: music, lyrics, history, dancers; scholar of *lunfardo*, music, orchestration, musicians.

lunfardo  Spanish/Italian slang of the Buenos Aires underworld.

tanguerical  A quintessentially tango quality.

portenos  Inhabitants of the port city of Buenos Aires.

muliebrity  Womanly qualities.
Abstract

This thesis explores two different forms of improvised, social partner dance – contact improvisation and Argentine tango – arguing that despite their emergence from wildly different cultural and socio-political contexts, there is nonetheless a shared core of physical partnering skills. It draws on my embodied experience as a professional dancer trained in various forms of modern dance, as well as extensive and ongoing study of contact improvisation, Ideokinesis, and Argentine tango, in order to ask: what are the practices and issues that create difficulties or barriers to the transmission or reception of these core skills from one form to the other? In order to investigate this question, this thesis is particularly interested in the ‘lead/follow’ structure within the tango ‘embrace’, understood as key to the partnering relationship.

Consequently, this practice-led thesis draws on field work undertaken at milongas, practicas and classes in Sydney, Hamburg, Berlin and Buenos Aires, as well as on interviews undertaken with key practitioners in both forms. This primary research is supported by scholarship drawing on social practice theory, dance anthropology, gender and performance studies, psychoanalysis and pedagogy.

Critical to this thesis is a concern for gender equality and social practice, particularly in the context of best practice in adult education. Consequently another question is whether the tango partnership, with its historically defined roles of leader and follower, has the potential to grow into a more equal and collaborative relationship built around negotiation, as is commonly practised in contact improvisation, rather than being defined almost exclusively by hierarchical heteronormative gender stereotypes.
Also critical to this research project is an interrogation of the concept of ‘authenticity’ explored through the traditional Argentine tango *codigas*, or ‘codes’ – the *cabeceo* and the tango embrace – through which the perception of an ‘authentic’ practice is constructed, maintained and measured. The social practice theory of Pierre Bourdieu, and, in particular, his concepts of *hysteresis*, *habitus*, field and social capital, are integral to this research. The recurrent question ‘Is it tango?’ is also explored through an examination of practice and pedagogy, but in particular the philosophies and practices of contact improvisation and queer tango, understood as strategies that may mitigate against a habitual reassertion of normative values.

This thesis concludes by finding that even if there are no absolute solutions in efforts to loosen tango’s socially unforgiving binaries, several areas in movement research might be fruitfully explored in order to understand and foster an ‘endless gliding’ between differences – understood as a search for ways that allow participation in tango partnerships to be more socially inclusive – not necessarily so that tango becomes unrecognisable, but in order that some of the understandings of the postmodern enterprise might enrich the beauty and intimacy of a tango partnership.
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In Germany: Ute Walter, Adriana Pegorer, Enrique van Doezelaar, Gabriele Koch and Tobias Funke.

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Argentine tango through the eyes of a postmodern dancer

This thesis explores two very different forms of improvised, social partner dance: contact improvisation, which first emerged in New York in the early 1970s; and Argentine tango, which arose in the late nineteenth century in the streets, tenements and brothels of Buenos Aires and Montevideo. It argues that, despite their emergence from wildly different temporal, cultural and socio-political contexts, at the heart of these very different dance practices there is nonetheless a shared core of physical partnering skills. The central question that this thesis asks is: what are the practices and issues that create difficulties or barriers to the transmission or reception of these core skills from one form to the other?

The question of whether there are concepts, practices and pedagogic strategies drawn from contact improvisation that have the potential to provide for progressive creative freedom for dancers participating in the Argentine tango, regardless of gender or sexual identity, is critical to this research project. The question is whether the tango partnership, with its historically defined roles of leader and follower, has the potential to grow into a much more collaborative relationship, built around negotiation in the dance, rather than being defined almost exclusively by hierarchical heteronormative gender stereotypes. Consequently, it is important to stress from the outset that in contemporary thought, all dance forms are understood as gendered (e.g. Rothfield 1988; Dempster 1988). It is not this fact alone that is important to this thesis, but what it means to dancers: how gender is imagined and performed in various ways, and in particular in its relationship to the roles of lead and follow in Argentine tango. This thesis elaborates on each of the forms.
mentioned – traditional Argentine tango, *nuevo* (‘new’) tango, queer tango and contact-tango - seeking to show an increasing freedom of approach through which the dance partnership is facilitated to evolve into a much more collaborative, negotiable relationship, rather than being defined exclusively by rigid hierarchical heteronormative gender stereotypes.

This research project is necessarily practice-led, being inevitably informed by my 40-odd years as a professional dance artist, working primarily in postmodern genres. My dance practice has been deeply inflected by a wide range of training that arose as part of the radical social and artistic practices which initially occurred in New York in the 1960s, and whose impacts were felt globally. Critical to this practice is my immersion in contact improvisation and release work, and in other somatic practices that underpin much postmodern and contemporary dance. As a young dancer in the mid-1970s, I learned a number of standard dance techniques simultaneously: Graham, Cunningham and classical ballet, as well as release-based practices including contact improvisation, all of which I studied intensively from the mid-1970s through to the late 1990s in Sydney. As a consequence, I was not always clear where the boundaries between different kinds of work lay. By the time I became inspired by Sally Potter’s film *The Tango Lesson* in 1997¹, these separate bodies of understanding seemed to have coalesced in my body, having merged in a way that allowed me to see clearly the similarities between contact improvisation and Argentine tango, where most people would find only differences.

¹ Sally Potter, British dancer and filmmaker, directed and performed in *The Tango Lesson* (1997), a film produced by Christopher Sheppard in Britain, and Oscar Kramer in Argentina. It features dancers Gustavo Naveira, the reputed ‘father of nuevo’, and Pablo Veron, choreographer for the film, who comments that ‘*The Tango Lesson* was the first vision of a modern, different tango, the one that marked and inspired change’, [http://www.pabloveron.net/PABLOTANGAUTAing.pdf](http://www.pabloveron.net/PABLOTANGAUTAing.pdf).
However, my particular interest in this research arose as I began to learn Argentine tango, and recognised partnering issues common to both dances. At the time, in 2009, I was searching for that elusive dance that could hold my attention and imagination, while sustaining the kind of philosophical approach to the dancing body, which I have found both culturally and personally rewarding. I was sure that some of the ways in which partnering worked in contact improvisation, and in which I was well practised, could help tango dancers achieve a more satisfying partnering experience. For example, one could cultivate an attitude of exploration and play in which dancers could more easily become sensitive to the quality of another’s touch; one could learn to find controlled and mutually shared touch, pressure and body weight to direct or deflect a partner’s movement; and physical exploration could develop techniques for mobile balances, spirals and pivots.

As far as my research has been able to determine, my experience of tango in Sydney is relatively uncommon owing both to my status as a mature professional concert dancer with well-developed postmodernist leanings, combined with my somewhat less clear status as an Anglo-Australian, middle-aged, feminist woman. But while my postmodern dancerly perspective may not be common in tango in Sydney, it affords me a rich arena in which to further develop some ideas about dance as a kind of social demeanour.

I am not, in fact, the first to see similarities between contact improvisation and tango. For instance, UK-based dance artist, Adriana Pegorer, has been working since 1998 with a hybrid form called contact-tango, a fusion of contact improvisation and Argentine tango (Pegorer 2013), developing a pedagogical
approach called Tango Release that applies the principles of Todd alignment and release work to the study of Argentine tango (Pegorer 2012). At their best, both contact improvisation and Argentine tango are improvisational partnering forms relying to a great extent for their execution on the sense of physical touch, a sharing of body weight and pressure that is so close, and so open to being read, that within the partnership there is great potential for intimacy and meaning to flourish.

Whether emotionally expressive or not, ideally both are practised with a type of intensely controlled abandon within an attentive and responsive partnership that is rare in other partnered forms. What became clear, however, was that in the world of tango in Sydney, few teachers understood how these skills might be taught, being, as this thesis argues, hampered by the traditional system of teaching tango – that of teacher demonstration and student mimicry – with my own teacher’s ever-present injunction to ‘have a look’ being emblematic of this approach. These perspectives, drawn from both my experience as a professional dance artist and teacher, and as a social tango dancer, have inspired the research and writing of this thesis.

1.1 Methodology

This thesis is practice-led, drawing strongly on my personal and professional experience as a dance artist over many years. As such my methodology may be understood as ‘autoethnographic’, a research methodology that recognises ‘the innumerable ways personal experience influences the research process’ (Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2011). In this thesis, my personal and professional history is read in conjunction with the cultural narratives embedded in the two dances and the ways in which they are imagined as features of personal and cultural identity. In particular this research examines how embedded values, particularly concerning
heteronormative gender ideals, are transferred within the context of teaching and 
practising Argentine tango, and subsequently, how the practice of Argentine tango 
has developed in Sydney, Australia, substantially displaced from its country of 
origin. This inevitably raises the vexed question of authenticity as one perspective 
through which to explore my experience of learning Argentine tango, which I 
examine through the lens of French social practice theorist Pierre Bourdieu’s (1930- 
2002) concepts of habitus, field, hysteresis and social capital, terms which are 
explained in Chapter 2.

As a consequence, this thesis employs not only a scholarly voice but also the voice 
of personal experience. As a form of case study, it may also be understood as 
moving between the emic and etic perspectives, as described by theatre scholar, 
Julian Meyrick (2014), meaning that the writing moves between the position of the 
subject and that of the observer at different points throughout the narrative. The 
writing is thus in part a cultural history, but it is also autobiographical, drawing on 
embodied experiences that are simultaneously emotional and physical, and which 
have provided the initial impetus for this research as I sought to clarify some 
unexpected dilemmas experienced during my initial induction into the Sydney 
Argentine tango community.

As noted above, my professional dance practice encompassed an immersive study 
of contact improvisation and release work undertaken from the mid-1970s through 
to the late 1990s in Sydney. This work encapsulates many of the modernist and 
postmodernist perspectives that continue to inform my practice, and a number of 
these influences are elaborated further in this chapter, in order to clarify the
philosophic and aesthetic lens through which I have approached the practice of Argentine tango.

This thesis also utilises primary research in the form of formal and informal interviews and conversations undertaken in Sydney, Hamburg, Berlin and Buenos Aires during the research period (2011-2014) to gain further understanding and a breadth of viewpoints\(^2\). Throughout my research, I have also had informal conversations with many different kinds of tango dancers, over coffee or in class, and gleaned a wide range of viewpoints, understandings, emotional responses and personal stories about tango and its cultures. Insights from these interviews and conversations are interspersed throughout the thesis.

I also describe a number of personal and professional experiences as a practitioner within Sydney’s Argentine tango culture, as well as my experiences as a participant in several international Argentine tango and contact improvisation dance events in Berlin, Hamburg and Buenos Aires (2013 and 2014). My research encompassed 6 week-long practical workshops in Argentine tango, contact-tango and tango release. I also attended the Berlin International Queer Tango Festival in both 2013 and 2014, and many other social tango events where I was able to participate in and observe much of the social demeanour conveying a range of normative values within several different tango cultures, including traditional Argentine tango, queer tango, nuevo and contact-tango communities. As primary research, these experiences have provided the content for my reflections, speculations, analysis and critical thinking about the wider Argentine tango dance culture.

\(^2\) Ethics approval was granted by University of Wollongong in 2012, 2013, 2014 and 2015. See Appendix 4 for details.
This thesis is concerned to describe the historical and cultural influences that have informed and shaped my particular understanding of improvised social partner dances, developed through my years as a professional, contemporary dancer in both experimental dance and in the tango subculture. The imbrication of the personal and the cultural is extended in this opening chapter through a discussion of my early artistic influences, which, as this thesis hopes to make clear, have deeply inflected my own embodied understandings. Crucially, it is this material that has sparked the central questions and arguments posed in this thesis. Such embodied practices function as a matrix upon which I seek to build an historical appreciation of the political and cultural climate in which tango developed in Argentina and globally.

1.2 Contextual and literature review

The contextual and literature review surveys a range of scholarly sources from the fields of social practice theory, dance anthropology, gender and performance studies, psychoanalysis and pedagogy. It also analyses a wide range of other sources, including material gleaned in interviews with practitioners in the field, as well as drawing substantially on my artistic lineage, understood as central to my early postmodern influences.

As primary research, I conducted interviews and conversations with a number of professional and non-professional dancers and teachers, as well as participating in tango, tango release and contact-tango workshops in Hamburg, Berlin and Buenos Aires during the research period (2011-2014). I invited commentary from professional teachers and dancers in both disciplines, as well as a number of non-professional social dancers. Formal interviews and group discussions were conducted with six highly skilled Sydney-based contact improvisation dancers and
teachers. I conducted formal interviews and had less formal conversations with seven professional Argentine tango teachers in Hamburg, Berlin and Sydney, five of whom have extensive experience in both Argentine tango and contact improvisation, and several of whom also teach the hybrid form of contact-tango in Berlin. In Sydney, interviews and conversations with Argentine tango practitioners have included six professional teachers and social dancers with many years of experience, and three dancers with less experience. All of this material has informed and shaped my thinking and arguments concerning the social practice of Argentine tango.

In terms of artistic influences, the work of Australian dance artists, Nanette Hassall (b. 1947), Russell Dumas (b. 1946), Elizabeth Dempster (b. 1953) and Eva Karczag, founding members of the collective Dance Exchange³ was instrumental in introducing postmodern practices to Australia in the mid-1970s, and I worked with Dumas for a number of years, from 1980 to 1996. A strong influence on the work of members of Dance Exchange in the early 1970s was the radical artistic environment of New York, and the emergence of contact improvisation, introduced by the seminal American dancer/choreographer Steve Paxton (b. 1939). Paxton’s performing, teaching and writings elaborate on many aspects of the prevailing artistic culture of 1960s and 1970s New York. Paxton’s artistic colleague, dance artist and filmmaker, Yvonne Rainer (b. 1934), was also highly influential. Critical to the writing around this legacy is the scholarship of American anthropologist and dance professional, Cynthia Novack (1947–1996), whose Sharing the Dance:

³ Dance Exchange was originally co-founded by Nanette Hassall, Russell Dumas, Elizabeth Dempster and Eva Karczag in Australia in the mid-1970s. Dumas subsequently became sole artistic director from 1979, and is now based in Melbourne. For more information about Dance Exchange, see http://www.russelldumasdance.com/about/index.html.
Contact Improvisation and American Culture (1990) outlines how many of the historical and cultural influences of the 1960s and 1970s in the US converged in the practice of contact improvisation. This thesis draws on her research to clarify some of the influences that have been critical in shaping my own dance perspective, including the work of composer John Cage (1912-1992) and choreographer Merce Cunningham (1919-2009), as well as the experimentation undertaken through New York’s famous Judson Dance Theatre group (1962-1964) and the improvisational dance group, Grand Union (1970-1976). This section also draws on the work of practitioners of Ideokinesis and release work which became central in the perception and pedagogy of postmodern movement practices, and thus in my own. In particular, the pivotal work of New York-born Mabel Elsworth Todd (1880-1956), described in her highly influential book The Thinking Body: A Study of the Balancing Forces of the Dynamic Man (1937) and forming the basis for what became known as Ideokinesis, is central to my arguments.

This project is also underpinned by scholarly research that seeks to inform and support this thesis’s arguments as it investigates dance as a form of social practice. In particular, this thesis focuses on improvised social partnered dance, where critically the relationship between partners has the potential to be expressed in many ways. It draws on a wide range of sources including scholarship from the fields of social practice theory, dance anthropology, gender and performance studies, pedagogy, and psychoanalysis which, in particular, includes contemporary ideas of intersubjectivity. Consequently, different ways of thinking about social practice and contemporary pedagogy are elucidated as a means of developing these perspectives for further consideration of the tango scene.
For example, the social practice theory of Pierre Bourdieu and his concepts of *habitus*, field, social capital and *hysteresis*, are employed throughout this thesis as a means of exploring my experience of the social and cultural currents underpinning movement and dance in two culturally distinct fields. In his highly influential publication, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977), Bourdieu gives several accounts of the kinds of dilemmas which grow out of a mismatch between evolving field and *habitus*, producing discord in both societies and individuals, which he terms ‘*hysteresis*’, referring to situations in which one’s habitual ways of relating and operating within a particular arena become obsolete, being undercut by changes in the prevailing field. I have used as a case study my own experience of *hysteresis* which emerged in the clash of these two cultures occurring at the boundaries of my practice where my own embedded physical understanding of my dancing body – as *habitus* – was tested in a new field, the Sydney Argentine tango scene, with its very different history and ways of operating.

This research also draws on several accounts that reflect critically on the social and political histories and cultures surrounding Argentine tango practice and discourse in a number of tango communities. In particular, the writings and performance work of Argentine anthropologist and tango artist, Marta E Savigliano,⁴ provide a rich understanding of tango’s gendered practices as they developed within Argentina’s ‘political economy of passion’. The scholarly research and writing of German-Argentine sociologist and tango practitioner, Paula-Irene Villa, provides insight into gender and contemporary queer tango practice and its relationship with the

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traditional form. Ute Walter, co-founder of queer tango in Hamburg, is a tango artist with a commitment to queer pedagogy, and her work provides insights into the possibilities for emancipatory teaching practices. American anthropologist and tango practitioner, Carolyn Merritt, offers a detailed discussion of contemporary developments in nuevo practice and its relationship with traditional practices.

Canadian academic and dancer Erin Manning’s exploration of relational movement elucidates the processes of how thought and movement co-create tango partnerships.

A major theme of this thesis is the search for links between the experiential, re-educative understandings of Todd alignment, Ideokinesis and release as elucidated principally by Mable Elsworth Todd (1937), and the possibility that tango dancers might understand the dancing body as more than a sexualised body, by deflecting pedagogic focus away from imagery and practices which accentuate hierarchical heteronormative sensibilities. To this end, this thesis draws not only on the practice-based research of Steve Paxton (2008) and Adriana Pegorer (2013), but also the

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5 See specifically the chapters, translated into English in 2013 by Christian Koop, ‘The dance of construction: tango and gender’ (2011) and ‘Moved and moving discourses: why tango can make the (gender) relations dance’ (2006), and the transcript of an introductory forum in ‘Queer tango: cheerful theory or sluggish practice’ (2011), available on request from Eleanor Brickhill.


9 See for example Contact Quarterly’s contact improvisation sourcebook II: collected writings and graphics from Contact Quarterly dance journal 1993-2007 (2008) and ‘Steve Paxton in interview’, in Theatre papers, the first series 1977-78.
work of English-born paediatrician and psychoanalyst, Donald Winnicott (1896-1971), as well as that of American psychiatrist Daniel Stern (1934-2012), in particular *The interpersonal world of the infant* (1998) and other journal and conference papers. The thinking of Winnicott and Stern underpins many ideas concerned with the dynamics of communication, whether in personal relationships or as a basis for cultural experience.

Grounded in contact improvisation and release-based practices as well as in traditional Argentine tango, UK-based practitioner Adriana Pegorer has adapted the concept of ‘the space in between’ to develop the more contemporary hybrid practice of contact-tango (2013). Her focus on this conceptual and literal ‘space in between’ affords the possibility of examining the relational aspects of dance partnerships, which, in this thesis, are viewed through the lens of psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott’s concept of ‘potential space’ (1964, 1971a, 1971b). In addition, the work of American psychiatrist Daniel Stern, with his foundational concepts of ‘affect attunement’ and ‘vitality affects’ (Stern 1973, 1998, 2007), has enhanced the thinking and discussion about the role of the imagination in relational movement, and its effects on communication, improvisation and partnering. These ideas have figured in Paxton’s own improvisational and partnering work (2007), in the philosophy and interdisciplinary scholarship of Maxine Sheets-Johnstone (2007; 2011) and in Erin Manning’s relational movement (2009).

Undertaking this research has also led me to a number of non-academic sources, including websites written by tango dancers from the USA, Berlin, Hamburg and London, in order to build an understanding of the ever-evolving social practice of

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10 See, for example, Winnicott’s books *The child, the family, and the outside world* (1964) and *Playing and reality* (1971).
dance. Notable in this context is the writing of Vio Saraza, founder of Queer Tango Boston and Queer Tango Wellington, New Zealand, in *TangoForge* (Saraza 2011b), whose interests are in nuevo and queer tango, through which she raises a number of issues surrounding global tango culture and discusses her teaching methods. Another key commentator is tango dancer, Terpsichoral, whose blog, *Tango Addiction* (2008-2012), describes the traditional tango scene from the perspective of a foreigner living in Buenos Aires.

This project has found no academic writing on Argentine tango culture from an Australian perspective, and seeks to add to the global academic debate by contributing qualitative research from the local field of Sydney’s tango community. While there are several blogs written by Australian dancers, none is written from a particularly Australian perspective, elaborating instead on tango experiences in Buenos Aires as they participate in the assumption of that city’s cultural authority.11

1.3 Chapter outline

The exploration of various ways of thinking and moving towards these goals and instigating a more inclusive emancipatory Argentine tango practice necessitates the elucidation of two strands of thought which inform this thesis. As previously identified, the first is my understanding of contemporary ‘somatic’ practices as understood through the lineage of Todd alignment and Ideokinesis, first developed by Mabel Elsworth Todd (1937) and expanded during the 1960s and 1970s through release-based pedagogical and movement practices, and incorporated in contact improvisation practice. Central to this research is my attempt to draw a connection

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11 For example, see Angelina’s tango blog at: [http://www.tangoaustralia.com.au/](http://www.tangoaustralia.com.au/)
between Todd’s formulation of how imagery and thought shape the body, thus fundamentally influencing a person’s habitual and unconscious ways of moving and thinking (1937), and how this human capacity may also be seen at work as traditional Argentine tango dancers continue to foster the kinds of imagery and cultural stereotypes that prevailed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and which, this thesis argues, are still cultivated today. Todd’s work is essentially re-educative, and demonstrates how habitual or maladaptive ways of moving and thinking are not fixed for life but, with training, are amenable to change.

Chapter 2 extends this line of inquiry by contrasting the idea that tango may be understood as a hybrid dance form since its inception, with the opposing idea that rigid gender stereotypes have been cultivated over time within strongly heteronormative social values and ways of behaving and thinking. This latter concept, it is argued, is what underpins the fairly strictly imposed tango codes that tend to shape the dance and its attendant social behaviour today.

Chapter 3 describes some of these codes, which are often discriminative and restrictive, particularly for women, but are accepted as a ‘normal’ part of tango culture, with their reasons for existing appearing ‘self-evident’ and largely unavailable for scrutiny. The link here describing the maintenance of such ‘habitual unconscious ways of moving and thinking’ (Todd 1937) is also supported by the social practice theory of Pierre Bourdieu, and his concepts of *habitus* and ‘bodily *hexis’* (1977) described in Chapter 2.

The second strand of thinking is concerned with the pervasive rhetoric around tango’s authenticity, the demands to maintain ‘real’ tango, and the consequent
claims regarding who, in any tango community, may judge the authenticity of tango practice. This is critical to this project because, as discovered through the field research, it underpins all discourse on Argentine tango, and is a common salient issue even in newer forms. Without necessarily partaking of the same strength of conviction, even non-traditional teachers, such as those teaching queer or contact-tango, rely on claims of tango authenticity in order to maintain their professional teaching status. In Sydney, however, I saw much tango which seemed to cultivate personal styles and widely differing competencies, so that an insistence on ‘authentic’ practice did not seem congruent with what people actually do. What is meant by ‘authentic’ tango? And which particular historical version of the dance should qualify? Are such claims simply part of an elaborate game of manners played by aficionados jockeying for power and position within the tango community? Thus this second thread, discussed further in Chapters 2 and 3, seeks to explicate some of the tango codes that reinforce the notion of correct or ‘authentic’ practice. While Chapter 2 argues that tango has always been a hybrid and global phenomenon which has in the past, and continues to evolve and change, and that such a confluence of multiple cultural and social practices within a global culture is both inevitable and enriching, Chapter 3 departs from this sense of tango to show how the deeply stereotyped heteronormative imagery surrounding tango culture forms the basis of claims for correct behaviour and authentic practice. This second strand also argues that claiming the authority to make judgements in these matters provides a fertile pretext for the ceaseless power plays that create many of the problems associated with gender hierarchy and social inequity which undermine the positive values of inclusiveness, social wellbeing and community cohesion that tango is thought to provide.
Chapter 4 draws these two strands of thought together, arguing that the imperative to embody negative aspects of heteronormative stereotyped behaviour is not in fact an unassailable requirement or condition for tango to exist, to develop, and to be danced well. Physical and emotional identification with tango’s traditional heteronormative imagery, especially the negative and exclusive aspects of the practice, is not necessarily fixed forever, regardless of what the proponents of tango ‘authenticity’ require. When dancers desire a different kind of experience, then with practice of a kind of ‘deferral’ of habitual judgement about the body and gendered relationships, identification with restrictive values can dissipate. For dancers with such an inclination, this notion of deferral of judgement has been a central feature in the exploration and cultivation of the radically different ways of understanding movement and the body, including gender, that postmodern practices in dance, including contact improvisation, have ushered in. Similarly, the contemporary development of ‘queer tango’ practice, for example as developed by German practitioner Ute Walter through her concepts of ‘tango and mindfulness’ and ‘tango as dialogue’, cultivates the central idea of deferral of critical judgement and expectations, being derived in part from David Bohm’s ‘dialogue process’ (Bohm n.d.; Bohm, Factor & Garrett 1991; Walter 2007, 2013; Walter & Nagel 2008; Thimm 2007, 2008).

Understanding the ethos of postmodern practices leads on to a discussion in Chapter 5 of the more contemporary hybrid development of contact-tango, and UK-based dance artist Adriana Pegorer’s adaption of the concept of ‘the space in between’ (2013). Grounded in contact improvisation and release-based practices as well as traditional Argentine tango, Pegorer’s focus on this conceptual and literal ‘space in between’ in some measure seeks to resolve, however imperfectly, some ensuing
problems arising when the different disciplines, as embodied by a variety of dancers with a variety of experiences and expectations, seek to inform each other. Chapter 5 continues this discussion of the relational aspects of dance partnership, viewed firstly through the lens of psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott’s concept of ‘potential space’ (1964, 1971a), and the work of psychiatrist Daniel Stern, whose foundational concepts of ‘affect attunement’ and ‘vitality affects’ have enhanced the thinking and discussion about the role of the imagination in relational movement, and its effects on communication, improvisation and partnering (1973, 1998, 2007).

Chapter 6 concludes the thesis, outlining a number of areas for further exploration, including those areas where significant differences in the practice of the two forms may make the transfer of skills problematic. However, rather than envisaging ‘constant, permanent relationships of inequality’ operating within any dance arena, as Bourdieu might have observed (Thomson 2008, p. 74), this thesis argues that, when grounded in the relational ideas of Winnicott and Stern, Todd’s re-educative practices, and the kinds of explorations with which Paxton, Villa, Walter and Pegorer are concerned, these differences can be understood as mutable and amenable to change by further experience and training, thus fostering emancipatory practices in Argentine tango and enhancing the potential for a ‘qualitatively different culture of communication’ (Walter 2007, p. 5).

1.4 From contact to tango

As this thesis hopes to demonstrate, contact improvisation is a highly relevant practice to compare and contrast with Argentine tango primarily because, as an improvised social partner dance, it is, like Argentine tango, a clearly codified form
that shares similar attributes. For instance, both rely on heightened haptic senses and the use of peripheral vision as central features of partnering. Practitioners of both forms have at various times professed to idealise dance qualities that are experienced subjectively, such as focused attention on one’s partner, sometimes described as a kind of empathic response. Similarly, while neither dance is designed to be performed in front of an audience, informal appreciation of dancers’ skill by aficionados is highly sought after.

My training and experience with the somatic practices of release work and Ideokinesis, to which I progressed in training with Australian dance artist Russell Dumas, have played a principal part in my understanding of contact improvisation. The kind of contact improvisation to which I was first introduced was, to a great extent, informed by a coalition of hybrid practices developing in the peculiarly distinct critical and philosophical culture of New York, which came together as part of the 1960s cultural zeitgeist, quickly spreading through the western world, including Australia. As discussed in Chapter 2, however, these kinds of embodied understandings were not available to dancers in Argentina during the same period, due to the impact of Argentina’s conservative political regime from the mid-1950s, and in particular, the repressive effects of the military junta which took power in 1976, instigating Argentina’s ‘dirty war’.

This account, however, starts with my experience of tango’s traditional, hierarchical structure as I first encountered it in the Sydney tango scene in 2009. My subsequent dissatisfaction, particularly with regard to the gendered characterisation of men as

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12 The ‘Dirty War’ refers to the American-backed military coup in Argentina, lasting from 1976 to 1983. Valeria Manzano (2014) notes the period between 1967 to 1976 as a ‘culture of contestation’, and it is this contestation that the military, who imposed the coup in 1976-83, was publically responding to, deeming the social situation as chaos, upholding a patriarchal and authoritarian discipline by way of the cry ‘family, fatherland and God’.
leaders and women as followers which appeared to determine the form of the dance by controlling all partnering issues, meant that I began to look for an alternative perspective. I became interested in Sydney’s tiny *nuevo* tango scene, where I found a slightly more loosely structured social milieu, professing a somewhat wider ethos as expressed through a different way of conceiving physical techniques. While this made a difference to the look of the form, the underlying structure of tango as created through the distinctively gendered roles of lead and follow remained fundamentally unchanged. However, in extending this research through travel to Hamburg and Berlin and deepening my understanding of queer tango and contact-tango practices, it became clear that wider practical and philosophical tango vistas were available.

Throughout this period of research, it also became clear that changes over time in the practice of tango and the images that inform this practice globally, underpin a great variety of viewpoints about tango. These multiple viewpoints continue to function simultaneously and affect the process of learning and practising this complex form. My interest in the changing faces of tango, from Sydney’s local tango school communities to larger international arenas, has tended to eclipse any focus I had initially as a beginner on the choreographic art of ‘doing steps’. Instead my attention has been drawn more to the variety of forms, and most importantly their associated ways of thinking, specifically in the cultural *transmission* of tango practices, including the pervasive, if nostalgic, search for the perfect tango ‘connection’ with its transcendent potential. This ultimate dancing relationship appears to be universally sought after, whether it lies within a partnership restrained by a traditional way of conceiving that relationship, or within a more expansive
notion of a partnership that is able to accommodate a variety of emotional and physical understandings of gendered and dancing bodies.

This focus on transmission and different ways of thinking led to a more comprehensive study of the ways in which that partnership might be manifested in the all-important ‘connection’, and how the dynamics that shape the relationship existing between two dancing bodies might be understood. Despite some counter-argument, this thesis argues that there is no single, absolute way this partnership should operate; rather, it has the potential to grow and change in a number of different ways through the development of increasingly sophisticated models of participation and attentiveness to one’s partner. Importantly in tango (and unlike partnerships in contact improvisation) these dancing bodies are in a continuous and very specific embrace, which invites not only the possibility of a rare physical and/or emotional intimacy, but also an exacerbation of any problematic dynamics that lie in that ‘space between’ two people, that shared space that British psychoanalyst and paediatrician Donald Winnicott has termed ‘potential space’ (1964; 1971a).

The kinds of insights into relational dynamics offered by practitioners in a very wide variety of fields, both scholarly and practice-based (dance, gender studies, performance, child development and psychoanalysis, anthropology, philosophy, intersubjectivity, relational movement, as well as the primary research generated by interviews and discussion with practitioners of tango, contact improvisation, release and Ideokinesis) have all been relevant to the analysis of how evolving ways of thinking and imagining can radically alter the dynamics of the relational in dance, specifically Argentine tango, and contribute beneficially to personal, social and
cultural experiences, by instigating and enacting movements towards emancipatory social, personal and artistic expressions and a loosening of cultural and gender specific boundaries.

1.5 **Artists and early influences**

The radical movements of the 1960s and 1970s in art and social practice questioned fundamental issues of human rights, gender and other forms of social inequality, renegotiating ideas of hierarchy and democracy, freedom and limits, group choices and vetos, and the examination of relationships with power and authority (Gitlin 1993; Novack 1990; Banes 1987). These themes were central in shaping the movement explorations of postmodernist dance practitioners, beginning in New York. In the mid-1970s the Dance Exchange collective were instrumental in bringing many of these new ideas to the attention of Australian dancers for the first time. This work, conveyed mainly through the teaching of Nanette Hassall and Russell Dumas, has fundamentally shaped my own sense of dance practices as embodied ways of thinking.

As students, working with Dumas from 1979, we focused on an ‘internal’ experience of the body, using practices such as Todd alignment and Ideokinesis, described later in this chapter, as well as contact improvisation skills developed first by American dance artist Steve Paxton in 1972\(^\text{13}\). We studied ‘non-dancerly’

\[^{13}\text{For more information on contact improvisation, see Cynthia Novack’s important work } Sharing the Dance (1990) \text{ which characterises the wave of experimental dance in the 1960s and 1970s as a movement which participated in a socially conscious radicalism.}\]
pedestrian behaviour as a basis for making dance material\textsuperscript{14}, chance- and rule-based compositional processes such as those of American composer John Cage (1912-1992)\textsuperscript{15} and American choreographer/dancer Merce Cunningham (1919-2009)\textsuperscript{16}, a smattering of aikido and tai chi, as well as material developed from the choreographic influence of American dance artists like Sara Rudner\textsuperscript{17}. Over the next few years we became finely attuned to new bodily states and levels of physical awareness, developing increasing agility and skill working with body weight in various ways, through falling, leaning, rolling and lifting, using deflection or redirection of a partner’s momentum, rather than resorting to our previous habitual muscular efforts to shape movement. At this time, I understood contact improvisation to be most useful as a set of physical skills which could facilitate partnering practices as part of a professional dance-making process, which

\textsuperscript{14} For example, Yvonne Rainer was a particularly influential American dance artist and filmmaker, whose compositional interests at this time included the ‘found object’, or found gesture, ‘… the unlikely object that demanded to be looked at as art.’ A seminal work of Rainer’s, \textit{Continuous Project – Altered Daily}, was developed in performance over several years by the improvisation group Grand Union (1970 to 1976). The initial concern was to make an ongoing performance that changed between and during each viewing by an audience, using the working processes of making dance as its vehicle: rehearsing, performing, learning, marking, running through, working out, practising. The visibility of the processes was the central feature. For further information see, for example, http://www.getty.edu/research/exhibitions_events/exhibitions/rainer/; the 2012 ‘Interview with Yvonne Rainer, the Museum of Modern Art oral history program’, http://www.moma.org/docs/learn/archives/transcript_rainer.pdf.

\textsuperscript{15} Composer John Cage was a seminal figure in American dance in the 1960s, particularly with his work using indeterminacy and chance procedures. Such procedures might include tossing coins to determine path, sequence, movement and personnel. Cage distinguished between structure and process in composition, where ‘process’ might emphasise various changes occurring over time, without the necessity for a clear beginning or end: ‘the now moment’. See for example, Perloff (2012).

\textsuperscript{16} The work of American choreographer/dancer Merce Cunningham (1919-2009) constellated a number of new practices in dance of the 1960s and 1970s. He was interested in a non-hierarchical approach to all elements of performance, including movement, space, sound, decor and lighting, so that each medium existed as a separate element. An interest in everyday gesture made pedestrian action, like walking and running, as compositionally interesting as already codified ‘dancerly’ movement. Movement itself no longer had intrinsic meaning or emotional qualities attached to it, as had been the case in the earlier work.
supported my interest in using this physical understanding to facilitate tango partnering.

However, such a far-reaching web of new physical understandings blending together produced in Dumas’ students a very different kind of physical awareness and a radically new way of conceptualising movement for teaching and performance, one that I later discovered did not sit well with the ethos of traditional Argentine tango. For example, in stark contrast to tango, but consistent with the ethos of American postmodern dance, an ‘ideal’ body was thought of as one which expressed a democratic, non-hierarchical, non-theatrical improvisational movement practice.

The basic characteristics of contact improvisation as developed by Paxton and colleagues in the early 1970s were, and still are, for both professional and social dancers, built around following a rolling point of contact, supporting and giving weight to a partner, practice which includes falling, rolling, sliding, developing alertness, peripheral vision, and cultivating an openness to the physical laws that govern motion – gravity, momentum, inertia – by learning to release excess muscular tension. As a member of the improvisation group Grand Union (1970-1976), Paxton also shared with Rainer and others a desire to break down ‘arbitrary social hierarchical’ forms which in many ways determined the look of dances. An important feature of Paxton’s training was the ‘small dance’, which he considered

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17 Sara Rudner participated in the development and performance of Twyla Tharp’s modern dance repertory in the US from 1965, later founding the Sara Rudner Performance Ensemble.

18 Social hierarchy was thought to shape the working relationships between dancers and choreographers, with the choreographer acting as arbiter of aesthetics, and dancers struggled to become what was required of them (Novack 1990, pp. 53-54). This ‘star system’ meant that those who were better able to reproduce the desired aesthetic became ‘stars’, and Paxton aimed to undercut this, promoting unique individualised movement that was independent of established aesthetic patterns.
an excellent means of re-training dancers wishing to investigate a more profound physicality. The process required a kind of ‘deferral’ of habitual action and initiative in favour of becoming aware of other possibilities. By foregoing habitual activity, dancers became sensitised to much deeper movements of the body by which it supported itself in a stability which was not fixed but vitally mobile:

Standing still and feeling your body. Doing absolutely nothing but letting your skeletal muscles hold you upright. This is one of the most important detraining devices. … So we call it standing still because everybody knows what that means, and then you point out that in the midst of standing still, something else is occurring and that the name for that is the Small Dance (Paxton 1975, pp. 8-9).

In relation to this concept of ‘deferral’ of habitual activity, Paxton discussed how in these early days he had wanted to teach in a very disciplined way, asking students ‘… not to talk, not to laugh, even though funny things happened. Not to make social contact, not to make it emotionally pleasurable or stimulating’ because these actions overruled much of the potential already in the movement. He added ‘… like with emotions, for example, they are never dealt with in this work except to cool them out when they get in the way’ (Paxton 1981, p. 8) 19.

During the 1970s in the US, somatic practices like Ideokinesis and release work were becoming increasingly important in a variety of dance trainings, resonating

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19 By 1983, technical execution developed, with dancers performing with enormous virtuosity. The concern became how weight was given, how much, and with what attitude, being invested with a quality of playfulness, rather than being dangerous and unpredictable. Contact and support included the lightest touch or simple eye contact across the room (Novack, 1990). While still maintaining a strict regime for beginning students, he became engaged with dance that included socialising, laughter, talking, eye contact, and hand manipulation (Novack 1990).
well with the ethos of contact improvisation. Glenna Batson, writing for the International Association for Dance Medicine and Science, suggests that there are three key elements of somatic training: novel learning contexts, sensory attunement, and augmented rest (2009, p. 2). In these areas, a ‘deferral’ of habitual thought and movement patterns is encouraged in order to cultivate a dancer’s movement awareness and develop new responses.

Mabel Elsworth Todd (1880-1956) is one of the best-known practitioners in somatic education, becoming prominent in the 1930s chiefly amongst dancers and health professionals of the time. A major principle of Ideokinesis is founded on the intimate relationship between the musculoskeletal system and thought. Todd, as pioneer of this principle, referred to this interrelationship as ‘body attitudes’. Todd described popular conceptions of posture as influenced by military training or current fashion (Matt 2014), with automatic postural reflexes to a great extent determined by a person’s idea of what they ‘ought’ to look like. Thus desirable

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20 Somatic practices emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in response to the dualist concept which saw mind and body as separate entities. Early practitioners had sought a more ‘natural’ approach to physical training, rather than one based on the current ideology of repetitive and militaristic effort and discipline, replacing it with an approach by which one ‘listened’ to bodily cues arising from breathing, from touch and movement, addressing the ‘whole’ person, not just the body (Eddy 2009; Batson 2009). Somatic awareness has been described as a matter of perceiving the body from the ‘inside out, where one is aware of feelings, movements and intensions, rather than looking objectively from the outside in’ (Green 2002, p. 114). For further information see the American philosopher and Feldenkrais practitioner Thomas Hanna (1928 – 1990), Fortin (2002), and Rothfield (1994).

21 For a more detailed discussion of Batson’s somatic elements, and the importance of deferral of habitual thought and action, see Batson’s discussion (2009). Freeing the dancer from the fixed holding patterns of more ‘disciplinary’ practices ‘enables dancers to discover how readily intentional goals trigger habitual muscular patterns arising in the first few milliseconds of movement initiation, when the brain “sets” the body’s overall muscular tonus’. Somatic training typically includes rest intervals between periods of movement to aid and consolidate memory and improve motor recall. For example, the ideokinetic practice of ‘constructive rest’ reduces the load of gravity on the body and minimises muscular activity involved in habitual postural support. It is a relaxed supine position with feet resting on the floor and knees bent upwards. Neuromuscular coordination is enhanced by visualizing particular ‘lines of movement’ which facilitate new neuromuscular patterns in the brain without engaging habitual muscular effort (Batson 2009).
posture ‘is evidenced by the behaviour of the average adult upon hearing the words “Stand up straight”. The chest is thrust out, the head and chin drawn stiffly back and up, in the effort to look “tall and straight’” (Todd 1937, p. 35). In her seminal work, Todd writes:

It is as profoundly true that we are as much affected in our thinking by our bodily attitudes as our bodily attitudes are affected in the reflection of our mental states. Changing the attitudes of the body is one way to change the mental attitudes; conversely, changing the mental attitudes certainly changes the bodily. ...

Imagination itself, or the inner image, is a form of physical expression, and the motor response is the reflection of it (Todd 1937, pp. 294-5).

This is the central premise around which is organised the work of Todd alignment, or neuromuscular re-education, now known as Ideokinesis. Australian practitioner and academic Elizabeth Dempster notes that ‘one of the fundamentals of Ideokinesis is that it seeks to address the generative core of movement expression’, and thus by touch ‘Ideokinesis addresses the motor attitude of a person, their anticipatory set, their habitus, and it is this which is engaged and affected by the touch of another’ (Dempster 2003, p. 40). One might ask whether simply engaging with a single idea or ‘suitable image’ would have the strength to create change in deeply etched patterns of bodily habit. But in 1997 American Ideokinesis teacher Andre Bernard (1924-2003) described an important aspect of this work which is sometimes underestimated: the need for images to be suitably attractive to a person so that they act as a ‘lure’ for the nervous system (Dempster 2003).

22 Compellingly, such an observation occurs in Pierre Bourdieu’s work 40 years later as he describes ‘the hidden persuasion of an implicit pedagogy, capable of instilling a whole cosmology, an ethic, a metaphysic, a political philosophy, through injunctions as insignificant as “stand up straight”’ (Bourdieu 1977, p. 94).
The images developed in Ideokinesis refer to both real physical structures and to imaginary ones. For example, the ‘centre line’ has no actual location but is an idea that can support and integrate the body’s energy. Importantly the images and instructions concern movement and direction rather than suggesting something fixed and static. Ideokinesis works through an ‘imaginary’ anatomy on the emotionally laden body patterns that operate at a pre-conscious level, and it is this aspect of the imagery which drives and supports the possibility of change in complex habitual bodily attitudes (Dempster 2003, p. 47).

During the 1970s, particularly in the US, Ideokinesis informed the practices of many dance teachers and facilitated individualised ways of understanding the body. This thinking, often known as ‘release’, had a major influence on dance training. Teachers and dancers worked with anatomical images as strategies for re-educating bodily alignment as well as for shaping preferences for creative activities. Dancers increasingly saw their practices as having more to do with how to move, ‘a preparation of the alert, alive and responsive body’, rather than the incorporation of codified vocabularies (Dempster 1993, p. 16).

1.6 Sex and sensibility

This thesis argues that the kind of embodied consciousness that these practices both require and develop, creates an imagination, a sense of movement, of space, structure, and physical sensibility very different to that acquired by working in traditional tango pedagogy where the ‘third person’ perspective, the ‘outside eye’ and other external visual cues, are the primary guiding principles. Release practices work to find movement possibilities and sensibilities that lie beyond the bounds of prescriptive or codified ‘choreographic’ processes, working almost by default
against reconstructing unquestioned genderised stereotypes or sex-specific roles.

Dempster writes:

Dance contains within itself gestures towards a dissolution of the dichotomous pairings of terms fundamental to the Western philosophical tradition. In moments of dancing, the edges of things blur and terms such as mind/body, flesh/spirit, carnal/divine, male/female, become labile and unmoored, breaking loose from the fixity of their pairings. This vision of dance is not utopian but a felt experience occurring fleetingly, elusively, in many styles and occasions of dance (Dempster 1988, p. 24).

This thesis further argues that it is the ‘felt experience’, the heightened kinaesthetic sensation, the creation of an intimate haptic space as a place where ‘the edges of things blur’, which is primarily important in partnerships, whether in contact improvisation or in Argentine tango. When listening to the ways some people describe the quest for the perfect tango ‘connection’, Dempster’s idea of a fleeting, elusive dissolution of boundaries resonates here as well. For example, writer and tango dancer, Terpsichoral, comments on tango’s physicality in her blog:

This is what we are looking for: the subtleties of this somatic communication; the physical intimacies of the dance which bypass the verbal and run deeper than the superficially erotic. Diving past the layers of sexual orientation, the rigid restrictions of hetero and homo, deep down beyond the selfish demands of our genes, the complementarity of mitochondria, far from the localised ache of sexual longing, the sticky, odorous frictions of lovemaking, there is something else. Something both more constant and more universal. A delight in the living body (Terpsichoral, 2012a).

For Terpsichoral it seems a question of trying to ‘dive past’ sexuality and the erotic, as if these feelings, sometimes felt to be at the core of Argentine tango, are obstacles
in the way of the desired experience. It is difficult not to see similarities between Terpsichoral’s perception and those of Paxton with his desire to ‘cool out’ those feelings which interfere with an enhanced physical perception of oneself and others through intimate touch.

Contact improvisation has sometimes been thought ‘in its very practice to challenge people to investigate their relationship to touch, intimacy, sensuality and sex’ (Paxton & Lori b 1996, p. 82), and yet a number of dance artists have commented on the lack of specific references to sexuality in most teaching situations. What tends to take precedence is a reliance on the body’s ‘physics’, and a deferral of Paxton’s ‘gland game’ when practising contact improvisation (Cohen Bull 2001, p. 407). Paxton comments:

Mention the word ‘sex’ or ‘sexual feelings’ and once it was in the room, it took a while to get back to gentler and perhaps more physical realms. ... if I let those feelings take over, then I simply have stopped doing Contact and I’ve started doing something else (Paxton & Lori b 1996, p. 89).

Consequently, while touch as a fundamental in contact improvisation requires essential investigation on many levels, Paxton’s concern is to reorientate people’s awareness, ‘to get back to a sensory experience that isn’t sexualised’ (Paxton & Lori b 1996, p. 85). For this to occur, ‘the whole re-socialization process through the special touch work in the studio needs to be done slowly’ (1996 p. 89). In the teaching situation a leader creates a kind of ‘container’ for activity, by emphasising words like ‘gravity, momentum, friction; strong investigation into the senses’ (1996 p. 84), a place of ‘incredible, exquisite quiet, with great patience, with a lot of attention to what’s going on in the body’ (1996 p. 85). In this way, the ‘playing
down’ or ‘deferring’ of one’s habitual focus becomes important in the pedagogy not only of contact improvisation, but also of Argentine tango, particularly if the intention is to reorient physical awareness, away from the specifically sexual towards a valuing and consciousness of widely differing social experiences of physicality and connection.

This chapter introduces my research question which asks what impediments there are to the transmission of what this thesis argues are a shared core of physical partnering skills, in order to investigate practices and pedagogic strategies which provide for the potential for Argentine tango partnership to grow into a more collaborative relationship built around negotiation rather than being defined exclusively by hierarchical, heteronormative gender stereotypes. It does so by briefly establishing both an historical and a personal history of contact improvisation and Argentine tango, and through a survey of the literature, particularly as that pertains to social equality and the body. This chapter also outlines my experience in contemporary dance circles in Australia as informed by the philosophical and physical practices of a number of postmodern dance artists and trainings, as a background for my growing interest in partner dancing and the possibilities for socially enhanced living.

It is that experience, informed by a firm grounding in release-based exploratory practices, including contact improvisation, that allowed me to perceive the inherent inequity in the partnering relationship when dancing Argentine tango, and the ways in which this unequal relationship often expresses itself in Sydney’s small Argentine tango scene. Initially I found my questions informed by the social practice theory of Pierre Bourdieu, particularly in his notion of *hysteresis* and the
ideas of *habitus*, field, capital and *doxa*, discussed further in Chapter 2. This next chapter also introduces my first encounters with Argentine tango in Sydney, before going on to elucidate some of the cultural context in which Argentine tango developed, noting its multiple hybrid origins as layered social and political expressions. It also describes the simultaneous pull towards the deeply enticing imagery of the popular tango stereotypes of film and fashion, expressive of a kind of cultivated authenticity of practice.
Chapter 2

Tango: first encounters

This chapter seeks to investigate how, in the context of learning Argentine tango in Sydney, my training in release-based exploratory practices, which consciously aspire to cultivate a non-hierarchical, socially emancipatory way of thinking and dancing, caused me to question many of the difficulties of achieving what I considered a similarly desirable gender equality in tango. My research initially found a framework within which this thesis might begin to resolve some of my questions, in the social practice theory of Pierre Bourdieu, and particularly his concepts of ‘hysteresis’, ‘habitus’, ‘field’, ‘social capital’ and ‘doxa’. In order to understand my own social dilemma in the context of practising tango, it became important to explore the cultural and historical underpinnings of Argentine tango, as a means of understanding the vehement and exclusive attachment to the idea of an ‘authentic’ practice held by many people in Sydney’s tango community. Consequently, this chapter investigates tango’s origins, understood as expressive of the layered cultural, social and political currents in late nineteenth century Europe and Argentina. It also examines the deeply enticing imagery of ‘authentic’ tango as experienced, for example, in film and fashion, images which are strengthened by a pervasive nostalgia and a need to preserve a ‘traditional’ cultural identity. This chapter begins, however, with my first encounters and experiences.

2.1 Social tango

I first became interested in Argentine tango when I saw Sally Potter’s film The Tango Lesson in 1997. I loved the movie because it highlighted the necessity of how dance, any dance, arose in a particular place and time, expressive of a kind of
cultural demeanour, and embodying not just movement per se, but relational aspects of how, when and why movement between people happens. A dance makes visible particular social aspects of thinking, responding to and being with others in a particular place and time. To an ‘outsider’, different modes of dance might clearly distinguish social group affiliations and differences, but within one’s own culture, they are often so ‘naturalised’ and ubiquitous as to go almost unnoticed, being, as it were, always already meaningful.

When I began serious practice in 2009, Argentine tango felt far less codified than ballroom dance\(^\text{23}\) which appeared preoccupied with competition and marketing. Tango, however, seemed to appeal strongly to a person’s secret imaginings and desires, offering something exotic with a slightly illicit flavour, the difficulty of the form itself hidden within enticingly seductive trappings. The burgeoning tango industry in Sydney seemed to bring these fantasies within the bounds of the possible, offering at the very least a potentially passionate, if fleeting, intimacy.

In 2012, there were at least 24 schools for Argentine tango in Sydney alone (SydneyTango 2012)\(^\text{24}\) as well as a number of private teachers hosting hundreds of tango events each week, and all competing for students and enhanced reputation within the local tango community. Most schools are run by male and female couples, who hold classes ranging from beginner to advanced levels. Many teachers or interested dancers run \textit{practicas} of several hours’ duration, which is where people

\(^{23}\) Ballroom dance is here understood as American or International styled partner dancing, either recreational or competitive. It includes highly codified forms of five specific International Standard and five International Latin style dances, regulated by the Word Dance Council and the World Dancesport Federation. In the United States, these are commonly termed American Smooth and American Rhythm. Ballroom tango is one of these dances, but bears little relationship in aesthetics and technique to Argentine tango.

\(^{24}\) See SydneyTango website: \url{http://www.sydneytango.com.au/WebModules/Pub/AboutTango.aspx}
practise what they have learned in class or elsewhere, somewhere in Sydney most days of the week.

The milonga, however, is the crowning social event in the tango calendar, usually hosted monthly or weekly by a school, or run by dancers. Thus dancers may, if they wish, attend a milonga every night of the week, in venues often set up to resemble nightclubs, with red velvet curtaining and tables with tablecloths and candles around the sides of the room.

Figure 1. A Darlinghurst milonga, 2011. Photo by Vincenzo 2011.

The milonga is the place where people go to dance socially, and in particular, to be seen dancing in a socially advantageous way. It is a place where the unwritten rules of tango are most conspicuous, either in their adherence or in their transgression.

Practicas can be ‘led’ where the host creates a play list of music for the dancing and may also be available to assist dancers with technical matters or at least make sure that everyone dances. Practicas can also be unstructured where the host only provides the music and the venue but no teaching.
How firm these rules are depends often on the host. For example, at a conservative milonga, men and women may be required to sit on opposite sides of the room when not dancing so as to make it easier for men to locate a suitable partner to ‘cabeceo’. This has been a practice in some of the milongas in Buenos Aires, and as a consequence is considered more ‘authentic’. Cabeceo itself is a more or less covert glance across the room that a man may give a woman with whom he wishes to dance, and she will either acknowledged it by meeting his eyes and holding his gaze, or look away to avoid the request. The secrecy reputedly operates so that men will not feel publically humiliated if their offer is conspicuously refused. There are a number of other rules for a milonga: one most commonly noted, although not always maintained, is that no-one is supposed to teach or comment on their partner’s dancing. Another is that one does not dance in the thirty-second interlude between tandas as this moment is for polite chat. Another implicit rule frowns on dancers speaking to each other during the dance, as it is thought to taint the romance of the moment. The deeper into tango lore one gets, the more subtle the rules become, and some appear to require very stringent maintenance. For example, inadvertently touching another couple on the dance floor is considered most impolite, and can even be grounds for hostility.

Meanwhile, what I had not anticipated were some of the ‘other’ social aspects of tango, and in particular, the intense and continually emphasised gender hierarchy operating between a man and woman in leading and following roles respectively, and expressed through the physical and relational intimacy of the embrace. By contrast, in contact improvisation, any kind of physical intimacy is generally

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26 The musical interlude is called a cortina.

27 A tanda is a bracket of three or four songs to which couples dance before changing partners.
regarded as quite ordinary, and usually has little to do with sex. Initially my response to the visible sexual politics actualised through the iconic and commercialised trappings of tango: the stilettos and slinky clothes, the subtle, or not so subtle, characterisation of leaders and followers as sexually predatory, as macho men and femmes fatales, was to decide, perhaps naïvely, that as a professional dancer, I would have little difficulty separating out the physical discipline without resorting to behaviour that seemed to me slightly affected and unnecessary. I was, for example, amused when a young dancer told me that she’d been instructed to wear stilettos by her male teacher, because otherwise, he said, you cannot do tango as your posture is all wrong. Likewise I treated the feminine acquiescence that the follower’s role is supposed to embody in a kind of parodic way, not believing that it could be all that serious. When first hearing a female teacher dutifully elaborating on the idea of a woman ‘hovering’ waiting to be ‘led’, I was merely intrigued.

Later, however, it seemed, at least in the traditional version I experienced, that you just cannot do tango without this sexualisation, and without a certain amount of sincerity in the roles. While some people profess that the roles are just a kind of elaborate game or act, in my experience this attitude is not well received at most Sydney venues, where a fairly rigid gender hierarchy within heterosexual stereotypical partnering relationships seems distinctly serious, if not compulsory. If you do not, or will not, or cannot, participate in those dynamics, then in some tango circles you are just not recognised as a serious dancer. Any skill you might have as a dancer seems invisible unless you convincingly acquiesce to the shared but unwritten doxa of ‘authentic’ tango practice, and in part that means taking seriously a kind of ‘mystique’ surrounding tango. Looking the part is very much approved of: for a woman to be young, perhaps under forty, attractive, dressed enticingly, or to
be well-known as a mature, experienced but nevertheless appropriately compliant follower is important. I suggest that the ways that women have of asserting their own expertise in this context are limited and circumscribed. If you do not fulfil at least some of these requirements, you are treated as an undesirable tango partner.

So the dynamics of participation and negotiation within tango partnerships are taken very seriously. Within the traditional scene in Sydney, it seemed that there was a great deal at stake, particularly for the (inevitably) male leader. What I observed was the apparent frustration and resultant anxiety that many men, as leaders in classes, practicas, or milongas, suffered when trying to get their partners to do what they wanted, and particularly men with some possibly hard-won but not extensive experience. They seemed tense and easily offended, and there was a sense that it was their job to be in control of what their partner did, and that they were diminished in some indeterminate way if they were not. One might even argue that such feelings of anxiety and humiliation sometimes translated into a pervasive and patronising criticism. A man’s efforts to assert his dancing prowess might include behaviour towards his partner that was certainly not conventionally polite or well-mannered. The assumption seemed to be that if things did not go smoothly, it was the fault of the woman, who should therefore be willing to be corrected by her partner. The least she was expected to do was demonstrate a good-natured compliance and be encouraging, buoying up the man’s flagging confidence by telling him how well he was doing. At the same time, it did not seem to be her place to assist in any practical way by, for instance, offering a greater expertise.

On first attending a milonga, I was surprised that the social responses I might have expected as an adult among others did not operate. Picture a single, well-dressed
woman entering a milonga, sitting down at a long table with one or two other women, while several single men were sitting at the other end. Picture her glancing briefly and smiling slightly as a gesture towards them in greeting; then picture them immediately looking offended and turning away. Encounters such as this brought their own kind of strangeness, leaving a lingering perplexity, and I progressively became aware of needing to be careful, to know whom to speak to and when to speak, to keep smiling (vaguely into the middle distance rather than at anyone), and not to make what might be construed as a rude or unwelcome comment. If I did unwittingly say or do something spontaneous, then I needed to protect myself lest I be subjected to reprimand, or even a kind of abuse: to be walked away from, to be shouted at, or patronised.

In seeking to understand such experiences within the Sydney tango scene, I was perplexed to find that often those very subjects seemed unavailable for discussion. I spoke to several women about aspects of tango that bothered me: for example, men who assumed the role of a somewhat autocratic teacher despite their own lack of expertise, but my questions were often perceived as complaint. For instance, if I found someone hard to dance with or unpleasant, the explanation often given was that he must be a very good dancer. Alternatively, my questions might be met by an uncomprehending blankness, or I might be advised that we were not there to complain, and no-one wanted to hear ‘that stuff’. I interpreted ‘that stuff’ as referring to what might be assumed as my feminist stance, although I cannot be sure. Faced with such consistent non-comprehension, I sought further explanation.

Meanwhile there were enough people who seemed to share my experiences to some extent. For example, a friend and former sex worker who had dropped out of the
tango scene ‘because of the men’, suggested a similarity in the behaviour of her former clients and some of the men at tango class:

I actually learned very quickly that there are some people that you just really have to be on your guard around mentally … there are plenty of men out there who’ve got their own insecurity issues, and they’re really threatened by women, and they really feel the need to put women down to make themselves feel better. … I think there’s a lot of that going on, people who feel powerless in their everyday life, and tango is somewhere they can come and have a bit of power (Anon, 6 August 2011).

It seemed clear that in a tango situation, it was perfectly permissible for men to speak to women in disparaging ways about their dancing, or to behave as if some women were simply invisible: to swagger and preen, or decline to speak, let alone dance, with them, or to quickly look away and avoid eye contact. Simultaneously, however, another idea insinuated itself into the picture: that of fragile male egos, of bluster and bombast, a powerful need for other men’s allegiance, and to demonstrate masculine competence by being seen to have perfect control over the social situation. I began to wonder whether the demeaning attitudes towards women I experienced were intrinsic to tango. I decided to investigate the roots of tango, a form that is necessarily associated with Buenos Aires.

Argentine tango in Australia is barely 20 years old, and to understand its social and cultural formation requires an understanding of the colonial culture of Argentina from the mid-nineteenth century. While there are many popular accounts of tango’s history that dwell on the delights of romance and illicit sexual passion, this chapter draws firstly on the writing of Argentinian political theorist Marta E Savigliano who explores the politics of tango as it arose in the late nineteenth century (1995a). She
seeks to untangle multiple social currents within the changing cultural perspectives of Argentina as it was exported to the world, and ironically back to itself again as an exoticised commodity, and a defining feature of Argentinian cultural identity.

Savigliano employs the idea of the heterosexual tango embrace as a metaphor, within which is tightly held a sense of exile, a mass of conflicting currents of anxiety, frustration and loss which beset the Argentinian population in the face of racial and class tensions (1995a). Such tensions, she argues, were exacerbated by enormous waves of European migration and the urban/rural displacements endemic in Argentinian culture prior to the turn of the twentieth century. She further emphasises the difficult process of hybridisation as tango developed along with other dances, and describes the difficulties of assimilation, and how the multiple conflicts of race, class and gender were contained within tango’s embrace. She discusses debates around machismo or ‘authentic virility’, not as an essence but as a product of history, of gendered and sexualised class and racial struggles and competition, not just for women but about achieving male identity (Savigliano 1995a).

The culture that Savigliano describes has been maintained on some levels, to the point where it has been fetishised over the intervening century by a global culture hungry for exotic fare. As it is taught and practised here in Australia today, Argentine tango appears to retain many of the cultural vestiges, including, for example, some of the gender stereotypes and associated behaviours that were a feature of tango’s ‘dark origins’ (Savigliano 1995a, pp. 155-6), such as a ‘cult of maleness’, or machismo as described by Savigliano, and discussed further in Chapter 3.
I have speculated that the infamous Argentinian *machismo* at the heart of tango resonates strongly within Sydney’s popular cultural imagination, nurtured by tango’s compelling allure, of ‘real men’ with boundless power. I have imagined the possibility of similar images brought to Australia embedded within the bodies and lives of our teachers and professional practitioners, and made visible in the dance itself. I have imagined how such demeanour might be conveyed to students through a kind of ‘silent curriculum’ (Moi 1991, p. 1022), by a ‘practical mimesis’ that occurs outside one’s conscious awareness, ‘a silent and practical communication from body to body’ (Downey 2010, p. 45) by which one acquires the practical knowhow of the dance including the cultural subtleties by which tango is practised. I have also speculated that students might in a sense ‘misrecognise’ a teacher’s demeanour and thus mistake what is merely arbitrary for an essential characteristic (Bourdieu 1977, p. 164). For example, conveyed almost imperceptibly as essential through a teacher’s pleasant and jovial conviviality are ideas suggesting that: women are most charming in stilettos; men unquestionably need to dominate the dance; women do not need to know what is going on; and a leader’s job is to teach the follower what her correct response to him should be, and to protect her from injury. In fact, while other dancers’ ‘misrecognition’ might create problems for people such as myself, it is nonetheless successful in building community and conformity. It does, however, beg the question of what is *essential* in dancing tango, and whether this is congruent with the set of shared opinions and unquestioned beliefs – the *doxa* – by which the tango community maintains itself.
2.2 Pierre Bourdieu and social practice theory

The writings of French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) are utilised in this thesis to assist my understanding of the relationship between the world of tango and my own practice, carried out primarily within a postmodern dance aesthetic. His concepts resonated with my own experiences, both in the world of tango and in my more familiar niche within postmodern dance. It was perhaps a little myopic on my part to expect that in entering a different, although potentially related, cultural field like Argentine tango, I would be equipped to deal with whatever arose in this new field simply by virtue of my status in the old, and that nothing about my practices or viewpoints would seem out of place. Socially, I expected to feel in my element, or as Bourdieu and Wacquant put it, ‘like a fish in water’ (1992, p. 127). Instead, the reverse was the case: I felt like a ‘fish out of water’. Consequently, this and others of Bourdieu’s concepts, such as having ‘a feel for the game’ (Bourdieu 1990, p. 66), made immediate and intuitive sense, inviting a new kind of access into the micro-dynamics of the situation. Adopting some of Bourdieu’s analytic tools gave me a platform from which to view my circumstances, clarifying aspects of my experiences of both tango teaching and dancing in Sydney.

Bourdieu’s most fundamental terms – field, habitus and social capital – gave me a vocabulary to describe the dynamics of my situation. Bourdieu insists that to understand the dynamics of the social world, these three ideas are integral and work in profoundly interdependent and mutually formative ways. He uses the analogy of a game and the idea of ‘strategy’ in order to emphasise the dynamic nature of practice. Educational sociologist, Karl Maton, describes how each social field:

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… can be understood as a competitive game or ‘field of struggles’, in which social agents strategically improvise in their quest to maximise their positions. Social agents do not arrive in a field fully armed with god-like knowledge of the state of play, the positions, beliefs and aptitudes of other social agents, or the full consequences of their actions. Rather they enjoy a particular point of view on proceedings based on their positions and they learn the tempo, rhythms and unwritten rules of the game through time and experience (Maton 2008, p. 54).

Bourdieu’s notion of habitus helped elucidate the unconscious assumptions I brought to tango. Habitus is conceived of as the ‘subjective’ element in the field, designating a person's ‘way of being, a habitual state (especially of the body), and in particular, a predisposition, tendency, propensity or inclination’ (Bourdieu 1977, p. 214). Maton describes it thus:

Habitus focuses on our ways of acting, feeling, thinking and being. It captures how we carry within us our history, how we bring this history into our present circumstances, and how we then make choices to act in certain ways and not others. This is an ongoing and active process – we are engaged in a continuous process of making history, but not under conditions entirely of our own making (Maton 2008, p. 52).

One issue that pushed me to investigate tango further was the pervasive silence about sexist behaviour in classes, practicas and milongas. Few people thought to question, for example, why the often socially dubious behaviour of some men was, for the most part, sanctioned as perfectly acceptable, if perhaps a little ‘rude’.

Contemporary scholars tend to subscribe to the idea that the world is socially and historically constructed in such a way that is not readily available to
consciousness\(^{28}\). Bourdieu’s idea is that ‘What is essential goes without saying because it comes without saying’ and ‘the tradition is silent, not least about itself as a tradition’ (1977, p. 165). Norwegian-born literary theorist and feminist scholar, Toril Moi (b. 1953), notes that Bourdieu’s idea of *habitus*, or ‘feel for the game’, may be compared to what educationalists have called a ‘silent curriculum’ (1991, p. 1022). This thesis suggests that in Argentine tango, the standards and values to which dancers are encouraged to conform are inculcated unconsciously through attitudes which often lie unexamined in the bodies and minds of their teachers and peers, and that insofar as these values are firmly identified with and incorporated, they seem ‘self-evident’, and unavailable for scrutiny. As Bourdieu describes:

> The principles embodied in this way are placed beyond the grasp of consciousness, and hence cannot be touched by voluntary, deliberate transformation, cannot even be made explicit; nothing seems more ineffable, more incommunicable, more inimitable, and therefore, more precious, than the values given body, made body by the transubstantiation achieved by the hidden persuasion of an implicit pedagogy, capable of instilling a whole cosmology, an ethic, a metaphysic, a political philosophy, through injunctions as insignificant as ‘stand up straight’ ... (Bourdieu 1977, p. 94).

Tango also appeared self-contained as a field, possibly due to dancers who did not see their practice as part of a wider dance context. With the embrace, the connection and therefore partnering skills being central to the dance and creating almost all of the issues which surround learning and dancing tango, it seemed to me that there were many techniques from other contemporary forms that could be used to assist these partnering skills for both men and women. Tango practitioners, however,

\(^{28}\) For example, see Berger and Luckmann, 1966, *The Social Construction of Reality*. 
seemed unwilling to contemplate these ideas, firstly because they did not come from
the legitimised teacher. My status as a professional dancer/teacher meant little
without the required tango legitimacy or social capital. I had not yet been to Buenos
Aires, and nor did I subscribe to many of the codes, such as remaining silent while
dancing, or being suitably attentive to either the technique of cabeceo or my
partner’s ego. Further, the field of traditional Argentine tango maintains itself by
fairly rigorously upheld doxa, and in particular, the dominant position of men as
leaders and the consequent ‘lesser’ status of the women as followers. The ‘natural’
consequence of this gender hierarchy, which for the most part, does not allow
women to speak with authority about the dancing, means that women consistently
derfer to their male partners.

The culture of traditional Argentine tango seems to align with Bourdieu’s concept
of a field in which players compete for stakes, for power and for legitimacy, using
different kinds of strategies at different times to maintain or improve their social
credibility, or capital. ‘For a field to work, there must be stakes, and people ready to
play the game, equipped with the habitus which enables them to know and
recognise the immanent laws of the game, the stakes, and so on’ (in Moi 1991, p.
1021). The idea of acquiring and maintaining social capital also resonates in the
kind of vehemence and seriousness with which people uphold and defend the doxa
of the tango field. It would be difficult for a dancer to acknowledge that the
intuitively recognised social rules operating in tango may be merely arbitrary and
neither ‘natural’ nor essential, because this may necessitate forfeiting a hard-won
place in the competitive game for power and status.
Habitus as ‘internalised structure’ is simply the condition of successfully incorporating the unwritten doxa by which field conditions are maintained. People who have ‘a feel for the game’, that is a feel for the rules of the field, question neither its authority, its ‘reality’, nor its rules. Only in the event that field conditions no longer match our habitus, and our feel for the game is undermined, do questions arise. This relates to my third difficulty: my confusion over other people's social responses to me, as a woman, as a dancer, and as a person, as I experienced it in Sydney’s tango community.

As Bourdieu describes, when a person’s habitus ‘confronts’ a field which is maintained by unfamiliar doxa and differing strategies for acquiring social capital, this experience of feeling like a ‘fish out of water’ alerts one to how one’s own unconscious expectations have been shaped by a very different cultural field. He terms this the hysteresis effect. In Homo Academicus, Bourdieu discusses a particular field change within the academic milieu, but his words are pertinent here: ‘... everything which made up the old order, the intangible liberties and connivances which are shared by people of the same milieu, the respectful familiarity which was de rigeur between different generations of the same family were abolished’ (Bourdieu 1988, p. 151). Similarly, American sociologist, Cheryl Hardy, describes the experience of hysteresis: ‘What is then at risk is the taken-for-granted membership of one's own community and the “familiarity with the game” that is acquired in early experiences ...’ (Hardy 2008, p. 141), echoing my own experience of the tango scene.

The gender revolution of the 1970s may have transformed social life in Australia, but in 2015 it is possible to discern a strong sense of cultural nostalgia operating on
the Australian psyche. Arguably this harks back to an earlier era of social etiquette – perhaps the 1950s and 1960s – idealising strongly-marked heteronormative social relations. Thus in Sydney, for the most part, both men and women participating in the burgeoning tango culture readily accept these gender roles, and willingly participate in tango’s social dynamics. Some women speak rapturously and dramatically about their ‘addiction’ to tango, as if they are helpless to resist being drawn into something both pleasurable and illicit. To me, however, it seems more a fabricated ‘addiction’ by which people identify with the mythology bound up in the experience of ‘authentic’ Argentine tango. In any case, certainly many women love the experience of tango, not being nearly as resistant as I am to being told how to behave, either as a woman or as a dancer.

2.3 Searching for ‘real’ tango

Accordingly, this chapter explores an ever-present tension between the idea of ‘authenticity’ in Argentine tango practice and the notion of tango as a hybrid form. It seeks to find evidence that tango has been a global and hybrid form since its inception, in order to provide a counter argument to the popular idea, chiefly advanced by those outside of Buenos Aires (Merritt 2012, pp. 161-63), that there is only one ‘authentic’ practice understood as deriving from tango’s ‘golden era’ in early twentieth century Buenos Aires.

‘Hybridity’ in this context may be understood as a communicative process which recognises that transcultural relations are ‘complex, processural and dynamic’, and that divergent practices are often continually and competitively negotiated (Kraidy 2002, p. 4).
In much of the authenticity/hybridity discourse, suggests post-colonial scholar and critical theorist, Homi Bhabha, ‘claims for an inherent authenticity ... frequently become political arguments for the hierarchy and ascendancy of powerful cultures’ (1994, pp. 83-84). While hybridity and cultural inequality are not mutually exclusive (Kraidy 2002), it seems certain that a central feature of Argentine tango discourse today is fired by these ideas in contention. This thesis argues that the ‘powerful culture’ in this case is that found in the multiple interwoven forces of class and racial struggles in the late nineteenth century, exacerbated by the cultural dominance of an elite Europeanised cultural morality, so that a traditional heterosexual gender hierarchy became more rigidly prioritised within the relational and movement dynamics of Argentine tango.

Despite the demonstrably hybrid nature of tango, as evidenced through the continual conflation of forms from a variety of global sources (see Appendix 2), this chapter argues that such Europeanised heteronormative ideals, and their re-appropriation by the Argentinian elite in the early twentieth century, have played a central role in shaping the notion that there is one authentic Argentine tango practice, ‘the tango’.

This chapter also introduces the closely related idea that cultural norms and stereotypes continuously influence social relationships of all kinds. The way the dance is imagined by individual dancers today, and how those imaginings underlie tango’s physical and social practices, is shown distinctively through a kind of policing of codes of behaviour and organisation by which cultural authenticity is constructed and measured. Importantly, how gender norms in tango are historically constructed has been rendered almost invisible by the prevailing cultural stereotypes with expressions of heteronormative values reified through elaborate codes of
behaviour in tango cultures throughout the world. These codes construct not only the physical forms of tango, but importantly the ways of feeling and aesthetic values which inhabit them, thus shaping a globally recognised and purveyed cultural product.

Issues of authenticity and what constitutes ‘real’ tango are threaded through many of the histories written about Argentine tango. As this chapter argues, the traditional lead/follow structure of the tango embrace, the gender-specific hierarchical practice we recognise today, is a hybridised feature originally adapted from the European waltz and polka, initially brought to Buenos Aires with Italian, Spanish and Czech migrants, and developed further in the elite circles of Paris and London before being re-appropriated by the Argentinian elite. Thus, the embrace and the lead/follow structure which it seems to inevitably initiate, may be understood as a hybridised embodiment of the particular social and political values evidenced in the Argentinian migrant working classes in contention with the ‘polite’ upper class sensibilities of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Paris and London.

2.4 A little tango culture

While a detailed cultural and political history of Argentina is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is useful to understand some of the prevailing conditions which shaped the variety of expressions of tango since the late nineteenth century. This section draws on historical and cultural research by several writers including Argentinian anthropologist Marta Savigliano, American art historian Robert Farris Thompson, American anthropologist Carolyn Merritt, and American cultural anthropologist Jeffrey Tobin.
Savigliano (1995a) explores the politics of tango as it arose in the late nineteenth century in the streets, tenements and brothels of Buenos Aires, which in the early twentieth century was one of the wealthiest colonies, maintained by significant British investment, offset by a massive influx of largely poor, male labourers from Southern and Eastern Europe between 1871 and 1914. As Merritt notes, at the same time projects seeking to modernise the urban landscape, remodelling them to mimic the sophisticated avenues of Paris with expensive shops for the newly wealthy and upwardly aspiring cosmopolitan consumer, led to a widening gulf between poverty-stricken, working class immigrants and the newly wealthy (2012).

Critical in this context, too, as described by American art historian Robert Farris Thompson (2005), is the cultural and social influence of African slaves originally from the Portuguese-ruled Kongo. These Argentinian blacks, along with working class migrants from Spain and Italy, the gauchos (cattlemen) coming in from the pampas (South American lowlands) for employment, and those from the fashionable European centres of Paris and London, all brought their own dance and musical traditions with them. Tango culture and sensibilities emerged from the conflicting and competing interests of all these groups.

Thus, at the beginning of the twentieth century, there were a number of divergent tangos co-existing, among them canyengue, milonga\(^\text{29}\), tango criollo and tango liso. Each adopted a European-style embrace derived from the waltz and polka, which enabled a lead/follow structure and sensibility\(^\text{30}\).

\(^{29}\) ‘Milonga’ is both the name of a dance and the name of the dance event or venue.

\(^{30}\) See Appendix 2 for more detailed descriptions of these tangos.
Savigliano’s cultural analysis describes two principal and overlapping styles that developed between the 1880s and 1930s, the *ruffianesque* and the *romantic*, which blended together during that period, participating in the narratives of popular theatre. The main characters of this theatre were the *milonguita* (tango woman) and the *compadrito* (her male partner) who perform versions of the gender stereotypes and heterosexual dynamics so familiar in tango today. The *milonguita* is characterised as a ‘rebellious broad’, while the *compadrito* is a ‘whiny ruffian’, and together they become tragicomic expressions of the difficulties suffered in efforts to gain social standing and financial security. Such social tensions, notes Savigliano, are seen as embedded in heterosexual relationships: ‘In the micro-politics of tango, all social tensions are simmered in the sexual cooking pot – a pot in which sexuality seems to be a male concern about questions of maleness’ (1995b, p. 86). This notion of a ‘cult of maleness’ at the turn of the century in Buenos Aires was not just about fierce competition for scarce women, but even more, had to do with achieving male identity. Savigliano notes: ‘... although women are at the centre of the polemics they do not play a central role’ (1995a, p. 46). Men’s behaviour with women constituted:

... manipulations among men. Male bonding, male society – maleness is what is at stake … a power play between men. … On a micropolitical level, men of various racial/class ascriptions struggle over women of diverse classes and races … Whoever gets to the top at a certain point gets to define what maleness is all about. Maleness will be the reason given for being at the top, and thus the victory will seem natural and incontestable. The victory is a victory of men of one race and class over those of another race and class (Savigliano 1995a, p. 46).

In Buenos Aires at the beginning of the twentieth century, the places where tango was danced were inextricably associated with lower classes, undesirable
populations, and with dangerous ethnic and racial mixing. Conversely, the city of Paris in the same period, represented the height of cultural sophistication, so that as tango became immensely popular there, upper class Argentinian women were at first ambivalent, seeing their political power at home in danger of being undermined by Paris’s acceptance of what they considered to be a low-class, culturally suspect population. A passage from *El Diario*, December 1912, reads:

> When we were all almost convinced that Europe was no longer considering us as ‘savage’ … we received … the unexpected news that in Paris they were suddenly aware of our existence not through the valuable products of our soil … but through the tango. … Moreover … tango, as it is danced in Paris, has little to do with ours except for the name and the music (Savigliano, 1995a p. 140).

For the dance masters of Paris and London, the disciplining of dancing bodies was a profitable undertaking, as they instructed their students on how to control their ‘bodily instincts’ as demanded by a bourgeois morality, while at the same time keeping in mind the allure of the more exotic, if scandalous, forms of waltz, polka, and tango (Savigliano, 1995b). According to Savigliano, dancing bodies were coerced into a ‘new heterosexual amorous code’ whereby gender roles were shaped by the dance masters’ notions of ‘good taste’ and ‘decorum’. Paris ruled on posture, the kind of attitude required in the embrace, and the stylisation of the roles of lead and follow which ‘emphasized an erotic imagery of smoothness, harmony, compatibility and fluid complementarity … in skilled performances of heterosexual romanticism’. It was the lure and rewards of ‘class’ which marked and policed the chief distinctions between correct and incorrect techniques (Savigliano 1995a, pp. 99-100).
Such European, or European-influenced, dance instructors wrote manuals for their students, undertaking a careful screening to eliminate tango’s ‘indecent’ features. Thus Argentinian women had access to a ‘civilised’ tango performed in a stylised manner. However, with their own class and national identity at stake, they also required that the tango they danced to be distinguishable not only from the low class, home grown ‘ruffianesque’ tango criollo style (Figure 2), but also from the ‘exotic’, refined European tango liso (Figure 3). To ameliorate the European influence, they re-appropriated some features of local criollo or canyengue (Figure 4) mainly evidenced by close bodies and tightly locked arms. As Savigliano suggests, ‘it was exoticization and national self-affirmation by means of autoexoticization: exoticism under local control’ (1995a, p. 153).
Figure 2. *Tango Criollo*. ‘Call and response’ becomes ‘lead and follow’ (Thompson 2005, p. 231).
With the proliferation of styles generated by such ‘civilising’ processes, notes Savigliano, increasing endeavours were made to establish an ‘authentic’ tango, so as to avoid losing the sense of the tango’s ‘dark origins’, of exploited people and class confrontations, which had created the first hybrid expressions (1995a, p. 155). Nevertheless, as Thompson suggests, in Buenos Aires, the 1916 publication of The Argentine Salon Tango: Method, Technique, and Practice of the Dance tended to codify tango.

Thus, according to Jeffrey Tobin, who has written extensively on the performance of masculinity in tango, the embrace derived from European social dance became
more rigid than in earlier tangos, with couples being taught more stable and sexually distinctive roles to maintain a more ‘seemly’ moral code, making it ‘... conform to the established mechanics of European, bourgeois, heterosexist social dance, in which a dominant man leads and a docile woman follows’ (1998, p. 94). Such refined versions as tango de salon and tango liso from around 1905 to 1910, as depicted in this dance manual, eschewed the canyengue ‘lean and crouch’ in favour of the Europeanised ‘fine posture’ with a vertical torso. These dances were performed in ‘a gliding, more expansive manner’, with space between the dancers, widely held arms, and the avoidance of thighs and feet touching (Figure 3).

Figure 4. Canyengue. Photo by Aaron Davies, UK, 2012.
Following its endorsement by the Parisians, over the ensuing decades the legendary ‘golden age’ of tango became ascendant, reaching the height of its popularity during the early years of Juan Domingo Pérón’s presidency (1946-1955), after which its popularity began to wane. But for 30 years or so between the 1920s and 1950s, tango was the dance of the masses, and the spirit of competition and innovation central to its development.

According to Thompson, one dancer, Argentinian Benito Bianquet, known as ‘El Cachafaz’, reputedly shaped the look of pre-1940s tango, being renowned for his competitive spirit and the cultivation of an extreme milonguero manner (2005, p. 240). Cachafaz’s expertise may in effect characterise what many people claim now to be ‘authentic’ tango. But as he was equally adept at canyengue and tango liso, switching styles with ease, and in contrast to the view endorsing only one authentic version, it can be seen that ‘golden age’ tango was not necessarily danced chest-to-chest in close embrace, nor did it mean keeping the feet close to the floor, as is popularly believed.

From the mid-1950s onwards, several factors contributed to the decline of tango as a popular dance, a period coincident with increasing economic, political and social unrest and culminating in the military coup and the horrors of the ‘disappearances’ during Argentine’s Dirty War (1976-1983). Government policies during this time included curfews, which severely curtailed social gatherings, including tango.

31 See Merritt’s discussion of the ‘propaganda of close embrace’ (2012, pp. 159-161).

32 In this same expansive spirit, in the 1940s another famed dancer, Petróleo, and 23 Club Nelson men who practised together, had tango innovation and new moves as their goal, and it was Petróleo who first used the term ‘nuevo’, declaring the 1940s the era of ‘el tango nuevo’ celebrating choreographic development. He was regarded as ‘a tremendous creator’ with ‘unparalleled inventive skill’. He and his colleagues were ‘rebels’, aiming to ‘innovate’ and develop personal style (Merritt 2012, pp 53-54).
events. While some attest that there were still a few scaled-down *milongas* during the 1960s and 1970s, the dance largely went underground (Merritt 2012).33

With the reinstatement of democracy in 1984, Buenos Aires led Argentina’s wide social and cultural reclamation with the creation of the *Programa Cultural en Barrios* (Neighbourhood Cultural Program), encouraging the revival of community space. At this time, the re-emergence of music and dance from the ‘golden age’ of tango, as danced by older *milongueros* in a fashion now 30 years old, helped kindle a nostalgia which also mourned the passing of a lost era. Such nostalgia for the imagery and lyrics associated with tango music and dance of this earlier time fed into strong nationalistic desires in a new search for cultural identity.

In the exiled Argentinian communities, particularly in Paris, tango’s global renaissance became evident. In 1983, the spectacular touring show, *Tango Argentino*, was first staged in Paris, and has often been credited with the international revival of tango. Produced with this as its particular purpose, *Tango Argentino* showcased costumes, tango movement, sentiment and lyrics as icons of Argentine history, thus reinforcing the idea that there really was an ‘authentic’ tango. With the impetus of the show, cast members were in demand as teachers and demonstrators, igniting the growth of tango communities throughout the world (Merritt 2012).

33 Notably, composer Astor Piazzolla, having left Buenos Aires in 1955 for Paris, was nevertheless arguably the most important tango composer at this time, revolutionising tango music by creating complex musical compositions and introducing ideas and instrumentation from other genres. While these were thought to be ‘undanceable’ by those who preferred traditional tango, he is thought to have kept tango alive among international audiences. At the same time, he often inspired hostile criticism in Argentina, that *eso no es tango* (‘that is not tango’), a complaint which is still heard today in many tango gatherings for a number of reasons, not only musical. After Petróleo in the 1940s, Piazzolla also reputedly used the phrase ‘nuevo tango’ in 1960 when referring to the music of his newly formed quintet many years prior to the tango renaissance of the 1990s (Merritt 2012).
At the same time, a new generation of dancers, less steeped in the nostalgia for a lost era, was also active. In the spirit of discovery and innovation, Gustavo Naveira, one of a small group of ‘young, restless and hungry’ boys on the tango scene (Merritt 2012, p. 45), and close friend Fabian Salas, eventually formed the now-famous Cochabamba ‘investigation’ group in the mid-1990s, to investigate new ways of dancing and thinking about tango. They rejected teaching through the pre-arranged collection of steps favoured by the older tangueros, wanting to break down these larger patterns into their fundamental constituents: all movement of either the leader or follower is some combination of backward, forward and side steps. Each dancer maintains his or her own centre, with dancers constantly rotating around each other. To accommodate such explorations, the dancers’ embrace could be loosened, and attention was refocused away from the emotional narrative of earlier tangos and towards the physical skills and mechanics of partnering (Merritt 2012). This more analytic approach created a marked change in the way tango was practised and therefore the way it looked. Students were no longer limited to replicating their teachers’ sequences, being prompted to create their own, with improvisation becoming seemingly endless.

Thus attempts to recreate ‘golden age’ tangos by older milongueros, the advent of international tango stage shows like Tango Argentino, and nuevo tango which injected new ways of thinking about the old dance, all featured in the late twentieth century global tango revival. Nevertheless, the idea that there is only one ‘authentic’ tango is still pervasive. For example, the term ‘nuevo’ is sometimes used pejoratively to distinguish it from ‘close-embrace’ tango which is thought to possess the valued qualities of the ‘authentic’. Merritt notes, however, that ‘close embrace’, promoted as estilo milonguero, or milonuero style, by many teachers, is sometimes used as a marketing ploy catering to tourists looking for ‘authentic’ tango. Such a ‘propaganda of
close embrace ... seeks to create a hierarchy of tango experience, where certain ways of enacting and speaking of one’s enactment of the dance are, at the very least, presented as more authentic than others’ (Merritt 2012, p. 161).

2.5 Cultivating norms and stereotypes

When one looks at what constitutes ‘authentic’ tango in the popular imagination, it might be argued that Rudolph Valentino’s image of the archetypal ‘Latin lover’ in the 1921 film *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* is quintessential. In fact, Valentino was chosen by director Rex Ingram not just because of his dance prowess, but because he was the perfect ‘type’ for the character of the hero:

Valentino appears, you see his face laughing: thin lips, hard eyes, tough jaw. His eyes slit with interest. … He asks for a dance. … Her partner says no. Valentino sends him flying into a table. … Then Valentino and Dominguez start to dance. … Sometimes he holds out a stiff arm in the fashion of the tango of Europe, sometimes not. He looms over Dominguez, bending her back, tango-pirate fashion, with a devastating downward gaze. He is making the world look at him (Thompson 2005, p. 15).

The stereotypical image provided by Valentino also resonates with Savigliano’s description of the ‘whiny ruffian’, partner to the ‘rebellious broad’. Both these ruffianesque characters were originally brought to life by Argentinian writer,

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34 *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, directed by Rex Ingram in 1921, is an American silent film epic produced by Metro Pictures Corporation, and based on the Spanish novel of the same name by Vicente Blasco Ibáñez. The film had a huge cultural impact, adding to the global passion for tango.
José Sebastián Tallón, in his 1959 portraits of El Civico and La Moreira\textsuperscript{35}. El Civico is a man who is cruel, violent, sensual, exploitive, but also loving and financially dependent, (Savigliano 1995b, pp. 86-87). Tallón’s description of El Civico emphasises the machismo which Savigliano sees as a result of the struggle for maleness which beset the compadritos in fin de siecle Buenos Aires. She describes the compadritos as men who needed ‘to look tough, to despise life, and to distain women’:

Perhaps they disdained women defensively because women were unattainable or difficult to keep. Perhaps they came to despise life from fighting over women in order to keep on being men, despite their class. The macho identity was born out of this contradiction, and women’s identities were born out of the competition among

\textsuperscript{35} Argentinian writer José Sebastián Tallón, in 1959, portrayed a tango couple living at the beginning of the twentieth century in the characters of El Civico and La Moreira. She was born Luciana Acosta but went by the name of La Moreira and was known best for her relationship with her criollo pimp, El Civico. Tallón writes about this couple thus:

In the years (190)5, 6, 7, and 8, El Civico, between twenty-five and twenty-eight years old, lived in room number 15 of El Sarandi, a tenement house located on the street of the same name. His profession was that of exploiting his woman, La Moreira. [...] He was of South Italian ancestry (Albanian); she was the daughter of Andalusian gypsies. It is unnecessary to depict El Civico as an extremely good looking guy, because the key to his success, as we all know, lay in his seductive ways. [...] At dusk, La Moreira would go with other women to the ‘bar’ of La Pichona [...] where she ‘worked’ as a prostitute, as a lancera, as a go-between for clients and other prostitutes, and as a dancer. As a lancera because she stole wallets from the drunk distracted clients and from the immigrants who had money; as a go-between because she was associated with her ‘husband’ in that business of deceiving poor souls and selling them as ‘novelties’; as a dancer, because she was a great one and because La Pichona’s ‘bar’ was one of the places that helped to give the tango its fame and its association with prostitution. At night, she was a tango-woman. Brave gipsy blood ran through her veins, and, even though she was apparently very feminine and quite beautiful, in her dark endeavors she showed great ‘courage’ in throwing the dagger, and that is where her name comes from. [...] Her looks: Not too tall, perfect figure, sensuous voice, like her face; like her walking. [...] Her hairdo, a roundlet at the nape of her neck, held by turtle-shell clips and combs, big golden earrings—the size of a glass rim—and from the necklace dangled a locket. Well, the locket carried a portrait of El Civico. [...] And he loved his woman. The most dreadful thing about this arrogant subject was his love for his woman. That professional prostitute who every afternoon kissed him good-bye on her way to the brothel. El Civico loved her. La Moreira was truly his beloved, his everlasting companion. [...] When he hit her, she would let him do it, even though she was able to fight back like a guapo [tough guy], because he did not punish her with the brutality of those who could not master their whores, but with the demands of a handsome master or jealous lover. If she would have left him, he would have tracked her down to kill her; or perhaps he would have sought forgetfulness in alcohol (in Savigliano 1995b, pp. 86-87).
men: Macho men of different colours and classes pulling at women from different directions shaped women’s nameless identities (Savigliano 1995a, p. 31).

Tallón’s portrait of La Moreira depicts Savigliano’s ‘rebellious broad’, best known for her relationship with El Civico, her criollo pimp. She is courageous, aggressive, sexually manipulative, ambitious, treacherous, astute, as well as submissive, and as a dancer she anticipates his every move. The theatre of the time popularised such ruffianesque caricatures in song lyrics which often centred the action around the brothels and cabarets of late nineteenth century Buenos Aires. Frequently the plots of these dramas featured a man of the elite moneyed class, a ‘real’ man by virtue of his wealth, who steals the milonguita (tango woman) away from her compadrito (her male partner), as she seeks the social stability that his wealth provides (Savigliano 1995b, pp. 84-97).

Such mediated images of ‘authentic’ tango as described by Savigliano and enhanced by the ‘glamour’ industries of fashion, theatre and film have been the means of creating tango as a saleable commodity worldwide. Although many people may see playfulness and humour in these clichés of passion and sexual conquest, there is often a kind of magnetic pull towards those characters, both past and present, real and celluloid.
For many people, tango demeanour is much more than a game, or even a temporary ‘lifestyle’ choice. On the dance floor it remains a marker of status, and also provides a moral code which, according to Vannini and Williams (2009), may function as an inducement to normative gendered behaviour. Even if tango stereotypes appear superficial, they still incorporate cultural gender norms which are very close to the
bone. For some, tango demeanour constitutes a serious and unconscious embodiment of social and gender norms which remain apparently ‘natural’, unassailable and unavailable for questioning.

This chapter argues that the idea of only one authentic tango, ‘the tango’, has been transmitted globally through the marketing of these cultural stereotypes, in live performance, film, lyrics, music, choreography and costume. Thus the countless images of stereotypical characters – the macho men, the pimps and femmes fatales of an exotic, if imaginary, fin de siecle demimonde – still populate the globally marketed tango industry today. Even as well-worn clichés, these images continue to capture the imaginations of people worldwide who are responsive to tango’s enticing narrative of passionate if fleeting romance, of sexual allure and seduction, and the promise of fantasy fulfilled. As Merritt comments:

> Argentine professionals who brought the dance abroad … planting the seeds of global tango communities as they traveled, carried these narratives as memories, cultural heritage embodied. Further, these narratives play out in classroom exercises, whether to mock and discount as clichéd or to elicit heightened performances from students through romantic and theatrical anecdotes that get at one particular aspect of the dance’s history… often at the expense of any other. Thus, this facet of the tango is deeply embedded in the global imagination as the tango (Merritt 2012, p. 93).

Whether we are enamoured with these stereotypes or seek to dismantle their power, it is always by way of these gender norms, and their import both personally and collectively, that we struggle to understand ourselves and our relationships with others. As American philosopher and gender theorist, Judith Butler observes: ‘The norms that constitute gender both do us and undo us; they make us but they also
prevent us from making what we would of ourselves’ (Butler 2008). Further, she comments:

... [W]hen we speak about my sexuality or my gender, as we do (and as we must), we mean something complicated by it. Neither of these is precisely a possession, but both are to be understood as modes of being dispossessed, ways of being for another, or, indeed, by virtue of another (Butler 2004, p. 19).

Following Butler, this research shows how easily recognisable gender boundaries seem to ‘humanise’ us, making clear what is expected of us as social individuals. There is tacit agreement to perform and maintain these gendered images, which obscures their production so that they are believed to be entirely ‘natural’ (Butler 2007). Butler’s project contextualises the glamorised gender stereotypes cultivated, often unconsciously, over and over again within various tango communities. The women’s clothing, the crimson and black, the almost compulsory stilettos, the split skirts and slinky dresses, as well as the dapper hats and inevitable aftershave the men use, and the often impeccable milonguero demeanour seen on the dance floor, are all expressions of the gender roles that dancers identify with and emulate, often without irony, as part of the allure of tango.

Crucially, it is not simply the physical appearance of these stereotypes which resonates within us, but also the ways of moving, feeling and thinking that they present through their physical demeanour, via our ‘bodily hexis’. As Bourdieu writes:

There is no better image of the logic of socialization, which treats the body as a ‘memory-jogger’, than those complexes of gestures, postures and words — simple interjections or favourite clichés — which only have to be slipped into, like a
theatrical costume, to awaken, by the evocative power of bodily mimesis, a universe of ready-made feelings and experiences (Bourdieu 1984, p. 474).

2.6 Discourses of authenticity

Sociological and cultural studies scholars Phillip Vannini and Patrick Williams note that the idea of cultural authenticity is a ‘moving target’ (2009). In everyday usage, it may refer to an ‘inherent quality’ which cannot be appropriated and is non-negotiable. However, the irony of this is seen in contemporary cultural industries, which make huge financial investments in producing an authenticity which one is forever being told cannot be manufactured. In this context, Argentine tango may be understood as emblematic, which is even more ironic when measured against another facet of the ‘authentic’ which typically ‘stands against replicas, pretense and posing’ (2009, p. 2). While ‘authenticity’ is a socially constructed phenomenon with values changing over time and national boundaries, it is still ultimately evaluative. In particular, and in line with this chapter’s argument, ‘authenticity is often something strategically invoked as a marker of status or method of social control’: claims of authenticity often have a kind of moral force which functions as an inducement to normative practice. Moreover, issues of authenticity, such as are found in much tango discourse, can underpin personal, group, and social identity and maintenance, as well as status (Vannini & Williams 2009, p. 5).

The question ‘Is it authentic tango?’ comprises the central feature of tango culture and discourse, leading then to the question of who has the right to judge who best, as Villa describes it, embodies authentic tango (2011b). As previously outlined, my own questions arose from my perception that in Sydney, while ‘authentic’ tango was vehemently proclaimed, it was not always clear what that meant. When I asked,
many would refer to the way it was in the ‘golden age’ or ‘the way it is in Buenos Aires’. As this chapter has sought to demonstrate, however, there is no single ‘authentic’ tango. Rather, there has always been a diversity of styles, even in the ‘golden age’. Following Vannini and Williams, it also argues that such claims of authenticity are more markers of status implying social control than indicating a distinctive and independent quality (2009, p. 5).

Nevertheless, much behaviour of both men and women within tango events is often lent meaning and justification by claims that it is in some way related to ‘authentic’ practice. In this context, it is interesting to return to Bourdieu’s concept of doxa, as it relates to the idea of tango authenticity, and to what this thesis argues are some of the shared and largely unquestioned assumptions, including gender inequality, which seem to hold the tango world together. French cultural academic, Cécile Deer, commenting on Bourdieu’s notion of doxa, notes that:

... doxa allows the socially arbitrary nature of power relations that have produced the doxa itself to continue to be misrecognised and as such to be reproduced in a self-reinforcing manner … The mutual reinforcement between field and habitus strengthens the prevailing power of the doxa, which guides the appropriate ‘feel’ for the game of those involved in the field via presuppositions that are contained in the doxa itself (Deer 2008, p. 121).

As Bourdieu argues, it is this ‘mutual reinforcement’ or congruence between what people see as the objective social field in which they operate, and their subjective feelings, which creates a ‘practical mimesis’, that is, the unconscious process of how a person might adapt to social expectations of the people around them: ‘The body believes in what it plays at ... What is “learned by body” is not something that
one has ... but something that one is’ (1990, p. 73). Judith Butler, however, points to a potential ambiguity at the core of such practical mimesis, such that people may feel dissonance or ambivalence in the face of what they feel to be coercive social rules. Such a sense of ambivalence functions so that wholehearted identification cannot ‘work’ and the norm is not embodied (Butler 1999, p. 118).

Deer’s description of doxa might be appropriately applied to strictly traditional, autonomous social organisations. Even if it is not always an entirely perfect match, the microcosm of a traditional tango milonga in Sydney arguably approaches such an organisation, being somewhat protected from other external influences by its strong identification with arrangements in Buenos Aires, and the somewhat incontestable ‘how it is’ there. As Bourdieu would maintain, and this chapter argues, any reflection on established rules is thus mediated and limited by day-to-day experience, by ‘what is’. Lacking the means to question what is taken for granted, any attempt to redress a socially disadvantageous position, such as the role of women in tango, is limited to weak and non-discursive means, or subjected to ‘symbolic hijacking’. Consequently, many people are able to rationalise their own and others’ behaviour and assumptions in a tango environment as either conforming to tradition, just the way ‘it is’, part of the mystery, a matter of good or bad taste, or manners that should go without saying, or perhaps just a mistake, rather than seeing it as systemically discriminatory in some way.

2.7 Tradition and purveyors of authentic tango

Writing on tango as a ‘queer’ commodity, Savigliano comments that early twenty-first century globalisation has brought about a proliferation of tango tourism,
evident both in the increasing number of visitors to Buenos Aires, and in the exportation of purveyors of tango ‘authenticity’ from Argentina to the rest of the world (2010, p. 135). Both globalisation and tourism, however, have fuelled anxieties about maintaining tango’s ‘authenticity’ as a means of consolidating cultural identity, as well as the possibilities, beneficial and otherwise, arising from tango’s global marketability. Tango communities have flourished outside Argentina and created a variety of global re-adaptations with localised styles and meanings that fuel debates framed primarily by the contested aesthetics of innovation and tradition in ways of partnering and musical taste. The legitimacy of any innovation in these areas is determined by those with ‘rightful authority’ (Savigliano 2010, p. 136) which, until recently, has always been aligned with the nationality of the innovators and their recognised stature within the Argentine tango community. The global expansion of tango in the late twentieth century has seen these traditional markers of legitimacy become more complicated, with younger generations of social and professional tango practitioners becoming increasingly interested in the aesthetics of tango. Their allegiance is to a more international dance scene than that of their parents. They also relate more to the expanded economic benefits of a global market, which competes with the ideals of tango legitimacy and authenticity. According to Savigliano, the areas of nuevo and queer tango now attract a much wider spectrum of dancers formerly excluded from participating in debates about tango aesthetics and practice because of traditionalist antipathy to their ‘suspect’ nationality and community credentials (2010).

Tango traditionalists and innovators alike appear to want tango as a popular art to be considered ‘universal’, and its appeal to cut across cultural, social and class boundaries. At the same time, however, tango codes, aesthetics and politics are still
fiercely guarded by those Savigliano ironically describes as ‘cultural citizens, bearers of the tango “tradition” involving knowledge, sensitivity and a quasi-biological predisposition related to socialisation’ (2010, p. 136). These are people who desire to preserve their culture as unique by acting as gatekeepers to special knowledge and tango lore, while simultaneously emphasising its marketability by enhancing its cultural uniqueness. Thus they participate in the creation of an exoticised product, and profit from the sale of what Vannini and Williams would recognise as a ‘manufactured’ authenticity (2009, p. 2).

This is borne out in my experience of Sydney’s tango scene, where some practitioners have taken on a similar gatekeeping role. Heated conversations about what is socially and aesthetically correct behaviour on the dance floor in Sydney abound, and individuals seek to be seen as influential in the way tango is conducted, either through condemning certain kinds of behaviours and practices, or praising what they admire, with reference to ‘the way it is done in Buenos Aires’.

Meanwhile, notes Saraza, such claims to knowledge of the authentic, often function as a kind of trump card, ‘making an unchallengeable assertion’ which disempowers students, and ‘keeps control in the face of anything new, and, almost always, when confronted with the energy of youth’ (2012b), a comment that is resonant in light of Vannini and Williams’ discussion of authenticity (2009).

This chapter has sought to draw out evidence of tango as a global and hybrid form from its inception, thus countering the conventional claim for a single authentic practice understood as deriving from tango’s ‘golden era’ in early twentieth century Buenos Aires. The chapter has also sought to show how rigidly prioritised ‘traditional’ heteronormative ideals of the early twentieth century are reflected in
the way the dance was, and is still, imagined, as well as the policing of codes of behaviour by which an ‘authentic’ practice is constructed, maintained and measured.

The following chapter describes some of these codes and their transgressions, in particular ‘cabecéo’, the invitation to dance, as well as further aspects of the tango embrace, in order to demonstrate their impact on the dynamics of personal relationships within the dancing partnership and thus the quality of the tango experience.
Chapter 3

Authenticity and transgression: Cabeceo and other relational codes

The previous chapter sought to investigate whether it is possible to introduce into Tango the non-hierarchical, socially emancipated ways of thinking that this thesis argues are intrinsic to contact improvisation. In doing so, it surveyed some of the history that may have led to a more intense commitment to social mores understood as ‘traditional’ or ‘authentic’ in Argentine Tango. Chapter 2 also examined some aspects of the authenticity discourse seeking to understand the means by which the ‘traditional’ heteronormative ideals of early twentieth century Europe are reflected in the ways the dance has been, and still is, imagined over time. Through an analysis of the prevailing stereotypes embodied in romantic and ruffianesque tango styles, Chapter 2 also sought to develop an understanding of the means by which the demeanour cultivated in tango’s embrace and associated lead and follow roles is shaped.

Chapter 3 extends this analysis in order to investigate how some aspects of ‘authentic’ practice function, but are also regulated by the codes through which tango is structured and understood. The strength or laxity of these codes enacted through tango’s social milieu, particularly the milonga, is as much a part of the discourse about authenticity as the codes themselves. This chapter takes my experience of Sydney’s tango world as a case study, examining two forms of coded behaviour in order to understand how gender roles and social power are intertwined and played out. It also draws on interviews undertaken with members of Sydney’s tango community. This chapter seeks to demonstrate that such codes not only regulate the details of tango etiquette, but also the physical techniques embedded in
both traditional Argentine tango and nuevo forms as I have observed them. The first is cabeceo and the associated phenomenon of ‘wallflowering’ as described by Savigliano (2007). The second focuses on the follower’s role within the tango embrace, which, as described in Chapter 2, is adapted from the late nineteenth century European dance forms of waltz and polka, and codified into more refined or ‘exotic’ forms of tango acceptable to the ‘civilised’ values of the European and Argentinian cultural elite. As this thesis argues, such values have perpetuated the pervasive ‘heterosexual embrace’ into the present day, continuing to shape the associated behavioural codes, and thus the relationship in a dancing couple. This chapter also examines the ‘self-evident’ nature and mechanics of these codes, which it argues are shaped by heteronormative thought, in order to imagine how ‘tradition’ might be transgressed. In doing so, the research seeks to show how dancers’ recognition of the power differential between men and women is often quite limited, and that any ‘questionable’ behaviour is justified through a kind of ‘symbolic hijacking’, making the project of transformation speculative rather than likely.

### 3.1 Social capital

Drawing upon the concept of ‘social capital’ as formulated by Bourdieu (Crossley 2008, p. 88), this chapter suggests that the values attached to tango codes have import and currency, as if the strength with which one subscribes to them ensures a commensurate value exchangeable for tango status. Maximising one’s social position is how Bourdieu might describe the social currents in the tango field: as long as everyone is playing the same game, there is an acknowledged degree of competition for social status within that game. There are stakes which people play for, there are winners and losers, and each win tends to heighten one’s status within the field, and then becomes available for use
as capital in the power stakes. For example, in conversation, Sophia, a professional tango dancer and teacher in Sydney, describes the competitive nature of the milonga:

When Australian men go to Buenos Aires, they want to dance with the locals, that’s their aim. And the Argentinean women, they’re very fussy … you need to be proven; they have to see you dancing with someone good. So the catch-22 is, if you don’t get someone good to dance with, you can’t be seen on the dance floor, and they judge you as not worth dancing with. And they’re worried, because if they dance with you, that could affect their reputation. It’s all about reputation, very competitive, and all about image, status and pecking order. It’s all there, it’s huge in BA, the air is electric – at the very traditional milongas I’m talking about … It’s a real competition to get the best dance (Sophia 2013).

Meanwhile it is very clear that not all tango situations would be considered traditional, and that some of the more recent practices, even in Sydney, might be thought of as transgressive in some way both by the perpetrators and by traditionalists who perhaps might relegate them to the ‘inauthentic’ category. It is also clear that these transgressions form an essential and intense focus for debate about tango and its practice and development. Furthermore, the strength with which people identify themselves with certain aspects of tango often creates an intensity of manner within the debates that can either reassert the boundaries of the codes strongly, or else disrupt them with equal force.

3.1.1 Incident 1: A subtle tango code

One night I went to a milonga, and while waiting to dance I sat at a table chatting to a friend. A young man greeted her, and he seemed pleasant but a little anxious as he tried to speak to her. When she got up to dance, he told me that he had met her at a
previous milonga, that he liked dancing but had not done a lot. It seemed obvious from his questions that he was not familiar with milonga protocol. When he asked me if it was okay to ‘cut in’ (on the dance floor), I responded vehemently that no, it was not okay. His question seemed to reflect both ignorance, and also a lack of respect for the situation, not to know the ‘obvious’ tango protocol. It reflected unfavourably on his tango credibility, and even his personal status. Later, as I chatted to the woman minding the door, the same man came over. He disputed the cost of entrance, firstly asking what time it finished. As a disparaging aside he murmured that it ‘must be when the orange pop runs out’ (which might have been related to the apparently unsophisticated 1950s-school-dance ambiance, as no alcohol was allowed at the venue). Then he left obviously annoyed, as if he’d been insulted. I mentioned his question about cutting in, and my friend rolled her eyes as if she also thought his ignorance was somehow unforgivable.

On reflection, I wondered how we could have been so mean. But this anecdote illustrates how, over three years of practice, my own desire to ‘fit in’ may have imperceptibly led me to become attuned to the social codes of the milonga, despite having initially found them relatively unappealing. But thinking about my first solo milonga, I remember being encouraged by my teachers not to feel intimidated, and advised to go with friends so I would have someone to talk to. I had wondered at first why anyone should be intimidated by the prospect of dancing, and of course there would be many people to talk to. It was only after my polite social overtures were regularly rejected that I began to feel the unexpected and irresistible grip of an alien authority exerted apparently on everyone else in the room. Now, however, I realise how readily, despite all my best efforts, I had begun to assume the judgemental attitude of the tango aficionado. The young man had felt the negative social response that his tango ‘ignorance’ engendered, even if nothing specific was
said. But to the initiated, he had clearly not been through the necessary social acclimatisation process unconsciously acquired through participation in tango classes and *practicas*, where the rules become so ‘self-evident’ that they go unnoticed. Thus his social overtures were not deemed worthy of recognition.

Furthermore, in the context of this *milonga*, I was able to use the young man’s ‘ignorance’ to shore up my own ‘superior’ status. With Bourdieu’s ideas about acquiring social capital, it is certain that the codes attached to tango culture, particularly evident in a *milonga*, have deep implications for the ways in which people relate to each other, and the kinds of behaviours within that traditional milieu which, to me, have become, while not entirely acceptable, then at least anticipated and to an extent tolerated.

A traditional *milonga* such as one finds in most Sydney venues is rather a formal situation in which to dance socially, and to be seen dancing. A *milonga* shows off socially polished behaviour through which one seeks to follow rules/codes which for most people, given time and experience, become intuitive, and which seem conducive to creating a relatively pleasant, if somewhat predictable, social climate. To preserve this ambience, an implicit code is that no one should teach at a *milonga*, or comment on a partner’s dancing, as this is thought to intrude on and weaken its formal ethos and its potential for romantic transcendence. One does not speak at all while dancing as it supposedly ‘dissipates the power of the dance’ (Thompson 2005, p. 276). It is mostly assumed that any ‘authority’ will always be the lead and therefore male, and if a man breaks this code in order to bring attention to his partner’s dancing, it can be meant and felt in the circumstances as quite severe criticism, although often couched in the guise of helpful, if impatiently conveyed,
‘tips’ that the follower should accept gratefully. Thus the man increases his social capital if his partner believes that her dancing is not up to scratch, even if there may be other reasons for his perception.

Within the protocols of the milonga, another feature is that the boundaries are constantly being tested: either unknowingly as previously described, or knowingly where dancers are aware that they are in danger of ‘transgressing’, as for instance when a woman asks a man to dance, or when couples of the same sex dance together.

An important part of the social practice at milongas is to circulate, conspicuously greet people, watch the dancers, perhaps noticing what they are doing: who is looking good, who is dancing with whom. Generally this involves a form of fluid, silent critique encompassing a general kind of social awareness that merges seamlessly into an appraisal of the dancers, their expertise and their consequent desirability as partners, or how their performance enhances their partner’s perceived expertise. Of particular interest is how well the couples dance together within the embrace, the quality of their relationship, the ‘authenticity’, or tanguidad (‘tangoness’), with which the man holds the woman, and her response to his lead. This appraisal is aligned with a set of social codes with which people tend to comply, but which may be relaxed or heightened depending on the venue and the host. It is sometimes hard to say what rules apply in the social situation until they have been transgressed, and then the standards become more evident, as was the case in my experience with the young man previously mentioned, where I momentarily spoke with the cultural authority of the initiated, thus reinforcing my status (Vannini & Williams 2009, p. 5).
The codes surrounding *cabeceo* and the embrace are reifications of interdependent discourses that create a matrix underpinning the structure of tango, each code having a history by which it becomes loaded with acquired meaning and value. But the social and historical conditions which first gave rise to the codes may no longer operate, and the codes are thus ‘misrecognised’, even fetishised, being mistaken for essential characteristics of tango, and begin to operate in an increasingly autonomous manner. These two examples, while not exhaustive, indicate not only how tango culture is maintained, but also how it can be challenged. *Cabeceo*, the invitation to dance, is a piece of social behaviour by which a strict gender hierarchy can be maintained, and it also carries the possibility of conferring increased status on a participant if she is seen as a popular dancer. The tango embrace, however it is managed, with distinctly pronounced tango *doxa*, also tends to reinforce hierarchised gender roles, and, as Chapter 2 sought to make clear, is certainly grist for the ‘authenticity’ mill.

### 3.2 *Cabeceo* and associated ‘wallflowering’

What initially surprised me about the practice of *cabeceo* was the general acceptance of what seemed a rather anachronistic piece of flirtatiousness, being often mentioned in class as a ‘secret’ glance across the room that a man gives to the woman he wants to dance with. Popularly, it is justified as a face-saving measure for the man, so that he can avoid the humiliation of having his invitation conspicuously refused. Often it is no more than a man raising an eyebrow, but an attentive woman will be looking out for that glance, as it means that if she accepts his invitation – by holding his gaze – she will have a partner for the next twelve minutes or so, the length of a *tanda*. If she does not want to dance with him, she will
simply look away or avoid his eyes. Sophia commented on the art of cabeceo which has been adopted here:

... because people realise it’s a good way to be able to choose who they want to dance with. People who like the cabeceo are always the better dancers. They’ve seen how it works in Buenos Aires, and it actually gives you more freedom. In Buenos Aires, you’ve got very crowded milongas and when people get off the floor, it’s a very quick moment you’ve got to work out who you’re going to dance with. You’ve got to do it when the floor’s empty, and the only way to do that is to do it with the eyes. You can’t physically walk over to the person. ... You get good at remembering: you’re watching people dance, you say, Okay, I like the way that person dances; I’ve got to remember when the next vals is on, ... you’ve got to remember where they sit, the clothes they’re wearing. It actually is quite stimulating and fun. It is like a game, you don’t take it too seriously. You try to optimise your dance experience (Sophia, 2013).

Women usually outnumber men at milongas in Sydney, and predictably there are always many women who continue to sit without being invited to dance, often all evening. In Savigliano’s words, ‘marginality, misfitness, naiveté, awkwardness, patience beyond the call of duty, and frustration with a smile, are some of the very corporeal experiences to which a wallflower is subjected …’ (2007, p. 1 transcript).

... [I]n entering the milonga, tango dancers step on a highly competitive stage ruled by the laws of naked seduction … all women who approach the milonga scene must learn sooner or later that every time they enter a milonga, they will do so as a wallflower … A woman’s wallflower position will be tested every single night at the milonga, no matter how good a dancer she is. … The wallflower, a dancing loser, becomes a successful milonguera, a winner of the successful dancing game, by
dancing a sufficient quantity and quality of dances. Dancing with the best
milongueros at the club is crucial … they must carefully plot how, when and with
whom they will show off their dancing skills so as to call the attention of those
potential best male partners (Savigliano 2007, p. 8 transcript).

Thus traditionally the wallflower role is an accepted one over which the woman
seems to have little control. She can conform by sitting and waiting to be invited to
dance, which is what mostly happens in a traditional milonga, and perhaps she will
be successful in attracting partners. While it may happen that a man cannot attract a
partner, if he is seen not dancing this is often thought of as reflecting his heightened
discrimination in choosing tango partners. Should a woman lose patience with
waiting and ask someone to dance, whether using cabeceo or not, she is just as
likely to be ignored, refused, or gain the reputation of being ‘desperate’. Either way,
she is conspicuous in being overlooked, and forced to endure what I have
experienced as the social discomfort of conspicuous sitting. To deflect this situation,
she may engage in conversation with other women, thus making herself appear
unavailable and therefore not a participant in the wallflower scenario. Frank, a
Sydney dancer, comments on the protocol of a woman inviting a man to dance:

Women say to me, ‘I don’t ask you to dance because some guys I’ve asked to dance
have spoken to me so badly’. I don’t know why they would, but I understand that it’s
a fact. I don’t know why we treat people badly. I can understand perhaps in a
traditional Argentinian society where it’s not the right place for the woman to ask the
guy to dance, but we’re in Australia now, we’re in a much freer society, and women
should have no hesitation about asking people to dance. But they do, and I think
that’s engendered by guys who’ve treated them badly. ... There are some things that
we could adjust because we’re Australian and we don’t have to be absolutely Argentinian in everything (Frank 2013).

Another arguably more transgressive means of combating feelings of debility is for women to learn to lead, and lead well, so that they can dance whenever they want to, with whoever will accept their lead, man or woman. The fact that such women do not usually participate in milongas in this way, despite often knowing how to lead extremely well, attests to the complexity of these social rules.

Experience suggests that the use of cabeceo in Sydney creates social division between those who use it and those who do not. Those who either do not, will not, or cannot, participate in that way, for whatever reason, are differentiated, simply through this behaviour, as lesser dancers, lacking desirability as partners. Conversely, those who slip easily into the habit appear to be the most popular, having conspicuously achieved a measure of tango status. In fact, there is usually little discussion about the cabeceo. Most women assume it is a natural condition of tango: whether they love it and see it as an opportunity for flirtation, or merely endure it, it is rarely questioned. Nevertheless, many women seem grateful to have friends with whom they can chat in the event that they are left sitting. There are conspicuous greetings, and the conversations they have can often look quite engaging from an observer’s point of view, except that one cannot help but notice that everyone is always glancing around: ‘Mirada’, UK-based tango artist Adriana Pegorer calls it, ‘the look, for everybody is looking at everybody else at all times, with conversation generally limited to short anecdotes, brief exchanges or complimentary remarks’ (Pegorer 2008).
In conversation with Sophia, she comments that from her experience in Buenos Aires, women can use *cabeceo* although in a slightly different way to men:

In Argentina, the rule is if you want to dance with someone, you smile at them, but it doesn’t mean that’s the invitation. It just means you’re open to being invited. And so you smile, but it doesn’t mean they’re going to invite you (Sophia 2013).

More recently, in Sydney’s queer *milonga*, Jewel Lab: Milonga Experimental, hosted by Vio Saraza, the *cabeceo* code has become less important, and it is fine not to use it. However, at this *milonga* I have also seen several women who are more socially and publically assertive – extremely good leaders as well as impeccable followers – and who do not hesitate to use *cabeceo* if they wish, sometimes with an ironic edge, and with whomever they please, without attracting the negative attention in this queer tango venue that others might experience in a traditional situation. Saraza maintains:

I use [*cabeceo*] everywhere, and I find that men are using it with me in those very places where people say we don’t use it. People who know how to use it will use it if they can, because it always avoids rejection, and if you’re a man who knows how to use it, you’re going to look to see if there’s a responsiveness... It’s always better to be able to get that little confirmation from someone that they want to dance with you before you walk over to them. It’s not really on or off, it’s a whole realm of communicative action ... If someone’s dancing and you’re looking at them, they can feel that ... and that’s part of the *cabeceo*, that you’re paying attention to them (Saraza 2012b).

It is intriguing to notice Sophia’s comment on women who smile at men: in some situations they can do so with impunity, but in others they cannot without attracting
a negative response. An ensuing question is what makes some women successful in using *cabeceo* but not others. I have speculated that those who are successful are, in Bourdieu’s sense, women who are seen to occupy positions of relative power, having perhaps worked very hard to become well-known in the contemporary tango scene as charismatic dancers or teachers, and whose aesthetic authority and technical proficiency are accepted by virtue of their closeness to the famed spirit of Buenos Aires. My own experience is from a different perspective, that a woman who does not use *cabeceo* may have a deep ambivalence to participating in this way, perhaps, as Butler describes (1999, p. 118), finding it a kind of betrayal of the values she holds and the person she believes herself to be.

### 3.3 The embrace

#### 3.3.1 Men ‘just practising’

In tango lore, there are a number of different versions of how tango evolved. For example, the idea provided by the iconic images of men dancing together is usually attributed to the demographics of early twentieth century Buenos Aires. With the huge preponderance of poor, working class men in Buenos Aires, women to socialise with were scarce, so men took every opportunity to increase their attractiveness to these women by ensuring their dance expertise. In her blog, writer Christine Dennison (2003) proposes that it is a myth that tango originated in the brothels of Buenos Aires. Rather, brothels as extremely lucrative businesses were able to afford to hire musicians to entertain the queues of waiting men who met and socialised there. These men were of various classes and cultures, but given the opportunity provided by live music, they entertained themselves by practising together, as well as competing with and parodying each other, in competition for
male power and recognition. As Savigliano notes, this struggle, engendering the kind of machismo for which tango culture is renowned, was a ‘struggle for male supremacy waged between men but carried out through women’ (1995a, p. 46).

Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges (1896-1989) attests that ‘on street corners, pairs of men danced it, because the neighbourhood women did not want to participate in a brothel dance’ (in Tobin 1998, p. 82). By contrast, others cite this traditional Argentine practice as creating a precedence for queer tango, identifying it, as does New Zealand dance artist, Mike Parmenter, in his website, ‘as a source for the continued evolution of tango and gender role expansion’ (Parmenter 2013).

Jeffrey Tobin’s view is that there is an ambiguity in the tanguero’s sexuality evident from tango reconstructions which indicate that the embrace in early homosocial tango was very loose, and that the relationship between lead and follow was not really fixed, with the roles only nominal (1998 p. 90). He also maintains that in contemporary Buenos Aires, men continue to dance with other men despite the availability of women as partners. Julie Taylor recounts scenarios in Buenos Aires from the 1940s, where boys practised tango with each other, and Marta Savigliano speaks of older milongueros who reported that they would dance the woman’s part exclusively for several years with an older adult man before being considered good enough to take on the lead (Tobin 1998, pp. 91-92).

Such scenarios, however, suggest that when men danced together in a traditional environment, the follower’s role was often taken by a young, non-expert boy, someone without authority. As cultural and performance theorist, Diana Taylor, notes: ‘Tango, danced first by men, then by men and women, both re-enacted and
parodied the macho attitude of dominance of the feminised other, male or female (1997, p. 41).

In traditional milongas these days, men do not usually dance together, but in a traditional practica or class it is still done most often for teaching or practice purposes, with the leader taking on a more authoritative role. Moreover, in Buenos Aires, as Tobin describes, men do not usually refer to what they do with other men in a class or practica as ‘dancing’ but rather as ‘practising’. ‘Dancing’ is reserved only for what they do with women (1998, p. 92). When men ‘practise’ together, as well as often being a serious enterprise with the follower accepting teaching points from the authoritative leader, it can sometimes also appear playfully combative. While one might want to say that any power imbalance is somehow defused when men of equal expertise dance together, it seems evident that this situation is laden with implications that are hard to escape, even as they are also difficult to untangle: of a lead who is dominant, and a follower who is acquiescent; or, as Tobin maintains, whether the couple is composed of two men, or a man and a woman, it remains a dance between ‘two subjects who evoke tango’s primal scenes of men competing with steps or knives’ (1998, p. 96).

3.3.2 Women do not lead
Merritt notes a comment made by an Argentinean professional teacher, who, when going abroad to teach, became exasperated and angry because people asked him over and over again to explain why the man leads and the woman follows: ‘Surely, he said, this most basic principle of tango, of social dance in general, is only natural’ (2012, p. 84). His attitude serves to underscore, yet again, one of the relatively uncontested assumptions in tango as I have experienced it in Sydney: that
the ‘natural’ role for men is to lead, and thus it is equally natural for women to follow.

Figure 6. A waltz’s close embrace: Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Bal à Bougival, 1883.

In the tango embrace, on which the lead/follow structure seems to depend, the man’s right arm circles the woman’s waist, with his left hand holding her right hand at about eye level. A woman may drape her left arm around her partner’s neck, initiating a close embrace, or place it on his right upper arm, creating a more open embrace. In either case, it is this configuration that indicates which person is leading, and, as is consonant with Bourdieu’s views, in some ways this pose seems
to almost inevitably ‘turn on’ the relative role behaviours of ‘dominant’ leader and ‘submissive’ follower (1984, p. 474).

In conversation, Frank, a Sydney dancer, extends this thought:

> Girls talk about the guys who lead badly, and about the fact that sometimes they don’t get asked. But guys don’t tend to talk about that sort of stuff at all. I think they believe that they lead, the girl follows; that’s all there is to it. ‘If she doesn’t like my leading, tough. This is the way I do it’ (Frank 2013).

However, the assumption that women do not lead is mistaken. Women do lead, and often, but it is the context in which they lead that allows them to do so with a degree of impunity. In class, for instance, there are often too few men, so women teachers and assistants must learn the lead well enough to function adequately. Because this situation is considered temporary, and not quite ‘normal’, they are considered useful as leads only for instruction, or to help with the ‘gender balance’\(^{36}\). In my case, I learned to lead because, as a dedicated dancer, I was curious about how the dance worked in all its aspects, and to learn just the follower’s role would be to understand only half the dance. Another reason women give for learning to lead is that, due to the lack of good male dancers at milongas, they are forced to sit when they would much prefer to be dancing, or are forced to dance badly with an incompetent lead. Some women say that while they might perhaps prefer to dance with a man, they have nonetheless taken matters into their own hands and learned to lead so that they can always find someone good to dance with. It is, however, still relatively rare in

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\(^{36}\) However, women leading even in this situation can be viewed with suspicion. As recently as 2013, at a Sydney tango event, a visiting Argentine maestro would not allow women to lead in his class, even though the organiser had asked them specifically to make up the ‘gender balance’. Furthermore, the organiser acquiesced to his demands, rather than explaining that in Australia women often take on the lead role in class to even out the numbers (Anon, pers. comm. 2013).
Sydney to see two women dancing together at a traditional milonga, and the acceptable places to do this are at the less public practicas and classes.

When a woman leads as an assistant, she may see herself as assuming the role of controller or teacher, and if this does not sit easily with her, there is ample space for the role not to be taken seriously. Sometimes women are self-deprecating when leading, often downplaying their own performance. In my own experience as lead, I was aware that some women felt uncomfortable being partnered with a woman. Even if they said nothing, I could feel it through their skin, in the tension of their muscles, their discomfort readable through their physical state. In such cases I tended to parody my own lead role, letting my partner know that I was ‘just practising’ to enable her to feel more comfortable. I fell into this habit almost without thinking, because it seemed an easy way to diffuse her anxiety. As long as she did not see me as seriously ‘dancing’, the situation was ‘safe’.

As noted previously, this idea is supported by Jeffrey Tobin, who describes that same nervousness in other men when he danced with them. When teaching North Americans, most male Argentinian teachers hire women to dance with American male students, but they forego this for Argentinian men who are mostly quite happy to dance with their male teachers. His explanation is that ‘as a rule, Argentine men do not refer to what they do with other men as “dancing” … they insist on the word “practicing” to label spins around the dance floor in the arms of another man’ (1998, p. 92). Further, Tobin tells us, when speaking to his male partner, ‘I assured him we were not “dancing”, we were “practicing” and he appeared to accept this distinction with apparent relief’ (1998, p. 93.)
Figure 7. Women ‘practising’ together for fun seems to almost defuse the impact of a heterosexual embrace.

At a practica, where the milonga codes are more relaxed, ‘practising’ is fine, having perhaps the characteristics of ‘investigation’, fun, play or even parody, and the situation usually lacks the earnestness and intensity that often characterises the heterosexual ambience of men leading women at a milonga, as if ‘performing’ their male prowess for the benefit of other men. So a lack of seriousness can be a cue for those watching to read the lead and embrace in ways other than as a heterosexual ‘courtship’ display. If perceived like this, the intent of the embrace can be transformed, and the importance of gender identity almost sidestepped.

Sometimes, as if emphasising that they are assuming a role, women leading in classes or practicas change their stilettos for traditional men’s tango shoes,
manufactured in Buenos Aires, rather than wearing women’s ordinary flat shoes, which would of course suffice just as well. Stilettos are usually de rigeur for women followers at a milonga, although for a respected and experienced milonguera to be seen wearing flat shoes as a follower can be ever so slightly, even enticingly, transgressive. If, however, she is obviously inexperienced, she may be deemed sloppy, untutored or even unfeminine. Shoes, both men’s and women’s, seem to function as a badge of office, so that a woman donning men’s tango shoes lets everyone know she is ‘dressing the part’, temporarily stepping into a man’s shoes, and if she is not all that proficient it does not matter much because she’s being a good sport and ‘helping out’.

But a woman’s ‘normal’ role as follower can seem sometimes to run deeper and to be more essentially connected with her sense of identity, her sense of being female. Wearing stilettos for a woman is the norm in tango, and consequently, for most women it does not feel like fancy dress, but rather something quite ‘natural’. Similarly, if she does not change her shoes and tries to lead in stilettos, it is often much more difficult, making her lead appear incompetent. It seems that if her feminine identity is questioned, she stands to lose something more valuable to her than any reputation as a competent leader. Asserting her incompetence, or at least her ambivalence, as a lead is, at the same time, asserting her desirability as a woman.

So the idea that women who lead should not take themselves too seriously is a strong one. The exceptions of class and practica are seen as necessary, but temporary, and not really important. Conversely, once she is seen leading at a milonga, her intent is read differently, and she is often regarded with suspicion. The
evident rarity of women dancing together in traditional milongas in Sydney suggests that the situation is more complex than it might at first seem. Hardly anyone in Sydney asks why this might be the case, because, as this thesis suggests, the answer seems self-evident: proper women do not lead.

It seems there is something deeply distressing to many about the thought of dancing tango with someone of the same sex at a traditional Sydney milonga, presumably because they do not want to be identified as lesbian, and women almost always refuse when asked to dance by another woman. Because a milonga is a place for the demonstration of correct and coded display, to be seen there as transgressive may feel shameful, as if what is being called into question is much more than the merely pleasant aspect of having fun; it can seem deeply antagonistic to a person’s sense of self-worth and identity. There are, nonetheless, tango dancers who relish such ‘transgression’, although usually only when they are with like-minded friends who will support them if their behaviour is challenged. Even in the twenty-first century, one needs a certain confidence to go against these codes.

3.3.3 Incident 2: Visible intent and heightened seriousness

Pegorner notes that by 2007, while gendered behaviour appeared more fluid at queer tango events in Buenos Aires, the hyper-gendered stereotypes of leader and follower were often reinstated even if the genders of the dancers themselves were fluid. To this, she asks the question: ‘If one follows the code, does gender matter?’ (2008, p. 10). But the following incident adds weight to the idea that gender and coded behaviour are firmly entwined.

In 2011 I attended a regular evening milonga in Sydney. I noticed two women dancing together, a sight which is not common at milongas in Sydney. It made me
feel slightly uncomfortable, but I could not think why, so I focused more closely on what they were doing, on the quality of their ‘performance’ and their embrace, to better understand the situation, and what expectations I might have brought with me. They seemed strong, almost relentless, and quite serious in their intent as expressed through their demeanour, how they held their bodies, especially in the close embrace through which they established their relationship or connection in the dance. But why was it disturbing?

Both women cultivated a technically impeccable partnership that was graceful and neat, without inaccuracies or tiny misreadings of the lead, with no visible faults. Both were slim and young, dressed simply rather than provocatively. The follower wore modest stilettos, and the leader wore flat women’s shoes. Crucially, however, my perception was that there was no sense in which these women were ‘just practising’ or that the leader was playing a ‘male’ role, or standing in any man’s shoes. They were serious, and lacked the typical playfulness that can mark two women dancing together at a practica. There was no suggestion of experimentation or parody in manner or dress. In this traditional milonga, as they danced within the traditional close embrace, what stood out for me was their intent: their demeanour indicated that this was serious business, not just a social get together, or just ‘helping out’. They were dancing to be seen, and to be acknowledged as two of the best dancers on the floor.

3.4 A heterosexual embrace?

On the face of it, it is hard to imagine that an embrace is somehow ‘owned’ by a particular group, so that it could ever be termed a ‘heterosexual embrace’. But, as

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37 In Berlin and Hamburg, many German dancers call it a ‘hug’, which has connotations of a friendly, rather than sexual, encounter.
described in Chapter 2, it seems that the embrace as we know it has acquired layers of meaning. It is not neutral, not just a position by which one dancer maintains friendly contact or connection with another. These women, as they danced in close embrace, were, almost by default, emphasising the particular sexual intimacy for which this embrace is renowned, drawing attention to the meaning by which it has become understood. Seen as specifically heteronormative, intense, romantic and sexualised ‘courtship’ behaviour, at some level their act has muddied Sydney’s clear heteronormative waters, and their status as ‘proper’ women has become ambiguous. The public nature of the milonga as a showcase does not allow the men who watch to understand their performance as merely ‘practice’, where in a class or practica, the implications are neither transgressive nor threatening to heteronormative values. But in this context, on the milonga ‘stage’ in Sydney, two women dancing together would understand their behaviour to risk being judged negatively, even if they chose to ignore the risk. At the same time, it is possible that, like Pegorer, they assumed their impeccable technique and demeanour would allay any critical judgement, thus hoping that indeed if they performed the codes correctly, their gender would not matter.

Ultimately, I decided that my discomfort arose because I felt the women were being underestimated; that, rather than being seen as the expert dancers they actually are, they were judged according to their assumed sexuality, an aspect of their performance that may have held relatively little interest for them. As a dancer, it disappointed me that someone’s sexuality would be more of an issue than their dancerly expertise, colouring, or even obliterating, the way their skill was appreciated and interpreted.
I felt that for many people there was ambiguity in the way they seemed to be playing the same ‘game’ as the men, seriously endorsing the same heterosexual lead and follow codes to the letter. But, then, to what purpose did they dance? In light of Tobin’s insight, that ‘the primary relation in tango ... is between the man who dances with a woman and the other men who watch’ (1998, p. 90), a woman leader cannot seek the approbation of other men, with their conspicuous hand shaking and backslapping, and no ‘male’ bonding occurs. So how are they to be perceived? Such ambiguity seems to eclipse a recognition of status in the milonga community, rendering their expertise almost invisible. Having left the protected zone of the tango class, with its sense of helping out, or the practica where play and investigation are important, by performing the roles so seriously and perfectly in a milonga, the women’s expertise was undermined by the fact that they were seen to be endorsing the idea that tango is inevitably an expression of their sexual relationship. Two women dancing together in this heightened heteronormative situation are deemed sexually ‘suspect’.

This chapter has sought to utilise my own experience in Sydney’s tango culture as a form of case study, in order to examine two tango codes, the cabeza and the embrace, to highlight some of the ways in which gender roles and social power are intertwined and played out. The following chapter seeks to investigate several pedagogical approaches and practices whereby tango has been conceived and seeks to foster a ‘qualitatively different culture of communication’ (Walter & Nagel 2008). In particular, it takes account of some of the ideas, philosophies and practices of nuevo and queer tango, in which tango’s traditional heteronormative grip has begun to loosen, while at the same time acknowledging that the idea of an ‘authentic’ tango is often reasserted in practice.
Chapter 4

Searching for a ‘qualitatively different culture of communication’\(^{38}\):

Tango nuevo and queer tango

Chapter 3 examined several tango codes as experienced in Sydney’s tango communities, in particular cabeceo and the status of women who lead, highlighting some of the ways in which gender roles and social power are intertwined and played out in these codes, and how their rationale appears ‘self-evident’ and is therefore largely unavailable for questioning within the tango community.

Chapter 4 views tango as an evolving platform through which different expressions of gender norms can be played out, taking account of several different ways in which tango has been conceived in terms of practice and pedagogical approaches: tango nuevo, queer tango and some aspects of contact-tango, which, in different ways, seek to contribute to a more socially emancipatory trajectory for tango practice, including differing perceptions of heteronormatively structured codes. This chapter is concerned with changing the traditional model of tango partnerships, and elaborates on the strategies employed by practitioners and teachers who have explored these approaches. In a search for a ‘qualitatively different culture of communication’, this chapter also recognises how traditional or ‘authentic’ tango is often reasserted despite attempts to loosen its heteronormative grip. It begins with Sydney’s small queer tango scene and the local expression of nuevo tango experienced through the work of Sydney-based tango artist Vio Saraza, interviewed as part of this research project. It discusses the pedagogical approach originally

\(^{38}\) Searching for ‘a qualitatively different culture of communication’ is a phrase used initially by Ute Walter in her 2007 Diplom-Pädagoge thesis, ‘The meaning of the inner mindfulness for the Tango Argentino and its procurement in classes by inclusion of selected aspects of the dialogue process method’ (2007, p. 5).
derived from the innovative pedagogic strategies of the Cochabamba group led by Gustavo Naveira in the early 1990s, and further elaborated by Saraza and American anthropologist Carolyn Merritt (2012), highlighting the contributions of women who have changed the profile of the global tango terrain.

In light of the philosophical underpinnings of queer tango practice and gender construction provided by dancer and academic Paula-Irene Villa, this chapter also explores the work of Hamburg-based tango artist Ute Walter, whose pedagogical approach has in part been developed in line with American theoretical physicist David Bohm’s ‘dialogue process’. It discusses how Walter’s teaching encourages ways of achieving a more meditative practice of ‘tango and mindfulness’ by which it may be possible to circumvent the often automatic reassertion of heteronormative stereotypes in tango practice. This chapter goes on to discuss some of the problems associated with traditional teaching practices and Walter’s reformulation of tango as ‘dialogue’, seeking to contribute further to a socially emancipatory trajectory for tango practice, rather than perpetuating what many dancers recognise as a restrictive heteronormative orientation inculcated in, and by, traditional pedagogy.

In my first forays into a more equitable tango experience, a small group of tango dancers provided an opportunity for me to recognise what had already been termed ‘queer tango’ elsewhere in the world. In October 2011, owing to my general discomfort with the quality of social decorum cultivated in most Sydney tango environments, I invited a group of like-minded friends to meet on Sunday afternoons to practise in a Newtown studio. The idea was that it would be ‘a non-hierarchical, non-sexist, non-arrogant, non-intrusive group of people getting
together and having a bit of a practice’, and the group would meet for as long as it served a purpose for members\(^{39}\).

It is important to stress here that one concept of queer tango allows that it is not just for gay and lesbian-identified dancers, but for anyone interested in exploring a more equitable negotiated partnership, one in which the gender categories of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ may be loosened. Same-sex dance partnerships are normally part of queer tango experience, but in Sydney’s tango environment they seemed puzzlingly problematic and certainly unusual, in vivid contrast to the contact improvisation environment I was used to where such partnering is unremarkable.

As a contemporary dancer and teacher I am interested neither in differentiating the roles of leader and follower along gender lines, nor in confining my experience solely to the follower’s role. Rather, my purpose is to understand both roles. In the environment I established, taking on a facilitative role to help others work on problematic partnering tasks seemed appropriate. My approach is that partnering skills need not be thought of as gender-based, as is the usual expression in lead and follow, but more about human mechanics, the ‘physics’ of partnering, as contact improvisation practice envisages. Such ideas about dance, and particularly partnering in tango – mobile spirals, varying momentum and using body weight and pressure to influence a partner’s responses – are mostly derived from my experiences of release work, including Ideokinesis and contact improvisation.

Equality within any partnership, whether in tango or in contact improvisation, is a

\(^{39}\) I wanted a space set aside specifically for interested people to play with ideas of a more inclusive, open dance relationship. Ideally, dialogue between equals was expected, dance problems and solutions could be discussed, negotiated and experimented with, and it was not a place for men, or leaders, to be the guiding authority on ‘correct practice’, as was usually the case in traditional tango practicas.
personal requirement, as well as being recognised professionally as best teaching practice, as Merriam and Bierema have described (2014, pp. 95-108).

This small group was fairly short-lived, and it is interesting to speculate why. It seemed that participants were concerned with something other than ‘just dancing’. The ‘physics’ of the dance was not the primary issue for them as it was for me. In this particular tango environment, participants found that the challenges of the physicality did not sufficiently hold their attention. Neither did they seem attuned to the concept of equality in partnerships, or able to make use of the opportunity to discuss and play with physical awareness and sensibilities as part of the process, so that the kinds of experiences offered were not really taken up.

It is possible, as Marta Savigliano suggests, that to heteronormative sensibilities the subdued look of queer tango ‘looks lame’: one sees ‘no strutting around for prey, no anxiety to be chosen, no advances to be resisted, no visible negotiations concerning sexual ... trophies as a result of partnering ...’ (2010, p. 143) She notes: ‘Queer milongas are not phallocentrically sexual’ (2010, p. 143), describing the rewards of queer tango practice as ‘unmarked by heterosexual tensions’ and more connected to escaping the regular heteronormative impositions encountered in traditional tango scenes:

... milongueras are not required to wait to be asked to dance, to follow a man’s lead, to endure his comments on their dancing abilities, to put up with his sexual innuendos and advances, and to take care of a tanguero’s ego under the watch of his tango friends (Savigliano 2010, p. 143).

In the Newtown group, perhaps the ‘heteronormative impositions’ I felt most hampered by were simply not an issue for my tango friends, who may have viewed
such ‘heterosexual tensions’ as desirable, but unfortunately lacking in this environment.

At this group I first met professional tango artist, Vio Saraza, who arrived in Sydney in 2011 from Boston and Wellington where she taught and organised queer tango events. Although queer tango was still a relatively new phenomenon in Sydney’s tango community, Saraza established Rainbow Queer Tango classes and practica at the Colombian Hotel in Darlinghurst in early 2012 (Saraza 2011b), describing her events as part of a global movement celebrating diversity:

... to create inclusive and diverse space for Argentine tango dancers. This means celebrating gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender dancers. It also means celebrating any dancers who want to experiment with different approaches to gender and roles while dancing Argentine tango, such as women who want to lead, men who want to follow, and dancers who want to change roles while dancing. Queer Tango is inclusive, which means that people are welcome to dance tango in any roles they want, including the traditional ones (Saraza 2011b).

According to Saraza, there was also a tantalising sense of challenge in this move to Sydney, as she had been ‘warned’ that she probably would not be able to lead at other Sydney milongas, owing to the climate of social disapproval of anything non-traditional (Saraza 2012b). Slightly ‘Goth’ in appearance, Saraza presented an image unlike that of traditional tango women, sporting decorative tattoos, high platform black boots instead of stilettos, dreadlocks, and very short, black skirts. She seemed to lead more often than follow at our Newtown practicas, but watching her dance, it was often difficult to see how the roles worked. This suggested that the

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40 Saraza was not the first in Sydney to organise a tango space catering particularly to gay and lesbian sensibilities. Teacher and dancer Anne-Maree Therkelsen had already gained a following in Sydney where she taught from 2000 to 2008.
defining structure of lead and follow roles within the embrace was in some way changed in her dancing.

Despite these differences, however, Saraza remained committed to the gender roles associated with lead and follow in her teaching and dancing. That is, the way she danced and taught either lead or follow was still prescribed by her ideas about gender, although she had no difficulty in changing from one to the other, from ‘femme’ to ‘butch’, as she described her feelings, when either following or leading:

I think the lead is masculine, and when I lead I feel like a man ... I feel masculine in that moment [even though] I don’t look it. When I dance tango, it’s the first time I’m able to be actually masculine ... the first time that I’m actually able to do something about it in a way that feels convincing (Saraza 2012b).

4.1 Learning and teaching tango

While her main focus is queer tango, Saraza’s dancing aroused curiosity in Sydney tango circles for other reasons too. Saraza’s practice in Sydney exemplified an approach pioneered in the early 1990s by Argentinian dancers Gustavo Naveira, Pablo Verón and Fabian Salas and the Cochabamba Investigation Group in Buenos Aires. They sought to demystify the physicality of traditional tango, and to liberate the dancing couple from the strictures of a partnership driven by traditional pedagogics, that is, learning sequences of steps by imitating the teacher.

In tango culture it is often assumed that there is a contradiction or opposition between nuevo and ‘authentic’ tango, but like many nuevo practitioners, Saraza stresses that her pedagogical and dancerly approach is a continuation of, rather than
a break in, tango tradition. She admits, however, that there are aspects that lead to criticism from other dancers at Sydney milongas, such as ‘kicking’ her legs off the floor and having an ‘open’ embrace, which is thought to take up too much room on the dance floor (Saraza, 2011a). Not only the way she looks, but also the way she dances proved challenging to the traditional character of tango practice in Sydney. The following link, 

https://www.facebook.com/david.mcpherson.7165/videos/10151921876695093/, is an example of her work, with German dancer Armin Kyros leading.

Both Merritt (2012) and Saraza (2012b) note two main areas of change brought about by the exploratory pedagogic strategies of the Cochabamba group which produced the appearance of novelty: firstly, the deconstruction of the underlying concepts of physical sequencing and partnering which fostered a burgeoning improvisational practice; and secondly, the invigorating influence of dancers, particularly women, with different physical sensibilities and a much wider range of

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41 It is perhaps worth noting what Naveira himself, the reputed ‘father of nuevo’, says about tango nuevo, and its meaning in traditional tango culture:

There is great confusion on the question of the way of dancing the tango ... the term ‘tango nuevo’, is used to refer to a style of dancing, which is an error. In reality, tango nuevo is everything that has happened with the tango since the 1980s ... The words ‘tango nuevo’ express what is happening with tango dancing in general; namely that it is evolving ... growing, improving, developing, enriching itself ... There has been much recent discussion, in the community of tango dancers, on the problem of the embrace ... Open embrace or closed embrace, dancing with space or dancing close, these are all outmoded terms ... an old way of thinking, resulting from the lack of technical knowledge in past eras. This simple and clumsy division between open and closed is often used by those who try to deny the evolution of the dance, to disguise their own lack of knowledge. Today it is perfectly clear that the distances in the dance have a much greater complexity than a simple open or closed ... We have learned, and we have developed our knowledge. The result of this is a dance of greater possibilities, and also of a much more artistic quality (Naveira 2008, pp. 81-83).

42 For further description see ‘TangoForge’ website http://tangoforge.com/tag/nuevo/

43 This video link shows an example of Vio Saraza’s work, with German dancer Armin Kyros leading. The video was shot in July 2012 by David McPherson at the Newtown School of Arts.
experience. One of these ‘new generation’ dancers in the Cochabamba group, professional dancer Luciana Valle, observes:

> We cannot dance the way we did fifty years ago because we are not the same human beings ... the relationship of every human being with their own body is not the same ... The health, the sports, the yoga, everything that people do now was something that people [did not] do fifty years ago, so how can we dance the same? (Merritt 2012, p. 54)

Similarly, tango professional Raul Masciocchi comments:

> When people began to arrive from contemporary dance, pop, folk – traditions that already had a detailed description for every movement – we could begin to understand how tango movements worked. And I think this had a lot to do with the women: they could understand how the proposal or the lead functions, they could intuit how the movements arise and unravel ... Naveira developed it, but it was the women who really made it work (Merritt 2012, p. 54).

As Merritt describes, this new pedagogic understanding developed in the ‘investigation’ group enabled dancers to break down the prearranged collection of steps into their simplest elements, with each movement of leader or follower being either a forward, a side, or a back step (2012, p. 46). As a consequence, these steps could be recombined in a seemingly infinite variety of ways, contributing to the idea that *nuevo* created ‘new steps’ and therefore could not be traditional, and consequently not ‘authentic’.

Merritt further notes that while the traditional method of learning by pattern replication may sometimes be useful, it undermines the basic improvisational core of tango. Both Merritt (2012) and Saraza (2012b) argue that *nuevo* innovation in
teaching aided the development of a much more sophisticated form: students were able to be more autonomous, were able to play and improvise more, and introduce their own ideas into the dance. Furthermore, it might be argued that achieving a nuevo understanding of the basic building blocks can in some sense sidestep the inherent hierarchy of the lead and follow structure by deconstructing the way the steps fit together. As both leader and follower increase their understanding of tango partnering, the follower may participate more in the decisions of improvisation, and potentially has more power to drive the dance. Within this different conception of practice, it seems possible that the strictly gendered character of the roles might be relaxed. Even if the leader still leads in the formal sense, the way is potentially open to a less authoritarian stance or power differential typical of more traditional partnering, and to an increased sense of ‘sharing’ of initiative and participation.

Certainly, as Merritt argues, there was an huge change in the social participation of women in tango, with Naveira’s group ‘including female tangueras with backgrounds in classical ballet, modern dance and other dance forms [who] could identify and verbalize the mechanics within the embrace’ (Merritt 2012, p. 54). Saraza, however, notes that this change did not take hold until about ten years after Naveira’s investigation group, in the mid-2000s. Like Merritt, she argues that the change was marked principally by a change in the follower’s dynamic, driven by the more sophisticated practices of women who came from other disciplines ‘with agile bodies, yoga experience, and an expanded range of ways of moving the body’, as exemplified, for example, by tango professional Dana Frigoli’s dramatically visible fluidity and extension (Saraza 2011a). According to Saraza:

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44 Chapter 5 suggests that it is in this improvisational core that the quality of the partnership is most evident, and where the capacity to create the dance equally is potentially foremost.
This is what makes nuevo tango look so different. Much of the backlash [against nuevo] is specifically about the proper position of the woman’s legs, how much space she will be allowed to take up, how visible she will be (Saraza 2011a).

Such a backlash, posits Saraza, has been against women’s intellectual contributions, their ‘agility’ which could change the way the dance looked, and the fact that in this new understanding, men became more reliant on the women’s skills in following, meaning that men lost a dimension of independence and authority (Saraza 2012b).

Despite its initial popularity, however, Saraza’s recent experiences attest to a dwindling interest in nuevo by 2009, a reaction occurring both in Buenos Aires and abroad, especially among younger dancers. Perhaps this derives from the recognition that there really is ‘nothing new’ in nuevo, and practitioners and teachers can therefore no longer claim a progressive or innovative outlook. By 2010 in Buenos Aires and the US, young dancers had reverted more often than not to a ‘traditional’ close embrace (Saraza 2011a).

Similarly, Merritt’s research, undertaken between 2004 and 2007, shows that in Buenos Aires and the US, despite the possibility of dancing differently, traditional heteronormative values have reasserted themselves, particularly in the context of a milonga or practica. One professional woman comments:

It’s a social thing – why I don’t dance with girls in the milonga. When I go out to a milonga or a practica, the dance is no longer about investigating ... it’s an outing, it’s a social encounter. ... I’m going out to have fun and dance, and if I’m going to have fun and dance, I want to have fun with a boy (Merritt 2012, p. 102).
This seems to suggest, as Merritt notes, that there is an acceptance of the ‘natural’ division of dance roles according to gender, supporting the idea that women may lead more out of necessity than desire, and not necessarily as an expression of feminist ideals (2012, p. 103). With this in mind, and despite continuing criticism from traditionalists who argue that nuevo is ‘not tango’, it is a short step to understanding why Naveira and his followers have proclaimed that there is ‘no new tango’, and that what they do is traditional. There is still a commitment to the historically formed lead and follow structure which maintains heteronormative values regardless of who is taking each role. The advent of nuevo may have at best provided a means of enabling women to recognise themselves as dancers who have a creative impact on the process, and a testing ground for gender role boundaries.

In my research into tango culture in Sydney in 2011 there was little evidence of the kind of tango that employed a pedagogical approach driven by something other than a desire to reinforce the hierarchical nature of heteronormative gender stereotypes. Practitioners indicated in various ways their understanding of gender issues in tango, some attesting to the excitement and liberating attraction of hyper-gendered role-play arising from images in popular culture, others shrugging their shoulders as if it was not their problem, and still others becoming defensive or angry. No-one seemed interested in the idea that the division might be a spurious one, a cultural and social fiction that creates the performance of gender stereotypes in western dance forms, and Argentine tango in particular. From the research I have undertaken in Sydney to date, it seems that Saraza is possibly the only teacher open to the idea that this is an aspect of tango culture that might be useful for dancers and teachers to contemplate.
In terms of pedagogic approaches, the philosophy outlined in Jacques Rancière’s *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five lessons in intellectual emancipation* (1991) has become increasingly relevant to my research, which argues for teaching methodologies that foster a less hierarchical approach to gender and partnering, as well as a more somatically informed understanding of the potential relationship between two dancers. As translator Kristin Ross’s highlights in her introduction to Rancière’s work, his central principle is critical: ‘equality is neither given nor claimed, it is practiced, it is *verified*’ (1991, p. xxii). Further, ‘the pedagogical myth divides the world into two: the knowing and the ignorant, the mature and the unformed, the capable and the incapable’ (Ross 1991, p. xx), and the separation of ‘master’ and ‘student’ by hierarchy and distance is an essential part of that myth. Rancière’s provocation resonates with the central question of this thesis:

But what if equality, instead, were to provide the point of departure? What would it mean to make equality a presupposition rather than a goal, a practice rather than a reward situated firmly in some distant future so as to all the better explain its present infeasibility? (Ross 1991, p. xix).

In Berlin and Hamburg, my research revealed several approaches to teaching tango which appeared to have such an ideal as a premise, a fundamental principle being that of equality between participants, both students and teachers and dance partners; or if not exact equality of experience, then a culture of communication in which the teacher’s role is to facilitate mutual negotiation and exploration as a reality actively practised within the physicality of the dance partnership. Within these communities it was *not* usual that the lead automatically assumed the role of ‘teacher’ to an ‘ignorant’ follower, as is generally the case in traditional tango.
4.2 Tango: a debate about authenticity

Throughout my research, it has become clear that almost nothing about tango is universally agreed upon: there is no definitive history or technique, but there are multiple versions and ensuing controversies. Ultimately it is the multiple viewpoints and different opinions ebbing and flowing across the world which create tango culture. The tango culture in Sydney comprises only a small arena in the global debate. As German academic Melanie Haller suggests, it seems that tango arises in the continual ‘back and forth between people, nations, continents and cultures’, so that since its genesis it has been, and it continues to be, both a global and hybrid practice (Haller 2012, The hybrid history of tango Argentino).

Meanwhile, dancer and academic, Paula-Irene Villa, through her own practice and research, has compiled a list of what many social dancers might consider to be genuinely tanguerical qualities, elements which may be understood as defining an ‘authentic’ tango:

1. Elegance of movement
2. Absolute musicality
3. Complete harmony within the couple
4. Capability of improvisation and flexibility, usable at call as the dancing ‘craft’
5. Heterosexual, eroticised tension used as an ‘intensive and primordial encounter between man and woman’ and
6. Individuality within the bounds of the communal whose expression is the style (Villa 2006, Us/them: discursive boundaries in motion)\textsuperscript{45}. Cutting through the obfuscation and mystification of tango created by practitioners who have a stake in maintaining its mystique, Villa has questioned these qualities as being somewhat romanticised. Speaking at a 2011 panel discussion\textsuperscript{46}, she emphasised that, whether straight or queer, what dancers actually do is unlikely to correspond to this ideal of authenticity:

Read any interview, the most straight commercial dance partner, tango dancer, whatever, it’s always about the freedom of exploring, the freedom of dialogue, the mutual understanding, the flow, the love. Always. The question is, what do people really do? The question is, are we honest enough? ... We’re very far from saying we’re all the same and it’s all about the flow (Villa 2011b).

Villa notes how these ‘authentic’ qualities imply high expectations, and require immense skill to embody. She emphasises the impossibility of any person being able to live up to them successfully; no-one can be all these things all the time, or even some of the time, and there are more often than not times when ‘things go wrong’. Inevitably dancers fail to measure up, and in that failure articulate the difference between the aspiration and the doing, between the myth and the reality

\textsuperscript{45} This article was first published in 2006 by Paula-Irene Villa as ‘Bewegte Diskurse, die bewegen. Überlegungen zur Spannung von Konstitution und Konstruktion am Beispiel des Tango Argentino’, in Robert Gugutzer (Hg.), 2006, Body turn. Perspeckiven der Soziologie des Körpers und des Sports, [transcript] Verlag, Bielefeld, pp. 209-232. It was translated into English in 2013 by Christian Koop as ‘Moved and moving discourses. Reflections on the tensions between constitution and construction, using the example of Argentine tango’, and uploaded onto Academia.com without page numbers. For the sake of clarity, I have used the first published date of 2006, and English section names to indicate where quotations are taken from. The link is: https://www.academia.edu/6181944/Moved_and_Moving_discourses._Why_tango_can_make_gender_relations_dance._Translated_by_Christian_Koop.

\textsuperscript{46} As part of the 2011 Hamburg International Queer Tango Festival panel discussion ‘Queer tango: Cheerful theory or sluggish practice’. Participants included: Paula-Irene Villa, Charlotte Rivero, Marc Vanzwoll, Adriana Pegorer, Felix Feierabend, Melanie Haller, Winter Held.
(Villa 2006, Us/them: discursive boundaries in motion). In my experience, expectations of partner ed bliss are often at odds with the reality in which clumsiness and lack of common purpose between partners is a frequent and often dispiriting experience; or the ‘naturalness’ of lead and follow roles as interpreted only via heterosexual gender stereotypes is belied by the fact that men and women are equally capable of both leading and following, and do so frequently; or when a tango sequence, learned by imitation, ‘fails’, for any number of reasons, to contribute to harmonious dancing.

Following Foucault and Butler, Villa employs discourse analysis in her discussion of tango, treating discourse itself as a social product and part of a wider social context (Ruiz 2009, p. 45). Villa argues, following Butler, that discourse is productive, not simply reflecting a model of the world, but also creating phenomena, and giving shape and substance to those phenomena as it generates order. She notes that, in tango discourse, ideas such as ‘passionate’, ‘elegant’ or ‘Argentinian’ exist independently of any particular context, relying on other notions for their intelligibility, and that in this way the terms are constantly in motion and shifting in meaning. Villa notes too how the body carries and produces meaning through mimetic action (2006, Discourses and popular culture: performativity and mimesis). Mimetic acts, or movements that refer to other movements, gestures or poses, attempt to reconstruct gesture or demeanour in all its intricacy. However, even if mimesis aims at exact reproduction, the process is confounded by the inherent instability in the way that gesture might be understood, and consequently is open to an individual’s interpretation which depends on a particular (but perhaps unknown) context. As Villa argues, whatever action is reconstructed is one that has
never been done in exactly that way before (2006, Discourses and popular culture: performativity and mimesis).

According to Villa, tango discourse is constituted by a ‘contradictory and internally fractured intersection of different discourses’ that comprise anything conveying meaning about tango. There are not only the ways in which people might actually dance, but also the periphera: ‘... photos, classified advertisements, interviews, advertisement posters, modes of speaking in class, stories, movies, internet portals, stereotypes of Latin America, concepts of alterity, forms of habitus in specific settings’. While these two ‘levels’ of practice and discourse are mutually interdependent, what people actually do is not a simple materialisation of any ideal, and conversely, what is pronounced as ideal is not necessarily congruent with what is done in practice (Villa 2006, Discourses in motion).

This expanded notion of discourse suggests that tango is far less fixed than traditional practitioners allow for, and further that it can be discussed from a number of perspectives. Another set of precepts formulated by dance artist, Ute Walter, reflects a desire to dissolve dichotomies, thus cultivating the possibility of an ‘endless gliding’47 between differences in service of her ideas of ‘mindfulness’ and ‘dialogue’:

1. Tango is heteronormatively constructed.
2. The act of dancing allows for an immediate perception of presence, a sense of here and now, some form of flowing.
3. Tango implies meditative harmony, playful enjoyment of moving around, technical ability and erotically charged intimacy.

47 Villa notes German sociologist Urs Staheli’s concept of an ‘endless gliding’ through different contexts and interpretations (Villa 2006, Deconstructivist expansion).

5. Gender and sexual identities are in a state of flow.

6. Communication constitutes the essence of tango. It is about creating and perceiving resonances, with empathy being a vital prerequisite.

7. Psychic patterns and blockades are reflected in the way you dance, thus it is also always about the confrontation with your own fears and internal barriers.

8. Bodily flexibility is linked to mental flexibility and vice versa.

9. Internal mindfulness leads to the ability to enjoy dancing, something which can’t be acquired by simply learning the movements by heart or producing choreographed figures, an emphasis on impressing the audience with one’s skills, or pursuing narcissistic self-projection (in Thimm 2008, p. 28).

Ute Walter is primarily known for her role as co-founder of the first International Hamburg Queer Tango Festival in 200148, organised primarily to provide a space for gay and lesbian-identified tango dancers. Critically, however, this was not its only purpose as the website of the 10th International Queer Tango Argentino Festival in Hamburg in 2011 makes clear:

   The intention [in 2001] was not to alienate but to make something open ... regardless of gender identity or sexual preference ... [for those] interested in experimenting with role identities ... curious and open-minded towards overcoming the strict structure of leading and following ... to deconstruct the prevalent heteronormative structures and gender attributes in tango and society (2011).

So in this context, ‘queer’ meant an openness and availability to all tango enthusiasts ‘regardless of their abilities, gender identity or sexual preference who

48 With Felix Feirabend and Marga Nagel (and later Timm Christensen).
were interested in experimenting with their role identities and with tango’. An important intention was to create something that was not socially divisive, that could include anyone – including heterosexually-oriented people – interested in expanding their physical and emotional experiences through dance, in experiencing themselves in different ways, in going beyond the gender clichés (2011).

Consequently, within this extended paradigm, which includes dancers who are not Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender or Intersex (LGBTI), there are variations on what has become known as ‘queer tango’. There is also considerable overlap with traditional Argentine tango practice, which sometimes results in a confusion of the issues for people interested in understanding and perhaps differentiating a queer tango from an LGBTI strategy.

Most commonly, the traditional lead and follow structure is adhered to, and this can lead to the same kind of behavioural differentiation, regardless of a person’s gender identity and whether one is in the role of leader or follower. At the 2013 International Queer Tango Festival in Berlin, I observed that, despite the purported interest and opportunity to play with roles and gender stereotypes, more often than not the result was partnerships which conformed to a clear lead/follow role distinction.

At the same time, a common expression of same-sex partnerships in queer tango is a kind of cross-dressing, and roles can sometimes be portrayed parodically: a woman who leads may don the outfit and demeanour of a traditional milongero, or a man who follows may desire to experience ‘feminine’ vulnerability or the strong ‘femme fatale’ sensibility that wearing stilettos can create. For many people, this constitutes a subversive act because it is thought to undermine the prescriptive heteronormative
gender stereotypes with which traditional tango has been branded. Whatever the role, within the queer tango arena it is this subversion of, and experimentation with, gender stereotypes that is the point. Gender stereotypes, as they are played out within the roles of lead and follow, are not necessarily ignored, but rather their visibility may sometimes be enhanced and played with, thus blurring heteronormative boundaries.

The following link, https://youtu.be/WOpwLkPNLYo?t=20s, shows a performance by Ute Walter and her dance partner, Eliane Rieger. While they do not play out the heightened stereotypes of the ‘milonguita’ and ‘compadrito’, their dance reflects a male/female partnering in terms of their roles and costumes: black for the leader (‘man’) and white for the follower (‘woman’). In this regard, Walter and Nagel observe that ‘in spite of all openness and the formulated desire to break open gender roles, the dichotomy of leading and following...’ (2008, p. 5), the opportunity is not always taken up in practice. Further, they note, ‘we experience within ourselves how persistently these images we want to change work ... there is a strong discrepancy between one’s own claim and the ability to convey content’ (2008, p. 5).

It is this aspect of self-questioning and analysis evident in her practice that is potent in Ute Walter’s teaching, promoting a serious desire to transcend the clichés and gender stereotypes in a search for other important qualities, cultivating different aspects of the partnership, with the aim perhaps of dispensing altogether with the need to enact gender stereotypes. In her teaching, therefore, Walter encourages students to cultivate a recognition of individual differences in other people without reference to gender orientation. I experienced in her classroom exercises how they
are built around developing sensitivities in seeing, listening or recognising differences in a person’s physical tone and ‘feel’ through muscular qualities, skin texture, the quality of their gestures, even their emotional nature. All of these qualities can be foregrounded as elements to be acknowledged and worked with in a mutually reinforcing partnership, contributing to an enlivened sense of richness and openness in tango dancers’ communicative endeavours.

Another approach that offers a differing perspective on tango partnerships prefers instead to focus attention on the physical capacities of weighty and moving bodies: the shifting of weight, the action of gravity, changes in momentum, speed, gestural quality, and touch sensitivity. As in contact improvisation, these physical qualities can be cultivated for their own sake, rather than enhancing the dramatic or emotional loading that may lie within the partnership. In this approach, the importance of stereotypical heterosexual imagery and the often-associated emotional qualities and attitudes can recede into the background, in favour of other perceptions.

The following link exemplifies how contact improvisation partnering skills can be contained within a tango ‘score’ of movement, primarily utilising sensibilities which are not necessarily concerned with the dancers’ sexual orientation or feeling. While this hybrid form of contact-tango may not always be thought of as part of the queer tango field, there are overlapping features. For example, both contact-tango and queer tango dancers are usually comfortable with a fluid approach to gender relations, and it seems that Festival organisers recognise this, including contact-tango workshops in the 2013 and 2014 Berlin Queer Tango Festivals.
This example, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_3KfOFdYxge, shows an approach rather loosely contained by a tango ‘score’, in a performance from German contact-tango dancers, Gabriele Koch and Tobias Funke at the 2014 Contango Festival, Wuppertal. One can see their often-changing embrace which is quite different to traditional tango, and includes lifts and falls usually seen only in contact improvisation.

Individuals at queer tango events do not necessarily take a clear stance on what they are doing, except that the queer tango ‘label’ potentially provides a sense of safety in a practice space with clear boundaries, thus allowing an alternative social agenda to be imagined. Within this differently configured social space, a desire to throw heterocentric gender stereotypes into disarray has the potential to be realised. For many people, playing with gender stereotypes is the central focus of their dancing, as well perhaps as a wish to enhance and expand physical and emotional sensibilities, to look for experiences which allow them to express their differences, both from their usual day to day lives and within their own personal emotional realms. It should be noted, however, that in queer tango events with many ‘non-queer’ participants, there can be a fine line between dancers who play with heterocentric norms with the purpose of undermining their power, and those who wish to reaffirm traditional gender roles.

Several writers (Savigliano 2010; Walter 2013; Davis 2015) note a distinction between ‘gay’ tango and ‘queer’ tango. ‘Gay’ can be thought of as having a more overt sexual orientation, where, for example, a milonga space can be dominated by gay men performing a kind of machismo that makes them inhospitable to women (Davis 2015, loc 2269). As noted previously, however, ‘queer’ may be more political in intention. Savigliano suggests, for instance, that while queer tango is rarely overtly announced as ‘lesbian’, it embraces variation and values relationality through touch and physical
responsiveness. ‘Queer desires are sensual, aesthetic and romantically playful (2010, p. 143).’ Unlike ‘gay’ tango, it embraces alternative subjectivities where erotic possibilities expand past the bounds of heteronormativity and explores other ways of relating (Savigliano 2010).

Because professedly anything is allowed in queer tango, the idea of men following and women leading usually results in the capacity for both partners to dance either role, and to swap lead and follow roles, either changing between tandas, or after a single song, or changing many times during one song, as noted by Swedish queer tango teacher, Charlotte Rivero (2011). People who play with ‘alternative’ gender expression often feel comfortable with the idea that role-swapping is a sufficient strategy by which to undermine heteronormative gender boundaries in any context. However, Walter and Nagel comment:

As has been frequently stated, the dance roles are not equal. Leading and following have to do with ruling and hierarchy: Leading means to exercise power and following means to cede power, even if this is more or less done ‘out of free will’ and ‘actively’. Changing roles doesn’t fundamentally change anything within this structure ... but something will probably change between the dancing couple who has changed roles. It is now about two people who master both roles and are dancing as equals (Walter & Nagel 2008, p. 2).

While Rivero suggests that changing roles is not a necessary attribute of queer tango, that it depends on how the power structure is working within the couple (2011), my experience is that it is the further step of continual swapping of lead and follow roles which ultimately ushers a profound and qualitatively different sensibility into the dance.
The heteronormative qualities inspired by the separate roles may dissipate so much that the viewer can no longer easily identify lead or follow at any particular moment.

The following video link shows how Danish dancers Mette Munk and Jessica Naeser, at the Lille Festival in 2013, change roles frequently: https://youtu.be/3qy-pgy-jV0?t=45s. Sometimes the changes are imperceptible, the lead/follow structure ceases to dominate how the dance is seen, and the dynamics seem to undergo a qualitative change.

Villa too, proposes that ideally, because of its heteronormative connotations, dancers aim to progress beyond a lead/follow structure:

… even today, wherever we dance tango with each other in a clear leading/following structure, we do it in an extremely heteronormative way ... the ideal would be that we get beyond this structure. I don’t see it happening, and I don’t see it happening in the queer context either. That’s what I think is the main thing about queer tango, to question, and to understand what the leading/following structure implies. It implies much more than just two technical versions of dancing. It implies a lot of political issues and a very strong political history. And I think queer tango would be about questioning and being aware of this ... (Villa 2011b).

With this in mind, it is my experience that the usual tango embrace often seems an encumbrance when dancers are seeking a ‘leaderless’ tango. As can be observed in the following video link, in such cases the most comfortable and useful ‘embrace’ is to clasp one’s partner’s forearms or hands, which is much more amenable to a leaderless dance, particularly in contact-tango. This can be seen in the work of Gabriele Koch and Tobias Funke at the 2014 Contango Festival, Wuppertal, as shown in the video link on p. 116.
4.3 Another pedagogical model

As already suggested, another important facet of Walter’s work emerged as I searched for ways to apply my own physical and social understanding as a dancer to tango. In my tango experiences, there remained the striking absence of any cohesive pedagogical base, and the dance seemed surprisingly resistant to engaging with socially emancipatory values in the transmission of body knowledge. Thus it has tended to preserve a hierarchy and mystique almost as an end in itself, which operates like a hall of mirrors, perpetuating an infinite recycling of imagery now understood as integral to tango practice. Such views are challenged by Walter and Nagel, among others, with their particular form of queer pedagogy which participates in the philosophical and political underpinnings of queer theory.

Two central themes of Walter’s workshops, ‘Tango and Mindfulness’ and ‘Tango as Dialogue’, reflect teaching strategies concerned with examining social equality and gender roles as they inevitably arise within the tango arena. As already noted, much of Walter’s teaching focuses on cultivating a capacity for valuing difference – in people, as tango partners, and in ideas. She notes that many of the problems in teaching and learning tango, as in life, arise from people who wish to claim they have all the answers. Walter comments:

The word has spread, meanwhile, that there is no absolute truth, but only perspectives. We find it very hard, though, to completely comprehend this new paradigm, develop it into an inner attitude and integrate it into our diverse sets of habits, whether it is conversation or tango. We want to protect our convictions, about who we are, who the others are and how things should be, for fear of the pain that could arise if we question ourselves (in Thimm 2008, p. 30).
In general, however, the traditional tango teaching model used currently relies on teacher demonstration and student replication, on a ‘practical mimesis’ where students watch their teachers demonstrate steps and sequences in partnership and then try to copy what they have seen, often without much experiential practice time. Teachers might introduce students to ‘the eight-count basic’ pattern, with men and women being taught one role only as distinct ‘choreographies’, either leader or follower respectively, standing in separate groups on either side of the room. Later in the class they are asked to put the two ‘halves’ together. The couple is then usually left alone for a time to grapple with the subtleties of physical partnership, as well as trying to maintain a perhaps ‘misrecognised’ machismo. Lead and follow techniques are almost never learned within the embrace. Instead, humorous but rudimentary ‘hints’ for partnering are given in phrases like ‘drive her like a shopping trolley’, or as Merritt notes, ‘Drive me like a car’ (Manejame como un auto) (2012, p. 82).

Though teachers may demonstrate specific steps and sequences many times over, they may not always understand the learning challenges or physical problems that students encounter, and very often they appear to be demonstrating and reinforcing their own virtuosic mastery for a somewhat captive audience. Nor do many tango teachers have access to bodies of specialist movement theory and practice, or even teaching practice, which would enable them to take a different approach towards potential solutions to the kinds of problems encountered in tango partnering. Furthermore, if improvisation is a key feature of tango, this method of mimetic learning of discrete steps does not adequately enable students to improvise with what they do know, and there is inadequate encouragement to self-expression.
It is evident that this way of teaching does not completely satisfy contemporary adult learning models which ideally are based on building on students’ current understanding, knowledge and experience (Merriam & Bierema 2014, pp. 104-106). Student-centred approaches in which students are actively engaged with the material in authentic, reflexive and collaborative ways have been shown to be more effective than teacher-centred approaches, which allow students only an arm’s length experience of the material (Merriam & Bierema 2014). In a traditional tango situation, teacher virtuosity rather than student mastery often appears to be the primary focus.

Imitation as a primary teaching technique may be useful in a limited way, but often produces insecurity, anxiety and feelings of deficiency, as students are rarely able to reproduce the masterful dance of their teachers in the time available, if ever, and become increasingly aware of their difficulties. As a teacher, Walter is faced with barriers to learning caused by these feelings of deficiency, and ‘individually marked defence routines, concepts, patterns, conditioning’ (Walter 2007, p. 3). Furthermore, tango teachers are unlikely to prepare their students for handling the realities of a close physical partnership. Such partnerships are usually quite different from the impression created by the tango myths of irresistible seduction and seamless ‘instant intimacy’ which distort expectations. When faced with a difficult situation, an anxious person is often difficult to dance with because their focus is likely to be confused, but the result is that they often deflect blame onto their partners, a strategy that intensifies the difficulties. In her reflections, Walter notes German tango writer and dancer Arnold Voss’s solution:
... not only exercises help which bring us closer to the ideal of harmony and
elegance, but those which teach us to handle the reality of difference, yes even of
dissonance and disharmony within the everyday practice of the Tango Argentino.
And this without hiding them and without displeasing or insulting the partner.
Exercises to accept this difference without suffering it, to convert it into mutual
thoughtfulness and understanding without distorting ourselves or accepting one-
sided compromises ... Exercises which may even be able to convert the fear of
difference into the joy of difference (in Walter 2007, p. 50).

As both a feminist and a queer dance artist, Walter has been concerned to find ways
of loosening tango from its gender-related heteronormative forms and definitions,
and at the same time supporting what she believes to be the essence of authentic
tango: its immense capacity to create an equal and intimate dialogue between the
two dancing partners (Thimm 2007). For Walter, ways of communicating and the
potential for an equal dialogue, rather than the acquisition of heteronormative and
gender-specific role characteristics, are the essentially important characteristics of
tango. Walter’s approach relies on the premise that good tango requires good
communication, heightened physical sensibilities and a fundamental quality of
consciousness or internal attitude with a capacity for introspection and
contemplation, which she describes as involving an understanding of the dance as a
duet form of meditation in movement, or an inner mindfulness (Walter 2007). It
seems clear that her approach is consistent with some of the pedagogical concerns
of Paxton, who, for instance, encourages students to meditate on the physical laws
of gravity and momentum as they relate to the human body, not as an end in itself
but in order to heighten physical sensibilities and meet the constantly changing
reality of dancing in equal partnership with another (Paxton 1978).
In order to develop an approach for a qualitatively different culture of communication, Walter has based much of her pedagogic strategy on working with ideas outlined in a special process of ‘dialogue’ initially posed by American theoretical physicist, David Bohm (1917-1992). Bohm says of his ideas: ‘I am suggesting that there is a possibility of a transformation of the nature of consciousness, both individually and collectively, and that whether this can be solved culturally and socially depends on dialogue’ (Bohm, n.d.). Bohm has designed his communication process in order for people to explore their often unconscious assumptions about the world, which subtly control their relationships with each other and the environment:

... hidden values and intentions can control our behaviour and ... unnoticed cultural differences can clash without our realizing what is occurring. It can therefore be seen as an arena in which collective learning takes place and out of which a sense of increased harmony, fellowship and creativity can arise (Bohm, Factor & Garrett 1991, p. 2).

Opinions and assumptions operate in everyone, and some of these are by no means trivial and might even be considered ‘non-negotiable’. These may involve social values and meanings, religious or political views, self or national interest, and may be very deeply felt. If challenged, people defend such deeply held views, often vehemently, causing further polarisation, at which point dialogue becomes impossible (Bohm n.d). Therefore the suspension of all judgement, opinion, impulses and assumptions, without either acting on them or suppressing them, lies at the heart of dialogue. Slowing down one’s automatic thoughts and impulses, while still giving them serious attention, may permit a deeper understanding of the way human minds operate, allowing a new more coherent collective intelligence to
evolve. While any process is vulnerable to manipulation by more dominant individuals, in the dialogue process a predominant principle is that hierarchy and authority have no place; it is essentially a conversation between equals (Bohm, Factor & Garrett 1991).

This is the starting point for Walter and Nagel’s pedagogic methodology, which argues that the traditional hierarchical nature of partnering on the basis of power and gender in tango is not an appropriate means of properly understanding a dance which has at its heart the subtle communication between ‘two dancers who (must) approach each other with respect and emotional openness’ if the dance is to succeed (Walter & Nagel 2008, p. 3). If tango is essentially about communication between dancers who have the potential for an equal dialogue, then cultivating a sensitivity to oneself, one’s partner and the situation, developing an inner mindfulness, is crucial. In this way, Walter argues, tango can make an emancipatory contribution to people’s lives, freeing the sensual experiences of eroticism, sexuality and fantasy from their previous heteronormative orientation (Walter 2007, p. 34). Tango then becomes open to a diversity of artistic, creative and relational possibilities, a place for experimentation.

It seems likely, however, that fostering a state of inner mindfulness in tango may be problematic because the dance itself leads students towards the need to confront their own limitations and expectations. It could impinge on their capacity to deal with a high degree of stress created by prolonged physical intimacy, or present difficulties in interpersonal social situations and anxiety in relation to learning barriers, both physical and mental. All this can pose a threat, and may arouse personal defence strategies that are often unpleasant and which tend to be projected
onto the people closest to them – in this instance, their tango partners – further distorting communication, expectations and behaviour. Consequently, an important feature of the process requires students to have opportunities within the tango lesson framework for discussion and personal reflection, verbalising feelings, perceptions of a situation, expectations and other concerns. Teachers can sometimes expedite solutions to problems, particularly for beginners, through both spoken and movement guidance.

Tango is very often thought of as a ‘danced dialogue’, but within the wider tango discourse, this notion of dialogue is usually confounded by the necessity of participating in the hierarchical doxic state. Walter and Nagel understand the traditional notion of dialogue as seriously flawed, for in David Bohm’s terms, ‘Hierarchy is the antithesis of dialogue’ (Walter & Nagel 2008, p. 2), and the possibility for equality between the dancers is thereby limited. In fact, they assert that there is no reason why traditional tango rhetoric may not be taken at its word, and the principle of dialogue treated as a serious endeavour with both sides assuming equal rights from the beginning (Walter & Nagel 2008, p. 2).

For dialogue to work, dancers need to be primarily motivated by its advantages and have a fundamental desire for equality that is more important to them than hierarchical position or the privileges of status. Both leader and follower need to abstain from the privileges gained by the ‘patriarchal dividend’. Walter and Nagel, however, describe its profound simplicity: ‘the prerequisite is openness and a positive attitude towards this possibility, as well as a joyful willingness to try out both sides’ (Walter & Nagel 2008, p. 2).
While self-reflection is essential in order to recognise destructive patterns, it is often the case that despite being convinced of the need to change, it can be hard to confront old psychological conditioning. Further, for people who just want to learn tango, the deep self-examination necessary for a dialogue with equality may be too rigorous.

However, Walter has analysed ten specially defined core abilities in the dialogue process (more fully outlined in Appendix 3), which are thought to methodically train a person’s inner mindfulness and capacity for self-observation, linking these abilities to the tango situation with the aim of learning how to purposefully create a successful physical dialogue rather than merely hoping for rare or serendipitous success (Walter 2007).

In searching for a qualitatively different culture of communication, this chapter has uncovered several ways in which tango has been conceived in terms of both practice and pedagogy, in order to loosen its heteronormative grip. It includes some of the philosophical underpinnings of both nuevo and queer tango practices that may militate against a habitual reassertion of tango’s normative values.

The following chapter seeks to focus more directly on the dynamics created within a dancing couple in the intimacy of close physical contact, and to offer some further possibilities for how tango practice and pedagogy might change advantageously in order to support a more contemporary outlook in terms of gender equality and social engagement. In particular, the rich communicative network of ‘the space in between’ two dancing bodies is discussed, firstly as exemplified by Adriana

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49 This list of ten core abilities is distilled from Ute Walter’s 2007 Diplom-Pädagoge thesis, ‘The meaning of the inner mindfulness for the Tango Argentino and its procurement in classes by inclusion of selected aspects of the dialogue process method’, University of Hamburg, pp. 77-96, and is described more fully in Appendix 3.
Pegorer’s concept of contact-tango. By placing the hybrid form of contact improvisation and tango in a research setting, Pegorer has created opportunities to find meeting points in the two techniques. Her approach derives from Paxton’s contact improvisation work, Todd alignment and release practices, and proposes an open-ended examination of the constraints and freedoms provided by such somatic understandings when applied to a tango ‘score’. Similarly, partnered negotiation enabled by physical touch is the focus for Erin Manning’s relational movement practice, with the investigation of tango’s ‘enabling constraints’ as ways of thinking that promote a heightened sense of flexible co-creation within tango’s embrace (Manning 2009). The theoretical constructs provided by Donald Winnicott’s concept of ‘potential space’ and Daniel Stern’s notion of ‘affect attunement’ provide catalytic power for further descriptions of how a dance partnership might evolve towards a more equitable, fluid sense of communication and hence a more socially and personally rewarding outcome.
Chapter 5

Negotiating the ‘spaces in between’

In searching for a qualitatively different culture of communication in tango, Chapter 4 has focused on some practices and pedagogical approaches that may enable a loosening of tango’s heteronormative grip. It has included some of the different pedagogical understandings shaping nuevo and queer tango practices – for example, the work of queer tango artist Ute Walter – seeking to engage different ways of thinking about the relationship between two dancers that may militate against a habitual reassertion of tango’s heteronormative perceptions.

Chapter 5 focuses more intently on this relationship, interrogating the idea that the ‘space in between’ two dancing bodies comprises a rich intersubjective, interpersonal communicative network that, if properly attended to, can provide opportunities for dancers to negotiate and shape their dancing relationship in more satisfying and diverse ways.

This chapter seeks to link dance artist Adriana Pegorer’s idea of the ‘space in between’ a dancing couple and British psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott’s concept of ‘potential space’ which describes the way the relationship between carer and child develops, providing a compelling analogy for the kinds of communication and interpersonal dynamics created by a dancing couple within the intimacy of close physical contact. It argues that, in terms of Winnicott’s model, the qualities of touch or ‘holding’, the capacity for trust and play, and the degree of openness developed in early relationships are all reflected in the dance dyad, where the communicative capacities for play and empathy are essential for social, improvisational dances like tango and contact improvisation to be fully realised.
As Walter proposes, the quality of communication generated within a tango partnership is central to the dance’s success. This chapter describes some current explorations into communicative partnerships, including the ambiguous quality of ‘empathy’ or ‘we-ness’ as employed in neurological studies of mirror neurons, arguing that such a quality is not automatic as neurology suggests, but can be either fostered in various ways in teaching, or perhaps ignored in favour of more ‘choreographic’ concerns.

Similarly, the work of American psychiatrist Daniel Stern, particularly his concepts of ‘affect attunement’ and ‘vitality affects’, provides a fitting model in terms of how the kinds of communicative dynamics unfolding within partner-dance relationships might be understood. This chapter argues that, following Stern, Sheets-Johnstone’s idea of dynamic congruency, while proposing ‘a natural binding of affective and tactile-kinaesthetic bodies’ (Sheets-Johnstone 2011, p. 399) lying at the heart of interpersonal exchanges, also suggests that whether dancing is thought of as ‘pure physics’ (as in contact improvisation) or emotionally driven (as in tango), these are aesthetic constraints which, contrary to popular thinking, need not be mutually exclusive, and neither do they have any necessary bearing on the expression of a ‘compulsory’ gender hierarchy.

Specific ways of thinking about relational practices between two bodies in contact and motion are considered in light of their capacity to foster alternatives to tango’s hierarchical heteronormative practice. Firstly, this chapter describes Adriana Pegorer’s ‘tango-release’ work, and her desire to explore the ‘spaces in between’ dancing bodies, by placing the hybrid form of contact-tango within a research setting, and creating opportunities for meeting points between the two dances. Her
approach derives from Paxton’s contact improvisation principles, Todd alignment and release practices, and proposes an open-ended examination of the constraints and freedoms provided by such somatic understandings when applied to a tango ‘score’. Similarly, negotiation enabled by touch in partnering is the focus for Erin Manning’s relational movement practice, as she investigates tango’s ‘enabling constraints’, and ways of thinking that promote a heightened sense of flexible co-creation within tango’s embrace, particularly, for instance, the concept of ‘deferral’ or ‘holding in abeyance’ ways of thinking which may simply reinstate traditional heteronormative responses in leading and following.

5.1 The paradox of touch

In the teaching of tango, it is sometimes forgotten that the primary communicative sense which mediates the relationship between two dancers is the sense of touch. Instead, rather more emphasis is put on performing steps, as dancers try to emulate their teachers through an external visual sense, thus tending to ignore the rich communicative capacity of touch. Touch, however, has been understood as the basis for interpersonal interaction throughout life. As Luce Irigaray writes, it is:

... the sense that underlies all the other four senses, that exists and is in them all, our first sense and one that constitutes all our living space, all our environment (in Harvey 2003, p. 6).

Feminist and literary cultural theorist Elizabeth D Harvey has written extensively on the nature of touch (2003), pointing to its paradoxical nature, which has been noted as far back as Aristotle who questioned whether skin was central to this sense, or whether the real organ was situated ‘further inward’, deeper than skin (Harvey
2003, p. 4). In an echo of this idea, tango dancer and blogger, Terpsichoral, writes of her own sense impressions within tango’s embrace:

Oddly, as so often in close embrace, I feel as though the front of my body has disappeared. My senses seem to shift away from the feeling of his chest in the moist wrapper of his white cotton shirt making contact with mine at the solar plexus, the mirrored curls of hands around each other. Instead, I am aware of the play of muscles in his back, which forms the edge of the magic circle which surrounds us and separates us from the outside world. It is the boundary, the skin not of the individual, but of the couple. I am not focused on touching or feeling for its own sake, for the sensual pleasures it can bring, but on communication. I am intent on the message, not the medium ... In tango, the body is a message bearer, the movement a declarative speech act. I hereby take this tanda (Terpsichoral, 2012b).

In this dancer’s experience, touch is an expanded field, extending both ‘further inward’ than the skin, and further outward too, tracing a boundary that encapsulates two bodies and their sense of communication within the dance. Terpsichoral’s perception also suggests it is movement in partnership, not merely skin on skin, which bears important messages. Further, she implies that dancing with a partner has the quality of a public declaration of acceptance and commitment for the length of the tanda. While Terpsichoral says that she is intent on the message not the medium, invoking serious commitment through her language, it is unclear, however, what she is committing to? What does she assume the message is about? While it may be a difficult question to answer, such ambiguity gives impetus to the explorations in this chapter.

For example, between two dancers in an intimate embrace, communication can be about many things: Where is the centre for the two of us? Is it static or can it move
fluidly? How is our combined momentum working? Is my partner relaxed? We communicate not just about what the movement is, but how it feels. Subliminal messages like muscular tension and subtle pressure, even smell, convey more than just physical information about the dance. They reveal information about a person’s state of mind, whether acknowledged or not, about how a dancer may feel about his or her partner, or the situation. Are they anxious, solicitous, gentle or pushy, jerky, tense, clutching, or mechanical? Are they too controlling, helpfully clear, or simply lacking enthusiasm? Are they dancing to impress an audience or to be in tune with their partner? And how might an aware partner respond in the face of all this information? From informal conversations with other tango dancers, it is evident that most people are aware of this communicative power, although perhaps in different ways and to different degrees.

In terms of that connection, the idea of the ‘space in between’, as discussed by UK-based dance artist Adriana Pegorer (2013) in relation to tango practice, is helpful in considering this question. Pegorer, who in 2012 introduced a series of annual week-long workshops called ‘Tango Diférente’ which were specifically designed to develop dialogue between contact improvisation and Argentine tango, envisages them as a place where teachers and participants can experiment and play. Pegorer emphasises the creation of a ‘research environment’ where all participants might share an ‘open-minded’ approach to tango and contact improvisation practices. Pegorer’s own ‘tango release’ approach recognises release-based techniques and principles originating with Mabel Elsworth Todd’s Ideokinesis research as a basis for her work with Argentine tango. The aim, she says, is ‘letting go and challenging

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50 At Ponderosa Movement & Discovery, a non-profit residential centre created as an international meeting space for movement artists, in Stolzenhagen, Germany.
tango’s verticality, fixed positions, binary lead and follow, asymmetries, and the use of high heels, among other things’ (Pegorer 2013):

Going back to the binary: what if we have a space in between? So you have right and left, male and female, teachers and participants, but this is just a boundary or a frame, and you have all the spaces in between. This is the space I would like to explore, with the possibility and freedom to go from one side to the other and find our own way around (Pegorer 2013).

The idea of the ‘space in between’ is not new and has been used in a number of ways. Following cultural anthropologist, Victor Turner, for example, it can be thought of as a liminal space, ‘a fructile chaos, a storehouse of possibilities, ... a striving after new forms and structure’ (Turner 1986, p. 42 ). For the purpose of this thesis, and recognising Pegorer’s interest, this chapter seeks to examine the shared but ambiguous territory lying, as Terpsichoral has noted, within the boundary of ‘the skin not of the individual, but of the couple’ (2012b).

As this chapter seeks to demonstrate, the forms of contact improvisation and Argentine tango as improvised social partner dances are both created within rich intersubjective spaces shaped firstly by the need to merge two dancers’ own familiar, but different, ‘kinesthetic/kinetic melodies’, which Sheets-Johnstone has described as the ‘insuppressible living dynamics of kinesthetic experience’, and is discussed later in this chapter. While it is possible to be aware of one’s own kinaesthetic sensations, such experience is often disregarded in adult life (Sheets-Johnstone 2011, pp. 389-390) and it is this lack of awareness that adds further complexities to partnering. Pegorer’s phrase, the ‘space in between’, draws attention to the space shared by a dancing couple, facilitating, firstly, an understanding that dynamics of great complexity develop within a
moving partnership. Secondly, such a directed focus allows us to investigate the qualities of those dynamics in the relationship between the two participants, to examine some of the assumptions which may operate to restrain or drive the relationship, and thus the movement dynamics within the improvisational dyad. With this focus, one can seek to expand partnering practices in ways that can be socially and personally emancipatory.

This chapter seeks to extend the discussion of the ‘space in between’ by connecting the kinds of intersubjective experiences created within the dynamics of a dancing partnership with the concept of ‘potential space’, first formulated by British paediatrician and psychoanalyst DW Winnicott, in his work elucidating the dynamics of the infant/caregiver dyad in child development\(^{51}\).

Winnicott terms this developing relationship ‘potential space’ or ‘holding environment’, being neither wholly psychological nor physical, but developing between a carer and infant. Ideally, it is in this ‘space between’ that an infant learns to trust the world and others through experiences first created within a caregiver’s attentive and reliable holding. For Winnicott, these first experiences are ‘body experiences’ and crucially depend on ‘experience which leads to trust’ (Winnicott 1971a, pp. 5-6). Potential space is understood as a place where the encounter between a person’s private reality and the outer world can be negotiated. ‘The potential space between baby and mother, between child and family, between individual and society or the world, depends on experience which leads to trust’ (Winnicott 1971a, p. 6).

\(^{51}\) For example, see Winnicott’s writings 1960, 1964, 1971a, 1971b.
Much of Winnicott’s work has been about the conditions that help or hinder a person’s ability to play, and thus to interact with the world in a meaningful and creative way. For Winnicott, the capacities for trust and creative living arise in play as the foundation for the most creative aspects of an adult’s personal and communal life (Winnicott 1971a; Praglin 2006). Play, for Winnicott, is not only concerned with how one might participate in the processes of a more studied kind of art (as in being an artist), but includes an ‘everyday’ kind of creativity manifesting, for example, ‘in the choice of words, in the inflections of the voice and indeed in the sense of humour’ (Creme 2013, p. 39). Play could also seem to be a ‘preoccupation, absorption and near-withdrawal, with the activity itself being experienced as outside the individual and yet not belonging entirely to the external world’ (Kuhn 2013b, p. 57). This idea is reminiscent of a kind of trance-like quality in dance, an experiential state which people sometimes seek as an ultimate goal in both tango and contact improvisation.

Thus his ideas of potential space as a safe environment created in the interstices between the ‘me’ and the ‘not me’, and the complexities of play as initially a bodily experience leading to many kinds of creative practices, have strong implications for the creation of both professional and social forms of partner dance and improvisation. Ideally, in play ‘an individual can engage with the (external) inherited tradition whilst bringing something of their own inner world to it, drawing upon and feeding into a personal style or idiom’ (Kuhn 2013a, p. 5). As improvised dances with rich, though divergent, inherited traditions, a common feature of both contact improvisation and Argentine tango, but one which this thesis maintains is not always recognised as such, is the requirement for participants to cultivate a capacity for play within the dance partnership, because play is fundamental to the
ability to improvise and to invent. Without that ability, neither dance can be fully realised.

Winnicott’s interest is also in the growth of a person’s ability to empathise with others and to be able to accept diversity in society, nascent capacities first experienced as part of this ‘space in between’. He stresses that in good relationships there is always an element of ‘subtle interplay’ that presupposes an acceptance of human imperfection (Nussbaum 2003). For an adult, potential space can encompass all kinds of relationships throughout life, and does not literally refer only to direct physical touch. The concept, however, provides a compelling framework when investigating the interpersonal dynamics created by a dancing couple within the intimacy of close physical contact. The quality of touch, the depth of trust in finding secure physical support, and the degree of openness to play are all reflected here in the dance dyad: there may be a pleasurable and curious attitude to play, a comfortable holding, a willing trust and acceptance of each other’s ‘imperfections’, or perhaps a relationship that is not so trusting, creating a situation in which dancing together is difficult and fraught with possible misunderstandings, and even anxiety and fear.

This chapter further argues that, whether or not it is called ‘empathy’, the capacity to relate to another person through movement, and the qualities of trust and creative play required in a good partnership can be either fostered, as they are in contact improvisation, or perhaps overlooked in favour of other more ‘choreographic’ concerns, as may occur in Argentine tango. In my own dance experience, however, good physical partnering skills imply a kind of emotional sensitivity to one’s partner, conveying the feeling that one is ‘in good hands’, and that one’s partner can
be trusted. This is a desire which one often hears expressed when dancers talk about partnering quality. Notably, in Argentine tango, ‘empathy’, or a visible, albeit restrained, emotional intensity is often described as the essence of ‘real’ tango, and finding and maintaining such a connection with one’s partner is central. In describing the qualities of this relationship, one hears terms like ‘communication’, ‘connection’, ‘contact’, ‘presence’, or ‘chemistry’, which seem to reflect the success or failure of a multitude of physical and emotional adaptations that each person makes continually at the micro level, to be ‘in tune’ with their partner. In fact, both tango and contact improvisation call upon this capacity for trust, and by these means the quality of both the relationship and the dance is judged by both dancers and spectators alike. In this chapter the question arises of what might constitute that feeling of communication and sense of connection people describe when talking about good partnering, and whether the idea of ‘empathy’ does justice to the complexity of qualities needed for a dance partnering relationship to be successful.

The term ‘empathy’ can be described in various ways, but, popularly, it is thought of as a human characteristic by which people understand others, emotionally, physically and intellectually. This chapter, however, suggests that how we understand ‘empathy’ operating within the interpersonal dynamics of a dancing couple has important implications for the pedagogical approaches adopted in teaching either partnered dance form.

For example, there has been much recent speculation by dancers and scientists alike about the neurological mechanism of ‘mirror neurons’ in the brain that creates

the capacity for empathy, in that an observer understands the meaning of movements, sensations and emotions which s/he perceives in another person because of an automatic activation of the same neural circuits in the observer that are activated in the mover\textsuperscript{53}.

However, in many dancers’ experience, it is evident that this capacity is not at all automatic, but is enhanced or inhibited depending on the kind of experiential learning to which a person is subject (Sheets-Johnstone 2011, p. 389), promoting the idea that ‘culture tunes our neurons’. Canadian anthropologist David Howes (2005) notes that, in the view of American neurologist Oliver Sacks, culture complements physiology\textsuperscript{54}.

Following Sacks’ notion of the ‘biological and cultural woven together’, and in response to Vittorio Gallese’s neurological study of mirror neurons, American philosopher, Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, argues for the validation of the kinaesthetic origin of mirror neurons (2011). Thus she poses a qualitatively different way of conceptualising movement behaviour in daily life as well as participation in dance, maintaining that ‘however marginalised in our adult lives, our tactile-kinesthetic/affective bodies are the foundation of our everyday reachings, lifttings,

\textsuperscript{53} Neurologist Vittorio Gallese writes:

A common underlying functional mechanism — embodied simulation — mediates our capacity to share the meaning of actions, intentions, feelings, and emotions with others, thus grounding our identification with and connectedness to others. Social identification, empathy, and ‘we-ness’ are the basic ground of our development and being (Gallese 2009, pp. 519–536).

\textsuperscript{54} Noted in an interview with Oliver Sacks published in Psychology Today in 1995 (pp. 28-30):

OS: Our culture beats on us constantly ... Our nervous systems need culture as much as they need chemicals.
PT: The culture tunes our neurons ...
OS: Right, and so the biological and the cultural are woven in us together ... from the first days of life. This is why a pure view of physiology is not sufficient. It has to take in the whole world (Howes 2005, p. 22).
pushings, pullings, walkings, runnings, scratchings, stretchings, explorations, hesitations, and more’ (Sheets-Johnstone 2011, p. 393).

Insofar as we are not born with mirror neurons, and furthermore, insofar as we all, in addition to sensing and learning as foetuses, learn our bodies and learn to move ourselves in the course of our infancy and early childhood ... it would seem incontrovertible that the mirroring capacity of certain neurons derives basically from kinaesthetic experiences of one’s own moving body, that is, from one’s own movement experiences. In effect, mirroring is basically the mirroring of another’s moving body on the basis of the actual and possible movements of one’s own moving body (Sheets-Johnstone 2011, p. 389).

German anthropologist Herman Roodenburg corroborates this view, highlighting a study showing that mirror neurons in fact respond quite differently in different people according to the kinds of movement experience each person has acquired over their lives (Roodenburg 2012). Roodenburg’s study\(^5\) makes it clear that intensive experience within a particular cultural, social or learning milieu makes a huge difference to the kinds of movement one individual recognises and relates to, and to the details of what is both seen and felt, including a gesture’s emotional undertones. In other words, notes Sheets-Johnstone, our somatic awareness – the attention we have given in the past to

\(^5\) Roodenburg notes:

Consider a highly interesting study on how our mirror neurons respond differently when watching dances that we have learned to do, for which we have acquired the necessary bodily skills, and dances that we have not. In this neuroscientific study videos of classical ballet and Afro-Brazilian capoeira dance were shown to a group of subjects with motor experience of ballet, another one with experience of capoeira, and a third group of non-expert control subjects. The results were revealing: while all the subjects saw the same actions, the mirror areas of their brains responded quite differently according to whether they could perform the actions. The ballet dancers showed greater activity in their mirror areas when watching ballet than when watching capoeira moves, while the mirror areas of capoeira dancers showed the opposite effect. For the group with no motor experience of either ballet or capoeira, no such differences were detected. Crucial in each case were the inculcated motor skills. As the researchers concluded, these skills even inform the brain’s mirror mechanisms (Roodenburg 2012, p. 6).
our own movement experiences – has created ‘kinesthetic melodies’, habitual dynamic patterns which set us up to recognise best in others what we have already experienced in our own bodies (2011, p. 389). Such kinesthetic awareness, however, Sheets-Johnstone notes, is not inevitable, but is a capacity often marginalised throughout life. Consequently we are not necessarily aware of many of our actions unless something unpredictable occurs to interrupt their expected flow, and ‘something goes wrong’ (2011, pp. 389-390).

It is likely that such intensive somatic awareness, and the familiar ‘kinaesthetic melodies’ we develop over time as we learn to negotiate the world and our relationships with each other, all contribute to the cultivation of a quality that Sacks describes as ‘deep attentiveness’ (2005). For example, in the sensual world of someone who has learned to live without sight, they may acquire:

... a better sense of feeling, of taste, of touch ... [which] blend into a single, fundamental sense, a deep attentiveness, a slow almost prehensile attention, a sensuous intimate being-at-one with the world which sight, with its quick, flicking, facile quality, continually distracts us from (Sacks 2005, p. 36).

The cultivation of this ‘almost prehensile attention’ resonates with the notion of how a dancing couple might sensitise their kinaesthetic awareness over time, developing acute tactile/kinaesthetic responses when learning how to ‘listen’ carefully to each other. ‘Listening’ is a term used often to describe the commitment of tactile/kinaesthetic attention given to a partner’s physical and emotional behaviour in order to create consonance or harmony in the dancing relationship, an important factor for mutual enjoyment, and common to both dances. To this end, many dancers in both contact improvisation and tango half-close their eyes to
enhance peripheral rather than direct vision, as well as their tactile/kinaesthetic awareness.

The work of American psychiatrist and psychoanalytic theorist Daniel Stern, who has specialised in infant development, has enriched and consolidated such views with the concepts of ‘affect attunement’ and ‘vitality affects’, ideas which are compelling in their description of how human communicative ability develops. Stern’s work over several decades continues to generate currents of interest in movement research. For instance, the influential experimental dancer, Steve Paxton, has commented on his particular interest in Stern’s work in the early 1970s, noting that they had both in some ways been investigating similar areas of dynamic relational experience, albeit from different perspectives (2007). Sheets-Johnstone also emphasises Stern’s work as seminal in elaborating at a micro-level the intricacy and dynamic complexity that occurs within the interpersonal exchanges of a carer/child couple, an exchange that forms the basis for how we relate to others in a physical-emotional melding of awareness throughout our lives (2011). Erin Manning employs Stern’s ideas of affect attunement and vitality affects as they relate to her philosophical/practice-based understanding of relational movement (2009).

Stern’s focus on communication through attunement relies on a meticulous examination of inter-relational gesture and vocalising within a carer/infant dyad. Sequences of interaction captured on film and then vastly slowed down reveal in micro-movements the changes in timing, shape and intensity that constitute the process of affect attunement (Stern 1973, p. 123). It is not so much the specific forms of gesture, posture or vocalising that he focuses on, ‘but rather on the changes
in motion, posture, expression, and arrangements – and what kind of communicative flow these changes have in the dyadic flow of events between people’ (Stern 1973, p. 115). When a person ‘matches’ the ‘intensity, timing and shape’ of another person’s behaviour rather than merely imitating the form, then ‘feeling states within one person can be knowable to another and they can both sense, without using language, that the transaction has occurred’ (Stern 1998, p. 139). Stern calls these feeling states ‘vitality affects’.

The ultimate reference for the match appears to be the feeling state (inferred or directly apprehended), not the external behavioural event. Thus the match appears to occur between the expressions of an inner state. These expressions can differ in mode or form, but they are to some extent interchangeable as manifestations of a single, recognizable internal state (Stern 1998, p. 142).

Affect attunements are embedded in behaviours so commonly and subtly that they can remain almost imperceptible, while at the same time vividly colouring the quality of a relationship. An important part of the carer/infant attunement process is a carer’s occasional deliberate ‘mis-attunement’ where s/he varies a response, say in timing, in order to surprise or create interest for the child, but not enough to break the sense of attunement occurring (Stern 1998, p. 213). Similarly, this capacity to create interest through variation occurs in adults’ play and ways of relating (Stern 2007, p. 6).

As already noted, many tango dancers refer to their desire for emotional connection and expression, rather than what they perceive to be a non-emotional partnership that seems to focus on the mechanics of movement, as is sometimes thought to occur in tango nuevo, or in contact improvisation duets. There are, however,
teachers of contact improvisation, Paxton among them, who insist that the emotional aspect of a contact improvisation partnership is as important as the ‘physics’ of the relationship, without which the dance is not satisfying:

The best dances that I’ve seen ... had to do with the fact that emotions and psychology and movement were intertwined, were present and full and rich. Some of the least interesting dances had to deal with that fact that you get technically facile, and the other things don’t exist, and then the experience is quite empty (Paxton 1981, p. 18).

Vitality affects underlying attunement are always present in every act, and always available for attunement. Vitality affects concern ‘how a behaviour, any behaviour, all behaviour is performed, not what behaviour is performed’, and these qualities can be described by kinetic terms like ‘surging, fading away, fleeting, explosive, crescendo, decrescendo, bursting, drawn out, and so on’ (Stern 1998, p. 54). Vitality affects occur along with feelings or emotions (as in a ‘flood’ of happiness) as well as in the absence of such feelings (as in a ‘flood’ of light), but both share the quality of ‘flooding’ (Stern 1998, pp. 45-49). Because vitality affects function below the level of specific forms of expression, they are not tied to the content of an act or event. As Stern describes, there are ‘a thousand smiles, a thousand getting-out-of-chairs, a thousand variations of performance of any and all behaviours, and each one presents a different vitality affect’ (1998, p. 56). In dance, vitality affects present a ‘play of powers made visible’ (1998, p. 158).

Sheets-Johnstone argues that it is this ‘dynamic congruency, a natural binding of affective and tactile-kinaesthetic bodies’ (2011, p. 399) that lies at the heart of interpersonal exchanges. Following Stern, she notes that this dynamic congruency is
a formal relationship, which means that movement and feeling can be consciously separated, either understood and expressed as separate events, or entwined together, depending on personal aesthetic and social preference:

A particular kinetic form of an emotion is not identical with the emotion but dynamically congruent with it. Precisely because of this, we can separate out the emotion from the movement … we can thus feign and mime an emotion: we can go through the motions of a particular feeling and we can inhibit the motion of a particular feeling (Sheets-Johnstone 2011, p. 399).

It may be argued that, in the context of modern dance training in the second part of the twentieth century, exploration of the kinaesthetic and proprioceptive senses has been foregrounded as part of the postmodern dance agenda in New York. Contact improvisation developed originally as part of professional postmodern dance practice, and historically shares much of its cultural and political agenda. The ‘physics’ or mechanics of a moving body were originally accentuated and explored for their own sake, while the emotional load or meaning that might be habitually attached to everyday as well as dance movement was deliberately put in the background. Steve Paxton comments that he first encouraged beginners to focus on remaining in physical touch, ‘meditating upon the physical laws relating to their masses: gravity, momentum, inertia and friction’, not in order to achieve results, but rather, ‘to meet the constantly changing physical reality with appropriate placement and energy’ (Paxton 1978, p. 37). He clearly acknowledges that emotional expression is crucial in this work, but states that ‘what I am trying to do is to quieten the theatrical impulse which amplifies those things or manipulates them in order to play games’ (Paxton 1981, p. 15):
Some people come to the classes who ... cannot understand life without an emotion leading hither and thither. They don’t understand that it’s possible to consider those emotions slightly objectively ... to analyse that aspect of themselves as well. And this is especially so in dance where, in the older traditions, emotional projection is a primary quality ... At this stage in contact and in some of the other postmodern works, you have a situation in which emotional narrative projection is seriously questioned (Paxton 1981, pp. 34-35).

More recently, and still concerned with this issue of the relationship between movement and feeling, Canadian dancer and academic, Florence Figols, writes:

With the fall of figurative/narrative art in the late twentieth century, the human body as subject/object has become in dance the new territory to explore and from which to create. To sense and to feel are now integrated in the training of dancers and are considered to be ‘the new virtuosity for dancing bodies’. The attention paid to sensing weight, playing with tension/release, and feeling the motion of the joints contribute to an enhanced role for kinesthesis and proprioception. But all this activity happens in simultaneity with seeing, hearing and the information that comes with the tactile sense — in other words, with being in the world (Figols 2008).

Meanwhile, within a traditional tango situation, as perhaps occurs in any traditional dance form, the kind of detailed awareness and exploration of kinaesthetically-based physical experience that Paxton and Figols highlight has never been mandatory, and is not necessarily engaged with at the same level – if at all. The cultural imagery associated with tango is redolent with expressions of emotional intensity, whether real or imagined, which is perhaps, as Paxton might suggest, an historical legacy of a much earlier tradition. Personal meanings attached to tango movement are not
necessarily separated from the physical experience, and in fact there is usually little desire within the dancing partnership to examine that relationship.

In light of this diverse research from psychoanalysis, neurology, and dance studies, this chapter seeks to demonstrate that through a complex blend of the neurological with enhanced experiential attention to our own kinesthetic/tactile experience, such qualities of ‘deep attentiveness’ and intent ‘listening’ for a partner’s ‘kinesthetic melodies’, whether or not they constitute empathy, are qualities that can be learned. Furthermore, they shape our interpersonal relationships and remain central to communication in dance partnering. Sheets-Johnstone puts it simply:\(^{56}\):

We relate to other people through movement, through our awareness of our own tactile, kinaesthetic bodies, and through our awareness of the kinetic dynamics of others. We learn this through play, through affect attunement, and through more sophisticated forms of dance (Sheets-Johnstone 2007, p. 1).

This thesis argues that the qualities of emotionality or ‘pure physics’ are aesthetic/social constraints which need not be mutually exclusive, occupying, as Stern has noted, different ends of a spectrum (Stern 1998, p. 142), and neither do they have any necessary bearing on the expression of a ‘compulsory’ gender hierarchy. From Sheets-Johnstone’s perspective, and following the work of Stern, it can be seen that both forms have the potential to express a whole spectrum of

\(^{56}\) This event, called ‘Dance, Movement and Bodies: Forays into the Nonlinguistic’, occurred in 2007 in New York, and was hosted by the Philoctetes Center for the Multidisciplinary Study of the Imagination, promoting integrated, interdisciplinary approaches to the understanding of creativity and the imaginative process. Participating in the discussion were: Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, movement and philosophy; Daniel Stern, parent/child relationships; Robert Fagen, animal play; Joanna Gerwertz Harris, dance therapy and history; and Steve Paxton, dance performance and improvisation.
diverse qualities, whether emotionally or kinaesthetically based, and this enhances the potential for an expansion of relational possibilities.

Also working with Stern’s concepts of affect attunement and vitality affects, Erin Manning has developed the concept of relational movement in the dynamics of tango partnering. For the purpose of this thesis some significant features of her work resonate considerably with ways of thinking about tango partnering previously discussed. In particular, the idea that action, judgement and other normative ways of thinking can be subject to a process of ‘deferral’ is important in a number of other contexts: Batson’s discussion of somatic and release practices, Todd’s work with Ideokinesis, Paxton’s pedagogic regime, and Walter’s consideration of mindfulness and the process of dialogue in tango, all of which seek to forestall the usual ways of thinking and acting in relationship, keeping them ‘in abeyance’ in order to foster new levels of awareness and other kinaesthetic possibilities. Dance artist and scholar, Elizabeth Dempster, notes that the work with touch and imagery in Ideokinesis ‘aims to address the motor attitude of a person, their anticipatory set, their habitus’ (2003, p. 40), implying attitudinal changes at a deep level, and is consonant with these other approaches in which touch and imagery are also fundamental.

Manning notes that tango’s embrace does not guarantee a freedom from the ‘unthinking dichotomies’ of hierarchy and gender, but that within the ‘enabling constraints’ of face-to-face walking lies the possibility of an emancipatory practice, a ‘reciprocal reaching towards’ inspired by a politics of touch that implies:

... a myriad of possibilities brought to light by the manner in which two people ...

respond to each other. I lead, you follow, yet even as I lead, I follow your response,
intrigued by the manner in which we interpret and touch one another (Manning 2003, para. 53).

Daniel Stern’s work provides considerable focus for Manning’s ideas about relational movement and the complexity of the dynamics operating within the space between a dancing couple. Two concepts, preacceleration and the interval, are central to her thinking, and relate to Stern’s ideas of affect attunement and vitality affects respectively. Firstly, suggesting that ‘movement need not be thought of as a quantitative displacement from A to B’, Manning emphasises ‘how movement can be felt before it actualizes’ (2009, loc. 71). Thus she foregrounds the difference between displacement and the concept of preacceleration, which in dance is the feeling of momentum welling up to ‘take form’ prior to any actual move. ‘Preacceleration does not predict one displacement over another. It holds in abeyance openings, out of which shapes emerge’ (2009, loc. 227). Following Stern, Manning’s notion of preacceleration allows that movement can be explored by focusing on the micro-movements alive within the process before any step or shape materialises. ‘In the preacceleration of a step, anything is possible. But as the step begins to actualize, there is no longer much potential for divergence: the foot will land where it lands’. Once this happens, there are few options for surprise (2009, loc. 95). Before this, however, within the preacceleration lies a multifarious potential, not only about what the next move can be, but about how that move happens in terms of its vitality, and how it is inflected by past moves.

For Manning, Stern’s vitality affects colour movement through an experience that does not strictly belong to either person in a dyad, but rather to the space or interval between them. This interval is not a thing, but a quality – of speed, closeness, intensity – which is felt between two dancers as a shared texture (2009, loc. 153). The quality is elastic and allows ‘changing intensities’ to arise and flow between two people whose mobile
central axes can fold around, lean towards, or open out from each other within the embrace. In dancing, ‘I move not you but the interval out of which our movement emerges’ (2009, loc. 211).

Manning proposes the self as a ‘becoming-body’ for which ‘there is no stable identity that emerges once and for all’, one that ‘resists predefinition’ as a particular subject or identity’ (2009, loc. 81), a self which has not yet converged into a final form. For Manning, all ‘final forms’, all resolutions, as a body, an individual, an object or movement, are ‘simply one remarkable point, one instance of a collusion materializing as this or that’ (2013, loc. 719).

However, she appreciates an intrinsic problem here, especially if one presupposes the ‘stable going-on-being’ of a person’s sense of self and identity (Winnicott 1960, p. 586). In a world of ‘final forms’ some qualities seem irrefutable:

A body is black, gendered, sexed, you might say, adding that these are irrefutable givens that situate the body within the realm of fixed form. Irrefutable, yes, but only as the limit of a constellation of processes that collude to foreground one measure of how the body expresses. Identity is less a form than the pinnacle of a relational field tuning to a certain constellation (Manning 2013, loc. 682).

To answer such a problem is, for Manning, to emphasise that ‘taking form’ is neither the start nor the end point, but a constellation of processes that collude in an expression at a particular time. One needs to recognise that process itself is a deferral of form-taking, ‘forever deferring its own completion in the dynamic form of more becoming’ (2013, loc. 91).
Because a body is always more than what emerges within a particular constellation, for Manning the issue is not ‘How is the body not black or gendered or sexed?’, but becomes ‘How is the body more-than-the classification this singular constellation foregrounds?’ (2013, loc. 682). Rather than foregrounding the ‘blackness’ or ‘genderedness’ of a body, and thus further inflecting those qualities as salient, Brian Massumi notes that it is by a deferral of recognition that those issues of status are held at bay (in Manning 2013, loc. 65).

While this idea of deferral may appear to be more like a sidestepping or even a denial of crucial issues, it is reminiscent of how ‘gender’ in contact improvisation, as discussed in Chapter 1, is somewhat sidestepped in the teaching of technique. Some might say that the issues surrounding gender equality in contact improvisation are ignored (Paxton & Lori b 1996), while others assert that they are dealt with implicitly as part of good technique and do not need further elaboration (Paxton 1981, p. 16). Similarly in her queer pedagogy, Walter does not presuppose how dancers in class should interpret the lead/follow dynamics, or pin the experience of those roles to gender, but rather seeks to facilitate a breadth of thought and perception about gendered expression that may emerge through the process of learning tango.

In Manning’s thinking, such deferral allows an issue to be ‘held in abeyance’ until such time that other ways of thinking and other techniques become established (2013, loc. 53-66). In the case of tango it allows the dancer to concentrate on what the form could be, rather than what it should be. It allows a profusion of relational possibilities to be explored in the playing out of a tango improvisation, rather than pre-empting a particular form or feeling. It allows an inventiveness and diversity in
an improvisation that happens within the potential inherent in the mutual ‘reaching towards’ of a tango embrace. For Manning, relationality allows the leader and follower to be equally co-creative in a tango partnership:

We walk, I am leading. But that does not mean I am deciding. Leading is more like initiating an opening, entering the gap, then following her response. How I follow, with what intensity we create the space, will influence how our bodies move together. I am not moving her, nor is she simply responding to me: we are beginning to move relationally ... (Manning 2009, loc. 382).

While these propositions about dancing relationally are not assertions about some potential, hypothetical state but a description of felt experience, nevertheless, Manning’s initial descriptions bring to mind some of the most traditional tango rhetoric. In threads running all through tango discourse, there are repeated claims about what ‘leading’ and ‘following’ should properly express in terms of the relationship between partners. For example, in traditional tango rhetoric, the ‘man proposes and the woman disposes’. The roles are declared ‘equal but different’, requiring different but complementary strategies where the follower is free to choose how to respond to a leader’s invitation as is fitting; a good leader is sensitive and accommodating to the nuances of a partner’s responses. It is the ‘connection’ that is all-important in tango, rather than the ‘demands’ of lead and follow. Therefore one should not think of the lead as the authority for what happens in the dance, or assume that the follower must be ‘submissive’ and obedient to his cues.

While these ideas sound promising, as Villa points out this may not be what people actually do in their usual expression, and as Manning acknowledges, like Sheets-Johnstone, ‘lived experience of affective attunement ... gets backgrounded in most
adults’ resulting in a more limited capacity for creative possibilities (2013, loc. 534). Consequently, such traditional statements about the partnership may seem to be no more than spurious ‘political correctness’ so that creative equality seems to be simply a matter of declaration rather than necessitating any conscious effort. But if any kind of equality is worth achieving at all, then it is not the mere declaration that makes it happen, but rather its actual practice. Even if it occurs serendipitously, it is likely that for many dancers, expectations of gender equality are often disappointed.

As discussed previously, Villa’s traditional tanguerical qualities, which include complete harmony, absolute musicality, elegance, individuality and masterful improvisation, are difficult to manage even for the most generous and experienced dancers (Villa 2006, Us/them: discursive boundaries in motion). Such aspirations depend on both dancers cultivating a capacity for extraordinary ‘listening’ and exceptional tolerance for the differences in perception and sensibility a partner might bring. Without considering these technical requirements, what happens in practice inevitably eclipses the possibility for much nuance. As suggested by Walter and Nagel, there is no reason why traditional tango rhetoric should not be taken at its word. The proposition here is that just as the principle of ‘dialogue’ can be treated as a serious endeavour in tango pedagogy, so can intensive relationality, a heightened listening and a willingness to embrace difference. These are concepts which lie at the heart of both processes of dialogue and relational tango. If movement practice and thought co-compose, as Manning proposes, then the traditionally professed sentiment of ‘equal but different’ needs to be borne out in the practice. What happens in the space between two dancers inevitably has a shared texture, a relation initiated by the embrace and enabled by the constraint of walking together. The interval is malleable, able to be stretched, lingered in, folded, felt
intensely. Being aware of these potential textures provides openings for invention, but without this awareness we merely make steps, and the textures we share begin to feel more like entropy:

When I begin by moving her, what I feel is resistance. I pull, push, trip. The movement becomes a series of steps we fall into, always a little early or a little late, our balance in disequilibrium, our mood darkening (Manning 2009, loc. 415).

This chapter has sought to establish the idea that the space between two dancers in an embrace is teeming with possible relational expressions. It poses the question of how these various relational expressions might be encouraged or discouraged in terms of pedagogical models used to transmit cultural values within the dancers’ practices, and in light of expanded ideas about touch, negotiation and attunement. It also describes how the possibility of the ‘deferral’ of habitual thought and action, central to Ideokinesis, release work, Walter’s development of dialogue and mindfulness and Manning’s relational movement, may enable more emancipatory, creative and less anxiety-arousing possibilities to be developed in the relationship between partners.

Chapter 6 continues this exploration by asking how such a partnering relationship might be actualised in the teaching and practice of Argentine tango. By establishing some of the key differences in the imaginary and technical worlds of contact improvisation and Argentine tango, the idea of practising such a deferral of habitual thought and action in the form of an ‘endless gliding’ between these differences may in some sense offer ways to soften some of the major obstacles that dancers need to overcome if they are indeed seeking a ‘qualitatively different culture of communication in tango’.
Chapter 6

Concluding ideas: Fostering an ‘endless gliding’ between differences

The fields in which the genres of Argentine tango and contact improvisation operate draw from different cultural and personal experiences and so different kinds of social awareness and behaviour become salient. In Bourdieu’s terms, in each form different degrees of social capital are attached to the cultivation of proprioceptive and kinaesthetic awareness. While kinaesthetic training has acquired high professional status in most concert dance practices, including social contact improvisation, in Argentine tango there is negligible status attached to such a non-hierarchical, non-heteronormative social order implied by, or imagined in, such training. For the traditional tango dancer, it is the imagery and feeling qualities associated with the lead and follow structure, including a distinct gender hierarchy and expression, that determine and reinforce its imaginative agenda and ultimately confer status and value on the dancers.

Developing awareness of and interpreting one’s own kinaesthetic and proprioceptive body, along with working with the ‘physics’ of movement, has created quite a different social and aesthetic trajectory in contact improvisation; this kind of practice and understanding is, in fact, what constitutes the form. One simply cannot do contact improvisation without it. While it is quite possible to find tango dancers with a highly developed somatic awareness, in general it is, as this thesis argues, the differing breadth and quality of kinaesthetic experience and the conscious attention given to it, such as is cultivated in contact improvisation, that influences and separates the different imaginative agendas for practitioners of
Argentine tango and contact improvisation, and shapes what is conceived of as possible.

So the question arises: rather than envisaging the relationships between dance partners, as well as their teachers, as ‘constant, permanent relationships of inequality’ operating within a dance arena, as Bourdieu might observe (Thomson 2008, p. 74), might it not be possible to understand those social relationships differently, and as Villa suggests, to foster an ‘endless gliding’ (Villa 2006) between the imaginative agendas which construct the forms, so that the more negative and unpleasant aspects of hierarchically gendered roles, particularly those occurring in tango, become attenuated?

Within the mind of a contact improvisation dancer practising tango, or a tango dancer practising contact improvisation, the liminal space lying between these agendas can become, as St John cites, a ‘fructile chaos’ indeed (1999), for which one needs great tolerance and persistence if the densely packed webs of participants’ experiences, expectations and imaginations are to be negotiated successfully. Only with considerable effort, might such chaos, lying ‘betwixt and between’ fixed cultural certainties, eventually resolve into forms that are meaningful in some way (St John 1999). Such cultural certainties require a questioning approach if there is to be any kind of resolution of the difficulties that constrain the quality of tango partnerships for many people. Such an approach might centre on: a renegotiation of the hierarchical values and frames of reference underpinning the lead/follow structure; and a testing out of the more equitable, less socially and personally restrictive interpersonal dynamics as has been historically cultivated in contact improvisation’s ‘postmodern’ agenda.
This thesis finds that there are no absolute solutions in efforts to loosen tango’s socially unforgiving binaries. Nevertheless, this concluding chapter draws together several areas in the research which might fruitfully be opened up in order to understand and foster such an ‘endless gliding’ between differences, not so that tango becomes unrecognisable, but so that the understandings of the postmodern enterprise can fruitfully enrich the beauty and intimacy of a tango partnership.

This chapter considers some areas where these differences primarily occur, and where pedagogical practice may help to ameliorate difficulties in relation to these differences. Some of the strategies that might be employed and which are discussed in this chapter include: deferral of judgement and negotiation; compelling imagery; identifying with the roles; play and improvisation; starting states; and the dancer’s relationship to gravity. All of these areas pertain to the central aim of this thesis: to foster more equitable partnering practices and promote teaching supportive of that possibility.

One of the central features of contact improvisation, and one of the major differences in the pedagogical approaches of the two forms, is the foregrounding of a training which actively requires reflection on, and discussion of, personal experiences and perceptions, a recognition of the need to seriously cultivate the understanding of another’s perspective and experience. Within the contact improvisation situation, communication of ideas and discussion of personal experiences within a partnership is always given time, often at the end of a class or jam, with participants perhaps sitting in a circle and offering comments on their experiences.
As observed throughout my field research, however, this process is rarely available in traditional tango due to constraints in time, place and social etiquette. It is, however, cultivated in the pedagogy of queer tango, as developed by tango artist Ute Walter, as well as in the relational concepts and practices of Canadian dancer and academic Erin Manning, and in Adrian Pegorer’s ‘tango release’ methodology. An important feature of these approaches is that there should be no demand for consensus or conclusion as part of participants sharing their experiences. Instead, the paramount issue is the cultivation of a capacity for accepting in an open-minded and non-judgemental way the equality of one’s own and other participants’ perceptions and experiences. With this as a goal, it is certainly possible for negotiation and non-hierarchical dialogue, rather than the exercise of power for its own sake, to drive the tango partnership.

To accomplish this, the idea of cultivating the ability to defer one’s action and judgement is important, and is a central concept in release-based trainings closely associated with contact improvisation practice. As discussed previously, for example, Paxton refers to his ‘small dance’ as an excellent means of re-training dancers, involving doing ‘nothing’ except standing still: ‘and then you point out that in the midst of standing still, something else is occurring and that the name for that is the Small Dance’ (Paxton 1975, pp. 8-9). Similarly, in Ideokinesis training, habitual ways of thinking and moving are circumvented, or deferred, so that new neurological pathways become established (Todd 1937; Dempster 2003; Batson 2009).

This research has sought to demonstrate that non-hierarchical processes are more appropriate than traditional pedagogical methods in promoting social and personal
change. In dancing tango, non-hierarchical attitudes may require substantial ability to defer one’s habitual ways of thinking and acting. In tango teaching, this conforms with the precepts of contemporary ‘dialogue’ and ‘mindfulness’ as described by Walter (2007), with Manning’s relational practices (2009), and with experiential student-centred learning situations as are cultivated in kinaesthetic and release-based practices, including contact improvisation (Paxton 1975, 1981; Paxton & Lori b 1996; Todd 1937; Batson 2009).

It can also be seen that the central idea in all these pedagogical practices is that changing the imagery inherent in a practitioner’s habitus is crucial to changing the thinking and the moving which is based on that imagery (Todd 1937; Dempster 2003). Mabel Todd is recognised as a pioneer in the field of human physiology and the effects of psychological and mental processes on human movement. She writes that movement quality is ‘determined by the vividness of the imagined responses, or the importance of it for life ... the emotional drive, or feeling for the idea, is one of the important conditions for a specified type of movement’ (1937, p. 281). Further, as noted by American Ideokinesis teacher Andre Bernard (Dempster 2003), it is important that people feel an intense interest at a deep level, and they will gravitate towards personally compelling imagery and ideas that create the most lively imaginative landscape in which to work.

For many people, the ‘imagery’ in Ideokinesis refers to the network of movement lines of direction, some of which are anatomically based and some of which are ‘imaginary’, inculcated within a person by a teacher’s touch, by repetition and by practising simple actions, in what is essentially a re-educative process. Todd’s work, however, concerns what some people see as a different kind of imagery from this
intense re-educative focus. As Dempster notes, Ideokinesis seeks to address a person’s ‘anticipatory set, their habitus’ (2003, p. 40). Chapter 2 described how ‘habitus’ is structured by all of a person’s prior experience in the world, generating practices, beliefs, perceptions and feelings, both durable and mutable in terms of a person’s responsiveness to their social landscape. Both Bourdieu and Todd refer to the ways in which a person responds unconsciously to the requirements of socially ‘correct’ behaviour and posture, understood as the motivating force behind how a person desires to be seen, and to be. For Todd, for example, the injunction to ‘straighten up’ carries a moral imperative which in essence derives from the military, in order for a man to demonstrate traits of strength, integrity and self-reliance. As a consequence, a man’s need to exhibit the demeanour of a brave and strong leader transforms into a habitual stance carried throughout life (1937, p. 35). Clearly this kind of persuasive cultural imagery is not simply confined to dance training, but describes a much wider field of social practice. Bourdieu provides a similar example whereby the ‘hidden persuasion’ of a social milieu has a moral force, a capacity to instil socially desirable behaviour, even ‘a whole cosmology, an ethic, a metaphysic, a political philosophy, through injunctions as [apparently] insignificant as “stand up straight”’ (1977, p. 94). However, while Bourdieu suggests that one’s habitus changes only slowly with regard to social requirements, Todd’s teaching methodology provides a more ‘tangible’ route for modifying one’s thinking and moving, using the same processes whereby new images are practised so that they become habitual, eventually replacing unhelpful, stereotypical modes of thought.

Consequently, this research argues that Todd’s ‘feeling for the idea’, reminiscent of Bourdieu’s ‘feel for the game’, illustrates that the strength of the underlying imagery with its social and cultural attractiveness deeply affects one’s physical and
emotional stance. What compels a person to adopt particular social practices over others is determined by how emotionally resonant they are. Thus images we relate to emotionally, for example those in popular culture, perpetuated by the film industry, in the demeanour of film stars, fashion models and magazine illustrations, all play a part in defining the shape of a person’s unconscious desires.

The experiences of Australian-based contact improvisation dancer and teacher, Alejandro Rolandi, bear this out, as evidenced in an interview undertaken in 2012. Raised in Buenos Aires, Rolandi initially learned both tango and contact improvisation there in the early 1990s. He describes how his experience of traditional tango in Buenos Aires was conditioned by imagery that was vivid and deeply held, and how such imagery travelled within a person’s attitude to life. His description is also reminiscent of Butler’s discussion of gender as performance (2007), and how gender is shaped in part by one’s desire, whether ambivalent or not, to participate in the prevailing social climate (Butler 1999):

The compadrito, the macho, they’d walk like that … it was the macho thing to do. It’s just an attitude that gave birth to that walk … If you grew up watching the movies, that idea is a lot more available; I probably did it as a kid playing with my friends. It’s something that’s kind of in your body, because by imitation you play with that idea. I’d just pretend that I was this guy in that movie, and that was the walk … So you can actually do that artificially; like you’re dancing with that woman, and even if you’re not looking at her, your fantasies are telling you that she’s the woman of your life. And that’s what drives the dance (Rolandi 2012).

Ultimately, however, he found the socially emancipatory imagery inherent in contact improvisation more compelling. His first experiences of contact improvisation in Buenos Aires were about ‘breaking free from the constraints of our
culture and social restrictions. Suddenly I can interact with another adult who is not my partner in a way that is so intimate’ (2012). Given the pervasive climate of renewal, freedom and change occurring at this time in the political and social lives of porteños, it is likely that this extended to experimenting with different kinds of movement expression with a desire to loosen the restrictive cultural constraints experienced in previous years.

As Bourdieu might suggest, one’s ability to comply successfully with prevailing social norms also seems to be an important aspect of one’s attraction to them in terms of vying for social capital. For instance, Rolandi notes that in 1990s Buenos Aires, those who were recognised as the ‘good [tango] dancers’ were ‘really falling in love with each other when they were dancing’, and part of their skill seemed also to be able to switch the feeling off when the dance was over: ‘You can reach into your emotions like you can flex a muscle. It’s just practice’ (2012). Rolandi’s success in this milieu relied on foregrounding those feelings, ‘to connect with the poetry, with the way of walking, with the elegance of the form’. While he describes this set of rules as being ‘very invasive’, he also noted that without them ‘it wasn’t as much fun’ (2012), suggesting, perhaps, that if one did not subscribe, one did not achieve the same social approbation, or perhaps the same emotional pleasure in performance.

Such a feeling quality in tango, akin to ‘really falling in love’, was clearly an important feature of Buenos Aires culture at that time: for example, some aspects of the imagery in contact improvisation in Buenos Aires, according to Rolandi, were also very similar to that of tango, being ‘a lot about the emotional experience’ (Rolandi 2012). Thus it seems that the social imperatives operating in Buenos Aires
in the 1990s were quite different to those in New York in 1972, where, in Paxton’s view, feelings which might surface during contact improvisation duets were thought of as extraneous and distracting to its central aims.

In Rolandi’s experience, the ability to separate the physical from the emotional, ‘switching emotions on and off’, came after moving to Australia, where he found it was required equally in both dances, because, as in tango, such feelings in contact improvisation were also ‘tricky’:

... when you’re striving to dance, it’s a feeling – unless you’re really good at switching it on and off – that stays. It has blurry edges, and you end up confused. You may think that this beautiful dance that you just had with this woman or this man means something beyond the dance. So it messes with your head because the emotions were leading the dance. It was not anchored to technique (Rolandi 2012).

In Australia, he notes, he practised a more ‘technical’ contact improvisation in which feeling was no longer the anchorage. In Bourdieu’s terms, perhaps he began to comply with the New York-inspired ‘emancipatory’ practices of 1970s dance aesthetics that became popular in Australia’s contact improvisation community a decade or so later, rather than the ‘emotionally’ driven practice of Buenos Aires:

You can feel things while you’re dancing, but they’re not carrying the dance. What you’re doing is a game of physics. I’m not paying attention to how close to this person I am; I’m paying attention to how close we need to be so we can fall together. The concept of intimacy changed for me; it stopped being related to proximity (Rolandi 2012).

From my research, and as both Todd and Bourdieu suggest, it seems that the kinds of imagery one finds the most ‘compelling’ is a complex issue. Changes in a
dancer’s patterns of thought and action to accommodate a wider range of partnering possibilities occur most readily when such desire has strong personal motivation. As previously discussed, in the professional concert dance arena, somatic understandings like that of Ideokinesis have achieved a high degree of social capital, but such skills are not similarly valued in more traditional dances like Argentine tango, and hence may not be so attractive a proposition for tango dancers.

The act of focusing on the interpersonal space between two people, perhaps stumbling into those confusing ‘blurry edges’ that Rolandi describes, can create anxiety, as it is indicative of occasions when personal and social boundaries are not clear and expectations are unknown. If the emotional forces described above are not sufficiently understood, contradiction and confusion may arise and seem impossible to reconcile. While this can occur in both dance forms, this thesis suggests that such a focus may be more confronting in traditional tango as any discomfort exerts more pressure, given the constraint and intimacy of the extended embrace, maintained over a much longer time than physical contact in contact improvisation. The points of contact between partners are often imposed and can be relatively unchanging, even uncomfortable, being the intimate areas of the face, breasts, abdomen and thighs. Furthermore, stringent social etiquette allows no polite option to disengage prior to the acknowledged end of the tanda without some discomfort or negative repercussions, as evidenced in the following comments from two highly skilled contact improvisation practitioners.

As participants in my practical research, they discussed their first experiences of tango’s close embrace, comparing this with their understanding of contact
improvisation, and concentrating on the kinds of intimacy associated with close physical contact:

Mike: I do find [tango] more confronting, because I have Gina’s face 15, 20 centimetres away. I can feel her breath, I can see her eyes, I can see all those micro things. Whereas in contact, it moves on.

Gina: You have that option in contact, if you’re dancing with someone and you don’t want to, or it’s a new person, you can easily just move (Mike and Gina 2012).

So for some people, to mask confusion or to deflect any anxiety that may arise in the partnership, it is easier to distance oneself from such extended confrontation.

Serving this end, within a traditional tango situation, the dance roles become, whether consciously or not, associated with familiar gender roles, functioning as a kind of ‘default’ agreement. At its best, adopting masculine and feminine stereotypes as ‘templates’ for the lead and follow role structure tends to clarify social expectation, provoking less anxiety, as Butler notes (1986, p. 508).

Conversely this may preclude much questioning of roles and their implications, limiting the capacity to recognise or negotiate any other kind of relational possibility. If the dance roles work by reference to the authority of ‘tradition’, and such tradition is already a function of unequal gender and power dynamics, then such a denial may serve to exacerbate any lack of understanding between dance partners regarding the experience of gender identification.

Energetically reinforced, as is usual for a traditional heterosexual tango couple, identifying roles with gender requires the lead be the dominant authority, with the follower being expected to ‘submit’ to this authority. Even if such submission is actively chosen, envisaged, for instance, as part of a ‘game’, accepting such a
structure sets up within the couple a strong mutual commitment to promote whatever is thought of as socially ‘legitimate’ and to disallow the potentially ‘deviant’ or transgressive. If, however, a man’s authority as lead falls short in some way in terms of this commitment, his identity as a man may also come under suspicion. The fear of losing social status can arouse anxiety. Within a traditional tango situation, the man often assertively defends this potential loss of status, reinscribing the gendered behaviour he assumes the role requires. As leader, he may find he needs to ‘correct’ his partner’s errors in following, and in that act he is also stressing her ‘muliebrity’, or the deficiencies in her ‘feminine’ tango nature (Villa 2011, p. 279). For both roles in traditional tango, the strong implication is that a dancer’s skill is a function of his or her gender expressed through specific behaviours.

In queer tango, too, where gendered behaviour might be thought of as less fixed, the lead/follow dance structure can provide a guide for ‘correct’ (heteronormative) technique. Many participants enjoy playing with the predictability inherent in the stereotypes, in a kind of heightened gender performance, as well as experimenting with new ways of behaving when swapping roles. While dancers might acknowledge that they interpret lead and follow via gender, this process may also be usefully employed as a means of experimenting with new experiences of gender.

Of particular interest to this thesis, however, is the way in which a dancer might reliably interpret another person’s physical proximity and/or intimacy in body contact. Lack of clear behavioural cues can undermine this capacity, and may create a situation which is somewhat threatening. When dance roles, and therefore gender roles, are not specified, and there is no ‘protective’ role adopted by which to reliably
predict or negotiate one’s partner’s intentions or motivations, this may lead to a fear of unbounded intimacy, whether ‘ fluidly’ gendered or not. For example, my research found that while a man may be experienced in the body proximity/intimacy required by both lead and follow roles in same-sex tango partnering, in a same-sex contact improvisation partnership he may experience the lack of any such ‘agreed’ roles shaping the interactions as inducing unpleasant anxiety. The relationship then becomes difficult, even impossible, to manage even when the contact is minimal; increasing anxiety is enough to inhibit the possibility of dancing altogether. In this case gender-specific roles can provide a ‘buffer zone’ or a degree of protection from undefined ‘blurry edges’.

In a queer tango situation, identifying closely with a particular tango role can also prevent dancing entirely. In my experience, it is possible that two women who both identify strongly as leaders find themselves unable to negotiate a loosening of their attachment to the power, initiative and creativity they associate with the lead, thus completely preventing their dancing together. As Walter stresses in an interview in 2013, despite one’s personal ideals of equality and freedom of choice, these are very often overruled by the strength of habitual gender identification (Walter 2013).

Similarly, a rigid role delineation can also lead to anxiety and lack of trust if it is felt that one’s gender ‘competence’ is being judged. For example, in interview, professional Sydney contact improvisation dancer and teacher, Ashley, found it hard to accept a tango teacher’s description of the specifically ‘masculine’ characteristics that the lead should embody:

Yeah I was angry. I’m not the most traditionally masculine guy there is ... I don’t like being told what it is to be a man. There’s no way of proving what it is to be a
man, or what it is to be a woman ... it’s impossible to tease out the effects of society and pressures and any natural tendencies, because as soon as you’re born, you’re in society (Ashley 2012).

This thesis argues, therefore, that the way of challenging inequality as perceived in these gendered roles lies best in changing the way we imagine the roles, how we think about them, and therefore how they are practised: with an enhanced will towards equality in dialogue, a deepening of kinaesthetic awareness which promotes expansive, non-hierarchical gender roles, a non-judgemental, playful attitude to social relations which works towards the development of trust, and having a greater desire for, and commitment to, finding social equality than in maintaining the benefits of hierarchical social status.

This thesis has explored the ways in which imagining oneself and one’s body are integral to the ways one has of thinking and acting. In other words, one’s habitus is formed and maintained through the more or less instinctive participation and experience of one’s immediate social surroundings. Our experiences may, or may not, include such deliberate and concentrated attention to our own kinaesthetic experiences provided by practices such as Ideokinesis, contact improvisation and other kinaesthetically-based trainings. However, it is through such attentiveness that we may be enabled to broaden our physical and emotional understanding of our own bodies, and how we relate through them to each other and the world.

This thesis has found compelling notions, too, in the work of Winnicott, Stern and Sheets-Johnstone, which suggest a close relationship between one’s early, essentially kinaesthetic, or bodily experiences, which go towards building trust in one’s surroundings, and the development of interpersonal attunement and one’s
capacities for openness, inventiveness and play. As has been established, such attunement is ‘a natural binding of affective and tactile-kinaesthetic bodies’ (Sheets-Johnstone 2011, p. 399), a physical-emotional melding of awareness lying at the heart of interpersonal exchanges, forming the basis for how we relate to others throughout our lives, including within dance partnerships.

For example, Steve Paxton notes similarities between his own improvisational duet work and Stern’s affect attunement, describing how it is:

... founded innately in us as human beings to be able to play this game, that [contact improvisation] is not an artistic overlay on top of human behavior. It is part of human behavior that is now, in this dancing, very much developed and amplified, and done by adults as opposed to a mother (Paxton 2007, p. 11).

Stern describes these dynamics of the playful partnered responses of contact improvisation in terms of the finely tuned coordination that occurs in affect attunement:

[The dancers are] throwing themselves around with a certain imaginative anticipatory expectation of what the other person is going to be able to handle in the next split second ... It looks like it’s about the tricks but it’s really about the coordination (Stern 2007, p. 6).

Such fine coordination relies on what Paxton describes as a ‘fundamental constant’, a set of ‘permissions’ present in both contact improvisation and affect attunement that inevitably becomes visible as a structure in improvisational relationships (Paxton 2007, p. 11):
Improvisation doesn’t have quintessential elements – it has to do with lack of form, right? But it doesn’t last very long that way ... The words I used, the examples I gave, the things we found together as a group, created a direction which, it seems to me, has remained sort of constant since ’72 ... when it sort of got into the bodies and people began to trust it as a form (Paxton 2007, p. 11).

Similarly, Stern suggests that events proceed in a ‘semi-structured’ way, with sudden unpredictable emergent properties that upset expectations. Like Paxton’s ‘fundamental constant’, this ‘semi-structure’ seems to determine a person’s expectations of their partner’s behaviour, and when such deviations or ‘violations’ occur, becoming ‘more and more discrepant, and at the same time remain[ing] true to the original behavior, the degree of interest and pleasurable arousal increases’ (Stern 1973, p. 125). In this way, the skill can be seen in the pleasure and surprise that ‘deviations’ provide, and they are integral to the structure of contact improvisation.

In traditional tango, my observation is that a sense of play is much less evident, especially for those dancers who have less experience. In Stern’s terms, perhaps, the traditional tango ‘steps’ and relational codes form a ‘semi-structure’ which determine the parameters of any possible deviation. My observation is that very little deviation is likely to be tolerated for either partner. The leader usually has much responsibility, being required to improvise seamless and effortless sequences of technically expert moves, in the right place on the floor, and at the right time in the music, as well as taking into account his partner’s responses. He and his partner must be seen to endorse the codes, and if they are not complied with, either inadvertently or deliberately, the effects can be subtle but powerful, and even
potentially humiliating, not only for the leader who is supposed to have perfect control, but also for the follower who is likely to be blamed.

Although traditional tango rhetoric attests that some leaders enjoy the follower taking initiative on occasion or refusing the lead’s ‘proposal’, in the experience of several dancers, if the follower does not do what is expected of them, it is usually an unwelcome transgression. For example, Saraza notes:

I have many times heard teachers and dancers say things like ‘I don't lead, I propose’ or even ‘It's interesting to me when she does something different than I was intending’. I think this is horse shit. I don't think any mark enjoys when the revel does something else, and these guys are lying to themselves and their students. The reason I think it is horse shit is that on the rare occasions that I misinterpret my mark, I can feel his displeasure clearly. And many of these are people who claim to enjoy interpretive revelling (Saraza 2014b).

It is clear that the signs of a leader’s discomfort are always evident – sometimes in words, but also through tactile/kinaesthetic responses which can be read through the embrace. Such dynamics may allow a kind of ‘symbolic violence’, or even actual verbal violence, to enter into the partnership, as if both have accepted as legitimate the leader’s right to show anger or deflect blame in order to maintain his authority. Given the authority granted the leader, it may be difficult for him to consider that his own feelings of anxiety may have created a disturbance that undermines the quality of the improvisation. This thesis proposes that with vehement insistence on the power hierarchy inherent in the roles of leader and follower, the potential for antagonism is implicit from the outset. In such instances, trust is undermined, a
good connection is unlikely, and both partners are thereby disadvantaged by a vastly curtailed capacity for play, improvisation and creative participation.

Conversely, trying to incorporate the experience of a contact improvisation dancer into a tango partnership may create breaches of expectation which both partners find difficult to manage. For example, as a follower in tango there are only a very small number of possible movement pathways available in terms of movement vocabulary, which the leader is supposed to organise, or ‘improvise’, and indicate by good marking. The intention and the scope are narrow, so a contact improvisation dancer who is following needs to filter out much of the potential in their own mind that does not comply with a ‘legitimate’ tango scenario. This can feel unappealingly like creative impetus stifled. Furthermore, a contact improvisation dancer may find that many of the leader’s ‘messages’ are in fact unconscious and unintended movements, thereby seriously confounding the process of following. Thus, if such a low ‘signal to noise’ ratio is to be successfully decoded, extra careful listening by the follower is needed so that ‘unintended’ movements or physically inflected emotional states can be safely ignored. For the leader, then, a high degree of body awareness and physical articulation is needed to clearly define his leads from any unintended or unconscious movement.

My experience is that in contact improvisation a dancer can choose how they will respond to a partner’s weight and momentum: they may ignore it, or go with it, or resist it, or just walk away, or in some other way break contact; and all this is possible with varying degrees of physical intensity, play and sensitivity. In a traditional tango situation, the follower’s only legitimate option is to ‘go with’ the leader, at the same time creating a particular kind of ‘resistance’ or ‘friction’ within
the contact which is mutually supportive (Saraza 2014b). Deviation from this kind of touch response is usually considered inappropriate, or at least unhelpful: a follower who is not ‘resistant enough’ may also be considered to lack correct technique and be in need of a lead’s ‘helpful’ corrections.

For an experienced tango dancer, tiny deviations by a partner may well add to the interest and surprise in the partnership, as long as they do not break the attunement, or connection, such as a contact dancer ‘pouring’ her weight into her partner’s centre, which may be quite unexpected for a tango mark. But for a leader without much experience, any deviation is often too difficult to manage, and along with the anxiety created by physical closeness, and possibly a lack of kinaesthetic confidence, this can augment anxiety and the feeling of not being in control. This thesis argues that this is largely what serves to reinforce a culture of blame in tango, and continually reinstates the legendary gender hierarchy.

Vio Saraza has been my teacher for some years now, and throughout our work together we have discussed many aspects of the tango partnership, and played with gender and role initiatives in tango. In conversation, she describes how our partnership has affected her approach, as the division of responsibility between lead and follow has shifted:

Generally when I mark, I am attached to the outcome. I mark the movement once correctly. If the revel doesn't get it, I mark it again, worse, because I add force and tension. [But] with Elly, when she doesn't get it, I check the quality of my signal and try again. I am more attached to the perfection of my signal than to the outcome. By taking over responsibility for the connection, the activity of her embrace somehow negates the possibility for me to abuse the embrace to get a
result. ... Generally, as the ‘man’, I feel responsible for control and outcome, and my revel is receptive. By shifting the line of responsibility, actively searching for and taking information from my body, Elly frees me to concentrate on my own clarity (Saraza 2014b).

Within a search for enhanced creative participation, a number of dancers have cultivated a high degree of expertise in both contact improvisation and Argentine tango forms in order to experiment with the boundaries of both, seeking a flexible, non-hierarchical partnership which maintains the essential communicative basis of both dances. When the boundaries become more permeable, the space is opened up to a variety of possible relationships between partners, not the least being to bring the lead/follow structure of tango into question. To this end, the hybrid form, contact-tango, is emerging, and in this context, one of the challenges is whether the result can still be classed as tango, or whether it becomes unreadable as such, resulting in an entirely new dance. Of course, while many of these dancers are comfortable with the idea that whatever the result, it is a further emancipatory step in the continuing evolution of tango, there are some who find a heightened study of both forms essential, so that the integrity of both dances can be maintained within the mix. In an interview in 2014, Gabriele Koch, Wuppertal contact-tango dance artist, and teacher at Tango Diferente, maintains that good contact-tango relies on having a deep knowledge of both dances:

… the more you know about both, the more you can get the spice of mixing it, syncing one into the other. I say this because it’s so complex. You can put tango music on and [dance] ‘as if’, pretending to do tango steps, ganchos, blah, blah, blah. Then I have the feeling that the sensitivity, the quality, and also the listening quality of tango disappears. So [there’s] a German word ‘Beliebige’ that means ‘whatever’
or just ‘anything’, and it loses depth. Both contact and tango have such a quality and depth in [themselves], so it’s really nice to study the qualities of each, to bring them together (Koch 2014).

In a similar vein, but diverging from the contact-tango context, Saraza also notes her concern for the integrity of tango and problems associated with interpretative ‘excesses’:

I have also experienced revels who take such teachers' permission ['I don't lead, I propose'] quite seriously, interpret, and do their own thing. I do not enjoy such revelling at all, and I even feel somewhat unsafe, as I lose control over our relation to the line of dance. When I talk about active revelling, I am not talking about interpretation which would result in so much as an autonomous step. I am only talking about the revel being active in searching for information from my body, adjusting her embrace and her arch of connection to maximize her responsibility for the quality of our connection (Saraza 2014b).

In an interview in 2014, Enrique van Doezelaar, who teaches contact improvisation, tango and contact-tango at Tango Diférante, related his initial feeling of surprise at finding that tango dancers do not generally prepare their bodies in any way before dancing, but simply find a partner and walk onto the floor. He felt his own dancing suffered if he neglected to prepare himself physically, and so for him, preparation became an important part of tango, whether or not it was considered necessary in the tango milieu (van Doezelaar 2014).

Nancy Stark Smith, New York dance artist and co-founder of contact improvisation with Steve Paxton, describes a duet which grew out of a strong kinaesthetic preparation of the body into a deepening attitude of mutual listening for both herself
and her partner, in which they found a more satisfying depth of attunement to even the smallest internal shifts of weight:

We stood facing each other, the crowns of our heads bowing toward one another to touch, to lean in slightly, bridging our skeletons, our weight, up from the ground under our feet, through bones and joints, through the spine then skull, through the point of contact and through the partner’s skeleton, back down to the ground. We stood quietly, balancing together, noticing the small reflexive movements our bodies were making, floating in the balance, losing it, catching it. Like putting your ear up to the wall, a point of physical contact amplifies the movements on the other side. So, between our two ‘small dances’ of balancing, there was a lot to notice, be in, dance. … I don’t know what triggered it, maybe some tiny synchronous shift of weight – some micro-support offered for an impossibly obscure internal fall, a meeting point, but sometime during our moving, I felt my emotions release into the body of our dance. An ease and a fullness flooded in. The dialogue of our balancing became finer, deeper, subtler, and more personal as it went on (Stark Smith 2003, p. 170).

A traditional tango dancer’s initial state can look very different. It is as if there are expectations that he will establish, immediately and apparently without effort, the kind of heightened communion with a partner that Stark Smith describes above. Even before walking onto the floor, the image of how to walk is carried within a tango dancer’s ‘bodily hexis’, in the demeanour which is cultivated by and for tango’s particular social milieu. Even before the first touch, a tango dancer already has expectations of how the embrace should feel and what qualities the partner should exhibit. In the competitive environment of a tango milonga where dancing is being, in some sense, judged continually, there is little time to prepare oneself or attune to a partner, or to pay mutual
attention in any physically profound way. What then often shapes the dance is an
expectation of ‘instant intimacy’ (Ericksen 2011). In the event that intimacy is not in
fact instant, or indeed is lacking entirely, one might even perform or ‘go through the
motions’ of such intimacy, which as Sheets-Johnstone and Rolandi suggest, is perfectly
possible.

At Tango Diférrente in 2014, an important teaching point became the idea of ‘not
doing’ (van Doezelaar 2014). Actively ‘doing’ movement, as is customary in much
traditional tango – for example, a willed muscular effort to produce the visual
impression of a step correctly – can undermine contact improvisation’s fundamental
concept of ‘allowing’ gravity and momentum to do the work of the dance as they
operate on the dancers’ body mass. One can use the innate energy of gravity and
momentum to move, rather than trying to resist it, as if the bodies of the dancers are
simply ‘going along for the ride’. One needs to experience the body’s weight falling
under gravity, being caught by another body or the floor, using that weight as
leverage, and flowing with the momentum created by falling, all of which are
integral in the dynamics within a contact duet. Nancy Stark Smith comments that:

Contact bases its language on the natural laws that govern motion (gravity,
momentum, inertia, etc.). … The natural world enforces its own laws – drop a book,
consciously or not, and it will fall. … The truths we find in contact, whether basic
or elevated, are truths that exist with or without contact improvisation as a means
for revealing them (Stark Smith 2003, p. 156).

Tango too is subject to these laws of gravity, momentum and mass, but a
fundamental difference between the two dances is in dancers’ relationship to them.
For example, falling is a sensation which is cultivated in all its different aspects in
contact improvisation: In Paxton’s ‘small dance’ Stark Smith notes that ‘even standing, we execute a continuous fall’ (2003, p. 157), while walking is often thought of as a continual falling and catching of weight. In larger balances and aerial work, the possibility of injury through falling is very real, so dancers work to become familiar with how, in the face of fear or danger, one’s automatic reflexes take over. For example, the feeling of falling may at first result in fear and disorientation, so that a person struggles against gravity and momentum, trying to cling onto the vertical by tensing muscles. Contact improvisation dancers learn to relax in the face of this force, and to be able to modulate their responses in falling with a fine degree of exactness:

The more I fell, the more familiar the sensation of dropping through space became, the less disoriented I was during the fall. … I found that falling was in itself a dynamic balance. One in which the forces at play – gravity, momentum and mass – were all operating in their natural order and if my mind was with me I could gently guide that fall towards a smooth landing. Confidence came with experience and soon enjoyment took the place of fear and disorientation (Stark Smith 2003, p. 157).

In contrast to contact improvisation’s refined practice of falling, many traditional tango dancers cultivate a stance in which they seek to be ‘balanced’ in relation to their partner in a more or less vertical position, with the point of contact at the sternum, so that they are neither ‘leaning’ on their partner, nor so responsive that their partner inadvertently pushes them ‘off their centre’. This balance can feel like an almost static state, and there can be a struggle to maintain it, often with a sense of anxiety if a dancer is not on balance at all times. Stark Smith’s mutual ‘dialogue of balance’ seems, in tango, to express itself often as a struggle for control.
While the tolerance for ‘allowing’ one’s weight to fall into a partner is very slight in tango, in some pedagogy there is less sense that balance should be immobile, and it becomes much more apparent that the relationship between two dancers’ weight and contact pressure can be very finely tuned indeed. While acknowledging the lack of attention that is usually given to working with the physical properties of weight and gravity, Saraza has cultivated an attention to, and a very detailed analysis and micro-management of, muscular control at a level in which the different ways the two dances deal with weight and energy become much more pronounced (Saraza 2014b). For many teachers, however, it may be difficult to come to terms with the immense subtlety required in both leading and following successfully within tango’s small margin. As previously noted, the evidence of many practitioners and scholars indicates that it is not often properly dealt with, as the teacher’s job usually falls to the leader, even though he may be quite inexperienced. Nevertheless he becomes the arbiter within a particular partnership. The kinds of experiences that allow contact dancers to learn about the ‘physics’ of body weight and momentum are not available within a traditional tango context, and thus need to be acquired elsewhere if they are to be useful. Similarly, the social ‘etiquette’ required in many tango situations in Sydney makes it impossible to give either the time or the ‘permission’ for students to experiment and play with their partner’s weight and balance, which this thesis argues creates an experiential situation that promotes fuller physical attunement. Even if teachers are aware of the need for such experiential learning, their capacities may not extend to provision of the space in which this might happen. Instead their teaching is often driven by the requirements of what one could call the ‘tango fantasy’ they share with their students, where the focus is on
demonstrating an array of steps, rather than providing practice in the rich and highly nuanced possibilities of play and negotiation involved in good partnering.

Because copying a teacher’s steps from an external viewpoint is the way that tango is traditionally transmitted, this practice often makes it impossible to be aware of the real functionality and potential within a body lead or response. Muscular effort ‘to do’ something that approximates the aesthetics of a teacher’s demonstration, a mostly visual and muscular response, tends to override kinaesthetic awareness of how movement actually occurs in response to some other physical shift. The question of why a movement looks the way it does in terms of the interaction of bodies is rarely examined. Instead dancers aim to make the movement look a certain way from an external perspective, heightened by the fantasy images based on gender that pervade their thought.

The interior techniques and physical awareness of release-based practices cultivated in contact improvisation concern many things, like carefully preparing one’s body in warming up, closely focusing on one’s own kinaesthetic sensations so the entire body is potentially available for contact, opening up all senses so one is more acutely aware than normal, anticipating many directions in movement, and being ready for an instant response to various forms of touch or pressure. This makes a contact improvisation dancer’s kinaesthetic/tactile awareness quite different to that of a tango dancer.

Aspects of this practice are, however, fairly extreme, and so not always useful for tango dancers’ more circumscribed social interests. Nevertheless, this thesis argues that tango dancers can be trained in the ways described by Paxton: in a slow re-socialising process that ‘get(s) back to a sensory experience that isn’t sexualised’
(1996, p. 85), which, ‘through the special touch work in the studio, needs to be done slowly’ (1996, p. 89). By emphasising words like ‘gravity, momentum, friction’ and creating a situation where tango’s physical lexicon can be developed with the same strong kinaesthetic attention as Paxton has given to walking, the meditative aspect of tango may also be realised as a place of ‘incredible, exquisite quiet, with great patience, with a lot of attention to what’s going on in the body’ (Paxton & Lori b 1996, p. 85).

This thesis has found, through field research, through taking my own experience as a case study, and through analysis of the literature, that by foregrounding the communicative aspects of partnering, dancers can be enabled to cultivate a non-judgemental appreciation of individual differences in others. With the ability to defer the temptation to slip into heteronormative stereotypes, dancers may instead focus on developing a heightened sensitivity for seeing, listening to and recognising the nuances of a partner’s physical tone and ‘feel’ through their muscular and gestural qualities. Taking seriously the idea of tango as an equal dialogue between two dancers, and the creation of a qualitatively different culture of communication, allows for the development of the kind of sensibilities Terpsichoral describes in searching for ‘the subtleties of this somatic communication; the physical intimacies of the dance which bypass the verbal and run deeper than the superficially erotic ... something both more constant and more universal. A delight in the living body’ (Terpsichoral, 2012a).
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Appendix 1: Author’s background

I have been a professional dance artist in Australia since 1975, and beginning as a child of five, a student of Dalcroze (music through movement) and partner dancing. Like many small girls, I was enamoured with the fairytale imagery of dance, which for me included ‘dancing on my toes’. The idea of becoming an ethereal fantasy being, as light as a feather (first on tip toes, and later in high heels) drew me like a magnet. After beginning ballet at the age of nine, I discovered other kinds of dance: jazz, and what was in 1962 called ‘modern dance’. These forms suited my emotional and physical constitution, and fulfilled my musical predilections which included an affinity with jazz and blues rhythm and melody, and an appreciation of less conventional twelve-tone scoring of ‘serious’ concert music. But at the age of 14, in 1966, I gave all this up for the compelling social possibilities offered in weekly ballroom dance classes, where I was made to feel what many of the boys who attended convinced me was ‘totally feminine’. I wore ‘high’ heels and stockings for the first time, which seemed calculated to blend seamlessly with my five-year-old fantasies of fairytale and femininity.

When school was over in 1969, I looked back lovingly to ballet training, but finally, in 1972, was captured by a series of modern dance performances by Sydney dancers, or more particularly the undeniable strength and robust physicality that their strength, sweat and laboured breathing emphasised. From then on I was a fully committed modern dance student in Sydney, studying Martha Graham technique, the Bodenweiser tradition, jazz and ballet. By 1975, I had graduated to a traineeship with the only professional dance company in Sydney,
the Dance Company of NSW, and my first professional engagement. The three years I was with this company (1975-1977) were formative in my professional life, introducing me to major modern techniques and philosophical approaches simultaneously, including those of Merce Cunningham and John Cage, Steve Paxton’s contact improvisation, Ideokinesis and release work, as well as experiencing professional partnering techniques for the first time. Later in 1979, I began working with Russell Dumas, whose work blended a balletic aesthetic with postmodernist forms, including Todd alignment and contact improvisation. The specifics of modern and postmodern practices in dance as taught initially by Dumas, exclusively held my attention for many years.

By the early 1990s my growing interest in writing about dance coincided with a kind of distancing by which I began to see dance as being shaped more by specific social contexts. For example, in the 1980s and 90s, in Sydney and Melbourne, it seemed that dancers identified as members of particular artistically inclined groups, each professing a different set of shared values and practices, although people were not necessarily able to specify what those shared values were (Brickhill 1997). There was often a moral quality infusing these values too (Brickhill 1997; 2009), and group cohesion was consolidated through aesthetic values and socially formed doxa functioning in the service of the social.

But by the early 2000s, ideas seemed to be repeating themselves. A similar kind of rhetoric was circulated by younger artists raking over an old vocabulary of concepts, as if they assumed that the dance field was cohesive, and everyone shared the same ideas about what issues were important: lobbying funding bodies to support ‘innovative’ work, although it was still unclear what that term might
mean; the idea of ‘production values’ in dance, and the necessity of being ‘produced’, to name a few.

Inevitably times and the body change. As a 50-something professional dancer in 2004, I was keen to participate in something that touched me more emotionally, rather than paddle in the tepid concepts of what seemed to me a slightly lacklustre and repetitive enterprise.

Fuelled by this impasse, in 2005 I developed the first part of a research project, called *Fit*. One writer who inspired me was educational psychologist Liam Hudson who delivered ‘The Life of the Mind’ as part of the Tanner Lectures on Human Values, at Yale University in 1997, and from whom I borrowed the phrase ‘conversations across boundaries’ (Hudson 1997). In *Fit*, boundaries, and the conversations by which we seek to cross them, were central themes:

People enter into dialogue, ideas collide, you kind of bump up against other shapes and textures which, in a sense, show you where your own boundaries lie, what shape you’re in, and your ‘place’ within any perceived cultural arena. It’s in the process of collaboration that you find out where these boundaries are: in the people around you, in ideas, in materials; one can also observe the quality of those boundaries, how permeable or mutable they can be, what their texture is – cold, hard, brittle, or fluid, like warm oil? With what energy are they defended, and what investment is made in their protection? (Brickhill, 2005).

This theme has continued to be of enduring personal and professional interest, resurfacing as a primary motivating factor for this thesis.
In quite a different arena, I experienced a kind of epiphany. As a friend took hold of my arm one day, I had a sudden strong reaction to the quality of his touch as if I ‘knew’ exactly what his attitude was to me. In this single event it became clear that one could find in another person’s touch, if not a thought exactly, the sudden unexpected nudge of truth. This understanding provided me with a new awareness of the importance of touch as a way of accessing what seemed to be another person’s apparently unconscious ways of feeling and being in the world, an idea which gains resonance particularly in the work of Todd, Winnicott, Stern, Walter and Manning, and is elaborated on in Chapters 4 and 5 of this thesis.

In 2007, the idea of producing ‘conversations’ across artistic and personal boundaries became a generative strategy in another site-specific video/dance project called Friction, devised with video artist Anne Walton (Brickhill 2007), and the conversations which we had provided the basis for both the structure and the content of the work. The focus was on a series of boundaries or liminal zones. In particular, skin and the sense of touch provided a kind of threshold, both as a physical site for investigation, and a metaphor. As a sensitive organ of the body, skin is a deeply reactive conduit for many stimuli, permeable to emotional and other subliminal communications, as well as a barrier. It is an in-between place; it implies touching but also losing touch, a place of change and exchange. This thesis expands on this work, arguing that the quality of touch as a way of communicating on a deep level is central to the practice of both Argentine tango and contact improvisation.

By studying tango, I had initially hoped for a new untrammeled experience of dance that was not weighed down by the kind of micro-culture that experimental
performance and dance research in Sydney seemed to both engender and then drag along in its wake. With tango, however, it seemed possible to engage intellectually and emotionally with the ideas that Fit and Friction were concerned with: that there was something critically important to human aliveness in the experience of skin on skin, the sharing of physical touch. The need which people have for physical and social contact, particularly in an ageing population, became a focus for my interest.
Appendix 2: Tango’s hybrid history

Figure A1. *El Candombe* by Pedro Figari (1861-1983), dated 1921.

At the beginning of the 20th century, a number of divergent tango styles co-existed, among them being *canyengue,* *milonga,* *tango criollo* and *tango liso,* all of which employed a European-style embrace enabling a lead/follow structure and sensibility. However, notes Thompson, several features of the black Afro-Argentine *candombe* tradition, danced in Argentina from the early nineteenth century, were incorporated into these tangos. For example, in the candombe tradition, couples danced face-to-face, touching now and then, but they did not embrace, using instead a vocal and
gestural ‘call and response’ structure to indicate changes in step or direction.

According to Thompson, it was only later with the adoption of a European embrace from the waltz and Czech polka that this call and response structure was transformed so that the leader could communicate changes directly through body and hand pressure. ‘Call and response becomes lead and response’ (Thompson 2005, p. 278). Likewise, the anti-clockwise circular direction of the candombe line-of-dance was also an important feature incorporated into the tango as it is danced throughout the world (Thompson 2005, p. 277). Other candombe features, like the dancers’ deeply bent knees and crossover steps, were transformed into features of the later dances, milonga and canyengue (Thompson 2005, p. 236).

By the early nineteenth century, the waltz, with its face-to-face embrace, had become an exemplar for many other dances, and remains a feature of many contemporary partner dances, including Argentine tango. In the mid-nineteenth century the term could also simply mean that the dance was a turning one, where ‘waltzing’ might indicate that couples continually turned around a shared central axis rather than proceeding without turning. For example, the Argentinian polka of around 1850 was danced in a tight ‘waltz-like’ embrace, hands held at the waist, with bodies leaning together and the couple twirling to right and left (Thompson 2005, p. 224).
The fusion of Cuban habanera rhythms with the Argentine polka’s lean and embrace was picked up by young black dancers, and the whites and mulattoes who parodied them, and this hybrid form became canyengue (Figure A3). Canyengue combined the classic Central African dance position: ‘feet flat on the ground, bottom out, torso bent forward, face frozen, with the cheek-to-cheek, arms-around-the-partner romanticism of European embrace dancing’ (Thompson 2005, p. 9).

Thompson describes the embrace of canyengue thus: ‘She falls on his chest, he falls
on her chest. The pressure is shared as both bend their knees. Should one partner step back, so dancers argue, both would fall down’ (2005, p. 153).

By 1903, *ochos*, ‘figure-eight’ steps, had entered the *tango criollo* (Figure A4) vocabulary, and this, Thompson says, is evidence that the lead/follow structure, the *marca*, or ‘mark’, had become conventional practice: ‘Dancing cheek to cheek, chest to chest, a man could indicate direction by shifting the weight of his body ... sometimes even with his leg’ (2005, p. 278).
Figure A4. *Tango Criollo*: ‘Call and response’ becomes ‘lead and follow’ (Thompson 2005, p. 231).
Given the proliferation of styles at the beginning of the twentieth century, notes Savigliano, there were increasing endeavours to establish an ‘authentic’ tango, so as to avoid losing a sense of the tango’s ‘dark origins’, of exploited people and class confrontations which had created the first hybrid expressions (1995a, p. 155).

Nevertheless, in Buenos Aires, the 1916 publication of *The Argentine Salon Tango: Method, Technique, and Practice of the Dance* codified tango and, according to Thompson, transformed ‘an improvised, spontaneous club and street dance into set
patterns and measured expressions’ (2005, p. 242). Such refined versions as *tango de salon* and *tango liso* from around 1905 to 1910, as depicted in this dance manual, eschewed the *canyengue* ‘lean and crouch’ (Figure A3) in favour of the Europeanised ‘fine posture’ with a vertical torso (Figure A5). These dances were performed in ‘a gliding, more expansive manner’, with space between the dancers, widely held arms, and the avoidance of thighs and feet touching. The upright stance of the *tango liso* is also seen in *tango criollo* (Figure A4), a style reputedly influenced by Italian immigrants, but in *tango criollo* the embrace is much tighter.

**Figures**


**Figure A2.** *Montesquieu. A Lively Polka.* After a lithograph by Vernier, in Vuillier, Gaston (1848), *A History of Dancing*, p. 312. p. 197

**Figure A3.** *Canyengue.* Photo by Aaron Davies, viewed 1 October 2015. [http://www.layumbatango.com/2014/11/scene-photos-stage-pictures.html](http://www.layumbatango.com/2014/11/scene-photos-stage-pictures.html). p. 198

**Figure A4.** *Tango criollo.* ‘Call and response’ becomes ‘lead and follow’ (in Thompson 2005, p. 231). p. 199

Appendix 3: The Dialogue Process: Ten core abilities


1. **Openness:** The characteristic of openness is in this context a readiness to adjust to new ideas and the unexpected. This makes it possible to improvise and create. It implies a readiness for movement because of a relatively stable balance point from which to dance. One’s balance needs to be sufficiently mobile to be both reliably in contact with one’s partner and also independent enough to maintain one’s own centre. It implies a receptivity of the senses and a willingness to receive sense information from one’s partner. Openness includes a willingness to let go of one’s own intentions, efforts of will and ideas of what the dance should be like. It also implies a great ability for perception and communication within the movement language, and describes the capacity to continually reference each other’s physicality. The dancers’ posture needs to be open and confident – with direct contact at the thorax or sternum. Above all, openness requires a willingness to question one’s own assumptions and conditioning.

2. **Radical respect:** This means that the partners accept each other’s qualities and differences as legitimate and equal to their own. It implies that excessive physical force will not be used to affect one’s partner, especially because of the physical vulnerability created in the dance. A leader invites the follower to move, and a follower has the freedom to accept or reject the invitation. Many leaders lack sensitivity because of emotional stress caused by insecurity in their
self-image or competition with other men, and thus there is an attempt to compensate for these feelings, often by one-sided demands that the follower should understand him, rather than he understand her. The qualities of empathy and initiative are often weighted differently depending on the roles, with the follower’s initiative often thought of as too disturbing to the leader. However, within an equal partnership, both roles enjoy the same respect, and it can be addressed specifically in that the leader needs to be actively empathic to the follower in this respect. The willingness for role reversal can facilitate a mutual respect for the difficulties encountered by one’s partner in either role, and implies a willingness to take in another perspective. Learning both roles within a course is an important feature of developing empathy. When something in the dance communication fails, it is often attributed to the partner who is thus devalued, and these feelings can further significantly complicate the communication.

3. **Adopting a learning attitude:** A learner’s attitude is one that cannot know, and in dialogue the participants finally are not able to know how the world looks from another’s perspective. It implies the ability to be insecure, not only to bear it, but to cultivate it and value it positively, in order to treat mistakes with dignity and thus learn from them. There is a willingness to adapt over and over to the present situation, being ready to work with whatever presents itself. The capacity to improvise relies on this exploring attitude. Learning by copying and thus creating ideas of right and wrong performance patterns can also facilitate the process, but concepts and patterns need to be dissolved eventually into the flow of the dance. For some teachers, any move the student makes which lies outside their own repertoire is often interpreted as a mistake, and a good teacher allows
the student’s imagination to be brought into the dance. Walter quotes well-known tango teacher Castro:

> There is a variety of personal originalities, like the aesthetics or feelings, which every dancer should treat as his individual concern. I don’t want to be a model or example in this regard, so he has the chance to be the reference for his feelings and aesthetic sensations himself (Walter 2007, p 84).

4. **Productive pleading:** In dialogue, this implies that participants not only perceive their thinking processes but also explain them. While tango does not invite verbal comments during the dance, it is possible to show ways of thinking in the dance by creating a decisive and clear intention in the lead, thus providing what Walter sees as ‘intelligent and responsible conduct’ (Thimm 2008, p 29).

5. **Speaking from the heart:** In tango, it is often said that how the movement is danced is more important than what movement is danced, and that ‘sincere’ self-expression is very often replaced with a great variety of steps which muddy the emotional waters of the dance. It is argued that this limits one’s self-perception and therefore the ability to communicate with a partner, which can result in one being ‘captured by the extreme aesthetics’ and creating one’s own stage simply for narcissistic gratification. Walter comments on the observation that there are people who simply use their partner as a ‘column’ to dance around or as ‘dancing sports equipment’; here the implication is that it is often at the expense of the follower. There is a danger that ‘appearances’ become more important than really showing oneself, which is how Walter interprets the idea of ‘authenticity’. Walter finds an equivalence at the physical level where direct contact is made between the couples’ sternums, and that this is where an emotional exchange is made. ‘This turning towards each other is in many cases
marked as a symbiotic fusion if the communication is successful. The tango can
open a space of inter-physicalness which lets the dancers become one body’.

Walter comments, however, that this ‘inter-physicalness’ within traditional tango
can occur ‘role-specifically’, and thus it is the lead who is able to ‘lead by heart’
and the follower ‘follows his heart’, a rather one-directional communication
(Walter 2007, p. 87).

6. Generative listening: This is interpreted as active and compassionate listening
for both partners, with the object of perceiving one’s own critical and reflexive
judgements and assumptions which occur in response to what is ‘heard’, because
these preconceptions often change the sense of what is heard. Empathic listening
means listening to the deeper meaning of what is said ‘between the lines’. In
terms of tango, one can listen to the body of the other, perceiving
compassionately another’s often ‘unspoken’ anxieties or needs, and respond
accordingly. For instance, one might notice their partner’s shaking hands or fast
heartbeat, or intense sweating, which perhaps indicates some discomfort. It refers
to an empathic ‘waiting’ both for the leader and the follower, for one’s partner to
be ‘ready’ for the next movement invitation. A leader’s impulses and flow of
movements need to correspond appropriately to the place the follower is in, in
the present moment. Dinzel and Dinzel note that it is usually the man who is not
able to listen because in a traditional situation he has become accustomed to
soliloquise his imagined role, and this is often bound up with his own
insecurities and fear of not playing his role well (Walter 2007, p 89). Walter also
references a sequence of two comments regarding listening to the body, but adds
that in some part the second seems an overstatement for an appropriately equal
partnership. Nevertheless is it common and idealised rhetoric:
Of all things within the tango, which is regarded as the most masculine of all dances, something is abrogated what in modern gender discussions is claimed a suppressed ‘female speaking’ ... her language is cut through and what is said is not heard because it is the body which speaks and because the man doesn’t listen to the body of the woman (Cixous 1992, p. 112). In tango dancing the dancer listens to the female body: also to the sequence of her steps as well as to the balance point of her body and her dynamics. If a man wants to learn how to lead, he also has to subordinate to these dynamics with his own movements (Walter 2007, p. 90).

7. **Slowing down:** This refers to the idea that if one’s own thinking patterns are to be observed and available for contemplation, one’s thoughts must slow down. Walter considers that in terms of the development of inner mindfulness, this is the fundamental ability on which all the others rest. Good communication implies an attentive contact with the partner, and slowing down thinking and movement may facilitate mindfulness, which helps focus perception on the immediate situation. Furthermore:

The first movements on the piano are fumbling and helpless, as well as the first writing attempts in a foreign language. If a movement pattern (of the body or mind) becomes increasingly flowing and practised, it is not only carried out faster, but at the same time it becomes unconscious in many cases (Walter 2007, p. 91).

While tango sequences need to become automatised through repetition and thus enter seamlessly into the flow of the dance, they also need to be performed with continuous awareness, with an inner mindfulness, and utilised creatively as a kind of ‘scaffolding’ for improvisation. Dynamics and rhythm form part of the
dance and a conscious control of these elements can be established by calm technique. The capacity to reverse movements, the mindful use of pauses, an awareness of where the partner’s weight and centre is, as well as the dynamic perception of how the dancing is done, all benefit creatively from slowing down. Within this slowing down, however, dancers can be increasingly confronted with their own muscular and mental limitations.

8. **Suspending assumptions and evaluations**: This is a central aspect of dialogue, to become aware of one’s own opinions, assumptions, mental models and moral judgements, to step back from them and keep them suspended. The point is not to suppress them, but to make them the subject of further observation, to be able to question one’s own attitudes and beliefs and possibly modify them. This capacity assists in creating a dance that is free from judgements and expectations, a capacity which is necessary for creative improvisation. One’s own clarity, unity of thought, perceptions and movements all supportively influence communication with others; being distracted by the mental activity of learning can disturb the dialogue. Meanwhile, for the leader, the danced dialogue can only occur from their perspective if their ideas are clear. The tango dialogue is about freeing the consciousness from too many anticipatory images, making it as empty as possible, and this capacity to relax and remain detached in a certain way is a difficult task for learners. Nevertheless the idea is to free perception from any inner comment which judges and evaluates. Self-observation is trained in this way and one’s own prejudices and habits of thought and feeling then become available for contemplation.

9. **Assuming an exploratory attitude**: This can be thought of as an unconditional attentiveness towards both partner and music, whilst still maintaining a strong
presence. It is based on an honest curiosity about, and interest in, one’s partner, explored with mindfulness, modesty and humility. It is not a clearly differentiated ability when compared to openness, a learning attitude, radical respect and generative listening. An empathic attentiveness to one’s partner is a precondition for dealing with problems that arise within the relationship when dancing. One can be curious about the partner’s dancing level, personality, or physical nature, and explore this in an empathetic way right from the beginning of a dance, and especially if the partner is unknown. One’s own impulses, ideas and inner dialogue can also be explored. Walter notes Castro’s thoughts on this:

To push or pull someone mechanically from one place to another will in the most cases cause resistance ... if one person moves the other one by means of muscular strength, both automatically are ... in a relation of aggression and resistance (Walter 2007, p. 94).

10. **Observing the observer**: This concerns the ability to defer one’s own opinions and observe one’s own reactivity, a response which may allow insight into one’s own projections before they become troublesome. This ability is considered central to dialogue. Walter notes that it is commonly thought that tango dialogue can be an appropriate medium for exploring mental patterns and limitations, and assist in understanding which feelings and assumptions can be useful to positively influence the dancing partnership (Walter 2007, p. 96).
Appendix 4: Formal ethics permissions

AMENDMENT APPROVAL
In reply please quote: HE12/287

27 September 2012

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Faculty of Creative Arts
University of Wollongong NSW 2522

Dear Professor Miller

Thank you for confirming the location of the stored data in response to the conditional approval granted on 19 July 2012.

I am also pleased to advise that the amendments dated 24 September 2012 to the following Human Research Ethics application has been approved. The University of Wollongong/ Illawarra and Shoalhaven Local Health Network District (ISLHD) Social Science HREC is constituted and functions in accordance with the NHMRC National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research.

Ethics Number: HE12/287

Project Title: Classes in Tango Skills: A practice-led MA by Research project investigating Argentine tango in Australia, comparing and contrasting techniques of tango and contact improvisation

Name of Researchers: Professor Sarah Miller, Ms Eleanor Brickhill

Amendments:
- Addition of two groups to the study (tango practitioners and contact improvisation practitioners)
- Revised Participant Information Sheet and Consent Forms
- Revised interview questions
- Invitation to participate

Amendment Approval Date: 19 July 2012

Expiry Date: 18 July 2013

Please remember that in addition to reporting proposed changes to your research protocol the HREC requires that researchers immediately report:

- serious or unexpected adverse effects on participants
- unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project.

The University of Wollongong/ISLHD Social Sciences HREC is constituted and functions in accordance with the NHMRC National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research. A condition of approval by the HREC is the submission of a progress report annually and a final report on completion of your project. The progress report template is available at

Ethics Unit, Research Services Office
University of Wollongong NSW 2522 Australia
Telephone (02) 4221 3386 Facsimile (02) 4221 4336
Email: no-ethics@uow.edu.au Web: www.uow.edu.au

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6 December 2013

Professor Sarah Miller
Faculty of Creative Arts
University of Wollongong

Dear Professor Miller

I am pleased to advise that renewal of the following Human Research Ethics application has been approved. This certificate relates to the research protocol submitted in your original application and all approved amendments to date.

Ethics Number: HE12/287

Project Title: Classes in Tango Skills: A practice-led MA by Research project investigating Argentine tango in Australia, comparing and contrasting techniques of tango and contact improvisation

Name of Researchers: Professor Sarah Miller, Ms Eleanor Brickhill

Renewed From: 19 July 2013

Expiry Date: 18 July 2014

Please note that approvals are granted for a twelve month period. Further extension will be considered on receipt of a progress report prior to expiry date.

This certificate relates to the research protocol submitted in your original application and all approved amendments to date. Please remember that in addition to completing an annual report the Human Research Ethics Committee also requires that researchers immediately report:

1. proposed changes to the protocol including changes to investigators involved
2. serious or unexpected adverse effects on participants
3. unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project.

Yours sincerely

Professor Kathleen Clapham
Chair, Social Sciences - Human Research Ethics Committee

Ethics Unit,
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RENEWAL APPROVAL LETTER
Ethics Reference: HE12/287

27 July 2015
Professor Sarah Miller
Faculty of Creative Arts
University of Wollongong

Dear Professor Miller

I am pleased to advise that renewal of the following Human Research Ethics application has been approved. This certificate relates to the research protocol submitted in your original application and all approved amendments to date.

Ethics Number: HE12/287
Project Title: Classes in Tango Skills: A practice-led MA by Research project investigating Argentine tango in Australia, comparing and contrasting techniques of tango and contact improvisation
Name of Researchers: Professor Sarah Miller, Ms Eleanor Brickhill
Renewed From: 19 July 2014
Expiry Date: 18 July 2016

Please note that approvals are granted for a twelve month period. Further extension will be considered on receipt of a progress report prior to expiry date.

This certificate relates to the research protocol submitted in your original application and all approved amendments to date. Please remember that in addition to completing an annual report the Human Research Ethics Committee also requires that researchers immediately report:

- proposed changes to the protocol including changes to investigators involved
- serious or unexpected adverse effects on participants
- unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project.

A condition of approval by the HREC is the submission of a progress report annually and a final report on completion of your project. The progress report template is available at http://www.uow.edu.au/research/rso/ethics/UOW009385.html. This report must be completed, signed by the appropriate Head of School and returned to the Research Services Office prior to the expiry date.

The University of Wollongong/ Illawarra and Shoalhaven Local Health Network District (ISUHD) Social Science HREC is constituted and functions in accordance with the NHMRC National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research.

If you have any queries regarding the HREC review process, please contact the Ethics Unit on phone 4221 3386 or email rso-ethics@uow.edu.au.

Ethics Unit, Research Services Office
University of Wollongong NSW 2522 Australia
Telephone (02) 4221 3386 Facsimile (02) 4221 4330
Email: rso-ethics@uow.edu.au Web: www.uow.edu.au
Letter to interested participants

Dear [Participant],

Thank you for your reply. I'm so glad you're interested in participating in my research. I'm doing postgraduate research at the University of Wollongong, and my project is focusing on some physical and social aspects of Argentine tango in Australia.

Having been a professional dancer for over 35 years, with a fair bit of contact improvisation training, one of the things that interested me when I first started learning tango was that most beginner tango students who hadn't danced before would benefit by having some contact improvisation skills. A lot of the physical skills that they were being asked to learn were quite difficult without some prior understanding, but there were no tango teachers in Sydney who had ever had the experience of learning contact improvisation. Consequently many people were quite challenged by the movements.

Both tango and contact improvisation are improvised social partner dances, and I have become very aware of both the overlap in skills base between these two forms, and at the same time how very different the two dances are. While tango is notorious for being a dance of heterosexual passion and romance, contact improvisation, as you know, has a very different democratic and non-sexist social ideology at its base. While the rhetoric of tango claims to offer the participant a passionate, romantic and addictive experience, I have been keen to see how much of this is simply rhetoric, and whether one could dance tango just by treating it as an enjoyable, skills-based dance. How much could you strip away the sexualised aspects of tango and still have a recognisable dance?

There are other questions to do with the kind of emotions that arise when dancing tango. For instance, there is often a kind of tension between the leader and follower which tango in particular seems to induce in participants. The male leader’s role is usually taken most seriously, and he often takes it upon himself to become “teacher” to the follower, thus delimiting her capacity to fully develop her own independent role. When danced by contact improvisation dancers, I wondered whether this dynamic would still be induced.

This is a brief description of some ideas about tango and contact which I would like to investigate with you. Primarily I would like you, as a skilled contact improviser, to be able to talk about the kinds of contact skills you felt you have used when learning tango, the kinds of difficulties you might have experienced, as well as the pleasurable bits, highlighting some of the differences and similarities of the two dances.

I am thinking about having a class on Sunday afternoons over about 6 weeks, depending on people's availability. I have a studio in Newtown available on Sunday afternoons. I anticipate that the classes would be two hours long, with the first hour dancing and the second part discussing your experiences in the class. I would hope to record both parts of the class - some video in the first part and audio recording the discussion. I would
teach the beginnings of traditional tango over the first three weeks, and the more contemporary tango *nuevo* over the following weeks. All classes would be free.

I wonder what your availability is – whether you are still interested after what I have told you, and also whether you would be available on Sunday afternoons? If you'd like to call me to have any further discussion, my number is 0403 511 513. Or else we can correspond via email.

Once again, thanks so much for your interest.
TITLE: Classes in Tango Skills: A practice-led MA by Research project investigating Argentine tango in Australia, comparing some similarities and differences in the techniques of tango and contact improvisation.

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH
This is an invitation to participate in a study conducted by researchers at the University of Wollongong. The aim of the research is to elucidate the physical skills that expert contact improvisation dancers have which may be useful for learning Argentine tango. Over six teaching sessions and subsequent focused discussions with a small group of expert contact improvisation dancers, we aim to investigate the physical boundaries of each genre, and highlight some points where the skills are perceived to be common to both.

INVESTIGATORS
Professor Sarah Miller (Supervisor)   Eleanor Brickhill (HDR Candidate)

METHOD AND DEMANDS ON PARTICIPANTS
If you choose to be included, you will be asked to participate in a six 1-hour lessons in traditional Argentine and/or Nuevo tango, followed by a discussion about your experiences using the skills you already possess from contact. Classes and discussions will be led by Eleanor Brickhill, and are free of charge. You have been invited to participate in this project because you have expertise in contact improvisation and you already have extensive experience dancing with close physical contact and touch as an integral part of the dance. You will be asked to learn over three weeks’ tuition the moves in Argentine tango using the traditional way of demonstration and imitation; Nuevo tango will be taught using the common teaching methods over the last three weeks. Each class will be video-recorded in order to closely observe the skills being used. Video material may be used subsequently for creative documentation subject to your consent. After each movement session, there will be a focused discussion highlighting your responses to the new material. This part of the session will be audio-recorded for subsequent closer examination. This recording may be transcribed and used either as sound-over for the video documentation or as information to include in the written part of the MA thesis. The use of this material is also subject to your consent. The discussion questions are designed to be open-ended, concerning, for example, which skills you felt were important for learning the new material; whether you found it challenging or not; any other skills which were brought to bear in the new situation. This material will subsequently be analysed by the researcher to find possible
themes: for example, which skills you mostly employed in the new material; how these already acquired physical skills were employed; were they adequate to the material or did they require modification; any emotional factors which might be raised during close or open embrace partnering, compared to physical contact in contact improvisation.

POSSIBLE RISKS, INCONVENIENCES AND DISCOMFORTS
Apart from the six weeks of dance classes and discussions, we can foresee no risks for you. Your involvement in the study is voluntary and you may withdraw your participation from the study at any time without question, and withdraw any data that you have provided to that point. Refusal to participate in the study will not affect your relationship with the University of Wollongong.

FUNDING AND BENEFITS OF THE RESEARCH
This research is self-funded by the researcher. The information gleaned during the project may be useful in assisting Argentine tango dancers and teachers to be more effective by allowing them to identify and employ some contact skills which can be used to enhance their tango practice. It is hoped that the experience of learning the basics of a new dance will be an enjoyable one for all participants, highlighting possible new directions of practice, both in tango and contact, encouraging a cross-over and increased flexibility and hybridity of form which can push the boundaries of social and cultural practice in improvised partner dancing. Findings from the study may be included in an MA thesis and creative documentation, supervised through the Faculty of Creative Arts at the University of Wollongong. Confidentiality is assured, and you will not be identified in any part of the research unless you have specifically given consent.

ETHICS REVIEW AND COMPLAINTS
This study has been reviewed by the Human Research Ethics Committee (Social Science, Humanities and Behavioural Science) of the University of Wollongong. If you have any concerns or complaints regarding the way this research has been conducted, you can contact the UoW Ethics Officer on (02) 4221 3386 or email rso-ethics@uow.edu.au.

Thank you for your interest in this study.
CONSENT FORM FOR:

RESEARCH TITLE: A comparison of tango and contact improvisation practices in Australia: A practice-led MA by Research project investigating Argentine tango and contact improvisation practices in Australia, comparing and contrasting the experiences of expert tango and contact improvisation dancers.

RESEARCHER/S: Professor Sarah Miller and Eleanor Brickhill

I have been given information about A comparison of tango and contact improvisation practices in Australia and discussed the research project with Eleanor Brickhill who is conducting this research as part of an MA by Research supervised by Professor Sarah Miller in the Department of Creative Arts at the University of Wollongong.

I have been advised of the potential risks and burdens associated with this research, which include audio recording of interviews, and have had an opportunity to ask Eleanor Brickhill any questions I may have about the research and my participation.

I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary. I understand that I will be assured personal privacy in any results that are used in the documentation or written research by providing or withholding my consent to disclose any identifying features, should I wish to do so. I acknowledge that I may withdraw from the research at any time and for any reason without explanation. I acknowledge that I may also withdraw my consent after the project is over to use of any material by which I may be identified.

My refusal to participate or withdrawal of consent will not affect my treatment by the University of Wollongong in any way.

If I have any enquiries about the research, I can contact Eleanor Brickhill on or Professor Sarah Miller on or if I have any concerns or complaints regarding the way the research is or has been conducted, I can contact the Ethics Officer, Human Research Ethics Committee, Office of Research, University of Wollongong on 4221 3386 or email rso-ethics@uow.edu.au

By signing below I am indicating my consent to (please tick):

1. participate in an interview.
2. have this interview audio-recorded.
3. allow audio material to be used subsequently in creative documentation and/or written thesis material.
4. Allow identifying features, such as my real name, to be used in the documentation of these results.
5. Allow an alias to be used in any documentation of this material to protect my identity.
I understand that the data collected from my participation will be used for thesis and creative documentation purposes, and I consent for it to be used in that manner.

Signed

Date

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