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Tango's Journey From a Río de la Plata Dance to a Globalized *Milonga*

Christophe Apprill

Translated from French by Kacey Link and Gérard Pigeon

Photo 1. *Milonga* de la Rue du Tango, Marseille, 2015. Photo by Estelle Doehr. Used by permission.



Imagine that you are at a dinner party conversing about tango. Without fail, the same general observations arise: “tango is such a sensual and passionate dance;” “it is beautiful when it is danced well;” and “it used to be danced between men in the *bordellos* (brothels).” Scholars of tango, however, aim to deconstruct such limiting descriptions. In this chapter, I seek to examine tango stereotypes, particularly in relation to tango dance, while opening new perspectives on contemporary dimensions of globalized tango scenes.

Brothels and Slums: The Landscape of Despair

In the wake of the importation of frozen meat by the commercial boating network, tango disembarked and landed in Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century. Upon its arrival, tango became “Argentine.” In the realm of the music, tango scholar Béatrice Humbert underlines the role played by Alfredo Gobbi and his wife Flora Rodríguez, who lived in Paris from 1907 to 1914, as transporters of the art form. As for the dance, Humbert notes the uncertainty that remained as to who was responsible for its introduction to the aristocracy and “made it pass from the mud of the suburbs to the parquet floors.”¹ Since then, throughout the world, the dance and the music have been “naturally” qualified as Argentine.

Yet, during the last twenty years of the nineteenth century, Argentine foundations of national identity were not well established.² One must keep in mind that tango developed in the Río de la Plata (River Plate) region of Argentina and Uruguay within the context of mass immigration, port modernization of the harbors, increased trade, a booming livestock industry, and urban demographic and geographic growth in Buenos Aires and Montevideo. In Buenos Aires, a city under construction and transformation, immigrants primarily from Spain and Italy assimilated with *criollos* (creole, or local Argentine) as well as Afro-Argentines. Two hundred twenty thousand immigrants settled in Buenos Aires in 1889, and 32% of those immigrants were Italian.³ Within this migratory flow, Buenos Aires became the largest city in Latin America as the urban social fabric profoundly transformed. It is no wonder that from 1880 to 1916, as historian Carmen Bernand notes, Argentina and Buenos Aires became the “*creuset argentin*” (“Argentine melting pot”).⁴

1 Béatrice Humbert, “Le tango à Paris de 1907 à 1920,” in *Tango nomade*, Ramón Pelinski, ed. (Montréal: Editions Triptyque, 1995), 110–113.

2 Christophe Apprill, “Les métamorphoses d’un havane noir et juteux... Comment la danse tango se fait ‘argentine’,” *Volume!: La revue des musiques populaires* 8, no. 1 (2011): 41–67.

3 Gérard-François Dumont, “1492–2006. L’aventure démographique des Amériques,” in *Herodote.net: le media de l’histoire*, 1996, accessed April 25, 2022, http://www.herodote.net/histoire/synthese.php?ID=55&ID_dossier=227.

4 Carmen Bernand, *Histoire de Buenos Aires* (Paris: Fayard, 1997), 207.

From this early period in tango's history, first-hand sources are few and difficult to interpret.⁵ The dominant historiography focuses on the description of a typical portrait, which oscillates between caricature and stereotype, and forms a set of representations that has been attractive to scholars.⁶ The geographic setting of an urban landscape lends itself to the creation of figures such as the *compadrito* (young ruffian who lives on the city's outskirts), the prostitute, the pimp, and the *gaucho* (cowboy). Together, these figures summarize both the mixing and confrontation of ethnic and cultural Otherness. In this discussion, one must also include the evocative poetry of Jorge Luis Borges. In his *Evaristo Carriego*, the chapter devoted to tango's history in particular presents urban growth as the fertile ground for tango's emergence.⁷ Therefore, if one agrees with tango scholar Donald Castro, the meeting and interweaving of the social cultures of the *criollos* and the immigrants, as well as the contrast between the rural and the developing urban environments, permeate Argentina's history and its literature.⁸ One may then wonder: is the history of tango, therefore, only an imaginative way of telling the history of Argentina?

The notion that tango was born in the brothels and slums of Buenos Aires and Montevideo gives the art form an aura that combines elegance with depravity, while the social context becomes aestheticized. For example, scholars do not analyze tango in relation to the economics of prostitution at the time in large European cities such as London and Paris. Tango is rather systematically assigned a popular past whose settings emphasize vice, perdition, and misery, as well as feelings of nostalgia, sadness, loneliness, and love. The understanding of these

5 Donald S. Castro, *The Argentine Tango as Social History (1880–1955): The Soul of the People* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1991), 94.

6 Madeleine Séguin, "Le tango et les jeux de représentations. Vers une déconstruction de son image stéréotypée et érotisée," in *Tango, corps à corps culturel*, France Joyal, ed. (Québec: Presses de l'Université du Québec, 2009), 77–96.

7 Jorge Luis Borges, *Evaristo Carriego* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1969).

8 Castro, *The Argentine Tango as Social History*, 94.

ideas is not without ambiguities, because the value attributed to them today is sometimes a projection on the immigrants of the last century. People often speak about the immigrants as if they had crossed paths with them yesterday. Argentine writer Ernesto Sábato remarks in his introductory essay to Horacio Salas's *El tango*:

The brothel is sex in the state of (sinister) purity.... [And] as Tulio Carella says, the solitary immigrant who entered it solved easily his sexual problem: with tragic ease this problem resolved itself in this gloomy establishment...It wasn't, then, what worried the man of Buenos Aires...It was precisely the opposite: the nostalgia for communion and love, the yearning for a woman, rather than the presence of an instrument of his lust.⁹

Thus, complex notions, such as joy, melancholy, and anguish that tango music conveys are attributed to these “uprooted people stranded in the Southern capital.”¹⁰ One, therefore, ends up ascribing many intentions to the Argentine individual. This approach uses empathy for affects,¹¹ which are accessible to us today to interpret the complex social and cultural activity that constitutes the emergence of the dance. It does not, however, allow one to account for tango's intermediary alternative places of diffusion, or its indicators that would counterbalance the idea that tango was “born in the brothels.” A quantitative ethnographic methodology has shown that tango's reception is an intimate, complex act that is resistant in a way to sociological analysis.¹² Many survey-like conversations between contemporary *milongueros* (tango dancers) attest to the complexity of their lived experiences in connection with their practice of tango. It seems

9 “El prostíbulo es el sexo al estado de (siniestra) pureza. Y el inmigrante solitario que entraba en él resolvía, como dice Tulio Carella, fácilmente su problema sexual: con la trágica facilidad con que ese problema se resuelve en ese sombrío establecimiento. No era, pues, eso lo que al solitario hombre de Buenos Aires podía preocuparle...Era precisamente lo contrario: la nostalgia de la comunión y del amor, la añoranza de la mujer; no la presencia de un instrumento de su lujuria...” Ernesto Sábato, “Estudio Preliminar: Tango, canción de Buenos Aires,” in Horacio Salas, *El tango* (Buenos Aires: Planeta, 1986), 13. Translated by the editors.

10 Bernard, *Histoire de Buenos Aires*, 199.

11 Max Weber, *Economie et société* (Paris: Plon, 1995), 31.

12 Jean-Claude Passeron and Emmanuel Pedler, “Le temps donné au regard. Enquête sur la réception de la peinture,” *Protée* (Chicoutimi, Québec: Presses de l'Université du Québec, 1999), 94.

difficult to base a social history of tango on such anachronistic projections. The purpose of these stories, however, is to make people dream about an ideal world, rather than analyze the economic, intellectual, and sexual misery of Buenos Aires' *suburbios* (poor urban outskirts).

According to historian Roberto Daus, tango's landscape of despair comes from a handful of intellectuals whose cultural benchmark was Europe and who have endeavored to deny the popular character of tango. He recalls that many districts of Buenos Aires where tango was developing (La Boca, Montserrat, San Cristobal, Recoleta) were close to the city center, not the *suburbios*. Taking into consideration the 18,123 pianos imported into Argentina between 1901 and 1907, and the writing of tangos for the piano, Daus notes that the spread of tango took place very early outside of the marginal circles, and long before its validation by the European bourgeoisies.¹³ By recalling the internal movements, and the geographical and social displacements of a budding art form in an emerging city, his analysis qualifies the idea that tango went from a miserable urban and social setting to the golden paneling of Parisian salons.

A Break in the System of Couple Dances

Introduced in France before the beginning of World War I, tango dance was based on improvisation. A variety of different steps, in terms of grandeur, rhythm, and direction, became possible. The dance also created new gender roles.¹⁴ In the typical embrace of traditional couple dances, each person maintains their own space and defined role. However, with tango, there was a break in the system of these norms, which demonstrates the dance's stylistic modernity and

¹³ Roberto Daus, "Homenaje a la Guardia vieja del tango. Banda municipal de la ciudad de Buenos Aires, 1908–1909," *El Bandoneón*, CD 123. Ricardo García Blaya also disputes this thesis in "Reflexiones sobre los orígenes del tango," *Todotango*, accessed July 25, 2022, <https://www.todotango.com/historias/cronica/103/Reflexiones-sobre-los-origenes-del-tango/>.

¹⁴ Rémi Hess, *Le tango* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1996), 23–32.

helps explain its success and longevity. Whereas the waltz, through its historical evolution, provides a stage for an enchanting partner encounter, the tango places the male and the female face-to-face in a duel. It balances masculine and feminine energy and power as well as oscillates in speed. This creates a force of restraint between the couple and places them “*en majesté*” (“in majesty”): it gives the couple a form of presence and poise.

After World War I, tango dance experienced a Golden Age in Buenos Aires. More than 600 orchestras brought the *milongas* (tango dance events) to life in the interwar period,¹⁵ and this craze spread throughout the capitals of Western Europe. Afternoon gatherings called “tango teas” were all the rage, and women would attend wearing “tango-colored” skirts (first orange and then red). Among all the exotic dances that crossed the Atlantic and swept through Europe during this period,¹⁶ tango is the one that has lasted over a century and has spread to over five continents.¹⁷ Tango was so popular during the craze that it caused a decline in open dances of the nineteenth century, such as the *quadrille*, *berlines* (salon dances), and *pas de quatre*.¹⁸ In the interwar period, it was added to the waltz and the French java, and together they constituted the “basis for the musette.”¹⁹ After being purified of its sensuality by the incorporation of dance teachers,²⁰ tango took over the dance halls—temples of worldliness, modernity, and celebrations. It was, therefore, a phenomenon of acculturation of dance and music that occurred during the interwar

15 The term *milonga* designates both a term for the place where one dances tango and one of the three rhythms of the tango genre, including tango, *milonga*, and *vals*.

16 For more information, see Anne Décoret-Ahiha, *Les danses exotiques en France: 1880–1940* (Paris: Centre national de la danse, 2004).

17 For further reading, see Pelinski, *Tango nomade*.

18 Among the ballroom dances, there are group dances, couple dances, and solo dances. Open dances are in the category of group dances, where the formation of the couple is intermittent.

19 The musette style in dance refers to a musical repertory and style, as well as to a certain type of sociability of the neighborhoods and inhabitants of Paris in the first half of the twentieth century (namely Italians and Auvergnats). According to accordionist Jo Privat, in François Billard and Didier Roussin, *Histoires de l'accordéon* (Paris: Climats, INA, 1991), 25.

20 For more information, see Christophe Apprill, *Sociologie des danses de couple* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2005).

period and then continued after 1945. Gradually, tango became a form of an eroticized embrace that expressed itself throughout the world.

One may wonder about the vigor of tango's development and even its permanence. But note, tango did not maintain its dominance and craze throughout the twentieth century. It began to decline in the 1960s and 1970s, first in Europe with changes affecting customs, and then in Argentina with dictatorships disrupting political stability. This decline can be observed with all social dances as ballroom dances became outdated and new dances emerged. In line with the musical tastes of the new generations, bebop and rock were among these new dances. Their open structure foreshadowed the separation of the couple in dance, and the move towards individual dances like the twist and the jerk. These new forms of "freestyle" dance allowed dancers to explore other options that featured encounters between the sexes: the "slow dance" is the obvious example.²¹

The Reinvention of the *Milonga*

A resurgence in the 1980s followed tango's phase of decline, and its revival traveled along multiple trajectories. In Europe, the hit show *Tango Argentino* played a major role in the art form's rebirth.²² In Argentina, one may see a correlation to tango's renewal and the end of political dictatorships in 1983. These two complementary phenomena took place during a general worldwide cultural movement of interest in dance practices. There was a general craze for body, sex, seduction, and dance in the 1980s, and dance was the catalyst for them all.²³ Several cultural

21 For further reading, see Christophe Apprill, *Slow. Désir et désillusion* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2021).

22 *Tango Argentino* (1983), directed, stage design, and costumes by Claudio Segovia; dancers include Juan Carlos Copes, Mónica Pelay, María Nieves, Ana María Stekelman, and Carmencita Calderón.

23 For further reading, see Eva Illouz, *La fin de l'amour. Enquête sur un désarroi contemporain* (Paris: Seuil, 2020); and Christophe Apprill, *L'invention politique de la danse contemporaine*, (forthcoming, 2024).

signs bear witness to this, although it is difficult to know whether they are the causes or the effects. For example, the musical and movie *Hair* (Milos Forman, 1979) connects cultural liberation of the body with movement. *Flash Dance* (Adrian Lyne, 1983) exalts the work of the dancer and the social and individual assumptions that result from creative perseverance. Additionally, the emergence of hip-hop dance, driven by the novelty of video, shook up the academic dance traditions and diversified audiences of amateur dancers.

In France, the concomitance of several events reinforced the renewed interest in dance practices. *Grands bals* (large dances), organized as a part of the Lyon Dance Biennale, built bridges between social dances and stage dances. Supported by the cultural policy of Jack Lang (French Minister of Culture, 1981–86 and 1988–93),²⁴ young choreographers began embracing “new dance” and “French dance.” The year 1989 was crowned the “Year of the Dance,” and the bicentenary celebration of the French Revolution was staged by Jean Paul Goude on the Champs Élysées. For the opening ceremony of the 1992 Winter Olympic Games in Albertville, France was entrusted to choreographer Philippe Découflé. The explosion of dance also manifested itself in the field of writing—between 1980 and 2000 several works were published which combine dance and thought.²⁵

In the context of this renewed interest in dance, tango resurfaced in France and other European nations. Its most widespread places of practice reappeared in revived *guinguettes* (establishments for dance, music, and drinking in the suburbs of Paris), cafés/cabarets, afternoon salon dances or teas, and dance competitions. Tango’s restoration and renovation assumed a variety of attributes, including varying styles, relationships between partners, new professionals

²⁴ Philippe Le Moal, *Dictionnaire de la danse* (Paris: Larousse/Bordas, 1999), 765.

²⁵ For further reading, see Niclas Lorrina, ed., *La danse. Naissance d’un mouvement de pensée, ou le complexe de Cunningham* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1989); and Laurence Louppe, *Poétique de la danse contemporaine* (Bruxelles: Éditions Contredanse, 1997).

(dancers, musicians, event organizers, and DJs), and a circulation of both professionals and amateurs. All these attributes are still expressed at the *milonga* today.

The Passion of Passion

The trajectory of contemporary tango dance oscillates between the *milonga* and the stage. With the latter, tango benefited from international productions of *Tango Argentino*, other shows such as *Tango Pasion* and *Chantecler Tango*, and reinterpretations by choreographers such as Ana María Stekelman (neoclassical), Catherine Berbessou (contemporary), and Julio Bocca (classical). But, tango is not just for staged productions. If the theatrical stage gives tango volatile legitimacy, the social stage of the *milonga* gives tango sustainability. Before tango's resurgence, the notion of a *milonga* did not exist outside of the Río de la Plata region. From Baltimore to Singapore and Beirut to Rome, a reinvention of social dance culture has occurred in a multitude of deterritorialized scenes.²⁶ One may see the same weakening of cultural ties to a place or location with *milongas*. Without the *milonga*, tours of the great tango dance masters, as well as the shows and concerts, would probably not have been enough to ensure the longevity of tango for three decades.

In other publications, I have examined how social tango dancers understand “passion.”²⁷ The word comes up most frequently to describe the practice of tango in the *milonga*. It is used by both practitioners from the inside and observers from the outside. This generic term has three dimensions of meaning: it refers to a state of the body, it oscillates between valuing and devaluing dance, and it conceals a singular specificity of “the passion of passion.” Tango dancers

²⁶ Deterritorialization refers to the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, in which cultural, social, and political practices become severed from their native location or territory and a part of another location. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *L'anti-Oedipe* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1972).

²⁷ Editors' note: see Bibliography. Also, see Kathy Davis's discussion of passion in chapter 11 of this book.

do not share the same degree of passion with ordinary dancers. This difference in depth of passion is especially true for tango's close embrace, which is more erotic than other dance practices. Penetrating more deeply than ordinary passion, "passion of passion" is like an addiction cut from ordinary eroticization. The passion of tango dance merges with the passion for an encounter with another person, hence, the power of this addiction and attachment to tango. When deprived of tango, some social dancers state that they become sad and depressed. But paradoxically, when it comes to speaking of the eroticization of the bodies and the relationship between two people, there is silence. Social tango dancers prefer to simply evoke "the pleasure of dancing."²⁸

The Journey of Oneself

Through their investment in the multidimensional aspects of passion, social tango dancers engage in a temporal, geographical, and intimate nontraditional lifestyle characterized by a predominance of nocturnal over daytime sociability. Dancing through the night is not easily compatible with a normal pace of life devoted to work. Such a dance experience brings about an inversion of the industrial revolution's hierarchy of how one spends time, namely the subordination of pleasurable pastimes to work activities. In this inversion of priorities, dancing becomes first through the construction of an idealized rhythm of life, breaking with social conventions, seriousness, and responsibilities.

For Europeans and North Americans, dancing tango undoubtedly appears as a reason for travel. Listening to the stories of those who make a pilgrimage to Buenos Aires exemplifies how tango dance enthusiasts often share common life themes both with each other and tango in

28 Christophe Apprill, "Le plaisir de la danse: des représentations aux propriétés formelles," in *Tango, corps à corps culturel*, France Joyal, ed. (Québec: Presses de l'Université du Québec, 2009), 99–117.

general, such as loss, death, mourning, and the search for oblivion. After the death of a loved one or an amorous breakup, tango may offer a way to change the *paysage* (scenery). A pilgrimage then allows one to remove themselves from their previous reality that is struggling to flow, and the Rioplatense matrix of the tango becomes a place in which one can absolve this former reality. Some familiar attributes of Argentina allow this absolution to occur easily for Europeans and North Americans—the country is in the Southern hemisphere, yet the climate temperate (also, there are no tarantulas or malaria); the population is primarily white and Catholic; and the cafés serve foreign drinks that similar enough to those of Europe and North America. All these familiar ingredients combine to set the scene for white exoticism in which the tango fits perfectly. For example, does not the *abrazo* (embrace), which is one of tango's formal properties, come from the European system of couple dances? Immersion in the Río de la Plata region, therefore, does not constitute a plunge into radical otherness. Yet, upon returning to one's native country, travelers tell stories imbued with an enchanted tone from which it is possible to extract two themes of sensations. One theme is how, as these travelers insist on going to the other side of the world to absorb the Argentine tango culture, they live a lifestyle according to the *milonga*. A second theme is how in doing so, they create the impression of living and carrying out a collection of experiences with and through their body.

Because one encounters a similar culture to one's home in the *milongas*, the dance enthusiast experiences only a small change of scenery. But the transition from situations of interactions based on verbal exchanges (and structured by the rationality of language) to that of the *milonga* causes a powerful change of perspective. Because of this change in perspective or moment of rupture from reality, the experience of the *milonga* can be considered as an “adequate

discharge of pathogenic affects” and a “deliverance from internal conflicts.”²⁹ But it is also an enjoyable experience in the form of a musical *ritornello* (returning theme), where a feeling is accomplished by the body in movement with other bodies. The experience of dance is also a way of filling the void of loneliness, of restoring structure, of getting back into one's body through the presence of another.³⁰ Through this metaphysical dance journey, the *milonguero* examines their existential foundation and rebalances themselves in the *milonga's* whirlwind of excitement and intensity; therefore, one better understands why tango dancers talk about it so passionately.

A Low-Intensity Trance

Tango dancers can reach a state of being what I call a low-intensity trance.³¹ This notion includes the ideas of losing oneself and a suspension of being. Nevertheless, tango is often narrated by some as a modified state of consciousness. On one hand, they encounter this state of trance at the *milonga*, although not as it has been analyzed by anthropologists.³² On the other hand, it is not identified as *a priori*, or gaining knowledge independent from experience, as a context where one may glean an instance of a modified state of consciousness.³³

Despite both losing oneself and a finding a suspension of being, tango is nevertheless narrated by some as a modified state of consciousness. This would arise in part from ecstasy in that the atmosphere is completely illuminated by becoming denser, in a back and forth between

29 Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2007), 60–61.

30 According to Jean Oury, it is the signifier that will allow for the development of the psyche. Jean Oury, *Création et schizophrénie* (Paris: Galilée, 1989), 145.

31 For further reading, see Christophe Apprill, *Les mondes du bal* (Nanterre: Presses universitaires de Paris Nanterre, 2018).

32 For more information, see Gilbert Rouget, *La musique et la transe. Esquisse d'une théorie générale de la relation de la musique et de la possession* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980).

33 The idea is controversial. Is it the consciousness or the state that changes? What norms serve as a reference to designate an ordinary state of consciousness? Not only is this dichotomy implicitly established between culturally relative ordinary and extra-ordinary situations, but the concept varies according to the individual.

lightness and gravity, between detachment and reattachment. The dancer Federico Rodríguez Moreno thus describes how improvisation evokes the low-intensity trance state:

Yes, [improvisation] is something that at times you touch in the tango, during a *milonga*, a *práctica* [practice *milonga*], or an exhibition. It's not common, it's not frequent, but every now and then you touch it. I think that it is a great motor of the passion that there is around the tango, these moments of light, these moments other than the normal experience, which pushes people to try to find it; that's why they're in it and that's why they train more and more, because these are truly magical moments... It is true for me, I am someone who dances a lot at the *milonga*, I do not stop myself, and at times, I leave [lose myself] completely.³⁴

This beautiful escape resembles abandonment and enjoyment detached from reality and from the perception of the world, like the state of Durassian rapture.³⁵ It is guaranteed by the protective embrace, that is to say the enveloping presence of the Other (the partner, and all those who surround them taking part in the *milonga*). Once achieved, a tango dancer continues to seek this magic and the accompanying feeling of freedom. But these feelings occur quite rarely, hence the need to return frequently to the *milonga*. This repetition, in the form of a *ritornello*,³⁶ follows the pattern of breaking up and reattachment—the enjoyment of the dance is both singular and collective. The description of psychological states experienced by the dancers attests to the importance of their individual dimension. These states are not necessarily shared by others at the same time. Lived in a singular, narcissistic, or even egocentric way, the beautiful escape nevertheless has a timeless character. Additionally, it draws from a communal practice: it is through others that the dancers reach this state. In doing so, they operate a reattachment with the imagery of the *milonga* as expressed in the song lyrics “which turns, and which carries them,”

34 Author interview with professor and tango dancer Federico Rodríguez Moreno, 2010.

35 For more information on Durassian rapture, see Marguerite Duras, *Le ravissement de Lol V. Stein* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964).

36 This aspect was noticeably observed in the 1970s with traditional and folk dances. See François Gasnault, “Les enjeux de la danse dans les réseaux ‘revivalistes’ français,” *Recherches en danse: Danse(s) et politique(s)* 4 (2015): 5–6, online, accessed October 1, 2016, <http://danse.revues.org/1185>, doi: 10.4000/danse.1185.

which places them “body against body,” “becoming one,” “eye to eye,”³⁷ “blooming, intoxicated, and happy.”³⁸ (See Photos 1 and 2 for images of such states in a *milonga*.)

Photo 2. *Milonga*, Marseille, Catalans, 2018. Photo by Estelle Doehr. Used by permission.



Photo 3. *Milonga de la Rue du Tango*, Parvis de Saint Charles, Marseille, 2016. Photo by Estelle Doehr. Used by permission.



37 “Le petit bal perdu,” (song) by Robert Nyel and Gaby Verlor, sung by Bourvil.
38 “La foule,” (song) by Michel Rivgache, sung by Edith Piaf.

Although not directly related to ecstasy or trance, these states require significant concentration. Hungarian psychologist Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi (1934–2021) formalized them in his 1990 notion of flow,³⁹ of which one finds the four main characters in the *milonga*.⁴⁰ Achieving this low-intensity trance can be hampered by the stylistic segmentations that run through the *milonga*.

Nuevo vs. milonguero styles

With the development of teaching dance in the Rioplatense matrix during the 1990s and 2000s, two stylistic variations emerged: *nuevo* and *milongero*. One main figure embodied each style, namely Mariano “Chico” Frumboli for *nuevo* and Suzanna Miller for *milonguero*. The *nuevo* style is carried by the generational renewal that stretches from the tango of the 1990s through today. Next to the first prestigious dancers, such as Pablo Verón, Gustavo Naveira, and Fabián Salas, a new and technically superior generation of dancers are making it possible to analyze the dance structure with influences by other disciplines, such as classical and contemporary dance and tap. This new generation includes Giselle Anne, Catherine Berbessou, Bernadette Doneux, Teresa Cunha, Cecilia Gonzales, Milena Plebs, and Victoria Vieyra. By

39 For more information, see Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: the psychology of optimal experience* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990). See also Jean Heutte, “Mise en évidence du flow perçu par des étudiants au cours d’un travail collectif: l’homo sapiens retiolus est-il un épicurien de la connaissance?” Blog, accessed June 28, 2021, <http://jean.heutte.free.fr/spip.php?article114>.

40A sense of mastery and control; a perception of altered time, a feeling of detachment from oneself, a feeling of wellbeing. Jean Heutte & Fabien Fenouillet, “Propositions pour une mesure de l’expérience optimale (état de Flow) en contexte éducatif,” paper presented at Actes du congrès de l’Actualité de la recherche en éducation et en formation (AREF), Université de Genève, Geneva, Switzerland (September 2010), available online, <https://plone.unige.ch/aref2010/communications-oraux/premiers-auteurs-en-h/Propositions%20.pdf/view>. This state has been analyzed in the practice of tango by Sabine Zubarik, “Sublime Feelings: The Experience of ‘Flow’ in Dancing Tango,” paper presented at Tango: Creation, Identification, Circulation, organized by Center for Research in Arts and Language, Paris, France, October 26–29, 2011.

settling in Europe, or by touring there for several months, these dancers have also distanced themselves from their Rioplatense home.

The resulting transformation recomposes the relationship between partners. In the *nuevo* style, the female dancer no longer typically “follows;” she becomes the dancer’s alter ego. She is no longer reduced to the rank of the muse that inspires the “*maestro*;” she becomes a full performer. The fluid *abrazo* varies between open and close, in other words, it can be modified according to the desired combination of steps and figures. In this context, at the beginning of the 2000s in France, dancers acquired an unprecedented recognition that allowed them to break away from certain codes. For example, dressed in pants and sneakers, women could invite “like men.” Although still, contrarily, several male dancers persist in claiming their attachment to patriarchal privilege; in their eyes, dancers who dare to issue an invitation to dance are devalued with an attitude of, “But who does she think she is?”

Based on a collection of detailed manners of dancing by the traditional *milongueros*, the *milonguero* style was invented in Paris by Suzanna Miller during a workshop in 1994. It systematizes a teaching method based on a close embrace, where the chests of the dancers are in permanent contact. Compared to the *nuevo* style, the repertory of steps is considerably limited as is the amplitude or height of the movements. On the other hand, this style allows for a search for rhythmic games and an enhancement of sensuality between partners. This style also has several educational advantages. While providing immediate benefits, it is rich in promises of sensuality, and it conveys an image of a fusional couple relationship. It neither challenges stereotypes, particularly in terms of gender roles (“the man guides, and the woman follows”), nor patriarchal codes of the *milonga*. The ritual of the invitation, including the *mirada* (the exchanging of a glance) and the *cabaceo* (the head nod to express a desire to dance) gives the dancers the

impression of a parity. Lastly, where the *nuevo* dancers have transgressed dress codes, *milonguero* dancers pay particular attention to their appearance (with women wearing feminine attire, high heels, and slitted skirts). *Milonguero* dancers attach great importance to tradition and believe in the existence of an “authentic Buenos Aires tango.”

A Heterosexual Dance

Looking face-to-face, men and women create a traditional male-female tango performance. Opposing certain contemporary choreography, which strives to desexualize the bodies of the performers,⁴¹ such traditional practice highlights gender and sex. At the point of transgression, each person has their own place and plays a role while respecting a constant dissymmetry, particularly among professionals. For example, a man is typically taller so that the average-size female dancer does not become ill at ease. Although, if a tall woman dances in high-heels, the eight-to-ten-centimeter height gain from her shoes will give her immediate domination. During demonstrations, a woman rarely leads a man; moreover, women are often younger than their male partners. As one author observes in the process of forming couples, the man, often the expert in the dance, gives the female dancer social status and might even open doors professionally.⁴² Younger, less experienced, but well-trained female dancers put their flexibility, technique, and erotic potential at the service of the male dancer. Even while being subjected to this role, the female dancer serves it and ensures its sustainability. Whether in the context of the *milonga* or a demonstration, the female dancer’s erotic aura is directed toward the male dancer and at the service of a flawless performance. By articulating them precisely, communities of practitioners continue the tango social codes and stylistic elements that seem to carry on or

41 François Frimat, “Danse avec le genre,” *Cités*, 44 (2010): 77–89.

42 Michel Bozon, “Les femmes et l’écart d’âge entre conjoints : une domination consentie, I. Types d’union et attentes en matière d’écart d’âge,” *Population*, 45, no. 2 (1990): 327–360.

pursue a shared purpose—they provide a dynamic way of dancing and being that maintains a tolerance of male superiority over female partners. All these forms of domination are presented as “natural” by many dancers who have internalized this principle.⁴³ The tango couple thus appears to be normalized. If there are alternative tango scenes, like queer tango,⁴⁴ the couple is sometimes overtaken by a prescription of roles—there is still frequently the guide and the guided in a relationship of subordination.

Made up of transfers, re-compositions, and adaptations, the circulations of tango around the world have not altered the permanence of a system of reference for couple dances founded on a heterosexual historical configuration. This remarkable inertia can be attributed to the engagement of the body. More than in other social places, the moments in the *milonga* bring to life a different spectrum of relations between genders. Dancers implicitly attempt to express the internalization of social structures. For the researcher, unless one resorts to a quantitative survey, it remains difficult to specify the content of the sexual orientations of the practitioners at a *milonga*. But it is clear, that, unlike some leisure spaces, diversity is the rule at *milongas*, and statements from those in North America and Europe to those in Buenos Aires show that the heterosexual couple holds the majority. Lived, interpreted, and defended by communities of practitioners, this “tradition,” whether right or wrong, is a part of tango’s heritage.

Conclusion

The conditions of tango’s transnational circulation lead to questioning the meaning of its characteristic cultural identity. Is this a macho tradition that offers an additional platform for deploying male domination? Is it a passion where the shared presumption of heterosexuality

43 For more information, see Pierre Bourdieu, *La domination masculine* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1998).

44 For more information, see María Mercedes Liska, *Argentine Queer Tango. Dance and Sexuality Politics in Buenos Aires* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017).

provides tangible benchmarks in a period marked by multiple forces affecting the redefinition of gender identities and relations? Examined from the angle of a heterosexual dance, the culture of tango seems less researched, whereas this dimension accounts for more than a century of tango's territorialized and deterritorialized properties. Key to the fundamental partnership system, this configuration crystalizes the essential dimensions that make sense beyond the microcosm of the dance. Tango is a heterosexual couple dance, where the eroticization of the relationship (qualified by a presumption of sexual orientation) participates in the making of the act of the dance. Approaching the distributions of roles in a different way, as in queer tango, goes beyond the simple question of style. Through a partial or total reconfiguration of gender assignments in dance, tango's historical properties are freshly questioned and brought again into play in the globalized *milonga*.

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