



## March 2023 Newsletter

### Tango Mulatto: The Untold Afro-Argentine History of Tango, 1800s-1900s

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#### Abstract

During the time of nation-building Argentina constructed a Europeanized identity that rejected nonwhite and particularly African cultures. Tango is likely a synthesis of candombe, a dance developed from the African nations in the River Plate region and from milonga which stemmed from the payada traditions of the gauchos. However, because of the insistence on erasing African elements in Argentine culture, the Afro-Argentine contribution to tango is often denied or unnoticed. To research this topic, I analyzed secondary sources such as texts from political leaders, scholars, and writers, as well as consulted primary resources including Afro-Argentine newspapers from the late 1800s. I found convincing evidence to suggest the rhythm and certain chorographical elements of tango were borrowed from candombe. The recognition of a hybrid Black and white tango would force Argentina to rethink its white nation identity and open itself to the possibility of confronting its racial past.

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#### Introduction

In 2002, *Clarín*, a widely circulated Argentine newspaper, reported that police detained María Magdalena Lamadrid, a fifth generation Argentine of African descent, at the Ezeiza International Airport in the Buenos Aires providence as she attempted to travel to Panama

(Anonymous, 2002). The migrations officer accused her of presenting a false passport. They argued that they found her document suspicious because it was new, and it had a different security code, which their system did not recognize. The migration officer also claimed he was unaware of the new passport alterations because Federal Police had not informed them of the recent changes. However, Lamadrid reported that they asked her if she spoke Spanish and commented to her that her passport could not be real because a person cannot be both Black and Argentine. It is not uncommon to hear Argentines say that the Black population does not exist in their country, unless foreign born, and incidences like this prove that race and identity are deeply intertwined in Argentina's consciousness.

Argentina is far from the only country in the Americas who, when imagining the social and cultural boundaries of their identities in newly formed nations, made exclusions based on race. For example, in the United States, the American identity was constructed on a foundation of white, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant superiority. This became problematic for populations like Mexican-Americans and Puerto Ricans. When the territory of the Southwest was annexed by the United States from Mexico, the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848) gave Mexicans living on the land full citizenship; similarly, Puerto Rico would be incorporated as a United States territory and, in 1917, Puerto Ricans became United States citizens.

However, because of differences in religion, race, and language, Puerto Ricans and Mexican-Americans continue to be excluded from the American identity and are often viewed as "foreign others" (Oboler 1997, 35–41). The goal of forming a national identity is homogenization and when a group of individuals physically live within the boundaries of a country, but they do not conform with the standards of the nation's cultural citizenship they are often socially excluded. In his research on Colombian national identity, race, and musical traditions, Peter Wade concluded that one of the functions of the outsider is to define who is on the inside. He realized that the presence of Black and indigenous people through the Americas was a necessary point of reference to define whiteness (Wade 2001, 855).

Prior to the conceptualization of the modern nation-state, people's identity generally corresponded with their religion, but, as one might imagine, when countries in the Americas found themselves with a mixed population of languages, races, and beliefs living within the same territory, the creation of a shared identity was a difficult task. There are more obvious external signs of state-building in the process of nation formation, such as the erection of infrastructure

and the creation of state institutions. On the other hand, nation-building refers to the efforts of newly independent countries to form a national identity which include symbolic entities such as flags, but also intangible characteristics like language or race. The construction of a national identity in a modern nation-state is often driven by the majority which can be complicated in multi-ethnic states. Benedict Anderson developed the concept of “imagined communities” to analyze nationalism; Anderson uses the term “imagined” because the members of a nation will never meet every other member face to face, but the individuals of a nation have an imagined set of markers or qualifications that create a national identity so that citizens from the same country view themselves as a formation of a homogenous body. Arguably, Argentina consciously sought an identity that was based on the social, political, racial, and cultural traditions of Europe. Blackness in Argentina challenges this imagined community by presenting a paradox that goes against the notion that a person simply cannot be Black and Argentine at the same time.

As of 2010, 97% of Argentina’s population identifies as European, mostly of Spanish and Italian origin, or mestizo (mixed European and Amerindian ancestry), while less than 0.4% identify as African decedents (Luongo 2014). While many view Argentina as a highly European-ized society, historically, Afro-Argentines formed a large part of the population. In fact, until 1850, the capital city of Buenos Aires was 40% Black (Andrews 1980, 64). Although these numbers reveal that the Afro-Argentine population experienced a seemingly dramatic demographic decline, whose causes are up for debate, traces of African influence in Argentine culture linger and in more recent times are being rediscovered. Historians have documented and understood the history of slavery in Spanish-America, but they have not studied to the same degree the lives of freed slaves in post-emancipation society. Neither Latin American nor foreign historians have given much thought or study to the role of Black people in Spanish-America as compared with Brazil and the United States where greater efforts were made (Andrews 1980, 201).

Although their accomplishments are often undervalued, Afro-Argentines initially played a key role in the nation building of their country. Whether or not they were given deserving credit for their actions, Afro-Argentines, in fact, were significant actors in every foundational narrative from the struggle for independence in 1810, to the development of defining cultural elements in Argentina like the tango. Following the fall of dictator Juan Manuel de Rosas in 1852, who was widely supported by the Black population, racism and the push towards reinventing a newer,

more “civilized” country, downplayed and distorted the role of the Afro-Argentines’ cultural contributions. Some evidence based on primary sources and the research of historians indicates that tango, a dance which has come to symbolize the essence of *Argentinidad*—in other words, what it means to be Argentine—was developed from the movements and music of the Afro-Argentine populations. Many influential historians and writers including Vicente Rossi, Jorge Luis Borges, Ricardo Rodríguez Molas, Néstor Ortiz Oderigo, and George Reid Andrews have debated the African origins and influences of Argentine tango. While esteemed musicologist Carlos Vega and scholar Julio Mafund have failed to consider or directly denied African influences in the genealogy of tango, other authors like Vicente Rossi have attempted to reinsert African descendants back into its history. This thesis explores the historical denial of Afro-Argentine contributions, not only to tango, but in other aspects of Argentine history. The denial of Blackness in Argentina gives way to a false narrative that the Afro-Argentine population was insignificant, inexistent, or did not contribute to anything of cultural value. The “Europeanized nation” narrative was consciously formed by thinkers and politicians like Domingo Faustino Sarmiento and Juan Bautista Alberdi who wanted to distance Argentina from anything “barbarian” and move the country closer to their vision of civilization and thus creating a white nation social identity. The history of tango is revealing of these racial conflicts as they relate to the running dialogue of what is Argentina and who are Argentines.

There are innumerable theories on the family tree of tango. Carlos Manus, author of *Entre la Política y el Tango* (2005) (Between Politics and Tango) recognizes its convoluted history and brings up the possibility that tango may be a synthesis of African candombe, Cuban Habanera, Tango Andaluz, Payada, and Milonga. Others, such as tango musician Juan Carlos Cáceres firmly holds that, at its base, tango has an underlining African rhythm from candombe, and that it is mixed with Cuban habanera and the milonga traditions from gaucho culture. *Cumprásita* (carnival), one of the most recognizable tangos embodies this uncertain birth:

Con permiso, soy el tango,  
Yo soy el tango que llega,  
De las calles del recuerdo,  
Donde nací ni me acuerdo,  
En una calle cualquiera,  
Una luna arrabalera,  
Y un bandoneón son testigos  
Yo soy el tango argentino

Cuando guste y donde quiera (Manus 2005, 21)

(Pardon me, I am tango, I am the tango that arrives, from the streets of memory, where I was born I don't even remember, In whichever street, An arrabalera moon,<sup>1</sup> and a bandoneon are witnesses, I am Argentine tango, whenever and wherever you wish.)

This common acknowledgement of the profound ambiguity of the origins of tango brings up another more important question; perhaps what needs to be asked is not whether the African origins can be proven, but rather why for so long has the possibility of African origins of tango been so quickly dismissed, and a European origin so easily accepted? Historian and musicologist Nestor Ortiz Oderigo points out that African influences exist in all countries of the Americas where Africans were forcibly brought as slaves (Ortiz 2009, 41–42). In the case of Argentina, not all groups who participated in the construction of national identity received historical credit. Vicente Fidel López, Bartolomé Mitre, and the historians of the Academia de la Historia Argentina were in charge of telling the story of the Black experience, but their white *criollo*<sup>2</sup> accounts were either inadequate or exclusionary (Poosson 2004, 87). For example, although the colonial records are clear about the demographic presences of Africans in Argentina, one author claimed Argentina had no Black population until the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713 (Castro 1988, 12).

In *Morenada*, a historical account of the lives of the Black population of the Rio de la Plata Region, author José Luis Lanuza comments that much of Black history in Argentina seemed to be forgotten or avoided:

A veces, hamacados por una melodía de los negros de Estados Unidos, de Cuba o del Brasil, se nos ocurre pensar que los morenos de Argentina pudieron también dejarnos una música típica. Pero nuestros morenos casi no nos han dejado ni su recuerdo. Nuestra historia parece complacerse en olivarnos, en evitarlos (Lanuza 1967, 7).

(Sometimes moved by a black melody in the United States, Cuba,

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<sup>1</sup> Referring to *arrabales* the working-class outskirts of the city.

<sup>2</sup> Person from South America of Spanish descent.

or Brazil, it occurs to us that the black population of Argentina would have left us a traditional music. But our blacks have left us almost not even a memory. Our history seems complacent to forget them, to avoid them.)

Lanuza goes on to explain that when history is presented in a way that is abstract and described in terms that are too clean cut, it generally leaves the reader suspicious of a truer version of events. Yet, he also seems to deny or be unaware of any musical contributions of the Black community of Argentina.

The possibility of an African influenced tango is important because of its implications on the contemporary Argentine identity which traditionally views itself as distinct from other Latin American countries, many of which identify closer with their indigenous, African, or mestizo heritage. There are several convincing primary sources that link African candombe, milonga and tango to a common lineage, such as folklorist Ventura Lynch's first-hand account of the creation of tango which documents the Afro-Argentines' participation. When confronted with the possibility of an African inspired tango, Argentina is forced to rethink its presumption of a white nation. Identifying the African origins of tango becomes second to an even more critical investigation about how the Argentine identity is affected by race. This story can be told through the origins and debates surrounding the development of tango. While Argentina typically sets itself apart from what is considered Afro-Latin America, this differentiation is due perhaps more to the systematic denial of African influences in culture and history rather than the true absence of such influences. On the one hand, this paper aims to explore the possible ramifications of a hybrid Black and white tango on Argentine identity and, on the other hand, it contributes to the voices that have added rectification to Argentine history by giving credit to the contributions of the Afro-Argentines whose feet first stepped and danced the rhythms that so inspired tango.

### **Slavery to Freedom**

The first recorded importation permit for enslaved Africans was granted in 1534 in the Rio de la Plata region, two years before the initial founding of Buenos Aires (Andrews 1980, 23). In this region, which encompasses both the capital cities of Buenos Aires and Montevideo, it is estimated that between 1587-1640, the year Portugal became independent from Spain, the Portuguese brought 45,000 slaves along the Rio de la Plata region and that slaves accounted for 2/3 of the value of all the imports entering Buenos Aires before 1645. Additionally,

approximately 70,000 slaves arrived from either Brazil or Africa between 1777 and 1812 when the revolutionary government of Buenos Aires banned slavery (Borucki 2015, 2). The last transatlantic slave trade trip from Angola to Montevideo occurred in 1835, but the Rio de la Plata region also depended on the importation of slaves from Rio de Janeiro and Salvador de Bahia.

The port city of Buenos Aires was founded twice; the first time by Pedro de Mendoza in 1536, who named it Nuestra Señora Santa María del Buen Aire. The original settlement was abandoned because of clashes with the native population. Buenos Aires was again settled, this time permanently, in 1580 by Juan de Garay and, just five years later, the Cabildo of Buenos Aires requested permission from the Spanish Crown to import African slaves to Peru (Borucki, 2015, 1). The Spanish Crown heavily regulated commerce and trade in Spanish America resulting in sparse grants of *asientos* (charters/contracts) to bring in slaves. Strict regulations did not stop the slave trade, but rather made it an illicit business. From 1595-1680, there were 22,892 registered Africans brought into the port, but historian George Reid Andrews estimates this number was likely only a small fraction of the total amount, as many were brought in by other unofficial means (Andrews 1980, 24). For example, it was common for sailors of slave vessels to report damages to their ships at sea, and while buying time with repair requests in the Buenos Aires port, the slave traders would unload undocumented slaves at night.

Buenos Aires itself did not have a significantly high demand for slaves, as did not have a labor-intensive plantation colony such as in Brazil or the Caribbean, therefore most of the slaves passed through the city and headed to northern Argentina, bounded for provinces? like Córdoba, Salta, and Tucumán, or were passed along to Paraguay, Chile and Alto Perú (modern day Bolivia). The inconsistencies found in the official records are a testament to the commonness of the illegal slave trade. For example, between 1612-1615 official records indicated 3,463 Africans arrived in the port but a reported 4,515 left on their journey into the interior north (Andrews 1980, 25). In contrast, urban slavery was common and occupied an important part of the Buenos Aires's economy. Slavery was most frequent in the domestic service sector with most upper-class families of Buenos Aires having household slave servants. A newspaper publication from 1802 laments the use of enslaved domestic servitude first on the grounds that it was questionably moral to house slaves of all sexes and ages in the same quarters and secondly that the labor they produced could be used in a more economically productive way in the agricultural sector (Andrews 1980, 31).

The year 1775 marked the beginning of a series of revolutions which would take place throughout the Americas. Importantly, in 1804, led by Jean-Jacques Dessalines, Haiti gained independence. This slave-led revolution was cautiously observed by the elites in other Latin America countries who feared similar revolts. Then, in 1807-1808 French forces invaded the Iberian Peninsula, which caused a ripple effect in the Americas as Spanish colonies began to call for independence. The United Provinces of the Río de la Plata started their revolution in May 1810. Initially, the two most prominent liberators of South America, José de San Martín and Simón Bolívar, did not speak out against slavery, but later they both recognized that a revolution based on the ideal of freedom was not consistent with slavery and both began to impose laws that supported emancipation (Andrews 2004, 56). The revolutionary government in their fight for an independent Argentina, stood against the traditional Spanish racial caste system as it was beneficial for the revolutionary government to conscript Blacks into their military units (Andrews 2004, 87).

Eventually, slaves were able to transition from slavery to freedom by various means including manumissions, which were either granted by slave owners or more frequently made through self-purchase, completion of a five-year commitment to military service, as well as Free Womb Laws in 1813 (Andrews 2004, 36, 62–64). In 1810, 22.6% of the Afro- Argentine population was free and by 1827 this number had gone up to 63.4% (Andrews 1980, 51). Most remarkably, the Afro-Argentines contributed not only to their quest for freedom, but to the independence of Argentina through their military services. Afro- Argentines served in the military in segregated units and were an essential part of the Argentine military strength. The Black militiamen fought alongside the white troops to push out two British invasions from Argentina. In the revolutionary wars, free Black troops formed two all-Black units and another Black unit made up the Seventh Infantry Battalion, composed of slaves who were either donated by their owners or bought by the state (Andrews 1980, 116–117). On May 25, 1810 the local government in Buenos Aires would declare independence from the Rio de la Plata viceroy, which was composed of present-day Argentina, Bolivia, Paraguay, Uruguay, and parts of Brazil. Slowly, the Afro-Argentines became a freed people, but despite their critical roles in the military and independence movement, they were not graced with social equality and were looked down on by the European descendants of Argentina.



Interestingly, an Afro-Argentine woman played a key role during several battles in the Argentine War for Independence, earning her the name *Madre de la Patria* (Mother of the Homeland). During the battle of Ayohuma (1813), Maria Remedios del Valle and her two daughters accompanied the Argentine army led by Manuel Belgrano. Known as *Las Niñas de Ayohuma* (the girls of Ayohuma), they ensured the troops had water and comfort. Remedios de Valle additionally participated in the battles of Tucumán, Salta, and Vilcapugio. During the Exodus of Jujuy, an incident which led to the mass displacement of people from the Jujuy Province, she was shot. She was also imprisoned by the Spanish seven times, participated as a combatant and as a spy for Belgrano's army but was largely forgotten by history until activists pushed to have her recognized. In 2013, Argentina national law 26852 sanctioned November 8th as "*Día Nacional de los/as Afroargentinos/as y de la Cultura Afro*" (National Day of Afro-Argentines and African Culture) in commemoration of Remedios del Valle (Balsa 2011, 664). In the post-independence era, Afro-Argentines again would again play a leading role in history during the administration of dictator Rosas.

### **Civilization v. Barbarianism**

The Juan Manuel de Rosas administration, which lasted from 1829-1832 and again from 1835 to 1852, heavily reached out to the nonelites, including Afro-Argentines, in a way that upset Rosas's rivals, the Unitarians, who supported a strong central government (Andrews 1980, 14-15). Afro-Argentines served and supported in great numbers the Rosas government and the federalists, who favored a confederation with almost completely autonomous providences, despite the fact the caudillo reopened the slave trade from 1831 to 1838 (Andrews 2004, 96-99). Rosas' tactics seemed to foreshadow the actions of Juan Perón, who much later would become an iconic political figure and president of Argentina. Perón, like Rosas, saw the value in the mass support of the poor and socially marginalized.

Rosas made some concessions to the Afro-Argentine population in return for their support. Among these concessions, he lifted the ban on holding candombe, a dance which developed in the Americas from the music and dance of different African nations (Andrews 1980, 163). The previous governments had prohibited candombe since the 1820s. The lifting of the regulations on candombe was significant because dance and music were a central theme to Afro-Argentine culture and more importantly, a means for them to organize and socialize. Rosas offered financial assistance to African Nations, (Andrews 1980, 150) which were mutual aid

societies composed of freed and slaved Africans that provided housing, loans, funeral expenses, and bought members out of slavery. In 1838, he also invited the African nations to hold a day long dance celebration in the central plaza to commemorate Independence Day (Andrews 1980, 98). He additionally overturned legislation requiring a draft of freed slaves over the age of fifteen (Andrews 1980, 98). Rosas' wife and daughter were famous for their support of the Afro-Argentine population as well. Manuelita, the daughter of Rosas, was said to have regularly attended dances of the African nations (Andrews 1980, 97). As tangible evidence of the good relations between Rosas and the Afro-Argentine population and his family's regular attendance of the African nation's dances, many scholars point to Martin Boneo's nineteenth-century painting, *Candombe Federal* (Figure 1). This painting depicts Rosas attentively watching a candombe performed at the Congo House, *Augunga* (Andrews 1980, 147) where he was well received. In this way, Rosas worked to legitimize Afro-Argentine culture. Yet, it should also be kept in mind that Rosas was also extrinsically motivated to gain Afro-Argentines' political support and for their supply of bodies for his army.



**Figure 1. *Candombe Federal* by Martin Boneo.**

The support for Rosas was not entirely unanimous among the Afro-Argentines either. His care for their community could come and go at will according to the political agenda of the moment; several of his actions proved contradictory to his rhetoric support. Rosas ended the draft for native-born freed Africans, yet he established a draft for foreign born Africans in 1834. He did not provide them with advancements in education and continued to heavily rely on Black males to populate the military, which had many negative implications on the Afro-Argentine population as many died in combat (Andrews 1980, 98–99). As a result, some Afro-Argentines, including those who lived in the city and even some military officers, including the highest-ranking Black officer, Colonel José María Morales, sided with the unitarians (Andrews 1980, 99). Even though support for Rosas from the Afro-Argentine community was not fully uniformed, the unitarians were so upset by Rosas's display of courtship of the Afro-Argentine community that they would intrinsically tie together the connection between the Afro-Argentines and the federalists.

Meanwhile, using the slogan, “civilization versus barbarism” (Miller 2004, 92) the unitarians worked to characterize Rosas and his Afro-Argentine followers as uncivilized. The unitarians also endorsed their own liberal ideology which promoted a shift towards the “progressive” nations of Europe, namely England and France, and a movement away from what they perceived as the country's traditional colonial Spanish past. (Andrews 1980, 102). An example of how the unitarians viewed the Black population can be seen in Esteban Echeverría's short story from 1838, *El Matadero* (The Slaughter Yard) in which the author represents the followers of Rosas as vicious, primitive, and predominantly Black. An example of this is the way he describes Black women scavenging for food, “Multitud de negras rebusconas de achuras, como los caranchos de presa, se desbandaron por la ciudad como otras tantas harpías prontas a devorar cuanto hallaran comible,” (A multitude of Black women rummaging for organs, like birds of prey, disbanded through the city like harpies ready to devour whatever they found edible) (Echeverría 1986, 94). Echeverría's lifetime (1805-1851) coincided with the rise of Rosas in 1829 as governor of the Buenos Aires province until his fall in 1852. *El Matadero* represents a moment of intolerance between the unitarians and federalists and is deeply a product of its era. The story's characterization of Blackness would be woven into Argentine society and carried over to the proceeding generations.

After the fall of Rosas in 1852, Argentina entered a period dominated by the Generation of 1880, in which the ideology of the unitarians (Andrews 1980, 101) became hegemonic. Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, who would become president of Argentina from 1868-1874 authored influential works full of racist ideology in which he portrayed Afro-Argentines as primitive and unintelligent. For example, a passage from his work *Facundo: Civilization and Barbarism* (1845) reads,

Los africanos son conocidos por todos los viajeros como una raza guerrera, llena de imaginación y de fuego, y aunque feroces cuando están excitados, dóciles, fieles y adictos al amo o al que los ocupa (Sarmiento 1963, 223).

(Africans are known by all travelers as a combatant race, full of imagination and fire and although ferocious when they are provoked, docile, faithful, and addicted to their owner or whoever employs them.)

Echoing Echeverría's portrayal of Blacks, this statement describes Afro-Argentines in animalistic terms, as though they are untamed but domesticable creatures; besides taking away from their humanness, his description makes them sound controlled by instinct or emotion which also diminishes their agency. Later, Sarmiento followed up this work with another entitled, *Conflicto y armonías de las razas en América* (Conflict and Harmony of Races in America) first published 1883. He begins by asking fundamental questions about the identity of Argentines: What is America? Who are we? His answers to these questions are guided by the philosophy of social Darwinism, a theory that allowed him to blame Latin America's social and political woes on the careless mixing of races while praising North America for having maintained a purer European heritage.

At the same time that the ideology behind the Generation of 1880 was gaining strength, a wave of around one million European immigrants, mostly from Spain and Italy, arrived in Argentina between 1880-1900. The population nearly doubled from 4 million in 1895 to 7.9 million in 1914 (Andrews 1980, 178). The increase in European immigration is not a coincidence. The racial aspiration of the Generation of 1880 will get codified into law. For instance, Juan Bautista Alberdi, known as "The Father of the Argentine Constitution," ensured a preference for European immigration by sponsoring several articles in the 1853 Argentine

constitution which gave all inhabitants, including foreigners, specific rights. Article 25 explicitly calls for European immigration,

El Gobierno Federal fomentará la inmigración europea; y no podrá restringir, limitar ni gravar con impuesto alguno la entrada en el territorio argentino de los extranjeros que traigan por objeto labrar la tierra, mejorar las industrias, e introducir y enseñar las ciencias y las artes.

(The federal government will foster European immigration; and will not restrict, limit, or burden with tax the entrance in the Argentine territory foreigners whose object is to work the land, better industries, and introduce and teach sciences and arts.)

Alberdi felt that European immigration would benefit Argentina. In his book *Bases y Puntos de Partida para la Organización Política de la República Argentina* (Bases and Starting Points for the Political Organization of the Argentine Republic) (1852), he writes optimistically about European migrants' ability to influence the locals with habits of industrialization and civilization (pg. 8 Schulman). Alberdi, like other Argentine elites of his time, hoped that by whitening the country they would experience greater economic, political, and social growth and welfare.

While statesmen like Sarmiento and Alberdi seemed to have the advantage in controlling the major published works that shaped the racial narrative of the time, the Afro-Argentines also published several newspapers which helped unify their communities, solidify their identity, and function as a testament to their organization and agency in Argentine society. According to Arnold's theory of imagined communities, the print media in the vernacular language is a key element to the development of national identity because it allows for a shared experience among people who have never met. However, the print media can be limited, since those who have the education and power to control it are the ones who structure the narrative; the Afro-Argentines of Buenos Aires seemed to understand this principle. They circulated several newspapers among their community and these written records are first-hand accounts of the Afro-Argentine experiences and their thoughts on the creation of print media. For example, the Afro-Argentine newspaper, *La Broma*, from October 4, 1877 opens with a letter to the friends of the newspaper,

Nuestra intención al fundar nuevamente la "Broma" no ha sido la de lucrar, antes, al contrario; sacrificarnos si necesario fuera con tal de tener un órgano que verdaderamente tratase con independencia las grandes cuestiones que se ventilan hoy, por medio de la prensa

que representa esta gran parte de la sociedad argentina.

(Our intention for founding again the “Broma” was not to profit, all the opposite; sacrificing ourselves if necessary, to have an organ that truly deals with the important issues that circulate today, by means of the press that represents this great part of our Argentine society.)

In this passage, the author is acknowledging that the written press is an essential tool for communication in the community and is apparently willing to go through great lengths to keep the newspaper running. *La Broma* is among several Afro-Argentine papers including, among others, *La Igualdad*, *La Raza Africana*, and *La Negrita* which circulated during the 1800s.

Another passage from *La Broma* which dates to May 18, 1876 also indicates the importance of the press to the Afro-Argentine community. The newspaper opens by stating that when they decided to present themselves in the arena of journalism, they believed that society in general would applaud the effort and that each would offer their thoughts on the rules that should be adopted for the printed media. There, the writer explains that, while he/she believes education is important, the publication of the paper did not require a perfect understanding of grammar. It is vital to remember here that Afro-Argentines were disconnected from the education system. In that context, it makes sense for them to have a choice between deciding which is more vital, the voice that the newspaper brings to the community or perfect grammar. The author goes on to say,

Creemos que debemos pensar en que todas esas pequeñas fracciones sean llamadas a un solo centro, en el cual pueden todos, sin distinción de color político (si los hubiera) emitir libremente sus ideas debiendo ser respetados lo mismo la del letrado como las de el de escasa inteligencia, captándonos así las simpatías los unos de los otros, y dando de este modo el primer paso sobre uno de los principales propósitos: la IGUALDAD.

(We believe that we should think of all these small fractions as a single center, in which all can, without distinction of political differences (if there are any), freely emit their ideas, and [those ideas] should be respected regardless of whether they come from a lawyer or from someone of lower intelligence, by capturing all of the sympathies from each other, in this way, giving the first steps to one of our main purposes: EQUALITY.)

This passage indicates that the Afro-Argentines were aware of the importance of education, but also valued the power of the written press to allow a voice for the community over worrying about

written imperfections, thus valuing equality at the most important element to the printed media.

The December 18, 1879 print of *La Broma* opens with a thought on the concept of Liberty in Argentina. It begins by explaining that the ideas of freedom, equality and fraternity are the basis of the ideals of a republic but the author of the passage complains that these ideals only exist in the minds of the legislators who create the laws but are not put into practice in everyday life in the country. The author states that the constitution does not distinguish between race to grant rights to citizens and goes on to say that the men in power are often the first to violate the constitution. Additionally, the writer states that for others to enjoy their rights as citizens, the Black community has made great sacrifices, “*nostros hemos sido los primeros en abandonar nuestras familias y nuestro hogar para volar a defender la patria.*” (We have been the first to leave our families and our homes to rush to defend the country.) What is the compensation for this, the author asks, and answers with “*El desprecio, la humillación.*” (contempt and humiliation). Immediately after, the author adds when the Black community has attempted to call on the constitution to protect their rights they were responded with a “sarcastic laugh.” The writer concludes: “*La igualdad, en nuestra patria solo existe en la forma. Esa es la libertad de que goza ante la ley, nuestra clase.*” (Equality in our country only exists in form. This is the freedom our class enjoys under the law.) The complaints in this edition of *La Broma* speak for themselves; clearly, while Afro-Argentines were given full citizenship, they were not viewed socially or culturally as full citizens, worthy of claiming the same rights and protections as other Argentines. The passages also highlight the historic struggles of Republican governments in the healing racial inequalities across the Americas.

### **Flexibility of Racial Labels in Latin America**

While Argentina was becoming Europeanized, it also seemed to be losing its Black population, at least according to the census records. The 1895 census registered a Black population which had nearly disappeared (Andrews 1980, 106). Previously, in 1778, Woodbine Parish, a British diplomat, had noted that people of color made up around one-third of the population of Buenos Aires, but by 1825, this population decreased to about a quarter. By 1860, the Black presence in Buenos Aires was reportedly almost null (Andrews 1980, 65). Then again, the low population numbers were only according to the accounts of the census records of Argentina. There were several issues with the census, including inconsistencies, and a lack of

accuracy of information (Andrews, 1980, 79). One example of this was the census records tendencies in both North and South America to undercount the Black population. Often, the Afro-Argentine populations lived in neighborhoods like Montserrat in Buenos Aires, which was heavily Black and considered an unsafe slum. Census workers often did not venture into these areas. Additionally, a main purpose of the census records was to count men who could be potential military recruits. After participation in various wars, Black males became weary of heavy recruitment among their population and may have purposely hidden from the official's count. Considering these possibilities, it is very likely many Afro-Argentines were excluded from the census record.

Another possibility which may have influenced the census is the flexibility of racial labels. After independence, the province of Buenos Aires added the word *trigueño*, literally meaning “wheat-colored” and sometimes translated as “brunette,” to their official records (Andrews 1980, 83–84). The term was ambiguous and could be applied to any combination of races, including mixed races, indigenous, Africans, or Europeans with darker complexions like Sicilians, Andalusians, or Portuguese. The word *trigueño* thus gave Argentines of African origin a way to escape terms like *pardo* or *mulatto* which imply African descent, thus, distancing themselves from the social implications of African heritage. It is important to remember that, although racial labels were more fluid in the Americas, white European heritage was still preferred, and a rigid racial class system existed. As proof of the institutionalized importance of race, one can turn to the extended system of *gracias al sacar* which enabled the purchasing of whiteness.

The Spanish monarch created a process for the Americas starting in 1795 in which the *gracias al sacar* system began to list prices for Black people in the colonies who wished to buy whiteness. Specifically, somebody classified as *pardo* could make a payment of 500 reales to whiten their official records (Twainam, 2019). In her writing about the system, Ann Twinam notes that only people of mixed African ancestry in the Americas were seeking out this official recognition of whiteness. Although it appears few people actually went through with the petition, she also points out that the system of *gracias al sacar* demonstrates the tension between inclusion and exclusion in the Americas.

The New World viewed racial identities differently than Europe. For example, in the Americas, a person of mixed African and European heritage may be perceived as white if that



person had accumulated wealth or prestige, but, from a European perspective, the same individual would certainly not count as white (Andrews, 1980, 78–79). This explains why the European visitors' accounts of this time make a much different assessment of the white population based on their observations. For example, Alexander Gillespie, a British officer wrote in 1807 that he estimated one-fifth of Buenos Aires' population was "white." Later, Samuel Haigh, who was also from England, noted in 1827 that the "pure whites" of the city were not a large portion of the population, and that most were a mix of white, indigenous, and Black (Andrews 1980, 78). It is imperative to address the European visitors accounts into the history of the demographic decline, because, for some time, historians mistakenly took census records at face value, and did not factor in the subjectivity of race. The contemporary understanding that race is socially constructed helps make sense of the differing accounts of race from local and foreign perspectives.

Scholars cite different reasons to explain the seeming disappearance of the Black population from Argentina. First, the African population's growth slowed due to the end of the slave trade between 1812 and 1840. As Africans were forced migrants, after the slave trade ended, so did their immigration path to the Americas. This impacted the African population of Buenos Aires because slaves were generally younger and of childbearing age, between 15 to 29 years old. After the abolition of the slave trade, birth rates among the Black population declined (Andrews 1980, 70–72). The Afro-Argentine population also experienced high male mortality because of their participation in the independence wars (1810 to 1818), and the wars against Brazil (1825-1828) and Paraguay (1864-1870). Additionally, miscegenation was common as was a high infant mortality rate among Blacks (Natale 1984, 119). Since there was an imbalance in the male to female ratio due to the high death rates of Black men in the military, Black women would seek white male partners, often wishing partly for upward mobility to result from the relationship (Andrews 1980, 5). Other popular explanations include the yellow fever epidemic of 1871, which likely affected the Black population in greater numbers (Natale 1984, 40–43), and an increase in European migration, which overtook the Black population in numbers.

Andrews argues that while these explanations are logical, they are also poorly researched. He theorizes that, since it is likely the census of Buenos Aires and the vital registries did not reflect correctly the racial makeup of the city, there was not necessarily such a large demographic decline as commonly believed but rather a shift in identity as more Afro-Argentines chose the

label of *trigueño*. Andrews believes it is conceivable that the Afro-Argentine lineage lives on in Argentine citizens who are perhaps unaware their ancestors' records did not fully reflect the true racial makeup of the country. It is possible that forgotten African heritage is not only woven into the DNA of the tango but are also part of many unsuspecting Argentine citizens' genetic makeup.

### **Nationalism, Race, and the Golden Age of Tango**

Regardless of their possible demographic demise, the Black population was great enough in numbers that the Afro-Argentine's culture, specially their dance and music, at one time was very visible (and audible) in Buenos Aires. When the Afro-Argentine population was still prevalent in Argentina, records from the 1780s and 1790s show how the African nations petitioned the viceroys to allow public dances. Viceroys banned Black dance two times between 1766 and 1770 but were otherwise rather lenient to the gatherings of Afro-Argentines. The municipal governments were often stricter (Andrews 1980, 157). The legacy of dance is not a unique experience to Argentina. Andrews notes that African descendants were responsible for the creation of samba and capoeira in Brazil, rumba and son in Cuba, Merengue in the Dominican Republic, and candombe, milonga, and tango in Uruguay and Argentina. He additionally points out that, in all these cases during the 1800s, upper and middle classes rejected these dances.

Later, as a result of growing nationalism in the 1900s, Latin America would accept and embrace these dances as a fundamental symbol of national identity (Andrews 2004, 9). Latin America had previously attempted to attract European immigrants, but many of them failed to do so because they lacked favorable labor conditions. In countries like Argentina, where they successfully lured immigrants, competition for jobs led to the formation of xenophobic and anti-immigrant political parties. After the 1920s depression, Latin America tightened immigration policies to preserve jobs for the locals (Andrews 2004, 153–167). After the closing of immigration, the African populations in places like Brazil and Cuba grew more rapidly than the white population. However, in Argentina, mass European immigration was much more successful than in other countries of Latin America, and the Black population did not recover in the same way as that of Brazil's or Cuba's which grew significantly during this period. Since the majority of citizens in Argentina identifying as white and European, there was a greater rejection or denial of Black participation in the formation of the national identity and this is exemplified by the creation of tango, which has become internationally recognized as the quintessential Argentine

symbol.

After the 1920s, the export economies of Latin America were in crisis. This disruption led to political struggles resulting in the rise of populism starting in the countries of the Southern Cone. The first phase of populism began around the time of the Great Depression in the 1930s. During this time, voting rights, elections, nationalism, and labor relations were at the forefront of politics. These issues enjoyed widespread support and populist leaders attracted people across the social spectrum who were looking for relief from destabilization. Hipólito Yrigoyen's second term as presidency began in 1928 following the waves of European immigration from Italy and Spain which resulted in 30% of Argentina's population being foreign-born (Clay 2017, 264–265). While originally welcomed because the elites thought they would bring skills and efficiency, Argentina found itself overwhelmed by the scale of immigration as well as large numbers of poor immigrants. While Yrigoyen first focused on labor unions and working conditions, his administration responded to anarchist-led strikes with repression, leading to the Tragic Week of 1919 where hundreds of workers were killed and many more imprisoned. After these events, the focus was turned to nationalistic education to instill patriotism and Spanish heritage to Argentina's population.

The second phase of populism in Latin America began after WWII during a time of heavy urbanization and industrialization. These populist leaders of the 1940s and onward reached out to the working-class and unions by offering higher wages and factory jobs. The second era populist leaders were also nationalistic in nature, many of them pledging to end economic dependency. It was during this period of disaccord that many Latin American nations began to link race with politics. The populist leaders also tended towards cultural nationalism and worked toward authenticating their country's culture, such as dance, music, poetry, and art, as being just as singular as the imported arts. This move was contrary to the traditional elite view which legitimized only European art and culture. By championing local culture, the populist leaders were able to reach out to the poor who felt that this new version of Argentine identity allowed them to escape marginalization. Cultural nationalism in a sense was inclusive because it created a national identity based not on ancestry but rather on shared cultural traditions. However, this colorblind approach of cultural nationalism failed in that it did not recognize the real consequences of historic and persistent racial inequalities. Although Argentina had more success with the whitening process, the country still experienced race-based populism in the

administration of Juan Domingo Perón, who like Rosas before him, catered to the non-elite composed of the nonwhite population. Perón's wife Evita was well-known for her work with the *descamisados* (shirtless poor) also known as *cabecitas negras*, literally, "little black heads," who were mix-raced populations coming from the rural provinces seeking work in the heavily urban center of Buenos Aires (Andrews 2004, 157–167). The populist governments of Latin America associated themselves with Blackness and so they began to embrace African and indigenous culture as a more authentic national identity. While this was true for most nations, in Argentina the tango, which retained elements of African candombe, did not become fully popularized until Europe's tango craze legitimized the dance in the eyes of the Argentine elite (Andrews 2004, 167).

While the date given to the beginning of tango is 1880, it was not immediately popular. The Golden Age of tango was between 1920-1950 (Collier 1992, 92). Tango probably reached France sometime around 1910 via aristocratic Argentine families who often traveled to Paris during the hot summer months of Buenos Aires (Vega 2007, 141). In his memoir, *Mon Petit bonhomme de chemin*, Henri Dreyfus, more widely known as Fursy, a well-known French cabaret singer, claims that tango sprang to life in Paris on one single night when a young Argentine named Macías paid an orchestra at L'Abbaye de Thélème to learn to play the tango. In his account, this occurred on December 1910 (Dreyfus 1928 as cited in Vega 2007, 145). On January 10, 1911, *Le Figaro*, one of Paris most popular newspaper, declared the popular dance of that winter would be the Argentine tango (Vega 2007, 147).

This Parisian craze for tango left the Argentine upper-class in a precarious position. Paris was the universal trend setter for Argentine social elite, who thought of tango as an indecent dance for the lower-class, associated with drunkards and prostitutes (Vega 2007, 152–153). The elites of Argentina were then divided into two opinions. One side suggested that since Paris had accepted tango and Paris ultimately dictated social values, tango was therefore redeemed of its unprincipled beginnings. Others believed the dance to be immoral and Paris had only accepted it because it ignored tango's low-class origins. Because of its indecency and association with brothels, moreover, tango salons should be closed. Normally, other popular dances in Argentina, such as the polka, the *chotis*, and the mazurka became popular in Paris and were transferred to Buenos Aires; tango took the opposite route. Buenos Aires opened dance academies to teach young middle and upper-class Argentines to tango because they simply had not had contact or

interest in the dance before (Vega 2007, 157–158). Although tango flourished during this era, it continued to have critics. In 1941, an influential Argentine businessman, Luis Colombo, commented on the tango, calling it, “una música de países que no han llegado a una completa civilización: estridencias, lamentos y lloriqueos.” (a music from countries that have not arrived at complete civilization: shrillness, cries, and whining) (Vega 2007, 162). It was not until Europe intervened by approving the tango that Argentina finally accepted the song and dance as their own, and even then, with some continued reservations from the elite as demonstrated by Colombo’s attitude.

Wade refers to how this narrative of working-class music and dance form in Latin America was appropriated by the middle-class or elites and redrawn as a symbol of national identity and then given international recognition. As examples, he points to tango in Argentina, samba and maxixe in Brazil, danza in Puerto Rico, ranchera in Mexico, and son, rumba, and guaracha in Cuba. In many of these cases, the music styles started in working-class areas, particularly in cities going through urbanization, and usually as combinations of Europe and African musical elements. They were viewed as vulgar until the middle-class appropriated them and turned them into national symbols. Additionally, Wade points out that these dances were hybrid or syncretic from their local beginnings and were again transformed by the middle-class. He uses the tango as an example of the hybrid nature of local dances, conforming with the opinion that candombe danced by the Afro-Argentines combined with the milonga and habanera, typically danced by lower-class white Argentines to create modern tango. He called this initial process of formation “a highly complex hybrid formed in long-term transnational exchanges, including of course, the slave trade itself” (Wade 858). He then refers to the growing interest the middle-class and elites took in tango and its mass popularization in Paris. Wade does not seem convinced tango became the national identity because of its trajectory from the *arrabales* to Paris, but simply because there was a mass urban dance that could be considered authentic or traditional and which arose at the time when there was a need to fulfill cultural representation of the nation.

While one can argue Argentina’s embrace of tango was indicative of cultural populism that favored the non-elite and non-European cultures, it still took the approval of Europeans to nudge Argentina in that direction. According to Juan Carlos Caceres, who has researched and lectured on the African roots of tango, by the 1940s and 50s tango had already been whitened. He notes that tango artists of this era are all white. But he states that they did generally recognize and

agree that tango had some Black roots and there were frequent references to milonga and candombe in tango lyrics. He believes that after tango's decline in popularity and its rediscovery, perhaps out of ignorance, but also likely out of racism motivated by socio-political reasons, a revisionist approach was taken to tango where the African roots were no longer recognized. At this point a closer look into the etymology of the word tango will demonstrate a linguistic connection between tango and Argentina's racial history.

### **Etymology of the Word “Tango”**

The first argument of the origin of the world tango is that it came directly from Africa. Musicologist Néstor Ortiz Oderigo and author of *Aspectos de la cultura africana en el rio de la plata* (Aspects of African Culture in the River Plate) published 1974, believes “tango” originates from the word *shangó*, which in the Yoruba language is the name of the God of Thunder, or perhaps from other words that refer to drum or dance in African languages, including *tanga*, *tamtamngo*, *tangana*, and *tangú*. Shango is also associated with several syncretic religious practices, including santería in Cuba, vodou in Haiti, and candomblé in Brazil. Shangó is associated with batá drumming, which according to Yoruba oral tradition became Shango's favorite drum after he sponsored a music competition (Murphy 2012, 70–71). Oderiego supports this claim by noting the various forms of Afro-American music which also use the word “tango.” For example, the Cuban habanera is also called tango americano, and a Black dance from Veracruz, Mexico is referred to as a tango (Ortiz 1974, 71–75). Among the Black populations in Venezuela, there were several dances carrying the name tango, including *merengue tanguillo criollo*, *tango merengue*, and *tango matigua*. In Brazil, *tango- lango- lango*, another dance, was of African-Brazilian origin. Another theory is that “tango” may come from kiKongo, a Bantu language spoken in the Republic of the Congo and Angola. For example, it could have originated from the word *tanga* which refers to a party or festival, or *tánngu* meaning “versatility” and which is a word that the kiKongo-speaking slaves may have used to refer to music and dance (Megeheeny 2003, 40). Historian George Reid Andrews, using information from the Archivo General de la Nación, estimated that of the more than 13,000 Africans imported into Buenos

Aires between 1742-1806, 2,742 were of Congo or Angola origin, evidence that kiKongo speakers may have been present in the region.

Argentine poet, essayist, writer and founder of the Academia Porteña de *lunfardo* (slang unique to Buenos Aires) José Gobello, concluded that the word “tango” was probably from Portuguese and was transmitted from Africa to Buenos Aires via slaves (Gobello 1976, 130–140). The Portuguese verb *tanger* means to play an instrument. “Tango” is the first- person singular past tense of the verb *tanger*. The critique of this theory is that there is not a direct phonological relationship between the verb “tango” in Portuguese and the word “tango” in Spanish because in Portuguese it is pronounced [tAngu] with a final [-u] sound instead of the [-o] sound like in Spanish. Another hypothesis is that “tango” may have emerged from the Portuguese word *tangomáo*, which is a combination of the verb *tanger* and the word *máo* (hand), meaning to play an instrument with the hands. *Tangomáo* is associated with *tanglomanglo* also known as *tangolomango* (witchcraft). To arrive at the word tango from here would require apocope of the last syllables and the elimination of the “l”, which is possible considering it is a word that is easy to split into two (tanglo and manglo) and the “l” in this case would have a sonorous quality which linguistics consider to be sounds that are easily dropped from a word (Megenny, 2003, 40). Although the phonological argument is quite convincing, the semantics in this case do not add up; the meaning of the word would have to switch drastically from “witchcraft” to having some association with dance and there is no apparent evidence of how the word would have switched meanings. Even if the Portuguese origin is true, it still links the role of the African slaves and their decedents to the formation of the word “tango” in its present-day use to refer to music and dance associated with Buenos Aires.

The dictionary reveals some evidence to support the claim that the word “tango” has an association with African dance and music in the Americas. Esteban Pichardo’s *Diccionario Provincial de Voces Cubanas* (Provincial Dictionary of Cuban Voices), published in 1836, defines tango as “reunión de negros bozales, para bailar al son de sus tambores o atabales” (Gathering of newly arrived Africans to dance to their drums and atabales) (Pichardo 1836 as cited in Natale 1984, 20–21). Curiously, the Webster’s New World Dictionary of 1968 defined tango as a Black dance from Cuba. Today, the Real Academia Española (RAE), the official dictionary of the Spanish language, gives tango two definitions, the first being “Baile rioplatense, difundido internacionalmente, de pareja enlazada, forma musical binaria y compás de dos por

cuatro” (A River Plate dance, internationally known, of an entwined couple, with a binary musical form and with a measure of two by four); and the secondary definition, “fiesta y baile de origen africano o popular en algunos países de América” (party and dance of African origin, popular in some American countries). It remains clear that, throughout Latin America, there is a significant correlation between the presence of a high population of African descendants and the use of the word “tango” to refer to dances of African origin.

Some scholars like historian Rodriguez Molas and Brazilian Anthropologist Artur Ramos studied the matter and concurred with the thesis of Rossi that states tango comes from a corruption of the phrase *vamos tocar tambor* (let’s play drum) which changed to *vamos tocá tambó* and finally to *vamos tocá tango* (Rossi 2001, 99-100; Andrews 1980, 165). Vicente Rossi points out that drums (*tambores*) and other percussion instruments were common to the African descendants of the River Plate region, and believes that *tangó* is an example of onomatopoeia, inspired from the sounds of the drums. In fact, the practice of using descriptions of sounds was common in the Americas and Africa. Sylvain Poosson points out that this is not the only example of the alteration of “b” to “g.” In fact, it was common among the lower class. An example is given in a verse dedicated to Governor Rosas written by his Afro-Argentine followers, “Ya vites ene candombe/ Que tuditos lo moreno/ Gitaban viva Larosa/ Nuestro gobernadó güeno.” In this passage, the word “bueno,” is changed to “güeno,” and the letter “r” is dropped from the end of “gobernador” (Poosson 2004, 91). These verses are stylistically written to intentionally mimic the way Afro-Argentines allegedly spoke and given that, during the 19th century, Afro-Argentines and other people of color’s access to the education system was limited, it was common that they committed these types of phonological errors. While this theory seems plausible, there are some linguistic problems with it. The original word “tambor” is an oxytonic word, which means the stress is carried on the last syllable and, in this case, it would have had to transform into a paroxytone word, which is a word that carries its accentuation on the penultimate syllable. While this is not impossible, it is also unlikely given that this does not follow the normal change in stress shifts in words borrowed from African languages to European languages in the Americas (Megenney 2003, 39).

The incorporation of African words into the Argentine dialect is also revealing of the Afro-Argentine history in the region and may come as a surprise for those likely unaware of the linguistic influences of African languages in their everyday speech. According to Ortiz Oderigo’s



*Diccionario de Africanismos en el Castellano del Rio de la Plata* (Dictionary of Africanism in the Spanish of the River Plate) several common contemporary words unique to Argentine *lunfardo* are derived from African lexicon, including *mucama* (maid), *quilombo* (commotion), *bancar* (endure), and particularly the names of many dances including *zamba*, *malambo*, *milonga*, *candombe*, and, most importantly, *tango*.

Early uses and references to the word “tango” associate it with places of African dance. There are documented examples of this in Montevideo, the capital of Uruguay, which once formed the Rio de la Plata viceroy with Argentina, and which is culturally similar and geographically close to Buenos Aires. Óscar Natale notes that, in 1807, upon prohibiting Black dance in Montevideo, local authorities used the term “tango” in the official decree to refer to the forbidden dances (Natale 1984, 18). Again, in 1816, municipal authorities in Montevideo created a further prohibition, stating, “se prohíben dentro de la ciudad los bailes conocidos por el nombre de tangos, y solo se permiten a extramuros en las tardes de los días de fiestas” (It is prohibited inside of the city, the dances known by the name tangos, and it is only permitted outside of the walls in the evenings of holidays) (Vega 2007, 34). Natale also points out a document dated in 1802 which assesses? the survey and taxation values of a property in the Concepción neighborhood of Buenos Aires; a house called *Casa y Sitio del tango* (House and Site of Tango) which was a known location where African descendants congregated to dance and play music (Natale 1984, 18). Furthermore, Rodríguez Molas noted that, a few years prior, the house carried the name *tambo*, giving more credit to the argument that tango is perhaps a corruption of the word *tambo*, (Molas 1957, 13–15). Additionally, Vicente Rossi states that, in 1866-1867, a song labeled as a tango, titled *El Chicoba*, also known as *El Escoba* or *El Escobero* (the broom-maker), sounded like a candombe according to those who were familiar with it. Thus, Rossi believes without a doubt that the song was an African-inspired tango (Rossi 2001, 150).

In the Afro-Argentine newspapers there are also numerous references to dance and music with the word “tango” appearing in many of the copies. For example, on February 23, 1879 *La Broma* published the lyrics to a tango written for carnival and to be sung by a new group, *Negras Bromistas*. The song was entitled *Lenitivo Contra la Toz* (Soothing a Cough), which they refer to as a “tango.” Five months later, on October 23, 1879 the same newspaper made a reference to *un muy bonito tango* (a very beautiful tango), titled *Las Bromas de La Broma*, written by Julio Vilaza, and on February 7, 1880 published the lyrics to another “tango.” Finally, in March 6,

1881, the carnival societies of *Negros Humildes* and *Negras Bonitas* published the lyrics of their various songs, including waltz, mazuka, habanera, brindis, and tango. Given that the date associated with the creation of tango is 1880, these early references to tango are important clues to its creation as well as its connection to the Afro-Argentine community.

Critics like Carlos Vega contend that the phonological argument does not necessarily prove African origins of Argentine tango given that many misnomers of culture exist. In his book *Estudios para los orígenes del tango* (Studies on the Origins of Tango, 1940), Vega similarly concludes the word tango is most likely of African origin, but he stops at that point to say that he does not believe the choreography or music have any African influences. Without going into details or giving examples, he states that there are many non-African things which are named with African words and many non-Spanish things named with Spanish words, a fact that made him distrust any African contributions to tango. He clearly states that he believes the choreography is purely European and does not have African influences at all. For Vega, the main argument many have is that the accompanying rhythm of tango is likely an African rhythm, but he dismisses this argument as well, stating that, from his point of view, it is a misinterpretation. While he calls it a “persistent ignorance” to insist on determining the origin of something by its name, he also does not give an explanation to exactly how the African word “tango” would have ended up being used on a dance to which African influences were not present (Vega 2007, 33). He argues for the “Argentinness” of tango along with the “Europeanness” as if the two go hand in hand. While Vega makes some good points on being aware of misnomers, he abruptly dismisses any relation between tango and Africanness. In Vega’s opinion, the connection between tango and Africa is absurd as Blackness is too far outside the scope of possibility for Argentina or tango.

### **Blackness in Argentina: From Candombe and Milonga to Tango**

It is not unusual for Africa and its inhabitants to be associated with both music and dance but also with primitiveness and a “less than” culture. In his *Critique of Black Reason*, Achille Mbembe writes that Africa and Blackness are often viewed as symbols of a “limited state” (Mbembe 2017, 11). To demonstrate this, he refers to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s description of Black men as antagonists who fight, dismember, and destroy each other, and who do not possess the same consciousness of the universe or themselves. He goes on to explain how,

in the very first categorizations of race, Black people were viewed as the prototype of human form who are trapped in a more primitive state (Mbembe 2017, 17–18). This interpretation extended into the realm of artist contributions emerging from Africa and its descendants. Often African art is viewed as simplistic and described in terms like ethnic, primitive, or tribal rather than being appreciated as complex forms of human expression. This racial framework made it possible to view all non-Europeans as lesser beings which helps bring an understanding to the disdain expressed by the white elites of colonial Argentina when viewing African dance.

A profound misunderstanding of African culture may have resulted in the European rejection of early African dances in Argentina. The authorities of Buenos Aires in 1788 banned “por bien de la Religión, del Estado y del Publico” (for the good of Religion, of the State, and of the Public) the gatherings of slaves, where they danced candombe, arguing that the gatherers were indecent and obscene (Lanuza 1967, 45). The authorities of Buenos Aires were weary of large slave gathering, like the candombe, because they felt the dance gatherings provided them a chance to plot rebellion. The successful uprising of slaves in Haiti in 1789 helped enhance their fears (Andrews 1980, 94). The viceroys also stipulated that during the dances the African nations were not permitted to crown their own king (Andrews 1980, 157–158). Economically the dances were dangerous from the authority’s perspective because the Afro-Argentines would use them as opportunities to take up collections to sponsor more events.

In his essay *Conflicto y armonías de las razas en América*, Sarmiento addressed candombe, calling it the “terror” of Buenos Aires that was permissible under the tyranny of Rosas:

Cada pueblo africano, los de Guinea, los mandingas, los Congos, establecieron sus municipalidades llamadas Candombes a causa del tambor que sirve para acompañar el baile, que es la expresión de la vida y de la felicidad del africano. Los candombes fueron el terror de Buenos Aires durante la tiranía de Rosas, que hizo de Manuelita la patrona de la institución (Sarmiento 1915, 121).

(Each African nation, the Guineans, Mandingas (Mandinka), Congolese, established their municipalities called Candombes after the drums used in their dances, which are the expression of life and happiness for the African. The candombes were the terror of Buenos Aires during the Rosas tyranny, that made Manuelita the patron of the institution.)

This expression of contempt for *candombe* from Sarmiento is rather typical of the time and true to his unitarian views. He takes the opportunity to politicize the dance by explicitly linking Afro-Argentines with Rosas and his daughter. The negative attitude towards *candombe* would eventually penetrate the Black community. *Candombe* remained common in the 1850s and 1860s, however it became less popular as younger African descendants sought to integrate themselves into Argentine society and gave up traditional dances for those that were popular with white Argentines such as the waltz, polka and mazurka. An article from 1882 in an Afro-Argentine newspaper criticized a Black drummer who played during carnival, stating he would better serve his community if he learned a real instrument rather than playing the drum which symbolized a reminder of “corrupted customs of long ago” (Andrews 1980, 164).

*Candombe* was a celebratory dance and music of the Black population throughout Argentina and Uruguay. Meanwhile, to white Argentines, the steps of the *candombe* were considered immoral, dishonest, and threatening to civility (Ortiz 2004, 62). The movement of *ombligada*, where the dancers pushed stomachs together, was a typical choreographic step in traditional ceremonies to express procreation, birth, the transition out of adolescence, the circle of life, and a man’s partnership with a woman (Ortiz 2009, 63-66). When studying the connection between race, sex, and nation, Peter Wade points out that Europeans linked respectability with sexuality which in turn became a part of the structure that build nationality. During the 19th and early 20th century, Europe developed the idea that proper moral sexuality was based on restraint and they feared sexual purity was at risk in the colonies where men (and especially poor men) may end up in sexual relations with nonwhite women. This is connected with the creation of nationalism because, to some extent, European identity relied on sexual morality as well as whiteness (Wade 2001, 850-851). This theoretical framework helps explain the uncomfortableness the Argentine elite likely felt when faced with African dance and culture.

For many, including Ortiz, these movements were precursors to the steps of the tango, but rather than getting credit for their contributions to national culture, Afro-Argentine dances were misunderstood and rejected by the European immigrants who saw the dances as inappropriate. In “Blackness in Argentina: Jazz, Tango and Race before Perón,” Mathew Karush similarly concludes, “The black *candombe* provided tango composers with what the blues gave their counterparts in jazz: primitive source material for a modern, heavily rhythmic dance music” (Karush 2012, 238). Even scholars like the aforementioned Vega, who felt that only tango’s name

was borrowed from African culture, could not see any common links between the music or choreography of candombe and tango. Karush argues that while the sounds and movements of tango and candombe appear dissimilar, the Black candombe was a part of the foundation of the combination of musical elements that created the tango.

Just like Jazz, the influences of tango are an assortment of experiences in the Americas. A distinction should be made here to highlight that forms of Afro-American music are not composed of pure African elements but are rather a modified or hybrid Afro- American sound which developed as the Black population encountered new habits, conditions, and language (Ortiz 2009, 42–43). Finding a singular source of tango proves to be likely futile, and, thus, the discussion of the history of tango is not so much about where it came from but what it represents to race and identity in Argentina. Popular music in the Americas tends to have aspects of indigenous, Spanish, African, and European influences. Some elements of each influence will be transformed, altered, and mixed. Ortiz theorizes this process happens in the first expressions of tango. African elements are found in the rhythms characterized by restless jumps, a fast tempo, and languishing melody (Ortiz 2009, 44). He describes the similarities in the choreography of the candombe and the tango in an article published in *La Prensa* on December 9, 1979. According to Ortiz,

In the texture of the choreography of the early tango, threads of African heritage can be found in the famous belly bumping, umbilical bumping, stomach banging, pelvic bumping, frontal pressing. All actions in which the man bumps against the female's stomach. [...] all done in a way to have the body appears like an 'S,' all these were characteristics of dances of Africa as well as the African originated dances of America in general. (Ortiz 1979, as cited in Poosson 2004, 91).

For many, it was the candombe that influenced the milonga dance, which in turn is widely accepted as the parent dance of tango. Given that premise, to understand the history of tango, it is necessary to start with the origins of milonga.

The exact date of the emergence of milonga is unknown, however, there does not appear to be any document mentioning milonga as a dance or song before 1880 (Vega 2007, 67). The milonga was originally played only in song-form. It consisted of long improvised lyrics played with a guitar and drum. Milonga originated in the gauchos' traditions. The gauchos were skilled horsemen living in the countryside and they engaged in a tradition of long competitive,

improvised verses known as *payada*. Milonga as a song form was one of the styles of *payada* (Poosson 2004, 88). Donald Castro links not only tango, but also the *payador* tradition to African culture, arguing that this style of vocal counterpoint is African in nature and exists in other Latin American countries where African populations lived, for example, Afro-Caribbean music genres? such as *tapada* (drum duels) (Castro 1994, 10–11). Castro, Lynch, Rossi and other writers and historians have acknowledged the legacy of the Black gauchos who may have been responsible for influencing *payada* as well as milonga.

It was when milonga was brought to the urban centers by the *compadritos* that it became a dance. The *compadritos* were men of poor background who sought to mimic the upper-class. The term *Compadrito* was used in Argentina and Uruguay for urban men whose origins came from the *gaucho* tradition. The emergence of the *compadrito* phenomenon was a result of rural to urban migration during the 19th century. For many, milonga was likely the beginning of tango only with a different name. Vega agrees with this assessment, stating that the milonga did not extinguish after 1900, but rather reemerged later with a different name, *tango Argentino* (Vega 2007, 73).

Sometimes described as a slow tango, milonga was a major influence in the development of tango. The milonga met the *candombe* through contact between poor Blacks and whites who tended to mix together in *academias de baile*, which functioned as dance halls and saloons and in *piringundines*, the low-class venues where women were hired as dance partners. Many of these meeting places were thinly disguised brothels and were considered low-life venues located in the *arrabales* (lower-class outskirts) of Buenos Aires (Collier 1992, 97). This racial and cultural cross-contact provided the background for the creation of the dance of milonga, which became popular in the 1870s among the *compadritos*. In 1883, folklorist Ventura Lynch documented that the milonga, which as previously mentioned was only performed in song form, developed as a dance by the white *compadritos* to mock the movements of the Black *candombe*. According to Lynch, “La milonga solo la bailan los compadritos de la ciudad, quienes la han creado como una burla a los bailes que dan los negros en sus sitios” (The Milonga was only danced by the *compadritos* of the city, who had created it as a mockery of the dances of the Blacks in their venues) (Ventura 1953, 49). Lynch states that the drum movements of the *candombe* were transferred into the milonga dance. Indeed, the milonga’s quick tempo and syncopated rhythm are characteristic of African music (Karush 2012, 238). To further back this theory, distinguished

scholar of Buenos Aires culture, José Gobello, makes a reference to an anonymous article in Buenos Aires's first major newspaper, *Crítica*, in the 1870s, where compadritos mocked the candombes from Mondongo, the Black district, and in the brothels of Corrales Viejos, combining it with milonga to create a new form of dance (Gobello 1980, 10–12). Another theory determines that the tango is likely a combination of candombe, milonga, and the habanera. In other words, tango is a synthesis of Africa, America, and Europe. After its development, it spread to the *academias de baile* where tango mixed the milonga with the *quebradas* (exaggerated movement) and *cortes* (pauses) of the candombe (Collier 1992, 97). While primary sources exist to back this theory of the birth of tango, there are historic and ongoing debates on the conflicting accounts of the development of tango, perhaps one of the most notable was between two writers one from Uruguay, Vicente Rossi, and the other from Argentina, Jorge Luis Borges.

### **The Rossi-Borges Controversy**

Vicente Rossi like Jorge Luis Borges concluded that milonga was indeed the parent dance to tango. However, he differs in his geographical account of the development of Argentine tango. Published for the first time in Córdoba in 1926, Rossi's *Cosas de Negros* is notable for being the first attempt to have a documented place in history for African descendants of the Rio de la Plata region, giving them credit for their cultural contributions. Rossi chose his title carefully, as it means both things related to Blacks and foolish things. He is implying, of course, that Black history was not foolish but rather significant and worthy of study (Castro 1988, 3). The author also is very intentional in his use of geographical language; he calls his account the history of the Rio de la Plata, rather than of Argentina or Uruguay to emphasize the interconnectivity of the region between the two countries. Rossi argues Argentine tango came from Montevideo and it is a combination of milonga and habanera which started in the Academia San Felipe by the Black population of Uruguay (Rossi, 134) and it was then transferred to Buenos Aires. Rossi explains that Montevideo was the most frequented port in the Rio de la Plata region during this time, and through the passing of sailors and ships, culture and language were also imported and exported. He believes sailors from Uruguay and Argentina would have been responsible for the transmission of milonga from Montevideo to Buenos Aires, where it was well received because dance was already an important part of Argentine culture (Rossi, 129–130). He gives the Afro-American population of the Rio de la Plata the credit for the creation of tango, Rossi states, “La

milonga-baile era una improvisación como la Milonga-canto; una creación espontánea e ingeniosa (sic) del movimiento combinado como el sonido; y fue el negro criollo el creador de su técnica” (The Milonga dance was an improvisation like the Milonga sang; a spontaneous and ingenious creation of movement combined with sound; and it was the Black creole the creator of the technique) (Rossi 2001, 127). By Rossi’s account, the Black population of Uruguay, being the creators of milonga, would then be deserving of credit for the creation of Argentine tango.

Jorge Luis Borges critiqued Rossi’s work, for the most part disagreeing with Rossi’s geographical theory. Notably, Rossi was a long-time resident of Buenos Aires who was originally from Montevideo (Castro 1994, 3). Borges, a *porteño* (native to Buenos Aires), rejects the Uruguayan origins of Argentine tango. The famous writer states he is more convinced of Rossi’s Uruguayan origins than that of the tango. Perhaps in this statement, Borges also exposes his own biases as he is an Argentine attempting to claim the dance for Argentina (Borges 1994, 97). Borges felt that tango was an expression of being *porteño* and given that the residents of Buenos Aires could identify with the music and dance, it belonged to them. In *El Idioma de los Argentinos* (The Language of the Argentines), published in 1928, Borges defends the purely Argentine origins of tango. In his opinion, “El tango es la realización Argentina más divulgada, la que con insolencia ha prodigado el nombre Argentino sobre el faz de la tierra” (Tango is the most disseminated Argentine accomplishment, which with insolence has lavished the Argentina time on the face of the earth) (Borges 1994, 95). He reduces Rossi’s argument to a syllogism; milonga originated in Montevideo, tango originated from milonga, and therefore the origin of tango is Montevideo (Borges 1994, 97). For Borges, the minor premise, that milonga is the origin of tango, is plausible, but the major premise, the Montevideo origin and thus the Afro-Montevidean participation, had no valid argument to back it.

Borges states that Rossi lacks proof in his assertions about the genealogy of tango. For example, Rossi states the word “milonga” was not recorded in the *lunfardo* dialogue published in Argentina by *La Nación* in 1887 (Borges 1994, 97). For Borges this is an argument of negation which is not rather convincing. Rossi explains that the Angolan slaves of Brazil were the only group of African descendants in South America who were able to create their own language known as *bunda*. According to Rossi, milonga is a *bunda* term which means, “word” or “question” and it is the plural of “mulonga” (Rossi 2001, 118). He further states the word “mulonga” in Montevideo was used in *candombe* song and he asserts that “milonga” is a word of



African-Brazilian origin which was later accrued into the vocabulary of the Rio de la Plata region. While Borges confirms milonga was influential to tango, he argues the Afro-Uruguayan milonga was a separate phenomenon that did not cross the river to mix with the Argentine tango.

On one hand, Borges believes milonga was part of the tango mix, but it was from Argentine creole and not the same as the Black milonga from Uruguay, on the other hand, he does admit the origin of the word tango as well as milonga sound African or “pseudo-African” in nature (Borges 2016, 32). Borges argues that, in 1880, when the tango became popularized in Argentina, there were several other dances people mixed up, including Andalusian tango, Creole tango, milonga, and the habanera; therefore, there is no conclusive evidence of the precise origins of tango. His argument does not appear on the surface to be centered on racial motivations or biases. Rather, he makes it geographical in nature, as Borges focuses on asserting the pure Argentineness of tango. Even when Borges’ argument sounds nationalist, Sylvan Poosson believes that, while Rossi lacks proof of his thesis, Borges wrote from the point of view of the Generation of 1880, which sought to eliminate anything related to Black culture in Argentina. That is to say, in the act of denying Rossi’s proposals of Uruguayan involvement, Borges is in effect denying the role of the African population in the creation of tango in the River Plate region (Poosson 2004, 90). Interestingly, Borges addressed his feelings towards the possibility of Black participation in tango. After summarizing Rossi’s thesis, Borges states,

Es decir, el tango es afromontevideano, el tango tiene motas en la raíz. Ser de color humilde y ser oriental son condiciones criollas, pero los morenos argentinos (y hasta los no morenos) son tan criollos como los de enfrente y no hay razón para suponer que todo lo inventaron en la otra banda (Borges 1994, 38).

(That is to say, the tango is Afro-Montevidean, tango has traces in its roots. Being humbled-colored and being Uruguayan are creole conditions, but the blacks of Argentina (and even the non-blacks) are as creole as those across (referring to Uruguay) and there is no reason to suppose that everything was invented on the other side.)

It seems from this passage that Borges is attempting to clarify his lack of outright objections to the possibility of Blackness in tango and that African descendants from Argentina or Uruguay have the same legitimacy since they share in the same common “creole” race. This comment aside, in his work *Con Borges* (With Borges), author Alberto Manguel writes of the personal time he spent with Borges. Among his reflections, he writes that Borges did not believe that he could

find anything of universal importance in American Black culture, that is, it was just too provincial compared to universal cultures like the ancient Greeks or Chinese because they were an inferior race incapable of offering anything valuable to the world canon of literature and arts. From his personal encounters with Borges, Manguel describes,

In spite of his essential humanism, there were times when he prejudices made him surprisingly and horribly puerile. For instance, he voiced on occasion a senseless, commonplace racism that suddenly transformed the intelligent, keen reader into a momentary dolt who offered, as proof of the black man's inferiority, the lack of black culture of universal importance. In such cases it was useless to argue with him or attempt to excuse him. (Manguel 2006, 69)

It was this point that Rossi was attempting to counteract, arguing African descendants had a meaningful culture that contributed to the Rio de la Plata region in a significant but overlooked way. It can often be a difficult task to uncover Borges' final thoughts on race and tango as he had complicated and sometimes contradictory thoughts on both.

*El Idioma de los Argentinos* is commonly cited as a source for Borges' thoughts on Rossi's work, but it may not be entirely fair to judge his final thoughts on tango using this work alone. Notably, *El Idioma de los Argentinos* was one of three works he intentionally omitted from his *Complete Works* collection of 1974. While this exclusion could carry various meanings, it is known that Borges did in fact put effort into hiding these absent works which seem to be treated with shame from their very author. Nevertheless, the work remains influential in the debate as they reflect Borges's thought at the time of his controversy with Rossi. Also, this work was not the only time that Borges would directly address Vicente Rossi's work. In 1926, in an article of the magazine *Valoraciones* (Reviews), Borges again addressed Rossi's work, although this time praising it for stimulating the conversation around tango. There he condemns Rossi for getting so excited about the topic that he did not offer the historic proof that his thesis would require. In this writing, Borges also seems more indifferent about the possibility that tango may have started in Montevideo, a place that he characterized there as another neighborhood of Buenos Aires. Among other praises Borges gives to Rossi's book, he states that in *Cosas de Negros*, Rossi manages to give an envious description of the first candombe. However, he remains skeptical of Rossi because of the many perceived historical inaccuracies of his work. Again in 1928, Borges

comments in the magazine *Síntesis* (Synthesis) that Rossi will be discovered someday, and it will be a well-known document, despite its many incorrections. When speaking of Rossi's work, he again emphasizes his disbelief in the historical accuracies of *Cosas de negros*, stating he was certain Rossi would go down in history despite its many incorrections. What is universally agreed on by most authors is that tango was a dance of the lower classes which was not popularized until France accepted it. The fact that European acceptance of tango was necessary for the national canonization of this music form as an authentic expression of Argentine culture reveals the power of Eurocentrism in the process of national culture-formation.

## Conclusion

Since much of the evidence is circumstantial and the documentation lost in time, it becomes a difficult task to rewrite African origins back into the history of tango. However, it is undeniable that if not the initiators, Afro-Argentines were, at the very least, important contributors to the tango movement. Gabino Ezeiza (1858-1914), a Black *payador*, popularized milonga which, of course, played a crucial role in the development of tango. Many notable Black pianists also played tango in the *prostíbulos* where tango was popularized. Rosendo Mendizábal, a Black man, was the author of the first known written tango in 1897, called *El entrerriano*. Between 1890-1920 many notable Black musicians contributed to tango, including violinist *El negro* Casimiro, clarinet player *El mulato* Sinforoso, and concertina player Jorge Machado, *El pardo* (Castro 1994, 16). Furthermore, Robert Farris Thompson has identified thirty-five Black tango musicians in Buenos Aires between the years 1890 and 1930, including José Ricardo, who was Carlos Gardel's guitarist between 1915 to 1928 (Thompson 2005, 272). These Black artists seem to be unnoticed in the history of tango and arguably deserve to be highlighted further for their contributions. In fact, in more recent times, an effort to uncover Black history in Argentina is underway.

In 2010, *La Nación* ran a piece on African influences in Argentina by Alicia Dujovne Ortiz, the niece of Néstor Ortiz Oderigo, author of *Latitudes Africanas del Tango* (African Latitudes of Tango), published in 1988. After his death, Ortiz left behind manuscripts of his works which detailed the importance of the Afro-Argentine culture. Dujovne commented, "la prosapia negra del tango representa una piedra en el zapato. La Argentina no fue ni es el país blancoeuropeo que imaginaron nuestros abuelos, sino parte indisoluble de Afroamérica" (the

black ancestry of tango represents a rock in the shoe. Argentina was not the white European country that our grandparents imagined, but instead, an indissoluble part of Afro-America.) (Dujovne 2010). She goes on to say that Argentina is not distinct from the rest of Latin America for its lack of a Black population, but instead is only different for not incorporating Blackness into the Argentine identity. It is common to hear that Argentina is distinguishable from the other countries of Latin American for their deeper connections with Europe, but perhaps this is only true on the surface while other layers of cultural influences exist.

Race is an important factor in Argentine identity as demonstrated by Alicia Dujovne Ortiz's interview with an Afro-Argentine descendent who describes the disbelief she receives when Argentines see her dark complexion and ask her where she is from; her response is that she is more Argentine than they are as her ancestors reached the shores of Argentina long before their European forefathers. She describes a subtle racism in the way other Argentines receive her, mostly for their belief that she, a Black Argentine, does not exist. Her experience is not isolated. In fact, the Argentine newspaper *Clarín* reported in 2002 that then President Carlos Menem, on a diplomatic visit to the United States, was asked about the Black population and responded, "en Argentina no existen los negros; ese problema lo tiene Brasil" (In Argentina blacks do not exist; that is a problem Brazil has) (Anonymous, 2002). Of course, in this statement, Menem is letting his own implicit biases slip, but not all forms of racism are so overt.

In modern-day Argentina, like many other countries, there does not seem to be a solid solution to confronting racism directly. Mbembe calls this "racism without race" which arguably has become the norm. Republican universalism acts as though its policies are color-blind, but people of color are still being immobilized by historic and present-day deterrents (Mbembe 2017, 7). This claim is reminiscent of the complaints of the Afro-Argentine's in *La Broma* which suggested they felt unequal in a society claiming legal egalitarian principles under a republican government. Sociologists who criticize colorblind theory say it allows for the silent covering up of racial inequalities and for the manifestation of discrimination to continue and gives room for people to ignore patterns of racial bias. An open and explicit acknowledgement of a rich Black history and cultural contributions may allow for Argentina to see through its racial biases and move beyond them.

While conducting research, Andrews describes the persistent notion that Argentina is free from racism. But this belief in a post-racial Argentina comes down to a difference in the

definition of racism. He notes that, in Argentina, a common belief is that racism is an immediate and hostile reaction to a person, whereas in the United States racism includes the belief that race reflects a person's behaviors, abilities, and intelligence (Andrews 1980, 214). From a North American perspective, it is easy to conclude that this attitude towards race is harmful, as it leads to prejudice beliefs and behaviors that seem to go unnoticed because they are not directly being addressed or are perhaps more likely to be casually dismissed in Argentine culture.

However, cultural commentary about the interrelation race and tango are developing in Argentina. A documentary debuted in 2013 called *Tango Negro: The African Roots of Tango*, directed by Angolan filmmaker Dom Pedro and starring Argentine tango musician Juan Carlos Cáceres. The documentary explores the expressions of Africaness present in tango and speaks to the contributions of African cultures in tango and Argentina. The documentary interviews Argentines of African descent who express the “policy of invisibility” of Afro-Argentines in their society today. These Afro-Argentines also steadfastly believe their ancestors had a role in the creation of tango. One descendent of the *candomberos* of Argentina blatantly states that he is sure of tango's African roots, but, to a white Argentine, that statement would be like an insult. Another interview with an Afro-Argentine woman reveals her belief that there is a denial of African heritage in Argentina and she vouches for the theory of miscegenation rather than disappearance to account for the lack of Black population. She is married to a white man, and she states her grandchildren are white, which is a common experience for Afro-Argentines. She slyly comments that there are entire groups of Black people in Argentina, inviting the audience to look in the providences and even in the capital where she lives, to see on the streets “cuanta gente blanca tiene cara de negros” (how many white people have black faces). Finally, Cáceres breaks down the elements he believes are in the tango mix, the African rhythm, the milonga, and the habanera; he shows how they come together to make the tango sound. He states, “The tango is made up of three layers of sadness. The sadness of the immigrants, the sadness of the gauchos—the people who lived in the country—and finally the sadness of the blacks, who didn't come here as immigrants but were brought here by force.” Cáceres moved from his native Argentina to Paris in the 1960s, where he performed tango and helped popularized it in France. He passed away in 2015 after decades of advocating for the recognition of African influences in tango.

In 2014, the New York Times published an article detailing the emergence of a new consciousness surrounding the importance of Black history in Buenos Aires. Reporter Michael Luongo notes, for example, that in 2009 UNESCO incorporated the *Capilla de los Negros* (The Black Chapel) as a slave site in Argentina (Lunge 2014). The reporter further accounts his experience at the Movimiento Afrocultural, a cultural institution which began in Buenos Aires in 2009 to rediscover and endorse Afro-Argentine culture. The cultural center offers tango lessons, which they assure visitors is a creation of the fusion of African and European culture. Although the recognition and preservation of the chapel and the opening of the cultural center are steps in the right direction, there is still much work to be done to fill in all the gaps of African history in Argentina.

The discussion of how tango moves through history and how it relates to race, nationalism, and the Argentine identity is perhaps more important than whether it is possible to piece together a theory to prove its African origins. Tango is a cultural art form, passionate and creative, but it is also an economic, social, racial, and political phenomenon. It is like many cultural aspects across the Americas, a synthesis of colonization, slavery, class, identity, and cultural mixtures. Since Latin American culture tends to combine elements of African, indigenous, and European cultures, discovering a true “origin” of a singular cultural element is unlikely. Culture is not a stagnate entity, but rather a living shared experience that adapts to change, freely crosses borders, and takes on many forms as it moves through history.

Argentine anthropologist Néstor García Canclini is known for his conceptualization of the studies of hybridization and how it alters identity, culture, difference, inequality, and multiculturalism. He defines hybridization as “sociocultural process in which discrete structures or practices, previously existing in separate form, are combined to generate new structures, objects, and practices” (Canclini 1995, 10). Like Wade, Canclini points out that the original “discrete structures” are a result of prior hybridization and cannot be considered pure points of origin. To exemplify this, he points out the debate on the legitimization and acceptance of Spanglish where Spanish and English are viewed as the pure points of origin. However, both languages have previously been modified by Latin and Arabic among various other outside influences. Canclini points out that during the 19th century hybridization was considered detrimental to social development as was the case in Argentina with the rejection of African and indigenous cultures. He further discusses the impact hybridization has on identity stating,

The emphasis on hybridization not only puts an end to the pretense of establishing “pure” or “authentic” identities; in addition, it demonstrates the risk of delimiting local, self-contained identities or those that attempt to assert themselves as radically opposed to national society or globalization. When an identity is defined through a process of abstraction of traits (language, traditions, certain stereotyped behaviors), there is often a tendency to remove those practices from the history of mixing in which they were formed (Canclini 1995, 13).

The author explains that he is in favor of shifting the focus from identity and heterogeneity in favor of hybridization and that the emphasis should be placed on the process of hybridization. In essence, if Argentina, or any country, were to break apart all of its cultural elements, the process of mixing and reconstructing would be continuous. The sustained process of reinventing tango happened with the mixing of African elements, continued with the popularization of tango in France, is seen in the redefining of tango by Astor Piazzolla’s *tango nuevo*, and continues today with *tango electrónico*, a fusion of tango and electronic music. In a modern age of globalization, the newer fusions of tango are celebrated by Argentina as well as given worldwide recognition. However, the African elements of the initial process of hybridization seemingly remain ignored.

Finding the many origins of tango is secondarily important to what tango means for identity and race in Argentina. The denial of the African influences in Argentine tango is not only likely a falsification of history, but it affects the way race is perceived by modern Argentina. If Argentina chooses to incorporate a recognition of the Blackness of tango into the national consciousness, it will also force the country to reexamine its identity, history, and contemporary ideas about race. Doing so will be a long overdue acknowledgement of the lost history and impact of the Afro-American population that once heavily populated the Río de la Plata region. The Afro-Argentines have left behind seeds of cultural heritage in their wake and, whether recognized or not, they were there, living and dancing.

## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank Dr. Carlos Abreu Mendoza from the Texas State University Department of Modern Languages for his support and mentorship in the completion of this honors thesis.

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