

## Humanities Seminar: Argentine Tango: Art, Activism and Global Popular Culture

Professor: Melissa A. Fitch Office: ML 572  
Class session: TH 1:00-4:00 UA Poetry Center Rubel Room  
Office hours: TH 12:00-12:45 ML 592 (and by appointment)  
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### Course Description:

This seminar is focused on the production, consumption and trafficking of meaning found in global cultural narratives, specifically those related to Argentine tango. Far from the hackneyed rose-in-mouth cliché, the seminar will demonstrate how tango has been used for art, activism, therapy and the pursuit of social justice around the world. We will examine films, advertising, theater, poetry, art, documentaries, material culture, children's television programming, digital art forms, fiction, musicals, film shorts and even public protests. Students will learn of the ways in which tango is used as a form of therapy for Parkinson's and hospice patients. They will find out how and why it has been incorporated into programs for the blind in Argentina, France and the US. They will discover the link between tango tourism and the transformation of public space in Buenos Aires. Perhaps most fascinating, they will hear of the many ways in which Argentine tango has been transformed and revitalized through the mixing and mingling of local elements through globalization (sometimes referred to as the "glocalization" of culture). Students will learn of the use of tango as a mechanism for championing women's rights and modernization in Turkey in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and how Jewish prisoners of concentration camps used it as a symbol of life and endurance during the Second World War. Participants will explore the current merging of Argentine tango with Eastern practices and beliefs such as martial arts and Taoism in China, Korea and Hong Kong. Finally, students will find out how the rise of Social Media, such as Facebook, YouTube and Second Life has enabled the global community to mobilize and champion both local and global causes. The final class session devoted to the variants of the dance itself, including a demonstration and basic lesson by local instructors (participation is not mandatory). Participants will also have the opportunity to meet, via Skype, a few of the members of the tango community who have been involved in the fascinating global evolution of this vital artistic expression.

**NOTE:** This is **not** a "how to dance" class! The final session will devote 1 ½ hour to that topic, with guest instructors, but nothing more. Those interested in taking Beginning Tango courses are encouraged to take lessons at 6pm on Tuesdays at the Shall We Dance studio (4101 East Grant Road) with Dave and Shelli Little ([shellinina@gmail.com](mailto:shellinina@gmail.com)) and/or to take the special intensive Beginners Track at the March Tucson Tango Festival (or take classes with the local conference organizers and also excellent instructors, Rusty and Jo).

The Tucson Tango Festival will be taking place March 12-17. This yearly event attracts some of the best dancers in the world. I am not an organizer, so I cannot answer specific questions about the event (although I will attend!). Interested students can learn more at the festival website or by contacted the organizers (their email is found on the website):

<http://tucsontangofestival.com>

**Course Texts:**

*Tango: The Art History of Love.* Robert Farris Thompson, 2005

*Gotta Tango: Argentine Tango Anywhere, Anytime.* Alberto Paz, Valorie Hart, 2008.

Additional very short reading selections for the course will be provided in the form of a PDF via email (or hardcopy by request):

*Long After Midnight at the Nino Bien.* Brian Winter, 2007.

*Tango Nuevo.* Carolyn Merritt, 2012.

*Alpha, Bravo, Tango* by Dyv Saraza, 2008

*Tango: Walking Dance Meditation.* Chan Park, 2005.

**Films/Documentaries**

A significant part of this class will include viewing clips of tango in advertising, television shows, films, music videos and documentaries from around the world (many of which are not in English and too many of which to list here, though a complete bibliography will be provided to students). Beyond those segments, you will be watching the following, either in class or at home (depending on their availability):

A **(very)** partial list of some of the films and documentaries we will view in class:

**Documentaries:**

*La Confeitería Ideal: The Tango Salon* (BBC, 2004) (available online)

*Tango: Bayle nuestro* (Tango: Our Dance, 1988) (One of the very first documentaries on the “new wave” of tango that swept the globe in the late 1980s)

*Tango Your Life.* Chan Park (2011)

**Feature Films** (seen in class if unavailable online):

*The Tango Lesson* (Dir. Sally Potter, UK, France, Argentina, Germany, and Netherlands, 1997);

*Tango: Never Leave Me* (Dir. Carlos Saura, Spain/Argentina, 1998);

*Bar el Chino* (Dir. Daniel Burak, Argentina, 2003).

**Course Learning Outcomes**

- Students will be able to trace the histor(ies) of tango as it developed around the world, in particular in Argentina, France, Japan, Finland and Turkey.
- Students will be able to evaluate global cultural narratives related to Argentine Tango, placing them within their socio-historical contexts and recognizing their ideological presuppositions.
- Students will be able to apply the tools of critical theory to understand the ways in which global power relations and economics play a role in determining the lens with which other cultures are appropriated, viewed and consumed.
- Students will assess the impact of technology and, in particular, social media on the

development of alternative global cultural narratives regarding the meaning of tango and

- Students will gain an understanding and awareness of global tango communities that have emerged in the last twenty years, serving as a source of solidarity and support (both financial and psychological) during times of political, economic and social unrest.
- Students will possess an understanding of the connections between Argentine tango and physical and mental well-being, reviewing studies conducted around the world demonstrating how the dance is able to aid those suffering from numerous ailments, including depression, visual impairment, Parkinson's disease, and others.
- Students will develop an understanding of the history and development of homosocial or "Queer" tango as a global social movement that is both political and activist in bent and in which the traditional male-lead/female-follow equation is dissolved.
- Students will understand the differences between ballroom tango, Argentine stage tango and Argentine social tango.

### **Course Plan**

**January 30 WEEK 1:** Foundational Clichés: From Valentino to Viagra Part 1.

Readings:

Thompson, Preface, Chapter One (from start to page 24);

Paz and Hart, Chapter 1 (through page 16)

**February 6 WEEK 2:** Foundational Clichés: From Valentino to Viagra Part 2

Readings:

Thompson, Chapter Two (25-46);

Paz and Hart, Chapter 2 (17-34)

**February 13 WEEK 3:** Tango "Discovery" and the Neocolonial Gaze Part 1

Readings:

Thompson, Chapter Five (121-145);

Selections from Winter and others, provided in PDF form via email or from handout.

**February 20 WEEK 4:** Tango "Discovery" and the Neocolonial Gaze Part 2

Readings:

Selections from Winter and other writers of non-fictional accounts of tango "discovery" (Cusumano, Palmer, and others) provided in PDF form via email or from handout.

**February 27 WEEK 5:** Queer Rebellions Part 1

Readings:

Selections from Alpha Bravo Tango and 1-2 other articles/websites on the global Tango Queer movement provided in PDF form via email or from handout.

**March 6 WEEK 6:** Queer Rebellions: Part 2

Readings:

Selections from Alpha Bravo Tango and 1-2 other articles/websites on the global Tango Queer movement provided in PDF form via email or from handout.

**March 13 WEEK 7:** Touch, Healing and Zen: Part 1

Readings:

Merritt: Chapter 5 ¿Droga o terapia? (Drug or Therapy?) 111-142 (provided in pdf)  
 Selections from *The Tao of Tango* (Seligman) and *Tango Zen: Walking Dance Meditation* (Park) provided in PDF form via email or from handout.

**[TUCSON TANGO FESTIVAL IS THIS WEEK, MARCH 12-17!]**

**[NO CLASS MARCH 18]**

**March 27 WEEK 8:** Touch, Healing and Zen: Part 2

Readings:

URLs of studies related to tango therapy will be provided via email.

**April 3 WEEK 9:** Activism, Social Media, Crisis and Community

Readings:

Selection from Chapter Five of my manuscript “Global Tango: Travels in the Transnational Imaginary” will be provided in PDF form via email or from handout.

**April 10 WEEK 10:** Tango as Dance

Readings:

Thompson Chapter 8, 219-301;  
 Paz and Hart, Part II (Chapters 3-8, pages 35-154)