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Stepping Back, Unmasking Tango: (Re)Covering the African Elements in Tango.

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“The steps of the tango form a kinetic memory of the *candombe*, a dance that has died but in dying gave birth to the dance that identifies Buenos Aires, a dance exported around the world.”
George Reid Andrews

“E e e bariló,” “E e e mbadi lo”(1) or “bring out the drummers,” was a popular phrase hollered at midnight by Afro-Argentine attendants at the Shimmy Club in Buenos Aires, Argentina. At late hours of the night, in the basement of the Swiss House and underneath the main floor where conventional dances such as jazz, waltz, and tango would play, the black aristocracy of the capital would congregate to dance to the beat of *candombe*—a term of Kimbundu and Ki-Kongo origin and which in Argentina came to mean “the music and dance of blacks.”(2) As the night started to come to life, prominent families from the black community in Buenos Aires would sit in tables surrounding the dance floor. Reminiscent of an Archibald Motley painting depicting the urban flavors of a Chicagoan club, anyone that wanted to dance at the Shimmy Club would step into the circle to let the atmosphere of laughter and light conversation embrace him or her. The camaraderie went on until midnight, when suddenly black Argentines on the floor would shout “¡afuera los chongos!” (chongos get out!) referring to the white folks dancing among them. “E e e bariló,” “E e e bariló,” and Afro-Argentine drummers would take the stage while the black elders would take the dance floor.(3)

The Shimmy Club, founded in the early 1920s and in business until the 70s, represents a microcosmic space where the beat of Afro-Argentine culture remained alive and strong despite efforts at “Europeanizing” Argentina. This paper will examine what I call the seeming “push and pull” effect seen in Argentine culture; as the country’s European veneer became more visible, the African influence decreased to the extent of almost invisibility. This process is neatly retained in the politics of tango. As long as its African sources were noticeable, tango dance and music did not occupy the rank of national icon; however, tango’s approval came after it was masked with European traits, aiding to proliferate at the same time a larger national and political project of turning Argentina into the “Europe of the Americas.” As Charles Chasteen mentioned in his essay “Black Kings, Blackface Carnival, and Nineteenth-Century Origins of Tango,” in the 1900s tango had been “bleached and ironed during its stay in Paris, replacing its funkiness and hunched shoulders with languid glides and pointy toes.”(4) The zenith of the popular phrase “no hay negros en la Argentina” (there are no blacks in Argentina) takes place at a moment in the history of tango when black traits had been almost entirely whitened.

As the title of this paper indicates, the overarching aim will be to step back figuratively so as to scrutinize the correlation between the discursive and cultural erasure of Afro-Argentines and the growing tendency of populating Argentina with Western-European people and traits. To some people—Argentines included—the title of this essay could sound oxymoronic since the terms “African” and “Tango” are seldom found in the same sentence, let alone expressed. Only scholars interested in Afro-Atlantic studies and some members of the Afro-Argentine community have fought the theory that claims that blacks have “disappeared” from Argentina.(5) The crux of the problem appears to be an issue of “visibility” or the lack thereof. Thus, one of my goals in this paper is to ascribe in these pages the visibility of Afro-Argentines, especially in tango music and dance. I wish to leave the reader with a sense that tango—as both music and dance—is a kinesthetic and cultural experience that transcends temporal and spatial boundaries, thus allowing us to recover and re-cover tango with its African traits. As our hearts beat to the rhythm of a drum used in *candombe* or a *bandoneón* played during a tango song, we become kinesthetically implicated in recovering the pounding pulse of Argentina’s Afro-foundation.

“Convert the outrage of the years into a music, a sound, and a symbol”(6) is a famous verse by acclaimed Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges and is exactly what Afro-Argentines did when they participated in the many forms that prelude tango. After presenting a short yet essential summary of the history of black people in Argentina, my second goal will be to explain such dance-related terms as *malambo*, *payada*, *candombe*, *milonga*, and *canyengue* in order to show how “visible” the African tradition was and what is still retained. As time progressed, however, politicians found some of these traditions detrimental to their project of “Europeanization.” After being stripped of black traits and masked with a Parisian patina, tango became the national icon that enjoyed international success. Nevertheless, as part of tango’s globalization, other world dances—most of which have an Afro-foundation—left an imprint that would connect tango back to its African sources. It will be my third goal in this essay to discuss tango in the international arena.

I. Rapping Back at History: Afro-Argentina Lives in *Malambo* and *Payada*

According to a letter written on the 26th of September by Jesuit priest Ignacio Chome, in 1730 there were 20,000 men and women in Buenos Aires who were black(7). In his letter, the priest exclaimed surprise at learning the number of black people in a city of 10,000 white inhabitants. Other epistles reveal that some enslaved people were also smuggled into Buenos Aires via Brazil. In any case, priest Chome mentioned that 90% of the blacks in Argentina came from Angola and the language that was mostly spoken was Kimbundu. Forward almost 50 years later; the number of people of African descent could go from 25% to more than 50% depending on the region. In 1810, the Afro-Argentine population in Buenos Aires reached a peak of 30%. The census of 1887 questionably reveals that only 2% of the Argentine population was black(8). One must be doubtful, however, of these numbers since by the late nineteenth century there was already a project established of physically and symbolically changing the visage of Argentine identity. Scholars such as George Reid Andrews and Alejandro Solomianski go a step further by questioning the truthfulness of the census of the last part of the nineteenth century. For them, the drop in the Afro-Argentine population could have been accelerated artificially through official tallies(9). Nevertheless, it remains true that throughout the nineteenth century there was a considerable decline among the black population due to a combination of historical events.

The Afro-Argentine community’s lack of physical visibility must be founded on veridical—even though deplorable—information. This is not the case of the *myth* of the purported total “disappearance” which helped exacerbate the drop in numbers of black people in Argentina. The historical events that must be acknowledged, however, were the several wars in which the country was involved during this century. Starting with the Argentine War of Independence in 1810 and other subsequent wars, many Afro-Argentines fought and died for their country. Even after the *Ley de la Libertad de Vientres* (or Freedom of Wombs Law), which declared free any children born from enslaved women after January 31, 1813(10), many black men were “volunteered” by their masters to go to war. The time spent fighting for their country, and in an oblique way for their freedom, represented a period of increased miscegenation. Clearly, the wars served to hasten the genetic whitening of the Argentine population by keeping black males from having progeny with black females(11). Moreover, a cholera outbreak in 1868 and yellow fever epidemics in 1871 and 1873 further reduced the black population. The total death toll was over 20,000 and the percentage of black people who died in all probability was extremely high. This seems to be a logical conclusion since the two neighborhoods of the city hardest hit by the epidemic were La Boca and San Telmo, the areas of greater concentration of Afro-Argentines(12). Partly as a way to substitute the large number of deceased, the massive immigration of Europeans came to represent cheap labor in urban and rural settings. Thus, as journalist Narciso Binayán Carmona candidly puts it, white immigration has categorically divided the history of black Argentines into a before and after(13). Even though it fits outside the scope of this paper, it is worth asking whether the decline in numbers of black people who fought in the wars or died from cholera or yellow fever was part of a larger policy of demographic racial cleansing carried out by *caudillos* or commanders who, moved by the liberal spirit and yearning of breaking free from Spanish rule, sought to create a creolized Argentine identity that was up to par with its Spanish counterpart? Furthermore, even if the numbers waned, Afro-Argentine identity was still carried by those who survived the wars and the diseases and by the multiple generations of mixed descendants that are very much visible even today. Even if the presence of Afro-Argentines did not appeal to the sight of members from the elite circles, black dances and their music were indeed felt by white Argentines.

The centralization of Buenos Aires in Argentine’s politics and culture tends to elide discussions of the interior regions of the country. In the *pampas*—the plains widely known for occupying a large section of the Argentinean countryside—many black workers were initially brought as slaves. Next to the *gauchos* (Argentina’s beloved cowboys) blacks developed the *malambo* dance. According to Robert Farris Thompson, it has a modicum of Central African influence which is perhaps most visible in the dance’s clear Kongo name(14). In *malambo* the upper half of the body maintains a rigidity that is Andalusian in nature yet the footwork is meant to be complex and sophisticated so as to challenge and eventually win over an opponent. The exchange of dance steps is reminiscent of the “call-and-response” structure of Central African song and dance(15). *Malambo*’s feistiness is doubled once the *payada* comes into play. *Payada* puts guitarists face to face with each other in a duel of strumming and

verse(16). Just like the body of a *malambo* dancer, the influences in *payada* are split in half: on the one hand, *payada* is the lineal descendant of the African tradition of musical contest of skill but it also comes from the challenge songs found in the Iberian Peninsula(17). As in rap, the one who “spits” better wins.

As a matter of fact, one of the best *payadores* was the Afro-Argentine Gabino Ezeiza(18). Ezeiza, natural from Buenos Aires, represents the tradition of *payada* in an urban setting. In true battle form, Ezeiza rhymed sophisticated insults and rapped them to his opponents.

I see no equality
In this here rink:
I improvise, simply and quickly,
You have to sit down and think(19).

As stated already, even though the dance and music of *malambo* and *payada* started in the rural regions of Argentina they were quickly brought to the city where, combined with the tradition of *candombe*, contributed to the visibility of Afro-Argentine’s cultural expressions.

II. A Political Hot Potato: Blacks, *Candombes*, and Retaining Culture In Spite Of

Some years before *gauchesque* musical traditions reached Buenos Aires, the practice of *candombe* had already been established since the 1830s as an Afro-Argentine tradition. The term is a combination of Kimbundu (ka = ‘costume’) and Ki-Kongo (ndombe = ‘black’)(20) but in Argentina, the word *candombe* came to represent a dance, a music, and a place of congregation. It did not lose, however, the notion of ethnic pride, implicit in the original African word.

According to Alejandro Frigerio, a scholar who has studied the cultural traditions of black people in the Southern Cone, “*candombe* is played in private meetings in houses, but also surfaces many days of the year in small (callings), group gatherings parading through their neighborhood playing the drums.”(21) *Candombe* achieved great visibility during carnival, especially around the neighborhood of Palermo. Contemporary *llamadas* take place in another historic zone, in San Telmo, which by the mid-nineteenth century was known as “el Barrio del Tambor” (the neighborhood of the drum) since several African nations resided here.(22)

Pedro Figari’s paintings give us an insight into the choreography of *candombe* (fig. 1 and 2). Traditionally men and women stand in opposite rows; this was called the courtship. Standing in front of your partner but without touching each other, couples would move their bodies forward and back while shrugging and advancing the shoulders a bit and sticking the buttocks out(23). This was the prelude to the *ombligada* or striking of the bellies. Robert Farris Thompson explains that this movement, also called *bumbakana*, is the climax of Kongo dancing(24). This brief invasion of your partner’s space is an acknowledgment (one might also call it teasing) of the importance of procreation in life. Even though *candombe* eventually morphed into a new version, probably influenced by other dances, it remains true that for most of the nineteenth century this tradition represented a direct reflection of a conflation of Central African dances. With the movements of *candombe*, Afro-Argentines directly challenged the elite’s whims of not “seeing” black traits in their culture. White Argentines in the upper circles perhaps did not “see” black people but they surely “felt” black dances.

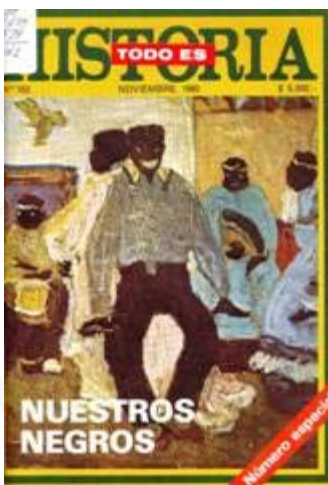


Fig. 1. Front cover of *Todo es Historia*, published in November 1980. Published with permission of *Todo es Historia*



Fig. 2. Pedro Figari, *Candombe Federal*, n/d. Oil on cardboard, 24.4" x 32.3". Published with permission of Fernando Saavedra Faget

One Argentine president who did embrace the tradition of *candombe* among black Argentines was Juan Manuel de Rosas, who governed Argentina from 1829-32 and then from 1835-1852, and was renowned for being a populist. His policies indicated a defense of Argentine nationality and creole values. A member of the Federalist Party, Rosas was famous for attending—along with his daughter Manuelita—*candombes* organized by different African nations in Buenos Aires (fig. 3). While Rosas was obtaining the support of the black population (undoubtedly as a political strategy), as well as that of other sectors of Argentina's underbelly, he was also making enemies among the upper crust of society. The Unitarians, Rosas's adversarial party, wanted a centralized government in Buenos Aires and wanted Argentina to get rid of any "uncivilized" traits, a euphemism used at the time to denote Indians, *gauchos*, and blacks. In turn, Rosas made sure the Unitarians did not affect his administration by exiling and terrorizing its members. Later, when the Unitarians gained control of the government, they embarked on a large-scale project of retaliation against supporters of Rosas's governments—including, of course, black Argentines.



Fig. 3. Candombe in the presence of President Juan Manuel de Rosas. Published with permission of *Todo es historia*.

It is believed that in 1865 when the Paraguayan War began, President Domingo Faustino Sarmiento used black and gaucho troops as cannon fodder⁽²⁵⁾. Sarmiento's figure is important in the discussion of the purported "disappearance" of black Argentines because his crusade consisted of a scheme that sought to obliterate their presence at a physical, discursive, cultural, pedagogical and clinical level. Led by the mottos "Europe in America" and "to govern is to populate," president Sarmiento advocated strong immigration policies that gave Argentina, what professor Marvin A. Lewis calls, a "massive blood transfusion."⁽²⁶⁾ Continuing with this clinical trope, it is known that Sarmiento prescribed a type of immigration that would "correct the indigenous

blood with new ideas ending the medievalism"⁽²⁷⁾ in which the country was caught up. It is evident that in referencing Louis Agassiz in one of his books, Sarmiento thought that the concept of racial mixing was unthinkable in his project of advancing Argentina into a more European-recognizable nation.⁽²⁸⁾ The *Ley de Avellaneda* (Avellaneda's Law), passed in 1876, gave the green light for thousands of immigrants to enter Argentina⁽²⁹⁾; if the number of Afro-Argentines was in decline, as the government had been wanting us to believe, the hordes of Europeans would decisively finish overwhelming the black population and their contributions to the arts in Argentina—or would it?

Furthermore, the fact that Sarmiento is seen as the father of Argentina's educational system cannot be overlooked. Thus it is quite plausible to consider that, by having the structuralization of the public school system under his control, it was probably very easy for Sarmiento to indoctrinate in young white Argentines and recently arrived immigrants the discursive rhetoric of the disappearance of blacks in Argentina. A revision of these political devices that sought to eradicate Afro-Argentine's presence serves to set up the context in which the blacks' artistic contributions survived despite the unfavorable circumstances.

III. Two Resilient Dances and a Prelude to Tango: *Milonga* and *Canyengue*

If there has ever been doubt about the presence of African descendants in Argentina, it only suffices to consider carefully the term *milonga*. As a cultural African descendant, *milonga* is an upbeat, faster, let-your-hair-loose kind of dance made popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The term is derived from Kimbundu and classic Ki-Kongo words meaning "argument" and "moving lines of dancers," respectively⁽³⁰⁾. As a dance and as a type of music, *milonga* is the urban counterpart of *malambo* and *payada*. Robert Farris Thompson goes even further by saying that "when *payada* reached Buenos Aires, the city renamed it *milonga*.⁽³¹⁾" From *payada*, *milonga* still retains competitive and argumentative qualities that make it such an interesting dance to watch. *Milonga*'s high tempo can tempt any couple to bring it on into the dance floor and show off their most creative steps in an attempt to challenge any brave bystanders into a duel. Thus, even if *milonga* is not a verbalized argument, it does represent a calling among couples to enter into a kinetic quarrel for the purpose of determining who the best *milonguero* is.

The other African meaning to which the term *milonga* alludes—"moving lines of dancers"—calls to mind the first

stage of *candombe* in which men and women form two lines facing each other, singing, chanting, and swaying to a slow and steady beat(32). Even though *milonga* bears the Western trait of dancing in couples, often one can appreciate that the “moving lines of dancers” have moved to the periphery by forming a circle surrounding the performers. Two other African elements that are worth noticing and that are subtly retained in *milonga* are the sudden pose struck when the end of a song is announced by uttering the words *chan-chan* and the offbeat pattern of the footwork(33). Thompson identifies this final gesture as having roots in the idiomatic Ki-Kongo expression *tshia-tshia*, meaning “step it down” or “perform(34).” However, as a crucial ending, *chan-chan*'s source comes from the dances among the Akan people in Ghana(35). The offbeat footwork came as a result of trying to make *milonga* similar in rhythm to *candombe*, hence the quick insertion of an additional step in between beats.

In very subtle ways, *milonga* was able to hold on to some characteristics that had been passed on down the lineage of black Argentine dancers and musicians. Nevertheless, it is worth pondering on the reasons behind the slow dwindling of African and Afro-Argentine traits and the steady increase in the Europeanization of *milonga*. An article titled “The People of Color” from 1905 throws light on this issue. The author, Juan José Soiza Reilly, congratulated blacks on changing their style of dancing. Soiza Reilly described how “instead of the grotesque *candombe* or s[a]mba—lewd as a monkey's grimace—they dance in modern clothes in the manner of Louis XV. (36)” This quote is important because it demonstrate two things: first, Afro-Argentines at the turn of the century were negotiating their traditions via mimetic representations of white's codes of behavior (i.e., what to wear, how to stand, what gestures to make) while also maintaining traits that, in the long run, could be linked back to an African heritage and to an Afro-foundation. However, the theatrical revue *Homburgs and High Hats* announced the end of *milonga* in 1906(37), a year after Soiza Reilly had congratulated Afro-Argentines at finally succeeding in assimilating the forms of white Argentines. The closeness in time between these two announcements leaves one wondering if *milonga*'s demise in 1906 came as a result of the acknowledgment of black Argentines making their way into the high echelons of society.

Despite white Argentines constant disavowing of the black population, especially in the artistic arena, black people kept performing *milonga* and another dance, *canyengue*—recognized as the first and earliest version of tango. This early form of tango retains characteristics of Kongo and Afro-inspired dances. For example, *canyengue* is danced in a constant *quebrada* which means torsion of the hips combined with the sharp bending of the knees. Thus *canyengue* is danced *down* as if extending the couple's embrace to the earth. The rocking movement forward and back is also an African-inspired motion. European-inspired, however, are the cheek-to-cheek and the clinging hook of the woman's arm. According to dance-historian Petróleo, “the blacks modified the posture [in *canyengue*]—they carried the hand down to the level of the hip(38).” Petróleo's statement is important at this point of the essay: African elements in Argentine's tradition need not be circumscribed to the continent of Africa per se, let alone to one country in this vast territory. They can also be invented and created by the black diaspora in America. If the purpose of Afro-Argentine studies is to expand the discursive field of what constitutes “Argentine identity” then one must broaden the sources of influence and talk about an Afro-foundation on which the quintessence of modern America is based.

Even if tango's black features seem to be hidden under an Italian fedora, they often resurface underneath the sleeve of a Harlem zoot suit. In the next section I will discuss the black characteristics in Argentina's national dance and music and how they work together with European traditions in order to become the cultural composite that tango represents.

IV. Tango's International Argentine Identity: A Multicultural Approach

It would be ingenuous to try to identify the specific origin of each of the subtle African elements seen in tango today. It is not my goal in this paper to attempt such a futile exercise since part of the greatness of tango is its multicultural and diasporic structure. The same way that Africans from different nations living in close contact with each other gradually developed a sort of composite dance—the *candombe*—that borrowed elements from a number of African dances(39), later on tango would become an amalgam of a previous amalgam. From polka to jazz, from habanera to reggaeton, tango's contemporary definition requires a tour around the globe. It was not always seen this way, however, for Argentina's elite tried vehemently to turn the country into a European nation in America. In its attempt, tango made a stop in France where it received a Parisian makeover.

One steady characteristic that tango has enjoyed since early in the nineteenth century is the different permutations that make this musical tradition an all but pure and one-dimensional artistic expression. The first instance of the term's usage comes from Montevideo, Uruguay. In 1808 some neighbors in Montevideo asked foreman Francisco Javier Elío to prohibit the “tangos de negros” (tangos of blacks) among his slaves(40). Many scholars agree that tango was a generic term that encompassed the dance, the drums, and the meeting place of black people. Eventually, *candombe* became a more specific term that replaced the word tango in the nineteenth century.

Nevertheless, as a concept and as a dance, tango is derived from classic Ki-Kongo(41) and identified, since its beginnings in South America, as belonging to African descendants in the Rio de la Plata region.

Forward some decades later to the end of the nineteenth century when the early tango dance, even though popular among inner city men, was associated with the slum and brothels of Buenos Aires. Perhaps because of Argentina's vortex of turning into the "Europe of the Americas," the members of the elite class disdained tango during the first decades of the twentieth century. In 1910 tango began to move from the underbelly of Buenos Aires to the downtown cafés of the city. Still, during the second decade of the twentieth century and after tango had reached the cafés and theaters in London and Paris(42), some white Argentines rejected tango for not being a noble dance. Vicente Rossi, in his seminal work *Cosas de negros* (A Negro Thing) quotes an Argentine diplomat in Paris who in 1914 exclaimed:

Tango in Buenos Aires is exclusively a dance of the classes of ill repute and danced in the worst hole-in-the-wall kind of places. It is never danced in places of good taste nor by distinguished people. To Argentines' ears, tango arouses really unpleasant ideas. I don't see any difference between the tango danced in elegant academies in Paris and the one danced in the lower class nightclubs in Buenos Aires. It is the same dance, with the same gestures and contortions(43).

By saying "gestures" and "contortions" the diplomat avoided disclosing the truth: that in Argentina there were indeed people of African descent and thus that tango moved in ways reminiscent of this heritage. Moreover, the Argentine literary figure, Leopoldo Lugones, who severely criticized the "brothel choreography" of tango, declared that "in order for it to be tolerable it is necessary to denaturalize it...for only a black's disposition can bear to see this spectacle without getting repulsed(44)." Lugones's words are telling. His statement reveals several issues concerning blacks' connection to tango and whites' need to dissociate from this. Firstly, we learn from Lugone's claim that Afro-Argentines were enjoying tango by attending the cafés and quite possibly dancing, and secondly, that white Argentines knew that the *nature* of tango did not reveal a European heritage, therefore the need to fabricate a new and whiter complexion.

During its stay in London and Paris, tango transfixed European danceophiles and, in turn, they transformed tango into what it is today. For instance, it was a Parisian who designed the "tango-dress"—made so that women could increase their leg extension. Moreover, it was a poor French immigrant who represents the ultimate essence of tango: Carlos Gardel. In the 1920s, as today, it was widely recognized that tango's true character had been transformed into a new modality acclaimed to be more "soft" and "elegant." Additionally, the wide array of movies such as Rex Ingram's *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* from 1921 sent tango into international stardom. As African and Afro-American characteristics in tango fell prey to the rhetoric of "invisibility," the European veneer of Argentina's identity gained international visibility—in widescreen dimensions to be more precise.

Tango's expedition around the world allowed the dance to gain more exposure, which would translate into richer and more varied sources of influence. Before commencing our tour around the globe and before disclosing some of these influences, it is necessary to recapitulate the legacy of African features that survived throughout the many dances that came before tango. The call-and-response, traditional in Central African drumming, takes place in tango when the man leads the woman by tapping her near the shoulder blade and the woman responds with a step. The sudden stops when the body freezes for microseconds called *cortes*, and the *quebradas* or torsion of the body combined with the sharp bending of the knees, have made it into tango from *canyengue*. The step called *gancho* is simple: with a slight kick, forward or back, the man or the woman penetrates momentarily the other person's space. The logic and symbolism behind *gancho* is very similar to the *ombigada* or *bumbakana* found in *candombe*. However, instead of invading your partner's space with your mid section, with the belly, in tango it is done with the feet. Also, the eternal swaying forward and back is an Afro-inspired move still present in tango.

Tango's beauty does not stop here. As a veritable cultural product of the African diaspora, one can find in tango cases of musical syncretism. One example can be found in the figure of a white tango composer and *bandoneoista*, Astor Piazzolla. Piazzolla's pen did not know how to discriminate; his scores filled with sophisticated blends of jazz and classical music, did not respect strict musical categories. He experimented with jazz spontaneity by embellishing a line, just like in *milonga*; then he would introduce a strong riff, reminiscent of the *descargas* played by salsa groups and heard in New York clubs in the 1970s; and lastly, Piazzolla would introduce polymusicality in which he would slip from scored music to free jazz and back to the score again(45).

Even if tango's validation was obtained ironically not at home but abroad during the first half of the twentieth century, during the second half, Argentines like Astor Piazzolla took advantage of the myriad musical possibilities that tango could incorporate and re-made it into a more eclectic sound. As a national icon, tango was born in Argentina yet raised in the musical fabric of the world, but it was specifically moved by the black beats in the

Americas. Today, tango has also left a mark in other Afro-inspired musical expressions such as in the Caribbean reggaeton, a phenomenon born from a blend of reggae, dancehall, and rap. In a perfect example of musical symbiosis, the Puerto Rican reggaeton group, Calle 13, recorded this year “Tango del pecado,” a song that features the production of Gustavo Santaolalla (two times Academy Award winner) and the collaboration of Bajofondo Tango Club and Pumasuyo, two South American groups. The tango beat mixes effortlessly with the tongue-in-cheek and kitschy rap lyrics of Calle 13(46).

In short, Sarmiento’s project of turning Argentina into a “Europe in America” was partially put in motion through tango. However, asking tango to remain Europeanized would be uncharacteristic and contradictory of the moving nature of dance. Christophe Apprill recognized the kinesthetic and cultural possibilities of the identity of tango in his book *Le Tango argentin en France* (Argentine Tango in France): “Dances are journeys from one continent to another, round-trip journeys, triangular journeys, journeys from white Europe to black Africa, from the country to the city, journeys from the working classes to the bourgeoisie, in its essence, the movement of dance contradicts immobility and in reality it is a permanent flux(47).” In its permanent state of fluidity, tango has been able to show at times a European mask, however, underneath it lies a pulsating “Afro-foundation” that flirtatiously kindles our senses here and there, forward and back.

Notes:

1 In *Tango: The Art History of Love* (New York, NY: Pantheon, 2005), a book that has been seminal for this paper, Robert Farris Thompson evaluates the African source of this phrase uttered at the Shimmy Club—located in the basement of the Casa Suiza—right before stepping out to dance. Thompson associates the phrase with the lament cry from classic Kongo, “e, e, e, mbadi lo,” sung during funerals. He draws a parallel between the phrases not only for its phonetic similarity but also because in both contexts a hand is placed on the brows over the eyes; in Argentina, the hands are used as a manner of looking for the drummers and in Kongo as a gesture of depression (*Tango*, 139). [Return](#)

2 *Ibid.*, 97. [Return](#)

3 Alejandro Frigeiro, “Usos de Africa en un país ‘blanco’: Reivindicando la tradición y la identidad negra en Buenos Aires,” Accessed March 19th, 2007, <http://www.lpp-uerj.net/olped/documentos/ppcor/0075.pdf>. [Return](#)

4 Charles Chasteen, “Black Kings, Blackface Carnival, and Nineteenth-Century Origins of Tango,” in *Latin American Popular Culture: An Introduction*, ed. William H. Beezley and Linda A. Curcio-Nagy (Wilmington, Delaware: A Scholarly Resources Inc., 2000), 56. [Return](#)

5 For more information see the documentary: *Afroargentinos = Afroargentines*, videorecording, directed by Jorge Fortes y Diego Ceballos (2002; New York, NY: Latin American Video Archives). [Return](#)

6 Borges, *Antología personal*, 1961, quoted in Thompson, *Tango*, 3. [Return](#)

7 Narciso Binayán Carmona, “Pasado y permanencia de la negritud,” *Todo es historia* 162 (1980), 67. [Return](#)

8 Scholars of Afro-Argentine studies more or less agree on the statistics regarding the black population in Argentina since the 18th century. For this essay the majority of the data was taken from Donald S. Castro, *The Afro-Argentine in Argentine Culture: El negro del acordeón* (Lewiston, N.Y.: E. Mellen Press, 2001). [Return](#)

9 Alejandro Solomianski, *Identidades secretas: La negritud argentina*, ed. Beatriz Viterbo (Rosario, Argentina: Estudios Culturales, 2003), 24. [Return](#)

10 Total abolition of slavery came in 1853. [Return](#)

11 Castro, *The Afro-Argentine in Argentine Culture*, 145. [Return](#)

12 *Ibid.*, 52. [Return](#)

13 Binayán Carmona, “Pasado y permanencia,” 66. [Return](#)

14 Thompson, *Tango*, 91. [Return](#)

15 *Ibid.*, 65-66. [Return](#)

16 *Ibid.*, 92. [Return](#)

17 Ibid., 93. [Return](#)

18 According to George Reid Andrews, “The best known payadores were almost all Afro-Argentines, among them Pancho Luna, Valentín Ferreyra, Pablo Jerez, Felipe Juárez, Higinio D. Cazón, and Luis García.” However, Ezeiza stands out as the best of them. Andrews also presents an interesting fact that illustrates how important Gabino Ezeiza was in Buenos Aires: “There are only three statues of Afro-Argentines in all of B.A., a city that boasts some 200 public monuments. Of those three, one is a memorial to the institution of slavery, another is a statue of the semimythical Falucho, and the third is a dilapidated bust of Gabino Ezeiza, its nameplate missing, set in a small playground in the outlying neighborhood of Mataderos, the Stockyards.” Andrews, *The Afro-Argentines of Buenos Aires 1800-1900* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1980), 171-173. [Return](#)

19 Thompson, *Tango*, 95. [Return](#)

20 During the slave trade and the period of slavery, Kimbundu and Ki-Kongo cultures were mixed together. The mixing of these two nations’ cultures over this period would have allowed for linguistic combinations of this sort. Another possible source of origin for the word *candombe* is the combination of two Ki-Kongo words: *nkându* meaning ‘small drum’ and *mbé* an onomatopoeic expression referring to ‘drum beating’, which may be the source of the Brazilian *candomblé*.

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21 Frigeiro, “Usos de Africa en un país ‘blanco’,” <http://www.lpp-uerj.net/olped/documentos/ppcor/0075.pdf>. [Return](#)

22 Ibid., 10. [Return](#)

23 Information about the choreography of *candombe* was taken from Lauro Ayestarán’s “El folklore musical uruguayo”—quoted in Estanislao Villanueva, “El candombe nació en Africa y se hizo rioplatense,” *Todo es historia* 162 (1980), 45—and anonymous, “Figari, Pintor de Negros,” *Todo es historia* 162 (1980), 41. [Return](#)

24 Thompson, *Tango*, 66. [Return](#)

25 Castro, *The Afro-Argentine in Argentine Culture*, 51. [Return](#)

26 Marvin A. Lewis, *Afro-Argentine Discourse: Another Dimension of the Black Diaspora* (Columbia & London: University of Missouri Press, 1996), 19. [Return](#)

27 Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, *Conflicto y armonía de las razas en Américas*, 2nd ed. (Buenos Aires, 1953), 183 quoted in Andrews, *The Afro-Argentines of B.A.*, 103. [Return](#)

28 Ibid., 103. [Return](#)

29 The numbers are staggering and worth noticing. Professor of History at Columbia University, Nancy Stepan states, “43 percent of the more than three million immigrants who settled in the country between 1880 and 1930 were Italian.” Stepan, *“The Hour of Eugenics”: Race, Gender, and Nation in Latin America* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1991), 114. [Return](#)

30 Thompson, *Tango*, 121. [Return](#)

31 Ibid., 122. [Return](#)

32 For a description of the four stages of *candombe* read: Andrews, *The Afro-Argentine of B.A.*, 163. [Return](#)

33 Thompson, *Tango*, 127-129. [Return](#)

34 Consider too that as a Kimbundu word *tshia-tshia* means “to make noise ^[SEP]while dancing with rattles on your ankles,” and quite possibly the origin of the modern word cha-cha-chá. For more information read: Fernando Ortiz, *Glosario de Afronegrismos* (Havana, Cuba: Imprenta Siglo XX, 1924), 159-161. [Return](#)

35 Ibid., 127-128. [Return](#)

36 Juan José Soiza Reilly, “Gente de color,” *Caras y caretas* (Nov. 25, 1905), quoted in Andrews, *The Afro-Argentine of B.A.*, 165. [Return](#)

37 Thompson, *Tango*, 130. [Return](#)

- 38 Ibid., 155. [Return](#)
- 39 Andrews, *The Afro-Argentine of B.A.*, 162. [Return](#)
- 40 Vicente Rossi, *Cosas de negros* (Buenos Aires: Taurus, 1926), 146. [Return](#)
- 41 Thompson has associated eight Ki-Kongo words from which tango could be derived. [Return](#)
- 42 It is not clear how tango arrived at the French capital although there are three hypothesis discussed in Nelson Bayardo's *Tango: De la mala vida a Gardel* (Montevideo: Aguilar, 2002), 139-144. [Return](#)
- 43 Rossi, *Cosas de negros*, 168-169. (My translation) [Return](#)
- 44 Bayardo, *Tango*, 139. [Return](#)
- 45 Thompson, *Tango*, 209-210. [Return](#)
- 46 Calle 13, "Tango del pecado," <http://youtube.com/watch?v=a0lrzbBiluY>. [Return](#)
- 47 Christophe Apprill, *Le tango argentin en France*, (Paris: Anthropos, 1998), 2. (My translation). [Return](#)

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