

Neither Virgins nor Whores: Tango Lyrics and Gender Representations in the Tango World

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As a typical exponent of a male chauvinist society, the tango—created, manipulated and dominated by males—had (has) on its side, in its center, a zone that can be called as marginal, something like “a tolerance house” (brothel, *quilombo* or *queco* to say it in old tango), occupied by women who sung it, danced it, composed it and played (and still sing, dance, compose, and play it) with humbleness, very close to men, depending on their approval (they hire them) while keeping certain independent attitudes when receiving the public applause . . .

(Dos Santos, *Las Cantantes*, 2225)

THE RENEWED POPULARITY OF THE TANGO AS AN INTERNATIONAL AND glamorous dance form in recent years has brought increasing attention to its history, as well as to the gender relationships that have constituted a vast volume of the tango’s literary repertoire. Tales narrating male–female social (and sexual) exchanges were the favorite motifs of the first tango tunes, born in the Río de la Plata regions (Buenos Aires and Montevideo) during the last decades of the nineteenth century. Early tangos were played and danced in the *casitas* (brothels) among men and between men and women, who would alternate sexual encounters with the practice of innovative dancing steps accompanied by novel tango orchestras (Viladrich, “Performing”). By the turn of the twentieth century, the tango had already escaped the brothel’s secluded social space and had become part of the

working-class musical and social repertory in which tango lyrics turned into stories describing *compadritos* and *rufianes* (tough guys and pimps) engaged with women of dubious reputation (Carretero; Dos Santos, *Las Cantantes*; Savigliano, *Tango*).

The tango's success in Europe and then in the US in the early 1910s promoted the expansion of its social base that included its wider acceptance among the elite and middle-class sectors. Nevertheless, as Guy (*Sex and Danger*) notes, it was not just by imitating the French that the upper class would accept the tango, and therefore this genre had to endure a process of "sanitization" or "domestication" before receiving large social reception and its ultimate patronage by the Argentine agro-industrial elite (Guy, *Sex and Danger*; Matamoro; Sarlo; Vila). This was accomplished by reducing the sensuality of tango movements, by replacing fast beats for slow tempos, and by taming the tango's gender characters.

By the mid-1910s, these modifications had assured the tango's transition from the Old Guard to its *Epoca de Oro* (Golden Era) or *la Nueva Guardia* (New Guard), which marked the tango's upward mobility in two ways: from its working class' ascription to middle- and upper-class sectors, and from the active sensuality of its dance form to an emphasis on the tango song, or a shift from the feet to the mouth (Faruk; Castro, *The Argentine*). These changes were also accompanied by the tango's geographical and symbolic displacement from the peripheral *barrios* to the center of the cosmopolitan urban life (Corradi; Azzi).

At the same time, female artists began struggling against traditional roles by pursuing tango careers that mostly targeted and conquered a female tango audience. The tango's tough characters were then replaced by romantic male heroes longing for love and companionship, more in tune with the changing class and gender relationships taking place in an emergent modern Argentina (Archetti, *Masculinities*; Savigliano, "Whiny," *Tango*; Ulloa).

From the 1950s through the 1970s, the tango's social history was largely affected by Argentina's dramatic sociopolitical changes that led to its quasi-extinction during periods of military dictatorship, and that encouraged its latest renaissance after the country's return to democracy in the early 1980s (Viladrich, "Social Careers"). Paradoxically, the current global tango revival (*tangomanía*) has been largely based on the recovery of tango tunes that symbolized the Golden Era's artistic pinnacle, and that have remained as a paradigmatic icon of what

“authentic” tango is, and as a living history of the social changes that have affected the evolution of gender roles in Argentina.

Although much has been written about tango and its gender relationships, the women’s history behind it is still waiting to be told, as there has been a paucity of studies on women as interpreters, players, and writers. This article will address this vacuum by providing a detailed analysis of the contradictory gender representations conveyed by the lyrics of the tango’s Golden Era, vis-à-vis the careers of women who not only interpreted mainstream tango songs but also challenged traditional gender roles via authorship and performance. Most of the scholarly research on tango lyrics has thoroughly examined the tango’s gender characters as metaphors of the social anxieties that characterized the transition to a modern Argentina (Archetti, *Masculinities*; Castro, “Carlos Gardel”; Guy, *Sex and Danger*). These changes involved, among others, European immigrants’ attempts of upward mobility, the conflicts between modern and traditional sexual morals, and the rural/urban tensions marked by the paradigmatic contrasts between peripheral neighborhoods and the urban *centro* (downtown) (Azzi; Corradi; Vila).

By examining popular tango lyrics as well as female artists’ strategies to challenge mainstream gender roles, this article will contribute to a better understanding of the social spaces where women have been historically able to defy conventional gender stereotypes both through lyrics and performance (Taylor). To a certain extent, this article is also a tribute to the many female composers, writers, and singers who have been the “silent” voices behind their tango characters, and who have remained largely understudied (many texts are not translated into English), have been hidden under male pseudonyms, or have been mostly appreciated on the basis of their stereotyped public personas. In addition, this article will provide a unique contribution to the literature on gender in popular culture by examining tango lyrics addressing women’s self-determination, which, although an important part of the tango repertoire, have been mostly outnumbered by narratives depicting female submission and treachery.

The first part of the article will offer a comprehensive analysis of women’s representations in mainstream tango lyrics (e.g., as manipulative beauties of dubious moral), whereas the second part will examine how women actually challenged these stereotypes via interpretation and authorship. In particular, this article will analyze the main strategies that enabled female artists to reach a privileged

position as tango singers (e.g., via humor and sarcasm as in Tita Merello's case), while conveying lyrics that both celebrated and penalized women's independent endeavors.¹

The ultimate purpose of this article is to raise some provocative interpretations of the tango's cultural legacy to the social construction of gender in Argentina. The tango artists and characters who will be introduced in the following pages have been continuously recreated in the Argentine cultural imaginary, from popular art to literature (e.g., Borges). And they have remained alive not only as a memoir of the past but also as a social metaphor of the ongoing gender and class tensions being performed through dancing, music, and poetry.

Neither Brides nor Mothers: The Price of Class Betrayal

With the tango transition from the brothel to the cabaret by the end of the nineteenth century, mainstream images of women in tango lyrics became more refined, unfolding throughout a continuum: from the treacherous seductive young woman (identified as the *milonguita*) to the sacrificing mother who forgives her children's abandonment.² Male characters also underwent dramatic transformations. From the *ruffianesque* (villain) typical of the tango's Old Guard, men evolved into romantic heroes longing for love and companionship (see Archetti, "Multiple Masculinities"; Castro, *Argentine Tango*; Savigliano, "Tango"). The masculine revengeful character, formerly epitomized by the *compadrito's* and *rufian's* knives (tough guys and pimps), was progressively substituted by the tango's whiny male who surrendered himself to cigarettes and alcohol to ease his pain. *Mi Noche Triste* [*My Sad Night*] has been considered as the first real tango ever recorded (by Carlos Gardel in 1917), a tune that inaugurated the tale of female abandonment in the tango repertoire:

Woman, you abandoned me in the best of my life
 leaving me with a hurt soul and thorns in my heart.
 . . . For me there is no longer consolation,
 and that is why I get drunk: to forget about your love.
 . . . When I go to bed at night I cannot close the door,
 by leaving it open I hold on to the illusion that you will return.

From then on, the tango's male lover would become a "tormented fellow," not able to release himself from the painful experience of

frustrated (and betrayed) love. Undoubtedly, the gender stereotypes that accompanied this transition were partly the result of the expansion of the tango's class audience encouraged by an Argentine elite, which, reluctantly at the beginning, little by little welcomed the tango into its salons. As Guy (*Sex and Danger*) argues, the wide acceptance of the tango themes developed in the late 1910s—based on frustrated love, women's abandonment, and sublimation of sexual desire was supported by the anxieties and fears that crossed class lines. In the following decades, the unambiguous association between women and prostitution typical of the Old Guard would be replaced by a *criollo* (Creole) version of the femme fatale whom good men could not resist.

Geographical mobility also summarized women's attempts of upward ascension, along with their futile skills to achieve success. For example, the tango *Margot* narrates the life of a woman (formerly known as Margarita) who abandons her abnegated mother to join the tango's nightlife under the spell of promised material gains.

I remember, you had nothing to put on
and today you wear silk clothes with little roses!
I cannot stand your presence, I would even pay for not seeing you!
And your mother, your poor mother,
washing clothes all week to make ends meet
in her Franciscan poverty, in her sad tenement house
. . . lit by kerosene.

Like *Margot*, other tangos such as *Ivette*, *Milonguita*, and *Flor de Fango* refer to young, unmarried, and beautiful young women who not only betray their lovers and mothers but also dare to defy their social class ascriptions by leaving their neighborhoods and families' protective environment. These lyrics usually portray working-class females moving to downtown Buenos Aires, a social space associated with urban sins and promiscuous sexualities.

Although *milonguitas* are not openly considered as sex workers, the tango's imaginary suggests that they will be eventually drawn into exchanging sexual favors for material gains including clothes, jewelry, and money. These aspects reveal themselves clearly throughout the frequent association between women's betrayal and their monetary ambitions portrayed in tangos such as *En la Palmera* [*In the Palm Tree*] and *La Mina del Ford* [*The Woman of the Ford*]. Furthermore, the New Guard's tangos are usually more condescending, with women

undoubtedly identified as hustlers than with *milonguitas*, as the former are often portrayed as fallen victims of a sex trade orchestrated by forces beyond their control.³ Tangos such as *Gallequita* [*Little Woman from Galicia/Spain*] and *Esclavas Blancas* [*White Slaves*] refer almost explicitly to the moral tale from which sexual trade is a direct result of women's oblivious choices. Contrary to *milonguitas*, women who openly exchange sex for money are not considered as totally responsible for their fallen fate, as they would not dare to take advantage of males for the sake of their own individual gain.

Contrary to what actually happened to many real women who attempted social mobility throughout their tango careers, the tango's *milonguitas* do not take advantage of their newly acquired freedom to be in charge of their own destiny. In the end, these tangos' moral fate is clear: those who dare to abandon the safe controlling protection of their families and neighborhoods will be cursed to continue their dependence under the illusion of financial autonomy. And contrary to the homo-social bonding re-edited via the tango's male brotherhood, women almost always appear alone or socializing only with men.

Tango lyrics usually present dual reactions toward *milonguitas*: either resentment (particularly when the narrator is the abandoned lover) or pity and moral redemption, typically when the storyteller becomes a witness of the *milonguita's* pathetic decay. As with spells that vanish with time, the young woman's talents will evaporate sooner or later. In the tango *Esta Noche Me Emborracho* [*I Am Getting Drunk Tonight*], the protagonist surrenders to alcohol in an attempt to comfort himself after his casual encounter with his formerly beautiful girlfriend, now transformed into an aged *milonguita*:

Crooked, dressed as a young woman,
with your dyed hair and displaying your nakedness.
She looked as a featherless cock showing off its bruised neck
I, as I know when I cannot stand seeing her like this any longer,
began running to avoid bursting into tears . . .

Nevertheless, tangos not only punish females for being dragged into a corrupted path but also seek their recovery while warning others not to follow *la mala vida* (the bad life). In the tango *Organito de la Tarde* [*The Barrel Organ in the Afternoon*], the male protagonist walks the city searching for his daughter who has been seduced by a rich man's money (Gobello). Some humorous tangos also admonish *milonguitas* to repent

and return to the good path before it is too late such as in the tangos *Che Papusa*, *Or* [*Hey, Silly Girl, Listen*], *Carnaval* [*Carnival*], and *Pompas de Jabón* [*Soap Bubbles*] in which the narrator compares the *milonguita*'s dreams with breakable soap bubbles.

Think, poor cute girl, that one day your beauty will disappear
and like flowers that fade, your crazy illusions will die.
And with the *misbé* [mature man] who pampers you with his money,
he will get bored one day, and like many flowers in the mud
you will end up begging on the street.
. . . You will see that your crazy dreams were all soap bubbles.

As Archetti (*Masculinities*) notes, the New Guard's image of the ideal woman was no longer associated with the ideas of virginity and chastity, as it was the case with romantic novels at the time. In fact, the tango's mistresses represent the opposite of the bourgeois idea of domestic housewives as they skip legitimate marriage (Castro, "Carlos Gardel"). However, the *milonguita*'s transgression does not necessarily suppose a challenge to traditional feminine roles. While on the one hand, it is clear that tango lyrics subvert the moral order of the traditional family by portraying feminine sexual freedom and consensual sexual union without marriage, on the other the obsessive fatalistic end of these fables encodes a moralistic message addressed to all women. In the end, no matter how ambitious women are, their attempts to become independently successful will be dashed. If the working class's fantasies of social mobility are to be rewarded with abandonment and class exclusion, the *milonguita*'s tragic end is the price that women from all social classes have to pay for exercising too much sexuality and too much freedom. By summoning the *milonguita*, the tango is also conveying a moral lesson that crosses class frontiers, a message that also works as a social metaphor against attempts of upward mobility for both men and women.

Nevertheless, *milonguitas* are not the only female characters punished by tango lyrics. In fact, women's inability to bear children is also sanctioned via pathetic representations of older single women (spinsters), who lack both the beauty and the needed allure to attract men, as in the tangos *Nunca Tuvo Novio* [*She Never Had a Boyfriend*] and *Fea* [*Ugly*]. The spinster is undoubtedly characterized as the *milonguita*'s opposite: while the latter is beautiful, assertive, and adventurous, the spinster is ugly, compliant, timid, cautious, and never leaves her

neighborhood. Consequently, these two female stereotypes are penalized in different ways. While the *milonguita* is punished for having too much of a life, the spinster is sentenced for having too little. In the end, however, they are both condemned to a path of loneliness, the price they have to pay for having remained childless.⁴

The *Milonguita* Learns to Sing: Gender, Class, and Upward Mobility

While tango lyrics were obliterating women's audacious attempts of upward mobility, the destiny granted to them by the tango's moral tales was somehow challenged by female tango performers in real life.⁵ Most women artists emerged from the same poor neighborhoods that gave birth to the *milonguita's* stories, and ventured themselves into novel artistic roads morally forbidden to their peers of higher social strata. Many *milonguitas* (made of flesh and bone) launched their tango careers in the early 1920s by alternating low-paid occupations (e.g., shop sellers and seamstresses) with singing and dancing in cabarets of dubious reputation.

In addition, the increasing popularity of the radio contributed to the tango's *feminization* by allowing female interpreters to reach a large female public (80% of the tango audience), which did not need to leave the safety of their homes to cherish their beloved tango artists (Castro, *The Argentine Tango*; Dos Santos, *Las Cantantes*). In fact, the anonymity reassured by the radio helped launch the careers of many women who would have been reluctant to participate in the tango industry otherwise. And as a result, all of the big female tango names born during this period surpassed their male counterparts both in number and popularity. Women's tango careers were also boosted by favorable conditions in terms of increasing industrialization, and changing gender morals promoted by emerging feminist waves worldwide (Calvera; Arnaiz and Chomnalez). Emerging tango figures were able to expand their popularity through tango contests sponsored by radio stations and conservative newspapers, while sharing a place with those coming from aristocratic cradles (Vila).

The success of female tango interpreters in the 1920s and 1930s, nevertheless, contrasts with the paucity of tangos written by women. In the same way in which some female artists assumed male attires and

virile postures to portray respectable images, others camouflaged their names under male pseudonyms, a fact that reflects their tenuous status in the tango field where they were considered as “necessary evils” (Castro, *The Argentine Tango*). The majority of the tango collections only contain a few tangos attributed to women (e.g., Benedetti), and tango songs written by artists such as Marina Sabor, María Matilde Mom, and Rita Molina have still to be rescued from old music sheets that circulate in Buenos Aires’s flea markets and secondhand bookstores.

We do not know how many lyrics have either disappeared or have been disguised under other authorships for the sake of women’s respectability. For example, María Luisa Carnelli (1898–1987), a distinguished writer and journalist, utilized two male pseudonyms in many of her tango lyrics (Luis Mario and Mario Castro) in order to conceal her identity (Gobello and Bosio; Archetti, *Masculinities*). The same seems to be the case with some of the tangos written by Eloisa d’Herbil de Silva who, among other themes, composed *El Maco* later published under M. J. Tornquist’s name (Gobello). Even when female singers wrote and signed their own tangos (as it was the case of Tita Merello, Mercedes Simone, and Azucena Maisani), they mostly became acknowledged as tango interpreters and not as tango poets and writers.

Many female tango pioneers created their own innovative styles. Rosita Quiroga, for example, became the first female vocalist in 1923, soon followed by Azucena Maizani, considered as a *varonil guapeza* (virile prettiness) who soon turned into Carlos Gardel’s artistic counterpart (Benedetti; Ferrer). Maizani often dressed as a man in public, a lead followed by others such as Ermelinda Spinelly and Mercedes Simone. Other singers relied on their feminized sweetness (Libertad Lamarque), or developed characters as femme fatales (Ada Falcón). And finally there were those who challenged stereotypical gender characters, such as Sofía Morán, Tania, and finally, Tita Merello, whose life and artistic trajectory will be examined next.

Tita Merello: Dialectic Embodiments of Tangos’ *Milonguitas*

Do you know what is the basis of my insolence: my ugliness. This is a truth that I have faced so many times with astonishment, which has given me a sense of my own value. Everything I have obtained

has been on my own. Instead, cute women are never certain that they got to the top because of their own efforts.

(Tita Merello, quoted in Dos Santos, *Las Cantantes*, 2379–80)

During the first three decades of the twentieth century, numerous tango lyrics expressed the increasing social discontent and radicalism of the Buenos Aires' working class. The Great Depression in the early 1930s became a source of inspiration to many tango authors such as Enrique Santos Discépolo, whose tango lyrics have become the tango's highest expression of social and political critique (Faruk; Vila). Within the lighthearted environment of the comic theater, the vaudeville, and the cabaret, everything could be said without offending anyone. By relying on the satire and the grotesque, tango authors and interpreters conveyed critical perspectives on class, politics, and gender, while avoiding censorship. Some authors wrote lyrics in which female characters would mock males' arrogant vulnerability such as in the tangos *Gloria* [Glory], *Muñequita* [Little Doll], and *Hambre* [Hunger], which opened the paths to stardom to an incipient cast of female tango artists.

Tita Merello, popularly known as Tita (1904–2002), has been considered one of the most important figures of the tango's Golden Era, a woman who combined an unconventional artistic talent with the challenge of feminine clichés, and who became a role model for further generations of female artists. The excerpt that opens this section summarizes this artist's symbolic rebellion against dominant ideals of femininity, which not only permeated the tango's mainstream imaginary at the time but also constituted an a priori condition to succeed in the artistic field. Tita's powerful image arose from a domineering sensuality associated with an arrogant, puissant (almost masculine) character, which challenged the feminine etiquette prescribed by a bourgeois society. Although the ugliness to which Tita refers could be contested, the fact that she made of it a "battle cry" illustrates her conviction in making a difference for herself. In the 1920s and the 1930s, Tita interpreted the embodied version of the *milonguita*. As an interpreter, she sang and danced "tango milongas" (a fast tango melody linked to the *canyengue* style) and as a woman, she arose from a marginal background to achieve success in the Buenos Aires's artistic milieu.

Tita was born in San Telmo (a humble *tanguero* neighborhood at the time) in Buenos Aires, and at an early age was taken to a farm to

perform various kinds of rural jobs. Tita's experiences in the countryside, where she was mostly treated as a *criada* (servant), had a decisive influence in her defiant, and often bitter, character in adulthood. When years later, Tita returned to her original neighborhood, she committed herself to challenging the surrogated status ascribed to uneducated working-class girls, and decided to follow one of the new paths opened to young, attractive, and ambitious talented women like her (Merello; Dos Santos, *Las Cantantes*). Therefore, she joined the troupe of many female artists who risked their moral reputation by immersing themselves into the Buenos Aires's dubious nightlife.

Tita began her career in the Ba-Ta-Clan and the Maipo theaters, known as *teatros de revistas* (similar to the American vaudeville theater), where she performed as a chorus dancer. Her stubborn perseverance, strong character, and artistic versatility introduced her to the *sainetes* (musical and theater pieces) where she performed both as an actress and as a singer. However, she had to wait many years before being able to play a main role as a tango singer in the musical comedy *La Muchachada del Centro* [*The Downtown Boys*], written by Pelay and Canaro in 1932. Tita's interpretation of humorous tangos such as *Pedime Lo que Querés* [*Ask Me Whatever You Want*] and other amusing tangos built her reputation as *la expresión risueña del tango* ("the laughing tango expression"; Dos Santos, *Las Cantantes*).

Tita's amusing characters allowed her to convey a social critique of tango's mainstream gender images. During the 1930s, she performed humorous tango on Radio Paris (Paris Radio) where she mocked the tango mythology, including the recursive theme of the sainted little old mother, the young girl who gets corrupted when moving downtown, the fake femme fatale, and the *compadrito's* idiosyncratic world. Tita reinvented herself as a token of popular culture along with the inter-textualities of the different tango tunes she interpreted. And indeed, her performances can be read as an ongoing ensemble of her evolving personal and artistic edges. For example, in *Arrabalera* [*Woman from the Outskirts*], she performs as Felicia Roberano, a tough girl from the *arraval* (poor outskirts), who is proud of her lack of formal education and presents herself as somebody who has achieved everything by herself and owes nothing to anyone. In the tango *La Milonga y Yo* [*The Milonga and I*], Tita introduces herself as the homologue of the tango milonga: "With the *milonga* we are equals, we belong to the same *arrabal*." In *De Contramano*, [*Against the Traffic*], she interprets an

independent woman, someone who defies mainstream norms as it is clearly illustrated in the reference to Eve's biblical transgression: "It has never been called to my attention the story of Eve and the apple, as I am Eve's sister . . ." In *Pipistrela* [*Goofy Girl*], Tita teaches women how to pass for foolish girls in order to trick men. All female strategies shared with a complicity tone (Savigliano, *Tango* 56):

I have a guy at the market who looks at me,
 who is an Italian pretending to be a creole.
 I bat my eyes at him
 while I am stealing a piece of coal from him . . .
 They call me 'Pipistrela' [Goofy] and I just
 let them call me so,
 it's worth more to pass for a goofy girl,
 if you are actually a sharp girl.

Contrary to many of her peers, Tita did not look as a presumptuous diva, nor as a virtuous prima donna. On the contrary, as a *femme fatale's* reverse image, she created her own artistic blueprint by relying on a deep voice and an impolite, almost defiant, personality. These aspects, added to her crude self-awareness as an unpolished woman, allowed her to depict herself as an authentic *milonguita* from the poor outskirts. As Gobello (*Breve*) notes, tango singers at the time privileged the lyrics or the story to be told, rather than on the technical aspects such as perfect intonation or flawless pitch.⁶ And Tita followed this trend, by portraying herself as an artist for whom interpretation meant the ability to convey her embodied experience of tango feelings. Tita's tango interpretations combined singing and talking not only as a stratagem to deal with difficult tones but also as a way to merge lyrics with a staged drama.

Above all, Tita built up her tango personality as the *milonguita's* counterimage, the one who did not (and could not) rely on her physical charm to step out from a humble milieu. By emphasizing her ugliness, not only did Tita make a virtue from a weakness but also challenged conventional feminine standards while imposing those of her own. Tita's apparent unattractiveness turned indeed into a tricky mirror that reflected an alternative standard of beauty sold as her own personal merchandize. This strategy is clearly revealed in the tango milonga *Se Dice de Mi* [*It Is Being Said about Me*], considered as Tita's

autobiographic signature song that became immortalized in the movie *Mercado del Abasto* [*The Abasto Market*]:

It is being said about me . . .
 That I am ugly
 that I walk as a *malevo* [rough tango guy]
 that I am *cbueca* [warped]
 and that I walk
 with a *compadrón* [tough guy's] attitude.
 That I look like Leguisamo
 that my *napia* [nose] is pointed
 that my looks don't help me
 and that my mouth looks like a mailbox.

If I am ugly, let's assume that,
 I haven't notice it because I've only known
 that when it comes to love affairs
 I have dumped more that a *gil* [silly one] . . .

They may say, they may talk,
 they may mumble and bray . . .
 But the ugliness that God has given me,
 has been the envy of more that one woman.
 And they cannot say that I am *engrupida* [pretentious]
 Because I have always been modest . . .

Tita's self-representation as a revenged *milonguita* presents different edges, some of which complement and somehow contradict each other. Contrary to the *milonguita* who dreams with an ascending social career by adopting high-class feminine *habitus* (Bourdieu), Tita did not forsake her working-class origin. On the contrary, not only did she rely on her humble background to create a unique tango persona, but she also commercialized her cultural capital via the spontaneous romantic aura of a working-class hero who, in spite of her lack of refined mannerisms, was still able to achieve social recognition. In the end, Tita revenged the defeated *milonguita* by showing that the dream of upward mobility could become true for *arrabaleras* like her, who did not depend on ruthless exploiters nor had to return to their neighborhoods as a result of an inevitable defeat.

Women such as Tita Merello sung, played, and performed tango songs, as part of a stratagem that allowed them to become legitimate icons of popular culture. Both in life and in art, Tita paralleled the

milonguita's social climbing but did not follow her prophesied fall. Neither a Victorian fragile character nor an exquisite feminine character, she invented herself as an "ugly defiant beauty," thus confronting dominant feminine standards of refinement, sweetness, and submission. In the end, Tita's main message became the reversal of the bourgeois ideal: neither should women become striking docile beauties nor perform as enchanting mistresses, as they can publicly do just the opposite.

Dual Games: Gendered Transvestism and the *Milonguita's* Retaliation

No matter how powerful Tita's strategy was, humor and sarcasm were not enough to open the path to women wishing to achieve artistic success in a male-dominated tango field. Indeed, women's entrance and permanence in the tango world (as much as their participation in the artistic field) were not entirely possible without the male patronage that controlled most of its lucrative production. Therefore, most women's initial careers as tango singers were built, to a certain extent, on their interpretations of a male repertoire, which complemented but did not compete against their male counterparts.

Female transvestism is the term I have chosen to describe women's interpretations of tango lyrics written to be sung by male singers, without matching the narrator's gender with that of the interpreter. Female transvestism allowed women to perform *qua* males, by relying on masculine pronouns and by addressing other women as the recipients of their longing promises of love. This turned out to be one of the most successful strategies through which female tango singers fostered their careers, even at the cost of punishing the *milonguita* or rewarding the *compadrito's* violence in their interpretations. Female tango artists lent their voices to perform as males' "mediums," as part of a tacit agreement with their audiences and as a resourceful strategy to succeed in a male-dominated tango industry. The fact that female voices had become firstly popularized by the radio contributed to the dissociation between the tango lyrics and the interpreter's gender. Indeed, female transvestism allowed many female artists to make a living at a time where the artistic field was a contested territory. As noted by Dos Santos (*Las Cantantes*), the pinnacle of the tango song left women in absolute minority in terms of lyrics forcing them to rely on a male

repertoire. In reference to Manolita Poli's interpretation of *Mi Noche Triste* [*My Sad Night*], this author notes:

The public that went to see her during her five hundred performances did not find incorrect for a woman to say emphatically: "broad who abandoned me in the best of my life." Besides, men and women repeated these verses without asking themselves if they identified with the character who is in pain or with the one who did wrong. Is it a self-female flagellation or a healthy separation between the represented and the person who is representing?

(Dos Santos, *La Mujer* 246)

Azucena Maizani's vast interpretation of acclaimed tangos makes her an ideal case to explore interpreters' female transvestism, as well as some of the contradictory messages conveyed by tango poets and interpreters. Maizani has been considered as the best female tango singer at the time, an artist who built her reputation on the interpretation of abandoned males who would either vent their lovers' betrayal, or declaim their sorrowful pain while waiting for their women to come back home. The fact that Maizani, as well as many of her peers, disclosed her fictional love affairs with other women was unlikely the case among male interpreters, who usually did not sing tunes written to be sung by their female counterparts. Maizani became the first interpreter who recorded many of the tangos that would become part of Carlos Gardel's celebrated repertoire (Benedetti).

Maizani's scenic performances included the interpretation of courageous *compadritos* (who had become famous during the tango's Old Guard) although her high pitch would reveal her feminine character. In these tangos, the narrator usually discovers his woman with another man and revenges the offense through physical violence, including murder. The tango's moral tale justifies the perpetrator's actions, as he becomes the victim of the worst-possible imagined humiliation perpetrated to his masculine dignity: sexual betrayal. In the end, the message conveyed by these tango stories is that female infidelity makes men's virility not only doubtful but also public, and physical revenge is necessary to reinstate their loss sense of pride and of manhood.

Maizani's tango interpretations also included tunes that complained about women's unfaithful nature, as well as narratives of feminine salvation through a path of submissive choices. In one of the few compositions carrying her signature *No Salgas de Tu Barrio* [*Don't Leave*

Your Neighborhood], Maizani advises the *dulce muchachita* (sweet little girl) to be good, humble, and to stay away from rich men's temptations and the volatile seductions of the Buenos Aires's nightlife, although she was doing just the opposite in real life. Nonetheless, not all of Maizani's interpretations were odes to women's self-restraint and male revenge, as in some tunes she revealed men's meager personalities while subtly criticizing gender inequalities. For example, in one of her tangos entitled *Pero Yo Sé* [*But I Know*], Maizani exposes the male protagonist's emotional nature by describing his suffering for a former love, in spite of his attempts to perform as a ruthless macho.

Maizani, and several other female composers and singers, also re-vented the *milonguitas'* tragic destiny through the personification of abandoned female lovers, thus competing with other rejected males. This is the case of the famous tango *Padre Nuestro*; [*Our Father*], also popularized by Maizani, in which an abandoned woman prays for her lover to return. Female interpreters also turned the *milonguita's* fate upside down by assigning her perfidious features to male characters. For example, in the tango *Primer Agua* [*First Water*], female composer María Luisa Carnelli tells the story of a man who abandons his faithful girlfriend and seduces rich women for the sake of upward mobility. By combining the talents of both a *compadrito* and an opportunistic gigolo, the male protagonist takes advantage of his new girlfriend's financial resources. In the tango *Lloró Como una Mujer* [*He Cried Like a Woman*], a woman defeats her partner's determination to abandon her by presenting herself as virtuous as his mother. "Tell me if I haven't been like a mother for you. . . . Tell me if I deserve what you are planning to do. . . ." Enough convincement for the guy who breaks into tears and stays.

Finally, female artists did more than rescuing the *milonguita* from her bitter destiny, and boosted her to the point in which she would become a model to be followed by others. Although these tangos are not as well known and popular as those sentencing the *milonguita's* cursed path, they were also part of the tango repertoire of the time. The tango *Se Va la Vida* [*Life Goes By*], written by María Luisa Carnelli in 1929, became another of Maizani's signature songs:

Life is fleeting,
is fleeting and will never return.
Listen to my advice:

if a rich man promises you a good life,
 you must accept it.
 Life is fleeting, fleeting . . .
 And not even God will stop it.
 The best you can do is to enjoy life
 and forget your sorrows and pain.

As Archetti (*Masculinities*) notes, this tango challenges the traditional message of constrained virtue and suffering by encouraging women to enjoy life. And above all, its lyrics vindicate the *milonguita's* dreams of upward mobility not as a predicted fatality, but as another possibility among women's adventurous, and still unwritten, paths.

Epilogue

By analyzing tango lyrics and the role of women as novel tango singers during the Golden Age (1917–1935), this article has unveiled some of the contradictory gender messages that characterized Argentina's entrance into modernity. At the same time when mainstream tango stories were punishing *milonguitas'* independent endeavors (while rewarding their distressed mothers), real working-class women were immersing themselves in novel tango careers. And they did so by performing as male characters, by disguising their tango's authorships under male identities and by punishing but also rescuing the *milonguita* through their tango interpretations.

Not only did the tango's Golden Era open, for women, unique positions in the artistic field through their roles as *cancionistas* (singers, from the French *chansoniers*), but it also allowed them to achieve public visibility via their interpretation of paradoxical tango lyrics. Women have always relied on poetry and performance to express their deepest, and often conflicting, emotions regarding their roles in society, and female tango pioneers were no exception (see Abu-Lughod). While most popular tango lyrics of the New Guard depicted women's treacherous personalities along with their feeble autonomy, others (often subtle and camouflaged under humorous facades) portrayed women's self-reliance as the genuine expression of their talented personas. And while female artists personified the abandoned male lover, they also portrayed males' insecure emotional nature, while advising young women to pursue their own independent paths. These conflicting messages were acknowledged by the tango's audience, as they conveyed

social anxieties emerging from changing class and gender relations in an emergent modern Argentina. Female tango artists, above all, succeeded in a male-dominated world by relying on the construction of unique personas (the femme fatale, the sweet beauty, the masculine image), and by interpreting tunes mostly written (or authored) by male authors.

In real life, many of these tango singers paralleled the *milonguita's* social career by seeking a better life in the Buenos Aires's nightlife. This has been exemplified in this article through Tita Merello's life, an artist who has been considered as the tango's countermyth, and who made a myth of herself (Dos Santos, *Las Cantantes*). Tita's humorous interpretations nourished a cultural imaginary of social critique by relying on comic parodies of class and gender relationships that defied the *milonguita's* expected decline and opened new opportunities for women in the tango world. Azucena Maizani, on the other hand, became the symbol of the tango's Golden Era (the first and the most popular *cancionista*), as the one who chose a male-dominated repertoire and masculine attire for her presentations. Nevertheless, she also performed and wrote tangos that preached just the opposite of what her male characters would utter. While on the one hand, she recommended women to be good, reserved, and submissive, on the other hand, she created and interpreted tunes in which she conveyed her own experiences as a self-reliant woman aware of men's frailties.

The artists and tango characters examined in this article have never disappeared from Argentina's social imaginary, as they have continued being part of Buenos Aires's cultural legacy. No doubt has the tango evolved and continued doing so as a nomadic hybrid able to blend themes, world music, and traditions (see García Canclini; Pelinski; Washabaugh). Nonetheless, the themes of the tango's New Guard have continuously nourished Argentina's nostalgic past. Probably, the universal meaning of old tango lyrics (with their tales of love and betrayal, and conflicting gender roles) are the basis for its enchanting spell on both audiences and authors, who find in these stories inspirations for their *aggiornated* tango tales. In a way, the *milonguita*, the *arrabalera*, the *malevo*, the *rufián*, and the abandoned lover have become icons of Argentine popular culture not just in tangos but also in the ongoing recreation of melancholic stereotypes, which allows *Porteños* (people born in Buenos Aires) to claim for themselves their belonging to a peculiar urban culture, and their ownership of a unique *tanguero* past.

NOTES

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1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the XXI International Congress, Latin American Studies Association (LASA) held in Miami, FL, March 16–18, 2000.
2. *Milonguitas* is the *lunfardo* (slang) word to name young unmarried women from poor suburban areas, who typically performed as dancing tango partners in cabarets, in exchange for a percentage of their clients' consumptions. After work, some might accept to have a sexual affair with their clients, and some would become a *querida* (mistress).
3. These representations were supported in the 1920s by social anxieties regarding the "white slavery," which inspired national and international campaigns against female European immigration. These campaigns perceived the root of the problem in women's vulnerability and the immorality of Latin American cities, and were based on prostitutes' images as hopeless and desperate slave victims, unaware of their eventual enrollment into the sex trade once they reached the Argentine soil (see Guy, "Medical").
4. As Guy ("Medical") observes, religious values have been key to understanding the social construction of motherhood in Argentina. The Roman Catholic religion has continued to be central in the hegemonic circulation of representations of gender and sexuality in Argentina, as well as in many Latin American countries (see also Viladrich and Thompson).
5. According to Ferrer, the origin of women as tango interpreters finds its roots among the female performers of the *cuplé's* (a heritage of Spanish minor artistic trends), which was followed by women's participation in musical comedies that included tangos.
6. Many tango singers since Tita have utilized the same strategy (e.g., Susana Rinaldi) to transform themselves into tango actresses or staged versions of female living dramas.

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