

Queering Orientations: Towards A Queer Phenomenology of Queer Tango

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Academic writing has typically embraced Tango in terms of what is represented in the dance. In a way that curiously parallels prevailing narratives of queer cultures and identities, Tango is celebrated for its ability to evoke or rehearse either radical possibility or tragic impossibility. Tango is given to us as melancholic: borne of displaced communities nostalgic for a lost past, it ritualises colonial and gender hierarchies. It speaks of tragedy and loss both in lyrics which often focus on absence and betrayal and in movement which endlessly rehearses the deferred or unconsummated seduction. Or conversely it is written as transformative and joyful: the improvised dialogical nature of the dance suggests collaboration, creativity and strategies of resistance.

In place of this, I wish to make an argument for thinking Tango through phenomenology. In this way we can engage with Tango, and in particular Queer Tango, not as metaphor but as lived experience.

Phenomenology brings our focus to ways of being-in-the world and being-with-others, and in the work of Merleau-Ponty it is our direct embodied relationship with the world around us which is central to understanding human experience. In place of Descartes' definition of human being in terms of 'I think therefore I am' – a dualist perspective which locates subjectivity in the mind and relegates the body to mere object – Merleau-Ponty suggests that our primary sense of self is a practical embodied orientation towards the world and others: 'I can'. He names of this feel we have of our body and how it connects us to the world the 'corporeal schema' and considers it be developed through dynamic embodied interaction.

More recently, Sara Ahmed (2006) has enacted an encounter between phenomenology and queer theory (as well as post-colonial theory) in her book *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. She starts from phenomenology's claim that as embodied beings we are always already both located in the world and oriented towards the world in a particular way. Our being-in-the-world is thus always a particular form of situated engagement; it is positional and directional. Ahmed's insight is to think this through in relation to the rendering of identity and desire in terms of sexual 'orientation'. Thus we can begin to consider the ways in which lines of desires position us in and engage us with the world in particular ways. We experience and occupy the world in terms of orientations, trajectories, or lines of movement that may be aligned with the 'straight' lines of normative expectation or may not. Orientation is about where we've come from and how that affects where we're going, and these roots and routes through life in turn open up and close off certain possibilities to us.

So how can this help us understand the experience of queer tango? Firstly let us see what phenomenology can tell us about our experience of sharing the Tango embrace; about what it is to dance together. Having redefined subjectivity in terms of embodied presence to the world and others, we also find intersubjectivity – our sense of connection with the other as another human subject, not just an object in the world – redefined in terms of direct embodied experience. We recognise the other as another human being because we are both embodied in the same world and there is thus overlap between my experience of my body and my experience of other bodies. Merleau-Ponty speaks of this as a reversibility or reciprocity of perception: when my right hand touches my left, my body is both perceiving subject and perceived object, and this experience of reversibility is also present when I touch (or see or hear) you, and you me. Intersubjectivity is thus more properly thought of as intercorporeality: I recognise you as human like me by virtue of our mutual embodiment in the world.

This reimagining of the inter-personal as primarily inter-corporeal (rather than a question of the meeting of minds) allows us to make sense of some of the most basic and most significant aspects of dancing with someone. As we dance with the other, we can experience a deep

sense of connection with that person: an intersubjective connection which occurs at the corporeal level as we mutually perceive each other. Thus phenomenology helps us name and define the embodied understanding we develop of the other as we move with the other; the kinaesthetic empathy which allows us to gauge things from their immediate physical intentions to move in a particular direction through to more subtle states such as their current mood.

I offer the following quotations, which I collected while conducting an ethnographic study with dancers involved in contact improvisation, to illustrate this sense of connection and understanding that develops between bodies which dance together. As you read them, you might reflect on your own experiences of the Queer Tango embrace and thus your experience of intersubjectivity as intercorporeality:

- ❖ “You don’t talk you just know ... you feel inside and you just react – that’s the strange thing and that’s really exciting when you just have that, when it’s in sync like that.”
[Louisa]
- ❖ “There’s this different kind of awareness that you have to have, just because you have to be able to move together ... you have to talk with your bodies so you have to kind of listen to each other – you can’t always do it your way, you have to find the way.” [Anna]
- ❖ “You can kind of listen to each other through your bodies. You can become quite close to people – you have to be prepared to work very closely with people physically, but because you’re so close physically you, it opens up something mentally as well, there’s some connection there.” [Tara]
- ❖ “You can feel one another, be with one another and experience this thing with one another and I mean, when it gets to that point you know whether they’re feeling sad or whether they’re feeling happy and they don’t even have to even say anything so you know, you have a sense of how they are that day and you take that into account - there’s not a judgement on that it’s just this is how the person is today, this is how I am today and this what it is today and that’s why it’s beautiful.” [Steven]

There are, however, queer critiques of phenomenology which we must of course address if we are to employ it in order to make sense of Queer Tango. Firstly, Merleau-Ponty's definition of human being in terms of 'I can' may seem at odds with the lived experience of those whose lives are not so much about grasping the rich possibilities the world offers us but more about suppressing, hiding, passing and missing out. As Ahmed suggests, queer lives do not follow straight paths, but rather are lived obliquely¹. Furthermore we might question Merleau-Ponty's definition of intersubjective connection as based in the recognition of a reversibility between us; a recognition that the other who stands before me is a human being 'like me'. Where does this leave, we might ask, those whose lived experiences do not mirror those of all the rest; what chance is there of recognition for those whose embodied orientation towards the world may in fact be radically different from those they stand before?

Yet a queer phenomenology is one which overcomes this through a return to the basic insight that human being cannot be understood in Universalist terms. Subjectivity is always already embodied and thus positioned in and oriented towards the world in particular ways. Returning to this point is also important for thinking about just what 'reversibility' does and doesn't imply within the theory of intercorporeality. Reversibility here is something that happens between individuals, each of whom are embodied and situated in their own particular and unique way. Thus it is a theory of reaching out across difference, not of collapsing different human being into sameness.

So how are we to implement this queer phenomenology? By attending first and foremost to ways in which embodied beings experience themselves as oriented in particular ways, and to the paths and possibilities this opens/closes to us. As part of this we must attend to non-normative alignments (or perhaps lack of alignment) – to queer mis/alignment – and explore how such orientations shape our experiences and our trajectories through life. As we do this, we must of course also ask how things might be otherwise: how possibilities that seemed

¹ The origin of the word 'queer' is not known with any certainty, but Ahmed is interested in its links back to words which mean (*physically*) twisted, crooked, bent, etc. This etymology suggests a German root, linking the English word 'queer' to the German 'quer' which can be translated as 'oblique' and which is itself derived from a root meaning 'twisted'.

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closed off or out of reach from queer positionalities might become graspable or how straight paths might be encouraged to meander and multiply.

Queer Tango offers us a lived embodied experience through which it is possible to explore these ideas. Unlike traditional philosophical pursuits, it offers a mode of embodied thinking, through which we can open ourselves up to new types of knowledge – that derived from and expressed by situated, embodied, moving beings. In dance we directly experience ourselves as practically or physically orientated; we are reacquainted with a sense of directionality, of towards-ness, with respect to both the space of the world and the embodied others within it. The dancing of Tango is thus the intense (re)experiencing of those processes of bodily becoming and bodily attunement which underpin our lives more generally. Aspects of our bodily being that normally go unnoticed and taken-for-granted become apparent to us in Tango, and are potentially opened up to reflection and experimentation as we move in a creative and focussed way with the other. Moreover, queer(ed) dancing together allows for the experience of a mutual openness to and sharing, across difference, of non-straight(forward) orientations. Thus it is in the Queer Tango embrace that we might discover and explore how queer ‘disorientations’ (with respect to the straight path of the normative) might develop into new, collaboratively improvised movement patterns which, in turn, allow us to imagine and embody new ways of being-in-the-world and being-with others.