

# Notes on Tango (as) Queer (Commodity)

**Marta E. Savigliano**

University of California, [marta.savigliano@ucr.edu](mailto:marta.savigliano@ucr.edu)

In this paper, I reflect on queer (non-heteronormative) interests in tango. Puzzled, I wonder why tango, an icon of hyper-heteronormative ‘love’, attracts dancers with queer sensibilities. In order to begin exploring answers, I look into tango as a commodity, composed of aesthetics and affects, which circulates as a fetish that can be consumed in globalisation unhinged from its socio-cultural moorings, gaining power precisely in its transgressive performance of same gender, counter-heteronormative ‘passion’. I will look into the queer *milongas* of Buenos Aires attending to local and foreign dancers, into the presence of same gender dancers in regular Buenos Aires *milongas* and the traditional *milongueros/as*’ responses to male and female tango partnering; and into queer tango expectations shared at a conference in Berlin in 2008 and a queer tango festival in Buenos Aires in 2010. Questions throughout, and only begun to be addressed, include: How does capitalism tap into queerness and tango, and how does globalisation enable connecting for marketing and consumption purposes? How is tango marketed to queer culture? How does queer tango intervene in the formation of queer subjectivities at ‘home’ and abroad? And how does it affect local Argentine *milonga* culture?

## Tango, (Post)Exoticism, and Globalisation

I wish to enumerate the particularities of the tango scene in globalisation before moving to a discussion of queer tango. In doing so, I aim at contextualising the wide circulation of tango lore, of tango dancing practices and beliefs about what tangos stand for, its uniqueness as well as its availability for global consumption. This combination of uniqueness and accessibility is, in my view, the marker of exoticism under globalisation where otherness is available without others or, put in different terms, ‘cultures’ can be tried out without the need to be or become a ‘native.’ Natives, however, are not out of the picture. They often facilitate (teach and translate) their cultural traits to interested global customers who appreciate cultural differences and the experiences they promise to deliver. Globalisation, including the early 21<sup>st</sup> century crash of the Argentine economy under neoliberal policies and, consequently, the advantageous exchange rate for dollar- or euro-earning travellers, brought about the proliferation of tango tourism to Buenos Aires as well as the export of Argentine and Uruguayan tango experts (unprecedented migration also resulting from the crash) as providers of tango ‘authenticity’. Concomitantly, local tango scenes mushroomed outside Argentina (especially in Europe, the US and Asia), giving way to a variety

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of global/local re-adaptations (taking up local shapes and meanings) fuelling anxieties about tango's authenticity and excitement about tango's marketability around the world. Exoticism and its paradoxical operations in globalisation help in interpreting these complex tensions that arise from conflicting interests among different sectors of local and foreign tango practitioners. The debates, and the ensuing enmities and alliances, are framed in terms of aesthetics, centred primordially in musical tastes and modes of partnering that affect choreographic choices.

Tango masters and dancers are prone to accept or reject innovations in terms of legitimacy, which relies on whether the innovators have earned the right to call what they do 'tango'. The rightful authority to introduce innovations into tango always aligns with tango's place of origin, the nationality (Argentine or Uruguayan) of the innovators, and their seniority (recognised stature) in the tango world. Globalisation has brought complications onto these informal but well-known and broadly-accepted rules in that Argentine and Uruguayan professional musicians and dancers of younger generations have taken (aesthetic) interest in tango (an interest formerly aligned with older generations), in that they are more connected to the music/dance scenes abroad (either through education, travel, migration, virtual music industry, and/or work opportunities), and in that the global marketability of the tango has expanded bringing economic interests into considerations over legitimisation. As a result, tango innovators in globalisation encounter an ambivalent response on the part of the tenants of the traditional tango because the innovators are competitors as well as enablers. Tango Nuevo and Queer Tango effectively attract artists, practitioners, and tourists previously kept out of the tango world, i.e. from participating in the making of the tango aesthetic as well as in the consuming of tango products (music, dancehalls, dance shoes, dance lessons, tango shows, etc). Tango traditionalists and innovators coincide in the proposition that tango, as a popular art, is (and should be) 'universal' and they do so by calling attention to its appeal across 'cultures'. However, they also guard carefully who and what should be accepted as a legitimate part of the tango lore, its aesthetics and politics. In doing so, they resource to exoticism by way of nationalism (as cultural citizens, bearers of the tango 'tradition' involving knowledge, sensitivity, and a quasi-biological predisposition related to socialisation). Tango, like other World musics and dances, accommodates with difficulty its statuses as Art (i.e. universal), as popular culture (i.e. tradition), and as consumer good (i.e. commodity). Exoticism and auto-exoticism function as aesthetico-political devices that allow artificially fixating the contours of a 'culture' by offering a 'tradition' (a stereotypical ethnicised and racialised referent) to explain otherness (the sameness of some and their difference with others). Exoticism and auto-exoticism displace the agential intervention of the subjects of exoticism (the exots or exoticisers) onto their object (the exotic). As a result, tango's controversies in globalisation focus on the aesthetics of its music and dance as objects of 'culture' (tradition versus innovation) and push aside the politico-economic dilemmas concerning accessibility, interests and benefits.

In globalisation, exots and 'natives' cross the divisory lines of identification and move into each others' territory. Exots practice auto-exoticism as they try on selected aspects of other cultures and choose to embody otherness and experiment with what difference

has to offer. Foreign practitioners of Argentine tango, beyond the modernist quest for self reflection and self discovery, aim at inhabiting postmodernist multiple subjectivities, claiming the globe as a legitimate space available to their status as cosmopolitans. Global exots do not go 'native' all the way; whether as tourists, fans, artists or scholars, they aim at moving around the world attuned to their interests and what global/local cultures have to offer to them, acquainting themselves with a multiplicity of selected cultural traits without taking up demanding, unwanted commitments. 'Natives' and their demands of cultural ownership stand in the way of global exots pursuits. In addition, natives' positions enter into contradictions as they seek to adjust to globalisation's opportunities.

In globalisation, 'natives' are aware of the value attributed to some differences and persist in their claims to cultural identity and their rights to selectively extend permission to foreigners to enjoy the uniqueness they have to offer to the world. On the one hand, they uphold their 'culture' as unique, welcome its appreciation, and even work at improving its allure to foreigners, thereby accepting and complicitly partaking of exoticism; on the other hand, they challenge exoticism by claiming their rights to enjoy the mobility, fluidity, and accessibility globalisation seems to offer to all, including innovating and transforming their 'culture' and experimenting with postmodern-like sensibilities and subjectivities. Natives are caught between protecting and preserving (i.e. reproducing) their 'culture,' controlling the usage of and the access to their particular knowledges, and profiting from others' interest in their difference so as to gain access to the (intellectual, emotional, and economic) perks of globalisation. In globalisation, 'natives' respond to the exoticist message that their 'culture' and difference is their asset and the potential door to globalisation – which needs to be earned.

Globalisation, from the natives' standpoint, is something difficult to afford. When it comes to 'culture,' globalisation seems to operate on two different registers: the logic of exoticism and the logic of the market. While exots approach cultural differences as gifts, natives aspire to have their differences taken for legitimate commodities. Natives base their assumptions on concrete observations as exots frequently profit from their acquisition of exotic knowledges. Tango dancers and musicians (addressed previously as 'natives' for the sake of moving along quickly with these arguments) nowadays aspire to teach, perform, research and create new works without the need of cultural translators and intermediaries who simultaneously take exotic traditions for a gift to the world and make a living by selling it in the global market. The directionality of the paycheques complicates exoticism in globalisation, turning exots and exotics into uneven competitors in the cultural market.

Postexoticism is meant to allude to the new intricacies of exoticism under globalisation. It evokes the 'post' in postmodernism as well as the 'post' in postcolonial. Postmodernism prepares the terrain for the exploration of otherness without others. It assumes the free-floating of differences, unmoors otherness from origins, questions the linear genealogy of traditions, the totalising narratives of cultures and nationalities associated to racialisation. In doing so, it liberates aesthetics and emotions to the realm of the universal and paves the way for pursuing the experience of otherness as individual subjects. Following in the steps of ethnographic modernism, postmodern exots identify and enjoy the specta-

cles of otherness, and work at selectively embodying difference for personal enrichment. Exoticism becomes a regular exercise for the care of the self. In addition, exoticism in globalisation denotes appreciation for diversity, as in multi-culturalism, while denying the discrimination it exerts between acceptable and unacceptable others, and its appropriations of assimilatable othernesses without others. Postcolonialism questions the politics of these pursuits. It brings back into the picture the ethics or responsibility towards the others and denounces their erasure. To put it bluntly, postcolonial exotics claim the rights to their attributed exoticism, but they also aspire, on the one hand, to critique the limitations that exoticism imposes on exotics, and on the other, to partake of the exots' advantages by moving, ambivalently, between auto-exoticism and cosmopolitanism. Globalisation opens the way for new exots and for new exotics, and their interests collide.

Postcolonial exotics also face a paradoxical position with regard to other exotics with whom they are drawn to compete in the global market, as well as towards 'natives' among themselves who remain invisible and ignored. Given that Capital rules the market of exoticism in globalisation, hierarchies are established between exotics in terms of their specific worth as bearers of culture, their access to the global market as labourers, their class and geopolitical mobility, not to mention their access to citizenship and visas. The market of otherness expands in globalisation, but it increases competition and fine-tunes the selectiveness of differences. Otherness enables some exotics more than others, as it entrenches them all in exoticism.

It is important to keep in mind that exoticism is a politics of aesthetics and the affects, which are emotions they are capable of generating in the exots—consumers of exoticism. Not all alterities are able to enter the game, and those who enter do so on different footings. In addition, exotic otherness (as an emotionally loaded aesthetic) can be consumed and even (re)produced without the input of the others with whom it is associated or to whom it is attributed. Concerning the tango world, its aesthetics and affects, a chain of tensions follows its globalised popularity. The exot, modern or postmodern, might be able to learn the moves but whether he/she can capture the affects (*tanguidad*) remains in question, even when painfully researched and rehearsed. The fulfilment of the desire for otherness is endless and frustrating, and exotics make a point of reminding exots of their limitations. Doing away with the actual exotic others, and the otherness they stand for, is now impossible. In globalisation, exotics have gained knowledge of the uses of exoticism and claim their place as exotic subjects. Their work as cultural translators is always necessarily in the way, offering legitimacy, accuracy, and opening up opportunities for deceit, irony and even scorn towards exots, towards their own auto-exotic practices, and towards exoticism as a whole.

How do emerging, non-traditional forms of tango partnering challenge and/or reconfigure exoticism in relation to the intimate economies of gender and sexuality?

## **Tango's Queer Exoticism?**

The question mark above signals my attempt to understand the ways in which the practice of queer tango breaks away and/or re-inscribes both, exoticising tango and exoticising

queerness, as they move together (as queer tango) in globalisation. Tangos, as previously discussed, are emblematic of heterosexual 'love' and its unruliness. Tango, as a multi-art form, makes use of music, lyrics, costuming, dance, and visual art to convey a particular philosophy of life, a mood. Tango explores a dark, resentful, even vengeful disposition towards the impossibilities of heterosexual 'love', and exposes the traps of compulsive heterosexuality. In tango, gender differences are taken for granted as a fact that must be dealt with in following the paths of desire.

Tangos also show that gendered relations are conflictive, difficult to navigate, and necessarily asymmetrical. Tangos take sides: they tell and perform the story from the male's perspective. Tangos are pedagogical: they organise desire and educate sentiments so as to create a clear cartography of intimacy within a patriarchal worldview and geared towards male interests. Tangos warn men about the perils of heterosexual 'love', and, even when recognising that love/sex exerts an unavoidable attraction, they offer male-bonding as a reliable net on which to fall. However, in exposing male vulnerabilities, tangos offer a long-list of female rebellions and subversive tactics. Tangos also offer women a paradoxical education in desire. They layout a patriarchal, heterosexist script for women, full of menacing warnings; but they also teach them how to resist and even how to conceal their knowledge about their own agency. While concealing how much you know about the compulsory tango/'love' game might contribute to the effectiveness of the 'surprise-effect', tangos and the tango scene consistently foreclose the possibility of alliances among women. It is as if the whole tango system would work against the constitution of women's friendship, indicating women's (compulsory?) antagonism and competition with each other. Women's 'love' for other women is a true and denied 'problem' in the tango-system. How does queer tango intervene in this complex tango picture? And why would anyone with queer sensibilities and queer politics take an interest in this blatantly patriarchal, heterosexist form? Tango's display of compulsory, yet fraught, heterosexual 'love' is a starting point. Tango's flamboyant, 'over the top' performances of antagonistic yet irresistible male/female relations, and its reliance on set gender differences, amount to an invitation for queer interventions. Does this mean that queer tango is parodic? And if so, what are its targets?

Parodies are undecidable and ambivalent in that they pay homage to their referent while exposing and questioning its premises. If tango is already self-parodic, in itself a practice that props up and undoes heterosexual love/sex, what does queer tango seek to reframe and upset? Queer tango emerges in globalisation and should be looked at within the context of a politics of difference that now includes de-naturalising gender differences in themselves. From this viewpoint, queer tango re-exoticises tango so as to take 'love' apart from heterosexuality and its premises, namely gender differences.

Tango's love/sex ambivalence invites queer interventions that produce exoticism of both the tango form when in queer-land and of its queer practitioners when in tango-land. In the traditional (heterosexual) tango scene, same-sex tangos have their marginal space (especially in *prácticas* and informal settings). Queer tangos, however, introduce an unsettling lack of gender differentiation into formal tango partnering: tango masculinity

and femininity are, so to speak, suspended and left floating phantasmatically around the queer tango practitioners, apparently disinterested in engaging in the reproduction of gendered difference – and its power inequalities. This *tour de force*, a liberating practice for the queer practitioners, installs a problem at the core of the tango scene. The queer tango couple remains exotic, outside and indigestible when considered from the perspective of a regular (i.e. compulsively heterosexual) *tanguero*. To the *milongueros/as*, queer tango misses the whole point of the tango. In contrast, queer tango raises the question: Why do those with queer sensibilities choose the tango specifically to explore queerness? This, I believe, is a more interesting question.

I will reach out again into the complex geopolitics of globalisation in order to continue this discussion. Reframing queer tango in these terms seems to move us away from intimacy and the scene of Two. However, there is a way in which the outside enters the intimate scene and vice versa, creating a web of intimate economies. Exploring queerness at home (where one belongs) is not the same as undertaking queer explorations abroad. In addition, exploring queerness among queer-identified tango dancers, whether at home or abroad, has different effects for all those involved than exploring queerness among straight *tangueros*. A celebration where queerness ‘belongs’ turns into a provocation where it does not. And the *agent provocateur* may be using his/her queerness auto-exotically as empowerment when facing other exotics, i.e. the ‘traditional’ tango dancers in Argentina or Uruguay. Local tango scenes, in Europe and the US, are more welcoming to queer-tango practitioners, but more out of extending benevolent gestures towards ‘difference’ than out of appreciation. Queer-tango introduces something exogenous (exotic, unfamiliar) into regular tango scenes and their heterosexual preoccupations.

It could be argued that newcomers to the tango scene engage in dancing tango, because they are attracted to the aesthetics and techniques of the form, in particular to the way in which this partnered dance foregrounds sustained contact and improvisation while keeping a signature movement style. In Argentina, foreign and local younger tango dancers, and especially women, are frequently trained in or at least familiar with other dance traditions such as ballet, modern dance, postmodern dance, and contact improvisation. Their interest in tango tends to be formal and dance oriented. Within this artistic realm, tango provides an entry to a new and different set of movement techniques along other forms such as *butoh*, hula or flamenco. These ‘formalistic’ interests tend to occlude ‘exoticism’ and the presence of other desires in the choices being made as to what is worth learning. When it comes to ‘other’ dances, purely formal interests are enabled by an ethics of the care of the self, by exerting the right to choice, and even by a liberal openness to cultural diversity. An education of desire is already at play in these formalistically informed dancentric endeavours. Tango’s partnering, however, offers something different within a possible array of once exotic and now also globalised dancerly undertakings. New tango practitioners confront a particularly eroticised dynamic, that of a heterosexually marked couple that stresses gender differences and relies on the complementary roles of a leading masculine figure and an active feminine follower. Gender differences and sexual orientation thus enter into the compound of interests that make tango attractive, even for the sake of undoing them.

Is there tango beyond the performances of gender and heterosexuality? Assuming that *tanguidad* is about supplementing sexual relations, what kind of ‘love’ does queer-tango enact? Do same-sex tangos inhabit heterosexual erotic fantasies, do they recompose tango’s pleasures along a distinguishable queer erotic formation, or do they do away with tango’s erotic preoccupations? In other words, how much of the tango risk does queer-tango take, and what does queer-tango settle for?

To begin addressing these questions, I believe it would be helpful to focus on established views of the distinctively gendered compositions of same-sex tangos. Male-male tangos are not only more popular than female-female tangos; male-male tangos are frequently addressed as the original or at least the most widely practiced in original times. They are also often regarded as the most harmonious and beautiful from a stylistic viewpoint, stressing how male bodies, their weights, shapes, heights and energy levels deliver a better balance and can take more freely the challenges mutually proposed through improvisation. Male-male tangos do not seem to require gender difference to convey tango-ness; they capture the tense qualities of defiance and alliance that compose the tango couple in movement. Male-male tango couples, it should be added, never make use of drag or cross-dressing unless they are set to perform a tango parody that immediately suggests the grotesque. In sum, male-male tangos are easily recuperated as straight. In the tango scene, male bonding indicates masculinity beyond sexual preferences—suggesting that sexual preferences can be circumstantial. Male-male tangos are tangos because the tango is a *macho* form.

All-female tangos are noticeably suspect in the tango scene. When femininity takes over the dance, again referencing the tango-lore, it results in diluting *tanguidad* because it amounts to betraying the need for tango men, because it ruins women’s ability to respond to male-initiated *marcas* (the leadership in the dance), or because it delivers an over-eroticised spectacle (when seen from a male-perspective), that runs against tango’s subtle sensuality. One way or another, all female tangos are discouraged in *milongas* and shows (i.e. public space), and are only tolerated in the private realms of family gatherings or dance classes. All female tangos, when publicly presented, often resource to cross-dressing of one of the partners, the one taking the man’s role of conducting in the dance. There is little space for experimenting with an all encompassing femininity in the traditional tango scene, and it is reserved to queer *milongas*. In Buenos Aires, queer *milongas* have become visible only very recently, responding to the impact of the globalised queer movement and to gay and lesbian tourism. Female-female tangos propose a gendered alliance among women that does not find a place in the traditional tango world – it is interpreted as competitive and resentful of the *macho*-centric tango rules and questions, altogether, women’s interest in tango. It raises the question: why would these women want to tango if they are not willing to endure its (patriarchal) rules?

In sum, femininity in tango seems to be less containable than masculinity. All female tangos are not predictable, and the potential results (of women ganging up against *milongueros*) could destabilise altogether the tango scene. Women dancing with other women begets something unnatural, almost degenerate: the dangers of lesbianism, meaning

‘love’ for each other. This amounts to a perverse enigma. The tango world is not ready for this challenge. How does queer-tango propose to navigate these entrenched impossibilities of degendering the tango dance?

## **Queer Milongas**

In Buenos Aires, queer *milongas* are weekly gatherings of tango practitioners that meet at a cultural centre identified as alternative, convoked by friendly, open-minded tango teachers. They are characterised by offering a relaxed atmosphere, and an ample variety of usually recorded music: classical tangos as well as neo tangos and other electronic popular dance music, adapted to traditional and new tango dancing styles. Queer *milongas* are attended by mostly women of diverse sexual orientations, looking for a welcoming tango environment, one that is non-judgmental towards gendered partnering preferences or tango dancing prowess, generally unconstrained from the etiquette of traditional *milongas*. Most importantly, in queer *milongas* women can choose their dancing partner and dance whenever they please, as opposed to waiting to be asked by a *milonguero* for a dance. Sexual orientations are not flaunted in queer *milongas*, except for the presence of a few butches and bois, and fewer openly gay men (who tend to attend gay *milongas*). Patrons tend to be younger than at traditional *milongas*, more casual in their dressing and general demeanour, and more prone to talking and socialising. They are convoked by the possibility of engaging in whatever kind of partnering and style of tango they choose, not constricted by traditionalism and free of judgment, and a less charged atmosphere than regular *milongas* where gendered roles are guarded, and men hold the privilege of choosing dancing partners and the responsibility to lead the dance. Although less competitive and judgmental, and more open to innovations in tango dancing styles, queer *milongas*, like traditional *milongas*, do have their stars, and the queer tango stars are women. And they stand out because of their dancing abilities as leaders, their capacity to switch gendered partnering roles even in the midst of a tango dance, their ability to keep a sharp tango dancing style regardless of the music, and a gentle, calm, confident attitude devoid of cockiness.

Queer *milongas* hold as a backdrop traditional *milongas*, and seek to undo all the elements that queer tango patrons identify as unpleasant and limiting in regular *milongas* associated with *machismo*. As a result, queer *milongas* are oriented towards pleasure defined in different terms than in regular *milongas*. The tense, erotically charged, atmosphere of compulsory heterosexual *milongas* and their heteronormative dance rulings are kept in check, giving queer *milongas* a safe, even prudish patina. Queer desires, which in queer *milongas* are women’s desires, whether identified with alternative masculinities or femininities, are more of an open space for exploration than a clearly readable delineation of crisscrossing intensities. Queer *milongas* are clearly about dancing tango, and about having a good time while doing so, and offer a decompressed overall atmosphere towards that end. The informality thus achieved is more welcoming to local young dancers and to foreigners, often trained in other dance forms, interested in practicing tango as a dance but not in subjecting themselves to the traditional mores and customs or the authorities of the traditional tango scene. Queer *milongas* readily accept tango dancers at different

training stages without imposing hierarchies based on seniority or authenticity, and are open to innovations of movement techniques and vocabularies, dress codes, and partnering arrangements. In this sense, they are transgressive at multiple levels, inviting attendees to traverse the limits of what is known to constitute tango as such and to reconfigure tango subjectivities as queer. Queer *milongas* transgress the norms of the tango world, as they tame traditional tango's aggressions towards otherness.

## **Spectacular Invisibility of Tango Queer Desires**

The overpopulation of women in the tango queer scene, both at home and abroad, has the effect of transforming the (hetero)sexualised currents that permeate regular *milongas*. These events are definitely about dancing tangos, but also about picking up partners and facilitating sexual encounters. Queer *milongueras*, whether hetero, homo or asexual, are invested in the intimacy of the tango's close contact dancing; relationality through touch and bodily responsiveness drive their interest in tango. To queer *milongueras*, tango is an alternative to self-contained subjectivity, as displayed in solo popular dances that require little attuning to partners and surrounding dancers. Tango queer desires are sensual, aesthetic, and romantically playful. And they are connected to the pleasures derived from escaping regular heteronormative impositions encountered in traditional tango scenes: queer *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. In sum, queer *milongas* are not phallogenically sexual.

To the trained tango eye, steeped in heteronormativity and the macho cult, tango queer desires are subdued, almost puritanical and chaste. The erotics of the queer tango encounter are subtle by all (heterosexual) standards: no strutting around for prey, no anxiety to be chosen, no advances to be resisted, no visible negotiations concerning sexual booties or trophies as results of partnering a tango dance. Queer tango, unmarked by heterosexual tensions, looks lame; and yet queer tango practitioners are passionate about it, and insist in its resistive and even subversive potency. Rarely announced as lesbian, and unlike gay tango, queer tango (mostly) women practitioners literally embrace, fully-heartedly, alternative subjectivities where erotic possibilities expand into the outside of heteronormativity, and other ways of 'being with.' Tango, as an iconic danced figure of heterosexual love and its complications, is the chosen vehicle for rehearsing queer transgression, a doubled transgression that raises the stakes of tango's promises for delivering heterosexual love to that of delivering love across sameness, and outside sex/gender and cultural paradigms.

CORRESPONDENCE: MARTA E. SAVIGLIANO, University of California, Riverside, Department of Dance, 900 University Avenue, 121 Arts Building Riverside, CA 92521, USA. E-Mail: [marta.savigliano@ucr.edu](mailto:marta.savigliano@ucr.edu).