

Should a Feminist Dance Tango?

Dancing Tango:

Passionate Encounters in a Globalizing World

By Kathy Davis

New York: New York University Press, 2015, 232 pp., \$27.00, paperback

The Gods of Tango

By Carolina De Robertis

New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015, 384 pp., \$26.95, hardcover

Reviewed by Debra Cash

Tango has the reputation of being a vitamin for the sensually deficient. At the turn of the liberating twentieth century, the naughtiness of close embrace was its signal attraction, as the dance form born in the Argentinean dockyards swept European dance halls, ricocheted to the United States, and was incarnated for narrative purpose in *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, the blockbuster 1921 silent film starring Rudolph Valentino.

Tango has always been a transnational dance form, shape shifting and accreting different theories of origin and valuation depending on whether its practitioners believed it to be a dance of debauchery, a performance of exquisite expertise, or something in between.

So it had to happen that someone, somewhere, would ask “should a feminist dance tango?” The

from a rather obscene exhibition, which is still indulged in by certain cabaret performers, it bloomed forth a polished and extremely fascinating dance, which has not had its equal in rhythmical allurements since the days of the Minuet.

Tango, she insisted, was healthful. But where she and Vernon championed tango and other social dances as paths to physical vigor at the dawn of the jazz age, Davis attempts to reclaim the psychological benefits of embracing the repressed, especially during our era of gender anxiety.

Davis looks at two early twenty-first century tango cultures, distinguishing the customs of her home community of Amsterdam (where tango first appeared in 1913) from tango’s Buenos Aires

invitation to dance; how couples manage not to collide and how they apologize if they do; the obsession with women’s high-heeled shoes; and the lives of “tango junkies” and “tango nomads,” who live to dance. She does a beautiful job of evoking the “past-ness” and “elsewhere-ness” of the tango dance hall, and how it feels to dance close to an unfamiliar partner whose smells—aftershave, sweat—determine the experience of surrender.

Davis’s participant-informant status serves her well as she describes the subtle communication that goes on chest to chest as the dancers move on a single axis, the dancers’ use of wordless cues to make adjustments and improvise, and the engrossing safety of their embrace. Davis quotes the philosopher and dancer Erin Manning’s description of tango as a three-minute pact between strangers that “guarantees nothing but a listening.”



sociologist Kathy Davis, who admits that “when all is said and done, [I] would rather dance tango than do just about anything else,” poses that hypothetical in her new ethnography, *Dancing Tango: Passionate Encounters in a Globalizing World*.

Reclaiming tango from its status as what Davis calls a marginally shameful “incorrect pleasure” has a long and sometimes amusing history. In 1914, the ballroom-dance icon Irene Castle insisted, in the book *Modern Dancing* (1914), co-written with her husband Vernon, that the “sensuous character” of this “old gipsy [sic] dance” had been toned down until

hometown, which has experienced a huge resurgence of tango as a commercialized symbol of *argentinidad* since the end of the country’s Dirty War in the 1980s. In Amsterdam, Davis writes, today’s tango dancers tend to be of similar ages (between 35 and 50) and from professional backgrounds. In Buenos Aires, the men tend to be older, retired, working-class men (perhaps married), while the women are younger professionals (typically single). She describes the culture of each tango salon or *milonga* in loving detail, including their etiquette codes, which prescribe how to invite, accept, or reject an

It is, as one informant tells her, one way a woman can be herself without having to be in control. For Davis, it offers an arena for the performance of an atavistic, dependent femininity, and of connection without commitment.

Like other dance cultures, the tango *milonga* has its implicit rules. Unfortunately, under the sway of theorists, in particular Marta Savigliano’s 1995 *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion*, and what Davis refers to as “the normative lens of contemporary critical feminist and postcolonial theories,” her interpretations of those rules are inconsistent and unpersuasive.



Take, for instance, her analysis of the separation of the sexes at the tables in Buenos Aires *milongas*. She argues that this serves to keep sexual desire in check between dance sets, noting that Buenos Aires men shy away from inviting women who are sitting with other men. However, the custom of segregated seating could just as easily serve to keep sexual availability and agency under the woman's control, since in the same paragraph, Davis explains that her informants told her they went out to *milongas* to socialize with their male friends. There, they would dance "under the careful inspection of their friends whose respect they want[ed] to earn."

Davis' frames her feminist problems with tango by asserting that it is inherently a dance of "(hyper)heterosexuality," a sexist "symbolic embodiment of traditional notions of gender." Indeed, it is a dance in which one partner leads and the other follows, and classical tango since its Golden Age in the 1930s has affirmed men as leaders. But as Davis is aware—but doesn't mention until late in her study—Robert Farris Thompson and other scholars have documented both that tango emerged from predominantly male settings (where women, including sex workers, were at a premium), and that homoeroticism has been a recurring thread in tango's aesthetic and the lyrics of its songs.

And same-sex tango never went away. Davis dates the establishment of the first (public) gay *milonga* in Europe to 2001 and the first in Buenos Aires to 2002. When she looks at today's queer tango, she argues that when men and women master both the leader and follower roles, this will "sanitize[e] tango of its heteronormativity and gendered inequalities of power." However, expecting dancers to switch leader/follower roles mid-dance may be as ideologically oppressive as the opposite sex partnerings it would displace.


While Davis refers to cross-dressing same-sex tango dancers as a proof of the intrinsic heteronormativity of tango dancing, Carolina De Robertis uses it as the jumping off point for *The Gods of Tango*, her novel exploring the dangers and delights of self-invention. In 1913, seventeen year old Leda leaves her tiny Italian village outside Naples, carrying the family's cherished violin as a wedding gift for the cousin she is married to by proxy, who is waiting for her in Buenos Aires. She arrives only to discover that Dante has been shot and killed during an anarchist protest.

The young Italian immigrant makes her way in the city where "listening to Spanish was like listening to someone speak her native tongue through murky water," where sewing piecework stands between her and starvation, and where tango dancing and music provide some relief and mournful beauty for the city's poor.

De Robertis uses tango music rather than dancing as the metaphor for cultural integration and freedom, but in her ripe language, it is no less embodied. Early in the novel, as an elderly violinist introduces Leda to the scintillating new music,

she was reminded of the tarantella, which skipped along its notes and pulled you upward, out of yourself, *come and play!* But these pieces, these tangos, didn't only lift; they also plunged you downward, deep inside yourself, to the unexamined corners of your heart. *Come, they whispered, come and look, see what's here and dance with it, this is music too.*

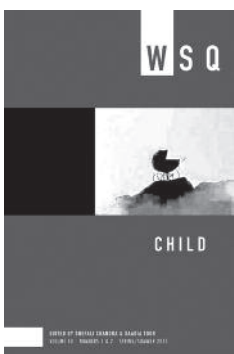
Leda's decision to cut her hair, bind her breasts, and reemerge as Dante—the name speaks of journeys to hell and paradise and back—is not so much transgressive as integrative. Leda/Dante muses that "you can be in one country yet carry another country in your skin; the way a place is changed by whoever comes to it, the way silt invades the body of a river." Cross-dressing changes her self-perception and her posture. She could "walk the streets at night, she could curse and spit into gutters. She could hold down a job that paid twice as much as anything a woman could do with her clothes on." Readers will be able to predict how it also changes her ability to acknowledge her desires and to love with mutuality. De Robertis's tale explores tango's fraught amalgam of anonymity and intimacy.

With subtle historical observations about the conditions in Italy during the Great War, the male environs of a port town, and the struggles of a not-always-successful itinerant tango orchestra, De Robertis paints a broad canvas of an untamed new world. Her modest heroine turns out to be a wild woman, free to explore whether her gender should be any more permanent than the connections she left behind. 

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