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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.[1] *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.*[2] *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.[3] 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.[4] 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.[5] 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 population 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.[6] 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.[7] 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.[8]

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.[9] 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[10]), 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 *ombligada* (when two dancers slap their bellies together), and because a few reliable drawings indicate as much.[11] 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 do so 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).[12] 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.[13] 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.[14]

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.[15] 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.[16] 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).[17] 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.[18] "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."[19] 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."[20]

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.[21] 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."[22] 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.[23]

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 minuets 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.[24] 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.[25] 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 Europhile 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 saucepanful 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 ordinance 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.[26] 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.[27] 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 airs 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.[28]

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 comparsa de los negros, La más constante y leal, A las amitas saluda, En el nuevo carnaval. Y a las niñas, como esclavos, Se ofrece para servir, Esclavos de cuerpo y alma, Y fieles hasta morir.[29]	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.

And then the chorus: "Oh, white mistresses! For pity's sake hear our sad black voices. . . ." Alhough Carnival revelries 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.[30] 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."[31] 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 musicianship, 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.[32]

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.[33]

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."[34]

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."[35] When the Spanish touring company presented its adaptation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* its blackface chorus sang "tangos." When Germán 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.[36] 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 deplored 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.[37]	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,	Le's sing, my dark one,
Pur cierto,	Oh yeah,
Nuestro tango popular.[38]	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.[39] 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.[40]

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*.[41] 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 chore- graphy of the international ballroom repertoire. As *candombe* withered into a conventional courtship dance during the second half of the nineteenth cen- ury, Afro-Argentine and Afro-Uruguayan young people became interested in losed-couple dances (in which the dancers put their arms around one nother), such as the polka, mazurka, and especially the *habanera*. Never- heless, these young people could still do the *candombe* moves. For one thing, *andombe* remained a traditional first number at dances in the black com- nunity. For another, the hip-driven undulations of *candombe* easily merged vith the closed-couple choreography of *habanera*, which appears to have een the most popular dance at black parties and in various other settings vhere black people danced in the 1880s.[42]

Because Cuban slaves (not liberated until 1886) consumed a lot of jerked eef from the Río de la Plata, a steady shipping trade linked Havana with uenos Aires and Montevideo. According to myth, Cuban sailors taught *abanera* during their uproarious shore leaves in the red-light districts of the outhern ports. While plausible, there is little evidence for this form of cul- ıral diffusion (but no question about the influence, already mentioned, of tour- ıg musical theater).[43]

From whatever precise combination of influences, a flashy new style of losed-couple dancing, distinctive to the Río de la Plata and clearly recog- izable as the choreographic antecedent of the contemporary tango, existed y 1890. Its most descriptive name was *baile de corte y quebrada*, or "cut- nd-break" dance, referring to its sudden "cuts" (stops and turns) and "breaks" swiveling movements). Another name was *milonga*. Then, by the first years f the twentieth century, the dance got its modern name. This was the tango f 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."[44] 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."[45] 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*.[46]

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.[47]

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 unequaled 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.[48]

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.[49] "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.[50] 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 complexity 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 Marta 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. Assunçao in *El tango y sus circunstancias 1880–1920* (Buenos Aires: Libraría "El Ateneo" Editorial, 1984), 133–34.