



Should a feminist dance tango? Some reflections on the experience and politics of passion¹

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Feminist Theory

2015, Vol. 16(1) 3–21

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DOI: 10.1177/1464700114562525

fty.sagepub.com



Abstract

Tango, of all popular dances, would seem to be the most extreme embodiment of traditional notions of gender difference. It not only draws on hierarchical differences between the sexes, but also generates a ‘politics of passion’ which transforms Argentineans into the exotic ‘Other’ for consumption by Europeans and North Americans in search of the passion they are missing at home. In this article, I offer a modest provocation in the direction of scholarship that places politics before experience by questioning whether passion can be explained solely through the discourses of feminism or postcolonialism. Instead I will show why we, as critical feminist scholars, need to pay more attention to the experience of passion, whether we are analysing a passion for tango or any other bodily activity that is intensely pleasurable, addictively desired, but also unsettling, disruptive, and – last but not least – politically incorrect.

Keywords

Affect, affective dissonance, ‘affective turn’, feminist killjoy, gender as performance, postcolonial exoticism, queer tango

The question ‘Should a feminist dance tango?’ may seem a bit frivolous for this journal. One can imagine that many readers are thinking: mmm, well, I guess so, if that is what she *really* wants to do, but are not there more pressing concerns to deal with? Indeed, there are, but the question of whether a feminist should dance tango is meant to be provocatively rhetorical. And one of the uses of rhetorical questions is to draw attention – in a playful way – to meanings that might otherwise go

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unnoticed, and to reconsider them in a different light. It is my intention, therefore, to use this rhetorical question to initiate reflection *not* so much on the impossibility of a feminist dancing tango (after all, many feminists do dance tango, myself included), but rather on the apparent contradiction between dancing tango and critical feminist inquiry. What is it about dancing tango as an embodied passionate experience which makes it rest on such uneasy footing with critical postcolonial feminist scholarship? And, more generally, what does this uneasiness tell us about the theoretical frameworks we, as scholars, have for making sense of passion and its politics?

Let me begin this reflection with an anecdote. Several years ago, I was having dinner with some colleagues, most of whom were sociologists, philosophers, and a few medical scientists following a conference we had all attended. I had been invited – as usual – to present the ‘feminist perspective’ on the topic at hand. I had attended many such conferences with this particular group in the past, but this was one of the first times that we strayed from our shared academic interests and began talking about other aspects of our lives. Probably as a result of the plentiful flow of wine, I launched into a lively account of my passion for tango. I described my experiences on the dance floor and my frequent trips to Buenos Aires ‘just to dance’. While most of my colleagues appeared to be mildly entertained by my stories, one sociologist looked at me with undisguised dismay: ‘But, Kathy...’, he said. ‘Tango? How can *you* possibly be involved in something like that? I thought you were a *feminist*.’ Now one could easily dismiss my colleague’s remark because of the assumptions he seemed to be making about feminists as joyless, overly serious, and disinterested in sensual activities like dancing. However, I found his reaction disconcerting for a different reason. It confronted me with the fact that I seemed to have crossed an invisible border into a strange and dubious sub-culture – a sub-culture that was apparently incomprehensible to anyone who was not a member. At the same time, his remark provided an immediate glimpse into the stereotypes that automatically come into play the moment most people hear the words ‘Argentinean tango’.

Tango evokes images of exotic couples locked in a close embrace: men with slicked-back hair executing fancy steps, while women in skirts with slits and stiletto heels submissively swoon in their arms. The performance of tango seems the epitome of passion. We *see* passion in the sweeping movements and entangled legs, in the long and sensuous way the partners gaze into one another’s eyes, and in the cat-and-mouse moves of approach and retreat which are part of the performance. But we also see the enactment of passion in the woman’s half-hearted attempts to resist her partner’s overtures and in her ultimate acquiescence to being conquered. This gendered performance of passion is what is enacted in films in which tango is danced.² It is the way tango is invariably performed in tango shows, both in Buenos Aires and abroad (Cara, 2009).³ It is the image that can be found on any postcard from Buenos Aires, the tango capital of the world.



Tango seems to be the most extreme embodiment of traditional notions of gender and heterosexuality. The appearance of the dancers, their movements, but also the lyrics of the music, and the codified interactions between dancers in salons (the venues where tango is danced) are all permeated by hyper-heterosexual and old-fashioned meanings of masculinity and femininity. Tango, therefore, not only seems to be the performance of passion, but it is also the performance *par excellence* of gender inequality: feminine subservience and masculine machismo.

Given this imaginary, however clichéd, it is hardly any wonder that a critical sociologist like my colleague would be shocked to discover that a long-time feminist like me could so eagerly – and even addictively – throw herself into a dance with such sexist overtones as tango. In the interests of saving face and reconciling

my passion for tango with my credibility as a feminist, I had every reason to take a closer look at this strange passion and find a way to understand why women like me – and, for that matter, many ostensibly progressive men – might want to dance tango. But, at a scholarly level, there were also good reasons to take another look at this seemingly frivolous topic of tango passion and, more particularly, why it might appeal to late modern individuals, including those with feminist sensibilities, progressive politics, and critical aspirations.

Problematic passions

Within feminist theory, there has been a resurgence of interest in passion as object for critical inquiry. In principle, feminist scholarship is uniquely placed to explore passion as an affective phenomenon that evokes intense bodily feelings and involves the negotiation of socially constructed emotions. As Carolyn Pedwell and Anne Whitehead (2012) note in their excellent introduction to a special issue of *Feminist Theory*, feminists have always been engaged with questions of affect, emotion, and feeling.⁴ Feminist scholarship began by challenging scientific authority that gave precedence to reason, objectivity, and value neutrality over emotions, subjectivity, and political engagement, thereby opening up space to explore embodied experience as a source of knowledge and a resource for a passionate and partisan feminist politics. In the wake of challenging the focus on rationality within mainstream science, feminist scholars might have begun a sustained exploration of the phenomenology and contradictions of passionate experience. For example, they might have investigated the ways that passion can be joyous, exciting, and exhilarating, yet also unsettling, disruptive, always just a little out of control. Or they might have explored the ways passion as embodied experience can become a transgressive activity in the context of late modernity, something which ‘incites rebellion [. . .] against the monotonous repetition of everyday oppressions’ (Delgado and Muñoz, 1997: 10). However, this has not been the feminist agenda when it comes to passion. Feminist scholars, for the most part, have been less concerned with how passion feels or what it means in people’s everyday lives than in uncovering its role in the psychic legacies of sexism, homophobia, colonialism, and slavery.

In keeping with the feminist mantra ‘the personal is political’, feminist scholars have tended to be interested in the ways passion is linked to power and how restrictive social norms and dominant hierarchies and exclusions get played out at an affective level (Pedwell and Whitehead, 2012: 116). This tendency has been exacerbated by the affective turn in feminist theory,⁵ which has taken up earlier critiques of rationality and provided a sophisticated framework for understanding the connection between rationality, emotion, and feminism. One of the most important contributions of this turn has been to explore the role of passion in the public sphere and the way it not only sustains, but also impedes a transformative feminist politics (Berlant, 1997; Ahmed, 2004; Probyn, 2005). As Sianne Ngai (2005) has argued, it is not the positive or empowering emotions which deserve our

critical attention, but the 'ugly feelings' which plague feminism (shame, envy, paranoia, disgust).⁶ These are the feelings that sabotage our good intentions and undermine our most cherished commitments. Passion is, therefore, less interesting for feminist critics for its joyful, enriching or even addictively exciting features than for the ways it undermines the normative and political commitments of feminism.

The work of Sara Ahmed (2004, 2010) can shed some light on the feminist reticence to confront passion. In her critique of the contemporary politics of denial that is endemic in late modern societies, she argues that feminists should be especially sceptical of all 'feel-good' enactments of desires, particularly if they lead to what she calls a 'wishful politics'. She urges the feminist critic to refuse anything that makes her feel happy and suspend her belief that happiness is something she or, for that matter, anyone else should want. Instead she should dare to take up the dissident position that happiness may not even be a good thing. As she provocatively puts it, feminist critics need to become 'killers of joy' (Ahmed, 2010: 573). Being a feminist killjoy means disturbing the fantasy that certain practices/encounters/situations make us happy in order to reveal what is problematic about them. The feminist killjoy is the trouble-maker, the dissenter, the spoilsport, who refuses to take happiness at face value. Instead she ferrets out examples of sexism and exposes the bad feelings that get hidden or negated in public displays of joy and shows how an individual's experience of happiness is sustained by erasing signs of unhappiness. Ahmed's feminist killjoy is emphatically not to be confused with the stereotype of the 'joyless feminist'. Her unhappiness has nothing to do with prudishness, lack of humour, or a sour outlook on life. She is unhappy because she is particularly aware of all the things there are to be unhappy about and, in revealing what is disturbing about our culture's embrace of happiness, she is working toward a world in which other ways of being with one another are possible (Ahmed, 2010: 592–593).

From the vantage point of the feminist killjoy, any passion – and this would include a passionate love for dancing tango – should set off warning signals in the feminist critic. Such a passion should necessarily evoke scepticism and distrust, thereby mobilising her desire to disturb, unsettle, and deconstruct. The metaphor of feminist killjoy provides a model for how a feminist scholar might approach the embodied experience of dancing tango and the passionately euphoric emotions it generates. It also leaves little doubt about how an inquiry into a passion for dancing tango should proceed if it is to be done critically. It needs to be challenged. It is precisely in this vein that several feminist scholars have, in fact, engaged in a critique of tango. Some have tackled the tango's history by uncovering the gendered, racialised, and class dynamics of its emergence in the dockside slums of Buenos Aires at the turn of the twentieth century where it was a dance that was popular among migrants and prostitutes, but shunned by the Argentinean elite as disreputable and lower-class. They showed how tango was subsequently and repeatedly appropriated abroad, becoming in the process 'whitened' and desexualised enough to be acceptable to a European audience as well as the affluent classes back home (Jakubs, 1984; Taylor, 1987; Guy, 1990; Baim, 2007). Other scholars

have extended this critique to the present, focussing on the heteronormative representations of gender in tango's lyrics (Archetti, 1999; Viladrich, 2006), the machismo inherent in representations of tango in popular culture (Podalsky, 2002; Fischer, 2004; Carozzi, 2013), and the legacy of imperial exoticism and North/South power relations in the global dance culture (Taylor, 1998; Klein, 2009; Törnkvist, 2013).

The performance and politics of passion

I now turn to two representatives *avant la letter* of this critique – Paula Villa and Marta Savigliano – as illustrations of how a feminist killjoy might approach tango as a passionate heteronormative performance with colonial overtones. Both use their ambivalence toward tango as a resource for their critique. And both leave little doubt about the answer to the question of whether a feminist should dance tango. The answer is loud and clear: a feminist has no business dancing tango unless she is prepared to de-gender and de-colonise it, and preferably both.

Villa has analysed the contemporary European tango scene in an attempt to understand why so many well-educated, enlightened professional women and men (the primary group of tango fans) are so enamoured of a dance which is part of another era (the early twentieth century) and a remote place (the slums of Argentina) and which is so full of highly problematic gender stereotypes (2001, 2009, 2010). Villa begins her analysis of tango by framing it as a gender performance à la Judith Butler. Tango, like many other gender performances, imitates heteronormativity, calling attention to hierarchical differences between the sexes, literally, with every step the dancers take. Women, already immobilised by impractical clothing and uncomfortable stiletto heels, are forced to follow their partner's lead, dancing backwards with their eyes closed. According to Villa, women can never become 'full subjects' when they dance tango because they are not allowed as followers to initiate steps. She wonders how any woman could feel anything but stifled and unhappy when she is 'confined' to a small space (the embrace) over which she has so little control and where she is dependent upon the whims of her (male) dance partner. In her view, the very performance of tango is hopelessly skewed against women exercising their autonomy.

This gendered asymmetry is further exacerbated by the unspoken codes in many tango salons – codes which have been adopted from the, presumably more 'traditional', salon culture of Buenos Aires, in which men are expected to do the inviting, while women wait passively on the sidelines, waiting to be asked to dance. The separation of the roles according to the sex of the dancer, the performance of the dance, and the gendered organisation of the salon culture all reproduce traditional notions of gender. By accepting a 'retrograde' gender regime as part of what makes tango 'authentic' (i.e. 'typically Argentinean'), European dancers reify gendered hierarchies as essential for the production of passion (Villa, 2001: 249). Curiously, Villa implies that this dilemma does not arise in Buenos Aires, nor that Argentinean men and women will also have to manage the tensions that are part

and parcel of gender relations in late modernity, apparently assuming that Argentines, unlike Europeans, are frozen in the past, doomed to perform the retrograde gender regime that is ostensibly part of their 'culture'. While Villa is interested in why modern, upwardly mobile, non-Argentinean tango dancers would be prepared to adopt such – for them – strange behaviour, she does not analyse this beyond asserting that tango provides an exotic 'gender game' for contemporary dancers who can afford to distance themselves from their normal lives in order to enact traditional gender roles from the past. As she puts it, European men and women are already so firmly convinced of their autonomy and independence that they can afford to 'play' with different identities in accordance with their own desires. For them, tango provides a pleasant, but reassuringly temporary diversion whereby they can adopt exotically different, restrictive roles that they would reject in their ordinary lives (Villa, 2001: 257–258).

One might conclude from Villa's work that combining tango and a feminist commitment to egalitarianism and consensuality in gender relations is a mission impossible. However, she leaves some room for transformation, here, again, drawing upon Butler's work. In her view, queer tango – as rapidly emerging dance culture and as transgressive feminist ideal⁷ – not only 'denaturalizes' gender, but it 'de-genders' tango (Villa, 2010: 162). Tango is queered when new generations (of non-Argentines) refuse to faithfully perform the gendered norms of traditional tango. It happens when they don androgynous cargo pants and comfortable shoes instead of sexy clothing and high heels. Tango becomes queer when women refuse to wait patiently until a man asks them to dance or when a follower interjects her own steps during the dance. And, most radically of all, tango is queered when the gendered binary between leader and follower is disbanded altogether and partners constantly – and with passion – switch the roles of leading and following.⁸ In other words, Villa implies that queer tango is the only real possibility for a feminist to dance tango because it alone allows her to eliminate the problematic aspects of (hetero)normativity which have traditionally pervaded tango, while keeping her progressive politics firmly to the fore.

Marta Savigliano, in her pivotal book *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion* (1995), is more pessimistic than Villa about tango's capacity to be rehabilitated. Drawing upon feminist and postcolonial theory, Savigliano places tango in an explicitly political perspective – a 'politics of passion', as she has so aptly called it. Her focus is on the gendered, ethnicised, and geographical disparities which tango as a heterosexist dance with colonial overtones represents. For her, encounters between men and women on the dance floor are always sites for the exercise of heteronormative power relations between men and women as well as for 'othering', cultural imperialism, and economic exploitation. She shows how the representations of macho men and victimised, yet recalcitrant women ('rebellious broads') which have been associated with tango's history, have been recycled as the dance has moved to other places, becoming entangled in the global legacies of imperialism and colonialism. The crux of her argument is that tango's popularity abroad is just one more case of cultural imperialism – an asymmetrical encounter whereby the

political, historic, and economic asymmetries between the global North and South are played out on the dance floor (1995: 73–106; 2003). In her view, tango generates a political economy of passion that draws upon the same rules of exoticism that are part of any colonial or imperial project. Tango feeds the ethnicised and imperialist fantasies and desires of the white Europeans and Americans in search of the passion they are missing at home without their having to endanger the privileges they enjoy as inhabitants of the global North. In contrast, Argentinean tango dancers are forced, whether for economic reasons or from a misplaced desire for admiration, to offer themselves up as the ‘raw material’ for an imperial politics of desire that transforms them into exotic/erotic Latin ‘Others’ who are ‘closer to their bodies’, more ‘natural’, and more ‘in tune with their primitive desires’.

As an Argentinean expatriate living in the US, Savigliano situates herself within the growing contingent of postcolonial feminists in diaspora who use their ambivalent feelings about being treated as ‘exotic others’ in the US Academy, to criticise disempowering conditions in their homelands as well as global hierarchies of power, more generally. In this vein, she is wary of the commercialised consumption of tango as a global dance as well as her own complicity as tango dancer and Argentinean in the alienating power structures that both ‘other’ and privilege her (something she calls ‘auto-exoticisation’). Unlike Villa, Savigliano does not see queer tango as an unproblematic subversive remedy for the gendered hierarchies of tango. Indeed, she shows how queer tango has become a trendy tourist attraction in Buenos Aires, and, as such, recycles the same tired imperialist dynamic of exoticisation that is present in tango in its more traditional forms. The Argentinean tango dancer, whether queer or straight, is positioned as exotic ‘other’ who remains firmly wedded to her or his culture and is expected to perform tango ‘authentically’ for the consumption of foreign visitors.

In contrast, the queer tango dancer from Europe or the US can perform her or his subversive persona in a context where the ‘right to choose’ (one’s partner, one’s style of dancing, one’s comportment in dance venues) meshes neatly with liberal desires for diversity and commitments to individual freedom. Same-sex dancing may even provide a reassuring signal in European and US tango salons that, despite their claim to be offering ‘authenticity’, they have not become *too* traditionally gendered (Savigliano, 2010: 140). She shows that most Argentinean tango dancers are less able to enjoy the perks of a cosmopolitan lifestyle which are open to tango dancers in the global North. Since the collapse of their economy and the devaluation of the peso in 2001, they are compelled to stay at home, while their foreign counterparts can travel the world in search of new dancing experiences. While Savigliano is appreciative of the ways queer tango has subverted some of the heteronormative conventions of the traditional tango salon, she ultimately argues that under globalisation it is still a commodity, and, indeed, a commodity which can be consumed for its ‘transgressiveness’, without altering asymmetries of power between North and South.

Taken together, Villa and Savigliano provide invaluable insights for a critical postcolonial feminist understanding of the performance and politics of passion in

tango. However, I am also left feeling somewhat frustrated and more than a little dissatisfied. Explanations of tango as a performance of retrograde gender relations or as the shared legacy of the politics of a colonial and imperial past do little to explain why so many women (and men) across the globe have become so passionately enamoured with dancing tango. By drawing exclusively upon the discourses of feminist and postcolonial theory to account for this passion, such explanations may, when all is said and done, have missed the most important ingredient of passion – the thing that makes passion what it is – namely, an affective, embodied, lived attachment to something that makes people love it so much that they cannot imagine life without it (Benzecry, 2011: 5).⁹ This is not simply a methodological oversight, a matter of prioritising theory over empirical research, or being blinded by one's normative commitments. It has consequences for our ability to understand and, ultimately, to theorise passion – whether we are talking about a passion for tango or any number of equally dubious and politically incorrect passions which are part and parcel of many people's everyday lives. It is my contention that a feminist critique of tango should not only make the strange and unsettling aspects of tango passion familiar – that is, understandable – for someone who has never danced tango, nor could even imagine ever doing, but it should be prepared to elaborate feminist theorising on the politics and performance of passion with a consideration of the embodied, visceral experience of passion as well as what it means for the people who actually experience it.

Embodying passion

Taking up this challenge marked the beginning of my own intellectual journey into the world of tango. It started with an ethnographic exploration of tango salons in Amsterdam, which is one of the tango centres in Europe, and in Buenos Aires, which continues to be regarded as the Mecca for tango. I observed dancers' interactions on and off the dance floor and interviewed men and women who were passionate tango dancers, all of whom danced tango at least twice a week and some even twice a day. One of my initial discoveries was that being passionate about dancing tango did not necessarily make it easy to talk about the actual experience of passion. When I asked my informants how dancing tango felt or what they liked about it, they would say something like: 'Wow, let's see... that's hard... I don't know how to explain it... I just *feel* it.' What the experience of dancing means to a dancer often resists being put into words.¹⁰ Many of the people I spoke with would put on tango music during our conversations to help them talk about their dance experiences. They often jumped up in the middle of the interview to show me a particular step or movement. Some would even start to cry when remembering a specific dance experience and then proceed to tell me about how it resonated with the death of a parent or partner, a divorce, or just missing their homeland. It is not that these dancers did not *know* what they were experiencing. They knew all too well. However, they needed to find ways to talk about an

embodied experience where ‘a practice emerges as an invisible constellation of sensations, meaning, and action’ (Wacquant, 2005: 466) and express discursively something that was deeply felt, yet difficult to describe. I learned to regard these embodied moments in the interview as an important entrance into the experience of dancing tango, as the bodily preliminaries to a discursive story about passion, which enabled my informants to embark upon the difficult task of translating into words how tango felt and what it meant to them.

Tango begins when two people enter an embrace and move around the floor together in tune with the music. It is the *connection* that emerges, however, which is the embodiment of tango passion. Brandon Olszewski (2008) has coined it *cuervo de baile* (body of the dance), referring to the unique kinaesthetic connection which tango produces where two bodies move in synchrony with the music and which generates a feeling of becoming one (‘a body with two heads and four legs’). Most dancers become lyrical when talking about this experience. It does not happen with every dance or even with the same partner every time. But when it does, it is described with words like pure, total, or perfect. Nothing else seems to matter but this one moment outside time when ‘everything comes together’. It is an intimacy like no other, and yet, paradoxically, it sometimes occurs in the arms of a total stranger. The embrace provides a liminal space – a place which is outside everyday life, caught between the old (which has not been totally abandoned) and the new (which is anticipated but not yet realised). This space can feel extremely uncomfortable or perfectly at home, desperately unhappy or ecstatically joyful. While this sense of connection is the experience that dancers long for and that keeps them coming back for more, it is also elusive and unpredictable. It is gone before you realise you have had it. As one of my informants, who was trying to explain his idea of the ‘ultimate dance experience’, put it: ‘It’s when the music finishes and you don’t want to leave the embrace. You were dancing, something different happened, something magic, and then it stopped. It was perfect and then it’s finished. You only know it was perfect when you leave it’ (Joachim, thirty-five-year-old construction worker). It is this transitory quality that forms an essential feature of tango passion. Connection is not only about people coming together. It is also about leaving one another and longing to return another time, for another dance, again and again and again.

Talking about passion is not only difficult because it is hard to find the words that fit the experience. It also involves feelings that may disrupt the way people ordinarily think of themselves, their relationships, and their lives. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the gendered division of leading and following in tango. In traditional forms of tango, not only are leaders men and followers women, but the appearance of the dancers, the organisation of the salon, and the cultural imaginaries of tango draw upon hyper-heterosexual forms of masculinity and femininity. One of the difficulties for many modern dancers in talking about their experience of dancing tango is having to explain why they want to dance something so obviously ‘old-fashioned’ in terms of gender. Nearly every woman I spoke with, for example, explained why she, who was so used to having control over her own life, was

prepared to 'surrender' herself to her partner in tango. For example, this is the way Kate, a teacher in her mid-fifties, described her passion for tango:

You know what my perfect dance is like? It's like nothing bad is going to happen to me. I can close my eyes and just enjoy that this man is going to take care of me and make sure I have everything I can possibly need [...] I know what this sounds like [laughs]. I know there are two of you and it's important to satisfy the other person. I know that's all true. But I'm just telling you about my desires here.

Her laughter marks her need to set her passion apart from her 'normal' persona as self-proclaimed feminist and proponent of egalitarian gender relations.

But men, too, were constantly assuring me that they were not machos and often worried that they would not sound 'feminist'. 'Nevertheless,' they would say, 'tango lets me find another side of myself. I feel more whole, more who I really am.' As one man told me, somewhat sheepishly:

I like being the boss, but I could never do it so openly in my work. You know, you always have to negotiate, make sure everyone is equally involved and on board in the decision-making. But in tango, it's OK, it's a *good* thing to take the lead. I love it when my partners close their eyes, it's like they're saying, 'Lead me! Do what you want! I'll follow you wherever you go!' (Leo, sixty-year-old lawyer)

In a context where egalitarian relations between the sexes are the undisputed norm, if not necessarily the reality, dancing tango is not only difficult to explain, but it also requires some justification and even defence. Tango dancers have to make sense of experiences that are both fervently desired and yet at odds with the cultural or normative parameters of their normal identities and the shared cultural world view in many late modern societies (Illouz, 2012).¹¹ Their struggles to reconcile their desire for tango with their 'emancipated' selves outside the tango salon are not so much about imitating retrograde gender roles, as Villa would have it, but rather engaging in some playful transgression of the ubiquitous norms of gender equality. The normative commitment to gender equality makes power differentials politically incorrect and, in so doing, makes it difficult to engage in many of the rituals that made the performance of gender erotic and pleasurable (Illouz, 2012: 192). Thus, in late modernity men and women are left empty-handed when it comes to practices for expressing desire, along with an unrequited longing for passion.¹²

From this perspective, it is easy to see how tango might allow contemporary dancers to experience the passion that is missing from their lives. By accentuating the very gender differences that late modernity has made problematic, tango facilitates the emergence of passion. Its rituals of invitation draw upon the same techniques of ambiguity – the *cabeceo* with its enticingly off-the-record promise that enables flirtation.¹³ The communication between leader and follower is reminiscent of a seduction with its playful teasing with attraction and repulsion. And, finally,

the close embrace of tango allows and even demands the very abandonment of self to the other which has been lost in late modernity with its norm of autonomous individuals in control of their destinies. Tango thrives on difference, allowing partners to encounter one another across the gulf that divides them, to find a space outside time and space where all boundaries magically disappear. It offers them a temporary escape from the norms of sexual equality which many people find important in their everyday lives in order to temporarily pursue their desire for passion. They can leave behind their normal or socially acceptable identities as progressive, enlightened members of late modern society without having to worry about disrupting their egalitarian relationships in their everyday lives. Thus, dancing tango produces gender relations that are neither retrograde nor emancipated, but rather – somewhat paradoxically – a very contemporary compensation for some of the costs of late modernity.

So far, this sounds like a strategy along the lines of having one's cake and eating it, too. And yet, how harmless is this passion for tango in actual fact? What happens when it leaves the safe confines of the tango salon, spilling over into dancers' everyday lives? Dancing tango requires – at least for non-Argentineans who have not learned it from their parents or relatives at family gatherings – a considerable investment in time, energy, and money. Many dancers spend years taking lessons and practising. They devote hours to watching YouTubes of tango performances with the *maestros* and listening to tango music, often laboriously translating the lyrics. They attend tango salons as often as they can under the motto of 'A day without dancing tango is a day that is wasted'. They are prepared to travel far from home just to dance and no vacation goes by without their checking out the local tango scene. Large sums of money go into not only workshops and lessons, but also shoes and clothing. As one of my informants admitted: 'I walk into clothing stores with different eyes now. All I'm thinking about is whether this top or this skirt is something I can dance in. I'd say three-fourths of my closet is tango, one-fourth is for the rest of my life' (Ellie, a divorced nutritionist). As their lives begin to revolve more and more around dancing tango, they find that they no longer go to movies the way they used to. They stop listening to classical or popular music. They socialise less and less frequently with friends outside the tango scene. Unsurprisingly, their families – and non-dancing partners – may find it hard to understand this strange passion for tango and wonder what has happened to these people they thought they knew so well. Many dancers travel to Buenos Aires once a year just to dance and some even decide to leave their homes, their jobs, their families, and their friends behind and live there so they can dance tango all the time. For these people, tango is not only their passion; it has become the most important thing in their lives.

As one of my informants – Paul, a divorced retired engineer from Montreal who had been living in Buenos Aires for four years when I met him – explained:

It's kind of crazy, but I thought: so what's keeping me in Canada? My kids are all there, so that would have been a reason to stay there. On the other hand, they have

their own lives and they don't want me hanging around anyhow. So, my question to myself was: What do I *really* want to do? [...] And the rest is history.

Such tango exiles sound similar to the drug addicts whose biographical trajectory has moved from weekend user to full-fledged junkie. And, indeed, many dancers acknowledge that tango is a drug that has taken over their lives. However, it is precisely tango's capacity to pleurably disorder their lives, while being experienced, paradoxically, as safe, that makes it more than a hobby and different than an addiction. This suggests that the trajectory of a tango dancer might better be compared with processes by which people become passionate about something (i.e. the trajectory of becoming an *aficionado*). Passion is not a fixed entity, but rather an active process by which a person develops an intense attachment to something to the extent that s/he willingly gives up her or his own autonomy in order to pursue it. Passionate trajectories go well beyond just liking to do something (as in a hobby or a preferred pastime). Rather they involve an 'intense, embodied attachment which brings with it a particular kind of engagement with the world, whereby certain lines of action are chosen while others are discarded' (Benzecry, 2011: 184). They develop in a social context in which like-minded *aficionados* specifically come together for an experience that does not occur or might even be blocked in the broader society in which they live. Such passions provoke a person to abandon the routines of ordinary life, give up the familiar in order to do something that is experienced as 'what s/he was always meant to do' (but had not yet dared). Paradoxically, a passionate trajectory is about losing oneself, while coming home.

Embracing contradictions

So, where does this leave us with regard to the rhetorical question I raised at the outset: Should a feminist dance tango? And, more importantly, what is it about feminist scholarship which makes it easier to analyse the *politics* of dancing tango than the embodied, passionate *experience* that it evokes? The dance scholar Jane Desmond (1997) has rightly argued that dancing should never be seen as an unmediated, transparent expression of pleasure and passion. Dancing is invariably embedded in hierarchies of difference and power and, therefore, rarely free of the tensions and antagonisms that are produced by gender, heteronormativity, and differences in class, ethnicity, generation, and national belonging. This is true whether one is talking about ballroom dancing, salsa, or the lindy hop (Eriksen, 2011; Johnson, 2011; Wade, 2011) and tango is, obviously, no exception. Moreover, as a global dance that has crossed many borders, it bears the burden of its entanglements in the histories of colonialism and imperialism in which it emerged and is deeply implicated in the present realities of global economic disparities between North and South. Originally poor but always moving upwards, white but with some traces of colour, colonised yet with a touch of barbarism in the process of being civilised, tango was and is 'a perfect candidate for the modern

capitalist condition of the exotic' (Savigliano, 1995: 110) and, therefore, a welcome object for feminist and postcolonial critique. Villa and Savigliano have been particularly adept at uncovering the ways tango is conflated with gendered hierarchies of power and globally structured inequalities. However, they have been considerably less able to understand the embodied experience of passion which emerges through the dancing itself. At first glance, this is perhaps ironic, given that they, like most scholars of dance, dance tango themselves. A closer look, however, may help explain this irony. When a feminist dances tango she experiences a disjuncture between the experience and the politics of passion, between desiring something and yet knowing that she should not. This particular passion undermines her political or normative commitments, making her nervous, uncomfortable, and just a little conflicted.

The feminist who dances tango faces the same dilemma as her scholarly sister who writes about it – both are confronted with what Clare Hemmings (2012) has called 'affective dissonance'. Affective dissonance is an important resource for feminist critique. It sensitises the feminist scholar to things that are not right in the world, sets off flashing lights, or produces the gut-level, 'I smell a rat' feeling – that reflexive moment, which is the essential ingredient of a hermeneutics of suspicion that is central to any critical inquiry (Hemmings, 2012: 158). Seen in this light, it is, therefore, no longer so surprising that the critical feminist scholar might find that her passion is getting in the way of her normative commitments and that she may turn to theories that allow her to (comfortably) distance herself from her passion in order to criticise it. By the same token, she will probably want to forget these same theories when she goes dancing. Thus, affective dissonance may sensitise feminist scholars to what it is that they need to criticise and help them find theories which will help them generate explanations that are in tune with their normative commitments, yet these theories come with a price. The price is a neglect of the experience of passion and what dancing means to the people who are so passionate about it. Understanding the experience of tango passion *and* its political implications would require a different approach.

The feminist philosopher Sandra Bartky (1990) has been particularly interested in those experiences and practices that are passionately pursued by some women and yet at odds with their feminist politics. One of her most memorable cases – and it is one which is useful as a parallel for thinking about the experience and politics of tango – concerned a young feminist who was deeply ashamed about her masochistic fantasies which, as she admitted, tended to revolve around a host of normatively problematic experiences like 'painful exposure, embarrassment, humiliation, mutilation, and domination by Gestapo-like characters' (1990: 46–47). Bartky argued that feminist attempts to smooth out such contradictions between experience and politics along the lines of 'masochism is bad because it reproduces relations of domination' (the sexual determination thesis) or 'if that's what you want, just do it' (the sexual voluntarism thesis) were both problematic. The former is problematic because it ignores the fact that the structures of feeling that give rise to politically incorrect desires then pervade people's imaginations and

shape their sexuality to such an extent that denying them would be cruel and probably futile as well. As Bartky (1990: 57) puts it, one cannot simply replace a politically undesirable or oppressive sexuality with a politically desirable feminist sexuality, even assuming that one could define 'feminist sexuality'. Given the enormous variation in sexual desire and practices among women, this would be not only oppressive itself, but probably impossible. However, the 'just do it' position is also problematic because it ignores the significance of shame and unease as understandable responses to behaviour that is seriously at variance with one's political principles (Bartky, 1990: 60).¹⁴ In the case of the young woman who was deeply troubled by her fantasies, her shame is just as much a part of who she was as her sexual desires.

Bartky's approach, which has received little attention from contemporary feminist scholars of the 'affective turn', is not only concerned with the relationship between principles and passion; it is an approach which is both empirically grounded and critically reflexive. She believes that feminist scholars should treat any disjuncture between their own (and others') experiences with their political or normative convictions as something to be confronted and explored rather than smoothed over or neatly explained away. Passions invariably evoke existential unease and contradictions – between, for example, ideologically discursive commitments, on the one hand, and transgressive desires, on the other hand. Bartky invites feminists to embrace precisely those emotions which they find the most disturbing and use them as a resource for doing feminist theory. This not only implies that feminist scholars need to ground their normative, theoretical critique of passion in a grounded analysis of what the experience of passion feels like and what it means to those who have it, but it also suggests contradictions between feminist theory and embodied experience are a useful starting point for reflecting critically on some of the silences within feminist theory itself.

Does this mean we should ignore the feminist postcolonial critique of the politics of tango? Of course not. However, I would like to offer a modest provocation in the direction of critical scholarship that privileges the theoretical and normative discourses of feminism and postcolonialism to explain passion while ignoring its most basic ingredient – namely, that people love what they are doing so deeply that they cannot help themselves and have to keep doing it. Instead, I would suggest a more grounded and reflexive approach to passion is called for – one that uses the embodiment of passion as an affective, sensual attachment with political implications as a site for exploring the contradictions and entanglements, the constraints and the possibilities that are part of any activity which is pleasurable intense and fervently desired, yet unsettling and perhaps even profoundly disturbing.

Notes

1. This article is a revised version of the annual *Feminist Theory* lecture (Newcastle, May 2014). In it, I take up and elaborate some of the arguments I made in my book, *Dancing Tango: Passionate Encounters in a Globalizing World* (2015). Many thanks to Anna Aalten, Willem de Haan, and Henri Wijsbek for their helpful and provocative comments.

2. For example, see Martin Brest's *The Scent of a Woman* (1992), James Cameron's *True Lies* (1994), Liz Friedlander's *Take the Lead* (2006), Peter Chelsom's *Shall We Dance* (2004), Robert Duvall's (a real-life tango aficionado) *Assassination Tango* (2002), Baz Luhrmann's *Moulin Rouge* (2001), Sally Potter's *The Tango Lesson* (1997), Carlos Saura's *Tango* (1998), and Alan Parker's *Evita* (1996).
3. Ana Cara relegates performances that are full of flashy acrobatics and blatantly seductive movements to 'export tango – a form of tango which externalizes expressions of passion to an audience which will read them as "passionate"'. In contrast, "home tango" – that is, tango danced in ordinary venues (salons) by locals – internalizes passion as an intensely private experience between two people dancing together to the music' (2009: 441).
4. The differences between these terms have also been the subject of considerable debate. Affect is generally considered to be the physical response to feeling, linked to the biological body, while emotion is treated as a social or cultural expression of feeling and refers to the ways these feelings are managed in public spheres (see Probyn, 2005; Gorton, 2007: 334). In the case of tango passion, I would argue that, in addition to the affective or physical and the emotional or social dimensions, tango passion also entails an activity, a performance, and a cultural imaginary (see Davis, 2015).
5. Commonly-cited representatives of the 'affective turn' include Lauren Berlant (1997, 2008), Eve Sedgwick (2003), Sara Ahmed (2004, 2010), Teresa Brennan (2004), Judith Butler (2004), Clare Hemmings (2005, 2012), and Elspeth Probyn (2005).
6. Some have disagreed with this, suggesting that feminists have been too negative and need to move away from the endless hermeneutic of suspicion and become more 'reparative' in their critiques (Sedgwick, 2003). While Robyn Wiegman has remarked that critique ('chewing on the world') is a joy that feminists value and 'resolutely cling to' (2014: 19), this seems rather like enjoying being negative rather than celebrating joy.
7. Queer tango (or Tango Queer, as it is called in Buenos Aires) has become a global phenomenon, replete with salons, festivals, and performances by professional dancers. It is, however, also a philosophy about how tango should be danced which draws heavily upon Anglo-American queer theory (Arrizon, 2006; Pellarolo, 2008; Davis, 2015).
8. Tango passion which, in traditional tango, emerges in the connection of a close embrace between two partners together in the music is replaced in queer tango by a normatively-fuelled desire to switch roles during the dance itself. This difficult manoeuvre requires a certain amount of distance between dancers and considerably more attention to the mechanics and technique of the dance. Thus, not only are the politics of queer tango different; the experience and performance of passion are different as well.
9. In his delightful analysis of the opera fanatic, Claudio Benzecry (2011) criticises the use of sociological discourses on power, status or distinction to account for people's affective, visceral attachments to cultural forms. While he uses the term love instead of passion, his argument coincides with the one I am making here about a passion for tango.
10. See Andrew Ward (1997) for a discussion of the problems facing scholars of dance who grapple with the difficulties of translating kinaesthetic experiences into discursive descriptions.
11. I am not implying that gender relations in late modernity are always equal and consensual, but rather that the values of sexual equality, individual autonomy, and consensual relationships belong to a shared cultural world view in many parts of the world and to which many people, including those who dance tango, pay lip service.

12. In this respect, the performance of masculinity and femininity in tango resonates with the kinds of performances that occur in sadomasochistic (SM) relationships, where a scene of dominance and submission is played out consensually for the mutual pleasure of the participants. Debates about whether or not being a feminist precludes practising SM sex raise similar issues to the ones I address here (Hopkins, 1994; Stear, 2009).
13. In most salons in Buenos Aires, a dance must be initiated by a nod from the man – a *cabeceo* – and accepted by a return nod from the woman. This is designed to avoid overt rejection and subtly negotiate an invitation. Sometimes an invitation will be set up in advance, through eye contact made from the floor, a brief smile, or an infinitesimal shrug as if to say: ‘Yes, now I am dancing with her, but it is you I would like to have in my arms.’ This process can be extended over many dances. Even after a dancer has lost all hope of an invitation ever materialising, a long awaited *cabeceo* may suddenly appear, mysteriously, unexpectedly, and yet also with a certain inevitability. It is a subtle form of seduction, often playful, sometimes frustrating, but invariably exciting. It allows dancers to avoid unwanted dances by pretending not to see an invitation, thereby protecting themselves and preventing the other person from losing face.
14. Iris Young (1990) makes a similar case for investigating racism and xenophobia where unconscious aversion can sabotage consciously held attitudes of acceptance. While she advocates taking embodied reactions of aversion seriously, this does not mean that the person is absolved of moral responsibility for combatting the social and cultural effects of racism and xenophobia.

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