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# **102 | troubling romance tourism: sex, gender and class inside the Argentinean tango clubs**

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## **abstract**

This article aims to explore and make theoretical sense of a stream of tourism that blurs the boundaries between sex, romance and intimacy, and diffuses the line between affectionate and economic relations. The empirical scope is the expanding international tourism of tango dancing—meaning the increasing number of people from all over the world travelling to Buenos Aires to dance tango and engage with the local tango culture. In contrast to women’s sex tourism on the beaches of Jamaica and Ghana, the relationships evolving in the Argentinean dance halls only occasionally lead to sexual affairs and temporary romances, but they are still part of a sensual geography made up of a transnational skin-to-skin intimacy. In addition, the relations between local dancers and tourists rarely result in economic transactions of sex for money; however, they engage with a growing market of intimate dance services and are part of the economic injustices and exotified projections of our post-colonial time. Hence, this article seeks to shed critical light over a broader area of transnational romance. The case of tango evokes new sets of critical queries regarding the trade of bodily intimacy and affection; the consequences of economic inequality in the area of heterosexual romance; and the production of class morals and racialised gender regimes. Through an exploration of these intimate practices, discourses and sets of emotions produced in this particular context, a complex landscape of market forces and close-embrace dancing unfolds.

## **keywords**

romance tourism; tango dancing; intimacy; gender; social class; Argentina

## introduction

The issue of intimate spheres has become an international matter. The erotic and the exotic are intertwined in ways that make intimate desires and fantasies become important elements in the global flows of economic and human capital. This can be found in the market spaces of sexual-economic transactions involving Western tourists on vacation in the Global South. In the developing world, research has tended to focus on prostitution in which women and children (are coerced to) offer men sex for money (Truong, 1990; Bales, 2003). However, there has been a recent shift to focusing more broadly on the complex nexus between cash, sex and gender. Lately scholars have argued for the need to think about sex–money trades as more diffused and complicated matters than is normally acknowledged in the sex work literature. Julia O’Connell Davidson and Jacqueline Sanchez Taylor consider, for instance, ‘the phenomenon by which local and migrant women, men, and children enter into fairly open-ended relationships with tourists in the hope of securing some material benefits (including gifts, meals, clothing, cash, and opportunities to migrate to affluent countries) to be as much part of sex tourism as the phenomenon of brothel or street prostitution in tourist areas’ (2005: 83).

One phenomenon in this diffused geography is women’s sex tourism—or what is sometimes called romance tourism. This primarily covers Western women travelling to developing countries in Africa and Latin America in search of love, sex and romance. The economic–affective relations between white Western women and often younger black men in Third World zones have received increasing attention, both amongst academics and in popular discourses. Academic work, movies and press coverage tend to revolve around the similarities to and/or differences from men’s sex tourism, and attempt to pin down the features and consequences of women’s sexual involvement with much poorer men in holiday resorts. Since the mid-1990s a group of scholars have used the phenomenon to argue that women can be as exploitive as men given the opportunity. These researchers have persisted in defining the relations as ‘women’s sex tourism’ to emphasise the similarities to men’s consumption of sex (Kempadoo, 2001; Sanchez Taylor, 2006). Others have claimed that women’s search for sex and love in exchange for material goods differs from men’s sex tourism in regard to its less exploitive and violent nature (Jeffreys, 2003).<sup>1</sup> Some of these scholars have emphasised the term ‘romance tourism’ in order to distinguish what they perceive as a ‘lighter’ form of commercialised intimacy from strict sex trades (Pruitt and LaFont, 1995). Yet, most academics seem to agree that the topic is worth exploring in terms of its twisting and turning the relation between gender, sex and power. Examples from Jamaica, the Dominican Republic and Ghana illustrate how the shifting roles have changed the frames of heterosexual relations and brought about new subjects, practices and understandings of power. The consumer is not always a man, the currency not always money and the acts not always limited to heterosexual intercourse.<sup>2</sup>

**1** Sheila Jeffreys has also suggested the term ‘prostitution tourism’ to make a distinction between men who travel specifically to engage in commercial sex, and ‘sex tourism’ as a broader term for all sorts of sexual engagement during holiday (gay men travelling to Ibiza to

have casual sex and backpackers in short-term affairs with other travellers).

**2** These informal trades are often characterised by their more diverse and floating nature when compared to the regular activities within brothels and strip clubs. Women's romance tourism is said to range from sexual intercourse to flirtations, romantic small talk and companionship on trips. These encounters normally stretch over one or several weeks rather than being limited to a set time frame, as is more common in street prostitution. The trades do not take place within particular venues such as brothels and sex clubs, but go on in regular bars, on the beaches and in the women's bungalows, and the exchanges for material goods often consist of dinners, gifts and promises of a flight ticket rather than up-front transactions of money or checks (Meisch, 1995; Pruitt and LaFont, 1995; Ebron, 1997; Kempadoo, 1999; Herold *et al.*, 2001; O'Connell Davidson and Jacqueline Sanchez Taylor, 2005; Sanchez Taylor, 2006).

**3** The music, poetry and art of tango dancing emerged in the poor neighbourhoods of Buenos Aires during a time of massive immigration streams from Europe. As shown in Savigliano's work (1995a, b), class conflicts, ethnic dilemmas and

The aim of this article is to explore and make theoretical sense of a stream of tourism that further blurs the boundaries between sex, romance and intimacy, and diffuses the line between affectionate and economic relations. The empirical scope is the expanding international tourism of tango dancing in Argentina, meaning the increasing number of people from all over the world travelling to Buenos Aires to dance tango and engage with the local tango culture.<sup>3</sup> This is an intriguing case for exploring the complex nets of gender, race and socio-economic orders in contemporary post-colonial times. It involves a bodily intimacy—sometimes exchanged for money in the expanding market of dance services—romantic and exotic projections of Buenos Aires and its people, and a global power imbalance embodied as a set of class marks dividing the tourists and the local tango dancers. Hence, this is a phenomenon that allows a flourishing of money, intimacy and images of exotic places. It not only puts at stake how gender, race and class are intersecting in the making of a transnational geography of intimacy, but in addition it challenges the ways we think about intimacy, sex and romance. The relationships evolving in the dance halls rarely lead to sexual intercourse or temporary romances, but they are still part of a sensual skin-to-skin intimacy. In addition, the relations between local dancers and tourists initiated on the dance floor rarely result in transactions of sex for money; however, they involve an expanding market of intimate dance services and the disturbing presence of economic hardship and global injustices.<sup>4</sup>

The tango-tourists' intimate engagement with local dance partners, as well as their decisions to stay out of sexual affairs with Argentinean men and women, thus exposes a somewhat contradictory case in which gender, race and social class are played out in ways that partly differ from the majority of studies of Westerners' and particularly of Western women's intimate journeys to the South. However, this article does not aim to draw a sharp line between intimate dance voyages and sex tourism. Neither is the aim to add another example to the 'women do it too' debate, or to assess whether women's consumption of intimacy and affection is better or worse than that of men. Instead, it seeks to shed critical light over a broader area of transnational romance. The case of tango evokes new sets of critical queries regarding the trade of bodily intimacy and affection, the consequences of economic inequality, and the functions of class morals and racialised gender regimes in the area of heterosexual romance.<sup>5</sup> To sum up, this article seeks to broaden the conventional understanding of romance tourism through an investigation of the intimate practices, discourses and sets of emotions produced in the particular context of dance tourism. Throughout the exploration a complex landscape of economic hardship and the transnational flow of a heart-to-heart intimacy unfolds.

### **outline of the study**

The study draws on one year of ethnographic fieldwork in the tango scene of Buenos Aires and the home communities of some of the dance tourists (one North

American and one Swedish city). The study includes interviews and daily small talk with both male and female tourists, as well as Argentinean hobby dancers, local entrepreneurs and workers within the market around tango dancing (dance teachers, taxi dancers, shoe and clothing vendors, tango hostel owners, etc.). However, the main focus of this article is the female dance tourists. Although tango travelling is not restricted to female dancers, much of the romantic illusion spread in popular representations of Buenos Aires targets this group—as do many services within the tourist market. Furthermore, and in contrast to the production of erotic imaginaries of Asian countries such as Thailand as a sexual paradise for Western men (O’Connell Davidson, 1995), Latin America and Argentina are often portrayed as resorts for Western women who are romantically and sexually ‘dried out’ at home (Meisch, 1995). Hence, the quotes in this article are mainly based on interviews with women from the United States and Sweden, ranging from 35 to 70 years old. The women are all white and belong to an economic and cultural middle class and define themselves as heterosexual. Most of them were single at the time of the interviews, and some had just ended a marriage or a long-term relationship.

In addition, extensive participant observations at the tango venues have been carried out. These include dance halls and tango schools, as well as international hostels and shoe and clothing stores mainly visited by tourists. The study also includes critical readings of popular representations of tango dancing in Buenos Aires, such as novels, autobiographical accounts, discussions on virtual homepages for tango dancers, and advertisements of classes and clubs, primarily found in the two largest Argentinean tango magazines addressing both local and foreign dancers.<sup>6</sup>

In this article, the critical exploration runs throughout four empirical sections and a final conclusion. The first and second sections investigate the ways in which the women make sense of the bodily and emotional intimacy of tango. It is suggested that the tourists reproduce a distinction between sex and dancing that constitutes the journeys to Buenos Aires as romantic dance holidays, rather than a search for love and erotic adventures. This is partly explained by the women’s engagement with a symbolic economy evaluating dancing skills and ‘sophisticated’ tango manners higher than a ‘cheap’ search for sex, and partly by a gendered sex regime expressed by the women’s perception of physical and moral danger when taking the tango intimacy outside the dance venues. This boundary-making process is explored in terms of *restricted romance*. Section three investigates how the women make sense of the evolving presence of economic interests in tango and their own roles as clients in a market of bodily and emotional dance services. The article shows how they negotiate their experiences along a distinction between commercialised and authentic romance.

In the following section, the article explores the implications of the women’s discursive investment in traditional notions of sex and romance. It is suggested

a male-dominated society formed the involvement of the dance. Some historic accounts claim that the tango was born in the brothels where prostitutes sold dances for money as a way of attracting male clients; others suggest the dance developed by men spending leisure time dancing together in the ports of Buenos Aires (Guy, 1995; Savigliano, 1995a, b; Manning, 2003; Holm, 2004; Olszewski, 2008).

4 Although it is one of the strongest economies in Latin America, normally spoken of as a ‘white’ and European nation with a wealthy lifestyle compared with other Latin American countries, Argentina is still coping with the hard effects of the economic crisis in 2001 (Fiszbein *et al.*, 2002; Whitson, 2007). This means that depending on foreign revenue is a far safer and more remunerative strategy for guaranteeing income in a country whose currency and domestic possibilities for income generation have proven in the past to be decidedly unstable.

5 The main focus of this article is primarily the production of heterosexual romance, and hence the selection of quotes is primarily restricted to male–female relations. However, the so-called queer tango is an evolving movement in

Argentina and elsewhere, with its own festivals, pedagogic devices and history-making (Rivero, 2004).

6 *El Tangauta* and *B.A. Tango* are found in all clubs and dance schools and feature articles in both Spanish and English, as well as a large section of publicity from small-scale tango enterprises.

that the breakdown between sex and tango—as well as the division between affective and economic relations—should not only be explained in terms of a symbolic economy of tango or the women’s fear of sexual offence. It also relates to a moral class regime founded in normative heterosexuality and maintained through a respectability politics. The construction of the women’s own intimate journeys as authentic, pure and culturally refined is possible only through extensive negotiation. Tourism and transnational intimacy is reproduced along a binary opposition between love and sex, ‘civilised’ culture and ‘vulgar’ economics. Tango dancing is constructed as a refined form of intimacy—not sex—and the dance voyages as a refined cultural exploration—in contrast to cheap beach affairs.

## an ambiguous search for intimacy

In popular narratives tango dancing is often represented as a metaphor for sensuality and erotic desires. The word itself invokes images of naked skin and sexy movements. However, amongst the dancers involved in the tango communities of Buenos Aires and other cities around the world, a distinction is often made between sex and tango. It is common for dancers to describe their own and others’ dancing trajectory as moving from a simplistic notion of ‘tango as sex’ to a more complex understanding of the dance as a sensual way of communicating with others. A quote from Betty, a North American dancer on a two-week tango holiday in Buenos Aires, illustrates this point:

When I first started dancing I just thought ‘this is so incredibly sexy, how can people not just go having 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 years old, USA)

The distinction between sex and tango is common also when the dancers explain the motives behind their journeys to Argentina. Hardly any of the women I interviewed described the aim of their trip as a search for love or sexual adventures. Instead, most of them said that they had strict dancing in mind. They were all there to take classes with the best teachers, watch exhibitions with world champions, experience the dance venues ‘where it all once started’, and impress friends at home with a touch of ‘real tango’. Most dancers depicted a hectic life trying to make time for all tango-related activities. Many filled their days with morning dance classes, afternoon tango-shoe-shopping, dinners with new dance acquaintances and late nights out at the clubs.

However, when looking more closely into the practices and conveyed understandings, tango is also constructed as a mixture of fine dance expressions

and a set of relations that involve friendship, shared physical intimacy, restricted dance floor flirting and sometimes sex. Some female tourists I interviewed perceived the sexual invitations on the Argentinean dance floors as a 'fun part of tango life' (Lisa, 35 years old, USA), or at least a flattery that few men at home would offer. There were also those who returned to their countries recalling romantic experiences with local dance partners, ranging from 'a little *too* sensual dances' with unknown partners (*ibid.*), to innocent flirtations on the dance floors and dates in town. Even in accounts from dancers who seek to draw a line between sex tourism and dance voyages, the boundaries between the two blur. In the following quote from an autobiographical book on tango and other couple-dances, the author critiques the suggestion that (dance) tourists in Africa and Latin America are looking for sex. However, the author's description of dancing carries a language infused with sensual and possibly erotic images.

In his novel, *Platform*, Michel Houellebecq is wrong when he lays out the plans for sex tourism in Cuba. The tourist visiting Cuba is not looking for sex. But dance. [...] The German man does not dream of sexual intercourse in a *casa particular*. He is dreaming of becoming one of the dancing ones at the local salsa club. Letting his hand rest against a woman's groin, swinging his hips together with hers, putting a spin on her feet and creating a swirl of arms above their heads. [...] The climax for most of us is not a kiss or sex in an obscure corner. It is when someone reaches out their hand and makes you become one with those dancing at the dance club. (Holm, 2004: 27, my translation)

Thus, the journeys to Buenos Aires provide a rich spectrum of relations that slip between categories. Far from a one-layered representation of this as synonymous with *or* strictly separated from sex, tango dancing seems to make up a floating terrain inside which the dancers can move along a spectrum of feelings and engagement with temporary dance partners. Similar to scholars who recognise the multilayered nuances of intimacy in other arenas of social life, I suggest that we reflect on the intimate dance voyages in terms of a set of emotional expectations and practices that might—but do not necessarily—involve a sexual or erotic dimension and hence a language that gets beyond the simple metaphors of prostitution and commodification (Jamieson, 1998; Plummer, 2003; Zelizer, 2005).

The need for such an approach further shows in the tourist's sensual relation with the tango culture at large. The women's expectations convey an exploration of 'a romantic state of being with others' (Susanna, 51 years old, USA), and an understanding of Argentinean tango as evoking a nostalgic longing for other worlds, sometimes framed as a desire to be swept away by the music and the ambiance of the ancient dance venues. The journeys were often described as sophisticated adventures out of the ordinary, involving the cultural legacy of tango and sentimental imaginaries about city life in the Argentinean capital. The women engaged in love declarations of the history and particular atmosphere of

Buenos Aires—its architecture, restaurants, colours, perfumes, gestures, language and sounds, as well as its tango, people, venues, musical expressions and poetic history. Many also expressed a wish to become an integrated part of the local dance culture through plunging into traditions and informal customs including drinks such as *mate* (an Argentinean tea shared between friends), food (beef dishes served at the neighbourhood *parilla*), clothing styles and ways of talking (Spanish with the distinct Argentinean accent and expressions).

### **restricted romance**

Although tango dancing and the journeys to Buenos Aires can best be described along a fluid scale of intimacy, a majority of the dancers were keen to make a distinction between sex and tango. Some women had practical reasons to do this. Some of them described the sexually flirtatious behaviour as an obstacle that hindered them from fully engaging with the dancing. Overly intimate invitations were thought by some to disrupt the physical and mental presence, as well as the confidence in a dance partner. Some declared that they did not know how to play along with the flirty games in a relaxed way, especially not according to Argentinean rules of conduct, and in the Spanish language. Figuring out how to behave in these situations made some of them 'drop focus and dance axes' (Karin, 46 years old, Sweden). Others spoke of awkward situations in which a temporary partner tried to 'take advantage' of a shared intimate moment. Some even reported upfront sexual harassment on the dance floor.

Situations of overly intimate dancing could also appear in the women's home countries. However, the context of Buenos Aires slightly changed the significance of a flirty manner and made new strategies possible. Some women explained that the Argentinean tango world was partly made up of a play around sensuality where you as a foreign woman could flirt with men to get to dance with them. Hence, sexual capital, involving looks, body language and verbal flirting, instead of economic capital, could be used as a currency in the intimate tango economy. Yet the women emphasised the importance of not getting *too* intimately involved since this could damage the dancing experience, make them lose dance partners and eventually give them a bad reputation 'here in the catholic part of the world' (Lisa, 35 years old, USA). One example of this is found in the autobiographical chick lit novel and soon to be Hollywood movie *Kiss and Tango: Diary of a Dance-Hall Seductress*. The main character, a North American woman in her thirties, moves to Buenos Aires for a year with the aspiration of becoming a professional dancer. Throughout the book she searches for the perfect dance partner. In spite of hard dance training and cultural digestion, though, she ends up in the arms of Argentinean men who desire her sexually, but not dance-wise. She describes herself: 'In the eyes of men, I'm not wife material. I'm not even girlfriend

material. They take one look at me and think: SEX!' (Palmer, 2006: 304). A similar 'risk' was expressed by a female tango hostel owner, herself a European who settled down in the tango capital some years ago to make a business out of her passion. In advising some newly arrived women from her home country she told them to be 'careful with the tango guys', to 'look out for their intentions', and to not let themselves 'be fooled by the dark brown eyes' before they went out on their first night in town. The moral advice for foreign women was to stay out of sexual adventures with local men in order to reach the cultural and artistic heights of tango.

One way of understanding the women's search for romantic experiences outside an erotic framework and their ambition to distinguish between sex and tango is that such a restricted intimacy protects a bodily and moral integrity. Throughout history, this has been shown to be a female concern. Women have had greater reasons than men to fear both physical abuse in close relations with the opposite sex and the risk of being morally devaluated when acting overtly sexual. Consequently, the male tango tourists' thoughts on the 'dangers' of the tango intimacy differed from the female dancers' understandings. Although the male tango tourists also described the aim of their trip as experiencing and developing their tango dancing—not searching for casual sex and temporary affairs—only the women, both foreign and locals, spoke of the risks. The men I interviewed rather addressed the situations in which a partner did not respect the limits of the dance floor intimacy as 'at times awkward, but not a big deal' (Lars, 55 years old, Sweden).<sup>7</sup>

The perceived risks created a need for the women to set up guidelines for how, where and with whom to share the intimate dance moments. In effect, some women expressed a wish to keep the tango intimacy limited to certain practices and places. We find an example of this in the following quote from Swedish friends Magdalena and Elisabeth who spent a two-week dance vacation in Buenos Aires:

Elisabeth: There were these men, these *porteño* men (men from Buenos Aires) and it was all clear what they wanted. You could feel it pretty quickly. They were out picking up women. (Elisabeth, 48 years old, Sweden)

Magdalena: You could feel the difference in their way of dancing. (Magdalena, 50 years old, Sweden)

E: The attention towards me as a follower.

M: But this man who danced with us all the time, he was different. He said: 'It's so nice around your table'. In general he was like that. He was a fine dancer. He invited us up, one at a time. A real gentleman. It didn't feel like he was making any moves towards us but he was always very attentive and kind of gently flirting. Kissing us on the cheek when we arrived and taking care of us when we left. I mean he didn't ask for anything, he was just nice. But perhaps he was a little bit more European because he was married to a German

**7** Although male tourists are not the focus in this article, their view on tango and sex is relevant to add quite a different example to the field of sex tourism research. Rather than describing women as being in search of romantic experiences and men as looking for sex (Herold *et al.*, 2001), all tourists interviewed in my study emphasised the particular dance experiences as the aim of their trip.

woman and had moved to Germany. He had learned. And he wanted to live more passionately once he was here in Buenos Aires.

Magdalena and Elisabeth's portrait of vulgar *porteño* men—only out for casual sex—as a contrast to the 'nice' Argentinean man who took turns dancing with them reflects a vision of a controlled intimacy. They express appreciation towards his gentlemanly manners (flattering behaviour but no sexual invitations) and restricted physical closeness (dancing chest-to-chest and kissing on the cheek but no further approaches). In other words, they evaluate a particular masculinity among their dance partners, offering recognition and comfort through restricted verbal and bodily closeness.

The notion of restricted romance can also be used to describe the women's engagement with the service market of tango. Although a majority of the intimate encounters in the dance halls took place without upfront economic transactions, tango in Buenos Aires also consists of a wide range of services that involve a chest-to-chest connection and an emotional involvement between local service providers and tourists. As a consequence of the increasing stream of foreign visitors and the hardships of the Argentinean society, a tango market has been established around private dance teachers, tango club hostesses, city guides, shoe and clothing providers, dancers in show-restaurants, make-up artists, and for lonely travellers the company of so-called tango taxi dancers, meaning Argentinean men who sell themselves as temporary dance partners in the clubs. A majority of the women I interviewed had, at some point, paid for one or several of these services. Many had taken dance classes with private teachers who they expected would transfer a particular Argentinean tango knowledge; a few of them had also paid for a taxi dancer to be their dance partner for a night.

Most women declared that they were happy to exchange money for dance sessions as long as a rewarding dance experience was achieved. However, it was important to them that the contracted dancing met their demands of 'real' tango, meaning a sincerely established dance connection through bodily communication. This shows similarities to some evidence from Elizabeth Bernstein's studies of sex workers and their clients. The men in her investigation searched for 'real' sexual experiences provided by engaged, personal and sincere paid-for-sex-partners, within a restricted social frame. Many of the male informants spoke of their sex consumption in terms of a limited adventure outside their normal life with a wife and family—and not as a substitute for an absent sex life (Bernstein, 2001). Similar to these men, the tango-dancing women spoke of the paid-for bodily encounters in dance studios and *milongas* (tango clubs) as a sensual dance experience, most of the time as 'real' and authentic as non-paid-for dances. They paid for the teachers' and taxi dancers' particular dancing skills (which is what made these dances so pleasurable, some women said), not just the arms of any Argentinean man in town.

In addition, the floating and at the same time restricted tango intimacy enabled new approaches to sexuality and sexual identities amongst the women. The following is a quote from Kate, who describes herself as 'straight' and mostly taking on the role of a follower in dances with men. However, during her stay in Buenos Aires she frequented the large queer tango festival and discovered new enjoyments:

I have had a couple of really good dances with women lately. I'm straight but I noticed that there is a sort of energetic intimate connection not with all women but with the women I enjoy dancing with, with the magical dance partners there is certainly some hearty connection or body connection and it is sensual [...] it isn't just moving to the music it is this skin-on-skin and chest-to-chest and all of that stuff but it doesn't seem to be dependent on somebody that you would go home and have sex with. So even when I have that connection with a woman I'm not thinking that I will go home and do her but it's really at that moment really energetically sexy. (Kate, 38 years old, USA)

As Kate describes it, dancing with other women made her susceptible to a sensual attraction that diverged from her general sexual interest. However, she still defined herself as 'straight' and emphasised that she would 'not go home and do her' (about a female dance partner). Like the sex-consuming men in Bernstein's study, she spoke of the sexual energy of the dance floor as a force that was not meant to be taken outside the tango halls. Although she did not want to transfer the ambience to a set of 'lesbian' practices, she admitted the 'energy' to be sexual. In her understanding, the restricted nature of the tango intimacy made possible ambiguous feelings and desires that she would normally renounce in her everyday life.

### **can't buy me love?**

Returning to the significance of money inside a culture that revolves around intimacy, there were cases when economic exchange became an obstacle for the women. Different from the semi-regulated market of dance services and tango goods, the meaning and function of money shifted when introduced to the informal love market. As shown in the following story of Rebecca, a 47-year-old Australian tango dancer on a four-month visit to Buenos Aires, her Argentinean date's possible interest in her financial status became a romantic authenticity problem. With regard to her experiences of going on dates with local dance partners Rebecca expressed a fear that some of them were out for something other than her love. She recalled a man who made her pay for the coffee on their first date. She told me that they had met on the dance floor of the club, *Niño Bien*, and both danced well together and had a fun time making light conversation in the breaks between dance sets. Before leaving the club they decided to meet up for a coffee in town a couple of days later and exchanged telephone numbers. The date went well. They had a good time walking around the old neighbourhoods of San Telmo

and finally ended up in a small bar. However, when the bill arrived the man went to the bathroom leaving her to pay. This put Rebecca in such a bad mood that she decided never to see him again. She explained that her disappointment was due to the revelation of *his* real nature. What first appeared to be a 'nice and cute guy' turned out to be a 'trickster sneaking out the backdoor'. But more importantly, the reaction was identity-shaping in relation to *them* and *her*. When it comes to the construction of *them*, a potential romantic couple, the act brought in money where it should not be, at least not according to Rebecca. Rather than being based on attraction and sincere interest in her as a person, it occurred to her that the motivation (for him) might have been financial. 'Maybe', she reasoned, 'paying for coffee and later on dinners, tango classes and flight tickets, was part of a larger economic deal'. In relation to the specific context of being in, what she described as, 'a poor Latin American country', Rebecca feared this risked making her 'another fooled foreigner'.

Additionally, Rebecca's reaction not only had to do with a wish to experience authentic romantic adventures outside the frame of economic interest, although restricted in time and place, but also with the production of gender. On the surface the tango reproduces in the extreme stereotypical imaginaries of men who lead and women who follow. Although many dancers object to such a description, the rituals of several dance floors, as well as the representations of Buenos Aires, are invested with a traditional notion of femininity and masculinity (Archetti, 1999). Some women also declared that they came to Argentina wishing to explore a femininity characterised by classic gender roles, aesthetically exposed through slit skirts and high-heeled shoes. For some this had the character of a restricted role-play as they engaged in practices and performance far from their everyday lives. Moreover, it involved an idea of men in charge of heterosexual flirting. Some of my informants said that they wanted to be treated like 'real women' and hoped that Argentinean tango life—and moreover Argentinean men—would offer charms and recognition. Part of such an imaginary is the performance of economic agency. Particularly informants from the United States declared that their ideal man would not only be flirtatious, flattering and complimentary, but would also provide dinners and drinks along with material gifts. In effect, many of my informants expressed a romantic notion in which the woman performs economic subordination. This is part of why Rebecca reacted strongly. The exposed economic inequality between her and her date made it difficult for her to engage romantically.

In other words, heterosexual romance is here produced as a power relation whereby femininity, masculinity and attraction interrelate with a material dimension. This is also true in cases of women's sex tourism in the Caribbean and West Africa where women are in charge sexually, in terms of economic superiority (O'Connell Davidson and Sanchez Taylor, 2005; Sanchez Taylor, 2006). Yet, the context that this particular study looks into seems to put the significance of

unequal economic living conditions upside down. Rather than opening up for sex–cash transactions between Westerners on holiday and locals in the Global South, the romantic framework of tango made the lack of financial power and economic potency on the part of the men an obstacle. Hence, the hardship of the Argentinean economic reality blocked, instead of fuelled, a wish to live out a hetero-romantic femininity.

## **respectability politics and racialised gender regimes**

A further reason why Rebecca reacted strongly to her date's behaviour is that it risked putting her in bad company. One characterisation that illicit the most negative responses from my interlocutors, appeared in the tango rumours spread amongst tourists and local dancers. It was the image of a foreign woman, naively—or cynically—searching for affection and love in exchange for money. Some of my informants were heavily critical of the economic and political consequences of the global sex trade and perceived of this as a further example of Western exploitation. Others spoke of the shameful personal defeat of being someone who has to pay for things you are supposed to deserve by virtue of your personality—or hard dance training—such as affection. Money attracts sex, they reasoned, but not romance and love. Some even claimed that it is better to not get involved in any kind of romantic affair if there is a risk that an economic interest might be involved. 'If I started sleeping with my private teacher I would eventually ask myself if he flattered me romantically in order to keep me as a client', says my informant Maj (52 years old, Sweden). In that sense the involvement of money was believed to risk taking away the chances of discovering *real* tango romance.

This partly has to do with the symbolic economy of tango, teaching that the dance floor should be merited through hard dance work and controlled charms—not money. It also has to do with the earlier discussed distinction between tango (pure, sublime) and sex (filthy, low). However, the image of the deviant female sex tourist and the dichotomies between sex/tango and economic/romantic relationships also needs to be read through broader cultural discourses of tourism, female sexuality and the cultural significance of social class. Most women who embark on a journey to Buenos Aires belong to an economic and more importantly *cultural* middle or upper middle class. Keeping up the formation of oneself as such involves a notion of respectability, in Beverley Skeggs' use of the word (1997, 2005). In one of her studies on reality television shows, Skeggs explores how a group of British working-class women are constituted as cheap 'white-trash' through their embodiment of a vulgar and loud sexuality (Skeggs, 2005). This shows similarities to some frequent representations of female sex tourism. Even though the women in search of love and affection in foreign countries possess the economic means to travel far

South and pay for temporary boyfriends, they are often described as culturally and morally cheap (Ware, 1997). In one media representation of Canadian women's so-called romance tourism to the Caribbean Islands, the moral features are additionally manifested through the description of their degenerated (and hence unlovable) bodies: 'You go to a party and see couple after couple of older, quite substantial—I mean overweight—white women with very young, very lithe black men [...] It's quite a curious thing' (in the *Ottawa Citizen*, 2007).

Such respectability politics is partly what the tango-dancing women respond to when making sense of themselves and their holiday in Buenos Aires as distinct from sex tourism. Most of my informants perceived of their intimate voyage as a culturally refined way of discovering the world, a genuine exploration of cultural art expression, in contrast to the culturally vulgar sex travels to Jamaica and Ghana. Hence, the women reproduce a set of cultural hierarchies in ways of travelling and engaging romantically with the world. In addition, the moral evaluation of romance practices involves a racial scrutiny of the romantic counterparts, in this case the local male dancers. In my informants' accounts, as well as in popular representations found in novels, travel magazines and tourist pamphlets, Argentinean men are constituted as a mixture of 'white'/'European' (given the national history with recent ancestors from Italy and Spain and the strong impact of urban European city life) and overtly sexual 'latin lovers', much like the hypersexual 'black male stud' in tourist representations of local men in the Caribbean (Said, 1995; Segal, 1997; Kempadoo, 2001; Nagel, 2003; Sanchez Taylor, 2006).

Similar to women's romance tourism in other parts of the world, the representations of male Argentinean tango dancers as 'flirty' and 'always sexually willing' make it difficult to imagine (the tourist) women as sexual exploiters (Taylor, 2006). However, tango in Buenos Aires predominantly provides quite a contrasting case. As shown in this article, local men were desired romantically when acting against the racial stereotypes of 'savage' and exotic men constituted by an aggressive sexuality—and economic subordination. In the quote by the Swedish dancers Magdalena and Elisabeth, their reflection on the 'nice' Argentinean man married to a German woman, race—and hence romantic desirability—is explained as a matter of cultural degrees. Local men could climb the 'cultural ladder' through European refinement, in this case expressed by the performance of a restricted sexuality.<sup>8</sup>

8 Similar mechanisms are at work when it comes to the regulation of women's sexuality. As Beverley Skeggs (2005) argues, the moral borders around vulgar and overtly exposed female (hetero)sexuality have become more

In contrast to cases of women's sex tourism in the Caribbean, the constitution of Argentinean men as predominantly white and European makes the relation between tourists and local dancers intelligible as possibly 'authentic'. This is further illustrated in the following quote by two French women who had engaged a private teacher during their three-week tango holiday. They quickly became friends with José and spent more and more time together dancing in their apartment and out at the clubs. In addition, Valerie once indicated that

something more than dancing was going on between Chloé and the dance teacher. 'They *really* like each other', she said. Although they had signed an economic contract with José, exchanging money for his dance company, their view on the living conditions of Argentinean dancers suggested that the relation was equal—and hence 'real'.

Maria: I noticed how I became rich once I got here. At home I am quite a poor researcher living out of unemployment benefits and grants. What were your experiences?

Valerie: I didn't feel that way. The world of tango is a pretty wealthy world if you compare it with many other worlds. Most dance teachers earn more money than ordinary workers. A couple of classes render the same money as an ordinary worker makes in one month. (...) In such a world you don't have to feel too rich, I didn't feel that way. (Valerie, 55 years old, France)

Chloé: Most people in these *milongas* showed a good standard. They were well-dressed, fresh looking. (Chloé, 56 year old, France)

Valerie: You wonder whether the really poor people even dance tango.

Whether or not this is demographically true, the construction of local tango dancers as wealthier than other Argentineans made romantic sense of the French women's relation with their dance teacher. By emphasising the good salaries of tango workers, the possibly problematic consequences of an economic imbalance between romantically involved—or at least intimately dancing—counterparts were downplayed. This shows how the category of race intimately twines with social class in the understandings of transnational romance. As illustrated in the story of Rebecca and her date, being Argentinean became synonymous with being globally poor. Hence, the underlying romantic query for Rebecca was the implications of her date's socio-economic belonging. Rebecca rejected him not primarily as a racialised subject (a Latin lover), or in terms of his gender (a man), but as a poor man. His performed poverty—real or not—falsified him as a legitimate romantic object. In addition, it risked making her both heartbroken and economically broke, but more importantly an unrespectable and inauthentic romantic subject.

In sum, making the male Argentinean dancers intelligible as white, European and 'pretty wealthy'—in contrast to other Latin American people and poorer parts of the Argentinean population—legitimated the women's romantic involvement with local men. Furthermore, such representations serve the image of a Buenos Aires far from the colours and tastes of Argentinean unemployment and poverty. By engaging with such views the women could also avoid identifying themselves as part of a wider global landscape of unjust living standards where tourists are simply people with money—and not primarily tango dancers. The discursive investment in a mythology on tango and heterosexual romance (*real feelings, deep intimacy, dance connection*) becomes a way of buying oneself free from

ambiguous, with cultural representations such as the ones found in the HBO series *Sex and the City*. As long as the outspoken and raw sexuality is embodied by economically and culturally esteemed women—performing an upper middle-class lifestyle and set of bodies—possibly vulgar situations are understood as romantic.

an economic and political reality, hence locating the intimate dance voyages in a terrain far from hostile everyday life in the global village.

### **conclusion: romance tourism revisited**

A frequent image in popular discourses of prostitution is that of cold relations based solely on sex and money. However, studies show that sex consumption in brothels and strip clubs often also involves diffused affective practices, such as when customers use their paid-for hour with a sex worker to talk and search for care and concern (Bernstein, 2007) or when male sex clients in Thailand fall in love with sex workers and propose marriage (Cohen, 2003). Tango tourism and the trade of intimate dances for money add another example to the diverse geography of intimacy. The women on tango holiday seem at first to differ from the female love searchers portrayed in the academic literature on women's sex tourism. The aspirations of my informants' do not appear to be primarily sex and temporary romances, but dancing. As shown, invitations by local dance partners were at times even perceived as threats towards the women's dancing experiences and status within the community. Yet, at the same time, all dancers I interviewed had come to Buenos Aires to experience a particular Argentinean sensuality. Their expectations varied from 'a fun holiday with sun, wine and lots of close embrace dancing' (Gudrun, 52 years old, Sweden), to a search for a particular dance intimacy believed to exist only in Buenos Aires. In addition, some women were ready to pay a lot of money to access this particular experience.

Hence, rather than narrowly focusing on the involvement of sexual practices such as heterosexual intercourse and cold economic transactions of sex for cash, I suggest that we perceive of transnational intimacy as a multilayered terrain involving diverse affective/erotic and economic practices. As an example, tango tourism makes up a rich spectrum of pleasures around music, dancing, friendship and sex—at the same time as it offers a market space for consumption of bodily and emotional intimacy. This is not to say, however, that we should not make critical sense of the evolving relations in such diffused terrains. Instead, this article makes a case for also raising queries about understudied cases of intimacy in the shadow of sex tourism.

Referring to the work of Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Hochschild (2003), we might take on a broader global outlook of the emotional investments and economic institutionalisation of intimacy in post-colonial times. Hochschild and Ehrenreich argue that today's Third World is no longer exploited in terms of natural resources but rather, in terms of love and affection. They primarily study women in the transnational sex trade market and nannies in the international care chains, showing how an intersection of economic motives and exoticising discourses of 'Third World women' as warmer and more caring than Westerners structures a

complex global market space. As this article shows, we could add examples from tango and international dance journeys. Similar to their counterparts in the global sex trade, the relations of tango tourism are partly structured by economic power. The journeys take place in a context of economic hardship and a continuing cultural colonialisation of exoticised places and people. Rather than only looking into the evolvment of sex-for-cash relations within such contexts, however, I suggest that we also explore how tourists demand and consume a romantic illusion and thus create motives for the re-establishment and performances of certain images.

Referring to Hochschild's concept of *emotional labour* (1983/2003; Wolkowiz, 2006), we find a service sector of tango dancing and moreover a market of consumption of emotional experiences, aiming to create certain feelings within the tourists. Similar to the international care chains, this partly builds on exoticised images of a particular Argentinean 'emotionality' (Törnqvist and Hardy, 2010). The commercialisation of tango requests that the service providers perform an imaginary of romance involving gentlemanly manners. This, in turn, requests a performed masculinity balancing between a notion of Argentinean people as white and European and hence not too overtly sexual (*too* exotic and hence economically/culturally poor), and yet sensual enough to fit the stereotypical representations of Buenos Aires as a city of passion. Moreover, this involves managing the tourists' call for a restricted intimacy, expressed as a close bodily dance connection not transgressing the rules and spatial limits of the *milonga*. Such requests partly aim at constituting tango tourism as a culturally refined and classy intimate voyage—in contrast to 'cheap' sex tourism. The evoked practices of a restricted masculinity hence help to constitute the tango voyages as a romantic endeavour reserved for a group of economically and culturally wealthy Westerners.

### **closing the romantic borders?**

As shown in many studies of Western exploitation of cheap sex and care labour in the global South, economic inequality is the foundation in a transnational market of intimacy characterised by abusive working conditions. The examples from Buenos Aires, however, show something quite different. Interviews with dance tourists illustrate how money and economic dependency also function as a cultural imaginary that triggers emotional and romantic distance between the rich and the poor worlds. As demonstrated by the case of my informant Rebecca and her Argentinean date, it might even be probable to assume that the same economic inequality that underpins sex tourism at times closes the romantic and erotic borders of the world. Hence, the global geography of intimacy is not only a set of economic relations in terms of living conditions and economic driving forces, but clearly also a struggle over imaginaries and world views.

Moreover, the examples from Buenos Aires provoke a number of interrogatory points regarding the production of intimacy and romance. Can affection exist

between people in economically dependent relationships or between people facing dramatically different living conditions? How, for instance, to understand the ongoing flirtation between Chloé and her dance teacher José? Is she necessarily an intimate exploiter in terms of her financial position and the fact that she has paid for his intimate embraces? Or could the affective interest be mutual—regardless of their economic status? Could it be love? Or friendship? Are the male local tango teachers and taxi dancers involved in a diffused economic trade with foreign women really victims, and where does a victim discourse take us in terms of the discursive colonisation of the bodies of the Global South? (Mohanty, 2003) Which voices risk being downplayed when privileging rational economic motives in our understandings of these relations? Could, for instance, the sexual invitations at times be understood as provocations towards North Americans and Europeans on dance holidays? Or do they make up the more fun side of the otherwise tedious job of teaching foreigners how to dance tango? Or could the manifestation of an active potent masculinity initiating sexual activity switch the roles from 'service provider' and 'client' to 'man' and 'woman' and hence temporarily change the power relation between Europe and Latin America?

It is not in any way evident how intimacy and romance, as a set of discursive scripts and embodied and emotionally invested practices, operate in a global world. On the one hand, transnational liaisons of a sexual nature can be seen as the ultimate expression of cynical power relations, whereby material goods and promises of a better life are exchanged for intimacy. On the other hand, intimate cross-continental relationships might also constitute a radical resistance of racist decrees of social segregation and dominant assumptions of gendered orders. According to such a view, romance can be described as a possibly powerful and subversive force that enables people to transcend material and symbolic borders and engage in the empathic and political enterprise of acquiring new perspectives on the world.

Even though this most often appears as an unused political potential, the variety of intimate transnational relations evokes questions of whether one is avoiding or confirming racism as well as global economic injustices when one seeks 'respectable' and 'real' affairs with people of the same colour and class as oneself. Putting the intimate voyages of this article in dialogue with the intimate structures of the understudied geography of romance 'at home' proves the importance of opening up the scope of study. A consequence of the dichotomy between economic and affective relationships is that it reproduces an image of 'true romance' as pure and hence separated from economic life and exoticising projections. Rather than adding to such cultural imagination, I suggest that we enlarge the scope of critical sex studies to perspectives that allow us to see the variety of ways in which romance and sensual pleasures interweave with dimensions of economy, power and vulnerability—at home as well as on holiday.

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