As the chapters in this edited volume attest, tango is a rich and diverse cultural phenomenon. Global audiences have been familiar with tango from its circulation in films, television, musical recordings, and other media going back at least to the Parisian tango “craze” of 1917 if not earlier (Matsuda). In these circulatory contexts, tango has served as a conduit for the creative misunderstandings and cross-cultural fantasies that are at the heart of cultural globalization as it is envisioned today (Tsing). At the same time, such global circulations have not eroded the deep meanings the genre has in local contexts. In Argentina, for instance, tango has been drawn upon as a potent symbol of the nation throughout modern Argentine history, contributing at different times to the project of national consolidation (Bergero), the projection of the nation within global politics and economies (Goertzen and Azzi), the local rearticulation of musical modernism, and current efforts to promote Argentina as a destination for cultural tourism (Marchini).

This complex narrative of cultural production and creativity was turned on its head by the devastating Argentine economic crisis of late 2001. The economic crisis caused tremendous hardship in Argentina, the severity of which is difficult to overstate: during the crisis the nation’s GDP rapidly dropped 15 percent, the open unemployment rate rose to 25 percent, and the number of households living in poverty reached nearly 50 percent (Felix 2002). In the context of the widespread human suffering represented in these statistics, music might not seem particularly important. But debates going on within tango nevertheless engage the crisis and the broader contours of
Contemporary Tango and the Cultural Politics of Música Popular

Argentine history in ways that cannot be reduced to a symbolic function. In other words, contemporary tango not only reflects the impact the economic crisis of the early twenty-first century had on Argentine society, culture, and history, but is also an integral and productive part of those contexts.

In particular tango has become a focus of the many “managerial regimes” that shape how music and the arts are produced and consumed in post-crisis Buenos Aires. By managerial regime I mean any entity that aims to channel cultural practices into resources for social and/or economic development. In the case of tango, these regimes include the cultural industries and other media corporations, nonprofit and nongovernmental arts organizations, and, especially, the cultural policies of the city government of Buenos Aires. Similar trends can be observed at the global level, with governments the world over increasingly framing local cultures as a natural or renewable resource in need of management like any other (see Yúdice, The Expediency of Culture). The two quintessential examples of this are, on the one hand, the traditional cultural knowledge of indigenous and other place-based ethnic groups (Escobar) and, on the other, culture with a capital C, that is, philharmonic orchestras, art museums, and other high-art institutions that are promoted as the engines of urban renewal and economic development above and beyond whatever aesthetic value the “content” they contain or produce might have (Miller and Yúdice).

What does not fit this managerial model so well—and what I want to focus on here—is the category of so-called popular arts, especially popular music, which are neither traditional culture nor high art in the way those domains have tended to be conceived by governmental cultural agencies, nongovernmental arts organizations, and other managerial regimes. This incongruity is even more acute in the context of Latin America, where the idea of the popular as it is used in discussions of música popular is particularly nuanced. In Latin America the term música popular not only describes specific forms of musical style and mediation (as does the English term popular music) but also lingering hierarchies of musical value that are closely correlated with macro-patterns of social exclusion and inclusion (Capellano). That is, in Latin America the idea of música popular is associated not only with the relations between tradition and mass mediation but also with the social definitions of inclusion and exclusion centered on the popular or the people as a social and political category (Martín-Barbero). These patterns map directly onto musical concerns, such that socially popular genres of music have been largely excluded from most support programs for the arts in Argentina, that
is, from the sphere of official cultural politics (Luker, “The Managers, the Managed and the Unmanageable”).

Tango occupies a curious position within this larger discussion. On the one hand, it is clearly popular music as that term is usually understood in English: it is considered by some to be of inferior quality to other musics, it is neither folk nor art music, it has been and remains fully entrenched within the mass media and cultural industries, and so on (see Middleton). On the other hand, it is no longer música popular as that term is deployed in Spanish. Indeed, one of the key facts of tango’s life as a genre in contemporary Buenos Aires is that it no longer functions as a música popular—a cultural practice that both expresses and articulates the people as a lived social and political category—as it very much had in previous historical moments. Tango’s break from the popular experience led to a steep decline of the genre in Argentina, despite its continued salience as a potent symbol of Argentine culture within the national imaginary and global representations. And it is precisely this dual trend of detachment and connection that makes tango such a productive resource for so many different projects in Buenos Aires today—not so much a national genre (that is, a sonic icon of the nation state) as a national brand, something used to bolster a wide variety of developmental projects, the value of which clearly extends beyond the aesthetic domain. At the same time, these tensions have also made the genre a highly charged zone of engagement for alternative musical practices and cultural politics of the popular in contemporary Argentina.

I want to ground this discussion in an analytic and ethnographic examination of Astillero, a contemporary tango ensemble whose work is based on remaking tango as a música popular, that is, on rearticulating the genre’s relationship to a specifically Latin American notion of the popular. For the members of Astillero, tango must operate as música popular in order to be socially meaningful and aesthetically effective, despite the fact that tango has not functioned in this particular way for some fifty years in Argentina. I will discuss the formal details of Astillero’s music and the social milieu in which it circulates and is made meaningful. Each of these domains is framed by the contested musical and social histories of tango as a popular genre in Argentina, as well as the larger challenges posed by the economic crisis of 2001 and its aftermath. Taken together, I will show how Astillero’s project of remaking tango as a música popular must be understood as taking into account both a musical style and a social movement, an aesthetic ideology and an embodied social practice. This example—like the popular as such—allows
us to question the managerial impulse to productivity that is increasingly determining cultural life in Buenos Aires and beyond, while also helping us to better understand the changing role of music and the arts within the global context of crisis.

Música Popular in Tango History and Memory

Formed in May 2005, Astillero is a sextet of two bandoneonists, a violinist, a cellist, a bassist, and a pianist, plus a singer. Brought together by the pianist and composer Julián Peralta—who is one of the key figures within the contemporary tango scene in Buenos Aires—the group is dedicated exclusively to the composition and performance of original tango music. While this focus on original composition may seem unexceptional, the group operates in a historical juncture that has made the very act of composing original tangos—and perhaps the performance of tango in itself—a highly charged domain of musical activity. On the one hand, there is the repetition of memory on the part of Argentine tango audiences nostalgic for times and musics past, making them notoriously unreceptive to new, original work. On the other hand, I would argue that the majority of Argentines—especially those who came of age during and following the last military dictatorship (1976–1983)—have generally ignored tango if not rejected it outright, despite its influence on some early forms of Argentine rock music (Vila, “Argentina’s ‘Rock Nacional’”).

Claiming this position has therefore required that the group both break from and recommit to tango as a musical genre, a stance that they have theorized as the “tango of rupture.” As Patricio “Tripa” Bonfiglio, the group’s first bandoneonist, explained to me in an interview: “We talk about the tango of rupture precisely because it is not classic tango—it is a new tango, with new elements, but it comes from tango itself. It breaks with the classic scheme without falling into fusion, because it does not incorporate elements taken from other genres. It’s not that we break with tango by using jazz harmonies, but by developing the extreme gestures that are in tango but have never been interpreted in this way. So it breaks with the classic scheme but from within the genre” (Bonfiglio). While Astillero’s musical style is a sharp departure from that of previous tango groups, their tango of rupture in fact represents a break with tango’s recent musical history more than a break in musical sound per se. Understanding the stakes in this statement and in the group’s musical project as a whole therefore requires an (admittedly broad-stroked) overview of the history of tango music in Argentina.
The history of tango music is generally divided into three periods, to which I would like to add a fourth. First is La guardia vieja or the Old Guard period, which began with the genre’s initial formation on the outskirts of Buenos Aires (and Montevideo, Uruguay) in the late nineteenth century and ended with its codification as a national genre during and after the First World War. Significant parts of the classic tango repertoire were composed and published during this period, and many of the core stylistic features of the genre were consolidated at this time. Furthermore, many of the key aesthetic tropes and social sensibilities still associated with tango—such as passion, sexuality, loss, nostalgia, violence, and the ruptures of urban modernization—derive from and conjure the guardia vieja moment, though I think it is also important to acknowledge the mythologizing role that works of literature such as Jorge Luis Borges’s “Hombre de la esquina rosada” (1935; “Man on Pink Corner,” 1998) and others retroactively played in cementing these associations. Highlighting this back and forth between the musical history of tango and the history of thinking, writing, and talking about tango is significant because, in general, the documented history and historic material culture of tango is rather limited. As such, many historical claims about the genre, including those presented here, are arguably better understood, at least partially, as narratives of musical memory rather than music history per se.

Second is the golden age period, which dates from roughly the mid-1920s to 1955, during which tango reached its peak as both a popular music and a música popular in Argentina. At the height of the golden age, in the 1940s into the 1950s, tango was a massively popular music in the broadest sense of the term. There were innumerable large-scale tango ensembles known as orquestas típicas, both professional and amateur, that performed for large dancing audiences in venues ranging from the most refined and lavish dancehalls of the city center to the most humble social clubs in the suburban outskirts and beyond into the provinces (Sierra). Social tango dancing was a widespread phenomenon, enjoyed by all but the very highest strata of society, and the top bandleaders were stars who would come to have corners, streets, and subway stations named for them. At the same time, domestic cultural industries produced and promoted an array of tango media, from radio broadcasts to records, starting with 78s and then LP recordings, and from tango-themed magazines and books to tango film and, later, television production (Castro, The Argentine Tango as Social History).

Following the golden age is what is known as the “vanguard” period, which roughly covers the years from the late 1950s to the early 1990s, though in many
ways the vanguard movement is still very much alive and well today. The vanguard period was defined in part by a self-conscious attempt to transform tango into what could be described as an alternative art music. These efforts are most famously associated with the composer, bandoneonist, and bandleader Astor Piazzolla (1921–1992), whose *nuevo tango* or new tango style deliberately fused tango gestures with forms and techniques drawn from Western art music and jazz. These included utilizing specific compositional techniques such as fugal counterpoint, developing a more extensive (though not necessarily improvisatory) role for virtuosic instrumental soloists, drawing upon larger-scale compositional structures such as suites and other extended forms, utilizing smaller instrumental forces such as quartets or quintets (versus the ten to twelve members of a golden age orquesta típica), and cultivating performance contexts—such as genre-specific nightclubs and formal concert settings—that encouraged focused listening over social dancing (Azzi and Collier).

Along with these and other musical innovations, the vanguard period was also defined by the precipitous decline of tango as a popular form in Argentina, which happened for a number of specific musical, historical, and political reasons. In particular the members of Astillero trace the decline of tango as a música popular to the violent ouster of the populist president Juan Perón in September 1955. Upon taking power, the new provisional government declared a state of siege that, among other things, banned large public gatherings of any kind, including the innumerable formal and informal tango dances that were then taking place throughout the city (James). While the new regime was probably not anti-tango in any meaningful way—despite the fact that many prominent golden age tango musicians were ardent Peronists (Azzi, “The Tango, Peronism and Astor Piazzolla”)—its generalized fear of oppositional organizing outweighed whatever value tango dances and other ostensibly harmless social activities may have had, and they were swept away as collateral damage, if only temporarily. Nevertheless, the state of siege effectively drained the financial, social, and cultural lifeblood of the golden age orquestas típicas, if not the genre as a whole, marking what the members of Astillero considered the beginning of the end of tango as a música popular in Argentina.8

In the wake of these and other political ruptures and aesthetic upheavals, post–golden age tango came to be perceived, in the words of Julián Peralta, as “more and more conservative, more reactionary,” eventually taking on entrenched negative associations with the vast majority of Argentines
who came of age during and following this transitional period, despite the real (though generally singular) successes of certain tango-related cultural productions and representations (Peralta, Interview). Over time, however, tango came to have a renewed significance for many Argentines, especially those who are active in the current musical “renovation” of tango taking place in Buenos Aires today, including the members of Astillero and many of their peers. This renovation of tango, which I would suggest as a fourth period of tango history, began in the mid- to late 1990s. It is defined less by a dominant musical style than by a self-conscious return to tango as a means of reexamining and rearticulating the genre’s historical tropes and meanings against contemporary experiences and concerns (Luker, “Tango Renovación”). It is crucial to recognize that these artists have not taken up tango because it somehow inherently speaks to them or their concerns in ways that other musical forms or genres do not. On the contrary, it is the temporal distance between these artists and the more reactionary elements of post–golden age tango—that has allowed those renovating tango to approach the genre in ways that are influenced but not overdetermined by the broader sweep of music history. As Julián Peralta explained in an interview: “Forty years have passed, and in those forty years we appeared, a generation for which tango has lost some of its bad connotations. For us tango was nothing more than music, it returned to being nothing more than music, because when we listened to it tango was beyond all that other stuff. It was just records, which we approached with other connotations, able to say ‘hey, there is some good music here’” (Peralta, Interview).

When considered within this historical context, Astillero’s tango of rupture can be heard as a fundamental critique of the previous vanguard movement and what they perceived as the broader decline of post–golden age tango. For instance, where the tango of rupture is based on transforming tango from within the genre itself, the vanguard movement deliberately looked outside of tango for new techniques and inspiration. As such, Astillero’s tango of rupture is a musical style that is essentially about music history. At the same time, the members of Astillero have been drawn to “classic tango”—by which they mean golden age tango of the pre-vanguard period—not only because of its rich musicality but also because tango then operated as música popular. The group incorporates and exaggerates features of golden age tango in their original compositions in order to create a contemporary music that can sonically claim the historic legacy of tango as a popular form. Thus, despite Astillero’s
modernist discourse of rupture with the tango tradition, their project in fact marks a return to concerns with cultural history and local musical meanings. The stakes in this project go beyond those of musical revivalism to matters of social and historical renewal via new forms of artistic synthesis within a context of profound crisis, with musical form itself operating as the privileged site of historical and artistic intervention. It is therefore crucial to examine how this process operates at the level of musical gesture.

Música Popular as Music

The utilization of a set of standard accompaniment patterns is, in many ways, what defines tango as a genre. The most basic and fundamental of these patterns is the marcato, in which the accompanying instruments articulate all four downbeats in a 4/4 measure. There are two general ways of playing marcatos, one giving an equal emphasis to all four beats of the bar and the other placing accents on the first and third beats. These differences may seem minimal, but they have strikingly different effects in practice. Another fundamental accompaniment pattern is the síncopa, the basic rhythmic form of which, in a 4/4 bar, is: eighth note, eighth note, eighth note rest, eighth note, quarter note, quarter note rest (see figure 7.1).

Like the marcato, the síncopa can also be varied depending on how it is accented. These variations can be expanded even further by applying different sorts of accented or unaccented arrastres—rhythmic anticipations of as much as a half of a beat—to the basic pattern. These variations provide tango with much of its rhythmic liveliness. Indeed, while the Spanish term síncopa could be translated as “syncopation,” without arrastres and various other forms of accentuation the basic síncopa accompaniment pattern does not actually produce any musical syncopation.10 Julián Peralta and other members of Astillero believed that the pattern’s seemingly inappropriate name was a holdover from its origin in the fusion of what were (and are) two truly syncopated accompaniment patterns found in the bordoneo texture (see figure 7.2) of the milonga campera, a genre of folkloric music from Buenos Aires province.

While the bordoneo itself is occasionally heard in tango (as one of several more standardized accompaniment patterns), perhaps the clearest folkloric influence in tango is the 3–3–2 eighth note rhythmic division that is derived from the bass accompaniment figure of the milonga campera (seen in the downward facing stems in figure 7.2). However, formal links between specific aspects of folkloric practice and fundamental features of tango like the
síncopa and the 3–3–2—as clearly as they might be heard—tend to be underappreciated if not rejected outright by many of the genre’s aficionados, who imagine tango as a deeply if not exclusively cosmopolitan genre in congruence with broader trends in Argentine modernism. Still, the members of Astillero consider such connections between tango and Argentine folk music to be a core component of what makes tango compelling to their generation of Argentines. For if nothing else, folkloric music is another form of música popular, the acceptance or rejection of which parallels tropes of inclusion and exclusion that are at the heart of Argentine cultural politics, musical and otherwise. Therefore musical features such as the marcato, the síncopa, and the 3–3–2 are not just generic stylistic features of tango but also the sonic foundation upon which coherent readings of musical and social history can be constructed.

While the deliberate use of accompaniment patterns from golden age tango can be used to emphasize the popular roots of tango, other features of Astillero’s music connect their work to different types of values. A particular use of musical motives, for instance, links Astillero’s music to popular ideologies of musical sophistication and compositional rigor. In tango, as in other forms of music, a motive functions as the smallest unit recognizable as a distinct musical idea, with specific melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic characteristics. Usually no more than one or two measures in length, motives are used as the fundamental unit of melodic development in tango, the building blocks of larger musical ideas. Complete melodic phrases, for example, are often made up of a sequence of imitative and/or contrastive motives; units of two or more phrases, in turn, can be arranged into larger parts; parts can be paired to create a complete song and so on. Motivic constructions of this
sort can be heard throughout the repertory of golden age tango. Therefore, however formulaic such motive-oriented music might be, adhering to these types of melodic constructions also operates as a way for contemporary composers to maintain their allegiance to the genre’s traditional compositional processes.

At the same time, some golden age tango composers used motivic development in a more extensive fashion, creating compositions that are today exalted as something akin to a popular art music. The tango composer, pianist, and bandleader Osvaldo Pugliese’s (1905–1995) piece “La Yumba” (1943) is emblematic in this regard. Based on the elaborate development of a single motivic cell that is varied and expounded upon throughout the course of the piece, it has been described on numerous occasions as “the Beethoven’s Fifth of tango.” The compositional rigor of this piece, alongside its undisputable position at the core of the popular tango tradition, has served as a key inspiration for Astillero’s project of creating original tangos that can be both musically rich and socially popular. As Julián Peralta observed: “One does not need to make bad music in order for it to have reach. Pugliese demonstrated that [with “La Yumba.”] . . . It shows that one can make a song . . . with an almost Schubert-like structure, but in a certain moment it can become música popular because . . . it transcends conscious enjoyment and just hits you in the gut” (Peralta, Interview). While these and other compositional techniques can be and are valorously compared to those found in Western art music, my interlocutors repeatedly emphasized their development within tango itself. Therefore, while many contemporary tango composers are familiar with Western art music and its techniques, the motivic orientation of golden age tango predisposes them to compositional practices that might appear borrowed from Western art music but in fact emerged from the common practice of tango as a popular form. Utilizing such techniques does not add value to tango by raising it to the so-called higher level of an external art music, but instead it marks the inherent sophistication and artistic merit of tango as a música popular.

Given this emphasis on composition, it is perhaps not surprising that tango, in general, is not a highly improvisatory music. The golden age orquestas típicas, for instance, played from written parts in which most aspects of a given composition and/or arrangement were notated, including instrumental solos. However, there was and is a significant amount of interpretive space between what is notated on the page and what an ensemble or individual performer is at liberty and indeed expected to play. This is especially true
regarding overall rhythmic interpretation, which, in tango, is based on exaggerating the perceived pull that the notes that fall on the “strong” beats of the bar (one and three) exert on those that fall on the “weak” beats (two and four). When executed effectively, this interpretive style creates a rhythmic tension that makes it sound as if the strong beats of the bar are being rushed, when in fact the strong beats remain metrically steady as the rest of the musical material is slightly delayed, thereby creating a rhythmic swing that is essentially the opposite of that heard in straight ahead jazz.

The members of Astillero believed that the rhythmic tension created by this performance practice was central to tango’s appeal as popular dance music, and therefore learning how to interpret pieces according to these principles was considered a key component of performing tango “correctly.” Patricio “Tripa” Bonfiglio took these associations even further in my beginning bandoneon lessons with him, explaining to me that tango’s particular rhythmic feel could be understood as a musical embodiment of the tension, toughness, and looming violence that is at the heart of popular identity and experience in Argentina—in tango and beyond—both past and present. For example, in teaching me what he considered an acceptable rhythmic interpretation for the opening phrase of Jesús Ventura’s composition “A la gran muñeca” (1920; famously recorded by Carlos Di Sarli in 1951), Patricio constantly reminded me that tango was a popular form, that it was what he called “bien italiano.” He illustrated the musical implications of this by setting the piece’s rhythmically simple melodic line to a common but very vulgar set of Argentine curse words, creating heavy accents on the strong beats and their corresponding rhythmic drag on the rest of the measure: “CON-cha de tu MA-dré.”12 Though he used it only to illustrate the larger rhythmic concept, setting the line to these curse words made for a good interpretation not only because it highlighted the kind of rhythmic tension any version of the piece would need in order to be heard as tango but also because it established the stakes of remaking tango música popular.

By incorporating these and other features of golden age tango into their contemporary compositions, Astillero aligns its music with historical practices that its members believe to be essential components of what once made tango a música popular. These features are, in a way, what tango as a popular form is, and using them is what makes music tango. That said, the group has by no means embraced all the musical features of golden age tango, and those that they do draw upon are often exaggerated in an extreme way.13 Taken as a whole, Astillero’s music breaks with some of the most reified stereotypes of
tango without rejecting—or indeed radically altering—the musical fundamentals of the genre as it was practiced during the golden age, again suggesting a new concern for cultural synthesis on the part of these artists despite their modernist discourse of rupture. This, coupled with their rejection of the vanguard’s impulse toward fusion, is ultimately what the tango of rupture is about: reaffirming the genre’s roots in popular practice while reinvigorating it as a newly relevant form, something capable of speaking to a wider range of contemporary experiences in a way that golden age tango no longer could. As Mariano Caló, the group’s second bandoneonist, observed in an interview:

Tango was originally born from nostalgia, from the “lost world” [of the immigrants], but now that nostalgia is not there. I don’t miss any lost world because I was born here, my parents were born here. But there are other things that happen, this is a messed up country, a lot of things happen. . . . So it’s not that we just have a style: if you sit down to compose a tango today this is what comes out: something violent, with strong rhythms, influenced by a lot of things that have happened. There just aren’t many more ways of making tango today, making tango as a música popular. (Caló)

Música Popular as Social Practice

These formal features and compositional techniques are part of what makes Astillero’s tango of rupture popular music, but they are not everything that make it música popular. In Buenos Aires, as in the rest of Latin America, música popular is defined less by matters of musical style and mediation than by specific types of popular social institutions and networks, including, in the case of golden age tango, the large milieu of professional and amateur musicians who performed in the orquestas típicas, the social network of tango dancers and other audience members, and the institutional structures of neighborhood social clubs and other performance spaces. In other words, golden age tango was not música popular because it had a mass audience and was distributed through the mass media, it was música popular because it served as the center of gravity around which a specific type of participatory popular culture could coalesce, creating a literal golden age of live performance and participation that had a near-magical effect on social reality (Turino). But because tango has not mobilized popular participation and sociability of this type since the end of the golden age, Astillero has had to build, largely from the ground up, the participatory networks and institutional structures required to remake tango a música popular. These include
an underground tango school and a weekly tango dance and performance event.

Astillero’s tango school operates entirely underground, that is, outside of any official regulation or accreditation. It does not grant any degrees and has no real curriculum or sequence of courses, though students of all skill levels—many with extensive backgrounds in Western art music—take classes there. These include lessons on tango instruments, student performance ensembles, and private or group classes in tango music theory, arranging, and composition. I took weekly bandoneón lessons at the school and played with two different student ensembles that rehearsed there as part of my ethnographic fieldwork. The primary goal of the school, which had about fifty active students at the time I attended it, is to make tango musicians, to create a critical mass of performers who would want and be able to participate in tango as a newly popular form. As Mariano Caló explained:

The school is necessary so that there can be more groups like Astillero, . . . so that the friends of the people who are in each group like Astillero begin to listen to tango. After they listen to Astillero, and after they listen to other groups, they will want to create another group. And there will be more and more groups, like it was during the golden age of tango. That is it: tango as música popular. Having tango as música popular means that there are forty orchestras, playing tangos from one another’s groups. That is what happened before, and that is the logic of what we are looking for now. (Caló)

The training project of the school is paired with a weekly tango dance event or milonga, which is produced, organized, and staffed by members of Astillero and some of their students. The milonga as I participated in it opened with an hour-long dance lesson that began around ten or eleven p.m. The lesson was followed by several hours of formalized tango dancing to historic audio recordings of golden age tango orchestras, as is typical at contemporary milongas in Buenos Aires and elsewhere. Sometime between two and four in the morning, a short set of live music would be performed by Astillero, one of the student ensembles from the school, or another invited group. These musical performances served at least two specific purposes. On the one hand, they helped build an audience for Astillero, the other groups, and live tango music in general. This is important because there is no necessary affinity between an interest in tango as dance and an interest in tango as music—much less ostensibly new types of music—among tango audiences in Buenos
Aires today. However, because tango’s popular roots are firmly grounded in the genre’s historical function as a music made for social dancing, systematically reconnecting live performance with the dance-oriented sociability of the milongas—if not creating dance music outright—was considered a crucial component of Astillero’s project. On the other hand, the milonga also provides a readily available and relatively supportive venue for the school’s student ensembles or other emerging groups to present themselves before an audience. This is important because however pleasurable it might be to arrange or compose tangos in private, or to practice an instrument or even rehearse with an ensemble of friends, the members of Astillero believed that making tango música popular was ultimately about creating a back and forth dialogue with the audience in performance. The dancing continued following these live performances, eventually shifting to a variety of popular folkloric genres—such as chacarera, chamamé, and zamba—each of which is danced to a relatively elaborate set of steps (though none as involved as tango itself). Even later, the music would shift to cumbia, a massively popular and somewhat polemical genre of contemporary urban dance music (Cragnolini). The more informal style of cumbia dancing went on well into the daylight hours.

In the course of this particular milonga, Astillero mapped a specific narrative of the popular, sonically tracing connections not only between the contemporary tango of rupture and the genre’s popular past but also between tango and the popular folk music of the Argentine provinces as well as the hugely popular music of the peripheral urban “masses.” At the same time, the school and the milonga also created the space needed for the participatory sociability of tango as a música popular to be experienced by these musicians and their peers. As Mariano Caló observed:

The only way we have access to the public is by generating spaces, there is no other way to do it. This is not a genre that you can sell on the radio. The first thing you need to do is create a space where you feel like you belong. Where you can bring your friends and where they like it. I go to the milonga and I feel it, I go to the school and I feel like I am a part of it. . . . It is really a necessity for everyone that this kind of movement exists, because we need the tango, and we also need a space in which we belong. It is a thing that feeds itself, a movement. (Caló)

As suggested in this quote, Astillero’s inspiration for building alternative networks and institutions came not only from the group’s vision of tango’s
popular past but also from the many social movements that emerged in Argentina following the economic crisis of 2001, including unemployed workers movements, neighborhood assemblies, local, regional, and national barter networks, and community soup kitchens, among others. A key feature of these movements was a set of radically democratic organizational strategies that managed resources and institutions in such a way that they would belong to everyone and to no one at the same time (Sitrin). Astillero’s tango school and milonga both operated in strict adherence to these ideas and ideals. As Mariano Caló observed:

For example, when we first put together the milonga, I put in around a thousand pesos, all of us put in about that much, and we bought the piano, we bought lights, we bought a few speakers, glasses, and the first round of drinks to sell. That was returned to us in about two months, from the entrance fee, from the bar, and we were left without any debts. So, who does this all belong to? We all pitched in and helped, but we have already been repaid, so it is no longer ours. It isn't anyone's, it just is. It exists. The same goes with the movement. It is. It is everyone's. So this is the crazy part of the aesthetic, of being collective like that. We all do things because it is good, not because it is a favor to anyone. You do it for yourself, because you like that it exists. This is the movement. (Caló)

But as inspirational as these post-crisis social movements have been for local participants and outside observers alike (Lewis and Klein; Klein), it is important to emphasize that they emerged from a context of desperate need. They were (and are) mobilized to address the state's abject failure to provide even the most basic provisions and services in the wake of the economic crisis of 2001, essentially denying many Argentines full recourse to citizenship. These failures—or refusals, really—long predate the crisis (Auyero), and they are in many ways what define the popular experience in Argentina in the last quarter century.

Such uneven “modes of citizenship” (Lomnitz) have direct implications for music and the arts. In this particular case, Astillero’s project of remaking tango a música popular has been entirely excluded from official efforts to promote or develop tango as an emblematic component of Argentine culture, especially those of the city government of Buenos Aires. This is all the more striking given the sheer extent of those efforts: the city government is by far the largest producer of cultural events in Buenos Aires, having, for instance, produced more than 1,500 mostly free performances throughout
their network of city owned venues in 2006, the year I conducted my fieldwork (Ministerio de Cultura). The city has also mobilized an elaborate set of cultural policies designed to promote tango and the city’s historical connection to it as a cultural and/or economic resource, including two large-scale tango dance and music festivals that take place annually, though Astillero and many of their peers have been excluded from these projects. As Julián Peralta observed: “The city government has cultural policies [for tango]. They say, quote unquote, ‘we promote,’ ‘we develop,’ … but everything that is new they throw out like garbage, and in the end it is development without development. So you eventually begin to generate your own way of developing things, so that they work the way you want, because you have already been dismissed by the state. You already know that they are not going to help you” (Peralta, Interview).

The Cultural Politics of Música Popular

Here we can begin to see the real impasse that the popular as such represents in post-crisis Buenos Aires. On the one hand, the post-crisis popular social movements and those inspired by them have had to create alternative spaces and institutions because they have been excluded from the realm of official politics, cultural and otherwise. On the other hand, they have been excluded precisely because their “popularity” places them outside of what is considered acceptable or supportable by the government and other official institutions, with the popular here conjuring a complex amalgamation of longstanding racial, ethnic, gender, and, especially, class differences and prejudices, each of which has a specific genealogy within Argentina and other Latin American contexts (Grimson and Jelin; Wade).

At the same time, the popular points less to overt discrimination based on racial, ethnic, gendered, or class differences than to the social logic of systematic inequalities that are largely defined by patterns of cultural production and consumption. As the anthropologist Néstor García Canclini notes: “The popular is the excluded: those who have no patrimony or who do not succeed in being acknowledged and conserved; artisans who do not become artists, who do not become individuals or participate in the market for ‘legitimate’ symbolic goods; spectators of the mass media who remain outside the universities and museums, ‘incapable’ of reading and looking at high culture because they do not know the history of knowledge and styles” (145). Such exclusions have only been exacerbated by the spectacular series of failures on the part of international political-economic ideologies that have successively
intended to “develop,” “modernize,” “integrate,” or “globalize” Latin American economies, political policies, and cultures, of which the Argentine economic crisis of 2001 is but one recent example. Far from achieving their stated goals, these policies have succeeded only in compounding exclusions of all sorts—from economic opportunity, social integration, political participation, or cultural legitimacy—to the point that the region as a whole has been mired in what has been identified as a more or less permanent state of “crisis” (Yúdice, Flores, and Franco; Richard; Grimson). Within such a context, the popular has come to operate as a key component of Latin American politics (Laclau), social movements (Eckstein; Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar), culture (Míguez and Semán), the arts, and, of course, música popular.

Such divisions are reinforced—not reduced—by state cultural policies and other managerial regimes that aim to channel the multitude of local cultural practices and aesthetic meanings into a manageable, productive resource: in this case circumscribing what is or is not acceptable as tango. Astillero’s project of remaking tango a música popular highlights how these divisions are reinscribed on and through musical sound and style within the context of social practice. Indeed, música popular is worth talking about in part because it fits so uncomfortably within these processes, because it is at once irreducibly aesthetic and social, artistic and political, such that the most minutely artistic and aesthetic concerns are immediately implicated in a much broader cultural politics.

Recognizing this, however, does not represent a further invitation to depart from the serious consideration of specifically musical materials in favor of a more contextual and/or interpretive analysis. Indeed, as I hope to have demonstrated in the preceding discussion, both the political claims and material consequences of debates regarding tango as a música popular in contemporary Buenos Aires are embedded precisely within the sonic details of musical style itself—specific accompaniment figures, particular melodic gestures, modes of rhythmic interpretation, and so on—such that musical style, at least in this particular case, can and does serve as an aural icon of an alternative social universe. But this is not an instance of sound structure somehow representing social structure (Lomax; Feld) or even sound structure representing social sensibilities (Turino). Astillero’s tango of rupture is nothing more than a partisan reading of tango’s historic legacy as a música popular qua music, through which the alternative social sensibilities and institutional structures envisioned by Astillero and their peers can be imagined and called forth in social practice.
At the same time, it should be stressed that the aesthetic project of Astillero and the broader musical and social movement they have attempted to cultivate does not, in the last analysis, represent a radical alternative to the hegemonic forms against which they define themselves, particularly those of the city government. It could instead be argued that Astillero represents something of a “loyal opposition” that ultimately accepts tango as the privileged genre of the city’s aural public sphere. From this perspective the musicians of Astillero and their peers have not re-created tango as a música popular as much as they have convincingly engaged and animated the idea of the popular as it is imagined to have existed in the historical experience and legacy of tango by this particular demographic of musicians and their audiences (many of whom, it should be said, come from genuinely disenfranchised backgrounds among the so-called popular classes in Argentina). In this sense Astillero’s project—despite its real alterity—can ultimately be seen as broadly congruent with the broader narrative of purification and transculturation that Ana María Ochoa has located at the heart of the Latin American aural public sphere.

These debates, in turn, are framed by the new place of local musics within the transnational arena, which has reconfigured how these types of social and aesthetic divisions are experienced and lived in local contexts. For instance, while Astillero’s efforts to remake tango a música popular have been largely excluded from the aural public sphere of tango in Buenos Aires, it is very much in demand in places like Europe and East Asia, where the group regularly tours. In May 2010, as I was drafting this chapter, Astillero was in London rehearsing for a new production of Romeo and Juliet by the Mercury Theatre Company, which reenvisioned the star-crossed lovers as a pair of tango dancers. The production’s publicity brochure stated, in part, that “through the power and passion of the evocative tango the decline of the lovers is seen not as fate, but an act of orchestration. The musicians intertwine with the actors creating their world, their love, and ultimately their fate” (Mercury Theatre 4). Astillero’s participation in the play was made possible by financial support from the British Council, the international cultural relations organization of the British government, as well as other funding sources.

This production should be considered as a specific instance of engagement within a much larger and broadly shifting terrain of musical circulation, cultural policy making, and global commerce, perhaps the ultimate expression of which is the United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organization’s (UNESCO) declaration of 2009 that named tango an “intangible cultural...
heritage of humanity.” As defined in the proposal submitted to and approved by UNESCO regarding tango’s status as intangible heritage:

Tango is a genre that originally involved dance, music, poetry and singing. Tango expresses a way of conceiving the world and life and it nourishes the cultural imagery of the inhabitants of the capital cities of the Río de la Plata [Buenos Aires and Montevideo, Uruguay]. Tango was born among the lower urban classes in both cities as an expression originated in the fusion of elements from Argentine and Uruguayan’s African culture, authentic criollos (natives of this region) and European immigrants. As the artistic and cultural result of hybridization’s processes, Tango is considered nowadays one of the fundamental signs of the Río de la Plata’s identity (UNESCO).16

The UNESCO declaration, one of the first to acknowledge a genre of popular music with this distinction, has had many important consequences within Argentina and Uruguay, which jointly submitted tango for UNESCO’s consideration. On the one hand, and as can be seen even in the short passage cited above, it reinscribed tango within highly prestigious international networks of musical production and consumption while simultaneously reframing local musical and cultural histories within revisionist narratives of multicultural transnationalism. On the other hand, it gave a significant boost to already robust efforts on the part of local and national governments to promote tango as an engine for economic development via international cultural tourism and the exportation of music and other cultural goods abroad. It also (perhaps unwittingly) transcended the terms of the debate regarding tango as a música popular in Buenos Aires and the broader patterns of inclusion and exclusion that it represents by including a photograph of Astillero among the visual materials announcing tango’s new status as an intangible cultural heritage.17 Does the UNESCO declaration therefore represent a new path toward cultural legitimacy for these artists and their peers, or is it just another instance of the dual fetishization and gloss of local cultural difference on the part of cosmopolitan aesthetic and economic ideologies? Either way, it is clear that tango’s life as an object of cross-cultural fantasy and desire, now channeled by these and other managerial regimes, continues on.
Notes

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1. This is not to say that the popular arts and popular music have not been the object of these managerial regimes. Instead, I highlight the longstanding disconnect between governmental and nonprofit modes of promoting the arts and culture as a means of addressing the “ethical incompleteness” of the modern political subject (T. Miller) and/or the uneven distribution of state services and protections (Yúdice, “Afro Reggae”) and for-profit models that define music and the arts as nothing more and nothing less than consumable entertainment. Socially popular genres of music fall somewhere between these two poles: on the one hand, they are often considered unsupported by governmental and nonprofit organizations that take them to be aesthetically suspect, while, on the other hand, they are increasingly implicated in large-scale music piracy operations that significantly undermine the profit motives of the transnational cultural industries (Ochoa and Yúdice), which, by definition, are not invested in the social meanings of music and the arts in local contexts.

2. The name Astillero translates as “shipyard.” The name was chosen in homage to the shipyard unions of Argentina, which, according to the band’s members, were among the groups that most fiercely resisted the atrocities of the last military dictatorship (1976–1983).

3. The material presented here is part of a larger research project on the cultural politics of music in post-crisis Buenos Aires. Data for this project were gathered over eighteen months of fieldwork in Argentina between 2004 and 2007, including participant observation, “bi-musical” training and performance (Hood), and interviews with members of Astillero and others in their orbit (including tango musicians, dancers, journalists, audience members, and governmental policy makers, among others), only some of whom are directly represented in the text.
4. Tango has, of course, remained salient in certain sectors of Argentine society over the past half century. However, there is an undeniable gap between the continued enthusiasm of those who grew up with tango as the *música popular* of their youth and the vast majority of the subsequent generations, including Astillero and their peers, for whom tango has at best been a self-referential caricature and at worst an embarrassment to be explained away. Beyond these two poles, tango has continually attracted a significant though ultimately niche audience of dance enthusiasts and music aficionados, who have generally not been committed to or invested in the genre’s historic legacy as a música popular.

5. As such, Astillero’s efforts should be distinguished from those of other contemporary engagements with the genre on the part of the city government of Buenos Aires or nonprofit arts institutions such as TangoVia Buenos Aires, which have focused on the aesthetic and economic revalorization of tango over its potential life as a popular practice.

6. The bandoneón is a button squeeze-box instrument of German origin that by the early 1920s had become a standard component of tango ensembles.

7. Only now are we seeing systematic efforts to preserve tango’s historic material culture, and these efforts are being undertaken by nonprofit arts organizations such as TangoVia Buenos Aires rather than by any exclusively public entity (see http://www.tangovia.org).

8. While Julie Taylor has described how, for her, “some of the weight of past terror was borne by the tango” (*Paper Tangos* 22), tango was never, to my knowledge, the direct target of organized repression on the part of any government, military or otherwise.

9. Included in the tango-related cultural productions and representations are, among others, Fernando Solanas’s film *El exilio de Gardel: Tangos* (1985) and Claudio Segovia’s stage production *Tango argentino*. The latter premiered first in Paris (1983) and then on Broadway (1984) and is widely credited with rekindling interest in tango at the international level.

10. *Syncopation* is defined as “the regular shifting of each beat in a measured pattern by the same amount ahead of or behind its normal position in that pattern” (Oxford Music Online).

11. The significance of this piece is also due to Pugliese’s sociopolitical beliefs and positions, including his deep commitment to radical political causes. A dedicated communist, Pugliese ran his *orquesta* as a collective, distributing income equally among himself and his musicians and coming to collective decisions regarding repertoire. He articulated a particular aesthetic philosophy that saw composing and performing tango less as a personalized or individualistic artistic pursuit than a response to the collective needs of audiences and the larger genre as a whole (Liska, *Sembrando al viento*). As such, Pugliese has come to represent the musical, social, and political epitome of tango’s historic legacy as a música popular, serving as a model figure for the members of Astillero and their peers.

12. Literally, “your mother’s cunt.”

13. The members of Astillero have also created several ostensibly “new” elements, including a deliberately less florid approach to composing and interpreting melodic lines,
especially in vocal pieces; the use of some original instrumental and vocal effects; the use of modern studio recording techniques such as overdubbing; and the use of projected visual material during live performances.

14. I attended Astillero’s milonga on an almost weekly basis throughout my primary research period.

15. This is not to say that individual policy makers or governmental cultural agencies are homogeneously opposed to Astillero’s specific project, though the notion of música popular is undeniably problematic for the city. As one government functionary involved in programming cultural festivals explained to me in an interview, the city did not program truly popular genres such as cumbia “because of the people who would come, because of prejudice. Maybe because the city government still has a conception of culture in which the popular does not have a place.”


17. The image of Astillero is the fourth image in the series of thirteen that is accessible under the “slideshow” tab at http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?RL=00258, accessed July 8, 2013. It shows two bandoneon players with a violin player in the background; the foregrounded bandoneonist is wearing a black muscle shirt.