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Doing Argentine Tango. A passionate approach

The Friday afternoon I started to write this paper was a hot summer day in July. I was still tired after having been - as usually on Thursdays – at a *milonga* in Vienna dancing Argentine tango. I came home late at night, I definitely did not sleep enough, and the deadline for the delivery of the text in which I am supposed to address Kathy as a tango researcher and a tango dancer was coming closer rapidly.

Looking for inspiration I read again some passages of her monography “Dancing Tango. Passionate encounters in a globalized world”. (Davis 2015) Being an insider, an active part of the international tango cosmos, I am familiar with many observations Kathy describes and analyses in detail, sometimes with a little polemic touch as she admits. I share many of the experiences she presents in her book: First of all the passion for Argentine tango, which makes up an important part of my life, too. I am homebased in Vienna, but I dance very often in Berlin, which is entitled as the European Eldorado of tango within the community. Like many European tango dancers I have an academic background, I travel a lot, and to be honest, I select the places of conferences, workshops or cooperation not exclusively on a professional basis but also in respect to my preferred *milongas* or to new ones to be explored. The astonished faces of colleagues, when I leave a conference dinner earlier, telling them that I have to dance tango now, are worth to be seen.

I also share Kathy’s experience of being a tango researcher, having done an ethnographic, practice theory oriented study on the materiality of dancing tango on high-heels (Littig 2013). I am aware that turning a private sphere of life into a professional one is an ambivalent undertaking: On the one hand, it allows to skip the borders between life and work and to have an easy field access, on the other hand you have to stay skeptical whether being an insider allows for sufficient analytical distance.

But we may differ with regard to one issue: I never had any doubts about dancing tango – not from a feminist background nor from another. I am convinced that the micro cosmos respectively the global tango community is a relevant field of sociological research, not only from a feminist perspective but also from a socio-economic and socio-ecological point of view.

Kathy David’s study “Dancing Tango” is as she says both, a personal and an academic book based on long-term ethnographic field work and dancing experience. It is a reflection about Kathy’s own addiction to tango – a dance which at first glance might contradict feminist ideas of gender equity and therefore challenge her deeply rooted beliefs and values.

Today’s passion of many people for dancing Argentine tango, an old-fashioned couples’ dance often performed with music from the 1930ties and 40ties, with lyrics that many dancers do not understand and if so, they would be astonished what they are about – this strange passion is the puzzle which made Kathy present a sociological analysis of the recent global phenomenon of dancing tango. Comparing mainly tango salons and tango practices in Amsterdam and Buenos Aires she focuses on three research topics: First, how does the intimate relationship that is established even within just one dance relate to current societal

ideas and problems of intimate relationships? Second, what is about gender issues, stereotypes of masculinity and femininity that are relevant in tango? How do individuals who perceive themselves as emancipated deal with the dominance of traditional gender roles in the tango world? The third question relates to Argentina: What are the consequences of the globalization of the Argentinian dance heritage, which occurred in several waves over the last century? How do Argentinians, more precisely tango dancers from Buenos Aires, deal with the invasion of foreigners, thousands of tango addicts, who visit the Mekka of tango every year looking for the “authentic” tango?

I will not present her complex and well-argued answers to these questions in this talk.

Instead I strongly recommend reading the book, in which tango is presented “as a contact zone for transnational encounters” as DongKue Lee (2015) put it; a zone where “especially, gender is negotiated, along with other hierarchies of difference such as class, generation and nationality.”

(Ibid.) The book has been praised by prominent feminist scholars like Judith Stacey, who said that

“*Dancing Tango* offers a laudable contribution to literature on tango, gender, and

contemporary global cultural developments.” (Davis 2015, back cover). And Chris Shilling:

“This compelling study will be an invaluable resource for scholars and students interested in feminist sociology, ethnography, sexuality, embodiment, and globalization.” (Davis 2015,

back cover) And Ray Batchelor (2015), a queer tango dancer, who judges Kathy’s study as

“timely, and impressive.” And further: “If Davis’s approach is scholarly, it is also wonderfully fresh.

Here is learning as it should be: worn lightly and used with intelligence to illuminate.”

But if I do not just add another praise of the book, what I am going to say instead? – I thought at that particular Friday in July.

While I brooded over a potential topic a little conversation during the prior tango night popped into my mind: I was just changing my shoes – I always wear flat shoes, never high heels – when a man, whom I did not know, obviously a foreigner visiting the Viennese tango scene, said to me (in German): “If I were a woman, I would also like to dance with you.” I looked at him, I guess a bit surprised. Maybe this made him say: “I wish I could lead like you.” I smiled, thanked him for his compliment and after having said good-bye we parted. That’s it, I thought! I will talk about leading women in Argentine tango. This is something that is just marginally tackled in Kathy’s book. I am not talking about queer tango, which is very prominently discussed in Kathy’s publication as a subversion of traditional heteronormative tango norms. Queer milongas are explicitly announced as dancing events in which traditional gender roles are challenged and attempted to overcome. Queering tango is also a part of my motivation to lead - usually women, sometimes men. I rarely dance as a follower; I prefer to lead and did so from the beginning. I was somehow forced to dance as a follower when I visited Buenos Aires for the first time about twelve years ago. At that time I would not have had a chance to dance as a leading woman in most Argentinian milongas.

When I started to dance tango about 15 years ago in the very young and small tango community in Vienna, we – my female partner and I - were the only same sex couple who learned and danced Argentine tango. For many years I was the only woman in Vienna who

consequently lead women, in the beginning mainly my partner. But since five or six years I can observe that more and more women start to learn the leading role, not just in Vienna. I consider the rising number of (heterosexual) women, taking the lead *en la pista* (on the dance floor) in mainstream heterosexist milongas as a relatively new development of doing Argentine tango, certainly in Europe.

These women rarely start to lead because they want to change gender roles. Those who are elderly, let's say older than fifty, say that they are tired of waiting in vain for a man's invitation to dance. Instead of giving up dancing they actively manage their frustration by learning how to lead. They mainly dance with other women, very rarely with men as follower. The second group of leading women learns both roles because they want to improve their dancing techniques by knowing both parts. This is the main motivation for female (and male) tango teachers; a motivation which can be found in queer tango, too. But what about the first group, the women 50-plus, who start to lead as a consequence of being ignored by male dancers? (- Who clichédly prefer to dance with young, sexy women, often regardless of their dancing level.) How can this be interpreted? This practice certainly is subversive to the subordinate role women are supposed to take in the traditional macho Argentine tango. But is this an unintended queering of tango? Does this blur gender differences? With regard to the latter my clear answer is: No! From my own experience I know that it makes a difference whether you dance with a man or a woman. Their bodies feel different, their movements are different. I claim that I would recognize blindly whether I lead a man or a woman. But what is about passion? Is this same sex dancing less passionate? Or is it a different kind of passion? Or even a new experience of passion for these women? A pleasure which they have not known before – if they allow it to happen? And consequently subversive not only with regard to the spoken and unspoken codes of conduct in the mainstream tango but also with regard to deeply incorporated ways of perception and feeling?

Due to time restrictions I have to leave the answers to these questions open. They need further research and of course intense field work.

But I want to give a preliminary answer taken from the Austrian cabaret singer Georg Kreisler. In 1958 he wrote a chanson in tango rhythm entitled "Zwei alte Tanten", which can be translated as "two old ducks/ladies". The song makes ironic comments on political developments of that time casted in bizarre rhymes. It starts with an I-narrator who sometimes wanders through the streets at night because he cannot sleep. One night gazing through a window he makes an unexpected observation, which becomes the refrain of the song: 'Two old ducks (ladies) dancing tango in the middle of the night'. His comment on that is: 'Why not? They would not have slept anyway'. And further: 'How these angels wind around each other and nestle leg to leg, every step in accordance with this rhythm *must* be a pleasure!'

Kathy, may I ask you, to dance not to Kreisler's tango with me but to "Uno"? And: We leave it to the audience to judge whether it is a pleasure – for them and for us.

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The refrain of Georg Kreislers song "Zwei alte Tanten" (1958):

"Zwei alte Tanten tanzen Tango

Mitten in der Nacht

Warum auch nicht?

Sie hätten sonst die Nacht

Nur schlaflos zugebracht

Wie diese Engeln

Sich nur schlängeln

Und schmiegen Bein an Bein -

Jeder Schritt muss

Bei dem Rhythmus

Ein Vergnügen sein!"

(Full lyrics in German:

http://lyrics.wikia.com/wiki/Georg_Kreisler:Zwei_Alte_Tanten_%281958_Version%29)

(accessed 9.7.17):