

**LATIN AMERICAN  
POPULAR CULTURE**

*An Introduction*

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## Introduction

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What many call popular culture refers to the set of images, practices, and interactions that distinguishes a community and often serves as a synonym for national identity. More comprehensively, popular culture, as the term appears throughout this book, defines everyday culture. It identifies a set of behavioral practices with pervasive, ordinary character and acknowledges the general acceptance of these practices, their roots in common knowledge, and their frequent expression in nonwritten form. Because the literacy rate in most Latin American countries before the 1990s never exceeded 50 percent, reading and writing have not been the primary vehicles for expressing this prevailing culture. Rather, as the essays in this book reveal, oral traditions, music, visual imagery, dance, and family food represent the unique community character that forms much of popular culture. As with religion, a basic common pattern exists, but it is enriched and enlivened by the vernacular.

Furthermore, popular culture encapsulates the pleasure in everyday life. It offers moments of laughter (through jokes deriding political leaders regarding the economy, and mocking social betters, and simple foolishness); of delight in jobs well done (whether cooking or plowing, fixing a carburetor or setting a table with flowers); of escape from dreary daily life (in festivals or drinking, romance or dreams created by comic books and television); and of living well (by listening to current music, dancing the latest steps, or wearing the hottest fashions). As popular culture instills the pleasure in everyday life, it makes life memorable. It reorganizes the past and promotes the intriguing aspects of national culture. It creates local heroes accessible to everyday people—the best dancer, the best drinker, the best soccer player, the best cook, each of whom earns a place in the galaxy of neighborhood stars. As well, popular culture draws links to national heroes and attaches them in some way to the local community. The narratives connecting national figures to local affairs give texture and dimension to social interaction by becoming the references for anecdotes, expressions, and memories.

Often popular culture has a raw edge bordering on, or crossing into, vulgarity, with sexual innuendo, rich profanity, and ethnic slurs. Beyond its local character, widespread acceptance, and humor, therefore, popular culture

transgresses social, religious, and political boundaries. This insistent challenge to society's hierarchy finds expression by turning the world upside down during Carnival, in dancing the forbidden jarabe, tango, Charleston, or samba, and in repeating socially inappropriate, often profane, stories and gossip. Transgression hints at violence—which sometimes occurs. Its transgressive current makes popular culture at times a little daring and a little risky, giving people the delightful thrill of breaking the rules and of putting one over on authority.

## I

Popular culture has served throughout Latin America as a means to display identity, as an activity to produce momentary and playful pleasure, and as a way to joke. The identity can be expressed in individual, group, regional, or national terms; the pleasure can be enjoyed by participants and spectators; and the humor becomes a common weapon of the weak.

The humorous element of popular culture is the least known, perhaps because it has an ephemeral and elusive nature. Nevertheless, traces of historical humor survive that demonstrate the style and versatility of popular culture in its humorous forms. For example, missionaries from Spain's northern marches (today the U.S.-Mexican border region) regularly reported that Indian neophytes repeatedly made mistakes in simple religious rituals. Their accounts stressed the childlike learning ability of indigenous peoples, but in their near-sighted and indulgent benevolence, the friars missed the treacherous and therefore subversive ways the Indians used these religious performances as occasions for sly humor.<sup>1</sup> The so-called mistakes or parody of rituals, especially religious practices, paralleled similar behavior in Europe and represented one form of popular satire.

Marginal peoples—the poor, the enslaved, women—historically have manipulated cultural forms to their own benefit, and in doing so they have sometimes succeeded in producing humorous incidents for the pleasure of an attentive audience. An example is the reaction of the willful Doña Mariana Belunse y Salazar of Lima (1775–1800?; see her portrait on the book cover) to an arranged marriage to an old, wealthy count, whom she described as “uglier than an excommunication.” Arranged marriages were not unusual, nor was the bride's disappointment, but Doña Mariana's action was. She demanded a year of grace before consummating the marriage. Once she secured her stipulation, she slipped into a convent. Her sulky defiance of the count's insistence that she fulfill her bridal duties delighted Lima's public. Wags soon suggested in ribald limericks that the count lacked the prowess to control and satisfy his young wife. The public insults laid to his masculinity and his honor drove the count to intense sexual indulgence that soon carried him to his death. The amused public then saw Doña Mariana emerge from the cloister a virgin, a widow, and a wealthy young woman.<sup>2</sup>

The humorous engagement of political satire has long been a part of Latin American popular culture. Holiday celebrations in particular offer opportunities for the sardonic review of officials. During the seventeenth century, Corpus Christi, the most important religious festival in colonial Mexico City, occasioned widespread antihierarchical satire. Masked groups took over sections of the city at night. They closed off the streets and performed parodies of colonial bureaucrats and high-placed clergy. Puppet shows operated well past midnight, with presentations lampooning these same officials. In the eighteenth century, agents of the Inquisition confiscated over 200 satirical poems aimed at colonial authorities. Most of the poems probably came from the ubiquitous taverns, where authors composed and read their works. Despite the bans against political and religious satire, authors continued to circulate them, and some of these verses even worked their way into popular music and dances of the day.<sup>3</sup>

A recent occasion for popular satire followed the public exposure of the corruption and scandal in the administration of the former President of Mexico, Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988–1994). Everyday Mexicans tendered public judgment by selling Salinas masks on street corners, T-shirts picturing the imaginary monster the *chupacabra* (the goat-blood sucker) with Salinas's head, and miniature statues of the former president in prison pinstripes.<sup>4</sup> These incidents show humor used as a device for shaming brazen authorities, as a commentary on onerous cultural practices, and as a method of passing judgment on government figures. Humor invests popular culture with a wonderful sense of whimsy that turns from obvious jokes to more subtle, sardonic images and forms. Humor also appears in music, art, and handicrafts; it helps make popular culture pleasurable. At the same time, these expressions reveal the deep grain of humor that runs through popular culture in Latin America.

## II

An enduring feature of popular culture is its incessant give-and-take with high or elite cultures. Art generally has been appropriated by high culture; nevertheless, numerous popular forms exist, and the reciprocity between elite and everyday forms can be illustrated using art. Cartoons and portraits provide examples. *Latin American cartoonists* have adapted high art styles and techniques to illustrate their comic books and caricatures. They have used the styles of art nouveau, art deco, romanticism, and realism (including photography); a few have even used the wild extravagance of Antoni Gaudí, the Catalan architect. José G. Cruz created montages of drawing and photography in his photo-stories (a kind of comic book) of El Santo, the Mexican professional wrestler, that owe an enormous debt to surrealism. Cartoons and caricatures in turn have inspired well-known Latin American artists, among them Fernando Botero of Colombia and Miguel Covarrubias of Mexico, who for a

time drew stylish caricatures that appeared in *Vanity Fair*.<sup>5</sup> The language of comic books inspired such authors as Mario Vargas Llosa, who in *Los Cachorros* relies on the onomatopoeia of comic strip dialogue, while novelists such as Miguel Cervantes have supplied plot lines and adventures for cartoon characters. The interchange of forms and styles between high and low cultures enriches both.<sup>6</sup>

Elite culture rarely acknowledges its sources, nor does it draw on satire and irony to the same extent that popular culture does. Nevertheless, Latin American popular artists known and unknown have created images recognized throughout their nations and have devoted themselves to creating beauty in everyday life. This effort often takes subtly different forms for different people. Cooks, dancers, carpenters, and writers all see beauty slightly differently. And, even less apparent to many people, beauty exists for those who open their senses to the perfectly whistled song, the imaginatively whittled cane, the fresh smell of newly washed clothes. Often inspired by academic painting, popular art falls on a spectrum from ephemeral Day of the Dead grave paintings made from flower petals and colored sawdust to such utilitarian objects as furniture and cooking utensils. Even a cursory examination of art, both academic and popular, suggests that perhaps the most human activity is the attempt to create beauty in everyday life. In Latin America, this effort has often involved a reciprocal borrowing between popular and high culture.

This constant circular borrowing is evident not only in artifacts and forms but also in performances, during public celebrations, for example, and in everyday activities at home. During holidays, some people parody elite behavior, crowning kings and queens of Carnival, while elites go “slumming”—performing lower-class dances and dressing in what they regard as popular costumes. At home, food at times demonstrates this interaction. The well-known dessert *tres leches* offers a striking example of circularity. The Carnation Concentrated Milk Company wanted to boost its sales of canned milk. The company’s home economists developed recipes, including one for a three-milk dessert, that appeared on can labels. During the 1920s, Carnation began exporting to Central America, especially Nicaragua, where housewives, wishing to introduce a foreign delicacy to the dinner table, began offering *tres leches* for dessert. Nicaraguans adopted the popular sweet as the national dessert. Today, chic Miami Caribbean-Central American restaurants offer it as a dessert to elites as Nicaraguan taramisu. What might be considered an example of cultural imperialism at one time, as a popular food at another, and as elite cuisine later has also become the treasured recipe of a Sonora, Mexico, family that owns a Tucson restaurant.<sup>7</sup> Above all, the dessert illustrates the circulation of culture among social groups across international boundaries and the creative appropriation and reshaping by individuals of elements of that culture.

Popular music also reflects a pattern of cultural reciprocity between Latin America and the wider world. During the 1930s, Cuban musicians traveled to

New York City, where they listened to jazz and then took home the instrumentation and improvisation they had heard. The exchange worked both ways, as Afro-Cuban music influenced rhythm-and-blues artists and jazz musicians, including Herbie Mann, George Shearing, and Cal Tjader. Israel López, renowned as the creator of the mambo, played with and influenced Eddie Palmieri and Charlie Mingus.<sup>8</sup> This new Cuban sound created a market for Latin American-inflected recordings in the United States. Tommy Dorsey’s singer Helen O’Connell covered Mexican singles in English and Spanish, and Bing Crosby had a major hit in 1945 with “You Belong to My Heart,” based on Agustín Lara’s popular “Solamente una vez.” In the late 1950s the influence turned back to Latin America with the popularity of U.S. rock-and-roll.

### III

Music production illustrates another reciprocal relation between technology, especially the technology of the mass media, and popular culture. The relationship between popular culture and mass or commercial culture raises troubling questions for theorists that will not be considered here.<sup>9</sup> Instead, the reciprocity between popular culture and the media-enhanced or media-affected culture can be addressed simply by tracing the history of the samba as this local form entered the technology age.

Samba began as neighborhood popular music, some would say as folk music.<sup>10</sup> Ernesto dos Santos, known as Donga, registered the first samba, entitled “Pelo Telefone,” with the Brazilian National Library in 1917. He recognized the potential to make a profit if he protected his work. Other sambistas neither registered their songs nor worried about the songs’ commercial character. By the 1930s the recording industry had improved its technology and, along with radio, had created a widespread market. Recognizing consumer interest, white Brazilian singers sent agents to the hillside favelas to buy Afro-Brazilians sambas to record, paying only a pittance for the material. Ismael Silva sold sambas to white recording stars at first, but, recognizing an opportunity, began recording himself and became an internationally known singer. Other sambistas recalled that unscrupulous record companies held tryouts in local bars. While the composers sang, a company employee would copy the words and music. Later the songs would be sung, recorded, and registered under someone else’s name.

The technology of recording companies and the format of radio programs on which records were played greatly affected samba compositions. Recording companies and radio stations both wanted short musical selections that would fit on records (about three minutes a side) and allow enough broadcast time for advertisements during the program. Moreover, the radio and recording directors wanted sanitized lyrics, stripped of the vulgar, off-color, or socially inappropriate comments that gave samba so much pungency and

vitality. By the 1960s the sambas, especially those used by the samba clubs, called schools, in the Carnival celebration, had lost their immediate connection to everyday life and its struggles. Sambas from this era dealing with the history of slavery, for example, stressed themes of racial harmony in which abolition was portrayed as a gift from whites to grateful blacks. Princessa Isabel and Ruy Barbosa were the heroes in these songs, not Zumbi, the black renegade leader of the Quilombo de Palmares. Curiously, the lyrics often were taken nearly verbatim from primary school textbooks. In this way a popular form became little more than an expression of official history set to music.<sup>11</sup> In the late 1960s younger composers began changing the nature of sambas, which entered a new phase as protest music.

#### IV

The history of the samba is only one example of the politics included in popular culture, which has a long history in Latin America. Some of the most striking examples involve the efforts of political leaders to justify their reign or to consolidate a national identity in support of their agenda. After the conquests, the Spaniards attempted to legitimize their colonial regimes by developing lineages of rule. In Peru, they collected popular stories of rulers and conflated them into an Inca dynasty. The purpose was to create a linear succession in which the Incas, recognized by popular tradition, were followed by the Spaniards as the legitimate rulers of the former Inca empire. Adopting European court practices, the colonial officials had portraits of twelve of the Inca rulers painted. The Inca emperor portraits represented composites of various popular examples of these individuals that became elite art intended to picture succession to the Spanish rule. (The twelve portraits today form part of the South American colonial collection of the Brooklyn Museum of Art.<sup>12</sup>) The entire episode illustrates the invention of traditions whose exact relationship to reality becomes blurred in popular memory.<sup>13</sup>

After 1870, popular culture increasingly formed part of the national character promoted by populist leaders. Politicians such Getúlio Vargas, in Brazil, seized on well-known practices and publicized them as expressions of national identity, as a means of mobilizing a political following. Vargas built on the culture inspired by migrants from Bahia to Rio de Janeiro. In particular, he identified the samba and other Afro-Bahian practices as the true Brazil. Other Latin American populist leaders have made similar use of common practices of the humble population, giving national prominence to everyday culture.

#### V

Latin American popular culture has played a role in the social construction of middle-class self-consciousness, in the self-definition of elite classes, and

in projections of national character. Both elites and emerging middle sectors identified popular culture as the traditions of the lower class. Although at times both groups enjoyed these activities, both also wanted to separate themselves from what they increasingly regarded as coarse traditions.

Latin American leaders and intellectuals after about 1870 struggled with the desire to define their elite character as both cosmopolitan (to demonstrate their place in the modern world) and patriotic (to express their ties to their nation). This dual goal led to a shifting back and forth between elite and popular culture as these individuals sought on the one hand to establish their identity in class, ethnic, and gender terms and on the other to hammer out their social, national, and cosmopolitan character. Their campaign can be seen as both imitation (of European or U.S. standards) and invention (of social and national traditions). Their efforts required decisions to be made about what customs, resources, and fashions expressed the nation in a positive way and what practices identified elite behavior.

Consumption became the sincerest form of imitation. Elites bought imports as a material expression of their claim to cosmopolitan identity. Foreign pianos, clothes, wine, education, and travel—material goods and fashionable practices—represented cosmopolitan society. Chic clothes, luxury home furnishings, and European wines all became status markers. The nature of these goods—their high cost, limited supply, and, often, their French origin—gave them social cachet.<sup>14</sup>

Ironically, France's failure to market general goods resulted in the popularity of French luxury items. The British, Americans, and Germans all managed to reach Latin American markets with cheap, mass-produced goods; the French did not. Addressed to a much smaller, exclusive market, French goods of limited availability and high prices appealed to Latin American elites and became the epitome of exclusive and refined products. Elite consumers eager to separate themselves from the people and culture of their homelands used imports to distinguish themselves. Beverages offer an example. During the mid-nineteenth century, beer became a popular drink, and soon breweries opened in most Latin American countries. Once German pilsner and British ale became widely available, they no longer conferred status on the drinker, and wine became a more important emblem of social standing. Even in Chile and Argentina, where vintners could produce wine, they could not produce champagne, so this sparkling beverage, available only by import from one district in France, became the most important social marker for celebrations.

Seeking recognition as a cultured, cosmopolitan people, Latin American elites wanted to avoid association with the barbaric reputation of their countrymen. Especially repugnant was the general public's potential for disorder, particularly as manifested in streaks of violence and in popular culture's notorious breaches of etiquette. Latin American elites attempted to separate themselves from the commoners by withdrawing behind the walls of their homes,

the doors of exclusive clubs, and the ticket booths of expensive entertainment. They created cultural practices with limited access.

This desire to appear cosmopolitan resulted in strange behavior. Latin American elites disparaged the activities of their fellows as common, vulgar, even barbaric. But if these practices became the fad in Paris, London, or New York, they gained social acceptance at home. Music, dance, or food (today Aztec foods have become part of Mexican haute cuisine) became an emblem of national culture, once acceptance abroad invested the common practices at home with elegance. Brazil's upper- and middle-class society adopted samba after the French ambassador, accompanied by some 100 chic Brazilians, visited the Imperio Serrano Samba School in 1955. When avant-garde Parisians took up the tango from the Buenos Aires underworld, then Argentine socialites quickly followed.

Elite culture established restrictions. The controlling factor might be a high-priced ticket to the opera, say, or the time and education required to gain an appreciation of classical music, golf (clearly a cultural practice, not a sport), or Impressionist art. In other cases, popular practices were abstracted into forms for exhibit in new national museums. Thus, popular knowledge of woodcraft and wildlife was distilled and rendered in the form of natural history displays and mining skills were represented by a scattering of ore samples in geology exhibitions. Composers added instrumentation to traditional music and relocated it from street corners and cabarets to concert halls. Sanitized, popular culture served to create the national identity of Latin American peoples. Popular culture—appropriated by elites, refashioned, stripped of its vulgarity, and generally cleaned up—in the late nineteenth century became *costumbrismo*.

With the rise of programs to modernize Latin American societies in the second half of the nineteenth century, a small middle class began to emerge. Breaking away from popular culture became an act of self-definition for this aspiring group of middling persons hoping to be identified with progressive society. Members of this group sought to distinguish themselves emphatically from the lower classes by promoting, through legislative and moral force, the reform of what they considered the lazy, drunk, and sexually permissive behavior of the unredeemed masses. Punctuality, industry, sobriety, and abstinence became the ideals of the middle class's culture of progress. In local communities, proponents of these values passed laws against vagrancy and public drunkenness, and often restricted prostitution to special zones. Popular culture represented, in many ways, what the middle class said it was not.

Simultaneously, elites intended to put their unique nation on display. These nationalists seized every opportunity to express their identity as a nationality. At world's fairs, international exhibitions, and major, usually centennial, celebrations, civic and cultural leaders displayed the images of their nation and its peoples that they wanted to project to the world and to their

fellow citizens. Rich agricultural potential, untapped mineral and natural resources, available workers—all represented ready themes for promotion at international exhibitions.

Other occasions were manufactured as opportunities to present national values as represented by great leaders. State funerals afforded a particularly impressive moment to make this display. The ceremonies surrounding the funerals of Benito Juárez in Mexico, Jorge Eliécer Gaitán in Colombia, and Che Guevara in Cuba all provided moments for the presentation of Liberal, labor, and revolutionary ideals personified in the dead individual. The state spectacle created for the burial of Evita Perón brought together the mass media, nationalistic pretensions, populist images and rhetoric, and Catholic ritual, reworked in personalistic display.

## VI

The essays in this book examine different expressions of popular cultures, how such cultures and such expressions emerged, who used them, and what changed them. Neither the editors nor the authors have attempted to investigate inherited wisdom, the common knowledge that underlies popular culture and provides the wellspring for the wide-ranging references by which people construct an understanding of themselves. Instead, we focus on the expressions of people's preconceptions and passions. In other words, we examine the waves, not the water.

In introducing the history of Latin America's popular culture, we have identified five threads that form the fabric of the essays that follow. These themes are: 1) the invention of traditions, 2) the creation of national identity, which some call the imagined community,<sup>15</sup> 3) the formation of gender roles, 4) the prevalence of ethnicity—a sharper designation than the category of race—and 5) the dynamic interplay between textual deconstruction and performance analysis that is neither one nor the other but the relationship of the two. Thus, while we might have offered a selection on the formation of the Argentine or Mexican imagined community, we chose instead to include an essay on the Ecuadorian exhibit at the world's fair, an occasion used by national leaders to present their understanding of the Ecuadorian—that is, national—identity. The essay discusses how these leaders invented the “Indian man and woman,” expounding on their ethnicity, gender, and traditions in a changing series of exhibits that individually serve as texts and in their changes over time function as performance.

The chapters in this book show the humor, inventiveness, and determination with which people have used public events to effect more than the event sponsors envisioned. Crafty individuals seized civic and religious rituals to mock authorities, elites joined popular celebrations for the amusement of masquerading as marginal peoples, and leaders attempted to teach political

## Many Chefs in the National Kitchen: Cookbooks and Identity in Nineteenth-Century Mexico

Jeffrey M. Pilcher

*What a propitious subject to discover—household expressions of national culture! Festive meals celebrate family occasions, holy days, and civic holidays. Special dishes represent these celebrations, family identity, and the occupational and ethnic groups in society. Meals serve as ephemeral art expressions of popular history and powerful social symbols. Examples abound. The pit cooking of traditional meats and vegetables in the Peruvian highlands, called Pachamanca, was a ceremony honoring the earth goddess Pachamama.<sup>1</sup> Patricia Quintana wrote a cookbook that followed Mexico's civic and religious calendar and offered the family's recipes for each holiday.<sup>2</sup> Chile's en nogada became the special food for Mexican Independence Day because the dish contains the three colors of the national flag. Popular history recounts that cooks in Puebla, Mexico, created it to honor a visit by one of the first presidents on Independence Day.<sup>3</sup> Other Mexican regions and families have their own Independence Day speciality, such as tamales de espiga (corn pollen) in San Pancho, Morelia.<sup>4</sup> In Peru, bread represented independence and also, when the loaf combined a variety of flours from corn, sweet potato, and other potato tubers, the unity of its different peoples.<sup>5</sup> Many foods, especially sweets, have religious associations, such as the rich Peruvian colonial soup called sopa teóloga, the Mexican Lenten tamales known as tamales de vigilia, and turrón de Doña Pepa—almond sweets associated with the image of Christ of the Miracles, in Lima.<sup>6</sup> As Jeffrey Pilcher shows, food expresses the popular culture and history of the nation.*

Laura Esquivel's best-selling novel, *Like Water for Chocolate*, uncovered an affinity between two usually distinct genres, the romance and the cookbook. The story relates the forbidden love between Tita, who is bound by custom to remain single and care for her widowed mother, and Pedro, who

marries Tita's older sister to be near his beloved. Their passion is expressed—through the magical realism of Latin American literature—in the dishes she feeds him, the *mole poblano* (turkey with chile sauce) she sensuously grinds on the *metate* (grinding stone), and the quail in rose petal sauce that literally burns down the house. The manuscript cookbook in which Tita records these culinary secrets thus becomes part of the novel, inspiring the historian to ask, if a modern author can write recipes into a narrative, what narratives did women of the past write into their recipes?<sup>7</sup> The kitchen tales of nineteenth-century Mexico went far beyond the domestic world of food and love to imagine national communities, although the communities imagined in the published works of male professional chefs differed sharply from those imagined in the manuscript collections of female household cooks.

Attempts by Mexican patriots to forge a national cuisine reflected the deep historical connections between food and identity. Native Americans considered themselves to be “the people of corn” and even placed themselves in a cosmological food chain by offering human sacrifices to maize gods. Europeans, meanwhile, took communion through the medium of wheat—according to Catholic doctrine, the only grain acceptable for the Holy Eucharist. After the conquest, Spanish priests attempted to teach Native Americans to eat wheat as part of their evangelical message. They succeeded on ceremonial occasions—witness the elaborate breads prepared for the Day of the Dead—but maize remained the everyday staple. Over time, corn tortillas became associated with poor Indians and mestizos, while wheat bread was reserved for elite Spaniards and *criollos*.

Following independence, liberal governments sought to abolish the distinctions between Europeans and Native Americans in order to forge a common Mexican nation. Nevertheless, while *criollos* invoked the ancient splendor of the Aztec empire to justify separation from the Spanish empire, they rejected living Indians as culturally backward and unfit for participation in civic life. Native Americans could gain citizenship in the new nation only by sacrificing their traditional lifestyles and adopting the trappings of European culture. Intellectuals sought to inculcate liberal values in the masses through broadly conceived educational campaigns. With varying degrees of success, they used secular education, religious icons, and patriotic festivals to instill a feeling of common purpose. They invented a national cuisine as well, but divisions of race, class, region, and gender frustrated nineteenth-century attempts to serve *la patria* (the fatherland) at the dinner table.

### Many Mexicos, Many Cuisines

Deciding what constituted the authentic national cuisine was of ongoing concern during the nineteenth century. *El cocinero mexicano* (The Mexican Chef), published in 1831, a decade after independence, set the tone for the national

cuisine. The anonymous author adopted a sharply patriotic tone, praising “truly national” spicy dishes and denouncing the delicate European palates unaccustomed to chile peppers.<sup>8</sup> A later edition of the work admitted that foreign dishes appeared in the text, but only after they had been “Mexicanized”—adapted to Mexican tastes.<sup>9</sup> A few years after *The Mexican Chef* appeared, the *Nuevo y sencillo arte de cocina* (New and Simple Art of Cooking) advertised recipes specifically “accommodated to the Mexican palate,” which supposedly had no use for “European stimulants.”<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, Narciso Bassols began his two-volume *La cocinera poblana* (The Puebla Cook) with the pessimistic claim that cookbooks contained an abundance of useless foreign recipes.<sup>11</sup> Vicenta Torres de Rubio reiterated this attack on irrelevant cookbooks, observing that Mexicans neither seasoned nor condimented their food according to European practices.<sup>12</sup> A group of women from Guadaluajara declared that most cookbook authors copied recipes without concern either for quality or utility.<sup>13</sup>

Authors employed a number of devices to define the national cuisine. Chefs cooked everything from stuffed onions to barbecued meat *a la mexicana*, dedicated dishes to national heroes (Moctezuma's dessert, Donato Guerra's cod), and even decorated “monstrous pastries, like those of the middle ages” with portraits of prominent public figures.<sup>14</sup> They explored the national taste for foods such as “patriotic” frijoles, and an 1886 banquet attended by the minister of government and foreign dignitaries featured *mole poblano*, identified as the “national dish.” Writers also celebrated the recognition of their food in foreign countries. In 1898 a newspaper proudly announced that New York's finest restaurants served *mole* and other Mexican dishes.<sup>15</sup>

The audience for this national cuisine was largely confined to the literate middle and upper classes. Over the course of the nineteenth century, about fifteen separate cookbooks were published in Mexico. Multiple editions of these works brought the total number up to nearly forty, with perhaps a few thousand copies printed of each edition, for a total of as many as a hundred thousand cookbooks. Several of these works listed dual publication in Mexico City and abroad, principally Paris, which must have delighted Mexican patriots desiring foreign approval of their national cuisine. About four or five volumes, both new works and reprints of old ones, appeared each decade from 1831 until 1890, and at least eight cookbooks were published in the final decade of the century. Additional recipes printed in domestic manuals, calendars, and newspapers ensured that cooking instructors reached a broad audience, at least among the privileged classes.<sup>16</sup>

The authors of this national cuisine came primarily from the liberal intelligentsia. The anonymous author of *The Mexican Chef* employed many themes of the Enlightenment and denounced Spanish conservatism. His publisher, Mariano Galván Rivera, was a political moderate who produced a series of



famous almanacs as well as women's calendars, travel guides, and textbooks. Although later jailed for supporting the French intervention, Galván had employed liberal ideologue José María Luis Mora in the 1830s to manage his journals. Leading liberal newspaper editors, including Vicente García Torres and Ireneo Paz, also entered the cookbook trade. Vicenta Torres de Rubio, the first woman to publish a cookbook, moved in liberal circles and even included menus from political banquets in her work. Manuel Murguía dedicated a cooking manual to Mexican señoritas in 1856, two years after he printed the first edition of the Mexican national anthem. One of the goals of these writers was to create a sense of national identity through shared cultural values. They observed that Mexicans not only spoke the same language and shared the same history, they also ate the same chiles and frijoles.<sup>17</sup>

While emphasizing national unity, cookbook authors also recognized regional diversity. Common references appeared to the *moles* of Puebla and Oaxaca, the black beans and seafoods of Veracruz, and the grilled meats of Guadalajara and Monterrey. Yet, compared with modern works, nineteenth-century cookbooks included within the national cuisine only a handful of regional traditions, essentially those from areas with heavy Hispanic settlements. The virtual monopoly of *criollo* kitchens becomes apparent in the comparative treatment of *mole*. Puebla's chief rival in producing this dish, the southern state of Oaxaca, is known today as "the land of seven *moles*." But nineteenth-century cookbooks ignored the more indigenous versions of Oaxacan *mole* such as *verde*, a green stew perfumed with the incomparable anise-like fragrance of *hoja santa*. They focused instead on *negro*, a spicy black sauce similar to Puebla's fabled dish. An 1834 volume explained that the *moles* of Puebla and Oaxaca "owe their particular good taste to the types of chiles employed; the first making use of a sweet chile called the *mulato*, and the second from a Oaxacan chile called the *chilohante*."<sup>18</sup>

By defining even chile peppers in *criollo* terms, the nineteenth-century national cuisine ignored a gastronomic geography dating back to pre-Columbian times. Native culinary traditions centered on civilizations such as the Nahuá, Maya, Zapotecs, Mixtecs, and Totonacs—ethnic groups that rarely corresponded to Mexican political boundaries. The Huasteca, for example, split between the states of San Luis Potosí and northern Veracruz, seldom appeared on national maps. This heavily forested region contained only a small Hispanic population of *rancheros* with little political prominence. Nevertheless, large numbers of native communities thrived in the area and developed an enormously sophisticated cuisine. Modern ethnographers have counted forty-two distinct varieties of tamales, including the fabled meterlong *zacahuil*. Other regional dishes, such as the Pacific Coast hominy stew *pozole*, likewise received little notice because of their indigenous associations.<sup>19</sup>

Published cookbooks had little room for the corn cuisine of the streets. One book, supposedly "accommodated to the Mexican palate," contained not

a single recipe for tamales, enchiladas, or quesadillas.<sup>20</sup> Another manual defined tortillas for the benefit of foreign readers, explaining that they appeared on even the most affluent tables in remote provincial cities. The recipes assured Europeans that sophisticated continental cuisine prevailed, at least in Mexico City.<sup>21</sup> And when corn confections did appear, their marginal status was emphasized by their placement in sections designated *almuerzos ligeros* (light brunches).<sup>22</sup> Of course, a lack of written recipes does not prove that elites never ate popular foods. The Indian servants who did the cooking hardly needed instructions for making enchiladas, and virtually all were illiterate anyway. Nevertheless, cookbooks often contained positive censures against the derogation of serving Indian foods. One volume explained that the wealthy had virtually no use for the popular corn drink *atole*.<sup>23</sup> The *Diccionario de cocina* (Dictionary of Cooking), published in 1845, pointedly questioned the morals of any family that ate tamales, the food of the "lower orders."<sup>24</sup>

Even as cooking manuals concentrated on European traditions, clashes between elite and popular conceptions of the national cuisine became obvious, particularly in the streets of Mexico City. Late-eighteenth-century economic growth attracted thousands of rural immigrants, which the city strained to accommodate in hastily built tenement houses. These newcomers brought with them the traditional maize cuisine of the countryside, setting up braziers on any convenient street corner. Curbside *enchiladeras* became ubiquitous, causing officials to complain that virtually every street and plaza in Mexico City had its own resident cook.<sup>25</sup>

Foreign travelers remarked on the enormous variety of foods available from vendors in the capital. Women wandered the streets with baskets of corn confections such as tamales and quesadillas, while men carried improvised ovens with pastries and *barbacoa*. Festas provided the primary focus for popular cuisine, as they had since the days of Moctezuma. In the week before Christmas, people exchanged food and drinks in *posadas*, festive reenactments of the holy family's search for shelter in Bethlehem. All Souls' Day or the Day of the Dead was another popular holiday during which adults offered ritual foods to departed relatives while children devoured candy skeletons. The most spectacular celebration of the year came during Holy Week, when great crowds converged on the capital from distant villages and ranches. Throngs of people danced through the streets, guzzling fruit drinks and devouring ice cream, in a movable feast of popular cuisine.<sup>26</sup>

In the early years of the Republic, Mexicans of all classes participated in these festivals, but the process of modernization brought increasing attempts to restrict lower-class foods. Authorities launched ongoing campaigns against the traffic hazard of street vendors. Sanitary regulations also restricted the sale of vegetables and mushrooms by small-time merchants, at times going to the extreme of banning *chiles rellenos* (stuffed chiles), but these proclamations were invariably repealed because of popular outcry.<sup>27</sup> By 1900 Mexican elites

had come to view popular cuisine not only as unfashionable, but also as a positive menace to society. Using language from the newly developed science of nutrition, Francisco Bulnes attributed Indian backwardness to the supposed inadequacy of maize-based diets. Julio Guerrero went further stating that criminal behavior resulted from the "abominable" foods eaten by the lower classes.<sup>28</sup>

Even sympathetic authors expressed a marked ambivalence about the acceptability of the national cuisine. An 1897 editorial in *El Imparcial* entitled "The influence of *mole*" and signed pseudonymously by Guajolote (Turkey) wavered between nostalgic love and bourgeois scorn. "Baptisms, confirmations, birthdays, weddings, even last rites and funerals, to merit the name, have to be accompanied by the national dish, be it green like hope, yellow like rancor, black like jealousy, or red like homicide, but in abundance, in a broad *cazuela*, thick, pungent, with metallic reflections, speckled with sesame seeds, a magical surface." Guajolote attributed both the genius and the defects of the national character to the influence of chile peppers, then concluded with a warning. "Doctors counsel parsimonious use, even if it be *en nogada*, of this other enemy of the heart, that combined with *pulque* and tortillas, serves as fuel for the untiring machine of the proletarians and even of some who are not."<sup>29</sup>

Reform efforts therefore emphasized public cooking classes as a means of weaning the lower classes from corn and chile peppers. Not coincidentally, police inspectors led the recruiting campaign, an indication of the perceived importance of diet in maintaining social order. The classes, used to attract students to vocational schools, emphasized European models, such as modest French family cooking. Teachers inveighed against the "disgraceful habit" of eating spicy foods and advised their students to give up popular Mexican dishes in favor of English cooking—a drastic measure indeed.<sup>30</sup> Cookbook author Jacinto Anduiza summed up the belief that culinary techniques would contribute to the process of education that would level society, in other words, eradicate popular practices seen as immoral by European elites.<sup>31</sup>

### European Fashions, *Criollo* Tastes

Fanny Calderón de la Barca, the Scottish wife of Spain's first minister to independent Mexico, wrote scornfully of the elite's clumsy attempts to imitate European cuisine. She described one of her first meals after arriving in port as "the worst of Spanish, Vera-Cruzified." Parisian chefs employed in the capital's wealthiest homes produced no better results; she thought one dish resembled mining slag. Mexican culinary skills, whether in carving meat, seasoning stews, or dressing tables, invariably fell short of her exacting standards. Yet eventually she stopped drawing comparisons with Europe, accepted Mexican cooking on its own merits, and, on her departure in 1842, wrote that "Veracruz cookery, which two years ago I thought detestable, now appears to

me delicious."<sup>32</sup> Fanny's experience revealed that even the most dedicated followers of European fashion imparted a uniquely Mexican flavor to their cooking. The elite's deep aversion to the lower classes nevertheless kept them from accepting native foods as part of the national cuisine.

Like the upper crust from New York to St. Petersburg, wealthy Mexicans cultivated a taste for French haute cuisine prepared by male chefs. France had begun to assert a culinary hegemony over Europe at the dawn of the eighteenth century, when the Sun King Louis XIV's absolutist policies had shorn nobles of their political power. With few social functions beyond dueling and the salons, bored aristocrats turned for diversion to such pastimes as music, painting, and cooking. This aristocracy of the spoon, which actually included many members of the middle classes, rejected the heavily spiced foods of the Middle Ages and adopted the Enlightenment ideal that cooks should reveal rather than distort the true nature of foods. In the first decades of the nineteenth century, chef Antonin Carême perfected the laborious and expensive techniques of classical French cuisine. Beginning with *fonds*, deeply flavored broths, he performed a complex alchemy by concentrating and reducing, adding and extracting, garnishing and gilding, to return in the end to a simple and unified whole. Although Carême worked for only the wealthiest of aristocrats, other chefs such as Jules Gouffé extended *la grande cuisine* to a bourgeois audience, a process that culminated under Auguste Escoffier in the *fin de siècle* Age of Great Hotels.<sup>33</sup>

French culinary influence in Mexico cannot be dated with precision. Many writers date the arrival of continental cuisine to the French intervention, 1862–1867, but this is too late by at least a decade. Even a century earlier, manuscript cookbooks displayed an affinity for French names but not for the new techniques.<sup>34</sup> The first published works of the early republic demonstrated greater command of this exacting art. Gallie styles seem to have gradually displaced colonial dishes of Iberian descent over the course of the nineteenth century, even as Spain itself declined in political and cultural influence. Indeed, the disastrous war with the United States that terminated Spain's empire in America coincided with the 1898 opening by Escoffier and César Ritz of the Carlton, Europe's most fashionable hotel.<sup>35</sup>

Continental influences came to permeate nineteenth-century Mexican cooking literature. Kitchen manuals and the women's pages of newspapers contained recipes for Parisian soup, hollandaise sauce, eggs in aspic, truffled pheasant, chicken cardinal, *vol-au-vent à la financier*, and *bûche à la Chateaubriand*.<sup>36</sup> For women unwilling to spend hours preparing such dishes and unable to employ a chef to do it for them, specialty shops sold gourmet pâté and pastry. Wine merchants imported hams, cheese, olive oil, and salted fish, in addition to barrels of Bordeaux wine and Jerez sherry.<sup>37</sup> Mexicans could also enjoy the pleasures of Parisian dining vicariously through translations of French writings. Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin's *Physiology of Taste*,

one of the masterpieces of culinary literature, appeared in its first Mexican edition in 1852, a few decades after its publication in French. In 1893 a Mexican press issued a special edition of the celebrated cookbook by Jules Gouffé, former chef of the Paris Jockey Club.<sup>38</sup>

Aspiring gourmets indulged their appetites for continental cuisine in Mexico City restaurants and social clubs. In the 1850s, the Tyvoli of San Cosme began offering fine dining in an idyllic setting. Tuxedo-clad waiters moved smoothly through the tree-lined courtyard with platters of *noix de veau diplomate* and *becassines à la cavalière*. The magnificent Chapultepec Castle, illuminated in the distance by moonlight, lent a romantic air unsurpassed even by the view of the Notre Dame Cathedral from La Tour d'Argent. In 1870 another Tyvoli opened in Tlalpan, catering to Mexico City's wealthy people who fled the urban hustle, particularly during the riotous celebrations of Holy Week.<sup>39</sup> By the end of the century, talented chefs such as Paul Laville and V. Barattes could sell their talents to the highest bidders from a number of exclusive restaurants and social clubs. Mexico's greatest coup in international dining came in 1891, when Don Ignacio de la Torre y Mier persuaded the celebrated Parisian chef Sylvain Daumont to come to Mexico City. The Frenchman caused such a sensation that within a year he left the Mexican millionaire to open his own restaurant.<sup>40</sup>

Banquet menus testify to the cosmopolitan tastes of the country's leaders. An anonymous mid-nineteenth-century painting hanging in the National Museum of History at Chapultepec Castle and portraying a feast for a General León of Oaxaca shows the symmetrical place settings, the multiple dishes, and the innumerable wine bottles of classical continental cuisine. A dinner for five hundred held in the National Theater to celebrate President Porfirio Díaz's birthday in 1891 featured French food, wines, and cognac. Only men were seated for this banquet; their wives had to view the proceedings from the theater's box seats, an indication of their exclusion from full citizenship in this patriarchal nation. Meanwhile, provincial elites paid lavish sums to rent French chefs for important events such as a 1903 Monterrey banquet for Governor Bernardo Reyes. The quest for imported civility reached its pinnacle in 1910 during the centennial celebration of independence in a series of banquets honoring President Díaz, cabinet members, and foreign dignitaries. Not a single Mexican dish appeared at any of the score of dinners dedicated to this patriotic occasion. Sylvain Daumont served most of the food, and G. H. Mumm provided all of the champagne. Even the Mexican colony in New York commemorated the centennial with French food.<sup>41</sup>

Notwithstanding this desire to appear cosmopolitan, Mexicans demanded a uniquely national flavor in their haute cuisine. Foreigners such as Fanny Calderón de la Barca often made scathing comments about their inability to execute properly European culinary techniques. Critical Mexicans likewise recognized that continental dishes underwent a process of creolization. Anto-

nio García Cubas lampooned the pretentious Tyvoli restaurant, wondering who had granted diplomatic credentials to a piece of veal and predicting that anyone who ate the horseman's snipe would receive spurs to the stomach. He noted that many dishes parading as French bore little resemblance to Parisian preparations.<sup>42</sup> These differences, while appearing outlandish to contemporaries, provide modern readers with valuable clues to the nature of Mexico's national cuisine.

Chile peppers constituted the greatest shock to foreign palates. Mexican *adobos*, for example, differed from the marinades used to preserve meat in Europe principally because they included chiles. The eighteenth-century French culinary revolution had banished such sharply spiced foods common to medieval and early modern Europe. The Enlightenment ideal of flavors—"exquisite but not strong"—left Mexican cuisine as a self-conscious anachronism.<sup>43</sup> Some obsequious cooking experts conceded this point and joined Europeans in denouncing spicy foods. More nationalistic authors bitterly refuted the European opinion of peppers as poisonous and condemned the continental "war against stimulants, principally chiles."<sup>44</sup>

Another characteristic of Mexican elite cuisine was the profusion of meat. A quick glance at any nineteenth-century cookbook reveals an enormous variety of seasonings and dressings for meat.<sup>45</sup> Nor was this creativity limited to cookbooks; women prepared these diverse recipes on a daily basis. One foreign traveler observed that wealthy families ate the same meats prepared in different styles several times a week.<sup>46</sup> Fanny Calderón de la Barca described plates filled with meat, fish, and fowl served indiscriminately at every meal. She recorded that the wealthy ate meat for virtually every meal and in astonishing quantities, more than in any other country in the world.<sup>47</sup> Visitors from Europe and the United States almost invariably criticized Mexican meat dishes as overcooked. An Englishman, lamenting the lack of juicy roast beef, blamed local butchers for cutting meat in a "slovenly and injudicious manner."<sup>48</sup> In fact, tradesmen carved beef to suit their customers' preference for well-done steaks. Mexicans abhorred the dripping, rare fillets served in Europe and cut their meat into thin strips, pounding and marinating to tenderize them. Such techniques often constituted the "Mexicanization" of European dishes: a recipe for *biftec à la Chateaubriand* appears to foreigners like fajitas with French fries.<sup>49</sup>

Mexican elite men used cuisine as a symbol of the progressive Western society they hoped to create. But one must beware their public representations of national character made in cooking manuals and stylish restaurants because they may have had little relevance for the majority of the people, particularly for women within the domestic sphere. To understand actual culinary practices, it is necessary to peer into the smoke-filled confines of nineteenth-century kitchens where women were preparing the future of Mexico's national cuisine.

### Cookbooks and National Identity

Benedict Anderson has persuasively argued that modern nations were forged not through the development of tribal customs in the distant past, but rather in the eighteenth century as a product of the Enlightenment. The standardization of vernacular languages through the spread of print and literature allowed people from different ethnic groups to imagine "national" communities that had not previously existed. Nineteenth-century Mexican elites certainly used instructional literature to attempt to mold a patriarchal nation based on Western European models. Cooking manuals contributed to this identity by assigning women to a domestic role within the nation and spelling out acceptable cultural (eating) practices. But standards of domestic morality and national identity created by male authors did not necessarily reach a complaisant female audience. Indeed, community cookbooks produced in turn-of-the-century Mexico imagined an alternative vision of the nation and of the female place within it.<sup>50</sup>

Nineteenth-century Mexican standards of domesticity established an inherently unequal relationship, placing a woman under the authority of her husband. She could legitimately leave him only if he beat her *excessively*, and the law defined adultery as a crime for females but not for males. The culinary arts provided a natural medium for inculcating these gender roles because the kitchen was a primary focus of domesticity. Even women with servants spent a large part of each day making sure their family was well fed.<sup>51</sup> Professional cookbook authors explicitly supported the subservient role of women in the domestic world. In the introduction to one family manual, María Antonia Gutiérrez cautioned that a woman must "maintain a pleasant and agreeable home so that her husband would not abandon her."<sup>52</sup> Jacinto Anduiza elaborated this theme in an 1893 cookbook that attributed many of the worst domestic calamities to failures in the kitchen. He warned that men dissatisfied with their wives' cooking would seek their pleasures in taverns and bordellos.<sup>53</sup> Many upper- and middle-class women accepted—at least in public forums such as newspaper letter columns—the image of matrimony as a burden requiring constant work and self-abnegation on their part to ensure their family's happiness and honor. Nevertheless, manuscript works and community cookbooks contained other possible constructions of the domestic sphere.

Even to begin expressing themselves, Mexican women had to break a longstanding male monopoly on the cultural capital of literacy. Jean Franco has shown that during the colonial period, clergymen exercised editorial control over female authors such as the poet Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, and after independence liberal intellectuals took over the task of instructing women in their duties of citizenship.<sup>54</sup> By the end of the nineteenth century, works by female authors had begun to expand through educational campaigns. One measure of this literacy was the growing popularity of manuscript cookbooks,

which had impressed foreign visitors as early as 1880. Fanny Gooch observed that affluent Mexican ladies took great pride in their handwritten volumes, although she noted that a hired cook often followed her own recipes and ignored her mistress's instructions.<sup>55</sup> Simone Beck, the famous French cooking teacher, recalled that her mother had likewise filled notebooks full of recipes even though a hired cook did the actual work.<sup>56</sup> In the 1890s these manuscripts developed into community cookbooks as women came together to publish their recipes. Indeed, cookbooks may actually have helped spread writing skills by providing women with a medium for expressing themselves, a poetry familiar from their hours in the kitchen.

These nonprofessional books testify first to the sociability of Mexican women, for housewives carried on a brisk market in recipes as well as gossip. María Luisa Soto de Cossío, a rancher's wife in Hidalgo, included in her personal cookbook dishes from her grandmother, Aunt Gabriela, and a neighbor Virginia. She also copied out recipes from the published *Recetas prácticas*, a volume she may have borrowed from a friend.<sup>57</sup> Manuscript cookbooks even served as albums for recording family traditions, with dishes handed down from mothers and grandmothers. The fact that the older women were often illiterate added further to the value of their daughters' books. The exchange of cooking tips also reached beyond the extended family to become the focus for Catholic charities, which were one of the few legitimate female activities outside the home. A group of matrons in Guadalajara prepared a recipe manual to support the local orphanage, and several community cookbooks from Mexico City were dedicated to works such as cathedrals for Saint Rafael and Saint Vincent DePaul.<sup>58</sup>

In 1896, Vicenta Torres extended this community of cooks throughout the Republic in her *Cocina michoacana*, a serialized guide to the cuisine of Michoacán. Printed in the provincial town of Zamora and sold by subscription, it began with local recipes submitted by women within the state. Nevertheless, she soon expanded her audience to reach cooks from all over the country. A woman from Celaya sent her recipe for "Heroic Nopales," from Guadalajara came a green chile lamb stew, a Mexico City matron offered her favorite meat glaze, and a reader in the border town of Nuevo Laredo even sent her "Hens from the Gastronomic Frontier." By printing recipes from throughout Mexico, Torres provided the first genuine forum for a national cuisine. Contributors exchanged recipes with middle-class counterparts they had never met and began to experiment with regional dishes, combining them in new ways that transcended local traditions. Thus, women began to imagine their own national community in the familiar terms of the kitchen rather than as an alien political entity formulated by men and served up to women in didactic literature.<sup>59</sup>

Torres and her collaborators conceived of their work as a community cookbook, first for the state of Michoacán and later for the entire nation, in

which they shared in the common oral culture of the kitchen despite the distances separating them. Confident that readers were familiar with the basic techniques of cooking, they provided correspondingly vague instructions. One woman wrote simply to fry pork chops in "sufficient quantities of pork fat" until well done and to serve with "hot sauce to taste." A contributor to another community cookbook listed among the ingredients for *mole poblano*: "of all spices, a little bit." A recipe for stuffed chiles read, "having roasted and cleaned [chiles], fill with cooked zucchini squash, onion, oregano, etc." It went without saying that cooks would adjust their seasonings to taste, for recipes served merely as written keys to a much fuller language of the kitchen.<sup>60</sup>

Certainly cooks adapted the recipes they found in cookbooks to fit their personal tastes. María Luísa did not simply copy verbatim the dishes presented in the *Recetas prácticas*; she simplified procedures, removed extraneous ingredients, and on one occasion found it necessary to change "stirring frequently" to "stirring continuously," a lesson perhaps learned at the expense of a ruined dinner.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, they read selectively, passing over impractical dishes such as Manuel Murguía's absurd recipe for stuffed *frijoles*, which involved cooking beans—"but not too soft"—slicing them in half, inserting a bit of cheese, dipping them in egg batter, and frying them in oil.<sup>62</sup> Male chefs, for whom cooking provided a degree of status, may have delighted in such outlandish preparations, but housewives tended to view cooking as an everyday chore and therefore stressed practicality.

Women also used cuisine as a means of defining a uniquely religious version of the national identity. Torres and her correspondents, while not afraid to experiment with the techniques of foreign haute cuisine, emphasized national dishes that often held religious significance. Most prominent were the colonial *moles*, "those essentially American dishes," which they considered indispensable for festivals such as the Day of the Dead. Another culinary tradition with patriotic affiliations developed around the Virgin of Guadalupe. Having first appeared to an Indian in 1531, the saint gained a universal appeal in Mexico that was recognized even by such anticlerical liberals as Ignacio M. Altamirano. In 1895, church officials acknowledged the Virgin's power as a national symbol by formally crowning her the patron saint of Mexico. Vicenta Torres paid homage a year later by inserting in her cookbook a recipe for *gorditas* (small corn griddlecakes) from the Villa de Guadalupe Hidalgo, the location of the Virgin's shrine.<sup>63</sup>

The Virgin's incorporation into the national cuisine illustrated not only the religious character of female patriotism but also the peculiar selection process that transformed local dishes into national symbols. Residents of Guadalupe Hidalgo made a living by selling the plump, sweet, silver-dollar-sized corn griddlecakes to visiting pilgrims. But among their own families they celebrated December 12, the Virgin's day, by eating barbecued goat with *salsa borracha* (drunken sauce). Nevertheless, the *plaza gorditas* ultimately gained

recognition as the food of the Virgin, so that by 1926 a newspaper ran a cartoon showing a man refusing to accompany his plump wife (in Spanish, also a *gordita*) on a trip to the Virgin's shrine with the excuse: "Why take a *gordita* to *la villa*?"<sup>64</sup>

As in the case of *gorditas*, this exchange of recipes even began to cross established class and ethnic lines, perhaps because women worried less than men about the social stigma attached to Indian dishes. Unlike the usual practice of segregating enchiladas into the ghetto of "light branches," the *Recetas prácticas* integrated these foods among other recipes for meats and vegetables. Another cookbook prepared by a charitable women's organization in Mexico City gave more recipes for enchiladas than for any other type of food.<sup>65</sup> Vicenta Torres made a virtue of including recipes of explicitly Indian origin, assuring readers that these "secrets of the indigenous classes" would be appropriate at any party. Along with tamales, she included *gorditas cordials*, *pozole* de Quiroga, and *carnero al pastor* (Shepherd's mutton), but out of deference to her elite audience, she carefully set them apart with the label "*indigenista*."<sup>66</sup>

But care must be taken in interpreting this acceptance of native food as an indication that ties of gender were breaking down lines of class. Even middle-class women, after all, could generally count on a household servant to do the difficult work of grinding corn and chiles. Moreover, these same women shared with elites an admiration for French haute cuisine. Yet they also embraced a genuinely Mexican national cuisine based on colonial *moles* and even pre-Columbian tamales that were rejected by Eurocentric male elites. Being excluded from power themselves, perhaps women simply had less motivation to maintain the distinctiveness of *criollo* culture. After all, they based their image of the nation on the Virgin of Guadalupe, a symbol shared with the Indian masses, rather than on the trappings of Western industrial society idealized by elite men.

### A Mestizo Cuisine

Mexican leaders of the nineteenth century hoped to build a modern, patriarchal nation based on Western European models. Cookbooks offered a valuable means of indoctrinating women into this new order by emphasizing European dishes and disparaging Indian foods. In this way, intellectuals hoped to cleanse Mexico of the vestiges of its pre-Columbian past. Corn became a symbol of the disorderly and unsanitary elements of society, such as street people and backward villagers. Women were considered especially vulnerable to the immoral influences of the streets, hence the need to keep them locked away in the kitchen. Reformers focused particularly on lower-class women in an attempt to improve family diets and morality and thereby transform the proletariat into imitations of the bourgeoisie.

The dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz and its ideal of imported progress collapsed with the Revolution of 1910. From this social upheaval emerged a new group of leaders who sought to reformulate the sense of national identity and create an ideology with broad appeal to the Indian and mestizo masses. The revolutionaries launched a cultural campaign to legitimize themselves as representatives of the mestizo "cosmic race." They glorified the pre-Columbian past in murals, museums, and movies and decried the deposed dictator as a toady to foreigners. The culinary expression of this new ideology was stated succinctly by a leading nutritionist, Rafael Ramos Espinosa. He formulated the simple equation that people who ate only corn were Indians, those who ate only wheat were Spaniards, while Mexicans were those people fortunate enough to eat both grains.<sup>67</sup>

Mestizo cuisine was not identified as a national standard until the 1940s, but the roots of its recognition lay in the late nineteenth century. Cookbooks written after World War II, which offered Indian foods as a symbol of the Mexican nation, grew out of the community works produced at the turn of the century. The social gatherings of women sharing family recipes developed into organized cooking classes, and successful teachers in turn provided recipes to women's magazines and published cookbooks of their own. Their ties to oral culture nevertheless remained close, as can be seen from the hospitable author who invited readers to her Mexico City home for further instructions.<sup>68</sup> The most prominent teacher, Josefina Velázquez de León, traveled throughout the Republic, holding cooking classes and collecting regional recipes. She published more than 150 cookbooks exalting tamales and enchiladas as culinary manifestations of Mexican nationalism. Her audience came from the rapidly growing middle class, the wives of businessmen and professionals who shared a vision of the mestizo nation. Although stark inequalities remained between rural and urban diets, maize had finally regained its place at the Mexican banquet table.<sup>69</sup>

Laura Esquivel's novel provides an apt metaphor for the transformation of Mexican cuisine and society. Her heroine, Tita, declines a respectable marriage to an American doctor so that she can continue an illicit affair with her Mexican lover. In the same way, Mexicans have begun to give up the slavish imitation of foreign models and show pride in their Indian heritage. Foreign influences certainly persist, with American fast food displacing French haute cuisine as a modern status symbol. Nevertheless, the Indian dishes scorned by nineteenth-century elites have been enshrined as the national cuisine. *Pozole*, formerly a "secret of the indigenous classes," now serves as the symbol of Guadalupe's cooking. And tamales, once the food of the lower orders, have become the heart of the country's haute cuisine. Tita learned "the secrets of love and life as revealed by the kitchen"; modern Mexican women have followed that same path to define their national identity.

## Notes

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2. Patricia Quintana with Carol Haralson, *Mexico's Feasts of Life* (Tulsa: Council Oaks Books, 1989).
3. Guadalupe Rivera and Marie-Pierre Colle, *Frida's Fiestas: Recipes and Reminiscences of Life with Frida Kahlo* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1994), 49.
4. Diana Kennedy, *My Mexico: A Culinary Odyssey with More Than 300 Recipes* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1998), 10.
5. "Lima Gastronómica," I, in *Lima: Paseos por la ciudad y su historia* (Lima: Banco Sudamericano-Guías Expreso, n.d.), 299.
6. *Ibid.*, 296, 312; Kennedy, *My Mexico*, 254-57.
7. Laura Esquivel, *Like Water for Chocolate: A Novel in Monthly Installments, with Recipes, Romances, and Home Remedies*, trans. Carol Christensen and Thomas Christensen (New York: Doubleday, 1992).
8. *El cocinero mexicano*, 3 vols. (Mexico City: Imprenta de Galván a cargo de Mariano Arévalo, 1931), preface and 1:77.
9. *Nuevo cocinero mejicano en forma de diccionario* (Paris and Mexico City: Librería de Rosa y Bouret, 1868), x.
10. *Nuevo y sencillo arte de cocina* (Mexico City: Imprenta de Santiago Pérez, 1836), iv. See also *Libro de cocina: Arreglado a los usos y costumbres nacionales* (Mexico City: Imprenta de I. Guerrero, n.d.).
11. Narciso Bassols, *La cocinero poblana y el libro de las familias: Novísimo manual práctico de cocina española, francesa, inglesa, y mexicana*, 2 vols. (Puebla, Mexico: Narciso Bassols, 1877), 1:3.
12. Vicenta Torres de Rubio, *Cocina michoacana* (Zamora, Michoacán, Mexico: Imprenta Moderna, 1896), iii-iv.
13. *Recetas prácticas para la señora de casa sobre cocina, repostería, pasteles, nevería, etc.* (Guadalupe: Imprenta del Orfanatorio del Sagrado Corazón de Jesús, 1892).
14. *Nuevo cocinero mejicano*, 62, 158, 264; Bassols, *La cocinera poblana*, 1:37; Torres, *Cocina michoacana*, 28, 36, 224, 409; *El Siglo XIX*, February 2, 1853. Donato Guerra, a hero of the French intervention, may have tasted his namesake cod, but Mochezuma never ate the dessert named in his honor, which was made of candied sugar, ground almonds, and bread rolls.
15. Guillermo Prieto, *Memorias de mis tiempos, 1828 á 1840* (Mexico City: Librería de la Vida, de C. Bouret, 1906), 287; *Nuevo cocinero mejicano*, preface, 940; *Diario del Hogar*, February 9, 1886; *La Patria*, December 2, 1898.
16. For a comprehensive listing of cookbooks published in Mexico since 1821, see the appendix in Jeffrey M. Pilcher, "¡Vivan Tamales! The Creation of a Mexican National Cuisine" (Ph.D. diss., Texas Christian University, 1993).
17. Miguel Angel Peral, *Diccionario biográfico mexicano* (Mexico City: Editorial PAC, 1944), 292; *Diccionario Porría de historia, biografía y geografía de México*, 3d ed., 2 vols. (Mexico City: Editorial Porría, 1970), 1:833, 2:1434, 2:1593.
18. *El cocinero mejicano refundido y considerable aumentado en esta segunda edición*, 3 vols. (Mexico City: Imprenta de Galván a cargo de Mariano Arévalo, 1834), 1:391.
19. Dolores Avila Hernández, "Región centro norte," in *Atlas cultural de México: Gastronomía*, ed. Dolores Avila Hernández, et al. (Mexico City: Grupo Editorial Planeta, 1988), 67-78. This discussion draws on insights from Claudio Lomnitz-Alder,

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### Sights

*Art of the Fantastic* (Organization of American States, Audiovisual Unit).

*The Incas Remembered* (World Video).

*Fernando de Szyszlo* (Organization of American States, Audiovisual Unit).

## 3

### Black Kings, Blackface Carnival, and Nineteenth-Century Origins of the Tango

John Charles Chasteen

*Fiesta and music have always been instrumental in the fashioning of identity, whether at the individual, group (gender and ethnic), community, or national level in Latin America. The tango, both the music and the dance, has long been associated with Argentina and its national identity; its powerful rhythms have become the symbol of passion, sensuality, and erotic love. In its conventional appearance it is white, European, and therefore similar to the image of Argentina presented by elites in the late nineteenth century. Yet its origins rest with the black Argentine population, whose existence was ignored in the construction of a national identity. John Charles Chasteen traces how elites appropriated, refashioned, and redefined Carnival music and celebration, especially its original racial characteristics in Buenos Aires, until it became unrecognizable. He tracks tango from its black roots and charts its adoption by whites in twentieth-century working-class dance halls, Parisian salons, and finally white middle-class Argentine living rooms.*

*The essay invites comparison of Argentine Carnival and its characters with those elsewhere. Readers might consider celebrations of the holiday in its most famous form in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in Lisbon, Portugal, or even in Johannesburg, South Africa.<sup>1</sup> The essay suggests the appearance and reappearance of various stock figures found in different expressions of popular culture. Among these was Juan Moreira, a gaucho malo stereotype. Eduardo Gutiérrez first created him in newspaper serials that were quickly reprinted as cheap books. Moreira just as quickly appeared in popular criollo literature, then in pantomime, circus, and, beginning in the 1880s, Carnival. Carnival featured many fashionable disguises, especially of gauchos and their counterparts, the compadritos, those rural migrants new to the city. The Argentine compadrito was the equivalent of the Mexican pelado. By the early years of the twentieth century, the Moreira and the compadritos had become stock characters in Carnival processions.<sup>2</sup> They danced to the tango with the black kings.*

The modern tango evokes visions of suave urbanity, of dissipated nightlife in formal evening dress, and especially of the slicked-down hair and gleaming smile of Carlos Gardel, international tango idol of the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>3</sup> In the tango, the culture of Buenos Aires seems fully to embody its vaunted Europeanness. And yet, *tango*—a word probably of African origin—once referred to the sort of dancing one did to drums. Originally it was the slaves of Buenos Aires who “attended tangos.” But not so fast: Slaves in the South American city most famous for its European heritage? Here is something that has no place in conventional images of Buenos Aires or its famous dance, and yet a quarter of the population of the city was composed of enslaved Africans during the first half of the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, despite its current European associations, the tango appears to have strong African as well as European antecedents.

Since the 1920s, when it became recognized as an unofficial national symbol in Argentina (and just across the wide estuary called the Río de la Plata, in Uruguay), the tango has been defined by three elements: a music of silences and expressive accentuations; a dance of sudden, dramatic turns and glides; and the biting lyrics of faithless love. Of these, the most distinctive element is the dance, with its turns and glides, its broad theatrical gestures, those close embraces and sultry attitudes. The music of the tango, punctuated with accordion riffs, seems, overall, languidly un-African, although there are moments of rhythmic dynamism—syncopated displacements of the accented beat—that probably do derive from remote African roots. Yet something important seems to be lacking. Where are the regular hip movements that create the rhythmic energy in most dances of African-American inspiration? This chapter examines their disappearance and accounts for the choreography that replaced them, a choreography characterized by exaggeration and attitude.

Here is the nub: exaggerated attitudes are what make the modern tango so recognizable and so notably easy to caricature. In fact, I will argue that the modern tango was *created* as a caricature, when whites mockingly imitated the dance of blacks. This idea is an old one—suggested as early as 1883—and it is mentioned in passing by all of the serious contemporary scholars who have discussed the origins of the dance.<sup>5</sup> Still, something makes one skeptical about it at first blush. It is hard to imagine just how this mocking imitation might have taken place, in what specific situations whites observed and caricatured black dancing, why they would have done so persistently enough to propagate a full-blown dance genre, and how such a caricature could have become a symbol of Argentine national pride. Nevertheless, the fact is inescapable. By the early twentieth century, the huge majority of the people dancing were white. Mockingly or not, they had taken over as the principal dancers of tangos as the white population of the city moved past the one million mark, boosted by massive immigration from Europe, and the black pop-

ulation dwindled to a few thousand. If the tango was originally a practice of black people, it could only have become a practice of white people through some process of learning by imitation.

If we want to trace the development of the tango, and if *tango* has meant many different things over the years, then we must be specific. For clarity's sake, I will assign year designations to various historical uses of the word *tango*. For example, the tango of 1800 was any sort of dancing that slaves did to drums. That is the place to begin. Our search will take us back to the time when enslaved people from Africa danced together as their principal form of group solidarity on the shores of the great muddy Río de la Plata. Very little evidence about the dancing of black people has survived from this period, so we will have to take advantage of whatever fragments exist. Some of the best ones come from Montevideo, Uruguay, the other major port city of the Río de la Plata.

### Black Kings

In the eighteenth century, when large numbers of African slaves arrived in the port cities of Buenos Aires and Montevideo, they organized themselves into groups called nations. These nations—Congos and Angolas, for example—gathered in vacant lots, along the riverbanks, or outside the city walls on Sundays and holidays.<sup>6</sup> There each nation selected a leader whom, much to the distress of the colonial authorities, they called a king; and they danced to distinctive “national” rhythms that identified the group. The black kings did not challenge Spanish rule, and they exercised authority only for specific, mostly ceremonial, purposes within their nation. The nations were defined by their African port of origin in the slave trade, so they did classify people approximately by their region of origin, but individuals of many different tribes and cultural traditions entered into each.<sup>7</sup> The rhythm and dance characteristic of each nation were thus, in some measure, an innovation fashioned out of the ethnic encounter among its members, people who found themselves thrown randomly together but who did feel some communality and who, needing each other, immediately created new signs of collective identity in a familiar African mode, one that often had sacred associations as well. The dances of the black nations remained important as long as people born in Africa figured largely in the black population. As for American-born blacks, they belonged to Catholic lay brotherhoods or mutual aid societies that also danced together. The number of such groups multiplied over time until it reached several dozen in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup>

The aggregation of an American-born black population along the Río de la Plata brought another creative refashioning of black dance traditions on a larger scale—a dance form that the members of all of the black nations, brotherhoods, and societies could share. As early as 1789 a Buenos Aires



official had observed that some of the dances of slaves were "no longer those of the people among who they had lived" in Africa.<sup>9</sup> Sometimes called tango or tambo, this new "generic" sort of black dancing eventually came to be designated *candombe*, a more specific name for the tango of 1800. Although profoundly significant in the lives of those who danced it, *candombe* was not sacred like the Brazilian *candomblé*, whose name it so much resembled. Rather, it was a social dance in a particularly full meaning of that term. By mid-nineteenth century, *candombe* had replaced the separate dances of nations as the chief dance performed by the followers of black kings in the Río de la Plata.

If the modern tango has African choreographic antecedents, they must have passed through *candombe*. What was this dance like? It is impossible to reconstruct *candombe* precisely. Early nineteenth-century descriptions convey no clear idea of the physical movements involved ("violent movements, ignoble postures, horrifying contortions," specified a typically unhelpful French observer in 1820<sup>10</sup>), and detailed choreographies taken from observation of twentieth-century dancing provide an unreliable guide to earlier centuries. All evidence indicates, at any rate, that *candombe* always involved a hip-driven style of body movement. This can be determined because of the inevitable association of such movement with the other, more easily described aspects of the dance, such as the occurrence of the *ombliçada* (when two dancers slap their bellies together), and because a few reliable drawings indicate as much.<sup>11</sup> Later, some form of the Spanish word *quebrar* (break) became a conventional indicator of this movement that broke the straight line of the body at the waist to generate a sinuous, subtle, flowing motion, without bouncing knees or flailing limbs.

Black people sometimes danced secretly—at least insofar as that was possible, given that vigorous percussion was the sine qua non of their activity—but mostly they had spectators. As early as 1760, they were participating in the Corpus Christi procession in Montevideo, as we can tell from the deliberations of the *cabildo*, or city council. Interestingly, the dancers in question were organized through the initiative of a solid citizen, who offered one of his slaves as instructor for the group. A hitch occurred when soldiers scheduled to appear in the procession refused to go alongside black dancers, but the soldiers eventually relented, and the *cabildo* even subsidized the performance by supplying shoes (a contribution that the habitually barefoot dancers must have regarded with ambivalence).<sup>12</sup> Black dancers continued to participate in civic and religious festivals on both sides of the Río de la Plata throughout the colonial period, and that kind of public dancing was important enough to be exempted from the laws that (ineffectively) prohibited black dancing in all other circumstances.<sup>13</sup> The *cabildo*'s attitude is understandable. The participation of slaves and free blacks in civic and religious events signified their successful incorporation into colonial society just as the number

of blacks in Buenos Aires and Montevideo rose beyond a quarter of each city's population.<sup>14</sup>

Given the importance of Catholicism in the ideology of colonial rule, the Feast of the Epiphany offered the perfect occasion for black dances that involved kings. In English, the Christmas story speaks of three wise men, but in Spanish they are called the three kings. Because Epiphany commemorates the veneration of Christ by kings who came from afar, the public parading of black kings during the holiday season could be understood—in view of the close association between church and state—as a ritual of submission to colonial authority. Thus, January (and especially the sixth day of the month, called in Spanish the Day of Kings) became a special time for *candombes*. Often the black dancers associated themselves with King Baltazar, who, according to tradition, was black. In Buenos Aires, by the late eighteenth century, the black Brotherhood of San Baltazar was raising money to commemorate Epiphany each year. In the late 1780s and 1790s, their dancing generated problems, petitions, and protests that became a matter of record.<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, while these documents confirm the importance of black dancing in the period, they give little idea of exactly what went on. An 1827 traveler to Montevideo helps us a little more. On Epiphany of that year, after hearing mass, each black nation processed through the city streets and, arriving at the market square, put on a dance. The traveler, like almost all white observers, was impressed by how absorbed the dancers seemed and how much they enjoyed their dancing. "There," he noted, "more than six hundred blacks appeared to have reclaimed, in an instant, their nationality" and to have forgotten, at least temporarily, the privations and suffering of slavery.<sup>16</sup> This symbolic submission to the Christ Child performed by black kings and their nations drew crowds of white spectators for at least a century.

Black choreographic contributions to rituals of civic jubilation continued after Argentina and Uruguay became independent from Spain. At the height of the struggle for independence, in 1816, the black inhabitants of Montevideo staged a public dance in the main square as part of the patriot-held city's celebration of national independence (not fully consummated for twelve more years).<sup>17</sup> When Argentina's famous populist strongman of the nineteenth century, Juan Manuel de Rosas, took power in Buenos Aires, he gave black dancing a prominent place in public symbolism of his regime. As part of the patriotic May celebrations in 1836, Rosas sponsored a *candombe* in the main plaza that, according to his furious enemies, attracted many thousands of dancers and spectators.<sup>18</sup> "In the years of the Rosas tyranny," explained a newspaper a bit later, black people had a great influence. "They had associations in which they gave weekly or monthly dances, where they got drunk, slipped their traces, and occasionally killed somebody. They got so stuck up that, not content with any vulgar name for these orgies . . . they hit upon the name Academies, which sounded just fine to people so unfamiliar with the

dictionary."<sup>19</sup> As a means of garnering their support, Rosas, accompanied by his family, often attended dances of the black nations of Buenos Aires. The dictator's daughter Manuelita even joined in, creating a scandal. A government newspaper had to defend her against the wagging tongues of the regime's enemies: "Manuelita de Rosas shows no reluctance to dance on certain occasions with the honest and hard-working mulattoes, pardos, and morenos."<sup>20</sup>

Black dancing survived the occasional prohibition, not only because it was politically astute of governments to allow it or because the dancers themselves enjoyed it, but also because white spectators liked it. When problems in the San Baltazar festivities led the public prosecutor of Buenos Aires to launch a campaign against black dancing in 1797, the fact that San Baltazar attracted white spectators (and the allegation that it perverted them) constituted part of his brief.<sup>21</sup> A famous description of early nineteenth-century *candombes* in Montevideo emphasized their function as spectacle for the Sunday outings of well-to-do families—the kids always asking for sweets sold by black "aunties" seated on the ground, trays of goodies on their laps. At the words "'We're off to see the Kings,'" wrote the nostalgic memorialist, "the children leapt for joy."<sup>22</sup> An 1862 newspaper calculated that six thousand spectators were on hand for the Epiphany dances in Montevideo that year. One could also visit the houses where the nations or mutual aid societies had their headquarters, doubling as dance halls with a man stationed at the door to take contributions from the spectators.<sup>23</sup>

The black kings of Montevideo and their followers continued to process through the streets, visit the shrine of San Baltazar in the cathedral, and then dance at their headquarters or in the street out front, invariably followed by curious white crowds. These old-style *candombes* continued until about 1875, but then the dancing processions of black kings finally died out. By that time the drums of Epiphany were a thing of the past in Buenos Aires, too.

### Blackface Carnival

In the decades after 1850, the black population of Buenos Aires declined precipitously, from around 25 percent to less than 2 percent. The picture is similar, if not quite as drastic, in Montevideo. As the number of blacks fell and the number of whites soared, Afro-Argentines and Afro-Uruguayans became less assertive in their claims to public space, and the members of the younger generation often sought to blend in with white society. As part of this process of assimilation, they increasingly switched their street celebrations by a few weeks—from Epiphany to another holiday, the pre-Lenten Carnival, which usually falls in February. Carnival's important and little-known role in tango history merits a bit of background.

Today nothing is left of Carnival in Buenos Aires, and what remains in Montevideo is a pale reflection of years past. Yet Carnival was once a vibrant

popular festival in Buenos Aires—vibrant and popular enough, in fact, to be prohibited by specific royal edict every year but one between 1784 and 1797, despite the best efforts of the government of Buenos Aires to sponsor masked balls so squeaky clean that the most puritanical could not object. In order to convince the Spanish king of the unimpeachable morality of dancing minutes and contradances at the city's masked ball, the city government carefully transcribed sworn testimony from a score of public officials and other important personages who attended. One pointed out, in defense of decency, that only Spaniards were admitted. Most agreed that the abundant illumination in the hall prevented any possible misbehavior. Men were required to remain standing when asking the seated women to dance, and guards outside segregated the dancers who stepped out into the dark to cool off, men to one side, women to the other.<sup>24</sup> All in vain: crown officials soon renewed the ban on Carnival.

After independence, in the 1810s, the street play characteristic of the festival was no longer banned altogether but instead was regulated, and its popular energies were politically harnessed. The detailed regulations published each year on the eve of Carnival stipulated that the costumed groups, called *comparsas*, had to register with the police. They also had to stick together and wear the number of their police registration. The regulations further stipulated that boisterous water fighting (the principal street activity associated with Carnival) could not begin before sunup or last beyond sundown. Passersby not involved in throwing water were to be granted safe conduct through the melee. In fact, however, the populist Rosas regime gave free rein to its partisans during street carnivals. Enemies of the regime who set foot in the streets might be drenched, dusted with flour or ashes, pelted with eggs, or physically assaulted, and they later remembered the drumming of *candombe* as the sinister sound track of the 1830s "Rosas Carnivals," their synonym for terror. The figure of the poncho-clad Rosas tussling at street carnival with the rowdy plebeian crowd dismayed the European-oriented, liberal adversaries of Rosas.<sup>25</sup> For several years, Carnival served the dictator's purpose as a bellows to fan the flames of populist protest against the liberal elite. Once Rosas had thoroughly purged his enemies, however, he banned the festival himself (in 1845).

After Rosas was overthrown in 1852, the ban was lifted and street carnival resumed in Buenos Aires, with the European elite now setting the tone of the festivities. The city's theaters cleared away their ground-level seating and offered fancy costume balls for elite revelers. In the streets, water fighting became an adolescent battle of the sexes. Girls heaved water by the saucypanful from balconies, generally aiming at boys. Boys could return fire with hens' eggs—punctured, drained of yoke and white, filled with water, and the puncture plugged with wax—or even (though this was rather heavy ordnance to be aimed at a woman) with the huge eggs of the ostrich-like rhea of the southern grasslands. In 1855 a particularly drastic group of young men somehow laid their hands on a horse-drawn, hand-pumped fire engine and

used its squirting hose to strafe the balconies.<sup>26</sup> While these antics dominated public space, Afro-Argentines danced carnival *candombes* in their clubhouses (structures called, among other things, *tangos*).

A new Carnival diversion began in the mid-1860s, when a *comparsa* of elite males began to parade through the streets with faces blackened as if for a U.S.-style minstrel show, calling themselves "Los Negros." This "Dramatico-Musical Society" included sons of the some of the richest and most powerful families in Buenos Aires. It made its social debut at a stylish private party in 1864, presented its musical act the next year at a public Carnival dance in the prestigious Teatro Colón, and took to the streets at Carnival the year after that. Los Negros established a permanent clubhouse and even printed their own occasional newspaper. In 1869 the paper announced that the membership stood at about fifty, twenty of them musicians.<sup>27</sup> They played both stringed and wind instruments and paraded in pseudo-military uniforms with white pants and sky-blue jackets, kepis, and knee-length black boots. Their principal occupation was to march around in double file, stopping to play and sing popular arts of the day beneath the windows of young women of good family. Soon they had many imitators. By the 1870s the parading of a succession of uniformed musical groups, very often in blackface, had become a major event of Buenos Aires Carnival. Oblivious to the vulgar throng, the elite youth of Los Negros thought nothing of blocking the street and stopping the parade to serenade a strategic balcony.<sup>28</sup>

These confident young men represented the same elite families who had trembled at the Carnival drumming of Rosista blacks during the 1830s. Now they got a kind of revenge, dramatizing the love of docile, humble black men for their masters' untouchable daughters. Song after song takes up the same theme:

La comparza de los negros, La más constante y leal, A las amitas sahada, En el nuevo carnaval. Y a las niñas, como esclavos, Se ofrece para servir. Esclavos de cuerpo y alma, Y fieles hasta morir. <sup>29</sup>	The musical group Los Negros, Most trusty and most true, Greets every sweet missy, To give her this year's due. And each Negro offers, Missy, Slave in body and in soul, To remain your faithful servant, Until his life is o'er.
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And then the chorus: "Oh, white mistresses! For pity's sake hear our sad black voices. . . ." Although Carnival revelties can sometimes challenge or subvert the social order, their potential to rationalize and endorse it could hardly be more clearly expressed than in Los Negros' impersonation of blacks abjectly loving whites. Here, in ugly caricature, we confront that strange dimension of tango history: an extended tradition of mocking white impersonation of blacks.

When Buenos Aires whites impersonated blacks, they had two different sources of inspiration. On the one hand, they had real black people around

them and had long been attracted to their music and dancing. On the other hand, most people are not very good at mimicking what they see and hear. Ask them to imitate a foreign accent, and you will get a very second-hand version of it. They will, in effect, try to reproduce imitations they have heard elsewhere, imitations that have been made memorable by selection and exaggeration. No doubt a few whites with particular skill and exposure to black speech, music, and dance did passable impersonations. For the most part, however, groups like Los Negros were not directly imitating Afro-Argentines at all. They were representing not black people but their *idea* of black people, molded and caricatured to serve their own emotional needs; drawing, too, on preexisting caricatures of blackness.

Impersonation of black music, dance, and speech had been happening in Spain since the sixteenth century. The great Golden Age playwright Lope de Vega has a play with a part scripted for dancers disguised as blacks. There was even a conventional mock-black dialect used by blackface actors in the Spanish-language theater. U.S. popular culture also had a clear influence. The elite of Buenos Aires was well aware of the minstrel show's popularity in the United States, and they had an opportunity to see the minstrel version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* performed in Spanish adaptation as early as 1856. In fact, a series of theatrical tours visited Buenos Aires in the late 1860s, just as Los Negros began to transform street carnival there. In 1867 the city celebrated a Panamanian actor's impersonation of a black broom-seller, Negro Schicoba. And Louis Moreau Gottschalk, the Louisiana Creole pianist famous for his Afro-Cuban motifs, began an extended stay that same year. In 1868, theatergoers in Buenos Aires heard a U.S. minstrel performer render Stephen Foster songs in blackface to banjo accompaniment.<sup>30</sup> The next year the famous Christy Minstrels began a long tour of the area, inspiring one enthusiastic reviewer to write that "the blacks of Buenos Aires should learn to be blacks from the Christy Minstrels."<sup>31</sup> If *comparsas* like Los Negros were reacting against Rosista populism and drawing on Spanish theatrical traditions, they were also responding to a sense of international vogue.

Mocking representations of blackness were a dime a dozen in the mid-nineteenth century. Even real black people got in on this act. Real black people believed, understandably, that they could beat the phony ones at the game of representing blackness, and soon (by 1870) Buenos Aires blacks were mirroring white imitations of blacks—their uniforms, their serenades, even the mock-black dialect of the lyrics—all except for their obsessive theme of blacks loving white women. Because of strong traditions of black musician-ship, the real black *comparsas* presented a formidable challenge to the white ones in blackface.

Not to be outdone, the blackface groups changed tactics and "went African," so to speak. Instead of military uniforms, they dressed as slaves or even as "savages" in imitation leopard skins and something like black tights,

and they put on a full-scale satire of a *candombe*, including royalty and featuring percussion rather than the stringed instruments used by *comparsas* like Los Negros. Unlike the uniformed musical *comparsas*, these new groups more or less danced during their street performances. That is, they did a mocking imitation that was meant to represent—but was very far from really replicating—the elaborate choreography of early nineteenth-century *candombes*. Their repertoire as well grew less romantic and more satirical. The new groups were called *candomberos*, and there would be no Carnival without them for the rest of the century.<sup>32</sup>

But if the white *candomberos* thought they could triumph so easily, they were soon disappointed. By 1882, real black people were parading as *candomberos* too. Perhaps this is not surprising. Most interesting of all, the black *candomberos* made a point of not really dancing a *candombe* (which, though moribund, did still exist). Rather, in order to make plain that their *candombes* were not the authentic article—to signify that they were not experiencing blackness, so to speak, but performing it—the black *candomberos* wore blackface.<sup>33</sup> Now, the complexion of many of the black *candomberos* was not very dark. Afro-Argentine males had always been overrepresented in the army, and so many died there that black women often had to find lighter-skinned partners. The black population of Buenos Aires was fading, partly through a decline in absolute numbers, partly due to the influx of European immigrants, and partly because some descendants of slaves were losing a black identity. Black *candomberos* reclaimed that identity in an ironic mode. In darkening their faces, black *candomberos* were quite explicitly imitating those who imitated them, and they must have done so with mocking intentions of their own. If the white *candomberos* wanted to make the blacks look silly, the black *candomberos* wanted to make the whites look pathetic. No doubt both succeeded. At any rate, by the end of the nineteenth century, the people of Buenos Aires—whites and blacks—had become quite accustomed to the notion of performing blackness, and the standard form of this performance was most assuredly a mocking imitation.

But is there a direct connection between Carnival blackface and the modern tango? Neither the musical *comparsas* of Los Negros' ilk nor the extravagant dramatizations of the *candomberos* involved couple dancing. Nor did their music have a characteristic tango rhythm. Their varied repertoire included waltzes, polkas, and other music performed in a straight, "white" style. They sang such music "out of character," apparently, then reverted to their performance of blackness for the songs that had mocking intentions made crystal clear by the lyrics in theatrical black dialect. But here is the link: When blackface Carnival groups moved back into character to present one of their familiar caricatures, it was invariably called a tango.

Any mocking musical impersonation of blackness was called a *tango* by about 1860. A leading author of Carnival blackface compositions was referring

to this tango of 1860, as we can call it, when he wrote in his memoirs about transformations in Buenos Aires musical culture during the third quarter of the nineteenth century: "Tastes changed, and from romances and operatic arias, we went to . . . tangos! Black music had its great success at that time."<sup>34</sup>

Published lyrics from the period show that musical *comparsas* used the word tango only for the songs with lyrics in mock dialect, and this is the meaning specified by the entry under *tango* in a Madrid dictionary of the 1850s: "a song with black slang."<sup>35</sup> When the Spanish touring company presented its adaptation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, its blackface chorus sang "tangos." When German Mackay—the Panamanian blackface actor who presented El Negro Schicoba—sang his mock-dialect songs about liking to dance and making the girls blush, it was called a tango.<sup>36</sup> Apparently these tangos were derived musically from the Afro-Cuban *habanera*—a staple of Spanish touring companies in their performances throughout Spanish America by the 1850s.

Afro-Argentines, for their part, shaped these tangos in the performances of their Carnival *comparsas*. (Not all black Carnival paraders were *candomberos*, by any means. The city's black press deployed the *candomberos* and endorsed the more refined *comparsas*.) Compare the following *comparsa* lyrics printed by a newspaper of the black community of Buenos Aires in 1880:

Pedimos al que se digne	We ask those who lend an ear
Nuestro humilde eco escuchar	To the humble echo of our song,
Indulgencia, gratitud,	For indulgence, gratitude,
Y constancia en el amar. <sup>37</sup>	And constancy in their love.

Such were the lyrics of a locally composed mazurka, almost certainly the work of an Afro-Argentine musician or poet, and their waltzes or polkas would sound similar. The words of a tango, on the other hand, went more like this:

Vamo a cantá, negrita,	Let's sing, my dark one,
Pur cierto,	Oh yeah,
Nuestro tango popular. <sup>38</sup>	Our tango from down home.

This, in fact, was the newspaper's theme tango. The next year, the black *comparsa* called Society of Humble Negroes presented a mazurka, a waltz, and a toast, all in standard Spanish, and two tangos, both in mock dialect.<sup>39</sup> The word tango now denoted, above all, an explicit representation of black identity.

### The "Cut-and-Break" Dance

A crude drawing of a stage tango performed as a couple dance was published in 1882. The man and woman face one another (as in *candombe*) and do not touch. This is the first evidence of the word *tango* used for a couple dance.<sup>40</sup>

We have a more helpful (although insufferably snickering) description of the same dance from a Spanish traveler who visited the headquarters of Montevideo's Congo Nation in 1874: "A jet-hued gentleman rises ceremoniously and issues an invitation to some young lady the color of ripe blackberries, usually as correctly seated and as modestly dressed as any debutante recently presented to polite society." Taking his arm, the señorita looks back to see that the train of her gown is correctly stretched out behind her, and the two go the center of the room, where they face each other a few yards apart. Hands on hips, the two then inch toward each other with undulating body motions and only small movements of the feet. These dancers—who were not imitating anybody—still called this dance *candombe*.<sup>41</sup> Far different from the street dances of half a century earlier, this was the living *candombe* that the blackface *candomberos* mocked (exaggerating some of the movements and missing others completely) while singing something droll in mock-black dialect. Done in mocking imitation, it became a tango.

The characteristic profile of modern tango choreography finally emerged from an encounter between *candombe* moves and the closed-couple choreography of the international ballroom repertoire. As *candombe* withered into a conventional courtship dance during the second half of the nineteenth century, Afro-Argentine and Afro-Uruguayan young people became interested in closed-couple dances (in which the dancers put their arms around one another), such as the polka, mazurka, and especially the *habanera*. Nevertheless, these young people could still do the *candombe* moves. For one thing, *candombe* remained a traditional first number at dances in the black community. For another, the hip-driven undulations of *candombe* easily merged with the closed-couple choreography of *habanera*, which appears to have been the most popular dance at black parties and in various other settings where black people danced in the 1880s.<sup>42</sup>

Because Cuban slaves (not liberated until 1886) consumed a lot of jerked beef from the Río de la Plata, a steady shipping trade linked Havana with Buenos Aires and Montevideo. According to myth, Cuban sailors taught *zabenera* during their uproarious shore leaves in the red-light districts of the southern ports. While plausible, there is little evidence for this form of cultural diffusion (but no question about the influence, already mentioned, of touring musical theater).<sup>43</sup>

From whatever precise combination of influences, a flashy new style of loosed-couple dancing, distinctive to the Río de la Plata and clearly recognizable as the choreographic antecedent of the contemporary tango, existed by 1890. Its most descriptive name was *baile de corte y quebrada*, or "cut-and-break" dance, referring to its sudden "cuts" (stops and turns) and "breaks" (swirling movements). Another name was *milonga*. Then, by the first years of the twentieth century, the dance got its modern name. This was the tango of 1900.

Call it tango or *milonga*, cut-and-break dancing was not for everyone. The 1890 *Dictionary of Argentine Expressions* specified that *milonga* was "a dance found only among people of the lower orders."<sup>44</sup> Cut-and-break technique required that the dancing couple enter close bodily contact—something not allowed at middle-class gatherings, where standard decorum required that "light be visible" between the partners—and thus cut-and-break dancing developed in settings where middle-class proprieties could be flaunted with impunity. Gatherings of poor people in neighborhoods on the outskirts of Buenos Aires and Montevideo constituted one such situation, and this is why those neighborhoods and their inhabitants figure so largely in tango lore. "Around the edge of town," wrote a local observer of Buenos Aires in 1883, "the *milonga* has become so common that today it is obligatory at all third-rate dances graced by guitar, accordion, and kazoo."<sup>45</sup> In the center of both cities, large old houses subdivided into many tiny rooms—*conventillos*—sometimes housed hundreds of poor immigrants who were possible aspirants to this dance culture. There was little room to dance in a *conventillo*, but *conventillo*-dwellers might flaunt their skills in cut-and-break dancing on street corners where organ grinders cranked out mazurkas, *habaneras*, or *milongas*.<sup>46</sup>

And, of course, close bodily contact was the order of the day in those most notorious sites of tango lore, the brothels that abounded in the port and market districts and around barracks in both Buenos Aires and Montevideo. Then there were the dance halls, called academies, where women were paid for each song danced, and finally the cafés—the Dovecote, the Mill, the Poor Devil, and so on—located physically in centers of active nightlife and functionally somewhere between brothels and dance halls. The brothels, cafés, and dance halls played an important role in tango history because they facilitated encounters between people of contrasting social class—especially between poor women and their better-off customers, but also between males of unequal status, from slumming aristocrats to small-time punks.<sup>47</sup>

Descriptions of cut-and-break dancing in any of these places usually present it as a way for a man to show off, a display of ability and attitude. The San Felipe Academy (dance hall) of Montevideo, located near the stretch of ground where black nations had assembled for *candombes* earlier in the century, became a famous venue for the *milonga*. We have a full description by someone who visited shortly before it closed in 1899. Dancing shook this tin-roofed structure of wood, lit by kerosene and adorned by streamers, until nearly dawn. It had no tables—only a raised stage for the band, benches around the walls for the women (who were hardly wallflowers, however), and wooden bleachers for male spectators. The women were poor, but the male crowd was mixed, including unnequaled virtuosos (who were usually black) as well as knife-carrying toughs from poor neighborhoods and wide-eyed gentlemen from "decent" ones. Many of the fellows who went slumming at San Felipe were young, no doubt, and most seem to have felt themselves distinctly inadequate

compared to their *milonga*-wise social inferiors. Our witness assures us that most men in attendance never danced at all but only watched, and tried a bit of "cutting and breaking" later, in front of a bedroom mirror.<sup>48</sup>

In the first years of the twentieth century, more and more middle-class men learned to tango. Gradually middle-class women learned too, especially when their husbands or brothers showed them a few steps they had picked up here and there in situations better left unspecified. But this was still nothing that any of them would do in "polite" company or at a "decent" house. The rapidly rising general interest in the infamous choreographic creation of the city's late-night misbehavers was expressed instead at public Carnival dances, when even middle-class people could flaunt propriety. "This seems to be the carnival of tangos and cheap dances," reported a Buenos Aires newspaper in 1903.<sup>49</sup> "One could say that the creole tango has been glorified in this year's carnival," according to the illustrated magazine *Caras y Caretas* the following year.<sup>50</sup> But the tango of 1900 was to be no passing fad. The dance of Buenos Aires brothels had been launched on the path to international celebrity.

Polite society of Buenos Aires resisted the tango until Parisians with a taste for the exotic embraced the dance on the eve of World War I and lent it their prestige. This stylized version of the dance finally won total acceptance in Buenos Aires upon its return home from Paris, and it also established a formal model still disseminated today in international ballroom dance competitions. The tango of 1900 had been bleached and ironed during its stay in Paris, its funkiness and hunched shoulders replaced by languid glides and pointed toes. It had become the "smooth" tango, the modern tango that comes to mind when we think of the dance today. During the 1920s and 1930s, it was finally embraced at all social levels back home in Argentina and Uruguay, too.

### Traces

What aspects of African dance tradition are clearly preserved in the modern tango? Few indeed. Some have suggested that the fluid striding of modern tango dancers across the floor recalls a promenade segment of *candombe* choreography. Others have proposed that African influences are responsible for the relative independence of movement between the dancers' upper and lower bodies. Still, casual observers of the modern tango find little to remind them of other dances created by slaves and their descendants throughout the Americas, dances that, while varied, nevertheless reveal clearly the dancers' family relationship and their African roots.

The tango is danced today in Argentina and Uruguay (though much less than half a century ago) and around the world, especially in Finland and Japan, but for the last century it has not been a dance of people of African descent. Contrary to the old racist notion, people of African descent do not have rhythm in their bones, but they often do have rhythm in their culture. Rhythmic com-

plexity characterizes the music of the African diaspora, and dance holds a central place in the social life of the people who cultivate that music. As we have seen, the tango of 1800 was danced exclusively by black people, and it looked and sounded like African-American dances from all over the hemisphere, but the decline of the black population of the Río de la Plata after 1850 gradually removed polyrhythmic complexity from the performance of tangos. The smooth tango, back from Paris, seems to have lost polyrhythm altogether.

So, can it be said that the contemporary languid, gliding tango has African roots? Although appealing, the roots metaphor is misleading. Dance is a practice, not a vegetable. If we improve the question, asking what influence the dance practices of Río de la Plata blacks had on the evolution of the tango of 1900, the answer is, a very great influence. The blacks of the Río de la Plata stood out as musicians and dancers throughout the nineteenth century, attracting white spectators and becoming the object of routine imitation by whites. For about half a century before 1900, the word *tango* denoted not a step or a rhythm at all, but a mood, an attitude, an intention. To tango meant to dance black, whether in the spasmodic caperings of white *candomberos* or in the Afro-Argentine renderings of the standard ballroom repertoire performed tongue-in-cheek at a private dance. Cut-and-break choreography also had a heavy dose of posturing and attitude.

The subsequent international career of the dance has further effaced its African origins while accentuating the trace of caricature: those exaggerated gestures and attitudes that express a peculiar mixture of desire and hostility. Among twentieth-century dancers, the object of those contradictory impulses seems to be the dance partner, so that tango attitudes and gestures express a familiar tension in gender relations. Could this tension—perhaps the most distinctive dimension of the tango—result from a displacement of mixed feelings generated in nineteenth-century race relations?

### Notes

1. Roberto Da Matta, *Carnival, Rogues and Heroes* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991); Jose Saramago, *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1984), 133–38; Peter Abrahams, *Tell Freedom* (New York: Macmillan, 1970).
2. William Rowe and Vivian Schelling, *Memory and Modernity: Popular Culture in Latin America* (New York: Verso, 1991), 34.
3. On the tango's twentieth-century history, see Maria E. Savigliano, *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1995); Donna J. Guy, *Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires: Prostitution, Family, and Nation in Argentina* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), 141–74.
4. See George Reid Andrews, *The Afro-Argentines of Buenos Aires, 1800–1900* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1980).
5. Ventura R. Lynch, *La Provincia de Buenos Aires hasta la definición de la cuestión Capital de la República* (1883), cited by Fernando O. Assunção in *El tango y sus circunstancias 1880–1920* (Buenos Aires: Librería "El Ateneo" Editorial, 1984), 133–34.