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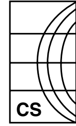

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Rethinking intimacy: Semi-anonymous spaces and transitory attachments in Argentine tango dancing

Maria Törnqvist
Uppsala University, Sweden; Institute for Futures Studies, Sweden

Abstract
Although intimacy is an area characterized by great variety and complexity, both popular and academic discourses have traditionally revolved around a restricted number of associations, of which the family, the romantic couple and friendship bonds have resided at the very centre. In this article the author argues that an analytical shift that addresses intimacy in terms of a relational quality – a specific mode of interaction and a particular experience of closeness – instead of a set of relationships, may assist in exploring a wider range of phenomena. This approach is used to study Argentine tango dancing. Ethnographic fieldwork locates the search to the dim-lit dancehalls of Buenos Aires, San Francisco and Stockholm, and accounts for experiences of transitory semi-anonymous attachments. The study concludes tango to be a multifold intimate arena that unveils how complex webs of feelings are entangled with the social organization of attachments.

Keywords
Argentine tango dancing, body, ethnography, intimacy, semi-anonymous space, transitory attachments

Introduction

> Tango dancing is very deep, in all aspects: socially, emotionally, culturally … Today I can't imagine living without tango. (Ruben, 58-year-old, Argentina)

Corresponding author:
Maria Törnqvist, Uppsala University, Sociology of Education and Culture: Department of Education, PO Box 256, 751 05 Uppsala, Sweden.
Email: maria.tornqvist@edu.uu.se

During ethnographic fieldwork in the tango dancehalls of Buenos Aires, San Francisco and Stockholm I encountered attachments that clearly impacted the dancers' lives and on which they – for various reasons – depended. When trying to make sense of these experiences, however, I found it difficult to fit them in with traditional sociological categories. Tango seemed to creatively escape the bounds of relational structures such as the family, the romantic couple and friendships by reflecting aspects of all those attachments without being reducible to one of them. Dancers often describe their community in terms of a *family*, yet tango seems to have little to do with blood-based kinship and caring labour – rather it is shaped around a sensual skin-to-skin communication and a shared intimate orientation. In tango one objective is to make use of feelings characteristic for *romantic attachments* – but instead of forming exclusive dyads, the sensuality lays ground for a transitory intimacy shared by many. And although tango is depicted as a hobby, bringing *friends* together, the *aficionados* are non-typical comrades in regard to the bodily intimate conversations and the often limited knowledge they have of each other's lives outside the dance floor. At first glance, tango thereby appears as a set of fluid attachments ready to fit with Zygmunt Bauman's (2003) and Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim's (2002) descriptions of liquid individualized late-modernity, in which people are unwilling to create deeper bonds and responsibilities. Yet, as the dancer Ruben accounts for in the above quote, for those entangled, dancing represents a deep affective structure, providing sense of belonging and entwined dependencies. But how?

In this article I address the question by putting tango in dialogue with ongoing sociological research on intimacy. I ask how the dancers live and experience closeness within a culture that requests participants to primarily communicate body-to-body and through transitory semi-anonymous attachments. What type of intimacy is produced and how is it reflected by the people inhabiting the world? Such queries aim not only at depicting the emergence of a particular expression of closeness, but also hold the objective of adding quite an ambivalent case to the field of intimacy studies. Also, this article contributes to the expanding area of tango research. Although intimacy is a central dimension in many academic tango studies (see Davis, 2015a; Manning, 2007; Savligliano, 1995; Taylor, 1998; Törnqvist, 2010, 2012, 2013; Törnqvist and Hardy, 2010), the dancing culture has not been explicitly framed and put in conversation with the broader sociological field of intimacy research.[1] This article enters into dialogue with both fields by tracing the affective life of a culture that is often described in terms of temper and passion, *not* primarily from the dancers' psychological states, but from the social structuring of the milieu. The reason why tango at times hurts, to paraphrase Eva Illouz's (2012) book on contemporary love, is not only because of psychological mechanisms on an individual level, but rather – it will be argued – has to do with the emotional architecture of tango. In short, I am interested in how intimacy is entangled with the organizing of behaviour in ways that are related to how dancers feel, orient themselves and connect with others.

Turning to the academic field of intimacy research, the article's focus and contribution may be introduced with the help of Lauren Berlant's call to rethink intimacy. In the book *Intimacy*, she describes how hegemonic fantasies colonialize minds and bodies in a way that make us trapped within a rather narrow horizon when it comes not only to how close relations are lived, but also in regard to how we allow ourselves to imagine and make sense of our lives. Feelings of shame, sadness or worse: a sense of not being

loveable or liveable subjects, come over us when we fail to adjust our lives to the appropriate scripts. 'To rethink intimacy is to appraise how we have been and how we live and how we might imagine lives that make more sense than the ones so many are living', Berlant states (2000: 6). She therefore calls for frameworks that encompass another type of liveability, embracing experience and imagination that do not conform to 'reigning epistemes of cultural intelligibility' (Butler, 2000: 23; cf. Ahmed, 2004: 103; Stacey, 2011).[2] In different ways, the sociological field of intimacy studies moves in tandem with this call. Scholars have developed concepts and angles to describe past decades' increasing divorce rates, shifts from life-long relationships to numerous shorter ones, the expansion of queer families and the growing impact of friendship relations (see work by Bauman, 2003; Bawin-Legros, 2004; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, 2002; Giddens, 1992; Jamiesson, 1998, 1999; Lewis, 2001; Pahl and Spencer, 2004; Roseneil, 2007; Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004; Ryan-Flood, 2009; Weeks, 2007; Weston, 1992).[3] Over recent decades, the field has also included new analytical approaches focusing on intimate relationships such as family not as fixed institutions but rather as on how people *do* family (Morgan, 1996). Others stress the importance of imagination and memory for understanding close relations (Gillis, 1996; Smart, 2007). Research covers critical contributions exploring relationships and communities that have not yet been put in scholarly dialogue with the intimacy literature, arguing that there is an expanding range of relationships that matter to people and that need to be addressed sociologically (Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004; Roseneil and Ketokivi, 2016). Recent studies have broadened the field with the ambition to reflect the complexity and multiple expressions of people's personal lives by studying a variety of relations such as human–animal bonds (Charles, 2014), leisure activities such as singing in choirs (Mjöberg, 2011), single events (Henriksson, 2014), the haunting significance of dead partners and family (Roseneil, 2009), the intimate significance of scent in medical care work (Stenslund, 2015), to mention just a few. Concepts capturing this wider reach of significant others and vital intimacies have been labelled 'personal community' (Spencer and Pahl, 2006) and 'personal life', which 'designates an area of life which impacts closely on people and means much to them' (Smart, 2007: 28, 29).

However, this fairly open conceptual terrain also contains limitations. For instance, the sociological literature leaves us rather short when it comes to mobile processes of attachments found outside of institutionalized forms, such as those intimacies that are not family, or hardly even relationships. Similarly to Smart, but from a slightly different angle, Berlant's contribution therefore represents a challenging prism for further rethinking exercises. Her interest in 'the kinds of connections that *impact* on people, and on which they depend for living' does not primarily address the realm of family life – which is the main focus for the 'personal life' approach – but rather explores 'the energy of attachment [that] has no designated place'. 'What happens', she asks, 'to the glances, gestures, encounters, collaborations, or fantasies that have no canon?' (Berlant, 2000: 4, 5). Although tango dancing is bound to a social structure with its distinct practices, regulations and identity-shaping mythology, the accounts of ephemeral encounters with strangers, partly lived through imagination, reflect aspects of both Smart's and Berlant's concern. The culture resists a linear narrative in which intimacy is evaluated in regard to continuity and stability. The intimate touch, making up the basis for the dance floor

connection, does not equal the first step in a relation with a desired prolongation on a friendship-based or romantic note. On the contrary, dancing is primarily experienced as creating its own pleasures; a sensual and emotional now-modus restricted in time and space. However, while the social architecture diverges from conventional peer bonds and romantic relations, tango appears to serve somewhat similar emotional and social needs.[4] In my interviews there are simultaneous accounts of transitory voluntary attachments parallel to stories about tango as a new family, a sort of collective identity that deeply affects its members and ties them together.

The article's empirical section takes off from a discussion on the transitory semi-anonymous attachments, addressing how this empirical case diverges from dominant streams of sociological intimacy research which, traditionally, have associated intimacy with the private sphere, primarily with places of family shelter, at times even with the most intimate corners of a home such as bedrooms and bathrooms. According to Theodore Zeldin it equals 'an intimate room … into which one withdrew from the hub-bub of relatives and neighbours' (1995: 324; cf. Simmel, 1971 [1903]). Recently, however, numerous studies stress intimate relations to be initiated and lived also in public spaces, such as workplaces, bars, streets, green areas and on the net (Berlant, 1997; Klesse, 2007; Morrill et al., 2005; Plummer, 2003; Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004: 154). Tango dancing offers an additional example: unfolding attachments emerging in commercialized public venues such as bars, restaurants and dance schools, as well as in free-of-charge community centres and city squares; locations that are formally open for anyone to enter and leave. Particularly in larger cities, these are fairly anonymous environments in which dancers – like visitors in a regular nightclub – have fairly limited knowledge about one another and meet in a transitory fashion. However, the level and degree of anonymity shifts with the local context and club. The larger and more transient the *milonga* and the city, the more likely visitors are to dance with total strangers. Still, also in fairly anonymous locations, visitors often encounter and dance with people they have met before. In this article the focus is mainly on larger venues with a global circuit of dancers and aspects reflecting the transitory semi-anonymous feature of the dancing. In the introductory empirical section, I address the social architecture of tango and how it generates an instant intimacy. In the following two empirical sections the article deals, first, with the significance and use of bodily communication and sensual memory in the production of intimacy, and second, with how the transitory culture manages to create a sense of belonging through a common intimate orientation and shared sentiment towards tango.

Intimacy as a relational quality

Analysing an empirical phenomenon that blurs the boundaries between family, romance and friendship requires concepts that transcend specific relational types. Instead of addressing intimacy in terms of a set of relationships, I advocate a shift in focus towards intimacy as a situational quality; a specific mode of interaction and a particular experience of closeness and connection that emerges in different relational forms.[5] This distinction implies that 'no relationship is ever only intimate, and no intimate situation is by itself a relationship' (Henriksson, 2014: 100). To address tango this way, we may

consider Jessica Mjöberg's work on intimate sociality. Using examples which are not bound to late-modernity – however not untypical for such societies either – like parent–child symbiosis, lovemaking and carnivals, she is able to dwell on what she perceives as a common denominator.[6] She defines intimacy as a 'specific mode of being social … a sociality of presence' found both within and outside relationships. This sociality is characterized by feelings of *oceanic unity*: 'of being boundary-less in relation to self and other'; a *mutual orientation* to the interpersonal unit; experiences of being in a *continuous present*; and *exclusivity* (Mjöberg, 2011: 178, my translation; see also 2009: 15–17). In a similar fashion, Staci Newmahr's (2011) work on sadomasochism explores intimacy as a relational quality. Drawing on Simmel's essay on the secret, she addresses intimacy as those moments when the other is perceived as unique and when we-ness appears as exclusive; a time-out-of-time sensation of transcending self and sharing liminal experience. These works all offer a conceptualization that targets attachments lived beyond and across traditional figures. The intimate element is not restricted to a number of relational forms but can be identified as a quality that emerges in a range of interpersonal relations such as families as well as in erotic attachments over the Internet, therapist–patient relations and late-night transitory dancing. The strength of the approach is that it allows us to empirically broaden the field of study at the same time as we are urged to be analytically precise. We could, in other words, think of attachments normally exemplifying the intimate, such as marriage, as being lived and experienced both in accordance – and not – with an intimate quality. Rather than being used as an argument to exclude practices or relations as non-intimate, however, the primary benefit is that this approach allows us to shed light on a broader variety of attachments.

Although I find these works highly inspiring, the actual qualities being stressed trigger a number of questions. Mutuality, for instance, making up the core of Mjöberg's definition, is a rather difficult criterion to evaluate sociologically, which the author also discusses. How do we know that both parts are equally oriented towards one another? Does a potential asymmetry affect the intimate quality on a subjective level? Is there ever a direct experience of the other? Thinking about sex, for instance, traditionally portrayed as a most intimate act, does not necessarily encompass mutuality in regard to how participants experience the situation. It is possible that one part performs the practices we associate with sex without perceiving herself as 'in intimate relation', while the counterpart senses what Mjöberg labels oceanic unity. For such reasons I wish not to fixate the notion of intimacy around a number of predefined aspects, rather I propose that we open up the framework and let the exact content remain a matter to empirically investigate within specific contexts.

Study design

How, then, to study an affective relational quality? Accepting intimacy to be a personal experience, not necessarily lived in mutual ways, puts focus on individual dancers' accounts of closeness. Moreover, I am concerned also with the ways in which feelings of connectedness find resonance in the social structuring of the relations being analysed. In order to include both dancers' accounts of lived intimacy and the context in which these

affective experiences are made, the study is based on ethnographic fieldwork at tango clubs in Buenos Aires (two months), San Francisco (four months) and Stockholm (six months), involving interviews with 29 dancers. The fieldwork was conducted in 2007 and 2008, the interviews between 2007 and 2014. The informants, of which a few have been interviewed on several occasions, have been dancing tango between six months and 15 years. They are of different nationalities (11 North American, 8 Swedish, 6 Argentines, 2 French, 1 Australian and 1 Belgian), 18 are women, 11 men. Reflecting a bias within the culture, the informants predominantly belong to an economic, cultural and urban middle class, represented by professions such as teachers, medical doctors, engineers and artists. The age group varies from 20 to 70 years old, with a majority in their thirties to late fifties. An absolute majority define themselves as heterosexual, at the time of the interview a majority were singles, some of them had just ended a marriage or a long-term relationship.

At the same time as the tango is constituted through reflexive processes by which intimacy is narrated and negotiated, this is also a culture lived through the body. Combining observational data and interviews therefore has several advantages. First, it enables us to encounter multiple and conflicting meanings of a particular practice, such as the dance embrace. Observing the *abrazo* – or even embodying it oneself – adds additional meaning to the informants' verbal accounts of bodily communication and closeness in tango. Second, combining ethnographic observations with interview accounts enables us to interrogate, when necessary, the inconsistencies between practice and discourse as a way of exploring emotional dilemmas and conflicts. Third, the study design aims to create a dynamic in the analytical process: an interpretative interplay between closeness and distance to the field of study. The ethnographic work has partially been carried out as a 'chest-to-chest' connection between me, the researcher, and the 'cosmos under investigation' (Wacquant, 2004: viii). Partly approaching the culture on high heels has provided me with an experiential understanding and an affective and bodily language for making sense of it from the vantage point of an insider (Newmahr, 2008). As Brian Lande puts it in his carnal ethnography on the production of soldiers, in which he enrols as an army cadet in the United States Officer Training Corp: 'passive participant observation and interviews would not suffice because what I wanted to know about was often pre-thetic and inarticulate' (2007: 98). Incarnating the tango culture, 'prying into the sentient, lived, and breathing body' (2007: 98), means that I, like other dancers, have worked hard trying to achieve the technique and emotional compass that would allow me to enter into the intimate dance flow and explore it at greater proximity.

Approaching the empirical object as an insider had the advantage of providing me with close-up scenes and facilitated finding informants.[7] In addition, exposing myself emotionally and bodily to the tango generated another ground for formulating research questions and relating to informants. Many interviews quickly turned confidential in content and tone, touching upon emotionally delicate subjects such as vulnerability, stigmatized erotic desires and childhood memories: the conversations were often emotionally intense and exhaustive, involving laughter as well as tears. Like other dancing ethnographers (cf. Beattie et al., 2005), I was, however, at times also struck by the insider–outsider dilemma. Where were my loyalties? Did I betray my new tango friends

and dance partners by also having sociological ambitions? Or were the dancing delights I experienced during fieldwork a sign of me being an untrustworthy scientist? My response has been to remain open about my research objectives, while not, however, inhibiting myself from also being a dancer, in the moment fully absorbed by movement and music just to, the following day, approach my late-night dances and fieldnotes more distantly through the lenses of theory and research questions.[8]

Transitory semi-anonymous dancing attachments

Martin: You could be anybody, you could be a multimillionaire, you could be almost homeless. You could be illiterate. Nobody knows and they don't really care. They might say hello to you for three years and never know your first name and dance five times a night with you.
Reporter: So what do they care about?
Martin: Dancing![9]

This dialogue, collected from a WNYC-coverage on tango in New York, addresses a culture formed around what the reporter calls an 'instant intimacy between perfect strangers'. 'Instant intimacy' and 'a three-minute love affair' are allegories describing consecrated moments as temporary states of which the emotional intensity presumably is strong enough to comport an entire love story in a very short time-frame. As suggested by Martin in the quote above, the so-called *milongas* are organized also so as to offer semi-anonymous attachments primarily lived in the glances crossing the dance floor and through connections created by touch and joint movement – 'you could be anybody … nobody really cares'. In New York and other highly transitory cities spaces like Buenos Aires and San Francisco, where parts of the fieldwork were carried out, large numbers of people come and go and it often happen that close-embrace dancers never meet again. This partly has to do with the structuring of the dance events, which most often are divided into so-called *tandas*: dance sets of three songs. Although it happens that couples dance more than one set in a row, the informal rule is to change partner every third song and thereafter search for a new companion.

As stressed in the NY-dialogue, the semi-anonymity has to do with the dancers' prime interest in dancing, and less so the person that offers her or his embrace. Contrary to verbal disclosure, by some stressed to be paradigmatic for late-modern intimacy (Giddens, 1992), many dancers perceive information about a partner as irrelevant for an intimate attachment to emerge. Instead of words, they use a sensual language based on kinetic and musical grammar, less qualified for manifesting reflexive aspects of self. Some even claim that they experience more profound connection when they dance with complete strangers, as, for instance, when they frequent tango scenes in other cities. One consequence of this, together with the dancers' praise of dancing skills and sentiment, is that a kind of intimacy that would hardly find the same social acceptance in other settings emerges. In tango, dancers who define themselves as heterosexual report sensual moments in same-sex constellations and most participants dance across social divides related to age, class and ethnicity. The ways in which tango is organized make people who would not approach each other intimately in other milieus, find ways of orienting

themselves to one another. Magdalena, for instance, describes the particular attraction as opening up a spectrum of intimate others:

Maria: What is this tango feeling that all dancers refer to?

Magdalena: Well, for me it's related to some kind of attraction. You can fall in love with almost anyone on the dance floor, I mean during the dancing. It can be a man that you would never choose as a man, you would never want to see this man in another situation. Without the dancing you would never get close to this person. But while dancing, you can still feel that it becomes very … well, yes, it becomes passionate in some way, or sensual. But actually this is not what it's about, the magic is limited to the meeting. It could be a fat old man or a tall tiny one, I mean it could be whoever, it's about the expression you find together, you find each other's bodies in some way together with the interpretation of the music. … You are allowed to walk around feeling somewhat in love with many. (Magdalena, 50-year-old, Sweden)

Tango thereby stands as an example of attachments that diverge from dominant narratives also in regard to numerical composition. The dancehalls display an intimacy that initially mirrors iconic two-parts relations, such as the romantic couple, but unfolds as harbouring a rather non-exclusive culture somewhat similar to polyamorous communities (Klesse, 2007). In fact, the dancing dyad is organized according to a principle of seriality that works against the couple. From the first beginner class, dancers learn to incorporate a bodily rhythm marked by a flow of different partners. Akin to what Arlie Hochschild (1979) describes as feeling rules, the device 'Change partner!' every third song creates routines and emotional acceptance around the shift of intimate other. The institutionalized *tanda* creates a natural end-point to the dance embrace and thereby enables, for some, a sense of reliance that makes them at ease engaging in bodily and emotional dialogues with a stream of new partners. Moreover, the restricted dancing space, marking boundaries towards the external world, assists the intimate devotion.[10] According to a Colombian woman living in Sweden, people in her local tango community use the emotional safety to access a closeness that is difficult to gain elsewhere. 'This fear of hugging, of getting close to strangers … hugging someone here is like hugging a rock, but once on the dance floor people take the chance, they dream away in the embrace and want to get close close' (Angelica, 53-year-old, Sweden).

However, dancers are not intimate with all potential partners. In tango it is quite common to decline invitations; in addition, all chest-to-chest dancing is not wished to be experienced intimately. This creates a sense of exclusivity and trust when dancers manage to find the 'chosen-one-partner'. The fact that a selection process structures finding a partner, partly based on status within the tango economy, makes intimacy a scarce resource (Törnqvist, 2013). For some, the constant shift of partners assures continuous surprise and makes dancers like Kate from San Francisco explain the strength of tango as: 'You never get bored … The beauty is that the honeymoon never ends, you just shift the partner.' Others describe the culture, for the exact same reasons, to be cold. Some speak of the dance as superficial and the emotional kicks as means of simple recognition.

This as an elitist culture, they claim, which prioritizes the same young fit bodies as elsewhere.

Bodily communication and sensual memory

Echoing the words of Mjöberg, tango partly holds promise of an oceanic experience whereby dancers '[move] the borders of … selves … to the borders of the joint unit' (2009: 16). Establishing closeness that transcends self is not, as mentioned, an everyday experience for most dancers. The feeling of unbound we-ness appears once in a while, when the conditions are right and not necessarily twice with the same partner. Although more of a potentiality for many, the wish to experience total unison constitutes an orienting force, pulling dancers back to the dance floor, night after night. Now, how do they make sense of the oceanic promise and what is described to be its magnetism?

In popular narrative, tango is often portrayed as a highly erotic dance in which dancers 'have sex' with their clothes on (according to the Urban Dictionary, 'horizontal tango' is another expression for intercourse). Many practitioners, however, are careful not to make the connection. Betty, for instance, speaks of tango as intimate, but not necessarily sexual:

> When I first started dancing I just thought 'this is so incredibly sexy, how can people not just go have sex in the bathroom during the *cortina* [the break between two dance sets]?' But it's different now. I have been dancing for about two and a half years. The level of intimacy that I feel that I'm connecting with now is actually different and better and more intimate than the sexual aspect of it. … It's incredibly sensual but not necessarily sexual. (Betty, 46-year-old, US)

In order to understand this distinction, we must take into account the various ways in which the bodily connection is lived and experienced. Physical closeness is integral to tango and striking when seen for the first time. With eyes closed and cheeks glued to one another, dancers smoothly move around the dancehalls appearing as one body. The proximity has, partially, to do with the fact that tango is an improvised dance, in which every step has to be lead and responded to in the moment. The lead is normally marked chest-to-chest, and requires that the follower reacts instantly in the shape of a corporal continuation of an intended movement. In the words of John Urry, this makes tango a 'thick co-presence' (2002: 259), comprising not only words – or hardly ever words – but skin, bodily pressure and sweat (for an extended discussion on the relation between tango and sex, see Törnqvist 2013).

The intimate dialogue is not, however, restricted to the moments in which the actual dancing takes place. In some dancers' accounts intimacy is experienced both in relation to the close connection with a partner, and to the dancer's own (historic) body, by use of sensual memory. The bodily posture of the *tango salon*, making the dancers fall into each other in the shape of an embrace, awakens – for some – childhood remembrances, which at times are explained to reinforce the intimate experience of the dancing. In the documentary movie *Taxi-Dancing*, for instance, Susanna, a British woman in her early sixties, explains the vital role of tango in her life by the lack of bodily affection during her childhood. For her, dancing constitutes a memorial practice creating new and somewhat healing bonds with the past. Others describe how they, particularly as beginners, fell in love

with every new partner. The physical proximity, the hugging and skin-to-skin connection, is said to evoke an emotional resemblance, a body memory, of emotionally intense relations in the past. In addition, the intimate experience can be brought out of the dance-hall for use in other situations. One example is the Swedish dancer Eva, who explains the 'magic of tango' by recalling a dance she had some years ago. When she has a hard time falling asleep, she relives the pressure of her partner's body. At this point she can hardly remember his face or his name, but the sensual presence, relived through recalling touch and movement, still provides comfort and sense of belonging.

In order to take such experiences seriously, we may reflect on how dancers learn to make use of (body) memory and inhabit imaginary worlds, partly related to the culture's nostalgic mythology. Some dance teachers stress the importance of not only being emotionally present with a partner, but also of being able to fantasize while dancing as a way to intensify the emotional attendance. It happens that tango is taught to be danced *as if* the dance floor did not belong to a gloomy community centre in chilly winter Sweden, but rather to a velvet covered cafe in early 20th-century Argentina, and *as if* a temporary dance partner was a secret lover. In fact, breaking with spatial and temporal conventions is declared to be part both of present and historic tango culture; the music and dancing being an avenue out of the rough reality of 19th-century harbour-life in Buenos Aires. Somewhat similar to how Merleau-Ponty, in his phenomenology of the body, describes the mimetic practice of learning how to sleep, the *as-if*-exercise aims at helping dancers access an emotional state. Merleau-Ponty writes: 'I call up the visitation of sleep by imitating the breathing and posture of the sleeper. … The body's role is to ensure this metamorphosis. It transforms ideas into things, and my mimicry of sleep into real sleep' (2003 [1945]: 189, 190). Like his example, the bodily mimicry of experienced dancers' way of performing tango assists beginner dancers to transform imitations of intimacy into incarnated 'real' feelings of closeness.

The role of imagination is also related to the semi-anonymous environments. The fact that dancers often know fairly little about each other leaves space for the use of fantasy and memory. At times, the intimate movements echo attachments from the past and harbour imaginative future worlds; closeness with a temporary dance partner may even function as a trigger for momentarily fading out of the embrace. Angela McRobbie's reflection on darkened disco spaces as assisting a transcendence of borders between past and present, self and other, helps think also of dim-lit tango floors as an escape out of 'daylight consciousness' (1984: 144). Although the *milongas* rarely are night-dark spots, it is common that the dancers themselves create such atmosphere by closing their eyes. Different from jitterbug and salsa, where eye contact is crucial, the movements in tango are primarily communicated through other senses and thereby allow dancers to delimit vision and float into an emotional state. This, some dancers reflect, both strengthens the dance connection with a partner and, at times, allows them to focus inwards. In fact, tango is by some experienced as an introvert movement allowing practitioners to dance together alone. Susanna, for instance, who filled the lack of physical childhood affection with tango embraces appears akin to those night-clubbers who set 'in motion a dual relationship projecting both internally towards self and externally towards the "other"; which is to say that dance as a leisure activity connects desires for the self with those for somebody else' (McRobbie, 1984: 144).

Collective intimacy

From these descriptions dancers come across as fairly free-floating units, loosely connected in short-lived couples. While performing a liminal adventure of epiphanic moments and a rupture of everyday life, tango also encompasses a circular rhythm which makes dancing a shared repetitive habit. The social events are structured with given beginnings and end-points, the same songs and recordings fill the dancehalls of Stockholm, San Francisco and Buenos Aires night after night. Stories of dance euphoria and desolation circulate different communities, steps and figures are almost identical across the globe, and – more importantly – the actual dancing follows a repetitive mode, whereby movements and emotional swings echo within a stream of new partner-constellations. The repetitive pattern creates familiarity and a taken-for-grantedness that allow dancers to feel at home wherever they go tangoing.

Some assert that the sharing of movement, culture and sentiment, the skin-to-skin texture as well as the vulnerability is what builds tango into larger communities. Andrea, an Argentine dancer, speaks of a 'family' emanating from the shared love for tango, lived through a non-exclusive 'chemistry' with a range of partners:

> We are like a family, almost. It's the people who spend all their nights and share what they love most. I have a particular feeling for this and others have the same experience. When you share something this beautiful and the others understand the same codes, you are getting close to one another. That's the love you have for your family, the love you share for this dance. … In tango you enter into the game with its rules. No one will be exclusive but you will feel a lot, a lot of chemistry, not with one person but with many. (Andrea, 25-year-old, Argentina)

In a similar fashion, Elisabeth, a 48-year-old dancer from Sweden, accounts for the culture as one big embrace: 'You walk into a world that totally encloses you. You walk into that world and it's like walking into an embrace, falling into an all-inclusive hug by everyone but one in particular. It is a collective attraction.' Also 50-year-old Swedish Daniella downplays the importance of individual partners and emphasizes the moments 'when you manage to connect the music and the dancing in a way that makes you forget time and space, that you are in a flow which might be rather consuming because you let go of everything else'. In fact, tango itself appears for many to be the intimate other. The social architecture is depicted as a joint emotional orientation directing dancers not only towards individual partners, but towards the collective venture, other couples on the dance floor and the culture at large. Like the players in a football team, or musicians in a jazz band, the dancing encapsulates not solely 'a directedness between the persons in a relationship, but rather a joint directedness from all those involved in a situation – toward the situation' (Mjöberg, 2011: 178, my translation; see also Becker, 2000). Ideally, the dancers become one with the larger dancing body, merging into a collective flow which – much alike individual singers in a choir – makes up the total. Symptomatically, many dancers go out, not necessarily with the aim of dancing with *one* person in particular or to deepen a relationship with *one* particular partner, but to be embraced by the multitude of moving bodies, as well as by the music and ambiance, the lighting, scents, clothing and friction between shoe and dance floor. This is how Steve describes the strength of the

culture. He explains the 'tango family' to be created out of a collective devotion, materializing into a sweaty skin-to-skin fabric shared by many:

> The *milonga* is not about the individual. It is about the individual within a group. This is something that you should identify with. It is important that this couple understands that they are dancing with this couple. … When I go to the *milonga* I go to dance with everybody on the dance floor and I dance with everybody. … That's when you get out of your ego and share culture with everybody. That's why people say 'this is my family'. (Steve, 58-years-old, US)

Conclusion

Both scholars who criticize the shifts associated with late-modernity and those who are more careful in their judgement tend to praise long-term bonds based on informal contracts of responsibility and care. It is, for instance, partly on the basis of a failing temporality that Zygmunt Bauman and Mary Evans criticize contemporary constructions of love by arguing that these are not accountable over time and that they dissolve into shallow entertainment. It is with similar arguments that friendship bonds have gained a rising interest and status among intimacy and family sociologists.[11] In this article I have addressed intimacy from the lens of a culture that diverges from such ideals while also proving to offer attachments on which people depend for living. Although most dancers leave the tango clubs without promises of durable bonds with individual partners, many carry with them a strong sensation of having experienced attachments that 'touch the personal world very deeply' (Plummer, 2003: 13). Returning to Berlant's call for a rethinking exercise, tango offers an intimate liveability while encompassing experience and imagination outside dominant scripts. The semi-anonymous transitory attachments reflect aspects of those mobile processes that take place 'on the street, on the phone, in fantasy, at work, but rarely register as anything but residue' (Berlant, 2000: 3). Although short in time and lived in fairly anonymous environments, the attachments are often described as deep experiences connecting the dancer not only with a partner but with profound dimensions of self and relations outside the dance floor. As 45-year-old Kate from San Francisco puts it, dancing comprises 'layers and layers of communication. Tango is a conversation about existentialism.'

Addressing tango in terms of an intimate sociality, rather than a set of relationships, helps open up the analytical spectra. The approach helps us set eyes not only on the various aspects of closeness experienced between dancers in a couple, but unfolds intimacy to be a more complex web of emotions and attachments, involving entire dance-clubs, the floor on which the *tangueras* and *tangueros* move as well as their own (historic) body. Additionally, tango is both a lively metaphor for a skin-to-skin intimacy placed in a defined spatial and temporal situation, *and* a dancing practice that makes use of fantasy and memory in ways that confound notions of space and time. The dance floor allows for an intimate presence that is lived through the touch and presence of temporary dance partners, as well as through imagination comporting childhood memories and fragments of lost love. Additionally, rather than being lived spontaneously *or* in strictly formalized ways, dancers enter into play through the existence of already defined rules and rituals, but rather than restraining movement, the rules are primarily perceived as risk-reducing conditions that help them to engage more emotionally in the intimate tango embrace.

Although tango may appear as an exceptional and somewhat exotic case on the margins of late-modern life, the accounts discussed in this article could be used to address also other contemporary experiences of intimacy. In fact, the dim-lit dancehalls urge us to consider the significance of semi-anonymous ephemeral attachments. Dancing unfolds a challenging prism also for disputing the great interest in verbal disclosure and self-reflexive narration within sociological discourses on late-modern intimacy, by suggesting the importance also of touch and skin-to-skin conversations. Moreover, tango illuminates the function of seriality and collective bonds beyond the dyad, and, finally, it displays the role of memory and imagination in intimate attachments.

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Notes

1. To just mention a few academic studies on tango, I wish to start with Martha Savligliano's ground-breaking piece *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion* (1995), which explores post-colonial and gendered structures throughout the history of Argentine tango (cf. Taylor, 1998). Similar themes are discussed in relation to contemporary dance scenes, in feminist studies engaging with 'passionate encounters in a globalizing world' (Davis, 2015a, 2015b), constructions and experience of gender difference (Carozzi, 2013; Villa, 2011), the evolving queer tango movement (Pellarolo, 2009), the 'kinetic fundaments of tango' (Olszewski, 2008), the 'politics of touch' in tango (Manning, 2007) and in cross-cutting intersections of tango and tourism (Skinner, 2015; Törnqvist, 2012, 2013; Törnqvist and Hardy, 2010).
2. One example of a creative study along the call for a rethink is Judith Stacey's book *Unhitched* (2011) in which she uncovers non-normative love and living within three contexts: gay male parenting in Los Angeles, polyamorous relations in South Africa and matrilineal non-marital families in China.
3. As many have pointed out, however, we should be careful not to over-theorize change. As Ken Plummer puts it: 'Change has been in the air – as it has been for the last three hundred years or so. … [M]ost of us were and are probably living simultaneously in traditional, modern, and postmodern worlds' (2003: x, 8; cf. Gross, 2005; Jamiesson, 1998: 1–2).
4. In critical response to dystopic analyses reflecting late-modern intimacy as social crisis, Sasha Roseneil's work on contemporary friendship relations, for instance, displays how various types of attachments can serve needs that are traditionally bound up with one particular relationship, like the family (Roseneil, 2010).
5. Emblematic of the academic intimacy literature is a reluctance to define the key concept. One way of approaching the terrain is to make intimacy synonymous with a particular type of relation. Neil Gross, for instance, uses the term 'interchangeably with the phrase "intimacy between sexual partners" ' (2005: 286). Others, like Ken Plummer, approach traditional

intimate attachments from the perspective of practice but while doing so he particularly focuses on certain relational forms such as 'families, marriages, and friendships' (2003: 13).

6. We should keep in mind, though, that the core of an intimate sociality, as conceptualized by Mjöberg, is often discussed as a praised affective modus in late-modern societies (Ahrne, 2014; Giddens, 1992; Illouz, 2012). Strong emotions and an intense sense of being-in-relation are acknowledged as an embraced feeling legitimizing both the establishment and ending of relations.
7. The informants were selected to cover a spread of ages, dance experiences, nationalities and gender. I made most encounters in tango venues, some informants were friends of a friend, a few I had danced with. The interviews lasted approximately one to three hours. When analysing the material, I mainly listened to the recorded conversations with the objective of catching the atmosphere and being brought back to the interview situation with its shifting emotional tones, pauses, surrounding sounds, etc. I thereafter transcribed vital parts to be used as quotes in articles and books.
8. See 'Notes from a dancing researcher' (Törnqvist, 2013: 247–257) for an extensive discussion on methodology and data.
9. 'Some sleep, others tango', in WNYC News, 4 May 2007.
10. One contribution in the *Together Alone* anthology, addressing relations in public spaces, analyses singles dance in somewhat similar terms, stating this to be 'a form of "designed" public sociability' enforcing the visitors to encounter a range of people throughout an evening (Beattie et al., 2005: 46). Although the visitors initially come with the objective of finding a mate, many return to seek momentary pleasures and fleeting relationships. The familiarity and comforting predictability is explained to secure the dancers' enjoyments of momentary intimacy. In a study on ballroom dancing, Julia Ericksen stresses something similar. She explains the reasons why this type of instant intimacy attracts people partly have to do with shifting demographics (high divorce rates), but also with the fact that long-married persons 'wish for a safe variety in their intimate life, one that is emotionally satisfying but limited' (2011: 22).
11. See Roseneil (2010) for a critical response to Evans.

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Author biography

Maria Törnqvist is a senior lecturer and associate professor in sociology at the Department of Education, Uppsala University and a researcher at the Institute for Futures Studies, Sweden. Her research mainly covers gender relations, cultural sociology and sociology of education. Besides a monograph on Swedish gender equality politics she has published a teaching book in feminist theory and is the author of *Tourism and the Globalization of Emotions: The Intimate Economy of Tango* (Routledge, 2013). She is currently heading a three-year-long research project on intimacy, funded by the Swedish Research Council.

Résumé

Bien que l'intimité soit un domaine d'une large variété et d'une grande complexité, les discours populaires et universitaires mettent l'accent sur un nombre limité d'associations qui ressortent de la famille, du couple romantique et des liens d'amitié. Dans cet article, je montre qu'une analyse de l'intimité axée sur la qualité relationnelle, c'est-à-dire un mode spécifique d'interaction et une expérience particulière de la proximité qui écarte une approche globale de relation, peut nous aider à étudier un plus large éventail de cas. J'ai adopté cette approche pour étudier des bals de tango argentin. Mon terrain ethnographique a été réalisé dans les salles de danse aux lumières tamisées de Buenos Aires, de San Francisco et de Stockholm en vue de recueillir les expériences d'attachements transitoires et semi-anonymes. Cette étude conclut à l'existence d'espaces d'intimité multiples qui révèlent l'imbrication de réseaux complexes de sentiments avec l'organisation sociale des attachements.

Mots-clés

Intimité, bals de tango argentin, corps, ethnographie, espace semi-anonyme, attachement transitoire

Resumen

Aunque la intimidad es un área caracterizada por una gran variedad y complejidad, los discursos populares y académicos han girado tradicionalmente alrededor de un número limitado de asociaciones, de las cuales la familia, la pareja romántica y los lazos de amistad son centrales. En este artículo argumento que un cambio analítico que aborda la intimidad en términos de una calidad relacional -un modo específico de interacción y una experiencia particular de cercanía- en lugar de un conjunto de relaciones puede ayudar a explorar una gama más amplia de fenómenos. Se utiliza este enfoque para estudiar el baile de tango argentino. El trabajo de campo etnográfico ubica la búsqueda en los salones de baile sombríos de Buenos Aires, San Francisco y Estocolmo, y explica las experiencias de apegos transitorios semi-anónimos. El estudio concluye que el tango es una arena íntima que revela la complejidad de las redes de sentimientos que se entremezclan con la organización social de los apegos.

Palabras clave

Intimidad, Tango argentino, Cuerpo, Etnografía, espacio semi-anónimos, apegos transitorios