

DANCING TANGO IN BUENOS AIRES

FEDERICA BANFI

DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY, SCHOOL OF HAPP, QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY BELFAST

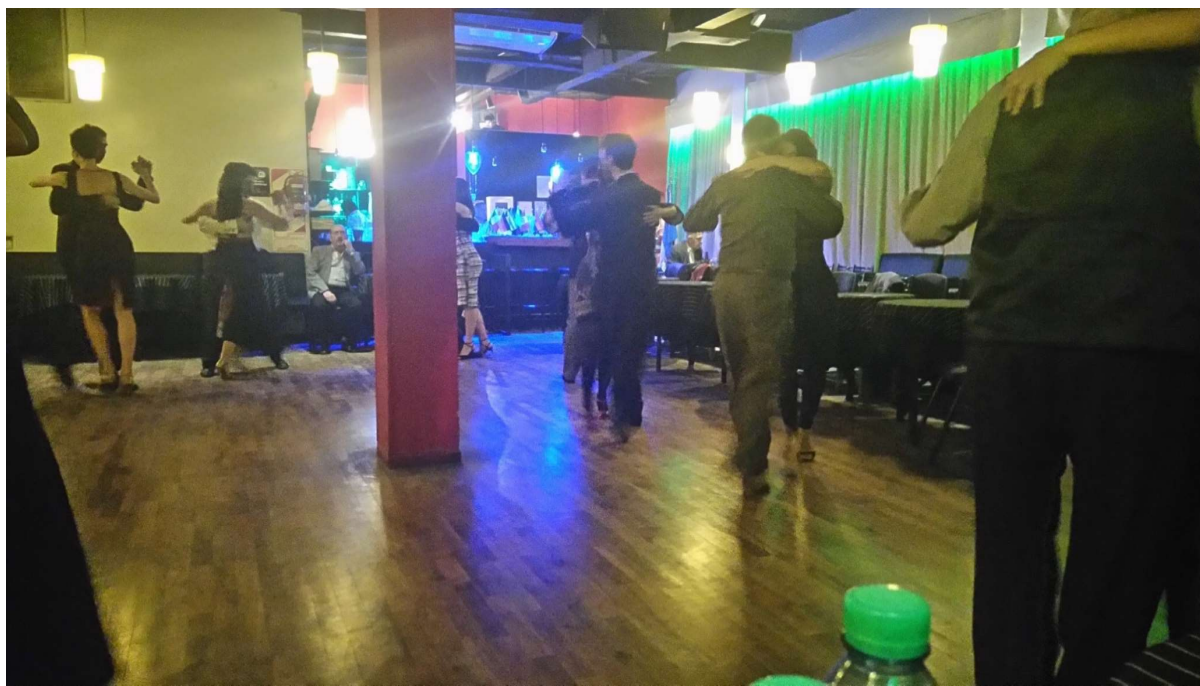


Figure 1: Milonga in 'El Beso', Buenos Aires (photo by the author, 2017).

She stares at her dresses all lined up, hanging smoothly in her wardrobe. She will go to a *milonga*¹ tonight and the ritual of getting ready has just started. So many flower patterns and colours. She cannot decide. She turns to her shoes; it's easier to pick an outfit when you know which shoes you are going to wear. She picks up the black sandals. They never fail her.

It always surprises her how comfort can come on 8.5 cm heels. She bought this pair only a few weeks ago and they already look battered. Indeed, she did nothing but going from class to class and from *milonga* to *milonga* since her arrival in Buenos Aires. The red sole is now a light tan colour where it touches the floor, marked by several overlapping circular scratches, each one a physical memory of all her pivots. The long straps that double around her ankles are the fashion of this year. She just had to have them, and when she saw the smile on the shop assistant's face while he looked at her feet in them, she knew it was the right choice.

She finally decides she is going to play it safe today and pick a black pencil skirt with a deep slit at the back and a pink velvety vest with black flowers. She puts her hair up with a hairpin on the right side so that they won't be in the face of her dancing partners and completes the look with a thin layer of make-up that won't leave traces on men's shirts.

As she gets into an old black and yellow taxi, she notices how dark the sky is and how it contrasts with the city lights. The traffic is as heavy as it always is in Buenos Aires; no matter if it is daytime or night, streets are always busy. Cars, buses, and taxis competing to get to their destinations quickly. Even

pedestrians walk as fast as they can. They pass a street lined with bars and young people sitting outside enjoying craft beers, a square where people exercise on the gym equipment or jog around its perimeter, a young man in dirty clothes who pulls a cart the size of a van artfully filled to unimaginable heights with carefully folded cardboard.

The taxi arrives at her destination, a small door opens on the tiny street. It has a little red neon sign on top glowing in the night: El Beso. She walks in and immediately hears *tango*² playing. The expectations rise; will she get good dances? Will she get any dance at all? She hopes to see the familiar faces of people she has danced with already who may give her another chance. Just inside the entrance there is another door, red and heavy, opening on a flight of black stairs. She takes a deep breath and starts climbing them, the music in 2x4 getting louder. The lady behind the desk welcomes her with a smile. 'Bienvenida!³' she says while taking her money. Walking around the bar, she is met by the lady's husband. It's *Cachirulo*⁴ tonight. Hector decides who is going to sit where. Walking towards her with his arms reaching out, he inspects her from head to toes. He hugs her and kisses her cheeks as if they were old friends. 'Follow me', he says. From that first look he has already decided how good a dancer she is and where she should sit. She managed to give him the right impression as he gives her a good spot at the edge of the dancefloor. She can see most men from here. Women sit on the long sides of the dance floor while men are sitting on the shorter sides. There is a second line of tables for couples, late comers and less accomplished dancers. Men in the first line look very serious, scrutinising every person entering the room and on the dancefloor, playing deep into the part of expert *tangueros*⁵ hunting for the best follower, exchanging comments with each other over an espresso or a glass of red wine.

She moves the black cloth covering the little round table to change shoes, removing first her sneakers and then discreetly taking off her hold-ups to wear the black sandals. Her naked feet show off red nail polished toes. Suddenly she notices a shadow over her. It's the waiter. Standing in front of her, he asks dryly what she wants. She cannot drink and dance; she has tried it, but that glass of white wine that was supposed to relax her only ended up making her sleepy and sloppy. Lesson learned, she orders some water.

Finally ready to dance, she starts looking around, properly checking out the men. They are all wearing shirts and jackets, most of them middleaged locals. She can immediately discern the Argentineans, as they chat among themselves, from the solitary foreigners sharing tables but not words. In the tango world, you make friends in the places you regularly go dancing. No need to leave home in company, you'll find them there, in the *milonga*, looking for dances, same as you. No matter where you are in the world, the locals and the visitors are always easily discernible.

She is here to dance, yet she is terrified of that first dance. There is so much at stake, as how the night will go depends on it. She forces herself to look around with confidence while feeling a stone in her throat. Maybe a sip of water will help push it down. Hector is now walking towards her with a woman in a red skin-tight jumpsuit who is assigned the seat at her right. 'Oh crap!' she thinks, 'I've seen her around, she's good. And with that perfect minute slender body, I stand no chance beside her.' Confirming her fears, a man walks towards the woman. 'There you go! She's already got an invitation and hasn't even had the time to change shoes yet.' She has been sitting here half an hour already and nothing has happened, and this woman has not been here two minutes and is already on the dancefloor. 'Stay positive,' she repeats to her herself, 'it's still early. Don't show your disappointment.' She is reassured by the fact that the couple know each other, as they hug and chat before starting to

dance. Being a regular is just such an advantage. How many months does it take? Will she stay in Buenos Aires long enough? Her doctoral research on improvisation in *tango* brought her there for six months. It may seem a long time, but it won't be long enough if she doesn't dance.

A few more *tandas*⁶ and she manages to lock gaze with a young man; he looks like a foreigner and also has had some difficulties getting dances. She has been sitting for nearly an hour and is getting bored, so decides to take the risk and return the gaze. She knows this is her chance to show she has the right to be here, that she has what it takes. It just needs to go well or she might as well go home. He finally nods at her in invitation and she accepts with a smile. He stands up and starts walking towards her. She stays seated, slowly taking off her shawl. She only stands up when he is in front of her, she will not make the same mistake twice. Once she stood up too soon when she accepted an invitation from across the hall, but the guy just walked past her to reach the girl sitting behind her. It was so humiliating.

Now standing in front of each other, they share a smile and without words they gently fall into each other's arms, their bodies shaping the close tango embrace. Their chests touch, she feels his arm reaching for her back and the other one finding her right hand while their heads softly lean on each other. In the meantime, the song intro plays in their ears. They take a deep breath together. He is wearing a nice perfume. She likes it when her dance partners do. Exhaling, they finally start walking as one. After the first song, they exchange names and nationalities. She was right, he is from Canada. They keep dancing until the end of the four songs set. They thank each other with a smile and he gentlemanly accompanies her back to her chair. He collects his glasses from her table before going back to his.

She can relax a bit now; it went well, and she feels reassured. She smiles while she sits and looks around, holding her chin up as she looks for the next partner. Let the *milonga* begin!

This short narrative piece was written drawing on field notes from and memories of my fieldwork, which took place in Buenos Aires between July and December 2017 as part of my doctoral project researching improvisation and transnational mobility in Argentine tango. Being both a tango dancer and an anthropologist researching tango dancing, I have been using my dancing body as part of my research methodology.

In the field, I often lived a power struggle between my-self as a researcher and as a dancer. Should I try to keep a certain distance all the time, even while dancing? Or should I allow myself to get totally immersed in the experience? As I often failed to maintain distance, I convinced myself that getting fully immersed in the dance experience would give me access to a wealth of vivid data that would enrich and guide my research. I was not wrong. Throughout my fieldwork, my personal experience of dancing guided my enquiries and helped me in establishing rapport with research participants. My field notes comprised both ethnographic accounts and personal impressions and feelings relating to my own dancing and learning experiences.

Once back home and settled into the task of writing my findings, I was faced again with the same predicament. Which of my selves should emerge: the dancer or the anthropologist? Constrained by the academic writing style, my researcher-self prevailed. I often felt my experiences of dancing in the field were out of place in a doctoral thesis, therefore the data emerging from my ethnographic accounts and interview transcriptions have formed the core object of my analysis. Experimenting with creative

writing, though, has allowed me to present my experiences in the field as a dancer, my anxieties and sensibilities, without the constrictions posed by a scholarly writing style. I believe creative writing allows the exposure of our multiple selves in a new light that communicates the experience, vulnerability, and sensuality of being in the field. The potential of accompanying more traditional academic writing with creative forms is to transport the reader into the worlds anthropologists describe and analyze. Such an immersion can only be beneficial for readers as it may give them a deeper understanding of the academic insights presented.

Notes

¹ Milonga is the place and the event of social Argentine tango dancing.

² I refer to Argentine tango. Argentine tango is both a music and dance genre as recognised by UNESCO's nomination of tango to its Intangible Heritage list in 2009.

³ Translation: 'Welcome!'

⁴ Refers to the organisers of tonight's milonga. Often in Buenos Aires the same venue hosts different milongas by different organisers, or organisers use different venues on different nights. The name of the milonga therefore reflects who is organising it.

⁵ Translation: tango dancers.

⁶ A *tanda* is a set of three or four tangos played at *milongas*. Dancers invite each other at the beginning of the first song and are compelled to dance together until the end of the fourth song. In *milongas*, *tandas* are separated by *cortinas*, a short musical intermezzo of a different genre, that allows dancers to go back to their seats and get ready to find a new dance partner.

Acknowledgments

This project received funding from the Northern Bridge Training Partnership.