Tango Lessons
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INTRODUCTION

MARILYN G. MILLER

The tango is an infinite possibility.
— popular saying

The Tango Continuum

For more than a century, an eclectic array of students, scholars, and fans have debated the origins, meanings, and relevance of the tango. Where did it originate? Who invented it, and who has composed, sung, played, or danced it best? How did it develop into what we know today as tango, and how should it be performed and preserved in our own times? Why is it called tango in the first place? The scholars convened in this edited volume address the fields of music and dance but explore tango’s vitality in language, literary critique, film, and art as well, concluding that tango is alive and flourishing in all these venues, in some cases to a degree perhaps never before seen. For some, this heightened interest and enthusiasm signals a resurgence, for others a continuation, and yet for still others a rupture with hallowed traditions. However one understands its recent history, tango praxis today constitutes a hub of rich, diverse, and multifarious activity in contexts both local and global.

Questions about tango’s present state in relation to its storied history are not new. In an essay published in 1926, the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges distinguished between a “contemporary” picturesque tango and a more genuine “primordial” tango built of “pure insolence, pure shamelessness, pure happiness in bravery” (On Argentina 43). Such categorizations, resting on the tensions between tradition and innovation, authenticity and creativity, still generate impassioned debate. Attesting to tango’s deep resonance in the twenty-first century, the twenty-four members of UNESCO’s Intangible Heritage Committee named the music and dance forms of the tango rioplatense a world cultural heritage in 2009.
As scholars and students who find ourselves in its thrall, we are witnesses
to tango’s vitality and complexity. Though we take into account its many
historical trajectories, here we focus principally on its current resonance and
power. In addition to its relevance as dance or music or literature, tango pres-
ents a useful tool for studying global cultural flows and their interactions.
Indeed, there are few popular cultural forms so thoroughly interdisciplinary
as the tango. In tango, “musical and nonmusical materials [are apt] to com-
ment on, criticize, or reinterpret each other as well as to repeat each other”
(Kramer, Music as Cultural Practice 14). Nonetheless, scholarly investiga-
tions from different disciplines have rarely acknowledged this multivalence.
As dancers, listeners, and participants in other practices of the form, we use
this edited volume to make a case for tango as a vast repository of local ex-
perience, wide-ranging knowledge, and global significance. Inspired by the
luminaries who have contributed to its rise to international fame in the last
century, we offer fresh perspectives on tango’s vigor and continuing appeal
for new generations of aficionados.

The backstory to tango’s unlimited possibilities can be found in the par-
allel and complementary processes of local development and transnational
circulation. Within this story, scholars refer to varied influences in the forms
and styles that contributed to its basic structure (candombe, milonga, mi-
longón, habanera, tango andaluz, etc.), in the home cultures of those elements
(Spain, Uruguay, Cuba, Africa, Italy, the Argentine pampas, specific Buenos
Aires neighborhoods, etc.), and in the colorful characters who implemented
them, such as immigrants from Europe, people of African descent, compa-
dritos (pimps), and payadores (street poets), among others. These myriad
musical and kinetic practices conjoined and coalesced as tango rioplatense
in Buenos Aires and across the Río de la Plata in Montevideo about 1880.5
The initial attractions were the dance and the rhythms driving it, rhythms so
infectious that twenty-first-century tango still retains a movement repertoire
based on the same holy trinity of milonga, vals (waltz), and tango proper.6

Of its three principal rhythms, milonga offers a key to understanding
tango’s history as well as its contemporary practices. Milonga harkens back
to the late nineteenth century and a brash, rules-bashing dance style (canyengue)
that developed from African diasporic elements and aligns tango with other
popular American forms such as jazz and Cuban son (see Thompson; Salinas
Rodríguez).7 Aníbal Ford describes the milonga, popularized in rural zones
and Buenos Aires’s suburbios or marginal neighborhoods, as a “slow, conver-
sational, boastful, rebellious, at times reflexive and at times laudatory form
Introduction

Robert Farris Thompson calls it simply the “conscience of tango” (12). “Like blues next to jazz, or son montuno with salsa,” milonga “keeps tango honest, being close to the roots” (Thompson 12).9

While musicologists, cultural historians, and writers, including Borges, discuss the specific role of milonga in tango’s evolution, most agree on its hybrid lineage, which displays traces of the habanera rhythm popularized throughout the Americas. The dance historian Sergio Pujol cites a comment in an edition of the magazine Caras y Caretas, published in 1903, that documents this process over a century ago: “The sleepy and steady habaneras easily won over the lazy compadrito, who was already enjoying the lubricious back-and-forth of the milonga, and the latter and the former fusing together engendered the plebian tango, whose baby steps are practiced today on the sidewalks of the conventillos to the beat of a street piano” (qtd. in Pujol 29).10 Whatever the exact ingredients and their order of aggregation to the tango mix, the movement synthesis described above would soon be complemented by increasingly elaborate instrumental and vocal accompaniment. The strains of the bandoneon, a small accordion-like instrument imported by German immigrants but adapted to the hybrid strains of the tango, ultimately came to define the characteristic tango sound.

Born in Brothels

In its earliest manifestations as a form that was danced and played in the brothels of Buenos Aires, the tango was jovial and ribald (G. Varela, Mal de tango 45). Even before the introduction of the tango canción with Carlos Gardel and other vocalists, to which we will return, tango lyrics exhibited characteristics of verbal daring and signifying.11 From 1870 on, periodicals published in rioplatense black communities contain curious references to “los tangos negros, como terribles, significando bonitos, gratos de escuchar” (black tangos as terrible, meaning pretty, pleasant to listen to) (Carretero 63). The earliest fans, who were overwhelmingly male and immigrant (Pujol 27), often danced to songs with titillating titles such as “Echale aceite a la manija” (Grease the handle), “Ponela, sacala y volvémela a poner” (Put it in, take it out, and put it in for me again), “Tocámelo que me gusta” (Touch it, I like that), “Mordeme la oreja izquierda” (Bite my left ear), “El fíerrazo” (The orgasm), “Tomame el puslo” (Take my pulse), and “Dos sin sacar” (Two without withdrawing) (G. Varela, Mal de tango 46), all tunes for which accompanying lyrics arguably would have been superfluous.12 Early twentieth-century songwriters such as Angel Villoldo, famous today for such “standards” as
“El choclo” and “La morocha,” also penned eyebrow-raising titles such as “Chiflala, que va a venir,” a masterpiece of double entendre that could mean “Whistle at her, she’ll come” or, alternately, “Blow her, she’ll come.” The “juicy” quality of these lyrics resonates with long-held assumptions about tango as an activity intimately tied to sex, as a form of physical contact bound by the conventions of heteronormativity and subject to (and of) a long history of male dominance. Such titles serve as prophesies of the charged gender dynamics of the dance as it develops throughout the twentieth and twenty-first century. Many such song titles confirm that early tango and sex were often companion activities: “True, men and women descended from Kongo, Andalusia and Italy met and created a new dance in rough neighborhoods. Some danced for sex; some danced for art; some danced to show off their bodies. New steps could hardly have emerged, however, had the best not been dancing for dance. In a city in motion, bravura moves were the crest of all change” (Thompson 221).

It is out of this dynamic atmosphere of experimentation, paradoxically, that tango’s “classic” style and markers would begin to take shape. The canyengue style would cede to a more upright, less closely danced tango de salon. Tango dancers would move from the marginal bordellos and piringundines (early twentieth-century dives) to the dance halls and glossy cabarets of city centers. Street musicians playing under the iconic farol or streetlamp would move inside to integrate orquestas típicas and even concert ensembles. But first, early twentieth-century tango needed an image makeover.

Transatlantic Traffic

Although Buenos Aires and Montevideo provided an ideal growing medium for tango as dance, music, and text, it was transnational and transatlantic circulation that converted it into a global sensation. One of the earliest and most celebrated of tango’s travels was its appearance in Paris in the second decade of the twentieth century. Upper-class Argentines who regularly traveled to the City of Light to polish and display their European family pedigrees discovered that the same dance still associated with marginal figures and houses of ill repute in Buenos Aires had unexpectedly become a sensation in the French capital. What’s more, dance skills could trump an illustrious surname to open the doors to Parisian high society.

Acceptance by French society was an essential key to tango’s reevaluation in Buenos Aires, which had by then been dubbed the so-called Paris of Latin
America. Word spread that even the Princess Bonaparte had taken classes at one of the Parisian dance academies specializing in tango (Gasió 18–19), proving to porteños that this dance of ruffians and rapscallions had become, rather shockingly, the dance of royalty. Still, the transformation of tango’s reputation from savage to civilized by virtue of the French connection was perhaps less sudden and wholesale than might first appear. In October 1913 the Algerian-born Jean Richepin gave a lecture at the Institute of France that served as a teaser for his stage show Le Tango, which opened two months later in a Paris theater house. By presenting tango in an elite academic context and an opulent stage show, Richepin celebrated tango in both empirical and aesthetic terms. The same year the newspaper La Razón published a report by the Society of French Medicine affirming that, “from the point of view of physical education, [tango] offers, beyond all other [dances] of the last twenty years, the advantage of making the body and arms work more, forcing the flexions and alternative extensions of the musculature of the lateral region of the torso, the extensions of the muscles of the chest region . . . [and] the extensions of the lumbar group and the lateral abdominals” (qtd. in G. Varela, Mal de tango 68). In other words, the dance previously dismissed as a social ill was now espoused as a cure. Its turn in the salons and parlors of Paris (as well as in London and other European metropoles) converted the tango into something infectious in an entirely different way.

Richepin’s sumptuous production fascinated theatergoers and sparked a revolution in Parisian style trends as well, but not without a backlash. Cardinal Amette, the scandalized archbishop of Paris, prohibited the faithful from dancing tango, directing priests to include a phrase in confession manuals that claimed the imported dance was of a lascivious nature and offensive to morals (Gasió 43). The publicity generated by events such as Richepin’s lecture and stage show, combined with the church’s prohibition, ultimately unleashed a media frenzy around all things tango, inspiring a host of new trends in Paris and beyond: clothing designed to be more danceable, a specific color and dessert labeled “tango,” a men’s haircut a la argentina, a spate of tango-themed dinners in London (Fuentes 290), and a series of drawings by Xavier Sager based on Richepin’s show (Gasió 39). The Parisian media lamented, “we have to put up with it everywhere, in every detail of life” (qtd. in Gasió 44).

Upon its return to the Río de la Plata after taking Paris by storm, tango’s popularity exploded. We can see its progressive repurposing as an icon of
national culture in the way song lyrics take center stage in poetry, narrative, advertising, and everyday language. That process itself is documented in the tango “Como se pasa la vida” (How life goes on), composed by Manuel Romero with words by Alberto Novion:

Cuando el tango se inventó
era nada más que un baile . . .
Pero ahora es una canción
y de las más populares . . .
Todo el mundo canta el tango

[When the tango was invented
it was nothing but a dance . . .
but now it is a song,
and one of the most popular sorts . . .
Everybody’s singing the tango] (Collier 69)

Song titles reveal shifts as well, as tongue-in-cheek numbers make way for loftier sentiments and local pride in themes such as “Viva la patria” (Long live the homeland) (G. Varela, Mal de tango 67). So thorough was this process that by the 1920s, tango had become the central component of Argentine popular entertainment in cabarets, cafés, dance halls, and theaters and could be heard on the radio and sound recordings as well (Collier 69). Soon, it would occupy a central role in cinema and television.

The status and cultural value of tango would from then on reside in the interstices of the primitive and the modern, the popular and the cultured (Garrañuño 106). Despite lingering associations with the underclass, the verses of renowned lyricists Homero Manzi, Enrique Discépolo, Cátulo Castillo, and Enrique Cadicamo were early on categorized and canonized as “poetry” and printed in Buenos Aires literary magazines such as Sur. We can see this graphically illustrated in the work of vanguardista artists who used tango to tell the story of modernization while often retaining traditional or nostalgic elements (Garrañuño 133). In “Picturing Tango,” chapter 3 in this edited volume, I invite readers on a virtual tour of tango’s representation in art from the early twentieth century to the twenty-first century, revealing how painters and other visual artists helped build a local aesthetic informed by cosmopolitan values, an aesthetic in which tango plays a key role.
Art of Walking, Art of Talking

If its Parisian success created broad acceptance and increased transnational circulation during the so-called golden age of tango from about 1935 to 1950, tango has in the twenty-first century become even more popular, even with competition from a host of other music and dance. Despite preservationist efforts by traditionalists, tango as music, dance, text, and language has exhibited an extraordinary elasticity and is now more accessible to international audiences than ever before, though perhaps not with the same widespread access across social classes that characterized earlier periods in Argentina (see, for example, Dávila). Tango has successively absorbed influences from jazz, rock, hip-hop, and other musical and dance styles. In October 2007 it was the focus of a globalization conference convened at Harvard University by the cultural critic Homi Bhabha titled “Tango! Dance the World Around: Global Transformations of Latin American Culture.” Participants examined globalization, gender issues, urban development, and performance history to move beyond the idea of tango as “simply” music or dance.²¹

However global or diverse it becomes, though, tango retains a core mystery; despite commonplace, even hackneyed associations with the past and its attendant nostalgias, something of the uncanny—both verbal and corporeal, both on and off the stage—still accompanies us as we watch, listen to, and participate in tango performances in Buenos Aires, Montevideo, Paris, Portland, and beyond. New articulations invite us to see tango as abundance rather than as loss and lament. The renowned Argentine poet Juan Gelman, himself an avid dancer from the age of fifteen, attributes the paradox of the binaries dispossession/marginalization and connection/pleasure to the notion of the danceable dialogue. While acknowledging Borges’s characterization of the tango as a way of walking, as an arte de caminar, he himself saw it as a way of making conversation, as an arte de conversar.²² Tango’s ability to serve both as a vehicle of communication and the subject of a musical, kinetic, or poetic conversation marks it as a perpetually renewable resource. This elemental connection between dance partners or the members of a musical collective is emphasized and respected by proponents of all tango styles—including fans of so-called nuevo tango, in which the classic embrace may be opened or relaxed and the standard tango musical signature questioned but never completely abandoned. The connections grafted in the three-minute duration of a standard tango are the source of the release and fulfillment we experience in its embrace.
The quintessential characteristic of tango dance performance resides in the pursuit of a communion between two or more bodies in a single dynamic structure, using an improvised form (Dínzel 9, 13). Juan Carlos Copes, considered one of the best milongueros ever to grace both a dance floor and a theater stage, explains that together, dance partners create a unique body with one head and four legs, a body that exhibits its combined passions with the hope that the orchestra will never reach the final “tchan-tchan,” the two-note rhythmic resolution characteristic of the tango (12). Rodolfo Dínzel, recognized as an expert bailarín and theorist of tango movement, notes that “one plus one in the tango isn’t two, but one” (9).

Until the twenty-first century, tango dancers generally advocated the formula of a male leader and a female follower, in which the sought after communion of “one plus one equals one” did not erase problematic gender relationships. Works by such scholars as Estela Dos Santos, Julie Taylor, Donna Guy, and Anahí Viladrich acknowledge the male privilege and dominance that have characterized dance practices, but they also show how “women have been historically able to defy conventional gender stereotypes both through lyrics and performance” (Viladrich, “Neither Virgins nor Whores” 274). These specialists reveal that within a form created, manipulated, and dominated by men, tango contains a zone—a tolerance house, to use an old term associated with the brothels themselves—in which women were allowed to sing, dance, compose, and perform (Dos Santos, Las Cantantes 2225).

Nonetheless, female dance partners went unnamed alongside their male counterparts on theater marquees, women composers assumed male pseudonyms to improve their chances of publication or circulation, and singers practiced “female transvestism” by interpreting tangos whose lyrics were written for male vocalists (see Viladrich, “Neither Virgins nor Whores”). Further, actresses who eschewed performing in seedy bars brought tango to life in radio dramas, and iconic figures such as Tita Merello challenged gender expectations and rejected prevailing standards of female beauty. All of these women harnessed diverse resources and talents to challenge and spurn the male dominance at the heart of the industry throughout the twentieth century. In the twenty-first century, as Carolyn Merritt’s chapter in this collection shows, women are taking on increasingly important roles in expanding global tango dance circuits. Their explorations and innovations as teachers, dancers, choreographers, and musicians enable us to broadly rethink gender roles in tango today.
From the Feet to the Eyes, Ears, and Mouth

Milongueros still dance in couples, seeking creativity and connectivity within the context of the *pareja*, however that duo is constituted. But tango dancers in the twenty-first century hear the accompanying soundtrack differently. Contemporary dancers are often oblivious to the rich textual legacy of song lyrics, poems, and a tango-influenced popular vocabulary that constituted another aspect of the danceable dialogue referred to by Gelman, who himself granted tango a central role in his literary endeavors. In his chapter in this edited volume, Oscar Conde analyzes the contemporary legacies of *lunfardo*, a popular argot of Buenos Aires that dates back to the late nineteenth century, when it developed among immigrants and native-born inhabitants in the tenements and outlying areas of the city. He shows how lunfardo retains a semantic richness fertilized by successive waves of cultural influences from the Argentine pampas, other national regions, as well as from Spain, Italy, Eastern Europe, Africa, and elsewhere. Remarkably, many words that figured in the first lunfardo dictionary from 1894, such as *mina* (young woman), *guita* (money), and *bulín* (den, love nest), are still in common usage in the Río de la Plata region. In a story that parallels that of the tango itself, lunfardo is typified by uncertain and disputed origins and by a muddied process of consolidation in a laboratory of everyday practices of a mestizo, working-class population. After its early circulation among mostly poor and “fringe” groups situated along the orillas or outskirts of the modernizing city, songwriters and poets appropriated both tango and lunfardo and validated them as central tenets of local cultural identity.

However, whereas tango dance and instrumental music translated well to foreign publics, lunfardo terms and the tango lyrics that incorporated them remained indecipherable to all but local listeners. Consequently, lunfardo has been sometimes exploited by Argentine lyricists and poets keen on accentuating privileged local knowledge and proving their “authenticity”; it was simultaneously rejected by thinkers more interested in the cosmopolitan features of local culture. For songwriters and poets such as Cátulo Castillo, Homero Expósito, Enrique Santos Discépolo, Enrique Cadícamo, and Celedonio Flores, though, lunfardo terms were like keywords or shorthand in the enunciation of a criollo poetics that sought legitimacy not through copying imported styles and tastes but through the elevation of a “locally owned and operated” vocabulary.
These histories of tango reflect volatile dynamics of the couple, the neighborhood, the nation, and the canon in uneven and uneasy formation. The early twentieth-century Argentine novelist Roberto Arlt believed tango was the escape valve for the pain of the city; the famous left-leaning composer and orchestra director Osvaldo Pugliese called it a register of neighborhood complaints; the contemporary political figure Susana Rinaldi deemed it the protest song that expresses the pain of a people (Horvath 22). These associations with release, free expression, and boundary crossing between genres, genders, social groups, and zones of the city take us back to tango’s early associations with carnival (see, for example, Chasteen 63–70). Carnival provoked the illusion that happiness was possible and egalitarian, illusions that extended onto the tango dance floor (Pujol 58). Even as it underwent a process of adecantamiento or gentrification that placed new value on glamour, high society style, and more socially condoned behaviors, tango continued to offer the allure of temporary release from the everyday constrictions of rank and class.

Descriptions of tango as an escape valve highlight its propensity for lament, complaint, or confrontation and frustrate the characterization of sentimentality that typically accompanies the stock images of tango in its globalized forms. They show how tango can function as a predictable performance of standardized elements as well as an outlet for local expressivity. For most fans of tango as a textual form, songwriters the likes of Discépolo and Manzi remain its true poets and privileged mouthpieces. Manzi brilliantly combined erudite and popular elements, synthesizing the two predominant schools of expression represented by the left-leaning, working-class Boedo group on the one hand and the more refined, cosmopolitan aesthetic of the Florida group on the other. In 2007, when Argentina celebrated the hundredth anniversary of Manzi’s birth, the artist Hermenegildo Sábat created a triptych portrait of the beloved lyricist with the heading “Manzi Somos Todos” (We are all Manzi). In fact, Manzi and many other great twentieth-century lyricists are still so revered that the youngest and most innovative performers of today’s tango continue to interpret their songs and sample their voices in electronic remixes. As Esteban Buch and Morgan Luker show in their chapters in this edited volume, “new” tango music is as much about recycling, recombining, and repurposing as it is about innovation.
Tango’s Intersecting Histories

Besides providing a rich account of itself, the tango rioplatense also gives us a tool with which we can plumb a whole host of other related histories. For example, if the most important events tied to tango’s emergence were the construction of the new port of Buenos Aires in 1870, the end of the war with Paraguay in 1871, and the federalization of Buenos Aires in 1880 (Nogués 198), then work on tango will lead us to a broader knowledge of the Atlantic world’s maritime and port histories, South American military history, and nineteenth-century political histories. With tango, we can also examine the labor and economic history that attracted millions of Italians, Spaniards, Poles, and Russians to the Río de la Plata region in the early twentieth century to work in slaughterhouses and other burgeoning industries, an influx that in turn increased prostitution, petty crime, urban overcrowding, and impoverished living conditions so often associated with the early development of the music (see Castro, *The Argentine Tango*). Or, we might investigate how growth in the film industry and international travel and tourism subsequently spread tango’s fame to vast new publics.

Tango history also intersects with African and Jewish diasporas in the region in surprising ways. George Reid Andrews, Gustavo Goldman, Robert Farris Thompson, and Juan Carlos Cáceres all make a case for the key contributions of Afro-Uruguayans and Afro-Argentines to tango. Julio Nudler and José Judkovski have similarly shown how tango bisects twentieth-century Jewish history, both in the Southern Cone and in Europe. Tango was very popular in Berlin, Vienna, and other European cultural capitals by the 1930s, and these scholars note that Jews imprisoned in concentration camps in Germany, Poland, and elsewhere composed many tangos, including some in Yiddish (Judkovski 19). Many Jews who emigrated to Argentina (including a long list of classically trained violinists) found in tango a performance environment in which they rubbed elbows with composers and musicians from a wide variety of immigrant backgrounds. Together, these “new” Argentines and Uruguayans explored common themes of uprooting, nostalgia, insecurity, dispossession, and despair, but they also faced the danger of contagion or dilution of religious particularity in the process of assimilating to their intensely hybrid environments (Nudler 13–14).

Tango carries the freight of memory and identity in the saga of Argentine exile as well. Antonio Gómez’s chapter examines *Tangos, the Exile of Gardel*
and *The Pavements of Saturn*, two films that portray the Argentine exile community in Paris during their home country’s dictatorship from 1976 to 1983. In both pictures tango accompanies the protagonists as they navigate the conditions of political repression and exile and as they discover that their efforts must conform to French audiences’ preexisting notion of tango’s meaning and function. Ultimately, the story of Argentine and Uruguayan exiles seeking refuge from a brutal dictatorship—a story the protagonists attempt to tell in part through tango—is thwarted, even repressed, by European patrons more interested in entertainment than historical experience.36

In another chapter focused on film, Fernando Rosenberg shows how recent tango-themed film documentaries frustrate a reading of internal Argentine history that is seamless, linear, or straightforward. The works he takes up reveal unsettled boundaries between daily life and filmic artifice and between “the real” in quotidian experience and its cinematic evocation.

In his chapter on shifts in Borges’s ideas concerning tango and milonga, Alejandro Susti demonstrates that while we may never resolve the controversies over tango’s origins or “true” nature, such debates compel us to consider competing understandings of national and regional history and aesthetics. Susti shows how in his essay “A History of the Tango,” published in 1955, Borges modified his earlier, stricter posture regarding the form’s provenance. After reexamining the assertions of the Uruguayan cultural historian Vicente Rossi, who argued for its African antecedents (by way of the Afro-Uruguayan candombe), and of the Argentine musicologist Carlos Vega, who just as adamantly affirmed its Spanish roots,37 Borges conceded that these and other histories might all have their merits (*On Argentina* 101). Beyond a few “essential facts,” such as its emergence in the brothels south of Buenos Aires around 1880 or 1890, the truth about the tango, Borges concluded, depended on who was asking and answering the question (*On Argentina* 102).38

Great Moments around the Globe

By the third decade of the twentieth century, the previously disreputable dance of the underclass had been proudly rechristened as a marker of Argentine national character. Growing numbers of porteños from many social classes danced and listened to tango, and tango’s early triumph in Paris, London, and elsewhere in Europe created a foothold for its ongoing transcontinental circulation. The increased travel of Argentine tango performers and teachers to metropolitan centers in North America, Europe, Asia, and elsewhere in Latin America;39 tango’s incursions in radio broadcasting;40 the
production, sale, and distribution of recorded music in several formats (records, CDs, digital formats, etc.); the portrayal of tango in film, on television, and in visual culture; and the diffusion of textual materials touching on tango in history, literature, anthropology, sociology, and other disciplines all represent important details of this colossal circulation history. Within this epic account, certain performers, performances, and productions stand out. Confessing beforehand to gross oversimplification, we suggest four “great moments” that have overtly determined tango’s global recognition and international popularity: Carlos Gardel’s creation of the tango canción in 1917 and the heralding of tango’s so-called golden age; the rise of nuevo tango with the unique style of the bandoneonist Astor Piazzolla in the 1950s, directed primarily at audiences of listeners rather than dancers; the “rebirth” of the international tango stage show with Claudia Segovia’s opulent production of *Tango Argentino* in Paris in 1983; and finally, beginning in 2000, tango’s irruption in the “world music” arena with recordings by Gotan Project, Bajofondo, and other electronic tango musicians.

The most sacred of these stories for older generations of tango enthusiasts is that of the inimitable (though frequently imitated) Carlos Gardel (ca. 1890–1935), whose disputed origins, like those of tango and lunfardo, are still hotly debated three quarters of a century after his death. Uruguayans, Argentines, and the French all claim him as their own, and his birth date and birth place remain matters of fiery contention, despite the “proofs” that have been presented all around. Simon Collier, the first researcher to publish a biography of Gardel in English (1986), identifies the singer as Latin America’s first and perhaps greatest entertainment superstar (xi). More than the tale of a remarkable voice, his was also an immigrant success story, imbued with the good fortune of belonging to an era and a place with a rich tradition of popular music that would soon be disseminated to a global audience. Privileged heir to a host of song styles from the Argentine provinces as well as from immigrants from Spain, Italy, and elsewhere, Gardel also learned from the payadores, dueling masters of verbal and musical improvisation who began to disappear just as he was coming of age.

In August 1925, while performing with José Razzanno, Gardel was invited to sing for Edward, Prince of Wales, who was visiting Argentina. That concert proved Gardel’s abilities to win over an international, celebrity-studded audience and inaugurated a transnational tour with stage and film performances in France, the United States, and Latin America. From Paris, Gardel wrote to Razzano that seventy thousand of his records had been sold in three
months, an incredible figure for that era (Collier 111–12). By 1931 he was making his first feature film, *Luces de Buenos Aires* (Lights of Buenos Aires), accompanied by the great Julio de Caro and his orchestra. De Caro famously postponed a gig at Buckingham Palace for King George V in order to film with Gardel (Collier 181). Audiences were so taken with *Luces* that they forced projectionists to rewind and replay the segment in which Gardel sang his own composition “Tomo y obligo” (Collier 183). The public reaction was even more deafening when Paramount Pictures released the New York–shot *Cuesta abajo* in 1934. A Buenos Aires film house reported “delirious public applause” and audiences’ insistence that Gardel’s singing scenes be replayed over and over (Collier 226).

Thanks to these huge successes, by the mid-1930s Gardel had come to epitomize many of the supreme values of porteño society: friendship, courage, virility, and the capacity for seduction (Mascia 243). These qualities of “Gardelism” outlived “the songbird” himself, and for decades Gardel was a household name in Argentina and other parts of Latin America, as well as in France and the United States. Colombians joke that they may not know where Gardel was born, but they definitely know where he died: the plane crash that cut short his life in Medellín in 1935 converted the international star into a character more tragic and heroic than any he had embodied in his film and stage performances. When Gardel died, it was “almost as if the voice of Buenos Aires itself had been cut off,” a reporter for *Crítica* wrote (qtd. in Collier 272). Radio stations in Buenos Aires agreed to not broadcast a single note of tango, whether of Gardel or his interpreters, for an entire week (Ulanovsky et al. 98), and desolate fans in several cities committed or contemplated suicide (Collier 273–74).

After this period of mourning, Gardel’s voice returned to the airwaves, and today we can hear him intone such beloved favorites as “El día que me quieras” (The day that you love me), “Volver” (Return), and “Mi Buenos Aires querido” (My beloved Buenos Aires) on the radio as well as on sound recordings and digital downloads. His aural presence is complemented by a strong visual imprint: Gardel has a subway stop named after him in his old barrio, a statuesque final resting place in Buenos Aires’s Chacarita Cemetery to which the faithful still flock, and a face so famous its recognition quotient in Latin America is second only to that of a later revolutionary named Ernesto “Che” Guevara. The Uruguayan photographer José María Silva’s famous portraits of “Carlitos” adorn millions of walls and businesses (see Del Barco) and grace the covers of newspapers and magazines designed to attract
his nostalgic fans. Gardel still grins out at us in beloved caricatures by Hermengildo Sábat and in huge, Warhol-hued street murals by the contemporary artist Marino Santa María.45

Despite the time that has lapsed, Gardel and his version of tango have stayed the test of time, in and beyond Argentina. In 2011 the United States Postal Service included him in a stamp series commemorating Latin music legends along with Tito Puente, Carmen Miranda, Celia Cruz, and Selena. In Argentina his philatelic fame had already spread via postage stamps created by the artists Carlos Alonso, Hermenegildo Sábat, and Aldo Severi. His devotees maintain that through the combined miracles of high fidelity sound recordings and the fidelity of his fans, “cada día canta mejor” (every day he sings better). Indeed, it does seem that Gardel’s enduring appeal remains unmatched in the vocal history of the genre. Something in Gardel’s style and persona still satisfies our need for an expressivity so broad that it can encompass joy, pain, longing, and hope, all in the same full-throated notes.46

The Piazzolla Phenomenon

On the set of the New York–shot El día que me quieras (1935), Gardel met a thirteen-year-old extra named Astor Piazzolla (1921–92). Piazzolla’s father Vicente had moved the family from Argentina to Manhattan a few years earlier, but he remained a great fan of Gardel and tango. When Astor was eight, his father had given him a bandoneon, wagering (rather presciently, it turns out) that his son would go far with the instrument (Fischerman and Gilbert 27).47 Astor studied classical and popular musical styles with various teachers, took bandoneon lessons with Andrés D’Aquila, and made his first recording at age eleven (Kuri 20).

The young Piazzolla demonstrated his skills for the great singer, and Gardel invited him to join the crew on its upcoming Latin American tour.48 Vicente insisted his son was too young to go, saving the budding bandoneonist from the tragic fate of Gardel and the others; Piazzolla later joked that if his father had agreed to the tour, he would be playing a heavenly harp instead of a fuelle.49 That fortuitous missed opportunity nonetheless planted a seed. In 1937 Astor returned to an Argentina in which tango reigned supreme and where hundreds of orquestas típicas—ensembles composed of piano, bandoneon, bass, guitar, flute, violin, and sometimes other string instruments—played in nightclubs, cabarets, and dance halls throughout Buenos Aires and beyond. Piazzolla sat in with several of these groups, most notably with that of the revered composer and director Aníbal Troilo or “Pichuco,” considered
by many the best bandoneon player of all time. He was simultaneously studying piano and composing with classical musicians such as the pianist Arthur Rubinstein (then living in Buenos Aires) and the Argentine composer Alberto Ginastera. By day Piazzolla was scoring his own compositions inspired by the works of Stravinsky, Bartok, and Ravel, while by night he was seeing how well his talents on the bandoneon stood up to the demands of the porteño public for música popular.

In 1953 Piazzolla’s Buenos Aires Symphony won a contest that allowed him to study in Paris with the acclaimed composition teacher Nadia Boulanger. Boulanger, concerned that an emotive core was missing from his symphonic works, reportedly quizzed Piazzolla on his personal life and creative endeavors, finally uncovering the “dirty secret” of his bandoneon playing in the nocturnal haunts of the Argentine capital. Legend has it that when he began playing his tango composition “Triunfal,” Boulanger stopped him after just a few bars, took his hands and said, “Don’t ever abandon that. That is your music. Here is Piazzolla” (Fischerman and Gilbert 120). As with Gardel decades earlier, the French connection allowed Piazzolla and other Argentines to approach tango differently, to see it not as an unrefined cultural product directed at an unsophisticated mass public but as a legitimate arena for creative inquiry, skills development, and musical performance of the highest order. In Paris tango was time and again redefined as cosmopolitan and transnational, and its reception there enabled and ennobled new levels of experimentation.

In fact, Piazzolla’s immigrant experiences in New York (where he modified George Gershwin and Bach for the bandoneon) and Paris (resonating in the early 1950s with the hard bop and cool jazz sounds of the likes of Art Farmer, Sonny Clark, and Miles Davis) were crucial to the subsequent integration of “foreign” matter in his tradition-bending tango compositions. These borrowings were considered heresy by many tango purists, some of whom would heckle Piazzolla at his performances by shouting “¡Ahora tóquese un tango, maestro!” (Now play a tango, maestro!). But the incorporation of jazz and classical styles would also garner the composer and musician worldwide acclaim among a new kind of fan, one more prone to appreciative listening than to dance floor derring-do. With compositions featuring bold, new harmonic and melodic structures, arrangements that included instruments previously unassociated with the tango such as saxophone and electric guitar, and a signature style of playing standing up, with one foot propped on a stool or chair to help support his bandoneon, Piazzolla singlehandedly inaugurated
the first coming of nuevo tango or tango nuevo, a term that at that moment referred to musical innovation and would later describe radical changes in tango dance as well. Though he would remain “misunderstood” by many, especially his fellow Argentines (see Fischerman and Gilbert), Piazzolla is currently the best-known tango composer on the planet.\textsuperscript{52} Dancers of canyengue, milonguero, and tango de salón styles may still choose to sit out the Piazzolla pieces as “undanceable,” but such works, described as “baroque” and “avant-garde” and praised for their contrapuntal qualities, have found a more receptive audience in a new generation of dancers trained in the more open, improvisational, and musically diverse environment of nuevo. Renditions of his works by classical musicians and ensembles such as the cellist Yo-Yo Ma and the Kronos Quartet have also helped fulfill Piazzolla’s wish to be considered a “serious” musician. Undoubtedly, the Piazzolla sound, which can be heard in a broad array of projects, is a central reason for Argentine tango’s continuing influence.\textsuperscript{53}

Lives and Deaths of the Tango

Before outlining two final “great moments” in global tango history that bring us current with its contemporary prominence and manifold practice, we step to the side to recognize the understudied Ben Molar. In 1966 the Buenos Aires man-about-tango mounted an energetic campaign to contest the notion that tango had become antiquated or moribund, a vanquished competitor in the global circuits of popular music. True, the golden age of tango was by then over, as was the heyday of the orquestas típicas. Some historians date this decline to 1955, when a military coup ended the first presidency of General Juan Perón. Perón’s ousters were less sympathetic to Argentina’s popular classes and considered the beloved música popular to be subversive and dangerous. They blacklisted or imprisoned many tango musicians, instituted new curfews, and placed new restrictions on free assembly, all measures that reduced the circulation of tango musicians in Buenos Aires’s prime performance venues (Gift 77). Attendance in the dance halls also plummeted (Horvath 159).

Other reasons for the decadencia of the tango in the late 1950s included the rise of U.S.-based recording houses with which local labels simply couldn’t compete, and most importantly, the soaring popularity of other dance rhythms from North and Latin America. Sergio Pujol marks 1952 as the year of the mambo, 1953 as the year of the cha-cha-chá, and 1957 as the moment when the twelve-year-old singer Roberto Sánchez perfectly imitated Elvis Presley, launching his ascent to worldwide fame as “Sandro” (Pujol 235–57).
A column published in 1956 in the newspaper *La Razón* asked “¿Qué pasa con el tango?” (What’s going on with the tango?) and bemoaned the fact that popular preferences were tending ever more to “North American rhythms” (qtd. in Horvath 159).

Molar, however, was undaunted, and he set out to prove that tango not only remained an essential element of local culture but indeed constituted the very pulse of the country and region’s expressive identity. That pulse, he argued, could be heard in the music and its lyrics, and it could be seen in the paintings, drawings, and engravings of the country’s most celebrated artists. Against enormous odds, Molar managed to convene fourteen each of Argentina’s renowned poets, composers, and painters to collaborate on a long-play record he titled *14 con el tango* (14 with the tango). By including fourteen full-color reproductions of commissioned artworks in the packaging of the LP, as well as the full text of all the lyrics alongside comments by the featured authors, Molar combined the auditory and textual experiences of tango with a visual feast of images. His ideologically, generationally, and aesthetically diverse list of contributors represented a veritable Who’s Who of literary, musical, and art world names, including authors Jorge Luis Borges, Ernesto Sábato, Manuel Mujica Lainéz, and León Benarós; musicians Juan D’Arienzo, Alfredo De Angelis, Lucio DeMare, Sebastián Piana, Aníbal Troilo, and Astor Piazzolla; and painters Héctor Basaldúa, Carlos Cañás, Carlos Alonso, Raúl Soldi, and Carlos Torrallardona. If tango’s deep and wide influence today—in language patterns and gender relations; in the local and national economy; in theater, television, radio, and other media; in art and popular art; in musical performances ranging from the classical concert hall to electronica; and in the highly stylized choreography of elaborate stage shows as well as in the *ganchos* and *volcadas* of the hipster nuevo tango set—seems ubiquitous, Mr. Molar deserves credit for his vision of its interdisciplinary value a half century ago. His project was one of the chief inspirations for the book readers now hold in their hands.

Once More, with Feeling, in Paris

Despite the dogged defense of the tango by ambitious custodians such as Ben Molar, from the 1960s on political and economic factors increasingly conspired to push tango from center stage ever further to the margins of rioplatense cultural life. Perhaps tango never “died” or disappeared, as many lamented, but its popularity definitely waned, both at home in Argentina and Uruguay and abroad. By the 1980s only a fraction of the earlier masses of
milongueros and musicians were performing the dance or music in Buenos Aires and Montevideo. So it was a risky, daring proposition when the choreographer Claudio Segovia and the designer Héctor Orezzolli teamed up to stage Tango Argentino in Paris in 1983. Responding to a request from the director of the Parisian Chatelet Theater to create a completely original stage show, Segovia returned to Buenos Aires and rounded up the best dancers, musicians, and singers he could find (Falcoff).

While Segovia considered enlisting Piazzolla in the project, the role of music director ultimately went to the great pianist, composer, and arranger Horacio Salgán; he was joined by a host of gifted musicians and singers, including the Sexteto Mayor, Roberto Goyeneche, Raúl Lavié, Elba Berón, Jovita Luna, and María Graña. The impressive list of dancers included Juan Carlos Copes (who choreographed the show) and María Nieves, Carlos and María Rivarola, Gloria and Eduardo Arquimbau, Pablo Verón, Nélida and Nelson, and Miguel Zotto and Milena Plebs. With this fantastic pool of talent, Segovia staged a general rehearsal in Buenos Aires in anticipation of the Paris engagement. The response of the Argentine spectators at that rehearsal was tepid, Segovia recalled. Why do a tango show when there were so many other things happening in the music scene? porteños wondered. Why sign these musicians, singers, and dancers, who were noticeably older and plumper than in the glory days of tango? Was this the best Buenos Aires had to offer a Paris audience?

Upon their arrival in France, the tide turned in a very decisive way for Segovia and Orezzolli. Since advance ticket sales were flat, the theater’s director insisted the cast perform for an audience of reporters. Segovia and company obliged, and the opening night of Tango Argentino met with rave reviews in Liberation, Le Matin, and Le Monde the next morning. Many Argentines then living in Paris were part of the delirious public, and at least one told Segovia, tear-y-eyed, “I spent thirty years hating the tango, and in reality life is a tango” (Falcoff). Almost immediately, the performers had a contract for the Festival of Venice and other tour dates in France and Italy; the show later traveled to Canada and then hit Broadway in 1985, where it met with even more thunderous applause (see Ferrer, El tango 418).

The reception of Tango Argentino was so ecstatic that the show spawned a slew of imitators and avatars: Forever Tango, Tango Inferno, Tango Fire, and so on, with many of them working with members of the original crew. However spectacular, such performances arguably have been unable to surpass (or equal, some would say) the Segovia-Orezzolli show. What these shows
have accomplished, nonetheless, is to place tango back on center stage, where rapt spectators are once again transported and delighted by a heady (and footy) mix of instrumental music, dance, and song. If twenty-first-century fans can find milongas in such distant sites as Verona or Alaska or even in Buenos Aires (where the production arrived ten years after its Paris debut), then much of the credit undoubtedly must go to Segovia’s initial staging of *Tango Argentino*.56

Nuevo Tango Redux

Tango in the twenty-first century contains all of the political, geographic, economic, and cultural shapings of a century and is yet still new. As a dance, it continues to expand exponentially, thanks to increased travel by dance instructors from Argentina to more cities worldwide and by dance students to classes and workshops in Europe, the United States, and elsewhere.57 Tango enthusiasts can find classes or milongas in many, if not most, of the major cities of Europe, Asia, Africa, the Americas, and Australia. The United States boasts the greatest number of cities with regular social dance venues, with more than two hundred from Akron to Ypsilanti. And in the mecca of Buenos Aires, foreigners now often outnumber the locals in many milongas and prácticas.

Newcomers enter this phenomenon on the heels of an evolution of music and dance forms that began in the 1990s and has been variously labeled nuevo tango, tango nuevo, neotango, electronic, alternative, or fusion tango—labels that themselves have been rejected by the key players we might identify as the architects of this evolution. These labels have only a tangential relationship with the nuevo tango musical style of Piazzolla, but they do allude to the emphasis on innovation and improvisation at the core of these new performative styles. Gustavo Naveira, one of the contemporary dance instructors most associated with nuevo, clarifies that for him, at least, “tango nuevo is everything that has happened with the tango since the 1980s . . . Tango nuevo is not one more style; it is simply that tango dancing is growing, improving, developing, enriching itself, and in that sense we are moving toward a new dimension in tango dancing. . . . We have learned, and we have developed our knowledge. The result of this is a dance of greater possibilities, and also of a much more artistic quality” (qtd. in Gift 82).58 Traditionalists warn that a lack of respect for time-honored codes will produce a dance display that may be athletically impressive but risks being devoid of *argentinidad* or even tango. For its proponents, though, nuevo offers the chance to incorporate new music, revamp
dance styles, experiment with the embrace, reconfigure the standard male-female lead-follower roles, and in short, rethink the dance in terms of the physics and logics of human movement, as well as “un sentimiento que se baila” (a feeling that is danced).

In her chapter in this edited volume, the anthropologist Carolyn Merritt examines how notions and experiences of gender and sexuality intersect in this contested field of Argentine contemporary dance and music practice. New generations of dancers ask to what extent they can “queer” tango while still retaining its historical, aesthetic, and social integrity—even as all of these are simultaneously being questioned. Merritt contends that the emergence of a new generation of practitioners with access to ever more venues in an increasingly fluid and interconnected global community signals the liberation of the dance from the hold of place and tradition, while still respecting tango’s historic propensity for experimentation and hybrid incorporations.

Similar questions inform the rapidly growing presence of music styles in the global arena classified as nuevo or electronic tango. In his analysis of the phenomenal success of the Parisian-based collective Gotan Project, the musicologist Esteban Buch argues that in quantitative terms, at least, Gotan’s massive appeal has no equal in the history of tango recordings or performance. With sales numbering in the millions (with the recordings figuring prominently in both the world music and dance/electronic charts), and viewings of their videos on YouTube approaching or topping the seven-figure mark, the members of Gotan have become the best-known tango musicians in the world—if you consider their music to be tango, of course.

Buch examines how tango’s nomadic tendencies, already in evidence a century ago, have expanded due to the capacities of twenty-first-century “technological crossover,” in which the strains of the bandoneon, tango’s signature instrument, are now joined—or replaced by—digital sounds created on a computer. He maintains that while the group incorporates unorthodox elements, a respect for tango’s long history and canons can be seen in Gotan’s integration of classic tango musicians such as bandoneonistas Niní Flores and Facundo Torres and pianist and arranger Gustavo Beytelmann, as well as in the inclusion of “straight” tango numbers in concert performances and recordings. In fact, their recordings reference a surprising number of revered tango personalities from Gardel to Piazzolla and cite key events in Argentine cultural and sociopolitical history. For example, in Tango 3.0, released in 2010, they lay musical tracks over a recording of the Argentine author Julio Cortázar (who also relocated to Paris and produced many of his most
important works there) reading excerpts from his novel *Rayuela*. For traditionalists, the radical modification and repackaging of the beloved tango genre for sale to a massive world music market unaware of its tangled national and transnational social histories threaten to strip the music of everything but perhaps a lingering *tangotude*. But Buch avows that such products attract new generations of listeners and spectators to social and aesthetic histories they might otherwise ignore. Thus, the musical result of Gotan Project’s experimentations can be at one and the same time—like tango itself—a lesson in the new and the historical, a “sexy combination of chillout programming and authentic tango.”

As Morgan Luker demonstrates in his chapter on contemporary efforts to re-create tango as música popular, the same tension between preservation and renovation is equally at play in contemporary versions of “classic” tango. While the members of Astillero and other contemporary groups may reject the radical changes of the electronic sector, they ultimately must engage with the same history of globalization in their efforts to reactivate tango as a música popular produced for and through a locally based social collective. This reactivation impulse, itself fueled by sociopolitical crises in Argentina since 2000, has generated substantial activity around the preservation of tango as an all-access genre bridging old and new. Musicians emulate and re-create the sounds of revered masters from yesteryear; composers and arrangers archive and update musical scores and other documentation from earlier periods; young players stage live performances for new audiences of listeners and milongueros too young to have witnessed tango’s social power prior to 1955. But, as Luker notes, Astillero and other musicians committed to tango as música popular circulate in the same global context as their fellow electronic musicians and may find a more responsive audience in Berlin than in Buenos Aires.

The New Language of Tango

The Golden Globe and Grammy–winning composer, musician, and film music producer Gustavo Santaolalla is perhaps best known for his work on the film soundtracks of *Brokeback Mountain*, *The Motorcycle Diaries*, *Amores Perros*, and *Babel*. But Santaolalla is also a central figure in twenty-first-century tango. His self-confessed obsession with the question of rioplatense identity led him to experiment early on with tango and many other local folk music from his home country, including those he found and recorded on a
road trip that extended from the northern tip of Argentina to its southern-most city. Those recordings formed the basis of the groundbreaking *De Ushuaia a la Quiaca*, produced with the fellow Argentine rocker León Gieco and recently rereleased in a twentieth-anniversary edition.

In 2002 Santaolalla teamed up with veteran musicians from Argentina and Uruguay to create the Bajofondo Tango Club. While their earliest work was mostly electronic, by the time he and his colleagues produced *Mar Dulce* in 2008, they had dropped the “Tango Club” to become just Bajofondo and considered themselves principally a rock band. The resulting electronic dance music fuses Latin alternative rock, tango, and milonga in a style that is undeniably contemporary. Santaolalla’s hybrid efforts include a collaboration with the Puerto Rican reggaetón stars Calle 13, another with the Spanish rapper Mala Rodríguez, and yet another down-tempo joint effort with the alternative rocker Elvis Costello. “With Bajofondo,” says Santaolalla, “we don’t like the label ‘electronic tango’ because we try to make a contemporary music of Río de la Plata. . . . Obviously, if you want to do music that comes from there or represents that part of the world, tango is going to be part of it—but, in our case, so is rock ‘n’ roll, electronica and hip hop. Hopefully a new language [results], not pure tango.”

Whereas Bajofondo brings tango to a global audience of mostly younger listeners, Santaolalla’s tradition-honoring *Café de los maestros* offers a lushly produced aural and visual archive of tango as the exquisite and unique expression of a generation that will soon pass away. That effort brought together singers, musicians, and arrangers from the so-called golden age of tango to record in the studio, perform on the stage of the Teatro Colón in Buenos Aires, and later star in an award-winning documentary of the same name in 2008. A two-cd box set titled *Café de los maestros*, produced by Santaolalla and Gustavo Mozzi and mixed and mastered by Aníbal Kerpel, was released in 2005. Although the audio-visual synergy of *Café de los maestros* has led some to compare it to the recording and film versions of Cuba’s *Buena Vista Social Club*, Santaolalla has said he sees it more as an outgrowth of his road trip research decades ago. In any case the ambidextrous producer has managed to simultaneously master—literally and metaphorically—the soundtracks of tango as innovation and as preservation.

Santaolalla’s varied engagements are just one notable example of the myriad ways in which the tango rioplatense lives on, appreciated by ever-larger local and global audiences. Like the vocalist and songwriter Carlos Gardel,
the instrumentalist and composer Astor Piazzolla, the stage show director Claudio Segovia, and his fellow musicians and electronic wizards in Gotan Project, Santaolalla embodies a metejón (obsession or love affair) with the tango that acknowledges previous masters, responds to contemporary desires, and paves the way for new renovators and innovators inspired by an ever-vaster treasure trove of sensorial pleasures. This is a metejón the writers in this volume all share. What new worlds of tango now stretch out before us? What hidden gem of its inexhaustible history will we find in a library or dusty bookstore? What new sound will catch our ear? What movement will we master to help us translate its complexity and mystery to the dance floor? What difficulties and disappointments will it express and ease? How will tango connect us with neighbors and cultural kin near and far? And who will be the next singer, player, dancer, poet, painter, or philosopher to school us in its many lessons, its infinite possibilities?

Notes

1. On the origins of the term *tango*, see Salas, *El tango*; Gobello’s “Tango, vocablo controvertido” in *La historia del tango*; and Megenney.

2. The adjective *rioplatense* refers to tango’s origins and development in both Argentina and Uruguay, especially in the principal port cities of Buenos Aires and Montevideo located on the Río de la Plata or River Plate. A glossary at the end of this edited volume provides brief definitions of tango-related terms.

3. As Ramón Pelinski notes in *El tango nómade*, “transethnic and transtechnical, transregistered bricoleur, the nomad tango is reluctant to let itself be restricted by the typologizing and philologizing procedures of traditional musicology; its semantic possibilities and its compositional strategies are open on all horizons” (33).

4. See also Kramer, “Dangerous Liaisons.”

5. See, for example, Rivera. A defense of tango’s Cuban roots is offered by Ortiz Nuevo and Nuñez. Daniel Vidart includes a lengthy discussion of northern and southern Italian influences in the tango in *El tango y su mundo*.

6. There are many variations and combinations of milonga, *vals*, and tango, but the three basic rhythms are still distinguishable for musicians and dancers; in the traditional milonga (dance event in a salon or hall), each *tanda* or set of three to five songs is devoted to one of the three rhythms. More recently, DJs have begun to add tandas of *nuevo tango* or other musics not identifiable as tango.

7. “‘Canyengue’ is the term often used to describe the first dance recognized as ‘tango.’ Canyengue first appeared in the slums at the outskirts of Buenos Aires around the turn of the 20th century and is considered to have lost its popularity by the late 1930s, when ‘tango de salon’ primarily replaced it as the predominant manner of social tango dancing” (Tango Voice, “Canyengue, Candombe and Tango Orillero: Extinct or Non-existent Tango Styles?,” *Tango Voice* (blog), accessed May 3, 2012, http://tangovoice.word
Introduction

8. “La milonga en sus formas primigenias rurales y suburbanas había ido desarrollando en pulperías, almacenes, fogones de milicos, comités, una forma de expresión lenta, conversada, jactanciosa, rebelde, a veces reflexiva, a veces homenajeadora” (Ford 39).

9. Thompson provides additional etymological and formal details: “Milonga, spirited and strong, emerged in Argentina in the 1870s. It was not a mere precursor to tango but a tradition in its own right, with its own sound, its own mode of action. Derived from Kimbundu and Ki-Kongo words meaning, respectively, ‘argument’ and ‘moving lines of dancers,’ milonga furthered a tradition of aesthetic dueling: pugnacity as poetry, battling as dance. It was, in short, African-influenced ‘carving contests’ on a scale turned heroic” (121).

10. A conventillo is a tenement or boarding house, associated with the throngs of immigrants who arrived in Buenos Aires from Europe and elsewhere at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries.

11. A definition of signifyin(g) from a glossary of terms related to the blues identifies it as “the act of using secret or double meanings of words to either communicate multiple meanings to different audiences, or to trick them” (PBS, “Blues Glossary,” The Blues, accessed July 1, 2013, at http://www.pbs.org/theblues/classroom/glossary.html).

12. Pujol notes that in this era, tango, like sex in the Victorian era, is what’s not said, what appears in print only by error (51).

13. Villoldo even wrote and performed some of his tunes under the pseudonym Lope de la Verga, a play on the name of the famous Spanish Golden Age dramatist Lope de Vega that made use of the slang term for penis, verga (or dick) (G. Varela, Mal de tango 47). It’s likely that Villoldo was influenced by the “challenge songs” of Afro-Argentines such as Gabino Ezeiza (Thompson 26). While Thompson has surprisingly little to say about Villoldo’s more off-color work and its possible relationship to black precedents or influences, he notes the “electro-obscenities” included in Villoldo’s “La bicicleta,” which “cuts the pretensions of modernism down to size” (29). Thompson provides a translation (albeit partial) of a particularly amusing section of that tango:

   El teléfono, el micrófono,
   El tan sin rival fonógrafo,
   El pampirulintintófano,
   Y el nuevo cinematógrafo
   El biógrafo, el caustigrafo
   El pajalacaflunchincófano,
   El chincatapunchincógrafo

   …

   [The microphone,
   The telephone
   The panpirilintintophone
   Plus cinematography

press.com/2010/03/19/canyengue-candombe-and-tango-orillero-extinct-or-non-existent-tango-styles/). Tango Voice also offers an excellent summary in English of the kinetic characteristics of this style.
Biography, caustography, 
Pajalacafluchinography, 
Not to mention chingatapuchinography]. (29)

Villoldo’s tongue-twisting mockery of the wonders of modern technology bears witness to the discomforts and discontent modernization produced in turn-of-the-century Buenos Aires. See, for example, Sarlo, *Una modernidad periférica*.

14. An excellent source on the *orquestas típicas*, and indeed on the instrumentalization of tango from its inception to the 1960s, is Sierra.

15. This is likely a reference to Princess Marie Bonaparte (1882–1962), the same figure who would gain fame for her psychoanalytical and sexual research, her professional and personal relationship with Sigmund Freud, and her role in facilitating the latter’s escape from Nazi Germany. See Bertin.

16. The perceived need for civilization in the face of barbarism was the primary cultural “problem” of the Southern Cone region and arguably of all of Latin America in the nineteenth century; Sarmiento’s midcentury treatise on that tension (*Facundo: Civilization and Barbarism*) predates the emergence of tango but also predicts its complicated tale of rejection and ultimate incorporation by the guardians of national and regional culture. Carlos Fuentes includes tango in his broader discussion of Latin American civilizing campaigns (289–90).

17. In a review published in the magazine *Mundial* (directed by the famed modernista poet Rubén Darío) in 1914, Enrique Gómez Carillo concluded that the show elevated the tango beyond the superficial and the sentimental and constituted “a profound moral study” (qtd. in Gasió 32).

18. When his students stopped attending his classes due to the archbishop’s ecclesiastical admonition, a prominent dance teacher named Stilson sued the church for twenty thousand francs in damages and won. The religious authorities were forced to concede that they didn’t in fact condemn the tango itself, only certain ways of dancing it (Gasió 43–44). Nonetheless, many Argentines, including the writer Leopoldo Lugones, maintained their abhorrence of the form, despite its popularity in Paris. “Cualquiera entiende el prejuicio moral que comporta el adjetivo argentino pegado a esa innoble y bastardar danza, con la cual canta sus folias de licencia la canalla mestiza de nuestro suburbio descaracterizado” (Anyone can see the moral prejudice that the Argentine adjective carries when tied to this ignoble and bastard dance, with which the half breed low life sings his licentious exploits), claimed Lugones (qtd. in Gasió 19).

19. For many younger Argentines, tango’s appeal and relevance were long ago surpassed by those of rock, *rock nacional*, *cumbia*, and, more recently, reggaetón. In point of fact, these seemingly unlike genres often intersect. See, for example, Plaza on the interactions of tango and rock and Gallego on the relationship of tango and cumbia.

20. While each of these writers is emblematic in his own way, Cadícamo’s biography is an especially resonant example of the profoundly interdisciplinary nature of twentieth-century Argentine tango. Born in 1900, Cadícamo registered over 1,200 songs before his death in December 1999. He was a favorite composer of Carlos Gardel, who between 1925 and 1933 recorded twenty-three of his compositions. He authored several volumes
of poetry (Canciones grises, 1926; La luna del bajo fondo, 1940; and Viento que lleva y trae, 1945), as well as El debut de Gardel en París, La historia del tango en París, several texts for theater and film, and his own memoirs. In a preface to a photo-essay on tango by the acclaimed Argentine photographer Aldo Sessa (1999), Cadícamo reflects on the African origins of tango dance and the synthetic nature of tango lyrics: writing a tango involves “reducing the plot of a three-act play that lasts two hours, with a beginning, a middle, and an end, to just three minutes, which is the time it takes to play a tango; that is to say, one minute per act.” In that essay, Cadícamo also attributed tango’s appearance to its black roots, whether from Guinea, Angola, or elsewhere in Africa and it was then brought to Argentina by Portuguese slave traders (Sessa 7).

21. It turns out that Bhabha himself was exposed to tango growing up in Bombay, where his father was an avid listener as well as an accomplished dancer. See Gewurtz.

22. See Gelman’s autobiographical text titled “Semblanza.”

23. Heightened attention to improvisation within the space of the tango embrace, unique among other popular dances of the Americas, is already much in evidence in the earliest existing motion picture recordings of the form, including Luis José Moglia Barth’s film ¡Tango!, released in 1933. That landmark picture (which helped initiate the film industry in Argentina) enlisted a host of popular performers such as Libertad Lamarque, Tita Merello, Pepe Arias, and Azucena Maizani, all already familiar to Argentines from live stage acts, earlier silent films, or their participation in radio broadcasts of telenovelas and musical programs (Falicov 11–12). The legendary figure José Ovidio “Benito” Bianquet, better known as “El Cachafaz,” also appeared briefly. The basic structure of the embrace, the mechanics of dissociation, and other elements of the tango movement vocabulary performed by the dancers in that film can still be witnessed in tango dance today. Despite its early production date, Tango—like Borges’s 1926 essay—represents tango from an earlier era. A clip of the film can be viewed on Youtube (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Y9vV-3APpc, accessed May 3, 2012). Carmencita Calderón, El Cachafaz’s partner in the film, looks almost as spry dancing at age ninety-six (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v= kXsj_WJY-c&feature=related, accessed May 3, 2012) and was still dancing on the occasion of her hundredth birthday (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AuLVZnEpg4E&feature=related, accessed May 3, 2012). Dínzel recognizes tango’s “mechanics of dissociation,” in which the activity of the body from the waist down is distinct from that of the body from the waist up, as the principal proof of its African antecedents (10).

24. The Dínzels’ fame has extended to the White House, where they danced during the Reagan administration (Ferrer and del Priore, Inventario del tango, vol. 2: 291).

25. Viladrich uses a translated fragment of Dos Santos’s text as the epigraph of her “Neither Virgins Nor Whores.”


27. For a discussion of tango’s problematic relationship to other mestizo cultural discourses in Latin America, see M. Miller, “Tango in Black and White,” in Rise and Fall of the Cosmic Race.

28. Borges regretted the studious crassness of tango lyrics and poems too heavily laced
with *lunfardo* (*On Argentina 72*), and he generally avoided the local vocabulary in his own references to tango in such masterpieces as the poem “The Mythical Founding of Buenos Aires,” published in 1929:

El primer organito salvaba el horizonte
con su achacoso porte, su habanera y su gringo.
El corralón seguro ya opinaba Yrigoyen,
Algún piano mandaba tangos de Saborido.

[The first barrel organ teetered over the horizon with its clumsy progress, its *habaneras*, its wop. The cart-shed wall was unanimous for Yrigoyen. Some piano was banging out tangos by Saborido]. (*Selected Poems* 48–49)

Enrique Saborido (1877–1941) was a Uruguayan-born musician, dancer, and composer. A celebrated figure of the “vieja guardia,” his composition “La morocha” (just one of his many successes) sold two hundred and eighty thousand copies after it was recorded in 1905. He also became a much sought after dance instructor in Paris. Hipólito Yrigoyen (1852–1933) was twice elected president of Argentina (1916–1922 and 1928–1930), and Borges is apparently referencing the period leading up to his first term. Known as the “president of the poor,” Yrigoyen instituted social reforms, including universal suffrage for all male voters. In 1930 he was deposed in a military coup.

29. In 2004 a reporter for the Buenos Aires daily newspaper *La Nación* asked the renowned Mexican author Carlos Fuentes (1928–2012) what his adolescence in Buenos Aires had contributed to his literary voice. “A great deal,” Fuentes responded, “it was here that I read Borges for the first time. I frequented the Ateneo bookstore; I followed the orchestra of Aníbal Troilo and I learned the lyrics of the tango, which is another way to learn Spanish” (Reynoso).

30. Despite being frequently identified with the second of these groups, Borges considered the antagonism between the two a pseudopolemic, and in 1928 he published his essay “La inútil discusión de Boedo y Florida” [The useless argument about Boedo and Florida] in *La Prensa*. See Salvador.

31. The tango-inflected verbal expression that appeared on song sheets and in literary magazines from the 1920s on soon found many echoes in scripts for radio, theater, and film performances, and poets and songwriters became cultural provocateurs and entrepreneurs of the first order. Along with his work as a songwriter, filmmaker, screenwriter, political militant, and labor activist, Manzi, for example, also created the record label Aula with the idea of protecting songwriters’ intellectual rights, founded the journal *Micrófono*, and participated in the formation of the political party Forja. And while Manzi is a notorious example of this cross-pollination of forms and fields, he is just one of many such stories in tango past or present. When he set about researching his father’s participation in tango history, Acho Manzi discovered that “it wasn’t only lyrics of popular songs that appeared during that period. Every time I opened a file, there appeared scripts for films that were never filmed, librettos for radio programs, and works for the theatre” (11). See Ford; Romero; and Salas, *Homero Manzi y su tiempo*. 
32. Two interesting examples of this phenomenon are Fernando Ayala’s film *El canto cuenta su historia* [The song tells its story], released in 1976, which features tango within a broader song history in Argentina, and Humberto Ríos’s film *El tango es una historia* [The tango is a history], released in 1983, with performances by Astor Piazzolla and Osvaldo Pugliese.

33. *El tango en la Economía de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires* (2007), published by Argentina’s Ministry of Production, examines tango’s economic impact in such fields as tourism, the online music industry, tango instruction, public policy, and copyright matters.

34. Another part of this African diasporic history is the relationship between early tango and early African American jazz. A key figure in this story is the black pianist Harold Phillips, who was active as a performer and composer of cakewalk, tango, and other styles in Buenos Aires and Montevideo from about 1900 until 1913, when he left for Europe. A postcard sent from the continent after German forces advanced into Belgium reported that he had been accused of espionage, imprisoned, and shot there (Nogués 200–201).

35. What is less well known is that other Jews at the Janowska camp were forced by an ss officer to accompany marches, tortures, tomb excavations, or executions by playing or singing “Plegaria,” a composition of 1929 by the Argentine composer Eduardo Bianco that became known as “The Tango of Death” (Judkovski 26; Nudler 27–28). The Jews integrating that orchestra were apparently murdered by the ss before Janowska was liberated (Nudler 28). Nudler notes that Bianco had played the tango for Hitler and Goebbels in 1939. In an interview Bianco noted that he had even earlier played “Plegaria” for King Alfonso XIII of Spain, a great fan of the tango to whom the composition is dedicated. It was apparently part of his repertoire for the seventeen months he performed in various other courts, where he was praised by Stalin, among others. Bianco was giving concerts in Germany when war broke out, and though he sought to leave the war-torn region, he was arrested at Innsbruck. The fear of being constantly watched reportedly produced heart problems so severe that Bianco was hospitalized in Magdeburg (see “Eduardo Bianco,” http://www.todotango.com/spanish/creadores/ebianco.asp, accessed May 3, 2012). Nudler nonetheless aligns him with fascist forces in Italy and notes that Enrique Cadicamo accused Bianco of working for the Gestapo (Nudler 30). The “Tango of Death” anecdotes from the camps likely informed the writing of the Jewish poet Paul Celan, whose “Tangoul mortii” [Tango of death] was penned in German in 1944 (Nudler 27). The lyrics to Bianco’s “Plegaria” can be found at http://www.todotango.com/spanish/las_obras/Tema.aspx?id=UUPUSyhwUOM=, accessed May 3, 2012. There are reportedly two other compositions that bear the name “Tango de la muerte” as well as a film and *sainete* (short theater piece), see http://www.todotango.com/spanish/biblioteca/CRONICAS/el_tango_de_la_muerte.asp, accessed May 3, 2012.


37. Rossi’s *Cosas de negros* is considered a groundbreaking if controversial argument for the African origins of the tango, an argument sustained by contemporary historians and musicians such as Goldman, Thompson, and Cáceres. The opinions of Carlos
Vega, considered the forefather of musicology in Argentina, are summarized by Kohan, “Carlos Vega y la teoría hispanista del origen del tango.”

38. Borges pointed out that, by the middle of the twentieth century, cinema had propagated yet another compelling if not entirely accurate story of the tango, and “this ‘from rags to riches’ Bildungsroman is by now a sort of incontestable or proverbial truth” (On Argentina 101).

39. See, for example, Viladrich’s work on the presence of “tango immigrant” communities in New York (“Tango Immigrants in New York City”; “From Shrinks to Urban Shamans”). For a general history of tango in the United States, see Groppa.

40. An excellent source on radio history in Buenos Aires is Ulanovsky et al. One of the highlights of this broadcast history was the Glostora Tango Club program, a daily show from El Mundo Radio recorded before a live audience that first broadcast in 1946 (1940, according to Ulanovsky et al. 142) and continued on the air for more than two decades.

41. See, for example, P. Ochoa.

42. On tango in literature, see Rossner; Orgambide. Antoniotti and Sebastián adopt a broader cultural studies approach. Azzi’s Antropología del tango offers one of the earliest incursions from that discipline; Taylor’s Paper Tangos provides an innovative anthropological engagement that addresses psychosocial aspects as well. On tango as social history, Carretero is a good resource.

43. Gardel claimed, on different occasions, to have been born in all three places (Monsalve 102).


45. Santa María’s work can be viewed at http://www.marinosantamaria.com/, accessed May 3, 2012. I touch on Marcos López’s photographic homage to (or parody of) Gardel’s beloved image in my chapter on tango art in this edited volume.


47. After moving the family from Argentina to Manhattan in search of economic opportunities, Piazzolla Sr. worked as a barber to the Sicilian mob in New York, the same cohort immortalized by Herbert Asbury in The Gangs of New York and by Borges in Historia universal de la infamia (Fischerman and Gilbert 26).

48. Gardel reportedly claimed that the young Piazzolla played bandoneon “like a Gallego,” that is, like a Spaniard or other foreigner, calling attention to a formation taking place outside the Argentine tradition. See Fischerman and Gilbert 12.

49. Fuelle or bellows is a lunfardo term for the bandoneon.

50. Piazzolla also arranged tangos for Troilo’s orchestra, but Troilo reportedly would go back and edit the arrangements, fearing they were “too advanced” and would scare away the dancers (Pessinis and Kuri).

51. Fischerman and Gilbert question the influence of these private classes with Boulanger on Piazzolla’s development, noting that the anecdote presents us with a
“recurring fantasy amongst musicians in the popular tradition, who at the same time reject and envy the mannerisms of the academic musician”; they point to a parallel narrative in the memoirs of George Gershwin (121).

52. Though he wrote an estimated three thousand works and recorded some five hundred of them, Piazzolla is most revered for pioneering compositions such as “Adios Nonino,” written in 1959 to commemorate the death of his father, and “Libertango,” written in 1974 and considered the quintessential example of Piazzolla’s particular musical language.

53. The operetta Maria de Buenos Aires written on a libretto of the poet Horacio Ferrer, the soundtrack of the film Tangos. The Exile of Gardel studied in this edited volume, and a landmark LP recording in 1965 of poems by Borges interpreted by Piazzolla and the vocalist Edmundo Rivero are just a few examples.


55. A line in the show’s original program sums up Segovia’s dual understanding of tango’s role on and off the stage: “The tango resembles, reassembles all of life.” Segovia further clarifies, “I try to reflect on the stage a life that actually exists, and that at the same time should come together as a scenic entity... I look for purity, for roots, but with artists who have dominion of the stage, who won’t get stage fright, who can give their all” (Falcoff). Whereas other Argentines had moved on by the 1980s, setting aside tango for other genres, Segovia forged ahead, convinced that a show conceived with a genuine love for popular culture would be read by audiences as a love story of sorts. For his efforts, he was credited with the second worldwide success of tango, some seventy years after it had originally taken Paris by storm.

56. Segovia’s singular achievement was further recognized in the return of Tango Argentino to the Argentine capital in February of 2011, this time under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture and in the context of La ciudad al aire libre, cultura para respirar [The open-air city, breathable culture]. On a stage erected near the city’s famous obelisk, experienced fans and curious newcomers could watch some of those same dancers from the show staged in 1983, including Copes, María Nieves, Carlos and María Rivarola, Gloria and Eduardo Arquimbau, Pablo Verón, and Miguel Ángel Zotto, and they could listen to interpretations of classic tangos by artists such as María Graña, Walter Ríos, Raúl Lavié, and Pablo Agri. All told, Segovia brought seventy musicians and dancers to (or back to) the stage, and some fifteen thousand fans enjoyed that free performance. A series of photos and videos of the event are collected at Sophie, “Claudio Segovia’s Argentine Tango,” 2xTango, accessed May 3, 2012, http://www.2xtango.com/?p=8959&lang=en.

57. One of the Argentines who saw Segovia’s original production in 1983 was the writer and filmmaker Edgardo Cozarinsky, then living in Paris. In 2007 Cozarinsky published Milongas, a memoir of his milonga-hopping in Europe and elsewhere that confirmed the far-reaching influence of Tango Argentino as well as the migration of tango back to the main stages and dance halls of global affections.
58. Though he rejects the moniker *tango nuevo*, Naveira is considered, along with Pablo Verón and Fabián Salas, a founder of the movement that bears that label. See Merritt’s chapter in this edited volume.

59. Gotan Project’s collaboration with the veteran New Orleans musician Dr. John on “Tango Square” evokes Congo Square, where slave populations were permitted to meet, drum, sing, and dance in pre–Civil War New Orleans, and it pays homage to the shared African parentage of jazz and tango. Ned Sublette argues that New Orleans is the site of the first documented use of the term *tango*—almost a century before it appears in any Argentine or Uruguayan reference (123).


62. Bajofondo is composed of Santaolalla on guitar, percussion, and vocals; Juan Campodónico on programming, beats, samples, and guitar; Luciano Supervielle on piano, keyboards, and scratch; Javier Casalla on violin; Martín Ferrés on bandoneon; Gabriel Casacuberta on upright bass and electric bass; Adrián Sosa on drums; and Verónica Loza as VJ and on vocals.


64. In fact, several of the “maestros” profiled in *Café de los maestros* had died by the time of the film’s debut, or they have since passed away.