The Many Histories of Argentine Tango

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I am a dancer. I know and enjoy many types of Latin dances but I am ultimately a tango dancer. When I started dancing tango almost 4 years ago, I did not know it would take over my life in such a pleasantly suffocating way. Little by little I became more submerged into the tanguera lifestyle. I remember when I started out I was so excited to learn new fancy moves and I wanted to dance to all the new, hip Nuevo Tango music. My best friend and mentor in tango laughed and assured me that one day I would grow up as a dancer and the world that I knew would be rocked and shaken down to its core. I could not have understood what he meant at the time. A year later another friend that became my most significant mentor, not only in tango but in life, told me that if I followed down this path of tango I would cry, hate, love, be joyful, and experience a long list of emotions that would exhaust my soul but also renew it in a way no other thing ever had. This sounded terrifying. Did I want this in my life? Did I need this kind of drama?

As I grew and met people and began to experience all these things he promised I would, I wanted to know more. My preferences for the music and atmosphere of my tango dancing slowly began evolving, like my best friend said they would. I found myself listening to older and older tango music, reading tango
blogs, having random conversations about tango in my normal life. I found that my non-tango friends and family did not understand me. I felt so disconnected from them at times. I was becoming more comfortable with the strangers I met in the milongas than with people I’ve known my whole life. I started watching videos of tango dancers and researching lyrics and orchestras of tango music. Then I began traveling to festivals, each time to spend an exhaustive weekend with complete strangers and some new friends that, while I might have only met them once before, were now people I would trust my life to. I now travel the world in search of quiet, intense moments with complete strangers, seeking out internal connections spawned by a physical embrace.

I was hooked and wanted more. So when I had the opportunity to study tango as part of my coursework towards my graduate certificate in Latin American studies, I took it! I had already started reading about the history of tango out of my own curiosity. The more I read, the more confused I became. There is so much information, much of it similar but a lot of it drawing different conclusions. I had not studied these works in a scholarly manner, dissecting the authors’ works in a historiographical perspective. So when I decided to study tango more completely, I picked books that had differing arguments. I wanted to know why the discourse was so varied yet so similar. Now, after this study, I find myself in Buenos Aires for the summer. Armed with a wealth of history and absolutely no conclusions, I will attempt to interpret for myself just what it means to be a porteño and a tango dancer in Argentina.
**Introduction**

Argentine tango is arguably the world’s most recognized and admired dance. It automatically evokes images of elongated bodies pressed together in a sensual close embrace, holding on to each other tightly, legs intertwined into seemingly knotted positions. Some, especially Americans, might envision a stage where the dancing couple is engaged in arias and acrobatics, the man in a suit and the woman in a tiny red dress with a slit all the way up to her hip and a flower in her hair. Others who have experienced it might visualize an intimate, dimly lit dance salon. The men sit on one side of the room and the women on the other. Not much talking takes place between the spectators, as they are engaged in the cabeceo, the silent form of asking someone to dance. No matter which imagery someone experiences at the first thought of tango, they all think of Argentina.

The Argentine tango is so deeply embedded into the cultural fabric, especially in the port city of Buenos Aires. Each year thousands of tourists come to learn tango or see it performed and thousands of dancers come to experience tango in what all dancers consider its Mecca. It is true, however, that other cities are known for tango amongst serious and experienced dancers, for example, Paris, Montevideo, Istanbul, New York, Portland, Berlin, Amsterdam and many others. Why then, if tango is so popular all across the world, is Buenos Aires the only city provoked in our thoughts? What is it about its history that keeps it so closely tied to Argentina, even as it spans all continents?
So much historical work has been carried out on the tango and its connections to Argentina. The general consensus is that tango is an Argentine dance, born out of the brothels, danced by the poor, rejected at first by the elites and then later accepted as a national identity for the country and its people. Countless monologues and articles have been produced, some focusing on the dance, some on the music, others on the origins or the etymology, etc. Very few authors have attempted a full legitimate synthesis of how these stories are connected, how they intertwine and overlap. Even less have challenged the typical conclusions argued by most scholars.

In my research I attempt not to find the real story behind tango. Others have done this and fallen short. Because of this, I aim to explore why they have failed. Why is tango history still an open-ended question with no definite answer? Why does one author offer an explanation when others are still undecided? I argue that the evolution of tango is so comprehensive, so extensive and so diverse in its genesis that it is impossible to find a single origin. I hold there is no single event that is significant enough to allow any author to pinpoint a starting origin of tango.

This story is not just one of authenticating the history of a dance. For tango dancers, it is about understanding the social conflicts that took place, ultimately influencing the lyrics and the music that we are so inspired and moved by. For Argentineans, it is about validating their own sense of pride and sense of nationalism. To pinpoint tango evolution to Argentina’s internal struggles is to provide nationals something to be proud of. Tango overcame so many obstacles in
its progression and so it serves as a representative of the development and transformation of a nation of immigrants, fraught with struggles of poverty, racism and class limits, who overcame their greatest trials resulting in a modern, urban porteño life that they all could be proud of.

**Tango Histories**

I. Scribes of Uncertainty

In the following sections, I lay the foundation for each author’s approach to deciphering the source material and explain their purpose in doing so. For organizational and chronological purposes, I have arranged the historiographies of the works by publication date. It is my intention that the reader will begin to not only put together their own chronicle of important events and ideologies, but also understand the many frameworks used for analyzing the archives.

Castro studies the popular culture form of the tango and its lyrics as a thematic entry way into Argentine social relations and social history from 1880 to 1955. His work is strictly a social history that explores intersecting and evolving class structures. Castro argues that tango can, and should, be looked at “as a social document and as a documenter of society”, pacing importance on the discussion of time and place, especially of lyrics, which “gave voice to the complaints of injustice and reflected the frustration of its authors and audience.”¹ He situates these larger arguments as a new contribution to current histories. By the time Castro finished and published his book in 1991, he holds that little work had looked at tango as a social history and he adds that even less was published in English. He contributes
one of the first monographs to the study of tango, as most of what had been written at the time was only articles. He credits Ediciones Corregidor with a large publication of tango lyrics with accompanying discographies that he utilizes at their fullest. Another contribution that Castro’s research offers is that it highlights the separate arguments for the roles of milonga and black culture in the formulation of the turn-of-the-century tango. While most tango historians support the theory that tango originated from candombé, influenced by Brazilian and Uruguayan black culture and transforming into milonga, Jorge Luis Borges disagree, arguing that the Argentine mestizo mix was the true origin of tango and greatly differed from the black version of milonga.\(^2\) Castro utilizes prominent literary figures, including Jorge Luis Borges, as well as tango lyricists. He dedicates an entire chapter to poetry and lyrics, citing numerous accounts of lunfardo in theatre and radio productions. His sources frame tango as closely associated with brothels, prostitution and crime.

Chasteen’s work spans nearly 2 centuries, starting in the early 1800’s and winding down at the turn of the 21\(^{st}\) century. He links the origins of Tango in Argentina with Maxixe in Brazil and Danzón in Cuba. Chasteen claims his study is a dance history but I see it as more than that and classify it as a sociocultural history. Chasteen argues that these dances were transgressive, violated proprieties, crossed lines and broke laws, and in doing so, challenged social controls that held political structures in place.\(^3\) He is interested in understanding how the dances of black people become dances of white people and how the black tango of the 19\(^{th}\) century became the white tango of the 20\(^{th}\). Chasteen also wants to explore how very
transgressive dances become official national rhythms and the processes that occurred in this occurrence. Chasteen argues that Milonga, the predecessor to what we now refer to as tango, was danced primarily by whites as an imitation of black movement. The dance itself constituted racial themes, as there were many “encounters between dark-skinned women and light-skinned men of superior social position.”

Chasteen argues that while most dance histories focus on music, his study looks descriptions of people dancing. He further holds that dance histories have tended to be ignored by historians because they lack hard written evidence and therefore “have had almost no presence in a historiographical landscape” of Latin America. Chasteen actually tries to describe the history and evolution of the physical movements associated with each genre of dance and connects them to each other. Chasteen assents to the ideas of other historians that the word *tango* was originally associated with a place, not a dance or music. He adds that by the mid-19th century, tango referred to a musical or theatre act, but not a dance.

Thompson focuses his work the Afro-Argentine involvement in the development of tango over a wide time frame, beginning with before the turn of the century and spanning all the way to more modern Hollywood depictions up to 2005. His work is very much a sociocultural history in which he explores the “country to city continuum” that brought country dwellers into the city and established traditional African rhythms in pre-tango music and dance. Thompson's thesis is the most clear and straightforward of all the authors, stating, “African and Afro-Argentine influences are continuous in the rise, development, and achievement
of the tango.” Thompson further argues that while many cross-cultural elements melded together to influence the modern tango, the most prominent was Kongo-style dancing, which he refers to in this case as candombé. A major theme in this work is black creole roots and immigration with a surprisingly antithetical take on racism.

Thompson, a seasoned Yale historian, claims to offer more depth to the current discourse. For example, he argues that tango historians “take for granted the rapid acceptance of the bandoneón in Buenos Aires in the 1870s” and so he adds to this discourse, or lack thereof. While his work offers a much more complete vision of Afro-Argentine influence in present day tango, he admits that the field remains to be analyzed in its entirety. Thompson uses poetry, paintings, photographs, films, videos and references from African dance.

Baim focuses on tango as a dance and as a song form during the time period 1875 to 1925. Her work documents an international cultural history of the tango leading up to its acceptance in Argentina. Baim holds that by studying the early world of tango, she can offer “a fresh, strong, yet transparent foundation for the study of many sides of the tango, and a clear idea of what remains unknown, speculative or unverified”. She is interested in identifying who tango belongs to. Moreover, she asks “What was it about Buenos Aires that prompted the invention of this unique dance form? What elements combined across the different cultures to make the tango the dance of all porteños, wherever their roots?” She utilizes diagrams of step patterns, dance manuals, film and photographs of dancers, written
anti-tango discourse from clergymen to social workers, newspapers, magazine articles, and oral histories. Where Baim’s work takes a different turn than most tango historians is in its scope of the countries outside of Argentina that adopted and shaped modern tango for themselves. She specifically leaves out details regarding the most famed tango musicians, including Gardel, Valentino and Piazzolla “because their stories are told elsewhere”.

Baim holds a PhD in Musicology, which should give her some clout on making assumptions and proposing theoretical ideologies regarding music. She admits that primary source material is scarce before 1910 and the material that is available lack details descriptions of the mechanics of the dance so “it is nearly impossible to reconstruct the earliest tango dances with any accuracy, even though dancers can perhaps approximate the style.” She also acknowledges the holes and gaps in the history and claims that the widest gaps are from the missing pieces that occurred within Argentina, not outside. What is perturbing is her lackluster effort to fill in those gaps with properly situated contentions and interpretations. Her writing style is amateur and vacant. Her arguments are difficult to define and her supporting evidence is vague and cluttered. The book is arranged in such a scattered manner that it lacks a feeling of completeness. In her goal to create a pellucid narrative for what mysteries remain to be solved, I feel she achieved this, leaving the reader not with confusion but with absolute clarity that there is so much unverified information. Furthermore, while Thompson manages to describe milonga and canyengue movement in depth, Baim struggled to find any ability to reference the
mechanics of the tango. Perhaps she did not recognize the link between the dances, as Thompson has. He gives exciting imagery for the waltz-like embraces, close, bent bodies, etc.

Garramuño focuses on the period of the 1920’s and 1930’s, “when autochthonous modernity was at its peak…[and] tango…began to be perceived as [a] national form of music and dance…” She focuses on artistic and ideological processes that revolutionized the popular music of tango into national and modern forms. Garramuño gives us a rich Cultural history, exploring the coevolution of nationalization and modernization in Argentina by examining the arts and forms of popular culture. She bluntly asks many questions…“How does a cultural form come to be transformed into a national one? What, on the one hand, does it mean to be national, and what are the operations that make it possible for determined cultural forms to be though of as symbols of a national identity? What were the discursive networks that came to be woven into these forms in order to allow them, despite inassimilable differences, to be constituted nonetheless as representative for an entire nation?” The primitive aspect of tango became precisely the reason for barring tango from the national cultural landscape but later, after the acceptance that it was primitivism itself and elevated in the cultural hierarchy, it was brandished as primitive in order to highlight it as a national symbol. Based on this idea, Garramuño argues, “the conversion of tango into a symbol of a national identity is a produce of the degree to which the nationalizing process was tied in with the modernization of Argentine culture.”
Garramuño emphasizes the need to closely consider the synthesis of popular culture and elite culture. She holds that popular culture is generally referred to as the culture of the masses, which the elite are not a part of, but that in Argentine Tango, the elite had to accept and embrace popular culture in order to gain status in terms of modernity. She argues that tango is not a “simple reflection of a previously constituted identity, but rather a crystallization of complex processes in the negotiation of cultural differences.”

Garramuño offers probably the most convincing support of her ideas by surveying the conflicting debates over the manufacture of modernity by way of the tango. Her use of literature, film and various arts provides for an engaging expedition of complexity, highlighting the numerous contradictions that eventually united the primitive and the modern.

II. Elements of Evolution

In this section I will discuss bigger events and overlapping themes in the evolution of tango as a national identity from its very roots. I will highlight how the different authors approached those events regarding language, music, theater, art, as well as social and political atmospheres. Some authors only focus on a few themes while others’ work spans every possible explanation. While at times there are conflicting statements and arguments arising throughout the texts, keep in mind these disputes will be addressed at the end of the article.

Lunfardo

The role of Lunfardo, a dialect born out of Porteño circumstances and experiences, is a special topic only seen in a few of the works produced on tango.
Castro believes that by studying the evolution of the Lunfardo language he can simultaneously paint a picture of Argentine socio-cultural history. He holds that “the use of lunfardo in the tango serves to highlight the manipulation of popular culture and language by an urban educated middle class.”¹ Much like tango in its early days, lunfardo was a language associated with the poor, low socio-economic and criminal classes. As it coevolved within tango lyrics, it gained acceptance as a “flavoring element in tango lyrics.”² As Rodriguez discusses in her book, Civilizing Argentina, part of the civilization process included in-depth studies of criminology and the blossoming of criminology as a sound science to account for the vagrancy and derelict conditions of the immigrant populations. In this context, lunfardo earned notoriety in that it became a valid linguistic approach to understanding crime during the turn of the century. Castro recognizes the appalling conditions that immigrants and poor creoles were surrounded in, and partly a causation of, and reports the mixture as an ideal catalyst for protests and crime.³ These circumstances were the very base material required for stimulating tango lyrics and lunfardo was the perfect brush for painting these issues. For Baim, Lunfardo was an influential urban vernacular that, at the time, greatly swayed tango lyrics and helped to establish the stereotypical images many people today hold of the tango’s early participants. She holds that this view of Lunfardo as belonging only to the criminal class carried on until after the turn of the century.⁴ When tango lyrics appeared that used Lunfardo, an aura of criminality was immediately added to the tango.”²⁵

**Music**
Castro attributes the formation of creole tango on the blended musical influences of different cultures and races from 1865 to 1895. He brings up the controversial discourse of the role that candombé had in the progression of tango. He holds that milonga “emerged as a new way of performing conventional dance music, adding rhythmic complexity and accenting hip movement.”¹ Milongas were not just a precursor to tango; they have their own sound and movement as well, even to this day. The off-beat phrasing in milonga, Thompson holds, is central to candombé and other African dances. Thompson underlines milonga as a fad among the whites, citing that tango outshined milonga around 1906, but holds that milonga was still very alive in strictly black clubs.

Tango “became progressively more sophisticated and polished after being submitted to a process of cleansing and modernization…made more sophisticated through combinations with other musical forms and the intervention of composers from the middle class and the elite.”² The piano served as a promoter of tango among the higher classes but when the bandoneón was introduced, it tagged tango as something very modern. While Thompson identifies all the instruments used in tango as European, he reminds us that how the instruments are played is very African, especially in the syncopation. The first bandoneón player in Argentina was black and his son went on to become the first bandoneonista to lead an orchestra. While whiteness, a kind of Europization, evolved in tango music, Pugliese honored the African roots of the tango in a challenge against the Euro-centrism he saw occurring in Buenos Aires.
Garramuño cites 1917 as the start of the development of the tango song and the beginning of its national acceptance. She holds that part of the civilization of tango occurred through the process of the participants of tango moving from dancers to listeners. Castro’s work also supports this idea, citing that tango lyrics began to change from spontaneous lyrics and music into a more standardized genre and this can “provide an overview of the changing preoccupations and status of the urban working and middle classes.” He describes a “transformation of the tango from a dance of active defiance to a song of passive protest.” Castro focuses on the evolving tango lyrics and the present themes that include country and city life, love, satire, crime, philosophy, gender and social protests. He highlights that the lyrics “reflect growing social discontent and radicalism of the working class” and “reveal the creole males’ increasing resentment of the immigrant men with whom they competed for work and women…” The evolving themes of the lyrics changed the way the music was played and interpreted. “Tango music became much slower, and its spirit changed completely. Sad or bitter lyrics accented its now, often melancholy mood. Tango music and dancing were becoming, in a word, more Europeanized.”

The appearance of the radio disseminated tango into every corner of the nation, facilitating the diffusion. Castro agrees that tango began its transformation into popular culture with the spread of radio and he cites this time as starting after 1917. Almost unanimously, historians of tango music recognize Carlos Gardel as the father of modern tango music. Gardel was arguably the most popular tango singer of all time but his music was intended for listening, not dancing. His music
was broadcast in every corner of Argentina and throughout South America and he became an adored pop icon in movies. His good looks, charm and smooth voice made people fall in love with tango music. Baim adds some emotional depth to the discourse of the tango song in the lives of Argentines. She declares that the “song has documented the spirit, culture and struggles of a nation of immigrants and displaced natives savoring and enjoying the loneliness and isolation of being foreign in their own country and feeling deeply the political and economic strife that has characterized Argentine life—particularly in Buenos Aires—throughout the country’s history.”

While tango had become a hit and had stroked a chord among the general population, both elite and lower classes, the genre saw a resurgence of milonga in the 1930s, probably in response to the melancholy atmosphere of tango lyrics up to this point. Thompson ascribes this to the reaction against the sad tango-cancion in circulation post 1917. And while milonga did experience an evolution within its sub-genre of what is now considered tango, it “stayed relatively black” by holding true to its steady pulsations and fast, melodic accents, according to Thompson. Attesting to its steadfastness, milonga music is still played in present-day tango gatherings: 1 out of every 6 tandas but it is still played! Part of why it is still played is because it adds energy to an otherwise flat event. “Tango and milonga still include short bursts of heel-stamping, depending on the artist and context.” This is true in the dance as well. The heel tapping inspired by milonga music is seen by very charismatic and musical dancers across the world in modern tango. Habanera music
“permeates milonga to this day” and Thompson holds that early recordings of so-called tangos are actually habaneras.

**Performing Arts**

Some of the authors passionately argue that performing arts such as shows in the circus, plays and other theatre productions, and eventually, modern cinema, played a major role in nationalizing the tango. Chasteen documents the supposed first stage milonga in the Rio de la Plata as part of the production Juan Moreira.¹ However, the event took place in Montevideo with Uruguayan performers, suggesting that the birthplace of popularized tango might be Uruguay and not Argentina. In addition, Juan Moreira greatly appealed to the native, criollo spirit during a time of severe dislike for immigrants. “Black music and dance became a key element of what was criollo—and therefore, of what was national—in the 1890s.”²

Chasteen argues that popular musical theater in the 1890’s began blurring the lines between tango and milonga and labeled sheet music as milonga but advertised as tango.³ By 1900, he says the word milonga has all but disappeared. Due to its caricatural depiction in the popular carnival, tango, as milonga was now referred to, tempted the whites of Buenos Aires to venture into the close-embrace, very “black” style of movement and experiment living out a temporary fantasy without actually dropping themselves to the lower-class level.

Baim supports this transition of increasing comfort with tango. She holds that theatrical productions were generally more available to the upper and middle classes. In Buenos Aires, she declares that the sainete porteño was very powerful in
introducing tango to these upper classes in a manner they were accepting of. Many of the plots were based on local social themes involving compadrito society and the growing tensions between them and immigrants. In addition, since many tango poems were known only through oral tradition, the sainete contributed extensively to the preservation of early lyrics and to the understanding of Lunfardo and tango language by the middle and upper classes. A very popular sainete was Los dientes del perro and it featured the now-very-famous tango song Mi Noche Triste. This act was produced so many times and so widely that is considered to have greatly persuaded the incorporation of tango within the genre for most future productions.

Of course with modernization, theatre went out the window as film and television productions took off. The industry of Argentinian, Parisian and Hollywood filmmaking made great leaps forward on behalf of tango. Garramuño reports “the first Argentine full-length feature film takes as its theme tango and the world of the poor marginal zones in order to establish in the cinema-which in that period can be considered the epitome of the modern-a national tradition: the tango movie.” Thompson holds that the first tango film featured an Afro-Argentine star, acknowledging that blacks were the experts on tango during this time.

**Visual Arts & Literature**

After 1900, the tango genre was highly observable among all social classes in Buenos Aires. Even though many still did not accept it, everyone knew about it. There was still something missing, something that would bring about toleration and appreciation for its history, the music, the movement. Up until this point, “serious
authors had not yet included the tango in accounts of Argentine literary, theatrical or social history.”¹ Slowly as it was depicted in visual arts and writings, especially as poems and recited lyrics, the tango gained significant media attention. Thompson briefly discusses how tango was becoming quite common throughout the media and in other various art forms that allowed it to be widely expressed by 1913 throughout Paris and Argentina as well.

Garramuño highlights various authors that wrote of tango, the gaucho and traditions of a national past as well as includes artists who constructed visual iconographies of tango that showed, in her opinion, “a very clear condensation of the primitive and the modern.”² She holds that “in the work carried out by Argentine artists and intellectuals immersed in modernization and the avant-garde movements of the years between 1920 and 1930…there is a matter of elaborating the primitive and sensual character of those products as a mark of the most elegant modernity.”³ She cites the heavy use of cubism to depict tango dancers and musicians, including one image of a man playing a bandoneón. “The primitive became a vector of modernity.”⁴

**Modernism vs. Nationalism**

During the birth and evolution of tango, a similar struggle was occurring that fought for decreased gaps within social spaces and renovated ideologies matching, or preferably surpassing, those of modern Europe. When it comes to the tango, Argentina found its pathway to modernity within the framework of nationalism. Between 1900 and 1920, tango rarely appears in the media, being publicized only in
associated with music records, cartoons and crime reports.\textsuperscript{1} However, it slowly became tied to more and more products and objects that spun “tango as an up-to-date cultural product and firmly placed it in the context of Argentine modernity.”\textsuperscript{2} Garramuño highlights an advertisement from 1914 that shows a dance hall of Tangueros in associated with a brand of soap. She holds that “tango’s association with a modern product effectively elevates it from the formerly unsophisticated realm of popular dance to the fashionable circle of modern, middle-class consumers”\textsuperscript{3} This was a very powerful message, mainly due to the fact that soap is a symbol of cleanliness, which in Argentina at this time, was synonymous with modernism, progression and civilization. She asserts that through the advertisement “tango is literally cleansed by the soap that is associated with it.”\textsuperscript{4}

Garramuño insists “the perception of the primitive reproduces European exoticism, which many Argentine intellectuals and artists in turn tended to imitate…The constructed exoticism elaborated a message of modernity.”\textsuperscript{5} In being rejected, tango exerts a special attraction by that which is repressed or prohibited.\textsuperscript{6} Garramuño credits those first travelers who exported tango music and dance as a raw product. Garramuño refers to the popularization of tango in terms of an avant-garde movement in Argentina. This might sound strange considering the normal definition of the term but Garramuño holds that in Argentina, the avant-garde was “the desire for modernity…and an absence of boundaries.”\textsuperscript{7} While it might have been primitive in Argentina, the Europeans viewed tango as exotic and very much avant-garde. In as much as Argentines looked to Europe for images of
modernism and cosmopolitanism, they found it in tango, as Europeans embraced it for their own. Garramuño offers an interesting analogy for this paradox. She insists that cosmopolitanism is not opposed to nationalism because they each represent one side of the same coin, where tango is seen as “both the local, national primitive as well as the sophisticated and modern.”

Chasteen agrees with Garramuño that Argentina focused much energy at the turn of the century into civilizing the nation and imitating European models in an effort to become modern. Chasteen holds that whites only learned the body movement and style of black dancing after it was incorporated and smoothed out in European social dance choreography. Baim supports Chasteen in that “this transition to a smoother style coincides somewhat with the acceptance of the tango by Buenos Aires high society, and one cannot help but compare the gradual acceptance of the one-step, foxtrot, and other such dances in the United States and Europe once dance teachers demonstrated that a smoother, more elegant style was possible.” Chasteen states that the stylized version of tango that was popularized in Europe and the U.S. was very different from the raw version danced in the cheap dance halls of BA and that “the international ballroom tango signaled its transgressive origins” resulting in an exoticized and theatrical tango outside Argentina.

Castro is in agreement with the other authors that there was a dichotomy of civilization and barbarism that fueled the progression of tango into a national culture. He further traces the progression of barbarism into civilization as a
movement of the tango from the suburbs and rural houses of prostitution in the port to the slightly more upper class area of La Boca with tango being played in bars where young, upper class men came for excitement, its movement to downtown cafes and its final transition to Europe. He cites the change in the dance style from complicated, jerky movements to more simple forms as a character alteration that bumped tango from “a cultural symbol of the creole population to one of the Europeanized elite.”

Baim claims that the tango arrived in Paris through the Argentines living abroad but not in the same sense as the other authors claim. She holds that the Argentines found a similar spirit in the Apache dance of Paris and began to exchange steps and styles. “As argentines became aware of the changes and adaptations made to their native dance, there was a wave of nationalistic pride in preserving the authentic Argentine version of the dance.” Baim sarcastically adds, “It is not surprising that a high society made up of people whose ancestors were European immigrants and who distinguished themselves form lower classes by trying to be as Europeanized as possible, would wait for foreign approval of the tango by persons of their own social class before the accepting its repatriation to Buenos Aires.”

Thompson argues that while many view Argentina as the only white nation in South America, the dark history of tango argues otherwise. “Over the course of the twentieth century, Argentines gradually forgot the African roots of tango altogether.” Thompson adds to this discourse by discussing the dichotomies of tango movement and modernism. He says, “True, men and women descended from
Kongo, Andalusia, and Italy met and created a new dance in rough neighborhoods. Some danced for sex; some danced for art; some danced to show off their bodies. New steps could hardly have emerged, however, had the best not been dancing for dance. In a city in motion, bravura moves were the crest of change.”  

According to Garramuño, the tango loses popularity during Peronism; “nationalization is not confused with the process that made listening to these musical forms generalized and popular, even though the former may encompass the latter.” Castro backs this up showing the effects of censorship. The lyrics of tango begin to lose all social content and are now reflective of nostalgic sentiment due to the socio-political consequences under Peronism. Castro depicts the atmosphere under Peron as one of scrutinization regarding the morals of the country. He highlights how Peronism was aimed at improving morality and Catholic ideals as well as getting back to national pride and moving away from sensationalized European ideals. The mid 1940s saw a media requirement that aimed to clean up the material being broadcast, and this included removing dirty or inappropriate tango lyrics. However, Castor argues “tango was able to hold its own even through the government encouraged folk music as a means of fostering nativistic values.” The 1940’s brought about a tango revival, according to Castor, and it was further popularized through novels and musical theatre productions during this time. For Garramuño, the characteristic of primitive that “served as sufficient proof to imagine operations of expulsion from those lascivious dances is now resignified as the sign of modernity.” For Argentina, being national IS being modern.
Conclusion

Racism and distaste for immigrants might have helped tango reach the cultural nationalism that it did. By being primitive and autochthonous, many who considered themselves native Argentines could find a connection to the roots of the nation through tango. But Castro offers another story, suggesting “the creole and the immigrant were united in the tango and by the tango.” If this is true, it insinuates that racist and xenophobic views by the elite created a field for the targeted poor to unite and feel a sense of national pride in their country bumpkin lifestyles.

The authors all agree that tango was started in the poor, rural and urban outskirts. Whether it started in Argentina or Uruguay, this is still up for debate, although most cite its origins in Argentina. Because becoming a musician or dance teacher was a perfectly acceptable career path for Afro-Argentines, many of the very first tango musicians and orchestras were black. This clearly shows, without argument amongst the authors, tango’s ties to African tradition and culture. But there are still contradictions here.

All the authors except Garramuño agree that tango can’t be traced to a single source, especially not an Argentine origin. She proclaims that tango was always principally Argentine. While “tango is unquestionably Argentina’s signature music and dance when viewed from outside the country”, there is a definite discourse occurring between Uruguayans and Argentines, as well as African immigrants that each claim tango for their own. In fact, according to Baim, the earliest reference to tango as a dance is in some proclamation of the municipal court of Montevideo.
Another source of discontent among the authors deals with the etymology of tango and its associated words. Castro’s explanation of the term *milonga* deems it as Afro-Brazilian and he cites it as meaning “a large unruly joyful gathering” and was associated with salons where alcohol, dancing and prostitution were the norm.  

*Milonga, canyengue and tango* all are African words according to Thompson. Chasteen assents to the ideas of other historians that the word *tango* was originally associated with a place, not a dance or music. He adds that by the mid-19th century, tango referred to a musical or theatre act, but not a dance. Additionally, Chasteen says in 1830 tango meant “an event, as in “all-night tango” involving any kind of dancing black people did to drums. Thompson holds that Kongo dances greatly influenced popular dances that pre-dated tango, based on ethics, art, spirituality and self-defense; For Thompson, “tango” refers to drums, dance and place. He also suggests that *Habenera*, which arrived to Buenos Aires in the 1850’s, led to *milonga*, *canyengue* and *tango*; a mix of steps from candombé and habanera music created a new blend that resulted in *milonga*. Garramuño agrees that tango emerged from habanera genre. She also claims that references to Brazilian tango are probably actually what most would call *maxixe*.

Another argument that stands out is when tango was accepted throughout Argentina in its entirety. Chasteen argues that it was not until the late 1920s that all Argentine social classes accepted the tango but Thompson says tango was full blown in 1903. “Before acquiring its current meaning as the name of Argentina’s national rhythm, the word tango was always somehow associated with the African diaspora.”
By 1937, according to Garramuño, tango as music defined the national identity of Argentina.

Also up for further debate is the brothel theory. Thompson believes this genesis theory is over exaggerated and should be thrown out. He argues in favor of a theory that considers the multiple venues that are responsible for the birth of tango. Baim argues not necessarily about the brothel theory, but for her assumption that by the late 1800s, many of those who adopted the compadrito’s identity and those who were involved in the world of the tango were people who had been born in Buenos Aires, no matter what their distant European backgrounds might be. Chasteen further argues tango is not completely considered the national rhythm by all Argentines and that rural criollo folklore competes with tango for the prestige of the national rhythm from inside the country.

The literature provides a deep, rich social, cultural, political and at times, an economic history of Argentine tango. Each author has a particular interest in a certain aspect of the history but this also means that each author omits pieces of information or fails to make some connections that become more evident across all the works. What the literature doesn’t do is provide a concrete answer to anything in question. This brings me precisely to my initial argument. There are no answers. After reading these works, it is easy to understand why the authors’ conclusions don’t match up perfectly. Each author sees only what he or she wants to see or perhaps what he or she has been led to believe and is already indoctrinated with. Some authors like Thompson and Castro have thoroughly researched the subject.
and still are left without clear conclusions. Others, especially Baim, have written
with an incredibly biased approach and have only contributed to the confusion.

The primary argument is not that tango became a national symbol for
modernity in Argentina. This is clearly argued and supported by all the authors. The
questions left unanswered are the same questions that each author tempted to
address at some point in their work. This is the question of the origins of tango.
Where was the first tango danced? Was it really tango or something else? Was it
Uruguayan or Argentinian? Tango is probably the most recognized Latin American
dance but what I concluded from this endeavor is that maybe it shouldn’t be
considered Latin at all. It is acknowledged that Argentina is more European than
Latin, so why should we continue to classify this dance as being Latin, especially
when the music and the movement resemble something much different than
modern salsa, cha cha cha, merengue, cumbia, etc? Should tango be considered more
African than Latin American? Or perhaps more European than American? I’m afraid
this question, no matter how much research is compiled or how many new primary
sources of information can be dug up, will not be answered. The tango is so
passionate, so emotional, so deeply imbedded in multiple cultures that everyone
wants to stake a claim to its roots. The lineage of tango looks much like the lineage
of our own human evolution. The further back you try to trace it, the more obscure
it becomes. Perhaps the answers are hidden too far back or have completely
disappeared. Regardless of the discourse, I hold that the last universal common
ancestor (LUCA) for tango will forever be a mystery. Scholars and historians of
tango all attempt to trace tango back to a single origin. What I argue is that this is simply impossible, for much of the same reasons it is impossible to find LUCA for life on the planet. For what I can assume from my research, tango did not develop from a single common ancestor at any one particular place or at any specific time. It is a mixing and mutation of many pieces of culture, social structures, music, art and dance, and politics that have shaped what tango has become. Each piece of the puzzle can be seen as another mutation in the evolution of tango.
Notes:

Elements of Evolution: Lunfardo
1. The first written description of lunfardo was in 1979 in a context of describing porteño criminal life. Baim, p. 17.
2. Castro, p. 17.
3. Castro, p. 32.
5. Baim, p. 33.

Elements of Evolution: Music
2. Garramuño, p. 22.
7. Garramuño, p. 36.
9. Tango music is played in tandas, or groups. A tanda consists of 3 or 4 songs (predefined by the DJ) from the same orchestra and usually from the same year or time frame. The general format for tanda organization at a dance social is Tango, Tango, Milonga, Tango, Tango, Vals. So one full set is a total of 18 or 24 songs, respective to the 3 or 4 song tanda format.
10. Thompson, p. 58.
11. Baim, p. 3.

Elements of Evolution: Performing Arts
2. Chasteen, p. 53.
4. Baim, p. 35; A sainete is a one-act burlesque or comic farce with music.
5. Baim, p. 36.

Elements of Evolution: Visual Arts & Literature
1. Baim, p. 47.
2. Garramuño, p. 66.

Elements of Evolution: Modernism vs. Nationalism
Brothel theory claims that tango was born and raised in the poor whorehouses of Buenos Aires, danced by prostitutes with low and middle class men.
Bibliography


- Collier, Simon, Artemis Cooper, Maria Susana Azzi, and Richard Martin. 1993. Tango! The Dance, the Song, the Story. Thames and Hudson. New York, NY.


