



Research Cluster and Graduate School
Society and Culture in Motion. Diffusion – Experiment – Institution
Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg
Reichardstraße 6
06114 Halle (Saale)

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Public Lecture

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Can a Feminist Dance the Tango? Some Reflections on the Experience and Politics of Passion

Tango, of all popular dances, would seem to be the most extreme embodiment of traditional notions of gender difference. The appearance of the dancers, their movements, the lyrics of the music they dance to, their interactions in the venues where tango is danced: all are permeated by hyper-heterosexual and retrograde meanings of masculinity and femininity. Tango Argentino not only draws on hierarchical differences between the sexes, but also on divisions between the global North and South. Within contemporary feminist and postcolonial discourse, the recent popularity of tango which has emerged in cosmopolitan centers around the world is embedded in a 'politics of passion' which makes it, at best, somewhat dubious, and, at worst, politically reprehensible. It transforms Argentines into the exotic 'Other' for consumption by Europeans and North Americans in search of a passion they are missing at home.

In my lecture, I will argue that the politics of passion is only one side of the story. On the basis of a global ethnography of tango culture, I show how gender is negotiated along with other hierarchies of difference (ethnicity, class, generation, and national belonging). The stories of tango aficionados, in particular, provide a site for exploring the contradictions, entanglements, but also the possibilities which emerge when differently situated individuals passionately encounter one another while dancing in a close embrace.

It is my intention to offer a modest provocation in the direction of postcolonial feminist scholarship which places politics before experience by questioning whether we should explain passion by drawing solely upon the discourses of feminism or postcolonialism while ignoring what is passion's most basic ingredient; namely, that people love what they are doing so deeply that they cannot help themselves from having to do it. Instead I would suggest that as critical feminist scholars we should start with the experience of passion, whether we are analyzing a passion for tango or any other bodily activity that is intensely pleasurable and addictively desired, but also unsettling, disruptive, and – last but not least – politically incorrect.

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