**Argentine Tango (ca. 1890s to the present)**

**Summary**

Tango often evokes images of men and women caught in a dangerous dance, where obscure desires (forbidden liaisons, betrayal, revenge, jealousy) become spectacularly stylized. Depictions of tangos in theatre and narrative cinema, tango choreographies conceived for the stage, tango portrayals and metaphors in advertisement and literary fiction, and to some extent tango lyrics have contributed to this worldwide well-established cliché.

To Argentines and Uruguayans, and specially to the *rioplatenses* (inhabitants of the harbour cities of Buenos Aires and Montevideo), tango is a modernist, urban cultural complex that expresses a worldview of conflicting national dislocations, tense racial and ethnic miscegenations, and class struggles, as well as gender and sexual tensions. Tango and modernism share space and time in Latino American cultural history, with complex imbrications. Modernizing forces, such as urbanization, social mobility, women’s liberation from patriarchal structures, materialism, mass culture, and consumerism made tango’s emergence possible, as a critique (rather than a celebration) of modernization. Tangos sing and dance the dark side of modernity: loss, loneliness, dislocation, dystopia.

**Beginnings**

Tango crystallized in the 1890s out of music and dances previously practiced by *criollos* (mestizo rural workers), African liberated slaves, and West and East European migrants, as well as Iberoamerican travelling theatre troupes. Historically, in its South American sites of origin, tango was associated to ‘popular’ (and thus ‘low’) culture rather than to ‘high’ art forms, as working and middle classes were crucial in developing this hybrid urban form. Tango quickly entered worldwide circulation through Europe and, soon after, the U.S. via immigrants, émigrés, tourists, entrepreneurs and travelling artists, and importantly, the incipient recording industry, before the First World War. As a form of mass culture, tango underwent multiple appropriations and re-stylizations for over a century, tailored to a wide range of audiences and practitioners. This traffic in tango styles impacted the local and foreign constituencies swayed by the tango appeal, causing tango culture wars over authenticity, ownership and competing styles, and anxieties over the preservation of the traditional tango.

**Music**

The various art forms that compose tango (music, song, dance) and its representations on stages, screens, and other visual media, followed intertwined, independent routes. Tango music’s *rioplatense* variant is recognized in its unique syncopation, where melody plays with rhythm, abrupt interruptions, improvisation, and the presence of the *bandoneon*’s sorrowful sounds. European and U.S. early renditions emphasize a tragic mood, and a march-like rhythm. Tango music, since the late 1960s, incorporates classical and jazz elements, and rock and electronic music infuse new tango compositions since the 1990s. Tango Nuevo and Electro Tango signal a revival of interest in this traditional art, now in hands of younger generations of performers and audiences around the world drawn to postmodern experimentations and sensibilities. Origins, authenticity, high/low art divides, and concerns with the purity of the form are left behind in favour of global mass media circulation and marketing.

**Dance**

Tango dance developed differently for social club and stage uses in the Río de la Plata as well as abroad. Staged tango exhibits flashy, sharp figures, aerial and heavily grounded contrasting movements, and sudden changes in trajectory. Club tango styles show greater North-South variations, arguably linked to class connotations associated to cultural traditions. *Rioplatense* club styles place emphasis on the tango walk, improvised footwork, and serenity of performance while Euro-American ballroom styles tend to exhibit set figures and dramatic gestures centered in the upper-body. Since the 1990s, Tango Nuevo appears in club dancing and selected stages as a choreographic approach to tango partnering that departs from the traditional close embrace, and introduces more freedom of movement, curvier trajectories, and other playful variants attractive to younger dancers trained in modern dance and in other popular, free-style dance forms. Given tango’s focus on heteronormative partnering and its association to love troubles, since the early twenty-first-century practitioners interested in exploring same sex and gender role switching through dance are showing their presence in the tango scene through Queer Tango.

**Film, Theatre, Choreography**

In contemporary film, theatre, and choreographic works tango is usually deployed as a medium for conveying impending conflict, suspense, danger frequently of a psychological or ethical nature. Transgression and its pitfalls tend to be encoded in sexualized terms through the presence of tango. Tango has thus operated for over a century now as a metaphor of crisis and enrichment, adequate to bourgeois, modern sensibilities. Taken for a cultural spice, once adept for mature audiences and now attracting younger ones, choreographers, theatre, and film directors have made use of tango as a ‘universal art’ with little interest for its socio-political moorings. Listening and dancing tangos, old and new, continue to offer opportunities to engage with the modernist impulses of self-reflection, working outs of interiorities, as well as critique of established social mores and morals. Once a frowned upon, hypersexualized, practice, tangos’ wilderness and class conflicts seem to be long over, assimilated and forgotten.

Global imperialism and postcoloniality have brought North and South to a seemingly neutral terrain where free-floating ‘culture’ bits, like tangos, circulate as fetishes of a *pass*é exotic threat, now nurturing multiculturalism (the celebration of cultural difference that aims to avoid cultural politics).

**Marta Elena Savigliano**

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**Paratextual Material**

[Fernando Guibert Argentine, born 1912](http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/artist/Guibert%2C+Fernando)

http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/artist/Guibert%2C+Fernando

*Negros Milongueando*, 1972

Black ball-point pen, with black fiber-tipped pen, on off-white laminate board 689 x 498 mm  Gift of Mr. Philip Pinsof, 1979.674

[Prints and Drawings](http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/department/3) Not on Display