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## Geographies of Gender: Social Politics of the Partner Dance Venue

DAVID KAMINSKY

*The typical partner dance venue will have a standardised layout conducive to the space's function as a marketplace in which attendees can display their own bodies as commodities. Dancers in the venue will have invested time and money in training, clothing, and grooming to demonstrate the value of their bodies according to the dance's typically heteronormative standards. The reward for successful marketing is physical access to other similarly well-marketed bodies. The social enforcement of this system occurs primarily at the moment between songs, when large numbers of attendees engage in a simultaneous process of partner selection.*

**Keywords:** Couple dancing, socialization, commodification, embodiment, space, heteronormativity.

The dance floor will ideally be large enough to contain the crowd comfortably, but not so large as to inhibit a certain intimacy. It will be smooth and not too grippy, with a little bit of give. Hardwood is generally ideal.<sup>1</sup> In all likelihood, the floor will adjoin one or two outer walls of the building. It will gain the air of centrality, however, in part due to its size relative to other parts of the space, and in part as a function of being framed on one or more sides by inward-facing chairs (and sometimes tables). This air of centrality and inward orientation will be reinforced by concealment from outside view. The dance floor will either be in a windowless space, or on a non-street-level story of the building, or both.

The entryway should be non-adjacent to the dance floor, so that attendees are not compelled to join the fray immediately upon entering the venue. Most people need some time to acclimate to the space and shift gears to the alternate social reality before they step onto the floor.<sup>2</sup> If the event costs money, which it usually will, some initial bottleneck will typically be created, with a small table and a chair or two for hosts or volunteers to take payment. Beyond this point, an additional intermediate space will allow people to change into dance shoes. In some cases, a dressing room (in a pinch, restrooms) will allow 25 / 26 for additional sartorial changes. Finally, some additional space external to the dance floor, like a bar, is also typical. This secondary space will allow people to retreat alone or in company and communicate to their surroundings that they do not at that moment wish to be asked to dance, at least not by strangers.<sup>3</sup>

If the event is public, it will almost always begin with some sort of lesson for beginners, and may also offer some for more experienced dancers as well. The absence of a lesson to start the evening is typically a sign of internality, marking the dance unwelcoming to those without prior experience. The beginners' lesson will usually last an hour or so, but may be as short as thirty minutes or as long as ninety. The goal of this lesson is usually less to create a solid technical foundation upon which skills can later be developed, and more to grant outsiders enough information to enjoy themselves during the evening without making life difficult for more experienced dancers.

Unless the venue has multiple rooms, instructors will typically hold this beginning lesson on the main dance floor. When the lesson is held in that central location, the arrangers may mark the transition from the end of the lesson to the beginning of the social dance with a dimming of the lights. This change transforms the room from practice space to event space, suggesting romantic and sexual possibility, and reducing any sense of being onstage for the benefit of outside viewers. It also deprivileges sight over the other senses within the partnership itself, even if only symbolically –

rarely does the change inhibit vision enough to make a functional difference for dancers. Not all venues mark the transition in this way. Keeping the room bright may in fact be a way to counteract the meat-market feel of the club scene.<sup>4</sup> Where it does occur, however, it helps mark the time and place of the event as distinct. The rules of engagement and interaction change. No longer is everyone expected to dance with everyone else as in the lesson, for instance. Verbal corrections of a dance partner's mistakes become less socially acceptable.<sup>5</sup> Many experienced dancers do not experience this transition, however, since they will often arrive an hour or more after the dance has begun, well after all but the most tenacious of beginners have left.

A number of different types of venue might host such an event. Dedicated dance rehearsal spaces, art galleries, restaurants, community centres, cafés, clubs, and outdoor pavilions are some of the most common. Most organisers will strive toward a common set of ideals with regard to layout, and beyond securing the location that best fits those ideals, further arrange the space to maximise its social dance utility.

The space I describe above is representative of what I would call the second major wave of the partner dance industry, a gradual global revival following some decades upon partner dancing's much-heralded 'death' at the hands of the twist, disco, and the nightclub scene – as well as, perhaps, World War II, suburbanization, and the rise of television. In the context of this analysis, the major difference between the two waves is that the first was mainstream enough (starting in the 1910s) to warrant purpose-built dance halls run by impresarios, [26 / 27](#) while the second has more often relied on amateur-run spaces that may serve other functions at other times, and must therefore be adapted to the event.<sup>6</sup> Naturally, because of regional and functional architectural variation in available spaces, not all will conform exactly to what I have described above. Nevertheless, the strategies of spatial adaptation for these sorts of dance venues have largely been standardized on a global scale.

Any well-travelled salsa dancer should thus hear described in the above language a familiar kind of dance venue and event, one they might look for in any reasonably sized city around the world. The same should hold true for any itinerant dancer of tango, lindy hop, bachata, Brazilian zouk, or any other social partner dance whose pedagogy has been formalised and standardized by a global circuit of professional or semi-professional instructors. These basic premises, along with many others, recur across internationally circulating (what I call 'cosmopolitanised') partner dance forms and their industries. Common principles of social and spatial organization form the corporate body that is a cosmopolitanised partner dance community, in addition to shaping its constituent individual bodies.<sup>7</sup>

This essay is about how the 'normative geographies' of partner dance work their embodied politics.<sup>8</sup> I consider the cosmopolitanised social partner dance venue as a model marketplace for the commodified body. Here, prior investment in the body – through classes and workshops, diet and exercise, apparel and grooming – pays off in a Bourdieusian three-way flow of economic, social, and cultural capital. My premise is that these processes operationalise the more-or-less standardised dance venue as a stage for semi-scripted performances of gender and sexuality, which while variable and improvisatory, are nevertheless shaped by specific bourgeois standards of social legibility. The carrot and stick that enforce these standards manifest primarily in the process of partner selection. Adherence to the norms is rewarded by access to the bodies of other dancers in the space, while their violation may result in degrees of social isolation.

I have based this work on fieldwork conducted over the past seven years among dancers and instructors who operate in and across a range of forms, including tango, lindy hop, blues, kizomba, zouk, salsa, balboa, fusion, and numerous others. I have interviewed instructors and participated in classes, workshops, and dance events across that spectrum of dance genres. My fieldwork has been located primarily in Stockholm, Boston, and San Francisco, but my interviews extend to internationally traveling instructors from a range of other places as well.

That fieldwork is part of a broader research project I have conducted on lead/follow partner dance as a supercultural phenomenon – one that has developed and spread across the globe as an effect and effector of the colonial encounter between Europe and the rest of the world. Elsewhere I consider the broad social history of that development, as well as the inner workings of the lead/follow system as an ideological construct whose power lies in a diffusion of agency across its four primary constituent elements: self, partner, music, and [27 / 28](#) surrounding dancers. In this piece I widen the lens to consider the venue as a whole, and the moments between dances, as essential infrastructure for enforcing and reinforcing that social ideology.

## THE FLOOR'S EDGE

Aside from the dance floor proper, the most critical location in the venue is the floor's edge. Here too, uses of space tend to be similar across different dance forms. At least one edge of the floor, but usually more, will have space for people to sit, stand, and demonstrate by their presence there a direct interest in the dancing. This liminal space has a kind of active energy, allowing people in it to scan the floor and its edge for potential future partners, while simultaneously exposing them to being asked to dance by others. The deejay (or live musicians) will occupy some other corner or edge of the floor, either directly on the floor or just off it, depending on the possibilities afforded by the venue.

Sometimes a small section of the floor's edge will be informally reserved for advanced dancers. This space allows an elite circle to sit and converse while watching the floor, without exposing them unduly to dance requests from people outside that privileged space. Blues and fusion instructor Ted Maddry describes the convention:

There's usually a spot on the floor, like an area in the room where the good dancers congregate, like a cool kid's corner. Like I mentioned before, often it's near the band or near the deejay, though it could be somewhere else, you know if there's a bar, often it's near the bar. And just by proximity, the beginners would have to walk all the way across the floor to the cool kids' corner to ask a cool kid to dance. And they do, but by the time they've done that you might have had the time to turn to your neighbour who you are really looking forward to dance with, and asking them to dance (4 April 2013).

The 'cool kid's corner' thus combines functional features of the floor's outer edge and the external bar space.<sup>9</sup> Contexts with a more explicitly anti-hierarchical culture of partnering, or venues with a non-conductive layout, will not usually host these informal spaces, however. In those sorts of venues, elite dancers who wish to avoid being asked to dance by outsiders to their group typically have no recourse but to retreat to the bar or whatever other external area is available.

The edge of the dance floor also reinforces the heteronorms of the space in bearing the tradition whereby partnership is initiated specifically by a man asking a woman to dance. This practice, notably, is not typically enforced in any material way, and is of all the gendered traditions in partner dance probably the most subject to challenge. Women ask men to dance all the time, in fact.<sup>10</sup> Sometimes women ask each other to dance, and sometimes (though more rarely) men ask other men. Nevertheless, the expectation that men initiate is still broadly recognised, and many dancers do feel constrained by it, whether they challenge that constraint or not. By and large, if the room is gender balanced, men will still ask women more frequently than the other way around. Thus, I read that tradition of male initiative as an operative force, albeit one that people have the capacity to disrupt. [28 / 29](#)

The power dynamic reflected in this tradition is somewhat complicated by the fact of multiple people engaging in partnership formation at the same time. Were only two people involved, for

instance, the tradition whereby the man asks the woman to dance would necessarily be simple in its hierarchy. If she wants to dance, she has to say yes. With more people in play, however, he now has the opportunity to scan the room to decide who he wants to ask, recognizing that other men are doing the same thing and may pre-empt him. She can choose to accept his offer or reject it, hoping that someone better might come along, while recognizing that she is in competition with other women in the space for male attention.<sup>11</sup> In rejecting an offer she might run the risk of losing certain future offers (that rejection having been observed by other men who wish to avoid a similar experience) but may also increase her chances of being asked by better and more confident dancers, who might now see her as discerning, and her acceptance of their offer above someone else's as a visible marker of their own elite status. I have elsewhere framed this multi-vector power dynamic as parallel to that of courtly love or the classic dating scenario.<sup>12</sup> When a man asks a woman to dance, or holds a door for her or pulls out a chair, he is demonstrating at once her higher status and his greater freedom. With his power of choice and hers of rank, he can choose who he wishes to court, and she can reject any suitor as unworthy.<sup>13</sup>

This also means that the edge of the floor can become a place for competition between women for male attention, managing simultaneously to coerce women into subjecting themselves to a multi-vector male gaze and to alienate them from one another.<sup>14</sup> Dancer Lilly Creighton recalls how she as a beginning tanguera became ostracised by the other women in her community, who resented her specifically for the way her appearance allowed her to jump the queue:

Denver had a pretty strong scene when I started learning, that was like 35 and up. And I was nineteen, right? And fresh and dewy-eyed and wearing scandalous outfits, and so we'd show up to the milongas and I wouldn't sit down. Like I danced the whole night.... And unbeknownst to me there was this growing hate of me among the older women. Especially the older older women, who were now that much less likely to get a dance with these leads, right? (21 March 2013)

Certainly, female solidarity can work to counter these forces. In this case, one of those older women actively defended Creighton to her friends, and let her know what was happening behind her back. Any number of other interventions may be deployed against the patriarchal superstructure.<sup>15</sup> Demonstrative expressions of female friendship and connection can work to keep unknown leaders at bay, for instance. Women often warn one another away from men who lead poorly, or violently, or harassingly.<sup>16</sup> They may engage in conversation with one another at the edge of the dance floor in part to help ensure that they are only approached to dance by people they already know (and to have a ready excuse for declining dances with those who do not take that initial hint). Tactics such as 29 / 30 as these that resist the forces demanding male access to female bodies may also breed frustrated sexist resentments, of course, and are not themselves without risk.

## BODY NORMS

In the musical *A Chorus Line*, the character of Val Clark briefly chronicles her trials as an aspiring dancer who finds herself perpetually uncast despite her talents. She is told at auditions that she cannot dance, but in truth she is simply flat-chested, skinny, and ugly. Val's moment of empowerment – where her speech becomes song – comes at an audition when she steals a casting director's scoring card. She finds she has been given highest marks for her dancing, but only three out of ten for looks. The epiphany prompts her to get plastic surgery, which propels her to a successful career on Broadway.

When it comes to having the right sort of body for social partner dancing, neither the stakes nor the standards are quite so high as they are for professional stage dancers. Yet neither is there ever

any judge's scorecard to inform you whether your body is being assessed for the way it moves or for its shape and appearance. The fictional Val's moment of empowerment will thus never be available to a social dancer in real life. Typically, the official line – the one that keeps you coming to lessons and classes – is that status on the floor is all about skill. The 'looks' category does not even exist. Those disillusioned with the world of social partner dance may critique it for its covert fixations on youth, attractiveness, and heteronormativity. Discussions that acknowledge the significance of appearance for attracting dance partners are uncomfortable, however, and thus unusual within the dance spaces themselves. The end result is a form of gaslighting made powerful, again, as a function of its being enforced by the social space itself rather than any discernible agent. (Did he ask her instead of me because she's ten years younger and showing more leg, or because I am not as good a dancer?) If your capacity to land dance partners, and the right partners, is predicated on some combination of skills and looks, and the line between those two categories can never be established, then the line between 'attractive dancer' and 'good dancer' cannot but similarly be blurred and unacknowledged. The silent conflation of looks and self-worth that rules in society at large is thus refined and intensified on the dance floor and its edges. The problem of finding a definitive line between skill and body type goes beyond discernibility to a question of whether such a clear break can even be said to exist at all. Most obviously, a dancer is more likely to be appraised as moving beautifully if their body is already conventionally beautiful. On an even more fundamental level, however, the shape, weight, strength, flexibility, and balance of a dancer's body all go simultaneously to looks and movement capacity.

One factor that may intensify the significance of looks for partnership formation is the convention of frequent partner changes. The social partner dance industry in the United States today trends heavily towards swing and Latin [30 / 31](#) forms, which are overwhelmingly taught through a basic step and a large set of associated moves. At social dances in these genres, the current prevailing norm in US contexts is to change partners after every song, presumably so that less-experienced leaders don't run out of vocabulary before finding someone new to dance with. This increases the value of appearance relative to skill, since more potential partners must be appraised at a quick glance, and unskilled partners become more tolerable given the quick turn-around. Even if the visual appraisal is meant to find skilled as opposed to attractive dancers, attractiveness may still be favoured given the abovementioned blurred lines between those two categories.

The demand to look the part can be tricky in particular for heterosexual men, since subjection to an appraising gaze has in modern Western society been constructed as a feminizing process. The expectation is often that men should not call attention to themselves on the dance floor, nor dance or dress too well lest they become sexually suspect.<sup>17</sup> The principle extends from a general social expectation that men should not cultivate physical skills unrelated to competition, functional labour, or violence.

Nevertheless, while these gendered expectations affect everyone both on the floor and off, they still act far more intensely on women than men. The traditional division between male leaders and female followers, combined with the practice of men initiating the partnership, work together to reinforce the distinct pressures society at large puts on women to be attractive. The normative process begins with men gazing around the room to determine who they want to dance with. Women can do the same, but their traditional capacity to reject is less effective in partner selection than men's traditional capacity to choose. The process thus reinforces a social norm of male subject to female object. The transition from partner selection to dance proper is also bridged by uninterrupted male initiative. The man escorts the woman to the floor and takes on his leadership role. The gendered lead/follow distinction further reinforces that subject/object relationship by positioning active masculine ability against passive feminine beauty. The fact that followers can and will close their eyes in an embrace reinforces this distinction. It also becomes easier for a female



follower to enjoy her male leader's body regardless of his age or appearance if she does not have to look at him.<sup>18</sup> Classes, furthermore, almost always implicitly privilege leading as the more valued skill by focusing on leaders' concerns to the detriment of followers'. In so doing they reinforce the common perception that leading is more difficult than following, and that all women really have to do is to show up and look good.

Once out on the social floor, women may also find that looking the part has a direct impact on their capacity to improve. One of the best ways to develop as a follower is to get a lot of time dancing with better and more experienced leaders. The resentment that Lilly Creighton bred as an attractive teenager among middle aged women in her local tango scene, mentioned above, was directly linked to the access her body granted her to skilled men, and her resulting accelerated development: [31 / 32](#)

It was really hard for a number of the other women to see someone like me come in and in six months become the dancer that they took five years to become. And now they're not getting asked to dance because I'm here and I look pretty in a dress, and all of this knowledge and time they spent to become good follows, and in a lot of cases good leads, and all of these leads they trained and put up with all of their awfulness had now all of this instant knowledge to impart to me, and were choosing to do so. (21 March 2013)

While men can also learn to lead more quickly if they have a chance to dance frequently with skilled followers, this principle has less impact than its inverse. As a baseline, of course, attractiveness tends in Western society to be weighted more heavily as a value for women, and skill for men. The social partner dance context reinforces this lopsided valuation by making it easier to dance with a beginning follower than a beginning leader. A skilled follower has less recourse to make the dance work with an unskilled leader than when the situation is reversed. The 'right' partner can also increase a dancer's status. For men, this often means attractive women, preferably with some level of skill. For women, this means skilled men, preferably with some level of attractiveness. In short, looks are more relevant to women's development than men's, since attractiveness is more likely to land women competent partners, and skilled leaders on the social floor can be more effective teachers than skilled followers.

The dance floor also tends to marginalise certain body types as a direct result of the advantage given to male leaders with visual command of the space and the ability to move their female followers with ease. A man who asks an unknown heavy woman to follow takes a calculated risk. If she lacks competence as a follower, he will not be able to control her movements as he might those of a lighter woman. Women who agree to follow shorter men, or men who agree to lead taller women, are also gambling. They run the risk of bumping into others on the floor as a result of the female follower obscuring the male leader's visual field. These factors naturalise and justify aesthetic preference for tall men and slender women, which is to say, conventionally masculine and feminine body types.<sup>19</sup> Western society's general tendency to exaggerate sexual dimorphism – encouraging women to diet and men to build muscle, for instance – is thus further intensified on the social dance floor.<sup>20</sup> The floor makes itself inviting to those whose bodies conform, and uninviting to others.

The obvious fissure in this system is that taller, heavier women and shorter, lighter men are potentially well situated to disrupt the gendered scripts of the lead/follow system. Tall women are indeed frequently conscripted into leading when women outnumber men on the floor, as often happens. This demographic is the most likely to become equally skilled at leading and following. Some tall women may be less than enthusiastic about constantly being expected to lead in these situations, however. They might want more chances to dance with men, they might feel their femininity is being undermined, or they might simply enjoy following more than leading. Short men

tend to have similar concerns, only greatly amplified. Men in general may feel more pressure to act masculine than women do to act feminine. Classically, men who act like women tend to lose status while women who act like men can actually gain it.<sup>21</sup> Short men 32 / 33 in particular may find themselves under added pressure to demonstrate their manliness.<sup>22</sup> This constraint is exacerbated on the dance floor by taboos on same-sex touching and embracing, which in Western contexts tend to be far more stringent for men than women.<sup>23</sup> While short men may be physically well-equipped to follow, therefore, they will typically (for that very reason) find themselves pressured to lead in more than equal measure. Fortunately for those men, most dance floors have a surplus of women, so they are less likely to be conscripted into following. Those short men who have not been dissuaded away from the floor altogether will therefore usually not represent any kind of threat to its heteronorms.

The particular bodies to which a floor makes itself welcome may also vary from one dance form to the next. The standards of bodily comportment for any given form (what I elsewhere call *choreohexis*) will always privilege a specific range of body types. Tango, for instance, favours moderately tall slim women with high centres of gravity. In part, this preference is a function of visual aesthetics, as the dance plays on the sexually charged dramatic capacities of women's long and slender legs.<sup>24</sup> A female follower will also find herself at greatest advantage if she is tall enough to maintain communication via a solid chest-to-chest connection with her male leader, yet short enough to allow him to see just over her head for the sake of floorcraft. A high and forward-tilted centre of gravity, exaggerated by heels and the A-frame's upward stretch, is also advantageous. Biomechanically, it puts her closer to teetering, making her easier to lead in quick and subtle weight shifts. Lindy hop, conversely, allows for more bottom-heaviness, the effect of which is maximised via that dance's athletic posture. Visually, the eyes are drawn to the butt. Biomechanically, a lower centre of gravity increases the effect of counterbalance in the swing-out, while at the same time granting the stability to manage the resulting inertia. The end result is a situation in which putative racial differences are simultaneously aestheticised, naturalised, and reified via the distinct body types for which these different dances select. Lindy is marked black in its bottom-heaviness, tango white in its slenderness.<sup>25</sup> Certainly, people can still dance all of these dances with the 'wrong' body.<sup>26</sup> They will find more obstacles in their path, however, and will be less likely to rise to the level of elite and model dancer.

The power of social partner dancing to materially mould and shape its constituent bodies lies greatly in the concealment of its influence behind a veneer of naturalism. Even in society at large people have a tendency to confuse physical form and biological predetermination, forgetting the social pressures that make women smaller and more delicate, and men bigger and stronger. The dance floor, in turn, reinforces these pressures by making itself less welcoming to those whose bodies do not conform to those heteropatriarchal standards. It does so less by the challengeable agency of any of its individual participants than as an aggregate result of its structural parameters. These parameters, being modelled on practices of embodiment in society writ large, are structured so as to be similarly natural-seeming. Certainly, there are many dancers, teachers, and event organisers who work actively to counter these pressures. Women can ask men to 33 / 34 dance, people can dance same-sex or role-switched, and classes can give equal time to both parts. Queer-friendly dance spaces also have a long history.<sup>27</sup> Yet because the structural constitution of lead/follow partner dance itself is formed out of those pressures, on no floor where those dances are practiced can those forces ever be neutralised completely.

## THE COMMODIFIED BODY IN THE SOCIAL DANCE MARKETPLACE

Scholars of the body have noted a historical change in the relationship of the body to society that came along with the rise of consumer culture. Shame associated with the body in the West shifts from being a function of its carnality to being a measure of its failure to conform to standards of



youth, beauty, and health. No longer a thing to be concealed, the body is to be put on display as a demonstration of its exchange value.<sup>28</sup> Attention to care of the body is no longer framed as a responsibility to society.<sup>29</sup> Instead it becomes a key to personal social mobility.<sup>30</sup>

In few spaces are the construction of the body as a saleable product more palpable than on the social partner dance floor, that living metaphor of the relationship marketplace.<sup>31</sup> Dancers expend a great deal of time and energy making their bodies into increasingly valuable commodities for their fellow dancers, the better to trade on for privileged access to one another. The pressure experienced by dancers to condition their bodies through grooming, hygiene, dress, and (most of all) training is doubly felt as both an avenue to personal advantage, and in its frequent framing as a responsibility to the dancing community itself. In this respect, it manifests all the forces of market capitalism on the body, while still retaining the pressures of communal accountability that those forces have supposedly eclipsed.

Bourdieu's three-way flow of economic, social, and cultural capital is very much at play in this marketplace.<sup>32</sup> All of the standard ways of investing in your own body to make it appealing to others will pay off in the dance space just as it does beyond it. Time and money spent at the gym, on grooming, clothing, accessories, and makeup can all grant a dancer value as a potential partner. Dress that exaggerates masculinity for men or femininity for women is almost always an advantage for those who wish to dance in traditional roles, while drag and other queering interventions can signal more flexibility, with all the social risk that can entail.<sup>33</sup> Dance shoes flag an economic investment in the practice that signals to others that you are not a rank beginner, and other forms of specialised dance clothing can reinforce this message. Dancers whose standing is such that they no longer need to prove themselves (and those who aspire to this category) may move away from these sorts of specialised markers, however. In some rare cases a particularly well-established dancer's idiosyncratic style will become a clothing trend in itself. [34 / 35](#)

Beyond sartorial choices, the most efficient way for a dancer to turn economic capital into both social and cultural capital is to join group classes. The increase in embodied cultural knowledge is the most obvious effect. More than this, however, fellow classmates will also help form a social network, as will certain teachers who take students under their wings at dance events, introducing them to others in the space. For women learning to follow, group classes may even be more important for networking than for skill development, since those classes frequently orient themselves more toward leaders' technique than followers'. Larger dance scenes will usually offer multiple levels of classes from beginning to advanced, allowing students to spend more money to 'level up' in both social and cultural capital.

Private lessons are a quicker but pricier route to embodied cultural knowledge. They are probably most popular in tango, due in part to that dance's culture of expensiveness, and in part to the weight it places on subtle communication in close embrace, which is notoriously difficult to teach in group settings. Professional instructors in almost any form will usually offer private lessons, however, if nothing else than as a key to their own economic survival. Private lessons offer less of a social network of fellow students than group classes, though private teachers with regular students will often feel a greater obligation to help them connect to others in social dance settings.

The economic investments in training and dress are made in advance of the dance event, and the social capital generated via group classes is similarly preestablished. The embodied cultural knowledge gained in lessons and training, however, must be performed in real time on the dance floor to become an effective element of self-commodification. To parlay personal skills into becoming a popular dancer who gets to dance with other popular dancers takes a good deal of work. Choosing the right partners to begin with is a significant part of this, as the level of the people you are dancing with establishes your own level by association. Obviously, it can be useful to dance in a way that makes you and your partner look good. Especially in forms that are less flashy, however, it

can be just as valuable to dance in a way that makes your partner feel good, so that they will dance with you again and recommend you to others.<sup>34</sup> Tango instructor Christopher Nassopoulos remarks:

I have basically made it my desire and my intention to really take care of the follower and so instead of getting kudos from a crowd of people I get reward and ego boost from basically one woman at a time if you will, one follower at a time, and that's very rewarding. It's very nice when somebody goes back to a table and says 'wow, that was really comfortable', or 'he really took care of me and I felt very safe on a crowded floor' or something of that nature. (26 March 2013)<sup>35</sup>

Many social skills brought to the floor from the outside world will also help. Whether you tend to find success in everyday life with friendliness and gregariousness, or hard-to-get chilliness, all of those skills will likely be transferrable. [35 / 36](#)

## PARTNERING AS SOCIALIZATION

The techniques and politics of partnering up may vary from scenario to scenario, and even from person to person in terms of their deployment, but the basic endgame is similar for almost everyone. There are those you want to dance with, those you do not want to dance with, and still others about whom you might feel neutral. The goal is to find out who in the space falls into the first category, and to get to dance with them while avoiding dances with those in the second. Most people (though not all) will want to ensure that the people they are dancing with actually enjoy dancing with them as well, since it may be difficult to find satisfaction being partnered with someone who would rather be somewhere else.

Reasons for wanting to dance with a given partner may be numerous. Most obvious is that the physical experience of the dance itself is likely to be enjoyable, but it might also be that you simply like them as a person, or that you are attracted to them, or that being seen dancing with them might improve your standing on the floor and thus expand your future options. Inversely, you might avoid dancing with certain people because you think the dance experience itself might be physically unpleasant or even painful or unsafe, or that they might be interested in you but you are not interested in them, or that they might sexually harass you, or that being seen dancing with them might lower your standing on the floor.

The point is that, everyone looking around the venue for their next partner is engaging in a similar evaluative exercise at the same time. (The music creates this simultaneity in the moment of its absence; the brief pause between songs signals its onset.) The aggregation of these processes, each of which is also individually inflected by an awareness that everyone else is doing the same thing, produces the social pressures that constantly hone and shape the space's constituent bodies. The venue hosts a game of hot and cold, gradually becoming warmer to each dancer as they grow closer to its ideals. The social pressures that shape those adaptations in turn influence new individual decisions, which create new social pressures, and so on and so forth. In this way, the system sustains and perpetuates itself. This process is what makes partner formation the primary practical mechanism by which a dance floor enforces its embodied social norms.

Most significantly, the structural power of this system relies on its being diffused to the space as a whole rather than being enforced by any given identifiable agent within it. While the gender dynamics of partner dance may be most clearly visible within the partnership dyad, or in the literal process of partnering up, they neither begin nor end in either place. The system manifests the principle, as Bourdieu puts it, 'that "interpersonal" relations are never, except in appearance, individual-to-individual relationships and that the truth of the interaction is never entirely contained in the interaction'.<sup>36</sup> This diffusion of agency makes those social pressures very difficult to resist.

Again, the specific mechanisms according to which this process operates may vary situationally and by dance tradition. It is broadly true, however, that no matter the specific context, the venue will work to mould its 36 / 37 dancers to fit its norms. Those norms will be taught explicitly in classes and workshops, as well as implicitly through observation and experimentation, then tested and operationalised in the moment of partner selection. And then by repetition and familiarity – particularly among those who have moved in multiple different partner dance contexts and been habituated to their overarching similarities – the system will become naturalised and thus generally resistant to critical interrogation.

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## NOTES

1. Wendy Buonaventura notes that the new standard of smooth, wooden dance floors in the eighteenth century was key to the development of dances like the waltz: ‘The polished surface of a wooden floor made it possible to dance faster and more smoothly than before. Now that dancers no longer had to lift their feet up to avoid stumbling over an uneven surface, they could move in a smooth, flowing pattern instead of leaping about, and this also made it easier to turn and spin’. Wendy Buonaventura, *Something in the Way She Moves: Dancing Women from Salome to Madonna* (Cambridge: DaCapo Press, 2004), p. 68.
2. Ethnographer Phil Jackson makes a similar observation about clubbing: ‘Only the most confident or intoxicated clubbers walk straight into a club and directly onto the dance floor. The majority of punters must first accustom themselves to the space itself and start to relax into it’. Phil Jackson, *Inside Clubbing: Sensual Experiments in the Art of Being Human* (Oxford: Berg, 2004), p. 17.
3. Ethnographer David Walsh notes a similar spatial feature in nightclubs, which he identifies with the function of allowing people to solidify romantic and sexual partnerships initiated on the floor. David Walsh, “‘Saturday Night Fever’: An Ethnography of Disco Dancing”, in Helen Thomas (ed.), *Dance, Gender and Culture*, (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1993), pp. 117–18.
4. Carolyn Merritt suggests that a trend away from formal milongas and toward practicas in the Buenos Aires tango scene was a direct result of women wanting to avoid being hit on by old men. Carolyn Merritt, *Tango Nuevo* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012), pp. 85–87. Lighting is often the primary visual signifier of the difference between those two kinds of spaces. Victor Lane, who helped take over and turn around a weekly blues dance in San Francisco that had previously had a reputation for being unsafe, advised another event organiser facing a similar situation: ‘You also need to discourage behaviour you don’t want. One thing we did was simply turn the lights up a little bit. That really changed the tone of the venue. People are less likely to be actively creepy if everyone can see them do it’ (posted to the Facebook group: ‘Safety Dance: Building Safe and Empowered Social Dance Communities’ on March 11, 2017, quoted with permission).
5. This is true for the most part. Some dancers will feel free to correct their partners verbally on a social floor, and certain venues will make it more explicitly acceptable (particularly where that practice dovetails with clarifications of consent). Some teachers may also discourage students from correcting one another in class.
6. Even dance-dedicated venues today will often serve multiple kinds of dance, not all of which are social, and not all of which are partnership-based. For a discussion of the ‘first wave’ of the partner dance industry and its venues, see, for example, James Nott, *Going to the Palais: A Social and Cultural History of Dancing and Dance Halls in Britain, 1918–1960* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 13–26.
7. Margot Lyon and Jack Barbalet give armies, churches, and families as examples of corporate bodies. They suggest that these larger social bodies are constituted sometimes via emotional practices that forge togetherness, like marching or choral singing, and sometimes through routine, like every day touching within a family. Margot Lyon and Jack 37 / 38 Barbalet, ‘Society’s Body: Emotion and the “Somatization” of Social Theory’, in Thomas Csordas, (ed.), *Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 55–56. The social partner dance floor, of course, does both.

8. See Tim Cresswell, “‘You Cannot Shake that Shimmie Here’: Producing Mobility on the Dance Floor”, *Cultural Geographies*, Vol. 13, no. 1 (2006): 74.
9. David Kaminsky, *Social Partner Dance: Body, Sound, and Space* (New York: Routledge, 2020).
10. In lindy contexts, this part of the floor is sometimes called the ‘Cat’s Corner’, a tradition going back to the Savoy ballroom. Juliet McMains and Danielle Robinson, ‘Swingin’ Out: Southern California’s Lindy Revival’, in Maureen Needham (ed.), *I See America Dancing: Selected Readings, 1685–2000* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), p. 86; William Given, ‘Lindy Hop, Community, and the Isolation of Appropriation’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Theater* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 733–34; Norma Miller and Evette Jensen, *Swingin’ at the Savoy: The Memoir of a Jazz Dancer* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), p. 107.
11. For a discussion of some of the history of women asking men to dance as a movement, see, for example, Nott, *Going to the Palais*, pp. 178–81.
12. Tellingly, the problem whereby someone must make the best possible selection from a dwindling number of options made available one at a time has historically been presented in consistently sexist terms, variously as ‘the Beauty Contest Problem’, ‘the Sultan’s Dowry Problem’, and ‘the Secretary Problem’.
13. David Kaminsky, ‘Gender and Sexuality in the Polska: Swedish Couple Dancing and the Challenge of Egalitarian Flirtation’, *Ethnomusicology Forum*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (2011): 131.
14. The same principle may be in operation no matter how ‘chivalrous’ the context. Ethnographer Shelly Ronen notes that grinding at college parties works in much the same way, for instance. Men approach women to grind up on them, and women use body language to either accept or reject their advances. Rarely do women initiate contact, and the system does not really support it when they do. Shelly Ronen, ‘Grinding on the Dance Floor: Gendered Scripts and Sexualized Dancing at College Parties’, *Gender and Society*, Vol. 24, no. 3 (2010): 367–68. See also Nott, *Going to the Palais*, p. 177.
15. Kathy Davis reports, for instance, on competitiveness among women at milongas, and various passive-aggressive behaviours involving women claiming seats that make themselves visible, and forcing other women into less-desirable positions. Kathy Davis, *Dancing Tango: Passionate Encounters in a Globalizing World* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), pp. 25–26.
16. Deborah Kapchan discusses female solidarity through trash talk in Austin’s salsa scene, for instance. Deborah Kapchan, ‘Talking Trash: Performing Home and Anti-Home in Austin’s Salsa Culture’, *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 33, no. 3 (2006): 364.
17. See, e.g., Nott, *Going to the Palais*, p. 177.
18. See, for example, Theresa Buckland, *Society Dancing: Fashionable Bodies in England, 1870–1920* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), pp. 120–22.
19. I thank Karin Stolare for this insight.
20. These aesthetic preferences are intimately tied to a social norm of masculine domination, as Pierre Bourdieu has noted. *Masculine Domination*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp. 35–37.
21. Pierre Bourdieu suggests that social norms of bourgeois feminine body shape have come to be enforced by a raft of experts: ‘Doctors and diet experts armed with the authority of science, who impose their definition of *normality* with height-weight tables, balanced diets or models of sexual adequacy; couturiers who confer the sanction of good taste on the unattainable measurements of fashion models; advertisers for whom the new obligatory uses of the body provide scope for countless warnings and reminders (“Watch your weight!” “Someone isn’t using...”); journalists who exhibit and glorify their own lifestyle in women’s weeklies and magazines for well-heeled executives – all combine, in the competition between them, to advance a cause which they can serve so well only because they are not always aware of serving it or even of serving themselves in the process’. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard 38 / 39 University Press, 1984), p. 153, italics and ellipsis in original. Sandra Lee Bartky argues similarly of the women who receive all this information that the discipline by which they shape their bodies to social norms of health and beauty is largely internalized. Sandra Lee Bartky, ‘Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power’, in Rose Weitz (ed.), *The Politics of Women’s Bodies: Sexuality, Appearance, and Behaviour*, Third Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 90.



22. This observation has perhaps most famously been made by the character of Julie in Ian McEwan's book *The Cement Garden* (also sampled from the film version by Madonna in her song 'What It Feels Like for a Girl'): 'Girls can wear jeans and cut their hair short and wear shirts and boots because it's okay to be a boy; for girls it's like promotion. But for a boy to look like a girl is degrading, according to you, because secretly you believe that being a girl is degrading'. Ian McEwan, *The Cement Garden* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), pp. 55–56.
23. The scholarly literature presents little to no evidence to support the existence of 'Napoleon complex' as a measurable social or psychological phenomenon. (The supposed complex would not even have applied to Napoleon himself, since he was actually taller than the average Frenchman of his time, the historical confusion regarding his height stemming from a difference between French and British inches). The social pressures on men to perform masculinity are certainly very real, however, and intensified for those whose bodies fail to live up to the standards of normative maleness.
24. For a discussion of the male touch taboo, see, for instance, Fredric Rabinowitz, 'The Male-to-Male Embrace: Breaking the Touch Taboo in a Men's Therapy Group', *Journal of Counselling and Development*, Vol. 69, no. 6 (1991): 574–76. This taboo also functions as a marker of privilege, and so does not apply equally to all men in the Western world. It carries more force in Western and Northern Europe than the Mediterranean and Eastern Europe, more among the upper classes than the working classes. The fact of male/male partnering in the early development of Argentine tango may be credited in part to the fact that many of its early practitioners were working class immigrants from areas of Southern Europe.
25. For a discussion of the fetishization of women's legs in tango, see, e.g., Melissa A. Fitch, *Global Tangos: Travels in the Transnational Imaginary* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2015), pp. 62–64.
26. This also places the tanguera's body closer to the classic ballerina's body, which likewise in its stick-slimness represents an ideal of white upper-class femininity. Erynn Masi de Casanova and Afshan Jafar, 'Bodies, Borders, and the Other: An Introduction', in Erynn Masi de Casanova and Afshan Jafar (eds.), *Bodies without Borders*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. xiii–xiv.
27. Julie Taylor notes, for example, that social tango's openness to all sorts of bodies – 'fat, thin, aged, youthful, fair, ugly, sickly' – tends to be touted by milongueros as a democratizing impulse within the dance. Julie Taylor, 'Death Dressed as a Dancer: The Grotesque, Violence, and the Argentine Tango', *The Drama Review*, Vol. 57, no. 3 (2013): 125.
28. See, e.g., Chad Heap, *Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife, 1885–1940* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), pp. 264–74.
29. Mike Featherstone, 'The Body in Consumer Culture', in Mike Featherstone, Mike Hepworth, and Bryan S. Turner (eds.), *The Body: Social Process and Cultural Theory* (London: Sage, 1991), p. 177.
30. Thomas Csordas, 'Introduction: The Body as Representation and Being-in-the-World', in Thomas Csordas (ed.), *Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 2.
31. Susan Bordo, 'Reading the Slender Body', in Mary Jacobus, Evelyn Fox Keller, and Sally Shuttleworth (eds.), *Body/Politics: Women and the Discourses of Science* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 95.
32. Marketed here is not only the individual body, of course, but also the event's general promise of sociality and intimacy. Julia A. Ericksen, *Dance with Me: Ballroom Dancing and the Promise of Instant Intimacy* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), pp. 25–29. [39 / 40](#)
33. For a detailed discussion of these three major forms of capital, see Pierre Bourdieu, 'The Forms of Capital', in John Richardson (ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, trans. Richard Nice (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), pp. 241–58.
34. Kathy Davis and Carolyn Merritt both note that in tango, women discover they are asked to dance more if they dress feminine, and especially if they dress sexy. In particular it helps to show some skin. Merritt, *Tango Nuevo*, p. 98; Davis, *Dancing Tango*, p. 107.
35. The capacity manifested in partner dance training that allows a dancer to develop their own body to increase sensitivity to their partner's is described in more general terms by Richard Shusterman as a key function of his philosophy of somaesthetics. For Shusterman, somaesthetics 'connotes both the cognitive sharpening of our aesthesis or sensory perception and the artful reshaping of our somatic form and functioning, not simply to make us stronger and more perceptive for our own sensual satisfaction but also

to render us more sensitive to the needs of others and more capable of responding to them with effectively willed action'. Richard Shusterman, *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 43, italics in original.

36. Leaders in these more minimalistic tango contexts may also be judged visually by outsiders based on their followers' facial expressions, in particular on whether they are smiling and dancing with their eyes closed. Davis, *Dancing Tango*, p. 40.
37. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 81. [40](#) /