

Lady/Woman, Gentleman/Man: gender roles and relations in ballroom dancing

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Abstract

Discussions on the theme of ballroom dancing have grown intensely, especially when observing aspects such as leading, strength relations between partners and the roles of lady and gentleman. This article proposes to reflect on and highlight, based on literature findings, some proposals regarding leading developed in the area that seek to break with cisheteropatriarchy in ballroom dancing. Feminist studies linked to the debate on gender are presented and the concepts of "co-leading" proposed by Jonas Feitoza, "active lady" proposed by Míriam Strack and "shared leading" proposed by Carolina Polezi are discussed. Comments are also made on queer and gay *milongas* and their influence on the problematization of the concepts of lady and gentleman. The problematization of the relations between lady and gentleman, leader and follower, is still incipient with regard to its theory and is little applied in ballroom dancing teaching practices.

Keywords: ballroom dancing; leading; cisheteropatriarchy; gender identity; sexuality.

Introduction

Ballroom dancing is a manifestation that aggregates several dance styles and the way in which it is practiced has specific characteristics when compared to other forms of dancing.¹ Although the practice of ballroom dancing can be found in many places, theoretical production regarding it is still scarce. According to Pazetto & Samways (2018), when relating academic production regarding ballroom dancing with other arts and even with other types of dancing, the approach to the theme is lacking in both the artistic and the pedagogical perspective.

Through the feminist movement women have acquired rights hitherto denied to them. One of the most recent victories of the LGBTQIAPN+² community has been the right of

¹ The English version of this article was revised by the British David Ian Harrad. This article is an in-depth and expanded version of a paper presented in 2016 at the 5th International Symposium on Gender, Art and Memory (SIGAM), held by the *Universidade Federal de Pelotas* (UFPel). For further information on that paper, see Nunes & Froehlich (2016).

² We have chosen to use the acronym LGBTQIAPN+ as we believe that each letter is important as a form of recognition within the movement. The acronym includes lesbian women, gay men, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, pansexual and non-binary people.

transvestite and transsexual people to use their preferred name and to have their right to gender identity recognised.³

In view of this context of profound sociocultural changes, ballroom dancing, for some authors, should no longer be taught “in the same way it was taught when it first came into being” (ZAMONER, 2005, p. 71, our translation to English).⁴ However, the duality of male and female, gentleman and lady, is still preserved in the teaching of ballroom dancing, which goes back to the social roles of men and women in the period when ballroom dancing emerged (ZAMONER, 2011a, n.p.).

This article, written by a ballroom dancing teacher and co-authored by a researcher who is familiar with the universe of ballroom dancing, seeks to highlight certain discussions about leading in ballroom dancing, problematizing the cisheteropatriarchy that prevails in this milieu. Furthermore, we also present certain class and racial prejudices that, currently, remain intrinsic to ballroom dancing.

This paper is divided as follows: first, a brief history of ballroom dancing is presented, followed by some reflections on ballroom dancing today. Next, we will discuss feminist studies and their influence on the debate about gender. Following this, we will discuss three concepts for rethinking the relationship between the gentleman and the lady: “co-leading” as proposed by Jonas Feitoza, the “active lady” as proposed by Míriam Strack and “shared leading” as proposed by Carolina Polezi. We will then highlight the proposal of queer and gay *milongas* that aim to question the roles of the gentleman and the lady in ballroom dancing. Following this, we will provide our final considerations on the theme focussed by the article.

A brief history of ballroom dancing

Ballroom dancing has its origin in the court dances of the Renaissance period. At that time, dancing had a prominent role in events held by the courts and it was performed in different places: courts, provinces, houses, public squares (NUNES, 2016). At that time, a noteworthy phenomenon was taking place. According to Nunes (2016), many court dances were appropriations of popular dances of the time that were reconfigured so that they could be danced in the salons of the nobility. The greatest paradox in relation to this is that the less wealthy classes sought to learn these reformulated dances, which in fact came from their own cultural milieu.

Perna (2005) mentions that ballroom dancing emerged in Europe in the 15th century. However, those initial dances, which arrived in Brazil in the following century, “were ballroom

³ Right ensured by Decree No. 8727, dated April 28th 2016 (BRASIL, 2016).

⁴ Original text in Portuguese: “*nos mesmos moldes dos tempos de seu surgimento*”.

dances, but not the closed hold type” (PERNA, 2005, p. 11, our translation to English).⁵ The waltz, the first closed hold dance, became the most popular dance in Europe in the 18th century and conquered that continent’s ballrooms in the following century (McKEE, 2012).

According to Perna (2005), ballroom dances in Brazil have had Native, Black and European influence since the 19th century. European ballroom dances underwent a process of adaptation to the national common taste, mixing with the local music and dance culture that gave rise to the first genuinely national closed hold dance: the *maxixe*. Later, the *maxixe* contributed to another dance widely practiced today, the *samba*, and both, at first, were considered to be an affront to the “good social norms” of the time.

In the case of the *maxixe*, Efegê (2009) points out that the movements of this dance were judged to be vulgar by the elite and it was only accepted in brothels and at Black peoples’ dances, and was ignored in aristocratic ballrooms. The *maxixe* underwent a stylisation process conducted by dancer Antônio Lopes de Amorim Diniz, known as Duque, who took it to Europe and the USA at the beginning of the 20th century, where it was well received and thus finally became recognized in Brazil (EFEGÊ, 2009). It was, however, a reconfigured *maxixe*, in the same way as Renaissance popular⁶ dances were reconfigured at the time of the courts.

Like the *maxixe*, samba was also subject to prejudice. Their musicians were arrested⁷ and the *gafieiras*, places where balls with orchestras and ballroom dancing were held, were also not seen in a good light, and were therefore considered to be vulgar and intended for the less economically well-off classes (PERNA, 2005).

Just as Duque stylised the *maxixe* danced in ballrooms, Perna (2005) states that Jaime Arôxa can be called the “Duque of the 1990s”, as he structured *gafieira samba* and incorporated Argentinean tango steps into it so that the upper middle class could have access to a form of expression to which only those with less purchasing power had access, as well as facilitating access to *samba* by Europeans through the courses and exchanges he held (PERNA, 2005, p. 29).

⁵ Original text in Portuguese: “*eram de salão, mas não a dois de pares enlaçados*”.

⁶ Renaissance dances were practical before the emergence of the concept of “folk dances”. According to Souza (2019), studies on European folklore and culture emerge in the late 18th century and early 19th century. Thus, we chose the term “popular dance” because we understand that there are differences between “folk dance” and “popular dance”.

⁷ An emblematic case involved João da Baiana, considered one of the patriarchs of *samba*. According to André Diniz (2008), in 1908, when João da Baiana was performing at the *Festa da Penha*, his tambourine was confiscated by the police. At that time, it was common for musicians to be arrested by the police for carrying a musical instrument. The fact is that, without his tambourine, João da Baiana did not attend a party at the palace of the then senator Pinheiro Machado. When he found out what had happened, the senator, who was an admirer of the musician, had a tambourine made with the inscription “With my admiration, João da Baiana - Senator Pinheiro Machado” (DINIZ, 2008, p. 31). It was a kind of safe-conduct in times when *samba* was frowned upon by many people.

The examples of *maxixe* and *samba* show how certain dances go through a process of elitisation so that they can be “accepted” by society. According to Arantes (1983), the fragments of popular culture identified as constitutive elements of national traditions are recreated according to the moulds dictated by the cultured elites and, under a new guise, are digested and returned to all citizens. An attempt is made to accept the recurrence and symbolic force of popular modes of expression, without compromising the supremacy of the knowledge of the cultured elites, which is done in vain, since it is impossible, in a process of reconstruction, not to add new meanings (ARANTES, 1983). The process of *maxixe* and *samba* stylisation was the recreation of a popular dance by the cultured elite that obeyed the standards of the upper classes as a way of recognising the popular force of this manifestation, but without affecting the hegemonic values of the so-called high society.

Even with the prejudice against the body movements of some dances, balls were a privileged space for social interaction. According to Strack (2013), for a long time, balls were considered the main meeting place where men and women were allowed to have “some socially accepted physical contact under the watchful eyes of their families” (STRACK, 2013, p. 12, our translation to English).⁸

Marion (2014) highlights the association between ballroom dancing and social etiquette that accompanied the educational process of the European aristocracy and, soon after, that of the elites who lived in European colonies. The author highlights that ballroom dancing was an activity intended to contribute to the cultural formation of the so-called high society.

Men and women had different representations within society and this was absorbed into ballroom dancing practices. According to Strack (2013, p. 5, our translation to English), “historically, in ballroom dances, the gentleman has always led his lady, so that she was left with a passive role of following him in his movement, displacement and musicality”.⁹

In addition to formation, Pazetto & Samways (2018, p. 169, our translation to English) also highlight another point by noting that,

the role of dancing in shaping heterosexual and sexist ideology, which is based on the assertion that men and women are different – and complementary – not only in relation to bodily characteristics, but also in relation to psychic, rational, behavioural and gestural characteristics, whereby this supposed difference is used to justify the sociocultural positions attributed to men and women.¹⁰

⁸ Original text in Portuguese: “*algum contato físico aceito socialmente sob o olhar da família*”.

⁹ Original text in Portuguese: “*historicamente, nas danças de salão, o cavalheiro sempre conduziu sua dama, restando a ela um papel passivo de segui-lo em sua movimentação, deslocamento e musicalidade*”.

¹⁰ Original text in Portuguese: “*a atuação da dança na conformação da ideologia heterossexual e sexista, que se sustenta na afirmação de que homens e mulheres são diferentes – e complementares – não apenas em relação a características corporais, mas em relação a características psíquicas, racionais, comportamentais, gestuais, sendo que essa suposta diferença é usada para justificar posições socioculturais atribuídas a homens e mulheres*”.

The statement made in the previous paragraph is corroborated by Freire & Accioly (2021, p. 06) who consider ballroom dancing spaces to be predominantly heterosexual, contributing to the reproduction of heteronormative logic, fostering a behaviour based on gender binarity and maintaining specific established behaviours for men and women.

In view of what has been presented so far, it can be seen that ballroom dancing is a manifestation that can reaffirm values disseminated in our society, whilst also having the potential to change the milieu in which it takes place. For this to happen, there need to be new conceptions in the ballroom dancing universe.

In what follows, we will approach points concerning the dynamics of ballroom dancing and possible reasons that justify a certain resistance by society to new ways of problematizing the theme.

Reflections on ballroom dancing today

We can highlight, in a generalised way, that ballroom dancing follows a cisheteropatriarchal norm: we have the figure of the gentleman (usually associated with a man) and the lady (usually associated with a woman). The gentleman is responsible for leading and the lady is led through the ballroom by her partner.

Even with the countless changes that have occurred in our society, ballroom dancing has kept the relationship between the gentleman and the lady practically unchanged. According to Zamoner (2011a), ballroom dancing continues to be a dual structure in which the gentleman/man leads and the lady/woman is led. The impression one has is that ballroom dancing “has become frozen in an historical moment in time that no longer exists” (ZAMONER, 2011b, our translation to English).¹¹

Based on the experience of the first author of this article, a discourse within ballroom dancing can currently be noted, namely that the lady/woman has more autonomy as to how she dances than she had in the past. This does not seem to be consistent with current reality, as we agree with Silveira (2018, p. 12, our emphasis, our translation to English) when she notes that “one of the few spaces where the lady has the possibility of demonstrating her creativity and autonomy is through movements called movement ornaments” that can only occur “if she takes care *not to hinder the movement that the gentleman is about to make*”.¹² In other words, she has autonomy as long as she does not compromise the action of the gentleman and the discourse of female empowerment becomes empty when based on this false freedom given to the lady/woman.

¹¹ Original text in Portuguese: “congelou-se em um tempo histórico que não existe mais”.

¹² Original text in Portuguese: “*um dos poucos espaços onde a dama tem a possibilidade de demonstrar sua criatividade e autonomia é através dos movimentos chamados de enfeites*” que só podem ocorrer “se ela estiver atenta para não atrapalhar o movimento do cavalheiro que está por vir”.

In their study with ballroom dancing teachers in a city in the state of Bahia conducted in 2019 and 2020, Freire & Accioly (2021) found that 21 out of 28 teachers considered that gender issues do not interfere in the planning of their teaching. This reveals how much this theme is not taken into consideration in many ballroom dancing classes.

Besides disregarding the achievement of numerous rights that women have gained throughout history, our society is also reluctant to accept different forms of sexual orientation. The World Health Organization (WHO) only withdrew homosexuality from the International Classification of Diseases (ICD) in 1990 and it was only in 2018 that the WHO withdrew the classification of transsexuals as people with mental disorders (BRASIL, 2014, 2018).

Ballroom dancing still suffers the consequences of a patriarchal and cisheteronormative society. Zamoner (2011a) notes that the reluctance of society to welcome other possibilities of sexual orientation reflects in the ways the roles of the gentleman and the lady are represented in ballroom dancing: the cisgender heterosexual male is responsible for the leading role and the cisgender woman for the role of the follower. Perhaps this is why, for many gentlemen, it is uncomfortable to admit any possibility of movement led by the lady, because the acceptance of a lady proposing movement in ballroom dancing could mean that the gentleman “is not man enough”, is effeminate and may possibly be labelled as homosexual¹³ for not imposing on the lady her due role of passivity during the performance of the dance (STRACK, 2013, p. 18).

In view of greater representativity and power given to the lady, there is an association between an effeminate man and a passive gentleman in ballroom dancing. This may occur because the practice of ballroom dancing is viewed in accordance with the same principle of the polarity found in sexual intercourse, whereby in the act of penetration there is the superior and the inferior person, the dominant and the dominated person, the winner and the loser (FOUCAULT, 1998, p. 190). The role of the gentleman, seen in terms of the classical structure still in force in ballroom dancing, cannot have attributes of weakness and submission.

Even if society does not openly accept female empowerment and the achievements of the LGBTQIAPN+ movement, it is not uncommon to see men dancing with men and women dancing with women, regardless of their sexual orientation. Not only sexual orientation, but also the

¹³ According to Louro (2001, p.542, our translation to English), “homosexuality and the homosexual subject are inventions of the 19th century. If prior to this same-sex love and sexual relations were considered to be sodomy (an undesirable or sinful activity to which anyone could succumb), everything changed with effect from the second half of that century: homosexual behaviour began to define a special type of subject that would be thus marked and recognised. Categorised and named as a deviation from the norm, their fate could only be secrecy or segregation - an uncomfortable place in which to remain”. Original text in Portuguese: “*a homossexualidade e o sujeito homossexual são invenções do século XIX. Se antes as relações amorosas e sexuais entre pessoas do mesmo sexo eram consideradas como sodomia (uma atividade indesejável ou pecaminosa à qual qualquer um poderia sucumbir), tudo mudaria a partir da segunda metade daquele século: a prática passava a definir um tipo especial de sujeito que viria a ser assim marcado e reconhecido. Categorizado e nomeado como desvio da norma, seu destino só poderia ser o segredo ou a segregação – um lugar incômodo para permanecer*”.

impossibility or refusal of dancing with their spouses/partners, as well as the opportunity of an experience to improve their personal dancing, can also be reasons why same-sex couples dance together (STRACK, 2013). In the opinion of Zamoner (2005), the roles of gentleman and lady in ballroom dancing have been preserved, but are not related to the sex assigned to them at birth or their sexual orientation. This differentiation is important because the roles of gentlemen and ladies are seen beyond the sexual representations of the partners, and do not have a fixed relation with the sexuality of the person who is dancing. To put it another way, this would mean that, in our current society, “men no longer lead women, but [in ballroom dancing] gentlemen continue to lead ladies” (ZAMONER, 2005, p. 70, our translation to English).¹⁴

Freire & Accioly (2021) contradict Zamoner’s (2005) position, as they consider that continuing to use the terms gentleman and lady has consequences and the need exists to be aware of these implications. Enabling men and women to exercise the role of gentleman or lady, under the pretext of inclusion, perpetuates the cisheteropatriarchal discourse of ballroom dancing.

Furthermore, Freire & Accioly (2021) emphasise that the ballroom dancing space is a place of greater presence of cis women, mostly heterosexual, who advocate for a heteronormative space (FREIRE & ACCIOLY, 2021). Other women who do not fit into this norm are rarely listened to.

One needs to be aware that “heteronormativity in ballroom dancing works like a cog in a social mechanism that regulates bodies and possibilities of being in the world” (SILVEIRA, 2018, p. 6, our translation to English).¹⁵ In view of preconceived roles of the gentleman and the lady, prejudices rooted in the origins of ballroom dancing remain implicitly in force.

But what might be the theoretical references that could help to approach ballroom dancing from a different perspective? This is the subject of our next topic.

A brief overview of gender and feminist studies: in search of a theoretical reference for rethinking ballroom dancing

Before looking into feminist studies, the term “gender” needs to be discussed. Goellner (2004) highlights that the use of the term gender emerged in the 1970s, within the Anglo-Saxon scenario, a period which some authors call the second wave of feminism, which we will detail below. According to her, even though the term “gender” may be analysed from different perspectives (Marxism, structuralism, psychoanalysis, post-structuralism, feminism and

¹⁴ Original text in Portuguese: “*homens não conduzem mais mulheres, mas [na dança de salão] cavalheiros continuam conduzindo damas*”.

¹⁵ Original text in Portuguese: “*a heteronormatividade na dança de salão funciona como engrenagem de um mecanismo social que regula corpos e possibilidades de estar no mundo*”.

others), there is a consensus that it refers to the social construction of sex, because, as an analytical category, gender shows that male and female are historical constructions.

Judith Butler (1990) says that gender can also be characterised as the actual apparatus of production through which the sexes are determined. In this way, gender is not to culture what sex is to nature, since gender is also the discursive/cultural meaning in which 'sexed nature' or 'a natural sex' is produced and defined as a pre-discursive form prior to culture, a politically neutral dimension upon which culture acts.

The discussion about gender and feminist studies are closely related. According to Caetano (2017), the first wave of feminism in Brazil occurred in the mid-nineteenth century, the demands of which were linked to the recognition of women's political, social and economic rights. It is in the transition from the first to the second wave that we find the work *The Second Sex*, by Simone de Beauvoir, published in 1949, and which is of great relevance to the feminist movement. For Beauvoir (2015), being a woman is not a natural aspect, but the result of an historical construction.

Caetano (2017) states that the second wave dates from around the 1960s, when the feminist movement was strengthened by the military dictatorship. An emblematic example of this time was the case of Zuzu Angel who, in search of her political activist son who had disappeared and ended up being killed, was also killed and was paid tribute by the song entitled *Angélica* composed by Chico Buarque and Miltoninho in 1977.

The third wave of feminism, according to Caetano (2017), seeks to re-signify the very concept of woman as a supposedly universal category, taking into account issues such as ethnicity, sexuality, class and others. This phase has a characteristic that some authors call intersectional and one of the main figures of this movement is the American educator and civil rights activist Angela Davis.

Although the feminist movement became stronger in the 1970s, the discussion of its themes in the academic sphere took a long time to find its own space. Michel Foucault became popular in Brazil in the 1980s and it was with effect from that period that the first studies of the female condition in Brazil emerged. Gender studies entered the academy in the 1990s and it was in this period that the *Grupo de Gênero Pagu* and the periodical entitled *Pagu*, one of the references in the area, emerged at the *Universidade Estadual de Campinas - Unicamp*.

In view of what has been presented, it is possible to note the importance of the feminist movement for the debate about gender. However, what is the state of the debate about ballroom dancing in the face of all these paradigmatic changes? In the next topic we will outline examples in which ballroom dancing studies propose new approaches to how it is practiced, especially with regard to leading.¹⁶

¹⁶ See Nunes & Froehlich (2018) for a discussion about leading in ballroom dancing.

Co-leading, Active Lady and Shared Leading

As mentioned above, ballroom dancing follows a discursive line that reproduces the cisheteropatriarchal model. However, according to Freire & Accioly (2021, p.11, our translation to English),

Ballroom Dancing spaces, despite continuing to be places where male chauvinist and heteronormative discourses and attitudes persist, have suffered the effects of changes in the perspectives of gender studies and feminism. There are signs of changes in proposals for the discussion of these perspectives by dance professionals and ordinary dancers, since today this presents itself as a social urgency.¹⁷

In this topic we will present three proposals that may have experienced the influence of gender studies and feminism, as they problematize the relations between partners in ballroom dancing. We will start with the concept of “co-leading” proposed by Jonas Karlos de Souza Feitoza.

For Feitoza (2011), although it is commonplace for ballroom dancing teaching spaces to treat leading simply as a stimulus/response relationship, this notion needs to be reconfigured. In view of this fact, the author proposes the concept of “co-leading” (FEITOZA, 2011).

According to Feitoza (2011, p. 09, our translation to English), “the term leading in ballroom dancing has been understood as an action in which one body has dominion over the other in the dance event”.¹⁸ Therefore, a good leader would be that gentleman who can command his lady according to his objectives in the dance.

Throughout his dissertation, Feitoza (2011) presents the debate on body leading by proposing the neologism “co-leading”, with the aim of achieving actions that are balanced between gentlemen and ladies in ballroom dancing practices. This proposal seeks to establish a dialogue between partners so that their dancing can be pleasurable.

In order for corporal dialogue to occur in a satisfactory manner during dancing, the gentleman and the lady need to connect to each other by paying attention not only to the relations established between them, but also to the space in which they are dancing, the fluency of their movements, the tempo of the music and the constant transfers of weight occurring throughout the dance (FEITOZA, 2011).

¹⁷ Original text in Portuguese: “os espaços de Danças de Salão, apesar de continuarem como locais de manutenção de discursos e atitudes machistas e heteronormativas, têm sofrido a ação das mudanças nas perspectivas dos estudos de gênero e do feminismo, havendo sinais de alterações para proposições de discussão dessas perspectivas por profissionais e praticantes, pois isso se apresenta hoje como uma urgência social”.

¹⁸ Original text in Portuguese: “o termo conduzir nas danças de salão tem sido entendido como uma ação na qual um corpo tem o domínio sobre o outro no acontecimento da dança”.

According to him, corporal dialogue requires the partners to pay special attention regarding their mutual intention and the relationship of exchange between their bodies that corresponds to the action of “co-leading”, which proposes two bodies responsible for leading the pair (FEITOZA, 2011). Instead of idealizing the traditional proposal of leading based on stimulus-response, the author seeks to enable a state of cooperativeness between the partners for performing the dance.

The author draws attention to the relevance of thinking about how to apply new leading teaching methods that can be understood by those who are learning to dance. Simply putting women in the position of gentlemen and men in the position of ladies does not problematize the core of the issue (FEITOZA, 2011). Doing so may serve only for a new experience in ballroom dancing practice, but it needs to be debated and, above all, theoretically and methodologically grounded, so that the experience is not merely a form of artistic fruition.

Míriam Strack (2013) suggests a proposal in which the lady has a more active role in the relationship with her partner. Nowadays, women feel increasingly uncomfortable in the passive role they represent in the traditional model of ballroom dancing and their attempts to play a more active role result in disagreements between partners (STRACK, 2013). The author’s concept of “active lady” arises from this reflection.

For Strack (2013), an “active lady” is someone who, upon receiving a proposal for movement from the gentleman, transmits a new stimulus to him. For the author, the “active lady” receives the gentlemen’s proposals for movement and returns them to him in a personalized way, thus enabling new stimuli from the gentleman. Moreover, “active ladies” use moments they find opportune during the dance to make movements, adornments, movement ornaments that are beyond the corporal communication of the partners (STRACK, 2013).

However, the author points out that to reach this level of interaction with the dance partner, attention needs to be paid to almost imperceptible bodily movements so that we can listen to the partner’s body and the movements performed can be decided in “common bodily agreement” (STRACK, 2013, p. 45, our translation to English).¹⁹ As harmony increases between the partners, those who watch them dancing need to have a sharp eye in order to perceive who was responsible for a given stimulus as they danced.

This intimate connection between partners can be achieved by observing several body signs: breathing, weight exchange, muscle tension and relaxation, body twists, among others (STRACK, 2013). Examples of some of these signs that can be glimpsed in ballroom dancing could be a step that is shorter or longer; a knee that, when performing bending and stretching movements, achieves a given angle; a look that can be directed towards the partner’s body or

¹⁹ Original text in Portuguese: “*comum acordo corporal*”.

directed more towards to the floor; the distance that can vary according to the styles of dance and the relationship of affinity as the dance is performed.

Like Feitoza (2011), Strack (2013) also believes that dancing can operate as a kind of dialogue between partners. Envisaging communication in ballroom dancing as a corporal conversation instead of the simple concept of stimulus/response may provide the opportunity to create other movements not experienced in ballroom dancing. Thus, as Zamoner (2011b) states, new generations of dancers could call for the building of new ballroom dancing genres in which greater corporal perception is necessary, besides the capacity of greater interaction between partners in order for the dance to develop. A fluid dialogue, a dance of both for both.

Our final proposal under this topic refers to shared leading. According to Polezi & Silveira (2017, p. 69, our translation to English), ballroom dance leading “is a device for sustaining and perpetuating the male chauvinist power relationship present in ballrooms and dance classes”.²⁰ With the aim of breaking with this pattern ingrained in ballrooms, Carolina Polezi developed the method of shared leading

the main objective of which is to broaden women’s artistic participation in dancing, as well as to develop greater male sensibility, so that men should mix action (his leading of the movement) with his response to the lady’s stimulus. Under this teaching method, women participate actively in the composition and creation of dance, since she also become leader and proposer of movements, in other words, leading is shared equally between the man and the woman (POLEZI; SILVEIRA, 2017, p. 76, our translation to English).²¹

Carolina Polezi states that the Shared Leading Laboratory (*Laboratório de Condução Compartilhada*) emerged in the city of Campinas (SP) in 2015 during the search for proposing other ways of practicing ballroom dancing involving a more egalitarian discourse between partners (POLEZZI; SILVEIRA, 2017). For Polezi, “new power rearrangements for ballrooms”²² can influence our subjectivities and the inequalities between men and women that occur in our society being reflected in ballroom dancing practice (POLEZI; SILVEIRA, 2017, p. 79, our translation to English).

The shared leading proposal seeks to problematize the dominant leading condition of the gentleman (who in most cases is a man) making the lady (who is usually a woman) an important piece in the creation of partner dancing. In light of this, Polezi & Vasconcelos (2017, p. 79, emphasis added by these authors, our translation to English) highlight that “to us, shared

²⁰ Original text in Portuguese: “é um dispositivo de sustentação e perpetuação da relação de poder machista presente nos salões de baile e aulas de dança”.

²¹ Original text in Portuguese: “como principal objetivo ampliar a participação artística da mulher na dança e também desenvolver maior sensibilidade no homem, que deverá mesclar ação (sua condução do movimento) com a resposta ao estímulo da dama. Nessa pedagogia, a mulher participa ativamente da composição e criação da dança uma vez que ela também se torna condutora e propositora de movimentos, ou seja, a condução seria compartilhada entre homem e mulher de forma igualitária”.

²² Original text in Portuguese: “novos arranjos de poder para os salões de baile”.

leading seems to be a form of politics of *transgression* generated by the transversality of the woman's action in partner dancing, as it confronts the dominant social forms".²³

Shared leading proposes division of the power relations found in partner dancing, since domination of the dance movements does not fall exclusively to the man playing the role of the gentleman. For this reason, "shared leading is more than a method to transgress the power relations within ballroom dancing, it means the very transgression of a verticalized and dominant dance method" (POLEZI; SILVEIRA, 2017, p. 80, our translation to English).²⁴

The three proposals discussed here are some examples of undertakings that seek to break with the cisheteropatriarchal logic that permeates ballrooms. Thinking of leading as "co-leading", the lady as an "active lady" and establishing "shared leading" between gentlemen and ladies potentializes the problematization of prejudices rooted in ballroom dancing: the idea that a gentleman who does not take the lead is less virile or homosexual and the conception that the lady should only follow the commands of the gentleman are two among many prejudices that our colonized and patriarchal society carries in its veins.

In addition to the three conceptions set out in this article, Pazetto & Samways (2018, p. 175, our translation to English) list other actions that problematize the issue of power relations between the gentleman and the lady, based mainly on queer theory:²⁵

In São Paulo, the *Dois Rumos* Dance Company holds study groups and contemporary ballroom dances, in which people are encouraged to dance freely in relation to heteronormativity. Based on the Argentinean queer tango movement,²⁶ in Porto Alegre Paola Vasconcelos developed practical and academic research into queer ballroom dancing, which admits the fluidity and the experience of exploring both possibilities - to lead and to be led - during dancing. In Belo Horizonte, dance teacher Laura James, a transgender woman and queer activist, is the organizer of *Queer Forró* and owner of the *Ata-me* school, which adopts a queer pedagogy in teaching partner dances: dancers are encouraged to learn both roles and to form gender-independent dance pairs. Throughout Brazil, some female teachers have

²³ Original text in Portuguese: "a condução compartilhada nos parece uma política de transgressão gerada pela transversalidade da ação da mulher na dança a dois, pois enfrenta as formas sociais dominantes".

²⁴ Original text in Portuguese: "a condução compartilhada é mais do que um método para transgredir as relações de poder dentro da dança de salão, ela significa a própria transgressão de um método dancístico verticalizado e dominante".

²⁵ According to Seidman (1999, p. 128) "Queer theory is less a matter of explaining the repression or expression of a homosexual minority than an analysis of the hetero/homosexual figure as a power/knowledge regime that shapes the ordering of desires, behaviors, and social institutions, and social relations - in a word, the constitution of the self and society". Queer theory seeks to bring about an epistemological change that aims to break with society's binary logic (LOURO, 2001). "Sometimes queer is used as a synthetic term to refer jointly to gay men and lesbian women. This use is, however, hardly suggestive of the political implications involved in the choice of the term, made by part of the homosexual movement, precisely to mark (and distinguish) its non-assimilationist and non-normative position" (LOURO, 2001, p.546, our translation to English). Original text in Portuguese: "Algumas vezes queer é utilizado como um termo síntese para se referir, de forma conjunta, a gays e lésbicas. Esse uso é, no entanto, pouco sugestivo das implicações políticas envolvidas na eleição do termo, feita por parte do movimento homossexual, exatamente para marcar (e distinguir) sua posição não-assimilacionista e não-normativa".

²⁶ According to Liska (2017), the emergence of queer tango is linked to the artistic and intellectual movement associated with the feminist movement and academic gender activism. In her view, queer tango is a complex synthesis that lies between academic and political feminism and practical feminism that emerges in the face of the everyday experience of gender inequality (LISKA, 2017).

begun to question the male chauvinist structures of ballroom dancing and have been active in creating training spaces that value gender equality. Some schools have replaced the terms 'gentleman' and 'lady' with 'leader' and 'follower' in an attempt to disassociate gender from the leading-response roles.²⁷

Given the variety of examples contained in the quotation above, it is appropriate for us to focus on a place that seeks to destabilise traditional conceptions, namely the queer or gay *milongas*.

Queer and gay *milongas*: overturning norms

Although it has been possible to look at some proposals that seek to escape from the cisheteropatriarchal logic of ballroom dancing, these debates are often isolated and end up not gaining enough strength to conquer space. Few voices are heard by few researchers and teachers working in the area of ballroom dancing.

Another factor that hinders a more in-depth debate about gender studies and feminism lies in the training of ballroom dance teachers. According to Freire & Accioly (2021), although many ballroom dance teachers refer to themselves as such, few are in fact specialists in the area and few seek the training necessary to ensure theoretical/practical dialogue when they teach. Moreover, many people feel qualified to teach ballroom dancing after a certain length of time of ballroom experience, but without undergoing training to do so. In other words, learning takes place in the ballroom itself and, being aware of this implication, it is important to put forward an example of a dance space that can help discussions about ballroom dancing both pedagogically and artistically, namely the queer or gay *milongas*.

Just as *gafieiras* are spaces where people dance samba, *milongas*, besides being a musical and dance genre, are spaces where people dance tango.²⁸ Cecconi (2010) distinguishes between three types of *milongas*: traditional *milongas*, youth *milongas* and queer and gay *milongas*.

According to Cecconi (2010), traditional *milongas* are those in which the most orthodox tango codes are insistently reproduced. They are *milongas* that were consolidated around the

²⁷ Original text in Portuguese: “Em São Paulo, a Dois Rumos Cia de Dança promove grupos de estudo e bailes contemporâneos de dança de salão, nos quais as pessoas são encorajadas a dançar de modo livre em relação à heteronormatividade. A partir do movimento argentino do tango queer,²⁷ Paola Vasconcelos desenvolveu, em Porto Alegre, uma pesquisa prática e acadêmica de dança de salão queer, que admite a fluidez e a experiência de explorar ambas as possibilidades – conduzir e ser conduzido – durante a dança. Em Belo Horizonte, a professora de dança Laura James, mulher transexual e ativista queer, é organizadora do Forró Queer e proprietária da escola Ata-me, que adota uma pedagogia queer no ensino das danças a dois: praticantes são estimuladas/os a aprender ambos os papéis e a formar pares de dança independentes de gênero. Por todo o Brasil, algumas professoras passaram a questionar as estruturas machistas da dança de salão e têm atuado na criação de espaços formativos que valorizam a igualdade de gênero. Algumas escolas passaram a substituir os termos ‘cavalheiro’ e ‘dama’ por ‘conductor/a’ e ‘conduzido/a’, em busca de desassociar o gênero das funções de condução-resposta”.

²⁸ Other forms of music can also be danced to there, although less frequently. For the purposes of this article, we will restrict ourselves to the Buenos Aires *milongas*.

1940s and that deem to recover and preserve the “true essence” of tango in which the roles of the gentleman and the lady are related to gender: men are the leaders, women are the followers (CECCONI, 2010, p. 03).

Youth *milongas* are attended by younger generations. For Cecconi (2010), in these *milongas* both males and females can take their partner to dance a *tanda*²⁹ and the classical *cabeceo*³⁰ invitation can be viewed as something rather antiquated. It is in these places that the so-called *tango nuevo* has developed strongly, allowing more open movements as well as enabling ladies to make steps in the air, which are much more like a stage tango than a ballroom one (CECCONI, 2010).

The third type of *milonga* – and the main point of discussion in this topic – are the queer and gay *milongas*. These *milongas* emerged at the beginning of the 21st century and, after beginning in different parts of Buenos Aires, they became established in the *Villa Crespo* and *San Telmo* neighbourhoods and also in the central region of the city (CECCONI, 2010).

Queer and gay *milongas*, as well as youth *milongas*, propose similar corporeities with more flexible movements, thus escaping from the rigidity of traditional *milongas*. However, according to Cecconi (2010), there is an essential difference between queer and gay *milongas* and youth *milongas*: in the former, the body that dances is a body that questions the role conventions that govern ballroom tango, as well as ballroom dancing as a whole. They are bodies that challenge the norm, dance more freely and can lead or be led depending on the desire that arises at the time (CECCONI, 2010). It is a political tango body defying the norm that explores the positions of leader and follower as a way of manifesting differences.

Within queer and gay *milongas*, the proposal is to dance queer tango. This has emerged in an artistic and intellectual environment associated with feminism and gender activism and the term was chosen for two reasons: to make a concrete connection between dance and theories on sex and gender diversity; to establish a link with similar practices in other cities and countries (LISKA, 2017). In principle, the initiative proposes to desexualise the roles of leader and follower and their notion of bodily exploration, shared with the set of tango alternatives developed in the 1990s, and consists of denaturalising the fixed sex-gender role to make room for diversification (LISKA, 2017).

²⁹ A *tanda* is a sequence of music in the same style. Usually, the invitations made to dance at *milongas* are to dance an entire *tanda* which is interrupted by *cortinas* (which are short pieces of music that are long enough for the couples to return to their seats and choose another partner for the next *tanda*). It is common for *tandas* to be comprised of music played by the same orchestra, which enables a similar dance style even when the music changes.

³⁰ At traditional *milongas*, invitations may be made informally or by asking directly. However, people with less confidence use the *cabeceo* technique, which consists of the gentleman staring at the lady until he catches her gaze and then making a slight head movement to one side, very often directed towards the dance floor (CECCONI, 2010).

One of the most famous queer and gay *milongas* in Buenos Aires is *La Marshall*,³¹ which was opened in 2003, initially aimed at male patrons. However, according to its founder, after the *Clarín*³² newspaper published an article indicating its existence, people with other profiles began to visit it as well (LISKA, 2017).

Many of the frequenters of queer and gay *milongas* are straight people who visit them out of curiosity or to have the experience of swapping the roles of the gentleman and the lady (LISKA, 2017). This helps us draw a parallel with traditional *milongas*: if in the latter the roles of the gentleman and the lady are well defined (gentleman/man, lady/woman), in queer and gay *milongas*, men and women can be both gentlemen and ladies regardless of their sexual orientation.

It is important to note that in queer and gay *milongas*, there is an important difference between a female couple and a male couple dancing. According to Liska (2017, p. 63):

The proposal also assumes that women are more challenged than men by the relearning of dance roles this dynamic requires, owing to the receptive corporeality and lack of initiative inherent in the training to be the one led that has predominated, at least since the tango revival in the 1990s. The proposal went on to explain that the male-male couple did not face the same difficulties because their bodies had been trained to lead.

This reveals that the inclusion of a couple of women dancing together leads to a more abrupt break with the traditional model of tango. Two people used to being led in ballrooms are now possible leaders.

The queer and gay *milongas* are a convincing example of the attempt to break with the gentleman/man, lady/woman norm prevailing in ballroom dancing. In these spaces, in dancing practice, it is possible to experience difference through a body policy, in view of transiting between different positions (gentleman/lady) regardless of sex, which enables dancers to relax the conventions established in the traditional tango norms (CECCONI, 2010).

That which is practiced within the queer and gay *milongas* breaks with the dynamics of the active body and the passive body, advocating non-fixation of a single role for dancers. Thus, it breaks with the phallogocentric conception of tango, but not with subordination in a binary relationship. In order to break with this, it incorporates the concept of role swapping in which both roles can be played (LISKA, 2017).

It is not only about the exchange of roles between the leader and the follower, because, as Valle & Icle (2014, p. 155) state, dance “teaches behaviours, conducts, rules, aesthetics and wills”. Through dance, we can rethink the values that our society propagates.

³¹ Tribute to actress and comedian Nina Marshall, an acknowledged figure in both tango venues and the LGBTQIAPN+ movement (LISKA, 2017).

³² Most widely circulated newspaper in Argentina.

Final Considerations

After examining the conceptions of “co-leading” in Feitoza (2011), “active lady” in Strack (2013) and “shared leading” in Carolina Polezi (POLEZI & SILVEIRA, 2017) and presenting the proposal of queer and gay *milongas* in Buenos Aires, it can be seen that there is an academic discussion, albeit with little scope, about ballroom dancing and its values that are contested by cisheteropatriarchal artistic and pedagogical practices. However, it is an incipient debate that appears not to be keeping up with the speed of the transformations occurring in our society.

Furthermore, although it is possible to find academic works problematizing leading in ballroom dancing, practical application of the conceptions dealt with in such articles does not permeate the majority of the pedagogical approaches taken by ballroom dancing teachers. This leads to disassociation between theory and practice, which reinforces the need for academic dialogue with society, since it is with society in mind that science is developed.

We believe that ballroom dancing has much to lose by excluding or rejecting couples that do not fit into the conservative norm of gentleman and lady, leader and follower in ballroom dancing. If deep transformations have occurred in our society, we cannot assume that the conservative models originally applied to ballroom practice should remain in force. As such, we think that the terms “gentleman” and “lady” are no longer adequate for modern ballroom dancing practices that aim to promote other corporeities in dancing spaces. Continuing to use these terms as well as the terms “leader” and “follower” without due problematization reveals the discursive maintenance of a norm that is being contested. The lack of a more in-depth debate on the subject means that the “ladies-women-followers” and “gentlemen-men-leaders” relationship persists in dance classrooms and spaces, implicitly reinforcing the cisheteropatriarchy of dancing practice.

We need to understand that the episteme³³ of our age is not the same as it was when ballroom dancing emerged. Over time, women have won countless rights that were previously ignored and the LGBTQIAPN+ community has been supported by legislation so that transvestites and transsexuals have the right to use their preferred name and have their gender identity recognised. Moreover, we find in our contemporary society other bodies that contradict

³³ According to Foucault, episteme is something like “a worldview, a slice of history common to all branches of knowledge, which imposes on each one the same norms and postulates, a general stage of reason, a certain structure of thought that the men of a particular period cannot escape. [...] it is the total set of relations that can be discovered, for a given period, among the sciences, when these are analysed at the level of discursive regularities” (FOUCAULT, 2008, p. 214, our translation to English). Original text in Portuguese: “uma visão do mundo, uma fatia de história comum a todos os conhecimentos e que imporia a cada um as mesmas normas e os mesmos postulados, um estágio geral da razão, uma certa estrutura de pensamento a que não saberiam escapar os homens de uma época. [...] é o conjunto das relações que podem ser descobertas, para uma época dada, entre as ciências, quando estas são analisadas no nível das regularidades discursivas”. In other words, episteme is a structure of thought related to a particular period in history and which leads that particular period to produce its truths.

cisheteropatriarchy and are asking to be heard: homosexual, bisexual, transsexual, intersex, asexual, pansexual, non-binary people, among others. Bodies that were not recognised in the context in which ballroom dancing arose and which seek to enter ballrooms to conquer their spaces.

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