“Manejame como un auto”
Drive Me Like a Car, or What’s So New about Tango Nuevo?

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The role of women? Minimum. They were like our tools to have fun. We cannot dance between ourselves, so we should call women. Yeah, that’s the first thing that was really obvious in nuevo. Well, not nuevo but the thing we were doing—that it wasn’t feminine. Yeah, we were creating steps like kids, and we didn’t ask the women for anything. We didn’t care about their opinions. (ε)
—Javier (Argentine), tango professional, on the role of women in the late 1990s investigation sessions that many cite as the breeding ground for tango nuevo

Some girls get fed up with following, and they want to dance like a man because they say it’s more entertaining. But I say you don’t have enough time in your lifetime to learn how to follow well. So I would recommend to these girls to really learn how to follow.
—Carlos Gavito (Argentine), tango professional, quoted in Quiroga

Sex and Gender in a “Very Passionate Dance”

In this chapter I examine how notions of gender and sexuality often play out in contemporary Argentine tango dance. Focusing on a contested trend referred to as tango nuevo, I map the intersection of local and global norms and desires in tango dance classes, prácticas, and milongas in Buenos Aires. Alternately portrayed as a threat to the cultural grounding and essential “Argentine-ness” of the form, a showmanship-oriented nuisance on the dance floor, an empty term imported from abroad and utilized solely as a marketing tool, an overly scientific approach to the dance that disallows feeling, or the
next step in the evolution of tango in the twenty-first century, these myriad interpretations of tango nuevo point at once to the difficulty in defining human movement practice and to the many and varied players with a vested interest in doing so. Moreover, earlier incarnations of *nuevo*—Carlos Alberto “Petróleo” Estévez employed the term to describe his dance more than half a century ago, and the term was associated with the music of Astor Piazzolla as early as 1960\(^2\)—reveal the deficiency of the modifier in describing a moment within a tradition still very much alive and therefore inevitably, though not quietly or easily, evolving. I contend that this tension between preservation and evolution extends to gender politics and performances in contemporary tango and, further, that this tension is heightened by the forces of globalization, the tendency to romanticize tradition, and both local and global desires to consume authenticity.

Whether or not there exists another new tango remains to be seen, for there continues to be heated debate over its very definition. Such ambivalence with the term is reflected in Javier’s opening quote. Simply put, many Argentines reject the term for the division it implies between the tango of today and that of before and for what they perceive as its fundamental misuse to denote a new style of tango. Countering that the tango of today is evolved rather than new, they object to its reduction to style and/or surface factors, including clothing, music, and acrobatic dance moves. One point that dancers across the board tend to agree on, however, is that the investigation sessions initiated by Gustavo Naveira and Fabián Salas in the 1990s greatly changed tango at the level of conceptualization and instruction; while they might object to the term itself, many would agree that something *new* in tango began here.\(^3\) Also, undeniably new developments are evident in the entry of increasing ranks of younger practitioners to tango communities around the globe and the concurrent growth of a veritable tango industry that is centered in Buenos Aires yet thrives on global interest and circulation. Further, a new práctica scene has exploded in Buenos Aires since the mid-2000s in the form of social dance events that function as young or nuevo alternatives to the traditional milongas.\(^4\) In employing the term *nuevo*, I reference these myriad developments, while also acknowledging that other factors, including the clothing people wear, the music they dance to, their dance vocabulary, and who they dance with in social settings, have evolved in contemporary tango as well.

In the pages that follow, I differentiate between traditional and contemporary veins of Argentine tango, drawing distinctions and pointing to areas of intersection in the performance of gender and sexuality in the practices
associated with each. At the heart of this chapter lies an argument that I
dance around, speak back to, and question through a series of vignettes, ob-
servations, and voices from near and far: that the growth of new venues, a
new generation of practitioners, and an increasingly fluid and interconnected
global community have freed the dance and its codes from the hold of place
and tradition. The following questions guide my investigation: To what ex-
tent has the growth of tango nuevo and/or the growing global community
of younger practitioners facilitated a more autonomous position for women
in the dance? Are there specific elements within the dance vocabulary or
among the attendant social codes that encourage practitioners to break from
the tango’s all-consuming image of heterosexual passion and male domina-
tion? Where have these ideas and practices originated, and what does that
mean for the future of a dance whose propagation and growth have histori-
cally been tied to its evocation of place?

Central to the investigation sessions in the 1990s that for many mark the
moment of inception of tango nuevo was an extensive analysis of the physical
possibilities in the dance, which many argue yielded a simplification in the
教学 and explanation of tango. One significant result of this process was
a classroom focus on giving all students the tools with which to deconstruct
and re-create their own dance, thus initiating a sort of democratization of
information. Female dancers of many different ages cited increased access
to information as the primary factor encouraging greater autonomy in the
dance, while foreign women have spoken of the further emancipation of the
tanguera outside of Buenos Aires due to distance from the hold of tradition.
Increased autonomy for the woman dancer is referenced at a number of
levels: in the embrace—tangueras and tangueros frame the dance in tango
nuevo as an equal exchange and note that the broadening movement vocab-
ulary requires an agile, active follower; within the social ambient, as a loos-
ening of stringent social codes that has freed women to invite men to dance
and to lead other women or men; and professionally, as evident in the rise of
women’s technique classes, classes for “women who lead,” and in the growing
number of female professionals who attract students on their own. Finally,
dancers trace the relaxation of social codes and the growth of global influ-
ences to the emerging gay-friendly tango scene. Nonetheless, gender iden-
tities are challenged by larger norms related to place, presenting a complex
situation for the global tango community that feeds from, circulates around,
and eventually meets in the dance’s birthplace, where cosmopolitanism and
machismo—already coexisting in an often contentious relationship—are pushed closer together in an often uncomfortable embrace.

Following earlier studies of gender in tango, including Archetti, Castro (“Carlos Gardel and the Argentine Tango”), Saikin, Salessi (“Medics, Crooks, and Tango Queens”), Savigliano (Angorra Matta and Tango and the Political Economy of Passion), Taylor (Paper Tangos), and Tobin, I examine the potential and desire for resistance to clichéd yet still powerful narratives of heteronormative passion, female manipulation, and male domination. More specifically, in turning my lens on the myriad developments associated with nuevo, I question whether these are yielding truly new narratives of gender and sexuality in the embrace. Building on studies that portray movement as a means of both reflecting and constructing the larger societal context (Browning; Collier, Cooper, Azzi, and Martin; Desmond; Ness; Novack; Sklar; Savigliano, Angorra Matta and Tango and the Political Economy of Passion; Taylor, Paper Tangos; Thomas and Miller), I argue that manifestations of gender and sexuality in contemporary tango rise from the heightened circulation of global norms and desires that mark modern life. These norms and desires are informed by disparate, fluid notions of self and other, influenced by narratives of authenticity and exoticism that evolve in reaction to place. In situating my study at the center of these global flows, I hope to produce a snapshot that is true to contemporary tango—a space where young and old, local and foreign, new and traditional, preservation and innovation meet, and where the future of a dance once described and more often pigeonholed as the “vertical expression of a horizontal desire” (Rippon) is negotiated, both on and off the dance floor.

Performing Tradition: El Piropo

For the tango pilgrim who travels to the mecca of Buenos Aires, the piropo is one of those local customs that immediately raises awareness of one’s displacement from home. In the porteño tango world, sweet talk on the dance floor has achieved the status of an art form in the piropo, in which one-liners the likes of “what beautiful eyes you have” stand at the tame end of the scale. A compliment that might also be a pick-up line, uttered without necessarily serious intentions or expectations, piropos are the juego de jure in many of the more traditional dance venues. With piropos, male dancers fulfill their partners’ expectation of the porteño male, on the one hand conforming to the (admittedly clichéd) notion of what it means to be Latin, macho, a seductor,
and on the other seeking to convince the tanguera of her singularity, to more fully extend the illusion of communion on a crowded dance floor. One wonders, of course, if the milonguero is indeed defenseless in the presence of countless beautiful young women, many of whom hail from abroad, many in desperate search of a “true tango moment” assumed to be achieved only in the dance’s birthplace, in the arms of a real porteño. More than simply generational, piropos are one of the many practices around which notions of style or community are constructed. As a game, piropos render the milonga a site for a theatrical enactment of traditional notions of masculinity and femininity, employed alternately to intimidate, entertain, define roles, fulfill the sexually charged promise of the dance’s reputation, and test the boundaries of possibility.

However, a part of the steady growth of a younger community of dancers and the creation of new venues represents an interest in approaching the dance and the larger social milieu in a more contemporary fashion, including relinquishing gestures such as the piropo. Buenos Aires’s “laid-back” práctica scene offers relief from such ritual theatrics sometimes deemed an annoyance or hindrance to simply enjoying the dance itself:

If you go to the milongas, you don’t want to look at the milongueros if you don’t want to be felt up, or if you don’t want to be told how beautiful your eyes are, and “if only they were younger.” And then they would mention that their last girlfriend was younger than you! There’s this cropping up of prácticas, and a lot of people trying to get away from that—not necessarily the milonguero style but more so the milonguero attitude—“el juego de la seducción”… all of the old guys trying to seduce the girls, and the younger people are more interested in the dancing and having fun, and they’re not analyzing it in this way that’s so sexist. (Ginger [American expatriate], chef)

Emphasizing this distinction between age and style, Ginger pointed out that “even some of the younger guys will do that in the context of the milonga,” thus framing the milonga as a site to play, to try on postures associated with a notion of tanguero identity informed by exaggerated representations of tango from the stage, screen, and visual media, as well as a form of apprenticeship in the milongas themselves. Of course, these exaggerated postures could be the milonguero’s response to what he perceives as the foreign woman’s expectations on her tango pilgrimage. Nonetheless, such reactions to this type of playing as “sexist” or “macho” (if ultimately harmless) are not
uncommon among younger female tangueras from abroad, even long-term residents like Ginger.

Imagining places as experiential containers, housing and imparting memories to those who would claim them (see Basso 1996; Samuels, “The Whole and the Sum of the Parts” and Putting a Song on Top of It), I argue that cultural practice facilitates the expansion of community across spatial and temporal bounds. Drawing on the national obsession with remembrance in sites constructed around and drowned in a sense of nostalgia, such posturing feeds from a sort of collective unconscious that is nourished at home and abroad through films, stage shows, images, and tango lore. Further, tango dancers insert themselves within a cultural tradition through a shared movement practice that doesn’t merely reference but in fact pays homage to a worldview that emerged at a specific place in time. In manifesting such postures out of time, however, a degree of kitsch and caricature may color the behaviors of the milongueros, their protégés, and the foreign dancers whose presence serves to encourage their perpetuation. According to Luciana Valle, organizer of the popular El Motivo práctica, the new social dance venues grew from a desire to escape an onto (vibe) approaching circus and to create a scene accessible to dancers who had lives to attend to outside of tango: “The night is weird. We were girls who lived in the daylight, we got up at 9:00 to go to yoga, so why I can’t dance until 1:00 AM, why I have to go to a place that is packed . . . have all that smoke, and be in a place where everybody is like . . . in a mise en scène. Why?!” (ε). As Valle frames it, the milonga is situated in the life of the night, an otherworldly realm that encourages behaviors that don’t make sense in the light of day.

To be fair, the piroppo finds expression off the dance floor as well. At times it may be as simple as a cheerful “que linda” (how pretty), while at others a barely audible comment muttered under a challenging glance by the porteño who catches you on a crowded sidewalk. For women moving through the Argentine capital, piropos quickly become one more element in an already overloaded soundscape, blending in with the noise of too many colectivos (buses) and the incessant drone of the drilling, banging, and sawing, slowly extending the reach of the city several stories higher, wider, or, for those with money, closer to a notion of First World comfort and amenities. Generally framed as a representation of traditional gender norms, it is also plausible that the piroppo functions as a reaction to so much noise.13

Female writers from abroad have produced varying takes on the piroppo. For instance, Miranda France reports relinquishing control over her most
intimate possession while living in the Argentine capital, where piropos are a constant reminder that one’s body (if one is female, that is) is at the mercy of porteño scrutiny and commentary. Kaitlin Quistgaard, on the other hand, describes the charm of the piropo as “refined machismo.” Unlike its vulgar North American cousin, the “white-trash catcall,” the piropo is subtle, romantic, and ultimately private, delivered like a quiet “gift” intended only for the recipient, the goal being tribute rather than shame (Quistgaard). Through the eyes of an enchanted outsider, the piropo also becomes a sign of inclusion, and Quistgaard takes these gifts as an indication that she is perceived as having arrived, capable of handling piropos like a real porteña.

While the foreign woman in Buenos Aires may arm herself against such comments by cultivating a healthy degree of haughtiness or an acute ability to ignore, the porteña abroad may acclimate herself to their absence. For the writer Alicia Dujovne Ortiz, born in Buenos Aires and exiled to France in the late 1970s, the piropo is at the root of a decidedly porteña mode of existence. Just as the larger country of Argentina has historically sought outside approval to confirm its existence, Dujovne Ortiz argues that it is under the reassuring gaze of the porteño male, reinforced through the piropo, that the porteña draws her strength and her very sense of identity. Without this gaze, or “when away from the Mediterranean countries,” her sense of self is blunted: “she is seen in an extremely modest manner that makes her feel invisible” (Dujovne Ortiz, “Etre Porteño (in Buenos Aires)” 74). Like Dujovne Ortiz, a young porteña who had relocated to Germany for several years confessed to exasperation over the lack of attention she received there. On her first day, she ran home five minutes after leaving the house, convinced she had made a catastrophic fashion blunder, for what other possible excuse could there be for the lack of male commentary? In conversations with porteñas, I found that rather than disrespectful or threatening, such comments are viewed ambivalently at worst. One of the many customs that allow the two sexes to revel in their separateness, piropos are generally perceived as harmless and, although unacknowledged, often secretly appreciated.

Beyond the informality and anonymity of the streets, the piropo is also at home in the realm of the professional. In my own experience conducting research in the tango world, I grew accustomed to comments I would have deemed inappropriate, infantilizing, and sexist away from Argentine soil—like the teacher who told me he had “never met such a beautiful woman with so many problems” after asking about my research. Such flattery and flirtation are arguably central to the business of tango itself. It isn’t just that these
Argentine tangueros never learned to filter their thoughts, something Kaitlin Quistgaard attests to with humorous effect in describing the special attention she received from “fawning men in suits” (government officials and corporate executives) as a foreign correspondent in Buenos Aires. In the porteño tango world, such posturing is expected, especially by foreign tangueras who take piropos as confirmation of the cultural difference that makes the dance in its birthplace so enticing, regardless of how they might ultimately feel about their propriety. Further, this posturing is frivolous, of the moment, and transparently hyperbolic; although by no means meaningless, the weight of its meaning is decidedly light. More importantly, the piropo warrants analysis that looks beyond the message itself.¹⁴ As Matthias points out, foreign attitudes in the face of such commentary reveal just as much about the recipient of the piropo as of the local who delivers it:

This subject comes up again and again if you talk to foreigners. Women in general start judging that way of playing because we experience it as threatening, or sometimes without any respect, but for Argentineans it’s a game. So asking a woman home is just their way of saying goodbye. And the other extreme—I have had experiences where if you don’t ask a woman this question, it doesn’t mean that she would follow you, but it’s almost “Am I not worth this? I’m not attractive enough to deserve this invitation?” As much as you perceive with your American values, they perceive with their values. (ε) (Matthias Kroug [German expatriate], scientist)

In this context, if the foreign tanguera is unable to read such flattery as a game, she may be judged as unwilling to fully give herself to the experience of tango in Buenos Aires, and there is a chance that she will miss out on more than just piropos.

Leading and Following: The Gendered Division of (Tango) Labor
“The dance portrays an encounter between the powerful and completely dominant male and the passive, docile, completely submissive female,” writes Julie Taylor (“Tango” 485). Further along in her essay, Taylor comments on the fact that the classic image of tango dance (of male domination and female submission) is at odds with that presented in many tango lyrics, in which men are quite often portrayed as suffering at the hands of willful, cunning, heartless women.¹⁵ Pablo Verón’s famous outburst in The Tango Lesson (Potter), that tango partner and film director Sally Potter “follow, just follow!” mirrors Taylor’s description of sexual domination in the dance. But the
tango has long since evolved beyond this initial, chauvinistic signification. Farris Thompson notes that the female partners of the 1940s Club Nelson dancers “rebelle against men who bossed them around with peremptory hand motions” (257). While he roots the origins of a fifty-fifty tango partnership in the 1940s, Juan Carlos Copes and María Nieves, international stars of stage and screen and virtual ambassadors of tango dance from the 1960s, are often credited with fully breaking with the image of male domination and placing the man and woman on equal footing (Del Mazo and D’Amore 56; personal communication with Juan Carlos Copes, March 2006). Gloria and Rodolfo Dínzel, who gained fame alongside Copes and Nieves in the stage show Tango Argentino, characterize this parity as “communion”: “in tango, one and one make one. . . . When tango is being danced well it is simply impossible to observe either one of the individuals. . . . To effect this image of oneness means to be in a constant quest of communion between these two bodies into one dynamic structure. In the very instant that the development of the form turns into an individual effort, the couple disappears, and when this happens, tango vanishes as well” (9). Dancers continue to make personal and generational claims to female autonomy and to equality in the embrace to this day. Nonetheless, culture impacts the way dancers conceive of, approach, and enact the roles of leading and following, and the modern implications of this (largely) gendered division of roles are anything but straightforward.

The title of this chapter comes from a friend’s initiation into tango in Buenos Aires. In an effort to get him comfortable with the concept and practice of leading, his female instructor told him to “drive her like a car” as they walked through the space in a practice embrace. This wording might seem a terrible step backward to some, but the metaphor is not entirely uncommon among Argentine instructors. Nonetheless, it stands in contrast to the generally more nuanced and egalitarian explications of the sexual and physical mechanics of the dance commonly invoked by U.S. instructors. Framing the dance as a conversation, a back and forth exchange based upon the equal participation of each, many U.S. teachers position the woman as an autonomous partner through the language they employ to teach and conceptualize the dance, problematizing this image of male domination. For instance, the dance historian and Stanford professor Richard Powers speaks of “great partnering” on his website, rejecting an outdated approach to the roles of leader and follower that hails from an intense period of formalization in ballroom dance beginning in the 1930s:
After centuries of ballroom emphasis on dancing for the pleasure of one’s partner, the 1930s saw the emergence of a particularly disagreeable phase of social dance, when the term “lead” came to mean “command” and “follow” meant “obey.” . . . The main reason I don’t like the term ‘following’ is that it doesn’t accurately describe the role. Women do not “follow,” they interpret signals they’re given, with a keen responsiveness that is not passive. . . . The follow role is mentally and physically active, like the flow state in sports.

And Powers describes the leader’s role as “tracking,” complicating a simplistic division between the two roles and pointing to the leader’s responsibility to respond to the follower’s cues as well.

Despite an advanced approach to the concept of partnering, it is worth noting that Powers still divides the roles according to gender. This brings to mind a conversation with an Argentine professional who confessed to feeling exasperated, at times even angry, when he first went abroad to teach and was asked time and again to explain why the man leads and the woman follows. Surely this most basic principle of tango, of social dance in general (and by extension in life as well), was only natural. Indeed, implicit to the dance’s functioning is a naturalization of this division (Benarós; Collier, Cooper, Azzi, and Martin; Dinzel and Dínzel; Pujol; Saikin; Savigliano, *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion*; Taylor, *Paper Tangos*).

This has interesting implications in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere, where instructors employ images, metaphors, and values from their various cultures to communicate the mechanics and meaning of the dance. The same dance can be imagined quite differently, and the relation of leader to follower can play out and be experienced distinctly. In an interview with Kevin, a dancer from the United States, he noted that one popular teacher explains the role of the follower through a post-feminist, American lens, encouraging a masculine energy in following. Arguing that this would be considered inappropriate in Argentina, Kevin distinguished the intention with which he perceives Argentine and American women enact the role of follower:

He’ll tell followers that they need to step with a leader’s energy, especially in the forward step; that they need to step as if they were leading, using his intention but with that kind of certainty, that masculine energy. This is something that I don’t think you would hear in Argentina—they would never tell a woman to step like a man, you know? . . . I think the active voice
of a follower in Argentina is more like what she can add in her own kind of monologue running on the side, and that the active voice of a follower say in the Northwest is challenging or responding or provoking the dialogue between the two. It’s not a sideline, it’s essential to the conversation, and for me that’s much more interesting.

According to this description, “active following” implies not only a subversion of gender but also a certain devaluation of femininity, where it is “masculine energy” that renders the follower an equal protagonist in the embrace. The ambivalence expressed by foreign tangueras to traditions like the piropo and to the terms lead and follow may also be a reaction to such thinking, for despite the gains of feminism, we have yet to fully reconcile empowerment and femininity. Indeed, Argentine tango is a practice par excellence for confronting and negotiating what many foreign tangueras experience as profound contradictions.

Building on Powers’s “tracking” and “interpreting,” another U.S. teacher cites The Tao of Tango (Siegmann) on his website to portray the interplay of masculine (yang) and feminine (yin) qualities in each of the roles. In an effort to dissuade American resistance to the male-leader and female-follower dichotomy, Jay Rabe draws on Asian philosophy, separating and overlapping the masculine and feminine roles and energies under the guise of an ancient, exotic, and decidedly less macho worldview. In conversation with an Argentine professional, he used the same image to free the tango from its image of strict heterosexuality, speaking of the dance as an experience where the idea of two sexes is lost, and gender distinctions are muddied or dissolved. At the same time, several foreigners employed the yin-yang image to frame tango as a dance that frees practitioners to embrace a separation of the sexes often discounted in the wake of feminism: “The primary thing for me is that you’ve got the connection of the male-female, masculine-feminine energy, which for me can create synergy and it’s fantastic for people to get through their prejudices” (Sarah Bonnar [Australia], tango professional).

“In Europe we always look for the equality, while here it’s more obvious that the man and the woman have different roles. . . . You could say there’s the feminine and masculine qualities that meet each other and do something together. It sounds maybe philosophical but I think every experience where opposites in a way unite is something we strive for. And it’s for me one explanation why this dance fascinates people all over the world” (ε) (Matthias Kroug [German expatriate], scientist).
In *Tango: Un baile bien porteño* (Tango: A very porteño dance) the German native and tanguera Nicole Nau-Klapwijk describes a similar quest for balance in her life, attained through her discovery of tango in Argentina, an activity and culture that together teach her to be a woman and to allow herself partnership with a man. A common theme in conversations with foreigners was that of the tango as a realm within which sexual difference is accepted and celebrated. A dancer and choreographer from the United States, Michele Kadison described how tango had released her from her dynamic, external, almost masculine body, freeing her to explore another dimension of her being through movement: “I was always a tough-ass—whatever the role was that did the most jumps and turns, that was me. So when I came to tango all of the sudden I could really explore my truly feminine side. . . . Tango is unraveling all of these neurological pathways to my muscular system to get me to be soft and listening and acquiescent, and really appreciate the goddess side of being female.” Foreigners also contrasted the experience of tango in Buenos Aires with that in their home community, where notions of gender equality pervade nearly all aspects of life. Like Michele, Nancy underscored the femininity of tango in Buenos Aires, while she described her first year of tango in the United States as a nearly genderless experience: “I didn’t feel the dance at all, which means I wasn’t in touch with my femininity. It was just, I’m a person and I’m dancing with this person and we’re creating something, and it was creative, but I didn’t feel feminine” (Nancy [American expatriate], actress).

I argue that this reembracing of a separation of the sexes is connected to notions of place that play out in the representation, enactment, and conceptualization of the dance. Here I borrow from Dempster’s notion of visual kinesthesia, in which she frames the skin as a surface that perceives visually and kinesthetically, that is inspired to thought through both touch and images (and, I would add, evocative, image-producing words). Stage shows, films, and promotional materials have traditionally been geared toward reinforcing romantic notions of the essential “Argentine-ness” of the dance, represented through a passionate, heterosexual embrace and references to late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century porteño society symbols and characters, such as the *farol* or gas lamp, the * conventillo* (tenement house), the port slum of La Boca, the *compadrito* (hoodlum) with his fedora and knife, and the prostitute in high heels and fishnets (Duvall; Orezzoli and Segovia; Romay; Saura; Zotto). Though male-male partnering was crucial to tango’s development and the spectacle of two compadritos dancing on a street corner
is a fixture of the tango stage show, this practice is consistently attributed to the demographics of Buenos Aires at the turn of the twentieth century, when men greatly outnumbered women. As Tobin points out, such same-sex partnering is regularly defined as “practice” and distinguished from “dancing,” so that, both in tango histories and in porteño tango classes and prácticas, the story of gender transgression is clarified and the possibility of homosexual desire is frequently dismissed.

While the tango has evolved beyond its bordello, slum, and tenement house origins, this narrative—of its dangerous, lower-class origins and its connection to a licentious heterosexual embrace—lingers. It is carried in movement vocabulary passed down through generations, lifted from historic images, and transferred from the stage performer’s theatrical reenactment to the dance class. Much like Browning’s “survivals” in samba—gestural references to a colonial or precolonial past—the plethora of tango movements developed since the dance’s inception serve as a window onto its past. The Argentine professionals who took the dance abroad in stage shows, training locals and planting the seeds of global communities in their wake, carried these narratives as memories, a sort of embodied cultural heritage. Furthermore, these narratives play out in classroom exercises—whether to mock and discount as clichéd or essentialist or to elicit heightened performances from students through poetic and theatrical anecdotes that get at one particular aspect of the dance’s history (where tango equals passion and drama), often at the expense of any other. In turn this image of the tango is deeply embedded in the global imaginary.

Outside of Argentina the tango is a safe space to explore the separation of masculine and feminine because it is “other,” “exotic,” and “Latin.” Indeed, part of the dance’s appeal for the non-native may be its perceived “dangerousness,” which is subverted and cleansed through its very performance; it is safe for foreign tangueras and tangueros to dress and dance suggestively, for there remains a degree of cultural appropriation or a sense that one is playing a character. This performance of a more traditional gender identity often involves a sense of theater, where throwbacks to the past and to a notion of “otherness” may relieve the self of any discomfort in the present-day implications of one’s role (for example, when women don fishnet stockings and slit skirts and men fedoras and scarves). Furthermore, behaviors prohibited by notions of propriety enter a state of limbo or experimentation when abroad, when thrown into contact with a culture or subculture where a separation of the genders and their roles is quite firmly embraced, and the notion of equal
rights does not yield an erasure of male-female difference. So it is that tough, independent foreign tangueras find themselves accumulating corsets and stiletto heels in Buenos Aires and dreaming of a tanda or entire song set spent in the arms of a viejo milonguero.

While the embrace sanctions a performance of gender that many non-Argentines described as freeing in contrast to that experienced in their everyday lives, others framed these gendered posturings in a negative light. Distinguishing between the relaxed codes of the emerging nuevo or práctica scene and the codes of the more traditional milongas in Buenos Aires, they highlighted an emptiness in the theatrics of the latter: “You have to get dressed up in fishnet stockings and a short skirt to dance tango. It’s like, no—more of that stuff we don’t need. You know, more of that fakery and all that stuff on the surface. The world is already enough about that and it’s not helping. You know, the facelifts and the lies and the bullshit” (Sarah Bonnar [Australia], tango professional).

Underscoring the difference she experienced on her first visit to Buenos Aires, Pia, a painter from Sweden, noted an emphasis on appearance in some of the more traditional milongas, where women are especially subject to all manner of discrimination and one’s ability is often the least important factor in securing dances: “Just sitting here and thinking maybe my dress is not nice enough... And all of these beautiful girls. That’s another thing I don’t like about Buenos Aires. The macho culture and the idea that you have to be beautiful to dance, and if you’re not beautiful you’re not worth anything. And there’s no old women in the milongas—if they’re not so beautiful they can just sit at home” (ε). As these two foreign women perceive it, the culture in some of the traditional milongas is not only superficial but also places disproportionate demands upon men and women.

Savigliano describes the milonga as a site where such external factors dissolve, where the dance comes first. For Savigliano, no matter how young, old, short, tall, fat, thin, or in whatever manner aesthetically endowed or challenged the participant, it is skill that determines whether and how much one will dance (Angorra Matta 153–55). This is still the case in many venues; moreover, I would argue that this logic operates to a degree, or among certain dancers, in most venues. But the sentiments expressed by Sarah and Pia also ring true. It is important to note here that Argentine tango stands out among dance forms for its acceptance of the aging body; in a realm that generally celebrates youth, tango is considered an appropriate activity for people of all ages. Moreover, there are plenty of traditional milongas where one will
encounter a largely mature crowd. At the same time, however, there is a milonga circuit that has grown alongside the city’s ever-expanding tango tourism, where the absence of older women is often striking. In these famed confiterías, dance halls, bars, and social clubs—attended by a mix of foreigners and Argentines, the percentage of each shifting throughout the year according to foreign holidays, porteño festivals, and international demands on Argentine teachers—the clichéd yet defining image of this particular milonga scene is the famed milongueros’ table. It is here that the male old-timers hold court, drinking champagne, watching the floor with an alternating mix of amusement and disdain, and occasionally emerging to grace one of the beautiful young milonguitas with a song or, if lucky, an entire tanda. The young women wait patiently on the sidelines, maybe stopping at the table to say hello, but never to stay and certainly never to invite the revered male bailarines to dance.

The above speaks to the cultivation of fantasy within this particular milonga circuit, inspired at once by historic anecdotes and images that favor the dance’s male forebears, traditionalist arguments that link age to authenticity, and global desires to experience the “authentic.” The further they decline, the more the male milongueros are celebrated and rewarded with the adulation of the young and beautiful women, while the young and beautiful act out an exaggerated notion of femininity inaccessible to them in the light of day. Conversations with foreign men did not reveal a parallel desire to encounter the tango in the arms of elder porteñas. Perhaps this reflects the absence of inspiration in the social scene or the larger imaginary created in films, media images, lyrics, and promotional materials. (On the other hand, perhaps these foreign men wouldn’t divulge such a desire to me for the simple fact that I don’t fit that profile.)

At the same time, this subworld serves as a window onto the larger, fantastical values embraced in porteño society, where “true beauty” does not preclude surgical intervention, in turn encouraged and heightened by global desires. Home to a growing plastic surgery industry, Buenos Aires’s medical tourism market has thrived in the wake of the economic crisis of 2001 and the ensuing peso devaluation, which made tourist consumption of the city available at a fraction of its former price for those with foreign currency (Balch; Dodes).

The importance accorded physical appearance in the tango world is reinforced in the city’s tango guides. Glossy, full-color, magazine-style pamphlets and other publications include information on classes, milongas, shoe
and clothing outlets, tourist excursions, interviews with dancers, photos of milongas, and ads for aesthetic surgery clinics (Caserón Porteño; Palumbo). Speaking about the connection between tango and the city’s booming aesthetic surgery industry, a native tanguera rooted the precedence accorded physical appearance in tango within the larger porteño culture: 29

If you like to dance tango, you’re going to like to look good. . . . Buenos Aires was a city and it still is a city where everybody really takes care of themselves. The ladies like to be elegant. They really want to look the best that they can. . . . The beauty and cosmetic clinics are all full, and the prices are much better than in the United States. So I think it is one of the reasons that a lot of people come here right now—because of the exchange. (e) (Linda [Argentine], doctor)

Despite this cross-promotion of aesthetic surgery and tango, there is no question that the cult of good appearance exists outside of the tango world as well. Moreover, many tango venues do offer older women refuge from a media-saturated culture that favors youth and beauty above all else and that places higher demands upon women in this respect. There are plenty of traditional milongas where older women are evaluated for qualities other than their appearance, and in tango communities around the world, older women are accorded license to express their sexuality in ways that are generally at odds with society’s expectations of women over a certain age (see Savigliano, Angorra Matta).30 Nonetheless, the pairing of beautiful young women with elderly milongueros speaks to the fact that men still wield greater power in the tango world and to the sexist ageism women face, both in the tango world and at large.

In the nuevo or práctica scene, on the other hand, dancers noted more flexibility in carving out gender identities, arguing that practitioners are free to dress as they like. In the prácticas fishnets and high heels are traded in for dance sneakers and bell bottoms, the suit jacket and tie for T-shirt and tattoos. (Of course, one might counter that the rules of looking good are simply different in these spaces and reflect the aesthetic values of their attendees.) Aside from dress, in the prácticas the music is generally not programmed into tandas (musical sets of three to four songs),31 freeing tangueras and tangueros to dance as many or as few songs with each partner as they choose. Free of the cabeceo—that silent invitation to dance performed by establishing and maintaining eye contact—in the prácticas dancers may walk right up to the partner of their choice, making the invitation unmistakably clear (if
not potentially coercive, as the act of declining such an invitation is equally clear and undeniably public). Further, women are (theoretically) free to invite men, and same-sex partnering is more widely accepted than in the traditional milongas, though as I discuss below, this is generally enacted as a practice technique or as a last resort, outside of the specifically sanctioned “gay” spaces.

“Women Who Lead” and Tango Queer

Deconstructing the leader-follower dichotomy, many dancers argue that learning the second role helps them better understand their partners’ position and feedback, and thus it serves to further refine their overall dance. With the entrance of growing numbers of younger practitioners to the dance and the creation of social and practice spaces in which experimentation is encouraged, the division of roles according to gender has relaxed in tango communities the world over. At times responding to a lack of male partners, but also often framed as an interest in more fully understanding the mechanics of the dance, more and more women are learning to lead. And they are leading in social dance settings, though this is occurring chiefly outside of Buenos Aires. No longer just a classroom or practice endeavor, women are increasingly dancing with other women in milongas around the world. The gender balance outside of Buenos Aires may discourage the reverse among men, where they are often outnumbered by women, and thus less often at a loss for a partner. Still, the man who wishes to follow is offered comfort in the generally accepted notion that knowledge of the second role will assist one in execution of the first, as well as in tango lore and historic images that trace the dance’s origins and development to male-male practice (figure 6.1) (Benarós; Collier, Cooper, Azzi, and Martin; Thompson; Savigliano, Tango and the Political Economy of Passion; Salessi, “Medics, Crooks, and Tango Queens”; Tobin). Indeed, some Argentines have argued that the tradition of male-male practice produces sensitive and understanding leaders because they have first learned to follow, and they question the potential for female autonomy with the loss of that tradition today.

In the wake of La Marshall, Buenos Aires’s first and most popular “milonga gay” that opened in 2002, several gay-friendly venues have emerged in the city. Among the more successful is Tango Queer (figure 6.2), relocated on at least three occasions due to its growing popularity. Like La Marshall, Tango Queer is open to all regardless of sexual orientation and founded on the desire to create a space where everyone feels free to dance the role of her
or his choice. In weekly classes students learn both to lead and to follow, switching back and forth throughout the hour-and-a-half lesson. And gender is not necessarily the best indicator of a dancer’s role in the post-lesson milonga, where the exchange of leading and following, oftentimes within a single song, is a common sight. Further, beyond the weekly class and milonga, Tango Queer has a decidedly political bent. The founder Mariana Docampo advocates tango as a platform to engage larger questions of inclusion and exclusion grounded in the relationship between gender and power, and she frames tango an ideal form for this project, specifically because of its historically macho profile. Through events, including scholarly conferences and the annual international Queer Tango Festival (inaugurated in 2007), Tango Queer aims to link dancers, researchers, writers, and artists interested in the role of gender in tango to the larger fields of gender and queer studies.

Outside of these specifically advertised gay spaces, however, the absence of women leading and men following in the práctica scene is striking. On those rare occasions when women dance together outside the classroom, it is likely that one (if not both) is from abroad, while few men appear to dance together outside of La Marshall and practice venues. And in Buenos Aires’s more traditional venues, same-sex partnering could elicit outright hostility. Dancing with a woman one night at Confitería Ideal, I was unnerved by the attention my partner and I received from an elderly tanguero. A famed

Figure 6.1. *Un Tango en el Agua* (1912). Image courtesy of the Archivo General de la Nación, Dto. Doc. Fotográficos.
tango institution, Ideal is classic porteño-faded elegance, bestowing a sense of nostalgia on those who never even knew its better days. Popular to the point of being a museum, in Ideal traditional milonga codes were respected one moment and tossed aside the next: twenty-year-olds struggled with the subtleties of the cabeceo, while retirees would cockily cross the floor and walk straight up to the table to invite women to dance. But the hall remains a beloved bastion of the dance, and in such sites traditionalists often made it their business to keep transgressors in line. On this occasion it was a septuagenarian tanguero who crossed into the line of dance from the sidelines, invading our space mid-song—this a crime in and of itself. Smirking from beneath his fedora, he clapped in our faces and muttered “que bueno, que bueno, que bueno,” his voice dripping with condescension and disgust, the intention crystal clear for us: In Argentine tango, women follow men.

While it is essentially required that today’s female tango professionals understand the lead, this capacity does not appear to have a voice in the social realm in Buenos Aires comparable to that in the United States and Europe. When I have broached this topic with local professionals, they have framed the milonga and the práctica as social events designed to bring men and

Figure 6.2. Tango Queer. Photo by Karina Maccioli. Used by permission of Mariana Docampo of Tango Queer.
women together: “It’s a social thing—why I don’t dance with girls in the milonga. When I go out to a milonga or a práctica, the dance is no longer about investigating. . . . When I go to dance in the milonga, it’s an outing, it’s a social encounter. I’m going out to have fun and dance, and if I’m going to have fun and dance, I want to have fun with a boy” (Marcía [Argentine], tango professional). Simultaneously, some foreign women have described Buenos Aires as a sort of “follower’s candy store,” where the unimaginably large pool of male dancers renders leading unnecessary or even uninteresting:

In the United States tons of women are leading, but here there aren’t many women leading, really. There are women who know how to lead but women don’t lead socially. I was leading more than I was following in the United States, and I don’t know if I’ve led two songs in the past six months. I have no interest right now. I feel like leading for women also has a feeling of last resort, like “I want to dance tango and there’s no one to follow. Okay, I’ll lead.” If you get to follow, for a lot of people it doesn’t seem to be that important. (Miriam [American expatriate], tango professional)

Inherent in Miriam’s comment is a naturalization of the division of roles according to gender and, further, an acknowledgment that women tend to lead more out of necessity than desire. As Marcía noted, leading falls under the realm of “investigation”—arising from her need to understand the dance in a more complete fashion, in order to transfer that knowledge to students. While one might argue that women lead more in the United States and Europe because women enact a different notion of what it is to be female in those societies, many foreign tangueras described their entry into leading as a way to keep the tango interesting when there weren’t enough skilled men for them to follow or as a necessary step toward professionalization, rather than as an expression of feminist ideals.

A Nuevo Machismo?

I think it’s very clear in tango that the man leads and the woman follows. But that doesn’t mean that the woman is passive, nor does it mean that the man is the boss, that he commands the woman. Because the tango is a dialogue, it’s a conversation. One proposes the topic, and the other continues the conversation, and the content and the form of the dialogue is constructed by each. . . . The man who dances tango well dances smoothly, clearly, piecing together the dialogue one step at a time. And this isn’t a new idea. If you look at the old dancers, and
the true milongueros, the really good milongueros don’t have that arrogant attitude in their dance. On the contrary, the man who dances like that doesn’t know how to dance.— Olga Besio (Argentine), tango professional

En route to the milonga one night, I got into a discussion about the role of the woman in tango with Jorge, an Argentine expatriate living in the United States. He argued that what characterizes “traditional” tango are the pauses, and that it is the woman who signals and makes these pauses happen. Contrasting this to nuevo, where the man manipulates the woman through complicated, acrobatic figures that grant her no voice in what is happening, he suggested that the woman exerts much greater control in traditional tango. Dancers who identify with nuevo may disagree, contending that rather than acrobatics, the tango being danced by young people is grounded in a whole new manner of thinking about the dance, that an expansion in vocabulary accompanied this, and finally that calling it acrobatics reduces contemporary tango to one element—and not a necessary one by any means—that ignores the conceptual and pedagogic revolution at its heart. Still, such manipulation (or “manhandling” for some) and acrobatics do have their place in contemporary tango, complicating the link between nuevo and female autonomy.

Discussions of the meaning of *nuevo* at the level of movement vocabulary have yielded a wide range of observations. In response to the question of changes in the woman’s role in nuevo or contemporary tango, I encountered a few recurring themes. First, many dancers noted that the woman dances on her own axis, rather than leaning or depending upon the man. Also common was the idea that the dance’s increasingly complex vocabulary requires a more skilled and active follower. Describing increasing flexibility in the embrace—the embrace may open and close and there is more *disociación* or torsion (the spine is allowed to spiral, the torso may break from the hips, creating a more circular and less rigid dance) (figure 6.3)—many dancers argued that this grants the follower more freedom. Finally, many pointed to the introduction of movements “off-axis,” where one or both partners lean into or away from one another, as a recent development necessitating both a more skilled follower and a more sensitive leader.33

Many of these dancers would likely argue that women are just as free to introduce pauses in contemporary tango as they are in traditional tango. With the opening and loosening of the embrace, the follower is free to comment on the lead throughout her entire body, thus increasing her role in defining the dance. Moreover, I contend that the possibilities within the embrace have
expanded greatly, and I trace this directly to the increasing entry of dancers from other disciplines such as modern dance, classical ballet, contact improvisation, martial arts, and partner dances, including salsa, zouk, swing, and rock ’n’ roll, among others, and deliberate efforts on the part of these dancers, both professional and social, to expand the vocabulary of the dance through the integration of non-tango elements. The contributions of followers with training in other disciplines have allowed the tango to stretch beyond the bounds of the embrace. Now the woman does not remain rigidly upright or constantly pegged to the leader. Her legs, torso, and hips are relaxed and free to explore the space away from her partner, and the timing with which her limbs fly, explore, and rebound through space may slow down or speed up the

Figure 6.3. Disociación (Torsion). José Halfon and Virginia Cutillo, “El Tango en la Piel.” Body art by Alfredo Genovese. Used by permission of José Halfon and Virginia Cutillo.
lead, thus shaping the conversation. Finally, in moving the follower onto her
own axis (as opposed to the milonguero or “close” style of embrace, which
often encourages the follower to give weight to the leader), the leader grants
her greater control over her movement.34

Many young dancers from Buenos Aires and abroad connect the emanci-
pation of the follower to the evolution of the dance that began in the 1990s.
Further, as Luciana Valle suggests, changes in the gender politics of the dance
are rooted in larger social shifts that have empowered women in other aspects
of their lives:

The tango changed a lot; it evolved a lot and the last big change in the past
ten years is that of the woman. . . . The woman has a much more active role,
but not in the sense of stealing the lead. Not active in leading, but active in
dancing, because the woman is more active in life. Women carried on with
men differently, and they lived life differently. Today women are much
more active in general; they’re much more free in general, and so we dance
differently. (ε) (Luciana Valle [Argentine], tango professional)

Many also spoke of the evolution at the level of conceptualization and in-
struction and of the democratization of information in the classroom. Rather
than demonstrating entire figures for reproduction, the system developed
by Naveira and Salas broke the dance down to its simplest elements—front,
side, and back step—providing both leader and follower the basics with
which to deconstruct, improvise, and re-create their own dance. This facil-
itated the development of female teachers who command the classroom on
their own. Graciela González was considered revolutionary when she began
teaching classes in women’s technique in the 1980s. Such classes geared to-
ward and instructed by women are now quite popular; however, they gen-
erally address walking, balance, or the aesthetic contribution of the woman
through adornments or embellishments. Female instructors noted that to
move beyond women’s technique classes and to broaden their professional
possibilities, they had to take responsibility for understanding the mechan-
ics of both leading and following: “Until we’d studied enough to know what
happens in the dance in its totality, and not only how to follow the man, there
wasn’t work for women alone. But having studied a bit more profoundly, now
we’re able to travel and work on our own” (τ) (Cecilia González [Argentine],
tango professional).

Moreover, such knowledge provides security in a market where women are
viewed as plentiful and more easily replaced than men: “You need to teach,
to be the one speaking in order to have an independent reputation. Your dancing isn’t enough. And like we’ve all said a million times, there are more women who can dance at the level that they could partner with any of the top dancers than there are those top dancers, so the women are quite changeable” (Miriam [American expatriate], tango professional).

While the advances acknowledged above are noteworthy, resistance to women leading still exists among male tangueros. In one illuminating interview with a young porteño, he rejected the notion that a woman could hold her own as a leader in an advanced class. He then admitted that even if a woman could lead at the level of a male teacher, it made him uncomfortable:

Female instructors can’t teach advanced classes, aside from a women’s technique class. But they can’t demonstrate sequences that are long or difficult, because they can’t lead them. I don’t know of any girl. . . . There are some that lead well, but I don’t know of any who is at the level of a man. And if she is I don’t like it. It’s ugly. I don’t like how it looks. Because it’s a woman acting like a man. Maybe she can do it—lead the sequence—but I don’t like the way it looks, it turns me off. (τ) (Orlando [Argentine], tango professional; emphasis added)

While the image of the conversation might be the ideal, the fact remains that it is the leader who retains responsibility for initiating. With the position of lead comes the job of choreographing, on the spot, what will happen. In line with the quote opening this chapter, where women are “tools to have fun,” manipulation of the follower occurs among dancers of all ages, at times approaching something along the lines of manhandling. For instance, at an investigación (or investigation session, a closed practice session where a small group of dancers gather to work on steps) one night, I observed as three young Argentine men tried to execute a complicated figure with two foreign women. Tossing the women back and forth like dolls, they shouted over them in Spanish, talking much too quickly for the women to keep up as they discussed the mechanics of the step. It was only when they determined what the followers needed to do (without their input) that the men either spoke in English or more slowly and clearly in Spanish. This pattern continued for most of the night: the woman was relegated to the role of follower in every sense, her input in deconstructing the movement was deemed unnecessary, and the men dictated to her what she should do once they’d determined that among themselves. While there was arguably a problem of translation, and perhaps a differential in the skill level of the women versus the men, this
scene bespoke a fundamental asymmetry, where the follower was largely at the mercy of the leader.

Promotional images are often no less ambiguous in their take on gender relations. Veritable entrepreneurs who share equal footing with their male counterparts, female dancers are heavy hitters in today’s tango industry. Nonetheless, many contemporary tango ads tell a more complicated story, walking a fine line between celebrating and exploiting the female form (figure 6.4), linking the tango to sex through nudity and even references to domination. In these ads women may at once be the dominators and the protected, “tools to have fun” and acrobatic innovators, anonymous seductresses and savvy businesswomen, proudly flaunting and quite strategically trading on their feminine assets.

The nude male form is less often utilized as a promotional tool. However, a handful of ads in recent years point to a potential shift in this regard, most notably with the billboards and DVD cover image for Bocca Tango, in which we see almost all of Julio Bocca’s naked body. Of course, Bocca is famed for his long career as a ballet dancer, not as a tanguero, and the nude or partially nude male form has a long history in ballet. While shirtless men have appeared in a few tango ads of late (figure 6.3, for example), the message in this case has tended more toward male strength or even prowess. In general these images have appeared to reinforce the role of the male as protector and/or protagonist, in contrast to the ambivalence suggested by many representations of the tanguera’s body.

El Tango del Futuro

Contemporary tango continues to evolve. By 2010 a handful of new prácticas had emerged in Buenos Aires, more than one situated somewhere in between the traditional and the nuevo. Like the previously mentioned prácticas, these new spaces are organized by and cater to younger dancers. However, there is a palpable feeling in these sites that something new is occurring yet again. Many dancers frame this latest shift as a return to the “essence” of tango. In these spaces one can see a return to this essence in the closeness of the couple (as opposed to the more open embrace that had become common in prácticas), in the return to the tradition of dancing in tandas, in the relatively ordered look of the floor, and in the decidedly classic costumes donned by some of the city’s hottest young tango stars during their exhibitions.

The term nuevo is still tossed about and debated, and the reinvigoration of tradition has not yielded a rejection of innovation by any means. The “return
to the embrace” so evident on my most recent trip to Buenos Aires is not a mere reversion to a former image. Rather, young tangueros appear to be integrating the creativity and experimentation of so many years of “investigation” within the frame of a more closed embrace. Situating themselves in a hundred-year-old lineage, they are the most recent protagonists of the tango’s continued evolutions, recognizing El Cachafaz, Petróleo, and Naveira as their forebears. In these newer prácticas, as well as in their predecessors, there is a maturity and assuredness on the floor that contrasts with the rebelliousness (and occasional chaos) of only a few years earlier.

Flesh and blood evidence of yet another “new” era, Ariadna and Federico Naveira, the children of Gustavo Naveira and Olga Besio, are today’s rising tango stars. An exquisite dancer who blends femininity and power to
stunning effect, and who dances both roles flawlessly, Ariadna is known to exchange lead and follow on the social dance floor and in exhibitions with partner Fernando Sánchez.

At the same time, young dancers continue to wrestle with the tango’s fundamental contradictions. For instance, the organizers of the Estilo Parque Patricios festival of 2010 evoked in their promotional materials a simpler time, when groups of men met on street corners to practice steps, while a promotional flyer for a new práctica featured an anonymous woman’s torso, her crotch barely concealed by a dangerously low-cut bombacha (panty) from which a tattoo of revered composer and orchestra leader Osvaldo Pugliese emerges. In this image a return to the essence of tango does not preclude a more modern aesthetic when it comes to marketing, and the tanguera appears not necessarily as a dancer but as an object to be gazed upon or a body part to be fetishized.

Tango and machismo have become so intertwined in the global imaginary that their connection may (mistakenly) appear to be somehow causal. But machismo is not an element of the dance itself, and this linking of the two ignores the fact that the essence of the dance depends upon a social connection. The threat of machismo lies in the practices of individuals themselves, and in the relationship they must establish within the embrace. As one porteño teacher reminded me, this relationship is fraught with the potential for misunderstanding—especially in Buenos Aires, where the two dancers are often communicating across linguistic, cultural, and generational divides. While the foreign tanguera might ascribe her porteño partner’s behaviors to the macho culture of tango, machismo is not a problem specific to the dance. Ultimately, each exchange on the dance floor, and any problem that may arise within it, is the product of the two individuals who meet in an embrace.

The notion that meaning is dependent upon context is hardly revolutionary, but I would take this idea further to suggest that place in its larger sense—including its history, mythology, and the metaphysical traces it imparts upon people and things—impacts our actions, our interpretation of and response to behaviors. Following Michael Jackson’s notion of intersubjectivity, I suggest that activities that engage the self and other(s) offer participants an opportunity to confront difference. In tango this experience of being with others is heightened by the physically intimate, nonverbal nature of the dance itself. The differences that separate us—language, culture, worldview—are subsumed in the moment of the dance, and this ability to converse through tango may facilitate communication outside of the em-
brace. In short tango may have something to teach us about accepting difference, about allowing—even enjoying—contradiction, about honoring the existence of self and other.

This aptitude for playfulness—the capacity to receive and go with what you’re given, to advance and retreat, to perceive exactly when it’s your turn, which over time one hopes will blend into an almost seamless whole—is the gem at the heart of tango’s mystery and allure. And these skills that are so desired in the dance spill over into the social context. In Buenos Aires, where an increasing number of dancers seeking to carve out some kind of existence through the dance meet with the ever-growing barrage of tourists and expatriates seeking to experience the dance in its birthplace, the result is a dizzying but ultimately energizing clash of contradictory norms and desires. While a loosening of rigid social codes is inherent to the philosophy of nuevo, such new trends are subject to more intense scrutiny in the dance’s birthplace. I argue that the future of the dance lies in the ability of practitioners young and old, local and global, to transcend the romance and exoticism of the tango’s often consuming macho imaginary.

Notes

1. A milonga is a social event where people dance Argentine tango. Somewhere between a class and a milonga, a práctica is a space in which to practice without the strict codes of the milonga (which regulate the line of dance, musical programming and dancing in sets, the invitation to dance, clothing, and more). Buenos Aires’s práctica scene functions both as a supplement and an alternative to the milongas, but with codes deemed more appropriate for younger practitioners.

The bulk of data informing this chapter was gathered over two years in Buenos Aires (2005–2007), during which I conducted participant observation in tango classes, milongas, and prácticas; attended tango festivals, theatrical and dinner show productions, music concerts, and museums; conducted research at institutions, including the National Archives and the Academia Porteña de Lunfardo; and interviewed social and professional dancers from Argentina and abroad, milonga and práctica organizers, tango tour organizers, local and foreign festival organizers, local tango entrepreneurs, and officials from the Ministry of Culture. I also draw on experiences and observations from my early tango education in the United States (2002–2005), two preliminary trips to Buenos Aires in 2003 and 2005, my return to the United States in 2007, and a follow-up visit to Buenos Aires in 2010. Aside from two noted exceptions, interviews with Argentines were conducted in Spanish and I provide English translation of their words throughout. These quotations are noted either (τ): translation by the author from Spanish, or (ε): an English response from a non-native English speaker.

2. Decades before young, hip dancers coined the phrase, Astor Piazzolla called his
music *tango nuevo* in 1960. A classically trained musician, Piazzolla was famous for creating complex compositions rejected as “undanceable” by traditionalists, for bringing the tango into contact with other music, and for importing ideas from other genres into the tango. Largely responsible for keeping the tango alive among international audiences, his music inspired rancorous debate at home, where the most common criticism, “eso no es tango” (that is not tango), can still be heard today. The term has been traced back even further in tango dance to the famed Club Nelson men who instigated a period of rich choreographic innovation in their all-male practice groups in the 1940s (Thompson 257).

3. Dancers are divided as to whether the results of these investigations, both in the dance classroom and on the floor, have been good or bad, however.

4. Prácticas have long existed in tango. Transcending the implications of their name, these new prácticas are social venues for dancing tango (not really for practice), attended primarily by dancers in their twenties and thirties, where an entirely new set of codes has arisen to create a space more befitting younger bodies and minds. One of the longest-running and most important of these new spaces is El Motivo, an all-female run práctica, tango academy, and teacher training program inaugurated in 2004 by Luciana Valle, Valeria Batiuk, and Dina Martínez. A favorite among young dancers, El Motivo is also a powerful symbol of the expanding role of female professionals in the tango world. Luciana Valle, in particular, was a crucial figure in the early dissemination of nuevo principles in the United States, where she began touring and teaching in 1999, following her participation in the Naveira and Salas sessions.

5. Taylor points out that what appears the dominant and oppressive vocabulary of the male lead directly contradicts tango lyrics that portray the natural state of man to be suffering at the hands of women. See also Archetti on the “doubting masculinity” of tango lyrics (157) and Castro (“Carlos Gardel and the Argentine Tango”) on tango as the “song of male defeat” (70).


7. More than one dancer pointed out that it is the woman who controls the invitation to dance in traditional milongas through the cabeceo, the nonverbal invitation to dance secured through maintained eye contact, because it is only when she returns and holds the gaze directed at her that the invitation is accepted and the two leave their seats and make their way to the dance floor. In many tango communities in the United States and in Buenos Aires’s prácticas, it is not uncommon to see a woman physically approach and verbally invite a man to dance.

8. Graciela González (http://www.tangoweek.com/bios/old/graciellabio.html, accessed June 1, 2012) is often cited as the founder of “women’s technique” classes. Luciana Valle, Valeria Batiuk, and Dina Martínez are key figures in the resurgence of the práctica in Buenos Aires (http://www.elmotivotango.com/quienes.html, accessed June 1, 2012). Olga Besio, former partner of Gustavo Naveira, has had a long solo career and
has brought tango to children since 2000 through her Tango con Niños program. Susana Miller (http://www.susanamiller.com.ar/, accessed June 1, 2012) is largely responsible for bringing tango milonguero to students in the United States and Europe. Ana Maria Schapira (http://www.tangopulse.net/interviews/ana_maria_schapira.php, accessed June 1, 2012) has run her own tango milonguero academy in Buenos Aires since 1999. Cecilia González (http://www.tangomotion.com/vision.php, accessed June 1, 2012) and Carla Marano (http://sites.google.com/site/carlamarano/, accessed June 1, 2012) are among the newer generation of female dancers who teach both on their own and with different male partners, in addition to teaching women’s technique classes.

9. Globalization is nothing new in tango—indeed it was central to its early development and to the more recent renaissance of tango dance beginning in the mid-1980s—but I argue here that the degree and intensity of global interconnections that marks our modern lives distinguishes such processes today from those of the past.

10. The piropo is widely documented in many Spanish-speaking cultures. Here, I draw attention to its use in marking space and defining dance style and community in the Buenos Aires tango scene.

11. A milonguero is someone who attends the milongas frequently, sometimes every night. Historically, the term often carried negative connotations, to refer to a man who “lives” in the milongas, is unemployed or barely holds down a job, and in many cases, is supported by a woman or family. The term was appropriated by a sector of porteño dancers and organizers in the 1990s to brand a style of tango danced in a close or “chest-to-chest” embrace, featuring a simple vocabulary that stresses rhythmic complexity, and that was quite successfully marketed locally and abroad as the “real” tango danced in Buenos Aires’s milongas, where the crowded dance floors often do not permit a more open frame.

12. See France. Memory is particularly politicized in Argentina as regards the horrific events of the Dirty War or the proceso, the “process of national reorganization” carried out by the military dictatorship that ruled from 1976 to 1983, during which it is estimated that up to thirty thousand Argentine citizens were “disappeared” under a program of state-sponsored terrorism aimed at ridding the country of subversives. Sites dedicated to remembering these events in Buenos Aires include the Parque de la Memoria, the Paseo de los Derechos Humanos, and the ESMA museum (un espacio para la Memoria y para la Promoción y Defensa de los Derechos Humanos) on the site of the naval school that served as a torture center. The Madres de la Plaza de Mayo (http://www.madres.org/navegar/nav.php, accessed June 1, 2012) and the Abuelas de la Plaza de Mayo (http://www.abuelas.org.ar/, accessed June 1, 2012) have long devoted themselves to uncovering the truth regarding those who were disappeared and to recovering the children of the disappeared, respectively, and for many years the Mothers attracted international attention to the plight of Argentines through public performances in which they “remembered” the disappeared by marching before the Casa Rosada, their heads covered under white kerchiefs embroidered with the names of the missing. Also, see Memoria Abierta (http://www.memoriaabierta.org.ar, accessed June 1, 2012), an organization dedicated to preserving the memory of events that occurred under this period of state terrorism.
13. While Sebreli cites Buenos Aires as the world’s third noisiest city (280), a World Health Organization report in 2006 ranks it the noisiest city in Latin America. Sergio Avello’s “Volumen,” which ranks the city’s ever-changing decibel level via a system of noise-sensitive lights installed on the front steps of the MALBA, speaks to the often oppressive character of the city’s noise (http://volumenurbano.blogspot.com/, accessed June 1, 2012).

14. See also Jacques-Alain Miller on the piropo as an indication of lack of interest, an attempt to connect with one’s object of desire (where that object is represented by any unknown woman), and a form of aggression in which the recipient is a “fiction,” a woman who represents all women for the piropeador.

15. Taylor explores gender roles in greater depth in Paper Tangos; in particular, see her discussion of a scene from a tango class in which dancers reversed roles only to have the professor relegate such an exercise to the classroom, specifically to assist the male to better understand his role as leader (86–87).

16. See Plebs.

17. Fabiano notes that Argentines often use the terms marcar (“mark” or “show the way”) and responder (“respond”) to describe the mechanics of the dance, while Tobin suggests that “el hombre propone y la mujer dispone” (the man proposes and the woman decides) is a common expression in the porteño tango world. During my time in Buenos Aires and in my interviews with Argentine dancers, I found that llevar and seguir (“lead” and “follow”) were more frequently used. Tobin suggests this reflects foreign influence, especially during the early 1900s, when tango was codified and tamed by European dance masters who transformed the dance into a bourgeois commodity to be consumed by an international elite schooled in the heterosexist politics of leading and following (94). One young porteño professional suggested that llevar and seguir were the preferred terms in verb form and that la marca (“the lead”) might be the preferred term for the noun form.

18. Salessi, “Medics, Crooks, and Tango Queens”; Savigliano, Tango and the Political Economy of Passion; and Tobin all draw attention to the “masculine” character of the women who were involved in tango’s early development.

19. See also Garramuño’s discussion of the cultural processes that have facilitated the integration of “primitive” elements into “modern” tango and samba, as a means of both amplifying understandings of the modern and demonstrating how once primitive cultural products have transformed themselves to become acceptable national symbols.

20. Tango is not always learned in a classroom setting. Writings and interviews left by the tangueros of yore and the milongueros of today speak to the survival of the dance through “acquisition” (see Del Mazo and D’Amore; Thompson; and Savigliano, Tango and the Political Economy of Passion). A typically nonacademic process, tango was passed down from one generation to the next through contact with the dance itself, through practice with family, neighbors, and friends. No longer a dance of the masses, such “acquisition” is increasingly being replaced by more formal classroom education in Buenos Aires, which is also the most common path for dancers outside of Argentina. Many point to the tango’s transformation into industry and the growing emphasis upon the consumption of classes as evidence of the demise of “traditional” tango.
21. In contrast with its humble origins and general association with lower-class porteños (despite a lengthy period of widespread popular appeal between 1920 and 1950), tango communities around the globe are decidedly middle- and upper-class enclaves, where the majority of practitioners are degree-holding members of the professional class and thus generally educated, successful, and financially stable. In particular foreign women spoke to the initial distance they perceived between their assertive, independent, egalitarian selves and the tango self who “surrenders,” “follows,” and “listens.”

22. According to Barco, four out of every ten visitors mention tango as a reason to visit Buenos Aires, a $400 million a year global industry. In 2000 a report by the *International Herald Tribune* (F. Ortiz) sets the number of tango tourists at twenty-five thousand per year. In 2009 the *Observer* reported that the tango industry brings $100 million annually to Buenos Aires (Carroll and Balch).

23. As tango communities have grown around the world and Buenos Aires has situated itself as the center of the global tango industry, the milongas have become sites for the city’s growing class of tango professionals to promote themselves. This shift toward the milonga as both marketplace and spectacle, as opposed to merely social gathering, incurred greater demands upon women to look good, as well as the growth of “exhibitions,” or short performances by professional couples at the milongas. The growth of exhibitions has been accompanied by a general shift toward more elaborate and showy choreography, in particular for the woman, and an image of professional tango that favors a young and agile female body (often capable of executing balletic and acrobatic movements), while the man may be of any age.

24. See the late Gavito’s explanation of being a milonguero and the “men’s table” in Trotta.

25. See Tobin on “phallic displays,” or the pairing of elder male dancers with *nenas* (girls) in exhibitions as evidence of the “homosocial desire” that marks tango, evidenced in the milongueros’ verbal exchanges of praise in response to their displays of young women.


27. The United States currently ranks highest in the number of cosmetic procedures, Argentina in eleventh place, according to a survey of 2011 by the International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, but the growth of “destination” cosmetic and medical industries suggests the intensifying triangular relationship of economics, aesthetics, and health. While economic inequities are surely driving the commodification of medical care, they may also be encouraging aesthetic surgery among locals in the postcolonial sites where many middle-class First World clients go for such procedures, unable to afford such luxuries at home.

28. Under the presidency of Carlos Menem, Argentina passed the Convertibility Law in April 1991, which converted the peso to a one-to-one fixed rate in relationship to the U.S. dollar. A host of factors in the late 1990s precipitated the country’s economic crisis and a series of currency devaluations and adjustments in late 2001 and early 2002, including rising unemployment, the appreciation of the peso (alongside the U.S. dollar)
in relation to its trading partners’ currencies, Brazil’s economic crisis (which also hurt Argentine exports), the devaluation of the peso for foreign trade, a series of debt restructurings, and bank runs (widespread efforts to withdraw funds from bank accounts) with declining confidence in the peso and rumors of default. Following a 29 percent devaluation in early 2002 for major foreign commercial transactions, and the institution of a floating rate for all other transactions, the peso quickly fell to 2.05 (to the dollar) in active trading (Hornbeck). By early 2003, the peso had stabilized in a nearly 3:1 relation to the dollar (BBC “Q&A”). While the peso moved toward a 4:1 relationship in the late 2000s, and was officially at 5.44:1 in July of 2013, this has been accompanied by rising inflation. However, the combined impact of these trends is hard to gauge in the face of declining trust in INDEC, the government statistics bureau, since a host of analysts were let go or resigned following the institution of a new method for calculating inflation, introduced by a government appointee (Gabino; Barrionuevo).

29. In relation to the growing aesthetic surgery industry, a Renfrew Center report of 2003 estimates that the rate of eating disorders in Argentina is three times that of the United States (Renfrew Center Foundation).

30. For instance, in 2010 Google declared the CougarLife dating website (for women seeking younger men) “non-family safe” and prohibited ads for such sites from displaying on their content pages, yet they did not extend the same categorization to websites geared toward older men seeking younger women (Kershaw).

31. A *tanda* is a musical set of three to four songs, all either waltzes, tangos, or milongas, in which dancers remain with the same partner until a *cortina* (thirty-second fragment of non-tango music) indicates the end of the set.

32. Tobin and Salessi (“Medics, Crooks, and Tango Queens”) highlight tango’s homosexual and gender transgressive roots, noting public discourse surrounding male transvestite prostitutes in the brothels that gave birth to the tango, as well as shifting gender roles in early twentieth-century Buenos Aires, exemplified by “masculine” women entering the public domain (whether prostitutes, artists, including early tango singers, or working-class women) and the “feminine” tango pimp, a vain character who depended upon a woman to support him.

33. More than one dancer argued that these themes could be used to describe expert “traditional” training for women as well. An arguable change in the look of tango when one travels from the milonga to the práctica is the increased distance that may separate the partners, the more frequent rupture of the embrace, and the increasing integration of non-tango vocabulary on the social dance floor. That such themes are championed by tangueras with “traditional” training underscores the difficulty in defining nuevo; furthermore, it demonstrates the tendency to assert independence from predecessors through a linking of style, generation, and culture.

34. This last point perhaps reflects the growing popularity of close embrace or milonguero style tango from the 1990s. While this image is not representative of traditional tango in a more general sense, nuevo and/or younger dancers might frame the woman standing on her own axis as something “new” because they had earlier been schooled in milonguero style or because the milonguero embrace had become popular in certain locales. Foreign influence may play a role here as well, for close embrace tango is often
promoted through the language of “authenticity” and sold as the “real tango of Buenos Aires,” danced in a tight embrace to accommodate the city’s small and crowded dance floors.

35. The reverse may also be true. For instance, I once heard men referred to as “danceable objects” by a traditional tanguera, the point being that both male and female dancers are capable of manipulating their partners or using their partners for entirely self-serving purposes.

36. Also, see a December 2009 interview with Mariano “Chicho” Frumboli (star pupil of Naveira and Salas, renowned for his unparalleled inventiveness and musicality, and generally cited as a global ambassador of tango nuevo, though like Naveira and Salas he has long rejected the title), in which he discusses how many younger dancers have lost touch with the essence and depth of the dance following years in which investigation and an obsession with creativity reigned (Plebs).