Social dancers thrive on the communication generated by improvised dance, inspired by the partner and the music, unpredictable and ever changing. (Denniston 2007: 172)

**Introduction**

Malta’s successful bid for the designation of European Capital of Culture (ECoC) provides a unique opportunity for the development and engagement with culture and the arts. The Commission for the ECoC has outlined a number of objectives for the ECoC project, one of which is to widen access to and participation in culture (McAteer *et al.* 2012). Research on previous Capitals of Culture has specifically highlighted the ways in which people felt that there was too much importance given to ‘high culture’ which excludes more local culture (O’Callaghan and Linehan 2007). It has also been specifically noted that previous ECoC projects were concerned with temporary year-long festivities and events with little thought being given to infrastructural development which, according to some, ‘are more likely to have a lasting legacy and impact’ (Evans 2011: 6). Within the studies conducted on ECoCs there is a remarkable dearth of literature which explores ‘social dancing’ with the lion’s share of the literature focusing on issues of urban regeneration and identity. If we are to take seriously the goal of increasing cultural participation more attention needs to be paid to the ways in which ECoC can serve as a vehicle for creating a public that is more engaged with culture. This necessitates a focus on the public’s engagement as actual participants in cultural forms and practices rather than treating the public as passive consumers of a spectacular culture within a ‘festivalisation’ of the city (Evans 2011).

In this study, my focus is on ‘social dancing’. Following Zimring, I look at social dancing as: ‘non-theatrical dancing in couples and groups: participatory social dance as opposed to performed art dance’ (2013: 5). Social dance includes diverse kinds of dancing from folk revivalism to waltzes and balls. Also the setting of social dance varies from purpose-built dance halls to ephemeral and temporary outdoor spaces. Given that social dance represents an embodied form of engagement with others, I aim to show how dance can serve to engender a form of community. Existing studies of folklore dancing in Scotland emphasise the important sense of community that emerges in social dancing ‘that extends beyond the dancing’ (Shoupe 2001: 130). While it is important to look at the sort of community formed through dance, one cannot ignore social differences embodied in dance. Cottle’s (1966) study of Chicago dance halls draws attention to the different class dimensions encoded in dance. He contrasts the lower-class culture of couples with the middle-class culture of individuals. Consequently, the
specificities of the form of the dance can have an important relationship to the forms of sociality engendered through participation in social dance.

Studies of dancing in the modern West remain scant and even outside anthropology, the study of social dancing remains limited. More recently, dance came to be analysed as a potential means of protest among the disenfranchised (Fuggle 2008; Hanna 1990). In this paper I argue that social dance engenders a community of dance (Shoupe 2001) thereby acting as a partial antidote to an atomised and rationalised dis-embodied modernity. Modernity has often been characterised as the triumph of the Apollonian impulse for rational control. With modernity comes a more ‘closed’ body that becomes subject to increasing civilising/disciplinary forces of rational bodily and emotional control (Williams 2001). According to some, the capacity to experience a genuine embodied community experience has become all but impossible in a ‘post-emotional’ society where the goal is a social world that ‘hums as smoothly as a well-oiled machine’ (Meštrović 1997: 150). In a ‘post-emotional’ society, emotions are experienced as dead. They are abstracted by ‘the culture industry in a ‘neo-Orwellian, mechanical and petrified manner’ (Meštrović 1997: 26).

This study investigates the potential social space for dancing within one culture of modernity—in this case the political/cultural space of a Europeanised Malta in light of Malta’s Valletta 2018 ECoC designation. The first part of the paper provides a broad overview of social dance in Malta which is then followed by a more detailed analysis of one particular dancing community, namely that of Argentine Tango. In conclusion I will argue that to take seriously the invective to creating a lasting legacy out of the ECoC initiative, one has to look towards ways of sustaining and fostering a greater element of cultural participation. This necessitates first and foremost an understanding of what the people themselves look for in their engagement with cultural forms.

Methods

This study is primarily based on ethnographic research among the Argentine Tango community in the Maltese Islands. I first started dancing tango in 2012 when I accompanied a friend to a fundraising event for charity. The event included a ‘taster class’. Normally I would shy away from such things, I had never danced in my life and felt I had no dancing bone in my body. To my surprise I really enjoyed the class and was keen to engage in a form of physical activity after having given up sports due to a knee injury. I started attending regular classes and social dances as well as workshops. However, as an anthropologist I was also intrigued to find that tango engendered a sense of what the German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies called Gemeinschaft or ‘community’. As I attended lessons and events, I noticed that through dancing a distinct sense of community is forged. This experience prompted me to analyse dancing in Malta more systematically.

As an anthropologist, I firmly believe in the importance of participant observation as a methodological tool wherein the anthropologist lends himself/herself to the subjective experience of the social, perceptual and embodied Lebenswelt of his/her informants. Like Davis, I too had to face the dilemma of being personally involved and being reflexively critical:

On the one hand as a dancer, she may worry that a scholarly, analytical approach to tango will interfere with her passion for dancing … she may be concerned about spoiling her pleasure in dancing and becoming critical of her own undoubtedly complicated desires. […] On the other hand
as a researcher, she may be concerned that her passion for tango will cloud her vision and prevent her from producing the critical ethnography of Argentinian Tango that she envisions. (Davis 2015: 5)

This tension highlighted by Davis is commonly faced in anthropology where our capacity to enter the worlds of our informants is the measure of any good ethnography. My own personal involvement undoubtedly aided me in gaining access to the world of my informants while at the same time providing me with a privileged perspective—an experiential access to the inter-subjective embodied encounter represented by social dance. Beyond the countless dances and informal conversations, I also decided to supplement this study with a survey administered online to members of the tango community of Malta. This served as a means of preventing my own experience from clouding my understanding of the broader social patterns. The survey was advertised through social media as well as personal appeals. The assistance of the Malta Argentine Tango Association (MATA) was invaluable in aiding me with this aspect of my research. The formal survey elicited a total of forty-six respondents. It is, however, difficult to gauge the actual total size of the community. In 2014 MATA had a total of fifty paid registered members. While this method of data collection meant that people with limited computer skills would not have had access to the study, there is reason to believe that this number would be statistically negligible since the Argentine tango community in Malta relies heavily on social media to promote its events.

In order to locate Argentine Tango within the broader context of dancing in Malta, however, I also interviewed a number of community leaders of various other dance styles, namely line-dancing, ballroom and salsa. I have also attended the odd dance event and/or lesson of these respective dancing styles in order to better appreciate what is specific to tango and what forms part of a broader pattern with regards to social dancing in Malta.

Maltese Dance and Dancing in Malta

According to the Euro-barometer Survey (2013), dancing ranks as the most popular ‘artistic activity’ in Europe. When asked whether or not they either sang or danced in the preceding twelve months, 12% of the European respondents said ‘Yes’. The respective statistics for Malta paint a starker picture. Malta has the lowest percentage in Europe in terms of participation in singing or dancing, with only 2% having participated in one of the two activities. When the Maltese National Statistics Office conducted a survey of the teaching of performing arts on the islands, it found that in the case of dance, girls under eighteen made up almost 41% (total population – 9,135). This large number is likely to be accounted for by the popularity of ballet lessons for young girls. In contrast social dancing tends to attract a significantly older crowd, as I shall discuss further on. In spite of the popularity of performative dance among young girls, there is a general disinterest in terms of the consumption of dance as a form of leisure activity. On the basis of the existing data it is safe to say that dancing seems to be mostly limited to young girls.

The revivalism of folk dances took hold in Europe at various times for various reasons. Folk-Revivalism in inter-war Britain was seen as a means of healing a nation from the devastation of war and rebuilding communities from the alienation of cosmopolitan modernity (Zimring 2013: 129–169). In contemporary Salento, the tarantella is experiencing a revival as a sanitized tradition stimulated by the promotional efforts of cultural tourism (Caroli 2009). It is difficult to imagine this sort of folk revivalism, at least in terms of dance in Malta, where no
folk tradition of dancing as such seems to be present. Maltese folk dances are limited to two choreographed court and commemorative carnival dances. In contemporary Malta, folk dance is largely revived (if not invented) purely to cater for a tourist market. As such, it does not offer the potential of community building as it has elsewhere (Shoupe 2001). Over the last twenty years however, Malta has witnessed the introduction of new foreign dance traditions which have found a firm place within the Maltese social landscape. These are new forms of community that are at once firmly localised and yet engender a global network of dance, enabled in no small measure through social media networks and increasingly affordable air travel.

**Growth and Globalization of Social Dance in Malta**

Even though statistics seem to point towards a marked absence of dancing as a leisure activity in Malta, it is interesting to note that over the last fifteen years or so, new social dance styles have been introduced to the Maltese Islands. These include Salsa, Argentine Tango and Line dancing among others. Line dancing seems to be the more recent dance style in Malta. While Ballroom dancing in the Maltese Islands can be dated to the period just before World War I, its current popular organisational structure was established circa twenty years ago through the establishment of two NGOs. There is currently one tango NGO while salsa and line dancing have no formal organisation. Apart from the NGOs there are a number of dance teachers who run dance classes and in some cases organise social dances or parties. There is a significant number of foreigners who act as dance instructors, and in fact many of these dance styles could be said to have been introduced to the Maltese Islands thanks to the charismatic personalities of foreign dance instructors.

The cases of salsa and Argentine Tango are particularly revealing. Due to the efforts of an enterprising British D.J./instructor, Salsa was introduced to the Maltese Islands approximately fifteen years ago and is firmly embedded in the nightclub scene in Malta. There are circa seven individuals/couples offering regular classes in salsa and some individuals who simply organise ‘salsa parties’. Only one of the organisers/teachers however is actually Maltese. Argentine Tango instead was introduced to Malta thanks to the efforts of a Dutch dancing instructor almost twenty years ago. In the case of Argentine Tango, we may speak of a successful case of implantation. While almost all of the five teachers are Maltese, they regularly maintain contact with foreign tango schools and bring visiting dance instructors to Malta to host workshops. Dance instruction tends to take place in a variety of spaces including hotels, hired out church halls, gyms, and even nightclubs. There are, of course, private dance schools that teach ballroom among other offerings and, in one case, a salsa instructor also runs a fitness club. Instructors and dance event organisers have often complained to me about the lack of appropriate dance spaces with for example, a sprung wooden floor, or at least lack of access to such spaces. Some of the private venues are hired out at prohibitive costs, which are beyond the budgets of community level organisations. This has led the more enterprising of the dance communities to seek to develop their own dance spaces. One of the few full-time dance teachers, Simone, teaching Argentine Tango in this case, has recently invested in furnishing and hiring out her own ‘tango space’ in an industrial area where she holds regular classes as well as social dances. Similarly, the Malta Dance Sport Association is also currently in the process of leasing its own premises.
While the lack of available and affordable spaces was often mentioned as a factor limiting the growth and spread of a dance style, internal rivalries have often been singled out as problems by instructors and dancers across all dance styles. It is difficult to understand how much of this factionalism is endemic to small-scale societies such as Malta. This sort of factionalism has been described as an enduring characteristic of Malta’s religious and political life (Boissevain 1966; Baldacchino 2002; Baldacchino 2014). I have personally been told for example that salsa teachers tend to have a ‘following’, where students follow the salsa events of their own charismatic teachers, leading to a significant degree of fragmentation. In the cases of line and ballroom dancing, people spoke of outright rivalry and active undermining among dance teachers. In the case of Argentine Tango, when I asked my informants to rank the reasons limiting the growth of Argentine Tango in Malta, 35.7% of the members of the community noted that lack of cohesion between groups was a very important factor. Another significant reason people mentioned is the general lack of awareness/publicity of the actual dance styles. There are at least two milongas (social dances) a week in Argentine Tango, one of which is held in an exclusive hotel and the other in a tango ‘salon’. Ballroom dance events are often referred to as ‘socials’. Three or four of the latter are organised weekly in various hotels. My survey responses indicate that attendees in a Tango milonga would have an average age of forty-four. ‘Salsa parties’ on the other hand seem to attract a younger following (people in their twenties) since Salsa is also regularly played in several popular night clubs in the major entertainment area in Malta through various (mostly foreign) DJs-cum-dance teachers. Across styles, dances are open to the general public and apart from lessons, people interact with each other in regular dance events through which they form networks of friends to varying degrees. Bobby described the friendships formed through salsa as ‘context-specific friends’, and it seems to be the case that they do not really meet outside salsa contexts. The social aspect is more pronounced in the case of Argentine Tango. When people spoke of the local tango scene they often referred to it as the ‘Maltese tango community’. In various conversations comparing tango in Malta and overseas I have often heard people remark that ‘We are still a young community in Malta’.

**Argentine Tango in a European Periphery**

With this tango the tango was born and like a shout
it left the sordid mud seeking the sky.
Strange spell of love made into beat
That opened a path without any law but hope
Mix of rage, pain, faith and absence,
Crying in the innocence of a playful rhythm.
From *El Choclo* (c. 1903) (Taylor 1998: xxv)

Argentine Tango is both a style of music and a dance form originally danced almost exclusively in Buenos Aires and Montevideo. Although primarily associated with portenos (people from Buenos Aires), the tango is Argentina’s national music. Originally, at the turn of the century, it was associated with male under-culture and its lyrics are peppered with sensual lower class dialect. By the early twentieth century, tango took Europe by storm and provoked strong condemnations from both ecclesiastical and secular authorities. Ever since this early period, the history of tango has been characterised by globalization (Goertzen & Azzi 1999; Davis 2015), challenging conventional bodily boundaries.
Tango is at once firmly embedded in local identity (Portenos), yet metonymically national (Argentine) and profoundly global, so much so that ‘Much of the modern support of the tango in its birthplace comes from outsiders, especially tourists’ (Goertzen & Azzi 1999: 69). Argentine Tango enjoys a growing following across the globe. Thanks to its popularized, stereo-typified caricatures in the global media, tango has spread to the far corners of the world from Japan to small American towns, to major European metropolitan centres. This global growth of tango leads one anthropologist to note that ‘never before has tango been danced by so many people and in so many different places as it has today’ (Davis 2015: 1). Consequently it is hardly surprising that Argentine Tango has also found its way unto Maltese shores.

As noted earlier, Argentine Tango started in Malta in the late nineties thanks to the influence of a charismatic Dutch teacher. To this day, Eric maintains regular contact with the tango community in Malta. Many Maltese regularly go to his school in Holland and he himself still organises workshops in Malta on a bi-annual basis. In 1995, the first local Argentine Tango School was formed. By 2007, another teacher set up her own private business teaching Tango and by 2012 she invested in setting up her own tango salon/school in an industrial area in the centre of Malta. As such, she is the only full-time Argentine Tango dance teacher. In 2010, the Malta Argentine Tango Association was formed as a state registered NGO. In 2013, another part-time local instructor started holding a regular weekly class. Although past its initial dramatic rise, Argentine Tango seems to be growing in Malta. The NGO membership data of the MATA shows an overall increase of over 60% for 2013 compared to 2012. When asked whether they feel that the local community is growing, over 60% of the people confirmed this.

Attendance at local dances, however, can vary considerably. I have occasionally attended milongas with only half a dozen people while sometimes that number rose as high as forty people. As is common with other dance styles, there is a sharp drop-out rate in dancing after a few months. One can generally estimate that only 10% of the beginners who start learning actually keep it up after six months (see Figure 1).

The typical Tango dancer in Malta is Maltese, single, in his/her forties, an employed professional with a university degree (see Figure 2 for breakdown of sample according to highest educational qualification achieved). While not an exclusively middle-class phenomenon, it is safe to say that Argentine Tango in Malta attracts a more middle-class following with over 50% of my sample declaring an income between €19,500 and €60,000, with only 15% earning under €8,500. While the average age of tango dancers in Malta is slightly older than that in Amsterdam, tango in Malta could also be considered as a cosmopolitan mix of the local and the global, much as it is in Buenos Aires. Its core consists of a relatively affluent and highly mobile population with the time and money to spend on leisure activities and the desire for community [my emphasis], a social outlet, and a taste for the exotic—all the ingredients that Argentinian tango seems to offer. (Davis 2015: 33)

There are various reasons why people opted to start tango. We could broadly divide these reasons intro three categories: social, personal or intrinsic. By intrinsic I mean reasons that are purely related to the music and dance as such. Social reasons would include the encouragement of friends or the desire to make new ones while personal reasons range from psychological motivations like building self-confidence to physical ones like keeping fit. There seems to be an equal distribution for the kinds of reasons that drew people to tango. From among the
personal reasons, keeping fit alone provided 24 of those responses. From the intrinsic reasons, a love for dance ranked highest with 28 responses, while out of the social reasons making new friends was a priority with 15 responses ranking it highly (see Figure 4).

For quite a few who start dancing, this tends to become a significant part of their lives and for many it has become their primary hobby (see Figure 5). Through their exposure to tango dance and music, several respondents found that they fell in love with the genre. The social dimension was an important reason for many people to persist in dancing tango. The case of Filippa, a single veteran tanguera in her forties is particularly telling. I often heard her say in conversation that after having followed a few lessons in tango she was ready to quit, however coming to a milonga and being exposed to the social ritual aspect made her pursue the dance with a passion which even took her overseas, including the mecca of Argentine tango—Buenos Aires.

Global Dance Networks

For a significant number of people who start tango, the dance and the music become a focal point in their lives. Within the local community I have often heard individuals described as ‘tango addicts’. As Davis herself observed the ‘Passion [for tango] may begin as a liking that grows in intensity until it resembles an addiction or even an obsession’ (Davis 2015: 16). Once they fall in love with the tango, technical mastery of this complicated and improvised dance seems to become a compelling driving force. 55% of my informants noted that technical mastery is an important reason for dancing. For a minority, tango becomes a lifestyle choice. For many, it becomes a fixed part of their travel itineraries. Whenever someone goes abroad, the first question tends to be ‘How were the local milongas?’ Many people travel specifically with tango in mind. Most of my informants (more than 85%) who have been dancing for at least two years have gone overseas specifically to dance tango. People come back from overseas milongas and tango festivals and share videos and pictures taken with their mobile phones with fellow dancers. Some have even taken to writing and sharing their experiences overseas through online blogs. Whenever I confessed that I had never attended a milonga overseas, veteran dancers were surprised. Travellers to Malta often incorporate a visit to the local milonga as part of their itinerary. At any given milonga, circa 15% of the dancers are all visiting foreigners. During the holiday seasons this can easily rise to 50%. In fact, local dancers often offer lodging to visiting dancers. Tango also provides a means for new residents to integrate and connect with the locals. While 71.8% of the respondents to my survey were Maltese, the rest were mostly other European citizens who are based in Malta.

Social media are a crucial source of information for local and visiting dancers and a means for connecting local dancers. The case of Susanna is quite typical. She recently went on a holiday to Venice on a budget airline after she had befriended Alessandra, a Venetian tanguera who had come to Malta the preceding year. Staying with Alessandra, she visited Venetian milongas during her stay. While it could be said that globalization has characterised tango throughout its history, the combination of more affordable flights and internet communication has transformed tango into a global network of dancers. For many tangueros/tangueras in Malta as elsewhere, Buenos Aires is still the ultimate destination of their travels (see Davis 2015). Local dancers who have spent a period of time in Buenos Aires speak (and dance) with an air of authority, even though, as some cynically observe, their dance has not particularly improved. Veteran dancers often speak nostalgically of a Buenos Aires that has become filled
with ‘gringos’, frequently failing to realise that they themselves are ‘gringos’ in Buenos Aires.

The international relationships forged through tango range from casual friendships to sexual encounters and, in some cases, marriage.

Argentine tango creates a global network based on a passion for dance. While some, including local dancers, tend to associate this globalization and its growth in Europe with an impoverishment of the tradition, I tend to agree with Goertzen and Asti (1999: 74) when they note that ‘The tango today is old, new, certainly vital, and undeniably global’.

While tango in Europe is characterised by mobility, the local tango community brings together a number of individuals who to a certain extent are characterised by Davis’ desire for community. This sense of community is created in three ways: (i) through actual friendships and occasions for socialisation (ii) through a sense of identity built out of narrative and a shared language and (iii) through the common pursuit of an embodied transformation of self.

Local Dance Community

The local dancers form a closely-knit group on the whole. I have often heard people tell me ‘Kemm aħna strambi tat-tango hux?’ (Aren’t we strange, we, tango people?). This was said in amusement but with fondness. It always tended to be followed up with ‘We are all wonderful people, however’. Tango definitely attracts a number of non-conventional people. The religious beliefs of the members of the community tend to be uncharacteristic of the general population as a whole. There is a wide variety of religious beliefs represented in tango. While 34% of the sample are Catholic, more than 45% of my sample described themselves as having no religion with a combined 12% of people selecting Native American Religion, Buddhism and Hinduism as their religion. I personally got to know people who believe in the power of crystals and others who attend moonlight ceremonies and meditation sessions. Some are strictly vegetarian while others are profound atheists. Several people establish relationships and friendships through tango that extend beyond it. Some people even speak of their ‘tango family’.

Within the community, smaller groups of closer friendships are also formed where people meet regularly, go out together, pet-sit for each other, have copies of spare keys and even help each other with the odd job as well as travel together on holidays. Many of these friendships were formed precisely through tango. The small-scale nature of the tango community and of Maltese society more generally might be a factor sustaining such close social proximity. After classes and milongas people share a drink or a tea, sometimes moving to other venues, which acts as a means for social exchange. I believe that the creation of a community is part of the ‘therapeutic value’ of tango. Some people started tango after going through some sort of life-changing event—whether the dissolution of a marriage or some other significant loss. One of my informants told me that she started to learn tango in order to ‘learn how to trust’. As such I think that the sense of community that emerges from tango provides an antidote to a sense of personal and social alienation. I have often heard tango organisers actively speak of the need to foster this sense of community and as such they organise various events sometimes only remotely connected to tango. These include clean-up days, movie nights, days at the beach, Argentine themed dinners and most recently a tango-spa. For their birthdays, some people organise little dances. Birthdays of community members are announced publicly during a milonga and marked by a ‘birthday dance’. All of the major holidays are marked by a dance from Valentine’s Day, Carnival to Christmas. When members of the community do not attend
a milonga, this rarely goes by unnoticed, and if somebody misses too many dances people express their concern.

While there is a tendency for dancers to be of a certain age and background, one cannot underestimate the diversity involved. Locally, one is unlikely to find the sort of unconventional gendered couples that one can see overseas. Unlike Amsterdam or Buenos Aires (Davis 2015) Malta has no ‘queer milongas’. On the dance floor, however, it is not uncommon to see octogenarians dancing with university students or younger men dancing with older ladies. The longer one has been dancing tango the more important it is that their partner also dances tango. In fact, it is quite common that individuals start dancing tango through the encouragement of a partner who is already a dancer. Out of a total of twenty-seven respondents who have been dancing for more than two years seventeen thought it was important that their partner danced tango as well.

Gendered Identity, Language and Narrative

Argentine Tango dancers in Malta also share a common imaginary which is built of a shared language, history and soundscape. One is unlikely to regularly hear the sound of tango unless involved in the tango community. From week to week one is likely to hear some of the same tangos repeated till they become ingrained into one’s acoustic and embodied memory. Some pride themselves in being able to back this sensory knowledge with a more ‘academic’ capacity to identify composers and singers, if not years of composition, and supply anecdotal information surrounding singers and composers. People will ask the DJs for names of particular tangos or even playfully quiz each other in identifying the pieces. Soon into their tango life people begin to be able to clearly identify between waltzes, tangos and milongas (the three types of music that characterise a milonga). Through tango, people share the same referential universe of music and dance but also a form of nostalgic connection to sense of a ‘golden age’ even though it is one which exists purely as an exotic imaginary sustained through travels to Buenos Aires—the repository for authenticity: ‘The popularity of tango across the globe is largely a function of its authenticity’ (Olszewski 2008: 63). This desire for authenticity, however, constitutes a common imaginary.

I believe that this imaginary is fundamentally constituted as ‘pre-modern’. It is a nostalgic and explicit performance of ‘traditional’ gender roles characterized by hyper-femininity and hyper-masculinity. This is most visible at the dances as women don very feminine outfits oftentimes with exposed backs and slitted skirts with the almost ubiquitous stiletto heels. Men on the other hand, especially the more traditionalist, are encouraged to wear suits. I have often heard it said generally that Maltese people don’t like to dance, especially Maltese men, or that the physical proximity and sensuality of tango dancing can be a challenge for Maltese people. My informants expressed these as possible limiting factors to the growth of Argentine Tango in Malta. Many men who would not otherwise dance other styles of music, however, dance tango because of its emphasis on traditional ideas of masculinity. This gendered identity is sustained and re-enforced through three mechanisms: firstly, the rituals of asking for a dance; secondly, the role (Leader/Follower) within the dance itself; and last but not least the actual kind of dance steps themselves. In tango, the gender roles are very pronounced with a male leader who decides the steps and a female follower whose focus is on following the steps of the leader. Some welcome this clearly gendered world and indeed find comfort in it. Women who otherwise command the attention of many others in managerial roles, for example, find
themselves having to relinquish control to a male leader. In fact, one of the followers I spoke to singled out this precise aspect as one of the most difficult yet enticing things about dancing tango. Men learning to dance are taught how to dance in a specifically *masculine* fashion while the femininity of dance steps is emphasised for women. In fact, over 37% of my sample listed learning to be more feminine/masculine as an important reason for starting to learn tango. I have repeatedly heard women asking teachers about women’s ‘footwork’ and how to do proper *adornos* (embellishments). Men on the other hand are taught how to be more assertive in their ‘presence’, to overcome timidity and keep level hips while stepping with confidence.

Locally, a communal imaginary is given a sense of depth and intimacy through narrative. People swap stories about dancers and dance events. Insiders are defined by their knowledge of this narrative history. Old feuds are narrated, histories of past relationships are shared and even memorable events on the dance floor are re-told. Sometimes these are stories about individuals one has never met but they become part of a shared history. One such story I heard repeated a number of times involved a particular dancer who, dancing in a wild fashion, managed to bang the head of his partner against a piano. Stories such as these involving both known and unknown persons are the very means whereby a sense of community is reproduced.

While every form of social dance has the potential to crystallize into a *community of dance*, given the right conditions, the structural conditions that are intrinsic to the form of the dance in and of itself merit a detailed consideration. Even if somewhat dated, Cottle’s study (1966) of dancing and class in various Chicago dance-halls draws attention to the correlation between the form of the dance and the variables of class. In particular Cottle observed that upper classes were marked by restraint in dancing and a masking of sexual overtones with a de-emphasis on intimacy, while middle-class dancers were characterised by ‘a desire to derive personal and private gratifications from dancing. This tends to produce a quality of erotic aloneness.’ (Cottle 1966: 180)

Argentine tango is social, improvised and intimate (Olszewski 2008: 64). The international community of Argentine tango dancers share a common ‘language’ not merely in terms of technical terms specific to the dance, or even a repertoire of dance steps, but also in terms of knowledge of ritualised conduct. This ritualised aspect and its importance in the formation of a specific kind of communal experience shall be the focus in the following section. The combination of highly gendered and circumscribed ritual on the one hand and the freedom/transcendence of self on the other makes for a particular experiential matrix achieved through a certain degree of physical intimacy which is highly unusual in other domains of Maltese society.

**Ritual and Transcendence in a Dancing Community**

It is Saturday night, almost ten o'clock. I hasten my pace as I step into the salon hall. I quickly scan the room to see who came tonight. The music is playing an often-played Canaro tune. It’s DJ Silvia tonight, good, I tend to like her music choices. I sit down on the couch and put on my dancing shoes. I walk towards the bar and greet all the regulars huddled around the bar. There are four or five unfamiliar faces, probably visiting foreigners; all in all the numbers are balanced between leaders and followers. There are some six couples on the dance floor moving in a circular ‘onda’ (wave). There are quite a few good followers and I am keen to dance the next ‘tanda’ (set) and have my first dance. Most of the followers are wearing stunning and seductive dresses with the obligatory high heeled shoes. The guys are a bit more of a mixed bag. The traditionalist ‘leaders’ are wearing a suit, jacket and shirt. A few of the younger ones wear more distinctive “non-conventional” clothes while
quite a few just turn up in jeans. I sit on a bar stool and exchange a few words with Paul as we both hold our drinks scrutinising the dance floor. The music stops and a popular pop song is played signalling the end of the ‘tanda’. The ladies return back to their seats. Some of the more ‘traditionalist’ milongueros escort the followers back to their seats after exchanging a few words with them. This is my chance, and I’m in luck, the next tune is one of my favourites. I quickly turn around to see if Charlene has already been asked to dance. I can see however that she is being approached by another dancer and in all probability she won’t see me in time. I turn my gaze to Maria. I try to lock eyes to signal my intention to dance she smiles and nods giving me a ‘cabeceo’ (nod). I stand up and move towards her to escort her to the dance floor. However I see Paul approaching from beside me intending to do the exact same thing. There is an awkward moment as it becomes clear that either Paul or I have misread Maria’s ‘mirada’ (look). We both smile as Maria apologises. Both Paul and I are also mutually apologetic. I laugh it off, decide to withdraw back to my seat, slightly disappointed but the night is young there are still at least three more hours of solid dancing to be had and as the night wears on and people leave, the floor is left to the die-hards.

When first entering a milonga, the novice might not realise how highly structured the environment actually is—though to all intents and purposes nowhere nearly as structured as the salons of Buenos Aires where even seating is allocated and segregated by gender. People dance in a series of concentric circles in an anticlockwise direction. It is highly important—especially when the floor is crowded—that one does not intrude into the dancing space of another couple and when this happens tensions flare. So-called ‘Floor navigation’ is an essential skill, which often sets apart the novice dancer from the more experienced one. If there is an accidental bump as a couple collides into another, there are profuse apologies exchanged. I have personally seen a case where one young foreign visitor was occupying a lot of space on the dance floor, ‘cutting off’ the space of another couple. The elderly man who felt slighted actually stopped the dance, locked eyes with the offending dancer and gesticulated quite wildly at the younger man, to the horror of onlookers. The dance is structured in highly distinct roles. The leader (most often a male) asks a follower to dance (most often a female). There is a protocol to the way one invites a lady to dance. It is considered quite rude for a leader to physically walk over to a follower and ask her to dance (Even though this often happens in Malta, much to the annoyance of followers who find it quite uncomfortable to have to flatly refuse a person to their face). Invitations are normally silent and over a distance through the cabeceo (nod); although, as outlined in the vignette in the beginning of this section, this does not always proceed smoothly. After a tanda, it is considered polite for the leader to escort his follower back to her seat, though this does not always happen. There is a general relaxation of the rules where novices are concerned.

Tango is a highly gendered form of dance where gender roles are enshrined in rules of ritual conduct. Some men make it a point not to accept a dance if a woman is inviting them to dance. In one case I remember a woman walking up to a man and asking him for a dance, he refused and the woman walked away with a highly offended scowl, glaring at him at this very public refusal. Inevitably, this event then became part of the local community’s narrative treasury. While some individuals and tango communities are more relaxed and open about being asked for a dance, as a general rule it is still the case in Malta that it is expected that men invite women for a dance. The protocol of the cabeceo and the mirada is designed to avoid embarrassing situations of public refusal. A woman can make herself available to be asked by looking in the general direction of the leader she would like to dance with in a curious dynamic of ‘inviting herself to be invited’. In between songs, some couples exchange a few remarks.
When total strangers, the questions tend to be variants of the same ‘Where are you from? ‘Are you here on holiday?’ and of course the almost ubiquitous ‘How long have you been dancing?’ These exchanges however tend to be brief. It is customary not to dance more than one *tanda* (set of three dances) with the same follower in succession, and dancing three or more *tandas* with the same follower invites the perception that there is an interest in the other person that extends beyond the dance floor. Especially in such a small community as Malta this is often noticed if not commented upon. The last dance of the evening is normally always a version of the popular song *La Cumparsita* which is reserved for one’s partner. Many of these rules of conduct or *codigos* are direct imports from the rules and regulations that characterise the salons of Buenos Aires. Judging by Davis’ discussion the ritual code in the Maltese salon is halfway between the relaxed openness of the Dutch one and the strict traditionalist one in Buenos Aires.

The ‘rules, or folkways and *mores* of the community help order indigenous activities of the tango hall’ (Olszewski 2008: 75); however they also create a form of ritualised conduct that on the one hand serves to generate a sense of community and on the other serves to control and regulate the intimacy engendered on the dance floor, preventing the situation from going out of hand (Davis 2015: 27). While collective rituals and celebrations are the bedrock of a community ‘giving shape to a rhythm of collective life’ (Keller 2003: 267) as a *structured* event they also create a social environment, knowledge and familiarity of which distinguishes between members and outsiders. Knowledge of these rules and sharing in their observation serves to *create* a community. As a regulatory framework for the expression of intimacy, they also serve to ensure that interpersonal intimacy and passion become an aspect of a socialised relationship, thereby neutralising any potentially disruptive effects. Drawing on depth psychology, Thomas Scheff (1977) has argued that ritual serves as a controlled environment wherein emotions can be expressed: ‘In traditional societies it seems likely that ritual, with its associated myth, provided a context that was both a psychologically enabling and a socially acceptable occasion for repeated catharsis’ (Scheff 1977: 488). The function of ritual is both individual and collective, allowing for the expression of repressed emotion and discharging of accumulated distress while, at the same time, creating a sense of social solidarity. Effective rituals in modern society, however, are rare (Scheff 1977: 489). Scholars of tango have repeatedly pointed out that there is a politics to the passion encoded in tango (Savigliano 1995). With Davis however, I believe that this is more characteristic of show-tango. Tango as a social dance is built on a passion which is more intimate and less dramatic (Davis 2015: 51). One of the most difficult things to overcome when first starting to dance tango is the nature of the dance hold and technically it is, perhaps, one of the most difficult things to master. It is often referred to as ‘the embrace’. In traditional tango, people dance in what is known as a ‘close embrace’. This requires the leader and the follower to have contact chest to chest, hand to hand and oftentimes cheeks touch in the embrace. This is often considered to be too intimate by many Maltese people when they first start out learning tango. It is one reason teachers often teach in ‘open hold’ where there is no chest and cheek contact. While some might stick to this hold as a stylistic choice in general, as dancers progress, it is expected that they switch to dancing in ‘close hold’. For some this is a challenge they cannot quite overcome. One of the people I spoke with, an elderly woman, had tried tango but then switched to ballroom dancing because she couldn’t feel comfortable dancing in such close proximity with ‘men who are not my husband’. The expectation to dance with strangers in the physical contact of the embrace can be a challenge for many people new to tango. The extent to which such resistance is due to
Mediterranean notions of gender is debatable. It is certainly true that it can lead to a certain caution being exercised in the selection of dance partners. One follower for example noted that ‘I don’t want to push myself against a man if his wife is there’. Due the physical proximity of the embrace, one tends to avoid the possibility of creating some source of tension between couples.

Passion embodies a search for intimacy and this sense of intimacy is potentially dangerous: ‘Passion depends upon boundaries being set if it is to be pleasurably intense, but not so intense that it will spoil the dance itself’ (Davis 2015: 69). Ritual codigos serve to control and frame this search for passion. This sought-after pleasure is sometimes described in almost esoteric language. One follower once spoke of this as the ‘Tangasm’ (a Tango orgasm). One other follower spoke of this as being ‘Lost in the moment’. These experiences entail a profound transformation. As such tango helps engender ‘a personal transformation regarding how they emotionally relate to others and kinetically to the world’ (Olszewski 2008: 78). When a dance goes well, there is a certain transcendence of the individual personas of the dancers, which is intrinsic to the passionate transformation in tango. There is an almost complete opposite of individual assertion but a complete loss of individuality.

While a milonga tends to be a highly-structured and ritualised event, this could be contrasted with the comparative freedom in the dance itself. Within the dance there is a leader who ‘composes’ the dance without choreographed or fixed steps. Tango dancers often draw attention to the greater freedom for individual expression within tango when compared to other more fixed dances which are based on sequences of steps. Followers tend to dance with eyes closed in order to focus on the music and the marca (lead) of their leaders. Even though they are following the leaders’ marca followers can, if skilled, shape the dance as well as embellish it with their own personality. In fact the most common sort of complaint is when dancers get lost in their own individuality. I have often heard followers complain that sometimes the leaders get so lost in their own steps and footwork that ‘they forget the follower’. On the other hand leaders often complain when followers ‘jaħarbu’ (they run ahead/away), that is when they do steps which are not led by the leader. It is often said that it is self-awareness which makes the dance not flow smoothly. In the moment of the dance one does not think about anything but is focused on the experience of the dance. One’s daily life is left behind as the dancer’s sense of self is subsumed in the embodied synthesis of leader, follower and music when experiencing the ‘tango from the heart’.

Conclusion

We have dwelled so often on the dehumanization and the disenchantment with the modern world and the solitude that it induces that we are no longer capable of seeing the networks of solidarity that exist within. (Maffesoli 1996: 72)

In this paper I have sought to argue that social dancing has the potential for community formation in a manner that acts as an antidote or a reaction to the disenchantment of a ‘post-emotional society’. If we are to conceive of ECoC as an opportunity to create a public that participates in culture rather than merely consumes it, we need to understand what it is that people derive from different cultural practices. In order to understand the function of social dance, however, one must pay attention to the specificities of the form as well as the broader social environment and local meanings of dance. I believe that the case of Argentine Tango
Jean-Paul Baldacchino
dancers in Malta is illustrative of what Michael Maffesoli described as ‘neo-tribes’. These tribes form an ‘affectual nebula’ (Maffesoli 1996: 76) and are characterised by the ‘fluidity, occasional gatherings and dispersal’ (Maffesoli 1996: 76) that is created in an ‘elective sociality’ (Maffesoli 1996: 86). The feeling of coming together in a form of ritual community is characteristic of milongas across the globe and ensures that tango dancers across the globe find an environment that is instantly familiar, creating thereby the potential for networks and social connections. Furthermore, the shared narratives and the social bonds formed through-tango-but-beyond-tango, also make of tango a vehicle for classical community formation. As such, at least for the local community, I do not find that the local dancers have ‘no real commitment either to a particular tango dance hall or to an established group of tango dancers’ (Savigliano 1998: 103–111). The Maltese tango dancers are not ‘nomadic’ and do not move to different milongas every day of the week. This might be partly explained by the small size of the community, however I also believe that there is a desire for community that is made manifest in the patterns of sociality that emerge from tango. Such a community is strengthened through shared activities, a sense of narrative, a common language as well as ritual. The global network facilitated by the electronic media and cheaper air travel as well as the shared language of the dance makes of the tango community a global network.

The uniqueness of tango when compared to other forms of dance comes with its balance of extreme formalism and ritualism with the actual freedom within the orchestration of the dance. This satisfies a certain middle-class craving for individual expression while simultaneously guaranteeing a communal structure through the shared ritual universe of the milonga. The androcentric gender roles within the dance enable people to play with gendered identities in a way which subverts modern expectations of agency. Followers are provided with a highly circumscribed space wherein they can renounce, to a certain degree, a sense of agency. This sense of agency however is irrelevant in the pursuit of self-transcendence as one is lost in the moment, in an intimate, highly-charged, quasi-erotic passionate bliss. Proficiency is marked by the capacity to achieve this state and a milonga can thus act as the ritualised expression of intimate communitas. Argentine Tango dancers in Malta form a ritual community not only because of their shared, oftentimes multidimensional social lives, but also because of the nature of the dance itself. While a far cry from the pre-modern Dionysian revelry imagined by Nietzsche, the unique mixture between formal ritual, role and transcendence makes of tango a community of modernity. It is one that rebels against the alienation of an over-determined ratio that characterises the social interaction of an atomised self in the modern world. Argentine Tango constitutes a space for sociality that enables people to play at traditional gender roles while seeking the loss of self in those brief moments of passionate intimacy and being-together generated by the synergy of bodies and dance to the rhythms of an anachronistic music from an unknown country on the other side of the globe.

**ECoC as an Opportunity to Develop Culture as Participation**

Through this study I have undertaken a detailed analysis of one participatory cultural form. The general underlying assumption of this paper is that social dancing has a positive effect on participants and not merely at the level of physical health but also—certainly in terms of Argentine Tango—emotional and social wellbeing. I have highlighted factors that drive people to dance and begun the work of identifying factors which inhibit the further growth of social dancing. Valletta 2018 can provide us with a unique opportunity to address the general lack of
participation in dance in Malta. One of the greatest complaints experienced by dance event organisers is the lack of awareness of the general public. Moreover dance event organisers are continually struggling to find suitable venues to host dance events. Oftentimes, they have to make do with temporarily available and unsuitable private spaces. None of the dance event organisers I spoke to have been able to gain access to assistance from the state in the search and utilisation of suitable premises. Most dance event organisers do this out of their own interests and do not possess the requisite funds to purchase or hire private venues without having to make dance events prohibitively expensive.

While state support in hosting foreign talent in order to teach and train musicians is possible, Malta’s dance instructors have had to train completely outside any state assistance. While Malta now boasts a refurbished new state-run music school, we have as yet no state-run dance space which can serve as a venue for the instruction and hosting of social dances. Valletta 2018 should serve to establish a legacy of cultural participation as opposed to the mere ‘festivalisation’ of culture in a ‘society of spectacle’ (Debord 1967). In order to do so, it needs to work with local communities, and thereby avoid the feeling of ECoC as the product of a high culture, as happened in the past (O’Callaghan and Linehan 2007). Through the engagement with local communities Valletta as European Capital of Culture in 2018 could provide an opportunity to help establish a framework and the infra-structural capacities to develop dance in the Maltese Islands, bearing in mind the different functions encoded in the forms of social dance.

Notes
1. This study does not look at ‘disco dancing’, which while hugely popular among a certain age group is significantly different in that it does not require any training and does not seem to engender the sense of community which, as I argue further on, characterizes social dancing.
2. The turn towards an anthropology of the body however has led to an interest in dancing qua embodiment (Wulff 2005; Filmer 1999; Olszewski 2008).
3. Most recently as part of their anti-government protests in Turkey, in February 2015 protestors donned gas masks to protect against tear gas and danced tango in the streets defying the Prime Minister’s orders to disperse
4. Only 18% of the population in Malta is likely to have ‘seen a ballet, a dance, performance or opera’ over the last week with 62% claiming not to have attended out of a simple lack of interest. (Eurobarometer 2013).
5. There has been however an active folk revivalism in terms of music, the Ghana (traditional folk singing genre) has been rediscovered as a valued product of elite consumption through a process of re-exoticisation. (Sant-Cassia 2000)
6. The Parata is a dance used to open the Carnival festivities and it is believed to commemorate the victory over the invading Turks in 1565. The Maltija is a court dance danced with powdered wigs and court costume with a leader calling out the steps. According to a noted local folklorist it was probably introduced as a court dance towards the end of the eighteenth century. It enjoyed a revival through its adoption by Maltese Officers of the Royal Malta Fencibles Regiment in 1844. Right up until independence it was still ‘customary to dance the Maltija at the first State Ball given by a newly appointed Governor of Malta’ (Cassar Pullicino 1961: 70).
7. In the words of one of the founders of the most well-known folk dance companies:
   The upsurge in the number of tourists visiting the islands during the 1960’s was creating a demand for typical Maltese entertainment. It was this phenomenon that had prompted the Malta
Tourist Board to approach Mr Curmi and ask him to introduce for the first time in Malta, Maltese folklore dancing. Paul Curmi accepted this proposal and dedicated all his energies towards this new venture. He delved deeply into local past customs and eventually came up [my emphasis] with a series of folklore dances related to both peasantry and aristocratic mediaeval activities. (paulcurmidancers.com)

8. Other more performative dance styles have also been introduced including belly dancing and flamenco. Since however this study focuses on ‘social dancing’ as such I shall not be delving into these dance styles in this paper.

9. I would like to thank Prof. Vicki Ann Cremona for supplying me with this information.

10. Ballroom dancing in Malta, unlike the other social dances is quite sui generis. On the one hand ballroom dances attracts a strong pre-teen following who take on the dance as a choreographed competitive sport on a national and international level. One of the NGOs ‘Malta DanceSport Association’ (200 members) is in fact a member of the Malta Olympic Committee. Once they reach puberty a lot of these people stop this ‘sport’ and in this respect it is similar to ballet. However in their adult years, typically in their forties some do re-connect to dance. On the other hand ballroom is also firmly established in the local community thanks to a number of weekly dances organized in Malta’s high-end hotels.

11. To protect the identity of my informants all names of informants have been changed except when referring to NGO’s.

12. A milonga is both the name given to a social dance event in Argentine Tango as well as the name of a particular music/dance within the repertoire of Argentine Tango. Unless otherwise specified I will be using the term milonga to refer to the social dance event.

13. Salsa aficionados, however, distinguish between the commercial music being played in clubs and ‘true’ salsa music. As such, salsa goers tend to bemoan the absence of true ‘salsa parties’ where only ‘real’ salsa music is played. Clubs are reluctant to allow DJs to play such music during peak hours and in the week-ends since they would not be popular enough.

14. While the first description of tango dates to 1856, primary source material on tango is difficult to find until 1910. (Baim 2007: 2)

15. In Germany officers were threatened with dismissal if caught dancing the tango while the Vatican condemned the tango as ‘offensive to the purity of right-minded people’ (Knowles 2009: 105–132).

16. From what other dance instructors tell me this is common across dance styles.

17. Even though people who participate in tango come from various parts of the island, over 40% of my sample hailed from either the affluent areas of the central coast of Sliema and therabouts or from the Northern affluent areas of Bugibba and the environs.

18. Studies on the general population place the Maltese Islands as being 98% Roman Catholic (Barker 2008: 150).

19. The therapeutic value of tango is not merely connected with a sense of overcoming social alienation. People have often told me how tango has helped them build their self-confidence.

20. A birthday dance is a dance where instead of dancing with one partner the birthday celebrant dances with several partners during the same dance as after a few seconds another dancer comes and ‘taps out’ the previous partner of the birthday dancer.

21. The lack of publicity was however also noted as a major reason. This was something I have also heard from teachers of other dance styles. It must be noted whereas love of tango is not usually listed as a reason for starting tango it is however listed as a significant reason for people’s continued pursuit of tango.
References


Q6 How long have you been dancing Argentine tango?

Answered: 44  Skipped: 0

Figure 1 – Length of time dancing tango based on online survey data.
Figure 2 – Academic qualification of Tango dancers in Malta.
Q14 Why did you first start dancing Argentine Tango? (More than one answer is possible. Please rank each answer according to their importance)

Answered: 42  Skipped: 4

- To make new friends.
- Because my friends...
- Because I love tango music.
- Because I love Argentine...
- To meet potential...
- To spend more time with my...
- I love to dance
- In order to build...
- To keep fit.
- To learn to be more...
- My partner got me into it

Figure 3 – Reasons for starting Tango.
**Figure 4 – Reasons for currently dancing Tango.**