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To cite this article: Anahí Viladrich (2018): Think global, act Argentine! tango émigrés and the search for artistic authenticity, Ethnic and Racial Studies, DOI: [10.1080/01419870.2019.1543892](https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2019.1543892)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2019.1543892>



Published online: 29 Nov 2018.



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## Think global, act Argentine! tango émigrés and the search for artistic authenticity

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### ABSTRACT

The renewed popularity of the Argentine tango has been spearheaded by Argentines' reterritorialization efforts through which they claim their symbolic ownership of the genre. Two related phenomena are addressed here. First, the article examines the blossoming of the tango industry in Buenos Aires (Argentina's capital), which is supported by both a foreign and local tango audience. Second, it explores the migratory careers of Argentine tango dancers and musicians who, particularly in New York City, have joined efforts to rebrand the tango as their authentic national product. In order to be successful in the worldwide tango field, Argentine artists must also accrue tango capital, defined as the combined effect of technical skills, social contacts and public recognition. Finally, this article reflects on the ongoing endeavours of Argentine émigrés to keep abreast of tango developments in Buenos Aires, as a key dimension for guaranteeing their success overseas.

**ARTICLE HISTORY** Received 15 January 2018; Accepted 24 October 2018

**KEYWORDS** Tango; immigrants; Argentina; music; dance; reterritorialization

### Introduction: dancing the Argentine tango "the Obama way"

In March 2016, a stunning video of then President Barack Obama dancing the tango at a state dinner in Buenos Aires made headlines around the world. It was he, the forty-fourth president of the United States (U.S.), the one who was timidly – and skilfully – following the lead of Mora Godoy, a renowned Argentine tango dancer (Hirshchfeld 2016). Obama's tango debut was a spur-of-the-moment addition to an evening programme that included a tango show, a taken-for-granted ingredient in the idiosyncratic repertoire of all things "Argentine." As of today, there is no way to plan a for-export event in Buenos Aires without an orchestrated ensemble of tango music and dancing, both deemed to be the highest expression of national artistry.

Obama's impromptu tango moves became a striking symbol of how one the most powerful men on earth had, close to the end of his mandate, succumbed to the sensual twists of a seductive musical form while being led

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by a provocatively dressed woman. Obama's wife, Michelle, was also bashfully trying out some tango steps in the arms of Mora's male partner; however, it was her husband who grabbed the spotlight that evening. Even though the Obamas' performance provides a glimpse into the couple's ability to play it by ear, it also became a conspicuous *mise en scène* of the allure of the Argentine tango to conquer – and be conquered by – the world's most powerful emissaries.

This article builds upon a recent and prolific literature on the Argentine tango's impact on audiences worldwide. Over the past two decades, wide-reaching entrepreneurial efforts have made the tango a musical and dancing craze, giving Argentine entertainers a preeminent position in global hubs like New York City (NYC), Paris, Barcelona, Istanbul and Tokyo, among others. In tune with the conceptual domains proposed for this issue, this study explores the tango's reproduction as an Argentine genre vis-à-vis contemporary debates on immigrant incorporation. From advertising Buenos Aires as a unique place to learn the genre's genuine passion, to teaching the secrets of tango improvisation to dancing aficionados in NYC, Argentines have strategically manufactured their symbolic ownership of the tango in order to secure a privileged place in the global entertainment industry.

The rising interest in tango reached its peak amid theoretical inquiries concerning the links between musical diasporas and human migration, as well as the connections between local and global musical expressions (Davis et al. 2010; DiMaggio and Fernandez-Kelly 2015; Karush 2017; Kiwan and Meinhof 2011; Martiniello 2015; Martiniello and Lafleur 2008). Recent books offer multiple lenses through which to explore tango music and dancing in dialogue with theories on global cultural production, worldwide tourism and migration trends (Dávila 2012; Fitch 2015; Karush 2017; Luker 2016; Miller 2014; Törnqvist 2013; Viladrich 2013). More intimate, in-depth ethnographies (Davis 2015; Merritt 2012) have delved into the contemporary tango dancing scene in Buenos Aires, spotlighting the role of passion as both pleasurable addiction and emotional currency, a topic examined early on by Savigliano (1995). A growing literature on queer tango has challenged the genre's traditional heteronormativity (Carozzi 2013; Liska 2016) while critically addressing the current commodification of queer culture (Kanai 2015; Savigliano 2010).

Still, with the exception of just a few studies on the lives and perils of mobile tango artists (Viladrich 2013; 2005a, 2005b; Viladrich and Castiglione 2014), little is known about the migratory trajectories of Argentine performers and producers along with their role in the tango's global symbolic reproduction. This article builds upon this latter line of research by combining an analysis of the recent literature on tango with findings from a long-term ethnographic study on tango artists in NYC.<sup>1</sup> In the following pages, two related processes involving the tango's reterritorialization will be analyzed. First, the article addresses the renewed popularity of the tango in Buenos

Aires, where, in a neoliberal globalized economy, it has been successfully advertised as Argentina's paramount national product. Second, it explores the careers of Argentine tango performers (mostly musicians and dancers) overseas, particularly in NYC, along with their efforts to be acknowledged as the tango's only legitimate interlocutors.

The tango's reterritorialization is mostly discussed here from the point of view of tango émigrés who champion the Argentine tango as their authentic "national brand," a cog in the cultural machinery of artistic reproduction that is continuously refashioned, marketed and performed, first and foremost, by Argentines but also by others who have made a successful livelihood of the tango in Buenos Aires and overseas (Dávila 2012; Luker 2016; Morel 2017). For Argentines living abroad, keeping up with the latest tango developments in Buenos Aires is critical to ensuring their leadership in the tango field. Indeed, the tango may be played, rehearsed, danced and sung in many places, but Buenos Aires must still be visited at regular intervals in order to reconnect with the genre's "authentic" roots.

Inspired by the conceptual framework of Bourdieu (1986), this article argues that Argentine tango artists painstakingly work to accrue "tango capital" – investing in their technical skills, knowledge of tango culture and social connections – in order to continuously validate their *Argentinidad* (Argentine-ness). This, in turn, will eventually allow them to seal their status as the utmost tango interpreters (Fitch 2015; Viladrich and Castiglione 2014). Tango capital is not accumulated instantaneously, but is instead built up through physical and artistic training along with the ability to polish one's marketing, entrepreneurial and social skills – all of which become symbolic capital in the form of prestige and public validation. This essay particularly describes the tango scene in NYC, where Argentine artists make good use of their tango capital in an extremely competitive artistic milieu. In the conclusions, this piece reflects on the study's main findings particularly regarding Argentine tango artists' reterritorialization efforts in a context of globalization.

### **Theorizing authenticity in the tango world: cultural heritage "for export"**

Originally coined by French philosophers Deleuze and Guattari (1972), the term deterritorialization has been widely utilized in the transnational literature to define the loss of the assumed natural relations between the physical and cultural domains (Basch, Glick-Schiller, and Blanc-Szanton 1994; Papastergiadis 2013). Deterritorialization processes dispute the premise of a geographical monopoly on both material and intangible cultural forms (Connell and Gibson 2004; Giddens 2004). As two sides of the same coin, the logic of deterritorialization presupposes reterritorialized efforts that eventually lead to novel and hybridized symbolic constructions (García Canclini 1995; Hennessy 2015;

Hernández 2006; Steingress 2002). The term reterritorialization is used here to identify the orchestrated efforts by states and their citizens to claim ownership of cultural heritage artifacts – Argentine tango in this case. As will be shown in this article, Argentine performers heartily assert the authenticity of their tango endeavours in an effort to validate their stature in the tango field.

Born in the late nineteenth century as a creative *mélange* that combined rhythms from African descendants (e.g. the *candombe*) and the European working class (e.g. the *habanera*), the tango became an accepted genre in Argentina only after the First World War (Farris Thompson 2005; Garramuño 2011). The tango's warm reception in Paris during the 1910s fostered the first *tangomania* and ultimately led to the genre's acceptance in Argentina after a thorough sanitation process that tamed most of its sexual overtones (Guy 1991). Although the tango continued to incorporate musical rhythms from the countryside (e.g. *campera* and *criollo* music, Chindemi and Vila 2017), these influences were eventually dismissed in favour of urban and cosmopolitan sounds. The Golden Age of tango (1935–50) witnessed the birth of important tango singers like Carlos Gardel who, along with the development of modern cinema and media broadcasting, helped make tango a worldwide success (Collier 1986; Lange 2014). The rise of Peron's populist government – which favoured rural musical genres like *zambas* and *chacareras* – followed by decades of military governments, witnessed the tango's decline and the influx of foreign and alternative musical expressions including Argentine rock and tropical sounds (Chamosa 2010; Favoretto 2016; Vila 1991).

By the mid-1980s, there was a renewed interest in the tango in Argentina, but only after it had – once again – become popular first in Europe and soon afterwards in NYC. This phenomenon was accompanied by the sudden international success of the show *Tango Argentino* and a succession of political crises that ended with the economic debacle of December 2001 (Kanai 2014; Luker 2007). The subsequent devaluation of the Argentine currency opened the floodgates to global tourism in unprecedented ways, a process that has given rise to a booming hospitality industry in Buenos Aires and a plethora of domestic tango initiatives (e.g. tango boutique hotels and tango tours; Dávila 2012; Törnqvist 2013).

In recent years, the tango's popularity has continued to be propelled by a growing number of cultural signs that are not only maneuvered by global industry agents and consumers (e.g. tango tourists) but also by Argentine artists who have greatly profited from a rekindled tango craze. All of this has sparked a renewed interest in the genre by Argentine natives who have found in diverse tango endeavours – from dancing and teaching tango to foreigners to organizing tango tours – a channel for their artistic expression and a viable career path. Today, as in the past, the fate of the tango hinges upon the efforts of both seasoned performers and newcomers who, along

with savvy impresarios, have continued to capitalize on the Argentine tango label.

The Argentine tango's expansion has continued well into the twenty-first century particularly under the sponsorship of Mauricio Macri, the former mayor of Buenos Aires and current president of Argentina. Today, the tango's reterritorialization is palpable in the increasing *tangofication* of Buenos Aires found everywhere in the city – from thematic tango stores to the mushrooming of tango competitions, recitals, and shows taking place year round. This latest tango renaissance has also been bolstered by a “patrimonial activation” of cultural heritage laws and initiatives that have become the object of both governmental and private entrepreneurial efforts in Argentina (Morel 2009).

Buenos Aires, being Argentina's largest and most vibrant metropolis has always been a tango hub (with Montevideo, Uruguay, occupying a second place), some calling it the Mecca of tango dancers (Viladrich 2013; Villa 2015). The marriage between Buenos Aires and tango actually highlights the tensions between an overpopulated urban milieu and a vast countryside, which is mostly represented by alternative cultural and artistic traditions including varied creole and folk musical forms. Popular genres such as *Cumbia Villera* (Shantytown Cumbia from the outskirts of Buenos Aires), *Cuarteto* (from the province of Córdoba) and *Chamamé* (from the Northeast) are more widespread among the contemporary urban poor in Buenos Aires, along with inhabitants from other provinces, than any tango form (Favoretto 2016; Vila and Semán 2011).

As noted in the literature (Dávila 2012; Törnqvist 2013; Savigliano 2005; Viladrich and Castiglione 2014) Buenos Aires has lately become a destination for a new class of global expatriates – especially tango lovers – that feel at ease in a milieu that prides itself on enjoying first-class consumerism and a highbrow lifestyle. Not only is the quality and quantity of tango offerings in Buenos Aires as rich today as it was in the 1940s (Luker 2016; Verdecchia 2009), but it is also in line with the tastes and whims of an affluent international tango clientele. More than one hundred *milongas* (tango dancing parlours) take place every single day in Buenos Aires (Morel 2017), where listening to and dancing the tango is done in formal settings (Taylor 2013) as well as in more relaxed environments (Merritt 2012; Viladrich 2013). Even though the tango is also danced and played in a handful of cities in other provinces (e.g. Rosario and Córdoba) the genre is not widely publicized – or broadly embraced – outside of Argentina's capital. Nonetheless, the tango's reputation as an Argentine genre has been continuously promoted by the national government, particularly the municipality of Buenos Aires.

As a cradle of cultural artifacts that “emerge as negotiation with difference” (Papastergiadis 2005, 48), Buenos Aires is still a place where tango entrepreneurs and artists (both local and foreign) continue to craft some of the

most innovative tango combinations. Against essentialist notions, the increasing global circulation of musical and dancing influences have not resulted in the vanishing of cultural variances (Papastergiadis 2005). Rather than giving rise to cultural homogenization, globalization has driven the production of hybridized, translocal tango styles – both in music and dancing – as a sort of “global *mélange*” (Nederveen Pieterse 2009, 59).

Furthermore, as noted by García Canclini (1995) the hybridization of cultural expressions does not necessarily take place away from autochthonous art forms, and instead are usually fashioned by assorted creative forces found at the core of the developing world. In fact, although Argentine tango musicians and dancers represent a minority in the international entertainment industry, the tango community still acknowledges them as leaders and trendsetters of the genre (Luker 2016; Viladrich 2013). Globalization has accelerated the production of tango mixtures, as well as the symbolic fights over their appropriation and ownership. In what Tzanelli (2008) calls the global circulation of cultural industry signs, tango products are now created and consumed both in Buenos Aires and overseas. Thus, the latest global *tangomania* owes its thanks to a rich assortment of tango products that are manufactured, and transformed, globally.

The next section examines Argentines’ efforts to retain their symbolic right to tango on the basis of their nationality, their innate ability to draw from the tango’s authentic soul and, last but not least, their ongoing investments in tango capital.

### **Tango reterritorialization: embodying tango capital**

Nobody else understands the tango as Argentines do. They [foreigners] may learn the music, follow the lead, and even become professionals; but in the end, they are like *maquinitas* [little machines]. They really don’t understand its meaning [of tango] and they miss the soul and pain that the music carries with it. (Sol, 24 year-old female dancer)

Sol’s blunt perspective is shared by many of her compatriots for whom achieving technical mastery is not synonymous with understanding the tango’s expressive depth. Even those who disagree with Sol would argue that it is not enough to play and dance the tango well – it is only by experiencing the genre’s genuine spirit that foreigners can master it. While in the past, tango authenticity was defined through traditional ways of performing and dancing, in today’s global artistic field it is more about “expressive authenticity” (Dutton 2003). This refers to the extent to which an artistic form conveys the cultural and moral values of the society or culture it claims to represent. Argentine tangos – and the interpretation of them – are considered authentic insofar as they yield “genuine passion,” which means that they are able to express the cultural sensitivities that resonate with the leading

tango styles. Those holding artistic authority over the genre (e.g. reputed Argentine musicians and dancers) are upheld as the most valid emissaries of the tango's authentic essence.

As noted by Nederveen Pieterse (2009) although hybridization is an age-old phenomenon, the discourses surrounding it are not. The latter have multiplied with the rise of cultural globalization. Thus, in today's artistic field, rather than referring to just one kind of tango, Argentine artists acknowledge and even celebrate the novelty – as well as the variety and richness – of an ever-growing range of tango expressions. And despite the multiple *tangoized* styles and products that co-exist in the music industry, Argentines continue promoting themselves as guardians of the genre's authenticity by creating both traditional and avant-garde styles. Example of this phenomenon can be traced is the so-called *tango nuevo* (new tango, Krüger 2015; Merritt 2012) and eclectic musical forms such as electro-tango (Karpp 2017). However, the feverish production of tango mixtures does breed both subtle and not-so-subtle tensions over “who creates and owns what” and “who is truly worthy” of public recognition in the tango field. As noted by Papastergiadis (2005, 48), “the contest over the conceptual and political frame of hybridity is underscored by an unresolved anxiety over authenticity.” Among tango artists, such anxiety is manifested through both covert and overt struggles to deliver, play and dance the most trail-blazing tango pieces.

Argentine performers have indeed made of the term “authenticity” a buzzword that is strategically deployed when promoting themselves and seeking potential employers and patrons. They typically voice such claims of authenticity as a strategy to fend off non-Argentine competitors, insisting that the secret to mastering the genre is – in Sol's words – to “grab the tango's true essence.” For Argentines, talking about their particular performing styles and long-term tango trajectories in Buenos Aires is as important as demonstrating their onstage artistry and technical skills. As investors in their own tango capital, they use their *Argentinitidad* to solidify their positions vis-à-vis artists from other countries. Learning and interpreting the musical scores of Argentine masters or even having played or danced with them, and knowing the urban legends that gave rise to classic tango songs, are invaluable commodities in the transmission of the genre's “real” lifeblood.

Meanwhile, Buenos Aires has continued to engineer an “imagined nostalgia” (Appadurai 1996) that is reified through allegedly pure – almost lost – tango forms. Ingrained in the contemporary search for the “real real” (Hobsbawm 1989; Lindholm 2008) the quest for pristine, traditional artistic expressions has become a sort of obsession among many tango practitioners. For instance, many of Buenos Aires' tango cafes, clubs and academies have lately been revamped, expanded and even reborn in order to meet the demand of tango lovers enthralled by the genre's nostalgic past. The branding of the tango as a unique heritage Argentine product has oiled a



reterritorialization machinery that not only continues to attract tourists to Argentina but also, first and foremost, draws *porteños* (those born in Buenos Aires) into the craze. Tango careers are continuously being forged in Buenos Aires academies, in non-profit and for-profit clubs as well as in the private studios of performers where gifted trainees may soon become itinerant migrants in a global artistic field.

Already a well-known artist by the time I first met her, Sol had been initially introduced to tango at a neighbourhood milonga when she was just a teenager. What started out as a hobby ended up becoming a profitable endeavour that led to her traveling and living overseas most of the time. Sol and her peers represent one of the groups with the greatest territorial mobility, a phenomenon characterized by flexible jobs and long periods of self-employment in different fields (Markusen 2013). Rather than anchoring themselves in one location, performers like Sol tend to try novel transnational routes. These artists' territorial flexibility gives them greater freedom to alternate between occupations (Florida 2014; Viladrich and Castiglione 2014). This strengthens their individual and peer capital which, in the end, is key to their success in the entertainment field (Duester 2015). For aspiring Argentine artists, the chance to make a living in euros and dollars – even through unstable contracts – is a crucial step in their professional careers at least temporarily. Cities such as New York are sought-after holy sites in the tango's global pilgrimage, and a necessary stop in artists' ambitious jet-setting careers. In a sense, these individuals become "cultural pollinizers" that rely on their self-professed creative seeds while profiting from their social capital, in places where the Argentine label has become a *sine qua non* ingredient of transnational creative consumerism.

In countries like the U.S., Argentines' invisibility – in terms of their scarce numbers vis-à-vis other immigrant communities – is disputed by their symbolic stature as performers *par excellence* of the tango. As will be shown in the next section, NYC is a metropolis that looms large in the entrepreneurial imagination of Argentine performers and which, sooner or later, must be visited by those tango artists who seriously hope to solidify their careers both at home and abroad.

### **Tango in New York City: A global tango frenzy meets Argentine locals**

The geography of tango in NYC has changed dramatically since I began conducting research on the topic almost two decades ago. Back then, one could identify two distinct tango enclaves. On the one hand, a local tango circuit (mostly in Queens and Brooklyn) was led by an Argentine old guard that arrived in the U.S. in the 1960s and 1970s, and was later joined by various other Latino groups. A Manhattan tango niche, on the other hand, bred a

more cosmopolitan (younger and more educated) crowd. Since then, the tango frenzy has expanded to become a widespread phenomenon along with gentrifying forces that have brought the genre across all NYC's bridges and tunnels.

The latest tango trend in NYC began taking shape in the mid-1990s, when Argentines became eligible to enter the U.S. under the visa-waiver programme. It was then that the "importation" of Argentine artists helped promote and solidify the primacy of the Argentine version of the tango in the U.S. Although the genre experienced a temporary backlash following the tragic events of September 11, 2001 and, subsequently, the termination of the visa-waiver programme in early 2002, the tango industry in NYC – and the Argentine presence within it – has continued to flourish ever since.

The number of Argentines in the U.S. is nevertheless meager in comparison with other immigrant groups; in fact, they are the 14th-largest population of Hispanic origin living in the U.S., or 0.5% of the total Hispanic population (López 2015). Argentines are also a numeric minority in the tango scene in NYC, where, as in the case of other South Americans (such as Brazilians) they have remained largely invisible (Margolis 2013). This phenomenon is also evident geographically. As of today, there is no identifiable Argentine enclave in NYC, aside from the remnants of an Argentine neighbourhood in Elmhurst (Queens) that was established by an earlier wave of Argentine immigrants (Freidenberg and Masuelli 1998; Viladrich 2013).

According to the U.S. Census (USCB 2015), New York State has the third largest population of Argentines in the country (24,969) with Florida presenting the largest number (57,260). Argentines' predilection for large metropolitan areas is evident when looking at urban populations. Of major U.S. cities, NYC has the most Argentines (15,169) followed by Los Angeles (8,570) and Miami (4,891; USCB 2015). Along with the mounting Argentine presence in the U.S. tango world, the overall Argentine population has more than doubled in the past twenty years, growing from 103,000 to 243,000 over the period (López 2015). More striking is the fact that Argentine tango artists' sociodemographic profile correlates with larger demographic trends in the U.S. In 2015, close to 70% of Argentines were first generation immigrants, young (38 years old on average) and had higher educational levels and income than the overall U.S. population (USCB 2015). Furthermore, Argentines' tendency to perceive themselves as "white" is reinforced by the racial and ethnic profile of the NYC tango landscape, which is characterized by the predominance of middle and upper-middle class white tango aficionados, both American and foreign (Viladrich 2013).

What about the current NYC geography of Argentine tango? On any given day of the week, there are between six and eight milongas and *prácticas* (informal workshops) to choose from, located mostly in Manhattan, Brooklyn and Queens. In the summer, the Argentine tango offer is even more varied as

it moves to the streets, parks and even to Lincoln Center. As nomads, tango regulars of all nationalities – many of whom have plenty of money and time to spare – follow dancing troupes all over the city: from the hot summer *práctica* in Central Park (on Sundays, by the Shakespeare statue) to the nightly salons.

In Buenos Aires, non-Argentine artists could not easily challenge locals' expertise; however, in NYC, regardless of nationality, the performativity of authenticity is deftly manufactured as a tool for accruing tango capital in an increasingly saturated artistic field. The frequent use of Argentine slang terms such as *Mala Leche*, meaning "bad luck" (literally "bad milk") as names for tango milongas in NYC is striking, particularly in the case of those hosted by non-Argentines. Thus, Argentines' reterritorialization efforts have become more urgent in the city as their reputation as holders of tango expertise is fiercely contested by a plethora of international practitioners, some of whom began their careers as students of Argentine tango pioneers, learned the tricks of the trade and ended up becoming tango pros in their own right. Nevertheless, competition among performers in the entertainment industry does not preclude cross-national collaborations, particularly when it means strengthening joint tango ventures. The tango field is still very bountiful and in the words of one Argentine tango entrepreneur in NYC: *aquí hay lugar para todos* (here, there is room for everyone).

In line with Grazian's study (2005) on contemporary urban blues clubs in Chicago, the search for the tango's authenticity in cities such as NYC or London has fed a blossoming market of musical and dancing repertoires – from traditional to experimental tango – that vie for prominence in the artistic field. As noted earlier, far from simply obeying traditional tango styles, Argentine musicians and dancers, particularly in NYC, innovate constantly by performing and creating hybridized musical forms that combine techno, rock & roll, folkloric music and hip hop in an ever-growing renewal trend (Cara 2009; Luker 2016, 2007; Miller 2014). Furthermore, while much of the sensual corporeality sold by conventional tango shows meets the general public's demand for stereotyped Broadway versions of the genre, the *tango renovación* (tango renovation) has become intrinsic to Argentines' malleable entrepreneurial adventures (Luker 2007).

Milongas hosted by first-generation Argentines in NYC are held in high esteem and, in the absence of other sociospatial ethnic enclaves, they provide venues for Argentine locals and visitors to hang out with their compatriots. As noted earlier by Savigliano (1995), even Argentines who despise tango at home, love it when they settle abroad and many may be moved to tears when listening to an interpretation of Astor Piazzola's *Adios Nonino* at one of the many tango ballrooms in NYC. Thus, one of the principal strategies of Argentine entrepreneurs in this city has been to cast their tango venues as genuine Argentine functions. When reviewing one of the popular

Argentine milongas named *La Nacional*, Widyolar (2017), from the online magazine *New York Latin Culture*, reported:

Tango La Nacional, Thursdays at La Nacional in Chelsea, is the New York City Milonga that gets as close to Buenos Aires as you can get in New York. The organizers Juan Pablo Vicente and Coco Arregui, and the house DJ Maria Jose are Argentine. They carefully manage the room to create a nice energy. 2018 is Tango La Nacional's 20th anniversary so they must be doing something right.

For almost twenty years, *La Nacional* has continued to host what is considered probably the "most authentic" tango milonga in NYC, a place that offers a one-of-a-kind Argentine ambiance. There, you can dance and listen to tango while enjoying a drink called *Coca con fernet* (Coca-Cola with Fernet, an Italian-style herb-based spirit) and eat *empanadas* made and sold by an Argentine local. *La Nacional*, along with a handful of other tango venues, offers a *mise-en-scène* of the ethnic authenticity that allegedly mimics the one found in Buenos Aires' *barrios*. Their hosts welcome a plethora of talented Argentine guests, such as Sol, whose presence attract both regular and new customers.

Even though a handful of Argentine artists in NYC are both tango dancers and musicians, there are several differences between these two groups. Argentine dancers have more chances to hone their instructional, acting and social skills as teachers, milonga hosts and performers; musicians on the other hand, are constrained by the limited demand for live music – most milongas play recorded tunes. In contrast to Buenos Aires, where listening to both traditional and modern tango bands in a sort of café-concert style has become the latest trend, tango in NYC is mostly a dancing *métier*. Tango musicians in this city, including a small number of part-time tango singers, tend to play in ensembles that are set up for watching and listening, rather than dancing. In order to make ends meet, they usually embrace a wider musical repertoire including jazz, classical, and folk music. Most Argentines also note differences in the way tango is danced in NYC versus Buenos Aires. They mention the influence of Broadway styles and a preference for acrobatic and hybridized moves, which, they claim, taint the practice of Argentine tango. As in other settings like Amsterdam (Davis 2015) Argentine tango in NYC is one of many dishes in a vast menu of genres aimed at satisfying New Yorkers' voracious musical appetites.

The next section presents a more intimate portrait of Argentine performers' trajectories in NYC, as a lens through which to further understand their accrual of tango capital toward achieving success in the artistic field.

### **Migrant tangos: manufacturing authenticity in a competitive field**

On an April evening I arrived at a fundraising gala in NYC, when I was suddenly struck by the 2 × 4 tempo of an enthralling tango *canción* (song) that seemed to harmoniously envelop the whole venue. The melodies were coming from a

tango ensemble—a singer, bandoneón, piano, violin and bass musicians—that played some classics and neotango pieces (mostly Piazzolla’s) along with some original scores. Out of five interpreters, only two were Argentines, and all performed with gusto and high technicality. I decided to wait for a break in their concert to approach them. Almost instinctively I addressed the bandoneón player, a guy in his early 30s, and greeted him in Spanish: “*Hola ... Sos argentino, no?*” (“Hi, you are Argentine, right?”) “Yes, how did you know?” He answered. “Because of the way you played,” to which he replied, “I know, I know ...”

In the course of our brief introduction, Nando and I had subtly referred to something that had little to do with his technical mastery in playing tango. Common among the descriptions of Argentine musicians and dancers is that they perform *con garra y sentimiento* (literally, with claw and feeling) terms that combine a heavy dose of stamina, desire and a sorrowful longing. Allegedly, Nando executed his music with dramatic passion, vigour and pain – emotions that were undoubtedly conveyed through his theatrical body language. The bandoneón, an instrument similar to the concertina that Nando played quite well, is considered one of the most beautiful and difficult to master and has become synonymous with tango music worldwide. It is also in Argentina where the best bandoneóns are built, and where both aspiring and seasoned players (from all over the world) travel to take lessons and play with the best (Luker 2016).

Nando’s performance in one of the most celebrated venues in NYC meant that he had achieved two of the main requirements in the reproduction of his tango capital: technical expertise and public recognition. Performers like Nando are cosmopolitan and educated individuals and members of an international creative class. They are ready to set foot in some of the most exciting, diverse and profitable hubs – everywhere from NYC to Shanghai – cities that, despite their specificities, are interconnected on the basis of global cultural and financial trade (Dávila 2012; Zukin, Kasinitz, and Chen 2016). Migrants like Nando are conspicuously aware of the competitive and versatile artistic field in which they must craft distinctive artistic personas in order to be acknowledged as genuine representatives of Argentine tango. Besides his musical talent and powerful public demeanour, Nando displayed an innate capacity to combine different styles in an eclectic repertoire that drew elements from American jazz, blues and Argentine folk, which together ended up (in Nando’s words) becoming “authentic tango music, that comes from the soul.”

In tune with the earlier observations of Román-Velázquez (1999) in salsa clubs in London, tango aficionados and professionals in NYC participate in local and global geographies of power, within and outside the music and dancing field. The NYC tango world is not therefore delimited by topographical boundaries but by the interpersonal connections that artists make – and maintain – with other clubs, patrons and colleagues around the world.

Nando participated in the reproduction of wide artistic networks while at the same time made a stand in NYC's local tango landscape. His success as a performer certainly rested on his ability to articulate his local-global connections in ingenious ways – he played and toured in several places throughout the year, while forging liaisons (i.e. recording) with artists from NYC, Buenos Aires and other locales.

Nevertheless, Nando's life was not as flamboyant as his tango persona might appear at first glance. Although his career is not that different from the lives of other creative workers in the post-industrial world, what made it distinct was the fact that he came from a developing country and was a holder of a temporary visa. As in Nando's case, Argentine artists' full membership in society is daily hampered by a fragile – and even unauthorised – legal status (Kasinitz 2012). Contrary to many European artists who hold "first-class passports," and therefore are eligible for the visa-waiver programme that allows them to come and stay in the U.S. for up to three months, Argentines generally need a visa to enter the U.S. Most U.S. artist visas are granted on the basis of merit, public acknowledgement and connection that translate into symbolic and social capital. Therefore, those who have proven their value in the tango world are far more likely to find sponsors that will offer them jobs and write letters of support on their behalf. Fortunately, Nando's steady investment in his tango capital eventually paid off. At a follow-up encounter, I learned that he had just been offered a full-time job with a touring musical company and had been given a U.S. artist visa.

### **Conclusions: embracing the tango's *Aleph* in the global village**

Writing about music and dance is both an exciting temptation and an unalterable faith. As is the case with other creative artifacts that feed on immigrants' identity anguish in the diaspora, scholars interested in migratory phenomena are prone to falling under the spell of their melodic repertoires. In a sense, music represents a quintessential metaphor for understanding migration as a polyfunctional singularity. As muses that turn their lure into corporeal realities, interpreters, composers and dancers transport themselves – along with their syncopated harmonies – to new destinations, while being swept off their feet (literally) in order to follow the tunes and moves they have created, and that will eventually take them to unchartered territories.

This essay's opening vignette recounted President Obama's first foray into the tango world in the city of Buenos Aires, an account that epitomizes the confluence of several phenomena discussed in this essay, specifically the deterritorialization of tango music and dancing vis-à-vis its reterritorialization by the same Argentines who initially took it abroad. Obama's tango steps summarize – graphically and symbolically – the uncanny power of tango as a signifier of cultural heritage and Argentine national identity. By the mid-

twentieth-century, the tango in Buenos Aires had already become a well-shaped expression of the nation-state, an invention, in Hobsbawm's words (1989), that would fit into the sanitized version of modernity in tune with urban ideals of progress, which were soon divorced from the alleged backward rural countryside. Through time, the tango's hybridized origins (mostly its creole and black roots) were erased, creating a refined – and white – trend. Today, the social diversity and the hybrid expressions of tango are no longer rejected but celebrated in a sort of post-modernity fête of multicultural tastes.

Meanwhile, Buenos Aires's reterritorialization efforts are being supported by a profitable tango industry that has encouraged a two-way population stream. On the one hand, it has spearheaded a continuous influx of foreign tourists and international performers; on the other hand, it has nurtured a domestic labour force of tango aficionados, many of whom will eventually become tango émigrés. The fact that Argentines find each other in diverse tango venues around the world, and particularly in NYC, speaks to the literal creation of a wide-reaching network of transnational cultural workers.

In tune with the hybridization of arts forms (Papastergiadis 2005), Argentines' tango endeavours are also an expression of cultural and economic globalization in the entertainment field. Today's successful tango forms conflate tango tempos with jazz, *candombe* and creolized salsa steps. By embracing their creatively mixed arrangements, Argentines reassert their place in wide-reaching entertainment circuits while proclaiming their roles as leaders of the genre. In the end, the "made-in-Argentina" and "by Argentines" tango brands have continued to feed Argentines' auto-exoticism.

The analysis of the tango scene in NYC has served as a case study to explore the reterritorialization efforts that eventually help Argentines reinforce their positions vis-à-vis non-Argentine performers. It is in a competitive milieu where Argentine artists are called upon to protect their ethnic capital from foreign virtuosos and talented neophytes – many of whom will eventually become successful tango entrepreneurs in their own right. Meanwhile, Argentines continue their attempts to overcome the deterritorialization forces that tend to make the tango borderless and stateless by relating to their Buenos Aires' roots both discursively and performativity. In the end, Argentines' commitment to their shared national heritage has become a *tour de force* through which they hope to continue conquering foreign audiences, while keeping their symbolic allegiance to Buenos Aires' *tangoized* spirit.

Buenos Aires has lately embraced the tango vortex as a sort of Borgesian *Aleph* (Borges, Monegal, and Reid 1981) and a point of confluence for Argentine artists, foreign tourists and worldwide tango workers who flaunt their art alternatively in NYC, London or Tokyo. In spite of the tango's globalization, or perhaps because of it, Argentine artists continue to promote the mystique

contained in their tangos' manufactured nostalgia. And they do so by embodying its authenticity, in its different forms, and teaching others what tango is – or is supposed to be – in all its rich, and even contradictory, musical rhythms and dancing manifestations.

### Note

1. For more than a decade, I conducted ethnographic research on tango (alone and with colleagues) in Argentina and the U.S. A detailed description of the methods utilized in this project have been thoroughly outlined in several of my peer-reviewed publications, including a book (see Viladrich 2013; 2005a, 2005b).

### Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the editors of this special issue, Marco Martiniello and Phil Kasnitz, for their vision in forging novel transnational connections between music and migration. Their enthusiastic support of my work was what inspired me to write this piece. I would also like to express my gratitude to the Journal's editors, Martin Bulmer, John Solomos, and Amanda Eastell-Bleakley, as well as Celia Boggust (from the editorial office) for their helpful insights and for promptly moving forward with the revisions of this article. Three anonymous reviewers provided useful and timely criticism to my article. My friends Ana Wortman, Gabriela Chistik and Flavio Martín Adam helped me shape key ideas regarding the current tango scene in Buenos Aires and beyond. I also want to thank my wonderful editor, Slava Faybysh, who helped me streamline this essay, and Stephen Pekar, who could not have been a better emotional and intellectual ally.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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