The Queer Tango Book - Ideas, Images and Inspiration in the 21st Century
Edited by Birthe Havmoeller, Ray Batchelor and Olaya Aramo
Colophon and Copyright Statement

Selection and editorial matter © 2015 Birthe Havmoeller, Ray Batchelor and Olaya Aramo
Written materials © 2015 the individual authors
All images and artworks © 2015 the individual artists and photographers.

This publication is protected by copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of
private research, criticism or reviews, no part of this text may be reproduced, decompiled,
stored in or introduced into any website, or online information storage, in any form or by
any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereinafter invented, without
written permission by the publisher.

This publication is Free and Non Commercial.

When you download this e-book, you have been granted the non-exclusive right to access
and read the book using any kind of e-book reader software and hardware or via personal
text-to-speech computer systems. You may also share/distribute it for free as long as you
give appropriate credit to the editors and do not modify the book. You may not use the
materials of this book for commercial purposes. If you remix, transform, or build upon the
materials you may NOT distribute the modified material without permission by the
individual copyright holders.

ISBN 978-87-998024-0-1 (HTML)
ISBN 978-87-998024-1-8 (PDF)

Published: 2015 by Birthe Havmoeller / Queertangobook.org
E-book and cover design © Birthe Havmoeller
Text on the cover is designed with 'MISO', a free font made by Mårten Nettelbladt.
When I moved to Seattle from Florida in 2006, I was initially excited to discover that social dance teachers (tango, salsa, swing) throughout the city used the terminology 'leader' and 'follower' instead of 'man' and 'woman' to address students in their classes. This linguistic shift seemed like a progressive move towards being more inclusive for those who didn’t conform to expected gender norms on the dance floor. I was hopeful that such a move could help to de-naturalize the relationship between dance role and gender, opening up leader and follower as roles anyone, regardless of gender, could occupy. The conscious rebranding of social dance terminology was to a large extent motivated by an interest in making the LGBT community feel more welcome in mainstream social dance classes. Century Ballroom, Seattle’s largest venue for social dancing, was a major force in this effort. Since the ballroom opened in 1996, lesbian owner Hallie Kuperman has required that all her teachers use the terminology leader and follower. “You can’t look at a room where 50% of the leaders are women and call them men. It just doesn’t make sense,” she explains. Although now the majority of her clientele is heterosexual and assume expected gender roles when dancing, same-sex couples pepper the dance floor at most events held at the ballroom, welcomed by the conscious employment of gender-neutral language in the classes. By the time I moved to Seattle, the terms leader and follower had become the default language of the city’s social dancers, including tango.

Over the next several years, however, I was troubled by the casual use of the new terms and their shortened versions. When I blithely heard someone mention, “There were ten follows at the party last night,” I would bristle. “You mean there were ten people who specialize in dancing the follower’s role, don’t you?” I countered. “You are talking about human beings, not objects.” It was not until my tango mentor Jaimes Freidgen shared his belief that American women dancing tango have become more passive since the general adoption of the term ‘follower’ that I realized how the well-meaning change in terminology intended to redress linguistic discrimination against same-sex couples produced yet another kind of subtle discrimination against women. Just as calling grown women ‘girls’ or men ‘boys’ has the effect of infantilizing and disempowering them when repeated systematically, the effect of calling anyone a ‘follow’ over an extended period of time eventually produces an internalized sense of self as less capable of initiating action. I am not suggesting that the role of the follower in tango is less difficult or even less powerful than the role of the leader, but that the use of the noun ‘follower’ (and the more distasteful ‘follow’) as an appellation for a group of people has unintended negative effects on that group, most of whom happen to be women.

In Argentina, dancers in the straight tango community use the verbs *llevar* (to take) and *marcar* (to mark) to describe the action corresponding to the American concept of leading, and the verb *seguir* (to follow) to describe following. They do not tend to use the noun forms of these words and instead refer to *varones* (men) and *mujeres* (women) when calling on a noun to distinguish the two roles, even when women are dancing the role of *varones*, as I did in every class I took during the eight weeks I was in Buenos Aires in 2012. The queer tango community in Argentina has rejected these terms as tainted by heteronormativity and favors the terms *conducir* (to drive) and *guiar* (to guide) as synonyms for the concept of leading. They too, however, still rely on the troubling term *seguir* (to follow). When they do reach for a noun to describe the two roles, I heard queer tangueras use the terms *conductor* (driver) and *conducida* (driven), the latter hardly seeming less offensive than follower.
I recently came across psychology literature that helps justify my objection to use of the term 'follower' even though I have no issue with the expression 'people dancing the follower’s role'. A series of psychological experiments have revealed that people view characteristics described with a noun (e.g., Heidi is an intellectual) as more enduring and central to identity than descriptions conveyed with an adjective (e.g., Heidi is intellectual). [1] Not only do such subtle linguistic distinctions affect how we view others, but they affect self-perception. In other words, dancers who are consistently referred to as followers will begin to view this as an essential and stable feature of their personalities.

What are members of the tango community to do with this realization? The effects of calling the two roles leading and following are not as harmful in a queer tango class in which everyone is learning both roles. If everyone dances both roles, no group is called followers on a consistent basis and therefore escapes from the effects of passive self-image development. However, shouldn’t queer tango dancers be sensitive to the effects of language on all people, even those who specialize in only dancing the follower’s role? Many queer tango dancers and allies object to a return to the language of 'men' and 'women' to describe the two roles, feeling that such labels marginalize male followers and female leaders (or people who prefer not to identify with either gender). Similar problems of outdated gendered language are likewise faced by other dance communities. In historic dance communities that practice renaissance, baroque, and contra dance, the terms 'man' and 'woman' are commonly used when teaching the dances. Teachers clarify that the roles are so named to reflect historical conventions, but that these roles can be assumed by anyone, regardless of gender. In practice, it is quite common to see as many women dancing the man’s role as dancing the woman’s role, and vice versa, enacting in practice the teacher’s words that these roles can be divorced from gender. Such a strategy works well in these communities because in none of these dance forms is the man’s role so significantly different from the woman’s role that dancers cannot easily switch between roles. In tango (and indeed other modern social dances like salsa and swing), the two roles differ so significantly that many people specialize in only one role. Thus, use of the terms man and woman in most tango classes not specifically identified as queer would not serve the denaturalizing function they serve in historical dance communities where gender becomes a technique that can be learned and reassigned fluidly. Ironically, queer tango classes are better positioned to effectively detach the language of male/female from gender identity through a re-employment of the terms 'man' and 'woman' because so many people in the queer tango community cross 'traditional' gender roles in the dance. Beginning a sentence with "when I am dancing as woman..." (or "when I am dancing as man") can reveal the constructed nature of gender roles and indeed gender itself. Many queer tango dancers will rightly worry, however, that the strategic deployment of gendered language in order to deconstruct it will backfire and reinscribe the binaries it seeks to dismantle.

I have no easy solution for this conundrum. I hardly think it's realistic to expect dancers to diligently avoid the noun form and consistently address ‘people skilled at dancing the follower’s role’ instead of the shorthand ‘followers.’ Should we employ a new term entirely for the concepts of leading and following? Perhaps 'proposers' and 'interpreters' better describes the two roles. One individual proposes a movement and the other interprets that proposition, decoding subtle physical cues and translating them into overturned ochos, playful sacadas and spirited boleos. It is time to update our language so that it reflects the very active contributions of both individuals in the tango partnership.
Note