

On an equal footing

From the global to the intimate – poetics and politics of Argentine Tango dance

In order to recognize a symbol by its sign observe how it is used with a sense – Ludwig Wittgenstein

What images do you, the reader, see popping up in your mind when you read the words ‘Argentine Tango’? Is it a knife duel between men fighting to gain the favour of a prostitute on a street of a Latin city, or a wild woman with a rose in her teeth facing her iconic Hollywood star Rudolph Valentino? Maybe to you suddenly appear, frozen in time, Carlos Gardel’s romantic smile, or the sensuous Al Pacino’s embrace, whilst a young woman is blindly falling in love with him, dancing? Perhaps your images are more general – a sexy woman’s feet clad in high heels, her legs stretched out as the man looks down at her in a stylized dance pose? I mention only a few, although of course, you may see something entirely different.

Yet, what if now we switch off the headlights and whilst dropping behind our eyes into the hollow darkness of our bodies, we allow ourselves to experience the connecting to the same words from that darkness – in this moment – truly anew? And what if, just like writing a story from a blank page, we try to see and to communicate the idea of tango together, from within this darkness, and dropping further via the sensory and sensuous portals of our feet, from within the darkness of the earth? For, by rooting our imagination inside the womb like spaces of the body and the earth, we can not only understand the idea of tango better, but also attempt to ‘decolonise ourselves’ in relationship to it (Marta E. Savigliano, 1995). Suspending our ‘civilized’ (my emphasis) judgements and illuminating the tango images, practical forms, rituals and stories from our common archaic origins, yet also from the fresh and personally embodied experience, we can allow ourselves to see beyond the violence, doom and gloom and cliché generally attached to the tango phenomenon, can ‘disturb erotic stereotyping’, ‘which usually universalizes its appeal and banalizes its tragedy’, as well as resist the making of the third world men and women of tango into primitive yet exotic ‘others’ (Marta E. Savigliano, 1995: 32).

Do understand, I am not suggesting the images we see are untrue. But they, like particles of light on an infinite journey, arrive to us through the fractures of time and constantly require to be seen anew. They are imperfect impressions of a collective creation dependent on the individual giving them meaning in the here and now. They are embodied ideas in flux, like words are too – being continually birthed from the original blackness.

Thus, by consciously inhabiting the inner landscapes of the body, I in fact wish to invite us to ‘re-member’ tango in its ‘contemporary shape’. And by ‘contemporary’ I don’t quite mean ‘modern’ – but I refer to a curious way of being both inside as well as outside of form that is defined by its history and politics.

I am well aware however, that I am only speaking in post-modern terms, i.e. I wish to talk about the whole of tango, yet I am starting from the limitations of my own post-modernity, which is defined by the interest in the multiple rather than the fixed modes of body’s representation. It also calls for curiosity about the processes of embodiment, the seeing/writing/making of the various bodies, which allows us to see that the body has its own language and awareness and through this language and awareness is capable of enfolding and reflecting the world as its own mirror image.

However, I am also aware that, just as the body of a dancer rests on its own feet and the feet rest on the earth, the tango, or any other body-based practice in the post-modern or any other shape rests upon its origins. This is why it is possible to see in today’s practice of tango the thread that links the different times within the form. Within an ever-changing present, each moment of tango created is both familiar and yet completely new.

Furthermore, this linking thread leads us to see that whatever exists now, has in fact always been – i.e. by always (at all times) connecting to its origins, it has also become ‘timeless’. And by extrapolating further, it is this timeless quality of tango that has given it a capability of being at once fashionable and up-to-date as well as out-of-date, *démodé*. In fact, it is this curious way of allowing freedom and innovativeness, whilst also being firmly and deeply grounded in tradition, arching across the gap between the past and the future, that in my view, makes tango permanently ‘contemporary’.

As Giorgio Agamben explains, that which is ‘contemporary’ is ‘always in advance in respect to itself and precisely for the same reason belated/delayed’. For Agamben, ‘the

gesture of contemporariness labels the present with the mark of the archaic,' where, 'archaic means 'near to the arche, the origin,' but, he also adds, 'what we call here origin is not located in the chronological past; it is contemporary to the historical becoming' (Giorgio Agamben, 2007). In the bodily terms of tango - the arche of the foot takes us back to the dance's origin, as well as springs us forward!

My intention therefore isn't to look into the past in order to dig for the sake of digging, but by listening and seeing through my feet, I wish to retrieve that, which by coming into visibility for the future, can spring us into an embodied sense of here and now. Of course, like everything that lies underground, tango roots are enveloped in the mystery of darkness, and that means that with any attempt to pull them into the visible one risks a part of them breaking away. Breakage and separation often bring about misinterpretation, exclusion and misuse, all of which tango has already had a fair share of, throughout its century and a half long history. But following my instinct, and in a true tango manner, I decide to push forward by releasing into the ground even more. And dropping from my head into the feet, I realize, I am in fact attempting to invite you, the reader, to step with care and sensitivity of a big cat, and like that, soft footed, even if only for a moment, embody with me the idea of tango – in writing.

Yet, what does that mean? How do I, a dancer, translate my own dance into words? And even if I do, will you follow? Through your own feet, will you hear the way both you and I touch the boundary of our earthly togetherness and attempt to co-create a dance through its walking story?

Tango is not the steps, but what happens between the steps – Carlos Gavito

At a place called milonga where the social form of Argentine tango is danced, at a tango workshop or a tango practice, one of the first things one hears is that there is nothing to fear - tango is only a walk. Yet, standing unguarded in front of you (another human being), even after 20 years long tango journey in my feet, still feels risky as well as exciting. I am immanently aware that if I say too much or I don't say enough I risk the dance never happening. But I also understand how: 'The body is never only what we think it is (dancers pay attention to this difference). Illusive, always on the move, the body is

at best like something, but it never is that something. Thus, the metaphors, enunciated in speech or in movement, that allude to it are what give the body the most tangible substance it has' (Susan Leigh Foster, 1995). Coming from the body, tango for me is in this kind of flux too, which also means that there is nothing to hold onto, one only has to stay curious and grounded in the present.

I therefore relax and fall into uncertainty, surrendering further to the inner recesses of the body, its inmost curvaceous spaces and longitudinal crevices. I wonder what metaphors are here to move us. Like in my physical tango practice, I sense through my feet the connection with the floor beneath me, noticing how its surface pushes as well as supports me, and I allow myself to melt into the feeling of my own centredness and deep grounding within the earth. The cushions of my feet keep me physically planted in this feeling. Softening through the whole body, I breathe through the feet, following with my awareness the cyclical and infinite movement of the breath, its flow between the inside and the outside of the body connecting me into one continuous stream of awareness. My skin tells me I am inside earth; my breath also the earth's breath. Still listening through the feet, I feel my chest and my heart opening. I connect to a sense of arrival and continue to attend to the internal movement and its impulses, which makes me feel in resonance and in communication with the movement of everything else in this field of kinaesthetic vision. From the outside I see my feet are the portal connecting my body to the body of the earth and from the inside of my feet, I see that earth and I are 'one'. In my heart I know I am embracing my own sense of the essence of this tango. Essence that is, as I understand, at all times related to the roots of the matter as well as the potential to shape-shift and to embody uncertainty of the unknown.

I free my imagination – the heart's eye. Who could you be out there, what do you like to wear, what is your hair like today, what are your interests, are you male or female? You are 'one of many' readers, although I like to think of you as 'many in one' as well. To me, you are already reading this essay, but to you the 'now' of mine is a future tense. I don't know you personally, you are a stranger, but the fact you are/will be reading these words, already says something about you and brings you closer. In tango that is enough. In fact, in tango, to dance with a 'relative stranger' is an essential part of the dance.

If by exercising your own power to choose, you decide to accept my invitation to this tango, I, as its leader, am to make a structural frame of the dance and send the

moving impulse to you, trusting that you will openly receive my call and willingly respond to it. Generating movement through a gradual transfer of weight from one foot to another, shifting the central axis between the standing/grounding and the 'free' leg, from chest to chest, hearts together as if suspended in time and space, our walking rhythm is to become a combination of stillness and dynamic movement, tension and release. Tango is only a walk, but to walk together in sync with another is not an easy fit. For that, I must remain receptive to your, my reader's needs and invitations as well. I ought to follow as well as lead, and you, connecting with me 'out of time', are always leading as well as following. If this was not so we would end up dancing locked inside our own bubbles - not really a huge problem in itself, but not exactly the idea of tango either. So, catlike, giving to the ground, whilst also arching from it, we are both making a leap of faith proceeding. Tango is a heart's dance – and a way to learn how to navigate its landscapes is via the perceptive qualities as well as the driving power of the feet.

Traditionally in tango, the leader is a man and the follower is a woman. But in the spirit of contemporariness, I am bringing into this tango what throughout time has been practiced in the darkness behind the curtains, at the fringes as well as at the very beginnings of the form in making – a wider possibility of a dance that admits gender differences as its important and defining factor, nevertheless the dance, which doesn't exclude same gender dancing alongside the usual mixed-gender, therefore allowing for a much wider and more colourful spectrum of feeling and footsteps to develop through it.

Hence, if you have said yes to the invitation and you are reading this line, then we can both lean over our toes, and let the weight of our bodies, as if pulled by an invisible string passing through our hearts, take us into a tango walking encounter, trusting that the strength of our foothold will also give the lightness to our footsteps and let them carry us. Eagle like, lifted by the energy of the two, dance in this way can gain wings, and at times even 'crowning the heightened states of being' can in turn bring healing and rejuvenation as well as reflection about deep issues (Robert Farris Thompson, 2005: 67). If the attentiveness is full, by listening to the way each one of us silently translates our sense of the living rhythm and melodies into a walking movement, for the length of one dance, magically, we may be able to create a mythological four legged tango animal with just one body, two heads and the wings. And if we imagine ourselves in a milonga,

this animal may also grow in size, gain more legs, wings, heads and more energy, although it will always remain contained within one, collective body.

Stepping together whilst holding each other within a tight embrace, all together tightly embraced by the earth, the tango people embody and co-create the tango soul by moving in unity, counter-clockwise, tracing the path of the sun. But are these words too intimate for this amount of distance, I wonder? Can my footsteps/my words reach that far and come back without getting trapped or lost on the way?

Tango is a dance in which, from the very beginning to the very end, there is nothing more or nothing less than an anxious quest for freedom – Rodolfo and Gloria Dinzel

I have spoken of tango's closeness and unity, but I also must declare something else as well. However tightly knitted people in tango are – the distance is always there. For tango starts and ends as a dance, a communication, a creative form... This means that individually, dancers are required to continually be aware of their own stand(ing), of the places in which their feet do and will land, of the quality of their foot placement. Also, they train an acute awareness of the way their axis is carried through each of their feet, which at all times throughout movement keeps them connected to their own independent feelings and needs. Through the vibrations of the floor, a sense of physical and imaginary connection to the earth, they furthermore connect to the feelings and needs of their partner and the other dancers on the floor, their feet being one of their most precious, sensitive and creative portals to their dance. And by learning to hold their creative distance, they also learn to observe, organize and shape these feelings via their own ideas into a tango. The embodied sense of individuality gives them a healthy knowing of a continuous boundary, which at the same time separates as well as unites them within a co-creative process.

Each tango when it is truly danced, even with well known partners, starts from point zero, from the origin, the darkness, the place of not knowing and treating each moment, each person and each dance as if it is totally new. Trusting their own sense of axis and connection through their deeply planted feet, the dancers let their body arch and translate its weight over, into the unknown of their ever shifting encounter. Partly, this is why everybody on the tango dance floor feels that, at least for that very first moment of the encounter, they are embracing a 'stranger'. And beyond one's immediate

judgement of the situation, they know this is an incredibly empowering act. Dancing the tango, one steps out of the limitations of time, and embraces the whole world, beyond one's individuated imagination. There are of course levels of distancing and 'estrangement' that we could endlessly analyse as well, but the point is that the distance is always there. The dance needs the distance, because the dance is (in) the infinite travelling towards its closure.

The distance, the individuation, the differentiation... aware of it, the intention and hope of any tango dancer on the milonga floor in fact, is to transcend it - even if only for as long as one dance. As Sonia Abadi in her book that speaks of the tango as it is danced in Buenos Aires says: 'Argentines, Uruguayans, people from the provinces or Buenos Aires porteños, Europeans or North Americans, they all show off and look each other over in the milonga. "Here, all the differences are erased: age, class, physical proportions," you hear the new people say with amazement and the milonga regulars with pride. It's true there's no discrimination, but the essential attraction of the milonga is precisely in the differences. The dance doesn't eliminate them, on the contrary, it accepts them. It takes them to the limit.'

There than, at the liminal edge, always moving closer and closer, is where tango is happening. There where each foot must be perfectly placed in relationship to everything else, softly and carefully yet with a determination and intent of someone who knows each step is life giving as well as life taking, just like each breath gives us life as well as takes us closer to death. There where the boundaries are blurred but also defined and clarified through the continual meeting of worlds, in the midst of conflict, infinite questioning and conversation about who came first, dance or the music, who decides first, men or women – tango is born and re-born. Tango as a tightrope walk and a poetic story of relationships and communication patterns which, in its social dance form, embodies a possibility of a world based on equality and balance within a feet-held rhythm and a heart-to-heart embrace. And by evoking this possibility every time that one engages with it, one also evokes the power to manifest it.

Manifesting this possibility wouldn't be possible without the ritualistic aspect of tango however, which, working with life's opposites, within the strongly defined boundaries allows for the greater sense of freedom, improvisation, intimacy and trust to unfold between the participants. When treated sacredly, tango becomes a spiritual

lesson, communion and a collective celebration of life's essential fire. Alighting the soul, tango becomes a symbolic action by means of which the spirits can descend, bringing joy, insight, inspiration and transformation and the ancestors can walk alongside the living... By gently touching and harmoniously walking the edge between the sky and the earth tango dancers lighten the load and escape the prison of the everyday, yet also express wholeness by evoking a feeling of being at home in the world.

An essential part of it, the ritualistic manner of being in tango clearly springs from its black roots, although this has not always been noted nor accepted. Marta E Savigliano writes quoting Vicente Rossi, author who traces the black culture in tango at the start of the 20th century in the Uruguayan capital Montevideo:

A serious and solemn attitude on the part of the dancers created the strange effect of a ritual, a "natural" ritual in that no evidence of effort was perceived as the orilleros (slum dwellers) followed the "insinuating anxieties of an irresistible cadence." Rossi explains that the notes "flew, soared and landed; started flying again, suddenly," never catching our dancers unaware. They traced with their feet an "invisible pentagram, graphing the musical language." Music and steps followed each other so closely that it was impossible to tell which one took place first, giving rise to the "suspicion" that "feet scribble" the music on the dance floor. (Marta E. Savigliano, 1995: 41)

Describing the world of tangueros and tangueras of today, Sonia Abadi also says:

A subtle balance of relations, where nobody needs to dominate. The selfish man who dances alone deprives his partner of the union she longs for. The couple closed in on itself is isolated from the rest, deprived of getting the sacred fire from them and of adding their own flame to the tribal dance. Those who are only showing off relinquish their privacy.

But when all the parties have been called together on equal terms, communion is perfect. The mystery of bodies in harmony, the tango magic leads them to ecstasy, emotion intense and complete emotion, body and soul. This way they live together, hearts beating in unison, "feeling how the blood comes to their face with each bar of the music", "mixing their breath", "closing their eyes to hear better."

In absurd contradiction they wish this tango could go on forever and end soon, for fear a stumble might break the spell. (Sonia Abadi, 2004: 42-43)

Highly ritualized environment is put in place, precisely in order to nurture the special opening, the crack in human time/space dimension through which spirit can come down to earth, possess the dancer's feet and make the whole community, including the observers fly in their hearts. But it is precisely through this relaxing of the everyday guard that the misuse happens as well. Throughout history, tango has played a role in sensual healing of the racial, class and gender displacements created by urbanization, war, immigration and colonial politics, but, as any popular dance form, it has also had an active role in re-creating them.

Through the gaze of the observer, which also plays an active role in making the dance - 'there is no "me" without "you": the observer completes the dance' (Benzecry Saba, 2007: 33) - tango images are created and interpreted, but also violated by ways of fixation and misinterpretation by the 'civilized' and the 'colonizing' eye/mind. Not content with only looking but happy to be a protagonist with one foot grounded in Argentina and the other in the West, Marta E Savigliano disturbs the status quo by creating new movements at the centre of action. She uncovers some of these mind-body dynamics within the world politics expressed through and by tango, carrying us further towards the belly of its darkness:

Tango is rooted in long-lasting conflicts over race, class, and gender supremacy. These conflicts are locally performed but globally framed through judgement over sexuality, that obscure question leading into – in Freud's words – a dark continent. Not surprisingly, in tango's case this darkness is associated with its black rioplatense roots.

Tango-eroticism-roots-sexuality-primitiveness-blacks is a chain of jumpy, imprecise associations that skip logical connections and yet make sense – rac(ial)ist sense hardly avoidable even in those well-intentioned antiracist attempts at understanding roots-tango-blacks-sexuality-and so on... So entrenched is the succession of these terms that the chain of thoughts is almost impossible to hold back. The participation of the black population of the Rio de la Plata region in the making of the tango has been turned into the construction of rioplatense blackness through the tango and its representations. In tango's case, the recovery of black roots (initiated by Rossi {(1926) 1958} and heftily debated ever since) has entailed

difficult paradoxes. On the one hand, it has acknowledged the importance of black participation in the creation of rioplatense popular culture – a fact that has frequently been neglected and even erased. On the other hand, no matter how important black participation is considered to be, positioning it at the “beginnings” of tango reproduces the racist association between blacks and “primitiveness.”

However, we only need direct our eyes towards today’s tango dance floor and notice that much of the black spirit is still alive within it, it is always contemporary. With an incredibly inspired academic voice, Robert Farris Thompson in his ground breaking book, Tango – The Art History of Love, makes us shake, vibrate and most of all walk with this spirit via the semantic roots, amongst others:

Kongo-derived burial traditions were strong on the River Plate. Figari painted a number of such rituals in black Montevideo. Note that the Kongo word for the celebration that traditionally ends mourning is tanga (or matanga). The word’s semantic range is broad. It means “drum,” “second funeral,” “festival,” or “dance.” Variations of the term refer to myriad modes of walking: tangala, “to walk with small steps”, tangalakana, “to walk making zigzags”; tanga dungulu, “to walk in a swaggering way”; tangala-tangala, “to walk like a crab.”

The semantic range of the Argentine word tango is equally broad and covers similar ground. Tango, too, means “drum,” “place of dance,” and “dance motions.” Earlier scholars were embarrassed by this, as if the multiple meanings were inherently contradictory. But the very nature of the word’s extension planted a clue as to its origin.

The tanga continuum, myriad dance terms with myriad nuances, seems a likely source for the name of Argentina’s national dance. As the Ki-Kongo term mambu was creolized to mambo in Cuba, so tanga may have changed into tango in Argentina.

Thus extending the roots in our minds, Thompson also reclaims the broken ones, in every little part reconnecting us to the ‘dark continent’ and its darkness to the Argentine tango (Marta E Savigliano, 1995: 32). ‘Bending down with the knees to the earth’ and ‘melting into’ the black sense of music, dance and language, he traces the

black footwork in tango and makes a firm footing where up until recently has only stood a footnote in its cultural history (Robert Farris Thompson, 2006).

As much as white, tango is black – filling the gap between them, it is an expression of the far away worlds meeting, and a calling of distant peoples to share stories of their bodies in the spirit of defiance and valour, amicable argument, reconciliation and celebration. Asking, ‘Whose embrace was the tango embrace?’ Marta Savigliano states: ‘Tango’s choreography emerged out of mutual admiration and scornful disdain among the different races, classes, and ethnicities lumped together in the city. The lighter-coloured ones imitated the skilful movements of the blacks and, self-conscious of their shortcomings, ended up caricaturing them. The darker ones, in trying to rub on some fashionable white elegance but knowing that this would bring them no more respect, mocked the loose embrace of the quadrilles, mazurkas, habaneras, and waltzes, tingeing it with bodily proximity and sweat. The tango dance emerged from these racial and class conflicts and competed for a place of its own among the dances that were already being danced, pending, as always, benediction in the cultural empires of the world. Men’s and women’s bodies displayed tensions of the “correct” and the “incorrect,” of the “civilized” and the “primitive,” of the “authentic” and the “parody,” and all these tensions were sexualized so as to render the conflicts natural, universal, and unavoidable.

But despite the fact that tango was born within the rather particular and complex socio-historical context of the Argentinean capital city of Buenos Aires in the late 19th century, after which it became and was heavily used as a symbol of the fixed gender and class, immigration and colonialism driven conflicts during the modern era of the 20th century, tango in the post-modern age has been shifting into more of a fluid global metaphor that has come to mean different things to different people and has come to, in its silent way, articulate personal differences more than the social ones. Nevertheless, continuing to keep hold of human imagination - across age, gender, class, culture or any other differences - the idea of the tango’s four legged animal still attracts and magnetizes people from all walks of life and in all corners of the world, to do what they can together – step within music into an experience of a dance ‘on an equal footing’.

Walking into the darkness of their world through their own embodied stories, the tangueros and tangueras of today express as well as help create the ever greater mobility of people around the world, reflect globalisation by making the tango into a global

commodity itself as well as are fraught with money issues and celebrity syndromes; all of which is still seen through the sexual and gender based issues that universalises their conflicts... Historically anchored in Argentina, yet created by displaced people of many different races, nations and cultures and as such 'untimely', their tango continues to vibrate between their maleness and femaleness, their courage to become footloose in order to leap into the new forms of being and their deep reverence for the tradition; between their ability to stand on their own feet and their ability to surrender into the vulnerability of being carried along by the shared energy (Giorgio Agamben, 2007). Always negotiating their position to their present in terms of a dual and even plural identity, a tango dancer is involved in the process of embodying the extremes of human experience by always grounding in and stretching out of the heart-center or a mid-line, whose spatial projection always falls right between the dancer's feet, creating an equidistant relationship with them, whether in two or three dimensions, stillness or movement.

Playing with roles of the actors and the 'spect-actors' in their tango theatre, today's tango dancers still recognise that beyond the conflict and inclusive of the gaze of the tango 'outsiders', their tango microcosm can teach them about macrocosm and bring them closer to feeling at home even when walking with 'strangers'. Thus they choose to follow in the shoes of their 'tango ancestors', still meeting at the milonga, to scribble with their feet the music on the floor bringing their spirit into the visible through the rituals of this social dance form. Many of them feel they have fallen through the rabbit hole, yet they fiercely believe their only way out is through the practice itself.

Juan Carlos Copes, a master of tango said: 'The (tango) dance is the coupling of two people defenseless against the world, and powerless to change things. This is the best definition of tango as a dance, I think.' Reading this may take you into darkness, which not everybody is happy to perceive in this way. 'But then, what does it mean to perceive the darkness? What happens when we shut ourselves in the darkroom, when we shut our eyes? Neurophysiologists tell us that the absence of light activates and sends emotion at a number of cells, which activate the special sensation that we call darkness. Therefore, darkness is not a negative phenomenon, which results from the passivity or inactivity of the retina, but it is the effect of the special activity of these off-cells, it is a production of our eyes' (Giorgio Agamben, 2007).

And if we return to the idea of contemporariness, Agamben explains Nietzsche's position: 'The contemporary is an untimely... Only he who does not perfectly coincide with his time truly belongs to it.... This disconnection or discrepancy does not mean that contemporary is the one who lives in another time. An intelligent man can hate his time, but he knows that he belongs irretrievably to it and has no escape from it. Contemporary in that sense is a peculiar relationship to one's own time, which adheres to it and at once distances itself from it. It is in other words a relationship to time which claims to it true a disjunction and an anachronism. Those that fully coincide with the epoch are not contemporary because they cannot see; they cannot fix their eyes on it.' In fact, Agamben continues, the contemporary 'is the one who is not blinded by the lights of the century, but is able to perceive its inner darkness'. He is someone for whom darkness is not something 'anonymous, inscrutable, something not meant for us, which therefore does not concern us', but on the contrary, 'the contemporary is the one who perceives the darkness of his time as his most intimate concern, as something, which directly addresses him. The contemporary is the one who gets directly into his eyes the beam of darkness' (Georgio Agamben, 2007).

To me, Copes fixes his eyes on the world precisely because his feet are firmly planted in the earth – because he is grounded in his embodied connection to his partner and his immediate environment. He also feels he belongs to the larger world as a person who can't reverse the world's problems and he really doesn't have a way to escape them either. Yet, he and his partner dance on. They walk together and create tango despite their powerlessness, which paradoxically gives them back their power. For this is how they also take their distance from this weakness and how they express their own resistance to it. And it is this resistance inherent within tango that gives them the courage and strength to stand firmly in the face of their own limitations in the world, still open and trusting.

In the echo of Copes' tango, I hear a total surrender and feel a 'nakedness' in front of the other person as well as the world, which speaks of an understanding that there is nothing to guard, though everything is to be given to vulnerability and through that to one's dance. For it is the dance that keeps one resilient and keeps one carry on. In my view, it is because of this ability to distance us, as well as face us with the darkest in ourselves and in the collective that tango summons Nietzsche's 'untimely', and because of that, those feeling the tango moving their feet, running through their veins and blood can also be called contemporaries. 'According to science, what we perceive as darkness

when we look up at the sky is the light of the galaxies, which moves fast towards us but yet cannot reach us.... Our time, our present, is not only the most distant from us, it cannot in any case reach us, its vertebrae are broken and we stand exactly at the point of this fracture' (Giorgio Agamben, 2007).

Jorge Luis Borges distils poetically:

I hear the echo of those tangos
of Arolas and Greco
danced upon the sidewalk,
an instant distilled that remains
without before, or hereafter, and anti-oblivion,
having the taste of everything lost,
and everything regained.

Between the immensity of loss and a huge sense of freedom, if we bend down to the earth as well as, through a heart's meeting, reach up for the stars, we can find a full acceptance of being in the moment in tango, which is nothing less than transformative. The transformation furthermore being expressed creatively.

The tango's great poet Discepolo describes this process as the iconic 'tango – sad thought danced', whilst Borges communicates it as a way to 'convert the outrage of the years into a music.' Devoting their lives to the creation of tango, lovers of tango live and dance on the go, certain in the midst of the dark light of uncertainty, at all times improvising. To them art and life are one and the same. It is why they often call tango a walk and a way of life. And walk is not about reaching the destination as much as it is about pleasures of staying present in each and every moment and step along the way.

They may not always see themselves as artists, they just are. And they mostly don't see themselves as social and political activists! For, like Copes says, they don't hope they can change the world, they only try to rise to the challenges of their time by standing directly facing its darkness whilst intimately, they seek to drop into their equally dark vulnerability to share and to communicate within a heart's embrace their bodily seeing, which puts everyone on an equal footing. But the act of giving voice to one's powerlessness through a creative expression is already an active and power-full choice of transformation and transcendence. And this is where, for me, lies tango's staying power.

Tango is self-transformation – Sally Sommer

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