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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
RIVERSIDE

Social Tango Dancing in the Age of Neoliberal Competition

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Critical Dance Studies

by

Radman Shafie

June 2019

Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Anthea Kraut, Chairperson

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Dr. Jose Reynoso

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2019

The Dissertation of Radman Shafie is approved:

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Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

## *Acknowledgments*

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*To all beings who strive to connect on multiple levels, and find words  
insufficient to express themselves.*

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Social Tango Dancing in the Age of Neoliberal Competition

by

Radman Shafie

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Critical Dance Studies

University of California, Riverside, June 2019

Dr. Anthea Kraut, Chairperson

How can we move beyond the hegemony of market fundamentalism? Against this backdrop, my ethnographic research focuses on tango as social dance, which in this dissertation, I explore within a political economic context. As the dominant political economic paradigm in the world today is neoliberal capitalism, which cherishes competition as a foundational value, this research has necessarily involved a separate genre of tango dance, competition tango, and shows how it can be conflated with social tango. I have used participation-observation fieldwork, interviews, and secondary sources, to study the social tango scenes, as well as formal tango competitions, in the two urban centers of Buenos Aires and Los Angeles. The first chapter lays the historical groundwork for the chapter that follows. In the second chapter, after describing the *Mundial*, the world's largest tango competition, and how it is enacting neoliberalism by way of "tradition," I categorize and discuss the various social tango spaces of Buenos Aires. I argue that *las milongas populares*, which are hotbeds for social and political

progressivism, have emerged as a primary challenge to both the heteropatriarchal and the socioeconomic aspects of neoliberalism. The third chapter discusses how a conflation of social and competition tango, unlike Buenos Aires, has permeated the tango scene of Los Angeles. This, I argue, is due to the prevailing receptivity of the scene to the insistence on the Argentine “authenticity” of the tango that the competitions are presenting. While a very considerable portion of the social tango scene in Buenos Aires has emerged as a site of resistance to neoliberal capitalism, Los Angeles tango is by and large perpetuating neoliberalism.

The overarching argument of this dissertation is that tango has the dual capacity to on the one hand, promote individualism, and on the other, to foster solidarity and social cohesion. It can both affirm neoliberal capitalism and its values, and act as resistance to it through a compelling practice of sensitivity to others. Most importantly, this practice of sensitivity, and of cultivating harmony and cooperation among individuals, can be seen as a way of moving (dancing) beyond the hegemony of neoliberalism and into vaster potentialities.



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## Introduction

*The curriculum must assume there have to be winners and losers among workers in the global economy, and the job of students is to acquire an education that will enable them to become winners. Students must not think about whether there could be an alternative global economy that would not be composed of winners and losers.*  
– Gerald Coles, *Miseducating for the Global Economy*

*I feel like the spirit of tango, if you want to call it that, is here to teach humanity, love, and how to embrace each other, and how to co-create... I think this is a very deep lesson that we as a species are really ready for, and ready to spread, and so I think anything that gets in the way of that will dissolve, just naturally, because we're here for a larger purpose.* – Mitra Martin

Binaries, particularly in academia, often have a bad rap. But it does seem that in this period of late capitalism, we, as a collective of human beings, are facing a choice between becoming increasingly competitive, or embracing cooperation and consideration for the well-being of others. In the tango embrace, the choice is clear: without cooperation and sensitivity to the other, the dance, at least in the social domain, is condemned to failure. While the same, I believe, is true for the dance of humanity, the choice is not always as apparent. Tango can thus be seen as harboring a crucial lesson.

Tango is first and foremost a social dance, one that originated in Argentina and Uruguay around the end of the nineteenth century and is now practiced by tens of thousands of dancers worldwide. While this definition may seem very basic, it is

necessary because there is a general misperception regarding what tango is; even the Merriam-Webster dictionary defines tango as “a ballroom dance of Latin American origin.”<sup>1</sup> The dance that I am writing about is *not* a ballroom dance, it is an improvised dance that mainly happens at the *milongas* - tango socials where dancers gather for an evening (or at times an afternoon) of recreational dancing. The milonga is defined by the *ronda(s)*, a circle of dance composed of couples, usually in a close embrace,<sup>2</sup> who are moving in a counter-clockwise direction. There are usually two, at times three, *rondas* in the milonga, forming concentric circles. An awareness of other dancers is crucial to the outcome of the milonga as a place of social gathering. The most important dancers to be aware of, other than one’s partner, are the ones that form the couples immediately in front or behind you, as well as to your side(s). As the follower often has closed eyes, the awareness that the leader has of his/her surroundings has a strong visual component, but all dancers, whether leading or following, need to have a perceptual awareness of others in their vicinity (in addition to a somatic perception of their partner). The *quality* of the awareness is also extremely important. When this awareness among the various dancers, both within and between the couples that form the *ronda(s)*, is existent *and* respectful, the entire milonga becomes a single, cohesive, and harmonious unit, which someone entering the milonga can immediately feel.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/tango>

<sup>2</sup> A close embrace is when the upper torsos of the dancers are touching.

My research focuses on social tango, occurring in the year-round milongas of Buenos Aires and Los Angeles, as well as on annual events that happen over a period of four days in these same two cities, presenting what I regard as an entirely separate genre: *competition tango*. The seeds for this research were planted after I moved to LA county in August of 2014, and was split between my daytime activities as a PhD student attending the University of California at Riverside, and my frequent night life as a social tango dancer in Los Angeles. Having moved from Albuquerque, New Mexico, I was appreciating the much larger tango scene of LA, with many more talented dancers, and the opportunities for sociality that it had to offer. But I also noticed a propensity among the local dancers for competitiveness, often showing up on the social dance floor in the form of executing “flashy” moves and a desire to be seen, significantly more than what I had experienced in my prior six years of tango dancing. Other than Albuquerque, I had spent a couple of months in New York City, and several weeks in Buenos Aires, for the specific purpose of studying and dancing social tango, in addition to dancing at local events in several other cities in the United States and a number of European urban centers.

Before moving to LA county, I had heard of tango competitions, but had never experienced them up close. After the launch of the “Southern California Tango Championship” (SCTC) in early 2015, I was struck by the widespread interest that the event generated among the LA tango dancers, and the impact it was having on the city’s social tango scene. This included a higher visibility of the “competition style” of tango

dancing, which I will clearly describe in the second chapter, the prevalence of competition-related classes and workshops, and the “elite” status afforded to competition winners. My early experiences of tango in Los Angeles inspired me to focus on tango competitions as a research topic. This orientation took me in the following year to Buenos Aires again and a much larger tango competition (the *Mundial de Tango*), enabling me to make many valuable connections between competing in tango and the political economic paradigm that is dominating the majority of the world’s inhabitants. But much more significantly, being in Buenos Aires made me realize that it is also in social tango spaces that a powerful danced response to neoliberalism can be found.

In this dissertation, I argue that tango both affirms neoliberal capitalism and its values, foremost among them individual entrepreneurial freedom, and acts as resistance to it through a compelling practice of sensitivity to others. It lends itself to being a means of striving to surpass others, as well as that which fosters solidarity and harmonious coexistence. The crucial question then becomes: if we choose to be and act in harmony with one another, are we giving up our freedom? What is gained and what is lost? If neoliberalism has defined the limits in which individual human beings can be “free,” a paradigm shift would require an alternative definition, one that delinks freedom and individualism. My ethnographic study of tango in two major urban centers explores its varied potentialities. But first, I will discuss what freedom might mean in the diverse contexts of tango.

## Practices of Freedom

Buenos Aires and Los Angeles are both large centers of neoliberal urbanism, and both have a sizeable social tango scene, with the one in Buenos Aires being considerably larger. With its affinity for competing and stardom, the Los Angeles tango scene, as I will discuss, is by and large perpetuating neoliberalism. In Buenos Aires, by contrast, a very considerable portion of the scene, constituted by *las milongas populares*, has emerged, I argue, as a site of resistance to both the socioeconomic and the heteropatriarchal aspects of neoliberal capitalism. This obtains special significance when one realizes, as I describe in the first chapter, that neoliberalism as a practice is an originally Latin American phenomenon.

A total revamping of the global capitalist order will require equal attention to the patriarchal and economic facets of neoliberalism. According to historian Samuel Moyn, we are living in an “age of human rights,”<sup>3</sup> prominent among them gender rights, at the cost of broad distributive justice. In *Not Enough: Human Rights in an Unequal World*, he writes that in our times, “To a startling extent, human rights have become prisoners of the contemporary age of inequality” (6). He makes a fundamental distinction between *sufficiency*, concerned with “how far an individual is *from having nothing* and how well she is doing *in relation to some minimum of provision* of the good things in life;” and *equality*, concerned with “how far individuals are *from one another* in the portion of

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<sup>3</sup> Often more as an ideal rather than in practice.

those good things they get” (3, emphasizes original). The ascendance of market fundamentalism, which started in the 1970s, was consolidated worldwide in the 1990s. It was a triumph over both 1) the welfare state, which after the Second World War and the Great Depression had provided some degree of social (economic) equality among the (mostly male) citizens *within* some countries; and 2) the possibility of “global justice,” a postcolonial idea which had envisioned a degree of equality *between* countries. Concomitant with the rise of neoliberalism, there has been “a more cosmopolitan and transnational understanding of human rights” (8), focusing on very important issues such as gender equality, while socioeconomic justice has largely fallen out of consideration.

Neoliberal concerns with gender equality, however, cannot be taken very seriously. It is no coincidence that an incremental approach to reversing gender inequality is simultaneous with a blatant disregard to economic equality. Social injustice prevails, while at the same time, the levers of power worldwide remain largely in male hands. As Beatrix Campbell writes in her illuminating article, “After Neoliberalism, the Need for a Gender Revolution,” “Neoliberal neo-patriarchy is the new articulation of male dominion” (13). And, “The new global settlement is nothing if not a new sexual settlement” (14). Therefore, any *real* discussion and practice of human rights must attend to gender as well as socioeconomic equality. That the fabric of *las milongas populares* contains this understanding, as I will argue in the second chapter, is a sign of



their power. And at the foundation of their resistance to both heteropatriarchy and neoliberal economics is a danced practice of freedom.

The neoliberal discourse of freedom, as Thomas DeFrantz points out in his essay, “Unchecked Popularity: Neoliberal Circulations of Black Social Dance,”<sup>4</sup> speaks of “a freedom to move as one wants to” (130).<sup>5</sup> This discourse of freedom, very much on par with the discourse of human rights championed by neoliberalism, worked as a successful political strategy later in the twentieth century in the face of restrictions imposed by former socialist governments. But this “freedom,” when taken out of the communal context and individualized, is far removed from being “a productive means of group formation and social connectivity” (128). According to André Lepecki, in the introduction to *Singularities: Dance in the Age of Performance*, “neoliberalism’s main character and product” is “*the self-performing, self-invested Self*” (11, emphasis original), operating with the so-called freedom that the limits of “liberal individualism” has allowed. For this “neoliberal Self,”

The ubiquitous notion that life is essentially a game of individual risk reinforces demands not for solidarity or communal life, but for increased performances of

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<sup>4</sup> In *Neoliberalism and Global Theatres: Performance Permutations*.

<sup>5</sup> “African American social dances,” DeFrantz writes, “circulate generously because their social and aesthetic underpinnings fit neatly with neoliberal discourses of freedom – so neatly, in fact, that the proliferation of markets that characterize contemporary life cannot check their popularity” (128). In the process, the dances are stripped of their original nuances. The neoliberal discourse of freedom, as Meghan Quinlan writes in “Gaga as Metatechnique: Negotiating Choreography, Improvisation, and Technique in a Neoliberal Dance Market,” also aligns with a rhetoric which advertises the dance as a practice which affords the freedom to create, without external limitations.

individualized security. Thus, the political as open field of potentiality, dialogical relationality, and the practice of freedom is replaced by controlled little freedoms, preconditioned by the sensation of safety that pre-given possible choices offer to subjectivity. (13)

Competitive tango is one such “performance of individualized security,” a “controlled little freedom,” within the confines of the rules of the competition. Trying to stand out at the milonga, literally at the expense of the harmony of the *ronda*, is another instance of this individualized freedom. This desire for being noticed also comes at the expense of one’s partner in the dance, as Chapter Two makes clear. In short, the vulnerability that enables the whole body to be constantly listening, even as it is moving, allowing for an ever-changing dance, is replaced by pre-made decisions by the leader of the couple, which determine the form and direction of the dance.

Lepecki goes on to say,

The question (for art and for life) then becomes: in supposedly free and open democratic societies, how does one imagine and perform more potent notions and motions of freedom? How does one think and choreograph “freedom beyond the bounds of liberal individualism” (Butler and Athanasiou 2013: 179)?<sup>6</sup> (ibid)

Lepecki explores the answers to these questions through experimental choreography. At the core of my research, what motivates me to write about dance, is the experience of powerful freedom in the social tango embrace. Far from being the freedom to do “whatever you want,” this is a freedom possible only with the presence and cooperation of the other(s). Many conditions have to be met for this sense of freedom to arise, and

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<sup>6</sup> In *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political*. Polity Press, 2013.

not all of them have to do with what is happening between the two people in the embrace. Beyond the need for basic skills in social tango technique and movement vocabulary, which allows for improvisation, a fine-tuned corporeal sensitivity to the minutest intentions, preferences, and suggestions of one's partner, and a degree of shared enjoyment and interpretation of the music between the couple, there exists what could potentially be, depending on the kind of social tango space that the dance is taking place in, the "communal life," the "solidarity," of the milonga.

Social tango, depending on the environment created by the milonga organizers *and* the dancers who attend the milongas, can affirm the ideas foundational to neoliberalism, or empower the performance of "more potent notions and motions of freedom," standing for values that a comprehensive restructuring of global capitalism would entail. A community-oriented approach to the social dance of tango, such as that of *las milongas populares* of Buenos Aires, with roots in social and political progressivism, creates a dance environment that enables cooperation and non-competitiveness. It opposes individualism and "standing out," the former foundational to neoliberal competition, and the latter a desired goal of the "selves" participating in it. While the community-oriented milongas support solidarity among the dancers, other milongas, similar to the case of competitive tango, encourage individualism. The latter, not surprisingly, are also predominantly sites of heteronormativity in the scene.

The social spaces that sustain the acts and experiences of performing (potent) freedom, which in the context of the hegemony of neoliberalism function as instances

of resistance, are the main focus of my research. That in tango, both individual little freedoms and collective potent freedoms can be danced, makes it an ideal medium for studying, but far more importantly, for moving (dancing) beyond, neoliberal capitalism. This is the heart of my argument.

In what follows, I start by outlining some of the scholarship which, as I mention in the beginning of the next section, are relevant to my research. I then discuss the methods I used for this study, before finally offering a summary of the chapters to come.

### **Tango Studies and Dance Studies**

Across this dissertation, I refer to, engage with, and aspire to contribute to studies of urban social dance, dance competitions, and of course tango, as well as critiques of neoliberalism. Accordingly, I here first review the literature on tango in the English language, and then discuss some works in the areas that I just mentioned, pointing out where and how my work potentially adds to these efforts.

Tango has been written about for over one hundred years. Some early works appeared in the second decade of the twentieth century, coincident with the “tangomania” that swept Europe and shortly thereafter North America.<sup>7</sup> In his 1946

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<sup>7</sup> See *The Tango and How to Dance it*, by Gladys Beattie Crozier (1913), *Modern Dancing*, by Irene & Vernon Castle (1914), and *Maurice’s Art of Dancing*, by Maurice Mouvet (1915).

book *A History of English Ballroom Dancing (1910-1945)*, dance historian Philip J.S.

Richardson chronicles the development of British ballroom dance and tango's place in it. Only later in the century did the English language literature give sufficient consideration to the history of tango in Argentina.

Tango dance as a social activity in Argentina became steadily more prominent in the first half of the century, reaching the height of its popularity in the 1940s and early 1950s. Starting in the mid-1950s, it went into decline for close to three decades, while in the rest of the world it was largely confined to ballroom dance communities. The 1990s, the decade that followed the worldwide resurgence of tango in the 1980s (in Argentina as well as Europe and North America), witnessed some major scholarship on tango. This scholarship paid due attention to tango's Argentine origins, rather than solely focusing on the dance as it had evolved in European dance halls, cabarets, and ballrooms. British historian Simon Collier, who joined Vanderbilt University in 1991, and whose article titled "The popular roots of Argentine Tango"<sup>8</sup> came out in 1992, was also a chief contributor to the book *iTango!*, published in 1995, making scholarly references to the early history of tango in Argentina. The same year (1995) was when Marta Savigliano published both "Whiny Ruffians and Rebellious Broads: Tango as a Spectacle of Eroticized Social Tension,"<sup>9</sup> exploring the history of tango as popular culture, including its lyrics; and her groundbreaking book, *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion*,

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<sup>8</sup> *History Workshop Journal*, Issue 34: 1992.

<sup>9</sup> *Theatre Journal* 47: 83-104, 1995.

which I will write about below. And later in the decade, in his piece, “Tango and the Scandal of Homosocial Desire,” Jeffrey Tobin argues for tango’s homosocial roots.<sup>10</sup>

The twenty-first century saw the emergence of scholarship on the contemporary social tango scene of Buenos Aires.<sup>11</sup> Savigliano’s “Gambling Femininity: Wallflowers and Femme Fatales,” which came out in 2003,<sup>12</sup> is based on her autoethnographic experience of the “traditional” milongas of Buenos Aires. Carolyn Merritt’s *Tango Nuevo* (2012) contrasts such “traditional” spaces with the informal *prácticas*,<sup>13</sup> where the “new” tango could be seen. Although Merritt consistently questions the “newness” of *tango nuevo*, which became common during the mid- 2000s in some Buenos Aires *prácticas*, it does (did) have some distinguishing characteristics: an open embrace; each couple taking up a larger, individualized space, which allows for the execution of moves that need more space and are clearly visible from an outside perspective; and the frequent use of contemporary (including electronic) music, sometimes of the non-tango variety (known as “alternative” music), as opposed to the tango dance music recorded

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<sup>10</sup> In William Washabaugh, ed. *The Passion of Music and Dance: Body, Gender and Sexuality*. Oxford: Berg, 1998.

<sup>11</sup> Another scholarly work regarding the origins of tango, Robert Farris Thompson’s *Tango: The Art History of Love* (2006), which particularly explores tango’s nineteenth century Afro-Argentine roots, also came out in this time.

<sup>12</sup> In *Angora Matta: Fatal Acts of North-South Translation*.

<sup>13</sup> Originally referring to a tango practice session, where men danced with men, the term is commonly used to describe an informal milonga.

between the 1930s and the mid-1950s (during the Golden Age<sup>14</sup> of tango). Ironically, by the time the book was published, this “new” tango was already on the decline in the city, and is now, for all practical purposes, non-existent (although it is still fairly common in the social tango scenes of Europe and North America). The *popular* social tango scene of Buenos Aires today, the highlight of my research, while sharing the informality of the *prácticas* of the mid-to-late 2000s which Merritt writes about, including a lack of adherence to traditional gender roles, features an otherwise very different tango: the embrace is close, with movements that are mostly subtle and contained, consistent with a respect for the *ronda* and its flow;<sup>15</sup> and the music is nearly strictly from the Golden Age of tango (one can hear an occasional *tanda*<sup>16</sup> of contemporary tango music, but *never* electronic or non-tango music).

Savigliano, Melissa Fitch, and Juliet McMains have all made important contributions to Tango Studies by writing about the gay/queer milongas of Buenos Aires,<sup>17</sup> which they also contrast with the “traditional” ones. Tango, according to Savigliano in “Notes on Tango (as) Queer (Commodity)” (2010), has consistently worked against alliances among women. How does queer tango intervene? Queer tango emerges in globalization, re-

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<sup>14</sup> See Chapter One.

<sup>15</sup> In Chapter Two, I write in detail about the quality of both the movements and the connection between the couple in the various milongas.

<sup>16</sup> A set of three or four songs that social tango dancers dance to.

<sup>17</sup> In Buenos Aires, queer milongas are mainly attended by female dancers, while the gay milongas are mostly the domain of male dancers.

exoticizes tango, and distinguishes between “love” and heterosexuality. It is not interested in the reproduction of gender differences and its inherent power differential; this liberating practice troubles the tango scene. In the “Tango Queer Rebellions” chapter of *Global Tangos: Travels in the Transnational Imaginary* (2015), Fitch writes about the global Tango Queer movement, and how it has flourished in Argentina. She gives a history of the Buenos Aires gay milongas, which first emerged in the late 1990s, and the creation of Tango Queer in Buenos Aires in the mid-2000s. She consistently places the city’s gay/queer tango scene in the context of globalization, and its connection with tourism. In “Queer Tango Space: Minority Stress, Sexual Potentiality, and Gender Utopias” (2018), McMains sees the limited queer and gay milongas of Buenos Aires (which as she acknowledges are a very small fraction of the entire tango scene) as judgment-free zones regarding sexuality and gender roles, giving gay/queer identified dancers access to tango’s “sexual potentiality,” and regards the practice of queer tango, with its “free-style exchange of roles and responsibilities” (74), as an area where the creation of a non (gender) binaried society can be explored.<sup>18</sup>

What has been less examined in the literature is the diversity of the non-gay/queer milongas as they exist in the current social tango scene of Buenos Aires, which are much more than just the “traditional” ones. And as Chapter Two will further clarify, *las milongas populares* (an umbrella term which includes some *prácticas*), differ in

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<sup>18</sup> For further scholarship on Buenos Aires milongas, see *Tourism and the Globalization of Emotions: The Intimate Economy of Tango* by Maria Törnqvist.



fundamental ways from the *prácticas* that in the 2000s hosted *tango nuevo*, the subject of Merritt's research. My desire is that by exploring this diversity, I supplement the work done by these scholars. That my research focuses on the intersection of tango and neoliberalism differentiates it as well.

The *Mundial de Tango*, part of the *Festival y Mundial de Tango*, an aggregate commonly referred to as the *Mundial*, is an annual competition in Buenos Aires attracting dancers from various parts of the globe, and has been happening since 2003. It is part of the various efforts by the city government to recreate tango as well as Buenos Aires in ways that attract the maximum number of tourists to the port city.<sup>19</sup> McMains, in her chapter "Reclaiming Competitive Tango: The Rise of Argentina's *Campeonato Mundial*," from the *Oxford Handbook of Dance and Competition* (2018), argues that the *Mundial* is a way for the Argentines to redefine tango competitions, which have for many decades been organized by British ballroom dance societies, in their own image, while simultaneously making it more white by adopting European balletic aesthetics. In the first two chapters, I write in detail about this event, placing it in the context of neoliberalism in general and the neoliberal urbanism of the city of Buenos Aires in particular. While I appreciate McMains's perspective, I view the *Mundial*

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<sup>19</sup> See "The new tango era in Buenos Aires: The transformation of a popular culture into a touristic 'experience economy,'" by Franco Barrionuevo Anzaldi; *Culture Works: Space, Value, and Mobility across the Neoliberal Americas*, by Arlene Dávila; and "Buenos Aires, Capital of Tango: Tourism, Redevelopment and the Cultural Politics of Neoliberal Urbanism," by Miguel Kanai.

as a “second ballroomization” of tango, not just because of adopting European aesthetics (while simultaneously exoticizing the dance), but also for creating an Argentine tango competition with formal adjudication and rules, where dancers are compared based on a numerical value that they become equivalent to.

I now come to Savigliano’s *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion*, as it is especially relevant to my discussion of the *Mundial*. In this fascinating work, Savigliano presents tango as a player on the imperial circuits of feelings, in which emotional capital flows between the countries of the core and the periphery. Savigliano shows how this emotional capital of the periphery - exotic Passion – is always molded in the shape of the core’s unfulfillable Desire. The flow goes both ways: the modern, exotic product of the periphery, once in the core, is “improved,” repackaged, and sent back (in its now “postmodern” form) to the periphery. These “new” qualities are adopted by the people of the periphery - autoexoticization - and the exoticized product becomes a symbol of national identity. In the case of Argentina, this symbolic product is the tango.

Central to Savigliano’s argument is that Argentina’s colonization did not end with independence from Spain in the early nineteenth century. Neocolonial arrangements with Great Britain in the last two decades of the century and the beginning of the twentieth century led to a period of rapid accumulation, but this massive wealth did not end the exploitation of the masses. Rather, the new leaders assumed a recolonizing task, colonizing their own people. The Argentine elite, rather than making productive investments in the country, kept their capital as liquid as possible, even as they

maintained a nationalistic rhetoric. While tango was initially not part of this rhetoric, it became a main part of it after the Parisian elite sanctioned the tango. This acceptance was in alignment with endless efforts by the Argentine elite to reaffirm Argentina's whiteness and its difference from the Rest (periphery).

The *Mundial*, organized by the City Government of Buenos Aires, can be seen as another instance of recolonizing by Argentine leaders. In other words, this "second ballroomization," while of course a form of "autoexoticization," is also, deriving from the term, what I would call a form of "autocolonization." The *Mundial* is a product of the Argentine elite. An initiative of Aníbal Ibarra, mayor of Buenos Aires 2000 – 2005, it became prominent under the leadership of Mauricio Macri, two-term mayor of Buenos Aires (2007 – 2015), and current president of the nation. Situating tango, including the *Mundial*, vis-à-vis the political economic paradigm of neoliberalism extends Savigliano's analysis of the flows of emotional capital.

The study of social dance in urban centers is another area relevant to my research.<sup>20</sup> I hope that my investigations in Los Angeles add to the work done by Cindy García, who also maps out a social dance scene in this metropolis. *Salsa Crossings: Dancing Latinidad in Los Angeles* is a story of Latinas in the LA salsa clubs. In her

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<sup>20</sup> See "Dancing to the Bhangra in New York City," by Gera Roy; *Salsa World: A Global Dance in Local Contexts*, by Sydney Hutchinson; and *Spinning Mambo into Salsa: Caribbean Dance in Global Commerce*, by Juliet McMains.

ethnography on salsa in the city, García makes a primary distinction between *salseras/os*, the “serious” dancers fixated on the latest moves of LA salsa, who often compete, and the “socializers,” dancers who aren’t as concerned with standing out and competing. Fundamental to her argument is the exoticized *latinidad* produced by Hollywood. Within these LA clubs, García identifies choreographies of exclusion and power, which are at odds with the narrative of a globalized salsa that claims to be bringing people together. According to her, the owners and managers of the clubs constitute a small group of upwardly mobile Latinas/os who have “the authority to exoticize salsa and simultaneously whiten salsa with ballroom considerations, such as line and extension, all the while becoming more and more savvy about the aspects of latinidad that local and global markets desire” (90). García’s work relates not only to tango in LA, but other major cities such as Buenos Aires as well. The simultaneous exoticizing and whitening that she writes about, prominent in the salsa dance competitions, manufactures globalized salsa. As I will discuss in the second chapter, the globalized “traditional” tango of the *Mundial*, the “competition-style” of dancing tango that can be seen in various Argentine tango competitions around the world, is constructed in the same fashion. I diverge from García’s work by analyzing an urban social dance form in the context of neoliberalism and its effects on urban centers and their social spaces of dance. Which brings me to the growing body of scholarship on dance and neoliberalism.

As dance scholars have noted, dancers around the world are becoming more “flexible” and “efficient” in order to adapt to the ever-increasing demands of neoliberal capital markets. In her 2014 article, “Flexibility and Its Bodily Limits: Transnational South Asian Dancers in an Age of Neoliberalism,” Anusha Kedhar complicates David Harvey’s perspective on “flexible accumulation” as a tool for labor exploitation.<sup>21</sup> She views flexibility not only in economic and material terms, but also as a tool used by individuals (South Asian dancers in her study) who, despite being imbricated in neoliberal structures, are not entirely devoid of agency. They can be flexible not just in their spines and limbs, but, given their diverse training, in how they meet the demands of various choreographers, and in the way they deal with immigration restrictions. Flexibility is “an embodied response to the contradictions and unevenness of globalization and a bodily tactic that allows racialized bodies to accumulate power and capital” (24). Relatedly, Meghan Quinlan, in her 2017 article “Gaga as Metatechnique: Negotiating Choreography, Improvisation, and Technique in a Neoliberal Dance Market,” argues that dance training systems such as Gaga<sup>22</sup>, while increasing the efficiency and the agency of dancers to compete in an increasingly demanding market, and despite Gaga’s utopian rhetoric, will continue to be influenced by the need to survive in the contemporary

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<sup>21</sup> See: Harvey, David. *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. London, Wiley-Blackwell: 1989.

<sup>22</sup> Quinlan sees Gaga as “metatechnique” as it utilizes “elements from conventional technique, choreographic, and improvisatory structures to train dancers to negotiate multiple bodily techniques” (35).

dance market as long as neoliberal capitalism remains the dominant global economic model.<sup>23</sup>

My work on tango not only further reveals ways in which dancers adapt to neoliberal capitalism but also explores how tango itself becomes a site of resistance to, and even transcendence of, the limitations of neoliberalism. Training in competition-style tango, similar to what Kedhar and Quinlan have shown, can be seen as a way for dancers to become more efficient in the global competition for touring and teaching jobs, assuming that they win in certain prestigious competitions around the world, or at least make it to the *Mundial* finals. (For the *Mundial* champions, this means instant job security.) While the training does not make them more flexible in their bodies (some men even wear special vests under their attire during the competition to keep them upright), or their way of dancing (they are conforming to a homogenous style that I will later describe), their proficiency in the style makes them more flexible in the tango job market in a neoliberal world that increasingly views competition as a marker of excellence and as a way for proving oneself. That a small portion of competition dancers ever succeed in their endeavor is a gamble that they are willing to partake in.

Susan Foster, whom I reference in the second chapter, has done important scholarly work regarding competition in dance. In her chapter “Dance and/as Competition in the

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<sup>23</sup> For other works on dance and neoliberalism, in addition to Lepecki’s *Singularities* and DeFrantz’s “Unchecked Popularity,” from which I quoted earlier, see “Between the Cultural Center and the Villa: Dance, Neoliberalism & Silent Borders in Buenos Aires,” by Victoria Fortuna.

Privately Owned U.S. Studio,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Politics* (2017), she expresses her concern with how the exponential increase in the last three decades of US dance competition circuits is affecting the way dance is taught, learned, and viewed. These include the multitudes of competition conventions around the country, with their apex being the highly mediated reality shows such as *So You Think You Can Dance*. The dance studios have become part of this circuit by training dancers for competition, and most committed students of dance must pursue their passion within the competition structure. “In Marxist terms,” as Foster says, “competition in dance replaces its use value as a form of personal self-expression and creativity, as a practice that people watch or do in order to understand something about their own corporeality or their connections to others, with exchange value that brings dance into the marketplace...” (61). In terms of my argument, the practice of freedom made possible by both the connection between the couple in the tango embrace, and the connection between dancers in the *ronda* of the milonga, is replaced in competitive tango with an exchange value that can potentially provide social capital and finances for the dancer. Tango therefore helps illuminate ways in which “dance as competition” participates in market capitalism.

Although in Buenos Aires, despite the prominence of the *Mundial*, tango dance competitions are in the end not taken very seriously among the locals, in other cities, such as Los Angeles, a picture is emerging that evokes Foster’s concern. Following the ballroom world, where the fact of competing is itself considered the “pinnacle” on a

continuum of social dance, many dancers in LA are striving to “make it” by way of success in competing, with LA’s two annual competitive tango events, the SCTC and the Summit<sup>24</sup>, placing it on the path of becoming the US “competition capital” for Argentine tango. This gives a primary status to competing as a way of establishing oneself in the city’s tango scene. In Buenos Aires, on the other hand, the primary importance of social dancing skills, foremost among them sensitivity to the other, and the secondary importance of tango competitions, are foundational to the emergence of *las milongas populares* as sites of resistance to neoliberal capitalism. My hope is that my focus on these sites of resistance, revealing an alternative to what is possible within the confines of neoliberalism, can be my main contribution, together with showing the various ways in which tango is a player, paraphrasing Savigliano, in circuits of capital flow.

## **Methods**

My research uses a multi-sited ethnographic approach to two distinct environments in two different cities, spanning the years 2015 to 2019: the social tango dance scene, as well as various competition events, in the metropolises of Buenos Aires and Los Angeles. While I attended the *Mundial* in Buenos Aires in the years 2016 and 2018, the bulk of the fieldwork there was done over a total period of six months in the city’s milongas and *prácticas*, 2016 to 2018. Buenos Aires stands as the major city of Argentina, which is one

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<sup>24</sup> See Chapter Three.



of the earliest countries in Latin America (itself the birthplace of neoliberalism as a practice) to implement this economic model.<sup>25</sup> And Los Angeles can be seen as the prime site of neoliberal urbanism on the West Coast of North America.<sup>26</sup> Where the two cities differ, relative to my discussion, is the relationship between the restructuring in each city brought about by neoliberalism, and the social practice of tango. Social tango dance can be seen as that which both enacts and reveals the various ways in which major urban centers respond to the deep shifts brought about by market fundamentalism.

In addition to participation-observation fieldwork, interviews form a major component of my work. I have done about thirty interviews with various dancers, both competitors and social dancers who do not compete, as well as milonga and competition organizers, in Los Angeles and in Buenos Aires, beginning in April of 2016 and extending through February of 2019. My interviews ranged from informal sit-down conversations to more formally recorded ones. The term “informal” implies that the interview was not recorded by audio means, but by writing notes immediately after (and sometimes during) the interview. Otherwise the interview was recorded using audio technology and later transcribed. In the beginning of my research, I recorded every interview. But later I realized that my interviewees often feel more comfortable

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<sup>25</sup> See Chapter One for a detailed history of neoliberalism in Argentina.

<sup>26</sup> See “The Global City: Strategic Site/New Frontier,” by Saskia Sassen.

and speak more candidly when they are not recorded. But I have never hesitated to record a person if they, in any way, expressed that preference.

My investigations and writings can also be seen as a form of “autoethnography,” a method which has been used by other scholars in tango studies, and dance studies in general.<sup>27</sup> Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner open their article

“Autoethnography: An Overview” with this definition:

Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*) [...] A researcher uses tenets of *autobiography* and *ethnography* to *do* and *write* autoethnography. Thus, as a method, autoethnography is both process and product (emphases original).

My research has certainly felt like a personal process, often vacillating between feelings of being an “insider” or an “outsider” to the tango scene that I have been studying. But first a bit of my tango story.

I have been dancing tango for ten years. When I started in early 2009, I was in a state of nostalgia for the ultimately indescribable *duende*, the feeling of “being in the zone” that I had at times experienced in my six-year practice of dancing flamenco,<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Some examples include: Savigliano’s “Gambling Femininity,” McMains’s “Queer Tango Space,” and Quinlan’s “Gaga as Metatechnique,” which I have already referred to, as well as Priya Srinivasan’s *Sweating Saris: Indian Dance as Transnational Labor*, and Ramón Rivera-Servera’s *Performing Queer Latinidad: Dance, Sexuality, Politics*.

<sup>28</sup> “All through Andalusia, from the rock of Jaén to the snail’s-shell of Cadiz, people constantly talk about the *duende* and recognise it wherever it appears with a fine instinct. That wonderful singer El Lebrijano, creator of the *Debla*, said: ‘On days when I sing with *duende* no one can touch me.’ The old Gypsy dancer La Malena once heard Brailowsky play a fragment of Bach, and exclaimed: ‘Olé! That has *duende*!’ but was bored by Gluck, Brahms and Milhaud. And Manuel Torre, a man who had more culture

which despite my deep admiration for, I had stopped doing after realizing it is not a dance that I would like to take on as a lifelong pursuit. During the two years or so between stopping flamenco and starting tango, I had tried dancing salsa, which brought me joy but not everything that I was looking for. Not long after by chance taking my first tango class at a studio that I had been studying salsa in, I had a fleeting experience of the *duende* again, this time in an embrace. The same feeling, but now possible only in close connection and collaboration with another being. What I didn't know at the time was the amount of time and practice required to be able to sometimes reproduce that feeling, the *tango moment*, which I will further describe in the second chapter. This is, borrowing from Lepecki, same as the "practice of freedom" that I have been writing about in reference to social tango. What took me even longer to realize was that, as I have also mentioned before, only certain environments enable this practice. Only a milonga that supports solidarity among the dancers as a whole is one in which a given couple can potentially practice freedom: a danced freedom, within a community of freedom-seeking dancers.

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in his veins than anyone I've known, on hearing Falla play his own *Nocturno del Generalife* spoke this splendid sentence: 'All that has dark sounds has *duende*.' And there's no deeper truth than that ... I heard an old maestro of the guitar say: 'The duende is not in the throat: the duende surges up, inside, from the soles of the feet.' Meaning, it's not a question of skill, but of a style that's truly alive: meaning, it's in the veins: meaning, it's of the most ancient culture of immediate creation." From "Theory and Play of the Duende," by Federico García Lorca, 1933. Translated by A. S. Kline. <https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Spanish/LorcaDuende.php>

The bulk of my research for this dissertation was done at the *milongas populares* of Buenos Aires, which I initially encountered in 2016. Despite spending a few months (in the years 2017 and 2018) of going three to four times a week to these various spaces (in addition to going about twice a week to other types of Buenos Aires milongas), and making repeated connections, on and off the dance floor, with some dancers who often attended them, I found myself on a brink between belonging and not belonging to the community of dancers which these milongas draw from. On the one hand, I felt completely at home and comfortable in these spaces, often coming home between 2:00 and 4:00 am after a night (and sometimes after a Saturday or a Sunday afternoon) of dancing, with the feeling of being totally happy and satisfied. On the other hand, even though I am fluent enough in the Spanish (or *castellano*, as they call it) that the *porteñas* speak to freely communicate with the local dancers, I was fully aware that I am not one of them (but was getting progressively closer to them). It was helpful that I am of Middle Eastern origin, with Iranian parents, and a skin color and facial features more resembling the *porteños* than the *gringos*, as I soon learned that being from North America is not a desirable quality in *las milongas populares*. During conversations on and off the dance floor, it became apparent that these locals very often see the United States as responsible for the many atrocities committed by dictatorships in Latin America, including the “Dirty War” of Argentina,<sup>29</sup> awareness of which is fully alive even

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<sup>29</sup> Also known as the *proceso*, 1976 – 1982.

among some dancers too young to have experienced it themselves. Also, the International Monetary Fund, a generally “evil” entity among this crowd, perceived as instrumental in the economic crash of 2001/2002 in Argentina, and always waiting for the opportunity to exploit the country again, is associated with North America. But still, I was an “outsider.” In addition to my danced connections (mostly with women, and sometimes with men), my interviews also created close connections with a number of these dancers (both men and women). But still.... I was convinced, however, after my last trip to Buenos Aires in August of 2018, that if I decide to live there one day, I would eventually fit in this community of dancers quite well.

Even if I didn’t completely feel as part of the local community of *las milongas populares*, I felt much more comfortable in it than I ever have in most of the Los Angeles tango scene (with the notable exception of events related to a dance school called Oxygen Tango, which I address in the third chapter). I participated in LA milongas on average twice a week during a period of two and a half years when I lived in LA county, and since moving to San Diego in March of 2017, I have frequently gone there to dance. Similar to how I have often felt at the non-*popular* milongas of Buenos Aires (which I write about in the second chapter), entering most of the LA milongas is like going into the “Matrix”<sup>30</sup> (or, depending on how you look at it, never leaving the Matrix). One enters a “La La Land” of tango, “fancy” spaces with “fancily-dressed” people, with a

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<sup>30</sup> Referring to the 1999 big screen hit, directed by Lana and Lilly Wachowski (as The Wachowski Brothers).

tendency to show what they can do on the dance floor. There is a palpable desire to be seen, which the organizers of the city's tango competitions use to their advantage.

As I mentioned in the beginning of this introduction, what initially became my motivation for doing this research was my early personal experiences as a social tango dancer in Los Angeles. By the beginning of the year 2016, with the second edition of the SCTC on the horizon and the "competition craze" in full sail, my partner and I, who were popular dancers in the scene, began to feel more and more estranged. The fact that we were considered among the better dancers in the community made it even more peculiar that we didn't compete, reflected on the looks of people when we would say that we are not really interested, after being frequently asked if we were competing, or told that we should. Somehow we weren't taken as "serious" dancers anymore. To place this in a more recent context, as I was writing this segment of the dissertation, I received notification from facebook that I was tagged in a post by Yuliana Basmajyan, founder and organizer of the SCTC, advertising the upcoming 2019 event, and saying: "If you are serious about tango & want to go in the direction of pursuing tango professionally or already are a professional tango dancer here is a great opportunity for you!" From my own observations and experience of social tango in general, whether in the United States, Argentina, or Europe, what makes you a dedicated dancer is the fact that you often show up at the milongas, and that you work on your dance. And what makes you a "good" dancer, in the end, is how you are perceived through the bodies of your dance partners, rather than how you are judged by an outside perspective. In LA,

your willingness to compete meant that you were dedicated, and then if you won, you were *really* good.

Los Angeles tango continues to largely move in this direction. It now has two local annual competitions, one in March and the other in September, and it is only in the last few months of the year that the scene is not permeated with the “competition vibe.” But more fundamental than the fact of the competitions themselves is the spirit of competitiveness in the scene, even if for some it does not manifest beyond the social dance floor: it creates the social space, not with an integrated sense of community, but with specks of individual self-definition. Moving from the latter to the former is a choice.

I close this section by saying that, despite the challenges of writing about what you are intimately involved with, it was never fully satisfying for me to research something that I do not actively and regularly participate in. Yes, it is true that I have often had to move beyond my judgments, in order to “look at what I’m looking at.” And perhaps I haven’t always been “objective.” But I continue to be convinced that no amount of intellectual understanding can supplant the knowledge resulting from direct experience.

### **Reader’s Guide to the Rest of this Dissertation**

Ahead are three chapters and a coda. Chapter One lays the historical groundwork for my discussion of tango in Buenos Aires. A more in-depth history of tango in the port city, as well as the neoliberal developments in Argentina, is necessary to fully grasp the

significance of the current manifestations of the dance in this metropolis. In the first segment of this first chapter, I outline the history of tango from its origins in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, a period during which Buenos Aires experienced rapid growth and urbanization, through the “Golden Age” of tango, and specifically the Golden Age of *dancing* tango (the 1940s and early 1950s), when it experienced an immense and to date unparalleled popularity, and finally its “decline,” starting in the mid-1950s and extending until the collapse of Argentina’s last military dictatorship in 1983. In this segment, I seek to establish the conditions that were relevant to the popularity of social tango dance during its “age of greatest glory.” In the two segments that follow, I offer a brief history of neoliberalism in Argentina, before returning to tango after it started its “revival” in 1983. Since the 1990s, the evolution of tango in Buenos Aires has been intricately related to the neoliberal urbanism of the port city, as well as the consequences of the neoliberal reforms implemented by the country as a whole. Also, as Argentina is one of the first countries in the world to establish neoliberalism as a practice, its story of neoliberalism is part of what contributes to a nuanced understanding of our current global capitalist system. The first decade of the twenty-first century, which during its early years (2001/2002) witnessed the worst financial collapse in Argentina’s history, was also when the *Mundial de Tango* was launched (in 2003), boosting the attraction of tourists that already in the 1990s had started to be a major economic factor. Together with other various structures and



economies contributing to the tango market in Buenos Aires, it is part of the city's vast "tango industrial complex."

Chapter Two, "Buenos Aires: How Good is Your Embrace?," is the product of the fieldwork as well as the interviews that I conducted in this city from 2016 to 2018. The chapter has two main parts. The first part gives a detailed description of the *Mundial*, the world's largest tango competition, and how it is enacting neoliberalism by way of "tradition," while simultaneously representing the "second ballroomization" of tango. This part thoroughly describes *el estilo mundial*, the exoticized, whitened, and globalized competition-style of tango dancing, which is deeply steeped in heteronormative patriarchy. I also write how the *Mundial*, a product of the city's neoliberal urbanism, affects the city's milongas around the time of the event, and the limited and temporary nature of this effect. Market fundamentalism, and the resistance to it, however, have impacted the social tango scene and tango dancing bodies in ways that are much more pervasive and enduring, which I address in the second part of the chapter. This part, the core of the chapter, categorizes the various milongas and *prácticas* of Buenos Aires, describing the basis of this division, with a focus on *las milongas populares*. This categorization is crucial for understanding the diversity of the scene, as well as the varied responses of social tango and its dancers to neoliberalism. I write how the city's *milongas populares*, a synthesis of informality, flexibility regarding gender roles, and (relative) affordability, constitute a vibrant scene with a majority of local, younger, dancers, at the forefront of social and political progressivism: a Latin American primary

challenge to neoliberalism. In this part of the chapter, I also point out how the study of social tango reveals a different relationship between “popularity” and “progressivism” when comparing the current age to its Golden Age. While in the Golden Age, the popular looked to the past, in today’s day and age, popular is progressive.

Chapter Three, “Los Angeles: The City That Is Crazy about Competitions,” is the final chapter, and also based on my fieldwork and interviews. A conflation of competing and social dance, similar to what exists in the ballroom world, is permeating LA tango, distinguishing this scene from that of Buenos Aires. Even if the organizers of the *Mundial* are attempting the same conflation, the residents of the port city are not buying it, and ultimately do not take the competition, which is the height of all tango competitions in the world, very seriously. But this strategy (conflation) has proved quite successful in Los Angeles, where competing, again following ballroom dance, is becoming the pinnacle on a continuum of social dance. The success of this strategy, I argue, is due to the prevailing receptivity in the LA tango scene to the insistence on the Argentine “authenticity” of the tango that the competitions are presenting, facilitated by the presence of prominent Argentine dancers as instructors and judges at these events. The affinity for competition among the Los Angeles tango dancers is reflected in the overall “fanciness” and competitive nature of its social tango scene, where many dancers are trying to “stand out.” This is in stark contrast with social events organized by a tango school in Los Angeles called Oxygen, with their casualness, affordability for members, and subversion of heteronormative stereotypes in tango. But the Oxygen

Tango events, despite their significance, as well as a few other events that are somewhat comparable, are in their own “bubbles,” their limited size and reach and their membership models precluding them from being an equivalent to the *popular* tango scene of Buenos Aires. LA tango, as a whole, reflecting and simultaneously asserting powerful neoliberal currents, well fits the neoliberal urbanism that the city is entrenched in.

The Coda summarizes my overall argument and points to future areas of research, which include other urban social tango scenes, likely in Europe. Where, outside of Buenos Aires, are tango scenes to be found that support powerful experiences and expressions of freedom? Italy (a country with deep historic connections to Argentina, particularly Buenos Aires) and Russia (if you consider it a European country) are the only locales of this continent with a large representation at the *Mundial*. While these countries perhaps have scenes similar to that of the *milongas populares* in Buenos Aires, my interest is currently in other European countries, such as France, which also have large tango scenes, with practically no interest in competing. What are these tango communities like? Do they promote unity, or separation? Does their disinterest regarding competition represent a resistance to neoliberalism? In short, *what* are they dancing? These are some of the questions that inspire me to continue my research on social tango.

## *Chapter I*

### **A Brief History of Tango, a Brief History of Neoliberalism in Argentina, and Tango in the Age of Neoliberal Competition**

Tango originated in Argentina and Uruguay in the last decades of the nineteenth century on both sides of a body of water known as Río de la Plata, predominantly in the port cities of Buenos Aires and Montevideo. But by the early twentieth century, Buenos Aires had emerged as its main center of development. It is not only home to the complex and fascinating unfolding of tango, but also its point of departure to the rest of the world in the twentieth century and beyond. The evolution of tango dance in Buenos Aires is intertwined with the flows of globalization that have connected the port city with the rest of the world, specifically in places that are now considered the Global North.

Thomas Piketty, in the introduction to *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, talks about the “first globalization” of finance and trade, which happened between 1870 and 1914, and the “second globalization,” which has been ongoing since the 1970s (28). Interestingly, tango experienced what I call a “first global expansion” in the beginning of the twentieth century, which continued until 1914; and a “second global expansion,” rooted in the 1970s and starting in 1983, resulting in what is now a thriving global

phenomenon. It was in the 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s, however, when tango in Buenos Aires experienced an immense popularity as a dance form, part of what is known as the “Golden Age” of tango. It then went into almost three decades of decline, before starting to become popular again in the 1980s and especially in the 1990s. But the popularity that the practice of tango dance has had in Buenos Aires in the recent decades does not match its popularity in the 1940s and early 1950s, a period that was “outside” of the two globalizations as defined by Piketty. In this chapter, I will first outline a brief history of tango, starting in the nineteenth and flowing through much of the twentieth century. To further understand tango’s evolution, and since neoliberalism largely characterizes the “second globalization” of finance and trade, I will then outline a brief history<sup>31</sup> of neoliberalism in Argentina, proceeding with how the neoliberal reforms implemented in the country affected the tango and its environments, and gave birth to a dance competition known as the *Mundial de Tango*. This will provide the groundwork for the ethnographic research that follows, which will include in the next chapter a study of the current popularity of social tango dancing among younger *porteños*,<sup>32</sup> manifesting as a proliferation of “*milongas populares*” in the city. This recent development, I will argue, is in large part a *response* to the socioeconomic conditions created by neoliberalism.

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<sup>31</sup> All my historical accounts, of both tango and neoliberalism, are based on secondary sources.

<sup>32</sup> Residents of the port city of Buenos Aires.

## A Brief History of Tango

“The history of tango,” as Marta Savigliano writes in *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion*, “is a history of exiles” (xiv). Prominent among them are the descendants of African slaves, the *criollos*<sup>33</sup> moving from the rural areas to the outskirts of Buenos Aires, and Italian and Spanish immigrants to the port city. The history of tango is also intertwined with that of Buenos Aires. The year 1880 was a pivotal moment in the history of the city and of the country. It was the year when the series of Argentine civil wars starting in 1814 that had pitted the rich province of Buenos Aires against the other provinces of Argentina ended, resulting in the federalization of the city of Buenos Aires, and it ceasing to be the capital of the province. It thus became the *Capital Federal*, capital of the nation, and under direct control of the federal government. It was also the year when General Julio Argentino Roca, who in the 1870s had led the brutal massacre and displacement of the indigenous people of Patagonia, became president of Argentina. It was in this manner that vast indigenous lands became available for ranching and agriculture, adding to the already existing pampas.

In “The Popular Roots of the Argentine Tango,” Simon Collier writes: “Argentina's agricultural-pastoral potential, a growing overseas (mostly European) market for her produce, and improved communications - railways, steamships, telegraphs - all meant a rapid and in many ways smooth integration into the international capitalist economy,

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<sup>33</sup> Creoles, native-borns.

then centered on Britain” (93). Between 1880 and 1914, according to Savigliano, the value of Argentina’s international trade grew immensely, with massive foreign investments, particularly of British origin, amounting to thirty-three per cent of all foreign investment in Latin America, entering the country (22). The 1880s were also a decade that witnessed a big surge in immigration, mostly from Italy and Spain. The vast majority of these immigrants settled in the capital city. As Ezequiel Martínez Estrada writes in *X-ray of the Pampa* (1933), “Buenos Aires has been the center around which has revolved Argentine life, national organization, culture, and wealth” (226). Buenos Aires thus started a period of rapid growth and urbanization, during which the tango was born.

### **The Early Years**

The details of how the music and dance that came to be known as *tango* took shape in the Río de la Plata region towards the end of the nineteenth century are shrouded in mystery, but as Collier indicates, it is widely accepted that a dance form called *milonga*<sup>34</sup> was the immediate predecessor of tango dance (95). The *milonga* was very popular by the 1870s among the *compadritos* (ibid), young, poor and mostly native-born “street toughs” of the outer *barrios* (neighborhoods) of Buenos Aires. The *milonga* itself was

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<sup>34</sup> Not to be confused with the other meaning of the word “milonga,” social events where tango is danced.

influenced by the Cuban *habanera* and the European *polka*, among other dances, which had arrived in the port cities of Montevideo and Buenos Aires earlier in the century.

Savigliano writes about the *compadritos* as “men of different skin shades but the same dark fate who cultivated courage – courage as a skill and as a value.” They were intimidating but fought only when they needed to. “With a few knife fights over questions of honor, few words but plenty of bad attitude, they established a reputation and territory for themselves on the outskirts of the city” (31). Women were scarce in these *orillas*<sup>35</sup> or outer *barrios*, places with an abundance of

soldiers on leave, slaughterhouse hands, herdsmen, carters and their helpers, sailors, workers from the new factories, storehouse assistants - that whole motley transitional world, generally a world of men on their own, tending to turn to the cafes, brothels and dance establishments in pursuit of distraction and relaxation (Jorge B. Rivera quoted in Collier 95).

The “dance establishments” mentioned here refer to the *academias* (from *academia de baile* or dance academy), bars and dancing locales where the waitresses could be hired as dance partners. These *academias*, as well as the brothels mentioned in the quote, are part of the story of the birth of tango, as I will soon discuss. But having talked about the *criollos*, and before talking about the immigrants, a few words are necessary on the other group of “exiles.”

Robert Cottrol, in “Beyond Invisibility: Afro-Argentines in Their Nation's Culture and Memory,” writes about Afro-Argentines in nineteenth century Buenos Aires:

Particularly at the beginning of the nineteenth century, various modes of African cultural expression were found throughout the city. This was aided by a large

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<sup>35</sup> Referring to the margins of the city.



percentage of people of African descent in Buenos Aires, a reported and probably undercounted 30 percent of the total population, since at the beginning of the nineteenth century a significant percentage of that population was African-born with relatively recent African memories. The city was awash with African nations, organized along ethnic or putative ethnic lines. (143)

Moving further in time, Collier writes about Afro-Argentines making up a quarter of the city's population in the mid-nineteenth century, concentrated in inner-city districts.

Their communal organizations staged dance festivals, and black marching bands were a distinctive feature in Buenos Aires' annual carnivals from the 1830s to the 1870s (96, see also Collier et al. 1995: 43). Prominent among the dances of the Afro-Argentines was the *candombe*. According to Robert Farris Thompson, in *Tango: The Art History of Love*, the word *candombe* in mid-nineteenth century Buenos Aires, in addition to the music and the dance itself, referred to "self-help dancing societies founded by persons of African descent" (97). The social events where the dance took place were also called *candombe* (similar to the dual meaning of the word *milonga*). It was danced by women and men, but not in an embrace.

In nineteenth century Argentina, as in North America, the parodic imitation of black dances by non-blacks, and vice versa, had become a tradition. Collier states that in the 1860s and 1870s, upper-class *porteños* blackened their faces and participated in carnivals as *Los Negros* (96), while some blacks began dancing European imports such as the *polka* and the *mazurka*. He then refers to a 1913 article in *Crítica*, Argentina's first mass-circulated popular newspaper, which has significance relative to the origins of tango. According to its unknown author, in 1877, a group of *compadritos* witnessed a

*candombe* danced by Afro-Argentines in a centrally located barrio of Buenos Aires, which they then imitated and incorporated into the *milonga* that they were already dancing. This new way of dancing *milonga* would soon become the *tango* (97, see also Collier et al. 1995: 43-45). While the accuracy of this account cannot be verified, I quote Savigliano to give it some context:

Tango's choreography emerged out of mutual admiration and scornful disdain among the different races, classes, and ethnicities lumped together in the city. The lighter-colored ones imitated the skillful movements of the blacks and, self-conscious of their shortcomings, ended up caricaturing them. The darker ones, in trying to rub on some fashionable white elegance but knowing that this would bring them no more respect, mocked the loose embrace of the quadrilles, mazurkas, habaneras, and waltzes, tingeing it with bodily proximity and sweat. The tango dance emerged from these racial and class conflicts and competed for a place of its own among the dances that were already being danced, pending, as always, benediction in the cultural empires of the world (32).

What is certain is that various cultural features combined across race and class to give rise to the tango. Two distinctive elements of the emerging tango that came from the black dances and that still exist in the dance were the *corte* and the *quebrada*. A *corte* (cut) is a sudden pause in the dance, while Farris Thompson describes the *quebrada* as a "torsion of the hip combined with sudden bending of the knees" (10). These elements were now incorporated in a dance in which the partners were embraced, rather than apart as in the Afro-Argentine dances.

The improvisations of the *compadritos* and the *milonguitas*, the women that they danced with, gave shape to the tango. Working as dancers for hire in the *academias*, and perhaps in the outer *barrio* brothels as well, these women provided the scarce

embrace that men would pay for and at times fight over.<sup>36</sup> It was common practice for wealthy (often young) men, presented in the tango lyrics of the later decades as the *bacán* or *niño bien* (well-to-do boy), to go slumming in these poor *barrios*, where some learned to dance the tango. These same young men would later take the dance to Paris, where it would receive its “benediction” in the capital of the world’s cultural empire.

While there is not much known about the first generation of tango musicians, other than a prominence of Afro-Argentines among them (Collier et al. 1995: 47), known composers were writing tangos in the 1890s. The new music and dance started moving across the whole city, popularized by the organ-grinders and the publication of tango sheet music, and made its way to inner-city cafés and dance halls, thus transcending its places of origin. The inner city was where the majority of immigrants had settled, many of them in crowded tenement houses called *conventillos*. Originally a patio-style home converted into multiple dwellings, some were newly constructed for the purpose of renting. According to James Scobie, the Buenos Aires census of 1887 registered seventy-two per cent of the *conventillo* dwellers as foreign born in the central city, while the figure was sixty-six per cent for the whole city (Nouzeilles and Montaldo 180). Groups of six or seven men, or a family of a similar number, lived in a single room (179), in attempts to cut down the cost of living relative to wages earned. The *conventillos* housed a significant proportion of the entire population of the city. The large and shared

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<sup>36</sup> Savigliano characterizes the *milonguita* as a “rebellious broad” (48). This definition is similar to that of *muñeca brava*, or “wild doll.” Both terms are used in tango lyrics.

central patios of the tenement homes were places of socialization, and tango steadily made its ways into these social spaces. Dancing tango in the patios became a popular activity, enthusiastically taken up by members of the immigrant community.

### **Into the Twentieth Century**

Popular dance halls opened in the 1900s, as tango moved more and more towards downtown Buenos Aires (*el Centro*). Here are the opening lines of the 1919 novel *Nacha Regules* by Manuel Gálvez, set in 1910 and describing one such venue:

An August night! Hot with the fever of her adolescence as a national capital, Buenos Aires was ablaze with millions of lights and rejoicing in noisy revelry. The Centennial festivities had been going on since May. Thousands of people had flocked in from every corner of the country, from neighboring states and even from Europe ... At night some forty theatres, and innumerable movie houses and concert halls, crammed overflowing masses into their hungry maws, while in the cabarets boisterous licence rubbed elbows with curiosity. The cabaret, of “the Port” – as Argentina calls its chief city – is a public dance hall: it provides a room, tables for drinking, and an orchestra. The patrons are young men of the upper classes with their mistresses; tourists and rustic sight-seers; and girls “of the town,” who come alone. The tango, almost the only dance seen there, and the orchestra, composed usually of white gangsters and mulattos are – with the champagne bottle and the tuxedo – the normal expressions of the Argentine suburban “soul”!

While the story of the novel, that of a *milonguita* which the title is named after, is of course fiction, its setting does offer a glimpse into the night life of Buenos Aires in the period, and the venues in which tango was danced. Of note, “white gangsters” in this translation (1922) by Leo Ongley refers to *compadritos* in the original version. 1910, the year in which the beginning of the novel is set, is a time when there was still strong

disapproval of the tango by the higher classes (which did not stop their young men from dancing it), as the dance had not yet been sanctified in Paris.

It is not known when exactly the tango reached Paris,<sup>37</sup> but we do know that in the first decade of the twentieth century, rich Argentinos, exemplified by the *niño bien*, as well as “some adventurous tango musicians and dancers, introduced it into the elite circles, cabarets, and music halls of la belle époque” (Savigliano 109). Marseille was another port of entry, whose “sailors and white-slave traffickers [Buenos Aires was a common destination for European prostitutes] were tango’s other – déclassé – introducers. Tango arrived in Paris by way of both the top and the bottom of the social scale” (ibid). In the years 1912 and 1913 tango dancing was very popular in the city. Gladys Beattie Crozier writes in *The Tango and How to Dance it* (1913): “Paris went completely mad about it. ‘La Ville Lumière’ [The City of Lights] was dubbed ‘Tangoville’ by its pet caricaturist, ‘Sem,’<sup>38</sup> and for months Tango dancing, Tango dress, Tango teachers, and Tango teas have been the only topics in the Gay City” (16). While dance activities were interrupted in Europe by the First World War, which marked the end of

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<sup>37</sup> Judging from the accounts in *Maurice’s Art of Dancing* (1915) by Maurice Mouvet, Belgian-American dancing master and exhibition ballroom dancer, who spent a significant amount of time in Paris very early in his career, it must have been the year 1907 or 1908. The same time period can be deduced by reading the chapter “Tango Days” in Philip J.S. Richardson’s 1946 book, *A History of English Ballroom Dancing* (22-27). According to Savigliano, composers and musicians Angel Villoldo and Alfredo Gobbi, and singer Flora Rodríguez, all from Argentina, moved to Paris in 1907 and spent over seven years in Europe performing as well as recording music (120 & 251).

<sup>38</sup> George Goursat, 1863 – 1934. For a link to the caricature album “Tangoville,” see “Goursat” in the Bibliography.

both the “first globalization” of finance and trade and the “first global expansion” of tango,<sup>39</sup> the dance became popular again in Paris by 1920.

The sanctification of tango by the Parisian elite prompted its acceptance by the elite of Buenos Aires and therefore its middle classes as well; it simultaneously continued to be popular among the immigrants, who arrived in large numbers well into the twentieth century.<sup>40</sup> By the 1920s, tango had found its way into various strata of Argentine society. As Savigliano points out, since elite and middle-class men had already crossed boundaries and experienced the tango with women of the lower classes, “tango could not be said to have actually crossed local social barriers until women located in opposite classes and moralities joined in the dancing practice of the tango” (138). With the joining of women from the middle classes, tango started its journey of becoming a popular cultural phenomenon of the 1920s, 1930s, 1940s and at least a portion of 1950s in Argentina, a period also known as the *época de oro* or Golden Age of tango (Merritt 36, Goertzen and Azzi 68). It is important to realize that dancing was only one aspect of this phenomenon, which also includes music and poetry.

Tango venues multiplied in the 1920s in Buenos Aires, which were often places where people went simply to listen to live tango music. The best tango bands of the 1920s, which had started to bring together very talented musicians, played at the

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<sup>39</sup> In the early 1910s tango made its way from France to London and then to New York, as well as other major European cities.

<sup>40</sup> According to Collier, at the time of the third national census of Argentina in 1914, “just over half of the 1.5 million inhabitants of Buenos Aires were immigrants” (93).

cabarets, where one could also dance. They became quite numerous in downtown Buenos Aires in that decade, with many of them named after cabarets in Paris, for example the *Folies-Bergère*. As Savigliano writes in “Whiny Ruffians and Rebellious Broads: Tango as a Spectacle of Eroticized Social Tension,” this is a time when, in the lyrics, “the ruffianesque characters [the *compadritos*] blended into romantic heroes. Tango, in its lyrics and choreography, became more polished, and the musical time slowed down and turned more sentimental” (99). This more sentimental tango, while danced, was often more suitable for listening; and while tango was danced throughout the Golden Age, it wasn’t a prominent feature of it until the second half of the 1930s.

The cabaret was a place that witnessed the mingling of rich men and “women of poor backgrounds, who were now, by virtue of their skill in tango, transformed into glamorous cabaret dancers” (Collier et al., 117). So while approval of the higher classes had facilitated the entry of tango into “respectable” spaces, the inter-class (higher-class man/lower-class woman) connection that characterized slumming in the previous decades was still present. Conforming to the glamour of the cabaret, tango musicians typically appeared dressed in a suit and black tie. As Matthew Karush writes in *Culture of Class: Radio and Cinema in the Making of a Divided Argentina, 1920–1946*, “In 1920s Buenos Aires, jazz was associated with elegance, sophistication, and the high life; in order to compete, tango needed to be dressed up” (97). The prototype of the dressed-up male tango musician was Carlos Gardel, the legendary singer whose image has become synonymous with tango. He popularized the *tango-canción*, or sung tango, after

his 1917 recording of the song *Mi noche triste*. Gardel sang tangos that were not for dancing, and in the 1920s like most other singers sang to guitar accompaniment rather than a tango orchestra (Collier et. Al 128). His lower-class origins as a poor kid from the humble *barrio* of *Abasto* in Buenos Aires made him an idol of the masses, and his early death in an air crash in 1935 cemented his image in the tango imaginary.

Tango in the Golden Age must be understood in the context of mass culture and its various elements. According to Karush in *The New Cultural History of Peronism*, in Argentina of the 1920s and 1930s, the radio, cinema, and mass-circulation press transformed daily life by prompting an explosion of mass culture. “Nearly all these mass cultural forms [such as tango songs, pulp fiction, and domestic films] appropriated the generic conventions and narrative strategies of Argentine melodrama, a literary tradition with roots in the late nineteenth century” (22). These various forms of popular culture, which especially thrived in the 1930s with the proliferation of radio stations and the advent of sound movies, shared a certain vision of society:

In all of its guises, melodrama presupposed a Manichean world in which poverty was a guarantor of virtue and authenticity, and wealth a moral flaw. Hundreds of songs, radio plays, and films presented Argentina as a nation irreconcilably divided between rich and poor ... Throughout the mass culture of the 1930s, wealth functioned as a sign of malice. The prototypical tango plot, revisited in dozens of songs, describes the tragic demise of the *milonguita* – the poor, innocent girl from the *barrios* who is tempted by the bright lights and wild life of downtown. Seduced by a *bacán* or a *niño bien*, the *milonguita* is usually abandoned once her looks have faded (25-26).

This depicted morality of the lower classes guaranteed the popular appeal of the product. Karush argues that since “the vast majority of radio stations and film studios



remained in private hands throughout the 1930s” (31), it was the pursuit of commercial interest rather than any overt political ideology that determined their productions. Leading radio stations of the time reserved their prime slots for tango and radio theater, as they were what people wanted to hear. *Radio Nacional*, the highest-rated radio of the 1930s,<sup>41</sup> “promoted its commitment to tango as a sign of its adherence to popular tastes” (33).

Meanwhile jazz music, which radio stations had already popularized in the 1920s, remained a competitor of tango in the 1930s, and tango bands often included “foxtrots”<sup>42</sup> in their repertoires. The proponents of tango pitted its “authenticity” and its *Argentinidad* or “Argentineness” against the “foreignness” of jazz. While the association of jazz with the United States and Hollywood conveyed an air of modernity, “tango proclaimed its Argentine authenticity by insisting on its sadness, its resistance to modernity, and its affiliation with plebeian popular culture” (36). This was most prominently expressed in tango lyrics. But tango’s populism, according to Karush,

hardly embraced progressive social change. Tango, like other melodramatic texts, systematically depoliticized social conflicts and contradictions by transposing them onto stories of frustrated love ... Further contributing to this conservatism was tango’s persistent nostalgia, its evocation of a pre-modern golden age ... This nostalgia neatly expressed the dislocations felt by those bearing the brunt of Argentina’s modernization, but it also suggested that these problems could be ameliorated not through social transformation but through an escapist recreation of a golden age (36).

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<sup>41</sup> Renamed *Radio Belgrano* in 1934.

<sup>42</sup> As *porteños* typically referred to jazz dance music (Karush and Chamosa 34).

The “golden age” in this quote opens a different dimension to the commonly used term, “the Golden Age of tango,” which refers, as I have already mentioned, to a period of popularity of tango music and dance. It suggests that the period is called the “Golden Age” not just for this popularity, but also because of its nostalgic quality that yearns for a golden past, pure and authentic, free of the evils of modernity. But not all tango lyrics of the 1920s and 1930s fit Karush’s description. For example, Enrique Santos Discépolo (1901 – 1951), tango composer and poet, wrote tangos that were deeply critical of the social injustice of the times, if still sharing the fatalism of other lyrics.

The first movie in Argentina using the modern optical sound technology was *¡Tango!* (1933), featuring well-known singers (mostly women) performing tango songs against the background of a simple plot derived from that recurring theme of tango lyrics: the *milonguita* who leaves her lover when seduced by the riches of another man. The “ruffianesque/romantic character blend” that Savigliano writes about, describing the (victimized) men that were the subjects of these tangos, fits the protagonist of this movie as well as some others that came after it. While many talented female singers performed in the Golden Age, they usually sang lyrics written for men, with some performing in drag.<sup>43</sup> For the decade that followed the successful opening of *¡Tango!*, the local film industry relying on tango and popular melodrama was able to “capture an audience willing to choose Argentine authenticity over Hollywood’s technical virtuosity”

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<sup>43</sup> Despite the prominence of female singers in the Golden Age, most available recordings from the time feature male singers.

(39), despite not having the technological or production capabilities of Hollywood.

Dozens of movie theatres in the *barrios* screened domestic movies that were affordable to most Argentines, while the first runs of North American and European movies played in the fancy downtown theatres (ibid).

Due to the effects of the depression, the early 1930s were economically difficult for the middle and working classes. Argentina was hard-hit due to the collapse of trade with Europe and its dependence on the foreign capital and imports that were made available by the export of agricultural products, a setting which can be called an “open economy.” Cabaret attendance decreased in these years, affecting tango workers and resulting in the unemployment of many tango musicians (Castro 56). Mid-1933 was when a growing intervention of the state in economic activities and a “closing” of the economy started (that continued until the second half of the 1950s), as an acceleration of industrial production, as well as foreign exchange controls and tariffs, created the conditions for “import substitution industrialization.” A period of economic stability and relative prosperity ensued by the year 1936, which could also be attributed to a temporary increase in agricultural exports in the middle of the decade (Romero 65 – 69).

Concurrent with the waning of the effects of the depression by the end of 1935, which revived social life, a musical phenomenon in this year prompted the prominence of dancing in the Buenos Aires tango scene. Juan D’Arienzo (1900 – 1976), born to Italian immigrants, and a tango bandleader and composer, in late 1935 introduced a new time signature to his orchestra which at the time was playing in the cabaret

*Chantecler*. This was the reverse of the slowing down that had occurred in the 1920s and had made tango more “sentimental.” The agent of this change was Rodolfo Biagi, whom the band had just acquired as its new pianist. The driving rhythm that resulted brought people to their feet and on to the dance floor, giving D’Arienzo the nickname *El Rey del Compás*, or “King of the Beat.” This D’Arienzo – Biagi effect is what José Gobello, in *Breve Historia Crítica del Tango* (Brief Critical History of Tango) calls a return to “danceability” (*bailabilidad*) as the essence of tango (114). In fact, to this day, Golden Age recordings of the D’Arienzo orchestra draw the maximum number of dancers to the floor at the milongas of Buenos Aires and elsewhere in the world. Other tango orchestras that were (and still are) successful in getting people to dance also appeared in the second half of the 1930s, such as those of Aníbal Troilo in 1937, and Rodolfo Biagi who in 1938 separated from D’Arienzo to form his own band.

### **Prosperity, the Golden Age of *Dancing Tango*, and Another Perspective on “Sanitization”**

Interest in dancing tango steadily increased throughout the rest of the decade, inaugurating what Eduardo Gálvez, in “El tango en su época de gloria: ni prostibulario, ni orillero. Los bailes en los clubes sociales y deportivos de Buenos Aires 1938 - 1959” (Tango in its age of glory: not of the brothel, nor of the outskirts. Dance [evenings] in the social and sports clubs of Buenos Aires 1938 - 1959), calls the “age of the greatest glory” (*época de mayor gloria*) of tango: the 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s (24). This

was a time when the best tango orchestras (to date) flourished, the music continued to be popular on the radio, and while dancing tango was still common in the cafés and the cabarets, massive numbers of people were also dancing in the city's numerous social and sports clubs (7). Various social classes attended these clubs, depending on its location within the city. Each *barrio* had its own *club social y deportivo*, at times up to four or five. In addition, soccer and basketball fields were being used for tango dancing, and some downtown theatres removed their auditorium seats, turning them into dancing spaces (Collier et al., 154). The article by Gálvez shows an image of a full page of a newspaper from the period, *El Mundo*, from July 16, 1946, that looks just like the “classified” section of current newspapers and is advertising multiple dance events for that evening. One certain *barrio*, Villa Crespo, has four events in the same night: two with live orchestra, and two using recorded music (9). The orchestras, many of which today are considered iconic among dancers, such as those of bandleaders D’Arienzo, Di Sarli, Pugliese, D’Agostino, Tanturi, and Troilo, circulated tirelessly among the *clubes sociales y deportivos* and similar civil associations (10). This period, I would say, was the Golden Age of *dancing tango*.

The 1940s were also years of prosperity for Argentina. The industrialization process increased substantially during the Second World War (in which Argentina had remained neutral almost to the end), the products of which were used not only for substituting imports but also for exporting to neighboring countries (Romero 96). Juan Domingo Perón, who was involved in the 1943 coup which put a military government in charge of

the country, came to power in that same year as head of the National Directorate of Labor, soon to become a secretariat. In this position, he established ties with labor leaders and supported the labor unions, empowering workers' rights and extending benefits for workers (93). Perón was elected president of Argentina in February 1946. After starting his tenure in June of that year, he started to redistribute an abundance of foreign exchange reserves that had accumulated during the war from both industrial and agricultural exports, greatly enhancing social welfare and making it available to a large segment of society. According to Luis Alberto Romero, in *A History of Argentina in the Twentieth Century*, "the welfare state contributed decisively to raising the standard of living: freezing rents, establishing minimum wages and price ceilings, improving public health, financing public housing projects, building elementary and secondary schools, organizing a national retirement plan, and undertaking initiatives in all things related to the realm of social welfare" (104). It is conceivable that the increased standard of living enjoyed by the masses, and their preference for Argentine "authenticity," together created the conditions for the mass popularity of social tango dancing in Buenos Aires during this period. For large segments of the population, in some important ways, the imagined "pre-modern golden age" had become a reality. The level of popularity of the dance that accompanied these social changes is one that has never since been achieved.

According to Gálvez, in order to enter the social clubs during this Golden Age of the dance, the tango had to shed its former image, whether that of the *orilla*, or that of the cabaret (14). It had to be sanitized and transformed in order to become "social." This is

a fascinating argument, because the discourse of the “sanitization” of tango has revolved around how it was “Europeanized” in Paris and thereafter became acceptable to the elite and by extension the middle classes of Buenos Aires. But in this argument, the tango of the cabaret, which is the tango of the upper classes, is also considered “immoral.” The focus of Gálvez’s research is *Club Villa Malcolm* in the *barrio* of Villa Crespo, which still stands today as both a sports club and a popular location for milongas and prácticas, and that I have frequented as a tango dancer. According to the archived minutes of the club that appear in the article, various tactics were used to achieve (and at times enforce) this sanitization: from raising the entrance fee arbitrarily when one was considered undesirable, to issuing warnings to dancers who behaved “inappropriately,” to expelling repeat offenders from the club. These “inappropriate” actions included dancing with the faces of the dancers touching (22), the most common way of social tango dancing today. At one point, even the contract for the orchestra of the (now) legendary Aníbal Troilo was canceled and they were replaced with another orchestra because some of its musicians were not behaving according to “healthy social principles” (23).

This is a period when other tango sanitizations were also in force. The 1943 coup brought General Pedro Ramírez to power as president of the nation. In the same year he passed a decree called *La Ley del Buen Hablar* (Law of Good Speech). According to Anahí Viladrich in *More Than Two to Tango: Argentine Tango Immigrants in New York City*, by this decree,

Under the sponsorship of the Catholic Church and the right-wing conservative elite, the government ordered radio stations to alter tango titles and lyrics in order to conform to both good morals and correct grammar ... Strong censorship of tango lyrics was enforced, and the lunfardo<sup>44</sup> terms typically used in tango were banned. Lyrics seen as immoral were changed to the point that their original content was unrecognizable, and those who broke the law by singing the original versions were heavily fined (loc. 946).

The censorship of tango lyrics was in force until 1949 when it was lifted by Perón, after meeting a group of leading tango figures (Collier et al. 156). Paradoxically, the sanitization of the dance as described in the case of *Club Villa Malcolm* was foreshadowed in the way the tango lyrics characterized men of the upper classes. The *bacán* (itself a Lunfardo term) of the lyrics is the rich playboy who frequents the cabaret, where he seduces the *milonguita*, the girl from the *barrio* who is attracted to his riches as well as the lights of downtown. According to Gálvez, the “prevailing spirit” of *Club Villa Malcolm* was not one of “*levante*” (pick-up) or fleeting love affairs; quite to the contrary, “one entered the club single and left married, continuing the line of producing devices of strong social bonding”<sup>45</sup> (20). Young women did not attend dance nights at the social clubs without their mothers or another woman like an aunt who could act in the capacity of a chaperon (19), ensuring the “morality” of the event. The dances also took place mainly over the weekends, as the week was meant to be the time for work (ibid). This was consistent with the society under Perón, which despite the state’s

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<sup>44</sup> A *porteño* dialect that originated in the Buenos Aires underclass and then permeated various strata of the city’s inhabitants. It is commonly used in tango lyrics.

<sup>45</sup> My translation.



valorization of the poor and the working class, was defined by the promise of upward mobility.

### **The Decline**

In conclusion, Gálvez argues that the rigidity of social norms may have contributed to the decline of tango after the first years of the 1950s, which is quite plausible. A host of factors were involved in this decline, including the popularity of American rock 'n' roll, which, according to Carolyn Merritt in *Tango Nuevo*, "was exploding on Argentine radio waves, on television, and in film" in the late 1950s (38). The military governments that succeeded Perón after he was toppled in a coup in 1955 favored foreign musical genres and associated tango with a populist brand of nationalism that they opposed. The dance linked with rock 'n' roll music did not follow the codes and rigid structures that the tango of the clubs did, which may have made the Northern import more attractive to the younger generation. Curfews and prohibition of public gatherings in the years following the 1955 coup also made a nighttime group activity such as tango difficult. Arlene Dávila, in *Culture Works: Space, Value, and Mobility across the Neoliberal Americas*, writes that in her interviews, dancers of the period recall being followed after leaving the milongas and being harassed and questioned by the police (139). What is not often talked about in connection with the decline of tango is the economic downturn after the beginning of the 1950s, what Daniel James, in *Resistance*

*and Integration: Peronism and the Argentine Working Class, 1946 – 1976*, refers to as the fading of the “peculiarly favorable economic and social conditions” (40) that had started in 1943 and come into full force in 1946, particularly benefiting the working and lower-middle classes.

Cafés and cabarets that had been famous tango joints closed down in the 1950s, and “the neighborhood clubs scaled down or eliminated the dance parties that had once filled soccer fields” (Merritt 38). The large tango orchestras with ten to fourteen members disappeared, while smaller quartets and quintets played in intimate salons (Viladrich loc. 955). Concurrent with the dominance of North American music, Latin American music other than tango was also becoming more popular. Both trends, writes Merritt,

further fed growing perceptions of tango as old-fashioned, kitsch, depressive, and maudlin. Responding to this shift, RCA [an influential record company of the time] is said to have destroyed a warehouse full of original tango recordings to make rehearsal and storage space for more lucrative pop endeavors in the 1960s. Recalling the latter years of tango's decline, artist Jorge Garnica notes that by the 1970s, young porteño artists and scholars were hosting anti-tango conferences that attacked the genre's “exaltation of pain,” and arguing for art forms that more appropriately reflected their modern lives. (ibid)

She further writes about the dance, “it is clear that tango as social dance largely fell out of fashion in Buenos Aires from the 1960s; this is supported by conversations with young adult and middle-aged Argentines who considered themselves part of the ‘lost generation’ of tango” (40). Meanwhile, small numbers of mostly older *milongueras/os* kept the dance alive in secluded spaces, even during the years of the brutal dictatorship

of the junta (1976 – 1983), when curfews were in place again. In a 2004 interview by Sonia and José Soltero with famed stage dancers Gloria and Eduardo Arquimbau, in response to the question of whether the military dictatorships of the 1970s affected the tango, they say, “No, by that time nothing could stop tango anymore. If there was a curfew, people would come to a milonga early, they would close the place throughout the night, would dance the whole night, and would leave the next morning” (Arquimbau 59). If tango as social dance was “out of fashion” for many years, it never really disappeared.

### **A Brief History of Neoliberalism in Argentina**

In order to further proceed with the historical account of tango, it is necessary to outline the history of neoliberalism in Argentina, as the country’s neoliberal reforms came to directly affect the unfolding of the tango. And to study neoliberalism and neoliberal competition in general, the Southern Cone of Latin America is an appropriate starting point, for reasons that I will soon clarify.

In today’s world, competitiveness has become almost synonymous with living, and being competitive, the hallmark of neoliberalism, is considered common sense. “To understand the world we are now in,” according to Nour Dados and Raewyn Connell<sup>46</sup>, “we need to understand where neoliberalism comes from and why it has gained such

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<sup>46</sup> In “Where in the world does neoliberalism come from?”

strength" (118). The most influential accounts of neoliberalism come from scholars in the global North, the best known among them probably David Harvey. According to Harvey, in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, the emergence of neoliberal theory can be linked to the gathering of a small and exclusive group of academic economists, historians, and philosophers, including North American economist Milton Friedman, around the renowned Austrian philosopher Friedrich von Hayek to create the "Mont Pelerin Society," named after the Swiss spa where they first met in 1947 (19 - 20).

Harvey writes,

The neoliberal label signalled their adherence to those free market principles of neoclassical economics that had emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century (thanks to the work of Alfred Marshall, William Stanley Jevons, and Leon Walras) to displace the classical theories of Adam Smith, David Ricardo, and, of course, Karl Marx. Yet they also held to Adam Smith's view that the hidden hand of the market was the best device for mobilizing even the basest of human instincts such as gluttony, greed, and the desire for wealth and power for the benefit of all. (20)

This is certainly an intriguing account. But to understand the practice of neoliberalism, we need to look at Latin America.

Neoliberal policies such as the implementation of an austerity program and the elimination of state regulations were carried out in Argentina as early as 1959 (Romero 142). However, according to Dados and Connell, the "first substantially neoliberal regime" in the world was that of Chile, as General Pinochet, who had come to power following a coup in 1973, consolidated his power in 1974 (122). This Latin American trend was further manifested by the rise of a military dictatorship in Argentina in 1976. In both Chile and Argentina these neoliberal changes were implemented by brute force;

and in both instances, they were carried out as a *development strategy*, rather than simply being a Northern imposition. Here is Harvey again, writing about Chile in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*:

A group of economists known as ‘the Chicago boys’ because of their attachment to the neoliberal theories of Milton Friedman, then teaching at the University of Chicago, was summoned to help reconstruct the Chilean economy. The story of how they were chosen is an interesting one. The US had funded training of Chilean economists at the University of Chicago since the 1950s as part of a Cold War programme to counteract left-wing tendencies in Latin America ... Pinochet brought these economists into the government, where their first job was to negotiate loans with the International Monetary Fund. Working alongside the IMF, they restructured the economy according to their theories (8).

Dados and Connell, instead of the habitual reliance on Northern intellectual perspectives, seek to understand neoliberalism from the perspective of the global South: “However vibrant, the link with Chicago does not begin to explain why a culturally conservative military leader would adopt an economic ideology *not* at the time mainstream in the United States” (122, emphasis original). Citing various Southern authors, they go on to say:

The Chicago Boys—and the other players in the making of the dictatorship’s economic policy—were not offering General Pinochet a textbook of economic theory. They were offering a solution to his main political problem: how to get legitimacy by economic growth, satisfy his backers in the Chilean propertied class, and keep the diplomatic support of the United States, without giving an opening to his opponents in the political parties and labor movement (ibid).

The neoliberal changes in Chile were a strategy for economic growth, and in alignment with the politics of the Chilean government at the time. The same can be said about Argentina in that decade. Unlike the claim by Harvey that the Chilean story of neoliberalism in the 70s was a “brutal experiment [of the center] carried out in the

periphery,” Dados and Connell acknowledge the agency of the Chileans, and more broadly, members of the communities of the global South, as seen by the intellectuals of these very same communities.

When it comes to neoliberalism and the global South, the role of the state cannot be overemphasized, bringing into question the concept of a weakened nation-state vis-à-vis neoliberalism. Quoting Dados and Connell again, who see the roots of Southern neoliberalism in colonialism, “Neoliberalism in the global South can draw on a long historical trajectory of coercion. Colonial society was not so much regulated by the state, it was *produced* by the state” (126, emphasis original). The resulting “colonizing structures” were responsible for the integration of local economies into the capitalist world economy. These structures “were contested but not destroyed by decolonization, and their continuity has underpinned the power of post-colonial elites” (ibid). In Argentina, the military junta that was in power 1976 – 1983 was more supportive of the land-owning elites than the manufacturing industry (Cooney 11) and the worker unions associated with it. Agriculture has been one of the key areas of neoliberal action in the global South, reshaping and expanding global trade (Dados & Connell 133); the export of agricultural products based on comparative advantage in the global markets became a key component of the Argentine economy. Alongside this shift from industrial manufacturing to agricultural production, the influential José Martínez de Hoz, Minister of Economy of Argentina 1976 – 1981, and a strong proponent of reduction of state powers and replacing state intervention with the market, implemented many neoliberal

policies including the Financial Reform of 1977, abolishing interest controls and removing many financial regulations. This resulted in a parallel shift from industry to finance, promoting financial speculation and capital flight (Cooney 12). According to Romero, in *A History of Argentina in the Twentieth Century*, “Paradoxically, the minister proposed using all the powers of the state to impose the liberal solution by force and to restructure the state itself” (231). This again brings into question the concept of a weak state. If the implementation as well as maintenance of neoliberal practices require state power, it appears that “weak” in this context refers to the inability or unwillingness to support society as a whole, while using force to sustain and expand power differentials, as evidenced by widening inequality under the rule of neoliberal regimes.

The military dictatorship of 1976 – 1983 was also a time of significant rise in Argentina’s foreign debt, growing from USD 9.7 billion in 1976 to USD 45 billion in 1983 (Cooney 13), in line with a similar trend in various countries of the global South. While attractive loans were initially offered by the IMF and other financial institutions in the mid to late seventies, a time when there was an abundance of petro-dollars in the world market, subsequent rises in the US interest rates resulted in a significant debt increase in many of these countries, including Argentina. Following the fall of the military government in 1983 and the return to democracy, the government of Raul Alfonsín initially chose to break with the orthodox neoliberal policies of his predecessors (such as privatization, insecure labor, and reductions in welfare spending) and adopted a more heterodox approach. But due to growing debt and rising inflation, the government had

to repeatedly give in to IMF demands for neoliberal austerity plans, resulting in the continuation of the neoliberal economic policies of the dictatorship (Cooney 15-16). When in early 1989, the IMF and the World Bank withdrew their support for the Argentine economy, the government devalued the peso, resulting in hyperinflation and a downturn of the economy.

### **“Fast and Furious” Neoliberalism, followed by the Collapse**

It was in this political environment that Carlos Menem, the main opposition party’s presidential candidate, “promised to return to the paradise of the welfare state” (Romero 282). After being elected president of Argentina in May 1989, he had a complete about-face, becoming a supporter of the “opening up” of the economy, and of privatization (287). During the first two years of his administration, Menem pressured congress to pass two major laws: the Law of Economic Emergency suspended various subsidies and authorized the layoff of public employees, and the Law of State Reform gave the president broad powers to privatize multiple state-owned companies (288). The supreme court was also modified in a way that would be supportive of the government’s decisions (289).

In March 1991, his administration implemented the *Plan Cavallo*, an economic plan named after his economics minister Domingo Cavallo. Similar to the policies of Martínez de Hoz back in the 1970s, it was fundamentally neoliberal, consisting of financial



deregulation, state reform, and trade liberalization (Cooney 17). “The Menem administration was committed to an accumulation model with its base in finance and agro-industry, sacrificing manufacturing and thus producing a second wave of deindustrialization” (ibid). (The first wave had occurred during the military dictatorship of 1976 – 1983). The privatization of state-owned companies became a major source of income for the government, simultaneously increasing the numbers of the unemployed in a significant way. The *Plan Cavallo*, however, had a very specific element: the pegging of the peso to the dollar, commonly referred to as *convertibilidad* or convertibility, which gave one Argentine peso the same value as one US dollar. While not an orthodox neoliberal practice, it was at the time supported by the IMF and the US government (ibid). It was effective in ending the hyperinflation, and it brought a sense of economic stability. However, it favored imports over exports, causing a net trade deficit of over USD 18 billion 1991 – 1999 (Cooney 21). Meanwhile foreign debt grew steadily, rising to USD 146 billion by the year 2000 (27).

When Argentina’s next president, Fernando de la Rúa, took office in December 1999, the country had already been in a recession for over a year. The economic crisis worsened under De la Rúa, and unemployment and poverty continued to increase. As this downward spiral continued in 2001, there was a run on the banks, resulting in the government restricting access to bank accounts. Riots and street protests spread throughout the country, and by mid-December there was a general strike. On December 19, people filled the famed Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires, which faces the presidential

palace, and shortly thereafter the president resigned. In 2002, with Eduardo Duhalde as provisional president, the country defaulted on its foreign debt, devalued the peso, and entered a state of economic depression.

### **The Recovery**

Néstor Kirchner was the next elected president of Argentina, taking office in May 2003. According to Christopher Wylde, in “State, Society and Markets in Argentina: The Political Economy of *Neodesarrollismo* under Néstor Kirchner, 2003 – 2007,” his administration combined elements of populism and neoliberalism (436). This should be understood in the broader context of what has been termed “post-neoliberalism.” More than a simple “return of the state,” as Jean Grugel and Pía Riggirozzi write in “Post-neoliberalism in Latin America: Rebuilding and Reclaiming the State After Crisis,” it can be defined as

the set of *political aspirations* centred on ‘reclaiming’ the authority of the state to oversee the construction of a new social consensus and approach to welfare, and the body of *economic policies* that seeks to enhance or ‘rebuild’ the capacity of the state to manage the market and the export economy in ways that not only ensure growth but are also responsive to social need and citizenship demands. (2-3, emphases original)

While the danger of trusting too much in the market was revealed to the global North in the form of the 2008 financial crisis, Latin America, again leading the way in all matters related to neoliberalism, understood this danger very early in the new millennium, as occurred with the Argentine crisis of 2001/2002. Therefore, a new level of state

autonomy had to be devised and implemented, while maintaining neoliberal policies such as the avoidance of fiscal deficit and the continuation of an economy dependent on export, allowing countries to remain stably connected to the global economy. This was manifested as the coming to power of a series of left or left of center governments, as in Ecuador, Bolivia, and Argentina.

Even though the economic crisis in Argentina had continued throughout 2002 and early 2003, key indicators were already improving by the second half of 2003, and under the (first) Kirchner presidency the country experienced significant economic growth (Wylde 437 - 438). This was achieved through promoting exports by maintaining a high exchange rate for the peso, in economic terms, a “stable and competitive real exchange rate.”<sup>47</sup> While this resulted in an increase in agro-exports, industrial manufacturing and the export of manufactured goods were also supported by the government. The collection of tax on exports simultaneously provided the government with funds for domestic spending. However, quoting Wylde, “Kirchner has not engaged in widespread social programmes;” rather, his programmes “have much more in common with neoliberal-style safety-net models of social welfare, designed to ‘catch’ individuals and prevent them from falling into complete poverty and destitution” (441). While the middle-class, which had fallen into poverty due to the 2001 – 2002 crisis, recovered

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<sup>47</sup> Frenkel and Rapetti, *International Review of Applied Economics*, 22 (2), pp. 215-26.

rather quickly, poverty levels remained high during his presidency, standing at 20.6 percent in 2007 (444). The national economy remained largely open and foreign investment was generally welcomed in these years, with this openness actively achieved through effective state management (448).

A very significant aspect of Néstor Kirchner's tenure was the way his administration dealt with Argentina's debt and the foreign creditors. Andrew Cooper and Bessma Momani, in "Negotiating Out of Argentina's Financial Crisis: Segmenting the International Creditors," argue for the agency of Argentina in the face of foreign creditors, another argument against characterizing countries of the global South as victims of international finance and/or the global North. The creditors fall into two main categories: multilateral organizations, and private international creditors:

Although multilateral creditors, particularly the IMF and to a lesser extent the World Bank, are significant sources of capital for developing countries, they have become secondary to private international creditors. This group of private international creditors includes commercial banks, bondholders, portfolio investors and multinational corporations investing in foreign direct investments ... Since the influx of petrodollars into the international financial system in the 1970s, private international creditors have provided more credit to most developing countries (and even more to emerging market economies) than the IMF provides. Still, the Fund retains a unique role: part watchdog and part enforcer of debtors' fiscal responsibility, with benefits to the private international creditors. (306)

The IMF (the Fund) has historically enacted a leadership role among the international creditors, with private creditors deferring to the IMF in debt negotiations as they assume "the Fund will be tough, technocratic and politically effective at getting the best concessions possible. Overpowering the debtor state, the Fund leads the 'creditor

coalition' to achieve state discipline and acquiescence" (307). This, however, was not what happened during the debt negotiations that took place between Argentina and its foreign creditors April 2003 – February 2005.

Putting the interests of the Argentinean people ahead of that of the creditors, the Kirchner government firmly rejected the proposal by IMF for a budget surplus, insisting that growth, not austerity, is what the country needed. It also rejected conditions put forth by the IMF for paying a loan in March 2004, all having to do with Argentina renewing its negotiations with the private creditors. But while Argentina patiently negotiated with the IMF, eventually repaying its entire debt to the Fund early, it refused to negotiate with the private creditors. It gave the private creditors, mainly composed of bondholders, a "take it or leave it" offer that would cut the face value of the bonds by seventy percent. Seventy-six percent of the bondholders took the offer, marking a victory for Argentina (313). According to Cooper and Momani, while the segmented approach of the Argentine government to negotiations with its creditors did not "guarantee complete success," it "helped ward off the full force of coercive control at the key moment of crisis and subsequently adjusted both its pace and degree. The overall impression generated is thus one of great nuance and equipoise in the contest between the power of international creditors and the reassertion of state control" (318). The nation-state demonstrated agency vis-à-vis international finance, without isolating itself and disconnecting from the international community. This account

furthering our understanding of the complexities of the realities and responses to neoliberalism in the global South.

### **How “Post” is “Post-neoliberalism?”**

Néstor Kirchner chose to not run for reelection, and his spouse, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, was elected as the next president of Argentina and came to power in December 2007. Serving two consecutive terms, she was in office till December 9, 2015. She broadly continued the economic and social policies of her predecessor, but the global financial crisis of 2008 and the resulting sharp decline in demand for Argentinean exports posed an early challenge to her government, as export tax remained a significant source of state income. This was exacerbated by the drop in international commodity prices in 2009; the severe drought of 2012 also had a large impact on government revenues. This is reminiscent of the effects of the Depression in the early 1930s on a similarly export-dependent Argentine economy, bringing us to the broader issue of reliance on primary commodities, whether raw or processed, in Latin American countries.

As Grugel and Riggiozzi point out in their 2012 article, “the current natural resources boom is without precedent in recent history” (13). While the economic growth of Bolivia and Ecuador has been mainly dependent on these resources, even Argentina, despite its more diverse export portfolio, steadily increased its reliance on

primary commodity exports since 2003 (15). This leads to limited diversification of the economy in these countries, hence “the emerging paradox within postneoliberal economic governance: the state is developing greater fiscal capacity (and using it to make some important investments in welfare) through export expansion at the expense of broadening the economic base” (ibid). These countries thus lose industrial competitiveness and their economies become vulnerable to factors beyond their control. Moreover, focusing on Argentina, transnational corporations are very prominent in agro-export, particularly in the area of soy (Wylde 2016: 336), meaning that these exports increase government revenue without bringing the export sector into public ownership. And I have not even discussed the environmental degradation resulting from intense exploitation of the land, including deforestation. “Post-neoliberalism,” it seems, more than a true paradigm shift, is a modification of neoliberalism to include more welfare spending.

Wylde, in “Post-neoliberal developmental regimes in Latin America: Argentina under Cristina Fernández de Kirchner,” explores the weakness of the “post-neoliberal project” in the case of Argentina. As I previously alluded to, export-driven growth was severely impacted by the global crisis in 2008. Fernandez de Kirchner, however, not only kept the welfare model of the previous government, she intended to “deepen” it, including extending the minimum wage to non-unionized workers, and “maintaining (even increasing) subsidies and price controls in a number of areas – especially transport, energy and fuel” (336). Downward trends in poverty and inequality were also

maintained, but all this was achieved at the expense of rampant inflation (337). At the beginning of her second term, Fernandez de Kirchner implemented foreign exchange restrictions, limiting the ability to buy or sell foreign currency, particularly the US dollar. This policy, combined with inflation, made it difficult for the middle classes to save, many of them also unhappy about how the restrictions affected their ability to travel to other countries, as well as the availability of foreign imports. The inflation also resulted in a decrease in real wages of the working class. These are among the significant factors that led to the loss of the Kirchners' party in the presidential election of 2015.

Reliance on export tax, as I have already mentioned, and as can be seen in the case of Argentina, makes for a vulnerable economy. And handing out cash, while preventing extreme poverty, does not deal with the roots of inequality. A more comprehensive approach, according to Grugel and Riggiozzi, would be a "tax system that shifts the burden from sales and export taxes to direct tax based on income and property" (10). Tax evasion is also a major issue in Latin America. Governments on both the left and the right have not gone after tax reform and tackling tax evasion, to avoid conflict both domestically and with corporate investors (11). Leftist governments have also been unwilling to confront informal earners, which constitute a significant portion of the economies in these countries. The authors add: "The scale of the reforms required to seriously address inequality, in short, cannot be underestimated, nor can the political sensitivities that potentially attach to them" (ibid). In Argentina, with its highly politicized climate in the recent years, which has seen riots, an abundance of



demonstrations, and the turning of street protests into a fact of life, fundamental and lasting reforms for social equality have yet to be seen. The coming to power of Mauricio Macri in 2015 as president of the nation, has certainly not been a step in that direction.

Macri, two-term mayor of the City of Buenos Aires (2007 - 2011 and 2011 - 2015), pro-business and free trade, and not associated with any of Argentina's major political parties, came to power as president of the nation on December 10, 2015. He lost no time implementing his neoliberal agenda: "Only 3 days after taking power, Macri signed an executive decree to eliminate all export taxes on agricultural commodities except soybeans, which were reduced from 35 to 30%" (Lapegna 326), thus transferring a very large income from the government to the private sector. Very early on, he also eliminated the foreign exchange restrictions, resulting in devaluation of the peso, as well as starting negotiations to pay off the "vulture funds" and the defaulted bondholders, known as "holdout creditors," who had not struck a deal with either the Néstor Kirchner administration or that of his successor. And thousands of public-sector workers were laid off during his first few months in office, as part of his agenda to shrink the state.

Empowered by nationwide victories of his coalition in the October 2017 congressional midterm elections, Macri has pushed forward with his agenda. The pension reform plan, which prompted widespread protests in Buenos Aires in December 2017, cuts funds to pensioners, while the salaries of government employees were frozen, with many of them set to be fired, deepening Macri's drive for austerity in his

efforts to decrease Argentina's fiscal deficit. Meanwhile, corporate income taxes are to be gradually reduced from thirty-five to twenty-five per cent by 2021.

So much for the "post-neoliberal" state, at least when it comes to Argentina. This "turn to the right" has manifested in Latin America not only in the coming to power of Macri, but also in the December 2015 victory for the center-right opposition of Venezuela in the National Assembly elections, and the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff of Brazil in 2016. According to Grugel and Riggirozzi, writing in 2012, before this shift to the right, "Scholars who understand globalization to have effectively ended opportunities for meaningful state action are unable to conceive of post-neoliberalism as possible, at least not without a wholesale restructuring of the capitalist global order" (16). But at the same time, it would be difficult to dismiss actions such as those of the successive Kirchner administrations as "meaningless." The authors conclude, "we understand post-neoliberalism, with all its fragilities, to reflect an attempt to deliver a democratic and inclusive social contract in Latin America within the confines of market-oriented, export-led growth" (ibid). Post-neoliberalism has indeed proven to be fragile. But again, we are talking about Latin America, the world's flag-bearer of both neoliberalism and its opposition, where surprises abound and trends are set.

## **Tango in the Age of Neoliberal Competition and *El Mundial de Tango***

After close to three decades of decline, the revival of tango in Argentina was simultaneous with the renewed interest in tango in other parts of the globe, as neoliberalism was sweeping the world consequent to the start of the “second globalization” of finance and trade. And since the 1990s, the unfolding of tango in Argentina has been deeply intertwined with the neoliberal reforms implemented in the country as a whole and specifically in the city of Buenos Aires. During the period of decline, from the mid-1950s to 1983, tango as spectacle was another factor that kept the dance alive in Argentina. According to the Solteros, whom I mentioned at the end of the first section of this chapter, the celebrated stage tango dancers the Arquimbaus were performing live at television stations in Buenos Aires in 1962 and 1963, as well as in numerous theatres (57). And as Viladrich writes, “Tango dancing also survived in shows that catered to foreigners and Argentines from the provinces, a practice that greatly contributed to the production of the ‘fantasy’<sup>48</sup> or ‘for export’ tango” (loc. 955). The “for export” tango show became key in the (re)introduction of tango to the world. The prototype of the blockbuster tango show is *Tango Argentino*. A stage production with an exceptional orchestra and many accomplished dancers whom the show’s organizers had recruited over a number of years (starting in 1974), including the legendary couple Juan Carlos Copes and María Nieves, as well as the Arquimbaus, it

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<sup>48</sup> *Tango Fantasía*, exhibition or stage tango.

opened in Paris in November 1983, setting off the “second global expansion” of tango. The following year the show went to Venice, and the year after that to New York City. It opened on Broadway on October 9, 1985, and continued till March 30, 1986, for a staggering one hundred and ninety-nine performances (Tango Argentino Production Information). The show spent a total of ten years touring the world, including the homeland of its artists, Buenos Aires. It had a major impact in the countries of the Global North where it was featured, creating a large interest for learning how to dance tango. According to Merritt, “the post-show classes, demonstrations, and workshops” offered by the cast members were instrumental in the growth of tango communities in the cities where the show toured (41). In the words of Franco Barrionuevo Anzaldi, in an article presented in 2012 titled “The new tango era in Buenos Aires,” “Tango has advanced since then [the opening of *Tango Argentino*] from a national culture to a more cosmopolitan culture.” Visitors from the Global North then started traveling to Buenos Aires to learn tango at its “source.”

Meanwhile in Argentina, the crumbling of the military junta in 1983, subsequent to the defeat of Argentina by the British in the war over the Malvinas islands, brought democracy back to the country. The end of the terror of the *proceso*<sup>49</sup> opened a space for social activities. As Merritt writes,

the government created the *Programa Cultural en Barrios* (Neighborhood Cultural Program) in 1984, with the goal of encouraging porteños to reclaim public space

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<sup>49</sup> Short for *Proceso de Reorganización Nacional*, or National Reorganization Process.

following years of repression, fear, and devastation. The program breathed new life into Buenos Aires' crumbled social landscape by creating a network of neighborhood cultural centers where residents had access to free classes, from drawing to photography, music, and tango. (42)

The tango classes in these centers turned out to be very successful, and at the same time, the neighborhood clubs (*clubes sociales y deportivos*) started to offer tango classes as well. The milongas slowly started to come back in these clubs, and also started to appear in the city's cafés and dance salons. During this time, the participation of tourists in the milongas was quite sporadic. According to Arlene Dávila, in *Culture Works: Space, Value, and Mobility Across the Neoliberal Americas*, Susana Miller, renowned tango teacher, "recalled the amazement that a French or foreign dancer would stir at a [Buenos Aires] milonga back in the 1980s" (141). This would change by the 1990s.

The 1990s saw an acceleration of Buenos Aires' residents dancing tango. Of note is the interest shown by the young generation of the time, particularly among the middle classes (Liska 2013). No longer just something that "old people" did, dancing tango became trendy. Public universities started to offer tango classes, due to a marked interest of their students in learning how to dance it (*ibid*), while the neighborhood cultural centers continued to offer free tango classes that remained popular. But in the 1990s, tango was a dance not only of the young or a certain social class, as various generations and classes of people started to mingle in the milongas of this decade. The city government of Buenos Aires, seeing the popularity of tango, began its efforts of harnessing its vast potential power.

This is a time, as I wrote in the last section, of “fast and furious” neoliberalism in Argentina. According to Barrionuevo, writing about the effects of the neoliberal reforms on the city of Buenos Aires in the 1990s,

These dynamics caused social polarization and spatial fragmentation: on the one side the deepening of structural unemployment and class bounded segregation and, on the other side, the recreational revitalization of the city for the new emerging consumption demands for the urban middle class and, in particular, for international tourists. In this broader post-fordist and neoliberal context the city’s council discovered tango as a tourist commodity to invent Buenos Aires as the “capital of tango.” (15)

Argentina transformed from relative global obscurity to becoming a popular tourist attraction in the 1990s, with Buenos Aires as a major destination. Tango became “the main cultural ingredient for the new symbolic economy of the city of Buenos Aires” (ibid), and a major force in the broader project of accumulating wealth and power in the port city, often at the expense of the rest of the nation. While the “Ley<sup>50</sup> Nacional del Tango” had been created in 1996, declaring tango an integral part of the national cultural heritage, in 1998, legislation by the City of Buenos Aires anchored tango to the city’s heritage (Ley 130), whereby the government enacted numerous projects to create infrastructure catering to the tourists. Entire neighborhoods were gentrified as *Casas de Tango* were created (home of the “tango dinner”<sup>51</sup>), and commercial streets were dedicated to tango culture. While the 1990s witnessed an increased number of tourists

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<sup>50</sup> Law.

<sup>51</sup> The “tango dinner,” consisting of dining and watching a tango show, today costs upwards of USD 100 for tourists, while the dancers make significantly less.

attending the milongas, far more were interested in watching tango shows at the *Casas de Tango* and elsewhere, a trend that is still true today.

The passage of these laws and their aftermath is what Hernán Morel calls the “heritage turn” (*giro patrimonial*) of tango. In “Buenos Aires, La Meca del Tango: Procesos de Activación, Megaeventos Culturales, Turismo y Dilemas en el Patrimonio Local” (Buenos Aires, Mecca of Tango: Activation Processes, Cultural Mega Events, Tourism, and Dilemmas in Local Heritage), he compares the Ley 130 of 1998 to the Ley Nacional of 1996. While both laws encourage the “preservation” and dissemination of tango and seek to promote its tourist value, Ley 130, which is much more detailed, anticipates and encourages the holding of “massive public events” (62). This, as Morel states, will make the city government (rather than the national government) the main authority vis-à-vis tango. Eight of the nineteen articles of the law are related to the creation of a new event to be called the “Fiesta Popular de Tango” (63). But this title never became a reality. Neither a “fiesta” nor “popular,” the first two events, in 1998<sup>52</sup> and 1999, were called *Buenos Aires Tango: Festival Internacional*, or in short, *Festival de Tango*. This was in concordance with global trends in the 1990s. As Andy Bennett, Jodie Taylor, and Ian Woodward write in *The Festivalization of Culture*:

In the last decade of the twentieth century in particular, all continents not only witnessed a surge in the number of annual festivals, but also a diversification in the types of festival that became a mainstay of cultural calendars, as well as diversification in local and global festival audiences. As an increasingly popular means through which

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<sup>52</sup> Considered a “pilot” run, the first *Festival de Tango* was actually held days before the passage of the law (64).

citizens consume and experience culture, festivals have also become an economically attractive way of packaging and selling cultural performance and generating tourism.  
(1)

This is a time when Buenos Aires started to become an avid participant in the “festivalization of culture.” Other than the tango festival, the first “Buenos Aires International Theatre Festival” (FIBA) happened in 1997, and 1999 was the year for the first “Buenos Aires International Festival of Independent Cinema” (BAFICI). Both festivals are ongoing, as are a host of other festivals that the city government currently organizes, notable among them the “Buenos Aires International Jazz Festival.”

There was no *Festival de Tango* in 2000, the third one being held in 2001. Then came the economic crisis of 2001/2002, itself the result of the neoliberal reforms implemented in the 1990s. It was by far the worst of its kind in the history of Argentina. It had two important consequences relative to our discussion: the devaluation of the Argentine peso, making the exchange rate very favorable for tourists, and the economic strife which made the city of Buenos Aires in need of the business that the tourists provided. For the local economy of the port city, an increase in tourism was seen as a crucial component of the recovery. The first *Campeonato Mundial de Tango* (Tango World Championship), the initiative of Aníbal Ibarra, mayor of Buenos Aires 2000 – 2005, was held in March 2003 as a way to boost the already existing *Festival de Tango*. The resulting *Festival y Mundial de Tango* (now commonly known as the *Mundial*) has been happening annually ever since. Among the various festivals, the greatest attendance belongs to the *Mundial*. In addition to the hundreds of dancers from



Argentina and other countries (mainly from the Global North) who participate each year in the *Mundial*, it attracts hundreds of thousands of spectators. As Miguel Kanai writes in “Buenos Aires, Capital of Tango: Tourism, Redevelopment and the Cultural Politics of Neoliberal Urbanism,” this “rise of tourist-oriented cultural entrepreneurialism marks a stark reorientation of urban cultural policies – which had been previously used to promote social inclusion and support grassroots neighborhood development” (1112). The democratic opening of 1983 which had given rise to the neighborhood cultural centers which had remained quite active in the tango scene well into the 1990s, eventually gave way to neoliberal urbanism’s use of “culture” as a way of attracting as many tourists as possible and creating profit.

Subsequent mayors have made no secret of their view of tango as a source of income for the city. These are the words of Mauricio Macri, mayor of Buenos Aires 2007 – 2015, at the opening of the 12<sup>th</sup> *Mundial* in 2010:

Sabemos que seguramente uno de los sectores más potentes, más dinámicos es el campo, la agroindustria, la famosa soja (...) Pero la ciudad también tiene que tener un lugar, en esa Argentina que quiere encontrar un lugar en el mundo. Y la ciudad obviamente no puede cosechar soja, no hay lugar para ese tipo de cosas. Entonces yo digo que la ciudad tiene su propia soja, su propio oro verde, que es sin duda el tango. (quoted in Morel 69)

We know that surely one of the most powerful and most dynamic sectors is the field, the agroindustry, the famous soybean (...) But the city also has to have a place, in this Argentina which wants to find a place in the world. And the city obviously cannot harvest soy, there's no place for that kind of thing. So I say that the city has its own soybean, its own green gold, which is without doubt the tango.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> My translation.

Macri's comparison of tango to Argentina's major cash crop is emblematic of his selective approach to tango, which is similar to the way his administration tackled urban development: focusing on the areas of the city which are potentially the most profitable. Furthermore, he connects tango to the role that the city of Buenos Aires has in helping the country "find its place" in the world. As mayor of Buenos Aires (he is now president of the nation), his administration foregrounded municipal diplomacy and international cooperation, creating cultural exchanges with European cities such as Paris and Berlin, while maintaining weak connections with the other areas of Greater Buenos Aires (*Gran Buenos Aires*), and "little responsibility towards the Argentine nation" (Kanai 1113). This is eerily reminiscent of this passage by Martínez Estrada in *Radiografía de La Pampa (X-ray of the Pampa, 1933, translated in 1971)*:

Europe became the closest point to Buenos Aires, although the city was but an out-of-the-way place for Europe. In a special spiritual, historical, and economic sense, which is what really counts, Paris is closer to Buenos Aires than is Chivilcoy or Salta ... The external structure, the amplitude, and the appearance of a busy and heroic life make of Buenos Aires a universal, cosmopolitan, and wealthy city with a great destiny. But from inside, in its blood and style, it is more similar to any forgotten town like La Rioja, San Juan, San Luis, Catamarca, or Jujuy than to any European or North American city in its category: Buenos Aires is the federal capital of the Argentine Republic (227).

Having written the book in 1930, after the military coup that overthrew the democratically elected government of Hipólito Yrigoyen, Martínez has some harsh criticism to bear and the overall tone of his writing is pessimistic; but his astute (radiographic!) observations in this quote foretell the "social polarization and spatial fragmentation" that Barrionuevo identifies in the neoliberal urbanism of Buenos Aires of

the 1990s and that were amplified a decade later under the leadership of Macri. And just as in the 1970s, when pervasive neoliberal reforms were implemented in the country as a *development strategy*, consecutive mayors of Buenos Aires in the past two decades have approached tango in a similar way. For them, tango has been first and foremost a means for developing the city.

Tango, with its various supporting structures and economies, is an integral aspect of the city's neoliberal urbanism. From tango shows, to housing for tourists, to dance instruction, to hosting milongas, to vending shoes and clothes, to working as a dancer for hire; a major and thriving market has been created. The *Mundial* is a major component of the city's vast "tango industrial complex,"<sup>54</sup> an appropriate term if we view tango as a "creative industry."<sup>55</sup> The market-oriented development of the city and the accompanying "neoliberalization" of tango have affected social tango spaces in very specific ways. These changes, and the responses they have elicited, are the subject of the next chapter.

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<sup>54</sup> Derived from Miguel Kanai's "tango economic complex" (1115).

<sup>55</sup> "Creative industry," according to Brian Moeran and Jesper Strangaard Pedersen, in *Negotiating Values in the Creative Industries*, is a combination of two older terms: "creative arts," and "culture industry" (1); the latter coined by Frankfurt School members Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in their book *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

## *Chapter II*

### **Buenos Aires (How Good is Your Embrace?)**

Buenos Aires is home to not only the annual *Mundial de Tango*, but also the world's largest year-round social tango scene. Far from being homogenous, it is a very diverse scene with different "categories" of milongas and prácticas, as I will later describe. The term "práctica," which formerly referred to a tango practice session (where traditionally men practiced with men), is now commonly used to describe an informal milonga. Visiting the website "hoy-milonga," a frequently updated site that lists the main social tango events of the city, on any given day reveals an abundance of prácticas as well as milongas to choose from.<sup>56</sup> This chapter provides an account of this diversity, which itself should be seen in relation to not only the long history of tango in Buenos Aires, but as I will argue, the effects of the city's neoliberal urbanism on social tango, as well as popular responses to these effects.

I have made six trips to Buenos Aires since 2010, with my last three trips in the years 2016, 2017 and 2018 for research purposes. Being a researcher, of course, has not

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<sup>56</sup> According to an informal conversation that I had on 8/15/18 with one of the website employees, any milonga organizer can contact the website staff and have their milonga be listed for free.

changed the fact that I am ultimately a tourist from the Global North, from the upper middle class, with the economic capacity to explore the wide variety of social tango space that the city offers. This is an ability, as I will discuss in this chapter, that is not available to the vast majority of local dancers. I began my 2016 trip with a focus on the *Mundial* of that year, investigating the epitome of the phenomenon that had so affected the Los Angeles social tango scene, in which I was involved at the time. But the majority of my fieldwork was done in the city's milongas and prácticas. I spent three months in the city in 2016 and then two months in 2017 and one month in 2018, going most of the nights, as well as some weekend afternoons, to its various spaces of social tango dancing. While some nights I have been to more than one milonga, I have usually gone to one milonga per evening. Depending on whether it's a weekday or weekend milonga, a typical time for me to arrive at the event is between 10 pm and midnight, staying until anywhere between 2 and 5 am. The tango lifestyle is most definitely a nocturnal one.

Embarking on my 2016 adventure, I was operating with this research question, relevant to the tango scenes of both Buenos Aires and Southern California: What is the impact of the massive cultural production of tango dance competitions on social tango (milongas)? But by the end of my time there in that year, at least as far as Buenos Aires goes, my focus somewhat shifted, as I encountered a considerable scene which, while largely irrelevant to the *Mundial*, was responding to the sociopolitical conditions that had given rise to the *Mundial*. My research question evolved into a bigger one: What effects is neoliberalism (which the *Mundial* is but one product of) having on tango

dancing bodies, and how is this shifting the social tango spaces? The ethnographic research in this chapter contains my own observations, as well as the viewpoints of some very experienced local social dancers that I interviewed. Some of them are teachers and performers, others are organizers, and some of them compete; what they all share is the quality of having years of experience in the social tango scene.

This chapter sets out to answer the above question in the following way: I will first give a more detailed description of the *Mundial*, which, given its foregrounding of winning and individuals, both reflects and enacts the foundational premises of neoliberalism. More specifically, I will describe how the *Mundial* is enacting neoliberalism by way of “tradition;” in other words, how it is a manifestation of the fact that neoliberalism and patriarchy are comfortable with and reinforce each other. I will also argue that the *Mundial* represents the “second ballroomization” of tango. Next, I will shift into a categorization and description of the social tango spaces of Buenos Aires, the main focus of my research. I will demonstrate the impact that neoliberalism has had on these spaces, and argue that *las milongas populares* have powerfully emerged as a “parallel” social tango scene, a progressive force in resistance to neoliberalism and the ways it has affected social tango dancers.

## ***El Mundial de Tango cont'd: Performing Neoliberalism by way of "Tradition"***

There are really three ways of dancing tango: at the milonga, at the mundial, and doing an exhibition. The three are quite different.

-Emanuel

I was in Buenos Aires from three weeks before the 2016 *Mundial* in August until a couple of months after it. And in 2018, I was there for the whole month of August. In both years, I got to observe the various stages of the *tango de pista* segment of the competition. The *Mundial* has two competition categories: *tango de pista*, which claims to represent social dance, and *tango escenario*, or stage tango. *Tango escenario*, which typically includes acrobatic moves as well as ballet vocabulary, is an exhibition dance genre that can be seen in theatre tango shows as well as the *casas de tango* that I mentioned in the previous chapter. This is distinct from the "three ways" that are quoted in the epigraph. The first is how people dance in social tango spaces, which is highly diverse and individualized. The second is *el estilo mundial*, which I will talk about in detail, and is quite homogenous. And the third refers to performances at milongas, which I will also expand upon. For now, I will just emphasize the point that the dance seen at the *tango de pista* category of the competition, despite claims of representing social dance, is quite different than the vast majority of what occurs at the milongas.

I attended the various legs of the *tango de pista* component of the competition in both 2016 and 2018 at two locations in the city: the qualifying rounds and semifinals at

the *Usina del Arte*, a power plant-turned-cultural center in the *La Boca* neighborhood, and the finals at the historic multi-purpose arena *Luna Park* in downtown Buenos Aires. While in 2018, entry tickets to the finals were provided by a friend, in 2016, in order to get the tickets, which are free, and are distributed about two weeks before the event at *Usina del Arte*, I had to wake up at 7am (a brutally early time for a tango dancer in Buenos Aires) and wait for a few hours in the cold weather of early August, in a long line that was stretching for hundreds of yards from the entrance to the compound. On the night of the event, both the times that I attended, *Luna Park*, which has a capacity of just over 9,000 people, was about three-quarters full. And in both years, the event was organized in a very similar way, and with the same MC: after the older gentleman with the short gray hair announced the significance of what we were about to witness, such as how it is undoubtedly the most important tango event in the world, the competition rounds were danced, followed by over an hour of live music, and finally the announcement of the results. While both times I was sitting not very far from the stage, I could also observe the dancers on a big screen erected behind the table of judges at the back edge of the stage.

Forty couples were competing, in four groups of ten. The groups came on stage in turn, one couple at a time, as their names were announced. When all ten couples of each group were on stage, standing in a circle that imitates the *ronda* of social tango, they took one rotation around the stage, with the women walking on the outside, as they were displayed to the audience (in the case of the only male/male couple among



the forty couples, which was the same couple in both years, it was the follower that was walking on the outside of the circle). Other than the male/male couple with their unique outfits, the follower in a cream-colored suit and t-shirt, and the leader in a red blazer with gold patterns, beige pants, and a black t-shirt, all the men were in dark suits, with almost all wearing a tie, and all the women were in one-piece dresses and stilettos (the unwritten dress code of the *Mundial* that everyone adheres to). Each group danced for about eight minutes to three songs, which the dancers find out about right before the beginning of their round, each song from a different Golden Age tango orchestra.<sup>57</sup> As far as their way of dancing goes, despite moderate differences in skill, they were all conforming to a remarkably homogenous style, which I will describe next.

The *estilo mundial* or “competition style” of dancing consists of uprightness of the torso, rhythmic precision, and fewer and shorter pauses during the dance than what one usually sees in a social setting. And what links the three, as I will explain, is a strong ingredient of (European) heteronormative patriarchy. The uprightness, particularly for the man, is requisite for the “elegance” that tango teachers who train students in this style often emphasize. The posture, together with the suits and ties and pocket squares and shiny shoes and the fancy dresses, give an image of belonging to some sort of privileged class or high society. This is reminiscent of the “International Standard” ballroom dance competitions, which in England are simply called “Ballroom”

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<sup>57</sup> At a milonga, tango *tandas* are typically four songs, all from the same orchestra.

competitions.<sup>58</sup> The “elegant” aspect of *el estilo mundial* is associated with its gendered composition and gendered dynamics, which I will now begin to address. As Emanuel, a teacher and performer in his mid-twenties, who also was a finalist in the 2016 *Mundial*, told me, “Competitors used to dance much more slowly and melodic. Now, they are more rhythmic and dance faster, as a way to establish their unique abilities” (informal interview, Oct. 19, 2017). Tango music is complex and multi-layered, with two major components: the rhythmic and the melodic. Dancers can alternately focus on either of these components, and leaders can change the quality and structure of the movements based on the feedback that they receive from the follower. It is this going back and forth, both in the sense of which component of the music to respond to, as well as the corporeal communication between the couple, that has the potential to give the social dance an extraordinary richness. But it is the rhythm that is mainly driving the men who are leading in the *Mundial*, as they try to stand out among other competitors. Their dance does not change much secondary to feedback from the follower, a concept that I will later discuss in further detail. In other words, the men are almost exclusively “in charge,” another component of this style of dancing tango.

The heteronormativity of the composition of the couple is one more aspect of *el estilo mundial*. In 2013, four same-sex couples, three male/male and one

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<sup>58</sup> Consisting of waltz, tango, Viennese waltz, foxtrot, and quickstep. While the tango of ballroom competitions, as far as music and type of movement go, has little resemblance to the tango of the *Mundial*, they share the qualities that imply “elegance.”

female/female, were for the very first time among the hundreds of competitors in the *Mundial*. Since then, same-sex couples have each year similarly constituted a very small percentage of the overall competitors, with the overwhelming majority of the couples male/female, with the man always leading the woman. But it is not only the composition of the couples that defines the heteronormativity of *el estilo mundial*. It is a very specific heteronormativity, one that I see as the “hyper” variety, with roots in “tradition.” Here is Juampy, a tango teacher and performer in his late thirties, who was part of the only same-sex couple who made it to the finals in both 2016 and 2018, describing the typical couple dancing in the *Mundial*:

The *mundial* promotes and looks for a stereotypical tango: heterosexual, with a man [who looks like he is] from the thirties or forties (just minus the fedora), well-dressed, upright, and elegant, with new shoes, and maybe a hint of a moustache. And the woman: elegant, proper, and delicate, with a beautiful dress, and pretty shoes. This does not reflect society... tango does. It [the *mundial*] is conserving something from the past (informal interview, Nov. 3, 2017).

It may at first appear puzzling that the *Mundial*, organized by the City Government of Buenos Aires, which has been striving to present Buenos Aires as a modern city on par with modern European capitals, is promoting a stereotypical heteronormative image from a bygone era. But appreciating the associations between neoliberalism and patriarchy helps clarify.

Neoliberalism thrives within patriarchy, and vice versa. “The new global settlement is nothing if not a new sexual settlement. Global capitalism works with patriarchal principles, institutions, cultures and psyches,” Beatrix Campbell writes in her article

“After Neoliberalism, the Need for a Gender Revolution” (14). Of course the *Mundial* isn’t even trying to look “new.” Its “old” look and feel, while exoticizing the tango that it presents, validates societal patriarchal structures, even as society is “modernised.” Quoting Campbell again, “Neoliberal neo-patriarchy is the new articulation of male dominion” (13). The old-fashioned tango of the *Mundial* reveals the essence of this “new” patriarchy.

What Juampy says is validated by Emanuel. According to him, the men who compete in the *Mundial* “just need to be the stereotypical man, coming from the twenties and thirties and forties. The goal is to show the woman. They [the men] have to be strong and masculine.” He also acknowledges that the “competition style” of dancing does not have much in common with how people dance at the milongas (although an iteration of it can be seen at certain milongas, as I will later explain). “At the milongas, I’ll do whatever (colgada, soltada, etc [different tango moves]). I dance very differently in the mundial.” I have seen Emanuel dance at both the *Mundial* and at the milongas, and he indeed dances quite differently in the two settings. While he appears quite serious and composed at the *Mundial*, he seems much more relaxed at the milongas, his posture is not quite as straight, and he often has a smile on his face. At the *Mundial*, he says, “the trick is to have some elasticity in the embrace without breaking it” (not breaking the embrace is also a component of the International Standard ballroom dance competitions). At the milongas, he often freely changes the orientation of his body

relative to his partner in order to execute some move or another, sometimes even breaking the embrace on one side, without losing his connection.

The European aesthetics of *el estilo mundial* can be traced to both ballroom dance and ballet. Emanuel's comment, "the goal is to show the woman," states a significant aspect of the heteronormativity of *el estilo mundial*. As Jorge, a tango teacher in his late thirties, also told me about the competition style, "The man has to be grounded, and the women airy and on display... and the woman is doing much more work than the man" (informal interview, Nov. 1, 2017). This aspect of the dynamic between the man and the woman is reminiscent of Susan Foster's perspective in "The Ballerina's Phallic Pointe," which while describing this dynamic in ballet, has striking parallels with *el estilo mundial* of tango. "Pliant, quivering with responsiveness, ready to be guided anywhere..." (1), she begins her description of the ballerina, which perfectly fits that of the *tanguera* in the *Mundial*. "He fades away behind or beneath *her* in their duets, becoming an indispensable assistant, the necessary backdrop against which *she* sparkles" (3, emphases in original). While the man in the tango couple isn't exactly "behind or beneath her," two aspects of the *Mundial* dancers create the circumstances for her to "sparkle." One is the attire. All the men (among the male/female couples) are wearing dark suits, giving them a homogenous appearance, while the women are wearing colorful and often sparkly dresses and shoes, which makes them easily stand out. The other is the lines that the women are making with their upright bodies and straight legs, similar to the "extended body lines and clear shapes" that Foster names as

“ballet’s aesthetic ideals” (2). This is directly related to the training of the dancers, meaning that “the woman doing much more work than the man” starts long before making it to the *Mundial* stage. Flavia, a tango teacher and milonga organizer in her early thirties, told me, “Among the couples who make it to the finals, the woman always has other training, especially in ballet,” while the men usually don’t. And when I asked Emanuel about this, he said, “It is true that the majority of *tangueras* [who rank high in the *Mundial*] have training in other dances. But not the men. They just need to be the stereotypical man...” In order to be “on display,” the women dancers require prior training *other* than tango. This training enables them to move in ways that appear “airy” and visible from a distance, despite the fact that the *tango de pista* category of the *Mundial* is supposed to be representing social tango, with many of the best *tangueras* in the social scene having no significant training in modalities other than tango. This of course makes sense when one considers that the *Mundial* is essentially a show, with the dancers projecting for an audience, which consists of the public as well as the judges. In this regard, both categories of the *Mundial* are performing a similar function: mainly, to show the woman.

### ***El estilo mundial: dialogue or monologue?***

In order to respond to this question, I will begin with a discussion about social tango and the concept of “active following.” Social tango is a dialogue, especially in the more

advanced levels of the dance, between the person in the role of the leader and the person in the role of the follower. In fact, in advanced training in social tango, many teachers stress that once the leader initiates a movement, he or she should then assume the role of a follower, adapting to how the follower has responded to the initiated move. This way of dancing opens the door to “active following.” In my opinion, as well as that of distinguished female dancer/teachers that I have studied with, including Noelia Hurtado, the follower does not have to initiate a movement, or to “back-lead,” in order to be considered “active.” Hurtado was recently teaching this concept in a followers’ workshop that I observed on May 10, 2018, in Athens, Greece, and again in a workshop that I participated in on June 21 – 24, 2018 in Seattle, United States. If a follower, based on how he or she is hearing the music, feels free to corporeally communicate with the leader what movement or quality of movement he or she desires, then he or she is an active follower. Granted, the success of this manner of dancing requires that he or she has a sensitive leader that will not interfere with this communication and is responsive to suggestions. But then again, active followers rarely dance twice with a (macho) leader who doesn’t give them this freedom. Such intricate exchange is not possible in the high-stress environment of the competition. In order to stand out among other competitors, all of whom are engaged in a quite homogenous style, leaders aim at “hitting” the rhythmic components of the music, with the followers in general not doing much more than passively following. This results in a dance in which an “assertive” man is leading an “obedient” woman – more a monologue than a

dialogue. This dynamic is not as common in the milongas and prácticas of today, at least not among many of the younger dancers, even if there are still quite a few people (women included) who assume that the follower role is a passive one.

### **The Second Ballroomization**

If the extreme heteronormativity of competition-style tango does not represent common ways of dancing, then what does it represent? I have been describing the parallels with ballet as well as ballroom dance. Seen from the perspective of Jeffrey Tobin, who in “Tango and the Scandal of Homosocial Desire”<sup>59</sup> argues for tango’s homosocial roots, the assertive man/obedient woman dynamic, more than having to do with popular customs, is about “European disciplinization.”<sup>60</sup> It conforms to “the established mechanics of European, bourgeois, heterosexist social dance, in which a dominant man leads and a docile woman follows” (94). It portrays the disciplining of the woman, and of the dance itself. What the attire and the dance style of the *Mundial* are putting on display is a “traditional” (read simultaneously exoticized and whitened) tango that is conforming to the codes of “bourgeois, heterosexist social dance” (as well as other codes of “whiteness,” such as balletic clear lines).

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<sup>59</sup> In *The Passion of Music and Dance*.

<sup>60</sup> As Tobin has noted, the disciplinization of tango by social dance masters in England and France has been documented by Savigliano in *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion*.



Placed in historical context, the dance that *el estilo mundial* portrays, together with the whole process of establishing a tango competition with official adjudication and rules, suggest that a “second ballroomization” of tango is taking place in and through the *Mundial*. As Savigliano writes in *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion*, in France, during the second decade of the twentieth century, “the basic continental tango was glamorized on the stages and tamed in the ballrooms” (119), mimicking the contrast between the exaggerated moves in *tango escenario* and the “elegant” dance of *tango de pista*. And in England, in the third decade of the century, competition became an integral part of the ballroom dances, including tango.<sup>61</sup> The “second ballroomization” reflects, paraphrasing Savigliano, the endless efforts by the Buenos Aires elite to reaffirm the port city’s whiteness and its difference from the rest of the country as well as other localities of the Global South.

### **The *Mundial* and the milongas**

In 2016, while I spent two mornings, two afternoons, and one evening observing competing couples at different stages of the *Mundial*, it comprised a small portion of my time in Buenos Aires overall. As I mentioned before, I was spending the majority of my time at social tango events, in addition to taking classes and practicing with my partner. In the week before the *Mundial*, during the event, and the week after it, most of the

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<sup>61</sup> See Richardson, Philip J.S., *A History of English Ballroom Dancing*, pp. 52 – 55.

milongas that I went to were completely crowded and packed with tourists, as well as with locals. Non-Latin American tourists are often readily distinguishable at the Buenos Aires milongas by their facial features and skin color (most of them coming from Europe or Asia),<sup>62</sup> and of course, during the course of the *tanda*<sup>63</sup> with each person that you dance with, you get to know where they come from. While I don't know exactly how many of the milonga attendees were competitors, I recognized some, and know from talking to others that they were there for the competition. And it was often possible to guess, with what turned out to be a high degree of accuracy, who was a competitor. The attire that I saw at the milonga, as well as the general mood of the milonga, were more formal than what I witnessed within a couple of weeks after the competition was over, reflecting the attire and mood of the competition itself. But it was mainly their way of dancing that often gave away who was participating in the *Mundial*. A recurrent observation was that of an impeccably dressed couple in an expensive-looking suit and a fancy dress, dancing *muy arriba* (very upright), hitting one strong beat after another, the man barely pausing in the middle of the song for him and his partner to catch a breath. And it was not uncommon to see the men doing (or attempting to do) an *enrosque*, a move not suitable for a crowded social dance floor (because of the space that it

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<sup>62</sup> While some foreign tango dancers live in Buenos Aires or stay there for an extended time, the vast majority of them are there for short periods that span from days to weeks.

<sup>63</sup> A set of usually four songs that partners dance with at the milongas, separated by a piece of non-tango music, the *cortina* (curtain), when partners customarily switch.

requires), in which the man pivots on one leg as the woman circles around him while supporting his axis. This move is often seen in the *Mundial* as well as in performances at the milongas, where the dancers have much more available space.

In about two weeks after the end of the *Mundial*, in the milongas of the city, it was as if the *Mundial* had never happened. *El estilo mundial*, or at least the most visible aspects of it, had all but vanished from the social dance floor. Perhaps some dancers who had ranked high at the event still carried some of the air of their success, but for the most part, there was a sense of relief. Some space had opened up at the milongas (there were fewer people around), the attire had become more casual, and people were generally more relaxed. As the cold season gave way to spring and more warmth, and as the tourists began to arrive in large numbers again, the milongas once more filled up, but *el estilo mundial* remained a sporadic spectacle on the social dance floor.

While most of the competitors who come from abroad leave soon after the *Mundial* is over, in the case of the local competitors, their relationship to the milongas is more nuanced. Asked whether they are as invested in social dancing as they are in training for the competition, Emanuel says, "There are couples who only go to the milongas around the time of the *mundial*." Other dancers like himself and his partner, can be seen at the milongas throughout the year, unless they are on tour. These "perennial" social dancers are also flexible in their style and able to switch their manner of dancing according to the circumstance, while for others, *el estilo mundial* is the main way of dancing. He adds that "around the time of the *mundial*, couples often dance mostly or exclusively

together [at the milongas] in order to establish themselves.” As the competition is approaching, competing couples, even those who at other times dance differently in social settings, dance in the “competition style” in hopes of being noticed, in advance of the competition itself, by a *Mundial* judge who is potentially present at the milonga. This is what is meant by couples “establishing themselves.” It is difficult to be recognized among nine other couples in the course of three songs, as is the case of the *Mundial*. Therefore, the dancers try to be seen before the competition. In this way, for these dancers, the competition begins before the event itself.

### **The *Mundial* and Neoliberalism**

Not only should the competition, as I have discussed throughout, be seen in the broader context of late capitalism, but its inherent gender inequality should itself be seen as linked to the socioeconomic injustice of neoliberalism. Here is Campbell again:

So, beware the liberation language of global capitalism: it rules the world, and it deploys the language of freedom, choice and competition to oust solidarity, co-operative creativity and equality. After the deluge of state communisms, the world is quivering with resistance but struggles to find new ideological and institutional forms for those great values of solidarity, co-operation, creativity and equality - values that are crucial for gender equality. In this moment of capitalism’s hegemony - its apparent inevitability, invincibility and normality - the language of the marketplace appears not only to govern the economy, but life itself. (13)

It is the competitive language of the marketplace that is governing both the dance and the dancers of the *Mundial*. To further this analysis, and to link it with Dance Studies scholarship, I will quote Foster from her chapter “Dance and/as Competition in the

Privately Owned U.S. Studio” in *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Politics*. She asks, “How does the fact of the possibility of ‘coming in first’ transform the nature of dancing?” (58). In terms of my discussion, how is neoliberalism, as far as the *Mundial* goes, affecting the nature of tango? Other than the fact that it is promoting *el estilo mundial*, which in turn validates society’s competitiveness and machismo, what is the competition doing to the dance and its dancers? Foster writes,

In Marxist terms, competition in dance replaces its use value as a form of personal self-expression and creativity, as a practice that people watch or do in order to understand something about their own corporeality or their connections to others, with exchange value that brings dance into the marketplace, where it is performed and viewed in terms of how it benefits the social and financial status of the dancers, the choreographers, and the studios. The students who finance the competitions gamble on the possibility of achieving renown, scholarships, or opportunities for employment. (61 - 62)

While competing in the *Mundial* is free, competitors in other countries pay significant sums of money to participate in the official pre-competitions (hundreds of dollars in the case of the US). This is in addition to the money that out-of-towners spend on travel to Buenos Aires and housing: a couple from abroad can spend anywhere between 500 and 2000 USD for a month of accommodation. Competitors also often pay copiously for attire and lessons, not to mention the time spent in training. While it is common among Argentinians to lend suits, dresses, and sometimes even shoes to each other, dancers from the Global North spend from hundreds to thousands of USD on their attire, often obtaining part of it, especially the shoes, in Argentina. Teachers who “know the ropes” and can train dancers in *el estilo mundial* charge between 100 and 150 USD for an hour

of private instruction. After all is done, of the hundreds of participants, many spending hundreds of hours in training, and those from other countries also spending thousands of dollars in expenses, only the first five couples are announced, and only the first three receive financial remuneration and the social capital that would enable them to travel and teach. We thus have the “gamble” that Foster mentions. All these dancers are laborers in the dance marketplace; their labor the many hours of practice, as well as the the hours spent in the backstage and on the stage of the *Mundial*, with many of them spending large sums of money to be there, and only a few making any social or financial gain.

The *Mundial* is a major source of income for the tourist-oriented economy of Buenos Aires. According to the Argentine publication *La Nacion* (using the statistics of the tourism office of the City), it generated more than 52 million USD in consumer spending in 2013 from the close to eighty thousand tourists who attended it, about sixty thousand of them from foreign countries (Castro, Aug. 28, 2013). It has official subsidiaries worldwide that hold satellite pre-competitions, the winners of which are sent to Buenos Aires to compete in the semi-finals or finals. These events, distributed across the Global North, including USA, Japan, Italy, UK, and Russia, as well as other countries such as Brazil and Colombia, pay large sums in royalty to the City of Buenos Aires (personal communication with a *Mundial* judge on Sep. 19, 2016). The timing of the *Mundial* is also strategic; it is held in August, a cold season in Buenos Aires, but convenient for tourists from the Global North.

In many ways, the *Mundial* can itself be seen as a multinational corporation (MNC).<sup>64</sup> It is obviously not a corporation proper, but the similarities are intriguing: while hundreds of contesting couples are vying for a few slots, the *Mundial*, as an entity, always wins, as when hundreds if not thousands of small individual corporations globally compete to fill the limited production slots of a big MNC like Apple. And while the *Mundial* has its headquarters in Buenos Aires, and is therefore protected by the state laws of Buenos Aires and Argentina, it has official representatives around the world. In addition, in the spirit of MNCs seeking cheap labor, the *Mundial* operates with the free (which is even better than cheap) labor of the hundreds of dancers who participate in it. And finally, we should consider the size of this project. The *Mundial*, in terms of production and spectators, is by far the largest single event representing tango anywhere in the world.

The willingness of the competitors to play the “competition game” has given the *Mundial* a monopoly of power as the self-declared authority that can determine the “world” champion of tango. Its many aspects, I argue, and as I have demonstrated in the previous chapter, can be properly understood only when seen in the context of neoliberalism. The *Mundial*, in turn, reinforces the individualism and the patriarchy inherent in neoliberal thought, and validates, as well as enacts, the economic

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<sup>64</sup> A corporation that is headquartered in one nation, but operates in a number of countries.

competition at the foundation of neoliberalism and the efforts of the city of Buenos Aires at neoliberal urban development. But neoliberalism, of which the *Mundial* is but one product, has affected tango dancing bodies in ways much broader than what can be appreciated by focusing on just the *Mundial* or even the milongas around the time of the competition. In the next section, I will shift into a larger discussion of spaces of social tango, how they have been impacted by neoliberalism, and how a specific scene has emerged as a site of resistance to it.

### **Social Tango Dancing in the Age of Neoliberal Competition**

As milongueras/os, we really don't care about the *Mundial*... it's really something for the 'outside' (*afuera*).

-*Dolores*

As I mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, the social tango scene of Buenos Aires is very diverse. Capturing the full complexity of the numerous milongas and prácticas that exist in this city has important consequences for understanding and investigating tango dance as a social, artistic, and scholarly subject. While Marta Savigliano, Melissa Fitch, and Juliet McMains have all made important contributions to Tango Studies by writing about the queer milongas of Buenos Aires,<sup>65</sup> these events

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<sup>65</sup> See "Notes on Tango (as) Queer (Commodity)" by Savigliano, "Tango Queer Rebellions" in *Global Tangos: Travels in the Transnational Imaginary* by Fitch, and



constitute a very small portion of the overall social tango scene of the city. What has been less examined is the diversity of the non-gay/queer milongas (by often contrasting queer tango spaces with the “traditional” ones, or queer tango with “traditional” tango, the writings listed in the footnote suggest that if a milonga is not gay/queer, then it is likely “traditional”), and the recent rise of a certain type of social tango scene, *las milongas populares*, that have emerged, I argue, as a resistance to the patriarchal and socioeconomic manifestations of neoliberalism. This acquires particular significance when one is reminded that neoliberalism as a practice is an originally Latin American phenomenon: the crux of my discussion is that a social dance scene has become manifest, in Latin America, as a primary challenge to neoliberal capitalism.

While some social tango events do not fall neatly into any single category, an effective way for sorting a vast majority of the non-gay/queer scene is placing them in one of the three main categories of *popular*, *tradicional*, and *cheta*. These terms do not represent some standard terminology to distinguish the various milongas and prácticas. Rather, they are used in popular discourse by local dancers, and emerged in the course of my interviews and conversations with them. In the following pages I will expand upon these categories, and explain their relationship to neoliberalism. While I initially contrast the “traditional” and “non-traditional” scenes as a way of outlining the research that led

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“Queer Tango Space: Minority Stress, Sexual Potentiality, and Gender Utopias” by McMains.

me to the *popular* milongas, what I am focused on is the contrast between the *popular* and “non-popular” (*cheta* and *tradicional*) milongas.

### ***Las Milongas Tradicionales (and what is not “traditional”)***

*Entering El Beso at 10:45pm, we were greeted by Norma, who collects the entrance fees, and shortly after by her husband, Hector. Together, they have been organizing Milonga Cachirulo since 2003. As usual, he asks us, just to make sure, “separados?” (separate?), to which we responded, “sí.” He took my partner’s hand, as he always does, and took her to her seat, which was a good one. Then he came back for me, and took me to mine, also one with good visual access (to the women in my case). Two opposite sides of the room are where the women are seated, the other two sides are for the men, and behind the women on one side is the “couples” section. After dancing the first tanda with my partner, I sat for a while, looking around to see who is at the milonga that I may know, as well watching the dancers, identifying skilled ones that I can potentially dance with. As each tanda begins, I look in the direction of a woman that I want to dance with, hoping that the interest is mutual. If my gaze is met and my nod is reciprocated, I walk across the floor to her and we dance. Sometimes I succeed, and sometimes not, but the best strategy is not to waiver during the mirada (gaze). As Cachirulo’s motto goes, “palo, y a la bolsa!”, signifying making a move and finishing it quickly and without hesitation. Sometime close to midnight, Hector made his announcements, followed by the sorteo (draw), when you might win a bottle of champagne or a discount for a tango dress. Then, as is customary, the milonga resumed with a tanda to the music of Troilo, starting, as always, with the tango “Cachirulo,” just after Hector, again as always, shouted into the microphone: “Caaachiiiruulooo!” (7/31/18)*

For anyone in the habit of reading tango scholarship, the social tango scene as a site for exploring heteronormativity is a familiar subject, which particularly looks at the “traditional” milongas of Buenos Aires.<sup>66</sup> In these milongas, the man is always the one

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<sup>66</sup> In addition to the sources in the previous footnote, see “Gambling Femininity:

who invites the woman to dance, the dancing couples are always a man and a woman, with the man leading the woman, and casual attire is frowned upon. One such milonga, *Cachirulo*, which happens twice every week (in two different locations), also has separate sitting areas for men, women, and (heteronormative) couples, with prolonged conversation among members of the opposite sex considered inappropriate (unless they are in the “couples” section).<sup>67</sup> Savigliano and Fitch both write about these milongas, as well as how they are in contrast with the queer milongas of Buenos Aires. In her 2010 article “Notes on Tango (as) Queer (Commodity),” Savigliano calls tango “an icon of hyper-heteronormative ‘love’” (135). In addition, she unequivocally calls it a “*macho*” form (141), and she mentions how the “trained tango eye” is “steeped in heteronormativity and the macho cult” (143). Similarly, in the “Tango Queer Rebellions” chapter of *Global Tangos*, Fitch writes: “While all gender may be understood to be performative, in the world of traditional tango it becomes much more so. Women and men are both playing their gender roles in an exaggerated fashion [...] He must assert himself, she must accept his advances and follow his lead” (107). While the hyper/exaggerated heteronormativity that these scholars write about is clearly in contrast with the tango of the queer milongas, my interest is in a category of milonga that is neither “traditional” nor queer: my experience of social tango dancing in this city,

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Wallflowers and Femme Fatales” in *Angora Matta: Fatal Acts of North-South Translation* by Savigliano; and *Tourism and the Globalization of Emotions: The Intimate Economy of Tango* by Maria Törnqvist.

<sup>67</sup> *El Maipú* is another gender-segregated traditional milonga.

especially on my last three trips, has revealed a type of space to me that has not been accounted for in the scholarship thus far. If we categorize the Buenos Aires milongas into “traditional” and “queer/gay,” we will be missing a very large portion of the social tango scene which does not fall into either category. The overtly patriarchal structures and the “macho cult,” I argue, while still at play at a number of the milongas, are not currently dominant in the overall social tango scene of Buenos Aires.

In 2016, I observed that at least half of the many milongas that I attended, and all of the prácticas, were far from what is considered “traditional.” *Milonga Viva La Pepa*, *Práctica La Maria*, *Milonga la Mandrillera*, and *Práctica El Motivo* are but a few examples. In these spaces, while the men were still the ones who usually (but not always) did the inviting, there was an abundance of mingling between men and women, the attire was mostly casual, and male-male and to a lesser extent female-female couples could be seen on the dance floor (I rarely saw a woman leading a man). Not only did straight men dance together, but straight and gay/queer men that I got to know formed couples as well. My observations suggested that, even outside the queer milongas, there was a clear distinction between “traditional” and what I had come to see as “non-traditional” milongas.

On my 2017 trip, I witnessed a marked expansion of this “non-traditional” scene. In addition, a bigger portion of the couples on the dance floor were same-sex couples, both male and female, *and* a woman leading a man was not rare anymore. What distinguished this scene from the gay/queer one was the following: the events were not

designated as gay or queer, most of the couples on the dance floor still consisted of a man leading a woman, and the events were held in different venues than the (designated) gay/queer ones. Also, the scene as a whole was much larger than the gay/queer scene. What is most important relative to my research was that as I continued to participate in these various “non-traditional” events, I observed that this scene is itself not a homogenous group. I found myself more and more in a certain kind of “non-traditional” environment, and while some of my experience can possibly be attributed to my encountering their prevalence for the first time, my investigations and interviews revealed that, in fact, this kind of social tango space had experienced a recent and very significant growth: an increasing number of milongas and prácticas in Buenos Aires now fall under the *popular* category, the continued prominence of which was confirmed by my 2018 trip. But before I dive into the description of this very specific scene, I will talk about another category of milonga that is also not “traditional.”

### ***Las Milongas Chetas***

*We arrive at Villa Malcolm around 11pm, entering after each paying our entry fee of 160 pesos. Walking down the hallway, the tiled dance floor is to the right, and a large space with tables to the left, where people who didn't make a table reservation, or otherwise don't want to sit right next to the dance floor, situate themselves. There is an elevated stage on one side of the floor, where in the Golden Age, many (now) legendary orchestras performed for the dancers. Now occasionally used for an orchestra, it is usually where the Disc Jockey sits, having an overview of the floor. There were about thirty couples on the floor, of various ages, but more on the younger side; mostly male/female, with the man leading, and two female/female couples. The floor is surrounded with tables, around which dancers sit during the cortina, or during*

*tandas when they are not dancing, and on one side, behind the tables, is a colorful wall on which the names of many of those Golden Age orchestras are written in various fonts and sizes. On the side of the floor that is closest to the stage, there is a large table where the performers of the night (Los Veliz on that particular night) and their friends and relatives sit. On the opposite side was a table of four female European-looking tourists, and two younger local male taxi dancers who took turns dancing with them. On the side closest to the hallway, was a table of two couples, which from their attire and way of dancing, looked like they were there for the Mundial (I later saw them competing at the event), and only danced with each other. The rest of the tables were occupied by other tourists, and some locals who had taken the pre-milonga class taught by Los Veliz, who gave a breathtaking performance around midnight. This milonga thrives on its performances, always with great performers, the videos of which promptly appear on facebook, where the organizer, Pepa Palazon, a Spanish emigré to Buenos Aires, has created quite a following... (Milonga Viva La Pepa, 8/5/18)*

I heard the term *cheta* for the first time from Juampy. It is diminutive for *concheta/o*, which in Argentina refers to a person who may or may not be rich, and flaunts their real or imagined class by their behavior and/or display of material possessions. In this context, *cheta* describes a “fancy” milonga, where people get to show off what they wear, who they are associated with (who is sitting at their table, and who do they dance with), as well as how they dance. These milongas are well-lit, as opposed to the often dim and more intimate environment of the *popular* spaces (which I will soon describe in detail), and very often feature spectacular performances meant to dazzle the attendees, including the abundance of tourists among them. *Las milongas chetas* are where people go to be seen. In these spaces, much of the focus is on the outward projection of the dance, not unlike what is happening in the competition setting. In fact, a certain *cheta* event, the Monday night *La Parilla* milonga, is often

where champions and finalists of the *Mundial* can be found. While the champions are let in for free, *La Parilla* also has a two-tiered entry system in which people on the “guest list” enter for half the “regular” price. The *Mundial* finalists, as well their friends who go there to accompany them, and certain other dancers, are on this guest list, making the milonga a sort of “club” for these dancers. The majority of the other participants are the tourists, often reduced to mere spectators (as they rarely get to dance with the locals, unless they are young, female, and unaccompanied), who are in effect largely funding the milonga. The well-lit floor of *La Parilla*, and at times other *cheta* milongas, are where skilled dancers can be seen “hitting it,” expressing their “rhythmic” virtuosity by hitting the corresponding components of the music with accuracy. While this aspect of their dance is shared with *el estilo mundial*, the absence of the requisite uprightness of the torso, and the generally less formal and less exoticized environment of *La Parilla*, make their dance somewhat different. This milonga is also where one often sees, more than any other milonga that I have attended, “revealing clothing” (as mentioned in a later quote by Flavia), as a way for women to get dances.

The distinction between the *cheta* and *tradicional* milongas is not always straightforward (while the division between both these events on one hand, and the *popular* ones on the other, is usually clear cut). These events can be placed on a scale, with one end featuring the most “traditional” milongas, where heteronormativity is the rule, and the other end milongas that, while being on the “fancy” side, have a more

relaxed attitude regarding the mingling of members of the opposite sex, as well as who gets to invite the other, or lead on the dance floor. To give some examples, *La Parilla* and *Viva La Pepa* are clearly *cheta* (and non-traditional) milongas, *Cachirulo*, *Derecho Viejo*, and *El Maipú* are strictly traditional milongas, and *Milonga Parakultural* in *Salon Canning* has characteristics of both. No matter where on the scale, what links them all, as I will soon describe, is their tourist-orientation.

### ***Las Milongas Populares: an Introduction***

*Arriving at the milonga around 11:30 pm, there was barely room to enter. We walked into the low light and crowded space of Sigue La Polilla (centro de resistencia cultural), where people were loudly chatting, many of them standing, some close to the bar on the left, and others sitting around the few tables or on the couple of couches that were placed here and there. The music could still be heard close to the entrance, its volume steadily increasing as one approached the marley floor packed with mostly young dancers. Getting onto the floor in the middle of the tanda was a skill in and of itself, given the close proximity of the many bodies, and at the beginning of each tanda, after the floor had been cleared during the cortina, it would again fill up quite rapidly. As each dancing couple gradually made their way down the slow-moving lines of dance, one couldn't help but notice, in one corner of the floor on the back side, a small television set that was on, but all it was ever showing was static snow. And close to the other corner in the back, one could see a sign on the wall, with a red circle and white arrow inside, under which in bold letters was the word Desvío (detour), pointing the way to the bathroom. Despite the many people that were off the floor and chatting, as each tanda started, there was a smooth flow of bodies going onto the dance floor, which somehow, astonishingly, did little to attenuate the crowd that was off the floor. The only tanda during which the floor itself was a bit less crowded was la ultima (the last one), around 3:30 am. (Milonga La Discépolo, 8/10/18)*



In this section and in the others that follow, I will give a detailed description of this scene, as well as how it is in contrast with both the *cheta* and the *tradicional* milongas. *Popular* milongas are at the forefront of changing attitudes and practices in the world of social tango. The gay/queer milongas, of course, are radically different spaces as well, but as I mentioned before, and as Juliet McMains acknowledges in “Queer Tango Space: Minority Stress, Sexual Potentiality, and Gender Utopias,” their habitués constitute a very small minority of the Buenos Aires social dancers (76). The *popular* tango scene, by contrast, now forms a quite sizable section of the entire social tango landscape of Buenos Aires. Here are some of the main features of the events that define this scene: they have a markedly relaxed environment, are often dimly lit, and occur in spaces that are usually smaller and not quite “fancy” (for example, the dance floor may have a hole or two in it). In fact, the floor of some of these spaces is so small (such as that of *Milonga El Batacazo* or *Práctica Muy Lunes*, which I will soon write more about), that to some dancers who are accustomed to large spaces suitable for the execution of large moves, which are common in much of the Global North, it may seem inconceivable that they are used to host social tango events. The outfits worn at these events are mostly casual, with many women not wearing the stilettos that have become emblematic of tango. Also, their entrance fees are either much lower than the milongas that are not *popular*, and at times one can enter *a la gorra*, or on a “pay what you can” basis. And as I mentioned, same-sex couples are often seen on the dance floor, more than what can be seen at some *cheta* milongas.

As far as the attendees of *las milongas populares*, one attribute clearly stands out: a majority of them are *local*, and often young. This is a clear shift from recent trends, as an abundance of tourists has been a hallmark of Buenos Aires milongas since the turn of the century. Dávila talks about how Buenos Aires milongas are “packed full of tourists,” and estimated that in *Niño Bien*, a milonga which used to happen every Thursday evening, “there were three tourist tables for each table of local dancers” (141). In my own experience, prior to the year 2017, during the “tourist seasons” (the month of August, due to the *Mundial*, and November to April, when it is warmer), often at least half, if not more, of the people at the milongas and prácticas were non-locals (mostly Europeans and Asians), while in the “non-tourist season,” the social tango spaces were often sparsely attended. But in both months of October and November of 2017, the *popular* events were completely full with locals. Any Saturday afternoon or Tuesday evening at *Práctica La María*, any Monday evening at *Práctica Muy Lunes*, and any Thursday evening at *Milonga El Batacazo*, I could expect a packed space with an abundance of highly skilled dancers.

In August of 2018, I continued to encounter this trend, with the events that I named just some examples of the many *popular* events. *Milonga La Discépolo*, which had not been in operation for over a year, was back, filled with locals the three Friday evenings that I was there. And for the first time, responding to the suggestion of Dolores, a university professor and avid social dancer in her early forties, I attended *La Domilonga*, a Sunday evening milonga, on 8/19/18. Here are my field notes from that night:

I entered the space close to midnight. It was packed. There was a large wood floor surrounded by tables on the ground level, with a few steps taking you up to a concrete-floored stage that had a few tables on one side, and a piano and a bandoneon<sup>68</sup> on the other. All the chairs around the tables on both levels were taken, even though the dance floor was full of bodies, at least eighty of them (forty couples), and of all kinds: younger, older, casually-dressed, a bit more fancy, heterosexual, queer, beginner, highly-skilled, the whole gamut... except that I didn't recognize a single *mundialista* (but there were plenty of them in *Viva La Pepa* that night, and the night before in *Cachirulo*). After a few tandas, the two-person orchestra started playing with a lively version of Piazzolla's *Libertango*, which is a tango *para escuchar*,<sup>69</sup> followed by a series of danceable tunes, after which the DJ resumed playing his selection of Golden Age music. At no moment, until 3:15 am when the milonga ended, was the dance floor, or the whole milonga for that matter, any less crowded...

One objective of my 2018 trip was to see if the abundance of the *Mundial* dancers that I had observed in the milongas in the month of August of 2016 (the month of the *Mundial*) was also reflected in *las milongas populares*. Except for Juampy and Daniel, the *Mundial* finals' token queer couple, I saw none of the forty couples that made it to those finals in any of the *popular* milongas, where I spent most of my time on this last trip. But the times that I went to the other milongas, always at least a few of them were present.

The *popular* and "non-*popular*" milongas are for the most part distributed differently across the city. *La María* is located in the *barrio* of Balvanera, *El Batacazo* is in Almagro, *Muy Lunes* in San Telmo, *La Discépolo* in Boedo, and *La Domilonga* in Barracas, all in less affluent areas of the city. The non-*popular* milongas, by contrast, can

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<sup>68</sup> An accordion-like instrument with a very distinct sound that is unique to tango music.

<sup>69</sup> For listening, rather than for dancing.

be found in more affluent areas, often in the *barrios* of Palermo and Villa Crespo, or in and around downtown Buenos Aires.<sup>70</sup>

### **Tradition and Popularity**

While in the Golden Age of tango dancing, namely the 1940s and early 1950s, “tradition” (in the sense of *Argentinidad* and resistance to North American modernity) and “popularity” seem to have gone hand-in-hand, in this current period of the “second globalization” of finance and trade, “tradition” (in the Hobsbawmian sense of a factitious continuity with the past) has assumed non-popular characteristics. It has become associated with the city government as well as the national government’s efforts to “own” the tango, manifest in legislation in the late 1990s defining the “heritage turn,” followed by declaring tango as “cultural heritage” a decade after that.<sup>71</sup> These official efforts are aimed at attracting the maximum number of tourists, mainly to Buenos Aires, in line with the city’s neoliberal urbanism and its resulting spatial fragmentation. The tango dance products coming directly from the government have been the *Mundial*, as well as the *Campeonato de Baile de la Ciudad*, or the City [of

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<sup>70</sup> See Bibliography for a link to “Map of Buenos Aires.”

<sup>71</sup> In 2009, under the sponsorship of the states of Argentina and Uruguay, tango was inscribed on UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, a fact that is prominently displayed on the website of the *Mundial* as well as its advertising and outreach material.

Buenos Aires] Dance Championship (which is for residents of the city), the champions of which go directly to the finals of the *Mundial*. The *Mundial*, geared towards the outside world and the economic benefits that derive from it, shares with the non-*popular* milongas of Buenos Aires their tourist-orientation. And combined with its adherence to “tradition,” it represents everything that those who crowd the *popular* milongas are avoiding in the non-*popular* social tango scene. As Dolores said about the dancers who frequent the *popular* scene, “As milongueras/os, we really don’t care about the *Mundial*... it’s really something for the ‘outside’ (*afuera*).” This “outside” is not only about the foreigners coming into Argentina, but also about the Argentinians getting a “ticket” to the world beyond Argentina’s borders, especially the Global North. Those who rank first, and to a lesser extent, the couples in the second and third positions, are immediately given multiple offers to teach in various parts of the world, in most cases giving them an overnight fame that they didn’t have. Maybe that’s another reason for it being called the *Mundial*... an opening to the world.

The city government has never assumed authority over the city’s milongas, except for the many cases of *clausuras*, or forced closures, supposedly for not complying with a certain city code or another.<sup>72</sup> Nevertheless, until recently, most of the milongas have aligned with the trends of neoliberal urbanism, conforming with the general framework of creating environments with the goal of attracting as many tourists as possible. This is

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<sup>72</sup> At the time of this writing, three famous milongas/prácticas have been permanently shut down: *Sunderland*, *La Ideal*, and *Cochabamba*.

done in one or more of the following ways: capitalizing on the history of a milonga (the older the better), and thus linking it to “tradition” and its accompanying heteronormativity; creating a “fancy” and bright space with a smooth wood floor and air-conditioning (in the case of *Salon Canning* also with a high ceiling and eye-catching images); having performances by one or two couples during the milonga, often replete with auto-exotic<sup>73</sup> dramatizations; and having a live orchestra at the milonga. Of course, the higher prices themselves become a way for keeping out those who cannot afford them, giving the tourists, as well as the locals who are willing and able to pay the fee, privileged access to these spaces. (The famous dancer/teacher Javier Rodríguez, infamously posted on facebook on August 25, 2017, “Si no tenés 100\$ para pagar una entrada quédate en tu casa.” If you don’t have 100 pesos to pay an [milonga] entrance, stay home). While a small minority of local dancers are of a higher socioeconomic class, other dancers actually save money just to be able to attend certain expensive milongas of their choice, where, at least for the night, they can feel wealthy.

### ***Las Milongas Populares* cont’d: Progressivism, made in Argentina**

Encountering the prominence of the *popular* milongas, the question that I was naturally faced with, was this: what is driving them? What became clear to me is that in these spaces, “laid-backness” and “non-traditional” gender roles combine with a push-

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<sup>73</sup> See Savigliano, *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion*.

back against the socioeconomic realities created by neoliberal urbanism. When asked about how *las milongas populares* come to be so popular, Dolores offered two explanations: people want a place where they are free of certain rules and structures; and more concretely, people simply can't afford to pay what the other milongas charge (informal interview, Nov. 24, 2017). I will start with the second explanation, giving some examples. *Viva la Pepa*, a description of which I used to open the section *Las Milongas Chetas*, is a milonga happening every Sunday in *Club Villa Malcolm*, which I wrote about in the last chapter as well. In October of 2016, I paid eighty pesos to enter the milonga, a fee that in October 2017 had risen to 130 pesos, and in August of 2018 to 160 pesos. This is a trend that applies to many milongas. To give another example, in the same time period, the cost to enter the (traditional) milonga *Cachirulo* rose from one hundred to 140 and then to 170 pesos. Rises in the cost of living, particularly hikes in public utility fees ushered in by the Macri government, are often cited as the cause for these increases. Perhaps it also has to do with the fact that for the most part the raises are inconsequential for the tourists, who benefit from high exchange rates, despite being limiting for a majority of the locals. Whatever the explanation may be, it is a trend that is consistent with neoliberal urbanism, and quoting Barrionuevo again, its accompanied "social polarization and spatial fragmentation," with the result that many locals are excluded from many of the milongas.

There are some arrangements for certain locals to have free or discounted access to the non-*popular* spaces; to give one example, I got to know some male dancers on my

2017 trip who told me that they were let into *Cachirulo* for free in exchange for a commitment to dance with female tourists. Here is another example: my partner and I were entering *La Bruja*, a Saturday evening *cheta* milonga which is also in *Club Villa Malcolm*, on August 25, 2018, accompanied by our teacher. She informed the lady at the entrance that she was part of the *Mujercitas* tango festival that the milonga was participating in. Asking our teacher's name, the lady looked at a paper in front of her, which had three or four different lists on it, and found her name on one of the lists. After letting her in, the lady turned to us. "Are you on any of the lists?" she asked. "No," I replied. "Two hundred pesos each," she said, the most expensive entry fee for a milonga that I have ever paid. I assume the other lists consisted of friends of the organizer, or perhaps people related to an orchestra that was performing on that night. But in general, if a non- *popular* milonga in Buenos Aires is full, it is in most cases with the contribution of an abundance of tourists. These milongas often have sparse attendance in the low seasons, while the popular milongas are usually well-attended throughout the year.

Economic realities, as I already mentioned, are one part of the equation. *Las milongas tradicionales* are certainly places that many people would avoid, irrespective of price of entry. Juampy, who identifies as queer, told me that he would never go to *Cachirulo*, as they do not allow same-sex couples on the dance floor. Many dancers, especially younger ones, do not want to be in spaces where certain codes have to be followed, such as separate seating, leading on the dance floor and the invitation to



dance as the prerogative of the man, or even an unwritten dress code that discourages jeans, t-shirts or sneakers. In the *popular* milongas, it is not uncommon for a woman to invite a man to dance, or as I mentioned before, for a woman to lead a man. The Saturday afternoon version of *Práctica La María* is actually called *La María Rolera*, encouraging the reversal of the traditional roles of man as leader and woman as follower.

The manner of inviting the other to dance is also fluid in the *popular* spaces. A very common *código* (code) among tango dancers is the *cabeceo*. Derived from the word *cabeza* or head, it is a nod with which a (usually) male dancer asks a (usually) female dancer for the *tanda*, from a safe distance. It is often considered desirable even among dancers who do not adhere to other “traditional” codes, as it can prevent the uncomfortable situation in which a dancer is approached by someone who do they not wish to dance with. This *código* is strictly followed in the *tradicional* milongas, with the male dancer approaching the female dancer only after his nod has been reciprocated, and it may or may not be used in the *popular* events, where it is usually acceptable to approach another without a nod. At the entrance of *Práctica Muy Lunes*, first-time attendees receive a slip of paper instructing that anyone can invite anyone else to dance, and one can get on and off the dance floor at any time, as opposed to being committed to finish the *tanda* that is playing with the person that they are dancing with (another common *código* in social tango). It reads: “Las mujeres también sacan a bailar, los cambios de roles son bienvenidos. Se baila sin cortina, sin histerias y sin

contracturas. Entrá y salí de la pista cuando quieras, no hace falta que empiece/termine la orquesta. A gozar!!!” (Women also get the other to dance, role changes are welcome. We dance without *cortinas*, fuss, or smugness. Enter and leave the floor whenever you wish, no need to wait for the orchestra [*tanda*] to begin or end. Enjoy!!!).

The *popular* milongas are also where followers tend to be more “active,” compared to the *tradicional* and *cheta* milongas. Often at the *popular* milongas, I have sensed a follower suggest a movement, or the direction or dynamic of a movement that is already in motion, and responded accordingly (I probably don’t catch all the suggestions...). This is not something that I have often encountered in a non-*popular* milonga. Sometimes I have even noticed that the same follower dances differently in the two settings. Or was it me? Perhaps I automatically lose some sensitivity in the environment of the *cheta* and *tradicional* milongas.

One significant characteristic of the *popular* events is that in these spaces, one frequently encounters progressive political discourse. Milongas of any kind in Buenos Aires always have a break during which the organizer welcomes the attendees and makes announcements about the milonga, after which, if the event is featuring performers, they come on the floor and dance. But the break is also a potential time and space for communal interaction. An element that is consistent and much more common in the popular milongas is for the organizer to open the floor to any announcements about tango events in the city that other organizers or dancers who are present at the milonga may have. Consistent with the popular nature of these events, this action is a

way of supporting the tango community. And often, statements by the organizer or announcements by the attendees are of a political nature, which would almost never occur at the non-*popular* events. For instance, the Argentine senate was voting on August 8, 2018 on the issue of legalizing abortion in the first fourteen weeks of pregnancy. Prior to the day of the vote, rallies in support of legalization were announced by the attendees at the *popular* milongas that I attended, with some organizers also taking a public stand in favor of abortion rights during the break. One event that is guaranteed to have political statements by the organizer is *Práctica Muy Lunes*. Martin Chili is in his early thirties, and has a distinctly casual appearance. He is always up to date with the status of progressive causes in the country, whether it is women's rights, maintaining free public education, or providing for the homeless, and is not shy to bring up current issues during the few minutes when he talks at the break. He is also very generous in giving time to any present person who would like to make an announcement. The public communications at the *popular* milongas are one more aspect of what makes them feel "of the times," rather than the "time out of time" quality that one often feels at the other milongas.

Suyai, who is in her late twenties, organizes *Milonga el Batacazo*, another *popular* event on Thursday evenings. When asked about her intention in starting this milonga, she told me:

Tango was born in a different era, when machismo was the norm. Therefore it has a fundamental contradiction relative to this day and age, but we are trying to change that: by educating people, by having women teachers, women organizers, women

leading, women dancing with women, etc. You can now see a lot more women leading or dancing together at the milongas ... Olga Besio [a very famous tango teacher who was instrumental in tango's revival in Buenos Aires in the 1980s] came to my milonga one time, and she said that she didn't know that milongas like this existed! This is really a new trend, it's even very different than how it was just a year ago. New (popular) milongas are coming onto the scene, and they are breaking with tradition and *códigos* ... My goal is inclusion. I would like everyone, regardless of what milongas they go to, to come to my milonga (informal interview, Nov. 21, 2017).

Her milonga is very well-attended, and *a la gorra*. Her comments, on the one hand, validate Savigliano's designation of tango as "macho," and, on the other hand, indicate how multiple new social tango spaces have already emerged that are contesting this notion. The *popular* milongas and *prácticas* of Buenos Aires do feel inclusive and laid-back, a quality that Savigliano has previously attributed to the city's queer milongas. In "Notes on Tango," she writes this about these milongas:

Queer *milongas* are clearly about dancing tango, and about having a good time while doing so, and offer a decompressed overall atmosphere towards that end. The informality thus achieved is more welcoming to local young dancers and to foreigners, often trained in other dance forms, interested in practicing tango as a dance but not in subjecting themselves to the traditional mores and customs or the authorities of the traditional tango scene. (142)

This description now fits the *popular* milongas of Buenos Aires, not just the queer ones, except for the fact that foreigners currently inhabit the "non-*popular*" spaces, while the *popular* ones are full with local and often young dancers.

The *popular* spaces of social tango are a synthesis of informality, flexibility regarding gender roles, and equally as important, affordability in concrete financial terms. This affordability, however, is not absolute. I was attending *Práctica La María* on August 28, 2018. Whereas the other Tuesday nights when I had gone the event was packed, on that

particular night there were relatively fewer people, even though it was still fairly well-attended. I brought the issue up with Marcelo, a local dancer who I often saw at the *popular* milongas. He said: "It's the end of the month. Some people have run out of money." Not entirely convinced, as the entry fee of seventy pesos seemed quite reasonable to me, I decided to ask Dolores, who was also there that night. "Between the 20<sup>th</sup> and the end of the month, some people can't afford the milongas," she said. "They would only go to the ones that are *a la gorra*. Otherwise, how would they pay their electricity bill?" I also noticed that on the last Friday of the month, *La Discépolo*, while again well-attended, had fewer people than the other two Fridays when I was there.

It should not be assumed that machismo is absent or even close to gone in *las milongas populares*. As Flavia, another organizer of a *popular* event told me,

The tango environment in Buenos Aires is still machista, although it is slowly changing and getting better ... men often invite women in aggressive ways, at times even approaching them from behind ... wearing revealing clothing is a good strategy for getting asked to dance ... a woman gets to be known more because of the status of her partner than her own abilities (informal interview, Oct. 14, 2017).

While the *popular* milongas offer a stark contrast with other tango spaces, especially the *tradicional* ones, elements of machismo, such as the aggressive approaches that Flavia mentions, are persistent and not yet on the verge of disappearance. And the last point that she makes, "a woman gets to be known more because of the status of her partner than her own abilities," while not directly related to the *popular* milongas, indicates another aspect of patriarchy in tango, best demonstrated by an example. Moira Castellano, a very accomplished female dancer and teacher that I study with, has for the

past couple of years been performing and teaching with the famous male dancer Javier Rodríguez, whom I mentioned before. Before that she was working with her ex-husband, Gaston Torelli, who is also well-known but not quite as well as Rodríguez. But since the shift to her new partner, Castellano has acquired a new status, despite the fact that she was no less a dancer or teacher when she was working with Torelli. While Castellano is older than Rodríguez, this mechanism for recognition more often occurs when an older and famous male dancer takes a younger woman as his partner.

But as I have argued throughout this section, times *are* changing. And in the social tango scene of Buenos Aires, the changes are not isolated or sporadic. They may have been slow, as Flavia mentions, but if the past two years are indicative, they are significantly gaining pace. And as Suyai calls it, the “fundamental contradiction” between the “original” tango and the current day and age has come to fore, and while spaces that lay claim to the “traditions” of tango, as well as the *cheta* milongas, seem to be most attractive to tourists, the majority of the young local generation and many of the older locals have little or no interest in them, in addition to the reality that they can’t afford them. The *popular* milongas, attended mainly by these same locals, are from a political economic perspective a *response* to the changes induced by neoliberal urbanism, as well as the patriarchy that is associated with it. These milongas are becoming increasingly prominent, alongside the continued prominence of traditional milongas like *Cachirulo*, or *cheta* milongas like *Canning* or *Viva la Pepa*.

The *popular* milongas retain the use value of tango dance as a social and popular activity. Foster writes, as I quoted before from the *Oxford Handbook*, that competition in dance replaces its use value with exchange value. The non-*popular* milongas have a similar function. While some milongas, particularly the *tradicional* ones, have a number of die-hard locals that are almost always in attendance, the efforts of the organizers of the non-*popular* milongas are largely geared towards bringing in the tourists, or otherwise strategically selected locals who would attract more tourists. By bringing social tango into the (global) marketplace, many of the milongas, rather than being sites for popular expression and connectivity, have become areas only accessible to a certain group(s) of dancers. The *popular* milongas, by contrast, are resisting the neoliberalism-induced market orientation of everything.

*Popular* milongas and prácticas now form a “parallel” social tango scene, in spaces that are often not as glamorous, and are often without performances. When a performance is featured, it is likely to be subversive in one way or another: a same-sex couple, a woman leading a man (or a role-changing couple), or a performance without the stereotypical heteronormative hyper-sexual dramatizations. As Emanuel told me and I opened the first section of this chapter with, “There are really three ways of dancing tango: at the milonga, at the mundial, and doing an exhibition. The three are quite different.” The performers at the milongas, while of course projecting for an audience, as do the *Mundial* performers, do not have the restrictions that the written as well as the unwritten rules of the *Mundial* place upon dancers. But very often, in the

non-*popular* milongas, a common feature of the performances other than a heteronormative couple in dress and suit is the hyper-sexual dramatizations with a highly assertive man and a woman alternating between rebellion and submission, almost always ending with the woman being “conquered” by the man. This behavioral stereotype is also seen in *tango escenario* and has been around for about a century or so, and it is a clear instance of auto-exoticization.<sup>74</sup> It is very unusual to see this kind of stereotypical performance in a *popular* milonga. Here are my notes from a performance at one *popular* milonga:

A young couple came onto the dance floor after being introduced by the organizer. She was in a dress and stilettos, as are most female tango performers in the role of follower, and he was, rather than the typical suit and shiny shoes, in slim fit jeans and a blazer. They danced three tangos for an enthusiastic crowd, after which the cries of *otra* and the bangs on the dance floor by the audience invited them to do a fourth. Their dance was crisp and clean, confident and yet humble, and refreshingly without any of the common patterns: the serious-looking man and his smoldering looks, bending the woman backwards and leaning over her in the famous “I have now conquered you” pose, or the lips of the pair a hair’s breadth apart but not touching. (*Milonga La Discépolo*, 8/24/18)

The performances at *las milongas populares* are of course just one more aspect that distinguishes them from the other milongas, one more expression of the *popularity* of this scene, another component of the *popular* response arising from the tango community of Buenos Aires to neoliberal (neo)patriarchy and the socio-spatial fragmentation that it has given rise to.

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<sup>74</sup> The dynamic between Rudolf Valentino and Beatrice Dominguez in the tango scene in the 1921 American silent film *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* is an early prototype.



## Then and Now: a Forward-looking “Popular”

I find it appropriate to revisit a quote by Matthew Karush, which I presented in the previous chapter, about various forms of popular culture of the 1930s, which were rooted in Argentine melodrama, as it also highlights a fragmented society:

In all of its guises, melodrama presupposed a Manichean world in which poverty was a guarantor of virtue and authenticity, and wealth a moral flaw. Hundreds of songs, radio plays, and films presented Argentina as a nation irreconcilably divided between rich and poor ... Throughout the mass culture of the 1930s, wealth functioned as a sign of malice. The prototypical tango plot, revisited in dozens of songs, describes the tragic demise of the *milonguita* – the poor, innocent girl from the *barrios* who is tempted by the bright lights and wild life of downtown. Seduced by a *bacán* or a *niño bien*, the *milonguita* is usually abandoned once her looks have faded (25-26).

Now, eighty years later, we are facing a similar rich/poor divide. While in the years after the 2001/2002 financial crisis the middle class recovered, it is now once more shrinking (at the time of this writing, one USD is exchanged for about 39 Argentine pesos, and president Macri has negotiated a loan from the IMF, *all over again*). The divide plays out in the social tango spaces, splitting them into the *popular* and *non-popular* milongas. Except that often, it is not wealth, but the *appearance* of wealth, that one sees in the attendees of the *non-popular* spaces. As Dolores told me, “Tango in general is a middle to lower-middle class activity,” and that includes a majority of the locals who go to the *non-popular* milongas. While the tourists do indeed have wealth, at least by local standards, which is sustaining these milongas, the fancy outfits of the locals often conceal their socioeconomic status. This gives a kind of modern-day credibility, generations later, to the poetic claims of the lyrics of the Golden Age: there is an air of

authenticity in the *popular* milongas, where hard-core and mostly younger tangueras/os gather, with their unassuming outfits; away from the bright lights of the *cheta* milongas, where the tourists, “wanna-be rich” locals, and cheap stereotypes of tango can be found. And in the non-*popular* milongas, with some observation, a common “plot” becomes apparent, somewhat different than the “prototypical tango plot”: rather than the innocent girl from the *barrio* who is seduced by the *bacán* or the *niño bien*, one sees the young male “taxi dancer”<sup>75</sup> who is courting a single tourist woman, typically older and less skilled in the dance. (These are not the same as the male dancers that I mentioned before, who are let in the milonga for free in exchange for dancing with unaccompanied tourist women). As he ages, he will have to compete with the younger men in his profession.

To further repeat Karush’s words about tango in the Golden Age and analyze them in the context of now, he states that in the 1930s, “tango proclaimed its Argentine authenticity by insisting on its sadness, its resistance to modernity, and its affiliation with plebeian popular culture” (36). While “sadness” as a function of the lyrics is still present today, as the milongas predominantly use recorded music from the Golden Age, it is fascinating to see what “resistance to modernity” may or may not mean in the *popular* social tango spaces of this day and age. If “modernity” is referring to neoliberal

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<sup>75</sup> A dancer for hire, who dances at a milonga exclusively or almost exclusively with their client, and is at times available for an after-milonga romantic adventure. While there are both male and female taxi dancers, the male ones are in higher demand.

urbanism and its “outside” orientation, manifesting as posh milongas catering to the tourists (or to the “modern” music and aesthetics that were common in the *práctica* scene of mid-to-late 2000s in Buenos Aires<sup>76</sup>), then there is indeed such resistance. On the other hand, contrary to the Golden Age, when according to Karush, tango’s populism “hardly embraced progressive social change” (ibid), the *popular* milongas are now hotbeds for social progressiveness, as I have already discussed. While in the Golden Age, the popular looked to the past, in today’s social tango spaces, popular is progressive.

Karush continues, about the nostalgia of the tango lyrics, that it “neatly expressed the dislocations felt by those bearing the brunt of Argentina’s modernization, but it also suggested that these problems could be ameliorated not through social transformation but through an escapist recreation of a golden age” (ibid). Indeed, the nostalgia of tango dancing itself, and not just the lyrics, is very fitting for the dislocations that the Argentinians who are living through neoliberalism are currently experiencing, as more and more of the middle class are losing the relative prosperity that they had recently experienced. But as I will soon discuss, the “escapist recreation” that many currently seek in tango dancing, has from a certain perspective, become integrated with social progressivism.

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<sup>76</sup> See Carolyn Merritt’s *Tango Nuevo*.

I often hear, from many different dancers, and especially those who participate in the *popular* milongas, that they dance to forget about the difficulties of life. That when they dance, they can leave the outside world behind, and experience, at least for a short period of time, a state of total bliss. In *Performance and Temporalisation: Time Happens*, Maeva Veerapen, rather than attending to the historical, political, cultural, or raced and gendered aspects of Argentine tango, presents the meeting of two bodies on the social dance floor as they create a shared choreography in each moment of the dance. Fundamental to her analysis are two notions: time (duration), and incorporation. Incorporation for her is literally the entering of the dance into the body, itself a function of time. Time, in tango, is measured by the duration of the *tanda*, a set of three or four songs. The temporality of this twelve-minute interval is in contrast with the feeling of timelessness, which she calls the “tango moment” (146), that the dancers seek. This feeling, however, cannot be forced. It becomes available after years of dancing many, many tandas at the milonga, which results in the incorporation of the dance. Once the dance has become incorporated, as Veerapen writes, the dancer can then focus on the music, the embrace, and their connection to their partner, enabling the achievement of the “tango moment.”

It is this “tango moment,” this total state of bliss, that the dancers are looking for. The focus on the music and connection through the embrace is facilitated by the relaxed, often dimly lit setting of the *popular* milongas, free from the tension that one often feels upon entering the highly competitive non-*popular* milongas, where

newcomers can be under intense scrutiny.<sup>77</sup> This competitiveness can be particularly felt in some *cheta* milongas. What the skilled dancers are creating on the dance floor of these milongas, while entertaining and at times inspiring to those who observe them, is different than the dance that is seeking bliss. Their preferential and often sustained focus on the rhythmic versus the melodic elements of the music, and the outward direction of the intention of their dance (as well as that of the other, less skilled dancers who prefer the *cheta* milongas), is in contrast with the inward direction of the intention of dancers who are dancing for the “moment,” and prioritize their connection with their partner. But this does not mean that the “inward” dance is any less skillful. As Veerapen writes, and I can personally attest to, it takes years of practice in the social setting to achieve the incorporation that enables the “tango moment,” which following André Lepecki, can be seen as an experience of “potent freedom.”<sup>78</sup> It just has a different focus, and perhaps it can be said, that it is a different kind of incorporation altogether.

The “escape” that dancers are seeking and that they often achieve, through their inward-oriented and non-competitive dance, is not the manifestation of a desire to deny reality or shed social responsibility, despite temporarily taking their minds off their difficulties. Not only, contrary to what Karush writes about the Golden Age, is the need for social transformation clearly felt and often acted upon in the current *popular* tango

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<sup>77</sup> For a detailed description of the competitiveness of a version of these often gendered spaces, see “Gambling Femininity” by Marta Savigliano, in *Angora Matta*.

<sup>78</sup> In *Singularities: Dance in the Age of Performance*, p. 13.

scene, the bliss that the dancers experience is itself the result of years of being socially sensitive.

I feel the need to explain that I am not claiming that the heartfelt tango between partners that are sensitive and connected to each other is only to be found in *popular* social tango spaces, while the non-*popular* spaces are where the tango is always “showy” or an otherwise disconnected affair. Many sensitive and connected dancers are to be found in the non-*popular* milongas, including many tourists. Furthermore, there is overlap between the dancers; there are some local dancers who can be found in both scenes, although they are few in number, typically quite skilled, and often admitted to the non-*popular* milongas for free or a discounted fee. Then there are some good local dancers who only go to the *cheta* or traditional milongas. Asked about *Práctica Muy Lunes*, one of them told me during a casual conversation: “I never go there. It’s for the hippies.” I assume by “hippies,” he was referring to the *porteños* who prefer dancing in jeans and sneakers, or otherwise are not trying to appear wealthier than they are. And then there is *Cachirulo*, the gender-divided traditional milonga, which stands out among all the non-*popular* milongas because it always has good local dancers in attendance who “go there to dance,” that is, to enjoy dancing and connecting with others. While this may seem to describe the obvious, in the *cheta* milongas one can always see small groups of dancers sitting together at a table who in the course of the entire night will maybe dance one or two *tandas*, and then only with each other. And finally, on a personal note, I have had plenty of blissful dance experiences in the *popular*

spaces as well as in *Cachirulo*, and have sometimes enjoyed dancing in the *cheta* milongas. The vast range of possibilities that the social tango scene of Buenos Aires offers has provided me a unique richness of experience, whether from the perspective of a dancer or that of a researcher. But being a tourist from the Global North, it is my economic privilege that allows me this range of possibilities, which is not available to most *porteños*.

However, what I *am* doing, is revealing how the dance itself, as well as its dancers, have overall differences across two distinct categories of social tango space, divided along socioeconomic lines, and also distinguished by the presence or absence of social progressivism. The neoliberal urbanism of the city of Buenos Aires has unwittingly given rise to a popular and highly vibrant social tango scene, at the vanguard of social change.

### ***La Milonga Rosa: A Different Case***

I have made numerous references to the distinction between the *popular* and the non-*popular* milongas, and wrote earlier that this division of category is usually a straightforward process. One extremely well-attended milonga, however, stands as an exception. Organized by Carolina Couto, a young woman in her mid-twenties, *Milonga La Rosa* happens every Sunday afternoon in *El Beso*, a dance club dedicated to tango and close to downtown Buenos Aires. Its smooth wood floor, bright lighting, and air-conditioning qualify the club as a “fancy” one, and while all of the other multiple weekly

events at this club are of the *cheta* or *tradicional* variety, *Milonga La Rosa* is different. While its entry fee of seventy pesos (August 2018) puts it on par with the *popular* events, its main distinguishing factor is its crowd: a mix of dancers who strictly attend the *popular* milongas, and those who almost never do. Witnessing this phenomenon on all three occasions that I attended, I call it a “hybrid” milonga. Couto was herself a *Mundial* finalist in 2016, finishing in fourth place together with her partner. Always in full make-up, a dress or a skirt, and stilettos, I have seen her in a variety of milongas of different categories. A very talented dancer with good social skills, she has established connections with various groups of people, and has created a space that is inviting to dancers that don’t normally cross paths. Chatting with her in between songs of a *tanda* at another milonga one evening, I voiced to her my admiration of her milonga and the inclusivity it has managed to accomplish, to which she proudly responded: “that is the idea.” While the space of *La Rosa* itself gives a bit of an air of “fanciness,” its mixed population creates a unique atmosphere, a combination of both *cheta* and *antiprincesa*<sup>79</sup> qualities.

The affordable pricing of the milonga, as well as the relaxed atmosphere that is typical of afternoon (as opposed to evening) events, facilitates this mix. This combination of factors, including the inviting personality of Couto, shows that with the right conditions, even a “fancy” space like *El Beso* could become a place for connectivity

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<sup>79</sup> In Latin American children’s literature, a term for a free and independent female protagonist who doesn’t need to be “saved.”



that moves beyond binaries, where bodies that are usually separate, willingly embrace each other. It could be said that in this instance, neoliberalism, perhaps more than being resisted, is transcended. After all, why resist a smooth wood floor, if everyone can afford it and be happy together?

### **Future Trends**

“Argentina is back in the loving arms of the International Monetary Fund,” Kenneth Rapoza opens his May 24, 2018 article in the *Forbes Magazine* (Rapoza 2018). As President Macri pushes full force with his neoliberal agenda, getting an IMF loan to the tune of fifty billion USD has reignited fears of a financial crisis similar to what happened at the end of the year 2001. But whether a crisis happens or not, what is certain is that the divides brought about by neoliberalism are to continue for the foreseeable future. I therefore expect the *popular milongas*, sites of resistance to the neoliberalization of tango, to keep thriving.

While a “wholesale restructuring of the capitalist global order” may ultimately be what is required for social justice in Latin America (and elsewhere) to prevail, it is important to remember, as Grugel and Riggirozzi write, and as the Kirchner governments demonstrated in Argentina, that “policy autonomy is an important aspiration for states and people in the developing world even in conditions of uncertainty, weakness and global integration” (16). Being indebted to the IMF is

certainly counterproductive to autonomy, a fact that the Argentine people are acutely aware of. The year 2019 is an election year in the country, and may well see the end of the Macri government. But beyond temporary swings to the left or the right, it may not be very idealistic to imagine that as Latin America has been at the forefront of both the implementation of and the resistance to neoliberalism, it will perhaps also be where an alternative politico-economic practice will be initiated.

The Golden Age of tango dancing, including the legendary orchestras that have inspired generations of dancers since, occurred in a period between the “first” and this “second” globalization of finance and trade; in other words, in a period “outside” of globalization. While neoliberal capitalism is inherent in our current globalization, the future may prove different. If “post-globalization” seems like an unrealistic idea, “post-(neoliberal) capitalism” is certainly not. It is very intriguing to imagine how social tango dancing will evolve as we possibly move into this different future.

## *Chapter III*

### **Los Angeles (The City That Is Crazy about Competitions)**

Scrolling down my Facebook News Feed one afternoon in Buenos Aires in August of 2018, I came across a post by one of my friends about the first edition of the “International Tango Summit & Argentine Tango World Cup” (the Summit), that was happening at the Hilton LAX in Los Angeles, September 6 - 9, 2018. I had never heard of it, so it immediately got my attention. While I wasn’t able to attend in person, I gathered all the information I could from their website and the related Facebook posts, and later, during the months of October and November, I had the opportunity to interview some dancers who had been there, as well as its organizers. What struck me the most was the *format* of the competition: with “Professional,” “Amateur,” and “Pro/Am” divisions, three levels (Bronze, Silver, and Gold) for the Amateur and Pro/Am divisions, and a syllabus for each level, it is directly copied from ballroom competitions. This is very significant, because, on the one hand, the event is appropriating the *Mundial* and making it even more “ballroom,” while, on the other hand, it is insisting on the “Argentineness” and the “authenticity” of the tango that it is presenting. The Summit, as well as other local competitions that I will write about, such as the “Southern California Tango Championship” (SCTC), have followed the *Mundial* in presenting a tango that is

“Argentine”: the movement vocabulary, the closeness of the upper torsos and the heads of the couple, and the music that the dancers move to, clearly distinguish this tango from the “ballroom” version.<sup>80</sup> But while the elements of the “competition style” of dancing tango that I described in the previous chapter, as well as the presence of formal adjudication and rules, represent a whitening and “ballroomization” of the dance in all these competitions, the ballroom format of the Summit, which distinguishes it from the other Argentine tango competitions, conveys to the practice of tango the same high status of competition vis à vis social dance that is established in the ballroom world. The City of Angels has thus presented a whole new level of moving Argentine tango in the direction of being yet another device of competition.

In *Glamour Addiction*, Juliet McMains’s research on the American ballroom dance industry, she particularly explores competitive ballroom dancing, which in hopes of inclusion in the Olympics, was renamed DanceSport in the 1980s. At the heart of DanceSport, according to McMains, is the conflation of competing and social dancing. Students approach dance studios to learn social dance, but they are channeled into competing by the teachers. A similar process is occurring in Los Angeles tango, by way of the organizers of its two competitions, the SCTC and the Summit, and the tango

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<sup>80</sup> The dance that I write about throughout my dissertation is *not* ballroom tango. As I point out in the previous chapter, one of the dances in the “International Standard” ballroom dance competitions, which in England are simply called “Ballroom” competitions, is called tango. But this tango, in ways that I just described in the body of the text, is different than the tango of the competitions that are the subject of my research.

teachers who funnel their students into these events. By conflating social dance and competition, LA tango is empowering neoliberal urbanism, following the language of the marketplace which depicts competition as an obvious fact of life. And what makes this conflation so successful, I argue, is the prevailing receptivity in the LA tango scene to the insistence on the Argentine “authenticity” of competition tango.

I lived in Los Angeles county from August of 2014 to March of 2017 (except for a total time of five months in Buenos Aires), a period during which I frequented the LA milongas as a social tango dancer, as well as a disc jockey. I danced on average two times a week, and played music at different social tango events once or twice a month. It was there that I started my research of tango dance as a social phenomenon, which subsequently led to my research in Buenos Aires. Since moving to San Diego in March of 2017, I have stayed closely connected with the Los Angeles tango scene. I often go there to dance, and I sometimes work as a DJ at its various milongas.

While I will further explore the “competitive shift” created and represented by the Summit, a primary aim of this chapter is to compare the intersection of neoliberal urbanism and social tango in the cities of Buenos Aires and Los Angeles, showing major differences between the two. These differences, I will argue, have a lot to do with how the dance was disseminated in the 1980s in the two locales. I will also argue that, while in Buenos Aires, tango competitions have a secondary function and importance relative to the social tango scene, in Los Angeles, they have a primary status. Furthermore, while one tango school in LA, which also hosts various tango socials, is making social tango

dancing as well as learning tango an affordable endeavor, and is more open to deviating from the heteronormative image of tango that is dominant in the overall LA tango scene, there is no equivalent in LA to the *popular* tango scene in Buenos Aires and its resistance to the socioeconomic and patriarchal aspects of neoliberalism. As a whole, the Los Angeles tango scene, and its affinity for competition, reflect powerful neoliberal urban currents, while simultaneously asserting neoliberalism in the city.

In this chapter, I will first offer a very brief history of neoliberalism in Los Angeles. What connects neoliberalism and LA tango is not only their shared valorization of competitiveness and the individual, but the sociospatial division resulting from LA's neoliberal urbanism, as tango in Los Angeles is predominantly a dance of the upper middle class. Next I describe how social tango began in LA in the 1980s, linking its origins with social class, followed by an overview of LA tango. Then I will launch into the phenomenon of tango competitions in LA, including the recent advent of the Summit, and how this phenomenon relates to the topics of authenticity and spectacle. In the end, before my concluding remarks, I will write about social tango events at a school called Oxygen Tango, and how they are different in regards to the overall "fanciness" which defines LA tango. The informality that characterizes the events at Oxygen as well as the various "práctica bubbles," as I will discuss, does not qualify them as a form of single network that could be considered a response to neoliberalism.

## **Global City LA: Neoliberal Bastion of the West (and who is dancing tango in LA)**

Los Angeles is a global city. As is Buenos Aires.<sup>81</sup> In *Expulsions: Brutality and Complexity in the Global Economy*, Saskia Sassen writes of two profound shifts in economies across the world that started in the 1980s. One has been

the material development of growing areas of the world into extreme zones for key economic operations. At one end this takes the shape of global outsourcing of manufacturing, services, clerical work, the harvesting of human organs, and the raising of industrial crops to low-cost areas with weak regulation. At the other end, it is the active worldwide making of global cities as strategic spaces for advanced economic functions; this includes cities built from scratch and the often brutal renovation of old cities. (9)<sup>82</sup>

As she describes in “The Global City: Introducing a Concept,” as privatization and deregulation weaken the national, the conditions are created for other spatial units such as the city to arise (27), and “the economic fortunes of these cities become increasingly disconnected from their broader hinterlands or even their national economies” (30). “Neoliberalism” is a common descriptor referring to the urban condition presented by these global cities,<sup>83</sup> more accurately known as neoliberal urbanism, which has restructured both Los Angeles and Buenos Aires in profound ways. Where the two cities differ, for the sake of my argument, is the relationship between this restructuring and tango dance as a social activity. A possible implication of my study is that social tango

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<sup>81</sup> In recent years, Buenos Aires has ranked among the top twenty-five global cities (Global Cities Report, 2018).

<sup>82</sup> The other shift is “the ascendance of finance in the network of global cities” (ibid).

<sup>83</sup> See: Brenner, Neil, & Theodore, Nik. “Neoliberalism and the Urban Condition,” p. 101.

dance can be seen as both enacting and revealing the different ways in which major urban centers respond to the deep shifts brought about by neoliberalism.

The theory of neoliberalism is a political economic one that advocates individual entrepreneurial freedom, privatization and strong private property rights, deregulation, and a government which, while protecting the above rights with whatever means necessary, is largely exempt from providing social benefits to its citizens. Municipal governments are often the ones instrumental in the implementation of neoliberalism, with Los Angeles being a case in point. Mike Davis, in the 2006 preface to *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*, summarizes how massive public investment in LA primarily served international commerce and corporations at the expense of large segments of the city's population. According to him, the administration of Mayor Tom Bradley, after coming to power in 1973, for the remainder of that decade and throughout the 1980s, oversaw the highly ambitious expansion of municipal infrastructure, resulting in massive new investment in ports and airports "that allowed L.A. to become a dominating hub of Pacific Rim commerce..." (vi). The Bradley administration adhered to the principle that "any notional profits from the operation of the Port or LAX must be reinvested *in situ*" (vii). He goes on to say that

City Hall ratified the same principle for Downtown: fiscal windfalls from the appreciation of publicly-subsidized real-estate were ploughed right back into further redevelopment. These fiscal closed circuits sustained high levels of public investment in container docks, terminal buildings, and downtown bank skyscrapers that, in turn, kept happy a huge constituency of pro-globalization interests, including airlines, stevedoring companies, railroads, aerospace exporters, hotels, construction unions, downtown landowners, the Los Angeles Times, Japanese banks, Westside movie



studios, big law firms, and the politicians dependent upon the largesse of all of the above. But the city was subsidizing globalization without laying any claim on behalf of groups excluded from the direct benefits of international commerce. There was no mechanism to redistribute any share of additional city revenues to purposes other than infrastructure or Downtown renewal. There was no 'linkage', in other words, between corporate-oriented public investment and the social needs that desperately fought for attention in the rest of the city budget. (ibid)

This encapsulates the neoliberal urbanism that was consolidated in those years in the city of Los Angeles. The lack of 'linkage' between the investments and the needs that Davis writes about illustrates the genesis of the sociospatial fragmentation that, just as in what I described in the case of Buenos Aires, is a manifestation of the city's neoliberalism.

According to Janet Abu-Lughod, in *New York, Chicago, Los Angeles: America's Global Cities*, the gap between the rich and the poor in Los Angeles "widened drastically in the 1980s and continued to do so in the early 1990s" (367). She also describes how downtown business interests during the leadership of Bradley "were operating in a structure *outside* city funding, the CRA" (Community Redevelopment Agency), which was authorized by the state to issue tax allocation bonds (392, emphasis original). Tax revenues could only be used to reinvest in the (downtown) redevelopment project or clear debts incurred by the project. The downtown real estate "empire," as she calls it, "controlled by Anglo businessmen and oriented heavily toward the profit motive, became a source of considerable extragovernmental power beyond the reach of the electorate" (393), especially since the city's revenue was curtailed by Proposition 13. Passed by California voters in 1978, Prop 13 severely limited property tax rates,

undermining the municipal government's ability to fund public services, including education and a variety of public programs.

Deindustrialization, as in Buenos Aires, was a component of Los Angeles's neoliberal urban transformation. According to Davis, while the decline in manufacturing jobs that came with deindustrialization was initially compensated for by an increase in aerospace jobs and a light manufacturing boom, some of this compensation was lost in the 1990s as defense jobs were transferred elsewhere and "light manufacturing was exported to border *maquiladoras* or to China" (xi). Decreased employment opportunities in manufacturing resulted in the funneling of a low-wage workforce into "a limited spectrum of service-sector jobs in restaurants, hotels, offices, theme parks, and private homes" (xii). This is a phenomenon that we can currently witness in Los Angeles. I would now add to this list low-wage jobs at corporations or their subsidiaries, for example, Whole Foods, which is a subsidiary of Amazon.

The widening gap between the rich and the poor seen in global cities like Los Angeles is characterized by the loss of the "traditional" middle class. As this middle class has been shrinking further and further, concurrent with urban restructuring, a "new" (upper) middle class has developed. Roger Keil, in an article published in the year 2000 in *Alternatives*, writes about the "new" middle class in large cities of the global economy:

... traditional working-class and middle-class occupations (and social milieus) do indeed disappear from cities as industries close and downsizing occurs; at the same time, however, new, and often younger, segments of middle-class people move to and

gentrify inner-city areas and occupy key positions in the burgeoning high-technology and information-based industries, which tend to link their corporate culture to urban life. (258)

Robert Reich, in an article titled “What Amazon HQ2 tells us about America’s great divide,” published in *The Guardian* on November 14, 2018, gives us a recent update on this phenomenon as it pertains to the United States, and LA. He explains how, in order to generate new ideas, companies like Amazon choose to locate their corporate headquarters in “geographic clusters” where talented people gather, mostly along both coasts, in “places like Seattle, New York, metropolitan Washington, Boston and Los Angeles.” As mostly young and educated people who get hired by these corporations stream into these locales, so does money from other places in the world where the designs and products generated by them go to, creating high wages and high standards of living, with the accumulated capital in turn attracting service jobs catering to this new wealth. The result of all this, as the middle class as it was known disappears, and gentrification makes large areas off limits to many, is sociospatial division, including increasing rates of homelessness.

A pronounced characteristic of the contrasting socioeconomic classes in Los Angeles is the wide variety of nationalities that shape them. Davis writes, in *City of Quartz* (1990),

the internationalization of class formation has recently made a quantum leap in Los Angeles beyond any other North American city. The most WASPish of big cities in 1960, Los Angeles now contains more polyethnic diversity than New York, with a huge manual working class of Latinos and a growing rentier stratum of Asian investors ... Meanwhile, great waves of Chinese, Korean and Armenian middle-class immigrants,

augmented by Israelis, Iranians, and others, have made Los Angeles the most dynamic center of ethnic family capitalism on the planet. (104)

The “internationalization” described by Davis has continued beyond the time of the writing, including the arrival of immigrants from various countries,<sup>84</sup> and is reflected (with the exception of the Latino working class) in the diversity of the LA tango scene. In 2010, seventy-seven percent of all immigrants to Los Angeles County had arrived since 1980.<sup>85</sup> These immigrants, and their direct descendants, currently form a large segment of the LA tango scene, which is highly diverse in terms of age, as well as nationality. At the Los Angeles milongas, I regularly encounter dancers from Armenia, Ukraine, Iran, Argentina, Turkey, Russia, the United States, and China, among other nationalities, as well as a wide range of ages. Overall, white North Americans are a clear (but sizeable) minority in the LA tango scene.

While immigrants from Mexico and Central America, many of whom work in the service sector, comprise well over half of the total immigrants to Los Angeles, they are greatly underrepresented in LA tango. This is not the case when it comes to the city’s salsa scene, where many of these immigrants can be seen. In *Salsa Crossings: Dancing Latinidad in Los Angeles*, Cindy García identifies two kinds of salsa clubs in LA: the ones

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<sup>84</sup> In 2010, 3.5 million immigrants comprised 35% of LA County's population. Foreign born residents accounted for 35.7% or \$232.9 billion of the county's total GDP. <https://www.lacounts.org/explore/immigration-la-county/>

<sup>85</sup> [https://dornsife.usc.edu/assets/sites/731/docs/LOSANGELES\\_web.pdf](https://dornsife.usc.edu/assets/sites/731/docs/LOSANGELES_web.pdf)

which, like Las Feliz Edades, are “a social haven for mostly lower class immigrant patrons who wished to escape the anti-immigrant American gaze” (loc. 267), and who are mainly from Mexico and Central America; and others which, like El Reino de la Salsa, are mainly attended by non-Latinas/os, Latinas/os who are economically successful and from the middle and upper classes, and lower class immigrants (from Mexico and Central America) who, by virtue of their attire and style of dancing, distance themselves from the class reality of their lives outside of the clubs. Such a marked class division does not exist inside and between the various LA milongas.

While social tango in Buenos Aires is mainly a middle to lower middle class activity, in Los Angeles, as in other major North American cities such as San Francisco and New York, it is primarily a dance of the upper middle class. Tango is an expensive activity in much of the Global North. In Los Angeles, for example, milongas typically cost anywhere between fifteen and twenty dollars to get into (more if you are also taking the pre-milonga class), and tango dancers very often go out at least two nights a week. Also, the process of becoming skilled enough in tango to be able to start participating in social events is very different than many of the other social dances. While becoming skillful in any dance requires lots of effort and practice, in salsa, to give an example, one can learn the “basic” move, complement it with a simple turn, and start getting on the dance floor. This does not apply to tango. It has no “basic” move applicable to the social dance floor, and it takes a considerable amount of study and practice just to get started. Taking many group lessons could be quite costly, and a single private tango lesson often

costs upwards of one hundred dollars. The “elegant” attire suitable for most of the Los Angeles milongas can also be quite expensive, with the iconic women’s stilettos alone costing \$200 - 250.

The socioeconomic divisions accentuated by neoliberalism in Los Angeles have translated, relative to my discussion, into tango in this city being predominantly a dance of the upper middle class. In the next section, I will describe how the phenomenon of social tango began in LA in the 1980s, connecting its origins with social class.

### **The LA Tangomania: Origins of Social Argentine Tango in Los Angeles**

It was the year 1986 when social tango became widespread in Los Angeles. The embrace of tango by members of the upper middle class, I argue, as in some other large cities of the Global North, is strongly related to the popularity of a stage tango show called *Tango Argentino*, that was launched in the 1980s.

The show was instrumental in the growth of the LA tango scene, facilitated by the presence of Argentine émigrés. As I wrote in the first chapter, *Tango Argentino*, which first opened in Paris in November 1983, set off the “second global expansion” of tango, as the “second globalization” of finance and trade was in full force. It went to Venice in 1984, and opened on Broadway in October 1985, subsequently spending a total of ten years touring the world. It had a major impact in the countries of the Global North where it was featured, creating a large interest for learning how to dance tango. The

show opened at the Pantages theatre in Hollywood on May 20, 1986, for a seven-week run. But its Broadway run had already made an impact in LA. Actress and choreographer Miranda Garrison was one of the Angelenas who had seen the Broadway show multiple times and had studied with the cast, and upon return to Los Angeles, was looking for a place to dance. In a June 5, 1986 article in the *Los Angeles Times* by Benjamin Goodman, she says, "Basically, I wanted to find a place where I could dance the tango, but there just wasn't any place around ... I found Orlando Paiva and the band Tres Para El Tango, and then I started organizing the dances..." Orlando Paiva (1935 – 2006), a tango dancer from Rosario, Argentina, who immigrated with his family in the early 1970s and settled in Los Angeles, was, according to Anthony Shay's *Dancing Across Borders: The American Fascination with Exotic Dance Forms*, "a blue-collar worker who could not even speak English" (46). And Tres Para El Tango was a tango trio led by Osvaldo Barrios, another émigré from Argentina. Norah Lopez, who ran a Bolivian/Argentine restaurant in North Hollywood in the 1980s called *Norah's Place*, hired the band starting in 1985 to play on the weekends, and it was here where Garrison started organizing milongas. Julie Friedgen, who together with her husband Angel organizes LA's longest-standing milonga, *El Encuentro*, confirmed to me that the first milonga in Los Angeles that was open to the public was at *Norah's* (informal interview on November 2, 2018). Other patrons of the restaurant included actor Robert Duvall, who had also been inspired by the Broadway show and started taking classes in New York City with the cast members,

which he continued to do after the show came to LA, and Juan Carlos Copes, the star of *Tango Argentino*, who would appear at the restaurant together with Duvall.<sup>86</sup>

After the opening of the show in the Pantages, interest in learning tango skyrocketed. Paiva was teaching tango with Garrison at *Norah's Place* right before the milongas on the weekends, and also on Tuesday nights at a private club called *Helena's*, run by dancer and actress Helena Kallianiotis. *Helena's*, according to a July 4, 1986 article in the *New York Times* by Georgia Dullea, titled "Two Los Angeles Clubs for the 'New Elite'," was

a private supper club for the stars, hidden away in the Silver Lake section. Only members such as Jack Nicholson and Madonna or their guests get in ... This is a large gray stucco building in an industrial-looking strip of Silver Lake. There is no sign, no indication that anything chic might be going on here until about 10 P.M. when the Ferraris, Cadillacs and Rolls-Royces begin to line up out front.

The article goes on to say that Tuesdays were "Tango Night," when "the stars takes lessons." And the "New Elite" in the title refers to "members of what is sometimes known as 'young Hollywood' ... an ever-expanding and changing clique." In an undated interview by an Argentine television channel with Paiva, he says that every Tuesday between one hundred and fifty and two hundred celebrities were present, when he and Garrison taught an hour-long tango class (Paiva YouTube).

Since these early days, the "star factor" of Los Angeles has inspired many tango dancers from Argentina to travel and teach in this metropolis. As an Argentine whom I

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<sup>86</sup> Duvall would later write and direct the movie *Assassination Tango*, released in 2002, with himself in the main role, and also featuring Orlando Paiva.



will call Gimena,<sup>87</sup> who lives in LA and teaches tango and organizes tango events in the city, told me, “Lots of Argentine dancers come to LA... it has a mythical quality for them... and there’s always that hope of being cast in a movie or commercial or something” (informal interview on November 2, 2018). The tango that many of these Argentines present is itself to various degrees influenced by the exoticization of the dance by Hollywood, often rife with hyper-sexual dramatizations featuring assertive men, and dating back, as I wrote in the previous chapter, to at least 1921 when the American silent film *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* was released. The effect of the movie industry on dance is of course not limited to tango. Central to García’s argument in *Salsa Crossings*, is the exoticized *latinidad* produced by Hollywood, a hypererotic *latinidad* manifesting in salsa as a combination of violence and sexuality. With similar manifestations in tango, a majority of dancers from Argentina who come to Los Angeles are versed in the skill of auto-exoticization.

*Tango Argentino* not only inspired people to dance tango, but also promoted a certain look for it.<sup>88</sup> Featuring mostly tuxedos for the men, with their slicked-back dark hair, and either vintage gowns or black slitted dresses for the women, the Angelenos followed suit. In another *LA Times* article from May 30, 1986, titled “Outfits Keep in Step with the Tango Trend,” the author, Rose-Marie Turk, writes that “The *look* means dark

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<sup>87</sup> I use pseudonyms only when my interviewees prefer not to be named.

<sup>88</sup> *Tango Argentino* was the prototype of major stage tango shows, and has since been followed by other ones such as *Tango Por Dos* and *Forever Tango*.

colors with light accents. Ideally, it's a double-breasted suit or tuxedo for him and something that's slinky and black for her..." (emphasis original). She goes on to say that,

Everywhere local tango aficionados gather, there's talk of a dance revolution. Nothing like it since "Saturday Night Fever," they say, adding that disco and disco dressing are on the decline, touch dancing (swing, tango, mambo, samba), elegant clothes, the supper club spirit and Big Band sounds are on the rise.

The teaching and learning of the "new" and "elegant" dance from Argentina was not limited to restaurants and elite clubs. According to the *LA Times* article by Goodman,

Dance studios all over Los Angeles are reporting that everyone is asking to learn the tango. "It's like when 'Saturday Night Fever' hit in '79," said George Chandler, director of the [Fred Astaire] Dance Resort in Reseda. "The hustle was hot all across the U.S. and everyone wanted to learn it. Now it's the tango. People see the show [*Tango Argentino*] or just hear about it and they want to learn it." Chandler estimates the Reseda studio is attracting 20 to 30 new students a week, "and they all want to learn the Argentine Tango."

These studios, such as the Dance Resort, were mainly ballroom dance studios. Turk writes in her article, "Terry Leone, director of the Arthur Murray [ballroom dance] studios in Beverly Hills, says there's been a noticeable increase in requests for tango lessons now that the [*Tango Argentino*] musical is in Los Angeles."

While within a couple of years of the show's appearance (it also had another three-week run in 1987), the LA "tangomania" would to a large extent be overtaken by salsa, social tango was in LA to stay. It had carved a niche for itself as a "classy" dance, among the high society and the upper middle class of LA, and its ballroom dance community. And its mode of transmission, as in other major metropolises where the show had made an impact, to a great degree determined the social class that the foundational

generation of social tango dancers in LA was to be drawn from. During the show's run, a mostly elite class had access to the cast members and taking private classes from them. The "stars" were also taking group classes from other teachers in a private club setting both during and after the span of the show. And group tango classes in ballroom dance studios, which became prominent even as the show was playing, were a major mode of learning tango in the formative years of social tango in LA.<sup>89</sup> According to Garrison, who is quoted in the *LA Times* article by Turk as well, " 'Tango Argentino' is a shot in the arm to the American ballroom community. It's injecting soul and creativity into partner dancing." The environments in which the very limited milongas (and their pre-milonga classes) of the time took place, were also geared towards the wealthier segments of society, with *Norah's* and its upscale clientele being a prime example.<sup>90</sup> In the 1990s, following a pattern seen in many big cities of the Global North, milongas in LA gradually proliferated and Argentine tango started to have its own (non-ballroom) community, integrating some of the ballroom dancers who had learned tango in the 1980s.

While *Tango Argentino* was inspiring the mostly well-to-do in the major centers of global capitalism, in Buenos Aires in the mid-1980s, as tango was becoming popular

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<sup>89</sup> As Joanna Bosse points out in "Whiteness and the Performance of Race in American Ballroom Dance," ballroom dance in the United States is principally the domain of the middle to upper classes (10).

<sup>90</sup> Another LA venue for "authentic Argentine tango" in 1986 (on Sundays), according to the *LA Times* article by Turk, was "Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel's Art Deco Cinegrill, where [Rudolph] Valentino is said to have danced, and 'dress to impress' is the recommendation."

again after the return to democracy in 1983, access to learning the social dance was very different. As I also wrote in the first chapter, the two main places for learning tango at the time were the neighborhood cultural centers, created by the government's *Programa Cultural en Barrios* (Neighborhood Cultural Program) in 1984, which offered free classes, as well as the *clubes sociales y deportivos* (neighborhood social and sports clubs). These places were available to a wide portion of the *porteño* middle and working class, and facilitated and inspired the grasp of social tango dancing among segments of the population that were different than the ones which were exposed to the dance in the Global North. Also, the exposure was not similar: in Los Angeles, as an example, the first glimpse of tango for many of the people interested in the dance was the show or highly dramatized/exoticized exhibitions by local teachers, most of whom had come from the ballroom world. But in Buenos Aires, as the milongas were coming back in the eighties, it was dancers who already had the experience of social tango dancing who revived the interest in the dance. These dancers, some of whom had not danced since the Golden Age, and others who had danced in the small gatherings which had kept the dance alive throughout the years between the decline of the tango in the mid-1950s and its resurgence in the mid-1980s, showed up at the (re)nascent milongas and became the inspiration for dancing tango for the emerging *milongueras/os*. It was 1992 when *Tango Argentino* came to Buenos Aires, and while it boosted local interest in tango, a social dancing community had already (re)formed by that time. How social

tango spread in the two cities in the 1980s has a strong connection with the prevalent social class that is now dancing it.

### **Social Tango in LA today: A Brief Overview**

*We arrived at the Tango Room around 11 pm. The large parking lot next to it was full, portending the state of the milonga. Entering the Tango Room, especially when there are a lot of people in it, is quite the experience, with the space and the dancers equally significant: the smooth wood floor, warm lighting, eye-catching images of famous tango artists hanging on the walls, and the large wooden “Tango” sign and the milonga banner on the wall opposite the entrance, together with how the dancers present themselves, instantly convey a feeling of being somewhere extraordinary. When we walked in, there were about thirty couples dancing, with most women in a one-piece dress or a skirt and a top, some of them sparkling, and just about all of them in stilettos; and most of the men were in a shirt or a suit, some with a tie, and a few with the added touch of a pocket square. Small, round tables were placed all around the room, covered with colorful tablecloths, each with a candle and a small sign designating the people that they were reserved for, and many of the chairs around the tables had someone sitting on them, despite the full dance floor. Over the next hours at the milonga, tanda after tanda, almost all the couples that I saw dancing were composed of a man leading a woman, except for the occasional woman leading another woman. The Tango Room has a small section in the back with black and white tiles and a table where food is placed on, with a large opening between this section and the dance space, giving someone standing there a great view of the floor. On the table were a couple of large fruit bowls, various plates with sweet and savory snacks, and amenities for tea and coffee. As always, several people were standing close to the table throughout the evening, snacking and chatting, while others were staring at the dancers on the floor. The milonga wound down around 3 am. (Milonga El Encuentro, 12/1/18)*

The Los Angeles social tango scene consists of various milongas and prácticas scattered over the Los Angeles metropolitan area, often separated by long distances and a lack of easy access by public transportation. As journalist and architect Joseph Giovannini has noted, Los Angeles is “a private rather than a public city,” in which space

separates people, rather than bring them together (quoted in *New York, Chicago, Los Angeles*: 424). Those who are willing and able to traverse the space by means of their private resources, overcome the distances.

Unlike Buenos Aires, there is a clear distinction between *prácticas* and *milongas* in Los Angeles. In LA, *prácticas* are informal, weekly events that last two to three hours, and are usually smaller, with the exception of a *práctica* at Oxygen Tango, which I will later write about.

Milongas are often monthly events that are of a longer duration, and are almost always “fancy.” This is reflected in both the venues, and the “elegant attire” of the dancers. By contrast, in Buenos Aires, the *milongas* and the *prácticas* are both typically weekly events, and while the term *práctica* does imply a degree of informality, the *popular* *milongas* are equally informal. And the duration of many of the *prácticas* is similar to the *milongas*.

Currently there are two *milongas* in Los Angeles that are regularly well-attended and that also happen on a weekly basis: *El Encuentro*,<sup>91</sup> on Saturday nights in Sherman Oaks (at the Tango Room), and *Tango Mio*, on Tuesday nights in La Brea.<sup>92</sup> As many of the LA

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<sup>91</sup> As of January 2019, *El Encuentro* has decreased its frequency to three *milongas* a month.

<sup>92</sup> Here is a map of LA Tango in which you can see where these two *milongas*, as well as other events, are located. Even though the map is not very up-to-date (for example, *Libertad Practi-longa* and *Milonga Querida* have been discontinued), it does give the viewer an idea of how the various events are spread over a large area:  
<https://www.coffeeandtango.com/los-angeles-tango-map-2>

milongas are monthly events, the organizers, in different ways, strive to make them as “special” as possible: a performance by a touring Argentine couple, food that stands out (such as pies or flan), special attire themes on occasion, etc... This in turn adds to the cost of organizing the milonga. Monthly events, just as a result of their lower frequency, convey less of a sense of community than the weekly ones. And the more “special” the event, the less it becomes a relaxed atmosphere that encourages connection, on or off the dance floor. “Fanciness” has become such a norm at the LA milongas, that it is hard to convey “relaxedness,” illustrated by this example: Maria Elena Lopez Cattini, up until January of 2019, has organized two monthly milongas in LA, both titled *Corazón*<sup>93</sup>. One was on a Friday, running from 9 pm to 2 am, and the other on a Sunday, from 8 pm to 1 am. For the Sunday one, she stressed “casual attire” in the description of the milonga on social media. On the Sunday in November 2018, when my partner and I showed up at the milonga, we were, together with Lopez Cattini, the only three people at the milonga that were not formally dressed. Most people were in a one-piece dress or a suit, and there was no one, other than us, who was wearing a t-shirt or jeans. *Corazón* now happens only on the second Saturday of the month, in Sherman Oaks, from 9:30 pm to 3 am. Other notable monthly milongas are *Milonga Bonbón*, held on the last Friday of the month in West Los Angeles, *Milonga Gavito*, every first Friday in Tarzana, and *Milonga LAX*, happening every third Sunday of the month in Playa del Rey.

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<sup>93</sup> As the old location of the milonga became unavailable, she has now moved to a new location, with her milonga replacing *El Encuentro* on the second Saturday of the month.

Los Angeles has a multitude of locals (meaning people who live in LA, but with various nationalities, including Argentine) who teach and/or organize tango events. The most common events organized by them are two-day workshops taught by traveling Argentine teachers; the ongoing group tango classes are taught by independent local teachers or through the tango schools. There are two main tango schools in LA: Oxygen Tango, with two principal locations in Venice and Inglewood, and one class a week in Torrance, and the Los Angeles Tango Academy, in North Hollywood. A smaller and newer school is the Tango Conservatory of Los Angeles, in Sherman Oaks, at the same location where the milonga *El Encuentro* is held.

LA's two competitive tango events, the SCTC and the Summit, which I will write about in the next two sections, are both annual events, each happening over the course of four days. While the SCTC shares its location with the *Tango Mio* milonga, the first Summit had a more exclusive location at the Hilton LAX. This general overview of the current Los Angeles tango scene, is also meant to give a degree of context to what follows in the rest of this chapter.

### **LA and Tango Competitions**

Social tango has existed in Los Angeles for over three decades, but the dominant interest in competition among its dancers is a more recent phenomenon. While LA, now with two major competitive events, is becoming the "competition capital" for US tango,



I should point out that the pioneers of Argentine tango competitions in the country have been the cities of New York and San Francisco. The first “USA Tango Championship” was held in 2007 in NYC,<sup>94</sup> an event which occurred annually for eight years. In 2011, Andrea Monti, an Argentine living in the Bay Area, started the “Argentine Tango USA (ATUSA) Official Championship and Tango Festival,” the official US preliminary of the *Mundial*, in the city of San Francisco.<sup>95</sup> Since then, it has been happening annually each April. (In response to the advent of other tango championships in California and elsewhere, the word “Official” has become very prominent on the event’s website; it is displayed in large font at the top of the homepage, and it is mentioned multiple times in the text). Despite being the official precursor to the *Mundial* in Buenos Aires, the ATUSA championship has been competing with the “Southern California Tango Championship & Festival” (SCTC), and now the Summit, in attracting dancers.

2015, the year of the debut of the SCTC, was a pivotal year for LA tango. It was also the year when I was first drawn to the subject of tango competitions. Within months of its inauguration in March of that year, I began to notice changes in the landscape of LA tango. The “competition style” of dancing became more visible on the social dance floor, and competition-related classes and workshops became prevalent. A hierarchy

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<sup>94</sup> <http://celebratetango.wixsite.com/celebratetango/6th-usa-tango-championship-c1pyu>

<sup>95</sup> <http://tangousachampionship.com/usa-tango-championship/>

was created at some milongas in which the competition winners had an “elite” status, including privileged seating, opportunities to perform, and high levels of praise. But Los Angeles had already been intimately connected with tango competitions, with one couple playing a key role. The winners of the 2011 ATUSA “Official Championship” in the *tango salon*<sup>96</sup> category, Yuliana Basmajyan (she later became the organizer of the SCTC) and Brian Nguyen, who went on to claim third place in the 2011 *Mundial*, hailed from Los Angeles (as did the winners of the 2013 ATUSA championship in the same category, Naomi Hotta and Laurant Lazure). Mitra Martin, co-founder of the LA tango school Oxygen, which I will later write about in some detail, said about the local tango stars, “When Brian and Yuliana won, it captured everybody’s attention; everyone was like: ‘Oh, there’s a competition? Like, you can *win* a competition?’ ... I don’t think the competition created them, they gave the competition credibility” (interview on December 2, 2018). The credibility that Martin talks about is in reference to the Los Angeles tango scene: the couple put competing on the map for the Angelenos. Winning in the competition, in turn, gave Basmajyan the credibility to later organize the local championship.

The SCTC greatly accelerated interest in competing among the LA dancers, creating a “competition craze.” By the beginning of the year 2016, as the second edition of the local championship was approaching, the “craze” was in full swing, with many dancers

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<sup>96</sup> To be later renamed *tango de pista*.

striving for the recognition and the prizes that winning would bring them, including tickets to Buenos Aires and invitations to perform at certain milongas. Every social tango gathering that I went to had an announcement about the championship and flyers for the event, and my partner and I often got the question, “are you competing?”, or the comment, “you guys should compete!” While I never did compete, I attended the event in 2016, 2017, and 2018, every year at the same location, the Candela Bar in La Brea, Los Angeles. As the years progressed, the four-day SCTC attracted more people, and with the arrival of talented dancers from out of town, the competition became tougher for the Angelenos.

In (March) 2018, I spent time both “in” the event, as a dancer at the milongas and spectator of the competition rounds, and “backstage,” where the competitors were doing makeup, practicing, and sometimes resting. The event featured, for the second consecutive year, the live tango orchestra *Sexteto Milonguero* from Buenos Aires, as well a line-up of famous Argentine dancers (and one Italian) that served as both judges and performers. While most of the participants, including many of the competitors, were from Los Angeles, the competition brought dancers from as far as Chicago, Tijuana, and New Orleans. With six categories: Tango Salon, Vals, Milonga<sup>97</sup>, Senior Tango, Stage Tango, and Jack & Jill, there were many chances to compete. In the Tango

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<sup>97</sup> These first three categories represent the different types of music (tango, milonga, and vals), and the corresponding dances, that one can see at the milongas, all falling under the umbrella of social tango. At the *Mundial*, only tango music is danced to (not vals or milonga).

Salon, Vals, and Milonga categories, both the winners and the runner-ups were from other cities, resulting in the LA competitors keeping a noticeably low profile on Facebook following the event.

The Jack & Jill category, a relatively recent addition to tango competitions in the United States, in which individual competitors are randomly assigned a partner, is an effort by organizers to make competing more “social” and “laid-back,” to encourage more beginners to compete, and ultimately have more sign-ups for their events. Of note, this was the only category in the 2018 SCTC in which same-sex couples could be seen, as two women had registered as leaders. The category is much less “serious” than the other ones, and the competition rounds have a mood that is palpably more jovial and relaxed. This does not however, change the overall tense atmosphere that is part and parcel of competing, and which carries over into the event’s milongas. The milongas are included in the SCTC package, and take place at the same venue, later in the evening after the competition rounds. The tension reaches its climax during the announcement of the competition results, which is in the middle of the milonga. Before the announcement, not many competitors can be seen on the social dance floor, as many are anxiously waiting the results. And after the announcement, the high excitement of winning and the disappointment of not winning, necessarily influence the mood of the milonga.

For the LA competitors, the stakes are especially high at the local competitions, for two related reasons: the presence of a majority of the LA tango community at the

events, and the value that this community gives to winning. Fluency in tango, as I discussed in the last chapter, requires years of dancing with various partners at the milongas. Once acquired, it can then be transmitted across bodies. This time-dependent fluency in turn translates into being considered a “good” dancer, as judged by a partner. But as far as the LA tango scene goes, particularly after the introduction of the local championship, as I wrote about earlier, this has not necessarily been the case. The social capital gained by winning or ranking high in a competition, and at times even the willingness to compete, have to some degree replaced the respect earned by the progress resulting from putting in countless hours of practice and dancing on the social dance floor. Moving up the competition ladder, from one perspective, is an effort to bypass this literally time-honored way of gaining respect as a *milonguera/o*. Comparing the role of tango competitions in Los Angeles and Buenos Aires, as far as gaining local social capital, further illustrates this point.

Juliet McMains, in her chapter, “Reclaiming Competitive Tango: The Rise of Argentina’s *Campeonato Mundial*” in the *Oxford Handbook of Dance and Competition*, writes about the dancers who compete in the *Mundial*,

Because tango dancers receive validation for their status as tango artists through so many other avenues (performing at milongas and in stage shows, being highly sought after as social dance partners, invitations to teach and perform abroad), the outcome of this one event, even though it is billed as the world tango championships, does not have a strong impact on their identities as dancers. Whereas it is virtually impossible for a ballroom dancer to build a high-profile career without amassing a long résumé of competition titles, tango dancers do not need competition victories to earn respect or status. (322)

This lack of need for “competition victories” is true about the Argentines who dance tango in Buenos Aires, and not just regarding the *Mundial*, but other local competitions such as the *Metropolitano* as well. But it doesn’t apply to the LA tango dancers who locally compete (or necessarily to the non-Argentines competing in the *Mundial*).

Performing at the milongas in LA is a privilege usually reserved for the Argentine teachers who are often in town, making the limited opportunity for local dancers to perform, which winning in the local championship provides, to be of considerable interest. In Buenos Aires by contrast, the *popular* milongas often feature performances by local dancers who have earned their “right” to perform by virtue of their social dancing skills. Stage tango shows are not very common in LA, and even in Buenos Aires, being a stage dancer does not usually translate into respect or status in the social dance scene. And “invitations to teach and perform abroad” are quite rare for local LA dancers. Also, “being highly sought after as social dance partners,” while the strongest and only lasting way to receive validation among social tango dancers in Buenos Aires, is often of secondary importance in Los Angeles. In Buenos Aires, as McMains goes on to say, “Dancers choose not to take the competition too seriously because Mundial champions are only revered outside Buenos Aires. Within the tango culture of Buenos Aires, everyone knows the competition that counts is at the milongas” (323). For the Angelenas/os, to an increasing extent, it is the competition that counts, that counts. The dominant interest of the LA tango community in the local events that feature

competition, and the status and the privileges, especially performing, that the winners achieve, give primary importance to winning.

The obsession with competing among Los Angeles tango dancers has provided a significant business opportunity for some tango teachers living in LA, as well the local organizers and the teachers whom they invite from Argentina. As Martin pointed out, “The competition is a great business model. It inspires privates and private packages.” In the run-up to the championships, many dancers are willing to pay considerable sums of money for their training as they prepare for the events. Privates typically run \$100 - \$150 for an hour, with some discounts available for packages. Spending lots of money for private lessons is another aspect that links competitive tango with competitive ballroom dance.

In the ballroom world, the fact of competing is itself considered the “pinnacle” on a continuum of social dance. A similar attitude and approach seems to have taken root in Los Angeles tango. And the Summit, which I will talk about next, is consolidating the primacy of competing in the city.

### **The Summit: Going ballroom (like, really)**

I now return to the Summit, with which I opened the chapter, to show how it is making tango competitions more “ballroom,” while simultaneously insisting on its Argentine “authenticity,” and conflating competition and social dance. I was very

intrigued from the point of view of a researcher to see the advent of the Summit in September 2018, but given my experience of LA tango, including the SCTC, the city of Los Angeles as the location for a new tango competition did not come as a surprise. According to an LA dancer who competed in the Summit, it was mainly attended by competitors from Los Angeles, and to a lesser degree dancers from Las Vegas, and then San Francisco (informal interview on October 8, 2018), despite being called a “World Cup” event. As I mentioned in the beginning of the chapter, it is the ballroom format of this event that distinguishes it from other tango competitions. If the *Mundial* is a “ballroomization” of tango, which is bolstered by local competitions like the SCTC, the Summit has done away with any pretense of being anything but ballroom in the way that it has standardized and codified the dance,<sup>98</sup> even if, as in the *Mundial*, its music and movement vocabulary is “Argentine,” rather than “ballroom.”

The four-day Summit, as in the SCTC and the ATUSA events, was a mix of tango classes, the competition rounds themselves, and the milongas later in the evenings. This organization itself contributes to the conflation of social dance and competing. The four milongas, one on each evening, were themed, apparently an attempt at creating some kind of historical context for social tango: “The Roaring ‘20s (1920s), The Golden Age of Tango (1940s), Cocktail Night, or Tango Argentino [referring to the show *Tango*

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<sup>98</sup> See “Categories/Divisions,” “Category Descriptions,” and “Full Comp Syllabus” under the “Competition” heading on the Summit’s website: <https://www.internationaltangosummit.com/>



*Argentino*] (1980s to Today), and Fashion Night (Own Your Style).” According to the Summit’s website, which made every effort at exoticizing the event,<sup>99</sup> “Evenings are extra special at the International Tango Festival with themed nights providing fun, mystery and elegance!” It featured the live tango orchestra *Sans Souci* from Buenos Aires, which I have heard on one of my trips there. An ensemble which has the goal of reproducing the sound of the Golden Age orchestra of bandleader Miguel Caló, it was a highlight of the Summit. The event, by various accounts, was designed to impress. Various dancers who had been there and whom I did informal interviews with in October and November of 2018, described the event, including its location at the Hilton LAX, the orchestra, and the appearance of the attendees, using terms such as “grand,” “elegant,” “fancy,” “chic,” and “classy.”

But at the heart of the Summit were the competitions, and the business opportunity that they created for certain dancers through the Pro/Am category. As in ballroom events, the “serious” competition was between the professionals<sup>100</sup> (in their own division), while the amateurs provided much of their expenses. The professionals had the chance for considerable income through participating in the (many) Pro/Am competitions, while many of the amateurs, in exchange, received a trophy. The Summit

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<sup>99</sup> <https://www.internationaltangosummit.com/milongas>

<sup>100</sup> See Appendix for a Summit description of “Professional.”

has thus provided another way for tango workers to create a business model out of competing.

Gimena, a tango teacher whom I quoted before, told me that she was approached by one of the organizers before the event and was told: “Bring all your students, you can make lots of money!” According to the event’s organizers, only seven professional couples competed (in various categories), while the majority of the competition entries were in the Pro/Am division (informal interview on December 1, 2018). Not only does the student pay the teacher’s entry fee into each separate category of the Pro/Am division, the teacher also normally receives money from the student each time that they compete with them. And with multiple categories to compete in, there was no shortage of opportunities. You could compete for the “Summit World Cup Title” (a mix of Tango, Milonga, & Vals), as well as any of the following categories: Tango Pista, Milonguero Style<sup>101</sup>, Tango Fantasia<sup>102</sup>, Milonga, Vals, Pista Role Reversed [meaning, same-sex]<sup>103</sup>, and Tango Stage Couple. (Then there is Tango Stage Group, and Tango Pista Mano y Mano [Jack & Jill], in addition to the different age categories). Dong Sung, an avid social dancer in LA, who participated in the Summit, told me: “There were many categories... many competitions had very few competitors, in this way, almost everyone got a

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<sup>101</sup> A term used more outside of Argentina than in the country, it refers to a close embrace “style” that uses smaller moves.

<sup>102</sup> Often used as a synonym for *tango escenario* (stage tango), it sometimes refers to a more “showy” version of social tango.

<sup>103</sup> This, I believe, was seen by the organizers as an opportunity to create an additional category, and therefore more entries for competition.

trophy! The Summit was really a chance for the teachers to make money and the students to get trophies, this was completely modeled after ballroom. Michael Thomas participated in maybe forty competitions!” (informal interview on October 8, 2018). Thomas is a young professional dancer from Las Vegas who is the ATUSA 2017 *tango de pista* and the 2018 *tango escenario* champion. He competed many times in the Summit’s Pro/Am division, as Dong Sung points out, typically with women significantly older than him. Together with his partner, Miki Catherine, they were themselves Summit champions as well.

Organized by Ruta Maria and Marcos Questas, an American/Argentine couple, who are tango instructors located in Los Angeles, the Summit featured a mix of well-known teachers from Argentina and others that I was encountering for the first time. At the bottom of the webpage for the event, it says, “Organized under the auspices of the United States National Argentine Tango Association (USNATA),” which I had not heard of before. And according to USNATA’s own homepage, “USNATA is the leading authority for Argentine Tango Professionals, Amateurs and Pro-Am Competitors in the United States.” The “About Us” page of the USNATA goes on to say:

The USNATA is the leading authority for authentic Argentine Tango, for the organizers and overseers of the Official National and Professional Argentine Tango Championships in the USA during which the U.S. representatives are chosen via championship events for the World Professional Argentine Tango Championships organized by the United Argentine Tango World Federation (UATWF).

I had never heard of the “United Argentine Tango World Federation” either, and no matter how much I tried to search it on the internet, my efforts were to no avail. All

links came back to USNATA. This is what Gimena, who is familiar with the Summit organizers, had to say about the USNATA “Board of Directors” and the “World Federation”: “All these people on the USNATA ‘board’ just have an internet presence... and the ‘World Federation’ has just been dreamt of... it doesn’t exist...” Some of the people on the “board,” were however, teaching and/or adjudicating at the Summit. One of them, Elina Roldan, was in 2018 as well as in 2016 responsible for choosing the judges for the *Mundial* in Buenos Aires, and another one, Julio Balmaceda, was a *Mundial* judge in those same years. Given the prominence of the *Mundial*, the “Argentine Tango World Cup” in the title of the Summit, and an overlap between key players in both, the Summit seems to have, in its own local and limited capacity, appropriated the *Mundial*, and made it even more “ballroom.” Already organizing for its second edition in the year 2019, it owes its success not only to the *Mundial*, but also the Los Angeles dancers, many of whom, according to my interviews as well as observations on social media, flocked to the event.

McMains, in the *Oxford Handbook*, argues that the *Mundial* is a way for the Argentines, through a state-sponsored event, to redefine tango and tango competitions in their own image, “wresting power away from British ballroom dance societies, which have been crowning world tango champions since 1922” (312), while simultaneously making it more white by adopting European balletic aesthetics. This both validates and challenges my argument in the previous chapter about the *Mundial* being a “second ballroomization” of tango. Adopting her perspective, the Summit, given its format, and

despite the “Argentineness” of its music and dance, appears to function as a move *away* from redefining tango (competitions) in an Argentine image, making it more “ballroom,” à la LA. Paradoxically, the presence of prominent Argentine dancers as judges for the event, and their even nominal existence on USNATA’s “board of directors,” gives validity and “authenticity” to this quasi-ballroom event.

The creators of USNATA, in addition to the Summit, are “sanctioning” the first annual “US National Tango Championship & Festival” on July 3 – 7, 2019, in Washington, DC. While the Summit gives out “World” titles, this event will be distributing “National” titles. USNATA is thus challenging ATUSA’s authority in determining the US champions as well. Given the fact that in recent years, the ATUSA champions, who are directly admitted to the *Mundial* semi-finals, have been unsuccessful in Buenos Aires, meaning they have not advanced to the finals, the USNATA championships may prove to be an attractive alternative for US tango competitors. This has been already apparent in the first edition of the Summit. USNATA, its LA-based Summit, and its upcoming satellite event, have created a very “ballroom” counterpart to the *Mundial* and its preliminary US competition (ATUSA).

## **Tango, Competing, Authenticity, and Attention**

It's not all about winning. For many dancers, especially in the Global North, competing is also about finding meaning, by being part of something "authentic." And in Los Angeles, being seen is an important factor as well.

The competition, is for many, a shortcut to "authenticity." In *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*, Dean MacCannell talks about the "dialectics of authenticity" and the sense of alienation that it has created, as well as how "The intellectual critique of society assumes the inauthenticity of everyday life in the modern world" (147). This can result in a search for "authenticity," often involving travel to faraway lands. While this search has taken many tango dancers to Buenos Aires (including myself on my first trip), and some to the competition stage of the *Mundial*, in the case of the local championships in the Global North, the "authentic" has come home. In LA, as is often the case in other places, its "realness" is guaranteed by the presence of Argentine judges/teachers at the events, both at the Summit and the SCTC. As Martin told me,

I think when people who aren't Argentine start this dance there's already a little bit of low self-esteem, there's this sense of "this isn't of my culture and I want to be sure I'm getting it right, I want to get the real tango, the essence of tango, the authentic tango," right? But what they don't realize is that the essential tango is very much intertwined in this process of expressing yourself through it, in the context of a peer group, right? I think that's like part of what allows somebody's own voice in tango to emerge. And we don't really have scaffolding or pedagogy that supports those peer groups forming, and that personal authenticity to emerge, like it's not really there, and it takes a lot of intensive resources for any person to create that type of a context where their own personal expression of tango is really gonna flower, it takes years, you know, and just a lot of difficulties... that path is not articulated, so, in the absence of that, you know, and in the absence of understanding how important authenticity

and personal creativity is to the core essence of tango, that's not well understood, so instead, people are looking for outside markers of what is the real tango, and so the competition culture provides a really convenient one... (December 2, 2018)

Again, we have a bypass, just as in the case of attaining social capital. The competitions offer an "authenticity" that can be bought, rather than being the result of taking the long and arduous path of finding one's own expression in social tango. Martin talks about the "essential tango," which has to do with "personal authenticity," in contrast with an "outside marker" of authenticity, which in reality is an oxymoron. Often, as she says, the importance of this essence is not even understood, which for many, makes the competition an obvious choice. This lends itself to the conflation of competition and social dance. And for some, the competition is just the more "convenient" path.

In Los Angeles, more than any other city that I am aware of, there is a strong desire to be seen. This is reflected in the milongas, as well as how social tango is taught in the city, and it is, I argue, another motivation for dancers to compete. "Fanciness" in the LA milongas is nearly always a given, and the social dance floor is often a place to demonstrate what you can do. As Gimena said,

In LA, vanity wins... there's a tendency for people to show their moves at the milonga, it's very superficial... beginners are eager to learn moves that are flashy: gancho, volcada, etc... teachers respond to this, so they have students and make money... If you insist on teaching the "real" thing, you'll go broke... we mix the "broccoli and the cheese" so we can at least teach them something... (November 2, 2018)

The "real thing" here is another way of describing the "essence" that Martin refers to.

And as another Argentine, whom I will call María, and who lives and teaches tango in LA,

said, “Lots of teachers in LA teach steps [as opposed to basic tango technique which can then be used to improvise], and many new students want to perform. This matches the ‘vibe’ of LA, with all its actors and artists... people want to be seen...” (informal interview on October 8, 2018). In this way, the milongas in LA are similar to the *cheta* milongas of Buenos Aires, albeit more “social.” In the LA milongas, there is often more of a willingness to “show your moves” with whomever is available to dance with you, whereas in Buenos Aires, many of the dancers at the *cheta* milongas would sit for most of the night and dance with a select person or two that they feel comfortable with.

The competitions, which are performances with the dancers in the spotlight, take advantage of this desire to be seen. Asked why is there more interest among social dancers in Los Angeles to compete than in New York City or San Francisco, the other large tango centers in the United States, Martin responded, “I think part of it is the culture of Los Angeles, LA has always been a place where people are interested in being the focus of other people’s attention, wanting to be on stage, wanting to be a star in a way... the competition provides an easy way to be the focus of attention that you can access just by paying for it.” While participating in the championships in Buenos Aires, such as the *Mundial* or the *Metropolitano*, is free, each couple competing in Los Angeles spends hundreds of dollars doing so. LA dancers thus buy their way into the tango spotlight for their few minutes of fame.

The desire for attention, as far as competing goes, is intertwined with the seeking of an “outer authenticity.” This relation between spectacle and “authenticity” is best



revealed by MacCannell, whom I quoted in the beginning of this section. He describes the five “stages of sight sacralization,” whereby something that is not evidently extraordinary, is made extraordinary. The encounter with an object that has been made sacred can be a powerful experience in the quest for authenticity. He writes, “Second is the *framing* and *elevation* phase. Elevation is the putting on display of an object – placement in a case, on a pedestal or opened up for visitation. Framing is the placement of an official boundary around the object” (44, emphases original). The competition stage is one such pedestal, enshrined by the shining of the floodlights. Except in this case the dancer hasn’t gone to see something on a pedestal; they were placed on it themselves. This, for them, can be an ultimate authentic experience, while they are simultaneously the center of attention.

### **Oxygen Tango: A valiant attempt at creating *popular* social tango in Los Angeles**

*I think the “fanciness” of the milongas in LA is a quest for “tradition” and “authenticity.”*  
-David Lampson<sup>104</sup>

*My partner and I arrive at 9:15 pm, soon after the start of the event, as it only goes to 11:00. The space itself immediately distinguishes itself from that of any other tango event in LA: various tools are hanging on the walls, there are shelves of hardware around the edges of the space, and one can see images of tools plastered on the walls. It is a workshop during daytime hours to teach children aged six to eleven how to be*

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<sup>104</sup> This quote links the Los Angeles milongas themselves to both the desire for “outside authenticity” that Martin sees in the LA competitors, and the “simultaneously exoticized and whitened” definition of “traditional” that I gave in the previous chapter regarding the tango of the *Mundial*.

*handy, and on Monday and Thursday nights it turns into a tango studio. The friendly and relaxed vibe of the event promptly puts us at ease. There are about twelve couples on the relatively small (by LA standards) dance floor, and more people are sitting on the benches around the edges. Dancers keep arriving during the next fifteen minutes, and very soon the dance floor is completely packed. Female/female couples could often be seen, and at one point make about half of all the dancers on the floor. I see one male/male couple, and sometimes the male/female couples change roles, taking turns in leading and following. Despite the fact that this event is a práctica, the sheer number of dancers that attend it and the high energy of the event have turned it into one of the most vibrant tango events of Los Angeles, comparable (in terms of numbers) to the LA milongas. The attire, however, just as the space itself, and the abundance of same-sex couples, differentiates the event from the LA milongas. Almost everyone is wearing casual, with many in jeans and t-shirts, and most of the women have flat shoes on. After the music stops at 11:00, as some begin to leave, others stay longer to chat. One couple practice tango moves on the floor, often laughing when they mess up, as several people enthusiastically watch them. We leave the space around 11:20, to the sound of laughter. (Oxygen Práctica, 2/7/19, Venice location)*

Oxygen calls itself “The School of Connection.”<sup>105</sup> Founded in 2009 by Martin and her partner Stefan Fabry, the school and the events that it hosts create a unique social tango environment, a “scene within the scene” of LA tango. Something is happening in one of Oxygen’s three locations in town every day, usually a class and/or a práctica, and they are all accessible for a membership fee of \$100 per month. There are two main locations, one in Venice, home of the Thursday night práctica with which I opened the section, Oxygen’s most well-attended social event, and the other in Inglewood. The membership model was started by Martin and Fabry, and continued by its current managers, David Lampson and Magan Wiles, who even expanded the weekly services

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<sup>105</sup> <https://www.oxygentango.com/>

that the monthly fee provides. As I mentioned before, there are two other tango schools in LA, the Los Angeles Tango Academy (LATA), and the Tango Conservatory of Los Angeles (TCLA). The LATA offers a membership model as well, but both schools are more expensive than Oxygen, considerably so in the case of TCLA. Oxygen also has significantly more social tango events than the other schools: with four weekly *prácticas*, one weekly open studio, a monthly milonga, and an afternoon milonga three Saturdays a month, it provides plenty of time and space to socialize and dance. The result has been a tight-knit community of dancers, in addition to the “outsiders” who show up at the social events, especially the Thursday night *práctica*. According to Martin,

when you see so many familiar faces, it’s like family, and when it’s like family, then you’re not in a transactional mindset when you go out, you’re not feeling like: I’ve put in all this effort, and I need to get my due from this event, you know, it’s different, it’s more like, well, I’m paying for the membership, so I’m gonna have some good conversations at least, and a few good tandas across the whole month, like it changes the whole dynamic, and it’s less transactional.

Milongas in Los Angeles often cost around eighteen or twenty dollars to get into, and if you add to this the commonly long distances and the lack of public transportation, social tango dancing in LA turns out to be a quite expensive endeavor. The “effort” that Martin talks about also has to do with the typical “fanciness” of LA milongas. While tuxedos and vintage gowns are not common anymore, as in the eighties, people still usually dress up for the milongas, with one-piece dresses for the women and suits for the men being quite common, and stilettos for the women being the norm, not unlike the *tradicional*

and many of the *cheta* milongas of Buenos Aires. The Oxygen Tango events, by contrast, are markedly casual, with dancers typically in jeans, t-shirts, and sneakers, even more than what is seen in the *milongas populares* of Buenos Aires. Also, similar to the porteño *popular* spaces, and unlike most of the rest of LA, same-sex dancing, or a woman leading a man, is often seen at the Oxygen events.

The Oxygen tango scene, however, despite characteristics that make it similar to the *popular* events of Buenos Aires (minus any kind of political discourse), is in a “bubble” of its own. *Las milongas populares* of Buenos Aires are a vast network of independent events, with multitudes of dancers, some of which are often seen at more than one of these events. Oxygen dancers, by contrast, and as Martin said, are more like a “family” unit, although in time, many grow to the degree that they feel comfortable exploring the larger world of tango. When dancers who have mainly spent their social tango life in Oxygen go to other milongas in the city, they inevitably cross a boundary. Wiles told me, about the Oxygen women dancers, “when we go to other milongas and lead, it feels a bit awkward... they tolerate us, but you can feel that they don’t really like it...” (informal interview on November 18, 2018). Heteronormativity is quite established in the majority of the LA tango scene, consistent with its “fanciness.” While the contrast between Oxygen and most of the other spaces of social tango in Los Angeles is similar to the contrast between *las milongas populares* and the *cheta* and *tradicional* milongas of Buenos Aires, the limited size and reach of Oxygen make it, from a broader perspective, incomparable to the *popular* social tango scene of Buenos Aires.

But no matter how limited, the significance of Oxygen Tango cannot be overlooked. Yelizaveta Nersesova is an experienced dancer who since moving to Los Angeles seven months ago has been regularly attending Oxygen events, three to four times a week, and sometimes goes to other LA milongas (interview on February 8, 2019). When I pointed out that Oxygen, despite its uniqueness, is a small segment of LA tango, she said,

Ultimately it's gonna be the more sustainable model, when milongas are more about the idea of a place where people come to connect and dance versus a place where people come to show off ... My idea would be like that Oxygen spawns other organizers, and I think that's gonna happen, eventually.

I don't know if Oxygen's inclusive and affordable model will become more widespread in Los Angeles, but Nersesova's characterization of Oxygen does capture its essence, as well as its meaningfulness. Oxygen tango has been successful in creating a small scene that, while lacking political rhetoric, does not adhere to any "outside authenticity."

### **The Práctica Bubbles**

Oxygen is not the only "bubble" of social tango in Los Angeles. There are other ones, although smaller and with events occurring on a less frequent basis, and not quite as affordable. The LATA has two prácticas per week,<sup>106</sup> which a membership of \$135 – 145 per month will make available to you. At Makela Tango, a smaller-scale tango studio, a

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<sup>106</sup> Held at the home studio of the school's owners, in Van Nuys, it is somewhat exclusive.

membership of \$129 per month will buy you two prácticas a week and another weekly tango social. And other studios that offer tango classes typically have one or two prácticas a week following class, often included in the class price, with a drop-in option for the práctica only. But there is little overlap between the dancers at these various events. The result is a number of separate “práctica bubbles” distributed over the vastness of the Los Angeles metropolitan area. If we even only consider the informality of the prácticas as their unifying quality, their separation precludes them from being any kind of single social network, with the potential of being a connected response to the city’s neoliberal urbanism.

Nonetheless, informality is not a commonly desirable quality in Los Angeles. The fancy milongas of LA, which constitute the majority, own the status of being the places for the “real,” the “authentic,” and the “serious” tango. And the informality of the prácticas, and the Oxygen milongas, hands out a lower status to them. To use *porteña* slang, LA tango, taken as a whole, is one big *cheta*<sup>107</sup> scene.

### **LA Tango: Perpetuating Neoliberalism**

It is apt that competing and social dancing are increasingly intertwined in Los Angeles tango. The scene, in a general sense, well fits the neoliberal urbanism that the

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<sup>107</sup> Diminutive for *concheta/o*, which in Argentina refers to a person who may or may not be rich, and flaunts their real or imagined class by their behavior and/or display of material possessions.

city is entrenched in, together with its sociospatial split. Heteronormativity is the norm at the majority of LA social tango events, in line with the patriarchal aspect of neoliberalism, and the token same-sex couples in the competitions are reminiscent of the same tokenism at the *Mundial*. Competition is in the fabric of LA tango, and on multiple levels: between individuals, between the local competitions, and between the local competitions themselves and the *Mundial* together with its US branch, ATUSA.

Buenos Aires has also been shaped by neoliberal urbanism. While many of its milongas conform to neoliberalism's socioeconomic ground rules, often complemented by its patriarchal gendered ones, a whole other social tango scene has emerged that is actively resisting them on the basis of its progressive political agenda. No equivalent scene exists in Los Angeles. Notwithstanding the significance of Oxygen Tango, the affordability of their small community is linked with membership, and political discourse is all but absent at their events.

I expect social tango dancing and competitions to continue to be meshed in Los Angeles, just as I foresee an ongoing secondary status for tango competitions in Buenos Aires. Tango in LA is an upper middle class dance, deeply linked with "neoliberal neo-patriarchy."<sup>108</sup> A major restructuring of the dominant global socioeconomic system,

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<sup>108</sup> In "After Neoliberalism, the Need for a Gender Revolution," by Beatrix Campbell, p. 13.

perhaps, will be what in the end moves individuals in metropolitan Los Angeles, including its dancers, beyond the need to be better than others.



## Coda

My discussion of tango in a political economic context, rather than focusing on the details of movement itself as that which “resists” or “subverts,” explores the dual capacity of the dance to on the one hand, define the individual(s) and promote individualism, and on the other, to create harmony and solidarity *among* individuals. While the latter, in the face of the hegemony of market fundamentalism, becomes a form of resistance, it is also a way of moving (dancing) beyond this hegemony and into vaster potentialities.

Tango originated in the last decades of the nineteenth century in Argentina and Uruguay, predominantly in the port cities of Buenos Aires and Montevideo. Its main center of development, however, since the early twentieth century, has been Buenos Aires. In the 1940s and early 1950s, social tango dancing in this city experienced a to date unparalleled popularity, before going into close to three decades of decline, followed by a resurgence in the 1980s. Buenos Aires has also served as tango’s point of departure to the rest of the world. The two “global expansions” of tango, the first in the beginning of the twentieth century, and the second since the 1980s, have occurred during what Thomas Piketty calls the “first globalization” and the “second globalization” of finance and trade,<sup>109</sup> respectively. The “second globalization” has been largely

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<sup>109</sup> See *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, p. 28

defined by neoliberal capitalism, and the evolution of tango in Buenos Aires itself, since the 1990s, has been intricately related to the neoliberal urbanism of the port city. In this decade, simultaneous with the acceleration of the popularity of tango as a social dance, the city administrators saw tango as a valuable tourist commodity, and invented Buenos Aires as the “world capital of tango.” Legislation by the City of Buenos Aires in 1998 made tango a part of the city’s heritage and enabled the municipal government to create infrastructure aimed at increasing tourism. Entire neighborhoods were then gentrified as various *Casas de Tango*, where tourists could partake in the “tango dinner,” were set up, and commercial streets were dedicated to tango culture. The year 1998 was also when the City of Buenos Aires created the first *Festival de Tango*.

Argentina’s neoliberal reforms in the 1990s culminated in the financial crisis of 2001/2002, the worst of its kind in the country’s history. An increase in tourism became crucial to economic recovery, and it was to this end that the existing *Festival* was boosted by the addition of the first *Mundial de Tango* in 2003. The resulting *Festival y Mundial de Tango*, that has been happening annually since, currently has the largest attendance among Buenos Aires’s many festivals. The port city’s cultural entrepreneurialism, geared towards the tourists, is in stark contrast with its prior cultural policies. The democratic opening that had followed the collapse of the military dictatorship in 1983, which had given rise to the neighborhood cultural centers, and supported social inclusion at a local community level, eventually gave way to neoliberal policies which use “culture” to create profit.

My ethnographic research is focused on social tango spaces but includes the more formal competition tango events as well. Tango is a dance which is primarily social, an improvised dance which happens at the milongas. In the world of tango, however, competitiveness, the value most cherished by neoliberalism, is not confined to the competitions. The environment of the milonga itself, which is created by both its organizers and its attendees, can be one that is competitive, or that fosters cooperation. The latter is achieved through a learned awareness and sensitivity toward others, which operates on multiple levels. Most immediate is one's partner, with whom one has an intimate corporeal connection; as the sphere of awareness expands, it includes the dancers in one's proximity, and ultimately, the entire milonga. This learned sensitivity comes as the result of a conducive environment, as well as the willingness of the dancer to place the time and effort needed to obtain it. The milongas can thus be training grounds for "communal life."<sup>110</sup>

I have investigated social tango, and what I regard as a completely different genre of tango dance, competition tango, in two different locations: Buenos Aires, Argentina, and Los Angeles, United States. Both of these places are large centers of neoliberal urbanism, and both have sizable tango scenes, the one in Buenos Aires being significantly larger. The *Mundial*, the world's largest tango competition, is essentially a show, and is enacting neoliberalism by way of "tradition." *El estilo mundial*, which is the

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<sup>110</sup> See *Singularities*, by André Lepecki, p. 13.

exoticized, whitened, globalized, and homogeneous competition-style of tango dancing, is what dancers participating in formal Argentine tango competitions, regardless of where they take place, are striving for. In addition to wearing fancy outfits, it consists of uprightness of the torso, a focus on the rhythmic elements of the music, and fewer and shorter pauses during the dance than what one usually sees in a social setting. What links all its elements is a strong ingredient of (European) heteronormative patriarchy, creating an “elegant” dance which conveys an image of belonging to a privileged class.

The tango scene of glamour-afflicted Los Angeles, as in the ballroom world, has been broadly permeated by a conflation of competing and social dance. But in Buenos Aires, despite the fact that it is home to the *Mundial*, competing, in the end, is not taken very seriously. The city has a remarkably diverse social tango scene, and while some parts of the scene are influenced by the *Mundial* around the time of the event, this effect is temporary and limited. Neoliberalism and its accompanying sociospatial fragmentation, however, have impacted tango dancing bodies in Buenos Aires in a much more pervasive and enduring manner. Appreciating the diversity of the social tango scene of this city, is crucial for understanding the varied responses of its dancers to the ways in which their lives and dance spaces have been affected by market fundamentalism.

Tango in Los Angeles is mainly a dance of the upper middle class; and Los Angeles tango, with its affinity for competing and the primary status that it bestows on competition, is by and large, perpetuating neoliberalism. Buenos Aires, on the other

hand, while having a vast infrastructure that funnels tango into the streams of market capitalism, has also given rise to social tango spaces which give primary importance to values that a wholesale restructuring of neoliberal capitalism would entail. *Las milongas populares*, an umbrella term which signifies this specific scene, are where solidarity among the dancers, and a community-oriented approach to tango, are prioritized. At these milongas, sensitivity and respect toward the other(s), and an inward orientation of the intention of the dance, are prized over an outward projection of the individual selves and their abilities. It is important to note that all these different values exist to varying degrees in the different milongas.

Social tango spaces in which this inward intention, and sensitivity, are supported, facilitate achieving the *tango moment*. This is a state of total bliss. While it is possible that some beginners have a fleeting experience of it, it more commonly becomes available after years of practice and dancing at the milongas, resulting in an incorporation which enables the dancer to focus on the music, the embrace, and his or her connection to their partner. The “moment” that potentially ensues, is an experience of “potent freedom,”<sup>111</sup> and the bliss that the dancers experience, a product of years of being socially sensitive.

Effectively resisting neoliberalism, which means to do this in a way that has the capacity to transcend it and move into a different social and political paradigm, must

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

pay equal attention to both its socioeconomic and heteropatriarchal facets. That *las milongas populares* have this understanding at their core, make them ideal sites for performing as well as studying such acts of resistance. What gives added significance to these hotbeds for social and political progressivism is the fact that neoliberalism as a practice originated in Latin America. It is fitting that this region of the world is also where primary sites of resistance to neoliberal capitalism are to be found.

The neoliberal discourse of freedom, which emphasizes moving as one wants, appears quite attractive at first glance. But this “freedom” is individualized and far removed from a communal context that enables social cohesion. The paradigm shift which I mentioned in the previous paragraph, will also require a delinking of individualism and freedom. A new discourse can potentially define freedom as that which is only possible with the presence and cooperation of the other(s). Social spaces of tango are where such freedom can be practiced, and I look forward to further developing this concept of freedom in my prospective research.

Social tango environments, accordingly, are where I will remain focused on in the future. While I will certainly stay connected with the scene in Buenos Aires and will go there again in the months and years to come, I am also interested in those of other parts of the world. Where, outside of Buenos Aires, can spaces of social tango be found, that support values consistent with surpassing the individualism and market dominance that have become so “normal” in our current lives? I am aware that any such potential scenes may not necessarily look like *las milongas populares* of Buenos Aires. In what

other forms may they manifest? Several European urban centers have large tango communities, prominent among them Paris, Rome, and Berlin. What are they like? While Italy has an enthusiasm for competition tango, and a strong representation at the *Mundial* (as does Russia), there is very little interest in competing among the French and the Germans. What does this (if anything) say about their social tango scenes? Is there any possible connection between this disinterest, and resistance to neoliberalism? In a more general sense, are their milongas promoting unity, or individualism? How are they doing that?

While global capital ultimately operates on local levels, and should thus be resisted locally, a linking of progressive movements around the world may prove effective. If there exist other social tango communities in the world with a progressive political agenda, what can be gained by their connection to one another?

Finding answers to these questions, motivates my future research.

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## Appendix

The Summit has a rather loose definition of a “Professional.” According to their website,

“A Professional Competitor is defined as:

- Any person who gets compensated for teaching, performing or taxi-dancing
- Any person who is registered as a Professional with the USNATA
- Any person who partners with a Pro-Am student to compete at Pro-Am dance competitions
- It is sufficient to simply declare yourself as a Professional Dancer and Competitor”