

Romance on the Road: Traveling Women Who Love Foreign Men

By Jeannette Belliveau. Beau Monde Press <www.beaumonde.net> 2006. vi + 412 pp (indices, bibliography, maps, photos, tables) \$34.95 Pbk. ISBN 096523441X

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“Remember”, warned the poster that adorned one female colleague’s office, “anything Fred Astaire could do, Ginger Rogers also did. On high heels and dancing backwards”. To some extent, the message sums up the story of (mostly Western) women in the long march for their rights over the last 60 years. Even though the goal of gender parity is still elusive, nearly all traditional areas sport a more diverse fabric nowadays. Women have made significant inroads in most of them and are relentlessly laying siege to the remaining bulwarks.

Romance on the Road sets out to assail one of those last fortresses—male predominance in the fields of sex and tourism. This is a tricky issue to boot. Current literature bundles these two subjects into the single one of sex tourism, defined as the exchange of sex for money between (mostly Western) male tourists and local prostitutes, mostly females. This would thus be man’s eminent domain, but Belliveau thinks differently. There are many more women that make love to strangers, indeed to foreign men, than commonly accepted—and this while on the road. As such, should not sex tourism become a category applicable to women as well?

The author seems to favor the affirmative, but this is no easy ride. When it comes to male-practiced sex tourism, the cash nexus usually dominates, even in what Cohen (2001) has termed open-ended prostitution, or sex-based commercial relations that reach beyond the mere sexual encounter. However, the skimpy evidence about casual sex between (mostly Western) females and men from different cultures is quite murky on this point. The author throws into the mix affairs between consenting adults of similar economic and cultural backgrounds (as experiences in South Eastern Europe); female-initiated sex-on-the-fly where the main interest of male partners is finding relief from the lack of available mates, many of whom have migrated abroad in search of jobs (as in the Caribbean); and relations where small gifts or even cash were given to men as tokens of affection (as in Africa or Southeast Asia). Not every one of those instances would pass muster as sex tourism, so arguing on the issue with this speckled baggage does not make things easy from an academic point of view.

Neither will academics be satisfied with the evidence provided to prove that tourism-related sex is increasing among women. Granted, statistics on this area are few and far between, but serving apples and oranges together will not help to make the case. That exactly 23,761 women per year (p. 41) have engaged in occasional sex while traveling may be the right or the wrong figure—there is no way to tell. That 3,500 American women bring home foreign husbands or fiancés per year (p. 182) may inform about exogamy, but not much about the relation between women tourists and casual sex. Maps showing world sex tourism destinations for straight

females and males, or gays and lesbians do not probe beyond conventional wisdom. Maybe one in ten young American women has dreamed of having sex with a stranger and maybe one in one hundred has made the dream come true (pp. 180-181), but a *stranger* is not necessarily a *foreigner*, even less somebody met on a trip.

The book, indeed, has not been written with academic audiences in mind. It is part memoir, part sex-travelogue, part advice blog for the general public, part advocacy for female promiscuity. It exudes vitality and energy with the joy of breaking new ground (one gets to know that women can really enjoy sex with foreigners even on high heels, although porn flicks had already made that case long ago); of closeting out (like Descartes with his reasoning skills, the author takes her own amatory experiences as Exhibit 1 for her musings); of using eye-popping unconventional lexicon that could not be reproduced in a journal like this one without much hair-raising.

Belliveau, however, does pose some important questions for academics. One of them should be answered by psychologist colleagues of the evolutionary persuasion. If an æons-long history has shaped male and female reproductive strategies into divergent but rather iron-cast moldings (Dawkins 2004), what will be the future of the mutants that do not follow their pre-assigned roles? Are Belliveau and her like-minded sisters of *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* or *Heading South* fame, plus all those (mostly Anglo-Saxon) female writers she quotes as having taken the lid off the jar of women’s right to multiple sex partners, just waning froth on the waves of time or trendsetters unleashing sudden changes to traditional sex roles?

At the other side of the spectrum, the cultural studies crowd should also take stock of the challenge. Its members have tried to argue that every trait in human behavior can exclusively be assigned to the beliefs of the communities in which one is born and raised. Many even consider those beliefs as not just facts of life, but as permanent norms not to be changed ever. Sex tourism, for instance, is often portrayed as predatory conduct on the part of (mostly Western) straight male tourists trying to avoid the changes in women’s status within their own societies. If Belliveau is right, however, once romance on the road becomes acceptable behavior for straight females, lesbians, gays, and transsexuals, this view should be cast into the oblivion of a *Dictionnaire d'idées reçues*. With its happy-go-lightly approach, *Romance on the Road* is a welcome reminder of the need to re-assess certainties every now and then. ▀

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