

What is Queer Tango?

I raised this question in November 2014 in a paper I gave about Queer Tango history at a dance historians' conference in America. I am not going to answer it here. Only an idiot would claim to have a definitive answer to this question at the moment, because in truth, there isn't yet a single definition satisfactory to all interested parties. In such circumstances, I suggest there is, however, a value in reviewing how and why definitions are arrived at and I offer three approaches to start to address this apparent conundrum: firstly, as a long time observer of the discussions about what is and is not Queer Tango, I identify and spell out some of the tacit, commonplace working criteria which I believe others informally apply in arriving at such judgements. These reflections can help us identify what the issues are. Secondly, and with these issues in mind, I review an arbitrary sample of definitions already out there and ask what are these definitions constructed for? And lastly, I make the case for abandoning all such language-based undertakings entirely, and suggest instead that we should be dancing an answer.

What are the issues?

What is and what isn't Queer Tango? Same gender couples? A woman leading a man? Any dancing by anyone in any combination at a Queer Tango venue? And does it matter who fancies who on or off the dance-floor? Or what they are doing? Or think they are doing? I have spent years listening to exchanges where questions like these feature, exchanges as likely to be at two o'clock in the morning sat on the wall outside a milonga at the Heilige Kreuz Kirche in Berlin during an International Queer Tango Festival as at any more formal debating venue. Based on these accumulated exchanges, I offer the following as a subjective account of the tacit set of assumptions which often underlie such discussions.

Implicitly, tango dancing is commonly thought more securely classified as Queer Tango dancing to the extent that:

1. The sexual orientations of the dancers correspond to LGBT 'norms'
2. Conventional gender roles are challenged because:
 1. Both dancers in a couple are of the same gender; or
 2. Conventional gender roles in a couple are reversed; or
 3. Both are found at a tango event
3. Those dancing believe they are dancing Queer Tango
4. The dancing occurs in an overtly Queer Tango context
5. What they dance corresponds to the observer's precepts of what Queer Tango is

For those disputing, not all of these criteria need be met at the same time. For some, only one of them is necessary while others require two or more and with each additional criterion, more and more people and practices are excluded. Applying such criteria is neither fair, nor objective, nor unproblematic and in describing them, I am neither sanctioning them nor recommending them. However, bringing them out into the open helps identify what the issues are: sexual orientations and genders, for example. In an age where queer theory has been kicking around academia for two decades and more, its consequences are only now starting to be felt in ordinary life. Most people – myself included, until recently – were content to stick to the politics of identity, where the identity of say, being 'a gay man' or 'a lesbian' was thought unproblematic and worth fighting for. Sometimes, it is, and much has been achieved with that mindset. Yet the day-to-day complexities of being who each of us is, of allowing that some, perhaps many may not neatly slot into any of the 'LGBT norms', or are choosing not to, are increasingly figuring in these discussions. And as they do, assumptions one and two become suspect as legitimate criteria in determining what Queer Tango is.

Assumptions three, four and five depend on having a definition of Queer Tango in the first place.

What are definitions of Queer tango for?

Queer Tango only needs to be defined if it is to be differentiated from something else, most obviously, from the tango mainstream. Ute Walter,

instrumental in creating Queer Tango in Hamburg in 2001 was quite clear why it was needed:

A queer perspective frees tango from the restrictions of heteronormative and gender specific structures and representations... [it] values instead its capability to accomplish an emancipated dialogue.

Clearly – and this is a recurrent theme in many writings on the subject – the objective here is locate Queer Tango as ‘emancipation’ from ‘restrictions’. Queer Tango is a purposive, overtly political act. While I agree that to dance Queer Tango *is* a political act, I take issue with the idea that its purpose is primarily or even tangentially to counter the evils of ‘heteronormative and gender-specific structures and representations’ – that which I choose in less judgemental language to call ‘the mainstream’. My opposition is based on my personal experiences of the mainstream and of those in it, chiefly, but not exclusively, here in London. Others with other experiences, perhaps gained elsewhere may think differently. My main reservation is that – counter to queer theory openness – it risks becoming exclusive. (For a fuller account of this argument see my article ‘Coming Out to Dance: or getting it straight – a re-examination of the relationship of Queer Tango to the tango mainstream’ shortly to be published in the e-book, *The Queer Tango Book* early in 2015.)

Mariano Docampo’s much cited definition from 2009 is interesting – and lengthy. In part it describes; in part it is a manifesto. I will not examine it in detail here, save to say that it goes much further than Walter’s in specifically locating Queer Tango as a practice, founded directly on the insights afforded by queer theory. It celebrates sexualities which have been marginalised by mainstream society, by mainstream tango and by conventional LGBT definitions, while at the same time proposing inclusivity. In a similarly inclusive vein, Adriana Pegorer in publicity for her Queer Tango Workshop at the 20th Annual Lesbian Lives Conference in Brighton in 2013 quoted the Walter extract, above, but added more encouragingly:

Queer tango communities promote the exchange of the leading and following roles regardless of one's gender, encourage same sex dancing and welcome anybody who wants to participate

Wikipedia's current (19 November 2014) entry under 'Queer Tango' picks up the familiar themes:

Queer Tango is to dance Argentine tango without regard to the traditional heteronormative roles of the dancers, and often to exchange the leader and follower roles. Therefore it is related to **open role** or **same-sex tango**. The *queer tango movement* permits not only an access to tango for the LGBT community, but also supports female leaders and male followers, regardless of orientation.

To what extent do these inform actual dancing? Or the running of Queer Tango organisations around the world? There is undoubtedly research work to be done to establish answers to just these questions.

One further thought: I suggest each of us who dance Queer Tango probably has our own working definition of what it is, even if most of us don't write it down. I have. My own – based on observation, rather than aspiration – would go something like this:

Queer Tango is the gender blind dancing of more or less authentic Argentinian tango by those who acknowledge something of the social and political significances of doing so.

It is characterised by – but not confined to:

- safe spaces for LGBT dancers
- same gender couples
- women leading
- men following
- role reversal within dances (*intercambio*)

So what?

So what is the point of devising definitions of Queer Tango? Do we have a stronger sense of Queer Tango identity as a result? Does anyone dance a more satisfying dance because this or that line of reasoning has been worked through? In America, I asked it in connection with the possibility that adopting one or other definition might mean constructing different, perhaps contradictory historical accounts of 'where Queer tango has come from'. Histories might be used to legitimise this or that definition by giving it a deep historical past. In the end, I decided this was not necessary. Queer Tango may have been conceived of in Hamburg in 2001 (or thereabouts), but the issues and themes identified here are sufficient to justify historical inquiry which stretches back a good deal further, to re-examine photographs of men dancing together from the 1890s, the 1920s or the 1940s; or drawings of women dancing together, or wondering about the significance of the play *Le Tango* performed in Paris in 1913, where the 'man' in the tango dancing couple was played by the actress, Eve Lévallier, in drag.

Do we need a definition for ourselves, now? Possibly. As noted, such discussions may well inform how Queer Tango organisations are run – although this is far from clear. I suspect most are driven by tacit understandings, less meticulously articulated than these complex definitions. As far as actually dancing is concerned, they may not be needed at all. After all, we have a range of ways of arriving at our senses of Queer Tango identities.

Queer Tango today is in a dynamic, not a settled state. Many of the unspoken criteria which have informed common discourse about 'what it is' are, in my view, not actually that helpful because they tend towards the exclusive. This, at a time when increased commonplace reference to the implications of queer theory would have us be *inclusive*. Similarly, although the various existing definitions were conceived of for different purposes meaning it is unlikely that one will satisfy all, they consistently address themes and issues which are pertinent to these discussions. Still, one should ask, what is the purpose of

them? I will risk sounding naïve by proposing that while there is value in academic discourse (well I would, wouldn't I? I am an academic), the significance to 'ordinary' dancers of that discourse is, at best, tangential. Has anyone danced with greater satisfaction as a result of these discussions? It would be hard to prove.

Most employ language at the expense of practice – that is, the dancing of Queer Tango – or its representations. Representations in imagery and video will doubtless prove a further fertile field for exploration and analysis and may yet help to inform definitions. In practice, multiple definitions – spoken and unspoken – arise out of the collisions of language, practice and representations. In general, I tend to favour those which describe over those which prescribe, those which are inclusive rather than those which exclude. For now, I suggest the clearest and most valuable definitions of Queer Tango are the unspoken, emerging, embodied ones created and recreated by the accumulated dancing of those who believe they are dancing it. These are porous, open, dynamic, delightfully unstable, and constantly renewed by practice. They rarely seek to exclude. They are also much more fun than the tedious bickering which occasionally clutters the ether or the academy in trying to arrive at universalising linguistic definitions. I argue that only contingent definitions are possible at the moment or, indeed, desirable. In trying to define Queer Tango, maybe the case for language has been overstated? Maybe it is time for us to dance our definitions?

I think it is.

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