MERCEDES LISKA

TRANSLATED BY PEGGY WESTWELL AND PABLO VILA

ARGENTINE QUEER TANGO

DANCE AND SEXUALITY POLITICS IN BUENOS AIRES

Argentine Queer Tango

Music, Culture, and Identity in Latin America

Series Editors: Pablo Vila, Temple University and Héctor Fernández L'Hoeste, Georgia State University

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Titles in series are:

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LEXINGTON BOOKS
Lanham • Boulder • New York • London

Published by Lexington Books
An imprint of The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.
4501 Forbes Boulevard, Suite 200, Lanham, Maryland 20706
www.rowman.com

Unit A, Whitacre Mews, 26-34 Stannary Street, London SE11 4AB

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information Available

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Liska, María Mercedes.
Title: Argentine queer tango : dance and sexuality politics in Buenos Aires/Mercedes Liska.
Description: Lanham : Lexington Books, [2017] | Series: Music, culture, and identity in Latin America | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2016045737 (print) | LCCN 2016050327 (ebook) | ISBN 9781498538510 (cloth : alk. paper) | ISBN 9781498538527 (Electronic)
Subjects: LCSH: Tango (Dance)—Argentina—Buenos Aires. | Sex in dance—Argentina—Buenos Aires. | Dance—Political aspects—Argentina—Buenos Aires. | Music—Argentina—Buenos Aires. | Homosexuality in dance | Buenos Aires (Argentina)—Social life and customs.
Classification: LCC GV1796.T3 L57 2016 (print) | LCC GV1796.T3 (ebook) | DDC 793.3/3—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2016045737

∞™ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992.

Printed in the United States of America

To those closest to me: dad, mom, Chino, and Simón.
To the Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas, the mother of all scholarships.
To my friends and colleagues in the Latin American branch of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music (IASPM-AL) that have been with me from the beginning.
To kirchnerismo, for its support of research in Argentina.

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Introduction

Personal Considerations and Knowledge

My interest in the tango began with the desire to dance, and not to study it. And now, after spending years frequenting *milongas*, where it is danced in the city of Buenos Aires, I can safely say that my own personal trajectory is what has motivated the present ethnological undertaking. I make this observation because the act of accepting myself as an analyst of dance situations did not hinder any emotions experienced through dance, which later resulted in reflections and knowledge.

After deciding to begin semisystematic fieldwork, in tune with the interests of dancers of my generation, I selected as my point of departure several *milongas* where young people were experimenting with new ways of dancing tango and interacting. In 2006, modulations flying in the face of conventional tango standards were gaining ground, while the increasing protagonism of women appeared to be denaturalizing a gender hierarchy based on a binary heterosexual norm.

Viewed through the lens of a cross section of historical sources consulted, I came to see how the normative discourse on sexuality of the early twentieth century, based as it was on a hygienic line of thought, had influenced the choreographic design of the tango as we know it today. This led me to ask to what degree the incipient modalities I was observing among a younger generation of tango dancers were—or were not—a deconstruction of this matrix. I then began to think of current dance practices as combining elements from different time periods of the tango. On the one hand, in my head I was analyzing the disciplinary regime governing corporeal action, and on the otherhand, in my fieldwork on the contemporary tango, I was primarily engaged in observing the practices of and efforts made by subjects to subvert in part what they had received as *tradition*.

Recuperating the historical dimension of the tango provided material to define a new empirical period based on one of the ways it is danced today: the queer tango, a proposal gestated in lesbian-feminist cultural spaces where the tango was adapted for women only, thus doing away with the set of fixed bodily movements traditionally assigned to the sexes. This has led to a feminine alliance surrounding tango that, in turn, has established a network of contacts with similar groups in different countries.

The queer tango has become a paradigmatic practice through which to reflect on certain inflections regarding historical forms of genderization in Argentine culture, including continuities that prefigured what is now viewed as new. At the same time, one of its greatest dislocations is having turned the dance floor into ground for political praxis; hence its double stance: plebeian and avant-garde.

In few words, to investigate how a patriarchal symbol had been turned into a dance experience among lesbians that, in addition, had grafted a foreign adjective onto tango, a key component of Argentine cultural patrimony, seemed *a priori* a worthwhile research proposal. In fact, the greatest difficulties appeared on the methodological plane.

In the course of acquiring practical knowledge on how the queer tango was danced, certain issues arose. Given my self-acknowledgment as heterosexual, I soon learned my knowledge of tango was not enough to access the wide range of meanings inherent in the ethnographic data; or, more precisely, since I embodied the dominant system of meanings with respect to particular affective expectations. Although a social science background is often assumed to indicate freedom from any and all cultural blind-spots, I found myself questioning how far I should go and whether I would be able to relate to situations ripe with sexual/gender experiences I had not experienced; how gender and sex combined to articulate bodies when dancing, and how to do it without essentializing and overemphasizing otherness. In this way, I began relating to research that used perception in fieldwork as an instance of interpretive definition and source of knowledge.

In conversation with one of the women with whom I talked and danced during the early stage of my ethnological data collecting at the *Milonga Tango Queer*, I perceived a certain interest on her part in knowing my sexual orientation. She knew I was doing research. First, she asked me whether I was living with my son's father. When I said I was, she then quickly asked in a skeptical tone of voice why I was interested in queer tango. What is curious is that I don't remember what I answered because, from that moment on, I found myself imagining time and again a satisfactory reply. I thus accumulated a number of theoretical and political answers that did nothing to alleviate the distress stemming from the question.

The effort to resolve this discomfort redirected the course of my investigation. Personal interest embodied the heterosexual anxiety generated by queer tango. To bring together in practice one of the bastions of Argentine heteronormative culture with that which this symbol rejects implied a redefinition of both gay and hetero identities. Recovering the nuances of this dialogue between dance and sexualities became the nexus of my project, a concrete space to analyze the dissipation of sexual ghettos for nocturnal socialization, together with the reconfiguration of the complex intersubjectivities of dance. That, in turn, made me into an actor emerging from a particular place and context. This book expresses how this experience in problematizing prejudices and preconceptions changed me and what I know. The aim of this analysis is to explore new lines of sociopolitical thought regarding dance within the framework of post-ghetto nocturnal socialization and its subsequent trajectories, conflicts, and pleasures.

In reality, I begin this introduction with what is in fact the book's point of arrival, which is its last and longest chapter. It would have been exhausting and unproductive to use the first-person singular throughout the entire manuscript. I chose to begin in this way to suggest a particular viewpoint to readers, and also because this personal view that I propose (only embraced fully in the last chapter) adds coherence to a master narrative on this work several years in the making.

The early chapters maintain the traditional impersonal narrative voice used by academics in order to lay out a set of topics indispensable for approaching the density of dance micropolitics. While my research is based on ethnological practice, I have also incorporated into the final result communicative and academic discourses, as well as public policies and visual, audiovisual, and musical aesthetics.

In the first chapter, I cover the gradual recovery of tango dancing in the city of Buenos Aires during the 1990s, which involves reviewing social conditions at the time and indicating the cultural transformations brought about by neoliberalism. I then analyze how new dance corporealities came into being, focusing on subjectivity viewed from a gestural and choreographic viewpoint that includes therapeutics and de-heteronormativization, and suggesting how to read this pluralization process. With regard to the last topic, certain issues regarding the choreographic canon of tango were relevant.

This is why in the second chapter I describe how tango was modernized between 1900 and 1920, and take up what has been called the *polishing* of tango (Matamoro 1982), which involved a series of transformations that shaped what has become the canonical form as representative of the Argentine culture we know today. Along the way, I describe the micromechanisms that reproduce hierarchical relations, as well as the subjectivation processes and

the formation of legitimate corporealities at work in tango; I also explore the historical problematics in force at the time: the links between center and periphery in processes of aesthetic-corporeal innovation; the technologies used for rationalizing and teaching tango, the form femininity takes in the dance, and how homoeroticism is annulled.

Returning to contemporary tango in the third chapter, I give a detailed description of the trajectory of queer tango from early 2000 to 2012, and its links to current gender and sexuality discourses and policies. Here, I recount the recent history of sexual minority activism and the implementation of policies extending the scope of equal civil rights, as well as the gradually changing modalities in nocturnal socialization that have come in their wake, one of which has been queer tango.

In the fourth chapter, my aim is to analyze the innovations in dance music complementing bodily stylization, with special emphasis on electronic tango. After reviewing its emergence and repercussions in mass media, I reflect on the negative reaction that it met in conventional tango circles. I then analyze the reciprocal relationship that developed between the music's subculture and alternative dance, together with the corresponding corporeal appropriations resulting from this repertoire.

In the fifth chapter, I take up the international transactions and circulation occurring in tango at the present time. Here, I point to the significance of the increase in tourism in Buenos Aires due to currency devaluation, in tandem with the repercussions abroad of promulgated equal-rights laws that created a "gay-friendly" image of the city among travelers. In this regard, I take a close look at the relations established among tango aficionados from different parts of the world involving, on the one hand, the kinds of links created through activities in foreign cities, and on the other, the modality of international festivals in Buenos Aires, and the expectations of foreign visitors.

Finally, in the sixth chapter, I analyze the subjectivities in play at dance, focusing on women. This chapter is based on the final period of my fieldwork in the *Milonga Tango Queer* between late 2010 and mid-2012. An examination of these experiences involved centering on the appropriations of this particular dance proposal, leading to a rethinking of the social transformations brought about by the gay-hetero adaptation of tango.

In the space of corporeal intervention many nuances are at play, as well as ways of processing commands of gender that differ from each other and which open up a spectrum of possibilities that go well beyond our initial intent. The chapter is organized around six topics I see as constituting the most sensitive, problematic, and enigmatic features of the dance practices under investigation.

In the first, I reflect on continuities such as how tango is rationalized and taught, the standardization of movement, and criteria of legitimacy in force

within the space. I investigate how the dancers relate to the conventions of this particular space, who accepts and takes pleasure in existing guidelines, who doesn't, and how the latter group distances itself from the norms in place.

Second, I inquire into how women assume the role of being led in dance. Here, I analyze the bodily movements involved in occupying areas historically dominated by masculine criteria, along with the degree to which the rupture of sex-gender binarism produces subjective redefinitions in the sex-gender relationship. I also examine the asymmetries that appear between dancing partners in the absence of males.

Third, I reflect on the preference by some female dancers to being led (in the context of a leader-follower dyad, the native name assigned to this role in the tango queer scene is that of a "follower") and ponder on how to interpret this choice in the context of contemporary representations of female emancipation.

Fourth, I look at the erotic textualities produced by the act of dancing. On the one hand, my aim is to analyze the bodily aesthetic of the queer tango, which leads me to reflect on gender policy as a stylistic vector in dance; on the other, I indicate some of the ways in which this practice facilitates the exploration of sexuality. I then focus on intercultural situations generated by dance partners, which include perceptions of proximity and bodily affinity between dance partners of various nationalities, a novelty within the customary hermeticism of *porteño* tango.[1] From this viewpoint, I contemplate whether the new corporeal techniques have any relation to this transnational familiarity and what these practices say about cultural frontiers. And finally, I explore areas of experience less subjected to bodily self-control, the interstitial moments when the most playful bodily, noncodified responses emerge.

Paula Cabrera opened my mind to the intersubjective and affective aspect of knowledge. Pablo Alabarces bears the responsibility of directing me toward communication and popular culture, where I became one of the crowd. Carolina Spataro and Guadalupe Gallo contributed reading material containing ideas and impressions crucial to my research. Sections and preliminary drafts of this project were shared in different spaces within the university, which led to improvements. There, I received observations and suggestions from Silvia Citro and Marta Savigliano. This book was possible thanks to the invaluable collaboration of Peggy Wetswell and Pablo Vila in the hard process of adapting and translating the text. I am also indebted to Héctor Fernández L´Hoeste and William Michael Lake for the final review of the original.

Many of the people I met in the *milonga* contributed to my reflections in the book—Mariana Docampo, Soledad Nani, Mayra Lucio, and Jorgelina Calleja in particular, which doesn't mean we always agreed. Edgardo Pagliera

introduced me to the 1916 manual for the instruction of tango mentioned in the book, which I didn't adequately appreciate at the time, only to return to it years later. Finally, the indispensable human resource: Pablo Graib, who accompanied me to my first tango class in 1996.

NOTE

1. *Porteño* is the term for an inhabitant of the city of Buenos Aires.

Chapter 1

Tango Awaits You

Revitalization

Amid so many warnings of doom, why did tango become an important part of the cultural map of Buenos Aires in the 1990s? Postdictatorship sociability and the return of Peronism which, according to the Menemist Decalogue,[1] knew how to disguise its neoliberal project through populism, is a good starting point for the examination of daily life during this period. The low-lying climate of despair and marked atomization of political life had repercussions on collective morale. It was within this context that certain cultural practices experienced a jolt of revitalization in the city of Buenos Aires. Indeed, during the 1990s tango started to regain its popularity among a considerable sector of the populace. Tango dancing became a popular leisure-time activity and classes were available in many neighborhoods. Once again, dances became part of urban geography and fostered spaces for social interaction mediated by historical understandings.

Far from waning at the turn of the century, these practices were consolidated into important spaces for socialization. Because of the distinctive sociocultural, political, and economic conditions distinguishing the first decade of the twenty-first century from the last decade of the twentieth century, I divide the tango revitalization process into two periods running from 1990 to 2000, and then from 2000 to 2010. The first tango festivals organized by the government of the city of Buenos Aires and the passing of the Law of Cultural Patrimony by the same body between 1998 and 1999 effectively linked the tango to official cultural policy, thus inaugurating a new era. In a certain sense, during the two decades under consideration, tango can be viewed as a totality, a single process during which novel elements were added and norms modified, while little was discarded. What distinguishes one decade from the other is a matter of emphasis: 1990–2000 is oriented primarily toward recreating a

period from the past in how the tango is danced, and from 2000 to 2010, the aim is to adapt dance dynamics to new regimes of cultural legitimacy.

RECOVERING THE TRADITION

The slow reactivation and propagation of tango began on the dance floor, with musical production coming later. An outstanding feature was the incorporation of young people between fifteen and twenty-five years of age.[2] It was thanks to this generational renovation that tango drew crowds once again. But the revitalization itself was not without precedents: In the 1980s the tango had appeared in film and onstage. In 1983, *Tango Argentino*, a show directed by Claudio Segovia and featuring a group of ballroom dancers, toured Europe and the United States. This success was followed by two films—*El exilio de Gardel* (1986) and *Sur* (1988)—directed by Fernando Solanas, a well-known figure in left-wing Peronism. In the early years of the next decade, *Tango X2* had a long run onstage at the Teatro San Martín, one of the prime areas of artistic activity in Buenos Aires at the time. This flourishing of tango onstage and onscreen left no doubt about the value placed on it by noted cultural and intellectual figures identified with progressive politics.

During the 1990s, free tango dance classes were offered in neighborhood cultural centers opened by the government of the city of Buenos Aires, while universities and high schools offered tango dancing as an extracurricular activity and events involving it were available to the public in open spaces such as plazas. Thus it was that tango emerged from seclusion and opened up to the public. According to Ana Wortman (2003), although neighborhood cultural centers offered a variety of workshops involving artistic activities, in terms of attendance and continuity, tango classes were the most attended and frequent ones. Following suit, the liberal arts and social sciences departments of public universities, at the prompting of political associations, began offering dance classes that attracted a large number of students. In 1993, a tango workshop opened in the most renowned public high school in the city, *Colegio Nacional de Buenos Aires*, some of whose participants are active in the field of tango dancing to this day. Dancer Rodolfo Dinzel was a forerunner in the creation of a space for tango among public educational institutions: One of his projects, the *Centro Educativo del Tango de Buenos Aires* (CETBA), which opened its doors in 2000, offers integral training in tango dancing.

This flurry of activity brought beginners increasingly into contact with dancers from the 1940s and 1950s, considered the high point of tango dancing. Some had continued dancing in the decades that followed at the few *milongas* that remained open. Others, having stopped dancing, took up the activity again. This was often the case of women who had stopped dancing

after marriage, which had been customary at a time when moral mandates relegated young women, once married, to home. Whether widowed or separated—the latter gaining increasing acceptance—or simply owing to the greater flexibility of boundaries offered by adulthood, women as well as men began to frequent *milongas* once again. When young people showed up, elders were pleased, applauding and encouraging this new group; on the basis of their experience, they became spokespersons for the orality of tango. As indicated by María Julia Carozzi (2005), in these spaces where young people looked up to the old, contemporary hierarchies were reversed. If, as Sergio Pujol has affirmed (1999), in the past the tango had offered a space where knowledge and subjects could shine as a popular-class revenge of sorts, in the 1990s this subversion took the form of fundamentally recognizing experience.

But young people were not the only ones learning to dance at that moment; there was also a segment of the intermediate generation—people between forty and seventy years of age—that became young once again. The members of this group had been strongly immersed in tango at home while growing up, but had themselves listened and danced to rock. A response to a pending debt is how they described what motivated them to bridge this intergenerational gap that rock had produced during their adolescence, when leisure-time activities differentiated by age and music consumption had emerged. It should be noted, however, that this generational encounter also occurred, albeit to a lesser degree, in rock culture.

Sideways in terms of age and its "points of entry," tango was being taken up largely by women. Regarding this gender imbalance, Wortman holds that a large part of the intermediate-age population returning to tango was women because divorced men preferred socializing in private spheres. The incidence of broken marriages in the resurgence of tango is no accident. The *Ley de Divorcio Vincular* legalizing divorce in Argentina was passed in 1987, a coincidence that led to the observation that *milongas* captured "everybody in the middle class who was separated" (Gasió 2011, 3965). Even if "everybody" is most likely an exaggeration, the number of middle-class members was considerable. However, as Pujol points out in *Historia del Baile*, this is not surprising, given that in Argentina, from the 1950s into the late 1980s not being young made finding a place for a night out dancing a problem, since *bailantas,* where tropical music was played, were the only option.

With no big tango bands—known as *orquestas típicas*—playing live music at this time, neither any other kind of popular music playing alongside tango, as had happened in the 1940s, the new aficionados were intent on recreating more than a corporeal technique; it was a ritual they had in mind. This included the addition of ways of dressing and behaving, interacting, looking and being looked at, spatial organization, and a great many other norms to

obey and codes to decipher. All in all, temporal hiatuses that become everyday occurrences is how Marta Savigliano refers to this process (2000, 87).

Who wouldn't like to recover a little bit of childhood? Not to mention to relive a night from the soundtrack of adolescence? What was it that turned this fantasy into a concrete experience shared with other social actors? How did tango become a common point of reference? By word of mouth, participants confirmed that the only really democratic shared space was the *milonga*. There, the equality experienced contrasted with what went on "outside." On the other hand, it is important to note that the majority of tango aficionados belonged to the middle class. María Eugenia Rosboch (2006) says that the pact not to talk about one's private life at the *milonga* had to do with not rendering explicit dancers' social position in a postdictatorial context where social links were being reestablished; moreover, the *milonga* also became a refuge from the neoliberal individualism that dominated the 1990s. Of course, class differences are manifested both verbally and bodily. As Marta Savigliano stated previously:

> Milongas as sites of pleasure are regarded as democratic, even revolutionary experiments that allow age and class differences to blur, male and female differences to explode and yet seductively combine, and self-interests to cede to the higher common purpose of keeping tango alive. . . . (Savigliano 2000, 120)

During the 1990s, both the federal government and the government of the city of Buenos Aires began to actively promote tango. In 1990, a federal law was passed creating the *Academia Nacional del Tango*. The most influential measure, however, was the *Ley Nacional del Tango,* passed in 1996, which declared tango to belong to Argentine cultural heritage. This law, which obliged the city government to act, resulted in the creation of an annual festival and a radio station dedicated to tango. According to Sofía Cecconi (2009), these innovations were aimed at encouraging the identitary and cohesive capacity of tango, very much in line with the democratic values expressed by practitioners. So the revitalization of the tango was seen as countering the predatory economic policies which undermined extant social bonds.

Positioning the tango within the Argentine cultural tradition once again created a meeting place for the old and the new, for residual and emerging values. But, aside from stimulating memories about and longing for the good old days of tango, it's not clear what these vestiges concretely brought to the contemporary political mix. Indeed, despite belonging to the first decade of Peronism, the golden age of tango was silent in this regard.

In the late 1990s, the consensual imaginary emphatically projected in tango dancing began to dissipate as incipient areas of stress appeared: At the