



***MASCULINITIES IN DISPUTE: QUEER PERSPECTIVES TO
PARTNERED DANCE EDUCATION AND POLITICS OF EMBODIMENT***

***MASCULINIDADES EM DISPUTA: PERSPECTIVAS QUEER NA
EDUCAÇÃO EM DANÇA A DOIS E POLÍTICAS DE CORPORIZAÇÃO***

***MASCULINIDADES EN DISPUTA: PERSPECTIVAS QUEER EN LA
EDUCACIÓN DE LA DANZA EN PAREJA Y POLÍTICAS DE CORPORIZACIÓN***

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how masculinities are produced, negotiated, and contested in educational settings of partnered dance. Drawing on interviews with researchers, teachers, and practitioners from Brazil and abroad, it investigates how embodiment, desire, and intimacy intersect with gendered and sexualized norms embedded in the practice. Guided by queer epistemologies and pedagogies, the study employs a qualitative approach, analyzing narratives to understand the ontological dimensions of dance for two and the interbodily dynamics that shape identities. The findings reveal that representations of masculinities emerge in constant tension between tradition and innovation, local culture and global flows, disciplinary technique and personal expression. These tensions, rather than being obstacles, open possibilities for reimagining partnered dance as an inclusive and reflexive space. The article concludes that such practices can challenge fixed gender norms, fostering more plural, relational, and transformative ways of embodying masculinities.

KEYWORDS: Body. Gender. Sexuality. Dance for two.

RESUMO

Este artigo examina como masculinidades são produzidas, negociadas e contestadas em espaços educacionais de dança a dois. A partir de entrevistas com pesquisadores, professores e dançarinos do Brasil e de outros países, investiga-se como corporização (embodiment), desejo e intimidade se articulam com normas generificadas e sexualizadas presentes na prática. Orientado por epistemologias e pedagogias queer, o estudo adota uma abordagem qualitativa, analisando narrativas para compreender as dimensões

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ontológicas da dança a dois e as dinâmicas intercorporais que moldam identidades. Os resultados indicam que as representações de masculinidades emergem em tensão constante entre tradição e inovação, cultura local e fluxos globais, técnica disciplinar e expressão pessoal. Essas tensões, mais do que obstáculos, abrem possibilidades para ressignificar a dança a dois como espaço inclusivo e reflexivo. Conclui-se que tais práticas podem desafiar normas fixas de gênero, favorecendo formas plurais, relacionais e transformadoras de corporificar masculinidades.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Corpo. Gênero. Sexualidade. Dança a dois.

RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza cómo las masculinidades se producen, negocian y disputan en contextos educativos de la danza en pareja. A partir de entrevistas con investigadores, docentes y practicantes de Brasil y de otros países, se examina cómo corporización (embodiment), deseo y intimidad se entrelazan con normas generificadas y sexualizadas presentes en la práctica. Guiado por epistemologías y pedagogías queer, el estudio adopta un enfoque cualitativo, analizando narrativas para comprender las dimensiones ontológicas de la danza en pareja y las dinámicas intercorporales que configuran identidades. Los hallazgos muestran que las representaciones de masculinidades emergen en constante tensión entre tradición e innovación, cultura local y flujos globales, técnica disciplinaria y expresión personal. Estas tensiones, más que obstáculos, abren posibilidades para resignificar la danza en pareja como un espacio inclusivo y reflexivo. Se concluye que dichas prácticas pueden desafiar normas fijas de género, favoreciendo formas plurales, relacionales y transformadoras de encarnar masculinidades.

PALABRAS-CLAVE: Cuerpo. Género. Sexualidad. Danza en pareja.

Introduction

Bodily practices – particularly those organized around relational movement, such as partnered dance – constitute spaces where social markers of difference (gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, social class, among others) and their entanglements in subjectivation processes become visible (Marques; Lara, 2024; Marques, 2023; Marani, 2023). Working with this, dance for two³ has been conceived as a relational practice in which two bodies consent to approach each other in order to construct and share flows of movement as a form of communication, expression, and mutual constitution. While it involves an openness to experimentation and the potential for embodied freedom, it is also conditioned by cultural norms that shape how bodies move together, alone, or in

³ The research in which this study is based adopts dance for two as its empirical focus not because other forms of dance are irrelevant, but because the interbodily structures of partnered dance – historically organised through gendered functions of leading and following – make the dynamics examined particularly visible. Unlike other modalities, partnered dance provides a privileged setting in which pedagogical and cultural devices that distribute power between gendered and sexed bodies, and that materialise expectations of masculinity and of ‘being a man’, become explicit.

groups – defining what is possible or permissible within specific dance forms. This dynamic highlights how subjectivity is formed in relation, through both bodily interaction and the regulatory frameworks of the dance itself.

While the body-subject is capable of movement, affective expression, and experience, it is crucial to recognize that these experiences do not occur in a political vacuum. As products of embodied subjectivation, bodily experiences are deeply shaped by cultural codes⁴ and norms through which diverse meanings are assigned to movements – depending not only on who performs them, but also on where, when, and how (Mauss, 2003; Shapiro, 2019; Parlebas, 1981; 2020). In partnered dance, this sexual and gender coding is explicit in the traditional division of roles related to leading and following. The widespread understanding that the man is supposed to lead while the woman follows reflects a contextual, historically situated, and stereotyped structure that appears to be ‘natural’ – or is sometimes framed in technical or pedagogical terms (Freire, 2020; Barbosa, 2021). This structure of division operates as a gender and sexuality device that reinforces binaries, categorizations, and power hierarchies.

Although contemporary pedagogical and political initiatives have sought to question this structure – for example, through ‘inverted forró’, ‘queer tango’, ‘rolerotation’, to cite some –, the normative pressure that teaches socially-perceived male bodies should lead, control, and act, while female-coded bodies are taught to follow, surrender, and respond, still operates strongly among dancers and educators. Various researchers have contested such pressure by studying the ontologically materialization and embodying of partnered dance, from different perspectives, though majorly focus on woman experiences while addressing gender, and with a significant lack of attention to aspects regarding sexuality (Moreira, 2024; Carneiro, 2022; Dickow, 2022; Pereira, 2011; Siqueira, 2009). Thus, this article examines the contours of the complexities of masculinities through the lens of gender and sexuality in dance for two.

Moreover, although this article centres its analysis on masculinities, the data reveal that such experiences never emerge in isolation from other markers of difference. Dimensions such as sexual orientation, race, class, and nationality profoundly shape how men learn, perceive, and perform their bodies, identities, and masculinities within

⁴ In this context, code refers to socially and culturally constructed norms that regulate how bodies move, behave, and are perceived. These codes are not neutral; they inscribe meanings onto bodies through repeated gestures, expressions, and roles, often naturalizing gendered expectations. Based on theorists like Mauss (2003), Butler (2019), such codes shape the ways individuals inhabit and experience their bodies (coding), functioning as disciplinary mechanisms that align subjectivities with dominant norms.

partnered dance, influencing not only their access to particular spaces but also the forms of recognition and agency available to them. Thus, this study understands masculinities as relational and intersectional constructions, formed and contested amidst social hierarchies that are continually updated through bodily practice.

Emerging from an expanded, ongoing research project, this article aims to offer reflections on how meanings attributed to masculinities are produced within bodily education practices around the relational dynamic of dance for two. Such dynamicity makes evident the complexity of gendering and embodying processes through which each person constitutes its own sense of identity. With this focus, the article seeks to contribute to understanding the circulation of meanings attributed to masculine identities in contemporaneity. Moreover, it enhances comprehensions of how the intricate sets that arrange teaching and learning processes affects bodily experiences of man with partnered dance, particularly when dancing with other man. With this, the main argument of this article is that the ways men learn about their bodies and the dance for two is strongly marked by gender and sexuality normativity, that often affect their perception of the own bodies' movement and the dance itself, as well as the conception of masculinities.

This article is organized into three sections that discuss the efforts of the study to address how masculinities are negotiated within partnered dance, with particular attention to relations surrounding bodily education and movement. Following this introduction, the text outlines the research methodology, the approach taken in this article, and general information about the interviews drawn upon. We then examine how straightening devices reinforce gender normativity through embodied codes taught to men as they learn to use their bodies to dance in partnership, reflecting on actions of queering educational processes and spaces. This is followed by a section that focuses more closely on the lived experiences of the men interviewed, particularly regarding struggles over safety as essential for unlearning and relearning masculinities, gender, bodily movement, and dance for two. Finally, we offer some closing reflections on the pedagogical and political implications of these analyses, emphasizing the potential for partnered dance to serve as a transformative space for reimagining gender and embodiment.

Methodological approach and participants

This study unfolds from multidisciplinary qualitative research⁵ grounded in critical and interpretive approaches, with an emphasis on discourse analysis (Foucault, 2008; 2011) focused on masculinities in partnered dance, also informed by queer and gender epistemologies (Sedgwick, 1985; Ahmed, 2006; Louro, 2018; Butler, 2019). From this perspective, the study seeks to recognize bodies and embodied experiences as legitimate sources of knowledge (Gallagher, 2006; Shapiro, 2019). Thus, the data gathered so far derives from 14 semi-structured interviews (Brinkmann, 2014; Patton, 2015) conducted with professionals – teachers, researchers, artists – who work with partnered dance in Brazil and other countries in diverse educational settings, including workshops, private classes, university modules, dance schools, festivals and so on.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling (Patton, 2015) and snowball sampling (Parker; Scott; Geddes, 2019) techniques, prioritizing individuals with teaching or research experience in partnered dance and in practices that engage with issues of masculinity, gender, and sexuality. Following invitations to participate voluntarily, interviews were scheduled and conducted online via *Google Meet*. Each session was recorded using the platform's tools, with prior consent from the participants for future use by the researcher (first author). After each interview, the researcher transcribed the recording into a word.docx document and shared it with the respective participant, allowing them to review the content and confirm their agreement before any material was used in data analysis. During this stage, participants were able to suggest deletions or adjustments to ensure their integrity and comfort. Due to this process, only five of the 20 interviews are directly referenced in this article, as these are the ones whose transcripts have been reviewed and approved by the interviewees for analytical use.

The 14 interviews averaged one hour and fifty five minutes each and followed a flexible script of ten open-ended questions covering topics such as: the meanings attributed to partnered dance; personal and pedagogical experiences related to the practice and the construction of masculinities; representations of masculinity; perceptions of gender and sexuality codes within partnered dance; pedagogical strategies used to address inequalities and stigmas; challenges and limitations in dance education; and positive, pleasurable experiences with partnered dance. As Patton (2015) notes, flexibility in using

⁵ This is a doctoral research (2023-2027) approved by the Ethics Committee in Human Research of the home institution (Opinion no. 6.652.528, of 16 February 2024) and financed in part by the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior – Brasil (CAPES) – Finance Code 001.

the interview guide is a central feature of qualitative research. This makes semi-structured interview lie between the rigidity of a structured questionnaire and the informality of a casual conversation, as emphasize Brinkmann (2014).

The characteristics of the semi-structured interview promote the intersubjective production of meaning and careful listening to lived experiences, as they allow the interviewer to adjust questions based on emerging topics and explore significant themes as the phenomenon unfolds (Patton, 2015; Brinkmann, 2014). This approach proved particularly valuable in capturing convergences, nuances, and contradictions in how participants construct meanings around masculinity, embodiment, and partnered dance within diverse educational and cultural contexts. Each interview has thus been conceived as a dialogical space, in which the researcher adopts a reflective and ethical stance in relation to the participant's narrative – acknowledging both the potential and the limitations of this methodology.

The interviewees are mostly independent professionals of various nationalities – 16 Brazilians, one Angolan, one Portuguese, one Spanish, and one British – with expressive presence and experience in both the Brazilian and international partnered dance scenes. Most are white, homosexual, cisgender men, with an average of 35 years old and over ten years of professional experience with this bodily practice – the five interviews directly referenced in this article reflect this general profile and will be properly referred in each first quote. From the interviews, powerful themes have emerged, which reveal the ongoing tensions and consonances involved in the construction of masculinities in partnered dance, as well as the contemporary reconfiguration of dance for two itself, as discussed in the following sections.

Finally, it is worth to note that the decision to focus on dance for two arises not merely from its cultural relevance but from its ontological constitution as a relational bodily practice structured through historically gendered functions. The technical and affective organisation of partnership – requiring proximity, shared responsibility, continuous negotiation – offers a privileged context for observing how masculinities are produced, challenged, and regulated within educational processes. Although gender and sexuality are also mobilised in other dance forms, partnered dance contains specific devices of orientation, control, and performativity that render these dynamics particularly explicit. For this reason, the empirical delimitation of this study is not a limitation but an epistemological choice aligned with the aim of understanding how power relations are embodied through partnered flow of movement itself.

‘Directed Bodies’: gender normativity, queer pedagogy, and educational arrangements in partnered dance

This study is grounded in the premise that the production of scientific knowledge critically engaged with the pursuit of social justice plays a vital political and intellectual role – especially in shedding light on events that shape subjectivities and cultural dynamics (Dardot; Laval, 2016; Hall, 1997). When addressing inequalities of sexual and gender diversity, the dynamics involved in the constitution of masculinities emerge both as a particular field whitening gender studies and as a site of contested meanings. Such meanings are formed by a wide range of discourses that reinforce the normative centrality of masculinities and associate them with threat, violence, or oppression, while simultaneously point to their disruptive potential and the possible gains in equity and justice that may follow (Connell; Messerschmidt, 2013; Anderson, 2005; Anderson; McCormack, 2016).

The tensions that shape these contested domains are not merely reflective of broader sociocultural configurations; they also influence the lived experiences of men and of individuals who identify with attributes traditionally associated with the ‘masculine’ in specific contexts – such as educational spaces, both formal and informal, dedicated to bodily practices (Brito, 2021; Devede; Brito, 2021). When focusing on the relationship between bodily education and movement, partnered dance offers a privileged site for understanding contemporary dynamics in the formation, expression, and contestation of masculinities. However, the Brazilian and international academic literature that connects partnered dance to sexual and gender diversity still offers incipient discussion on how men experience masculinity within contexts where partnered dance takes place. Is such literature, normativity appears as a crucial element that connects the analysis.

Normativity is described by Ahmed (2006) as a pressure to align or straighten – a force that operates by guiding subjectivity formation along inherited, contingent, and often arbitrary paths. According to her notion of orientation, bodies are not only positioned in space but also directed by lines that determine what is reachable, recognizable, or even desirable, in order to make each one find their way in the world. These lines of orientation shape how individuals come to inhabit certain roles, spaces, and relationships, making some trajectories appear as natural, while others are rendered deviant or unintelligible. The paradox of normative ‘straightness devices’ evidenced by Ahmed (2006) lies in the fact that, while its strongest pressure is often exerted on those

who appear to conform – compelling them to remain aligned with dominant ideals – it is especially violent toward those whose movements diverge from its expected paths.

Whether through sexual orientation, gender expression, or even forms of embodied discomfort, deviation is met with friction, disorientation, or exclusion (Ahmed, 2006). In the context of partnered dance, these normative lines can dictate which bodies leads, follows, talk in front of the class, or are used for demonstrations – which experiences are legitimated and which are not. It resonates the straightness devices determination of how bodies are expected to interact, reinforcing a spatial and relational choreography that privileges heteronormativity and binary gender roles and marginalize bodies that move differently. Such marginalization is addressed in studies on physical education educational settings that shows how boys and men who engage in activities traditionally coded as ‘feminine’ – such as dance or rhythmic gymnastics –, often face stigmas, exclusion, and violences linked to sexism and homophobia (Anderson, 2005; Marani, 2021; Devidé; Brito, 2021; Reyno-Freundt *et al.*, 2025).

These studies illustrate how gender acts not only as an external label but also as a structuring matrix that shapes individuals’ very ability to inhabit their own bodies while also the spaces (Ahmed, 2006). Although such studies make gender-based violence against boys and men visible, this topic remains under-addressed in educational debates – often neglected or silenced in light of other pressing issues within the field, particularly in relation to sports and movement-based practices (Devidé; Brito, 2021). This highlights the need for research that explores how masculinities are constituted, as well as initiatives – academic and otherwise – that ‘break the silence’⁶ around the effects of gender and sexuality norms on men’s embodied experiences, supporting not only making it visible but also perceive and interpretate it properly.

The inscription of codes of gender – ‘male’, ‘female’, ‘trans’, ‘non-binary’ – and sexuality – ‘hetero’, ‘homo’, ‘fluid’, ‘asexual’ – onto bodies’ movement characteristics can reinforce inequalities in learning processes, although bodily practices can also serve as spaces for deviation and reconfiguration. From a queer perspective, people whose embodied experiences do not align with the heteronormative setting of spaces for partnered dance can identify fissures within normative discourses, heritages, and

⁶ We refer here to the Brazilian documentary 'The silence of men' (*O silêncio dos homens*, 2019), as well as projects, groups of discussion on masculinity and men’s experiences, among other initiatives that aim to 'breaking the silence' around violences suffered by men – symbolic, physical, psychological, sexual – and that have fostered and democratized this debate, contributing to face and mitigate the strength of stigmas and discriminations regarding dynamics of gender, masculinities, and sexuality in men experiences.

expectations, through which diverse masculinities expressions and experiences – frequently named dissident, subversive, or non-hegemonic – may emerge and materialize (Louro, 2018; Curiel, 2020; Marani, 2021). These experiences often exceed fixed categories of gender or sexuality, challenging the binaries that underpin technical and pedagogical codes in bodily practices. This is where partnered dance reveals itself as a fertile ground for reimagining masculinity: while it ontologically reproduces norms, it also creates openings for reinventing bodily and affective dynamics.

Partnered dance, as both a social and pedagogical practice, offers a privileged environment where to observe and understand how gender and sexuality markers are enacted through interbodily dynamics. The interviews conducted reinforce the comprehension that meanings attributed to diverse masculinities in dance for two not only reflect broader cultural norms but also produce ambiguous subjectivities, marked by inadequacy, fear, guilt, as well as by pleasure, self-awareness, bravery. These and other ways by which ‘queer dancers’ feel and perceive their own and others’ bodies are effects of learning with and about bodies through norms that often teach that their experiences are illegitimate, do not fit, or do not belong to dance world. Simultaneously, the very illegitimacy of those men’s experiences show how their presence into dance world challenge, stress, and change dynamics that determinate what is a ‘real man’ and how should men use their bodies, as well as ‘wrong’ or ‘right’ ways of doing so by dancing.

The interview with Vitor⁷ (September 2024, our translation) brought elements that explicit how such ambiguity also materializes in the constitution of dancers’ experiences, subjectivities, and identities. As he highlighted, the presence and visibility of new configurations of pairs in contexts like performances, competitions, classes, and workshops “[...] produce significant changes in the conceptions we have of who can dance, who can teach, who can live ballroom dance [...]”, which ‘is very important’ to picture ‘other’ representations for people to identify with. In terms of sexuality, gender, and identity, he noticed that such pairs contributed with progress during the past decade that turned possible acknowledge the diversity of movement experiences in partnered dance as legitimate. Particularly regarding masculinities, he exemplifies it when he said that ‘boys dancing with boys’ in balls

⁷ Vitor is 33 years old, identifies as a cisgender homosexual white man living in Goiânia city, in the state of Goiás, Midwest of Brazil. He acts as a teacher of physical education in high school and higher education and works with partnered dance for more than 10 years, concentrating his activities in teaching in formal contexts, as well as in researching.

[...] had to be seen more like a parody, because it wouldn't be nice if we, the boys who danced, took it seriously. So if we danced but pretending that one of us was playing the role of the woman, then okay, people would laugh and say "Oh how funny, look at Vitor trying to look like a girl while dancing." Then I'd make some gestures as a woman and so on. People laughed, "Oh, wow, great!" But, for example, if I were to actually dance with another man, for real, from my own identity, how would that be? [...]

Vitor's particular experience echoes with the individual embodied experiences of all the men interviewed so far – as well as the author's experiences –, whose identity resonates with a sense of diverse or queer masculinity. Those men often learn about their identities with their own bodies while practicing dance for two in ways that shows inner conflicts faced by them in terms of desire, fear, belonging, sexuality, self-awareness, vigilance, among other elements. In another words, the utterance recalled from Vitor reveal an important unsaid aspect: the constitution of ambiguous identities of queer men in spaces settled by heteronormativity. We understand such ambiguity not as something to solve, but as a productive space of negotiation that reflects how identities, politics, and community are constantly in motion. This remarks that the conflict between following the line or fight against the pressure for straighten shape strongly the sense of identity of queer men, affecting the meaning of their masculinities differently of aligned men.

It is important to emphasise that the ambiguity described by the interviewees and exemplified by Vitor's quote does not stem solely from dissident sexualities, as it is the case, but from the ways in which sexual orientation, gender expression, and other social markers are interpreted within educational, training, and even leisure settings. Gay men frequently experience the positioning as 'naturally' suited to movements associated with softness, fluidity, or sensitivity, thereby reinforcing stereotypes and restricting possibilities for understanding and learning with their own bodies. Conversely, heterosexual men who wish to follow often are subject to the pressure and fear that their sexuality will be questioned, as some studies demonstrates de violent effects of being symbolic associated with such position (Massena, 2006; Silva Júnior, 2010; Marani, 2021). In both cases, bodily experiences are shaped by power dynamics that regulate who may move in particular ways and at what symbolic cost.

Rather than states that straight men or masculinities that conform with heteronormativity don't experience ambiguity in constituting their identities, that utterance evidence part of the conditions that makes queer or diverse masculinities often being perceived as causing discomfort, troubles, or ruptures in this configuration. We

interpretes that this perception expresses particular ways of experiencing masculinities – and other cultural traits of identity. With Ahmed (2006), we propose that those men can be better represented in the context of dance as subjects that create possibilities for queer pedagogies. While the traditional representation of male dancer is usually associated to a persona with attributes such as discretion, firmness, initiative, control (Silva Junior, 2010; Ferreira; Samways, 2018; Polezi; Martins, 2019; Tortola, 2023), those are dancers who stress such representation by facing the ambiguity that emerges in not identifying with so, by hesitating to embody this ideal, as well as by offering alternatives to it.

Queering bodily education invites a reorientation of how we learn, teach, and inhabit environments through our bodies, particularly by highlighting the invisible work of sexing and gendering both bodies and spaces (Ahmed, 2006; Louro, 2018). As Butler (2019) remembers, this hidden repeated work, shaped by social norms, constitutes a performativity that gains force through its reiteration. We notice that, in partnered dance, the naturalization of sexed and gendered principles as the basis for interbodily dynamics both performs and reinforces those norms through bodily technique and affective engagement. Thus, with Louro (2018), drawing on queer theory in education, we embody pedagogies that question precisely these ‘natural’ assignments, cultivating spaces where students and educators can become aware of the norms they update and possibly undo it. Ahmed (2006) facilitates to see and understand this naturalization through her concept of orientation as the aligning between body and space that help us find our way in the world through the extension of our body into space and homing devices – that make the strange familiar and support such extension.

From Ahmed’s epistemology, normative gendered roles in dance for two can be seen acting as lines that direct bodies in familiar ways – who leads, who follows, who touches where, and how. When this alignment fails, when one’s body can’t extend into space nor follow previous lines, it becomes disoriented. This disorientation, that reflects the ambiguity of constituting identities, challenges normativity by unsettling the familiar paths when making evident that “[...] some spaces extend certain bodies and simply do not leave room for others [...]” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 11). Queering bodily education, then, means to work on this unsettling, seeking for redirect familiar lines and create moments of disorientation, where other possibilities of embodiment and relation can emerge – especially conducted to the dancer’s identity.

One visible collective effort to unset normativity in partnered dance from questioning gender and sexuality codes are the tensions that commonly arise over the

most appropriate terminology for describing the interbodily relationship and around the different approaches proposed to organize the practice (Tortola, 2023; Nunes; Nascimento, 2020; Ferreira; Samways, 2018; Polezi; Silveira, 2017; Polezi; Martins, 2019). While this suggests changes in the dance world, it is also important to recognize the limits of these experiences. Many interviewees report that changes are still isolated, and even in progressive initiatives, there remains a tacit expectation that men, at some point, will assume the lead – among other expectations beyond the conduction. This highlights the resilience of discourses that naturalize male leadership as essential or desirable to masculinity, as well as ideas such as of ‘models of masculinity’ (Mulley; Epstein, 2024; Reese; Santos; Palma, 2025).

In terms of dynamics of power and education, the pedagogical work of queering is legitimately perceived for some teachers and dancers aligned to normativity as trouble or threat – whether considering their professional status within conservative environments or, in a broader perspective, that social practices tend to follow dynamics of identity-traits consumptions and reproduction more than self-perception and self-learning (Han, 2017; 2020; 2022). Other than that, when men dance with men, when they take on the role of following, or when they hesitate to lead according to dominant codes, for instance, they open cracks in the heteronormative masculine representations. These cracks are pedagogical in themselves – moments where discomfort becomes method, and disidentification becomes learning (Louro, 2018; Butler, 2019). With them, while dancing and extending themselves to spaces, queer men stress the conditions where meanings of masculinities are disputed with the same extension as meanings of the dance for two.

Queering dancing masculinities: disputes for safe places to move bodies

By triggering codes of gender and sexuality to orientate how bodies should move while dancing in partnership, how the pair should be set, which role each one should play and what it represents in terms of interbodily and social dynamics, dance for two materialize itself as a normative device. It allows such codes to be embodied by subjects through the ways they learn about using their body in partnered dance, how to relate with their own bodies and of another people through touch, conduction, expressions, sensations, or even how to perceive the bodies and movements. From the normative perspective, partnered dance conform gendered and sexed bodies to those expectations.

However, we understand the normative partnered dance as one of its ontological embodied forms – a product or effect of the sociality in which two bodies engage to

experience flows of movements together. From a queer perspective – of dealignment, denaturalization, and reorientation –, understanding how men learn to use their bodies to dance and express themselves – or do not express themselves – through and with codes of gender and sexuality in dance for two allow us to acknowledge how this normative device generates experiences of ambiguous masculine identities – non-conformed, marked by feelings of not belonging, risk or fear of being perceived as different, wrong, or needed to be straighten.

Rather than a strategy for inclusion or something strictly lined to non-heterosexual experiences, queer pedagogy in partnered dance is a practice of unsettling and working with unsettling. A practice of allowing all bodies to unlearn certainties like the performativity of specific roles and become attuned to other ways of being with themselves and with others in each one's own body and ways of move. However, this approach raises several educational issues, including the spaces where the practice happens, the safety of dancers and students, as well as the social impact of interventions. These three entangled elements strongly appear as one of the regularities in all the interviews conducted so far, although with different nuances.

When talking about the perception of sexuality and gender issues in places where the practice of dance for two happens, Alisson⁸ (October 2024, our translation) pointed out the importance of men dancing with men in public places, specifically in realities where diversity in dance does not receive broad visibility. Particularly regarding his reality in Northeast of Brazil, Alisson highlights that it is not common to see configurations of pairs of dancers other than composed by one man and one woman in the conventional roles attending to social places like pubs or balls, and either in TV shows, movies, or Instagram this seems to be unfamiliar still. For Alisson, dancing with other man in public spaces is a way to bringing this alternative representation close to everyday social settings, which represents “[...] a possibility of naturalize it [...]” and which is an educational practice *per se*:

[...] I think that in these actions, [...] they [gender and sexuality] happen in a way that it is already printed there in that action, it is already there, people are already seeing it, it comes in that way. There is no oral discourse to reach people, the speech is the dance. [...]

⁸ Alisson is 31 years old, identifies as a cisgender homosexual white man living in Salvador city, in the state of Bahia, Northeast of Brazil. He is a student, dancer, and teacher of ballroom dance, with national and international professional experiences for over 17 years, teaching and performing mostly in Brazil in both formal and informal contexts.

Alisson's reflections suggest that performing same-gender partnerships in public spaces – even within strongly heteronormative contexts – often elicits curiosity. This response, though not global, opens space for alternative gendered and sexual settings not only been seen but made thinkable. The performative power of these dances, in Butler's (2019) terms, lies in its potential to cite and subtly subvert normative codes: what appears as a 'simple' variation in partnership becomes a political gesture that reframes what bodies can do together – particularly bodies of two men in a dynamic of physical proximity and contact. Simultaneously, this proximity invites reflections on how such practice enhances bodily sensitivity, proprioceptive awareness, responsiveness to the presence of the other, an expanded kinesthetic intelligence (Laban, 1978) – all of which are fundamental not only to dancing, but also to reimagining ways of relating, perceiving, and being affected in everyday life that not necessarily involves sexual desires, as usually interpreted.

The extension of the educational intent of curiosity to the taught practice is crucial. Alisson embodies this by encouraging his students to not only practice dance through a method he names 'dilution of gender' (Moreira, 2024), but also to remain open to observing and engaging with diverse embodied styles, including more traditional ones. This invitation to cultivate curiosity rather than judgment reflects a trait of queer pedagogy as openness (Louro, 2018), where roles and identities are not fixed but continuously (re)negotiated in relation. However, this openness is not free of risk. As noted by other interviewees, the embodied negotiation of gender and desire within dance for two can generate tensions when it unfolds in spaces that do not guarantee safety, raising concerns not only about individual comfort, but also about how much one's body and subjectivity can be exposed to others' gazes and norms.

By reflecting about his reality in Portugal, Nirio⁹ (November 2024) expressed his concerns about the complexity of practicing dance in partnership with other men when alternative spaces or LGBT-friendly are not available, particularly addressing kizomba style. These concerns appear as uncertainty, as it also tends to be perceiving the reality and learning about it from queer experiences. He considers that it may be the moment to create those spaces, "[...] so that people can also have a place to go have fun and dance kizomba that is not only in the classes and that short moment when I give a little lesson at the event. [...]" On the other hand, he pointed out his feeling that same-gender pairs

⁹ Nirio is 31 years old, identifies as a cisgender black man living in Entroncamento city, in Santarém district, West of Portugal, where he acts as a dance teacher for over five years.

should occupy heteronormative spaces, so people can understand that different configurations are possible in kizomba places and ‘learn to deal with it’. Although, at the end, Nirio states that this would be ‘in the distant future’:

I think it is easier to bring the hetero first into our midst than we go straight into their spaces. It may be easier for them to come into our space because they will have to follow our rules. We go straight to their space can be a bit aggressive too. So I think maybe it’s better to change this dynamic a little.

This tension between creating separate, safer spaces and occupying heteronormative environments speaks directly to the pedagogical and political challenges of queering partnered dance. It reveals not only the performative dimension through which norms are reiterated or disrupted (Butler, 2019), but also the pedagogical potential of shared movement and spaces to generate new ways of being-with-others. Rather than prescribing a single path, Nirio’s reflection gestures toward a relational ethics of transformation – one that balances safety, visibility, and agency. In this sense, queer pedagogy does not operate merely as an instructional framework, but as a dynamic field of negotiation, where bodies, desires, and cultural codes are constantly in movement (Louro, 2018). The uncertainty he expresses may itself be part of this learning process, inviting reflection on how inclusion is embraced, under what terms, and through which practices.

The cares stated by the interviews revealed that perceptions of masculinities in dance are often linked to social surveillance concerning bodily expression – including violent or toxic traits tied to normative expectations as well as the policing of sexualities and gender expressions that deviate from norms. These tensions do not arise only in relation to one’s dance partner but also cross the dancers’ own subjective formation – in their training processes and in how they narrate and perform their gender identities (Seara, 2021; Carneiro, 2022; Dickow, 2022). As some interviewees pointed out, dancing in a non-normative role can trigger feelings of inadequacy, shame, fear of judgment. These affects function as disciplinary technologies (Foucault, 1987), as straighten devices (Ahmed, 2006) that regulate what can or cannot be felt and lived as ‘masculine’, what is a legitimate or illegitimate experience ‘of man’.

As one of those affects, interviewees regularly noted experiencing contradictory ideals such as that a man who allows himself to be led intends to be a woman, plays the role as if was the lady/woman, is less of a man than the one who leads. They also states the frequent need to justify ‘why they want to dance as a woman’, or face having their

sexuality questioned by wanting to do so – even in case of heterosexual men. Those experiences reveal the persistence of a heteronormative matrix of gender intelligibility (Butler, 2019) – in which men has to prove and show that their masculinities and themselves are aligned with expectations of virility, control, dominance. Such experiences echo the analysis of Anderson (2005) and Reyno-Freundt *et al.* (2025) regarding effects of homophobia and sexism on men's experiences in 'non-hegemonic' bodily practices.

The dynamicity and relationality of dance for two appears here as a liminal space: while offering possibilities for expression, it also activates mechanisms of surveillance and control over men's bodies. One of those mechanisms functions through the fear that dance serve as a device of feminization or homosexualization of men (Silva Junior, 2010). Such fear materializes a face of the 'moral panic' of homosexuality, feminine men, and other non-conform sets represented as "[...] an alleged threat to the social order or an idealized conception of it [...]" (MISKOLCI, 2007, p. 112, our translation). This turn queer pedagogies into practices of resistance in bodily education – not only by teaching that partnered dance can happen regardless of gender or sexual identities, but by creating spaces where men can safely use their bodies to experiment new ways of relating to sensitivity, pleasure, touch, self-awareness, identity and so on through simply sharing a dance, and learn about their bodies and themselves with it.

Rather than being momentary, queer (dis)orientations in bodily education have potential lasting effects on the constitution of subjectivities, as well as in the constitution of the dance world itself. When men allow themselves to 'find their dance' instead 'follow the roles', paraphrasing Ahmed (2006), they activate modes of listening, sensitivity, and care that shift their experiences from a position of certainty and control to one of shared vulnerability that foster dialogue. As pointed out by some interviewees, these moments of surrender – where pleasure lies in co-creation – prompt a movement in the boundaries of the self, challenging gender and sexual identities as fixed essences. Corporeality thus becomes fertile ground for experiences of disorientation or disidentification, where representations of new or alternative masculinities may emerge not as opposites of the hegemonic model but as multiplicities in motion.

Interviewees offer diverse, contradictory, and complementary perspectives on this effect, indicating ongoing disputes and transformations in how masculinities are represented among men who dance in partnership. Specifically regarding the education

of the leading body in Zouk, Tarcísio¹⁰ (December 2024, our translation) notes shifts in how men use their bodies to dance in partnership – whether with men or women –, comparing dancers from earlier generations with youngest ones. He states that while it can be ‘almost hypnotic’ watching some men leading, mostly of them are part of a generation target by a normative training that forms ‘men that doesn’t dance’: “[...] he leads, he makes the other body do everything he has in mind. It's incredible, it's beautiful, wonderful, but his body doesn't dance much. [...]”

In contrast, Tarcísio notes that new generation of dancers – particularly in zouk but not only – are taught to not just executing steps but expressing themselves – “[...] The man was the one making the movements happen. You still see this a lot. In traditional couples, I still see it. [...] But with the newer generation, men are dancing much more with their bodies, even while leading. It's different. [...]”. However, the conditions for this shift also have to do with the settings where the learning process happens, where the dance style came from, as well as how it is shaped by it. While kizomba, for example, came from community settings, Tarcísio states that

[...] zouk is a dance that originated in ballroom settings, where there's a difference in how markings are expressed. I've always noticed this distinction in zouk. The dancing body was the woman's, and the movements were already marked by a semiotic reading we associate with femininity: circular, rounded movements. [...]

The settings where dance styles came from, as well as the settings of educational spaces, matters at the extension that changes in how men use – or don’t use – their bodies to express themselves in partnered dance demand transformations in how leading is understood and conceptualized. As Feitoza (2011) argues, before being functional, technical, or pedagogical, leading composes the instructions and intentions through which dancers materialize the dance itself; it is symbolic, as is its binary division (leader-follower). This arbitrary symbolic division refers to the staging and reproduction of a gender regime that also organizes other spheres of social life (Butler, 2019). Based on the interviews and the literature, such transformations seem to point toward reinforcing mutual agency between dancing bodies in guiding the dance – challenging hierarchies and creating the potential for more symmetrical exchanges.

¹⁰ Tarcísio is 31 years old, identifies as a cisgender homosexual ‘mulatto’ (*‘pardo’*, in Portuguese) man living in Rio de Janeiro city, in the state of Rio de Janeiro, Southeast of Brazil. He is a teacher of art in high school, with professional experiences teaching ballroom dance for over 13 years in both formal and informal contexts.

Feitoza (2011) analyzes this gender staging in ballroom dance in terms of a bodily pedagogy that questions and denaturalizes the binary instructions and intentions through which roles or functions in partner dance are assigned. In doing so, he not only critiques traditional understandings of bodily relations in partnered dance but also examines the symbols and intentions that underlie newly proposed terminologies and structures. With that in perspective, Jonas¹¹ (November 2024, our translation) recall that he proposed the idea of ‘co-conduction’ to encourage professionals of partnered dance to think about how the interbodily dynamic has been conceived, particularly in Ballroom dances.

Under the understanding that “[...] we have two opposing movements that interact to produce a third. So there's lead one, lead two – and this generates a third kind of leading [...]”, Jonas’ reflections echoes in meaningful critiques emerging from the research in terms of dynamics of power in dance for two and normativity. One of those critiques relies on ‘reversing roles.’ As he highlighted, “[...] reversing the lead reinforces power hierarchies – there will always be one who knows more than the other. Why don’t we value both actions? Isn’t it the combination of differences that generates the movement? Why do we need to reverse anything? [...]” His querying converges with ongoing comprehensions from the research of complex entanglements through which gender and sexual codes inform our subjectivity, sensibility, and perception of differences in bodily practices, including dance for two (Marques, 2024; Marques; Lara, 2024).

The embodied experiences of men that work with dance for two in various educational environments, complemented with the literature in the early analysis approached in this article, suggest that even within highly technically codified practices, like partnered dance, there is room for subversion and re-signification as much as for resilience and prevalence of gender and sexual imperatives. This indicates that dance world provides cultural, pedagogical, and affective conditions that support openness to coexistence of diverse and intricate ways to dance as much as different bodies and its forms of express themselves – whether more traditionally or subversively oriented. Such possibilities of orientations echo with the perspectives of Louro (2018) and Curiel (2020), who stress the importance of educational spaces and practices not only tolerate difference but cultivate it as part of a political project of transformation and questions the need to understand its existence as a phenomenon.

¹¹ Jonas is 43 years old, identifies as a cisgender homosexual with man living in Aracaju city, in the state of Sergipe, Northeast of Brazil. He is a teacher dance in higher education, with professional experiences with ballroom dance for more than 22 years, including performing, teaching, and researching.

The ambivalence observed reveals that partnered dance, in its educational potentials, is a fertile ground for analyzing bodily subjectivation and embodied experiences, particularly in its crossings of sexuality, gender, and masculinities. By intertwining movement, technique, emotion, and interaction, it makes visible the disputes over what it means to be a man, how the male body should act, feel, and relate to others. At the same time, it can serve as a political-pedagogical laboratory for imagining other ways of being and relating – as it seems to have been at least over the past decade. At the core of this ambivalence is the tension between hegemonic models of masculinity and other expressions of masculinity that move away from ideals of virility, leadership, or control. As Connell (1995; 2005) points out, hegemonic masculinity is not merely a set of characteristics assigned to men, but a relational pattern sustained by the exclusion and subordination of other masculinities and of femininities.

This (transitory) comprehension of the state of dance for two echoes the notion of queer pedagogies as articulated by Louro (2018), who emphasize the need to make visible the norms that regulate bodies and affections in educational spaces in order to question and expand them. By allowing everyone to experience both leading and following, for example, these pedagogical proposals destabilize gender binarism and make room for reflexivity, mutual care, and co-responsibility in movement. Furthermore, as hooks (2013) argues, a transformative pedagogy must directly confront the structures that sustain domination. In the context of partner dance, this means not only allowing role dynamicity but also problematizing the cultural, social, and affective conditions that make the idea of sharing conduction or changing the way to conceive it feel threatening. It means creating environments that welcome discomfort as part of the learning process and that actively listen to the fears, resistances, and desires that shape embodied experiences.

Conclusion

The reflections developed throughout this article reaffirm that masculinities in partnered dance education are neither static nor homogeneous, but rather processes in constant negotiation, shaped by embodied interactions, pedagogical choices, and cultural traditions. The experiences of the researchers, teachers, and practitioners from different countries that participate of the research make visible how dance for two both consolidates and destabilizes the norms that govern gender and sexuality. These norms are enacted not only in the roles traditionally assigned to leading and following but also

in the micro-adjustments, negotiations, and resistances that emerge through interbodily encounters on balls, classes, public spaces.

By engaging with debates on embodiment, desire, and intimacy, and by mobilizing queer epistemologies and pedagogies as analytical and practical tools to understanding the ontology of partnered dance, it becomes possible to reimagine such bodily practice as a fertile space for questioning and expanding representations of possible masculinities. The empirical accounts examined here reveal that such reimagining often arises from tensions: between tradition and innovation, local culture and global flows, disciplinary technique and personal expression. It is within these tensions that the transformative potential of partnered dance resides, enabling masculinities to be lived, felt, and materialized in ways that face fixed norms and invite new possibilities for relationality.

Recognizing partnered dance as a site where identities are performed, contested, and transformed implies an ethical and political commitment for educators. It calls us for pedagogical practices that not only acknowledge the diversity of bodies, histories, and desires present but also actively work to undo the hierarchies and exclusions that have long been naturalized in these spaces. In this sense, teaching dance for two becomes more than transmitting steps or perfecting techniques – it becomes a form of cultural intervention, capable of opening spaces for inclusion, reflexivity, and recognition of multiple ways of learning with the bodies and embodying masculinities.

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