



Light women dancing tango: Gender images as allegories of heterosexual relationships

Current Sociology
61(1) 22–39

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DOI: 10.1177/0011392112469310

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Abstract

Trying to understand the self-image of Latin American women, many Anglophone studies have turned to the influence of Catholic feminine images, especially the Virgin Mary. Albeit later studies have criticized this emphasis on Marianismo for providing a passive image of women, the prevalence of gender images of Catholic origin continues to dominate research on the continent. Based on 12 years of participant observation in tango *milonguero* lessons and at night-time *milongas* in downtown Buenos Aires the author take a different stance on the issue, analysing the image of the 'light woman' (*la mujer liviana*) as an allegorical rendition of heterosexual relationships originating in tango dance halls. This analytical frame is inspired by cultural critiques viewing feminine figures elsewhere as the product of the allegorization and feminization of the relationships of colonizers with the colonized and conquerors with uncultivated lands. However, at odds with this literature, it considers the image under study as emerging from the immediate context where it is exchanged. By showing the resonance of the image of the 'light woman' and the characteristics of heterosexual relations in tango social dance events, this article suggests the possibility that gender images may be understood as the feminization and allegorization of relations involving men and women in the very contexts where such images circulate.

Keywords

Dance classes, gender, gender images, milonga, tango

Soon after I began to take tango lessons, 12 years ago, I overheard a teaching assistant say to some of my male classmates, 'Nobody likes to move furniture'. The meaning of

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'moving furniture' in the context of tango dancing only became clear to me five months later. According to a common way of evaluating female performance in tango dancing, women who deploy the ability to respond immediately and effortlessly to their dancing partner's movements with the complementary ones, are considered to be 'light women' (*mujeres livianas*). In this context 'light' means kinetically imperceptible and predictable, so as to allow for male choreographic improvisation.

Trying to understand the self-image of Latin American women, many Anglophone studies have turned to the influence of Catholic feminine images, especially the Virgin Mary – following the analysis of Emily Stevens in *Female and Male in Latin America* (1973). Albeit later studies have criticized this emphasis on Marianismo for providing a passive image of women (Bachrach Ehlers, 1991; Browner and Lewin, 1982; Guttman, 1996) the prevalence of gender images of Catholic origin continues to dominate research on the continent (Ellsberg et al., 2000; Flake and Forste, 2006; Sagot, 2005; Salyers Bull, 1998). Studies continue to discuss women's interpretation of these images (Derks, 2009), the moral lessons derived from them (Ellsberg et al., 2000; Flake and Forste, 2006; Sagot, 2005) and how they use them to maintain valued self-concepts (Stølen, 2004).

Based on 12 years of participant observation, in tango *milonguero* lessons – first as a student of the 'woman's role', then of the 'man's role' and finally as a teacher – and at night-time *milongas* in downtown Buenos Aires, I take here a different stance, analysing the image of the 'light women' as an allegorical rendition of heterosexual relationships originating in tango dance halls. This analytical frame is inspired by cultural critiques viewing feminine figures elsewhere as the product of the allegorization and feminization of the relationships of colonizers with the colonized and conquerors with uncultivated lands (Faery, 1999; Sharpe, 1993). At a difference with this literature, it considers the image under study as emerging from the immediate context where it is exchanged. Thus, this work aims to make a twofold contribution to sociological knowledge on feminine images. First it seeks to enlarge knowledge on the diversity of feminine imagery in Latin America by depicting a feminine figure that shows no connection to Catholic imagery. Second, by showing the resonance of the image of the 'light woman' (*la mujer liviana*) and the characteristics of heterosexual relations in tango social dance events, this article suggests the possibility that gender images may be understood as the feminization and allegorization of relations involving men and women in the very contexts where such images circulate.

Milongas and tango milonguero lessons

In Buenos Aires the word *milonga* designates either a musical genre, or a public social event where people dance *tangos*, *milongas* and *valses criollos*. I here employ the term in the latter sense, as a dance event. With few exceptions, while Saturday night *milongas* are traditionally attended by couples who go to dance with each other and their common friends, those taking place from Sundays to Fridays are attended by people who go alone, or with tango classmates and friends, to dance with partners they meet there. Among the latter there is a small but growing number of *milongas* where homodancing prevails. Throughout this article I refer to *milongas* taking place on Sunday to Friday nights in downtown Buenos Aires where heterodance prevails.

Regular attendants, called *milongueros*, distinguish 'orthodox' or traditional *milongas* (*milongas ortodoxas*) from 'relaxed' ones – *milongas relajadas*, sometimes called 'practices' (*prácticas*). 'Orthodox *milongas*' is a native term that indicates dance events that are regulated by strict 'codes' (*códigos*). Accordingly, men and women sit opposite each other on either side of the dance floor, there is a strict dress code of smart clothes and leather shoes and no jeans or trainers are allowed.

Men invite women to dance by fixing their gaze on those who are watching them, and then moving their heads upwards and sideways – a move called *cabeceo*. If the woman nods acceptingly, the man will go up to her table and then escort her to the dance floor. After the dance, he will accompany her back to the table. The couple's dance lasts four tangos, four *milongas* or four waltzes, depending on each specific *tanda* – as these sets of music are called. In these *milongas*, the dancing *tandas* only include these rhythms, played in succession and divided by *cortinas*, that is, excerpts of other musical genres that nobody dances to. At the beginning of each tango, the couple spends a few seconds in small talk, and then starts dancing, anti-clockwise, without overtaking or touching other couples, and only stopping to make some steps for no more than two or three counts – if the space allows – or else they keep moving forward. The couple's feet do not lift high from the floor, specially to avoid movements that may hurt nearby dancers. Once the *tanda* is finished, the man walks the woman back to her chair and returns to his, in order to invite another partner when the following set starts. The distribution of the places where one can sit is dictated by the time and frequency a person has been attending the *milonga* or others within the same circuit. When people are sitting at the tables, they do not talk or only do so in a low voice, in order not to disturb the dancers. The music played is mostly the recordings made by the 'typical orchestras' in the 1940s. These orchestras are known by the names of their directors (Di Sarli, Canaro, Troilo, Fresedo, D'Arienzo, De Angelis, Laurenz, Francini Pontier, Pugliese, Caló, Tanturi, etc.). Each *tanda* usually pays tribute to one of these artists – thus providing rhythmic homogeneity.

Generally speaking, the 'orthodox' *milongas* are more populated by older people than the 'relaxed' ones, although there may be a few younger dancers, especially women. In the former, there is a criteria based on 'dance standards' when choosing a partner. The evaluation of these standards is related to the years spent in the *milonga* and the reputation of the dancers (stage success can sometimes make up for the lack of years dancing in these social events). There is a tendency to choose partners who have the same dance level, although young women can quickly climb up – or skip – the hierarchy because of their beauty (Savigliano, 2003).

Most of the 'codes' respected in the 'orthodox' *milongas* do not exist in the *prácticas* and 'relaxed' *milongas*. Here, people attend in mixed groups and share the same table, talk while others are dancing and pay less attention to what happens on the dance floor, except when a new *tanda* begins and invitations are made to dance. Besides tangos, waltzes and *milongas*, it is common to have a *tanda* of other rhythms (a local music genre called *chacarera*, salsa or rock 'n' roll) during the night. The dance floor is not as clearly separated from the walking areas and there are verbal invitations to dance, as well as *cabeceos*. On the dance floor, *figuras* (steps having more than one move) on the spot are frequent, with legs unfolding upwards, backwards or sideways. Contact with other

couples is, if not welcomed, at least tolerated and excused with a smile, as long as it is followed by an apology. The circulation is still anti-clockwise, but it becomes slower as each couple stops to make more intricate movements, taking up more space and time. Often, couples of women or men dance together and, in some, though it is still rare, women 'lead' and men 'follow'. Many of these *milongas* include *tandas* of live music and recordings that would be unsuitable in an 'orthodox' *milonga*, either because of their nature – far from the 'typical orchestras' from the 1940s and their compositions for piano, bass, violins and *bandoneones* – or because they include more recently composed tangos. In general, in these *prácticas* or 'relaxed' *milongas*, the entrance fee is lower than in the 'orthodox' ones and, occasionally, the fee is *a la gorra*, that is, at the discretion of the attendees who contribute with what they can.

Despite the differences regarding codes, both 'orthodox' and 'relaxed' *milongas* forbid any erotic gesture beyond the limits established by the dance itself. With rare exceptions, dancers leave the room on their own, with a person of their own gender or, in the 'relaxed' *milonga*, in a group. There is no apparent sign of attraction or desire beyond the dance's embrace, and the couples are renewed in each *tanda*. It is still rare to see the same couple dancing more than a *tanda* in the same *milonga*, as this is considered a sign of mutual attraction. The organizers of 'orthodox' *milongas* make sure the codes are respected and warn newcomers who may challenge them. They may even expel them if their warnings are not followed. The exclusion of any sign of heterosexual attraction beyond the dance's embrace also characterizes the relaxed *milongas*, albeit without a direct control from the organizers.

During my fieldwork I attended both 'orthodox' and 'relaxed' *milongas*, first with my teachers and classmates and then with my tango students and fellow teachers. With them I also shared and organized dinners, birthday and Christmas parties; paid and received visits; attended shows; looked for places to offer tango lessons and participated in negotiations with their owners and administrators; travelled on long weekends and trained new teaching assistants and teachers. Because of the secrecy surrounding affairs originating in *milongas*, the close friendship relations that I established with many of them along the past 12 years were central to gathering data for this article.

Although at the beginning of my fieldwork I attended a number of tango classes in diverse styles, I finally opted for remaining in tango *milonguero* ones – which I took in four different 'schools'. Tango *milonguero* is a style created by the codification and modification of the dance of the *milongueros* as practised in downtown Buenos Aires. It was developed by two female teachers and one male teacher (each of whom nowadays has their own tango school) at the beginning of the 1990s: Susana Miller, Ana María Schapira and Cacho Dante. Old *milongueros* from the city centre had always considered their way of dancing tango impossible to teach collectively, as they had acquired their knowledge in secret practices with more experienced dancers and by constant participation in the *milongas*. After collaborating with Dante, however, Miller started creating with Ana María Schapira a method to teach the dance. In this way, they appropriated the only recognized knowledge in the tango dance – the man's role – and codified it (Carozzi, 2009). As part of the process, they selected elements coming from various movement techniques and they codified the combinations of steps made by many different *milongueros*. Thus, they created the 'milonguero style' and developed a teaching method.

From these *milongueros* they inherited the concept of ‘the light woman’ as the ideal dancing partner, and then they spread it among their students.

Once this method came into being, the tango *milonguero* classes in the city – as well as in various European and North American countries – multiplied due to their teachings and that of their collaborators, students and assistants. There were also some old *milongueros* who, with less success, decided to start their own classes and obtain the financial benefits that these produced. The tango *milonguero* classes were added to the other pre-existent styles: the tango *salón* (ballroom), *escénico* (stage) and *Nuevo* (new) classes that professional dancers and *milongueros* from the neighbourhood of Villa Urquiza and its surrounding areas had been delivering in Buenos Aires before the 1990s (Taylor, 1998). Therefore, these classes became part of a growing process of commodification and collectivization in the teaching of the tango dance that had some precedents in previous decades, but never enjoyed the success and growth that this decade would bring.

Because of the sustained, direct and frontal contact between the upper part of the torso of both members of the couple, the *milonguero* style, in general, is still considered by present dancers as the most obviously erotic experience within tango dancing. It is often stated that *milongueros* created this style in the sweet shops (*confiterías*) of the city centre in order to ‘hold tight’ or ‘grope’ the women they met there – who were far from the family control exercised in the neighbourhood clubs. Following the tradition started by Miller and Schapira, tango *milonguero* teachers use a vocabulary that makes reference to changes of weight, balances, stretches, flexions, muscles and also torso, hips, legs, knees and feet positions that remain unknown to most dancers who were dancing it socially before the 1990s. In the lessons, the use of technical and anatomical vocabulary somehow blurs the erotic connotations of the close embrace and of the ‘chest to chest’ body contact that characterize both the *milonguero* dance of the city centre and the ‘*milonguero* style’. The language, taken from classes in other dance genres like ballet or contemporary dance, makes tango lessons similar in appearance to them.

Light women dancing tango

Older *milongueros* attending Buenos Aires downtown *milongas* often criticize and dismiss as potential dance partners women who, intentionally or not, perform moves of their own, or at their own rhythm, as it hinders the development of the choreography the male dancers are creatively improvising. Professors (both male and female) who inherited and teach their art during tango lessons also transmit these expectations regarding the dance of women. So both at traditional *milongas* and during social tango lessons it is said that women who move without their companion’s indication are ‘like truck-drivers’. This figure, stereotypically associated with lack of good manners and delicacy, conveys the idea that by leading instead of letting their partners lead, they become masculine. Women who delay their response to the male’s moves are said to be ‘heavy women’, ‘pieces of furniture’ or ‘refrigerators’ that hinder the creative freedom of their male companions.

Each tango step is initiated with an almost imperceptible movement of the man’s torso known as *la marca* (a lead). This movement announces for the woman what his next step

will be. Then, ideally she will perform the expected complementary movement at the same time that he performs his step. The more precisely and on time a woman responds to her partner's movements, the less he has to worry about what she is doing. If he knows the music by heart, as is usually the case, he can create a choreography of various movements in advance for the couple to perform, being sure that she will answer as expected or, as tango dancers usually say, that she will 'follow him'. He will then conclude that she is a 'light woman'. Instead, when he has to stop the performance of his ideal choreography and adapt it to his partner's rhythm because she does not respond as fast or precisely as he expected, he will assert that she is a 'heavy woman', or a 'piece of furniture'. The 'heaviness' or 'lightness' of female dancers is therefore independent of their body weight. Tango 'lightness' does not relate, either, to the ethereal quality of movement expected from ballet performers since the 19th century.

Thus, in the context of tango lessons and *milongas* women's 'lightness' is a necessary complement to the male's creative freedom. Creativity, improvisation and the ability to surprise their dancing partners are central attributes of the esteemed male dance. Tango dancing in downtown *milongas* allows for advancing and retreating, stopping and going around, left and right displacements, sudden stops and rhythm changes, doubling beats and skipping beats, changing from following the rhythm of the *bandoneón* (concertina) to the melody of the violin, initiating advances that will end up in backward movements, long walks and long pauses. The ways *milongueros* move around the dance floor resonate with the ways Buenos Aires dwellers drive and once played football (Archetti, 1999). It is full of *amagues*, minimal movements indicating they will go in one direction to suddenly change to the opposite. So each *milonguero* dances adapting his own movements to a moving scene that changes all the time in unpredictable ways, while each *milonguera* dances adapting to a partner who moves all the time in unpredictable ways.

In the film *Tango Bayle Nuestro*, director Jorge Zanada includes a scene in which a group of *milongueros* watch the performance of a group of tango stage dancers who are being filmed for an English television programme. At the end, almost unanimously, the *milongueros* remark with disgust that the dances were previously choreographed. Tango, according to their own way of describing their art, should always be improvised, spontaneous, never planned or repeated. Every tango danced by a *milonguero* is, in their own eyes, a transient creation, freely invented at every instant, product of the moment's inspiration. For them, like De Certeau's (2000) tactics, tango dancing neither follows nor leaves footprints.

Creatively solving the many problems they may encounter on the dance floor – a couple that suddenly stops in front of them, another one that quickly approaches from the side, a third one pushing from behind – while they interpret with their bodies the variation played by a violin, the sudden dash of a piano, or the slowing movement of a *bandoneón* at the end of a tango, *milongueros* see themselves as free creators who improvise their dance following the moment's inspiration, and are proud of this ability. To experience this freedom, what they call 'a light woman' (*una mujer liviana*) as their dance partner is considered a necessary requirement.

A light partner is, for these social tango dancers, one that 'relaxes and allows herself to be carried' through the floor, never responds to their cues (*marcas*) with an impromptu movement, never stops unexpectedly, never generates, by herself, a movement that will

surprise them. With a 'light woman', the *milonguero* can feel that he 'freely creates the dance in her body', as a young and famed professor likes to say. A light woman is 'a Stradivarius', as legendary dancer Juan Carlos Copes calls his equally renowned partner María Nieves, or 'a Ferrari' allowing a swift ride through the dance floor, in the words of a student of the school where I teach. As a canvas that absorbs paint in a constant fashion, or a violin that produces exactly the desired sound, 'the light woman' always moves as expected in response to the improvised, imaginative, inspired move of her partner, thus contributing to his creative freedom.

Feminine images in Latin America

Following the analysis of Emily Stevens in *Female and Male in Latin America* (1973) a considerable number of Anglophone studies addressed the issue of the influence of Catholic feminine images, especially the Virgin Mary, on the self-image of Latin American women. While subsequent studies criticized the passivity that the author attributed to them in her study of Marianismo as a Latin American ideology of women's spiritual superiority, the prevalence of images of Catholic origin continues to dominate this body of literature (Ellsberg et al., 2000; Flake and Forste, 2006; Melhuus and Stølen, 1996; Sagot, 2005; Salyers Bull, 1998).

Thus studies continue to discuss how women interpret these images (Derks, 2009), what moral lessons they derive from them (Ellsberg et al., 2000; Flake and Forste, 2006; Sagot, 2005) and how they use them to maintain valued self-concepts or legitimize their choices (Stølen, 2004). Some studies on masculinities in Latin America have also analysed how men label women with categories derived from images such as saints and virgins (Nencel, 1996).

Argentine social scientists studying the field of music have departed from the assumption that feminine imagery necessarily derives from the Catholic Church, but not always from the one that assumes this imagery as inspired mostly or exclusively by the behaviour of women (Archetti, 1994; Martín, 2008; Vila and Semán, 2011). Thus Martín (2008) suggests that images of women in the lyrics of a local genre called *cumbia villera* may indicate transformations in the female role in intimate relations. Following her lead Vila and Semán (2011) argue that the frequent labelling of women as whores and of performing explicitly sexual practices in this genre is a (masculine) reaction to what the authors call 'the sexual activation of women'. Images depicting women seeking sex are a result of the infantile attitude with which men, dominant but besieged, contemplate the lively sexual activity of some women and fantasize that most of them exhibit this behaviour. Accordingly, the masculine voice heard in *cumbia villera* lyrics no longer describes women as passive objects; instead, it describes them as powerful. Thus, for Vila and Semán, through 'name calling lyrics' (Aparicio, 1998: 161), men try to keep control of women's sexuality when they have already lost it. Feminine images are, for these authors, a masculine reaction to changes in women's (sexual) practices. These changes are, in turn, indicative of a subversion of heterosexual power relations.

Archetti (1994) has made a similar argument in relation to the frequent mention of the figure of the *milongueta* in tango lyrics during the first decades of the 20th century. Around 1920, the daughters of recently arrived European immigrants ventured to public

entertainment places that constituted a new presence in downtown Buenos Aires. Dancing tangos in public places, sharing embraces that were neither approved nor controlled by their families and establishing heterosexual relations with men on the basis of personal preferences, these young women inspired tango composers, themselves descendants of immigrants, to create an impressive amount of lyrics portraying female figures they named *milonguitas*. For Archetti, these tangos were a masculine reaction to women's escaping the close control exercised by their parents at a time when the vision of a non-accompanied woman in a public place constituted a rare occurrence – and to watch one embracing a man was downright inconceivable. Influenced as they were by romantic literature, tango writers did not call them sluts, but their lyrics attributed to those *milonguitas* characteristics that bear a strong resemblance to those associated with whores. These include their demeanour – they were always depicted as laughing and drinking champagne; an interest in acquiring luxury symbols as a result of their relationships with men; and a marked disposition to abandon true love in the pursuit of a good catch. Thus both Archetti's and Vila and Semán's analyses argue that lyrics either labelling women as sluts or attributing them whore-like traits are male reactions to novelties in female behaviour: women dancing in new, more sensual ways and establishing heterosexual relations in ways that were until then considered improper (Carozzi, 2011).

Other authors have analysed stereotypical feminine figures in tango lyrics as controlling images, which have pedagogical effects on women (Collins, 1999; Sandlin and Maudin, 2012). Armus (2002) interpreted a widespread tango image, women dying from tuberculosis as the feminization of illness. For the author this feminization served moralizing purposes. Along the same lines, Campodónico and Gil Lozano (2000) have analysed the contrasting figures of the *milonguita* and the mother both in tango lyrics and films as constructions also having moralizing effects over women.

Some studies on gender images in Latin America have departed from the assumption that these are reactions to changes in women's behaviour and primarily affect them. Authors have made efforts to show that recurrent female and male images reflect not only gender but also class and ethnic inequalities (Stølen, 2004). Savigliano takes a similar stance, asserting that in tango gender is a metaphor condensing racial, class and colonial inequities. But in other sections of the same book, she also considers that tango lyrics reflect the real behaviour of women, describing their abilities to subvert gender relations both while dancing and loving a man. The author states that *milonguitas* are apparently docile women but they finally leave men who oppress them (Savigliano, 1995: 69).

Based on 12 years of participant observation in tango lessons and *milongas* in downtown Buenos Aires, I take a different stance, and analyse the image of the 'light women' as an allegorical rendition of heterosexual relationships originating in *milongas*. Etymologically allegory means 'other speech' (*alia oratio*), it conveys an open declamatory act that contains another layer of meaning. In western painting and sculpture the female form has been very frequently used to allegorically represent a variety of concepts such as freedom, justice, revolution, youth and death among many others (Warner, 1985). Rarely used by sociologists, the concept of allegory has sometimes been employed by cultural critics to analyse colonial relationships. Jenny Sharpe (1993) has used it to analyse narratives of rape written by colonizers in India. She argues that the images of the white innocent woman and the Indian rapist are allegories of the colonizer-colonized

relationship elaborated by the former when the continuity of the empire was threatened by rebellion. In turn, Rebecca Blevins Faery (1999) has noticed that images of naked women and virgins were produced by colonizers and conquerors as allegories of America to depict it as a vacant and uncultivated land. With a slight twist on this literature, I consider the image of 'the light woman' as emerging from the immediate context where it is exchanged, showing the resonance of the image of the 'light woman' (*la mujer liviana*) in dance and the characteristics of heterosexual relations in tango social dance events.

Heterosexual relations in Buenos Aires downtown milongas

The dance floor as a place of transient and generalized eroticism

Tango is almost universally defined as an erotic, sensual or passionate dance by those who watch it and by those who advertise it for international consumption (Savigliano, 1995). However, the way social dancers and teachers refer to it in Buenos Aires does not match this description. Old *milongeros* publicly state that they dance for the pure joy that it brings them, and thus hide from novices any possible erotic attraction – a link that, however, they will acknowledge in a whisper when they are among friends. The majority of those who started dancing from the 1980s onwards clearly distinguish between the pleasure that the dance produces from that associated with sexuality or with any other emotional link. They frequently state that there are partners they like dancing with because of the way they dance; that there are others who dance badly, but feel sexually attracted to; and that there are partners with whom they enjoy dancing, because they are funny or 'have a good vibe' or 'are friends'. This feeling of friendship is particularly encouraged in tango classes. Finally, whatever pleasure one may derive from a particular partner, most *milongeros* consider this should only be articulated within the couple's inner sphere and never made evident to those around (to other dancers in most *milongas*). Thus, even if social tango dancing may seem erotic to the onlooker, this eroticism appears to be evenly distributed between all the dancers with no special liaisons arising between any of them but for a brief moment. Tango eroticism also seems extremely mobile, for couples reshuffle as soon as a musical *tanda* ends.

When tango dancers experience pleasure or erotic attraction during the dance, the signs used to indicate this are usually subtle and only understood by the partner: a touch delayed for a few seconds, a hand that slides upwards to reach the flesh in the neck above the shirt collar or dress cleavage, some unavoidable contact that is a bit longer than the music concedes, or the imperceptible repetition of certain movements that allow more and sustained contact. An example of the expected limits of such signs happened when several advanced students, teachers and assistants of a *milonguero* tango school were watching the organizer of one of the so-called 'relaxed' *milongas* at the same place where they taught and learnt once a week. Because of the unusual explicitness of the erotic contact he displayed when dancing with his partner, the women nicknamed him 'The Groper':

Lara, Carina, Camila, Andrés and I were looking at 'The Groper' dancing with one of his friends. He invited her to open her legs wide and he put one of his legs between hers, embracing

her around her waist and making both bodies go upwards and downwards. Then, he put his hand with his fingers downwards on her bottom and he slid it upwards slowly but surely. We all watched from our chairs with our bodies and heads together, moving from side to side in order not to miss any of the scenes that the column that separated us from the dance floor hid from us. Lara put her hands in her stomach and made a painful face (she did this discreetly, but later on, when smoking in the corridor, Lara and Camila more explicitly and laughingly commented on the ‘disgusting’ organizer’s tango performance). ‘It’s like watching porn’, Andrés says. ‘Yes’, answers Carina, ‘I don’t have a problem with porn movies, but this is like watching one at home, in the living room, with your family.’ Martín, another teacher, ironically asks: ‘Do you know the name of that guy’s dance style? – “Uruguayan Tango”, it’s the one Walter and Waldo taught in Cha-Cha-Cha’, making reference to a TV comedy in which a pair of men parodied tango classes through grotesque performances. We all laughed until the moment Luciano said: ‘No, it’s called Erect Tango’. (From my field notes)

This unanimous censure when confronted by visible and openly sensual movement as displayed by the organizer shows the preference for invisible and subtle, tactile and only perceptible to the occasional partner, demonstration of attraction and erotic pleasure during the tango dance. It also explains why, for many *milongueros*, explicit (and exaggerated) demonstrations of passion associated with stage tango look ridiculous and become the object of parody and jokes within the context of social tango.

As a result of this subtlety, when watching the dance floor in a *milonga* no special attraction appears to link the members of any given couple. This impression is still more vivid since all couples are reshuffled every set of four pieces of music. When a musical *tanda* finishes, everybody goes back to their seats, searching for a new transient dance partner as soon as the music resumes. Thus, no special liaisons appear to arise between any of them. Tango eroticism also seems extremely mobile, since those who seemed attracted to each other moments before are likely to be showing identical interest in new dance partners as soon as they begin to dance with them.

However, every *milonguero* or *milonguera* recognizes that, occasionally, they have experienced an exceptional ‘connection’ during the dance that developed into erotic encounters beyond the confines of the *milonga*. When sexual encounters recur, *milongueros* refer to the relationship as ‘a story’ (*una historia*) – a native term I will use from now on. There are, as we will see, hidden liaisons involving sex between those attending the *milongas* and that remain unnoticed by others or, when noticed, unspoken. In the common *milonguero* language, this concealment is reinforced by statements such as ‘you go to the *milonga* to dance’ and ‘I choose my partners because of their dance’, though they may add afterwards in a whisper ‘and, if I also like them, all the better’.

Light heterosexual relations

Everybody knows that there is flirting in a *milonga*, but how you hit on someone is still a mystery to me. (Tango *milonguero* student, who had attended a *milonga* with his teachers and classmates, asking for advice)

Since the rules of conduct in *milongas* differ markedly from those applying in the world outside, *los códigos de la milonga* – the *milonga* codes – keep the limit between those in

the know and those who do not know, between old-timers and newcomers, keeping the latter away from the dance floor and making their initiation into a very gradual process. Although everybody in the *milonga* knows that there are *códigos*, and *milongueros* like to convey some of them to newcomers, they never mention rules organizing sexual encounters among them. The prospective *milonguero* has to discover this implicit aspect of the code by observation, spending time in *milongas*, catching words and attitudes and, especially, by listening to the warnings and secret anecdotes of close friends. As a general rule, in the *milongas* of the city centre that take place from Sunday to Friday, dates are arranged without any public display of affection or attraction beyond the tango's embrace. For unknowing watchers and newcomers, *milongas* appear as a space clearly divided between a dance floor where the dance evolves in all its erotic flair and its surroundings, where eroticism is completely absent.

Thus, most of the 'stories' born in the *milongas* remain publicly hidden, except to the most intimate friends of those involved (generally, just one or two people) who, in turn, will never acknowledge knowing, even while interacting with the participant in the story who is not the one that revealed it. Only a fraction of those attending a *milonga* regularly get to know some of the 'stories' through whispers or gossip that, on the other hand, is always suspected of being made up. Since further evidence is very difficult to gather, the evaluation of the gossip's veracity will depend on the intimacy between the listener, the teller and those involved.

A dramatic illustration of this invisibility regarding relationships took place at a *milonga* where I used to go weekly and involved a woman who used to sit next to my table. We had always greeted with a hug and we used to exchange a few words during the night. On one of these occasions, she started crying. When I asked her what had happened, she told me that one of the regulars in the *milonga*, whom I also knew, had died. She then told me that she had had a 'story' with him for over two years, but had never told anyone because he did not want others to know. Another friend then confirmed this revelation, while adding that the man in question had forbidden her to tell because he was 'a womanizer' and did not want other women to know about their affair. Throughout the night, the woman revealed her relationship with her deceased partner to each person who greeted her with a hug after seeing her crying, and she remained sitting at her usual table and without concealing her grief.

Without such drama, there were several occasions on which I got to know, by chance, about 'stories' that involved friends and acquaintances and even students and classmates I used to meet regularly. Either I would see them together in the street after they had parted their separate ways; or, after a fight, one of the partners would reveal the 'story'; or a close friend could tell in revenge, after an argument with a member of the couple. I have also helped cover up 'stories' of close friends by leaving the *milonga* with them so that they could meet their partner later outside .

The occasional couple who has met during the context of a dance will hardly ever leave the room together or at the same time. On the contrary, it will be during the initial musical phrases that start each tango that the date will be set. Then, they will return to their respective tables and they will meet again in another place, at another time, far from the other participants' gaze. These meetings can either be set for the same night, at a specified time, establishing who leaves the *milonga* first and in which bar or street corner

nearby they will meet, or it may be set for a different night. If it is not possible to agree on a date and time, telephone numbers will be exchanged in the corridors, in discreet and coordinated visits to the toilets, or at the door, in the entrance hall, on the balconies or when going out to smoke or take fresh air, always depending on the hidden and empty spaces that the *milonga* may offer.

In *milongas* attended by younger people, where social gatherings outside the dance floor are more common, there is another unwritten code that enables the possibility to coordinate secret dates: friends will never approach a man and a woman when they are speaking privately, unless both of them belong to a group of intimate friends, classmates generally, and they are certain that there is no possible ‘story’ between them – though, as I have realized, sometimes that certainty may not match the reality of the situation. I remember the shock of a female tango student, who worked as producer of a rock band and had just started attending *milongas*, when her teacher got angry with her because she had approached him while he was talking to another woman in the entrance hall. ‘I just can’t understand this’, she said in disbelief, ‘In the rock environment these things don’t happen.’

On the other hand, ‘stories’ do not have visible consequences in the way their main protagonists will interact in future *milongas*, and thus remain invisible. They may dance together in the future or not; if she ignores the male’s *cabeceo* (as explained, an almost imperceptible movement of the head inviting to dance) or if he disregards her enticing stare. If they do dance again, they may arrange a new date or not. If one of them suggests meeting on the same night, the other can always make up an excuse: ‘I have to work early’, ‘I’m knackered’ or ‘I have to take my mum to the hospital tomorrow’. This excuse may allow a secret meeting with another person from the same *milonga* on that very night. Thus, secrecy allows *milongueros* and *milongueras* to be involved in several ‘stories’ at the same time and to choose the person they want to ‘leave’ with on each night. It also allows them to try and start other affairs with new partners. As one of them once illustrated: ‘If I let other people know that I have a “story” with a woman in a *milonga*, I am stupid, because I am missing out on pulling all the other ones.’

In general, the few women who publicly proclaim their ‘stories’, either verbally or in gestures in the *milonga* confines, are either described as ‘clumsy’ or ‘crazy’. Moreover, those involved will spread the idea that ‘they imagine things’. On the other hand, those men who show their attraction towards a woman through gestures are called ‘slimy’. This is more common when they are newcomers. Generally speaking, most people who attend *milongas* learn quickly the code of secrecy and respect it. However, in private conversations, women complain more often than men about keeping their ‘stories’ secret, especially when they continue over time.

Though both men and women sometimes exercise the right to this free sexual circulation guaranteed by secrecy, it is – as far as I know – much more common for men than for women to be involved in several long ‘stories’ developing at the same time. This practice is not absent among women, but especially those above 30 tend to finish a long ‘story’ before starting a new one. Since women more frequently complain about events regarding ‘stories’ one could argue that (male) *milongueros* are more suited to this way of sexually relating than (female) *milongueras*. But it can also be the case that these complaints reflect more closely the gender distribution of what can and must be said

about the number and variety of one's own sexual experiences than that of actual experiences. To be sure during my fieldwork I heard men loudly bragging about the richness and variety of their sexual encounters in front of their friends while women just whispered about the same subject in the ears of a very close friend.

I must point out that though the usual endings of 'stories' originated in the *milongas* are to give birth to new ones, a few of them become official and develop into public relationships. However, only some of these relationships imply giving up the emergence of new secret 'stories', especially if one or both members continue dancing in the *milongas*. The secrecy code allows couples to initiate new relationships and set dates without being noticed, even if their partners are present in the same room. Occasionally, a new 'serious' relationship may mean the abandonment of those *milongas* where they used to interact and so, the new couple will start going dancing together in other places or they may stop dancing altogether.

The secrecy that *milonga* practices impose on the erotic relationships that take place in its realm allows for free sexual circulation and the development of multiple 'stories' that can happen at the same time and that may or may not be resumed during any given night, depending on chance and the will of the moment.

The unbearable heaviness of women who fall in love

The most often-stated reason by my *milonguero* friends to finish a liaison that started in a *milonga* is that 'she fell in love and started getting heavy'. As I heard this reason time and again as an excuse for the termination of several of their involvements – or of their friends' – I finally asked one of them: 'but don't *you* ever fall in love?' He answered: 'I might fall in love, but I never tell them, because if I do they start getting heavy.' Men going to *milongas*, therefore, seem to establish a close connection between falling in love and female 'heaviness'.

The diagnosis of falling in love made by the men is not always acknowledged by the women involved. On more than one occasion I have learned of women who were very much surprised to learn that they were being dumped because 'they were falling in love'. I have heard male *milongueros* diagnose infatuation and foresee increasing 'heaviness' of the women they were seeing in the following circumstances:

- When they found out that a woman had told other women in the *milonga* that they had 'a story' with them.
- When a woman asked that they go together to a *milonga*.
- When a woman demanded that the man not leave the *milonga* with another woman if she was present.
- When a woman engaged in public demonstrations of affect in the context of a *milonga*.
- When a woman, after a period of not seeing them, said she missed them.
- When a woman called asking to see them or to chat.

The first three of these behaviors entail a breach of the implicit code of secrecy that regulates relationships in the *milongas*, the last two involve an attempt, on the part of the

woman, to have a say in the frequency of encounters and in the development of an affective link. The limits of specific *milongueros* are variable, and some may take certain behaviours listed above and not others as proof of unwarranted (and unwanted) female love.

Many regular *milongueros* have told me that when they see a woman repeatedly they consciously deploy tactics to prevent their falling in love. These vary from individual to individual. Some avoid any word that may suggest a romantic relationship: ‘miss’, ‘love’, ‘want’, even ‘like’ are forbidden words that they force themselves not to utter during sex. Some even confided that they do not tell a woman that she is pretty, to prevent her from falling in love. Other tactics include abstaining of meeting in a public place – even if it is outside the *milongas* – so that the woman does not think they want to officially acknowledge their ‘story’; or not going out on Saturday nights, which would also give the relationship unwanted recognition and perhaps provide fuel for love. Interestingly, all these tactics construct female sentiments and love as a consequence of the males’ actions. I have heard them express their surprise when women fell in love ‘without them doing anything’ to warrant it. For these men, frequent sexual encounters over long periods of time with women they met in the *milongas* do not seem to lead to the development of sentimental feelings. Romantic words, public demonstrations of affection, seeing each other on Saturdays or being introduced to their friends, however, are considered possible causes for women to fall in love and thus turn into ‘heavy’ ones.

I must emphasize that I have rarely heard women complain because men they were seeing had fallen in love. Quite to the contrary, a frequent complaint is that they could only have one-night stands with *milongueros*. The male version is that they only do this if women become ‘heavy’ immediately afterwards – for example, if they call them during the week to chat or ask how they are doing. If not, they are willing to repeat the experience each time there is no other more desirable choice at hand. This may happen for an unlimited amount of time, as long as the woman shows no signs of ‘falling in love’.

Foreign women, known to social dancers as *las extranjeras*, are an interesting exception to the taboo of romance in the *milongas*. As one of my *milonguero* friends put it – much to the approval of others present – ‘a foreigner can become your girlfriend because she is leaving anyway’. *Milongueros* often explain that they can treat foreign women differently, express their love to them or show themselves together publicly because their eventual and inevitable departure ensures the fleetingness of the relationship. Foreign women are seldom considered ‘heavy’ and are allowed to fall in love, as long as they do not plan to put down roots in the city: their impending departure makes them extra-light women. An identical exception holds for tourist women in relation to their ability to dance. Differently from Argentine women, blond light-eyed or very dark-skinned foreign women are frequently invited to dance as soon as they arrive to the *milonga*, independently of their dancing skills (Taylor, 1998). However, if they plan to stay in the city they lose their ‘foreigner’ (*extranjera*) identity and they are judged as harshly as their *porteñas* counterparts (i.e. women born in Buenos Aires). Their ‘falling in love’ is avoided by the same tactics already discussed.

The exceptional lightness attributed to foreign women show the intimate relation linking the attribution of that trait to the fleetingness of ‘stories’. Although, as our analysis of ‘heavy women’ has shown this fleetingness should not be considered identical to briefness A ‘story’ continues to be light even when composed of many episodes as long

as recurrent occurrences do not imply any obligation to be repeated at any given moment in the future.

Conclusions

The secrecy that *milonga* practices impose on the erotic relationships that originate within the *milonga* allows the free sexual circulation and the development of multiple 'stories' that can happen at the same time and that may or may not be resumed during any given night, depending on chance and the will of the moment. They are, as 'light women' in dance, relationships that allow for the creative freedom of the participants and do not impose any obligations on them. They are characterized by secrecy, detachment, multiplicity and freedom. Conversely, public recognition, affective attachment and the obligation to meet at any given moment are enemies of this free circulation. They turn heterosexual relations 'heavy'. But in the *milonga* context lightness and heaviness are not depicted as attributes of 'stories' and 'love relationships': they become feminine images. They acquire an anonymous female form, as did justice or liberty when statues were made to represent them. Thus the 'light woman' can be understood as an allegory of those ways of heterosexually relating that *milongueros* call 'stories' while the one that becomes 'heavy' allegorizes monogamous affective attachments. In this process of gendered allegorization the role of men in heterosexual relationships is erased.

One could wonder if a similar process is not involved in the making of the figure of the slut in *cumbia villera* or of *milonguitas* in early tango lyrics. Couldn't they be understood as allegories of heterosexual relations established in the social contexts where these genres are or were publicly performed? In order to answer the question much more information of how relationships develop *beyond* the limits of dance halls would be needed.

No doubt when attributed to specific persons, images of women can become a social identity (Nencel, 1996). Such attributions have observable consequences for women and they develop diverse tactics to deal with them. They can sometimes choose to contextually identify with them, embodying them through kinetic behaviour, clothing and demeanour (Vila and Semán, 2011), reject them (Aparicio, 1998) or even use them to their advantage (Derks, 2009). But here I wished to emphasize that in the context of the *milongas* the image of 'the light woman' gives a feminine form to a prevailing way of heterosexually relating that engages both men and women.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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Résumé

Dans leurs tentatives de comprendre l'image de soi des femmes latino-américaines, beaucoup d'études anglophones se sont tournés vers l'influence des images féminines catholiques, en particulier de la Vierge Marie. Malgré des études plus récentes qui ont critiqué l'accent mis sur le marianisme dans la formation de cette image passive de la femme, la place importante accordée aux images féminines d'origine catholique continue à dominer la recherche sur le continent. Basée sur douze années d'observation participante menée lors de leçons de tango milonguero – afin d'étudier en premier lieu le 'rôle de la femme', puis le 'rôle de l'homme' et enfin celui du professeur – et lors de séances nocturnes de milonga dans le centre de Buenos Aires, cet article propose une approche différente de la question, celle de l'analyse de l'image des 'femmes légères' comme une interprétation allégorique des relations hétérosexuelles dans les salles de danse de tango. Cette grille d'analyse est inspirée des critiques culturelles qui considèrent d'autres figures féminines comme le produit de l'allégorie et la féminisation des relations entre les colonisateurs et les colonisés et entre les conquérants et les terres incultes. Cependant, à la différence de cette littérature, cet article analyse cette image directement dans le contexte immédiat où elle est échangée. En montrant les relations entre l'image de la 'femme légère' (*la mujer liviana*) et les relations hétérosexuelles dans les endroits où l'on danse le tango, cet article suggère que ces images féminines puissent

être envisagées comme la féminisation et l'allégorie des relations impliquant les hommes et les femmes dans les contextes mêmes où ces images circulent.

Mots-clés

Cours de danse, images des femmes, *milonga*, sexes, tango

Resumen

Tratando de entender la auto imagen de las mujeres latinoamericanas, muchos estudios anglófonos han recurrido a la influencia de las imágenes femeninas católicas, especialmente a la Virgen María. Aunque estudios recientes han criticado este énfasis en el Marianismo por proporcionar una imagen pasiva de las mujeres, la preeminencia de las imágenes de género de origen católico continúa dominando las investigaciones sobre el continente. Basado en doce años de observación participante en clases de tango milonguero – primero como alumna del ‘papel de la mujer’, luego del ‘papel del hombre’ y finalmente como profesora – y en milongas nocturnas en el centro de Buenos Aires, asumo una postura diferente sobre esta cuestión, analizando la imagen de la ‘mujer liviana’ como una versión alegórica de las relaciones heterosexuales originadas en los salones de baile de tango. Este marco analítico está inspirado por las críticas culturales que observan las figuras femeninas en otros lugares como la alegorización y feminización de las relaciones de colonizadores y colonizados, y de conquistadores con las tierras sin cultivar. Sin embargo, en contrapunto con esta literatura, este artículo considera la imagen estudiada como emergiendo del contexto inmediato donde es intercambiado. Al mostrar la resonancia de la imagen de la mujer liviana, y las características de las relaciones heterosexuales en los bailes y eventos de tango social, este artículo sugiere la posibilidad que las imágenes de género serían entendidas como la feminización y alegorización de las relaciones que involucran hombres y mujeres en los propios contextos donde dichas imágenes circulan.

Palabras clave

Clases de danza, género, imágenes de género, *milonga*, tango