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tourism and the globalization of emotions: the intimate economy of tango

Maria Törnqvist, Routledge, New York, 2013, 292pp., ISBN: 978-0-415-89220-9, \$87.45 (Hbk)

Why would any feminist or queer person ever dance Argentine tango, a dance form and subculture in which heterosexuality is the leading framing, and in which heteronormative ideals evoke exoticised and racialised colonial images of 'Latin lovers', 'machos' and 'passionate Latinas'? Although it is a global, or rather glocal, subculture, Buenos Aires, the Argentinian capital and in fact—along with the rather overlooked Montevideo—cradle of the dance, is still the Mecca of tango dancers. Within the context of Argentine tango, Buenos Aires is widely believed to be the sole place where one can experience its authenticity. Consequently, it attracts significant numbers of tourists from all over the globe in search of a unique tango experience. As Maria Törnqvist acknowledges, these tourists and dancers from nations such as Sweden, Japan, Germany, Australia or the USA are highly educated, wealthy members of the middle to upper classes.

Törnqvist describes tango tourism as a paradigmatic form of 'encounters across a Global-South-Global North divide' (p. 192). She explores how the economic logics of capitalist tourism intersect with the embodied affective logics of tango intimacy. As is often the case, this intersection implies a paradoxical structure. People engage in tourism knowing that it might endanger the very experience they seek: when tango dancers from the Global North travel to Buenos Aires looking for the 'real thing', they are inevitably part of what possibly destroys this 'realness' (however illusory this realness might be). As Törnqvist shows, tango tourists are very much aware of this paradox. They cope with their entanglement in fascinating, sometimes ideological, sometimes reflexive, manners.

The book comprises nine chapters and one methodological appendix. These are grouped into two sections, 'Argentine Tango Dancing' (i.e., a general enquiry into the narratives, yearnings, dynamics and practices of Argentine tango as intimate economy) and 'Negotiating Tango Tourism'. Törnqvist takes us on a thought-provoking journey through the *milongas* (dance venues), hotels, cafés and streets of the Buenos Aires tango circuit. In so doing, she never loses sight of global cash-flows and structures of inequality, intersectional regimes of gender, class, race and sexuality, or (even if somewhat superficially treated) Argentine politics. Hence, Törnqvist does not permit the reader to comfortably

settle into the romanticised colonial exoticism of the seemingly sensual Buenos Aires tango culture. Allied to this—and this strikes me as an original contribution to the growing academic literature on tango—Törnqvist manages to show the authentic quest for ‘real’ intimacy that keeps all tango aficionados going (and indeed travelling to Buenos Aires from far-flung parts of the globe): the close embrace of two people beyond mundane restrictions and fears. Törnqvist reconstructs this quest for intimacy with sober respect towards the narratives and experiences of her informants. She pays special attention to the subtle dynamics of intersectional gendering and racialisation built into all tango dancers’ practice. Törnqvist shows how the subtle, and thereby highly effective, codes of practice that underpin tango culture simultaneously enable and restrict experiences of intimacy. She explains how these implicit rules reproduce intricate gendered hierarchies of prestige within tango culture.

The study draws upon ethnographic and other qualitative methods in sociology such as interviews and discussions with tango dancers (some professionals, many not; some Argentinian, many not; both men and women), and an analysis of material such as blogs. In an academically interesting appendix, Törnqvist discusses her approach as ‘embodied ethnography’ and situates herself as ‘dancing researcher’. The study makes sense of the empirical material by drawing on feminist, partly postcolonial literature such as Judith Butler, bell hooks, Chandra Mohanty, Simone de Beauvoir, Carol Pateman, Nira Yuval-Davis and Edward Said. Törnqvist combines this body of work with classic and contemporary sociological debates around intimacy in (post)modernity, tourism and critical geography (for instance, Ulrich Beck, Saskia Sassen, James Urry, Zygmunt Bauman, Anthony Giddens and Eva Illouz). It is clear though that Törnqvist’s guiding perspective is that of Pierre Bourdieu. Törnqvist draws on all central concepts within his work: illusion—as embodied belief—symbolic/social/economic forms of capital, social field, prestige and honour. In addition, Törnqvist draws on some ethnological classics, especially Mary Douglas and Marcel Mauss, in order to describe tango culture as an ‘ongoing process of gift exchanges’ (p. 67). She interrogates how within this process specific boundary work is required, for instance separating sex (dirty) from intimacy (clean), the ‘sublime’ (existential authenticity and intimacy) from the ‘profane’ (money/material resources, tourism), them from us, and money from mastery based on experience. Although methodological accuracy is not Törnqvist’s strong suit (sociologists might ask themselves whether the material was not selected to fit the overall perspective, ethnologists might miss thicker descriptions of practices and venues), overall, readers will find the accessible combination of empirical material and theoretically infused analysis appealing.

As a tango dancer and scholar though, I find that some crucial dimensions of tango culture are missing. What can this study tell us about the shallow sides of tango? I have found boredom, routines and frustration but also emotions such as fun and silliness to be significant assessments of what dancers actually experience on the

dance floor. Furthermore, as a critical sociologist I missed the inclusion of Argentinian and/or Latin American scholarship in this study. If the author speaks Spanish well enough to conduct ethnographic studies in Buenos Aires, then I can assume that she would be capable of reading the relevant literature. For a privileged author from the Global North it seems a rather dubious move to write about the Global South without seriously engaging in its academic/intellectual production.

Törnqvist describes the subjective practices at the crossroads of tango intimacy and tourist logics as contested experiences. She convincingly argues that the international tango crowd in Buenos Aires, especially the women among them, manage (or not) to place themselves as 'we, the dancers' versus 'them, the tourists'. Törnqvist also shows how this might fail and how especially women become vulnerable subjects, because they take care of themselves through at times dubious racist and/or class-based practices. The chapters dealing with 'Taxi-Dancers' (i.e., male dancers for rent) illustrate best the pitfalls and struggles implied in these transnational, gendered and sexualised practices.

Returning to the initial question, this study offers no answer regarding why and how feminist/queer people engage in Argentine tango. But it does offer some thrilling, plausible and productive insights into the messy—and seductive, for many even addictive—logics of dance floors where money and intimacy mingle. Reading the book, you need not be an experienced connoisseur of tango in order to understand what it means to navigate the complex intersectional dynamics of globalised dance floors. If you are a tango dancer, you will not only recognise yourself but your behaviours throughout the book. However, you will also learn more about what makes Argentine tango so fascinating and so troublesome. Tango dancing is in fact an existential, intimate experience, and as such it is—of course—highly political. Törnqvist lays out what this means. *Bailamos*, shall we dance?

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