

Larks and Ravens: A Report from the Field

by Dela and Dugan Murphy

NOTE from Executive Director Katy German: *One of the most common requests I received last year is for CDSS to make a determination about which role terms will be used on the dance floor — ladies and gents, jets and rubies, men and women, lead and follow, larks and ravens, etc. However, I don't think it's CDSS's job to dictate what language is used in local communities. These are living, breathing traditions, and regional differences have always been present in our fold. I believe CDSS's role is to keep track of what is going on in the broader country dance scene on this continent, and to help people stay informed and connected. The article that follows was submitted by two organizers from a CDSS affiliate group in Portland, ME. I hope that you find this glimpse into their work interesting and thought-provoking.*

As the contra dance tradition continues to evolve, many communities and organizers in North America who hadn't considered offering gender-free role terms in the past are now trying them on or choosing them as the norm. Conversation about ideal role term language isn't new, but typically mainstream, predominantly straight dance communities have defaulted to gendered language, which in the recent past have been either "ladies" and "gents" or "men" and "women." Now, a growing trend indicates more interest in gender-free dancing, and the terms "larks" and "ravens" have become popular among these organizers. "Larks" end swings on the left, "ravens" on the right.

Why organizers choose gender-free terms

Noting that this conversation is much more complex, nuanced, and community-specific than is allowable in a short article, some of the primary reasons some organizers prefer gender-free language include:

- Feedback from dancers at gendered dances indicates a pattern of gender-norming pressure (or "gender-policing") the organizers are hoping to alleviate. This pressure occurs across the sexual-preference and gender-identity spectrums. Examples from dancers include, but are not limited to:
 - dance role choice shaming when gender-presentation doesn't "match" the role term chosen
 - neighbors attempting to 'fix' same gender-presentation dancers when they choose to dance together by attempting to match the partners with differently gendered people
 - gender power dynamics that affect who can safely ask or say no to dances.
- Organizers have noticed that that uncoupling

gender from the dance roles can allow more freedom for everyone to dance with whomever they wish in any role. Feedback indicates that freedom of role choice positively impacts many groups, including, but not limited to:

- people who wish to dance with a person of the same gender-identity
- people who need to dance a certain role due to a physical requirement (injury, disability, strength, etc.)
- families who wish to dance with one another, and most specifically children
- people whose gender identity does not fit the gender-binary
- people who dance in communities with more people in attendance of one gender or another, and thus are not "gender-balanced."
- Younger dancers are more frequently requesting gender-free language from dance series and special events.
- Many proponents state that in order for contra dance to continue being a thriving traditional art form, we must become more inclusive by identifying and deconstructing barriers that people of differing identities experience when they attend. Many of these barriers are invisible to mainstream white straight people, making them hard for those typically in the majority to identify. One identified barrier is gendered language.

As more communities advocate switching roles to "larks" and "ravens," it's important to note that gender-free organizers are not saying that every community should switch role terms, nor are they demonizing people who prefer gendered role terms. Rather, they suggest there is room for gender-free dances and gendered dances in the same ecosystem.

What transitioning to gender-free terms looks like

As callers, we have been asked to introduce the gender-free role terms "larks" and "ravens" in a number of communities in which gendered terms have long been the norm. In most cases, these introductions occurred without prior announcement or marketing. Communities included Burlington, VT; Rochester, NY; Lewiston and

Bangor, ME; and Amherst and Greenfield, MA. Each dance community's demographics were slightly different. In Rochester and Greenfield, for instance, the overall level of experience was high. In Burlington, Lewiston, and Bangor, the majority of participants were less experienced. Amherst, Greenfield, and Lewiston had more people who had danced to "larks" and "ravens" in the past while Rochester and Burlington had fewer.

We made no extraordinary effort to clarify role expectations. With a beginner's lesson and gentle reminders during teaching, every community caught on very quickly and no breakdowns occurred. The level of confusion demonstrated by new dancers was no higher than at any other dance at which we call. And, perhaps because our choreographic choices are the same at gendered and gender-free dances, experienced dancers had little-to-no trouble understanding which role term applied to them.

The roles that people chose and the partners people chose appeared not to change dramatically based on the role term change on these evenings. However, we noted that there was overall a slightly greater number of people dancing the role not typically assigned to their gender and/or choosing partners of the same gender presentation.

Feedback from dancers dancing to the terms for the first time, both new and experienced, indicated that they appreciated that the environment created more freedom for role flexibility. Feedback from dancers who were hesitant about the role term change ranged from neutral (e.g. "that was like any other dance," etc.) to positive (e.g. "I think the dance terms made it easier for that family," etc.). Effusively positive feedback typically came from younger regular dancers and LGBTQ+ dancers of all skill levels.

Most of these communities continue to explore whether transitioning to gender-free language is a good fit for them in the long term. One has already switched.

Long-term impacts for communities

Though each community's culture is different, as a case study of a dance that is not explicitly a queer contra dance and is gender-free, Portland, ME's model could be informative. Portland Intown Contra Dance was founded as a weekly gender-free contra dance in 2016 and seamlessly transitioned from the role terms "jets" and "rubies" to "larks" and "ravens" in 2018.

Having gender-free role terms and advertising as a gender-

free dance has influenced the dance audience, attracting and retaining dancers of many identities. Notably, the community is intergenerational, skewing younger, and people of many identities (straight, cisgender, queer, gay, gender nonconforming, transgender, conservative, liberal, etc.) are regulars. Like most North American contra communities, the majority of dancers identify as white. Attendance average at the time of this writing is about 92 dancers every week, a number that is steadily rising.

Feedback from dancers of varying backgrounds indicates that the gender-free environment in Portland, along with continual work to cultivate a culture of consent, bodily autonomy, integrity of communication, and safety, have resulted in outcomes that include, but are not limited to:

- A higher level of safety felt by all, but especially female-identifying, younger, non-straight, gender non-conforming, and transgender peoples
- Popularity amongst single dancers who feel more freedom to attend without bringing friends;
- Dancers bringing not just their romantic partner, but larger groups of friends because "anyone can dance with anyone"
- No gender-policing among regular dancers and a significantly lower level of gender-policing by new dancers
- A higher level of safety for individuals with injuries or disabled people, as they can freely choose the role that will ensure the most comfort.

Respectful and thoughtful inclusivity is viewed as Portland's biggest asset as a dance series, and foundational to practicing that value is inclusive dance-role term choices.

If you are interested in exploring gender-free dance role term usage in your community, we're happy to share more about our experience. You can reach us at delamurphy@portlandintowncontradance.com and duganmurphy@portlandintowncontradance.com.

Dela and Dugan Murphy are callers, dancers, and co-founders/organizers of Portland Intown Contra Dance in Portland, Maine. Dela is also a co-founder/organizer of Form the Ocean, a North American dance weekend for women started in 2018.

**What terms are YOUR community using?
Email us at news@cdss.org and let us know.**