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Tango, Not-For-Export:
Participatory Music-Making, Musical Activism, and Visual Ethnomusicology
in the Neighborhood Tango Scenes of Buenos Aires

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Ethnomusicology

by

Jennie Meris Gubner

2014

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2014

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Tango, Not-For-Export:
Participatory Music-Making, Musical Activism, and Visual Ethnomusicology
in the Neighborhood Tango Scenes of Buenos Aires

by

Jennie Meris Gubner

Doctor of Philosophy in Ethnomusicology

University of California, Los Angeles, 2014

Professor Timothy D. Taylor, Chair

This dissertation examines how local neighborhood tango music movements—reacting to “for-export” tango and the neoliberal cultural trends of Argentina in the 1990s—have reclaimed and reterritorialized tango as a form of local musical social life and as an approach to musical activism in Buenos Aires over the past 15 years. To most non-Argentines, tango is thought of as a passionate and sensual form of dance. However, tango as a musical culture also has a rich history in the city of Buenos Aires, and not one that is always associated with dancing. Scholars in the late 1990s studied the processes through which tango was deterritorialized, exoticized and transformed into a transnational “for-export” dance

phenomenon. More recent works have discussed the ways that, following the 2001 Argentine economic crisis, the government used “for-export” tango as an economic and cultural resource to promote tourism. Moving away from government agendas, my research explores how, parallel to these other phenomena, musicians have been revitalizing tango music as a form of everyday socialization and everyday urban activism in the contemporary neighborhoods of Buenos Aires.

Through a musical ethnography of the Almagro neighborhood, home to the city’s most thriving not “for-export” tango music scene, I explore how the advent of informal and participatory live music scenes in small bars in the late ‘90s allowed for the production of local spaces for musical transmission, urban intimacy, community building, and musical activism for a new generation of tango musicians. Beyond contributing to literature on tango as a contemporary musical form of urban culture in neoliberalizing Buenos Aires, I examine how feelings of locality in contemporary tango scenes are often produced at the complex intersection of sentimentality and post-neoliberal forms of urban activism. In particular, I examine I analyze the neighborhood location of these scenes not only as a physical space where alternative tango cultures developed, but also as a powerful symbolic imaginary where new musical and social practices continue to be constructed on top of powerful historic social imaginaries of the neighborhood.

Because globalized pop music genres like tango are so entrenched in powerful visual and sonic stereotypes, I utilize filmmaking throughout my dissertation as a sensorial mode through which to construct new visual and sensory ways of knowing tango culture. Inspired by theories of observational cinema, visual anthropology, and sensory ethnography, I propose sensory filmmaking as a rich methodological approach to studying the complex social dynamics and sensory aesthetics so integral to the production of meaningful local tango cultures today.

The dissertation of Jennie Meris Gubner is approved.

Helen Rees

Anthony Seeger

Gabriela M. Copertari

Aparna Sharma

Timothy D. Taylor, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2014

To the memory of Roberto Abal and Roberto Perez

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Introduction Part I

Welcome to Tango City, 2014: Introducing Tango and Buenos Aires



Figure 0.1 and 0.2. Typical postcard image of Buenos Aires promoted on the city's website for tango tourism¹ and a photo I took in one of Almagro's neighborhood bars during a concert by the festive local band, Amores Tangos (2012).²

It is after midnight on a Wednesday in Buenos Aires. Like so many other nights I walk the 14 blocks from my apartment to my field site, past the crumbling apartments where low income families sell collected street garbage on the sidewalk, past the towering arches of the old Abasto central market now home to a major shopping mall, past the fancy dinner theater offering overpriced tango shows to tourists, past the Peruvian restaurants and a McDonald's and the sounds of cumbia and rock music that pour out of cars and unmarked doorways, across the Broadway-like avenue Corrientes and into the heart of Almagro, a middle class residential neighborhood just outside the city center. Once I cross the avenue things immediately slow down, the streets are quieter, the lights are dimmer. Passing the Almagro plaza I start to hear the sounds of guitars and voices coming out of the small tango bar ahead on the corner. Every time I make this walk, it doesn't take much to imagine that I'm walking backwards in time from a

¹ Source: Image from the GCBA (City Government of Buenos Aires) *Tanguerías, Milongas y Clases de Tango* website. <http://www.turismo.buenosaires.gob.ar/es/article/tanguer%C3%ADas-milongas-y-clases-de-tango>

² Unless otherwise noted, all photographs taken by the author.

chaotic 21st century cosmopolitan city into one of the old romantic neighborhoods described in so many tango lyrics from the 1920s and '30s.

I walk in the bar. In the corner of the dimly lit room Christian and El Pájaro, a large man they call the bird for his high tenor voice, are singing and playing guitar. When they finish their acoustic rendition of a tango duet written in the 1930s, the casually dressed audience sitting around old wooden tables breaks into applause. As the night progresses, different members of the audience, anywhere from their 20s to their 80s, are asked to come forward and sing for the intimate crowd. As they walk to the front of the room they pull little pieces of paper from their pockets with the keys of the tangos they sing and whisper them to the guitarist before beginning their performances. Some are professionals, some are dedicated amateurs, and others are beginners, but everyone receives rowdy and enthusiastic applause. As it gets later and more bottles of wine and beer pass around the room, the musicians start playing more of the classics igniting sing-a-longs that turn the whole bar into a kind of late-night drunken neighborhood choir. In these spaces, tango is lived as an intimate and participatory way of being together in the city. In these places, music becomes a vehicle for experiencing and imagining tango and Buenos Aires in ways that bring poetry, togetherness, and social inclusion into a city characterized by struggles and contradictions. At one point in the show, an American woman leans towards me and says, "I think I have a lot to learn about tango. I might be ignorant but all I knew of tango was Astor Piazzolla and dancers in fancy outfits. I guess I didn't know this was tango at all."

~ ~ ~

Live and mediated experiences with tango culture have long played a prominent role in shaping ideas of city life in Argentina. However, in Buenos Aires today there exists a disparity between tango cultures produced primarily for tourist consumption that perpetuate exoticized stereotypes of tango's imagined past, and tango cultures emerging from local revitalization

movements that seek to reconnect the genre to the social, political and cultural realities of contemporary life in the city (see Figures 0.1 and 0.2). This cultural gap between what is commonly referred to as tango “for-export” and tango “not-for-export” has intensified over the past two decades. This intensification has occurred throughout a particularly turbulent political period in Argentina, and Buenos Aires more specifically, characterized by the implementation of neoliberal economic and cultural models of urban development and the consequences of and reactions to those models. Today, tango culture is used as both an economic resource through the implementation of neoliberal cultural-tourism models borrowed from North America and Europe, and as a vehicle for contesting and producing alternatives to those models.

Focusing on neighborhood music scenes as sites of local tango culture, this dissertation explores the different ways independent tango artists around the city are contesting for-export models of urban cultural politics and advocating alternative models of cultural production that situate tango as a localized, cooperative and participatory form of urban popular culture. Although similar processes are happening in tango dance communities in Buenos Aires, this research intentionally focuses on tango as a participatory musical practice. Integral to my investigation will be the idea that participatory practices of urban music-making allow individuals to collectively experience, perform, and even transform powerful social, political, cultural and imaginaries of city life in Buenos Aires. I explore imaginaries in this dissertation as powerful frameworks through which individuals and communities locate themselves socially and politically in urban space. By treating imaginaries as webs of ideas, images, sounds and feelings carried through the musical sounds, discourses, geographies, sensory experiences and socio-musical practices of neighborhood tango scenes, I explore how music so often blurs the lines between the imagined and the real in the process of making meaning through art and processing the complex everyday realities of individual’s urban worlds.

In Argentina, discussions of social, urban, cultural and political imaginaries have long played a prominent role in academic literature and in everyday conversations about life in the city. Appearing in discussions ranging from music and art to politics and urban planning, the term is locally used to talk about how ideas of the city, both past and present, inform how individuals and groups make sense of urban space. In this text I tease out and offer ethnographic depth to how different imagined ideas of life in Buenos Aires inform very real practices of music-making and vice versa. Before outlining the methodologies and theoretical frameworks orienting my research, this opening chapter seeks to convey a sense of everyday life in contemporary Buenos Aires. Especially intended for readers who are not familiar with Buenos Aires, this chapter introduces life in the city and locates tango within the complex cultural landscape of Buenos Aires as I have come to understand it through my years of fieldwork.

Setting the Scene, Past and Present

From the 1920s to the 1950s, tango dominated the cultural landscape of Buenos Aires. Theaters, cinemas, cabarets, bars, cafés, radio shows, and dance halls operated throughout the city and working musicians often played multiple gigs a day. When you ask old *tangueros* (tango fanatics) about those years, they recount the excitement of walking downtown on the central avenue Corrientes and hearing the sounds of the great tango orchestras coming out of the elegant cafés—perhaps Aníbal Troilo on one side of the street and Osvaldo Pugliese on the other. They also tell stories of tango dances in the neighborhood social clubs, of gathering to sing tangos on street corners with friends and of waiting to be old enough to wear long pants in order to enter the cabarets. They remember listening in their homes to live tango orchestras play on the radio, and tell stories of meeting their future husbands and wives while dancing and playing tango.

For much of the early 20th century, tango in Argentina was inextricably entwined with all forms of mainstream public culture and as a result the tango stories people tell often blend intimate personal memories with scenes from movies, lyrics from songs, or popular historical anecdotes. My friend and 84 year-old tango mentor Osvaldo Peredo, whose stories will color the pages of this dissertation, serves as a perfect example of this process. When I ask him to explain the meaning of the lyrics of the tangos he sings, he often relates them to anecdotes from his life. Then, frequently, he will relate this personal story back to a scene from a film, all as one memory of his past, seamlessly connecting the staged performances of singers like Carlos Gardel with memories of his father, his youth and himself as a younger man.



Sitting at a café in the pouring rain Osvaldo began to sing the first lines of one of Carlos Gardel's most revered tangos, "Sus Ojos Se Cerraron". "Sus ojos se cerraron, y el mundo sigue andando..." He was explaining to me the importance of really understanding the lyrics when you sing in order to be able to express the subtext of the songs. "Tango is not about drama" he explains, "it is about the subtle interpretation of all the details, the sweetness, the anger, the heartbreak, the nostalgia, every great tango has all of these things." He explains to me that this tango is featured in one of Gardel's classic films, and that he sings the song as his loved one is dying next to him. The lyrics translate to "her eyes shut, but the world keeps on turning..." He sings the line twice, once loudly with a bit vibrato and the melodramatic tone of heartbreak (characteristic of stereotypical tango) and then again, quietly, with the sadness that comes from a moment combining love, defeat, and the passing of time. "Do you see the difference?" he says. That is what subtext is all about, "this is not a line that is meant to be yelled. If you yell, you miss the point." He then went on to explain the scene from the movie in detail, then seamlessly transitioned to a story of his father's passing and going to the soccer stadium where they had spent their Sundays together and understanding the line "her eyes have closed

but the world keeps on turning.” Today, whenever I hear or perform this song, I imagine the black and white image of Gardel singing to his lost love, the image of Osvaldo sitting alone in the soccer stadium watching the game without his father, the café where he told me this story in the rain, and my own memories of love, defeat and the passing of time, all carried seamlessly through the notes of a song written in 1935³.



No matter how many people I talk to or how many books I read, I will never really know what Buenos Aires felt like in those years, nor what Osvaldo’s everyday life was really like as a young man. Nonetheless, the way people chose to remember and tell me about the city during the golden age of tango offers an important backdrop as I try to bring to life the ways I have come to understand tango culture today. After all, my own process of learning about tango’s past is not so different from that of my peers in Buenos Aires seeking to give meaning and life to a genre that most of us discovered years after it had fallen from the popular mainstream. These stories speak not only to how the elderly remember (or choose to pass down memories), but also to how young people use those stories and memories as building blocks to construct their own understandings of tango and their own experiences of the city today.⁴

Today, lived and mediated histories of tango’s golden years circulate in a public culture of nostalgia in the form of photos, films, and historical accounts of tango’s past. Although images of neighborhood life arise frequently in tango lyrics and personal stories, the dominant visual image of the golden years of tango tends to be centered on the glamour of downtown. Like a fading black-and-white postcard, it evokes elegantly dressed men and women dancing

³ For a recording and the lyrics of “Sus Ojos Se Cerraron,” see: <http://www.todotango.com/english/music/song/232/Sus-ojos-se-cerraron/>

⁴ For an example, see Leo Cusani’s discussion of his relationship to Osvaldo in my film *A Common Place* (00:005:00) at www.jenniegubner.com.

and playing music in the Parisian-style cafés and theaters of the city center. Today, these images no longer represent the realities of tango or of Buenos Aires.

Buenos Aires in 2014 is a sprawling, economically unstable, chaotic South American megacity with a population of over 13 million people, where urban life bustles with the transnational flows characteristic of modern, cosmopolitan cities. Layered on top of the romantic memories of old-fashioned Buenos Aires in the 1940s and '50s and the historical ideas of Buenos Aires as the glamorous Paris of South America constructed by 18th and 19th century elites, one now finds other darker imaginaries that contribute to shaping how life is understood and practiced in the city. These other imaginaries are born from memories of the violent and repressive military dictatorship of 1976-1983, the economic instability following the return to the democracy in the 1980s, and the neoliberal political agenda and convertibility law of the 1990s that culminated in a devastating nationwide economic crash in 2001.⁵

Along with the city, tango culture has changed dramatically from the times when the genre was a booming mainstream cultural industry. From the 1960s to the 1990s, tango fell out of the limelight of mainstream popular culture and especially of youth culture. Although the genre never completely disappeared, the rise of international rock and pop music industries and later the social repression of the dictatorship years (1976-1983) took their tolls on tango as an urban form of social life and as a consumer music industry. As in most cosmopolitan cities around the world today, the musical tastes of *Porteños* (people who live in Buenos Aires) range anywhere from local and imported versions of hip-hop and indie music to folklore, tango, afropop, classical music, heavy metal, electronic dance music, cumbia, and salsa; the list goes on. Of this list, rock and cumbia music are perhaps the most commonly listened to musics

⁵ The *Ley de Convertibilidad* was a plan instated by president Carlos Menem in 1991 that pegged the Argentine Peso to the US dollar in an attempt to curb hyperinflation that had been affecting the country in the 1980s and improve the Argentine economy. (For an exploration of how films processed these changes, see Leen 2008:446.)

among young people (cumbia especially among working class and urban poor and rock among the middle and upper classes). As for tango, outside the growing underground tango scenes many young people feel ambivalence or even hostility towards the genre, associating it with tourism, national stereotypes, and the culture of their grandparents.

Although tango is no longer representative of the cultural mainstream, it has certainly not disappeared. Most visibly, tango exists as a booming tourist culture throughout the city. Along the Parisian-inspired downtown avenues, tourists are sold nostalgic but exoticized tours of the city's past in the form of pricey cabaret tango dance shows, compilation CDs, books, posters, and tango trinkets. Downtown historic cafés feature afternoon tango shows directed at foreigners with small orchestras and choreographed dancers. Theaters, also targeting foreigners, offer larger cabaret shows in the evenings where one can enjoy a tango show with an elegant steak and a fancy bottle of malbec wine. Typically, these shows feature hyper-sexualized dance choreographies that scene-by-scene walk through the fashion trends and musical styles of different periods in tango history. They also usually feature a singer dressed up as Carlos Gardel (the most famous tango singer to have ever lived) who sings renditions of the most recognizable tango hits like "Volver" "Mi Buenos Aires Querido" and "El Dia que me Quieras." In the port neighborhood, La Boca, tango dancers perform on the sidewalks and in the various tourist-oriented cafés that line the streets. Hotels, restaurants, and even the airport coffee shops use tango images and sounds to attract foreign visitors looking to visit the world mecca of tango culture.

While less visible and largely ignored by the mainstream media, tango also continues to live outside these tourist circuits. Across the city tango fans of all ages collect and share LPs, CDs, cassettes, and mp3s of tangos rich musical history. Each day, Facebook groups and personal pages circulate YouTube videos of the great singers and orchestras of times past and present, often accompanied by photos and videos of a tango and a Buenos Aires of yesteryear.

Taxi drivers and shopkeepers listen to the city's tango radio station (*La 2x4* FM 92.7) religiously, day and night. In subway stops around the city one can hear tango on the loudspeakers or performed live in any number of formations ranging from young musicians with melodicas or guitars on train cars, to elderly bandoneon players, saxophonists, or vocalists performing with recorded backing tracks played from portable amplifiers, or even full live tango orchestras usually made up of young musicians.⁶ On any given night of the week, dance clubs fill with tango dancers of all ages and of from all social classes. While elder tango fans encompass a wider social spread, today the majority of younger dancers and musicians come from middle class backgrounds. There are informal dance halls for younger bohemian crowds organized in abandoned grain factories and warehouses, and others for elegant dancers who still dress up in sequins for a night of dancing.

Away from the dance halls, there are other tango worlds without dancing where people gather to experience tango as a live-music genre. Among older crowds, couples dress up in formal attire to attend small run-down neighborhood dinner theaters to hear similarly elder singers revive the classics in what are often somewhat amateur performances. In revitalized picturesque old-fashioned bars and younger "hip" modern spaces old and new generations of tango fans also gather to hear live music and participate in open mics for singers and instrumentalists. Every night of the week small cultural centers, neighborhood taverns, and even converted mechanic workshops turn into community spaces for underground tango music performances.

Whether intended for tourists or locals or older or younger crowds, all of these expressions of tango make up a very living part of the urban culture of Buenos Aires today. Although far from a part of mainstream culture, those who identify themselves as *tangueros*

⁶ The *bandoneon* is a button accordion of German origin that became one of the primary instruments for tango performance in the early 20th century.

tend to become very involved, often identifying tango as more of a way of life than a hobby. As a result, many people's social worlds depend on daily and weekly practices that involve dancing, listening to, or playing tango. These practices contribute to producing ways of acting and thinking about the city that are filtered through vocabularies of tango, vocabularies which contribute to producing shared imaginaries of city life that in turn create meaning and influence the everyday world views actions of individuals. In his study of jazz scenes in New York, Travis A. Jackson writes that his walks through the city from one jazz club to another contributed to shaping his jazz-related understanding of neighborhood life in the city by emphasizing certain places and ideas and deemphasizing others (2012:51). As I will argue, the tango scenes studied in this dissertation also contribute to producing *contemporary* tango-related understandings of Buenos Aires that differ from the dominantly tourist and old-fashioned representations of the genre. It is important to keep in mind that the Buenos Aires I discuss in this text is a Buenos Aires experienced through tango. For individuals not interested or involved in tango culture, the neighborhoods, plazas, streets and images that fill these pages are tied instead to other sounds, discourses and imaginaries. It is almost as if, depending on who you are and how you choose to look at the city, tango can be everywhere, or, nowhere at all.

In this dissertation I attempt to challenge and diversify understandings of tango that trap the genre inside faded postcards and tourist trinkets with a series of newer, updated snapshots of some of the dynamic practices, places and people making tango meaningful in the context of a now very different Buenos Aires. The task of this transformation will require the production of alternative forms of knowledge about tango and the city of Buenos Aires that engage with more than just one of our senses. Placing my focus on tango music as a form of neighborhood culture, I use text, photographs, and video to experientially evoke and critically analyze some of the local practices and powerful urban imaginaries shaping tango culture in the present day.

A Sense of the City



Figure 0.3. View of Downtown Buenos Aires.⁷

A Sense of Downtown

The sensory experience of Buenos Aires today—how it looks, sounds, smells and feels—provides the physical landscape for the different urban imaginaries that will be explored in this dissertation through the lens of tango music. Because neighborhood tango scenes locate themselves as an alternative to the busy, commercial and fragmented nature of downtown life, it is important to get a sense of what life feels like in the city center. Walking downtown on Corrientes Avenue at midday exemplifies the realities of a city that hovers between the first and third worlds, between the local and the foreign, between the old and the new, between decline and renewal. Street vendors, some Argentine, others immigrants, set up shop on the sidewalks selling anything from handcrafted jewelry to knock-off sunglasses or souvenirs. Crowds of all social classes and ages pour in and out of subway entrances: men and women in suits, old ladies in fur coats, working class men and women on their way to and from work, hipsters of all ages, families, tourists, beggars. Restaurant waiters in formal attire rush silver platters with coffee and snack deliveries from one office building to the next, passing by McDonalds,

⁷ Source: Image from GCBA Website. <http://www.turismo.buenosaires.gob.ar/>

Starbucks, and maybe a Chinese all-you-can-eat diner on the way. Downtown Buenos Aires is chaotic, hectic, and often totally overwhelming.





Figure 0.4 - 0.6. Downtown Buenos Aires, Avenida Corrientes, Avenida Rivadavia, and Avenida de Mayo.⁸

Billboards hung on the facades of elegant 19th century buildings flash with images of theater shows, cell phone ads, and the inevitable scantily clad lady or two usually promoting brands of perfume, lingerie or alcohol. Piles of putrid trash accumulate around overflowing garbage bins on street corners under other big yellow billboards from the current city government promising urban reform—an olfactory nightmare on humid summer days. Below these, men and women push portable carts that roast sugar-coated peanuts sending the rich smell of molasses into the streets to mix with with the exhaust of cars and motorcycles and the trash. Looking up, the skyline is an architecturally confusing mix of modern skyscrapers, dreary box-like apartment buildings and glamorous historic architectural landmarks.

And then there are the sounds. Sounds of rock, tango, cumbia, opera, and international pop musics waft out of store fronts mixing with the honking and humming of street noise in an endless battle to attract costumers. Actors in flamboyant costumes recite dialogues outside the big downtown theaters promoting shows, and people pass out promotional flyers for stores and restaurants that end up scattered and trampled on the concrete. Large protests and strikes,

⁸ Source: Image from GCBA Website. <http://www.turismo.buenosaires.gob.ar/>

accompanied by their own chants and drum rolls and by traffic honking and police sirens, and even amplified concerts in plazas also contribute to the soundscapes of downtown life. Outside the downtown congress building and in the streets protesters from all social classes gather to chant for abortion rights, for unemployed workers benefits, for laws to support LGBT rights, for the communist party, for and against the national and city politics, for the national law of musicians' rights; the list is endless. These protests, which seem quite remarkable when you first arrive in the city, quickly become part of the background soundtrack of city life. Living in Buenos Aires, it becomes normal to associate political discourses with cultural events and vice versa.

A Sense of Politics



Figure 0.7. Downtown Buenos Aires, Avenida de Mayo lined with Argentine flags. ⁹

This politicization of everyday life has been particularly present since the economic crash that Argentina suffered in 2001. The crash occurred after a series of neoliberal political and economic agendas were implemented by President Carlos Menem in the 1990s. These included the privatization of many public works, the pegging of the Argentine peso to the US

⁹ Source: Image from GCBA Website. <http://www.turismo.buenosaires.gob.ar/>

dollar, and a cultural shift in favor of North American consumer models of urban planning (see Grimson and Kessler 2005:72). During this period multiplex cinemas, private housing complexes, and malls appeared in the urban landscape. For many, these shifts offered promises of progress and an escape from the political and economic depression of the recent decades. However, the implementation of these free-market, consumer-oriented models did not favor everyone in Argentina and proved to be devastating for much of the middle classes, especially in Buenos Aires.

Following the 2001 economic crash and the unpegging of the peso to the dollar, the national political climate swung back towards the left following the election of President Néstor Kirchner, and subsequently Cristina Fernández de Kirchner. The Kirchner governments have been heavily critical of Menem's policies in the 1990s and the implementation of North American models of neoliberal government in Latin American in general.¹⁰ The current president, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, now in her second term, allies herself with the anti-imperialist and Latin Americanist political platforms of ex-president Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, Evo Morales in Bolivia and Fidel Castro in Cuba, and is considered part of what has been referred to as the Pink Tide in current Latin American politics, a term described by Petras and Veltmeyer as "left-leaning regimes in the new millennium...that rode the widespread disenchantment with neoliberalism to state power (2011:146). As President she has fought to bring privatized companies back into the public sphere, supported education and welfare programs for disadvantaged mothers across the country, and restricted the exchange of dollars in an attempt to avoid capital flight and support internal industries. Much like Menem in the 1990s, she is

¹⁰ In particular, the Kirchner governments align themselves with the left-wing political platforms of former President Juan Perón, the Peronist Youth movement, and the populist political militancy of the 1970s in Argentina. Although both Néstor and Cristina's governments sit to the left of the political spectrum, they are more centre-left than some of the more radical presidents such as President Evo Morales in Bolivia and former President Hugo Chavez in Venezuela. That said, Cristina's policies have become more radical than those of Néstor, especially over the past few years when she re-privatized the YPF, raised import tariffs, oil company and restricted access to US dollars in an attempt to avoid capital flight.

loved by some, and despised by others. Due to her populist and anti-imperialist political ideologies, her greatest support comes from the working and middle classes who suffered during Menem's reforms, and her enemies from the upper classes, who thrived during this period. The political climate in Argentina today is highly polarized, and everyday cultural and identity politics rarely escape alignment with or against the current government.

In Buenos Aires political tensions between the national government and municipal government of Buenos Aires have heightened since the current mayor, Mauricio Macri, was elected in 2007. Macri's right-wing PRO party falls at the opposite end of the political spectrum from the Kirchners. Similar to Menem, Macri has supported the implementation of neoliberal models of urban politics and urban planning and strives to model Buenos Aires after other modern cities in North America and Europe. Macri's models of cultural planning are closely related to his consumer models of government (see Kanai 2014b). Criticizing his consumer-minded and export-oriented way of conducting cultural politics, Luis and Eugenia Sanjurjo write that cities are made up of "living memories, territories and collectivities" and that these building blocks that make up the city's identity are being threatened by the municipal government that is trying to exclude collective memories from city life (2013:216). They see the paving of historic cobblestone streets and the shutting down of cultural centers as policies that promote a politics of urban forgetting common to neoliberal urban agendas.

The mayor's lack of interest in the past is visible in a famous conversation between the mayor and the ex-president of Venezuela. During a televised interview between these two figures, Macri told Hugo Chavez that instead of dwelling on the past as Chavez had in Venezuela, he had turned the page in order to focus on Argentina's future (Sanjurjo and Sanjurjo 2013:217). His gaze towards progress becomes particularly controversial when contrasted with the efforts of the Kirchner government, which has promoted a politics of memory about the dictatorship in order to raise awareness about these events and prosecute

those involved in the atrocities of the nation's past. The fact that Menem was heavily criticized for using promises of progress to avoid dealing with the crimes of the dictatorship period only further intensifies this divide.

Today residents of Buenos Aires live in constant tension between the neoliberal models of urban culture heavily promoted in the 1990s and by the current city government, and the alternatives to those models currently supported by the national government and many activist movements around the city. These tensions are especially present among the urban middle classes whose cultural habits and ideologies tend to fall sharply to one side or the other of this political spectrum. If fast food restaurants, shopping malls, private housing complexes, overpriced movie theaters, and mega-festivals represent one end of the spectrum of middle class cultural life, then arts collectives, non-profits, free public events, and grassroots community-organized associations represent the other. There are those who have the money and interest to spend their Sundays at shopping malls, wear American brand-name clothing, attend mega-events like the massive annual international electronic dance music (EDM) festival Creamfields (<http://www.creamfieldsba.com/>), have an iPhone and drop English words in everyday conversations with friends and strangers. On the other extreme are those who may or may not have the money but choose instead to support local arts collectives, attend free popular music festivals, eat at local cantinas, and ride their bicycles to work. While my research focuses on middle class alternatives to neoliberal cultural models, it is important to remember that many people in this city have no interest in these alternatives and vehemently reject the leftist and anti-imperialist platform of the current president who has limited the access to dollars and placed high tariffs on imported goods. However, as in many grassroots cultural movements, most of the people involved in the independent tango scenes where I conduct my research fall to the left of the political spectrum.

Defining the Argentine middle class is a topic large enough for another dissertation. Due to the economic turmoil of recent decades, middle class identity is not as easily identified by income or education level as it is in many other parts of the world. In a 2011 editorial, José Natanson describes the complexities of defining the middle class today in Argentina. He explains that middle class can be used to define families living in suburban private housing communities, workers employed by growing industries, owners of small businesses, and white collar workers like plumbers (Natanson 2011). He then adds that middle class can also describe the “new poor” who resemble the middle class in terms of education and profession but lack economic stability usually associated with the term. He concludes that the middle class, more than a fixed class, in many ways is a social ideal and a lifestyle that allows individuals to locate themselves in relation to the state and to other citizens. Generally speaking, when I speak of the urban middle classes in this dissertation, I am referring to the body of citizens that neither align themselves culturally, financially, or socially with the upper class elite, nor with the vast populations of impoverished lower-class citizens living predominantly in the slums and on the outskirts of the city. Most participants of neighborhood tango scenes exist fall within this broad and flexible understanding of the middle class, whether they be engineers or plumbers, psychologists or school teachers, truck drivers or small business owners, students or artists.

The political transformations experienced in Argentina over the past two decades affected the livelihoods and economic stability of many urban residents and had a profound impact on collective discourses of national identity, especially among the middle class. In Argentina, ideas of the nation have been historically grounded in ideas of the city of Buenos Aires (Bergero 2008:3), making the urban landscape a rich zone for political debate. In the 1990s, Menem’s political and economic agendas promoted political imaginaries that aligned Argentina with the market-led first world nations of North America and Europe. Those of the independent movements following the crash of 2001 and the current Kirchner government have

promoted largely anti-imperialist, nationalist and Latin Americanist visions for the nation. Thus, the politicization of everyday life in Buenos Aires involves not only the direct material consequences of these political and economic agendas but also the tensions between contrasting political, social and cultural imaginaries of the nation that play out in the micro and macro politics of everyday life.

A Sense of Demographics

The cultural makeup of Buenos Aires also contributes to the city's complex cosmopolitan nature. For much of the 20th century Buenos Aires was known and thought of as "The Paris of the South." This belief, traceable to discourses of the ruling Argentine elite in the late 19th and early 20th century, was reinforced in part by the large quantity of European immigrants that flooded the city in the first decades of the 20th century. Today, however, the immigrant populations of the city come primarily from Latin America, the interior provinces of the country and different parts of Asia. Each group has brought new cultural practices and social dynamics that color and complicate the previously ingrained Europeanized image of the city's urban landscape. Since public universities in Argentina are free to attend, students come from all around South America to pursue affordable educations. While some immigrant populations occupy middle class positions, own businesses, or work as educated professionals, not everyone is so fortunate. All around the city and especially on the outskirts and in the Southern edges of town, countless slums are home to populations of Paraguayan, Argentine, Bolivian, Peruvian and other marginalized populations, many of whom live by collecting cardboard in the streets at night, or working as domestic laborers or in factories, often with low pay and little job security. Drugs, crime, prostitution, and black market businesses provide other forms of precarious income.

At the other social extreme, temporary residents primarily from Europe and North America or from other Latin American countries also color the dynamics of the city, adding another layer of cosmopolitan transnationalism which falls somewhere between the tourists and the permanent immigrants. In general, these individuals consist of young adults who come to Argentina to work or study for periods of a few months to a few years, living in and driving up rents in the more affluent neighborhoods and contributing to the economies of the internationally recognized hip and trendy parts of town. The most popular neighborhood for these first-world temporary residents is Palermo, a highly gentrified neighborhood that is now divided into areas with North American names like Palermo Hollywood and Palermo Soho. Buenos Aires can also be divided by North and South, and similar to so many other places in the world, the North is “whiter,” richer and more cosmopolitan whereas the South tends to be “darker,” more working class and more on the margins of modernization.

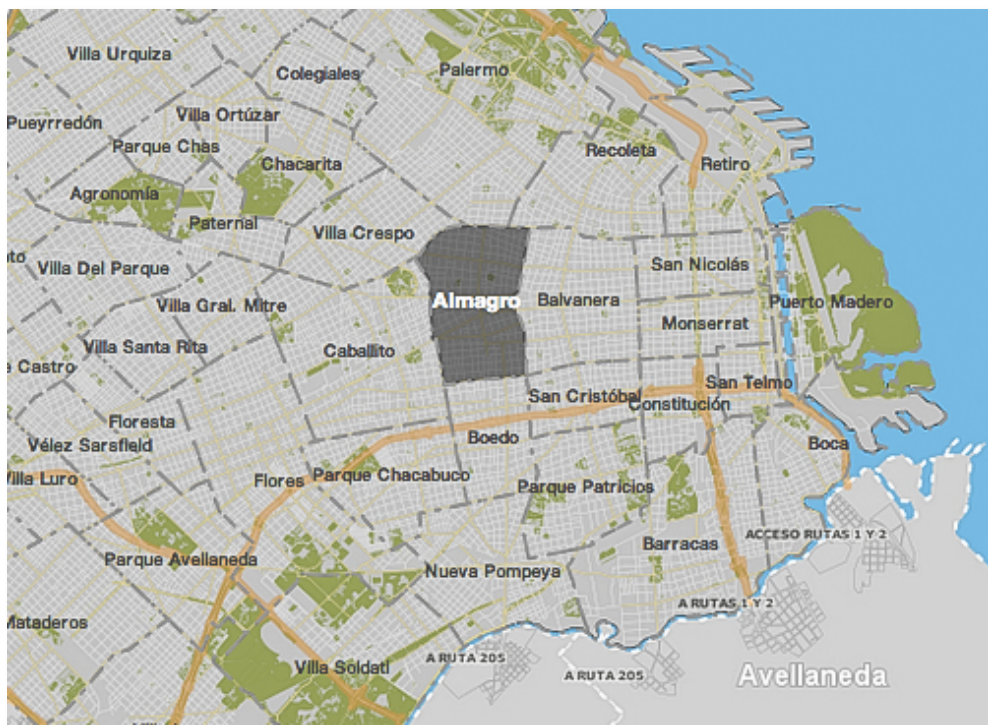


Figure 0.8. Map of Buenos Aires showing the Almagro neighborhood.¹¹

¹¹ Source: Map from the GCBA neighborhoods website. <http://www.buenosaires.gob.ar/laciudad/barrios>

The Almagro Neighborhood - My Ethnographic Research Site

While the northernmost and southernmost neighborhoods of the city represent the city's economic extremes—Palermo, Belgrano and Recoleta being representative of wealth in the North and La Boca, Barracas and Constitución characteristic of the poorer areas of the South—other neighborhoods around the city center, including Almagro, Villa Crespo, Boedo and Caballito, are home to large populations of middle class citizens. In these primarily residential neighborhoods, the jarring contrasts between fast food chains, modern buildings and historic architecture tend to be less present. Although neighborhoods like Caballito have been developing rapidly in recent years with new high-rise constructions on every other block (D'Avella 2012), the neighborhood of Almagro where my research is concentrated has stayed largely the same since my arrival there in 2005 (see Figure 0.8). While only a few subway stops away from the city center, Almagro retains a feel of *lo barrial* (a term used to describe traditional “neighborhoodness”). With an exception of the main avenues, most of Almagro is made up of quiet streets with old-fashioned stone residential homes and small businesses and cafés. Whereas the neighborhoods of San Telmo, La Boca and Palermo have been heavily marketed as tourist destinations, Almagro has escaped most tourist-oriented gentrification and touristification. It is recognized by both locals and travelers as a hub of local cultural activity.



Figure 0.9 and 0.10. Photo stills of the streets of Almagro taken from my film *A Common Place* (2010).



Although Almagro has not been a major target of official tango tourism in the city, the bordering area known as *El Abasto* (technically residing within the official Balvanera neighborhood) has recently become another example of gentrification and tango-themed touristification in the city (see Carman 2006). This began in 1998 when *El Abasto*, a building that used to be the city's central market, was turned into a shopping mall during Menem's presidency. In recent years, the Macri administration has promoted the area around the mall as a walking tourist destination for visitors wanting to visit the home neighborhood of Carlos Gardel, the most famous tango singer of all time. His childhood home is now a museum and murals of his face are found on buildings and various theaters that host nightly tango events for tourists (see Figure 0.11). Even the subway stop outside the mall now carries the name of the famous singer. While only blocks from the border of Almagro, this touristification has remained localized to the immediate area surrounding the Abasto mall (see figure 0.12).



Figure 0.11. A mural of Gardel painted on a door in the tango-themed part of El Abasto.¹²

¹² Source: Image from the GCBA (City Government of Buenos Aires) *Medios de la Ciudad* website. <http://www.buenosaires.gob.ar/noticias/abasto-tras-los-pasos-de-gardel>



Figure 0.12. A map made by the city government marketing tango spots in the Abasto neighborhood. The mall is located under numbers 2 and 3 and Almagro lies to the northwest where the wine glass is located. Although one location is marketed in Almagro, the rest lie around the mall.¹³

Unlike El Abasto, Almagro's streets are full of picturesque bars and small family-run businesses. The neighborhood is home to the city's most thriving underground theater circuit as well as to many live music venues. It has also become the center of activity for independent tango musicians from around the city over the past two decades. The residential neighborhood-like quality of Almagro and its historic reputation as a center of urban bohemia for theater and other artistic movements has paved the way for the growth of new artistic movements in recent decades. The fact that Gardel and other renowned tango artists lived nearby and were known to perform in the neighborhood in their early careers also undoubtedly contributed to making the area a mecca of artistic, and in particular tango, bohemia. Almagro offers an attractive place for

¹³ Source: Image from the GCBA (City Government of Buenos Aires) *Medios de la Ciudad* website. <http://www.buenosaires.gob.ar/noticias/abasto-tras-los-pasos-de-gardel>

the underground arts movements because it is centrally located, still affordable, relatively safe, and close to many performance spaces, universities, and conservatories. Although the neighborhoods of La Boca and San Telmo are still celebrated as the historic birthplaces of tango (and more attractive for tourism due to their historic architecture), today Almagro has taken center stage as the urban cradle for the culture of independent tango in the 21st century. The Almagro neighborhood and the tango cultures that have emerged from its bars and cultural centers over the past decade are the focus of my research. Juxtaposed with the much more turbulent and contrasting aesthetics of the city's downtown areas, it is easy to see how the centrally located and picturesque residential streets of Almagro have provided an attractive counter-imaginary for the development of new community-based tango cultures in the city. Before looking further at tango's revival in Almagro today, let me step back to paint a clearer picture of how tango has come to occupy such contrasting places in city life today.

Tango-For-Export vs. Tango Not-For-Export

During what is popularly referred to as tango's years of "decadence" (from the 1960s to the mid 1990s), many musicians stopped working in tango due to lack of job opportunities. Those who continued to play worked on nostalgia-oriented television programs, in dinner theaters for older audiences, or in the remaining neighborhood clubs and theaters that still hosted tango dances, concerts, and occasionally singing competitions. Musicians with international recognition or the right connections (like Astor Piazzolla, the renowned avant-garde composer and bandoneon player) spent much time living and touring abroad during these decades. As tango lost its popular appeal in Argentina, many artists sought to find ways to make a living by marketing the genre abroad. During this period tango underwent processes that both deterritorialized and delocalized the genre (Cecconi 2009; Pelinski 2000).

Within Argentina, tango is understood as both a music and dance tradition. However, on an international level tango has always been known as more of a dance than a form of music. The big exception is the music of Piazzolla, which was successfully embraced by both classical and jazz music circles—but this would be the subject of a whole different dissertation. Tango as dance arrived in Paris in the early 20th century, accompanied by scandalous stories of its development in the brothels of Buenos Aires. As Viladrich writes, the genres success was propelled by the “Europeans’ uncanny appetite for sensual and exotic forms of art during this period” (Viladrich 2013:35). It was in Paris that tango was converted into a symbol of passion steeped in complicated relationships of colonial exoticism. In the 1980s and 1990s, as tango’s popularity waned in Argentina, the exotic stereotypes of tango dancing were revived abroad when tango cabaret shows began to tour the United States and Europe. The most renowned of these shows, *Tango Argentino*, debuted in Paris in 1983, on Broadway in 1985, and only later in Buenos Aires (See Figure 0.13). These spectacular tango dance shows gained in popularity around the same time as the commercialization of World Music industries in the 1980s and 1990s. Continuing to feed an international appetite for ‘sensual and exotic forms of art’ these tango shows marketed highly stylized and choreographed representations of tango culture as an exotic Latin dance of passion and lust. Even today, working in these exotic traveling dance shows continues to be the most profitable way for tango musicians and dancers to travel and work abroad.

Tango-For-Export

With the help of these stage shows and a century of exoticized representations in international mainstream media, perceptions of tango to most non-Argentines became

inextricably entangled with images of fedoras, fishnet stockings, red roses, and passionate movie scenes or postcard images of stylized dancers.¹⁴ In Buenos Aires, these



Figure 0.13. Forever Tango poster from July, 2013.¹⁵

stereotypes have become the face of the mainstream tango tourist industry. On any given day or night, these representations are performed in tango cabaret dinner shows and in the many touristy areas of town where tango dancers dress up and perform for tourists. The most famous of these areas, located in the port neighborhood of La Boca, is known as *Caminito* and has become a kind of tango Disneyland for tourists. Tourists visiting *Caminito* wander the museum-like picturesque streets, take colorful photos of the refurbished tenement houses where tango first developed, and pose with the many pairs of exotically dressed tango dancers who perform outside of cafés and on the sidewalks (see Figures 0.14-0.18). In Buenos Aires, this exotic

¹⁴ In film, sexualized tango scenes are found in many hollywood movies including *The Tango Lesson* (1992), *Scent of a Woman* (1992), *True Lies* (1994), *Assassination Tango* (2004), and *Moulin Rouge* (2001).

¹⁵ Source: Screenshot from the Broadway TV Website. <http://broadway.tv/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Forever-Tango-Logo-2.png>

identity of tango has come to be known as tango-for-export, and represents the face of an industry that markets tango to mostly foreign audiences.



Figures 0.14 - 0.18. Photos of tango dancers in Caminito. (Photos courtesy of Natalia Almeda, 2013.)



Tango tourism has existed for some time in Buenos Aires—steadily growing after the success of the traveling stage shows in the 1980s and 1990s. However, the 2009 UNESCO declaration of tango as a Masterpiece of Oral and Intangible Heritage sparked new government interest in the genre. Following the declaration, the city government, criticized by many citizens for having an outward-looking cultural agenda, has heavily invested in this “for-export” side of tango culture, marketing tango as the focus of the city’s cultural heritage. This tango branding can be seen in many places around the city, including tango-themed neighborhoods and walkways like La Boca and El Abasto, a tango-themed café in the international airport and tango-themed subway stops and subway art (see Figures 0.19 and 0.20).

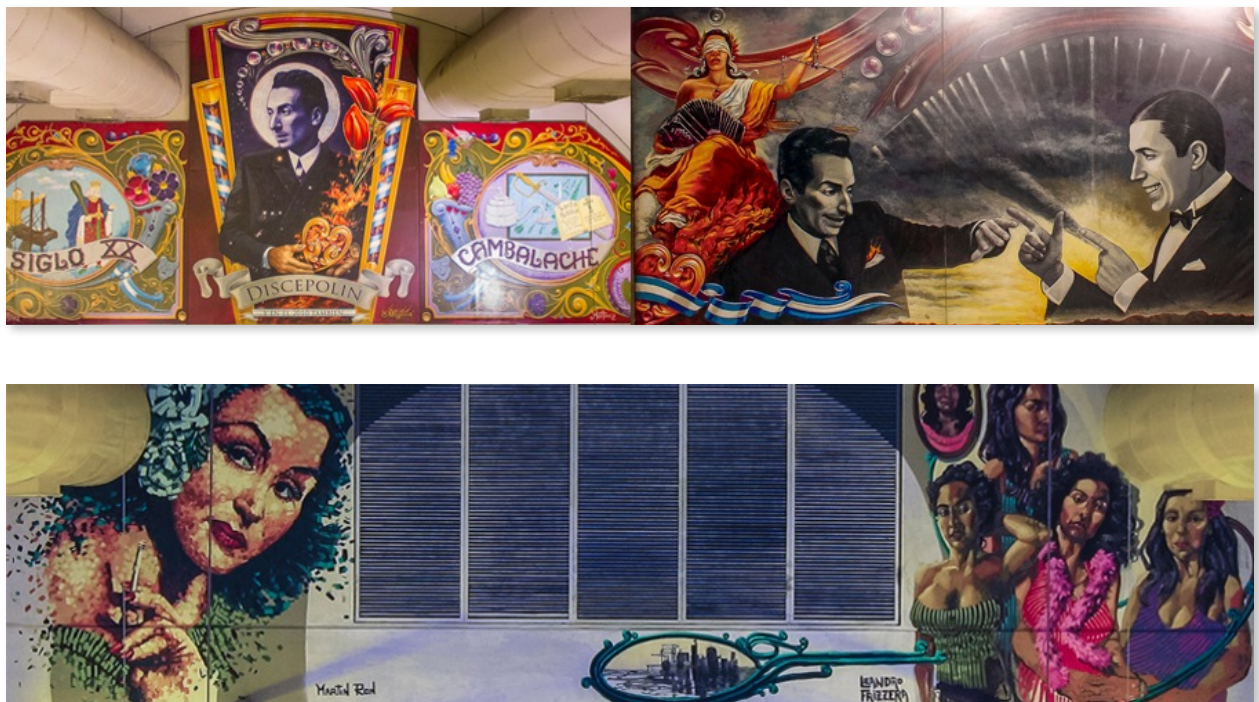


Figure 0.19 and 0.20. Images of tango-themed murals in the new Buenos Aires Subway line¹⁶

¹⁶ Source: Images from the GCBA Subway website. <http://www.buenosaires.gob.ar/subte>

Perhaps the clearest example of the city's shift towards prioritizing tango as a tourist commodity instead of a form of local culture can be seen in the politics of the city's official annual tango festival. Since 1999, the city had been organizing an annual tango festival geared towards local audiences and held outdoors and downtown during the Argentine summer. In 2009, to the surprise of many locals, the city government decided to move the festival strategically to the cold Argentine winter months to coincide with European and North American summer travel seasons. Instead of being held downtown, the primary location of the festival was then moved to a closed convention center in Recoleta, the wealthiest neighborhood in the city.

This approach to cultural politics, promoting the commodification of culture through mega-events like festivals and tourism and prioritizing the interests of tourists over those of local audiences, exemplifies the political models of Macri administration. The fact that Macri called tango the "soy crop of Buenos Aires" during one of the annual tango festivals, a reference comparing tango to the country's largest for-export agricultural industry, is brought up time and again as an indication that the cultural politics of the city treat tango as an economic commodity more than as a form of popular culture. While the city's official tango politics offer a particularly clear example of the government's outward-looking urban agendas, they are only one example of the tourism oriented cultural politics being embraced by the PRO¹⁷ government. Another frequently cited example of recent PRO agendas was a campaign called "Live the City like a Tourist," where Argentines could win nights in hotels, trips on tour buses and tickets to tourist tango shows (see Figures 0.21 and 0.22). When this campaign debuted, my friends and colleagues in the tango community reacted with a mix of exasperation, humor, and contempt. Overwhelmingly, the shared sentiment was that they had no interest in being tourists in their own city, but wanted a government that paid more attention to the basic needs of urban

¹⁷ The PRO (or the Republican Proposal) is the centre-right republican party currently in charge of the city of Buenos Aires (2007-), led by the mayor, Mauricio Macri.

residents than to outside visitors. For example, over the last year the basic subway fares have gone up from \$1.20 to \$4.50 pesos a ride.



Figure 0.21 and 0.22. Live the City as a Tourist campaign.¹⁸

These export-oriented agendas of the PRO government—or what Kanai calls Macri’s exclusionary world-class city politics (2014a)—stand in stark contrast to the current left-leaning ideologies promoted by President Cristina Kirchner. Given this polarization and the country’s recent turbulent political and economic history, Buenos Aires offers a rich terrain for scholars interested in studying ideologies of cultural production that seek to contest and produce alternatives to neoliberal capitalism. Tango, in particular, offers one example of a form of cultural expression that has been embraced by both sides of this divide in recent years. On the one hand, official city government politics and large tango tourist businesses have increasingly promoted tango as a cultural commodity to be bought and sold to foreign audiences, emphasizing the genre as a glamorous and world-class cultural icon appealing to eurocentric ideas of Buenos Aires (Kanai 2014a:9). On the other, independent tango scenes across the city have been doing the complete opposite. More aligned with leftist ideologies of cultural production and the current national politics than those of the city government, these alternative

¹⁸ Source: Image from GCBA Cultural Agenda Website. <http://agendacultural.buenosaires.gob.ar/evento/vivi-la-ciudad-como-turista/5194>

tango scenes have been working to reclaim tango as a form of local popular culture by utilizing grassroots activism to reintegrate tango practices into everyday places in the urban landscape. These proposals locate tango within a socio-cultural framework of Latin America, shifting their gaze away from a desire for European cultural affiliation and legitimization.

Tango Not-For-Export

In small bars and cultural centers around the city, new generations of tango artists and fans have been fighting over the past two decades to reclaim tango as a popular form of what they see as local and *not-for-export* culture. Integral to this process has been the task of contesting the exoticizing and outdated stereotypes of tango culture and cultivating new tango imaginaries and tango practices that place the genre within a localized frame and within the present tense. With less visibility and little to no government support, these alternatives to “for-export” tango industries have been slowly but steadily growing alongside the growth of mainstream tango tourist industries. Located within some of the historic neighborhoods associated with its development in the 1920s-40s, these movements have brought young and old tango musicians, dancers, and aficionados together to participate in local forms of tango culture. Within the realm of music, practices of intimate and often participatory music-making in late-night bars and cultural centers have given contemporary meanings to this old genre, meanings that empower tango as a vehicle for community-building and that sonically, visually and geographically reterritorialize tango music within the contemporary realities of this Latin American city.

In locating tango in the everyday realities of Buenos Aires, and subsequently in what could be understood as Pan-Latin American urban realities, the participants in alternative tango music scenes are distancing themselves from exoticized, old-fashioned and Europeanized understandings of tango and engaging in a process of relocalizing and redefining the genre.

Emerging out of a particularly complicated political moment in Argentine history, these not-for-export movements have come to align themselves with models of cultural production rooted in ideologies of the New Latin American Left and recent leftist movements in Argentina. By advocating new kinds of social environments that foster participation, community, and feelings of togetherness in the city, these artists are using tango music to collectively reconstruct new cultures of urban belonging, and to process the traumatic and devastating political and economic events of the city's recent history.

Nowadays, independent, not-for-export tango scenes in Buenos Aires represent a series of vibrant cultural movements. There are tango orchestras, tango duos, trios, quartets, groups that mix tango with rock or jazz, and any variety of other instrumental or vocal combinations that play in the many bars and cultural centers that allow live music across the city. The tango dance community is also thriving. There are countless cultural centers and dance halls across the city that host tango dances (*milongas*) on a weekly or sometimes even nightly basis, many with live music. There are also independent tango magazines (*Tinta Roja*), independent radio programs (*Fractura Expuesta Radio Tango*), virtual networks (*El Tango Será Popular o No Será Nada*), unions (*La Unión de Orquestas Típicas*), independent and officially funded tango music schools (*La Escuela de Música Popular Avellaneda* or *La Escuela Orlando Goñi*) and multiple independently organized festivals throughout the year dedicated to politicizing and bringing visibility to this other side of tango (*El Festival de Tango Independiente* or *El Festival de Tango de Almagro*).

These new tango communities—nowadays referred to as the city's underground, off-circuit, for-import, alternative, or anti-postcard tango scenes—have gradually become unified around the desire to create tango that speaks from and to the everyday cultural realities of contemporary Buenos Aires. The goal of all of these scenes is not to reject the presence of tourists in the tango industry, but to bring visibility to a kind of tango that is not envisioned solely

as a product for tourist consumption. Since the majority of tango artists in the city must work in the tango-for-export industries to make a living, many of these independent venues developed from musicians' needs to create spaces where their music could be experienced in more intimate, local and personal ways. As many of these scenes developed in the years prior to and following Argentina's 2001 economic crisis, they borrowed from and contributed to shaping alternative models of cultural production and political activism, positioned against the neoliberal cultural models promoted in the 1990s. Suspended between these urban agendas of the city government and independent movements seeking to reclaim tango as a form of local, popular culture (ideologically affiliated with new leftist movements and the current national government), tango has, over the past decade, been transformed into a rich and dynamic zone of cultural practice and debate.

Today, musicians navigate their artistic careers between tango-for-export tourist industries and grassroots movements that embrace tango as a form of revitalized local, popular culture. Moving through these different cultural worlds, individuals are brought face-to-face on a daily basis with contrasting imaginaries of both tango and Buenos Aires. In a big, cosmopolitan city like Buenos Aires, where tango culture is a form of tourist culture, a form of national patrimony, and a vehicle for urban resistance, most tango artists become entangled in all of these arenas. In this ethnography, I explore how powerful urban imaginaries of nostalgia, disintegration, activism and social reintegration in Buenos Aires have been shaping contemporary independent tango music practices in the city today.

Introduction Part II

“El Tango Vuelve al Barrio:”¹ Introducing Neighborhood Tango Culture and Conceptual Frameworks



Figure 0.23 and 0.24. Sanata Bar, Sanchez de Bustamante & Sarmiento in Almagro (2012).

An Interview with the Angel of Tango - Sanata Bar, Almagro - 11pm

He introduced himself to me as an angel of tango who had died in 1980 and returned to illuminate the way for young artists in the tango underground. We had met a few nights earlier on the corner outside Sanata Bar in the early hours of the morning (see figures 0.18 and 0.19). After telling him I was from the States, he had asked me to film him singing an enthusiastic unaccompanied rendition of Carlos Gardel's famous tango's "Rubias de New York" ("The Blondes of New York").²

Mary, Peggy, Betty, Julie blondes of New York/ Adorable little heads that lie of love./

They give the stars envy/ I can't live without them/ Betty, July, Mary, Peggy, with their

¹ "El Tango Vuelve al Barrio" translates to "Tango Returns to the Neighborhood." It is the name of a tango concert series based out of a bar called El Faro.

² A short clip of this serenade can be seen in *A Common Place* (00:05:40) at jenniegubner.com.

flower lips. (Gardel/Le Pera 1934)³

Now, dressed in a formal brown suit, he sat under a colorful mural of the renowned bandoneon player Ruben Juarez, one of many such murals painted on the walls of Sanata by a local artist (see figure 0.16 and 0.17 above). He looked to be in his late seventies. “*Y Contame, cual es la hipÓtesis de tu tesis?*” (So tell me, what is the hypothesis of your dissertation?). His aging eyes sparkled as he spit out the accented “o” in the word hypothesis for added emphasis. We sat at the back table of the bar in the evening, before the noisy crowds of musicians poured in after their evening jobs at the downtown tango shows, and before the late-night concerts and jams began. As I paused to think of how to articulate an answer to his question, he leaned in towards the shot mic that I had set up connected to my audio recorder on the old wooden table and stared into the lens of my camera. “*SHo te puedo dar una hipÓtesis si querés*” (I can give you a hypothesis if you want one). This time he proudly added emphasis to the “sh” sound in the Argentine pronunciation of the word “I,” then smiled, sat back and took another sip of whiskey.

In response to his question, I began explaining that I was studying neighborhood tango bars as important urban spaces of social and musical encounter, but Vela quickly cut me off and launched into his own hypothesis. In a performance I could never dream to recreate, his theories enthusiastically wove together segments of tango lyrics with references to Aristotle, Plato, God, and the Enlightenment. He proposed that the culture of neighborhood tango bars recreates social elements of rural life in the big city. In small town life in Europe, he said, everyone belonged and had a place. You could be a clown, a jester, a doctor, a sweep, or a fool. No matter how nuts you were or how much or how little you had, people co-existed and acknowledged one another because of the nature of living in a small area and sharing resources. In big city life and as people drifted from their homelands and their families, he

³ For full lyrics and recordings of “Rubias de New York” see <http://www.todotango.com/musica/tema/226/Rubias-de-New-York/>

continued, this acceptance is lost and people become alienated and socialization becomes more selective and exclusive. Similarly, connections become dictated through money and not face-to-face contact. Tango, and tango bars, he said, represent the artistic cry of the urban citizen who mourns the loss of places of social inclusion and seeks to rebuild contact and sense of belonging in the alienating city.

As he spoke my mind wandered back to my first year in Buenos Aires in 2005. During that year I spent a large percentage of my nights in a small century-old bar known as Lo de Roberto, located in the Almagro neighborhood, just a few blocks from where we were seated in Sanata Bar. At that time, the bar was run by the late owner, Roberto himself, a short and quiet



Figure 0.25 and 0.26. Roberto Pérez and Roberto's bar from the outside (2005).

elderly Galician man. Among other things he was an ardent tango fan who had been hosting acoustic late-night tango music sessions in his bar since the mid-1990s. By the time I arrived, the bar was a local underground legend, considered as a kind of informal classroom to the upcoming generations of tango musicians in the city, and a hidden gem to foreigners searching for something other than the flashy tango dance shows. Like a circus clown car, the tiny bar would fill to the brim from Tuesday to Friday after midnight with nocturnal tango fans that came

to listen and perform live acoustic tango in a room without a stage. Often the bar was so full of people that just pushing through the door was a challenge. The fact that Roberto never charged a cover and never forced anyone to buy drinks helped transform the bar into a haven of neighborhood bohemia. This was a bar for listening, not dancing, which usually featured acoustic voice and guitar performances.

Although a few key older artists ran the tango sessions—many of whom are now revered local legends—audience participation and impromptu performances were a part of the nightly experience. Among the regular performers, surely the most eccentric, was a schizophrenic (or so I was told) who enjoyed reciting improvised erotic poetry. He would jump up at various points throughout an evening of music-making to explode into improvised erotic monologues waving his hands wildly as we would all stare in awe and silence. On one unforgettable night, I remember him coming into the bar equipped with a mannequin leg which he used as a prop in his dynamic performance. Usually after a minute or so, Roberto or one of the singers would signal for him to quiet down, and after a brief moment of silence the house guitarist Agustín—known locally as the Jimi Hendrix of tango—would break into the opening chords of another tango. Some nights they had more patience for this poet than others, but he was never rejected or made to feel unwelcome. He was part of the social fabric of the bar, part of the eccentricity of the bohemian experience, and just one of many characters in this intimate artistic community that was to become the founding pillar of the Almagro neighborhood music scene that lies at the heart of my research. Maybe Vela's hypothesis was not so far off after all, I thought, as my mind returned to the interview in Sanata where we had somehow moved from Plato to Freud. Maybe the poet was the town fool, the neighborhood was the town, and Roberto's bar really was the recipe against social alienation in the modern city. There are, in fact, few social settings where I could imagine such performances being so tolerated, accepted and even celebrated.

After my interview with Vela that night, many acquaintances in the neighborhood joked that I had just interviewed the neighborhood dealer and laughed at me for taking the time to talk to him at all. “What kind of a thesis are you writing anyways?” they said to me with a mix of awe and disapproval. It did indeed put a new spin on his role as the angel of tango illuminating the path for the next generation of tango youth. Yet, eccentric as he was, and whatever he did to make a living, I thought of Vela and his hypothesis frequently as I stitched together the pages of this dissertation. Granted, his idea of tango bar culture and its supposed reconstitution of rural European life were highly idyllic. Furthermore, tango bars, of course, do not provide places of belonging for everyone who walks through their doors. Even when they do create intense moments of togetherness, these moments are often fleeting and ephemeral—easily lost in the chaotic din of city life. Nonetheless, Vela’s hypothesis about tango bar culture serves as a perfect example of the kinds of powerful urban imaginaries I will explore in the pages of this dissertation. These imaginaries, colored by and informing the sensory experiences of music making within these small tango bars, are more than just fantasies. They speak to the fundamental ways individuals relate to, digest, locate, experience, and produce musical meaning in their everyday lives.

In the end so much of what I have experienced in these bars over the years are the collective desires to create shared places of belonging, places that give music intimate meaning, that make big cities feel smaller, places that connect and empower people. They are places that have grown from the desire of musicians to create social alternatives, places that acknowledge the social and community values of music, and that allow music to actively participate in shaping how our urban worlds are conceptualized, experienced, and transformed. In fact, much of my research has become a study of just how complicated and difficult it can be to make and sustain meaningful, participatory contexts for music-making in a big, modern city like Buenos Aires. Nonetheless, it has also become a study showing just how important

participatory musical environments can be to the social lives of cities and to the growth of dynamic artistic communities.

Although these kinds of places and experiences often fall outside the dominant narratives, histories, and representations of tango culture, this dissertation argues that the neighborhood tango bars of Buenos Aires have played and continue to play an invaluable role in relocalization and revitalization of tango music as a living, dynamic and meaningful local form of artistic expression in the city of Buenos Aires. In a time when the city government is enthusiastically embracing tango as a tourist commodity, these neighborhood bars have made important contributions to fostering the creation of alternative tango cultures where tango can be experienced as a meaningful part of everyday neighborhood life. In this dissertation I aim to show my readers that in these very small bars—and through everyday sensory experiences of music-making—big things are happening.

Looking Beyond the Postcard

My choice to embark upon this project grew out of my frustration with the powerful disconnect between the ways I had come to know tango culture in Buenos Aires and the way tango was promoted and represented in the media, by the city government, and through many tourist industries in stereotypical and exoticized postcard-like images. In this dissertation I refer to this kind of tango as tango-for-export or *tango postal* (postcard tango), both terms which I have borrowed from contemporary independent tango scenes. In these scenes, the idea of tango-for-export and postcard tango refers to the tango of men in pinstriped suits, greased hair and fedoras and shiny spats, the tango of woman in lusty fishnet stockings and red heels straddling bandoneons, and the tango of stylized dancers dressed like prostitutes and pimps from times past posing under major Buenos Aires monuments and immortalized on 3 1/2” by 5” pieces of paper sold at kiosks and bookstores around the city.



Figure 0.27. A snapshot of the recent planetarium show called Tango 360, created by the director of the city tango festival, Gustavo Mozzi. Once again, tango is represented by dancers in sexualized cabaret costumes dancing in the streets of the city center. Photo taken from the webpage of the city government's cultural agenda.⁴

These hyper-sexualized representations of tango lock the genre within what dance ethnographer Marta Savigliano has called tango's political economy of passion (1995). This economy feeds off understandings of tango rooted in exoticizing colonial stereotypes of Latin American culture. Tango's political economy of passion, locally referred to as postcard tango, promotes staged and sexualized emotion as a commodity to be bought, sold and marketed to foreigners (see figure 0.27). When local artists criticize postcard tango they are criticizing more than the oversimplified understandings of tango propagated through the tourist industries. They are criticizing the exoticization and commodification of tango culture through hyper-sexualized

⁴ Source: Image from GCBA Cultural Agenda Website. <http://agendacultural.buenosaires.gob.ar>

Latin American stereotypes that are being used to buy and sell cultural products in the form of stage shows, CDS, postcards, clothing, souvenirs, and travel packages.

Although these images represent one face of tango culture, the vast majority of meaningful experiences I have had with tango music in Buenos Aires have occurred completely outside this dominant postcard tango imaginary. Away from mainstream tourist circuits, alternative, or what I will refer to as not-for-export expressions of tango culture, constitute a very normal part of the everyday artistic and social words of many people throughout Buenos Aires. Nonetheless, many of these not-for-export tango cultures continue to live in the shadows of stereotypical postcard representations of the genre that continue to dress and stage tango as a exoticized caricature of its past life. It is important to clarify that the values of not-for-export tango scenes do not reject the presence and participation of foreigners, or the possibility of traveling abroad. Instead the term is used to denote scenes and practices where tango is made primary for local consumption and where the social and artistic aesthetics of events are not tailored for tourist-consumption.

Over the past 15 years independent tango artists around Buenos Aires have made enormous efforts to reclaim tango as a living and changing expression of contemporary urban culture, drawing from the genres rich past but positioning their artistic practices in the present through the use of new sounds, new images, new venues, new aesthetics and new values. Much can be learned by studying tango's postcard imaginaries, their historical significance, how they are constructed and circulated today. However, my interests lie instead in finding dynamic ways to evoke and analyze new local narratives, practices, aesthetics and recent histories of tango culture, not intended for-export. As a North American scholar and musician deeply engaged in the everyday social, political and artistic realities of these local music scenes, I have produced this dissertation in hopes of diversifying understandings of tango culture and

encouraging international publics to look beyond postcard representations of globalized and exoticized popular music genres.

Research Questions

In this dissertation I explore how musicians build meaningful relationships to the social practices of music making in contemporary cities. Cities are complicated places, shot through with cultural, political, economic and social flows that shape us as individuals, influence how we live our lives and inform how we conceptualize and practice art. Musical practices and expressions, however, are more than reflections of our urban worlds. Carried within the sensory experiences of making and listening to music are dimensions of emotion that have the potential to shape our deepest understandings of ourselves and our surroundings and inform how we act in the world.

Under certain conditions, music experienced in intimate, live, and participatory settings renders individual emotions collective and can engender powerful feelings of solidarity, belonging, and togetherness. As these practices are repeated, social communities form around the shared sensory experiences of live music. Given the often scattered and fragmented nature of modern cities, intimate and actively participatory musical environments can have a powerful effect on shaping individuals' urban worlds. Although experiences with recorded music and experiences with live music in large crowds can also be transformative and connect people to larger imagined communities of taste, my interests lie in finding dynamic ways to study the value of small, informal, participatory live music venues in contemporary city life.

For the past decade I have been a part of a culture of tango music that exists in small neighborhood bars and cultural centers around Buenos Aires. Over the course of countless nights of playing, researching, organizing and listening, I have witnessed how the sensory experiences of making tango music in these intimate environments produce powerful

communities of urban belonging, raise critical consciousness about urban politics, revise and localize musical narratives and imaginaries, and inspire new forms of artistic expression.

Through these processes, I have also seen how neighborhood tango scenes are playing an invaluable role in the process of reclaiming and re-articulating tango as a living and dynamic form of local popular music in Buenos Aires today.

When dealing with a globalized popular music genre like tango—implicated in international world music markets, national identity politics, and exoticizing tourist industries—the kinds of local cultures that I explore in my research become dynamic zones for the production of new and localized musical meanings. When tango musicians travel abroad or perform for tourists (or even for Argentines with old-fashioned or equally exoticizing ideas about tango), they often compromise their own aesthetic goals to market the more sellable exoticized cultural representations of tango in order to make a living. When they play at home in neighborhood bars, they more frequently perform for audiences of their peers and cater to the aesthetics of these local environments. Like the negotiations of artists abroad, these internal negotiations are equally complex and loaded with internal discrepancies, power dynamics and tensions. Based on multiple periods of ethnographic fieldwork and filmmaking carried out in a series of neighborhood tango bars between 2005 and 2013, this research explores some of the sensory experiences and internal negotiations shaping local ways of knowing tango as a neighborhood-based musical practice in contemporary Buenos Aires.

Focusing on the Almagro neighborhood, I analyze how understandings of tango and understandings of urban life and urban politics inform and shape one another through everyday processes of music-making. Informed by theories of visual anthropology and sensory ethnography, I use filmmaking alongside more traditional forms of ethnographic writing to investigate how neighborhood tango music scenes are re-signifying traditional urban imaginaries and practices of neighborhood life in the process of building new tango cultures

within the contemporary geographies of the city. Using different ethnographic examples, I illustrate how neighborhood-based tango scenes are both contributing to rebuilding tango as a localized form of urban belonging, artistic expression, and everyday social life, and to contesting outdated stereotypes of tango culture. As tango music has been reclaimed as a living, breathing, and localized expression of urban culture—and particularly as a form of urban youth culture—its voice as a vehicle for urban politics has also been revived. Through practices of music-making informed by discourses of urban intimacy, leftist politics, and localist revivals, I explore how neighborhood tango musicians have become a powerful voice in advocating alternative and anti-neoliberal models of cultural production and urban socialization in contemporary Buenos Aires.

Understanding music as a cultural practice, a social practice, an economic practice, and a political practice concurrently, I ask: How are contemporary neighborhood-based tango music practices shaping the way individuals experience and imagine urban life in Buenos Aires? How are the changing urban imaginaries of Buenos Aires associated with recent political and economic transformations shaping the way individuals experience and imagine contemporary tango practices? As tango musicians and listeners collectively build meaningful social and musical worlds into the neighborhoods of Buenos Aires, how are these neighborhood artistic worlds shaping how individuals understand the place and role of music in city life?

Theoretical Frameworks and Orientations

The theoretical underpinnings of this study have been colored by my long relationships with the individuals and venues involved in Almagro's tango scene. In the Almagro neighborhood, I learned about tango music in and around local tango bars, became a participant in these spaces, and became localized into Almagro's vibrant tango music scene. Drawing from these experiences, my aim is to build and share with my readers an alternative

sensory world of tango music, one that defines itself through and around neighborhood practices and neighborhood symbolism, and that prioritizes local understandings of the genre over those perpetuated by mainstream tourist industries. Through this sensory world I seek to help my readers know tango, and particularly tango music, in new ways and as a form of contemporary neighborhood social life.

Through my interdisciplinary work, I aim to contribute to a number of broad issues relevant to the field of ethnomusicology. First, my ethnographic research sheds light on the ways tango is undergoing processes of relocalization and re-articulation in light of its exotic international identity. Second, my work contributes to studies of urban ethnomusicology by producing scholarship about music's role in the production of locality in a modern city at the intersections of politics, performance, and socialization within informal and participatory live music venues. In this way, I contribute to a body of contemporary ethnographies interested in localizing the everyday participatory musical practices within modern cities and looking at how and why music making continues to be an important and meaningful practice in urban life. Lastly, contributing to studies of Latin American culture and Latin American urban music cultures specifically, my dissertation offers an ethnographic case study of a South American city where musical practices informed by ideologies of the New Latin American left are producing alternatives to neoliberal models of urban cultural practices. By tackling these questions with a special focus on how musical knowledge is produced through sensory experiences and using a combination of writing, photographs and films, I will seek to illustrate the strengths offered by multi-modal scholarship in ethnomusicological research. To show the importance and central place of my filmed work in this project, I have dedicated an entire chapter to discussing these methodologies, the theories that lie behind them, and the ways they can enrich ethnomusicological research.

Studying Music-Making in the Global City

One of the frameworks of this dissertation involves situating contemporary tango music practices within the specific urban realities of Buenos Aires. In recent decades much scholarship has emerged about how globalization and neoliberal capitalism are affecting and transforming the production of culture in modern cities. As the world becomes more globalized, common traits that apply to many urban contexts around the world have led to the development of theories of the global city, or what Doreen Massey has called the “world city” (2007). Less attention, however, has been paid to how specific cities are embracing or resisting these modern flows in relation to their own specific histories, populations, and cultural contexts. While finding commonalities between different “world cities” can be useful, it can also blur the individual histories that contribute to shaping the culture of particular places. Furthermore, scholarship on global cities has been criticized for unevenly representing urban experiences around the world.

Andreas Huyssen warns that urban scholarship has been unevenly centered on the analysis of European and North American cities and calls for specific studies of “other cities” of the world (2008:2). In my work I seek to bring historic, geographic and cultural specificity to both tango practices and to the contemporary urban experiences of the city of Buenos Aires. In particular, chapter one provides an overview of some of the complex and multi-layered historical and contemporary processes informing the ways culture, politics and social life are experienced in this particular South American city today. Drawing from contemporary urban theorists and Latin Americanist scholars, I will explain how cultural and political ideas of Buenos Aires have been defined alongside and against those of other Latin American and European/North American cities over the past century.

In my analysis of contemporary Buenos Aires, I focus on the ways neoliberalism experienced in an Argentine context has brought powerful transformations to both the physical nature of Buenos Aires and the ideologies and cultural practices of urban life. Scholarship on

global cities has much to gain from analyzing specific culturally and historically contextualized urban narratives. In a similar way, the experiences with and resistances to neoliberalism become more meaningful when located within specific histories of time and place. Thus, another goal of my work is to offer some specific examples of how ideologies of neoliberalism, and in particular neoliberal models of urban cultural politics, are being challenged and contested through tango music practices in the landscape of Buenos Aires. As the city has recently lived through one of the most dramatic and arguably unsuccessful implementations of neoliberal government agendas in the 1990s (resulting in the economic crash of 2001), it offers a rich terrain in which to study the consequences of and reactions/resistances to these cultural shifts. Combining conceptual ideas from theorists of the New Latin American Left with the ethnographic data from my years of tango research in Buenos Aires, I will argue that post-neoliberal ideologies and discourses coming out of Argentina's cultural and political responses to the neoliberal 1990s have contributed heavily to shaping and localizing tango over the last decade.⁵

The Study of Urban Imaginaries

Throughout this dissertation I will reference both physical places in Buenos Aires and the imaginaries that have and continue to shape these places and produce senses of urban belonging and metropolitan identity. Given that Buenos Aires was once considered the prosperous "Paris of South America" and now is seen by most locals as a politically and economically turbulent and unmistakably Latin American city, the ways people use art to produce understandings of city life can offer rich insight into the poetics and politics of urban culture. Given the drastic political, cultural and economic transformations experienced in

⁵ My understanding of post-neoliberal comes from Grimson and Kessler (2005) who use the term to describe the current political moment in Argentina where neoliberalism is no longer accepted as the only political path for progress. This idea is discussed at length in chapter one.

Argentina over the past decades, looking at the city through the imaginaries that help define it become a way to interrogate the messy symbolic and material worlds through which individuals and groups have sought to define themselves in times characterized by instability and change.

I became interested in studying imaginaries as a way of discussing how people think about and envision city life because of the frequency with which this term is used in both intellectual and popular spheres in Argentina. I first encountered the term in the work of Bergero, Gorelik and Sarlo, all of whom analyze the political and social formation and transformation of Argentina, and in particular Buenos Aires over the past century (Bergero 2008; Gorelik 1998, 2009; Sarlo 2001, 2008). Subsequently, I encountered the term in the work of Grimson and Kessler (2005) in their analysis of the effects of neoliberalism on national imaginaries in Argentina following the 2001 crisis (see also Guano 2004). When I began researching the different artistic movements of the 1990s and early 2000s I again encountered references to imaginaries as scholars sought to explain the complex ways individuals were processing these political and economic transformations (Aguilar 2008; Copertari 2009, 2012; Leen 2008; Page 2009). In the case of tango, these discussions often revolved around the ways exoticized images of tango were entangled in the residue of complex colonial relationships between Latin America and Europe (Liska 2012; Morel 2012; Pérez de Mendiola 2006; Savigliano 1995).⁶

Beyond scholarly works, the idea of imaginaries also arises in everyday language in Buenos Aires, especially among the educated middle class with whom I primarily conducted my research. This may have to do with the fact that scholars, including Gorelik and Sarlo, have had a prominent presence in public culture as public intellectuals over the past decade, appearing in newspapers, television, and other forms of mainstream media. It may also have to do with the

⁶ Discourses of imaginaries in Argentina are most likely traceable to French origin through the existentialist writings of Jean Paul Sartre, and the works of Castoriadis (1975), and Baczkó (1984), among others. The works of the Argentine Sartre specialist Juan Jose Sebreli in the 1960s were especially influential in introducing discourses of the imaginary into an Argentine context (see Sebreli 2011).

fact that tango scenes have undergone a process of intellectualization in recent years as they have become more affiliated with cultural centers, radios and activist groups run by college-educated social scientists. Whatever the reason, during my fieldwork I found that oftentimes in casual conversations and in interviews, people would bring up the idea of imaginaries in relation to neighborhood life, neoliberalism, and for-export and not-for-export stereotypes of tango culture. Imaginaries thus were more than a way intellectuals were theorizing urban culture but were also a way urban residents were talking about and making sense of their everyday cultural practices.

As I became more in tune with the ways locals were using the idea of imaginaries, I decided to adopt the term to critically study how cultural and political debates about city life were being negotiated in discursive and non-discursive ways during musical performances, through different forms of public discourse at live events, and through social media. Instead of thinking of imaginaries as passive or fictitious representations of culture, I began to think of them as very real, active processes shaping the everyday lives of individuals in the city. Acknowledging the role of imaginaries in the production of culture helps to avoid conceptualizing culture as something material and fixed and emphasizes that cultural ideas must be actively produced through social actors as they make sense of their surroundings. As a scholar of music I find imaginaries useful because they emphasize both the discursive and non-discursive (multisensory) ways that people experience and share meaning in their lives. Bringing together popular and scholarly uses of the term, I reference imaginaries in my dissertation as a way of talking about different sonic, visual, sensory and discursive representations that help locate individuals in urban space, act as a glue in the creation of communities, and make sense of complex social worlds. Given the multi-layered and often multisensory ways people experience meaning through art, I realized I could use film as a powerful medium through which to study the

way sensory experiences of music-making shape and inform imaginaries of urban life (see chapter 3 for an in-depth exploration of how I used sensory filmmaking in my research).

Because musical practices are necessarily tied up with other practices of urban life (people, after all, are not making music all the time), understanding the processes through which tango has become reclaimed as a local form of popular culture necessitates engaging with broader conceptual debates about urban life in Buenos Aires. Although my research focuses most heavily on the ways imaginaries of neighborhood life are contributing to processes of relocalizing tango, neighborhood imaginaries are also entangled with political imaginaries of neoliberalism, imaginaries of crisis and resistance, and with historic social imaginaries regarding Argentina's relationship to Europe and North America. Through the chapters of this dissertation, I focus on how imaginaries of tango and imaginaries of Buenos Aires are being co-produced and transformed through both public culture and the social aesthetics and sensory experiences of music-making. In an effort to make sense of these messy symbolic webs, chapter one outlines a history of the city with added emphasis on the production and transformation of imaginaries of urban life in the city. This frames my research within what Anthony Seeger sees as a musical anthropology, which, different from studies of music *in* culture, "examines the way music is part of the very construction and interpretation of social and conceptual relationships and processes" (2004 [1987]:xiv).

The power and impact of social and urban imaginaries on the nature of modern cities has been discussed by many scholars, and not just in Argentina (AlSayyad 2001; Amish and Thrift 2002; Canclini 1997; Çinar and Bender 2007; Huyssen 2008; Keeling 1996; Rama 1996; Taylor 2004). Huyssen, in the introduction to the edited volume *Other Cities/Other Worlds* defines the term by stating,

An urban imaginary marks first and foremost the way city dwellers imagine their own city as the place of everyday life, the site of inspiring traditions and continuities as well as the

scene of histories of destruction, crime and conflicts of all kinds. Urban space is always and inevitably social space involving subjectivities and identities differentiated by class and race, gender and age, education and religion. An urban imaginary is the cognitive and somatic image which we carry within us of the places where we live, work and play. It is an embodied material fact. Urban imaginaries are thus part of any city's reality, rather than being only figments of the imagination. What we think about a city and how we perceive it informs the ways we act in it. (2008:3)

In a 2007 published interview, Canclini explains, "Imaginaries...[are] symbolic elaborations of what we observe or what we fear or what we wish would exist" (Lindon 2007: 90). Cities, he explains, are "heterogeneous, in part, because they are inhabited by many imaginaries (91)."

In another essay, entitled "What Is a City?" Canclini builds on this idea saying that a city is

simultaneously a place to inhabit and a place to be imagined. Cities are made of houses and parks, streets, highways, and traffic signals. But they are also made of images.

These images include the maps that invent and give order to the city. But novels, songs, films, print media, radio, and television also imagine the center of urban life. (2009: 43)

The imaginaries Huyssen and Canclini speak of do not correspond mechanically to conditions of class, but emerge as products of complex and dynamic social processes involving many social actors. Imaginaries can be constructed through hegemonic discourses of the ruling elite, like the historic aristocratic discourses of Buenos Aires as the Paris of Latin America, through grassroots resistance movements like the anti-neoliberal movements arising following the economic crash of 2001, and often through a messy combination of the two. Situating my work against a series of negative discourses emerging in the 1990s that lamented Buenos Aires becoming a third-world, "Latin Americanized" nation, I investigate how more recent alternative "Latin-Americanizing" urban imaginaries of Buenos Aires are shaping new positive, localized and activist understandings of tango culture and Argentine urban identity.

The imaginaries explored in this dissertation often circulate within what Appadurai and Breckenridge call “public culture.” Framed as a way of looking at how cultural forms shape each other in the context of cosmopolitan life, Appadurai and Breckenridge argue that beyond being an alternative to outdated terms like popular, traditional, mass, and elite culture, the idea of “public culture” allows scholars to “hypothesize not a type of cultural phenomenon but a zone of cultural debate” (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1988: 6). Situating my work within this frame, my focus on the production of imaginaries takes the emphasis away from looking at what tango culture *is* and instead looks at *how* understandings of tango culture are produced, circulated, transformed, and experienced in the context of the city.

Since local understandings of tango are produced through different forms of public culture but also through the sensory experiences of live performance, imaginaries offer a useful theoretical lens that encompasses these overlapping arenas of urban experience. Through different case studies, I illustrate how imaginaries of and in tango are more than just abstract ideas filling people’s heads. They are powerful and dynamic socially constructed frameworks that provide valuable insight into the everyday actions of social actors. Unlike the early discussions of the imaginary coming out of philosophy and psychoanalysis interested primarily with the imaginary in the individual’s subconscious (such as Sartre and Lacan), my use of the term focuses on the social life of imaginaries in cities, more in line with the writings of Canclini and other contemporary Argentine urban scholars. By addressing both for-export and not-for-export imaginaries of tango and locating these within broader social and political imaginaries of Buenos Aires, my goal is to highlight how ideas of music and ideas of urban life shape one another and urban culture through discourse and practice.

Central to my argument is the idea that contemporary tango culture is entangled in multiple local, national, and international imaginaries—many of which exist in active tension with one another. As such, tango culture means many things to many people. In his research on

what he calls the “chacarera imaginary” in Argentine folk music, ethnomusicologist Julius Carlson defines the chacarera imaginary as “a sonic and discursive representation mediated by technological means and reified by a flexible community of professional and semi-professional musicians in public performance” (2011:xii). This definition is helpful in applying the study of urban imaginaries to music as it combines both mediated forms of public culture and performative practices. Whereas he refers to the Chacarera imaginary in the singular, talking about “the imaginary,” my work turns instead towards imaginaries in the plural, acknowledging the many and often contradictory ways people experience and understand tango culture.

It is important to clarify that neither the physical changes to a city landscape nor the imaginaries that inform or contest these changes can be taken as direct prescriptive explanations of the complex ways urban cultures evolve. Finding ways to study the relationships between our physical experiences in cities and the imaginaries that accompany those experiences can help explain the production of meaning through music in urban life. To understand why and how nostalgic and activist imaginaries of the neighborhood are being employed in local tangos scenes today requires an understanding of the historical significance of the neighborhood in Argentine history. Integral to my analysis is the idea that feelings of locality, in this case expressed through “neighborhoodness,” are always changing and flexible and not fixed.

The Musical Production of Locality in the Global City

Cities, and the nature of cultures and communities in cities, are always changing. The rise of transnational flows of information, people, technologies and markets since the second half of the 20th century has resulted in urban cultures becoming increasingly more fragmented

and less reliant on unifying nationalized and urban identities.⁷ In Argentina this is particularly true as the recent economic crisis and still very present memory of the 1970s and '80s military dictatorship have caused much disenchantment with urban and national politics, especially among young people (Silva 2003; Lacarrieu and Pallini 2003). With the flows of media technologies, transportation capabilities, and the general volume of people and information moving through urban space, communities in cities become less reliant on geographic proximity. As cities become increasingly dominated by corporate and transnational businesses, traditional community spaces transform and become sites of consumption more than spaces of social participation (Zukin 1991). In Buenos Aires, this transformation from sites of participation to sites of consumption occurred during the 1990s when a culture of consumerism was heavily promoted by the government's neoliberal agendas.

Early urban theorists like Georg Simmel believed that these changes in urban life would result in social alienation and social disintegration (in line with the hypothesis of the "Angel" of tango). Many contemporary urban scholars have argued, however, that social affiliations have not disappeared, but instead are developing in different ways. Some scholars have suggested that technologies are moving social life away from urban public space and into the virtual and hence private sphere using examples such as watching the same TV programs, reading the same newspaper, watching sports games online, and online dating (Castells 1997; Sassen 1998; Soja 1997). Others have argued that communities are not disappearing entirely from public space but are increasingly formed around specific interest groups less bounded by geographic proximity (Amin and Thrift 2002:31-51). As the internet becomes an increasingly interactive place of social networking, ideas of the public sphere must broaden to incorporate

⁷ In relation to music, Alejandro Madrid and Ignacio Corona published a book of essays in 2008 entitled *Postnational Musical Identities: Cultural Production, Distribution and Consumption in a Globalized Scenario* (2008). In Argentina, questions of nationalism run deep still in discourses and narratives of musical production but are complicated.

virtual life. Combining these ideas, urban socialization today often forms around interest-based communities that are strengthened and sustained by social networks via the internet.

In Buenos Aires, as culture shifts away from more traditional ways of experiencing locality based primarily on geographic proximity, traditional geographies and practices are often not completely lost. Instead, memories, images, practices, discourses and physical places associated with urban experiences of locality offer powerful symbolic and geographic frameworks for the production of new practices and experiences of the “local.” In fact, maintaining physical and symbolic connections with previous models and sites of locality is frequently a way of constructing and sustaining modern communities today. Given the current criticisms of alienating and polarizing models of neoliberal urban development, traditional practices and imaginaries of neighborhood locality have become powerful building blocks for anti-neoliberal movements.

Tango music in Buenos Aires has always been entwined with narratives of everyday life in the city. Images of neighborhoods and old-fashioned neighborhood bars represent classic symbols of traditional urban locality. These images of neighborhood life arise in endless traditional tango lyrics that speak nostalgically about everyday life and everyday scenes in the neighborhoods of times past. Especially in tangos written in the 1930s, ‘40s, and ‘50s, neighborhood references are one of the most common tropes found in tango lyrics represented through references to *el barrio* (the neighborhood), *el arrabal* (the suburbs), *la plaza* (the plaza), *el farolito* (the lamppost), the cobblestone streets, corners, bars, cafes, houses, trees, and so on. Starting in the late 1990s, new tango scenes forming in old neighborhoods and old neighborhood bars began developing rich sensory environments where new generations of tango artists could connect with old lyrics and experience tango as a form of everyday neighborhood life. Combining past imaginaries with present realities of neighborhood life, these scenes added new layers onto the production of neighborhood culture in the city.

As old and new neighborhood tango practices layered on top of one another through everyday experiences of music-making, new neighborhood tango cultures have emerged. Within the context of modern city life, feelings of *lo barrial*, or “neighborhoodness,” must be continually produced and maintained through complex musical and social practices. As I will show, expressions of and references to *el barrio* (the neighborhood) are made meaningful through political discourses, musical aesthetics, social values, forms and places of organizing and representations of tango in different forms of public culture.

To understand how these feelings of neighborhood locality are formed through musical practices within the flows of the modern world, the traditional binary of the local and the global must be replaced with the understanding that global processes are taking place all the time within what are considered local environments (Massey 2007; Soja 1997). Saskia Sassen, for example, advocates studies of globalization that move away from overarching generalizing theories and instead investigate these processes as they play out through social practice (Sassen 1998). Thinking of culture through the lens of practice, I contextualize the everyday power dynamics of individual agents in tango communities within the larger macro-social, political and economic processes at play that also affect their cultural worlds (for more on theories of practice see Bourdieu 1990; Ortner 1999; Sahlins 2004; Sewell 2005).

Arjun Appadurai has written extensively on the processes and practices through which locality is produced in the modern world. In particular, he has emphasized the need to move away from the tendency of accusing modernity of destroying what is at times erroneously perceived as a fixed state of idealized premodern locality. Far from fixed, he argues that locality must be viewed instead as something that is continuously produced through complex rituals and ceremonies of social interaction. Thinking of locality as a socially produced phenomenon, he writes, “locality is an inherently fragile social achievement,” and that “[e]ven in the most intimate, spatially confined, geographically isolated situations, locality must be maintained carefully

against various kinds of odds” (1996:179). Taking this approach lends itself well to asking how music and particularly participatory music-making can play a part in localizing a music genre and producing local communities in globalized cities. Particularly intriguing is the task of understanding how certain bars come to be identified as local even though the audience members are made up of both locals and foreigners. Thus, one of my goals is to argue that the local is not produced by rejecting the global. Instead, I see locality as actively produced by creating specific social environments where locally determined values, aesthetics, and imaginaries are able to proliferate over those that are considered external and “non local.”

But how do you study the practice of the production of locality? What practices make a scene local in the context of the transnational flows of a modern city? And what role does music have in facilitating the production of locality in neighborhood music scenes like that of Almagro? As popular music is highly mediated visually, writing about how local cultures redefine themselves in light of powerful global stereotypes presents a unique set of challenges. Because globalized pop music genres like tango are so entrenched in overbearing visual and sonic stereotypes, I use filmmaking as a sensorial mode through which to construct new ways of knowing tango culture. Whereas the visual, sonic and aesthetic dimensions of commercial popular music can be easily seen and experienced alongside written scholarship, local expressions of popular culture are often less accessible at an international scale. Filmmaker and film theorist David MacDougall (2006) talks at length about filming what he calls social aesthetics as a way of constructing experiential knowledge about how people interact with each other and their environments. Sarah Pink (2007) also advocates for visual forms of ethnography by pointing out that much can be learned by studying the visual cultures of places as well as constructing visual representations collaboratively with locals. Drawing from these ideas, I have used what I call sensory filmmaking (discussed at length in chapter three) as a way of studying the complex social dynamics and sensory aesthetics so integral to the production of local tango

cultures today. Through the evocative and multisensory nature of film, my films show how local imaginaries and cultures of tango culture are produced and circulated in the context of sensory experiences of music-making.

Contributions to Tango Scholarship and Ethnomusicology

Throughout the 20th century in Argentina, most tango literature was produced outside academia. A majority of publications about tango music were written either by musicians and lyricists (Canaro 1957; Cadicamo 1977; De Caro 1964; Ferrer 1977), or journalists and tango aficionados from primarily upper-class backgrounds (Mina 2007). Most books in the popular sphere chronicle the transformation of tango into a symbol of Argentine national identity, highlighting its rise to the upper social classes by the 1920s as a form of orchestral music. The few existing scholarly books focus their attention on the lives of famous tango figures—like composer and musician Astor Piazzolla or Carlos Gardel—or present various arguments about the history of the music and its connections to Caribbean, West African, European, and indigenous roots (Azzi and Collier 2000; Barsky and Barsky 2008; Thomson 2005; Vega 1936; Rossi 1958 [1926]). In recent years, scholars like Garramuño (2007) and Matallana (2008) have written works on the role of technology and mass media in the rise of tango as a national symbol in the first half of the 20th century (see also Castro 1999).

In the late 1990s, many tango scholars wrote about the globalization, commodification and exoticization of tango culture, focusing on globalization of the genre and the production and dissemination of tango's international identity as a symbol of passion (Cara 2009; Goertzen and Azzi 1999, Pelinski 2000; Savigliano 1995; Shelemay 2006 [2001]). Of these, the most influential publications have been Savigliano's 1995 work on the exoticization of tango and Pelinski's collection of essays in *Tango Nomade* (2000) that discusses the genre's globalization and transcultural reterritorializations around the world in many places ranging from Japan to

Finland. The majority of these and other academic works about tango have been primarily focused on dance (Carozzi 2011; Liska 2012, 2013; Morel 2012; Taylor 1998; Washbaugh 1998). Contributing to tango dance scholarship, recent scholars have begun writing about tango and gender studies and in particular the rise of queer tango scenes over the past decade (Cecconi 2009b; Kanai 2014; Liska 2012) Scholarship including discussion of tango music has been predominantly concerned with the tango diaspora and the international development of the genre as a dance music through mass media (Falicov 2007; Garramuño 2007; Groppa 2004; Matallana 2009; Pelinski 2000; Savigliano 1995; Viladrich 2013).

Until recently, however, little ethnographic work was being published about tango as a contemporary *musical culture* in Buenos Aires. With the contributions of a handful of scholars, both in Argentina and abroad, this is now beginning to change. Over the last decade, a new generation of scholars have begun to take a critical interest in studying the urban cultural politics of tango, and both tango music and dance as local cultural practices in Buenos Aires (Cecconi 2009; Liska 2013, 2012, 2005; Luker 2009, 2007; Miller 2014; Morel 2011; Oliveri 2005). Much of this scholarship addresses the cultural politics of tango in relation to tourism and more specifically, the ways that, following the 2001 Argentine economic crisis, the government used “for-export” tango as an economic and culture resource to promote tourism. Research dedicated specifically to local tango music scenes not intended for tourism has been limited to a few books and journal articles (Cecconi 2009; Liska 2012; Luker 2007; Míguez 2006; Rocchi and Sotelo 2004; Ugarte 2008). My work contributes to this growing body of scholarship by studying the processes through which neighborhood tango music scenes are contributing to re-articulating tango as a local form of urban popular culture today.

Shifting the focus away from official government agendas and studies of dance, this dissertation examines how local neighborhood tango *music* movements— reacting to “for-export” tango and the neoliberal cultural trends of Argentina in the ‘90s—have reclaimed and

reterritorialized tango as a form of local musical social life and as an approach to musical activism in Buenos Aires over the past 15 years. My work seeks to enrich tango scholarship through a study of the grassroots and non-governmental efforts to reclaim tango as a vehicle for urban musical expression. Scholarship like that of Luker's focusing on cultural policy, and Liska focusing on the revitalization of tango dance, provide invaluable counterpoints to frame my research on independent neighborhood tango music cultures.

From Global Economies of Passion to Local Economies of Feeling: Contributions to Tango Scholarship

Much scholarship over the past decades has focused on analyzing the processes that have propelled tango into global circuits of exoticization. In her seminal book *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion*, Savigliano explains this commodification of emotions of passion saying:

This imperialist circulation of feelings gave rise to an emotional capital —Passion— accumulated, recoded, and consumed in the form of Exotic Culture: “mysterious,” “untamed,” “wild,” “primitive,” “passionate.” The emotional/expressive practices of the colonized have been isolated, categorized, and transformed into curious “cultural” patterns of behavior... Thus, “exotic objects have been constituted by applying a homogenizing practice of exoticization, a system of exotic representation that commodified the colonials in order to suit imperial consumption.”⁸ (1995: 2)

⁸ Artistic, political, and academic movements in Latin America have frequently influenced one another. As a result, discussions of postcolonialism and neocolonialism, present in the works of scholars like Savigliano, can be found in both scholarly and artistic forms of expression in Latin America. Latin American scholars have often used these theories to point out the European roots of academic thought, and to advocate for the need to construct new Latin American intellectual and cultural identities that speak to local realities (e.g., Canclini 2004; Freire 1970). Similarly, Savigliano concludes her analysis of the exoticization of tango by speaking of the need to decolonize herself by ceasing to reproduce the oppressive exoticizing stereotypes associated with tango, calling on other scholars and artists to do the same (Savigliano 1995).

This political economy of passion lies at the foundation of the global tango industry and continues to fuel the city's efforts to brand Buenos Aires as "The Tango City." However, as cultural objects of exoticism are bought and sold, other economies of feeling continue to circulate that are not based in the commodification and exoticization of emotions. Music scholar Lila Ellen Gray found this to be true in her recent research of fado music in Portugal. In response to Savigliano's writings on political economies of passion, Gray points out that not all emotional relationships to fado are "commodified to suit imperial consumption." She writes,

Many people I spoke to in Lisbon, ranging from bank clerks to taxi drivers, fadistas, and fans, positioned themselves as national subjects reflexively vis-à-vis their supposed capacity as Portuguese to "feel deeply" . . . But in these conversations "passion" or "feeling deeply" were not necessarily invoked as a sign of belonging to the "Latin" or to the Mediterranean (Gray 2013:129).

What Gray speaks to in her research are the very complex and multi-faceted ways individuals develop affective relationships to music. These relationships are what allow people to "feel" music deeply and connect with musical sounds on an emotional level. Especially when dealing with exoticized genres like tango or fado, acknowledging individuals' subjective emotions becomes a way of pushing past blanketing stereotypes of emotion and allowing local and diverse alternative frameworks for feeling to emerge.

In Buenos Aires, the majority of tango's "for-export" industries—including the tango festivals sponsored by the city government—continue to market tango as a symbol of passion. When Argentine and Uruguayan tango was declared a UNESCO Masterpiece of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity 2009, the minister of Culture for Buenos Aires, Hernan Lombardi, said in a speech to the Associated Press, "Tango is a feeling that can be danced, and

that feeling of course is passion.”⁹ But, tango means many things to many people and passion is, of course, only one of many emotions associated with the genre. In fact, passion has become such a loaded term in local tango scenes that it is rarely used seriously in the circles where I conduct my research. If passion is not the emotional capital of independent tango circles, then what is?

Driven by this question, one of my goals is to study and communicate people’s diverse and dynamic affective relationships to tango music. By illustrating multiple affective and aesthetic vocabularies that shape people’s relationship to tango, I argue that it is time to stop branding tango exclusively as a ‘passionate feeling to be danced.’ Tango, as a broad and complex vocabulary of artistic expression, can express many emotions. It can be humorous and lighthearted, political and critical, sad and nostalgic, sentimental and intimate, dark and angry, analytical and cerebral, or passionate and romantic. How these emotions are felt and expressed by different performers and listeners can also take many forms and come from many places, necessitating ethnographic specificity.

Like locality, emotional relationships to tango are not fixed but instead are flexible and dynamic. They must be produced, reproduced, and transformed through “complex rituals and ceremonies of social interaction.” In thinking of how alternative emotional relationships of tango are produced and maintained within the context of local tango scenes, I return to Gray’s writings on fado. In *Fado Resounding*, Gray explains that, “aesthetic form provides a framework for feeling—literally, a structure *for* feeling—conditioning expectations, teaching one how and when to feel in relation to gesture, to style and to ritual” (2013: 8). Drawing on Raymond Williams’ theorization of “structures of feeling” (1977) and more recent writings on “public feeling” by

⁹ Surk, Barbara. 2009. “Tango on UNESCO world Heritage List.” *Huffington Post*, November 30. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/09/30/tango-on-unesco-world-her_n_304023.html

scholars such as Ann Cvetkovich (2007), she investigates the ways affective relationships to and through fado are built, experienced and circulated through musical sounds and practices.

Continuing in this line of thought, and in dialogue with what Savigliano has called tango's global economy of passion, I use writing and sensory filmmaking to explore the production of what I call tango's local economies of feeling. Whereas tango's political economy of passion is rooted in the production and consumption of othering and exoticizing emotions for-export, I approach tango's local economies of feeling as the affective relationships to tango produced within and for local contexts. Through an analysis of the social and musical aesthetics of neighborhood tango music scenes and the imaginaries that help produce meaning in these places, I illustrate how local affective practices of music-making are contributing to shaping new local tango cultures that contest the genre's globally exoticized stereotypes. Instead of dealing in "passion," these local emotional economies are based in affective relationships to imaginaries of "the neighborhood" past and present, anti-neoliberal political ideologies, and specific, shared histories of local people, places, sounds and rituals. Because many of the emotions produced and consumed in tango's local economies of feeling are multisensory and non-verbal, I have sought out ways of studying and communicating these economies that go beyond the written word.

In this multi-modal text I bring alternative tango musical cultures out of the shadows and into the spotlight, granting them the space to become protagonists of their own musical and social narratives. Thus, without ignoring the existence of tango-for-export, this dissertation intentionally places the tourist shows, government festivals and mainstream stereotypes into the background and lets *other* tango local economies of feeling come into the light. I choose instead to construct new understandings of tango from the perspectives of the musicians with whom I have shared years of dynamic experiences. Through my work I want to humanize the everyday

lives and struggles of musicians as they work, learn, socialize and organize through and around tango today.

Contributions to Ethnomusicology

Within ethnomusicology I align myself with contemporary ethnographers who follow the everyday practices of musicians in cities as they struggle to understand how urban life shapes their artistic worlds and vice versa. In the past decade, many ethnomusicologists studied how local music genres became deterritorialized and entered into global markets of circulation (Taylor 1997; Ochoa 2003). Today, I am interested in studying how globalized music genres are undergoing processes of *relocalization* in their home cities in light of their globalized identities. Many contemporary ethnomusicologists inform my localist approach. One ethnography that inspired this project was Christopher Washburne's investigation of the everyday lives of salsa musicians in New York City (2008). His emphasis on live music practices forces readers away from stylized music videos of salsa dancers and brings them into the everyday life worlds behind the artists that make salsa for a living. I was also inspired by Aaron Fox, who wrote of the poetics of country music in engendering understandings of class and identity through the performance of country music in small bars in Texas (2004). His emphasis on amateur and semi-professional music communities and on the transformative and powerful sensory experiences of music in bars gave me examples of the kinds of sensory work I hope to accomplish in this dissertation. Outside of the Americas, Jeremy Wallach's recent ethnography of popular music in Indonesia—engaging with diverse performance practices and many kinds of public culture—also was an inspiration (2008). His street level perspective of approaching ethnography brings the reader into the everyday life of popular music making in Indonesia, acknowledging how music flows through cities in many settings and through many forms of mediation. By drawing on the dynamic approaches used by these scholars and applying them to

my multimedia research with tango music, I hope to contribute to finding new and vibrant ways to study urban musicians and the complex culture of participatory live music bars.

Positionality, Personal Background, and Research Sites

My position as an ethnographer of tango culture is far from neutral. Throughout my research, I positioned myself in the slippery territory between my identities as a foreigner and local, researcher and performer, listener and participant. Acknowledging and interrogating these different positions is another necessary step in framing my research. Since 2011 I have been living in Buenos Aires conducting research on neighborhood tango music cultures. Although there are many neighborhood tango movements arising around the city, my research focuses primarily on the musical and social practices surrounding the tango bars in the middle-class neighborhood of Almagro located just west of downtown. The Almagro neighborhood is more than a research site. I have been involved with the tango music in Almagro for 10 years and for the last three it has been my home. Over the past decade, my knowledge of tango has grown out of my sensory experiences performing, listening to, and socializing around tango music in neighborhood bars. Almagro has taught me to know tango as an intimate form of musical socialization, a vast and complex language of musical expression, a vehicle for of urban politics, and a way of building meaningful life worlds in the challenging and economically unstable urban landscape of contemporary Buenos Aires. These rich and formative social, musical and political experiences motivated me to pursue my Ph.D in ethnomusicology, to work with film, and to train as a tango violinist.

My experiences in the tango bars of Almagro and other Buenos Aires neighborhoods have shaped me as an individual, a musician and a researcher, and they have profoundly colored the way I understand tango and music as social practice at large. Throughout this dissertation, I will seek to empower and convey localized sensory experiences of tango as I

learned them through years of practice in these settings. Instead of looking down from above, or inside from outside, I prioritize what ethnomusicologist Jeremy Wallach calls a “street-level perspective of ethnography, engaging with the concrete details of the everyday lives of individuals in specific social settings” (2008:4).

My particular vantage point is the Almagro neighborhood. While I will discuss other neighborhoods and areas of the city, I want to establish my center in Almagro because I believe that different scenes and communities in the city come to shape different ways of practicing and understanding tango, molded by the particular experiential histories of places, venues and individuals and projects. My firsthand experiences in the neighborhood bar scenes of Almagro are what led me to think of tango as a social and highly participatory musical culture and not just a repertoire of songs to accompany dancing or to be heard on stage or on recordings. These bars have taught me the powerful and transformative social, political and musical values of informal musical meeting places in a city life. They have showed me how shared social gathering places inspire the growth of artistic communities despite the often uninspiring realities of the contemporary music industries. In a broader sense, they have taught me about locality, what it means, how it is produced through and around music, and why it is so important in people’s lives in Argentina today.

In my work I offer myself as an example of a modern “localized” foreigner in Buenos Aires. My localized identity in the Almagro music scene—based on the fact that I feel deeply integrated and local in this community—taught me to diversify my understandings of locality and to embrace the diverse social and cultural makeup of today’s tango communities. Through my fieldwork experiences I have come to understand locality as a social process more than a label based on geographic origin. Once I began thinking of locality as something produced and not something fixed, I came to think of culture “for-export” or “for-tourists” as categories referring to context and intent more than artistic content. Furthermore, my experiences with Argentines and

foreigners in tango bars taught me about the need to diversify understandings of what has been called the tourist gaze (Urry and Larsen 2011). In lines with Urry and Larsen, I acknowledge that foreigners interact with local cultures for many reasons—not just cultural tourism—and often for reasons not so different than locals themselves. I did not come searching for the exotic tango gaze discussed by Savigliano, but instead came looking for a different kind of popular culture, rooted and experienced in practices of everyday life.

When I arrived in Buenos Aires, I was 21 years old and had just finished a B.A. degree at a small liberal arts college in southern California. I came to Argentina on a Thomas J. Watson fellowship entitled “Searching for the Souls of Tango” that funded a year of experiential research about tango culture spread over eight countries in Latin America and Europe. I had been a tango fanatic since high school when I heard a tango band play during our orchestra’s trip to Cuba, but had little knowledge of the genre beyond a few CDs and DVDs, and a handful of Internet pages available at the time about tango history. Like many young people today, I did not come to Buenos Aires dreaming of attending fancy tango cabaret shows with elegant steak dinners and women dancing in scantily clad outfits. I do not know exactly what I was looking for when I arrived in the city, but I knew that I was not looking for exotic stage shows. I wanted to find the places where tango continued to exist as a form of informal and participatory popular culture. I had been to a small tango bar in Costa Rica where I heard an old man called “El Che” playing for a crowd of elderly regulars who took turns standing to try to sing a repertoire of classic tangos. It was the kind of bar where some singers gave almost professional performances and others had to be fed lines in order to get through all the lyrics of a tango. All performers were cheered on and appreciated by the small audience in the intimate setting of the tiny bar. This had inspired my fellowship research. If “El Che” existed in Costa Rica, imagine what might I find in Buenos Aires?

My experience is not unique in the world of travel. Ideas of tourism and travel are changing for many people, especially young people around the world. Furthermore, the transient nature of modern lifestyles has created a generation of young people who are increasingly familiar with having to assimilate into new communities, for long and short periods of time. Within a city people also move frequently as friendships, relationships, housing contracts and city trends push people from one neighborhood to the next. I have lived in five neighborhoods of Buenos Aires, spanning from the far north to far south of the city. This is important because when I came to Buenos Aires and “discovered” Roberto’s Bar hidden at the edge of a poorly illuminated plaza in the neighborhood of Almagro, I was neither infiltrating a setting of untouched natives, nor was I received as a unique or unwelcome foreigner. I would describe my arrival more as a combination of being welcomed and ignored as another newcomer in a scene characterized by both stability and change.

In my first year in Buenos Aires I spent most of my time in two different bars in Almagro, known informally as *Lo de Roberto* (Roberto’s Place) and *La de Stella* (Stella’s place). Roberto’s was a century-old bar that had been functioning as a tango hangout for a little over ten years. Stella’s was an apartment converted into an underground bar that opened as an after bar when Roberto decided he was too old to keep his bar open past three in the morning. While these bars felt extremely local, in reality they were made up of a very diverse population of individuals. My friend Tomas was a philosophy student who came from Brazil to live and study in Buenos Aires for a few years. Joel was a filmmaker from Spain who came to work on a project in the city for a time. Lola was a middle aged woman who would come weekly to the bar with her friends, many of them divorced, to listen to tango and socialize. Nacho was an aspiring young tango singer and friend from the city Bahía Blanca in the province of Buenos Aires who, much like me, had come to the city to learn about tango. There was Joel the rock pianist as well as a group of neighborhood locals who came to hear tango but spent most of their time talking to girls,

drinking beer on the sidewalk and occasionally engaging in the exchange of illegal substances. There was Facundo, a truck driver who would come to the bar after work only to leave the bar to go back to work the next morning without sleeping (a true mystery for the study of the necessity of sleep). There were a group of students from Colombia, a few North American exchange students, a constant trickle of backpacking travelers; and the list goes on. Leo, an Argentine singer from Roberto's who worked as an electrician by day, told me his daughter traveled to Machu Pichu and met a man with a list of the 10 most important things to do in South America. Alongside visiting Machu Pichu was visiting Roberto's tango bar in Buenos Aires. In other words, by the time I reached Roberto's, it still felt hidden, but within a certain circle, it was a legendary bar of the tango underground.

Roberto's and Stella's bar, and the Almagro tango community at large, offer good examples of the way I have come to understand contemporary urban locality. They were local scenes that prioritized local values and the importance of social intimacy, immediacy and belonging, but they have also had adapted to and grown out of the contemporary transient nature of modern cities and transnational urban life. Throughout this dissertation, I will visit the different ways that locality is produced in this and other similar neighborhood scenes, examining something as small as eye contact during an acoustic performance or as large as the organization of independent tango festivals or orchestral performances within neighborhood settings. Although I am no longer a frequent visitor at Roberto's bar and Stella's no longer exists, new places have emerged to take their place in the neighborhood landscape and new communities have formed with both old and new members. As I will illustrate, bars and neighborhoods exist as places on a city map but need to be continuously maintained in order to feel like places of belonging.

One of my goals in this dissertation is to convey that there is not one but many cultures of tango in Buenos Aires. Although they take center stage in my research, the bars and

neighborhood tango scenes I study do not exist in a vacuum. As individuals move in, out and through neighborhood tango scenes, they interact with many other alternative and mainstream tango worlds in the city. They also interact with other artistic scenes, political movements and organizations, day jobs, family life and educational institutions. These very different but linked cultural worlds are shaped as different people, institutions, politics, movements, economies, and places interact with and utilize tango as a form of expression. While practitioners of tango often interact with multiple tango environments in their daily routines, these worlds often occupy very different places in people's lives. Through these pages I offer my own subjective experiences with tango culture and those of the people I have worked with over the years. I have created this dissertation as a series of snapshots, stories, and insights to bring ethnographic depth and diversity into the very complex political and cultural urban worlds of tango in Buenos Aires with a focus on ways of experiencing and *knowing* tango as a local form of neighborhood culture.

The people who color the pages of this chapter are much more than research subjects. They are some of my closest friends, my band mates, and my teachers and mentors. I have spent time with many of them on large stages, small stages, recording studios, living room band practices, and around many dinner tables. They are the subjects of my formal interviews, as well as the friends with whom I drink maté and coffee while informally talking about music and life. They are the people with whom I work to help organize events, paint walls, clean up after concerts, and the people with whom I have shared countless nights and dawns with making and listening to music in little tango bars. Over the years, these people have become my family just as I have become part of theirs.

Methodologies: Research, Volunteering, Performance, and Filmmaking

The methodologies of my fieldwork have combined observational filmmaking, violin performance, participant observation and formal interviewing. Since our identities in the field

often shift from one moment to the next, it would be difficult for me to draw concrete lines between my activities researching, performing and filming tango. Each of these three methodological processes has provided a different lens through which I have come to *know* tango as a neighborhood practice. Throughout my fieldwork I have attended as many local tango events as possible, carefully observing the cultures of different bars and talking to musicians, audience members and organizers about their personal stories and the histories of different venues. Although my research primarily focuses on the Almagro neighborhood, I also have attended many events in other neighborhoods across the city as a way of framing the Almagro scene within larger neighborhood networks and to be able to draw comparisons between the culture of Almagro's bars and those of other neighborhoods.

Although much of my research still focuses on a community of musicians and bars located in Almagro, I do my best to position them alongside other movements across the city. Instead of trying to artificially connect and represent *all* tango venues within one neighborhood, I opted for this more flexible and organic way of constructing the territories of my ethnography. Beyond following neighborhood-based tango movements across town, I also have attended events connected with underground tango scenes that are not affiliated with particular neighborhood identities.

Whenever possible, I would participate in these events as a volunteer. This often involved taking photographs for independently organized concerts or festivals, helping set up and clean up after shows, making flyers and promotional videos for events, running errands, and even helping wait tables from time to time. Simultaneously, I used my camera to film both ordinary, everyday tango bar practices and also larger events like festivals and the processes of recording albums. I also conducted a series of long, in-depth interviews with different participants and organizers of neighborhood scenes. Some of these I filmed and others I recorded with an audio recorder. This footage, and these interviews, which I continue to edit,

have taken the form of a series of short films exploring themes of neighborhood tango culture (discussed in detail in chapter three).

Another ethnographic methodology utilized for this research was performance. When I arrived to begin my fieldwork in 2011—six years after my initial stay in the city—many people in Almagro already knew me as a violinist. This identity gave me insight into understanding how neighborhood performance communities operated and helped me to find new places to play. During my fieldwork I participated in multiple projects, each of which gave me insight into different elements of live tango music culture within the independent tango movements. My main project was performing and organizing with a neighborhood string orchestra in Almagro called the *Orquesta de Cuerdas Elvino Vardaro*. This orchestra, the subject of chapter six, became a central hub for meeting other string players and musicians in the city and connected me to the community of musicians and neighborhood activists who became my closest research collaborators. We performed together monthly in different neighborhood clubs in the Almagro and Villa Crespo areas, recorded on multiple albums, performed in different tango festivals and in the official city tango festival each year. Beyond my performances with the orchestra, the weekly rehearsals with the Vardaro, where we would get together play, rehearse, organize and socialize together as a group, became an invaluable place for my research. In these informal weekly encounters I developed strong and lasting friendships, learned firsthand about the challenges of organizing and sustaining independent projects like an orchestra and slowly over time learned the complex internal politics of the city's and neighborhood's tango scenes.

The stories I have documented through my camera and in writing are both large stories and small stories. They are stories of music making and of friendship, of economic hardships and of political changes, of recognition, competition and musical training, of artists searching for their voices, and of music as a vehicle to express so many things. They are also stories of aging, of life and death, of the desire to belong to communities, to connect to a city through

sound, to find roots, and to embrace the cultures of the past as a recipe to find oneself in the present and the future. They are stories of frustration, of unbelievable frustration with a collapsing music industry in the age of technology, of local cultures in times of increasingly globalized and market-oriented culture industries, and of neoliberal models of cultural politics that promote culture as an exportable product instead of a form of community practice. They are stories of life in a third world country still recovering from major economic instabilities and dictatorship, and of governments attempting to implement post-neoliberal political practices while living in constant fear of collapse in a competitive and daunting global market. But they are also stories of resilience, of fighting back through cooperation and collaboration, of making music a motor and a resource for constructing urban cultural practices different from the models being offered through mainstream culture. They are stories of individuals who have the ability to have tremendous impact on the lives of others, and of shared histories of music making that have become foundational in defining a new generation of tango artists today. They are also stories of neighborhoods, of old people and young people, locals and foreigners, and of the old and new traditions that are redefining urban experiences of neighborhood today.

How to begin to tell these stories? How to use the format of a dissertation to tell a story that is at once so analytical, so emotional, so expressive, and so complex? How to put my own musical experiences into a text and find a way to situate them alongside the things I filmed, my collaborative efforts organizing and the things I want to write about? How to come to terms with three very different ways of documenting and experiencing culture, that of standing behind a camera, sitting with a violin on my shoulder, organizing as part of a collective or sitting at home reading academic literature and writing? How do we talk about the politics of music making without reducing music making to a purely political practice or reducing politics to simple binaries between the people and the government, the north and the south, the academic and the popular? How can I use my stories, the ones I filmed, the performances I played, the events

I helped organize, to evoke these complexities, situating one next to another so that in the end my readers will understand these complexities as I have experienced them?

I did not find many models for the kind of dissertation I wanted to write. In 2009 Benjamin Harbert at UCLA made film a central part of his dissertation, starting a conversation in our department which helped pave the way to my own work. Although the nature of his work and his process were very different than my own, his dedication to film as a form of academic knowledge was inspirational in helping me articulate the reasons I wanted to use film in my own research. As a scholar, I aim to promote experiential formats of academic knowledge production and presentation with the hope of narrowing the gap between the rich experiences we have in the field and the ways we share those experiences with others.

This dissertation consists of a written thesis and a series of short films. The written and filmed work are closely tied with one another and serve different purposes in constructing a dynamic understanding of the communities I am studying. The filmed portions of the dissertation (available for streaming on my website www.jenniegubner.com) are as integral to demonstrating my arguments as the written elements. Through this unorthodox take on the dissertation format, my goal has been to produce a document that both theorizes and demonstrates the value of visual and sensory ethnomusicology.

Chapter Outline

This dissertation is divided into seven chapters. Each chapter looks at different processes that have contributed to the localization and neighborhoodization of tango music in recent years. The first chapter frames my research within the contemporary political, cultural and economic climate of Buenos Aires by providing a broad historical overview of the city looking at the different urban imaginaries that shaped ideas of the city in different periods of time. I then look with more detail at the transformations that occurred in Buenos Aires during the

1990s under the neoliberal political and economic agendas of President Carlos Menem and following the 2001 economic crash. Subsequently, I explore the political and cultural reactions to neoliberalism and crisis, and the rise of post-neoliberal ideologies of cultural production in line with ideologies of the New Latin American Left. Finally I conclude the chapter discussing how, within these post-neoliberal urban imaginaries of Buenos Aires, the neighborhood has been revitalized as a central symbolic and geographic place of cultural production, and social transformation, resistance, and activism.

In the second chapter I look at the growth of new tango music youth cultures in the 1990s. I begin by looking at some of the reasons tango fell from the mainstream in the second half of the 20th century and explain how the 1970s and 1980s came to be known as tango's years of "decadence." Then, I explore the revitalization of tango as a form of urban youth culture amid the turbulent political and economic realities of the turn of the 21st century. In order to move beyond these imaginaries of decadence, I argue that these movements had to construct new social and aesthetic worlds for tango that made the genre attractive and relevant to young people again. In particular I explore two new tango cultures that began evolving during those years. The first, *tango de ruptura*, draws heavily from images and aesthetics of a modern city in crisis, emulating gritty and edgy industrial aesthetics found previously in rock cultures. The second, *tango barrial*, focuses instead on reconnecting tango to ideas of neighborhood life. Unlike *tango de ruptura*, this second culture is less concerned with a counterculture aesthetic but focuses on relocating tango within neighborhood contexts and as an expression of urban intimacy and neighborhood socialization. In the second half of this chapter I look more closely at the development of Almagro's tango music scene.

In chapter three I turn to my work with film, and in particular sensory filmmaking, as a way of studying how tango bars have participated in localizing tango music practices into the neighborhoods of Buenos Aires. I begin by discussing more broadly the role of film in

ethnomusicological research and then introduce the idea of sensory filmmaking as a form of local knowledge production. I then discuss how I used film in my fieldwork and the different films I have made in Buenos Aires. I explain how these films produce new kinds of knowledge about musical practices, emphasizing music as a lived, social, and sensory experience. Through a discussion of social aesthetics and sensory ways of knowing, I argue film's potential as a tool through which to evoke examples of the ways localized economies of feeling are produced within local tango scenes.

The second half of the dissertation offers case studies of different projects that have emerged out of the neighborhood tango bar scenes over the past decade. In particular, these chapters seek to draw connections between different forms of tango activism and post-neoliberal ideologies of cultural production characteristic of contemporary Argentine social movements. In chapter four I look at the politicization of tango and the rise of neighborhood tango festivals. I begin by asking how a romantic genre like tango can become a vehicle for political activism and then explore tango's complicated relationship to the cultural politics of the city government in recent years.

Chapter five is based on my experiences performing with the Almagro-based string orchestra, *La Orquesta de Cuerdas Elvino Vardaro*. In this chapter I look at the history of this orchestra as an example of horizontal musical projects coming out of the recent neighborhood tango scenes. In particular I emphasize how the project embodies both musical but also social goals, thus helping to redefine ideas of popular music encompassing both sound and social practice. Using an example of our performance in the Buenos Aires opera house during one of the annual city tango festivals I talk about the complications in defining *musica popular* in relation to tango today.

In the final chapter I tell the story of a neighborhood tango club that was put together by a group of Almagro musicians in 2012. This chapter looks at a project that did not result in the

utopian venue it set out to create. Writing from my experiences watching this process, this chapter looks at what happens to a scene as people grow, as ideologies change, and as definitions of the popular are pulled in one direction or another to the point of being completely incompatible.

In the conclusion, I revisit the different localizing processes that have contributed to reviving tango as a form of neighborhood culture in recent years. I argue that the rise of neighborhood-based tango movements grew primarily from musicians' needs to build new local places for live music culture, but that the models they used align with broader cultural shifts driven by post-neoliberal ideologies of politics and cultural production. I end by looking at some scholars who have theorized strategies about the cultural shifts needed to counter the negative effects of neoliberalism. Relating these to music, I argue that the creation of intimate, participatory and politicized urban popular music cultures like those of the neighborhood tango scenes in Buenos Aires offers an example of these strategies in practice. Despite their internal conflicts and challenges, these scenes are successfully contributing to reviving music making as an integral part of social life in cities and redefining understandings of tango culture in Buenos Aires today.

Chapter 1

Crisis, Transformation and Resistance in the Neoliberalizing City: Popular Culture Revivals, Post-Neoliberal Activism, and the Revitalization of Neighborhood Cultural Movements in Buenos Aires after the 1990s



Figure 1.1. A banner showing a public protest in support of a movement fighting to create laws to protect cultural centers and other artistic spaces in Buenos Aires that have been suffering routine closures from the city government. Their slogan reads, “culture will not be closed down,” and in other banners, “culture will not be privatized.” These kinds of movements fall within the popular culture revivals discussed in this chapter and stand in contrast to the politics of the current city government. Tango artists have played an active role in this and other similar movements and initiatives. (Photo courtesy of La Cultura no se Clausura, 2014).

Introduction

The revitalized interest in tango as an expression of “the popular”¹ in the late 1990s and the growth of local, neighborhood-based tango scenes over the past decade did not occur in a

¹ I put “the popular” in quotations to remind readers that I am using the term as a translation of the Spanish term, “*lo popular*.” This term references a Latin American understanding of popular culture which is quite different than North American understandings of popular as connected to mainstream culture. In Latin America the idea of the popular is a complex and loaded term generally understood to be connected to the cultural practices and trends of popular “of the people” and not defined by consumer success. In Argentina, things that are deemed *popular* are often events, places or cultural practices that are products of, or feel connected to working class culture and/or feel accessible across all cultural classes as an expression of national identity. Following the neoliberal political agendas of the 1990s and 2001 crash, references to “*lo popular*” are frequently used as a kind of anti-neoliberal slogan within leftist political discourses and cultural movements.

vacuum. Instead, tango's recent entanglement with ideas of "the popular" and the genre's physical and symbolic "return to the neighborhood" can be contextualized within a series of much broader cultural shifts affecting Argentine society and culture — and especially middle-class youth culture. Broadly speaking, these shifts involve the economic decline in Argentina following the return to democracy after the 1976-1983 dictatorship. In particular, they involve both the consequences of and the reactions to this decline and particularly to the neoliberal agendas implemented by President Carlos Menem, who served two terms from 1989 to 1999. Grounding his political and economic agenda largely in North American models of neoliberal development, Menem's government promoted a culture of privatizations, individualism, and consumption in Argentine media and society (Smith 1991). Although his policies were initially well received, many of them proved unsustainable, and in 2001 the country suffered one of the largest economic crashes in Latin American history.

Argentina's "decade of neoliberalism," spanning from Menem's election in 1989 to the 2001 economic crash, brought profound social, political, and cultural changes to Argentine society. Following the crash, many Argentines grew hostile towards the ideas and policies associated with North American neoliberal models of capitalism promoted by Menem's government. Today, many working and middle-class citizens remember the 1990s as a time when they were introduced to the polarizing and alienating social and economic effects of neoliberal capitalism. Since many middle-class Argentines had enthusiastically bought into the individualist and consumer ideologies promoted by Menem's government in the early 1990s, this disillusionment signified a major rupture in the Argentine sense of self and in the conception of the city of Buenos Aires. This hostility towards Menem's government and neoliberal economic models more broadly has been further fueled by the anti-neoliberal and anti-imperialist political platforms of the current national government.

As these first-world imaginaries of Buenos Aires crumbled in the face of insecurity, crisis, social exclusion and economic decline, many frustrated and disempowered Argentine citizens—and especially those belonging to the recently impoverished middle classes—began to reject the logics of neoliberal capitalism and mainstream consumer culture in favor of alternative and less individualistic models of politics, culture and socialization. These included the rise of new leftist political and cultural movements, a renewed interest in working class popular culture, and a revival of traditional neighborhood imaginaries as a framework from which to promote community-based activism and local, anti-consumer cultural production in the neoliberalizing city.² In Buenos Aires, these different movements and initiatives have played a central role in shaping the production of culture and politics over the past 15 years. In this chapter I argue that these movements are rooted in political and urban imaginaries that can be considered post-neoliberal because they share a common interest in seeking out alternatives to neoliberal political, cultural and economic models.

Tango's recent revitalization as a politicized expression of popular and neighborhood culture in Buenos Aires must be contextualized within the political and social transformations occurring in Argentina over the last few decades. Throughout these transformations, tango—and in the case of my specific research, neighborhood tango music scenes—has become one of many forms of cultural expression offering alternative models of cultural production and urban socialization in local spheres. These movements frame popular culture as a social, political and aesthetic practice, and advocate that artists have the power and agency to embody and enact social change through the creation and social practices of art.

² Because discourses of the neighborhood were used as a form of citizenship building in the first half of the 20th century, imaginaries of neighborhood life today continue to be associated with feelings of national identity. For this reason, the neighborhood becomes an attractive place to position movements looking to contest neoliberal models coming from abroad.

To fully grasp the magnitude of the cultural and political transformations occurring in Buenos Aires over the past decades, it is important to understand the complex history of Argentina's self-image, historically identifying itself as a first and not third world nation. In this chapter, I provide a historical overview of the urban imaginaries that have helped shape ideas of Buenos Aires and of what it means to be *porteño* (someone from Buenos Aires) over the past century. Then I will explore how the shifting economic and political realities of Argentina over the past decades brought these imaginaries into crisis leading to changes in the way urban life and culture is conceptualized, practiced, and experienced in the city today. In particular, I will discuss how new forms of leftist activism are shaping new urban imaginaries and new urban practices in the city. The neighborhood as a geographical and symbolic locus of cultural and political urban practices is of particular interest to my research. Thus, the final section of the chapter will discuss the way neighborhoods have been revitalized as a rich geographic and symbolic terrain for the development of popular culture revivals and from which to advocate anti-neoliberal, or what I will call post-neoliberal, models of urban culture.

The Production and Transformation of Urban Imaginaries of Buenos Aires over the 20th Century

The Europeanizing Gaze: Buenos Aires as "The Paris of the South"

For the 19th and first half of the 20th century Buenos Aires borrowed urban planning and cultural models from the great cities of Western Europe. Over time, it earned the reputation of being the "Paris of the South." This image can be traced back to the desires of the Argentine ruling elites in the 19th century who had a strong desire to affiliate the nation with Europe rather than with the rest of South America. In the late 19th century presidents like Domingo F. Sarmiento began planning for the transformation of the relatively new city of Buenos Aires into a major, modern European city. He believed that opening Argentina to European immigrants would help

realize his goals of “American-style farmers on the plains, schools for everybody, and a rich city to be the seat of a strong government” (Sarlo 2008:38). Sarmiento’s famous *Facundo: Civilization and Barbarism* published in 1845 helped construct a dichotomy between what he saw as the culturally advanced European and North American models of civilization and those associated with the rest of Latin America.

In the latter half of the 19th century, different architectural projects began to take form that helped “Europeanize” the face of urban public space in Buenos Aires. Among these, the urban reforms of President Torcuato de Alvear marked a significant period of architectural Europeanization of the city. Inspired by the French architecture of Paris, Alvear demolished many old colonial buildings that did not fit into his image of the new modern, European metropolis and began constructions of the famous Avenida de Mayo, a Parisian-style avenue running through the center of downtown (Needell 1995:522). These reforms were followed by other reforms in the first decade of the 20th century, and by 1910 the city’s downtown area displayed many new constructions that gave it what was viewed as a distinctly European character.

These ideological and structural developments become central to how the city’s identity took shape during its process of modernization in the late 19th and 20th centuries. Urbanist Jeffrey Needell has pointed out that public space engages in a direct relationship with public consciousness, linking the ideas of physical space and urban imaginaries (1995). In the case of Buenos Aires one can see how the changes in public space helped write the new European imaginaries into the city’s physical landscape. It was during this period that Buenos Aires came to be colloquially known by many as the Paris of Latin America. Whereas some other Latin American cities like Mexico City embraced their colonial architecture and even blended it with architecture and art inspired by *mestizo* cultures, ideas of Buenos Aires have historically looked primarily towards Europe, not reminiscing in or glorifying any real or imagined past. One reason for this may have been that Buenos Aires was not a major colonial city and developed after

many other major cities in Latin America. Furthermore, the city developed an active trading relationship with Europe and received large influxes of European immigration in the late 19th and early 20th century (though not the wealthy North European immigration that elites had hoped for). All of these factors contributed to what is referred to as the Europeanizing gaze of porteños, a concept referring to the way individuals and often governments continually seek out cultural validation from Europe.

During the times of these Europeanizing urban reforms, the economy and infrastructure of Buenos Aires was also rapidly developing. Before many other Latin American nations, Argentina succeeded in building highly developed transportation systems that allowed for easy access to the center of the city from the peripheries and provinces. Railroads were constructed largely with the aid of English investments, which also helped develop docks, shipping houses and public utilities (Skidmore and Smith 2001:71). Keeping up with impressive modernizing projects, a subway system was built across the city in 1913, the first in Latin America (Sarlo 2008:32). These railroads and later subways aided the agro-export economy by allowing for agricultural workers and products from the provinces to commute into the city for commerce. The booming economy, changing architectural landscape and the accumulation of capital allowing for the importation of many European products by the urban bourgeoisie aided in Europeanizing the city.

In the beginning of the 20th century, following Sarmiento's and other intellectuals' desire for cultural internationalization, European immigrants were encouraged to come and settle in the Rio de la Plata region. Sarmiento had envisioned a wave of Northern European immigration as in the United States, but instead boats full of hundreds of thousands of predominantly Italian and Spanish and also Jewish, Russian, and Syrian populations arrived in the country, many escaping situations of extreme rural poverty in Southern and Eastern Europe (Sarlo 2008:38). This immigration had a major impact on Argentina, and by 1914 approximately 30 percent of the

population was foreign born, an impressive proportion compared to only 13 percent in the United States (Skidmore and Smith 2001:71). Although it was intended that these immigrants should move to the rural areas to work the land, many of the immigrants stayed to work in the city.

These immigrants initially disappointed the hopes of the elite to import a “civilized” and educated European population, and immigrant neighborhoods, foreign languages and “ethnic” cultural activities caused uneasiness in the upper classes of society (Sarlo 2008:38). Vigorous public education systems were put in place that went about training the children of immigrants to be Spanish-speaking citizens of the blossoming Argentine nation (Grimson and Kessler 2005: 8-9). As a result of these systems, Buenos Aires developed high literacy rates early on, again setting it apart from many other cities in Latin America. With the lack of a classic peasantry, an influx of an increasingly educated urban population, and a booming agro-export economy, Buenos Aires was rapidly developing a large middle class. This also set it apart from the rest of Latin America, as most other major cities in Latin America were instead characterized by small wealthy elites, a small middle class and otherwise highly illiterate, impoverished and largely indigenous or Afro-American populations. Political changes in party politics in the first decade of the 20th century led to a voting referendum that declared universal male suffrage in 1912. Soon afterwards the well-organized Radical Party, coming largely from the growing middle class, took the presidency, providing many new jobs for members of the middle class in government (Skidmore and Smith 2001:75).

Neighborhood Imaginaries and Citizenship Building among the New Urban Middle Class

Starting in the 1920 and 1930s, neighborhoods start to arise as important spaces of cultural belonging, especially for the growing middle classes of the city. Analyzing this shift, Graciela Silvestre writes that neighborhoods in Buenos Aires at the turn of the century were treated primarily as geographic territories, referenced for their location and not for the culture that

resided within them. She then explains that in the 1920s and '30s this began to change as neighborhoods started to be identified by the culture of their streets and by a nostalgic view of neighborhood life represented in many forms of public discourse and public culture (1987). These shifts arose from a need to establish and build local identities for the growing middle class as the city modernized.

In *Cultural Geographies of Buenos Aires: 1900-1930* (2008), Adriana Bergero talks about the role of neighborhood life in the nationalization process of Argentina. Whereas most of the immigrant populations that came at the turn of the century did not immediately enter into the culture of the elite classes who were centralized in the downtown areas of the city, neighborhoods became the places where the working and growing middle classes began to develop their own sense of shared citizenship. She argues that with the lack of strong national cultural narratives, people began to construct cultural narratives that revolved around the everyday activities of urban neighborhood life. Because of this, narratives of Argentina's national identity are frequently rooted in narratives of local urban experience.

As literacy levels gradually rose in the neighborhoods around the center of the city, neighborhood associations were constructed encouraging what Bergero calls social laterality, a term she defines as "the sense of identity individuals feel towards others of the same social environment or class" (2008:436). "Daily habits," she explains, "are the cultural spaces that best forge social laterality...Neighbors see themselves 'in' each other when they perform common rituals, celebrating them as mechanisms of identity recognition" (2008:375). During this period, rituals of everyday life started to be romanticized creating neighborhood imaginaries that became foundational to the production of a shared sense of urban locality. In *Modernity at Large*, Appadurai writes that social rituals "embody locality as well as locate bodies in socially and spatially defined communities. The spatial symbolism of rites of passage has probably been paid less attention than its bodily and social symbolism" (1996:179). Thus, rituals of everyday

life in neighborhoods and the spatially located representation of those rituals through different forms of public culture both contributed to producing feelings of belonging for the growing middle-class. As I will discuss in the last section of this chapter, these and new neighborhood imaginaries and social rituals are once again acting as mechanisms in the production of social laterality and locality in the neighborhoods of Buenos Aires today.

Through different forms of public culture during the 1920s and 1930s, these neighborhood imaginaries were strengthened. The poems of Evaristo Carriego and tango songs disseminated through mass media technologies like the radio broadcasts and printed song sheets all helped solidify these new neighborhood identities through lyrics that spoke romantically of everyday events in specific neighborhoods, on specific streets, in specific places. As Bergero explains,

The poem “El alma del suburbio” [The soul of the suburbs] constructs connecting spaces at odds with the fragmentation of the city center. Everything here smacks of an embracing, gossipy closeness and intimacy, as if the barrio were a corporeal bubble so inclusive and indiscriminate that it could shelter all its inhabitants. (2008:374)

Carriego’s poems, and later the lyrics of countless tangos, told stories that fed an imaginary of the neighborhood as a shared place of belonging. They were stories of picturesque streets where men socialized in cafés, children played, vendors sold flowers, women went about their daily chores, people fell in love, and everyone was connected through intimate spatial and social networks.

Citywide publications like *Caras y Caretas* also assisted in unifying the neighborhoods into a collective urban identity. By publishing frequent articles that profiled the social settings of different neighborhoods these publications contributed to spreading pride about urban culture. As Bergero explains, “The imaginaries responsible for constructing the quotidian in the barrio redefined proxemic distances by emphasizing a high sense of intimacy and social

laterality” (2008:373). Through these processes, the working and middle classes were constructing for themselves a shared Argentine identity by writing a sense of belonging into the common experiences of the city. Although the character of the lyrics and poems still held strong ties to connections with European imaginaries, they were rooted in neighborhood life and thus took on a more local character.

New Immigrants, Old Imaginaries: Living in Denial of Non-European Immigration

As new urban, immigrant, and *criollo* identities were beginning to solidify, a second wave of urban expansion occurred when agricultural export models were substituted by import industrialization (ISI) models following the Great Depression.³ Unlike the first waves of Europeans, the new immigrants were a very different group. When Juan Domingo Perón began strongly supporting the development of the urban industrial economy in the 1940s, large populations of workers began arriving from the provinces to work and establish themselves in Buenos Aires (Gorelik 2009:67). This rural to urban movement, occurring across Latin America, was viewed negatively by many intellectuals who called it “the rural attack on the city” (Romero 1976 in Gorelik 2009:67). This once again threatened the “white” European identity that certain sectors of the urban population were seeking to maintain in the city. These “other” immigrants came to be known colloquially as the “*cabecitas negras*” (black heads), a racist term for dark-skinned people who did not fit the image of the urban citizen of white, European descent. This term persists into the present. In *Desintegración y Justicia en el Cine Argentino Contemporáneo*, Argentine film scholar Gabriela Copertari hypothesizes that these internal migrants not only threatened the “white” European identity of the city but led to reinforced cultural ties with Europe

³ Whereas the ruling Argentine elites initially aligned themselves against a *criollo* identity in favor of aligning themselves with cultural models from Europe, with the arrival of less than desirable immigrants they began cultivating a new *criollo* identity to set themselves apart from the new immigrant class.

among wealthy urban residents not wanting to associate with these new city dwellers (Copertari 2009:119-20).

The increase in migrants from the provinces did not vastly change the already established self-image of the city in the same ways that it did in other Latin American nations. Gorelik hypothesizes that this was because this expansion was significantly smaller in Buenos Aires than it was in places like Mexico City, and because the elite maintained control over the recently modernized historic downtown areas and relegated the migrant populations to the peripheries of the city that came to be known as “Greater Buenos Aires.” He points out that while the urban population of the city had remained around three million since 1940, the population of the periphery had expanded by nine million, many of whom originally migrated from the provinces, or other regions of Latin America (Gorelik 2009:68). Returning to Needell, one can see how the spatial control over the city center helped maintain the elite gaze that continued to look towards Europe trying to ignore to the influx of immigrants from the interior and other Latin American nations. Even outside the city center, the representations of neighborhood life disseminated by tango, radio and print media starting in the 1920s and ‘30s continued to reproduce images of a white population of European descent, excluding the new working class internal migrants settling on the outskirts of the city from narratives of urban life.

Politically, the 1940s were characterized by a period of populism and nationalist reform led by Juan Perón. Among other things, Perón championed the working classes of the nation. He supported unions, encouraged all Argentines to seek work in the city, and aimed to develop economic independence for Argentina. Peronist politics led to the growth of internal migrants coming to work in the city but continuing to live in the outskirts. In the 1950s the Peronist Party lost power to a moderate military government that, among other things, reinstated economic models based on foreign investment. After two decades of tension between opposing parties,

another military dictatorship was installed from 1976-1983. Beginning in the middle of the century, another important ideological and economic shift occurred in the city of Buenos Aires.

A Shift in the Gaze: The “North-Americanization” and “Neoliberalization” of Buenos Aires

In *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, David Harvey writes,

How was neoliberalization accomplished, and by whom? The answer in countries such as Chile and Argentina in the 1970s was as simple as it was swift, brutal, and sure: a military coup backed by the traditional upper classes (as well as by the US government), followed by the fierce repression of all solidarities created within the labour and urban social movements which had so threatened their power.

(2007:39)

During the 1976-1983 military dictatorship, the controlling powers completely rejected Perón’s populist agendas and tried to return to the wealthy, aristocratic goals that the country had established around the turn of the century. Under the name *El Proceso de Reorganizacion Nacional* (Process of National Reorganization) violent repression and controls dominated the urban landscape of Buenos Aires and poor populations were systematically pushed out of the city centers.⁴ Laws were implemented that forcefully eradicated all the large urban slums that had developed in the 1950s and ‘60s and rent control laws were abolished in order to encourage private economic investment in rental housing (Keeling 1996:103). These reforms were also spurred on by the government’s desire to show off their flourishing modern city during World Cup in 1978 held in Buenos Aires.

⁴ This government was responsible for the genocide known today as *Los Desaparecidos*. During this period thousands of Argentines who were against the dictatorship or with leftist political values were kidnapped, imprisoned, tortured, killed or forced into exile in fear of their lives (Grimson and Kessler 2005:32).

These changes signified the beginning of a new era for the city, one where urban imaginaries of neoliberal progress emerged alongside traditional imaginaries of the Paris of the South. They were the first step in what would come to be seen as a shift towards North American economic models and approaches of urban planning. These structural and economic changes to Buenos Aires were accompanied by subsequent ideological and cultural changes. Beatriz Sarlo (2008) and Adrian Gorelik (2009) characterize this latter shift as the “North-Americanization period” in the urban history of Buenos Aires—following the Europeanization period that characterized the earlier history of the city. Primarily, this North-Americanization involved a transition from the gaze towards imaginaries and cultural models based on European cities and cultures towards those of North America. One of the major consequences of this North-Americanization period was that the more public and open urban models of European cities were rapidly replaced by the more privatized and closed consumer urban models characteristic of many North American cities. The widespread development of shopping malls and gated neighborhoods in Buenos Aires since the 1980s are two clear examples of this phenomenon.

The “Neoliberal ‘90s”

In the 1990s, under the presidency of Carlos Menem, Argentine society underwent a second and more intense phase of North-Americanization. In an attempt to curb the crippling hyperinflation plaguing the country following Argentina’s return to democracy in 1983, President Menem introduced a series of neoliberal free-market strategies based on North American economic models. These policies included the privatization of many public works, including the oil company YPF, telephone, electricity, gas, and water utilities, and the post office, as well as deregulation, and state disengagement in the domestic economy in support of free-market capitalism and consumer culture (Keeling 1999:18). He also pegged the Argentine peso to the US dollar in a 1:1 ratio in what was called the Convertibility Plan as a way of curbing inflation and

encouraging foreign investment in the nation. In an attempt to look towards the future instead of dwelling on the country's recent dark past, Menem hoped these policies would transform Buenos Aires into a modern, globalized city.

Although Menem did succeed in stabilizing inflation, by 2001 the country could no longer sustain a 1:1 ratio with the US dollar and entered into a major default. Typical of neoliberal models of economic development, the policies of the 1990s in Argentina widened the gap between rich and poor and contributed to the rise of an increasingly impoverished middle class. In the city of Buenos Aires, the polarizing effects of neoliberal reforms also had an impact on the urban landscape. As David Keeling writes, "Neoliberal reforms do not have neutral spatial impacts; their outcomes frequently are geographically and sectorally concentrated" (1999:19). These changes in society and urban life produced frustration and disillusionment with the state.

As Buenos Aires underwent these transformations, the economic stability of the nation was becoming increasingly precarious. This resulted in increased unemployment in the city and an increase in urban poverty. Many residents living in the areas where I conducted my research told me that the major increase in importation of goods from Asian markets caused local manufacturing industries to shut down, leaving many neighborhood residents unemployed. Older residents frequently mention that the rise in poverty and unemployment in the city brought about increasing insecurity in the streets and at home. Responding to fears of insecurity and urban decline, privatized and closed consumer urban spaces then became places to separate oneself from the rest of the city. Gorelik explains that the creation of privatized public spaces where guards and walls "protected" residents or consumers from the dangers of the city streets were increasingly desirable to wealthier urban residents but created sharp dividing lines between "haves" and "have-nots" throughout the city (Gorelik 2009:74). As the financial situation of the country worsened and poverty and unemployment rose during the 1990s, these closed consumer models of urban space created environments of social exclusion and a lack of accessible

public space in the city, since much of the middle class were excluded from these private, consumer spaces.

This phenomenon has been studied by many scholars (see Gorelik 1998, 2004; Guano 2002, 2004; Wortman 2003, 2012; Svampa 2004). Emanuela Guano's analysis of shopping malls as places of window-shopping for the middle classes instead of places of consumption offer another picture of middle-class marginalization. She writes,

As its "Parisian" centralized unity was becoming increasingly challenged, the Buenos Aires of neoliberalism was turning into a city of clusters, enclaves, and citadels. It was becoming a city where a significant part of the everyday practices of the population was increasingly being contained within the safe walls of *barrios cerrados* (gated neighborhoods), shopping malls, and country clubs—self-sufficient spatial formations that turn their back on their surroundings...shattering the apparent continuity of the modern urban experience. (2002:185)

Guano's article describes a middle class in crisis, divided between those still attempting to fit Buenos Aires into a first-world imaginary characterized by consumer culture, and those, discussed later in this chapter, who opted or were forced to search out other alternatives.

From Paris to Poverty: Discourses of "Latin-Americanization" in Buenos Aires

In a famous article "Ya Nada Será Igual" (Nothing Will Ever Be the Same) (2001), Beatriz Sarlo writes that one of the most dramatic consequences of Argentina's financial crisis was the loss of the three pillars that had previously defined a sense of what it meant to be Argentine—literacy, citizenship and secured employment. She explains that, for most of the 20th century, Argentines distinguished themselves from other Latin American nations by identifying themselves as a middle-class nation able to provide fundamental rights and services to all. As

these identity markers slipped away, Argentine society and urban imaginaries of the great city of Buenos Aires became fragmented and broken.

As economic instability increased in the city and surrounding areas and as the impending crisis approached, the lingering romantic imaginaries of Buenos Aires as the Paris of South America and the newer North American imaginaries of cities like Miami and Los Angeles were replaced by new realities of poverty, insecurity, and rapid urban decay. In the 1990s many intellectuals began to refer to the “Latin-Americanization” of Argentina as a way of speaking about this economic and social decline of the nation (see Keeling 1996:235). Argentine scholars Adrián Gorelik and Beatriz Sarlo are among the cultural critics that have made important contributions to this discussion (Gorelik 2009:61-84; Sarlo 2008:27-50). Through their essays on the changing economic, political, social, and cultural climate of Buenos Aires, these scholars aimed to construct realistic images of the current realities of Buenos Aires and the shifting urban imaginaries accompanying these transitions.

Academics and journalists were not the only ones to acknowledge these changes in the city. In the world of cinema, a new movement started to grow in the 1990s that came to be known as *Nuevo Cine Argentino* (New Argentine Cinema). In a time when the economic conditions of the country were starting to decline, these films began to produce images of Buenos Aires that spoke to the changing landscape of the city with its “growing unemployment, rising crime, and the expansion of the informal economy” (Page 2009:3). Unlike earlier politicized Latin American cinema movements the 1960s (like Third Cinema in Argentina and Cinema Novo in Brazil), these films did not have overtly political agendas but present an image of Argentina in a time of social alienation, economic decline, compromised social values, and in a stagnant state of apathy. In recent years, a few films from this movement have presented local images of tango culture, creating alternatives to dominant international tango narratives. Daniel Burak’s 2003 film *Bar, El Chino* offers one example. Instead of presenting glossy, staged images of tan-

go, the film is a docu-fiction featuring the making of a documentary about a tango bar in the working class Pompeya neighborhood. While attempting to document tango culture in this bar, the protagonists deal with everyday realities of making films during an economic crisis and are faced with the challenge of having to leave Argentina to look for work in Europe. In this film, El Chino's tango bar is presented as a nostalgic oasis of community and positive social values in a city that is falling apart.

Whether expressed through cinema, writing, or other media, the idea of Latin Americanization is in itself complex and must be understood alongside the complicated history of Argentina's image of itself as "European" nation, different than other Latin American nations. Today, certain sectors of the population—especially the upper middle and upper class, but also occasionally the white working class—continue to associate ideas of Latin-Americanness with imaginaries of decay, corruption and economic and political failure. These ideas of Latin-Americanization are often accompanied by xenophobic attitudes toward immigrants from bordering nations, racism, and constant fears associated with the perceived insecurity brought about by proximity to the urban poor. Since much of the urban poor have darker skin, their fears translate into blanket racism towards what they refer to as "the blacks" of the city or "los negros." Although I rarely encounter such people in the areas where I conduct my research, in my day to day life with taxi drivers, landlords, and other informal encounters, this unattractive side of Argentine culture appears frequently in everyday life and in mainstream media. These individuals generally are opposed to the current government and tend to prescribe to a romanticized past where Argentina was once great but is now a disaster. Reading between the lines of their rants, it's hard not to hear their longing for the imaginary of a "prosperous and white, Paris of South America."

However, over the last decade, the growth of new social and political movements affiliated with leftist ideologies are changing the ways some Argentines view their Latin American iden-

tity. These new meanings are associating the term with more pride than shame and are promoting new urban imaginaries rooted in contemporary local and pan-Latin American realities. In these movements, the negative connotations initially attributed to the term Latin Americanization are replaced with empowering discourses affiliated with Pan-Latin American social movements seeking social, political and cultural alternatives to what are perceived by many leftists to be the ineffective, destructive, colonizing and polarizing effects of neoliberal capitalism.

From First World Promises to Crisis and Beyond

Carlos Menem cannot be blamed entirely for the economic crash of 2001 and widespread social inequality present at the turn of the 21st century. However, his implementation of neoliberal free market reforms and privatizations are frequently blamed for exacerbating the polarizing divide between the haves and have-nots in the country. He is also blamed, especially by new leftist movements, for promoting a culture of consumerism and individualism characteristic of North America that many see as having been devastating for Argentine society. Perhaps most of all, he is criticized for producing a climate of consumer blindness in the country, turning his back to the recent dictatorship and making promises of a first world future that ultimately were unsustainable. A 1999 *Washington Post* article published around election time illustrates the reputation Menem had gained towards the end of his second term by describing the platform of his opposition.

In a country where a decade of reforms made the rich richer and the poor poorer, [Fernando] de la Rúa is promising the right things to the right people. To Argentine yuppies who strut through Buenos Aires' new high-rise financial district, he has promised to rein in government spending and slash the national debt. To legions of unemployed workers who lost their jobs during privatizations, he has promised a greater role for the state in regulating the free market and more spending on social services. At the same

time, he has scored points with everyone by promising investigations into government corruption and excess--even pledging to sell the presidential jet, Tango 01, as a symbol of fiscal prudence. "We need to end impunity and stop corruption," de la Rúa insisted in a recent interview. "By dealing with corruption, we'll find the money to pay for programs to fight poverty and create social justice." (Faiola 1999)

Fernando de la Rúa, a former mayor of Buenos Aires of the radical party, did indeed win the presidency in 1999, but started his presidency in a nation full of debt, corruption, unemployment, and political instability.⁵ When the economic crash finally occurred in 2001, involving a radical devaluation of the peso and the freezing of bank accounts to avoid capital flight (known as El Corralito), de la Rúa was forced out of office. The public demonstrations including protests and riots that led to his eventual resignation came to be known for the rallying chant "Que se vayan todos" (Away With Them All"). Since many angry and disillusioned Argentines took to the streets banging pots and pans, these protests are also referred to as the Cacerolazo (from the Spanish word cacerola meaning casserole pot).

Following a period of extreme economic and political instability, the leftist president Nestor Kirchner was elected in 2003 and governed the nation until 2007 when his wife Cristina Kirchner took office. Associated with the movement known as the New Latin American left—not nearly as radical as the political platforms of presidents such as Evo Morales and Hugo Chavez—Nestor and Cristina Kirchner fought to bring Argentina out of a state of crisis with a political platform that looked towards the working and middle classes of society and stood firmly against

⁵ Radicalism in Argentina goes back to the beginning of the 20th century when the radical party developed in hopes of providing political representation to the growing middle class of the country. Initially disappointed with the "uncivilized" nature of the influx of lower class European immigrants to the nation at the turn of the century (the elites had hoped for a more "sophisticated" immigrant population), the ruling elite had implemented strict education policies which assisted in establishing a growing middle class of first and second generation immigrants. Since Argentina previously had been governed by a ruling aristocratic elite, the radicals offered a voice to this growing middle class. Today, radicalism continues to represent the middle class.

the neoliberal agendas of Carlos Menem. As part of their political agenda, the Kirchners have also promoted a politics of memory and social justice, opening the vaults of history by prosecuting those involved in the crimes of the military dictatorship, promoting memory politics, and encouraging a *Nunca Mas* (Never Again) motto in relation to the dictatorship. The Kirchners also encouraged citizens to become involved in politics and to advocate for social justice further fomenting trends in leftist activism that had already begun to grow in reaction to the 1990s and the crash. The Argentine political youth organization *La Cámpora*, named after former Peronist president Héctor José Cámpora, was created in 2003 and has been particularly successful in mobilizing young Argentines to become involved in political organizing (for more on Héctor José Cámpora see Barrett, Chavez and Rodríguez-Garavito 2008:161). It has grown considerably during Cristina Kirchner's presidency. Despite these changes, Argentina continues to suffer economic instability that has for so long plagued the country.

Political and Social Responses to Neoliberalism and Crisis in the City

By the beginning of the 21st century Buenos Aires appeared to be a broken city. Both national and urban imaginaries had been fragmented, unemployment and economic instability were a common reality and many of the urban developments of the 1980s and 1990s, intended to improve society, were inaccessible to much of the population. The youth populations of Buenos Aires, many who came from middle-class backgrounds and were highly educated thanks to public education, struggled to find work in the city and were forced to seek work outside of the country in places like Spain and the US. Following the 2001, crash disenchantment with the state, especially among youth, became one of the most common sentiments associated by Argentines with their country (Silva 2003). In 2004 Argentine sociologist Alejandro Grimson said that what bonded Argentines to each other at this time was not the steak, soccer, or tango referenced frequently as shared symbols of Argentine culture but the shared experiences of

economic and political disintegration that characterized the last three decades of the 20th century. He noted,

Perhaps we can affirm that in recent experiences, Argentines share hyperinflation (as economic disintegration of society) and genocide (as political disintegration of society)... The paradox being that a group of people sharing basically what are experiences of disintegration can have in common the fact that they lived through these processes and were affected by them.⁶ (Grimson 2005:191)

Grimson's article, published three years after the crash, is representative of the general pessimistic tone in popular and scholarly analyses of the city in what has come to be known as the post-crisis period. Today, in 2014, although most people are better off than they were ten years ago, instability and insecurity are still a part of everyday urban realities. Making a decent and steady living in the city is a challenge for most, and nearly impossible for many others.

Nonetheless, even in the midst of major economic depression, Buenos Aires has never stopped being a center of political, cultural and intellectual production. In fact, the social responses to the neoliberal policies of the 1990s and the 2001 crisis are now referenced worldwide as some of the most organized and developed reactions to neoliberal capitalism.⁷ The most notable of these responses have included: 1) a series of factory takeovers resulting in the creation of horizontally-run workers cooperatives; 2) the rise of neighborhood political assemblies to address local neighborhood issues in times of crisis, 3) the development of neighborhood *trueques* (exchanges) that provided alternative exchange economies in times of economic hardship; and 4) massive social demonstrations and organized movements fighting to raise awareness about social inequality and unemployment, the most notable example being that of

⁶ This and all subsequent translations by author.

⁷ One example of this is the 2004 documentary film *The Take* about the recovered factories made by renowned social activist Naomi Klein and Avi Lewis. David Harvey also mentions these factory takeovers in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2007).

los piqueteros (the unemployed workers movements). Utilizing similar models as these more economically-oriented projects, many cultural movements have appeared looking to establish alternatives strategies for cultural production and socialization in the “neoliberalizing” city.

In his essay “Beyond Neoliberalism?” Phillip Oxhorn writes that, looking beyond the massive protests that forced 4 presidents out of office, the social responses to the 2001 crisis in Argentina

mark the beginning of a variety of new forms of mobilization in Argentina that offer the promise of a deeper, more inclusionary democracy... These organized activities, which ranged from women’s and human rights groups, to community organizations, organizations of the unemployed and mobilizations to increase government accountability, began to go beyond simply rejecting neoliberal policies and the politicians who promoted them. While still a long way from congealing into a genuine alternative to neoliberalism, these various collective activities began to actively involve Argentines in new activities that began to redefine the quality of Argentine democracy in positive, proactive ways that were often intended to help overcome the economic hard-ship caused by the crisis. The Argentine example also highlights how neoliberalism has contributed to sowing the seeds of its own transformation, if not downfall. As Goldfrank points out in his chapter, anti-neoliberalism has become the new “common enemy,” replacing the dictatorships of old and offering the Left a new target for mobilization that can serve as the launching point for winning electoral power. (Oxhorn 2009:225-226)

Collectively these responses forged yet another layer of imaginaries on top of those of economic crisis, political terrorism, and the lingering romantic images of the past. Although much can be learned about Buenos Aires from seeking out and analyzing shared experiences of disintegration, nowadays just as much can be learned from studying the imaginaries, practices and dis-

courses revolving around processes of social re-integration that have played such an integral and transformative role in urban life over the past decade.

From Grassroots Leftist Mobilization to a Post-Neoliberal Turn in National Politics

There are many ways to think and talk about the different political and cultural movements arising from the transformations of Argentine society in the 1990s and following the 2001 crash. They have been called anti-capitalist movements, anti-neoliberal movements, and/or post-neoliberal movements. Whichever terminology one prefers, they all describe similar processes that involve criticizing capitalism—and particularly neoliberal capitalism—as the dominant ideology for Argentine society.

It is important to point out that many anti-capitalist movements in Argentina originated as grassroots initiatives in the late 1990s out of economic desperation more than political idealism. However, the leftist turn in national politics over the past decade and the rise of organizations such as *La C mpora* (the organization of youth activism) have since brought many of these concepts and debates into the political forefront of contemporary Argentine politics. Even with a left leaning national government, tensions between neoliberal and post-neoliberal ideologies of city life and urban planning continue to affect the daily lives of citizens living in Buenos Aires. These tensions have increased once again following the election of mayor Mauricio Macri in 2007 who, similar to Menem, has his political eye on modernizing the city of Buenos Aires using neoliberal models and strategies of urban development. The consequences of his urban cultural politics—resulting in many autonomous and independent political and cultural initiatives— will be discussed in the last section of this chapter.

In 2007, Alejandro Grimson and Gabriel Kessler wrote that Argentina was entering into a period that could be characterized as post-neoliberal. Grimson and Kessler did not mean that neoliberalism had come to an end or was anywhere near coming to an end, but instead explain,

Post-neoliberal not because the economic and social consequences of neoliberal politics have been overcome—quite the contrary, they are in plain sight—and not because a new national narrative or way of fitting into the world at large has appeared. It is post-neoliberal because neoliberalism in Argentina in particular, and in the Southern Cone in general, no longer has the weight that being the “only way” lent it for so long, with the capacity to establish the bounds within which the socio-political imagination functioned. Post-neoliberal also because collective action and changes in political imagery now suggest a reaction to the negative effects of neoliberalism. (Grimson & Kessler 2007:191)

They continue to explain that they use the term post-neoliberal instead of an entirely new word because they see the phase as a kind of transitional narrative emerging from the political and economic events of recent years.

But what exactly does this term post-neoliberal mean in the context of Argentina and how has post-neoliberalism been understood and practiced at the crossroads of culture, politics and socialization in the city of Buenos Aires over the past two decades? In order to answer these questions, I will look first at some of the founding ideologies behind anti-capitalist movements, and then will analyze their application in more detail in the landscape of Buenos Aires.

Anti-Capitalism or Post-Neoliberalism?: Ideologies of the New Latin American Left

There are many ways to think and talk about the different political and cultural movements arising from the transformations of Argentine society in the 1990s and following the 2001 crash. They can and have been called anti-capitalist movements, anti-neoliberal movements, and/or post-neoliberal movements. They also could and have been affiliated with the growing New Latin American Left and with broader global movements reacting to capitalism and neoliberalism. Whichever terminology one prefers, all these terms describe similar processes that in-

volve criticizing capitalism—and particularly neoliberal capitalism—as the dominant ideology for Argentine society.

In 2011, Argentine sociologist Ezequiel Adamovsky published a book entitled *Anti-Capitalism: The New Generation of Emancipatory Movements*. The book is intended to be a guide or handbook to contemporary anti-capitalist initiatives and is helpful in clearly outlining the objectives and strategies shaping these movements. While this book is intended to be prescriptive and not descriptive (intended as a manifesto and not an ethnographic analysis), his clear discussions of the values of new leftist movements are helpful for framing some of the issues I deal with through ethnographic analysis in this dissertation. Especially since Adamovsky is Argentine and has spent his career studying the transformations of the middle classes in Argentina, I take his book as a theoretical framework onto which I will later apply my own ethnographic examples.

In the third chapter of the book Adamovsky outlines what he sees as the differences between traditional leftist movements and those of what he calls “The New Left.” I would like to briefly address a few of these concepts because they accurately describe many of the ideological foundations driving leftist political and cultural movements in Buenos Aires today. As I will explore in future chapters, these ideologies have had an important impact on how tango music practices are conceptualized, imagined and practiced in the neighborhoods of the city today.

TAKING POWER?

In this first category Adamovsky refers to the fact that New Leftists are less interested in taking power in any traditional sense because they see power itself as a problematic symptom of capitalism. As he writes:

Power doesn't have a center: it is present everywhere and manifests itself in a thousand ways. Power isn't a thing or an institution, but a continual process of separating people and taking away their ability to run their own lives. Therein lies the difficulty of “taking

power”: taking control of the State doesn’t mean taking power...The new anti-capitalism rejects the idea of “taking power” not only because it’s not possible, but also because sometimes it is undesirable. ⁸

Whereas traditional debates between the right and the left in Argentina continue to play out in party politics, this other understanding of power is very present within new leftist cultural movements in Buenos Aires today. In my experience in the city, I have frequently seen how activists frame their objectives around the need to provide alternatives to mainstream culture and mainstream systems of power, instead of infiltrating those systems. This does not mean that cultural activists refuse to participate in events organized by and for the mainstream, but focus instead on generating parallel alternatives to those systems.

AUTONOMY

Here Adamovsky introduces the idea of autonomy as a methodology of resisting the negative effects of power. He explains that the word power can mean two opposite things.

As a noun, power refers to the social relationship of command and obedience, or having power over others. As a verb, power refers to the capacity to create and develop activities; it is what we are capable of doing.

He uses the term autonomy to refer to the act of resisting power—the noun—and creating alternatives which instead embrace the idea of power as a verb.

New anti-capitalism tries to encourage this resistance with the aim of developing our power to act freely...Each time an autonomous space is created, a place for shared life, it opens a crack in the capitalist system...When workers organize themselves to defend their rights; when peasants take over land; when squatters convert an abandoned house

⁸ This and all subsequent quotations in this section come from chapter three of Adamovsky’s book. As this is an ebook, fixed pagination is not provided.

into a cultural center; when indigenous people defend their rights to conserve their traditions; when the unemployed develop self-managed economic projects; in all of these cases, resistance against capitalism becomes a struggle for autonomy... The politics of new anti-capitalism seek to increase and strengthen our ability for self-determination, that's to say, for autonomy.

Again, the cultural movements I have witnessed and participated in while in Buenos Aires today follow similar guidelines. Autonomy, frequently expressed through the term *autogestión* (or self-management) has become somewhat of a mantra for neighborhood tango movements as well as for other independent cultural movements in the city today. Although often *autogestión* rises out of necessity (lack of funds or government support for given initiatives or activities), it has also become a banner for these movements, signifying their ability and dedication to creating alternatives using grassroots means.

REVOLUTION IS TODAY

Here Adamovsky explains that the concept of revolution has shifted greatly in recent years. Whereas revolution in classic leftist movements was understood as a major overthrow of society resulting in a shift of power, contemporary understandings of revolution are shifting to embrace an understanding of the term that is ongoing and set in a gradual present tense transformation of society. He writes,

For the new anti-capitalism the revolution isn't a future event that we must wait for. The revolution is in an ongoing process, which occurs every day, each time men and women develop new ways of resisting power and create new spaces of autonomy. Each time they create self-managed, noncommercial, and egalitarian spaces, the revolution is taking place. The revolution results from what the community of struggling produces, and establishment of new social relations.

This is another concept embraced by the cultural movements I have experienced in Buenos Aires. In these movements, process becomes more important than product. Also, since instability has become a way of life in contemporary Argentina, cultural and political initiatives tend to focus on short term goals and present tense events rather than trying to plan events far into the future. This concept of prioritizing process over product can be seen in the final chapter of this dissertation “The Rise and Fall of the Almagro Tango Club.”

HORIZONTALISM

Horizontalism is perhaps one of the most central concepts to have arisen out of contemporary Latin American leftist movements. The concept refers to a shift in power from a hierarchical to a horizontal and cooperative structuring of organization. It is grounded in the idea that community-driven and cooperatively organized institutions and organizations will bypass the need for hierarchical power. The occupied factory cooperatives offer one clear example of this process.

Adamovsky writes,

The new anti-capitalism knows that if the idea is to create a more equal, autonomous, free world based on mutual solidarity, one can't start by fostering the opposite values.

The means should coincide with the end. The community of those who struggle—including their strategies and organizational structures—should anticipate the kind of world they want to build.

Horizontalism has become another banner of many cultural movements in Buenos Aires today. In the chapter on the Elvino Vardaro Orchestra I explore how ideologies of horizontalism shape music making practices in the context of a neighborhood orchestra.

NETWORK STRUCTURES

Adamovsky's understanding of network structures refers to the need to seek out new networks of support and communication between different horizontal and leftist movements on a local and global level. Following principles of horizontality, networks do not have a hierarchy but instead are horizontal platforms where creative approaches to activism can be shared. He writes:

A network is a series of voluntary relationships and connections between people or autonomous organizations...A network is established when participating groups or node groups find that they have a common interest and they can exchange information or resources or act coordinately...Central structures discourage local creativity and innovation, because everyone is waiting for things to come from the top. Networks are more sensitive to realities and local needs and facilitate the creation of alliances that are more flexible and pluralistic.

My exploration of neighborhood tango festivals in chapter four offers one example of how the current tango community has utilized network structures to help support and expand individual neighborhood and venue-based scenes into a larger united independent tango movement. These networks are heavily facilitated by social media networks, and predominantly through Facebook.

MULTIPLICITY

Here Adamovsky makes an important distinction between the old and new leftist movements explaining that new leftist movements have a more flexible and inclusive understanding of the subject of societal transformation. He writes,

The traditional left preferred to trust the industrial "working class" as the historic agent capable of leading the struggle against the bourgeoisie...The new anti-capitalism

conceives the subject as something more undefined, mobile, plural and ubiquitous than the traditional Left. Capitalism affects most human beings, although in very different ways.

In Argentina, this multiplicity is experienced in part due to the disintegration of clear class barriers as a result of the recent decades of economic crisis. Furthermore, as I will discuss later in this chapter, the middle-class affiliation with popular culture starting in the 1990s also blurred the lines between class barriers in many cultural contexts. Ultimately, while most of the movements I study primarily involve subjects that could be categorized as middle class, they also involve individuals from across the economic spectrum who share an interest in similar forms and places for cultural expression.

CREATIVITY AND HAPPINESS

Adamovsky concludes his list reflecting on some general transformations in activist culture in the context of new leftist movements. Unlike traditional leftists, he points out that the new left is less interested in militaristic and warlike forms of resistance and instead is interested in utilizing creative means to achieve the goals of the movement in ways that affect positive change in the lives of participants. Furthermore, he writes about how within new leftist movements, artistic practices often become integral elements of activism. He writes:

As the revolution is *today*, for the new anti-capitalism happiness is not something that is discovered or will occur when we get to the end of the road. The *community* of activists *itself* has a happy, satisfying, and personally gratifying ambience... This new activist culture is also reflected in the close relationship between *art* and *politics*. The “warlike” activist culture of the traditional Left reduced using art in the best of cases as an ‘accessory.’ But as the main tasks of activists is to create a new world *here* and *now*, the new anti-capitalism shares the work of artists. *Creativity* is something they both share.

Political art groups have played a fundamental role in many of the new anti-capitalist struggles. The anti-capitalist movement increasingly uses art in popular education, to send messages, and during direct actions [emphasis in original].

Here I would argue that not only do political movements utilize art, but leftist ideologies enter into complex relationships with artists in their practices, resulting in artistic movements that have both artistic and political objectives. Thus, just as political ideologies can inform artistic practices, ways of thinking about and making art can also inform modes of political action. I address this balance between happiness (conceived more broadly through feelings of belonging, locality and community) and activism (challenging stereotypes of tango culture and neoliberalizing cultural politics of live music culture) throughout this dissertation. For two examples, see the exploration of urban intimacy as activism in chapter four as well as in chapter five where I discuss horizontalism as a recipe for cooperative urban socialization in the context of the Elvino Vardaro string orchestra. Chapter three, which deals with sensory filmmaking in neighborhood tango bars offers another window into understanding how political projects intertwine with desires to create spaces of belonging, sentimentality and urban intimacy in the city, spaces that ultimately lead to feelings of happiness in the way Adamovsky describes this term.

Post-Neoliberalism as an Urban Imaginary

This brief detour into Adamovsky's anti-capitalist manifesto provides a window into some of the ideologies shaping leftist movements in Argentina today. In my own work I have chosen to use the term post-neoliberal over anti-capitalist to describe this movement as it is developing in Argentina, aligning myself with the definition of the term offered by Grimson and Kessler. What I like about their conceptualization of post-neoliberalism is their emphasis on the changing political imaginary arising out of the social responses to the negative elements of neoliberalism. In line with Adamovsky's manifesto, this approach emphasizes a growing desire for alternative ac-

tion, rather than focusing on radical movements wanting to do away with capitalism completely. Especially in the case of Buenos Aires, the idea of post-neoliberalism seems more useful than anti-capitalism because many of these movements position themselves as direct reactions to the kind of politics, culture and economic models promoted in the 1990s. In this text I choose to treat post-neoliberalism as an imaginary carried through complex webs of visual, sonic, affective and discursive representations that locate individuals and shape their actions in their urban worlds. Thinking of post-neoliberalism as an imaginary allows me to focus on how musical sounds and practices help create experiences of the city that feel post-neoliberal and bring these imaginaries to life. This approach shifts the emphasis off thinking of Adamovsky's points as direct prescriptive recipes of social action and focuses instead on how these concepts inform and create meaning within the everyday practices of messy urban worlds.

Remembering Andreas Huyssen's words, "What we think about a city and how we perceive it informs the ways we act in it" (2008:3), my time in Buenos Aires has shown me that post-neoliberalism as an urban imaginary can serve as a powerful recipe for shaping everyday life and everyday forms of social action. Most importantly, understanding post-neoliberalism as an idea that informs politics, culture and everyday life with new ideologies and practices allows us to contextualize post-neoliberal practices alongside the much more complex everyday realities of modern cities. The post-neoliberal imaginary does not include a total rejection of capitalism or assume that post-neoliberal activists live—or attempt to live—entirely outside of neoliberal systems. Instead, it becomes a way to explore certain practices and elements of urban life which seek alternatives to urban models promoted by neoliberal capitalism.

Working with musicians and activists in Argentina, I have found that our lives are frequently intertwined with products and processes connected to neoliberal capitalism. When financially possible, we purchase televisions or new computers, buy imported clothes and occasionally attend movies in the mall. When given the chance, most musicians jump at the oppor-

tunity to go on tour with tango dance companies to Europe, Asia, or North America and are happy when they can buy instruments, strings, gear, clothes and other products from abroad. However, most musicians I know tend to identify themselves more with projects like developing independent cultural movements, resisting dominant stereotypes of tango culture promoted through these same traveling shows, and reclaiming neighborhood spaces as the locus of socialization in the city. This is less about being anti-capitalist and more about being post-neoliberal, being aware of the negative elements of neoliberal capitalism but interested in pursuing and promoting alternatives to those systems as a part of their everyday lives. Rejecting all manifestations of neoliberal capitalism in a modern city like Buenos Aires would be nearly impossible and is not something that the people I know and work with seem interested in doing. What they *are* interested in is looking for, generating, and promoting alternative experiences and images of music making with the goal of improving artistic and social life of this city.

In my own research I am particularly interested in how these concepts have aided in constructing new imaginaries of social integration and urban regeneration in contemporary Buenos Aires. These are far from fixed recipes of social action but instead offer networks of meaning from which to build new ways of experiencing, conceptualizing and acting in the city. In treating post-neoliberalism as another urban imaginary—and not only as a political orientation—I will explore how these ideas are informing cultural practices in the city today.

Cultural Responses to Crisis and Neoliberalism in the City

In Buenos Aires, the political and economic turmoil of the 1990s had a particularly strong impact on redefining the political, social and cultural habits of a generation of middle-class youth growing up in these times of economic instability, social fragmentation and crisis. In her analysis of the middle-class youth in the 1990s, Ana Wortman writes:

If today's younger generations have to incorporate themselves into a labor market distinct from their elders, characterized by instability, under-the-table employment, de-unionization, flexibility, etc., clearly their understanding of social life, politics and culture will also be distinct from the established models of prior decades. As a result, the use of free, unproductive and unprofitable time starts to be administered in new ways. If the social actions of older generations looked towards future and long term horizons, those of young people, and also of contemporary adults, are now based in a reality of the present and the immediate.⁹ (2003:88)

For this generation of middle-class citizens growing up with high levels of education (university continues to be free in Argentina), with few prospects on their financial horizons and a general lack of stability in their everyday lives, leftist and anti-neoliberal cultural and political movements have offered an attractive and financially accessible way of socializing in the city.

Alongside the more overtly political responses to the crisis (like the *piqueteros* movement), cultural movements have become a popular way for middle-class youth to express their frustrations with neoliberal capitalism and the mainstream popular culture of the 1990s. These movements have resulted in the creation of neighborhood libraries, underground cultural centers and music venues, community theater movements, artisanal fairs in plazas and parks, and other forms of D.I.Y. (or Do It Yourself) culture. With a lack of financial resources and an interest in non-consumer culture, many of these cultural movements have adopted bohemian, underground and grassroots aesthetics (Cerviño 2012:134). They have also emphasized the importance of creating accessible spaces of socialization in the city and providing alternatives to con-

⁹ *“Si las nuevas generaciones deben incorporarse a un mercado de trabajo distinto al de sus mayores, caracterizado por la inestabilidad, el trabajo en negro, la desindustrialización, la flexibilidad, etc., es evidente que el modo de percibir lo social, lo político y lo cultural va a ser distinto a los modos establecidos décadas atrás. En todo caso el uso del tiempo libre, de ocio, de lo no productivo y no rentable se va a administrar de nuevas formas. Si la proyección de la acción social de las generaciones mayores estaba pautada por un horizonte a futuro y largo plazo, el de los jóvenes, aunque también el de los adultos contemporáneos está atravesado por el presente y lo inmediato.”*

sumer urban spaces like shopping malls and expensive movie theaters. As well, many middle-class youth movements have begun to identify themselves with places and aesthetics associated with *lo popular*, or ideas of what they see as popular or anti-bourgeois culture.

This trend is not specific to leftist movements but can be understood as part of a much larger cultural trend in the 1990s: the revalorization of *lo popular*. Sociologist Pablo Alabarces suggests that revitalized interests in imaginaries and discourses of popular culture have grown primarily out of the recently impoverished middle class need to redefine their identity in an increasingly divided urban landscape (Alabarces 2011).

A Middle Class Cultural Shift toward “*lo Popular*”

Faced with widespread unemployment and economic models that increasingly divided the city’s “haves” and “have-nots,” many middle-class citizens in the 1990s began to seek out new cultural identities in the city. Among those middle-class citizens not benefitting from or supportive of the neoliberalizing transformations in the city, many began to look “down” to the popular classes to build new senses of identity instead of looking “up” as they had traditionally done throughout the 20th century. Pablo Alabarces uses the term *giro plebeyo* (the plebeianist shift/plebeian turn) to refer to this process. As he explains,

Plebeianization designates the process through which goods, practices, customs, and objects traditionally defined for their belonging, origin or use by the popular classes, become appropriated (at times literally expropriated), shared and used by the middle and upper classes.¹⁰ (Alabarces 2011:119, in Liska 2013)

¹⁰ *La plebeyización designa el proceso por el cual bienes, prácticas, costumbres, y objetos tradicionalmente marcados por su pertenencia, origen o uso por parte de las clases populares, pasan a ser apropiados (a veces literalmente expropiados), compartidos, y usados por las clases medias y altas.*

Prior to the leftist political agendas of the current Kirchner government, this wave of “cultural plebeianism” began reshaping not only what kinds of culture were being practiced but also the aesthetics and ideologies surrounding the place of culture in contemporary Argentine society. These transformations occurred across the cultural spectrum and in the arts were particularly noticeable in the musical genres and practices that became popular during this period.

Alabarces is only one among many scholars to have noted this cultural change in the 1990s. Argentine historian Ezequiel Adamovsky finishes his extensive book on the Argentine middle class mentioning that since the middle of the 1990s, Argentine culture produced an unprecedented confluence between the tastes and styles of middle and lower class forms of cultural expression (2009:491). While this shift is associated with the middle classes at large, middle-class youth cultures in Buenos Aires have played a particularly central role in seeking out new forms of urban experience that reflect the values of *lo popular*. As a generation growing up with the political turmoil, social fragmentation and economic instability, many young people have turned to social and cultural practices that not only looked to the popular (working) classes but also sought cultural and political affinities with the past. Alabarces describes these values as being *neocontestatario* (neo-rebellious), *neonacionalista* (neo-nationalist), and *neobarrial* (neo-neighborhood-based) (2008). The latter two terms are especially rooted in powerful social images of Argentina in classic Peronist times, evoking an imagined golden age of abundant employment, solidarity between workers and a world these young generations only know through the stories passed down from their parents. (Alabarces 2008:46).

In music, the growth of certain rock styles known as rock *rolinga* and rock *chabón* (a colloquial slang meaning guy or dude) or rock *barrial* (from the neighborhood) and the middle-class interest in cumbia music culture are frequently referenced and analyzed as examples of the aesthetic revalorization of popular culture among young people (Alabarces, Salerno, Silba, Spataro 2008; Seman and Vila 2012). However, rock and cumbia were not the only genres af-

ected by these cultural changes. As Argentine ethnomusicologist Mercedes Liska argues in her work, tango culture had also experienced a return to the “popular” in the 1990s. She explains that the revival of tango in the 1990s shared many commonalities with the rise and aesthetics of the rock movements of the same era including the revalorization of values from other time periods in Argentine history (namely the 1940s), the revival of nationalist discourses, the transfer of politics into everyday spaces, and the revival of neighborhood culture (Liska 2013:12). In fact part of what made tango attractive to young people in the 1990s was the fact that it was culturally associated with working class values and a Buenos Aires predating times of dictatorship and the contemporary crisis, a perfect example of a cultural revival rooted in the social imaginaries of Peronist times.

In support of Liska’s claims, my research explores how this cultural return to *lo popular* contributed to reviving youth interest in tango music in the late 1990s. As I illustrate in the following chapter, tango’s revival as an expression of popular culture among youth around the turn of the 21st century was experienced in a variety of different ways. Common throughout the new tango youth cultures emerging during this time was a shared affiliation with both neonationalist (those described by Alabarces) and post-neoliberal ideologies of cultural production. However, whereas some tango musicians began revitalizing the genre through the use of aesthetics of counterculture and rebellion (what Alabarces would call *neocontestatario*), others built new tango cultures on top of the social aesthetics and imaginaries of neighborhood life (what Alabarces called *neobarrial*). My research focuses on the latter. The last section of this chapter locates these neighborhood tango revivals within broader cultural and political neighborhood-based movements arising during this time period.

Neighborhood Culture and Middle-Class Identity at the Turn of the 21st Century

Beyond the politicization of middle-class cultural movements and an affiliation with aesthetics and ideologies of the popular, another notable cultural transformation during the 1990s and 2000s has been a symbolic and geographical revitalization of the neighborhood as a place of cultural production and political activism in the city. This cultural and political return to the neighborhood can be understood as a product of grassroots initiatives looking for alternatives to the social and economic polarization of Menemist times as well as government initiatives to rebuild senses of urban citizenship through neighborhood political and social networks following the social fragmentation post-dictatorship. Furthermore, given the economic conditions of the 1990s and early 2000s, the neighborhood has become a place of identity construction for the marginalized and struggling middle classes at a time when national and urban narratives were fragmented and polarized. As Jesus Martin-Barbero has theorized, neighborhoods become particularly important places of identity construction in times of economic crisis because they allowed for the creation of social identities not reliant on one's professional ties (ties often compromised during times of crisis) (1987:217). Whereas Martin-Barbero wrote this in reference to popular or working class identities, similar claims can be made for middle-class neighborhoods over the past decades of economic insecurity.

Within middle-class neighborhoods, revitalized discourses and representations of neighborhood life in the 1990s and 2000s began arising in multiple ways. On the one hand, nostalgic representations of neighborhood life begin to arise in films, writing, and popular discourse. In many works these representations function to create an escapist counter-imaginary to the perceived Latin-Americanization of the rest of the city—a refuge in the good European values of the city in times of crisis and decay. In these cases, the neighborhood often comes to be defined against images of urban decay, poverty and insecurity (see Gravano's discussion of *Barrio Sí*,

Villa [o Asentamiento] No in Gravano 2003).¹¹ However, in other spheres involving community cultural organizations and neighborhood bars and cultural centers, organizers began to use practices, discourses and references to neighborhood life to help reclaim neighborhoods as places of cultural belonging in a city in crisis. In these contexts, the neighborhood became a place where alternative forms of socialization could be fostered and sustained. Instead of defining neighborhood against the slums or insecurity, these movements began defining neighborhood culture against the alienating and exclusionary effects of North-American neoliberal cultural models and the resulting fragmentation of downtown urban space. Neighborhood tango music movements as well as the community theater movement both serve as good examples (for more on neighborhood theater movements see Sánchez Salinas 2014). Through these kinds of movements, ideas of the neighborhood became less escapist and saturated in fear and more motivated by a desire for activism and social reintegration.

The re-articulation of neighborhood imaginaries has become significant as a stage for both popular culture revivals and post-neoliberal activism. In an attempt to frame contemporary narratives of the neighborhood between ideas of nostalgia, escapism and activism, this last section will emphasize how local urban imaginaries as products of public discourses and culture and lived social experiences have contributed to the construction of urban life. It will set the stage for understanding how tango emerges alongside other efforts to re-articulate urban identities and urban activism through imaginaries and discourses of barrio life.

Privatization, Decentralization and a Cultural Move From the Centers to the Barrios

Throughout downtown Buenos Aires, the privatization of goods and services and decentralization of the economy over the past decades led to the building of shopping malls, fast food

¹¹ Another example of this would be films that represented the middle-class move into private housing communities on the outskirts of the city, overcome with fear at the perceived insecurities of public space.

restaurants, transnational chain stores, and large-scale entertainment centers. In a recent analysis of New York, urbanist Sharon Zukin explains that these kinds of changes to the urban landscape reduce spaces of cultural consumption and socialization in downtown areas and replace them with the fast-paced markets of consumerism. “Familiarity,” she states, “is provided by institutional context rather than social interaction: the form of consuming is vital, not the cultural activity of consumption” (1991:197). Anthropologist Marc Augé has also merged the idea of the changing commercial and transitory nature of many urban spaces in recent decades with his idea of the creation of non-spaces. He explains, “If a place can be defined as relational, historical, and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place” (1995:77).

Certainly some of what Augé termed non-spaces could transform into places of local significance. Regardless, these changes to the urban landscape in Buenos Aires began to push many cultural practices away from the city centers and eventually out of the public (government-sponsored) spheres. Cinema offers one example of a cultural practice affected by these changes. Traditionally, downtown Buenos Aires used to house a large selection of important and iconic cinemas, many of which closed during the economic struggles of the late 1980s. In the 1990s, American theater chains housed in malls and multiplex theaters featuring commercial films relocated cinema experience for city residents and moved cinema’s center away from downtown (Aguilar 2008:185).

These neoliberal consumer-based transformations to the city landscape were occurring at the same time as many middle-and-working class citizens were falling further down the economic spiral and becoming marginalized in city life. As such, the imaginaries associated with downtown areas of the city came to signify these tensions created between first and third world realities. In addition, major commercial shopping malls and cinemas were not financially accessible to much of the population (Guano 2004). In need of new imaginaries from which to con-

struct narratives of urban belonging and forms of socialization, many middle-class residents began reviving the neighborhoods of the city as places of cultural production and social belonging.

Neighborhood Imaginaries of Nostalgia and Social Exclusion in Film

The revival of neighborhood imaginaries was manifested in artistic discourse and became represented in a variety of ways. The New Argentine Cinema movement began portraying images of urban life in contexts of social alienation, fragmentation and decay. Sophie Dufays argues that,

Contemporary popular Latin American cinema, like the films of the New Argentine Cinema...insisted in representing the city and its periphery (the suburbs) as no-places where constant mobility, transit, fast-paced life, noise and violence impede the function of memory and break down social and family ties; not allowing for the creation of *places*.¹² (2011:619)

Juxtaposed to these images of social alienation and societal fragmentation, many films within this movement evoked narratives of neighborhood life as a symbol of nostalgia and of the disappearing values of times past. Films such as *Bar*, *El Chino* (2003), *Luna de Avellaneda* (2004) and *Herencia* (2001) all evoke images of the barrio as the repository of wholesome and authentic values of a romantic and irrevocable past in times of crisis and change.

However, while these films evoke the neighborhood imaginaries in the context of romantic nostalgia, other films have chosen to show the darker ways that neighborhood imaginaries and identities are used to separate and exclude, rather than integrate and create a sense of inclusive belonging. The film *Bolivia* (2001) set in the San Telmo neighborhood showed how poor-

¹² “*El cine latinoamericano contemporáneo popular, como los filmes del Nuevo Cine Argentino... insisten en retratar la ciudad y su periferia (el suburbio) como no-lugares donde la movilidad constante, el tránsito, la velocidad, el ruido y la violencia impiden que funcione una memoria y deshacen los vínculos sociales y familiares; no permiten identificar lugares.*”

ly Latin American immigrants were being treated and how they were being excluded from neighborhood life. In her 2012 article about the film, *El Hombre de al Lado* (The Guy Next Door) (2012), Argentine film scholar Gabriela Copertari discusses how contradicting ideas of what it means to be a *vecino* or neighbor are performed throughout the film. Copertari writes about how the two protagonists in this film live next to each other but have very different understandings of what it means to live in a neighborhood and be a neighbor. Referring to the social exclusion and individualism promoted by neoliberal cultural models, she explains that the wealthier middle-class protagonist of the film values his privacy and views his neighbor who is from the lower middle class, as “the guy next door,” implying otherness and difference. In contrast, his neighbor, who repeatedly crosses these social boundaries and attempts to establish social and neighborly bonds, hints at a more “popular” and socially integrated conception of neighborhood life. Once again we see a social critique of the tensions in urban imaginaries in the city—the wealthier neighbor connects himself to a global, individualistic urban identity while the other neighbor continues to adhere to values of locality expressed through neighborly bonds.

Neighborhood Cultural Movements: From Social Critique to New Neighborhood Social Experiences through Art

These films shed light on the tensions revolving around neighborhood identities in the context of a city in crisis. They stand as powerful pieces of social critique made by a generation of filmmakers trying to locate urban identity in a fragmented city. Other cultural movements arising around the same time took a more activist approach at processing these urban changes. Starting in the 1990s and continuing to the present, many grassroots movements have turned to middle-class neighborhoods as places to build new forms of cultural activism and socialization in an increasingly neoliberalizing city. These initiatives take political, economic and cultural forms. Neighborhood political assemblies gathered on street corners to discuss neighborhood politics, and safety and swap meets known as *trueques* offered the possibility for people to trade

goods and services in times of economic crisis. Popular libraries, neighborhood cultural centers, theaters and other artistic venues all assisted in producing a cultural return to the neighborhood. Community theater movements located in different city neighborhoods have been some of the strongest cultural movements attempting to use art as a way of reestablishing urban socialization after the dictatorship (see Bidegain and Proaño Gómez 2014). These models have increasingly shifted the old idea that culture had to pass through the city center in order to receive cultural validation and replaced it with a new sense of culture with localized value as products of barrio cultural initiatives.

Government-Sponsored Neighborhood Initiatives

Although my research focuses more on grassroots neighborhood initiatives occurring primarily over the last decade, it is important to mention how government initiatives starting in the 1980s and 1990s also contributed to the revival of neighborhood narratives and neighborhood cultural initiatives. In a book dedicated to the anthropology of the neighborhood, *Antropología de lo Barrial* (2003), Argentine sociologist Ariel Gravano writes about the resurgence of neighborhood-oriented politics following the 1983 return to democracy. He explains that neighborhood civil programs were set up following the dictatorship in order to increase security in the neighborhoods of the city. The idea was that if people felt they belonged to their neighborhood, perhaps they would treat it better.

In her analysis of tango's revival, Liska explains that in the 1990s, the government of Buenos Aires began organizing socio-cultural events and classes in neighborhood schools and other government-owned buildings around the city to encourage neighborhood socialization (2013). Out of all the classes and courses offered, tango ended up being one of the most popular (Wortman, in Liska). According to Liska, these government-sponsored classes were one of the primary places where tango began experiencing a local revitalization as a dance culture for

younger generations. Over the course of the 1990s and into the 2000s, gradually more and more independent cultural movements arose promoting cultural initiatives in cultural centers, bars, and other neighborhood venues. These spaces offered attractive and financially accessible alternatives to downtown and mega-mall models of consumer culture. It is important to note that not all neighborhood movements were and are anti-establishment. However, especially over the past decade following the 2001 crisis, neighborhood movements have tended to become more politicized and aligned with post-neoliberal ideologies of the new left. This politicization of neighborhood cultural movements has intensified since 2007 when the conservative (and neoliberal-minded) PRO party led by Mauricio Macri took control of city politics.

This current city government, led by Mauricio Macri, has continued to promote neighborhood initiatives but with less popular appeal than the movements in the 1990s. Because much of Macri's time as mayor has been spent promoting cultural politics that favor the growth of tourism and mega-festivals, his attempts at promoting neighborhood cultural initiatives are perceived by many neighborhood activists as superficial marketing tactics. Especially within artistic communities, these neighborhood cultural initiatives seem quite hypocritical since many cultural centers and live-music venues have been closed especially after the Cromañon fire of 2004.

Cromañon was the name of an underground rock venue in downtown Buenos Aires. In 2004 the venue caught fire when a band shot fireworks off during a show, leading to the death of nearly 200 teenagers. Because many elements of the venue were not up to code, the tragedy sparked a political battle leading to the resignation of the city mayor at the time. Many say that the new city mayor, Macri, used this tragedy as a platform for his campaign, promising to make the city safer and to improve regulations. Immediately following the event countless small venues were closed down and live music was banned without appropriate permits, stifling artistic practices around the city. Today venues still struggle to stay open in what is commonly known to be a very oblique and corrupt permit system, with many venue owners resigned to purchasing

permits illegally out of desperation. As I write in 2014, many of my friends and colleagues involved with local artistic communities continue to fight for a series of laws that would facilitate these permitting processes and create specific permits for small live-music venues and cultural centers offering events like tango dances.

The PRO government's politics surrounding the licensing and permit processes for small bars and cultural centers has caused an enormous amount of hostility between artists and the city government. In the case of tango, the fact that the city spends an exorbitant amount of money putting on an extravagant annual tango festival and marketing tango as the cultural identity of the city while simultaneously closing down local bars and clubs has only led to further frustration. They argue that if the government wants to promote tango as the cultural identity of the city, then, as part of this process, it should help artists and small venues establish stable places for performing year-round in the city landscape. The tensions between cultural activists and the city government have politicized neighborhood movements in recent years. Today, while neighborhood cultural movements, like those of the tango community, still emphasize the importance of neighborhood culture as a form of urban intimacy and socialization, artists are increasingly identifying themselves as activists and politicized social actors in the struggle to create accessible and sustainable places for culture in the city landscape.

Conclusions

The kinds of imaginaries discussed in this chapter, like all forms of urban culture, tend not to cancel each other out but instead layer on top of one another in complex and messy ways. Ideas of Buenos Aires as the Paris of the South, as a globalizing and North-Americanized city, as a city of many nostalgic barrios, as a decaying economic disaster and as a hotbed for new forms of leftist organization and post-neoliberal cultural production live in constant tension with each other in the most private and public of urban settings. Even as someone who spends

most of her time with a group of left-leaning musicians, academics and artists, I encounter these diverse social imaginaries in multiple ways throughout my daily life (radios, newspapers, casual conversations, graffiti, TV shows, new and old buildings, scenes of poverty and wealth in the streets, song lyrics, paintings, poems, and the list could go on). Nevertheless, over the past decade, urban imaginaries of neighborhood life have been reclaimed and re-articulated in interesting and transformative ways, especially from the perspective of Argentines looking for alternatives to neoliberal forms of urban planning and urban socialization.

Much like in the 1920s and '30s, neighborhood imaginaries today are once again being used to create social laterality, although this time, much of the efforts are coming from grassroots, youth movements and not official government agendas. Instead of defining the neighborhood against the slums as was typical during the "Latin-Americanization" period of Buenos Aires in the 1980s and 1990s, (what Gravano describes in his chapter *Barrio sí, Villa [o asentamientos] No*), new leftist neighborhood movements are using the neighborhood to construct forms of urban identity and urban socialization that stand in contrast to the cultural modes of production promoted by neoliberal capitalism (and in particular as a statement against the current PRO city government led by Mauricio Macri since 2007).

The idea of the neighborhood as a premodern enclave of authenticity is nothing new. However, inspired by new leftists ideologies and the recent socio-political and cultural transformations of Argentina over the past decades, many contemporary neighborhood initiatives are not idealizing a romanticized premodern imaginary of neighborhood life but instead promoting a conception of neighborhood life that falls within the ideological frameworks of post-neoliberal activism and as an alternative to neoliberal urban cultural models. Mixing imaginaries of the past with activist agendas of the present, new cultural and political movements, and often politicized cultural movements, are seeking to update ideas of the neighborhood to fit contemporary realities of urban life in Buenos Aires.

In my research in various middle-class neighborhoods of Buenos Aires, I have found that in many cases, ideas of the neighborhood have taken on a more modern and flexible meaning. Whereas some residents remain diehard followers of their specific neighborhood's identity (often in relation to soccer teams), others see the neighborhood as a geographic and symbolic zone of debate from which to shape new ideas of citizenship and local cultural and political movements. In his dissertation entitled "From Banks to Bricks: Architecture, Investment, and Neighborhood Life in Buenos Aires, Argentina," anthropologist Nicholas John D'avella writes about the idea of the *barrio* as a concept and feeling more than a specific place in contemporary urban politics:

While in general the word *barrio* is often used to describe an area of the city, it also has a connotation that is more specific, describing a certain kind of place. One could, for instance, say that a part of the city is '*muy barrio*'—very *barrio*... The *barrio* is also considered to have features reminiscent of traditional porteño life, enshrined in popular music and stories: Buenos Aires is the "city of a hundred *barrios*" according to a popular waltz from 1945. And time, most people would say, has a way of standing still in *barrio barrios*, more so than it does in the center, where things are constantly changing.

(2001:83-84).

Today, the idea of the *barrio* arises as a zone of cultural and political production and a unifying idea for social actors seeking alternatives to neoliberal urban models. This is not the imaginary of the nostalgic *barrio* longing for the past. It is also not the fearful xenophobic *barrio* attempting to maintain an urban identity of decency and "good European immigrant values" in the face of crime, poverty and urban decay. Instead, neighborhood-based movements are using imaginaries of *lo barrial*, or "neighborhoodness," to promote forms of socialization that seek to create and construct new forms of social interaction using the neighborhood as a symbolic base and geographical location for local action.

I hope to have shown that ideas of “the neighborhood” or *el barrio* are amorphous and must be studied in the context of the specific social actors that employ them. Thus, while thinking of the neighborhood generally is not particularly helpful in understanding urban identity formation, looking at how specific individuals or groups utilize ideas of neighborhood-ness can offer rich insight into the way culture is practiced and conceived in a city landscape. In this dissertation, the social actors that I engage with are primarily artists involved in tango music culture—including both amateur and professional musicians, dancers, poets and writers. I also include the views of tango fans of various generations who chose to participate in neighborhood tango music scenes, and cultural activists and academics who follow and actively contribute to local neighborhood tango movements and their ideological underpinnings.

This chapter has provided a broad historical overview of some of the complex discourses shaping social practices and the production of social identities in Buenos Aires over the 20th century. In the next chapter, I will explore the making of new tango music youth cultures in the 1990s and will locate this revitalization among the broader cultural and political transformations occurring within the city during those years. Through specific ethnographic accounts and examples, I will argue that alongside a form of tourism, tango in the late 1990s was re-embraced as a language through which to build new spaces of socialization and cultural belonging in the neoliberalizing city.

Chapter 2

From Dreadlocks and Disco Balls to Old Men in Neighborhood Bars: The Making of New Tango Music Youth Cultures in the 1990s and the Growth of the Almagro Neighborhood Tango Scene



Figure 2.1 and 2.2. Tango singer Antonela Alfonso performing in Malevaje Tango Club, an underground tango bar in La Boca neighborhood associated with tango's grittier aesthetics, and the elderly regulars at Roberto's Bar in Almagro, drinking wine and soda in the evening before the live music starts in this century-old neighborhood bar (2012).

Tango(s) Not-For-Export

In this dissertation I draw a divide between what I call tango for-export and tango *not-for-export*. These terms arise frequently in scholarly and popular narratives but they must be explained carefully to avoid falling into reductive binaries. In “Entangled Tangos: Passionate Displays, Intimate Dialogues,” Ana Cara discusses how tango’s “home” and “export” identities are rooted in very different social imaginaries and cultural worlds, but at the same time feed off and inform one another. In explaining the difference between what she sees as “home” and “export” she writes:

[Export tango] involves the performance of the *exoteric* tango—exotic, external, outsider, fanciful—both for local tourists and for export abroad. The other [home tango] involves

the practice of the *esoteric* tango—familiar, inner, insider, secretive, initiated—danced among Argentines themselves... The flamboyant export tango is danced on stage both locally and internationally to entertain the world; home tango is danced intimately among family and friends or in the numerous *milongas* (tango dance halls) in Buenos Aires. (2009:439)

Cara refers to “home” tango as locals’ tango, made by and intended for locals, and “export” tango as intended for “outside” audiences. What she does not mention is that local tango cultures can be expressed, experienced, and conceived in many different ways—both as a dance form and a musical form sometimes with no dancing at all. To further complicate things, certain places where artists perform tango abroad can also foster intimate, participatory and non exoticizing experiences. Thinking of the local as a complex social process of creating feelings of locality and not as a fixed opposite to tango that is intended for “outsiders” can be helpful in avoiding this binary. Since many local tango scenes in Buenos Aires today are made up of diverse audiences including many people from other countries, flexible understandings of locality must be further expanded.

In my own research on not-for-export or “home,” tango cultures, I seek to bring ethnographic depth and diversity to some of the different ways that feelings of locality are produced and experienced within “local” tango music scenes in Buenos Aires. To frame this chapter’s discussion of the growth of new local tango music cultures in the late 1990s, I will approach the idea of locality critically. As discussed in the introduction, feelings of locality are not fixed. Instead, they change and transform over time and from one generation to the next and must be produced and reproduced through complex rituals and ceremonies of social interaction (Appadurai 1996:179). In cities, these processes are often accompanied by the production and circulation of powerful urban imaginaries that locate cultural practices within certain ideas and aesthetics of city life. Carried through sounds, images, discourses and the social and musical

aesthetics of certain musical events and contexts, the production and circulation of urban imaginaries often contributes to the production of feelings of locality and act as a “glue” to help connect people to other people, and people to places. In the fragmented and eclectic cultural landscapes of modern cities, understanding locality involves understanding both the places and contexts where local feelings are produced and the imaginaries that attract and bind people to those places and contexts.

As a music and dance that grew out of the urban experience of Buenos Aires over the past century, memories of and in tango have long contributed to shaping ideas of city life. In the late 1990s, tango culture began a process of revitalization that has continued to grow into the present. Integral to this process was the task of moving past what had come to be called tango’s years of “decadence” and updating ways of thinking about and locating tango culture within the city. In light of the broader political and economic crises affecting city life, tango re-emerged as a cultural form through which to process many of these dramatic urban transformations. As new generations of artists began to develop new practices and new aesthetic proposals for the genre, new tango cultures began to emerge. While studying the new aesthetic proposals emerging in these scenes is helpful, studying the parts of tango’s past that people chose to celebrate and remember in present times is equally illuminating. Through such a lens, the idea of local or “home” tango becomes more than just a general and fixed terminology for that which is *not-for-export*. Studying the *production* of locality within specific local tango cultures offers a way to explore how specific musical practices become meaningful to people’s contemporary social worlds.

In the previous chapter I discussed how in the 1990s Argentina underwent a series of profound cultural transformations in response to the economic hardships and neoliberal agendas developed by President Carlos Menem. For the struggling middle class, these responses included a revalorization of popular culture and popular cultures from times past,

growing anti-imperialist and anti-neoliberal sentiments, and a cultural, political and social “return” to the neighborhood as an important counter-imaginary and place of belonging in the city’s rapidly polarizing and neoliberalizing urban landscape.

In this chapter I will discuss the growth and transformation of the Almagro neighborhood tango music scene starting in the late 1990s, framed by a larger discussion of the revitalization of tango as a form of youth culture around the same time. These discussions will pay close attention to how live tango music scenes became places where recent shifts in Argentine society have been, and continue to be, processed and expressed artistically. My choice to compare the growth of neighborhood tango scenes alongside other emerging tango youth cultures serves to remind my readers of the multiple ways a single genre can be revitalized within the same urban landscape at any given time. First, I will discuss recent trends that have revitalized tango culture through a an aesthetic lens borrowed from rock and counterculture. I will refer to this trend as *tango de ruptura* (tango of rupture). These scenes have received significant attention by both scholars and mainstream media as they pose such a jarring contrast to the glamorous and old-fashioned aesthetics associated with traditional tango culture.

Subsequently, I will introduce another side of contemporary tango culture that, instead of filtering the genre’s revitalization through an aesthetic lens of rock music, focuses on reconnecting tango with the aesthetics and values associated with traditional ideas of *el barrio* (the neighborhood) and neighborhood culture. This trend, which I will call *tango barrial* (neighborhood tango), is exemplified in the culture of the Almagro neighborhood bars where I conducted the majority of my research. Using different ethnographic examples from the Almagro scene, I will explain how *tango barrial* has led different tango bars and cultural centers located within residential working and middle class neighborhoods across the city to become important places of urban refuge and intimacy for tango musicians and tango fans alike. In these places, I will explore how traditional values of neighborhood life were brought into the present tense

throughout the performance of tango music, leading to the growth of new neighborhood tango scenes. In the second half of the chapter I will explore how these neighborhood scenes have updated not only understandings of tango culture but also understandings of neighborhood life in the city. Although the recent revitalization of tango music is not limited to these two aesthetic trends, I use them in this chapter to illustrate the diversity of ways tango music has been reclaimed as a form of popular culture in Buenos Aires over the past two decades.

From Postcard History to Everyday Histories

Tango's commodification as a tourist product and romanticization as a symbol of Argentine national identity have each contributed to producing what is called tango's postcard history. People in the independent tango scenes often refer to the culture of tango-for-export as Postcard Tango (*Tango Postal*)—staged and exoticized. Many narratives of tango history treat tango culture in similar ways, reducing the history of the genre into an exotic tale of passion and nostalgia. This tale describes tango as being born in the brothels, validated in Paris, immortalized through the voice of Carlos Gardel, glorified through the orchestras of the Golden Years of the 1940s and 1950s, and revolutionized with Astor Piazzolla's invention of *Tango Nuevo* (New Tango) in the second half of the 20th century. Accompanying these postcard histories are well worn narratives of tango as passion, as nostalgia, as melancholy, as the soul of the people, as a way of life, a play in three minutes, the sad song that you dance and other catch phrases. They imply the existence of a universal "essence" of tango that applies to all tango practice. Like the image on a postcard, this history and these narratives reproduce only one perspective of a much larger picture of a complex genre that means many things to many people, has many histories, and can be expressed and experienced in many different ways.

Today, within and outside Argentina, postcard histories and narratives of tango continue to be reproduced. These "fairytale" histories, carried through popular discourse, theatrical

representations and all forms of visual and literary culture, continue to circulate reductive narratives of tango history. While these kinds of narratives continue to hold significance in the lives of many Argentines and foreigners alike, many participants in the contemporary tango scenes have begun contesting the limitations of these narratives and constructing different ways of conceptualizing and discussing the role tango plays in their everyday lives.

One of the issues that young tango artists (and especially young tango artists affiliated with current leftist and anti-imperialist political ideologies) have taken with tango's postcard histories is that they often reproduce narratives about how tango's success in Argentina relies upon validation abroad in cities like Paris, continuing the old pervasive idea that Argentina must seek cultural validation from Europe. This can be seen in the well-polished tale of how tango originated in the brothels of the poor neighborhoods of the city and had to travel to Paris before being accepted by the rest of Argentine society. Even though historians have long argued that the genre most likely evolved predominantly in neighborhood dance academies and had begun to spread throughout Buenos Aires before reaching Paris, the scandalous origins of the dance and its "civilization" in Paris continue to dominate narratives of tango history, especially those intended for tourists.

The history of tango's return to popularity in the 1980s offers an example of how narratives of the tango culture continue to prioritize the genre's validation through Europe. The most common narrative of tango's revival credits the 1982 Broadway premier of the internationally renowned cabaret show *Tango Argentino* with the explosion of tango onto international markets and the local revival of the genre in the following years. Morel questions the accuracy of this outward-looking narrative of tango's local revival suggesting that local processes also were key to the genre's revitalization, in particular processes related to the end of the dictatorship and the return to democracy in 1983 (2012). His argument is not that *Tango Argentino* played no role in the genre's revival, but instead that attributing tango's resurgence

solely to this stage show reproduces the nation's eurocentric gaze and ignores other important and influential historical processes occurring at a local level around the same time. The story of tango's return to popularity via *Tango Argentino* and other all-encompassing narratives of tango's past can oversimplify history by producing reductive metanarratives. Even more problematically they locate these metanarratives in the residue of colonial discourses of Argentines that seek cultural legitimacy from Europe.

As people produce and reproduce tango's metanarratives, notions of music history become detached from the plurality of individuals' lives. By conveying the contemporary tango histories of Almagro as plural and multi-dimensional and making a case for cultural plurality, I want to challenge some of these grand narratives of tango scholarship.¹ Since one of the primary goals of my research is to highlight the multi-layered processes that shape the everyday experiences of tango in Buenos Aires today, specific and situated ethnographic accounts voicing multiple perspectives offer an alternative form of historical writing. Following the lives and practices of musicians in a given area of the city over time, generalizations are transformed into specifics allowing the complexity and multi-dimensionality of local histories to unfold. Within these histories there are multiple agendas, multiple subjectivities, and multiple outcomes. My hope is that these everyday accounts will produce a valuable ethnographic picture that speaks to the different processes shaping tango music and tango music practices in Buenos Aires as they are experienced by specific individuals today, reinforcing the notion of culture as a process, not a product "for-export."

In *The Content and the Form* (1989), historian Hayden White revolutionized understandings of history by pointing out that historical narratives are in fact, produced by the

¹ Luckily, in recent years the nature of scholarship on tango has begun to change. Thanks to editorials like that of the *Centro Cultural de la Cooperación* (a cooperative dedicated to publishing anti-capitalist and left-leaning scholarship), and the scholarship of various graduate researchers from the social sciences either from Argentina or other countries, a new body of tango literature less focused on tango's European gaze, has begun to grow. See Cecconi 2009; Liska, ed 2012; Liska 2012, 2013; Miller ed 2014; Morel 2012.

people who write them. Historical events occur, but historical narratives, the act of linking together historical events, must be constructed and reproduced by individuals. Thus, conceptualizing ethnographic histories as subjective, plural, multi-layered and non-linear becomes a personal choice to avoid reproducing reductive metanarratives about the nature and evolution of popular music genres. Through specific and ethnographically situated accounts, ethnography becomes not just a form of documenting a music scene, but of re-envisioning the way history unfolds through the lived experiences of different musicians and those who participate in musical cultures.

In this chapter I look at some of the ways tango music began reemerging in the late 1990s, forming cultures where younger generations once again felt represented through the genre. This process involved not only finding new places to perform and listen to tango, but also developing new understandings of tango capable of revitalizing tango from its outdated and export-oriented stereotypes of fedoras, red roses, and greased-back hairdos. These processes are plural, not singular. Much like its rich past, tango's recent history has many stories and images that evolve and define it—stories and images that dialogue in dynamic ways with broader ideas defining and shaping urban life in Buenos Aires during these years. As both tango practices and the social imaginaries surrounding tango culture became revised and updated, tango—while still far from the mainstream—began re-emerging as a dynamic form of local urban youth culture.

From Decadence to Renewal

Although ethnographic research on the aesthetics of tango for-export often focuses on dance, it is not only tango dancers that seek ways to practice and imagine local tango cultures not-for-export. Shifting the focus to *music* culture, the first section of this chapter will touch on the way local tango music cultures fell from the popular mainstream in the 1970s. The second

section will focus on two different places where tango music cultures began to re-emerge in the late 1990s. Since I conducted my ethnographic research primarily in the neighborhood of Almagro, I will finish the chapter by taking a closer look at how individual musicians experienced the growth of neighborhood tango culture through a case study of a bar central to the development of the neighborhood's scene.

In the late 1990s, as tango was growing as an export industry, new local cultures for tango *music* performance began taking form across Buenos Aires. Similar to processes occurring in the dance community (see Liska 2013), young and middle-aged musicians and music fans started searching out places where they could create and engage in meaningful experiences with a genre that had fallen out of the popular mainstream decades before.² For many people during those years, the challenge of finding appealing tango atmospheres was not only about avoiding “export” culture but also about searching for places where tango felt “alive” and not a representation or caricature of its past life. I want to position this discussion of the emergence of new local musical cultures as a search for new tango localities, venues and practices that were neither intended exclusively for-export nor locked in the past.

Remembering Tango Music Culture in the “Years of Decadence”

From the 1920s until the 1960s, and especially in the ‘40s and ‘50s, tango music as a cultural industry boomed in Buenos Aires. Musicians played all over the city in theaters, cabarets, bars, dance halls, and on the radio. Starting in the late ‘60s, the rise of international pop and rock music industries and later the social repression of the dictatorship years took their toll on tango as an urban form of social life and as a consumer music industry. Although tango never disappeared, the tango musicians’ community became fragmented, and live tango music as a mainstream form of urban social life became largely a thing of the past.

In *Fear at the Edge: State Terror and Resistance in Latin America*, Patricia Weiss Fagen explains that one of the outcomes of the military dictatorships in the Southern cone was the privatization of social life: "Restrictions on social gatherings, on elections in social and sports clubs, and censorship of press, television, and popular songs, all conspired to draw people away from public life into private spheres" (1992: 67). In Buenos Aires, as public dance gatherings declined during the 1976-1983 dictatorship, many people started going to staged tango dinner shows or listening to tango music in their homes (Cara 2009: 444). This kind of a repressive socio-political climate, along with the rise of rock music, led to the decline of tango as a popular form of youth culture and the rise of tango as a mediated and staged form of "nostalgia" culture.

Goertzen and Azzi use the term *museumification* to refer to the way tango industries gradually transitioned in the later decades of the 20th century from marketing tango as a culture of the present into a nostalgic culture of the past. One place where this nostalgia culture was particularly visible was in the recording industry. Responding to the lack of youth interest in tango culture in the 1970s, nostalgic Golden Age and Greatest Hits recordings of the famous singers and orchestras from tango's past began to saturate the tango music market, targeting older audiences and tourists. As tango as a tourist industry continued to evolve, these records and outdated images of tango found a new audience of consumers. Alongside golden age records, records explicitly titled *Tango for Export* entered into the market (Goertzen and Azzi 1999:71). Remastering and making compilations may have been good for the recording business, but the aesthetics of these export and nostalgia records did not have much youth appeal.

Similar to the record industry, radio and television programs also catered to older audiences. Many young people associate these programs with evenings at home spent with their parents or grandparents. One of the most frequently cited television programs was *Los*

Grandes Valores del Tango (The Great Treasures of Tango). This program originally started as a radio program in 1951, became a television program in 1963, and with the exception of a few breaks, ran until the mid-1990s.³ Not only did programs like this cater to older audiences, they became a symbol of tango's *museumification* and decadence in the eyes of many young people. These sentiments can be seen in the way new tango movements define themselves against these programs today. As one tango activist and radio producer writes on the description of the online contemporary tango radio station *Volver Ni a Palos* (Never Go Back Even if Beaten with a Stick),

Really the movement defines itself in opposition to commercial tango for export, and to that mummified image of tango that those of us who are less than 50 years old experienced watching the TV program "The Great Treasures of Tango." This program traumatized many of our childhood and adolescent years, with its steady lineup of tango interpreters singing over and over the same tangos and engendering hatred among young rockers.⁴

Another young tango musician described *Grandes Valores de Tango* as the perfect representation of everything that went wrong with tango during tango's years of "decadence," accusing the program of promoting a tango aesthetic of idiotic glamour.

In my own viewings of archived editions of *Grandes Valores de Tango* from the middle of the dictatorship, one of the things that struck me was that both MCs and artists visiting the show spoke of Argentina with an inflated sense of romantic national pride. Not only were shows like *Grandes Valores de Tango* unappealing to youth, they also glossed over the political turbulence of Argentina during and following the dictatorship years. As I watched these shows, it became

³ Finkielman, Jorge. 2007. "Grandes Valores del Tango: Un Corte y una Quebrada." <http://www.todotango.com/historias/cronica/290/Grandes-Valores-del-Tango-un-corte-y-una-quebrada/>

⁴ "Volver Ni a Palos," accessed on February 10, 2013, http://www.laradiorebelde.com.ar/radio/?page_id=2200. Translated by author from Spanish.

clear that while rock and folklore genres were embraced as musics of resistance during these times of severe social repression, tango was not.

Despite the hostility towards these programs, many musicians admit to having developed their initial interests in tango through mediated and not live music culture. Television programs, which featured singers from other popular genres or even amateurs and semi-professionals singing “the classics” in less than inspiring ways, were particularly repellent to younger generations. However, many cite their family record collections and the *Radio 2x4* (the official tango radio station of Buenos Aires started in 1990) as places where they initially developed an interest in tango music. Family record collections and radio shows, unlike the amateur and semi-professional performances on television, more frequently featured historic recordings of the great artists of tango’s past.

By the mid 1990s many of the remaining live tango venues were either staged and priced for tourism (making them financially inaccessible for many Argentines), or, like tango television shows, simply aesthetically unappealing to most young people. In 2012, I interviewed Marisa Vazquez, a tango singer and local regular in the neighborhood tango bar scenes, to talk about her formation as a tango singer in the 1980s and 1990s. By day, Marisa works as a criminal defense lawyer for young women in prison but also has a long career of singing tango in professional and amateur settings. A longtime regular in the Almagro scene, we talked about her participation in the scene and her formation as a tango singer in the 1990s. Currently in her 40s, Marisa described the tango venues of the ‘80s and ‘90s as having an aesthetic of grotesque elegance and catering to an audience of middle class elderly and aging patrons. She explained that the venues she sang at in the ‘80s and early ‘90s were not elegant and picturesque like the historic cafés of Buenos Aires. Instead, she described them as *chotos* (an Argentine slang word used to describe things that are cheap, trashy, or of unattractive or poor quality). She had sung her first shows in these kinds of dinner theaters in the ‘90s and said that

in order to sing, she was required to dress in an evening gown. Not only was this level of formality unattractive to many young people, it also implied a financial investment difficult for many to achieve due to hard economic times. Similarly, attending a show at a dinner theater required a financial investment that many were not willing or able to make. For Marisa, these theaters offered her a place to sing and earn a little money, but were not places of learning or belonging. She said even the singing styles and repertoires of those theaters often represented the same *choto* aesthetic. Instead, she had actually learned most of her own repertoire listening to the radio and jotting down the names and lyrics of songs she liked.⁵

Lucas Furno, one of the primary organizers within the Almagro neighborhood tango scene, developed his interest in tango in the mid '90s around the same time that Marisa began to sing. Lucas, currently in his early 30s, works as a freelance tango violinist and is also very involved as a cultural activist organizing local concert series', milongas and other cultural events in the Almagro, and more recently, Villa Crespo, neighborhoods. For many years his primary income came from working at a tango-for-export tango show downtown but starting in 2013 he has been working freelance and touring internationally multiple times a year with a traveling tango show run by the dancer Mora Godoy. He lives in the Almagro neighborhood with his girlfriend Elsa who is a french geographer also writing her dissertation on local tango scenes. In our interview, Lucas explained that he and a few friends became interested in tango through some records of Roberto Goyeneche, a tango singer from the later period of the golden age who became known for his deep grizzly voice and poetic interpretations. Lucas considered himself and his friends oddballs of their time. Instead of listening to rock music and drinking beer like most teenagers before going to weekend clubs, they would drink whiskey, and listen to old tango records. Until he discovered Roberto's bar (discussed later in this chapter) he told me he

⁵ Marisa Vazquez, interview by the author, February 20, 2012, Buenos Aires, Argentina. All interviews translated from Spanish by the author.

felt like those records were his only way to connect with tango music.⁶

Stories like those of Lucas and Marisa are not uncommon in the scenes where I conducted my research. These are stories from a time period that has come to be popularly known as tango's years of decadence. This period of decadence spans from roughly the late 1960s until the late 1990s and is frequently referenced as the era when tango died, sold out to foreign audiences and tourism, or was systematically uprooted and sabotaged by the invasion of international rock industries. This last version is particularly popular among leftist, anti-imperialist tango fans. While tango never completely disappeared during this period, it dwindled as a form of social life in the city and particularly as a form of youth culture. Although a deep investigation of this black hole of an era in tango history lies outside the scope of this dissertation, a brief look at the period will help set up a context for the genre's revival over the past two decades.

During the years of decadence, tango as a musical genre continued to evolve, albeit in the shadow of other more popular mainstream music genres. In the face of a dwindling live music and social dance industry, many of the great leaders of big tango orchestras dismantled their orchestras and started playing in duos, trios, quartets, quintets, and sextets. Many of these same musicians played jazz, tropical and other popular genres during their evening jobs and would then congregate late after work to play tango in clubs like *Caño 14* downtown. The development of *Tango Nuevo* by renowned bandoneon player and composer, Astor Piazzolla also emerged in this time period. However, since he frequently worked and lived abroad (mostly in Europe and the US), and marketed his works as international avant-guard compositions, he was not associated with tango as a form of local, urban culture.

The few remaining clubs that people do reference as having been "hip," "authentic," and not saturated in "grotesque elegance," places like *Rincon de los Amigos* and *Caño 14* and *Cafe*

⁶ Lucas Furno, interview by the author, February 20, 2012, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Homero for professional artists or *Bar El Chino* for non-professionals performances, were relatively closed communities and not easily found on a city map. The lack of mass media coverage along with the absence of the Internet during these years made information about these live music venues less accessible. Although not located in the Almagro neighborhood, bars such as *Bar El Chino* and *Cafe Homero* provided important models for the new Almagro tango music scene. Many revere these places and the people who ran them as the bearers and keepers of invaluable tango traditions during the genre's darkest hour. This reverence can be seen in one of the films I made about a tribute to Ruben Juarez, one of the owners of *Cafe Homero*.

In the late 1990s all of this began to change as new and revived aesthetic proposals and new tango "spots" began to open, creating new ports of entry into the world of tango music for younger generations. If the 1970s and '80s were a time when practicing local tango often meant remembering tango as a thing of the past through television, radio and recordings, the late '90s became a time of taking elements of the collective memory of tango's past and re-signifying them in new "home" subcultures of the present.

The Rise of New Tango Music Youth Cultures in the Late 1990s

By the late 1990s, the economic stability of the Argentine economy was crumbling and many people became disillusioned by Menem's promises of economic success for the nation. This culminated in the major economic crash of 2001. What was left was disenchantment with the state, an impoverished middle class, and a lot of Argentine citizens questioning whether the individualist, "North Americanist," open market consumer model of government and society had done them any favors. By the end of the '90s, many individuals who had not benefitted from the policies of Menem's government reacted to neoliberal ideologies by promoting alternative forms

of socializing that emphasized community, non-consumer activities, and discourses of collectivity and cooperation.

These alternative forms of socializing and different ideologies of cultural production manifested in different ways across the artistic world affecting the worlds of theater, literature, cinema, design, visual art, and music. For the people involved in these scenes, many remember the late '90s as a time of small independent cultural centers, community libraries, rock concerts in basement clubs, and alternative theater and cinema movements. Through these various cultural and artistic initiatives, alternative ways of imagining and practicing urban socialization in Buenos Aires began to take shape. These cultural shifts coincided with the beginning of a new era for tango, an era when the genre as a growing tourist industry and a revitalized form of popular culture would work side by side to reshape the genre at the turn of the 21st century. This revival was propelled both by grassroots movements and government initiatives in support of tango culture. These government initiatives included the creation of the 2x4 tango radio station in 1990, the creation of the annual city tango festival in 1998, the funding of cultural centers that offered tango dance classes in various neighborhoods around the city and the creation and financial backing of multiple popular music conservatories for studying tango and folklore in the city. The *Escuela de Musica Popular Avellaneda* (Avellaneda Popular Music School) was founded in 1986 and the popular music department at the *Conservatorio Manuel de Falla* (Manuel de Falla Conservatory) in 2003.

The growth of underground tango movements and independent tango initiatives played an equal, or even more important, role in developing new aesthetic proposals to make the genre once again attractive to young people. In music, these underground initiatives took many forms across Buenos Aires. Although my research investigates neighborhood tango music movements, discussing other aesthetic proposals arising around the same time becomes important since they fed off and collaborated with each other. Since my emphasis is on live

music and tango as urban culture, I focus on the youth orchestra movement and the neighborhood tango bar music movements, both of which played a central role in relocating and reterritorializing tango back into the urban landscape of Buenos Aires. Electronic tango groups forming in the 1990s and early 2000s with groups like Gotan Project and Bajofondo Tango Club were also important but were more influential among dance circuits than in live music venues.⁷

Industrial Urban Imaginaries: *La Máquina Tanguera* (The Tango Machine) and *Tango de Ruptura* (Tango of Rupture)

Although Ana Cara uses words like “intimate” and “introspective” to describe local tango culture, not all of the new youth tango music movements were founded on such romantic and introverted values. Reacting to what many saw as the overly nostalgic, cheesy, unnecessarily glamorous aesthetic of tango promoted in the 1970s and ‘80s, a tango counterculture movement began emerging in the late ‘90s. This movement mixed tango with the gritty angst, dark aesthetics, and industrial images of the city associated with Argentine rock music in an effort to make a tango that was relevant to the times and more accessible to younger audiences.⁸ During the late 1990s, many young musicians in their teens and twenties began reviving the typical tango orchestra formation to make new musical projects using these new counterculture aesthetic proposals. Within a few years this transformed into the cultural movement known as the Tango Machine Cooperative (*Cooperativa Máquina Tanguera*) (Horvath 2006: 192).

One of the leading orchestras of the movement, the *Orquesta Típica Fernández Fierro* (know as the OTFF) used the classic formation of a typical tango orchestra to reinterpret tangos

⁷ For more on electronic tango see Liska 2013:140.

⁸ When I use the term industrial I am thinking of images of the city that draw on train tracks, warehouses, abandoned factories, and other non-romantic and industry-oriented images of city life. These also often relate to images of urban decay involving slums, graffiti and other forms of vandalism, broken buildings and abandoned urban areas.

through this new aesthetic lens, and soon a movement of similar groups began to evolve. Blending both traditional and new compositions and dressed in jeans and T-shirts with long hair and dread locks, they performed on street corners, in underground theaters, and in warehouses often with flashing colored lights and stage props resembling modern rock concerts.

Although their sound and look were decidedly more aggressive and modern than the tango of the Golden Era, many of the musicians in this movement looked to the famous Golden Era orchestra leader Osvaldo Pugliese as their musical idol from the past. For many artists, Pugliese represented not only the artistic height of orchestral tango arrangements and execution, but his radical political views, communist affiliation, and strong belief in running his orchestra as a cooperative became a model for youth seeking an escape from what they saw as neoliberalizing times. Even the name, *La Máquina Tanguera*, is a reference to a quote by Osvaldo Pugliese who, when finally invited to play at the Buenos Aires opera house as an old man said humbly, “We are just another bean in the tango machine, just another screw in the machine” (Horvath 2006: 24). Inspired by Pugliese, many groups organized themselves, and continue to operate, as cooperatives (see Marcos 2012). In 2005, with the help of some cultural and political activists in the city and emerging out of the movement that began as The Tango Machine Cooperative, a typical tango orchestra union (*Union de Orquestas Típicas* or UOT) formed to fight for the rights of music workers in the city and promote ideologies of collectivity and collaboration in the art world, furthering these bonds.

Much recent scholarship on contemporary tango music has focused on this movement, the aesthetics and projects these orchestras promoted and the ways in which they attracted young people to tango while simultaneously processing the contemporary socio-cultural climate of an Argentina post-crisis (see Juaréz and Virgili 2012; Luker 2007, 2009). At the root of the cultural movement initiated by the participants in Tango Machine was a desire to deliberately de-romanticize tango, take it out of the past, and inject it with a counterculture youth aesthetic

relevant to the present. One online tango magazine describes the renovated auto-repair warehouse where the Orquesta Tipica Fernández Fierro has played since 2004 as follows:

If you want to get to the Club Atlético Fernández Fierro (CAFF) you have to be ready for some little adventures far away from everyday routine. You'll stroll the winding streets of the less touristic parts of Almagro, step through a large door and pass down a dark hallway that leads to a storehouse converted into a concert hall. What mostly surprises is the atmosphere. There is an irreverent painting of Osvaldo Pugliese who gazes out from the wall to the audience thinking: "Idiots". There is a huge mirror ball that doesn't ever stop turning and, as if this weren't enough, the background music is from the glories of national rock of the eighties.⁹

In the same article, Chino Laborde, the primary singer of the Orquesta Tipica Fernández Fierro explains:

Ariel Ardit has an archaic point of view... My mother also has an archaic way of thinking. That's why we tend to say: We don't play for those who have seen the big orchestras like Troilo, Fresedo and Pugliese. We play for those who would never have gone to a tango show, because they were put off by the image of a pair of dancers that are so outdated.¹⁰

Following the Tango Machine movement, the group Astillero (who coined the term *tango de ruptura*) and another orchestra called Ciudad Baigón created a cultural center where they have continued to develop cultural hubs for this side of contemporary tango culture. Groups like The Fernández Fierro and Astillero continue to fill theaters with audiences of rebellious youth and intrigued foreigners. They and other similar groups have found success not only in Buenos

⁹ Casak, Andrés. 2011. "Entrevista con La Fernández Fierro: Somos Una orquesta Loca, 'Maluca'." *El Tangauta* 199. <http://www.eltangauta.com/nota.asp?id=1585>.

¹⁰ Ariel Ardit is a tango singer who represents the romantic revival of tango around the same years as the rupture movement. His name will return when I discuss tango bar culture in the second half of this chapter.

Aires but all over the world marketing themselves as the rebellious and young face of tango.¹¹ Today the two main social spaces for this movement are the CAFF (Fernández Fierro Athletic Club), an Almagro based auto-repair shop transformed into a venue by the Fernández Fierro, and the Teatro Orlando Goñi, a dark urban warehouse that was once a furniture factory then converted into a theater and school and run by the groups Astillero and Ciudad Baigon. Both places have a very similar aesthetic, one that feels dark, metallic, industrial, underground, and attractive to urban youth that grew up listening to rock bands in basements and warehouses with a similar aesthetic.

During 2012 I participated in a project to form a typical tango orchestra within the Goñi cultural center, run by the groups Astillero and Ciudad Baigon. The orchestra was run by a young woman in her twenties who was learning to write orchestral tango arrangements and wanted to try her hand at directing. Although the orchestra did not stay together for more than a year it gave me a way to get to know the culture of the movements coming out of the Goñi theater and to compare them to the neighborhood bar scenes where my research is primarily located. My experiences with this orchestra were particularly insightful in reinforcing my understandings of the aesthetics driving the *tango de ruptura* movement. Unlike Astillero, our orchestra played old tangos with arrangements put together by the director. However, the edgy industrial urban aesthetics characteristic of the *Máquina Tanguera* and *tango de ruptura* movements were clearly represented at all times.

My first weeks with the orchestra, as the project was taking shape, were particularly revealing. When it came time to name the orchestra, the ideas the musicians offered up almost exclusively referenced industrial scenes in the city. The two top contenders were *El Cargero* (meaning the cargo ship) and *El Furgón* (meaning the train car). We decided on *El Furgón*.

¹¹ For more information on *La Máquina Tanguera* and *Tango de Ruptura* movements, see Luker 2007, 2009.



Figure 2.3. A Facebook flyer for one of *El Furgón's* concerts in the Goñi Theater (2012).

Our concert posters usually featured dark photos or drawings of trains and abandoned train tracks (see figure 2.3). This affiliation with industrial urban aesthetics and edginess was present in both the visual and aural aesthetics by the group. When we began talking about the aesthetics of the group, the kind of sound we were going to try to achieve through the directors arrangements, our director pointed out that although, “we may still not know what we want to sound like, we know what we don’t want to sound like, and that is romantic,” a clear representation of the anti-romantic tendencies of this movement.

The aesthetics of the group were further reinforced when, during one of the early practices I brought in a song I had always liked. It was a tango called “*Tema Otoñal*,” written by one of the most famous tango violinists, Enrique Francini. The version I brought in was by the

group El Arraque, an orchestra started around the same time as *La Máquina Tanguera* by a group of young professional musicians looking to play traditional tango music. Their group was much less interested in edgy tango aesthetics or in belonging to any particular scene and instead positioned themselves as a group of young players looking to learn from the elders. The song, “*Tema Otoñal*” (Autumn Song), is a beautiful tango featuring the kind of romantic melody one might associate with love scenes in old hollywood movies. The rendition by El Arraque is bright and romantic, bringing the melody to the forefront in the middle of the recording using unison strings that play with wide vibrato while the rhythm falls into the background. Unlike most of the songs by groups like *Astillero* and *Ciudad Baigon*—emphasizing rhythm and using minor modes—“*Tema Otoñal*” is also set in a major mode. When I played the song for the director she looked at me with a face of disdain and laughed and said “Ah! Jennie! What are those Parisian chords!? No way, not here!” While, as far as I know, there was nothing inherently Parisian about the song, something about the romantic and melodic nature of the recording was easily identifiable as the complete opposite of the group’s aesthetic. My experiences with *El Furgón* illustrate how the reactionary and edgy urban aesthetics of the *tango de ruptura* movement carry through to all the sensory experiences of music-making, from images on posters, to names and ways of talking about music, to sounds and aesthetics of playing.

Neighborhood Urban Imaginaries: *Tango Barrial* (Neighborhood Tango)

Although the *máquina tanguera* and *tango de ruptura* movements successfully attracted many young people to tango, not all of tango’s revival in the ‘90s and 2000s was filtered through a lens of rupture and rock and roll. Around the same time that the *máquina tanguera* movement was evolving in and nearby the touristy downtown neighborhood of San Telmo, another tango music scene was beginning to develop in Almagro, a quiet, residential neighborhood just

northwest of downtown.¹² The orchestras involved in the rupture movement—many of whom played weekly on the streets of the San Telmo arts and crafts fair—positioned themselves in the heart of the tourist center of town in order to directly contest outdated stereotypes of tango and promote a new, youthful aesthetic for the genre with an overt “in your face” attitude. This other movement, which I will call the *tango barrial* (neighborhood tango), began more quietly and out of sight. Instead of dreadlocks and helmets and disco balls, this scene developed around the nostalgic, acoustic performances of traditional guitar and vocal tango, and in Almagro, in a small century-old bar known as “*El Boliche de Roberto*” (Roberto’s Bar). Instead of breaking with tradition and giving tango a new and edgy aesthetic makeover, *tango barrial* was associated with rekindling feelings of urban intimacy and belonging by inhabiting old places and updating old imaginaries of the city. If the *tango de ruptura* aesthetics utilized aggressive and dark images of abandoned streets, broken buildings and urban graffiti, this new movement represented itself through romantic images of street corners, neighborhood bar scenes, plazas, or, in the case of one Facebook announcement, two tango music angels hovering over a neighborhood bar (figure 2.3).¹³

While a significant amount has been written about the new tango orchestra movements that utilized aesthetics borrowed largely from rock culture, less has been written about this other tango music scene that grew out of primarily guitar and vocal tango performed in small neighborhood bars. This style of tango, associated with tavern performances in the 1920s and

¹² Again, these geographic boundaries are not fixed. Although much of the *Máquina Tanguera* movements started between Boedo, San Telmo and later San Cristobal, groups like the Fernández Fierro also opened their renowned club the CAFF in the Almagro neighborhood, becoming an important venue for the neighborhood scene.

¹³ While located in Villa Urquiza and not in Almagro, the “El Tango Vuelve al Barrio” concert cycle in El Faro Bar attracts many musicians from the Almagro scene and represents another central location for the development of the *tango barrial* imaginary.

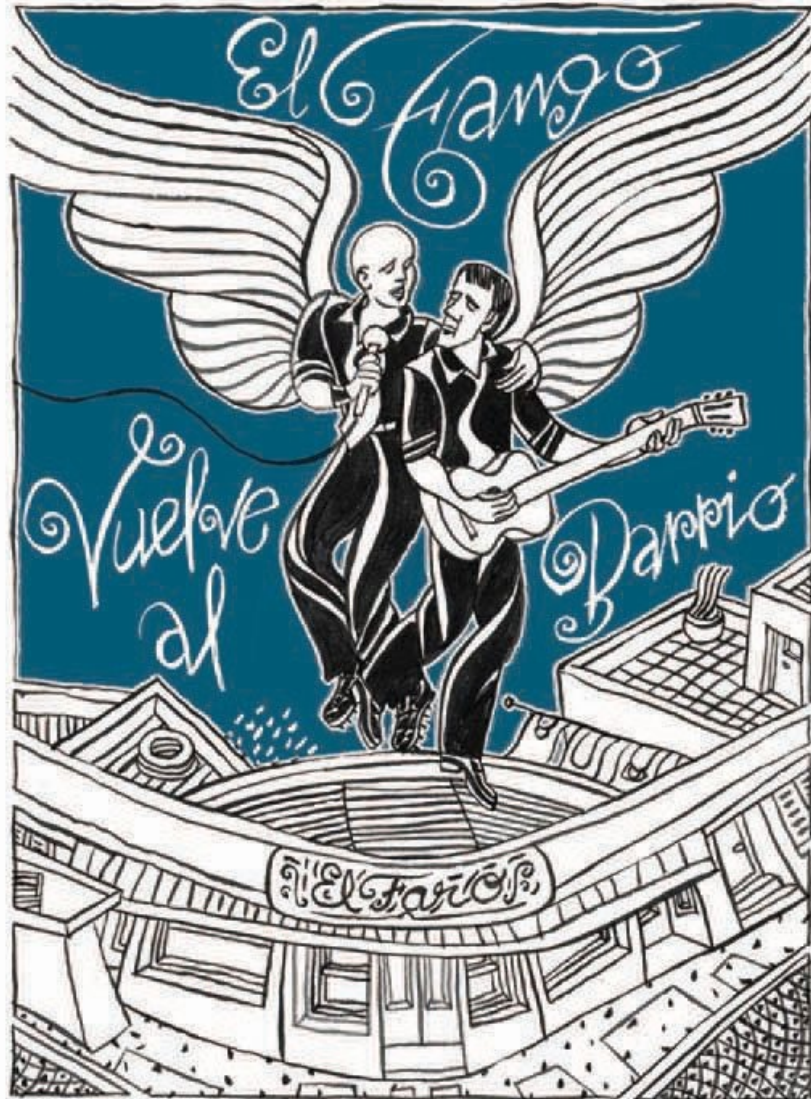


Figure 2.4. A Facebook announcement for a tango event in El Faro bar entitled “*El Tango Vuelve al Barrio*” (Tango Returns to the Neighborhood). (Courtesy of Hernán Castiello, 2011).

with the rise of the singer Carlos Gardel, was immortalized in both tango lyrics and tango films from the 1920s and ‘30s and ‘40s. In these films and tangos, one sees how romantic images of the neighborhood have long held an important place in shaping ideas of urban life in Buenos Aires, especially in the tango community (Bergero 2008). As discussed in chapter one, tango lyrics poetically describe the neighborhoods of Buenos Aires as romantic and nostalgic

landscapes where family, friends and lovers interact in picturesque cafés and plazas and on tranquil streets. Whether the places they describe ever “really” existed or exist more in a collective imaginary constructed through lyrics, films, and images is irrelevant.

Today, these images represent an understanding of Buenos Aires when Argentine culture was thriving and when old-fashioned values of pre-dictatorship and pre-neoliberal times still dominated the urban landscape. In Almagro, these imaginaries of neighborhood life were revitalized and re-signified in the 1990s in one specific bar, *El Boliche de Roberto*. By offering an accessible place of urban belonging and allowing these attractive nostalgic neighborhood values to be updated by younger generations, Roberto’s bar contributed to moving tango past decadence and bringing the genre back to life as a local, live music culture in the present.

Roberto’s Place

A hand slams down four times on the bar and people look up in surprise. Roberto, the short, grizzled owner of Lo de Roberto’s century-old tango bar is standing on his barstool again. “Callense!” [“Be Quiet!”], he barks in his thick, Argentine accent. A wave of abrasive shushing sweeps the tiny bar overflowing with young bohemians, middle-aged and old men in wool sweaters and suit jackets. A young man with dreadlocked hair, a large beer and a hand-rolled cigarette calls out from a table in the corner, “Che! [Hey!] Are we here to talk or to listen to tango?” The shushing dies down, as does the talking, and the opening chords of another old tango draws the focus back to the casually dressed young guitarist and stately, old singer standing, un-amplified, in the middle of the room.

This scene, taken from my early field notes in 2005, describes a typical night in Roberto’s bar. Within the neighborhood of Almagro this guitar and vocal type of performance tradition was revived in the mid 1990s when an old man began hosting a tango night in his century-old tavern.

El Boliche de Roberto, known as Roberto's Place or just Roberto's, is a tiny, century-old bar located in the heart of residential Almagro, just next to the neighborhood's central plaza. In the mid-1990s, Roberto Perez, who inherited the bar from his father in the '60s, started hosting open tango nights where elderly musicians would come to play and jam around the old wooden tables of the bar. The performances were always unamplified, the bar never charged a cover, and a hat was passed for tips. In the beginning, the audience consisted of the bar regulars, a group of aging men who were Roberto's friends that lived in the neighborhood. Typical of neighborhood cafes in the past, these men would spend their afternoons in the bar drinking wine and soda out of old soda siphons, chatting, and playing cards (see figure 2.2). As the story goes, the scene started when tango singer Roberto Medina happened into the bar one afternoon to use the phone after his car broke down nearby. Supposedly, the bar owner Roberto, a lifelong tango fanatic, had the radio on the tango station as he did most days. Medina, enchanted by the old-fashioned décor of the place and by Roberto, asked if he could start playing live tango music on the weekends. The rest is history.

It's important to understand that Roberto's bar is not only visually evocative of another era, but its location in Almagro is significant since the neighborhood was home to many famous early tango artists. Most significantly, Carlos Gardel, the most famous tango singer of all time and the singer associated with immortalizing this kind of guitar and vocal style in the 1920s and '30s was said to have played his first concerts in the bars of the neighborhood. Some even say Gardel, Pugliese and other tango greats frequented the bar when it was a neighborhood *almacen* (store and bar). Blessed by the ghosts of Gardel and Pugliese, and physically giving the sense of entering a place suspended in a different era, the atmosphere of the bar and the legends surrounding it fuse together to create this now legendary neighborhood tango haven.

Agustin Ortega, one of the house guitarists, has played in the bar multiple times a week for 17 years, 10 of which he spent performing as a duo with the now 84-year old singer Osvaldo

Peredo. In an interview in 2009, Agustin explains the late Roberto Perez' love for tango saying, "Roberto loved tango, he loved tango viscerally and continuously, that's just how he was."¹⁴ But it was not only love that inspired the growing music scene in Roberto's bar. Soon after the scene began, Medina moved on to other projects and the two main performers at the bar became the guitarist, Agustin Ortega and the singer, Osvaldo Peredo. Agustin explained in an interview that while he loved tango, he began playing in Roberto's after being fired from his factory job in the 1990s. Coming from humble backgrounds and living in one of the city's largest slums in the neighborhood of Mataderos, he turned to tango in a desperate attempt to find a source of income to feed his family in dire economic times.

Osvaldo Peredo, roughly 20 years older than Agustin, was a divorced, retired laborer who, after a short period of success as a tango singer in Venezuela and Colombia in the 1950s had spent most of his life working many jobs ranging from a taxi driver to a parking lot attendant. He had returned to singing in some of the remaining tango clubs in the 1980s, but only for a short time, due to the lack of venues for live performance. When Medina invited him to sing in Roberto's bar, he embraced the opportunity as both a source of income and a potential new beginning for his career. Since the bar never charged a cover—using a pass-the-hat policy—it catered to a broader audience unwilling or uninterested in paying cover charges for the live-music tango dinner shows described by Marisa. Thus, tango's return to neighborhood tango bars like Roberto's was in part a product of an economic depression, affecting both the people playing the music, and those choosing to consume it. Coinciding with the rise of tango tourism, these accessible live music spaces offered informal places of learning and cultural transmission for a growing new generation of tango musicians.

Lucas Furno, the violinist who had spent much of the 1990s listening to the signature gravelly voice of Roberto Goyeneche and drinking whiskey with his friends, discovered the bar in

¹⁴ Agustin Ortega, interview by the author, July 15, 2009, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

2000, just a year before the country experienced a devastating economic crash. He said when he first heard Osvaldo sing he was amazed because he realized that tango still existed. At the time he was 20 years old and said discovering Osvaldo was like discovering grandparents that he thought he would never meet. He had become interested in tango through recordings, but since there was no real community and no social networking online at that time, he had nowhere to experience the music first hand. In an interview, he told me, “I think we were a generation in our twenties that felt like our country was going to shit and didn’t know what might happen tomorrow, and the bar allowed us to grab onto these old values, values of times when things were better.”¹⁵ Like Lucas, young musicians from around the city used Roberto’s as their introductory course in living tango as a form of social life and as a place of belonging. Many of the leading musicians and singers in the city today revere the bar as a sort of authentic temple of tango and attribute much of their tango knowledge to the endless nights spent there singing, playing, drinking and socializing.

In the same interview in 2009, Agustin Ortega explained to me that when he started playing in the bar the crowd was made up of Roberto’s friends, the regulars. He said,

In the beginning it was all people from the neighborhood. Then people started coming from the peripheries, and now people come from all over the world... I’ve watched people meet each other, get married, and then bring their children here, it’s a real neighborhood place.

He explained that soon after they began performing for the bars elder regulars, young people intrigued by the setting started peeking their heads in the windows and doors and asking if they could come in and listen.

By 2005 when I reached Roberto’s for the first time, it was often so overcrowded that it was hard to squeeze through the door into the tiny bar. It was in this bar, and others that

¹⁵ Lucas Furno, interview by the author, February 20, 2012, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

developed alongside it, that I was introduced to a side of tango culture that did not cater to tourists, and where, like so many others, I came to receive my informal tango education. After a few months frequenting this bar I came to realize that I had been indoctrinated into a community that operated around a set of seemingly informal but very strict social codes. If you talked while someone was singing, you were rudely shushed. If you asked to perform without being invited by the house musicians, you were given dirty looks. If you asked for the wrong tangos—the ones that didn't fall into the bar's repertoire—you were laughed at or ignored. As described in my introduction, the bar was not only made up of locals in the traditional sense of the word. Many artists and tango fans came from different areas of the city to attend the late-night jams and many foreigners like myself found their way to the bar looking to experience tango in less touristy settings. However, through these complex rituals and ceremonies of social interaction sustained by a flexible but steady crowd of regulars, feelings of locality and the social aesthetics of the bar were reproduced night after night.

Spending time in the bars I realized I was not the only one who saw the bars as informal tango schools. Many musicians and singers, some of whom are now quite famous, learned their first songs, established their core repertoire, picked up guitar techniques, and even had their first public performances within those walls. Although rarely represented in narratives of tango's recent revival, I came to see how these bars, in providing a financially accessible and participatory way of experiencing music, were working as a motor to reclaim tango as a form of local social life. In order to be a local you did not have to be from the neighborhood, or even the city or the country, you just needed to learn to play by the rules. Whereas the tango venues used by the tango rupture movement tended to be more hidden from the public eye—behind closed doors in warehouses—one of the qualities of Roberto's was that it was visible from the street, allowing any passerby to see the venue and come inside.

Roberto's bar played an invaluable role in cultivating a neighborhood imaginary and a new "home" culture for the forming Almagro tango community. It was a place where the neighborhood became a romantic neighborhood again, and where participatory tango performances were a way of socializing among friends. These kinds of acoustic, participatory performance spaces are increasingly hard to find in large, cosmopolitan cities. The feelings of intimacy and community produced in the bar created die-hard tango fans not only out of musicians, but also out of other young people who previously had not been interested in tango. Alejandra, a lawyer in her 30s told me in 2009:

I think [what made me fall in love with Roberto's] has something to do with what is created between everyone that is there. There's something, it's the singer, the place, the atmosphere created, and it happens more when Osvaldo sings. He really transmits the music to you. You know how it is, when Osvaldo sings everyone shuts up and there is total silence. It's as if everyone in the room is really feeling something, and since everyone is so close I think that has something to do with it too.¹⁶

The fact that the repertoire is always the same and made up of old classical tangos also produces a sense of timelessness, belonging and familiarity. It is not uncommon to see people mouthing along or singing quietly while watching the performances. Through these kind of rituals of participation, rooted in the geographical and symbolic framework of the neighborhood, feelings of locality become further solidified.

Leo Cusani, an electrician by day and an amateur tango singer by night, explained the social and symbolic significance of Roberto's to me in our 2010 interview:

Roberto's is full of symbols and that gives old tangos new meanings...I mean anyone that has been to Roberto's know that. But if you say to someone who hasn't been to Roberto's, let's go to Roberto's Place they would think we were

¹⁶ Alejandra Reijter, interview by the author, July 10, 2009, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

going to some guy named Roberto's house. This symbolism at some point grows into a city and that is tango, with its types of words and expressions. When you belong to a group you begin to have words that are not only yours. Words get common meanings from common experiences and then when you say a word everyone laughs because it means something to a group, because it has a symbolic history.

He then explained some of the way the bar offers an intimacy difficult to find in modern cities:

We could say that Roberto's exists because people keep it alive but also we could say that it's because there are so many people who need it. Both musicians and audience members need places like Roberto's. Some might come as a curiosity, maybe for a few months. Others adopt it as a fixed part of their life, or maybe they come once every few months. But everyone needs that in their life, that moment of intimacy, that need to have contact with others, to be able to talk or think about feelings. Generally we don't yell in the bar. It's a a more calm space, I think this makes the bar appealing to people.¹⁷

In 2010 I made a short film about the sensory experience of Roberto's called *A Common Place* that that uses footage from the bar alongside interviews with Leo Cusani and another singer, Stella Diaz. I would recommend viewing this film at this time at www.jenniegubner.com. In this film I seek to illustrate how bars like Roberto's use music-making as a way of producing urban intimacy in the city, blending historic imaginaries of neighborhood and bar culture with contemporary performance practices. Through these practices, the neighborhood as a place of social belonging has been reclaimed and re-signified as people connect specific people, histories and places to these powerful historic imaginaries of urban intimacy.

¹⁷ Leo Cusani, interview by the author, July 19, 2010, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Although these places are very real, people experience them in almost magical and surreal ways. For example, Osvaldo once told me that he was at his local laundromat and ran into a woman who frequently came to hear him sing at the bar. He said when she saw him she was completely shocked and said she just never had realized that he existed in real life. Places like Roberto's reify neighborhood imaginaries through affective sensory experiences of music-making and allow people to create meaning and feel locality in their everyday urban worlds.

Since the mid-'90s, what started as a cycle of informal tango gatherings in this small neighborhood bar, has transformed into a thriving neighborhood scene. Nowadays, it consists of multiple bars, concert cycles, late-night live music circuits, neighborhood festivals, neighborhood orchestras, and most recently an independently run club and tango school founded by a group of musicians from the neighborhood scene. Over time, the scene at Roberto's bar has changed. Roberto passed away in 2007 and now a group of young men run the place. The same core performers continued to play until recently, when they became fed up with the new owners and moved on to new bars in the area. Similarly, the audience of regulars has diminished significantly and instead groups of eager travelers often fill the tables of the bar. Although Roberto's is not what it used to be, the bar still holds significant symbolic importance to the neighborhood. Almost any discussion of the neighborhood scene inevitably starts with a reference to the bohemian nights of the early 2000s and especially to Osvaldo, who has become a local legend.

In Almagro, the culture of Roberto's bar served to establish models of locality that were then adopted by many new tango bars in the area. Although many of the new bars looked beyond the tango style of singing the classics with guitar and vocal duets, the memories of Roberto's served and continue to serve as a foundation for this kind of intimate, participatory and community-based music-making venue. Inspired by these social aesthetics and values but catering to the emerging needs of the growing musician's community, new bars with new

aesthetics began to emerge. In this last section I will look at the emergence of new tango initiatives in the Almagro neighborhood that began bringing together the bohemian and nostalgic aesthetics of neighborhood bars with some of the leftist organizing principles characteristic of the tango orchestra movements across town.

Updating Neighborhood Imaginaries in Almagro: The Growth of the Almagro Tango Music Scene

By 2009 the needs of Almagro's neighborhood tango scene was changing. After working for years in tourist tango houses and with big impersonal international touring tango companies, Lucas Furno told me he entered into crisis and decided something had to be done about the fact that his band could fill theaters with 2000 people abroad but could hardly convince 15 locals to attend his shows in Buenos Aires. His primary group, *Viceversa*, was a quintet that played instrumental, highly virtuosic arrangements of old and new tangos, very different than the tango performed in Roberto's. Hearing that an old regular from Roberto's had opened a bar called *Sanata*, Lucas proposed to start a late night concert series there that would be run by his quintet along with four other tango groups from the neighborhood. The idea was to join forces to showcase new tango bands, and attract young audiences with free shows and a festive atmosphere.

The concert cycle they started was called *ConCiertos Atorrantes*. The name, aimed at attracting new audiences, uses the lunfardo term *atorrante*, meaning scoundrel or late night bum, in a play on words that ends up reading "the Scoundrel Concerts" and also "With Certain Scoundrels." The group consisted of four different young tango bands, among them *Amores Tangos*, *Quinteto Viceversa*, *Trio Boero Gallardo Gomes (BGG)*, and *Quasimodo Trio*. Although many of the musicians played in more than one of these founding bands, the groups spanned a wide variety of styles. *Quinteto Viceversa* was a virtuosic instrumental group featuring contemporary compositions in a style resembling the works of vanguard artist Astor Piazzolla.

Trio BGG combined the vanguard style of Piazzolla with structural elements from classical music creating songs in the form of suites, fugues, etc, (a common practice among contemporary conservatory-trained tango composers). Amores Tangos, one of the more popular crossover groups on the scene today, defined themselves as a carnival tango orchestra. Their arrangements combined elements of tango with other popular music styles from Latin America and Europe, and their performances had a festive atmosphere, usually ending in a cumbia dance party.

The idea of the collective was to join together to promote the growing tango music scene in Sanata Bar, by organizing events and transforming live tango band performances into an attractive and aesthetically appealing social experience for young people. On October 3, 2010, in its second year running, the organizers describe the concert cycle in the following Facebook post:

Tango culture today is experiencing an important historic moment, in which new generations are starting to take the reigns of the genre. This is happening not only at an artistic level (through new arrangements and compositions) but also through the creation of new spaces where musicians can communicate their new ideas musical thoughts. This is how “ConCiertos Atorrantes” was born, where, since 2009 more than 40 groups have participated in a series of late-night concerts with no cover charge hosted in Sanata Bar in the Almagro neighborhood.

The musicians who organized the *ConCiertos Atorrantes* concert series had many things in common. They were all middle-class musicians in their mid-twenties and early thirties. Most of them were male, unmarried and had no children. Unlike some of the participating artists in the *tango de ruptura* movement (that encourage performers of all levels of experience), these musicians were all highly musically proficient having trained either in conservatories or through informal networks of performance. For the most part they had all started playing tango in the

late 1990s and early 2000s (some having been inspired by family connections to renowned tango musicians, others having discovered tango in underground and alternative circuits like Roberto's). By 2007, the majority of these musicians lived almost exclusively from performing and teaching music, some receiving support from their families especially in the form of housing.

For the most part the *ConCiertos Atorrantes* musicians worked professionally in tango clubs around the city and/or as touring tango artists. They also shared the common experience of working in tourist-oriented venues where performances were highly choreographed for tourist consumption and performance settings were cold and distanced from audiences. Furthermore, they shared common frustrations with not being able to play their own compositions in these tourist houses, restricted to playing classic repertoires. Most also shared the experiences of touring to places like Europe and filling big theaters with excited listeners and not being able to get more than a few people to come and see them perform in Buenos Aires.

The Saturday night concert series hosted by these musicians quickly became a major hit in the tango underground. Since Sanata was bigger and offered amplified music, it had a different feel and was able to draw in larger crowds. Whereas Roberto's cultivated a form of neighborhood socializing around a nostalgic imaginary of tango's past, Sanata updated this imaginary through the creation of a modern, hip, and contemporary neighborhood space for the alternative tango scene. The manager of the bar, Martin Otaño, explained to me that the bar was never intended to be a quiet and intimate place. He explained,

The biggest challenge was to renovate who is below the stage, make things more massive so you don't have to invite your aunts and uncles and mom and dad... This is what Sanata has succeeded in doing, it created a new audience. There are lots of musicians here who come who are incredible virtuosos that work in tango houses, but that is their work, they feel nothing, they just go and work and then they come here

because maybe they want to play and maybe they feel a need to play because here they have a different audience.¹⁸

Nowadays, Sanata has live music seven days a week, often with multiple shows a night. Thursday nights have open jams for instrumentalists, and many evenings end in informal late night performances. These participatory events, similar to the impromptu duets at Roberto's as seen in the film, blur the lines between audience and performer and function to strengthen ties between musicians and create feelings of localness and community for both. For the non-musicians in the crowd, Sanata was able to create feelings of belonging and community not so much through intimacy and acoustic performance but through the warm celebratory atmosphere created by certain bands. The biggest hit of the bar was a group called Amores Tangos, a group that identified itself as a tango carnival orchestra and aimed to play tango-inspired compositions mixed with humor, different musical styles, and lots of energy. Although the bar usually had no dancing, the Saturday night Amores Tangos parties always turned into huge dance parties spilling onto the streets, lasting until dawn, and feeling like a perfect neighborhood block party. Osvaldo Peredo was always invited to sing a song or two, drawing a connection between Roberto's and Sanata, a bridge between the classical and the new, and a link connecting these two neighborhood spaces¹⁹.

¹⁸ Martin Otaño, interview by the author, February 10, 2012, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

¹⁹ For an example of this see my film *Los Locos De Almagro* at www.jenniegubner.com where Amores Tangos and Osvaldo Peredo interpret the famous bolero, "Besame Mucho" in Sanata Bar (00:06:00).



Figure 2.5. Members of Amores Tangos performing with a guest singer during the Friday night *Conciertos Atorrantes* concert series in Sanata Bar (2012).

In 2010, the musicians and organizers of Sanata Bar and the *ConCiertos Atorrantes* cycle, frustrated by city politics that had temporarily shut down their bar, decided to host the first independent neighborhood tango festival in Almagro to celebrate the neighborhood's music scene (discussed in detail in chapter four). In the promotional flyers for the festival, Roberto's Place, Osvaldo Peredo, and Agustin Ortega were celebrated as the foundational building blocks for this neighborhood event celebrating the contemporary musical tango life of Almagro. Alongside these foundational blocks, the *ConCiertos Atorrantes* concert cycle and new venues like Sanata were also celebrated as integral to the neighborhoods vibrant cultural scene. Just as participatory music making and dance parties created feelings of belonging, the kind of collective grassroots organizing used to put on these festivals also acted as a motor in the production of locality.

The members of the *ConCiertos Atorrantes* cycle did not stop at organizing a concert series and a single festival. The following year they joined with another independent tango cycle *TangoContempo* to start the first neighborhood-based string orchestra for contemporary tango compositions, named after a renowned tango violinist from Almagro, Elvino Vardaro (discussed in detail in Chapter Five). Then, after debuting the orchestra at the second annual neighborhood tango festival, they decided in 2012 to attempt the creation of their own live-music venue—a place to be called The Almagro Tango Club (discussed in detail in chapter six). The idea for the venue was to create a gathering place similar to old neighborhood clubs where the owners would host tango concerts, dances, informal jams, a rehearsal space and even a school. Although the project did not end up being the utopian venue many of them had envisioned, it represented another major collaborative effort by young, local musicians to create local spaces and contexts for their music, all rooted within the values of neighborhood life and neighborhood tango bars.

Although each of these projects has played an important role in the production of local spaces and local communities for the not-for-export tango scene, not everyone feels local everywhere. Returning to Appadurai's discussion of the production of locality, he reminds us that "locality is an inherently fragile social achievement" (1996:179). Today, many would argue that Roberto's is no longer a place for locals now that so many tourists fill the tables at the bar. In Sanata, beyond the issues of noise control, many musicians feel that you have to be part of the in-crowd to play on jam nights and that it is a more closed community than it pretends to be. In the new venue, the Almagro Tango Club, the cover charge makes the bar feel less popular and accessible to some, and although the concerts are succeeding, many would argue that it has yet to achieve its goal of creating a space that successfully blends the popular with the formal.

Nonetheless, these spaces have acted as a motor for learning, making music, organizing, and living tango as a form of everyday social life, reintegrating and strengthening

what had been a heavily fragmented community. As I hope to have shown, the neighborhood location of this scene is not only a physical space where these alternative places have developed, but also represents a powerful symbolic framework and a platform from which to fight for a local identity of tango that is something much more than a consumer product for the tourist industry. Much like the dreadlocks, disco balls, and often acoustically aggressive aesthetics used by the *tango de ruptura* movement to contest old-fashioned and for-export understandings of tango, the changing neighborhood imaginaries and aesthetics of tango bar movements like those in Almagro also act as powerful motors for relocating and re-signifying tango into the contemporary urban landscape of Buenos Aires.

Conclusions

The worlds of *tango de ruptura* and *tango barrial* are not isolated in the city landscape of Buenos Aires but instead feed off and inform one another in many ways. Similarly, the development of the Almagro *tango barrial* scene has served as a model for the development of other neighborhood tango music scenes around the city that are gradually uniting to form a united city-wide network of neighborhood-based tango movements. The scenes connected to the *tango de ruptura* movement have also helped to promote ideologies of cooperatives and collectives and helped to politicize the Almagro neighborhood scene when city policies began shutting down local music venues in 2006. While many individuals participate in both of these scenes, and while they share many of the same political agendas, they tend to have different leaders, different spaces and promote very different aesthetics of tango performance. As a result, most of the people that I know feel more connected to one scene than the other. If the *tango de ruptura* movement positioned itself as a break with the past seeped in an aesthetic of rock and roll, rebellion, and youth counterculture through orchestral sounds, the *tango barrial* movements grew out of a much more nostalgic imaginary, one based in the romantic settings of

guitar and vocal tango performance as a part of everyday social life in an old-fashioned neighborhood.

Situated within very different social aesthetics and urban imaginaries, both of these scenes emerged out of similar desires to create spaces of urban belonging through tango music in urban times of economic instability and crisis. Both scenes involved groups of young people trying to find places to connect with tango and each other in meaningful ways. Both scenes constructed new understandings of tango that framed the genre as a participatory, collective, non-consumer, community-based, national, and not “North-Americanized,” music tradition. Both scenes also took elements of the past and imbued those elements with contemporary meaning through live music culture. Both scenes offered new aesthetics and social imaginaries of tango that provided an alternative to the “grotesque elegance” associated with tango culture in the 1970s and 1980s. Each responding to the current political, social and cultural realities of city life, both of these alternatives created local tango music cultures to which young people could once again belong. Perhaps most importantly, both scenes were looking to find new places to socialize that felt local and connected and new social communities to belong to at a time when contemporary national narratives were not providing much in the way of identity for young people. The fact that they took such very different aesthetic approaches to this process, and that these communities continue to feed off, transform, and breathe new meanings into these new tango cultures, is a testament to the plethora of ways artists have found to reimagine and relocalize tango within the contemporary urban landscape of Buenos Aires.

Through each of these scenes, artists and listeners learn to *know* tango in new and updated ways. Fundamental to my research on the relocalization of tango into neighborhood contexts has been my use of film as a tool for producing alternative forms of sensory knowledge about local, neighborhood music practices. I made these films as a way of helping my readers begin to *know* tango culture within local contexts and communities. Before looking more in

depth at the complexities of the different projects emerging from the Almagro neighborhood tango movement (in chapters four, five and six), I turn in the next chapter to analyzing the ways I have used film as a methodology for my research. Given the jarring differences between the sensory experiences of these scenes and the understandings of tango promoted through mainstream culture, I will argue that sensory filmmaking offers a powerful vehicle through which to relocate globalized popular music genres within the sensory experiences of specific “home” environments.

Chapter 3

De-Exoticizing Tango Through Film: Sensory Filmmaking as Local Knowledge Production in Ethnomusicological Research



Figure 3.1. Filming during one of the late-night jams at El Faro bar, featured in my film, *The Procession of the White Bandoneon*. (Photo courtesy of Juliette Igier, 2012.)

Ethnographic Knowledge Production in the 21st Century

Writing is one of multiple ways humans share knowledge. Analytical writing is also only one style of producing knowledge with words. Oral storytelling, photography, music, lectures, film, theatrical performance, and multimedia presentations are other ways humans share their ideas with one another. Since the 1990s and the publication of *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986), ethnographic writing as a positivist, scientific practice has come under much

scrutiny. Ideas of scientific ethnography were supplanted by the postmodern understanding that all ethnographies are constructed fictions containing partial truths and colored by the subjectivities of the ethnographer and his/her relationships in the field. Questions of reflexivity, collaboration, fieldwork ethics, dialogic editing, visual, sensory and experiential knowledge production, and the overall goals of the ethnographic process have since come to the forefront of many ethnographic debates.

These changes have brought many new approaches to conducting fieldwork and to the kinds of ethnographies being produced by scholars today. Central to these new approaches is a desire to seek out alternative modes of exploring, documenting, and communicating knowledge between audiences. Furthermore, scholars have become more interested in applied forms of anthropology that allow their research to be accessible and ideally useful to local and international audiences both in and out of academia. Increased critical scholarship in the fields of visual, filmed, multimodal, and sensory ethnography are indicative of this growing interest in alternative forms of ethnographic knowledge production (Banks 1997; Barbash and Taylor 1997; Berger 1991; Crawford 1992; Grimshaw 2009, 2001; Hsu 2013; MacDougall 2006, 1998; Pink 2009, 2007; Ruby 1975; Shorter 2011). At the heart of these studies lies the idea that visual and multimedia approaches to ethnography are capable of transmitting certain kinds of knowledge difficult to express through written text.

Today with the media sharing technologies made possible through computers and the Internet and the increasing affordability of photo and video cameras, the production and dissemination of visual, filmed, multimodal, and sensory research is becoming more feasible. As a scholar trained in educational systems that encouraged interdisciplinary and cross-platform learning, visual and sensory approaches to ethnography have given me powerful tools through which to evoke and transmit valuable knowledge about complex and culturally contextualized ethnomusicological practices. My choice to incorporate alternative and multimodal forms of

knowledge production into my work is not supplementary to my research goals. Instead, visual and sensory methods of ethnography—and especially what I will call sensory filmmaking—lie at the heart of my objective to challenge exoticizing stereotypes of tango culture and relocate tango music practices within localized economies of feeling in Buenos Aires. In a multimedia age where words are clearly only one of many powerful ways we learn about the world around us, I am committed to moving past traditional forms of academic knowledge production and advocating research that makes our work more dynamic and more accessible to wider public audiences.

While alternative forms of ethnographic knowledge production offer new possibilities to ethnographic research, they also come with new challenges. Throughout this chapter I discuss my experiences incorporating filmmaking—understood through a lens of visual and sensory ethnography—alongside written scholarship in my ethnomusicological research on neighborhood tango music scenes in Argentina. In an effort to move past the traditional formula of using film as supplemental to critical research, I propose sensory filmmaking as a critical mode of ethnographic inquiry and sensory mode of knowledge production in ethnomusicological research. I address the reasons I chose to use film for my specific research project and then discuss the theoretical issues that have grounded my approach. The end of the chapter will be devoted to my experiences filming in the field and to questions related to the editing and presentation of the resulting films, including how I conceptualize their integration into this dissertation.

It is important to clarify that my interest in sensory and visual ethnography grew out of my interest in ethnographic film. Therefore, my interest in the sensory and the visual in ethnography are more connected to a desire to evoke experiential non-discursive knowledge that engages with ways of understanding that move beyond the written word, and less so with a desire to ethnographically interrogate the 5 senses. The medium of film is particularly helpful in transmitting auditory and visual forms of knowledge, which, of the five senses, are those most en-

gaged through my work. However, when I speak of sensory and multisensory knowledge in this chapter, I use the term more holistically to mean not only the visual and auditory. I use sensory to speak to the ability of film to create a sense of place, a feeling of embodied experience, and pathways of knowing that travel through the visual and auditory and allows viewers to engage through multiple sensory modes a given experience of music. The kinds of sensory knowing promoted here are intended to do multiple things: 1) break down stereotypical understandings of tango as a hypersexualized staged and choreographed dance tradition; 2) evoke the geographic settings, verbal discourses and musical sounds that work together to inform the creation of new neighborhood tango imaginaries, and 3) push viewers to understand the subtle and complex ways the political and the sentimental operate together through live-music performance. Approaching questions of the sensory from a film background and through film literatures, I seek to create a productive dialogue between theories of ethnography, theories of filmmaking and ideas of sensory knowledge.

Filmmaking is only one of the multiple modes of ethnographic inquiry I employed throughout this project. I also participated in many events through other more traditional forms of ethnomusicological fieldwork including performing as a violinist, listening as an audience member, socializing, organizing events, and conducting interviews. Nonetheless, if we are to move beyond the idea of ethnographic film as supplementary to our research and professional academic agendas, we need to engage in dialogue with each other about how and why film—and other alternative ethnographic modes—should be critically integrated into ethnomusicological scholarship. Framed this way, this discussion is not meant as a prescriptive model for sensory filmmaking but instead as a descriptive roadmap of the ways I engaged with alternative sensory modalities of knowledge production through film in the creation of this dissertation. Ideally, my goal is to encourage others to pursue similar multimodal projects and to think critically about some of the challenges and potentials offered by the medium of film. I believe these kinds of

projects have the potential to both enrich our discipline and make our scholarship accessible to broader and more diverse audiences.

Theorizing Sensory Filmmaking as a Mode of Local Knowledge Production in Ethnomusicological Research

Film and writing do not produce knowledge in the same way. In fact, film and writing often do very different things and offer very different tools in the production of ethnographic research. Writing is particularly good at shaping scholarly analysis and constructing theoretical arguments that draw on and reference previous scholarship. Film, on the other hand, is very effective at evoking sensory experiences and creating a more direct connection with the people and places in question through the multi-sensory audio-visual medium. Whereas film and writing are often experienced apart from one another, scholars like Sarah Pink have advocated bringing together these two modes of ethnographic presentation to explore “how writing and video might combine to represent sensory experience theoretically and ethnographically” (2006:58). Moving away from prioritizing the written word as the primary mode of conveying knowledge through scholarship, multimodal approaches to research offer many possibilities for producing theoretical research that engages with more than one of our senses. Especially when researching local cultures that continue to be heavily marketed through external economies of emotion (ie tango as commodified passion), the incorporation of sensory modes of knowing alongside written theoretical arguments offers rich potential for empowering local narratives through ethnographic scholarship.

A sensory filmmaking of neighborhood tango music scenes has offered me a way of shifting focus off representations of tango typically circulated in what Marta Savigliano has called tango’s political economies of passion (1995) and instead evoking tango music in the context of intimate, local economies of feeling—a term I borrow from Lila Ellen Grey’s research

on Portuguese fado music (2013). In my own work, I use this idea of local economies of feeling to refer to locally contextualized sensory experiences of tango music. Film has given me a sensory lens through which to explore these economies as experienced by myself and local musicians. The forms of sensory knowing advocated through my work and explored in this chapter are intended to build new pathways of understanding about how tango is experienced in local neighborhood music communities in Buenos Aires.

When I began the project I was initially drawn to film as a way of translating the kinds of musical experiences of tango bars to outside audiences. Over the course of my fieldwork and filmmaking I became more acutely aware of the political implications of my research. Seeing the disconnect between the marketed stereotypes of tango culture promoted through mainstream tourist industries and the kinds of tango created and shared in neighborhood scenes, I realized that my work could act as a productive bridge between internal and external understandings of the genre. Furthermore, as the scene itself became more politicized (reacting to the cultural politics of the city government and channeling the current climate of leftist cultural activism) I also realized that my films could not only show local culture but speak to local political issues. From this perspective I hope these films not only show local tango culture but act to evoke experiential and sensory knowledge about the everyday nature of grassroots activism in Buenos Aires today and the role participatory music-making can play in fighting for positive social change in modern cities.

Raising awareness about the exoticization of music genres as they enter into global markets of circulation is the first step in moving beyond these othering stereotypes. Thinking creatively about how to participate in the construction and dissemination of alternative artistic imaginaries for these genres is the next step, one that involves reflexivity, collaboration and participation. As Huyssen writes: "What we think about a city and how we perceive it informs the ways we act in it" (2008: 3). Thus, if the imaginative processes through which we come to un-

derstand our social worlds directly affect the way we (and others) perceive and act in those social worlds, it is my responsibility as a scholar interested in de-exoticizing tango to actively contribute to disseminating alternative representations of tango culture, both in local and cross-cultural contexts.

Driven by theories of visual and sensory ethnography, and particularly the writings of David MacDougall (2006, 1998) and Sarah Pink (2007, 2009), I treat film as both a research methodology and a mode of ethnographic presentation in my research. From a methodological standpoint I used film as one vehicle through which to investigate the complex relationships between the places, people and practices which are localizing tango music back into neighborhood contexts in recent years. This has allowed me to explore how informal, intimate and participatory music making produces locality in modern cities. It has also allowed me to investigate how alternative, not-for-export imaginaries for tango are being collectively produced through everyday multi-sensory musical and social practices of neighborhood music scenes.

From a presentational standpoint, I treat film as a dynamic medium through which to evoke the multi-sensory musical and social practices involved in the production of local tango culture in the neighborhoods of Buenos Aires today. By embracing the multi-sensory capabilities of filmmaking (in particular the ability to place musical sound within specific social, spatial and emotional contexts), film becomes a tool through which my readers/viewers can begin to construct their own alternative understandings of tango as a form of local, neighborhood culture. Through these sensory snapshots of tango as a part of everyday urban life and a form of urban culture in contemporary Buenos Aires, I contribute to a growing body of popular and academic scholarship seeking to diversify understandings of tango culture.

By combining writing with the creation of new sensory explorations of tango through film I am playing an active role in criticizing and contesting reductive stereotypes of tango culture as a hyper-sexualized dance culture disseminated through mainstream international media. Fur-

thermore, by making films and making these films accessible to the public via my website and other online social networks I see my filmed work as a way to make my research accessible and useful to broader and more diverse audiences. As both a mode of ethnographic inquiry and a medium of ethnographic presentation I have come to think of my filmed research through a lens of sensory filmmaking. This concept draws together primarily the theories of MacDougall and Pink, which I will discuss presently.

1. Filming Social Aesthetics as a Mode of Ethnomusicological Inquiry

In his 1988 book *Transcultural Cinema*, pioneer visual anthropologist and filmmaker David MacDougall writes in reference to film as a mode of ethnography: “Anthropological films present a genuine process of inquiry...They do not provide a ‘pictorial representation’ of anthropological knowledge, but a form of knowledge that emerges through the very grain of the filmmaking” (MacDougall 1998:76). But what kinds of knowledge *can* film and the process of making films produce and in what ways might film as a methodological approach enrich ethnomusicological scholarship? In his own research on film and the senses, MacDougall studies what he calls *social aesthetics* through filmmaking. This concept has nothing to do with theories of aesthetics in relation to high art and beauty. Instead his idea focuses on aesthetics as the everyday sensory experiences and sensory structures that produce embodied histories of places and cultures. He writes:

My working premise has been that the aesthetic dimension of human experience is an important social fact, to be taken seriously alongside such other facts as economic survival, political power, and religious belief. It is important because it often matters to people and influences their actions as much as anything else in their lives. (2006:98).

By defining aesthetics as culturally patterned sensory experience, his interest in filming social aesthetics speaks to his desire to evoke and produce knowledge about the sensory worlds

where he conducts his research. Borrowing from this idea, filming social aesthetics became a way of using my camera to explore how the multisensory experiences of practicing music in and around neighborhood tango bars were producing meaningful localized and not “for-export” tango imaginaries.

My interest in filming social aesthetics as a mode of ethnographic inquiry led me to approach my filmed work in a very different way than I would if I were setting out to produce a film strictly for entertainment purposes.¹ Rather than going out with a preconceived filming script or narrative sketched out, this theoretical orientation kept me focused on filming different ethnographic moments that spoke specifically to my research questions. These social aesthetics take many forms that can be seen in my films but can be thought of broadly as the socio-aesthetic sensory moments that play a significant role in the everyday production of meaning within these scenes. To offer some examples, the social aesthetics documented in my films involve practices of participatory music-making in small live-music venues such as sing-a-longs, sensory experiences of intimate listening through acoustic performances, the social solidarity and enthusiasm produced through collective moments of organizing, the storytelling that accompanies and personalizes many tango performances in these small venues, and the reification of neighborhood imaginaries as they are sung and played in the context of neighborhood cartographies of the city.

2. Sensory Ethnography as a Tool for Studying Processes of Localization

The second theoretical orientation that shaped my filmmaking practices was my interest in the field of sensory ethnography. Sensory ethnography, described by Sarah Pink, is a “reflex-

¹ In 2010 I made my first short film, *A Common Place*, with a friend who is a camerawoman for a local television station. We found that working together pushed both of our comfort zones because she was trained as a filmmaker and I was trained as an ethnographer. From this experience, I decided to film on my own in the future, not wanting to subject my friends to frustrating collaborations and also not wanting to change my specific methodologies in order to obtain the results I was looking for.

ive and experiential process through which understanding, knowing and (academic) knowledge are produced” (Pink 2009:8). I have found that sensory ethnography is not just about the idea that cultural experiences are multisensorial, but that multisensory experiential knowledge allows us to “know” in different ways, ways that empower local knowledge and that give room for us to become acquainted with or familiar with cultures and cultural practices. MacDougall’s comment about the kind of knowledge produced through anthropological films could be understood as one form of sensory knowledge production.

Pink’s writings on sensory ethnography pushed me to think about my field experiences in a different way. By taking sensory experience “seriously,” I came to understand how tuning in to the complex multi sensory nature of social and musical experiences created pathways for the production of rich ethnographic data that served to enrich my larger ethnographic project in creative and dynamic ways. Sensory ethnography has given me a way to ask not only why is tango meaningful to people today, but what conditions, what people, what places, what kinds of events foster meaningful moments and how do these sensory structures play an integral role in localizing tango culture today in Buenos Aires. Sensory ethnography has also led me to think more critically about how to produce scholarship that I can share with diverse audiences both in and out of the field. Among other advantages, making scholarship accessible to wider and more diverse audiences also gives me a way to receive feedback and establish dialogic relationships with my friends and colleagues in the field.

One thing that I have learned is that meaningful sensory moments are not universal. What is a meaningful moment to one person is not necessarily meaningful to the next. I learned this by making films and sharing them with my friends and colleagues in the field. One of my films, *The Procession of the White Bandoneon*, documents a tribute to a local musician who recently passed away. When I sent this film to two friends who had been close to the artist, I received very different reactions. The first wrote to tell me that the film had brought tears to his

eyes and that he would cherish it as an invaluable way of remembering this musician and that very special night. He said he had forgotten I was filming that night and that he was amazed at how I had put the sequence together in a way that highlighted all of the subtle moments that were most meaningful to him. Soon after, my other friend wrote to say that perhaps he wasn't the right person to ask because he thought the whole tribute felt like a spectacle and not a commemoration and had meant very little to him.

These kinds of experiences convinced me that I cannot pretend to convey any overarching recipe for how to create a meaningful sensory experience with tango in neighborhood settings. I can, however, use sensory research methodologies to create films and writing that bring my viewers into specific moments when sensory environments around musical practices produced particularly powerful and often transformative moments through social music making for certain individuals. It is the subtle but profound difference between telling someone "look, this is meaningful" and showing someone "look, this was meaningful to certain people at this one moment." Instead of prescribing fixed meaning, I aim to use film to bring my audiences closer to local sensory experiences of tango, allowing them to interpret them openly. This difference is essential in combatting the tendency to reduce culture to homogenizing cultural narratives like that of branding tango as a universal expression of passion. Crossing the deep divide between telling and showing, my ethnographic approach aims to evoke understandings of tango that are plural, complex, subjective, always changing, and far from universal.

3. Sensory Filmmaking

I have chosen the term sensory filmmaking to describe my approach to visual and filmed ethnography in my dissertation, bringing together Pink's writings about a need for scholars to take the senses seriously in academic writing and research presentation, and MacDougall's writings on the potential of the film medium as a tool for researching culturally pat-

tered sensory experience. It is the term that most accurately describes the methods I have used and the theoretical underpinnings that have accompanied these choices. An important step in utilizing an alternative methodology like filmmaking as a form of research inquiry and of research presentation (not just a supplement to research or a teaching tool) is establishing a clear reason to opt for this less than traditional path. Operating within the academic discipline of ethnomusicology where many still adhere to traditional approaches to ethnography—in this case text-based ethnographic research—this becomes even more important. In the next section I will address the experiences that led me to pursue a multimodal and sensory approach to my research.

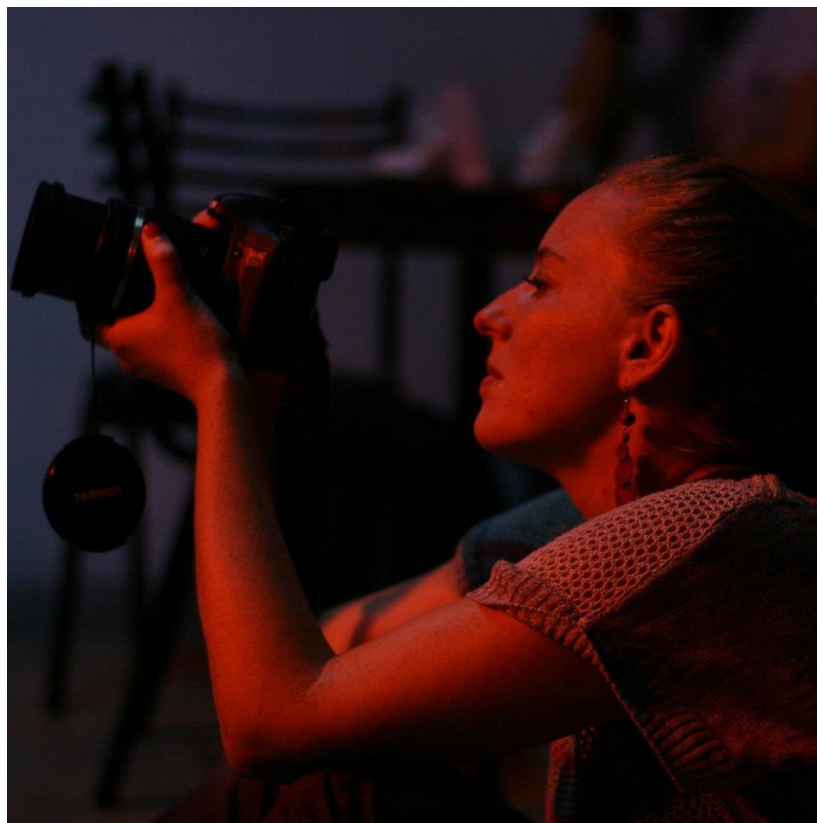


Figure 3.2. Filming During the 2012 Barracas Neighborhood Tango Festival. (Photo courtesy of Elsa Broclain, 2012.)

Why I chose Filmmaking as a Methodology for Studying Neighborhood Tango Music Scenes?

My interest in using sensory filmmaking as a methodology in my PhD research on local tango music scenes in Buenos Aires came from two separate but overlapping experiences. The first is that I spent a good part of 2005 in Buenos Aires fully immersed in the culture of intimate neighborhood tango music bars listening to, learning about, and performing tango on my violin. My rich memories of that year, staying up night after night to play music in these small, intimate bars, not only shaped me as a person but led me to want to shed light on the social and musical importance of small, late-night, informal musical venues as places of learning, transmission, and of social encounter around musical practice. These experiences taught me that neighborhood tango bars were playing an important role in reviving tango as a living urban music culture in Buenos Aires and were providing the contexts for creating urban belonging in a city recovering from a major economic crisis. Furthermore, these were places where tango was sung and played, not danced—a very different sensory experience than the common association of tango as dance. Realizing that stereotypical understandings of tango culture had very little to do with these environments, I became interested in finding sensory modes through which to study the culture of these environments.

Another reason I chose to use film in my research was to visually and sensorially challenge stereotypes of tango culture associated with blood red roses and exotic cabaret dancers, the stereotypes associated with ideas of “postcard tango.” This postcard tango imaginary is so powerful in international representations of tango culture that when I returned from Argentina I frequently battled these stereotypes in my attempts to convey the settings of the neighborhood bars where I was studying tango culture. In 2010 at a conference in Wales, I presented *A Common Place*, my first film short about tango in these neighborhood bars. I will never forget my surprise when, after the film, a man in the audience said, “Sorry for my ignorance, but, what we

just saw, that was tango?” The film I had shown featured people dressed in informal clothes sitting in a small bar listening to musicians play and sing guitar and vocal tango music. In my film there were no dancers in a passionate embrace, no bandoneon and no sign of the punctuated and repetitive habanera rhythm (chan [pause] chanCHAN [pause] chan) that many foreigners associate with tango music from classic cartoons, commercials, movies and other forms of popular media. Without these cues, this man, and many others with whom I shared my research, found it difficult to identify anything that resonated with their preconceptions of tango. At the conference I had spent my 20-minute presentation talking about the subtleties of how neighborhood tango bars were creating local places of belonging to this rich musical genre, and how film could evoke these experiences. That day I realized that those discussions needed to be prefaced by another discussion. This other discussion was about challenging visual, aural, and sensory stereotypes of tango’s postcard imaginaries and positioning my work instead within sensory imaginaries of tango experienced outside of these exoticizing frameworks. Through this approach, I would use my films to bring alternative and less commercialized local tango imaginaries into the light.

This discussion not only concerns the perception of tango outside of Argentina, but even more importantly lies at the forefront of independent tango movements in Buenos Aires today as artists struggle to bring visibility to expressions of tango culture that are very different from the exoticized stage shows intended for tourists (discussed in detail in the Opening and Introductory Chapter of this dissertation). Many of the people I work with are employed by these kinds of tourist stage shows but also participate in informal neighborhood bar scenes as a more intimate and community-based form of musical practice. It is not uncommon for musicians to spend their evenings performing on big stages, dressed in outdated, stylized costumes and playing tango’s most classic repertoire for foreigners, and then later come to neighborhood bars to perform and experience tango informally among an audiences of their peers. As they navigate through these

multiple and often contrasting and conflicting settings, these not-for-export experiences become even more significant to their artistic identities and everyday musical lives. After experiencing first hand the difficulties that exoticizing stereotypes pose to a genre's identity both in and outside of Argentina, I became even more interested in the potential that film and writing could have working in tandem to critically analyze and simultaneously create new sensory pathways leading to a richer understanding of the many worlds of tango culture.

Rethinking Filmmaking in Ethnomusicology Through the Senses

Surprisingly little has been written and theorized about the role of the visual in studies in ethnomusicology.² During the Charles Seeger Memorial Lecture at the 32d annual Society for Ethnomusicology conference in 1988, filmmaker and renowned ethnomusicologist Hugo Zemp spoke about the role of film in music scholarship. He stated:

My aim here is not to discuss the history, trends, problems, and scholarly status of film in ethnomusicology, nor the implications, for our discipline, of theoretical and practical work carried out in visual anthropology. Steven Feld, who kindly introduced me today, did this already 11 years ago, and his article in our journal remains the largest and most important reflection on visual communication in ethnomusicology (Feld 1976). (Zemp 1988)

For years, ethnomusicologists have allowed theoretical discussions of where the visual fits within the study of ethnomusicology to fall by the wayside. Although Feld produced a com-

² When I started my fieldwork in 2011 a Google search of the term "visual ethnomusicology" brought up only a few scattered results, the most substantial being a conference abstract for the Seminar for Ethnomusicology in Venice, 2004 that had visual ethnomusicology as one of its main themes. Similarly scarce results turned up in article databases like Jstor, Project Muse, and others. On a positive note, this year the University of Valladolid in Spain is organizing the first international conference on Visual Ethnomusicology with an emphasis on films, indicating growing international interest in incorporating visual studies into the field of ethnomusicology.

prehensive article entitled “Ethnomusicology and Visual Communication” in 1976, it is surprising how little scholarship has been produced since then dedicated to critical methodologies and theories within the subfields of ethnomusicological filmmaking and/or visual ethnomusicology. For the most part film has been and continues to be seen as a supplemental part of research and a didactic tool for teaching, not a critical pathway for constructing new forms of scholarly knowledge about musical cultures and musical practices.

In the larger field of anthropology, concerns with visual culture have been taking shape for some time. In 1984 the Society for Visual Anthropology was founded under the umbrella of the American Anthropological Association and began promoting scholarship and discourse about the role of the visual in anthropology. In 1997, Marcus Banks and Howard Morphy helped further define the parameters of the field by explaining that visual anthropology encompasses both studies of visual systems and visible cultures, and studies that utilize the visual as a medium of anthropological inquiry (1997:1-2). Today, journals like the *Visual Anthropology Review* and *The Journal of Visual Anthropology* as well as organizations like the Commission for Visual Anthropology and the Society for Visual Anthropology work to organize conferences, festivals, and other projects that promote studies of visual cultures and the role of the visual in the production of ethnographic research.³ Scholars including Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Taylor (1997), Peter Ian Crawford (1992), Ana Grimshaw (2001, 2009), Sarah Pink (2007, 2009), David MacDougall (1988, 2006), and Jay Ruby (1975) and art critics like John Berger (1991) have also greatly contributed to the development of the field over the past two decades.

³ In 2001 the American Anthropological Association published a statement entitled “Guidelines for the Evaluation of Ethnographic Visual Media” that explained the nature of visual research, the need for further integration of visual and multi-media research into academia and the importance of legitimizing this kind of research as part of the academic accomplishments of anthropology. This document can be found on the Society for Visual Anthropology website. The URL for this document is: http://societyforvisualanthropology.org/?page_id=2.

In recent years many of these discussions, especially those about film, have broadened to incorporate not just studies of the visual, but studies of what is seen as sensory experience, incorporating more than just the visual sense in ethnographic evocations of cultures. Sarah Pink writes that sensory ethnographies seek to both study and relay the complex relationships between culture and sensory environments (2009). Using Étienne Wenger's theory of social learning, Pink states, "the experience of knowing' [is] one of 'participation'... This means that individuals themselves cannot be the source of knowing. Rather, knowing is contingent on its connectedness both historically and with others." In order to study knowing as a participatory experience, she suggests thinking about knowing as a practice that is "specific, engaged, active and experiential." Knowing in practice she writes, is "an embodied and multisensorial way of knowing that is inextricable from our sensorial and material engagements with the environment and is as such an emplaced knowing (34). If knowing is experiential and so deeply connected to sensory experience, then conveying knowledge through ethnography should also strive to be experiential. Scholars like Steven Feld and David MacDougall have long argued and demonstrated this in their work (MacDougall 1998, 2006; Feld 1996, 2012).

Much ethnomusicological scholarship is based in the study of complex musical, social, political, economic and emotional practices that are often difficult to translate into the format of traditional written ethnographies. Especially when dealing with the social practices of music-making, filmmaking can offer a useful way of documenting the many non-verbal elements at play and transmitting them through a medium capable of evoking sensory experience. While written ethnographies are the standard medium for the presentation of most ethnomusicological research, creating dynamic multi-sensory narratives through film can offer new and exciting possibilities for evoking complex, difficult to articulate, and rich sensory experiences of musical performance. With a few important exceptions, (Baily 1989; Elschek 1989; Harbert 2010; Feld 2012, 1990, 1976; Titon 1992; Zemp 1990, 1988), ethnomusicologists have traditionally used

visual mediums like film and photography as supplementary to their research and not as integral elements to their theoretical goals and methodological approaches. One of my goals as a scholar is to challenge this idea and contribute to discussions advocating these alternative forms of visual and sensory knowledge production as integral and legitimate research methodologies.

If those of us engaged in this kind of work want to see film and visual research validated with the same academic legitimacy as our written work, we must take a more active and direct approach to explaining the value of this kind of research to the field. One example of the kind of integrated, theoretically grounded and critical work with visual ethnomusicology can be seen in the research of Benjamin Harbert. His research on music in the US prison systems employs film as a critical methodology through which to study how musical experiences affect the lives of prisoners. It also provides a theoretical lens through which to study the role of cameras as surveillance tools in prison systems (Harbert 2010). Alongside his dissertation research he produced a film entitled *Follow Me Down—Portraits of Louisiana Prison Musicians* (2012), which has been screened at festivals, prisons, museums and classrooms across the US, bringing his work into the public and applied sphere. It is exactly these kinds of careful studies of the way that visual and sonic cultures interact with one another that inspire my own work.

Steven Feld's most recent book *Jazz Cosmopolitanism* (2012) offers another creative model for how to produce scholarship that treats audio recordings, filmmaking and writing as complementary in the production of rich and dynamic ethnomusicological knowledge. In the introduction to his book he specifically states: "it felt more natural to let photographs, recordings, video, and performances express the sensuous substance and spirit of my inquiry as an artist among artists" (Feld 2012:5-6). In order for the field of ethnomusicology to truly legitimize and acknowledge these *other* modes of research with the same weight as written texts, ethnomusicologists must not only continue to critically engage multimedia modes of research in their

scholarship but must also be committed to educating the broader academic community about the value of these alternative forms of knowledge production.

In my own research I contribute to the growing field of visual ethnomusicology by combining methodologies and theories taken from visual anthropology and sensory ethnography. Dealing with communities fighting to create alternatives to dominant representations of tango stereotyped through over-exoticized visual imagery, my choice to produce both written and filmed work becomes politically important in representing local voices and addressing issues of representation from multiple sensory perspectives. In a recent article about her latest film *Kamakha—Through Prayerful Eyes* (2013), filmmaker and film theorist Aparna Sharma speaks to her use of film in destabilizing homogenizing cultural narratives:

[C]ommunities are all too often—particularly in postcolonial societies—perceived as homogenous and uniform. This can result in the quest for a singular and stable meaning/s or narrative/s. Apart from the apparent erroneousness of this quest for single meaning, what is more crucially at risk is cultural plurality: the disparate ways in which humans make meanings and representations from the very same stimuli, such as at the Kamakhya Temple. My aim to reflect the multiplicity in the visualisations of this temple was provoked by this understanding and I did not want to adopt a direct or conventional approach of inventorying and displaying the various ways by which the Goddess gets visualised.⁴

In order to rethink the visual imaginaries associated with tango on an international level, new and multiple alternative visual understandings of the genre must be constructed and circulated.

⁴ Sharma, Aparna. “Research Statement” *Kamakha: Through Prayerful Eyes*. JMP Screenworks. <http://jmpscreenworks.com/?pid=sharma>

It is my goal that through a methodology of sensory filmmaking, my work will contribute to that process.

Filming Neighborhood Tango

Using David MacDougall's methods of filming social aesthetics I used my camera throughout my two years of fieldwork in Buenos Aires to document places, people and events that I felt evoked localized economies of feeling in the context of neighborhood tango music scenes. I was not a filmmaker all the time. Most people know me more as a violinist, but filmmaking and photographing gradually became part of my identity in these communities. My identity as a violinist and longtime participant in these scenes was crucial throughout my filmmaking process. Not only did it break down barriers and humanize my identity as a participant and not just an external documenter of these scenes, but it also gave me intimate insight into the kinds of musical feelings and experiences I sought to evoke through my camera. Furthermore, being able to be a filmmaker sometimes and to be a performer or listener others kept me constantly aware that there were certain things I could represent through the lens of a camera, and others that could better be described through writing. Using these different approaches, and developing a sensitivity about the strengths of each of these ethnographic modes of presentation has given ethnographic depth to this project.

Another strength arising from my deep involvement with these scenes and the extended nature of my fieldwork was that I would use my camera when I anticipated that important moments were going to occur. I filmed opening nights of the clubs we built, the festivals we organized and the recordings we did with local legends. I filmed both ordinary and extraordinary days, depending on the kinds of sensory experiences I was seeking to evoke. I never felt that I was making a film *about* tango. Instead of setting out to explain tango through film, I approached filmmaking as a process of filming tango bars and tango neighborhoods trying to bring

viewers into the experiences of tango as they were practiced within specific neighborhood contexts.

Following methodologies of observational filmmaking, I avoided using a script for my filming but instead used a series of themes that kept me on track during my filming. These themes revolved around ideas of the neighborhood, bar culture, locality and localization, musical intimacy, informal cultural transmission, and of cultural belonging through live tango music performances. They arose in places, in sounds, in lyrics, in people and relationships between people, as well as in certain events. My choice to focus on these particular themes through the lens of my camera came out of my own experiences as a musician and audience member in these scenes as well as countless discussions with other musicians about why these places and experiences were meaningful to them in their individual lives. By the time I started my fieldwork I found that these themes were so deeply engrained into my ways of looking and understanding tango that I naturally gravitated towards events and moments that evoked these ideas, even when not totally conscious of my choices at any particular moment.

When I began filming I made a deliberate choice not to film tango “for-export.” Many people suggested I begin by filming tourist tango and then show the alternative. My goal was not so much to say, tango is *not* this but *is* this other thing. My goal was to construct sensory pathways of knowledge to help locals and non-locals connect with the kinds of tango music experiences occurring in neighborhoods and away from the flashy downtown stage shows. Tango is, of course, many things and takes many forms in and outside of the city of Buenos Aires. In an effort to contribute to current scholarship that seeks to bring diversity and plurality to expressions of tango culture (see Liska 2012; Miller 2014), I used my camera to bring my viewers into some very personal moments when I and those around me experienced tango as a local economy of feeling.

The Challenges of Sensory Filmmaking in Ethnomusicological Fieldwork

My choice to conduct the research for this dissertation through multiple modes of ethnographic inquiry and multiple modes of research presentation has been both frustrating and rewarding. The hard part is that I often feel I know a little about many things. I am part violinist, part filmmaker, and part conventional scholar, with never enough time to practice as much as I want or to perfect my filmmaking skills or to write all the things I would like to write. On the other hand, over the years I have come to feel empowered by the freedom I have to pursue research projects in creative and often less than conventional ways. Not only is this freedom liberating but it has allowed me to produce research that hopefully is valuable on many levels and to many audiences. Most importantly, it is at the crossroads of playing music, filming music and writing about music that I have had my most meaningful and transformative experiences as a musician and scholar.

In his essay in the 1992 book *Film as Ethnography*, Peter Crawford outlines three approaches to ethnographic filmmaking using the common metaphor of a fly and a bowl of soup. They include the more traditional observational “fly on the wall” approach, the experiential and participatory “fly in the soup” approach, and the more evocative and experimental “fly in the I” approach (62). These metaphors refer to larger debates in ethnographic filmmaking surrounding how filmmakers interact (or don’t) with the environments they film. The latter two metaphors emerged as criticisms of the former during a time when observational cinema was being criticized for attempting invisibility and objectivity (not dissimilar from the crisis of representation in anthropological writing discussed at the beginning of this chapter). Following this crisis of representation, filmmakers began bringing more reflexivity and subjective positionality into the films they made. These newer approaches involved allowing subjects to interact with the cameras directly in what became the fly-in-the-soup method, and other more experimental approaches

which brought about T. Min-Ha's conception of fly-in-the-I filmmaking. In this last approach, ideas of authenticity, truth and objectivity were replaced by more postmodern ethnographic film practices interested in evocation and reflexivity.

These lines between observational, interventionist and other experimental forms of ethnographic cinema are blurry. In *Transcultural Cinema* (1998) MacDougall reminds his readers that even observational styles can be participatory if accompanied by extended participant observation. For many filmmakers this participant observation means spending time somewhere with a camera long enough to make subjects comfortable, getting to know a community and talking to them about their objectives and then filming. In my own case, my multiple identities as musician, filmmaker, audience member and researcher complicate my ability to define exactly where I fit into the fly and the bowl of soup metaphor. Throughout my fieldwork I found that being an active performing musician while making films was a challenge but was also one of my biggest strengths. Not only did it change my relationships to people in the field, but it allowed me to approach the production of ethnomusicological knowledge from different epistemological angles. Although I tend to use a fly-on-the-wall approach to my filming so that I do not have subjects directly interacting with my camera, I feel as though I spent more time in the soup than on the wall in my relationships in the field. The fact that I appear performing in multiple films is because I was involved in many events on multiple levels as performer, audience member, and filmmaker. My experience navigating these different and overlapping roles, and even negotiating these identities with my peers, proved fruitful in my research. I also see this as one area where ethnomusicologists can bring new knowledge to the field of ethnographic filmmaking. If we can find ways to incorporate filmmaking into and alongside our other ethnographic methodologies of inquiry including performance, we can produce research able to address a single event from multiple subjective angles.

An example of this process may help to put these ideas into a more specific context. In August of 2012 I participated in the opening night of a tango venue put together as a collaborative project by seventeen independent tango musicians from Buenos Aires. The orchestra I played in was also part of the creation of the space and many of us had collaborated in painting, cleaning, and preparing the new venue from scratch. While not cleaning, painting and running errands, I also filmed the process of making the club as part of my dissertation. Using this material, I was able to create teasers for the venue and put them on YouTube and Facebook to get people excited about the forthcoming venue.⁵ Since independent tango scenes are grossly underrepresented in mainstream media, these teasers proved to be an important way of advertising the opening night of the club. Long before I had edited my material for my own research, I was able to use my material for the needs of the community.

On opening night, our orchestra performed and the club filled with local musicians and tango fans. I showed up at the club with my violin, my video camera, and an audio recorder. I immediately started working helping set up tables and seat people as they arrived since the venue was understaffed and there was much work to be done. After seating people I set up my camera in the attic looking at the stage and asked someone to film for me while I was performing. After playing, my plan was to run up to the attic, put away my violin and begin filming the after party and late night shows. I felt both overwhelmed and excited. Then I noticed an entire camera crew arrive to film the event for a documentary being made about independent tango scenes in Buenos Aires. They had five cameras, a director, a sound guy and some assistants. I could not help but feel disheartened and went to my friends to tell them that this crew reminded me what real filmmakers do to make *real* films. They laughed. They told me these people were there to film the event, but didn't really know anything about this place or its story. *They were*

⁵ These teasers can be watched on my webpage: <http://www.jenniegubner.com/teaser-for-almagro-tango-club/>

filming from the outside. They told me that I was a part of this place, and was filming the things that mattered to all of *us*, from within, to tell *our* story as *we* were experiencing it. It was one of the best complements I received doing my fieldwork and one of the most important moments where I remembered why I was doing what I was doing and how my filming methodologies were completely integrated with and connected to my other research goals. What I was hoping to express through my films was not perfect filmmaking, Hollywood editing and award-winning sound. My films are about feelings and experiencing places, and I've learned over the past few years that I do not need an entire film crew to accomplish this. Later that night after the film crew had gone, the tango singer and local legend Osvaldo Peredo (an adopted grandfather to all of us) thanked the organizers of the club saying: "[These musicians] deserve a plaque for everything they've done, because, without their efforts, our story would be forgotten, and we'd be left with things that aren't ours." What a privilege, I thought, to feel a part of this community and its history and simultaneously have footage that can facilitate in sharing and documenting its memory.

It turned out that the opening night was a huge success and I was able to perform, wait tables, and even film great footage of the after party and the late night shows. I even befriended the filmmaker of the other feature-length documentary who kindly offered to share any footage or audio I needed for the purpose of my research. We were doing completely different things and had no need to be in competition with one another. On the contrary, we both felt that our obligation lay with helping to bring visibility to this scene and those working in it. Some of the footage taken that night can be seen in the sequence *Los Locos de Almagro* (The Crazies of Almagro) (found at www.jenniegubner.com). As I make these films I use YouTube to share them with my friends and colleagues in Buenos Aires to get feedback and advice. I also show them to filmmakers and my mentors so I can continue to learn about processes of editing and narrative storytelling in film.

Ultimately, the process of filming the making of the club was collaborative on many levels. I was able to make teasers to speak to a direct need of the club for visibility in announcing opening night. I was able to make the “Los Locos de Almagro” sequence as a way of remembering the efforts we put into making the club and the collaborative efforts of musicians to build meaningful spaces for tango performance in the city today. I was even able to collaborate with other filmmakers and artists in the process of collecting and editing footage, opening my artistic process up to feedback and advice. And I was able to do it all from within the story I was telling, sometimes behind the camera, sometimes in front of the camera, but always intimately involved in the economies of feeling I was seeking to experientially represent. Furthermore, I was able to write at length about these experiences in the chapter of this dissertation dedicated to the Almagro Tango Club. In that chapter I address many issues around the politics and economics of opening a club like this and talk at length about how these projects can become easily complicated around issues of power and money. These were not issues I wanted to express through my films and did not lend themselves to the strengths of ethnographic film. However, they are an important part of the story and were a place where written analysis served me well. These conflicts are developed analytically through my writing and left out of my films, offering another example of how filming and writing can complement each other in the production of ethnomusical knowledge.

Filming

I shot all of my work on a Canon 7D camera. I chose a DSLR camera over a video camera because the relatively small size of DSLR cameras are less invasive than most larger video cameras. I also like the photographic feel of DSLR footage. I used two lenses, a Tamron 17-50mm F/2.8 zoom lens and the other a Canon 50MM F/1.8 fixed Canon lens. Although the majority of my work is handheld, I also had a monopod that I occasionally used to help stabi-

lize the camera. I used a Zoom H24 audio recorder to record sound whenever possible, especially during interviews.⁶ Because of my interest in highlighting the sensory experiences of neighborhood tango music culture, I chose an aesthetic of mostly taking fixed shots. This approach positions my viewers and allows them to absorb and concentrate on the dynamic sensory dimensions existing within each frame. Since I see filmmaking as an “arena of inquiry” (MacDougall 1998:136) integral to my academic research, fixed shots also provided a sense of intentionality, helping bring my viewers closer to the specific themes I was trying to portray throughout each film.

Tango bars are dark places, making my work more challenging. Due to the low light conditions I rarely used the zoom feature of my Tamron lens (zooming reduces light even further). Most frequently I shot with my fixed lens as it gave me the best light and would allow me to take close up shots of performing musicians without standing between them and their audiences. Because the proximity of artists is one of the most striking elements of small tango bar venues, I felt closeup shots would help evoke this sense of intimacy created between performers and their audiences. In general, I found that performers were quite comfortable being filmed, especially since in recent years the presence of cameras has become increasingly more common in any performance setting, large or small. My shots of audience members tend to be much shorter. This is because, even when audience members knew me and my project, I found most non performing subjects felt more uncomfortable being filmed while listening. I also felt it was important to respect their listening experience whenever possible and not interfere with their sensory experiences of a given musical performance by sticking a camera up their nose for the entirety of

⁶ Often it proved difficult for me to record sound and video simultaneously while moving around inside bars as I did not have a setup that allowed me to connect my zoom to my camera. As a result I often ended up using the sound from my camera for shots taken in bars. I highly recommend anyone using a DSLR camera to purchase a set up that allows an audio recorder or microphone to sit on top of your camera that allows you to film high quality audio and video simultaneously.

a song. Thus, in each given setting, I filmed what I felt was necessary to evoke a feel of different places and then would focus primarily on the musical performances—formal, informal, or participatory—as they took place.

Even with performers, I rarely filmed entire concerts. Instead, I would film a few songs, take some photos and then would put away my camera. I did this primarily to respect the intimacy of performance spaces where I often felt the presence of camera(s) detracted from the feel of a performance. The fact that I have experienced this sense of camera invasiveness firsthand as a performer, an audience member and a researcher (both by feeling self-conscious about my camera and observing others use of cameras) made me more careful in choosing what, when, and how much to shoot.⁷

When I started this project I was worried that musicians would be annoyed by me filming their performances. However, I found that most tango performers have a conflicted relationship to cameras. On the one hand, they frequently acknowledge that the intimacy of events is diminished if there are cameras present. On the other, the publicity that photographs and videos can offer is one of the most important ways to bring visibility to artists who perform largely outside the mainstream. As the years pass, more people are obtaining access to high-quality camera equipment and as a result cameras are becoming more and more common in performance environments. Even since I arrived in 2011, the quantity of cameras in venues—and in particular cameras owned by locals and not tourists—has skyrocketed. While sometimes this made me even more self-conscious about adding another camera into an event, it also made me stick out

⁷ I found that being a musician and longtime participant in tango bar scenes before becoming a filmmaker deeply shaped my relationship to my camera. Whereas someone trained in film might have taken more risks in order to “get the perfect shot” I found I was more hesitant and intensely aware of how my camera affected those around me. Perhaps at times I may have been overly hesitant. I notice oftentimes that my camera would cut right after a very meaningful moment in a song, and that my shots are often shorter than I would have liked. Perhaps this was my subconscious telling me that I had filmed enough and to stop interrupting. Having become more aware of this recently while editing my footage has made me want to be more aware of these impulses in the future.

less. By being sensitive to not overuse my camera to the point of detracting from the overall experience of a performance and by finding ways to give back to artists and venue owners by publicly sharing photographs from events, I came to a comfortable balance between these complex negotiations.

Finding Ways to Give Back in the Moment

Starting my fieldwork in 2011 I quickly discovered that being a regular in an underground music scene with a professional camera in one's hand comes with certain responsibilities/obligations. In my first months back in the scene I attended a series of independently organized neighborhood tango festivals as a way of meeting people and learning about these new and growing neighborhood movements. These festivals, which continue to happen annually are put together as grassroots efforts by groups of artists who each bring to the table what they can to make these events come to life. Once people realized I was a photographer who was willing to take pictures and help bring visibility to these events, I quickly became one of the scene's photographers. Each night of these festivals I would come home, stay up all night editing, and then post photos before falling asleep around dawn and returning to the festival the next morning. I would wake up to sometimes 70 or 80+ notifications on my Facebook feed as people commented, shared, liked and borrowed my photos to build their online identities. While a few artists took my work for granted, the majority showed an enormous amount of gratitude. Hiring a professional photographer is expensive and not a cost many can afford. The organizers of the festival were also incredibly grateful. One of the main reasons for hosting neighborhood tango festivals is to bring visibility to the efforts of neighborhood tango scenes as a way of showing their value and contesting the fact that the city routinely shuts down live music venues. With minimal interest from mainstream media, social networking sites like Facebook became a central hub for

promoting and documenting these events and spreading them throughout virtual communities. My photos became a part of that process.

I did not see this as a side project to my research. I saw this as part of my research. All this time I was filming as well for my own film projects but the reality was that I did not have the time to edit and upload all of my footage, so instead I chose photography as my way of sharing and giving to the community. In 2010 when I had spent a summer in the city, filming primarily in Roberto's bar, I had become worried that my camera was invading performance spaces and breaking the intimacy of events. In 2011 when I began my fieldwork, I found that after a few months, if I arrived to a show without a camera people looked shocked and asked, where's our photographer? Many people knew my photographs before they knew me. When I began photographing I decided to sign my photos with a watermark. In no time people started approaching me asking "*Vos sos Jennie Gubner?*" "*Sos la chica que saca fotos?*" "*Vos sos la que siempre sube las fotos no?*" ("Are you Jennie Gubner?" "Are you the girl that takes all the pictures?" "Are you the one that is always posting photos?"). Some local friends criticized what I was doing and said I should be charging for all the time and effort I put into my photographs. I explained to them that it was the least I could do to contribute to a community that was giving me so much.⁸

Postproduction: Collaboration, Editing, and the Resulting Sensory Tango Films

The films I make are not collaborative in the traditional sense of the word. For the most part I do not shoot or edit alongside my colleagues and I do not conceptualize the films I make as part of a working team. The films I make are made by me, using my position as a North American ethnomusicologist, filmmaker, violinist and local tango fan interested in questions of locality, intimacy, neighborhood culture and the musical cultures of tango bars in Buenos Aires. However, my films are collaborative in the sense that I work and live intimately involved in the

⁸ A selection of my fieldwork photography can be seen at www.jenniegubner.com.

lives and projects of my colleagues in the field and experience these events emotionally alongside them. They are collaborative in that my friends and colleagues allow me to film intimate moments and often suggest I bring the camera when they feel something special might happen. Although we have very different backgrounds, the protagonists of my films and I share many things in common. We share the experience of local people, places and events that have made our social and musical worlds meaningful and also share in our desires to each contribute in different ways to sustenance and growth of these scenes. I see my filmmaking as a process of co-producing knowledge from within these local scenes and as a product of my sustained relationship and dedication to these communities.

The biggest challenges I had with filmmaking occurred in the editing room. It is very difficult to make films accessible to foreign and local audiences, without making them overly pedantic to locals or overly mysterious to outside audiences. How many “internal” references can I use? What lengths of films are most appreciated today? How and where should I present these films? Are viewers more inclined to want to watch a ten-minute film or an hourlong one? Would they enjoy opening a webpage and choosing between a variety of short films or would they rather have just one longer film and less choices? Are short films less useful in a classroom setting if I hope to make these films available to my peers for teaching? Furthermore, are sensory films more powerful when they evoke a single place, representing a given day or a given bar, or when they jump through time to tell the stories of relationships as they evolve over time and many places? How much of my own story should I put into these films, and how do I do this? Perhaps most importantly how could I make films that people would want to watch and that also served the theoretical goals of my research.

The Films

1. *A Common Place* (2010)



Figure 3.3. Screenshot from *A Common Place*

To date I have four short films that accompany my project and a series of other smaller filmed projects (music videos, short clips or propaganda I made for different venues). My first film, *A Common Place*, I shot with my friend Natalia Marcantoni in the summer of 2010 in Roberto's bar. In editing this film I was most interested in conveying the small, intimate and participatory nature of classic neighborhood bars like Roberto's and the feelings of belonging that are produced through the social and musical experiences in these kinds of venues. I used shots from the bar as well as footage and audio from interviews I conducted with some of the venue performers. In my edit I tried to weave together an experiential sense of different ways intimacy is created in Roberto's and then enhanced these images by including very personal interviews and also descriptions of tango lyrics that also address these issues. Through the camera, I

sought to highlight the acoustic nature of the music in the bar, the close proximity between the performers and the audience members, the informal banter that plays such a central part of setting the scene between songs, the spontaneous performances that break down barriers between the audience and the performers, and the specific human relationships that lie at the heart of the social aesthetics of this venue.

The interviews in this project are particularly rich as I knew the subjects well and had had multiple preliminary conversations with each of them to talk about where my interests lay before the interviews began. During these interviews, I tried to emulate the kinds of discussions that happen regularly in and around the nightly music-making practices in bars like Roberto's. Since these kinds of informal conversations play such an important role in contributing to ways of experientially knowing tango, and usually happen without cameras present, I sought to recreate certain reoccurring themes in my interviews as a way of enhancing the sensory experiences represented through the footage of the bars.

In the case of the singer Stella Diaz, the audio interview I used took place in her house late at night, approximately six hours into what could be thought of as a very extended interview encounter. We had done an hourlong interview in the evening and then after sharing life stories with each other for hours, we decided to turn the recorder back on. It was at this point that I recorded my best material. These were the kinds of deep, intimate conversations I wanted to come out in the film as they were the kinds of conversations I have had countless times with musicians in the bars themselves before, during, and after performing or listening to live tango.

2. *Los Locos de Almagro* (2013)



Figure 3.4. Screenshot from *Los Locos de Almagro*

My second film is called *Los Locos de Almagro*, translated as “The Crazies of Almagro.” The title comes from a reference the singer Osvaldo Peredo made about the young musicians who have dedicated so much time to building tango culture in the Almagro neighborhood. In the 1920s, a group of young Argentine friends with very few resources put out the first radio emission from a rooftop in the 1920s and came to be known as the crazies of the radio. Osvaldo draws the comparison between these radio fanatics and the tango musicians who independently organize venues, festivals and projects in the neighborhoods today as a shout out to their dedication and enthusiasm to making these spaces possible in the face of little resources and little external support. In this film, I try to address the interconnectedness of different people, places and events in the Almagro scene, and particularly to the importance of Osvaldo as an elder symbolic figure in a community of predominantly young musicians. The film ultimately tells the

story of how a group of musicians got together to make an album featuring Osvaldo and a string orchestra as a way of giving back to the old man for everything he had given to them in their formative years. Simultaneously, I try to draw connections between the different bars in the area, showing how Almagro's tango music scene developed as a progression of relationships and contexts and not as a series of disconnected events.

In *Los Locos de Almagro*, the shots span multiple venues, events, and periods of time. One of my future projects is to expand *Los Locos de Almagro* into a longer piece that will tell the story of how elder referents like Osvaldo and places like Roberto's, Sanata, and the Almagro Tango Club are so central and indispensable in the production of meaningful urban tango music practices in Buenos Aires today. I want the film to show how the emotional significance of certain relationships and the social aesthetics of different informal and participatory urban music venues are not supplementary but foundational in the production of tango music today. I initially made and distributed a five minute version of this film for a local tango conference in Buenos Aires in 2013 where it was shown alongside other films being made in the independent tango community. I have now expanded it into a ten minute version currently on my website that will eventually be replaced by a more finished version.

3. The Procession of the White Bandoneón (2014)

The third film I made is called *The Procession of the White Bandoneon*. The film chronicles an evening dedicated to the life of the singer and bandoneon player, Rúben Juárez, a figure who is a local legend and internationally recognized tango artist. I shot the film two years after his death, when Rúben's family and friends decided to put on a tribute in his honor and took his infamous white bandoneon on a procession through the neighborhood tango bars of the city. The film opens with scenes in Sanata Bar and ends in El Faro, another central social hub for the contemporary tango community. I made this film to show how memories of Juárez in these bars

and imaginaries of neighborhood life are performed and experienced as a way of propelling tango's past into the present and future in celebration of the contemporary scene.



Figure 3.5. Screenshot from *The Procession of the White Bandoneon*

My objective was to make a film about celebratory, intimate, and collective remembering and about honoring artists like Juarez and the places and people he inspired along the way. I wanted to show viewers that tango is not always about sadness and that nostalgia can also be a way of embracing and celebrating the present as it connects with the past. In this project I experimented for the first time with archival footage. In the film I incorporated a video of Juarez performing in El Faro Bar a few years before his death, given to me by the owner of the bar who has also circulated it widely on the internet. My choice to use archival footage came from a desire to explore how I could evoke memory through montage in my film without losing connection to the sense of presence of place where I was filming.

Montage editing has the capacity to simultaneously layering images, sounds and texts to evoke complex multi sensory experiences. It is one of the ways in which film is capable of producing a kind of knowledge that writing cannot. In *The Procession of the White Bandoneón*, I used montage as a way of exploring how, in this event, the shared memories of specific people, represented through images of and speeches about Rúbén Juárez and memories of his bar blend with the more abstract neighborhood imaginaries expressed through lyrics about neighborhood tango all within the neighborhood and bar cartographies of the city. Through these multisensory and multi-layered processes of musical production, tango as an expression of locality, community, intimacy and collective memory becomes re-signified within what I have been calling local economies of feeling.

A few months after this procession, when asked to perform at the annual government sponsored tango festival in a convention center downtown, the artistic director of El Faro bar played the same archival footage of Juárez's visit to his bar (used in my film), using Juárez's own words to explain to the city mayor and the city how important spaces of intimacy and cultural transmission are to local artistic communities. In that instance the living memory of Juárez, immortalized on film, was transformed into a political message of activism in support of the current live music scenes.

By nature, the neighborhood tango bars where I conduct my research are intimate spaces of musical socialization but within those spaces, some nights are unquestionably more intimate and memorable than others. Whereas my explorations in *A Common Place* revolved around evoking a sense of what an "ordinary" night might be like in a tango bar like Roberto's, this film was about showing the emotions of a more emotionally loaded and "extraordinary" event. The night that Juárez visited El Faro in 2008, and the night of the procession of the white bandoneon in his memory in 2012, are two nights that hold heightened significance and stand out as symbolic events for the local tango music community.

4. *Domingo en Plaza Almagro* (2014)



Figure 3.6. Screenshot from *Domingo en Plaza Almagro*

The final short film I made is called *Domingo en Plaza Almagro* or “Sunday in Plaza Almagro.” This film takes place during the third annual tango festival of the neighborhood of Almagro, in the neighborhood plaza just steps away from Roberto’s bar. In the film I try to convey a sense of what it is like to experience an independently organized neighborhood tango festival and what values lie at the foundation of these kinds of events. As in the last film I return to the theme of the neighborhood and the actual people and places that are relocating neighborhood imaginaries and making them meaningful to contemporary tango communities.

I think this film does a particularly effective job of illustrating how neighborhood values and neighborhood tango imaginaries are imbued with local meanings and strengthened through these kinds of public events. Through the camera I try to show how neighborhood locations become meaningful as individuals produce and evoke shared *feelings* of neighborhoodness within

these settings. In the case of this festival, this process involves layering discourses about specific people, places and communities alongside performances of songs that speak to neighborhood life and bar culture.

Affective relationships to ideas of the neighborhood have also become a powerful vehicle for political activism in recent years as artists join together in response to the city closing venues and offering little support for small live-music tango venues. Through this film I sought to convey how these kinds of affective politics are expressed through music making in subtle but very visible ways. In a city that continues to spend the majority of its tango budget putting on a mega-festival and continues to make it difficult for small neighborhood venues to obtain and sustain performance permits, associating tango with affective sensory experiences of neighborhood culture sends a powerful message to audience members and the city about what kind of culture these artists support.

The socially constructed and collectively experienced events seen in these last two films are more than dots on a timeline of the city's recent localized tango history. The embodied sensory experiences of music making, collective remembering, and socialization occurring in neighborhood tango bars and neighborhood plazas encrypt new layers of meaning onto preexisting memories and imaginaries of tango as neighborhood social life, propelling locally produced understandings of tango into the urban landscapes and imaginaries of the present and future. As young musicians in *The Procession of the White Bandoneón* play Juarez's bandoneon, sing his signature songs, tell each other stories, watch his videos, and change the lyrics of old tangos to honor his memory within the neighborhood tango cartographies of the city, or as singers honor Osvaldo and Roberto's and the community efforts that go into creating a neighborhood festival while singing songs about neighborhood life in *Domingo en la Plaza Almagro*, memories of tango and imaginaries of urban life are fused with artists own identities as musicians and urban tango activists through the sensory experience of participatory music-making.

My goal in these last two films was to convey the multisensory and layered ways these kinds of events produce meaning around and through musical performances in neighborhood contexts.

Four Films, More to Come

Each of these four films seeks to evoke some of the different elements of neighborhood tango culture discussed in this dissertation. They are both deeply interrelated but also each speak from different angles and use different techniques to evoke the sensory experiences of music-making in neighborhood tango scenes. When I made the films I did not intend them to be a set, but now that they are finished I am pleased to see how nicely they sit alongside and complement one another. My goal was to use film to address issues difficult to write about that could be explored through the evocative sensory capabilities of filmmaking. The process of discovering and creating these films was not linear. Instead each film emerged at a moment when I felt that I could use my footage to say something that would be difficult to communicate with words.

As I worked through my fieldwork material and wrote this dissertation, I kept in mind all the material I had filmed along the way. I have, of course, filmed much more than what is presented in these four films, and all of my filmed material was very present in my mind through my writing process. As I addressed different themes in each chapter, I would return to my footage and spend long hours watching material to see if the questions I was addressing could be addressed through my visual material. These hours spent watching my filmed material were invaluable to my writing process. My footage always gave me a way to come out of my head and my ideas and return to the experiential feelings of being in these places and experiencing tango music in different contexts. Watching the things I had filmed constantly reminded me to come back down to the street-level, to speak from these experiences and to represent these individuals as they went about their complex, everyday lives. Even more interesting was that watching footage after the fact allowed me to look deeper into the details of events. During the events I

trusted my instincts and tried to film the places and people and scenes that represented the social aesthetics I was searching to study through the camera. Re-watching footage I often found elements that I had not noticed in the moment that strengthened my arguments—lyrics of songs that were more pertinent than I had realized in the moment, certain interactions between individuals that I had not picked up on at the time, or certain shots that brought clarity to issues I was thinking through in my writing.

For the most part these films came together at moments when I became interested in intensely addressing a specific issue through the lens of sensorial experience. The first film, *A Common Place*, I made in 2010 for a conference in Wales. This was the second film I have ever made and ended up being a sensory exploration of Roberto's bar, such a fundamental pillar in the Almagro neighborhood tango music community. That summer I spent a month with a friend filming different spaces in Almagro. Although we filmed many venues in the area, when I sat down to edit I realized that what I was most interested in was to show the kinds of musical experiences occurring in Roberto's bar. As a filmmaker I have learned that sometimes less is more and that instead of showing everything in a neighborhood, showing certain poignant moments in one iconic venue can do a lot to bring a person into a sense of being somewhere.

The second film I made was a much larger endeavor that is still in unfinished form. If the first form is an exploration of the social experiences of Roberto's bar, the second film is an exploration of the very complex interpersonal relationships that inspire music-making and cultural organizing in the Almagro neighborhood. This film addresses the making of Osvaldo Peredo's CD and the making of the Almagro Tango Club, two of the major projects I observed during my fieldwork. Instead of showing endless footage of making the CD and the club, in this film I really placed my emphasis on the relationships between key individuals involved in this scene. How could I use film to show the relationship between Juan Pablo Gallardo and Osvaldo, between Lucas Furno and Osvaldo, between Amores Tangos and Osvaldo. The film dialogues with a

Common Place because indirectly it illustrates how Osvaldo and Roberto's bar are symbolic pillars that hold together the scene. While Osvaldo is not the protagonist of the film, in many ways he is the figure that runs throughout the narrative, the living legend that acts as a constant source of inspiration in maintaining the values of these projects. One of the things I was trying to show with this film is that although I am focused on sensory experiences of music-making in bars, these experiences carry outside of bars into the personal projects of musicians as they work together to realize common goals. The making of Osvaldo's CD was a great example of how the intimate social and musical aesthetics of Roberto's bar were recreated in a recording studio and in rehearsal spaces. By focusing on the interpersonal relationships at play in the scene, this film dialogues nicely with *A Common Place* by reminding viewers that scenes are much larger and more complex than the bars that contain them.

Whereas the first two films are composites of multiple nights of filming, the second two films in this set, *The Procession of the White Bandoneón* and *Domingo en Plaza Almagro*, focus on evoking a particular singular event through film. In many ways these films hold more true to the styles of observational filmmaking that inspired my work with film in the first place. In these two films I took on the challenge of trying to evoke the production and experience of neighborhood imaginaries during two events that had heightened emotional significance for the community: the commemoration of the life and music of Rúbén Juárez, and the closing ceremony of the Almagro neighborhood festival. Both of these events were emotionally charged events that I felt could be helpful in conveying to my viewers the ways local economics of feeling about tango culture are shared and experienced through a musical event. They each illustrated the sensory experience of certain kinds of events—tango bars or festivals—but also connected these events to larger stories of people and projects—the life of Juárez or Osvaldo, the story of the neighborhood—allowing the experiences of the moment to be intensified by larger histories of people and places. I think these two films dialogue nicely with the previous films because they show

how these conversations about the micro and macro significance of events occur within the events themselves, and not only through my films.

The fact that I wanted these films to be accessible to the local tango community also kept me grounded throughout the process of writing my dissertation. Even though few of my peers in Argentina will sit and read my english-language dissertation, I know many people will watch my films. In one sense this held me accountable to represent people and places with integrity and honesty, and to be acutely aware of whether I was representing my subjects in a way they would enjoy to see themselves on screen. It also pushed me to create sequences and tell stories that could speak in and speak out at the same time, which is a very different experience than making a film primarily for an outside audience. This tension between speaking in and speaking out also helped me to avoid trying to make any overarching generalizations about my subjects. My goal was to bring snapshots to life, to speak from the emotions of my subjects and from my own subjective experiences to convey an experiential way of knowing tango as I had known it.

As always, these films do not seek to represent tango experience generally, but instead speak as a group to show different perspectives on a community of musicians and some of the experiences that make their musical lives meaningful. I think that the strength of the films as a set is that if watched side by side they enhance one another, reinforcing certain points, adding depth and giving perspective. There are characters that reoccur in the films, places that arise time and again, certain gestures, and certain ideas that are recurring that help reiterate my points and connect people to each other and to places in complex webs of meaning. Ultimately I see these four films as the beginning of a larger series of projects with film.

Ways of Being There and Being Here: Presentation of Research and Future Plans

In his essay in the book *Ways of Knowing*, Paul Stoller writes about the complexity of navigating the translation between experiences in the field and the presentation of academic research. He writes,

There is a gap, as Clifford Geertz famously noted between ‘being there’, the field experience, and “being here,” the institutional experience of the professional scholar. ‘Being there’ is usually a sensuous, fully human experience filled with personal drama and life-changing events. “Being here” usually compels us to adhere to a set of institutional rules that tend to separate “being there” from “being here.” The result is that, more often than not, we excise much of the passion of ‘being there’ from what we write. This absence, in turn, usually hides how doing and knowing ultimately shape being in anthropology. How can we understand the human condition if we place our own being in the margins of our professional discourse? (Stoller in Harris 2007: 175)

Stoller’s call for bringing together ways of “being there” and “being here” are at the heart of some of the exciting challenges I am now facing as I write and continue to edit the footage I have gathered into a series of sequences. I realize that there is not *one* way of doing any of this and once again feel empowered as I push the boundaries of creativity in my own research in hopes to inspire others to do the same in the future.



Figure 3.7. Screenshot from www.jenniegubner.com

I have made a webpage www.jenniegubner.com (see figure 3.7) where I have begun putting my films and photographs and some elements of my research. I see this site as one way of bridging the gap between “being there” and “being here.” Beyond making my research accessible to wider audiences, the platform of a website will allow me to continue developing and producing new films after the dissertation is complete.

Right now my films are short, all roughly from 10 to 15 minutes in length. Initially the films I made were short because I made them for conferences where I presented them in tandem with written papers. However, I have come to realize that in many ways the short length of these films has made them more accessible to audiences, and more conducive to functioning alongside written scholarship. In today’s world, we are becoming increasingly more used to watching short clips of video on the internet. Many colleagues and peers have told me that they

would be more inclined to watch a 10-minute film than an hourlong film if I put it online. By breaking my different tango stories into these individual shorter pieces and presenting them together on a single website with accompanying descriptions, my hope is that people will begin by watching the things they are most interested in, and then watch others if they become engaged with my project. The stories in these films are not chronological, and for that reason I encourage people to explore the website as an interactive sensory platform through which to learn about tango culture.

I think the website and short film model is more appropriate to the kind of multimodal ethnomusicological inquiry I am embracing in this dissertation. Each of the four films will be referenced throughout the dissertation at times when I feel that viewing the film would complement my written work. Understanding that I can only suggest and not dictate when and how these films are to be watched in conjunction with my written work, I will leave viewers to decide whether to watch the films in conjunction with this methodological chapter, while reading specific chapters where each film is referenced or perhaps at some different moment altogether. I know most academics have the habit of not reading academic books in a linear fashion, from start to finish. Therefore, I feel it is more important to make my filmed works available and easily accessible and shareable than it is to prescribe any certain way or time of experiencing them.

In the future, I plan to create a longer piece that can be used in classroom and broader cinematic settings. I am considering collaborating with some of my friends in the tango community in Buenos Aires who are interested in similar topics and have expressed a desire to make a collaborative film about certain figures in our community. We have talked about these ideas at length and I would like to see what kind of work would come out of a collaboration between people who are all intimately involved in this scene. Many of us feel that one day we would like to collaborate on a film to honor the contributions of Osvaldo Peredo, the singer who plays a major role in most of my films. I have made a very conscious choice not to collaborate in this

way for my dissertation project as I did not want to confuse my use of film as a methodology for ethnographic inquiry for my specific research questions with a larger collaborative project intended primarily for a general and not academic audience.

Conclusions

I want to close with another quote from MacDougall, who has been an inspiration for me throughout my process of filming tango. Reflecting on documentary filmmaking, he writes:

For me the commitment to documentary has always been a commitment to the possibilities of discovery and testimony—that is, to the proposition that ways can be found to document experiences actually happening to people that have never before been given public expression. The documentary filmmaker’s art is to find those experiences and analyze them in such a way as to make them accessible to an audience, and in doing so propose some theory about their significance. To have made a film that succeeds in doing even a part of that is to add to our common experience. (1998:225)

My experiences with sensory filmmaking have pushed me to think about the production of knowledge in many different and creative ways and has allowed me to contribute to what I see as the common experience of tango as I have lived it in these years in Buenos Aires. I hope to have illustrated how these films are not just pieces of visual stimuli but instead are, as Marcus Banks and Howard Morphy describe visual anthropology, “a study of visual systems and a critique of how ethnographic knowledge is produced and represented through visual forms” (Banks and Morphy 1997: 2). I hope they help my audiences think about tango in new ways, and about how important intimate and local live music scenes can be as a form of urban socialization and a way of being in cities.

Ultimately my goal is for these films to create a space of encounter between my audiences and the people and places I filmed in the tango scenes of Buenos Aires. In this space I want people not only to learn about local tango cultures and the questions underlying my research, but also to experience these places sensorially and emotionally, involving them in experiences of music that might even change them as scholars, artists, and human beings. At the end of *Transcultural Cinema*, Macdougall warns that documentary practices based on interviews about the past and archival footage risk turning their backs on the present and forgetting to leave records of our own time. He writes,

It may be useful to consider what aspects of our great-grandparents' lives we would wish had been filmed if there had been modern cameras a hundred years ago. By applying that lesson to today we can give some direction to how the cameras of documentary should fill the gaps left after the cameras of fiction and journalism have gone their way.

(MacDougall 1998:229)

Studying a genre where meta-histories and stereotypes have left me with more questions than answers regarding the nature of everyday life in tango early years, I carried MacDougall's advice with me throughout my time filming tango in Buenos Aires. I made these films out of a desire to bring pieces of tango's everyday sensory present tense to life for local and scholarly audiences and can only hope that they will be around to fill some gaps for the tango scholars and tango fans in the future.

Recently, I was talking to a friend and one of my primary research collaborators, Juan Pablo Gallardo, about how ideologies of collaboration and teamwork have been fundamental to the growth of independent tango scenes in recent years. He said that when everyone brings their strengths to the table, a lot can be accomplished. He was referring to the fact that his strength is writing musical arrangements whereas our friend Lucas deals with the politics of organizing events and gathering musicians for performances. As for me, I have been able to com-

bine my training as an ethnomusicologist, ethnographer, violinist, and filmmaker to do my small part to document and tell their/our story through writings and film. Ultimately, being a combination of many things is what has allowed me to *know* this culture so deeply and intimately and to have the skills to share this knowledge with others.

Chapter 4

From Barrio Nostalgia to Everyday “r”evolutions in the Barrio: The Post-Neoliberal Politics and Poetics of Neighborhood Tango Festivals¹



Figure 4.1. First neighborhood festival of Villa Crespo neighborhood, November 2013. A neighborhood youth orchestra performs a repertoire of tangos accompanied by the festival organizers who also own and run the neighborhood cultural center Oliverio Girondo.

Introduction

While tango is internationally well-known for many things, it has rarely been recognized as a music of protest. Similarly, the idea of people performing songs about love, nostalgia and heartbreak in the context of neighborhood bars and plazas may not sound like a recipe for revolution. However, this is exactly what has been happening in certain neighborhoods of

¹ Revolution with a lower case ‘r’ is a Zapatista concept discussed later in this chapter.

Buenos Aires over the past few years. Frustrated with the city government's interest in promoting tango as a commodity for tourism, artists have joined together to find different grassroots methods to promote tango as a local form of everyday culture. These efforts—taking many forms across the city—are promoting new ways of thinking about and experiencing tango, distancing themselves from the glossy, staged aesthetics of downtown tourist shows and locating tango within imaginaries and practices of everyday neighborhood life. As a result, the role of the neighborhood in tango culture, previously characterized as a symbol of nostalgia for times past, is being resignified as a symbol of urban resistance and protest in support of local, live music culture. Neighborhood-based tango festivals, organized by artists and left-leaning cultural organizations in the city, have played a particularly important role in politicizing tango's relationship to neighborhood culture in recent years.

Focusing within the neighborhood scenes where I conducted my fieldwork, this chapter looks at the recent politicization of neighborhood tango scenes with special attention to the rise of neighborhood-based tango festivals. My discussion will be framed by issues involving the official tango politics of the city government of Buenos Aires, the struggles to keep venues from being shut down, and the larger pan-Latin American leftist approaches to independent cultural production in Latin American cities today. Using examples of different neighborhood festivals, I will argue that certain forms of experiential cultural activism framed by broader post-neoliberal political discourses are encouraging new ways of conceptualizing tango as an everyday urban practice.

Although most tango artists do not think of their art as protest music in the traditional sense of the word, independently organized grassroots events like neighborhood festivals create an environment where experiences of neighborhood-ness become a way of advocating cultural models that position tango as a form of local culture. In the context of these events

references to tango as an expression of locality, urban intimacy and neighborhood culture become a counterpoint to the cultural politics of the city government. Furthermore, these kinds of events encourage individuals to become active and participatory agents in the production of urban culture. These processes involve both talking about and making music.

From Revolution to 'r'evolutions: Politics as Everyday Life in Latin America Today

Music either live or recorded is often used to protest social, political, economic, and environmental injustices. Most commonly, ideas of music and protest, resistance or social struggle are associated with large-scale social gatherings where groups of people join together to sing songs about different social, economic, environmental and political issues. Many might associate ideas of music and protest with thousands of people singing "We Shall Overcome" outside of the White House during the Civil Rights Movement or masses of rallying communists singing "Bella Ciao" during the anti-fascist resistance movements in the streets of Rome. Others might think of major concerts such as the North American Tibetan Freedom Concerts in the late 1990s or Country Joe and the Fish singing the antiwar song "I-Feel-Like-I'm-Fixin'-to-Die Rag" during Woodstock. Beyond large live music events, commercial recordings can also play a vital role in disseminating songs that become anthems for different political causes or social movements. Think of Nina Simone's "Mississippi Goddam," Public Enemy's "Fight the Power," or any number of the Latin American *Nueva Canción* songs by Victor Jara, Mercedes Sosa, or Violetta Parra circulated via underground radio stations and records during the dictatorship. Surely other examples come to mind. However, just as commercial recordings and mega-concerts and rallies inspire critical thinking about social issues, live music in very small places can also spread powerful messages of social activism and political engagement.

Just like ideas of music and protest tend to evoke images of large-scale events, sounds of music and protest tend to evoke ideas of protest-based lyrics. However, music can also communicate protest without *sounding* reactionary at all. As ethnomusicologist Anthony Seeger explains, “almost any kind of music can be used as a sign of struggle, depending on the meanings given to the performances by participants and their opponents.” He adds: “The meaning of a musical performance depends to a large extent on the specific context in which it occurs” (1990:59). Daniel Fischlin reminds us that sounds do not have inherent meanings but instead become meaningful in the context in which they are made and used by different communities.

Nothing in sound is intrinsically revolutionary, rebellious, or political. But...to say as much is to dream a nightmare world in which sound is pure and essential, divorced from its social and political contexts, meaningful in its abstract and metaphysical potential but irrelevant in what it has to say to the *here and now* of daily life....Instead, we live in communities permeated by the sounds they give shape to and that correspondingly give shape to them.... We generate sound and ideas about sound as extensions (reflections) of our political cultures, but also as critiques thereof. And the sounds we call music haunt our daily lives at their seemingly most trivial moments, and also at their moments of apocalypse and cataclysm. (2003:11)

These comments help to shift ideas of music and protest away from certain fixed genres and styles and instead conceptualize them more broadly as a subjective way of experiencing music contextualized within specific socio-cultural settings. Seen in this way, it becomes easier to understand how a genre like tango—known for songs about love, loss and nostalgia and not normally associated with protest at all—can be transformed into a vehicle for both political protest and social transformation.

In her writings on Latin American protest music, Martha Nandorfy reminds her readers that ideas of protest must be understood within specific socio-cultural contexts: “Protest means one thing in the most powerful, affluent and economically and culturally dominant country in the world. And it means quite another in a culture that differs radically in its racial and ethnic features, as well as in the precarious status of its economic dependence and political subordination to that dominant power” (Nandorfy 2003:173). Due to the turbulent economic and political realities of Argentina in recent decades, protest has come to be understood by many as a way of life and a way of surviving in a struggling, fragmented and politically polarized nation. In many cultural environments, activism is not a choice but becomes the primary option for sustaining cultural expressions that receive little support from the government or mainstream culture.

In a city like Buenos Aires where cultural politics is a part of urban political life, cultural practices often become mixed up in larger political debates. In her book, *Who Can Stop the Drums*, sociologist Sujatha Fernandes does an excellent job of theorizing contemporary Latin American activism within the neighborhood cultural movements of post-Chávez Venezuela. To avoid reducing politics to the binaries of the Left and the Right, or the people and the State, she offers the term “everyday wars of position” to theorize how “structures and discourses of exclusion are being contested in a range of quotidian sites” within neighborhood movements (2010:25). Her idea draws on three theoretical frameworks. The first is Gramsci’s use of “wars of position,” referring to the political struggles between classes. In particular she draws from Gramsci’s views on how small incremental changes in a society can result in the gradual building of counter-hegemonies. The second is that of James Scott’s “everyday” forms of resistance, a reference to the everyday ways that individuals resist their class positions. Lastly

she draws from her research subjects who use the idea of *lo cotidiano* (the everyday) as a way to discuss the numerous daily battles they participate in on multiple fronts.

In her analysis of Argentine social movements in the decade following the 2001 economic crisis, Marina Sitrin draws parallels between Argentine models of activism and similar models characteristic of recent leftist movements in other areas of Latin America. Among these, she borrows a term taken from Zapatista philosophies and suggests that many leftist Argentines are embracing a concept of revolution with a lower case 'r' instead of an upper case 'R,' meaning that individuals are focusing their efforts on enacting societal changes in everyday contexts instead of seeking a total overthrow of government (2012:6). While total transformation of society may still be a long term goal, more efforts are being devoted to creating sustainable alternatives to hegemonic structures through everyday forms of activism.

Thinking of contemporary not-for-export tango politics in the context of everyday wars of position and as "r"evolutions with a lowercase "r" can be helpful in understanding these movements. These theories can serve as as a framework for thinking about the quotidian sites and quotidian practices where dominant economies of tango and models of cultural production are being contested. Because activism is understood as an approach to everyday life among many leftist cultural practitioners in Argentina today, independently organized neighborhood tango festivals create a stage for the messy confluence of politics, social critique, socialization, networking and marketing, and artistic and social sentimentality and intimacy.

In his 1991 *Book of Embraces*, Uruguayan scholar Eduardo Galeano introduces a concept he calls *sentipensante*, or feel-thinking (in Nandorfy 2003: 137). He explains that he learned the term from Colombian fisherman who used it to describe how rational thinking and emotional feeling cannot—and in his opinion should not—be separated from one another. Because neighborhood tango festivals combine the sentimental sensory feelings of intimate

music making experiences with the rational political critiques of neoliberal capitalism and export-oriented cultural production, I have come to see the organizers of these movements as *sentipensante* cultural activists.

Using two neighborhood festivals that arose following the first Independent Tango Festival, I hope to illustrate how these festivals are contributing to and mediating the everyday wars of position fought by artists year-round in their efforts to create sustainable networks for musical activity in the city. By using sentimental neighborhood imaginaries and values, and positioning them against what many see as the neoliberalizing policies of the current city government, I argue that these neighborhood-based festivals are further locating tango as an integral part of everyday life in Buenos Aires and distancing themselves from ideas of tango as primarily an export commodity. While situating these events within larger political debates and frames is important, I want to turn to the actual experiences of these festivals. This will allow me to show how these political ideologies emerge in specific instances of music-making, discourses and forms of socialization.

Framing the Politicization of Tango in Buenos Aires

In the case of the neighborhood tango scenes of Buenos Aires, I have watched over the past few years as musicians in neighborhood venues have become increasingly organized and politicized around common struggles affecting the local tango community. This politicization of citywide (and in particular neighborhood) tango scenes has arisen largely in response to the cultural politics of the current city mayor, Mauricio Macri. Currently in his second term, Macri has governed the city of Buenos Aires as a representative of the right-wing PRO political party since 2007. Since taking office, the municipal government has heavily promoted tango as a tourist

commodity and a city brand while simultaneously making it difficult to open and sustain neighborhood music venues intended for everyday use.

In particular, live music permits in Buenos Aires have become extremely difficult to obtain for small clubs and bars ever since the Cromañón tragedy of 2005 when a fire broke out in a downtown rock venue and killed 197 teenagers. Many people resent how Macri used this tragedy to campaign against the opposition the following year, running on a platform to “clean” the city of unregulated live music culture. Subsequently, it became illegal to have any kind of live music, even a guitarist in a cafe, without a live music permit. Obtaining and maintaining permits for small venues has also become a long and painful bureaucratic nightmare often ending in under-the-table payoffs. In a city where surviving as an artist and maintaining small cultural venues was already difficult in the post-crisis years (following the 2001 economic crash), these closures were extremely detrimental to local cultural movements across the city.

Although most musicians and bar owners acknowledge the need to make venues safe, what has been particularly frustrating to them is the PRO government’s lack of interest in passing legislation to provide permits to small performance spaces like tango bars or cultural centers which pose very different risks than large rock venues. Making matters worse, even when venues do have permits, inspectors frequently come and shut them down and fine them, often on what seem like trivial and almost ridiculous details. In July 2014, over 15 bars and cultural centers were shut down around the city in another frustrating sweep of closures. Most of the bars were shut down because of outdated signatures on their evacuation plans. These bars all had legal and displayed evacuation plans but lacked the updated signatures, which are often hard to obtain due to the bureaucratic hurdles of the city government. These closures have sparked another strong wave of protest and activism towards the creation of a law that would assist and protect these cultural spaces. These cultural politics, alongside the glimmering tango

festival hosted by the city every year to promote “The Tango City,” have created much animosity between the PRO government agendas and struggling artistic communities. In particular, they criticize Macri’s interest in culture as a commodity and not a vital part of urban, local life.

Responding to the touristification of tango alongside these routine venue closures, independent movements began mobilizing to fight for a place for their music in the city landscape. With a lack of resources and lack of support from the city government, artists have increasingly turned to alternative and independent forms of cultural production and activism to create spaces and disseminate knowledge about local and not-for-export tango movements around the city. In particular I have seen how post-neoliberal ideologies of cooperativism (horizontalism), self-governance (autonomy), everyday approaches to resistance (the revolution is today) and local grassroots organizing within and between neighborhoods (network structures) shape the way musicians conceptualize and practice music.² These movements are building new neighborhood imaginaries and using music as a vehicle through which to promote understandings of the neighborhood as not only a place of belonging but also a place of urban resistance.

These politicized movements offer new ways of forming networks of socialization and solidarity for local tango communities in Buenos Aires today. Instead of localizing tango through the intimate social practices of tango bars like Roberto’s—discussed in chapter two—these new initiatives are employing politics as a way of strengthening and uniting local tango music scenes, connecting them to larger contemporary political debates. Instead of distancing themselves from feelings of intimacy and nostalgia in the process of politicization, some neighborhood tango movements utilize these sentimental sensory relationships between tango

² The terms in parenthesis are taken from Ezequiel Adamovsky’s anti-capitalist manifesto (2011[2008]). For a more in depth discussion of these terms, see chapter one.

and neighborhood culture as a motor for fueling their political agendas. The polarization between the growing leftist, anti-neoliberal movements across Latin America supported by Argentina's President Cristina Kirchner and the conservative neoliberal urban political strategies embraced by Mauricio Macri further frames these politics, and this chapter, within larger political and cultural spheres of debate.

Why Festivals?

It would be foolish to try to pick a specific point in time when the tango scenes of Almagro and other neighborhoods transformed from being places primarily of social intimacy, musical transmission and social gathering into think tanks and hubs of political activity and social activism. As I explored in the previous chapter, the social function of small neighborhood tango bars in the late 1990s and early 2000s was not overtly political. Instead, tango bars like Roberto's functioned first and foremost as spaces of social encounter, musical intimacy, and spaces of musical transmission for the city's growing tango community. Part of what made people love bars like Roberto's was that they made you feel part of a secret, unadvertised community shared only by those who were lucky enough to find their way through its doors.

However, at some point between 2005—when I spent my first year in the Almagro tango scene—and 2011 when I returned to conduct fieldwork, an unmistakable political agenda had infiltrated what had previously been the sentimental bohemian tango music establishments of Almagro. This was a different kind of change from the transformations I had seen in previous years. In my various trips to the city between 2005 and 2011 I had become used to seeing the physical map of the neighborhood change slightly from year to year. As years passed, old bars would close, new ones would pop up, and many of the same faces of young and older musicians would turn up from one place to the next, year after year. But in 2011, I immediately

noticed that some people in Almagro had begun to organize things beyond just their own shows in bars and that political discourses were filtering into everyday events in ways I had not experienced previously in the neighborhood. Around the same time, I noticed that artists and organizers were increasingly using verbal, sonic, and visual references to the neighborhood in their efforts to promote local scenes. This led me to wonder if, in a sentimental genre like tango, neighborhood imaginaries were becoming a vocabulary through which to promote cultural activism and not-for-export ideologies of music making?

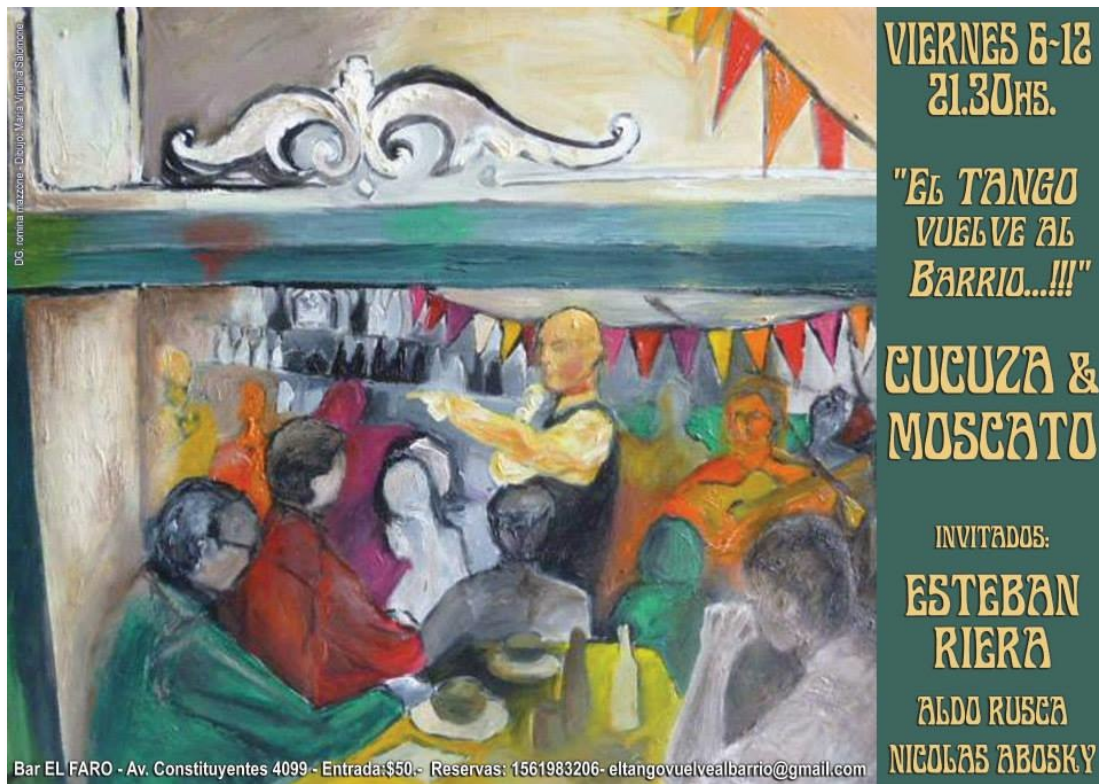


Figure 4.2. A typical Facebook announcement for a neighborhood tango show, featuring an intimate scene of a singer performing in between the tables of an old bodegon (Courtesy of Hernan Castiello, 2012).

Important to this process was the creation of neighborhood-based independent tango festivals. I choose to focus on these festivals as a way of discussing the politicization of tango

for multiple reasons. First, these festivals have become a motor for the growing independent tango scenes and have encouraged the unification and solidarity between various tango movements around the city. Furthermore, by taking a more public and activist approach than intimate bar settings, these grassroots initiatives were not only creating social solidarity among musicians in neighborhood settings but are also bringing visibility to local tango and standing up to city policies that stood in the way of local live music cultures. Because mainstream media coverage for independent tango movements is still scarce, public events like festivals offer a way to bring visibility to local audiences, and to government officials, if they are willing to listen. Lastly, musicians are converting the sentimental imaginaries and intimate sensory experiences surrounding neighborhood tango events into a political platform to advocate alternative social experiences for music in the city of Buenos Aires. In this sense, the context of the sentimental experience of the neighborhood, within the larger context of current post-neoliberal imaginaries in Latin America, becomes a powerful sensory stage for reshaping ideas of musical practice for musicians and audiences alike and challenging neoliberal and for-export models of cultural production. It also helps create and project alternative affective relationships to tango, where tango imaginaries of exoticized passion are replaced with more intimate imaginaries of sentimentality, community, neighborhood-ness, local belonging, and cooperation.

What Exactly is a Neighborhood Tango Festival?

The festivals discussed in this chapter are community-organized and community-run events put on by the different tango organizers within a given neighborhood of Buenos Aires. While the Independent Tango Festival occurs across multiple neighborhoods, the rest of the festivals discussed in this chapter are confined within the boundaries of a given neighborhood of the city. At www.jenniegubner.com I have provided a map of the city that shows the

neighborhoods that have hosted tango festivals in the 2012-2014 period. Predominantly the festivals are held in working and middle class neighborhoods around the city, though primarily organized by middle-class musicians, dancers and tango activists. Most commonly, what happens is that the primary organizers of a certain venue or cultural center or group of venues decide to organize a festival to bring publicity to their venues and celebrate the growth of these local scenes. Typically they start by creating a Facebook announcement and printing some flyers to hang up around the neighborhood. These festivals last from two to seven days and usually feature multiple daily free and accessibly priced concerts and tango dances by independent tango artists. Although many of the concerts are held in already functioning tango venues as a way of bringing publicity to growing neighborhood scenes, other events are held in public plazas, libraries and iconic cafes and restaurants that are considered to be important neighborhood locations. Oftentimes a festival will feature a few concerts each day throughout a week and then will culminate in a public outdoor closing ceremony featuring dancing and many live bands on a Sunday afternoon held in a public plaza. Most of these events are put together on a volunteer basis and if any money is made it is used to cover festival costs.

A good percentage of the publicity for these festivals is circulated through social media, word of mouth and through the flyers that get hung up around the neighborhood. Festivals are also promoted on the tango radio station and the various online tango radio programs hosted on a weekly basis around the city. More established festivals like that of La Boca and Almagro and the Independent Tango Festival usually get one or two articles published in a major newspaper, drawing in a more diverse audience. In recent years some of the festivals in places like Flores and Parque Patricios have reached out to local schools to do didactic performances as a way of involving the children in the community and their families. In other festivals such as The Independent Tango Festival and the Valentín Alsina Festival (both discussed in this chapter),

public debates are held where artists and organizers and community members can come together to discuss some of the issues revolving around organizing tango in neighborhood communities (anything from the politics of festival closures to how to bring more publicity to the growing scenes). These events tend to draw in a more selective audience of already involved organizers. The public events that happen in the plazas tend to bring in the most diverse crowds as public areas are commonly full of neighborhood residents on the weekends who gather with friends and family to drink mate, walk, and socialize in the parks. Because bars and cultural centers often keep a low profile in fear of being closed down by the city government, these public events provide important publicity and visibility to the neighborhood scenes, where interested residents can ask about the location of venues and the days of particular tango events.

In general, because these events are put on as a collective effort by different neighborhood scenes, they feel like celebratory community gatherings. Whereas during the first years the festivals tended to be more insular, featuring bands that were involved in the area, as the years have passed festival organizers tend to reach out and invite musicians from different scenes to come and participate in events, promoting solidarity between movements. Also, as musicians realize that festivals do bring good publicity to bands through photographs and occasional published articles, it is not uncommon for upcoming bands to reach out to neighborhood organizers and ask to be booked during a festival. The gigs are rarely paid but the publicity can be an important stepping stone in networking for new bands careers. As a result festivals often feature more new and upcoming bands and nonprofessional bands than the well established groups that already have a strong following or are accustomed to being paid for their stage time. That said, big name artists who are interested in supporting the local tango movements also show up year after year, often thanks to being friends with organizers. As

a violinist and a photographer I have participated in festivals in multiple ways. I have had the experience of using festivals to market our new tango quintet, *Quinteto Clandestino* (<http://tangoclandestino.wix.com/quintetoclandestino>), and have also had the experience of being approached multiple times to be a photographer and help in the organization of festivals by organizers who were looking for extra help.

Just as festivals are a place where individuals can gain publicity and visibility, and just as they are places of social solidarity, they can also become places of social conflict. When I arrived in 2011 a huge Facebook debate had broken out because certain musicians in Almagro felt that it was unfair that they had not been asked to participate in the neighborhood event. Similarly, a festival was once almost completely canceled in Parque Patricios over debates of who should be in charge and who should be allowed to perform and organize. Nonetheless, for the most part, they tend to create a welcoming and celebratory social atmosphere for those involved.

Just as festivals have started including different neighborhoods each year, they older festivals also tend to often have themes each year. The 2011 Boca tango festival carried the theme of “Tango will not be shut down” in response to routine venue closures that year. The 2012 Almagro festival, discussed later in this chapter, had the theme of promoting new Almagro venues that had opened that year. The Boca festival the following year in 2013 was organized as a tribute to Martin Otaño, one of the scene’s most active organizers who passed away after a battle with cancer. These themes, often accompanied by an annual T-shirt worn by organizers and sold at the different festival events, becomes a way of making each annual festival unique. Besides t-shirts and program flyers, the organizers of the festivals usually have one or two large banners made with the festival’s annual log. These banners are then carried from venue to venue throughout the week and hung outside or inside as a way of distinguishing the event from

any other weekly normal tango concert. After a few years of fieldwork, I now have a collection of T-shirts, old flyers, and many photographs and videos taken as memories of each of these annual festivities. Each year starting around October, my Facebook feed starts to fill up with daily announcements about the upcoming festivals. First Valentín Alsina, then Flores, then Caballito, San Telmo, La Boca, Almagro. At this point festival season is so vibrant that from October to December there is a festival almost every weekend in the city. It has turned springtime into a particularly celebratory time of year for the neighborhood tango scenes of the city.

Of Festivals and Counter-Festivals: The “Anti-Postcard” Tango Festival

The first Independent Tango Festival (*Festival de Tango Independiente*) was organized in 2010 as a joint effort by members of *Fractura Expuesta* and the *Unión de Orquestas Típicas* (Union of Typical Orchestras or commonly abbreviated as UOT). *Fractura Expuesta* is a politically activist underground tango radio station founded by two young journalists Maximiliano Senkiew and Hernan Marcos.³ The radio station broadcasts on the *Radio Madre* AM530 frequency from the headquarters of the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* and has as its goal to bring visibility and publicity to the independent tango scenes across the city. The other organization, the Union of Typical Orchestras, is a union of tango orchestras founded in 2005 by a collective of new orchestras.⁴ The UOT was formed in order to unite and organize the rapidly growing mass of new and upcoming tango orchestras in the city with goals of improving working and performing conditions for a new generation of tango musicians.

³ The official website for *Fractura Expuesta* Radio Tango can be found at <http://www.fracturaexpuesta.com.ar/>

⁴ The official website of the Union for Typical Orchestras can be found at <http://www.orquestodromo.com.ar/>

Both of these organizations maintain close ties to pre-existing leftist political organizations in the city. *Fractura Expuesta* takes much of its political orientation and support from the renowned legacy of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo (strong supporters of the Kirchner governments). The UOT on the other hand exists under the umbrella union of the UMI, the Union of Independent Musicians, created in 2001 to serve the interests of independently managed musicians across Argentina. Both *Fractura Expuesta* and members of the UOT collaborate frequently with *El Centro Cultural de la Cooperacion Floreal Gorini*, (The Floreal Gorini Cooperative Cultural Center), an editorial and cultural center dedicated to researching and promoting knowledge about cooperative movements and critical, leftist, anti-capitalist scholarship.⁵ The politicization of tango movements in recent years has not only been indirectly affected by the broader political climate of the city and nation but in fact can be linked to direct relationships built between tango musicians and specific influential activist organizations in the city. To understand how these relationships evolved, it is important to explain why tango musicians were seeking allegiances and support from these kinds of leftist organizations in the first place. Much of this has to do with debates in city politics over whether the city government's cultural agenda for tango should support and promote the genre primarily as a popular music and dance culture, or utilize and market tango as a resource for attracting cultural tourism.

Since entering into office as mayor, Macri has increasingly supported the growth of tango as a source of revenue and as a tourist commodity for the city. His decision to designate the hotel manager Hernan Lombardi as the Minister of Culture in 2008 was just one of many steps taken to support this agenda. Among other things, Lombardi merged the *Festival BA Tango* (a primarily music-based festival) and the *Campeonato Mundial de Baile del Tango* (the city's annual tango dance competition) into a combined mega-festival now known as *Tango Buenos*

⁵ The official website for this center can be found at <http://www.centrocultural.coop/>.

Aires Festival y Mundial. This change occurred following the 2009 UNESCO declaration of Tango as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, a title that continues to be utilized by the city government as part of the advertising campaign for the festival (see figure 4.3).



Figure 4.3. One of the promotional logos for the festival. Yellow is the signature color of the PRO government, and pink has become the signature color of the city's festival.⁶

The main impetus for the first Independent Tango Festival came as a reaction to the city government's decision in 2010 to move the annual tango festival from the middle of the Argentine summer to mid-August (the middle of the Argentine winter) in order to coincide with North American and European summer tourism seasons. Further solidifying his interest in tango as more of an exportable and sellable commodity than a form of popular culture, Macri commented during the 2010 festival that tango was the soy crop of Buenos Aires.

Frustrated with the increasing touristification of the tango industry by the current municipal government, the ideological tone of the first Independent Tango Festival, organized by the *Unión de Orquestas Típicas* (UOT) and *Fractura Expuesta Radio Tango*, was far from neutral. In one

⁶ Source: Image from GCBA Tango Buenos Aires Festival y World Cup Website. <http://festivales.buenosaires.gob.ar/tango/festivalmundial>

of the YouTube promotional clips for the festival, a deep voice announces the event over the sounds of a woman singing, backed by one of the new tango orchestras: “From the 6th to the 10th of March, the first festival of Independent Tango. The Buenos Aires scene that doesn’t get printed on the postcards.” In the festival manifesto, published on the *Fractura Expuesta* Website, the organizers outline the goals of their clearly not-for-export festival:

Because there is a tango that build identities without declarations, that lives in the neighborhoods, that resists the closures of live music venues, that imagines tango in primary and secondary schools, that runs through the city and the suburbs and because there is a tango that should also be made visible, the *Unión de Orquestas Típicas* (UOT) along with *Fractura Expuesta Radio Tango* are organizing the first Independent Tango Festival. The initiative aims to occupy the gap created in the Buenos Aires calendar when the Tango Festival of the City moved from the summer of the south to satisfy the summer of the north, for us, the middle of winter...

The proposal is simple. Across the city, contemporary tango scenes share essences, ideas, styles, and different forms of conceiving tango, that live among us but are isolated. Generating new publics for the genre is the challenge of this century and the Independent Tango Festival proposes to put this process into motion for new tango groups. Just as five years ago, eight typical orchestras came together to satisfy their needs, the current nature of the city’s political agenda has now presented us with new challenges. The Festival presents itself as a response to these contemporary issues.

The organizers conceived of the festival as a week to bring visibility to that which already is, that which exists, to the cycles, the spaces and artists that contribute to the

contemporary tango scene. These spaces do not need the Festival to open. They already existed before this event. For the festival they will each continue with their individually organized activities as they have done up until now until the festival comes to a close during Sunday's "Orquestazo" (neologism of the UOT that means a concert featuring multiple orchestras). As stated in the manifesto of the Festival—in the words of Alorsa from La Guardia Hereje—"another tango is possible, one without hair gel. A tango that once again sings to who we are." This is a festival envisioned for the inhabitants of the neighborhoods, an anti-postcard festival.⁷

This manifesto established a foundation for a new model of tango activism, one that used independently organized local music festivals as a way of bringing visibility to artists while simultaneously creating a platform where debates about cultural politics of the city could occur. While the festival was primarily organized by musicians to bring visibility to places where tango music was performed regularly, some events also offered places for tango dancing.⁸

Unlike the mega-festival model of the city government, the Independent Festival sought to bring visibility and publicity to the physical spaces in the city where tango occurred year round. Juxtaposed to the city's annual festival which the PRO government had been organizing primarily in the expo center in Recoleta—the richest neighborhood in town—the decision to organize the independent festival around already functioning bars and theaters within the city advocated tango as a dynamic and living expression of everyday urban culture. The first

⁷ 2010. "Llega el Festival de tango Independiente," *Fractura Expuesta*, 2 March. <http://www.fracturaexpuesta.com.ar/noticias/20100302.html>. Translated by author.

⁸ Some of the groups involved in that first festival included: Angel Pulice Y Ruth de Vincenzo Quinteto, Cuarteto de Julio Coviello, Analia Sirio, Juan Penas y Los Bonavenas, Orquesta NO Tocar las Flores, Proyecto LCB, Alan Haksten Grupp, "Cucuza" Castiello, "Tape" Rubin, Dema y la Orquesta Petitera, Timoteo, El Afronte, La vidú and Quinteto Negro La Boca.

Independent Tango Festival was not only a major success within the independent tango community but also received coverage across social media and in newspapers around the city.

Judging by the manifesto and general atmosphere of the first and subsequent Independent Tango Festivals, it is clear that one of festival's primary goals was that of politicizing musicians around the city. The festival set out to raise awareness about the closures occurring around the city, the changes to the annual official tango festival, and the importance of mobilizing to fight for local tango scenes. Integral to the atmosphere of this festival was the message that if tango was going to be reclaimed as a form of local urban culture, artists and other cultural activists were going to have to do their part in becoming active agents of social change. In order for this to happen, artists around the city were going to need to work together to rebuild places for tango in the urban landscape and bring visibility to these places year-round.

As many artists had already been organizing in bars and venues around the city in a more underground fashion, the Independent Tango Festival advocated solidarity between these movements and framed them within a distinctly political context. Although the festival is only one of the many places where these messages were disseminated, it provides a clear example of how political discourses began informing and inspiring tango practices. Most importantly, the festival created a model that prioritized advocating tango as a form of everyday culture and a way of bringing visibility to everyday activism, rather than promoting the event as a separate cultural event. It also repositioned tango practices within the neighborhoods of the city, away from convention centers and major theaters downtown, relocating music into everyday spaces in the urban landscape.

The kind of politics and critical consciousness promoted by these festivals move understandings of politics away from exclusively party politics. Instead, they embrace politics as a process of active participation in everyday events, shaping culture and society through actions

and public debate. On a larger scale, these forms of activism and discourse can be contextualized within the political frame of contemporary urban and Argentine politics and even more broadly within trends coming out of contemporary leftist movements across Latin America. One of the central pillars of the New Latin American Left is the idea that revolution should be thought of as an everyday process of gradual, grassroots transformation and not a singular, massive event.

From Anti-Postcard Festivals to Pro-Neighborhood Festivals

When I arrived to Buenos Aires in October 2011 to begin my fieldwork, I found that I had come in the middle of what had become the neighborhood tango festival season in Buenos Aires. Although I had just missed the Almagro festival that year, I learned that two other neighborhoods, Valentín Alsina, and then La Boca, were each hosting independent tango festivals starting the following month. Both located in the Southern regions of the city, Valentín Alsina is a working class neighborhood belonging to the greater metropolitan area, and La Boca is the renowned touristy port neighborhood where the tango-themed *Caminito* street is located. Venturing outside my familiar territory of Almagro, I attended both of these festivals which opened up doors to many other tango worlds in the city with which I had previously been unfamiliar. In fact, after meeting some of the La Boca organizers in Valentín Alsina, I became one of the official photographers of La Boca festival. In the spirit of collaboration I photographed various events throughout the four days of the festival and put them on the festival's website.⁹ I also filmed multiple events which I have edited and shared with local musicians and organizers, including the inauguration of a neighborhood tango school featuring a concert by some of the

⁹ Currently these photos are visible on the festivals' Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/FestivalTangoLaBoca/photos_stream

city's most renowned tango legends who offered to be godparents to the school.¹⁰ (This film sequence, and further discussion of it can be found on at jenniegubner.com; see Figures 4.4 - 4.9.)



Figure 4.4. The Banner of La Boca Festival featuring the “V” hand sign that represents the Peronist party and that has become a symbol of Cristina Kirchner’s *Frente para la Victoria* party.

¹⁰ It is very common in Argentina, as in much of Latin America, to appoint symbolic godparents for different cultural projects and initiatives.



Figure 4. 5. Malevaje Art Club, the central venue for La Boca Festival and the building that hosts the neighborhood tango school.

Figure 4.6. Cesar Di Carli holding the T-shirt for the 2011 Boca Festival that reads, "El Tango No se Clausura" (Tango will not be shut down), in response to recent venue closures.



Figure 4.7. Nelly Omar talking to local renowned neighborhood poet, David Duarte.



Figure 4.8. A night in the Teatro Verdi, another one of the venues that hosts events from La Boca Festival





Figure 4.9. 100 year-old tango star Nelly Omar outside of Malevaje with the organizers and musicians of La Boca festival

In general, neighborhood tango festivals last three to five days and involve a series of concerts hosted in different venues important to the neighborhood scene. Venues are either chosen for their historic or contemporary significance in the scene or to the neighborhood as a way of promoting and bringing visibility to new venues. Almost always, there is at least one event in a public plaza or outdoor space, usually hosted as a *milonga* (a tango dance) featuring different live tango orchestras. Most of the time concerts are free and if they do charge a cover it is minimal. Subsequently, musicians always play for free and almost all preparation for the festival (from graphic design to setup to performances) is done *de onda*, an Argentine slang phrase meaning, done free of charge as a favor.

For the most part, the musicians who perform and organize the festivals are young, and the aesthetics of the events have a generally youthful appeal. Banners with the festival names are printed and hung on streets and outside of venues and T-shirts are printed and sold to raise

money to cover festival costs. Because the events are put together through independent organizing and without many funds, audience sizes tend to be small but enthusiastic and technical difficulties are not uncommon due to lack of access to high-quality sound equipment (not unusual in the scene in general). Nonetheless, the atmospheres of neighborhood festivals are always informal and bring together tango musicians, dancers and fans from multiple generations in different neighborhood locations. Because of the generational gap in tango fans (remembering that tango fell from popularity from the 1960s to the 1990s) many of these events feature a combination of elderly retired locals and young musicians in their twenties and thirties. As many performers are also participants in the organization, the festival days are spent prepping, performing, cleaning, dancing, drinking, and celebrating among friends albeit with a certain amount of stress for the main organizers. Many people attend the events with their families and children, and it is clear that socializing is just as high on the agenda as listening to tango music. Nowadays, tango venues promoted by the new generations of musicians tend to attract more homogenous youthful, middle class audiences. In contrast, the public and open nature of the festivals often draws together a more diverse crowd representing neighborhood residents of a wider range of ages and social classes.

It was through my participation in these festivals that I really became interested in the way tango artists were beginning to use the neighborhood as a new imaginary for not-for-export tango music movements in the city today. Not only were these festivals based in neighborhoods, but increasingly I noticed that they began utilizing discourses and images of neighborhoods in describing their goals and motivations. The remainder of this chapter will explore how neighborhood-based festivals are promoting the post-neoliberal ideologies of current not-for-export tango movements by fostering and disseminating discourses about tango as a form of neighborhood culture. The first example will show that in the context of these multi-generational

neighborhood festivals, using discourses of the neighborhood as a form of politics can be more effective than using more explicit or party-based forms of political discourse.

**“Shut up and Play the Bandoneon, Tango isn’t Politics!”
The Challenge of Bringing Post-Neoliberal Politics to the Barrio in the First Valentín Alsina Neighborhood Tango Festival**

The first example comes from an event that took place on the opening night of the first independently organized tango festival in the neighborhood of Valentín Alsina in 2011. Valentín Alsina is a small working class neighborhood in the province of Great Buenos Aires, just outside the Buenos Aires city limits and about 40 minutes by bus from downtown. It is a quiet neighborhood with low houses and many longtime residents. Whereas the neighborhood was once known as a place with many tango events, nowadays most tango venues have closed and the neighborhood soundscape reflects the musical tastes of working and middle class youth, a mix of rock music, cumbia and other mainstream popular musics. It was a neighborhood I knew well because it was where my first tango violin teacher and mentor, Roberto Abal, had lived his entire life. When he was alive I would go to his house on weekends and listen to old tango cassettes and play along with them while talking about tango history. We would sit for hours and he would teach me the meaning of the lyrics and the nuances of the genre while drinking tea and eating cookies his wife Blanca would prepare. He used to tell me that there was not much left for tango life in his neighborhood and that is why, when he retired from his day job, he went to play in the touristy downtown port neighborhood of La Boca in a restaurant on weekends.

Roberto passed away in 2009, and I had not returned to the neighborhood since. Returning to the neighborhood for the festival it was wonderful to see elders like Roberto coming from around the neighborhood to dance and listen to performances, all with a mixture of

surprise and curiosity at how tango was returning to the streets of their neighborhood now carrying such a very different soundscape. What was also a surprise to many elders was the political subtext present in almost all of the events occurring over the weekend. Whereas they associated tango with a form of local neighborhood social life, the young people organizing the festival organically understood tango as both a form of social life and a voice for political protest and activism.



Figure 4.10. Poster from the first Valentín Alsina tango festival (spread through social media, on flyers and on posters hung up around the neighborhood and throughout tango venues in the city (2011).



Figure 4.11. Some of the members of one of the primary groups organizing the Valentín Alsina festival, the comedic tango group Quiero 24, from Valentín Alsina (2011).

On the first night of the festival the organizers hosted an event in the neighborhood's public library featuring a *charla-debate* (a talk and debate) followed by two tango music performances. The talk was entitled "Neighborhood Tango Festivals: An Alternative to the Institutional? A result of Cultural *Autogestión* (Self-Management)?" The speakers featured two independent journalists of the online tango magazine and radio show *Chamuyo Web*, and Alejandro Szwarcman, a renowned poet and tango lyricist as well as an independent journalist. The moderator was Alberto "Pata" Corbani, a local musician and one of the festival organizers. The groups to perform were Marisa Vazquez, a local singer from the neighborhood, and the Quinteto Negro La Boca, an activist tango group from the nearby Boca neighborhood (the organizers of La Boca neighborhood's tango festival).

I have chosen to include part of a written transcript of this talk because I think it highlights an important shift in the relationship between tango and neighborhood culture occurring in recent years. This shift involves a clear and deliberate politicization of the genre through post-neoliberal ideologies of political activism, contextualized as a reaction to the cultural politics of the current city government. What was interesting about this event was the way the elderly audience members reacted to the idea of tango being associated with politics (See Figure 4.12 for a picture of the audience). As you will see towards the end of this transcript, an argument breaks out illustrating the complexity of politicizing a genre formerly associated with sentimentality and intimacy. Keep in mind that many of the people in the audience were old enough to have lived through both Argentine military dictatorships. These were times when both neighborhood imaginaries and tango culture were largely disassociated from all forms of politics from fear of public persecution and censorship (see chapter two for more on tango in the years of “decadence”). Here, in 2011, this transcript illustrates how post-neoliberal discourses of tango and the neighborhood are being used to reposition tango as a politicized form of neighborhood culture. Thinking back to my discussions about the role of neighborhood imaginaries in the construction of citizenship in Buenos Aires (chapter one) this transcript offers an example of how tango musicians are rearticulating ideas of neighbors and neighborhoods (*vecinos* and *barríos*) within a frame of post-neoliberal politics.

Transcription of a Neighborhood Tango Debate

PATA CORBANI: Percussionist from La Santa Milonga
(<http://www.lasantamilonga.com.ar/>)

There is nothing more gratifying than being joined by so many neighbors. In this case, neighbors from Valentín Alsina, such a beloved neighborhood... I would like to first

ask for an applause for the organizers of this event, especially the local group Quiero 24 and everyone else that made this craziness possible, this dream that began a year and a half ago when a whole gang of us joined together to fight to bring visibility to our form of artistic expression.

What motivates us as musicians, as journalists, fundamentally as laborers of culture, is our desire to be recognized by the administrative governments and to react to the difficulties we had in 2009 and 2010 when so many venues where shut down. These closures, headed by the authorities of the city government of Buenos Aires, were often carried out aggressively and even violently, often in the middle of performances. In the face of these injustices, we came up with the utopian idea to make a festival. Perhaps it was a bit adolescent, but we decided, why not? Our goal as artists and laborers of culture is to establish an exchange with you neighbors, to create permanent spaces for artistic expression and communication, because ultimately everything we do we see as a product of our shared culture, a culture that is, no more and no less than a part of everyday life. We call on you because in order to succeed and grow we need the support of the neighborhood residents, in this case from Valentín Alsina and the surrounding areas.

For a few years now there have been festivals in Boedo, in Almagro, last year La Boca had its first festival. Coincidentally the festival in La Boca came about as a result of the fact that last year my group, the Santa Milonga and Quiero 24 were playing a concert in La Boca club Malevaje when the inspectors came and closed down the venue in the middle of the show leaving the club closed for months until the appropriate permits could be attained.

When this happened we got together and we said, well, alone we can't accomplish anything. We are a social and artistic community and we are a part of this city too. We all go to work everyday, we go to the corner to buy at local shops, we are a part of society. Furthermore, we try to express the music that we identify with, answering to our elders, to the generations that brought us this marvelous music and not only a music, but an entire way of being. I believe that all of us, from the older generations to the youngest adolescents, have things about us that are related to tango. The way we walk, our social encounters, how we greet, how we swear, all of this can be connected to tango. So we take this and try to express it artistically, try to translate all that into art.

*This is where the festivals come from, and we are going to need you to participate in this one and others. Each year there are more neighborhoods organizing to make something happen, and our idea is that these events will serve as a response to the institutional festivals, by that I mean the International Festival of the City of Buenos Aires, a festival that also should belong to us as neighbors, tax paying neighbors, and even to those who don't pay taxes, but unfortunately, the government has decided that tango is the soy crop of Buenos Aires. We refuse to agree with this statement, so the flag we raised last year was one that read *El Tango No Se Clausura*—"Tango will not be shut down"—and here we are, continuing that adventure. And all of this has been made possible by the self-management (*autogestión*) of the neighborhoods, of neighbors, and by the spirit of solidarity that has been such a force in making these events possible.*

I believe that artists must act in solidarity, if not, we aren't going to get anywhere. We all lived through a decade where individualism reigned and cause so much damage, and we don't want that anymore, we want something else.

HERNAN BUODO: Independent Journalist from Chamuyo Web
(<http://www.chamuyoweb.com.ar/>)

Good evening. Continuing the discussion of the city's festival and the neighborhood festivals, I think the clear difference that sets one apart from another relates to a question of market, specifically, the fact that the city festival is marketed to foreigners. The tango festival of the city of Buenos Aires used to be held in summertime. It was a festival intended for the people of the city of Buenos Aires and surrounding areas where people could come and walk through the streets. I remember going to the festival in the middle of Corrientes Street downtown. It was really something marvelous. You could walk between one stage and the next, it was summertime and the entire festival and the relations between the people had a different feel.

As of a few years ago the festival of Buenos Aires is now held in wintertime and behind closed doors. It is held in wintertime behind closed doors because the largest tourist influences are European foreigners that come looking for tango. That is why it is held in wintertime, in the middle of the Argentine winter. The festival is intended for them. It is no longer intended for the citizens of Buenos Aires.

I think that the neighborhood festivals arise with a different character and with different objectives in an effort to make up for what is missing from the cultural politics of the city. What is missing is a result of the fact that there isn't a market to support these cultural expressions here. What I mean is, maybe there is a market for the few remaining giants of tango's past and a few people from the new generation, but really there is little support for developing an internal market for tango, and likewise there is no festival created for the public of the city or for these musicians. The neighborhood festivals come to occupy this place and they do it with a different logic, with a logic of self-management,

that is the best word to describe it, self-managed (grassroots). The goals of these festivals are different and the love that's put into them is different, really this is what it comes down to.

ALEJANDRO SZWARCMAN: Tango lyricist, poet, independent journalist

Good evening, I'm very grateful to be here and to have been invited to talk here in the library, thanks to Pata, and to you all. I see so many faces. I imagine many of you left what you were doing, your families, tired after a long day at work, and took the time to come and listen to us...The only thing I have to add right now is that we should not be surprised that we have a festival like the one my colleague mentioned, a festival organized behind closed doors and for tourists, because the politics of the current city government, of the Macrista regime, follow the old concept of civilization or barbarianism. The white blonds of the North, in this case from Europe, come to show us the way, to teach us about ourselves...and yes, I am white too [this comment was in response to me smiling at being one of the only blonds in the room] but on the inside I am Latin American and I feel and act as a Latin American. So, if something doesn't receive legitimation from outside, and especially if that legitimation doesn't come from central Europe, we believe it doesn't have value, that it's worthless. This is where all our problems come from. I think one of the great challenges the tango genre faces is to stop looking for validation from Europe, and this is an opinion I discuss often with others that share my progressive popular and nationalist values. It is time to look inside instead. In this way, I think its very healthy that neighborhoods are organizing in their libraries, in cultural centers, utilizing what politicians call grassroots organizing (organización de base). These things allow us to create our own expressions, our own festivals,

encounters, etc... It seems to me that this is a good reaction to the proposal of the city government that excludes so many of us...

Following Alejandro's speech, Pata Corbani began to describe in detail two of the circumstances in which inspectors along with a band of policeman came into a venue where he was playing and violently closed down the bar, threatening to take musicians instruments away and the money made from the concert. As he mentioned how scared he felt, elders from the audience in the library began to shout:

"What is going on here!?"

"We came to hear tango not this!"

"We want tango not politics!"

"Tango isn't politics!"

"Why don't you just shut up and play the bandoneon!"

ALEJANDRO SZWARCMAN:

I apologize to those I upset and to those who left, but Kirchnerism runs through my veins and I can't help it. Unfortunately even when we don't mean to our political opinions come out and really, every opinion is political in the end. I hope I didn't come to the wrong conference but I thought we were here to talk about contemporary debates in tango, related to audiences, and for example, to talk about media coverage, to talk about the role of youth, of new authors, composers, musicians, etc... We can't emphasize enough that in the last 30 or 40 years tango as a popular and cultural expression has been marginalized with clear intentions to promote other cultural industries with specific

economic and even political interests. So I am sorry if my words offended anyone, but, it is my opinion, and I can't help it.

ANONYMOUS MAN #1:

I've been waiting for half an hour to say something. This man [referring to Alejandro] is an intellectual, yes, you are an intellectual because you are expressing yourself in a rational way about your thoughts, and I think that is totally valid because all my life I fought against the military dictatorship, and by chance I was not one of the disappeared, so that today we can have this kind of freedom of expression which I think is excellent. Now, I would like to say that today, after such victories, why are we choosing constant and permanent confrontation, and why do we keep wanting to fight with everyone?

ANONYMOUS MAN #2:

I was born and raised here in Valentín Alsina. I think that Argentina has problems. It had problems. There have been problems and there will be more problems, but they are not going to get resolved in one day. But the countries around us, they have more problems, and honestly, today I came here to hear tango.



Figure 4.12. The not-so-youthful crowd attending the tango debate and concert in the Valentín Alsina local neighborhood library (2011).

Analysis

After a well vocalized debate with the small audience in the community library, the talk finally came to an end and was followed by a concert featuring a local singer, Marisa Vazquez and the Quinteto Negro La Boca, a quintet who organized the festival in La Boca neighborhood. Both groups were part of the organizing members of the festival. I find this transcript rich from many perspectives. First and foremost, I think it offers a clear example of the way post-neoliberal ideologies of activism and social critique are being harnessed and utilized in the context of neighborhood events. It also shows clearly how different understandings of politics

are being negotiated through tango events (especially the idea of politics as everyday activism), turning these concerts into arenas of political debate in local neighborhood contexts. It is one thing to speak in the abstract about these post-neoliberal ideas and another to see them applied directly in public discourses in this fashion.

Secondly, I think it offers an example of how and why politicized tango musicians have come to utilize discourses of neighborhood-ness in promoting their events. It is evident here that while discussions of neighborhood identity are easily shared, political orientations and overt criticisms of the current governing political party are more difficult to agree upon (especially when dealing with older generations who grew up with very different political subjectivities). One can see how a more sentimental approach to promoting neighborhood culture might offer a powerful way of advocating critical consciousness about the role of culture in the city without creating dividing lines between audience members of different political orientations.

In the end, the first Valentín Alsina festival was a big success. Since that festival, the organizers have continued to host festivals, each year with more support and growing audiences. They also continue to work closely with the organizers of La Boca festival, showing the growing solidarity between neighborhood movements. In 2013, together with La Boca organizers, they also assisted in putting on a festival in the adjacent Barracas neighborhood. Whereas the festival of Valentín Alsina represents a festival made by musicians trying to create a tango scene in a neighborhood with very little tango activity, the Almagro festival that I will look at next offers an example of a festival created to celebrate the vibrant music scene that had existed in the neighborhood for some time.

The Almagro Neighborhood Tango Festivals: Evoking Local Economies of Feeling at Almagro's Second Annual Neighborhood Tango Festival



Figure 4.13. One of the flyers for the 2012 Almagro Tango festival featuring a photo of Plaza Almagro

On October 2, 2011 I landed in Buenos Aires to begin fieldwork. That same day I heard that the second annual tango festival of the neighborhood of Almagro was celebrating its finale in plaza Almagro, the plaza where Roberto's bar is located. Arriving to the plaza, instead of a festival, I found a bunch of young people who I had never seen before cleaning up the blocked street where the festival had taken place and then, to my excitement, the familiar face of Osvaldo Peredo, the renowned singer from Roberto's bar, now 81 years old. He was stacking white plastic chairs into the back of a brightly colored VW van covered in tango graffiti. When he saw me he stopped what he was doing and greeted me with a big hug and a nickname that I've never totally understood, but one that always puts a smile on my face. "Margarita, you've come back!" When you conduct research with the elderly it is always a great day when you return to find them alive and kicking, and even better if they are out on a Sunday night helping run a festival. After telling me how great the festival had been, he proceeded to introduce me to Lucas

Furno, explaining to me that he was an excellent violinist and someone I should really get to know. Lucas told me he was one of the festival organizers, and we exchanged numbers to meet up to talk soon.

A few weeks later I sat with Lucas and his girlfriend Elsa, a French geographer, in their apartment just a few blocks from Plaza Almagro. Today both Elsa and Lucas are close friends, but at the time of the interview, our only real connection was a mutual respect for Osvaldo. Over the course of a few hours Lucas explained to me the long history of his relationship to tango in Almagro and how he came to be one of the main organizers of the contemporary Almagro scene. Lucas and I talked at length about these neighborhood festivals. He explained to me that in 2010, Sanata bar, where the popular tango concert series *ConCiertos Atorrantes* played weekly, had been shut down multiple times by the city government. Frustrated by these city politics, the members of *Conciertos Atorrantes* and the organizers of Sanata decided to host the first independent neighborhood tango festival in Almagro to celebrate the neighborhood's music scene. On a side note, he also mentioned that the Independent Tango Festival the year before had not included any of the bands from his concert series and so the idea of hosting a festival was also to bring representation to their nook of the tango world. Of course, politics and marketing often go hand in hand. Thus, the festival was envisioned to celebrate iconic bars like Roberto's and Sanata, showcase local bands, and send a message to the city that neighborhood scenes like Almagro were an integral and vibrant part of the city's contemporary tango culture. The philosophy behind the initiative was that the festival would be done completely *a pulmon* (an Argentine phrase meaning done by the lung, or completely grassroots).

That was 2010. The first Almagro festival was a huge success in the neighborhood. Since then more festivals keep popping up in other neighborhoods around the city, illustrating

how neighborhood festivals like that of La Boca and Almagro could have repercussions beyond the borders of their own neighborhood. In 2011 the Almagro festival was repeated, celebrating the *ConCiertos Atorrantes* concert cycle alongside other independent concert cycles around the city creating solidarity and connections between neighborhood movements. In 2012 the event continued to grow, including musicians from other movements around the city and featuring the opening of various new venues in the Almagro neighborhood.

Each year in preparing for the Almagro festival the organizers would make a website and flyers promoting the event which were circulated around the neighborhood and especially through Facebook. On the 2011 flyer, Lucas wrote a romantic story of a neighborhood that breathes tango and of a music scene that started in Roberto's and gradually grew as musicians organized and fought for the right to have a place in the city for their art. It started,

Almagro has its own tango history; but after the years of decadence a new history began, one that started in "El Boliche de Roberto" at the hands of Osvaldo Peredo, Agustin Ortega and Roberto Medina Jr. Over the last 15 years, tango has been weaving together networks in the neighborhood, *La Catedral del Tango* with its late night refuge of a *milonga* for dancers, *El Boliche de Roberto*, a classroom for tango, *La Casa del Tango*, with the symbolism it represents and its *Orquesta Escuela*; those were the beginnings. Then the need for stages brought the CAFF, Sanata Bar, Musetta, and Teodoro's. Then musicians started getting ideas and organizing projects like "*ConCiertos Atorrantes*," which started a late-night concert series in Sanata Bar that exploded with young people, with nocturnal magic and bohemia. From Sanata bar they then created the first tango festival of Almagro to raise a flag for the tango that was happening year round in the neighborhood...[This story continues to announce the new festival and the unions with new concert series and organizations of musicians in Almagro and other neighborhoods,

including the introduction of the Elvino Vardaro Orchestra, to debut that year].

When I asked him about this, he told me that he wrote it like a fairytale and wanted to fuel the idea of an imaginary of the neighborhood, even though he knew it was an imaginary. He said he did not care if the people that went to the bars were really from Almagro. What mattered was that people went to the bars and supported the scene. He said the neighborhood imaginary was helpful to unite people and to create a story where people could feel like they belonged to something and feel love, because this kind of love acts as a motor that motivates and makes people believe in what they are doing.

This way of romanticizing a neighborhood imaginary can be directly related to the ways the neighborhood has been historically represented in tango lyrics. Take, for example, the famous lyrics of Aníbal Troilo's tango, "Nocturna a Mi Barrio" (Nocturne to My Neighborhood):

That was how my neighborhood was/ I mean, who knows if that was how my neighborhood was/ but that is how I remember it. / With Giacomini, the coal salesman on the corner/ with his burners full of soot/ who always played left midfielder by my side/ always, always/ maybe to be a little closer to my heart.

Someone said once/ that I left my neighborhood/ When? ... but when did I leave? / if I am always arriving./ And if I ever forgot/ the stars above my mother's house on the corner/ twinkling as if they were waving hands/ would say: Gordo, Gordo, stay here with us/ stay here (Troilo 1968).¹¹

Using a similar style of romanticizing language but this time in the context of Almagro, it becomes clear how musicians like Lucas utilize the neighborhood as an affective imaginary to

¹¹ A recording of Troilo's "Nocturna a Mi Barrio" can be heard at <http://www.todotango.com/musica/tema/4764/Nocturno-a-mi-barrio/>

promote a localizing politics of tango music in the urban landscape. By rebuilding affective connections between tango and neighborhood life, he and his colleagues are advocating for a politics of not-for-export tango. In these contexts, nostalgia becomes a tool for activism.

During our interview, I told Lucas the story of the argument that had broken out during the Valentín Alsina festival just weeks before to see how he felt about the politicization of tango in these festivals. Lucas explained to me that for that very reason he tries to limit overt political discourses, especially during the Sunday afternoon events, and instead tries to focus on playing tango and celebrating the neighborhood as a form of activism. Instead of expressing political ideologies through direct political discourse (speaking out against neoliberalism or against the city government or against North America), the Almagro festivals express politics through the participatory, public, and sentimental nature of music making occurring in a neighborhood plaza. By generating affect and by promoting a sentimental imaginary of the Almagro neighborhood, events like the Almagro festival can be read as an example of the kinds of everyday wars of position being fought to re-position tango music practices within not-for-export contexts in Buenos Aires today.

Exactly a year later, I found myself back in the Almagro neighborhood plaza on another Sunday afternoon at the 3d annual Almagro tango festival (See Figures 4.13 - 4.15). This time, instead of arriving late, I spent the evening on stage with my violin, playing with the *Orquesta Típica Conciertos Atorrantes*, backing Osvaldo Peredo as he sang a selection from his upcoming orchestral CD release that Lucas and his friends had recorded with him that year. When I was not playing I spent the day filming the day's events trying to evoke through sound and images a sense of what it was like to experience tango in one of these neighborhood festivals. Although I filmed throughout the festival in multiple bars, I chose this event because it represents many of the layers of meaning that are produced as a result of these kinds of

neighborhood grassroots events. I also chose this festival event because it is most demonstrative of the kinds of neighborhood economies of feeling being utilized to bring meaning and relevance to these events and to imbue them with localized political significance.¹²

Throughout the sequence, multiple subtle references are made in support of neighborhood tango culture and in support of a local tango politics. As singers reference iconic neighborhood bars and local legends, tango becomes rooted to local and specific histories and is removed from exoticizing generalizations. Within the frame of these specific references, the tango sung by Ariel Ardit that makes nostalgic references to neighborhood life becomes a celebration of locality and urban intimacy recalling memories of places like Roberto's and the Almagro plaza. Even if, as Lucas says, neighborhood life is not as connected as it once was, when Ardit sings these lyrics to a crowd of local neighborhood residents from a stage set up by local musicians in the neighborhood plaza, these neighborhood imaginaries are brought to life. Alongside the performances, speeches about the grassroots nature of the festival remind onlookers that these efforts are resulting from local initiatives and not those of the city government. The feeling of that day in the plaza event was intimate, the emotion of the organizers and performers came through in every performance and every speech, and each performer and speaker was received by rowdy and enthusiastic applause. By weaving together these powerful evocations of neighborhood life with speeches about the importance of local culture and celebrations of the neighborhood's rich recent musical history, this affective—or as Galeano would say *sentipensante*—approach to politics becomes a subtle yet important tool through which to raise critical consciousness about current debates surrounding the city governments cultural agendas.

¹² *Domingo en Plaza Almagro* (Sunday in Plaza Almagro) can be found on my website, www.jenniegubner.com. For a more detailed discussion of this film see chapter three.



Figure 4.14. Violentango performing at the 2012 Almagro Tango Festival in Plaza Almagro



Figure 4.15. Posing with local tango legend Osvaldo Peredo in the plaza (2012).

Experiencing Neighborhood Festivals vs. Mega-Festivals

Since 2011 I have attended many tango festivals in Buenos Aires, both official and unofficial. I have also performed with my tango quintet and with my tango string orchestra in both official and independent festivals. Having the opportunity to perform in these festivals I have come to see how they foster very different musical experiences, both for audiences and for performers. The major difference between the official and independent festivals involves questions of intent. What distinguishes one festival from another is not the sounds of particular groups. Many artists, in fact, perform in both official and independent festivals, although often in different formations. Frequently artists perform in the independent festival with their independent artistic projects and in the major festivals as backing musicians to more mainstream elderly artists¹³. Yet what really distinguishes the independent festivals are the social contexts of their musical sounds and the emphasis on creating local spaces of encounter where live tango music can be embraced as an integral, everyday part of city life. Independent festivals are festivals about the production of locality. They grow from grassroots efforts and treat tango as a creative, social and political form of expression integrated into the city landscape. Although efforts are being made by the city festival to include references to the everyday cultures of tango that exist throughout the year (mainly by allowing different neighborhood projects to represent themselves as cycles in the festival), the official festival has a long way to go before it will ever feel like a local celebration of tango culture and not a product for-export.

¹³ In the past few years this has begun to change as the politics of the festival has finally begun to change and the concert lineups are starting to feature the artistic projects of younger artists. The headline of this year's 2014 official tango festival, for example, was "*Los Clásicos del Futuro*" "The Classics of the Future," showing a notable shift of interest towards younger generations.

Since arriving in Buenos Aires in 2011 I have performed in three official tango festivals and four independent tango festivals. My experiences in the city's official tango festival are not so different than what one might expect playing in any kind of mega-festival. Big festivals bring more media coverage and larger audiences and also the opportunity to be heard by major artists and organizers in the city. Thus, our preparations for the annual performances at the city festival with my string orchestra were always accompanied by a certain amount of stress and pressure (more on this in the following chapter). The neighborhood tango festivals, however, are one place where tango music performances can be both social and political simultaneously. Because tango music does not carry overtly political messages in its lyrics and does not lend itself to feelings of political mobilization through its sounds, the political meanings of these festivals are constructed through the discourses that occur in and around them. Usually each artist says a few words about the importance of these kinds of events, and the organizers stand up and explain how the festival was put on with no financial help from the government but as a result of a collaborative and collective effort between musicians and non-musicians who help out in different ways.

In the case of the most recent festival organized in the Villa Crespo neighborhood (see Figure 4.1), the members of La Cámpora, Cristina Kirchner's youth activist organization, came to talk about the importance of the *comunas* and the role that *comunas* have in fostering neighborhood events like festivals. In this case the tango festival opens itself up as a space for the sharing of other political initiatives that look beyond music-making. In sharing similar ideologies with groups like La Cámpora, neighborhood tango movements are able to gain support from certain local political organizations, and they are able to assist those organizations by providing a venue through which they can educate public audiences about their own initiatives. After observing and performing in multiple independent festivals, I have realized that

some of the most important outcomes of the festival occur before the festivals even begin. Last year the members of the festival in Valentín Alsina began promoting their November festival in February. Each month they hosted an event called the “pre-festival,” featuring local bands and trying to create hype about the upcoming annual event. Festivals, of course are not all about politics. They also continue to be an important form of marketing and promotion for venues and bands with limited audience bases.

Conclusions

Through my analysis of festivals I have shown how tango artists are transforming the intimate musical cultures of tango bars not only into spaces of intimate social encounter but also important hubs of cultural resistance and urban activism for larger struggles concerning the city’s contemporary tango scene. I have argued that the the neighborhood imaginary in relation to tango culture is being transformed from an imaginary of nostalgia to one of resistance and activism that draws on nostalgic values of neighborhood life as a form of activism.

The politicization of tango and neighborhood imaginaries in recent years through independent neighborhood-based tango festivals has contributed to the growth, strengthening and unification of local neighborhood tango scenes. Furthermore, localized, independently organized festivals are playing an important role in continuing to update neighborhood tango imaginaries to address current urban realities and contemporary cultural politics. The neighborhood has historically represented an important symbolic place in tango culture. Just as Adriana Bergero writes that neighborhoods were used as a way of building common identities in the 1930s, I see this happening again today. Once again, tango music is being employed as an important vehicle through which these processes are occurring.

Around the time of the 2001 crisis, the inclusive urban intimacy of neighborhood tango bars was one of the things that drew people to the social and musical experiences of bars like Roberto's. Many people found Roberto's an attractive bar because it provided an alternative to the feelings of insecurity, crisis and alienation that were prevalent in the urban landscape during those years. The social atmosphere of Roberto's was powerful because it created feelings of being transported to a different time period with different social codes and a sense of urban intimacy. This feeling—also produced for many through the lyrics of tangos—was enhanced in these small bars as they created a kind of full-immersion experience into these feelings of *barrio* (neighborhood) locality. These places became significant for the growth of tango scenes around the city and new bars and venues began popping up catering to the new aesthetics of the growing tango community.

Today, entering into the second decade following the crisis, the values of neighborhood tango communities have taken on new qualities, and musicians who organize in neighborhood tango initiatives are shaping new relationships between tango and neighborhood life. These new understandings of tango's relationship to the neighborhood are based on old imaginaries of tango and neighborhood life but are also infused with a sense of agency and cooperative activism, inspired largely by narratives and discourses of the New Latin American left. In this chapter, I have shown that independently organized tango festivals are inspiring tango musicians to become active agents in producing alternative forms of cultural production, using the neighborhood as a powerful imaginary to unite and build alternative tango experiences in the city. These new imaginaries are constructed largely through different forms of public culture, whether online or integrated into live performances. Like bookends, these discourses come to frame tango events, imbuing them with political significance. They are processes that do not

happen overnight and are not easy. Politicizing the tango world and the neighborhood tango world specifically requires an enormous amount of effort on the part of practitioners.

Although my research subjects are far from the first activists in the tango world, I have tried to show how recent tango activists are positioning their activism firmly in the social values and geographical location of the city's neighborhoods. While these initiatives are strengthened by nostalgic ideas of neighborhood life carried through tango lyrics and the stories of elders, they are also deliberately connected to the shared social experience of tango as everyday neighborhood social life over the past decade, thus updating old neighborhood tango imaginaries to the present urban landscape. By drawing on the values associated with neighborhood life and connecting these values to struggles against the commodification of tango as a tourist product, these festivals are promoting a public image of tango that is both localized and politicized. They are also actively participating in producing new meaningful tango imaginaries that are connected to symbolic values of the neighborhood, thus distancing ideas of tango from the sexualized and exoticized images generally associated with tango as an export commodity.

In the contemporary neighborhood tango scenes of Buenos Aires, tango music is experienced in many ways. It is a form of socialization, a form of employment, a vehicle for political resistance and activism and a form of social intimacy and sentimentality. In fact, depending on the individual subjectivities of performers or audience members involved, tango music events can be experienced as many of these things at the same time. Whereas I used to understand these categories as somewhat separated, I have learned through fieldwork that the lines between politics, sentimentality, employment, and socialization in a music scene are usually quite blurry. Furthermore, through my work with tango musicians, I have observed how

sentimentality can be used as a powerful form of politics and a motor for social activism and critique.

Throughout my fieldwork I came to see that a *sentipensante* (feel-thinking) approach to activism—enhanced through the sensory experiences of participatory musical performances—can lead to a *sentipensante* ethics of music making capable of spreading messages of social transformation to broader audiences. Whereas rational politics and party politics are often polarizing and dividing, politicized economies of feeling are often able to cast a wider net in communicating complex political ideas about the importance of advocating music as an integrated part of urban, everyday life.

I want to remind readers that music scenes or music movements can be political and activist and at the same time still serve as important networking sites for providing formation and visibility to upcoming artists. If I wrote about the revolutionary ideologies of musicians without accounting for how these ideologies exist alongside their personal professional goals, it would be easy to gloss over many of the internal politics that drive these kinds of movements. Many musicians' political ideologies and professional goals mix together in tricky ways and if being an activist can help make the world a better place and also increase artists' visibility in a complicated and saturated music scene, all the more reason to get involved. The politics of activism in neighborhood tango scenes must be understood alongside the personal needs and goals of artists struggling for visibility and representation in the city. Although the goal of these movements is in fact to bring visibility and representation to artists in the city, the movements themselves are full of their own internal discrepancies and power dynamics. My goal in this chapter has been to explain how these political mentalities and initiatives made their way into the everyday musical practices of a neighborhood like Almagro.

In the next chapter I will explore how post-neoliberal ideas like horizontalism can produce important spaces of socialization for participating members within a given musical project. In a further exploration of how the social intimacy created in neighborhood tango bars is being recreated in larger projects like the festivals discussed in this chapter, I will look at the social dynamics of a neighborhood string orchestra are also contributing to the production of locality in the Almagro scene in recent years.

Chapter 5

Orchestrating Change: Experiencing the Collective and Negotiating the Popular in a “Horizontal” Neighborhood Tango String Orchestra



Figure 5.1. *Orquesta de Cuerdas Elvino Vardaro* performing in Oliverio Gironde Cultural Center. (Photo courtesy of Masa Takano, 2014.)

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*The truth is that we all have jobs and spend our time traveling, but that's not what we like. Or, we like that less than doing something to bring tango back to life here, so that it loses the stigmas it carries, and starts to be heard once again in the streets.*

-Lucas Furno, in reference to the *Orquesta de Cuerdas Elvino Vardaro*.<sup>1</sup>

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¹Vitale, Christian. 2011. "Que el tango sea una música viva." *Página 12*, 8 December. Translated by the author.

Introduction

How can playing music in a neighborhood-based tango string orchestra engender new ways of experiencing popular music? How can activist musicians help form other socially conscious artists through discourses and practices of music-making? How might a neighborhood-based tango orchestra become a vehicle for advocating post-neoliberal² ideologies of popular culture in the city? How might the social experiences of playing in a collectively-run neighborhood tango orchestra relocate avant-garde sounds within the realm of the popular?

This chapter turns its focus to a tango string orchestra that evolved out of Almagro's recent neighborhood tango revival. The *Orquesta de Cuerdas Elvino Vardaro* (The Elvino Vardaro String Orchestra) is a neighborhood-based initiative created in 2011 by the members of the *ConCiertos Atorrantes* collective in collaboration with *TangoContempo*, another independent tango organization.³ Guided by principles similar to those of the concert cycles and festivals discussed previously, the Vardaro is another project emerging out of Almagro that has contributed to relocalizing tango music as a form of neighborhood culture in the city. Whereas much of this dissertation has focused on the transformative social aesthetics of listening to small ensembles in tango bars, I now look at how the everyday collective social experiences of playing in a "horizontal" neighborhood-based tango orchestra have provided another sensory context for musical localization.

In previous chapters I explored how post-neoliberal ideologies and discourses of cultural politics and urban life have participated in framing neighborhood culture as a counter-imaginary

² As discussed elsewhere post-neoliberal is taken from Grimson and Kessler (2005) and does not imply an end to neoliberal culture but instead indicates efforts in contemporary Argentina to create models that provide alternatives to the logics of capitalism, firmly rooted in reactions to the neoliberal political policies of the 1990s.

³ See previous chapter for a discussion of the concert cycle and festivals organized by the *ConCiertos Atorrantes* collective.

to social imaginaries and cultural politics of the neoliberalizing city. These processes involved organizing grassroots cultural initiatives within different neighborhoods in the city, promoting tango as an intimate form of everyday bar culture, and openly speaking out against what many see as the for-export tango politics of the city government. In this chapter I focus on the social and musical aesthetics of a neighborhood orchestra to explain how post-neoliberal ideologies of cultural production can manifest themselves in the everyday practices of collective music-making in large groups. Through these experiences, post-neoliberal ideologies of urban life reinforced, and new ways of experiencing and conceptualizing popular music, and orchestral music in particular, are being encouraged. Using the setting of a string orchestra, a symbol of the hierarchical nature of the classical music world, these transformations become particularly noteworthy. In this chapter I outline the philosophical foundations and goals of the orchestra and discuss the political orientations of the project. I then provide an idea of who participates in these kinds of projects and how they address social, musical, and political goals of musicians in overlapping and complex ways. Finally, I tell a story of a performance that both challenged the values of the orchestra and ultimately strengthened what the Vardaro stands for musically, politically and socially.

The Vardaro is not a traditional *orquesta típica* intended as dance band. Instead, it functions as a chamber string orchestra to showcase new tango compositions from local tango groups from around the city in monthly collaborative musical performances, without dancing. Because the groups that collaborate with the orchestra must offer original compositions and full orchestral arrangements, they generally come from a more professional and academically trained musical pool. The orchestra has been widely received across the independent tango world and has collaborated with a variety of musicians ranging from local legends like renowned tango singer, Osvaldo Peredo, as well as some of the leading professional tango ensembles in the city today. Most often performances are held in small neighborhood venues although the

orchestra has also performed multiple times at the city's annual tango festival and also has included a performance in the city's opera house, the *Teatro Colón*. By drawing in multiple generations of professional artists to participate in the grassroots practices of contemporary neighborhood scenes, the project has helped to position the Almagro neighborhood as a center of tango production in the city. Similar to bars like Roberto's, the orchestra is founded around community-oriented and integrative neighborhood values. However, instead of basing these values in sounds from the past, it is envisioned as a platform to showcase contemporary orchestral tango compositions. As such, the Vardaro acts as a sounding board to challenge and negotiate new politically situated understandings and aesthetics of "the popular," and of "neighborhood music" in tango today. In the past, highly arranged instrumental tango compositions like those of Astor Piazzolla might have been located within an elitist culture of avant-garde art music and positioned in contrast to an aesthetics of "neighborhood music." Today, projects like the Vardaro are participating in blurring these boundaries and relocating avant-garde sounds within the realm of community-based neighborhood popular culture.

Over the past three years the Vardaro orchestra has made important contributions to the musical life of neighborhood tango scenes by fostering ties between a wide range of artists from both popular and academic backgrounds and from different generations. It has also succeeded in promoting leftist ideologies of music making through the musical and social politics of the orchestra, and has brought visibility and recognition to neighborhood tango scenes by participating in larger citywide projects like the annual government-sponsored tango festival. Through a discussion of the orchestra, I discuss how leftist models of political organizing are being employed by artists to create sustainable local musical initiatives. I then explore how orchestral projects like the Vardaro are challenging ideas of "the popular" in tango music by relocating avant-garde sounds into neighborhood, popular contexts. Lastly, I analyze how the social and musical experiences surrounding a project like the Vardaro are contributing to producing a gen-

eration of politicized and socially aware artists that understand music-making as a form of post-neoliberal urban activism.

I analyze this project because it exemplifies some of the core values and tensions that I have experienced as a participant of independent tango music initiatives in the city today. These values and tensions are negotiated through everyday experiences of performing and rehearsing as well as through discourses and debates surrounding the orchestra's performances in and out of neighborhood settings. As a regular performing member in the Vardaro orchestra for the last two years, I witnessed first-hand the powerful everyday dynamics of running a horizontal grassroots string orchestra and the sense of locality and community that result from being a participating member in this kind of independently organized and ideologically and musically driven project. I will thus rely on my personal experiences, my relationships with other orchestra members and public discourses about the orchestra to shape this discussion.

Rethinking Popular Music in the Post-Neoliberal Imaginary

One of the central debates in current not-for-export tango scenes is that of reclaiming tango as a *música popular* (a popular music genre) and redefining ideas of “the popular” in contemporary cultural discourse. To many young tango artists, defining tango as a contemporary form of *música popular* has become a way of arguing for what I have been calling tango, not-for-export. This understanding of *música popular* is rooted in contemporary post-neoliberal discourses and emphasizes tango's identity as a local and living form of social life. In many ways this represents a shift away from previous understandings of *música popular* as expressed in tango's years of decadence through artists like Piazzolla. In a 2009 article, tango scholar Sofia Cecconi, argues that the avant-garde philosophies of Piazzolla contributed to the deterritorialization of tango music in the second half of the 20th century. As Piazzolla was interested in music as a highbrow performance practice, he intentionally disassociated his music from urban

popular culture and tango dance culture in Buenos Aires. Cecconi argues that this deterritorialization was further emphasized by the fact that the tango vanguard of Piazzolla's time connected tango music to discourses that were more universalist than localist (2009: 60). It is important to remember that Piazzolla's philosophies about tango arose during the period of tango's decline as youth culture and mass culture, and at a time when tango was perhaps most distanced from leftist political ideologies. Therefore, while he referred to his music as "popular music of the city of Buenos Aires" and "contemporary popular music of the Rio de la Plata region," his use of the term popular carried more sonic than political or social implications. These *deterritorialized* philosophies of popular music have remained prominent in certain tango music circles into the present.

Today, avant-garde ideologies of popular music continue to be encouraged in many formal academic circuits such as in the Almagro-based conservatory Manuel de Falla (often by professors of a similar generation as Piazzolla).⁴ They are also present in the musical endeavors of the *TangoContempo* music collective that has for years hosted a concert cycle of contemporary tango performances featuring many avant-garde tango artists and hosted in more high-brow clubs than places like Sanata and Roberto's. However, following what Pablo Alabarces called the plebeian turn in the 1990s (2011:119) new ways of thinking about popular culture complicated how and where artists located "the popular" in tango music.⁵ In efforts to create a space for artists who combine Piazzolla's avant-garde musical understandings of the popular *and* the social aesthetics of the popular promoted through new leftist political movements, neighborhood tango initiatives like the *ConCiertos Atorrantes* coalition are challenging these his-

⁴ Michael O'Brian's 2010 PhD dissertation, *New Institutions for Argentine Music Education as Cultural Systems* offers a deep analysis of the complexities surrounding ideologies of popular music as related to formal tango training conservatories. He concludes that contemporary understandings of popular music in Argentina today lie somewhere between avant-garde and populist conceptions of "the popular."

⁵ See Chapter One for a discussion of Alabarces' theory of the "plebeian turn" in the 1990s.

toric divisions between popular and elite music cultures. Through these efforts, previously deterritorialized avant-garde sounds of the popular are being reterritorialized within the social aesthetics of local neighborhood tango scenes.

Debates and discussions of “the popular” today can be found throughout almost all contemporary tango styles. Because the Vardaro orchestra plays predominantly highly arranged contemporary and often virtuosic orchestral compositions, the challenge lies in conveying how the organizers and participants of this orchestra translate what many perceive to be elitist art music sounds into a form of neighborhood-based popular expression⁶. In a discussion of the *Tango de Ruptura*⁷ movement led by the group Astillero, ethnomusicologist Morgan Luker defines Astillero’s vision of *música popular* as “a form that is at once and irreducibly both musical and social” (2009:160). This definition helps conceptualize the realms of the social and the musical within *música popular*, not as separate entities, but as two zones of sensory experience that engage with one another to produce new understandings of “the popular.” Translating this idea to the Vardaro, my analysis highlights how ultimately the synergy between the musical, political and social aesthetics of the orchestra allow this project to be relocated within post-neoliberal understandings of “the popular.” Drawing from Luker’s definition, I analyze the Vardaro orchestra as a social project and a musical project concurrently, understanding the significance of both social and musical realms in the production of meaning.

Not surprisingly, what feels like *music popular* to one does not feel popular to all. While some argue that Almagro’s neighborhood venues are becoming more elitist with the inclusion of

⁶ I use the term elitist because in musicians in the tango scene frequently make reference to the dichotomy between music that is popular or *elitista*. Another way to think about this word would be high-brow or sophisticated. It refers less to an elite class but instead to a ideas of music making that place academic and avant-guard music as musically superior to other more mainstream and popular musics.

⁷ The Tango de Ruptura movement is discussed in Chapter Two as one of the counter-imaginaries to tango-for-export that arose around the turn of the 21st century alongside movements of *tango barrial* (neighborhood tango) movements.

orchestras like the Vardaro, others embrace the project as a way to diversify ideas of popular music and to integrate new sounds into the neighborhood music scenes. It is easy to understand how Osvaldo singing classic tangos with guitar accompaniment in Roberto's century-old bar feels popular and intimate. Much to my surprise I found that playing contemporary tango in the formation of a large string orchestra in neighborhood bars also had the power to evoke similar transformative imaginaries of urban intimacy and neighborhood belonging. This analysis of the Vardaro orchestra thus acts as a case study of the experiential construction of meaningful popular music practices by locating the project socially within the growing not-for-export tango community, politically within leftist models of horizontal activism and geographically within neighborhood imaginaries. I hope it challenges readers to think about what "the popular" means in South American musics today, why values of "the popular" have become so important to many young artists living within the current socio-political realities of Buenos Aires, and how "the popular" is sounded and experienced through collective forms of music-making. Before continuing, I suggest viewing the Vardaro's performance of "Cancion de Ausencia: Osvaldo Peredo con La Orquesta de Cuerdas Elvino Vardaro" (at www.jenniegubner.com). The video clip, made from one of the orchestra's 2014 performances, sets the tone for the kinds of intimate, neighborhood performances put on regularly by this orchestra.

Orchestrating Change: The Leftist Underpinnings of Almagro's first Horizontal String Orchestra

Elvino Vardaro (1905-1971) is one of the most renowned violinists in the history of tango. Born in 1905, his musical career spanned a large chunk of tango history from the 1920s until his death in 1971. He worked with many key figures in tango history including Osvaldo Pugliese, Astor Piazzolla, and Carlos Di Sarli. In his biography on TodoTango (the most comprehensive online tango library) he is remembered for his participation in tango ensembles of all formations

and for his renowned style of violin playing characterized by its romantic lyricism, unique vibrato, and expressive phrasing.⁸ He was also from the Almagro neighborhood.

In 2011, the year after the first Almagro Tango Festival, the members of the *ConCiertos Atorrantes* collective began a new project in the neighborhood hoping to continue to strengthen and unite the growing music scene. Instead of a festival or a concert series, they started a string orchestra and called it *La Orquesta de Cuerdas Elvino Vardaro*, a tribute to the neighborhood's most renowned tango violinist. The orchestra, which is now known as *la Vardaro* or, the Vardaro, was envisioned as a neighborhood-based and community-run project and was founded around a number of goals consistent with other previous *ConCiertos Atorrantes* neighborhood initiatives. The orchestra is informal, relies on rotating voluntary participation, and is focused around the community experience of playing orchestral tango music and showcasing contemporary new artists. Much like the philosophy of Sanata's concert series, the orchestra was envisioned as both a musical and social project.

Over the past three years the Vardaro has performed roughly once a month, each month working with new tango composers and tango bands to showcase their material. Occasionally repertoires include traditional tangos, but the emphasis has always been on innovation, either through new compositions or new arrangements of old songs. Unlike most orchestras, there is no formal audition for entering or collaborating with the Vardaro. Instead, participants are invited in by different members usually through word-of-mouth references. Continued participation in the orchestra involves adhering to the philosophies of the group, being a responsible member, and generally getting along with everyone. Technical expertise is also relevant but rarely arises as an issue as most of the players in the group play at an advanced or professional level. Each month an email is sent out to the many members asking who is available, and once a full or-

⁸ Pinsón, Néstor. "Elvino Vardaro." *Todo Tango*. <http://www.todotango.com/english/creadores/evardaro.asp>

chestra is established rehearsals begin. Since musicians schedules vary extensively between jobs and tours, consistency is sometimes an issue. Nonetheless, over the years a core group of members has developed who make an effort to always be present and help in the administration of the group.

While the orchestra was not created as a money-making project, it serves the tango musician's community in multiple other ways. In general all money made from performances is invested back into the project, although when the orchestra performed in the city's tango festival, each player was paid for their performance. Also, when making recordings, each musician is paid for their time although at a much lower rate than standard recording fees in an effort to make string recordings more accessible to independent tango artists. With minimal monetary rewards, it is the philosophical underpinnings and social and artistic goals driving the orchestra that enable the group to be successful and sustainable. At the heart of the Vardaro is the fact that the project is conceptualized as a horizontal and self-managed neighborhood-based initiative. I will examine first the structural foundation of the group and then will investigate how these philosophies play out in the orchestra's social and artistic projects.

What Is a Horizontal String Orchestra?

The Vardaro is organized around the principles of horizontality and *autogestión*, or self-management. As discussed in chapter one, these two philosophies lie at the heart of the current Latin American leftist movements seeking to contest the cultural and political models promoted by neoliberal capitalism. Following the 2001 crisis in Argentina, many social, political and cultural movements in Buenos Aires used these ideologies in their efforts to contest the individualistic and consumer-oriented culture of the "The Neoliberal '90s." The application of these leftist principles in the creation of a larger string orchestra not only illustrates how these values can shape musical practices in the city but also illustrates how these alternative models are being used to

contest the entrenched individualist and hierarchical structures so common in the classical music world.

Lucas Furno, one of the founders of the Vardaro orchestra, explained these terms to me when he invited me to join the orchestra in 2012. He explained that the term horizontal referred conceptually to the lack of formal hierarchy in the orchestra. He told me that some string players, especially those with formal classical training, had a very difficult time wrapping their head around this concept since structured hierarchy is at the heart of the classical music world. In practice, horizontality in the orchestra plays out in a number of ways. People do not have fixed positions and often switch chairs, or even switch between playing first, second or third violin parts from one concert to the next. Instead of designating people a seat, most of the time people assign themselves to the area of the orchestra to which they see themselves most suited, either by their level of playing or level of commitment to the particular concert.⁹ Since many musicians do come from more traditional orchestral experiences, some unspoken tension has arisen around this set up, but for the most part the system works smoothly and succeeds in de-emphasizing feelings of hierarchy in the group. Those who take issues to the way the orchestra is run usually choose not to continue to participate or are not invited back. The presence of this ideology of horizontality engenders a feeling of equality among the members of the orchestra which allows players to feel that everyone is contributing equally by participating, even if some players are stronger than others. Beyond an organizational principle, horizontality also works as an overall philosophy of the orchestra, locating the orchestra alongside other cooperative and participatory cultural initiatives in the city.

⁹ Although there are no fixed seats, there are unspoken codes about who sits where in the orchestra, and especially about who leads the different sections, based usually around questions of seniority with the project. When these codes are not respected, this can create tension, but for the most part problems do not arise.

The idea of horizontality also has implications of shared leadership and management, connected to another philosophy of the orchestra, that of *autogestión*. Although Lucas started as the leader of the orchestra, the responsibilities for sustaining the group are shared and collective. As discussed in previous chapters, philosophies of self-management are characteristic and foundational to independent tango movements across the city. With a lack of support from the city government and with the commercial tango music industry in crisis, musical practitioners have turned to models of *autogestión* as a way of carrying forward their musical initiatives. Compared to North American “indie” movements, the political implications of self-management in Argentina tend to be more heavily politicized and directly associated with the social movements emerging in response to the 2001 crisis and in particular to those of the recovered factories movement. Thus, not only do they advocate the independent production of culture (similar to the founding ideologies behind North American “Indie” movements) but they also align themselves with specific anti-neoliberal political and economic movements emerging from recent Argentine history. While self-managed initiatives are found in many cultural and political realms in Buenos Aires today, they have been particularly successful and popular in the independent tango scenes.

Another way tango artists describe these models of independent cultural production is the with the phrase “*hacer algo a pulmón*,” a phrase literally meaning “doing something from the lungs” but used to describe events that were realized with no external support. Especially given the hostility most artists feel towards the PRO government, phrases like *a pulmón* and *autogestión* are used in situating these movements against the official cultural politics of the city. One example of this can be seen in the politics of the 2011 Almagro tango festival, where The Vardaro Orchestra had its debut. In August of 2011, a number of groups from the *ConCiertos Atorrantes* collective were invited to play in the city’s official tango festival in a convention center downtown. Already in the process of planning the second annual Almagro neighborhood festival,

the groups decided they would participate and then use the money they made collectively from the festival to cover the costs of their upcoming independent neighborhood event. In this way, their participation in the official festival generated the money needed to fund their own festival, but did so in a way that they would not have to be associated with the city government and so they could identify themselves as another self-managed event realized *a pulmón*. After hearing this story, I asked Lucas if they would have accepted direct, instead of indirect, financial support from the PRO government to put on the festival. He explained that there was no way he would let the city come and cover Almagro's tango bars with the signature yellow and black logos of the city government, representing to him the ideological opposition to this movement. While concepts of self-management and self-production have developed in reaction to the lack of support for cultural initiatives in the city, they have also become symbols of resistance and a source of pride for urban cultural activists.

While ideas of *autogestión* and horizontality are connected to social activism following the 2001 crisis, they are also connected to elements of tango's own history, far predating the politics of the 1990s. In particular, many young tango artists today are inspired by the orchestral philosophies of Osvaldo Pugliese (1905-1995), one of the most renowned tango composers, pianists, and orchestra leaders of all time. Beyond his musical accomplishments, Pugliese stands out in tango history because of his political ideologies as a communist and for his activism for musician's labor rights. As a communist, he ran his orchestra as a collective where everyone was paid the same and duties were shared between musicians in a horizontal manner. Today, not only are these philosophies being re-embraced by the new generation but he is revered as a saint by many musicians.¹⁰ There are even saint Pugliese cards that many musicians carry in their wallets for good luck and protection.

¹⁰ For more information on Pugliese's political influence in modern tango see Etchegaray, Molinary and Martinez 2005; Liska 2005; Luker 2007; Luker 2009; and Marcos 2012.

For the members of the Vardaro, Pugliese is a central inspirational figure and appears frequently in both discourse and in imagery used in the places where the orchestra performs. The fact that one of the members of *ConCiertos Atorrantes* who frequently collaborates with the Vardaro, Daniel Ruggiero, is the son of Pugliese's orchestra's most renowned bandoneon player, adds an intimate personal connection to his memory. An example of Pugliese's contemporary presence in their tango initiatives can be seen in these two posters for the most recent milonga (tango dance) organized weekly in the Oliverio Gironde cultural center where the Vardaro regularly plays. The milonga is called *La Milonga Antimufa*, meaning the anti-mold milonga. The first poster features Osvaldo Pugliese smiling next to a banner of festive and colorful flags (an important symbol of popular culture connected to carnival festivities), and the second features a list of the artists who performed in the first month of the milonga next to a picture of Pugliese holding his left arm up in a fist, symbolic of leftist solidarity.



Figure 5.2. & 5.3. Facebook Flyers Promoting a Milonga Using the Face of Osvaldo Pugliese. (Courtesy of Charly Liska, 2014.)



For Lucas Furno, re-embracing the popular is not a matter of mixing tango with contemporary rock aesthetics, but instead is about channeling the musical ethics of Pugliese in his own musical projects. Speaking during the 2012 Independent Tango Festival in a conference panel debating the philosophies driving contemporary tango music scenes, he explained,

tango is a music that is 100 years old...it is a very powerful music...If you ground yourself in Pugliese's philosophies, in how he behaved his whole life, you can find more rebellion than what you see in Led Zeppelin or any other groups with that reputation.¹¹

For many tango artists today, rebellion is not so much about cultivating an image of counterculture but instead is about embracing organizational models and discursive philosophies that embody alternative values and allow artists to carry out their musical goals in a city with limited support for the arts. Grounded in philosophies of horizontality and *autogestión*, the goals of the Vardaro speak to both social and musical needs of the current tango community.

¹¹ Lucas Furno, interview by the author, February 20, 2012, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

What are the Social and Musical Goals of a Horizontal Tango String Orchestra?

1. *The Social: Localizing the Tango String Player Community*

The first goal of the orchestra was to create a project to foster a community of tango string players in the city. Although there are many tango string players in the city, relations between string players are often quite competitive. This is largely due to competition in the work environment and the lack of places for string players to socialize with one another through informal performance. As a violinist, Lucas experienced this for years firsthand and envisioned the orchestra as a potential solution. In small tango bars like Sanata, Roberto's or El Faro a violinist might occasionally show up to participate in late-night jams but more frequently these events feature guitarists, singers, bandoneon players, and pianists. Furthermore, the largely informal and improvisatory performance settings can be daunting for musicians trained to perform with sheet music. Other than playing in typical orchestras that have a small string section, there are rarely occasions that bring together many string players in informal social settings.

Responding to these needs, Lucas' vision was to create an orchestra where string players would play and organize together while working with different artists around the city, fostering a new kind of community created through collective performance and collaboration with different tango professionals. In a city where making a living as a string player is a constant battle and opportunities to join orchestras are very competitive, shifting the focus to create an orchestra based on collaboration and participation and disconnected from monetary goals offered a refreshing alternative to many musicians. The idea targeted a wide range of players in the city but, much like the *ConCiertos Atorrantes* cycle in Sanata, it was aimed largely at providing popular and local alternatives for musicians working in export industries.

Interestingly, the orchestra has also become an important community for international artists who come to Buenos Aires to live, work and study tango music. Much like myself, the orchestra offers an attractive community to foreigners looking to enter into networks of string play-

ers and participate in informal musical projects in the city. Also worth noting is that the orchestra is largely made of female players, many of whom, myself included, embrace the socializing opportunities fostered through this kind of informal, participatory and non-competitive musical environment.

Tango string players in Buenos Aires today have limited opportunities for steady musical employment. They can give private classes or teach music in schools, lead government-sponsored youth orchestras around the city (in a similar system to Venezuela's *El Sistema*), and play in the city's *casas de tango* (tango houses) for tourists. Working in tourism is, for most, the only way to make a steady income in the city through performing with the exception of a very small number of successful full-time touring and performing musicians. Even though tango house shows are generally full of "for-export" clichés, these jobs are highly sought after. Although many string players in the city speak out against jobs in "for-export" houses, part of this rejection may be related to the fact that these jobs are difficult to obtain and require an advanced level of playing and sight-reading that many string players in the city do not have. Entering into these kinds of jobs usually occurs when players are invited to perform in a tango house by another string player as a substitute. In order to be asked players must be excellent sight readers, be advanced players and have an understanding of tango styles and techniques.

Since there are many more string players than tango houses, this particular form of employment is very competitive. Even from one house to another there is much competition as certain houses offer higher quality musicianship and higher pay. For example, when playing in one of the most prestigious tango houses in the city and working six nights a week (about two hours a day) Lucas made roughly 8,000 pesos a month (roughly \$1,200 dollars). This rate is significantly higher than most other tourist shows or other forms of musical employment in the city. A music teacher in the public school systems working roughly the same amount of hours, if not more makes less than half that salary. Taking this into account, one sees how the competition

amongst string players could lead to a fragmented social community. When envisioning the Vardaro, one of Lucas' goals was to neutralize some of this competition by creating a participatory space of musical socialization for the string player community.

One of the goals of creating a horizontally run orchestra was to de-emphasize the egotistical and individualistic attitudes often characteristic of string players. Formal string instrument training in the competitive culture of classical music world tends to breed this kind of egotism and competition in order to succeed. Lucas is unique to the contemporary string scene because he first played rock music and then cumbia and later arrived at tango, never passing through a classical music education. He wanted to help create an environment that would foster cooperative and horizontal relationships between string players to take the focus off individualism and put it back into the collective and the festive. In an interview in the newspaper *Pagina 12*, he speaks to combatting values of individuality with values of the neighborhood and the collective. The interview was published in December 2011 to announce the orchestra's participation in the second Almagro neighborhood tango festival,

String players tend to have a huge ego, that's how their professors train them, but the beautiful thing about tango is the neighborhood...musicians need to learn to lower their ego and be half musician and half politician. They have to aspire to be a part of collective and horizontal efforts. Because of this, when we had the idea, the plan was to foment new compositions for this format creating the most "popular" atmosphere possible and recuperating a "popular" sound for strings, a sound that has been forgotten and washed away. I'm talking about Di Sarli, Pugliese, about Suarez Paz who was only 25 when he made history playing with Baffa and Berlingheri.¹²

¹² Vitale, Christian. 2011. "Que el tango sea una música viva." *Pagina 12*, 8 December. Translated by the author.

This clearly shows how Lucas' social commitment to community music-making is shaped by his experiences and understandings of tango as a neighborhood art form. These imaginaries not only inform the politics of how he envisions the group but also affect his desire to recuperate a "traditional" and "popular" sound for strings, a sound he sees threatened by the high percentage of classically trained string players in the tango world today. Thus, the Vardaro was envisioned as a social space for bringing tango string players together, and also as a space of cultural transmission and leaning to re-emphasize and recreate a popular aesthetic for string sounds in tango. This approach to relocating tango back into the neighborhoods and within ideologies of *lo popular* is a clear example of the revalorization of neighborhood and popular culture values characteristic of the late 1990s and post-crisis years in Argentina (discussed in Chapter 1).

2. The Musical: A Popular Orchestra to Showcase New Tango Composers

Similar to other neighborhood initiatives in Almagro, the orchestra sought to both revive tradition and create a space for innovation. Another goal of the Vardaro was to create a neighborhood-based orchestra that could be used to showcase new tango compositions. In Buenos Aires, finding an audience and a venue for the performance of new tango is not easy and less so for orchestral performances of new tango. Although one government sponsored tango string orchestra does exist—performing weekly in the downtown public theater Teatro Alvear—they perform almost exclusively traditional tango repertoires.¹³ Another government-sponsored city orchestra dedicated to Argentine composers, the *Orquesta Nacional de Música Argentina "Juan de Dios Filiberto"* occasionally features contemporary composers, although it is not exclusively dedicated to contemporary repertoire or to tango.¹⁴

¹³ For information on La Orquesta del Tango de Buenos Aires see: http://www.buenosaires.gob.ar/areas/cultura/dg_musica/orq_tango.php?menu_id=9463

¹⁴ For more information on the "Juan de Dios Filiberto" orchestra see: <http://www.cultura.gob.ar/elencos/orquesta-nacional-de-musica-argentina-juan-de-dios-filiberto/>

In response to a growing interest in arranging and composing for string orchestras in recent years (in part inspired by the Vardaro), the Vardaro orchestra was envisioned as a joint project between the *ConCiertos Atorrantes* cycle and another cycle from the neighborhood known as *TangoContempo*. *TangoContempo*, led by guitarist Esteban Falabella is another independent concert cycle, started around the same time as *ConCiertos Atorrantes*. Instead of the youthful and festive bohemian aesthetics of *ConCiertos Atorrantes*, *TangoContempo* features the musical projects of professional tango artists presented in more traditional art music concert settings. *TangoContempo* also has an independent label to support and bring visibility to independent tango artists.¹⁵ Because their performances usually cost between 50 and 100 pesos (\$10-20 at the exchange rate of a few years ago) they are less accessible to many young artists, hence creating a very different and more formal performance atmosphere. With the creation of the Vardaro, *TangoContempo* would invite featured artists to bring orchestral arrangements of their music to be played by the orchestra in joint performances. In general, the artists that perform with the orchestra make no money from the joint performances but also pay us nothing for working with them, placing the emphasis on fostering mutually beneficial artistic relationships. The accessible 30 peso entry fees that are charged at concerts go into a group fund that is used to sustain the orchestra.

The union of these two cycles brought together the traditionally festive, youthful and social atmosphere of the *ConCiertos Atorrantes* cycle with the high level of musicianship associated with the artists in the *TangoContempo* cycle. In an interview in *Página 12*, bandoneon player and composer Daniel Ruggiero who participates in both cycles commented on the importance of merging these two projects saying, “the idea [with the Vardaro] is to mix things together...lower the elitist pretensions of many musicians, but also raise the level of what we understand to be

¹⁵ For a list of recent CDs on the TangoContempo label see: <http://www.clubdeldisco.com/selecciones?fg=86>

popular...I compose for the orchestra and the stimulation it provides is powerful.”¹⁶ In general the *TangoContempo* cycle attracts a slightly older generation of professional musicians, some who refused to play in Sanata because of a lack of cover charge and noise. Under these new circumstances the orchestra has succeeded in further closing a generational gap between different eras of tango performers and bringing together artists from many levels of expertise and training.

While many of the musicians that regularly performed in the *TangoContempo* and *ConCiertos Atorrantes* cycles are interested in writing for string orchestra, the cost of hiring an orchestra for performing and recording far exceeds most artists' budgets. As soon as the orchestra was created, pianist Juan Pablo Gallardo (active in multiple *ConCiertos Atorrantes* bands and projects) began formally studying conducting in order to be able to lead the orchestra. The creation of the orchestra thus acted as a motor for young artists to pursue interests in arranging, composing and conducting tango for a string orchestra format. In 2012 and 2013 we recorded on multiple albums including that of Amores Tangos and Juan Pablo Gallardo's previous group, the Trio BGG, both groups associated with the *ConCiertos Atorrantes* coalition. These collaborations emphasize how the orchestra provided desired services for the musical community beyond being attractive as a social initiative, reemphasizing how the project sits at the crossroads of the musical, the activist and the professional.

3. The Geographic: Another Almagro Project to Further Localize Tango into Neighborhood Cartographies and Imaginaries

The Vardaro was envisioned as yet another initiative to further unite and expand Almagro's neighborhood music projects, connecting the contemporary scene to the rich tango roots

¹⁶ Vitale, Christian. 2011. "Que el tango sea una música viva." *Página 12*, 8 December. Translated by the author.

of Almagro. For its first year, since *Café Vinilo* (where *TangoContempo* regularly performs) and *Sanata* (where *ConCiertos Atorrantes* performs) were not large enough to comfortably house an orchestra, the *Vardaro* performed in the historic *Casa del Tango* in Almagro. This venue was founded in 1967 by renowned tango militant, composer, pianist and orchestra leader, Osvaldo Pugliese. When it began playing in the *Casa del Tango*, the house was already being used by other musical projects in the area, namely the *Orquesta Escuela*, the city's most renowned tango training orchestra started in 2001 by the members of *El Arranque*, (one of the leading classical tango ensembles on the contemporary scene).¹⁷ The goals of the *Vardaro*, different than those of the *Orquesta Escuela*, were less about technical training and more about utilizing the collective musicianship of the Almagro tango community to join together to collaborate to put on different musical and social events. Furthermore, the *Vardaro*'s emphasis on showcasing new artists instead of classic tango set it apart from other orchestral projects in the city. In the words of Marcela Vigide, a regular violinist throughout the first two years of the orchestra, "Tango is living a festive moment right now, and what is interesting about Lucas' idea to create the orchestra was to take a musician [Elvino Vardaro] that represents the most genuine elements of tango, and transport him to the modern era so that we, young people, can embrace another referent." The fact that this referent also happened to be from the neighborhood of Almagro added another layer of localized meaning onto the project, further embracing tango as a geographically located urban music genre and tangling the history of tango in Almagro's past with its present.

Although the space had historic significance, the formal auditorium with white lighting lacked the warm, festive and popular feel that members of the *Vardaro* were trying to associate with the social and musical aesthetics of the orchestra. After several very crowded perfor-

¹⁷ Unlike the *Elvino Vardaro*, the *Orquesta Escuela* program is run in a much more traditional and formal manner. Individuals must audition in, the training lasts two years, and practices are structured around technical training of the history of tango styles while working with selected *maestros* who come to conduct the orchestra. (For more on the *Orquesta Escuela* see Luker 2009.)

mances in the warmer atmosphere of Cafe Vinilo where *TangoContempo* hosts its cycle, the orchestra moved in 2012 to play in the newly opened Almagro Tango Club, the self-run venue created by members of *ConCiertos Atorrantes*. The orchestra was, in fact, one of the motivating factors in opening the Almagro Tango Club, solving the problem of finding an aesthetically pleasing and accessible venue to house their performances. A large mural of Elvino Vardaro still remains on one of the club walls. In early 2013 disagreements between musicians led to a change of neighborhood and now the orchestra is performing in Villa Crespo (just 10 blocks north of the Almagro Tango Club in the adjacent neighborhood to Almagro) in a cultural center called Oliverio Gironde. Despite frequent changes, all these venues are within short walking distance of one another and other central venues in the Almagro neighborhood. This kind of flexibility is very normal for anyone in the tango scenes in Argentina where closures are common and frequent club turnover is not uncommon.

Who Plays in a Horizontal Tango String Orchestra?

What motivates musicians to be in a project like the Vardaro, since, unlike the *Orquesta Escuela*, the emphasis is not on technical training, and unlike other groups, it is not intended as financially lucrative project? How does a horizontal orchestra fit into musicians' professional lives and other side projects? Who participates and what do they gain from the experience?

The orchestra is made up of roughly 12 to 20 musicians including violinists, violists and cellists. Most members are between 25 and 35 years old. Normal neighborhood performances generally use 12-15 players, but for festivals and larger events other professional colleagues are occasionally invited to come assist in strengthening each section. Although the orchestra is run horizontally, Lucas Furno is the creator and leader of the project and often takes on much of the responsibility of organizing and managing the group. Juan Pablo Gallardo—pianist, arranger, composer and conductor— also plays a key role in the orchestra as both an arranger

and conductor. Both Lucas and Gallardo are founding members of the *ConCiertos Atorrantes* cycle. Initially, the concerts were backed by the *TangoContempo* cycle who provided the featured guest artists. Although they continue to collaborate occasionally, now most artists approach the orchestra directly or members of the orchestra suggest artists for collaboration. Decisions about who to perform with are decided primarily by Lucas and the core members of the orchestra, those more interested in being involved in the project beyond just performing.

Although the members of the orchestra change slightly from one show to the next, a group of core members has remained stable since 2012. This group, of which I am a part, is involved with performing but also tending to other organizational and administrative elements of running the orchestra. It includes the following artists, all of whom are active members of the city's music scene. Ernesto Tito Gomez is a conservatory-trained violinist from Buenos Aires. He performs with the internationally renowned group *Color Tango*, known for carrying on the musical and political visions of Osvaldo Pugliese (<http://www.colortango.com.ar/eng/>), He works performing in the tourist show at the tango house *Madero Tango* (<http://www.maderotango.com/en/>), is employed by the city government leading youth orchestras around Buenos Aires (http://www.buenosaires.gob.ar/areas/educacion/dgie/orquestas.php?menu_id=31749) and teaches private violin classes. Carolina Rodriguez is a conservatory trained violinist from the adjacent city of Mar del Plata, just north of Buenos Aires. She performs with the all female contemporary tango group *China Cruel* (<http://chinacrueltango.wix.com/chinacruel>), works at the tourist show at the tango house *Complejo Tango* (<http://www.complejotango.com.ar/en/>), works leading youth orchestras in the provinces of Buenos Aires through a program funded through the national ministry of culture (<http://servicios2.abc.gov.ar/comunidadycultura/programapcialorquesta/>), and also gives private violin classes. Karmen Rencar is a conservatory trained cellist from Serbia who arrived in 2011 to Buenos Aires to pursue a career as a tango cellist. She currently performs with many groups in the city including the edgy tango orchestra *Rascasuelos* featuring

former rock singer Hector “Limon” Garcia (<http://www.rascasuelos.com.ar/>). Adriana Godachevich is violinist who teaches, coaching multiple youth orchestras around Buenos Aires while she continues her training as a classical violinist. As for myself, beyond the orchestra and my research I also perform in the tango dance band *Quinteto Clandestino* (<http://tangoclandestino.wix.com/quintetoclandestino>) that plays regularly at *milongas* (dance events) in the independent tango dance scene around the city.

For all of us the orchestra is a place of belonging, a place of socialization, a place for musical stimulation and an important way that each of us contribute to tango activism in the city. Beyond this the orchestra is also a good place for learning alongside skilled musicians and also for networking, as string players often pass jobs between each other in these kinds of settings. In an interview with Carolina Rodriguez, I asked her how and why she entered the orchestra.

I entered by recommendation through friends that I have in common with Lucas when I came to live in the city [from the neighboring city of Mar del Plata]. I wanted to enter the orchestra because it seemed like an interesting project to play popular music with a string orchestra, and besides it seemed that the level of musicianship of the orchestra was very high as well as the level of the musical projects with which they collaborated.¹⁸

I then asked her what she values about the Vardaro and how she compares her experiences with the orchestra to the other musical projects in her life.

At this point what I value most about being a part of the Vardaro is having met people that are now my friends and sharing with them the experience of a musical project that is not about making money but instead is about purely enjoying the act of playing music. Musically I also enjoy almost everything we play and the people with whom we collaborate. It gave me the opportunity to play with great musicians that I admire, such

¹⁸ Carolina Rodriguez, interview by the author, March 15, 2014, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

as Guillermo Fernández, Leonardo Ferreyra, Viceversa, Victor Lavallen and many more.¹⁹

Carolina's views align very closely to my own and are shared across the board in the participants of the orchestra, especially those of us who are most dedicated to the project. What is important to emphasize in her responses is the social value she places on the orchestra. I think many of us entered into the project as an opportunity for learning and networking in the tango scene but ultimately stayed because of the social relationships that evolved out of the experiences of playing and organizing with the group. When I asked her specifically about the social function of the orchestra in her life she responded,

For me, every rehearsal is an about seeing my friends, chatting, and seeing people I love. And then after rehearsals we almost always go to have a coffee, or stay drinking mate. In one way or another a period of extended socializing is always a part of our rehearsals.

For me, in many ways my social experiences with the Vardaro in our weekly rehearsals have come to replace the late nights I used to spend at Roberto's bar. Since many of us play in small ensembles and perform frequently, it is less common to end up all together at a bar late at night on a weekly basis. Also many of us have day jobs and daytime responsibilities that keep us out of the depths of late-night bohemia at this moment in our lives. Thus, the daytime rehearsals of the Vardaro become an important space of social encounter that involve music making, chatting, cultural transmission, learning, teaching, and networking. The Vardaro is then a social space in the city, flexible and transportable because it is not fixed to a specific location or neighborhood, but built around the same neighborhood values as the social experiences of Roberto's Bar, Sanata, and other neighborhood social tango venues. When I asked her about

her relationship to the Almagro neighborhood, Carolina spoke of the flexible geographic identity of the orchestra:

The truth is I don't feel a strong sense of identification with the neighborhood, but I do with places (Oliverio now, the Almagro Tango Club in its time, Sanata), maybe because I never lived, not now or before, in the neighborhoods where these projects exist. The idea of the neighborhood means something for me, but more when it implies contact with people, sharing everyday life, the places you buy your food, the plazas, the bars, schools, hospitals, knowing and sharing with others I suppose. I never lived in those neighborhoods, nor did I ever make music in the neighborhood where I live or am from, so for me, I live in one place and then if I go to Villa Crespo I go to the places I like, those places are *my* places.

Once again it becomes clear that while neighborhood imaginaries and practices are shaping understandings and meaningful practices of tango today, ideas of the neighborhood are understood as flexible and conceptual more than fixed to a certain geographic area. For Carolina, the networks of tango bars in Almagro and Villa Crespo represent her informal social network, much like a neighborhood would create networks in the more traditional sense through its bars, plazas and corner stores. This example once again locates neighborhood-ness as a powerful feeling and metaphor for social intimacy and participation in the city. However, as many people today tend to work, live and socialize in different parts of the city, feelings of neighborhood-ness become imbued into the sensory experiences of certain social environments and less attached to fixed geographical locations.

From the Neighborhood to the Teatro Colón and Back Again: Experiencing the Collective and Negotiating the Popular in and out of the Buenos Aires Opera House

2012 was a big year for the Elvino Vardaro Orchestra. It performed a concert each month and participated twice in the official city festival and also in the neighborhood festival of Almagro. As part of the official festival the orchestra was asked to perform in the Teatro Colón, the Buenos Aires opera house, as the backing orchestra to the *TangoContempo* cycle in a presentation of new tango music. As the Colón has always been considered a classical music institution, very few tango artists have ever been given the chance to perform there, making this opportunity a great honor. The Vardaro recorded on three albums, including the albums for two groups in the *ConCiertos Atorrantes* collective, The Trio BGG and the group Amores Tangos. Many members of the orchestra also participated voluntarily in the set up of the Almagro Tango Club, discussed in the following chapter. Each of these projects served to strengthen the orchestra as a community and challenge the participants to practice the underlying values of this musical and social orchestral project.

As musicians, we all experience musical moments that stay with us forever. When those moments are experienced collectively, they become part of the social fabric of our relationships and they serve to ground communities and friendships in shared memories of music making. The day our neighborhood-based tango string orchestra, under the umbrella of the city's annual tango festival, played in the the opera house of Buenos Aires was one of those moments. The tensions surrounding that performance allow a framing of a discussion about the kinds of values being promoted through this neighborhood-based music making project, and the way empowering activism occurs both on and off stage.

When we arrived the afternoon of the concert for our only dress rehearsal in the opera house, our collective excitement quickly turned to collective anxiety. A few days before a friend had said, "Be careful, when you get out onstage, you will feel like you are playing alone." As a

member of our horizontal and self-managed neighborhood string orchestra, individuality was not an emphasized part of the musical experience of this community. We had been rehearsing for the last month twice a week in a small room in Almagro, a space that was to become the collectively run Almagro Tango Club just weeks following our concert. Not only was it small but the acoustics and social atmosphere were warm and intimate and familiar to all of us. These were the kinds of intimate neighborhood settings in which we were accustomed to perform each month in Almagro. Just the month before playing at the opera house we had played a show in the small Café Vinilo in a performance we called tango 360. In collaboration with the group *Amores Tangos* the orchestra stood in a circle around the audience dressed in wigs and pirate hats and performed a festive repertoire with a band that called themselves a tango carnival orchestra. Whereas that concert celebrated the intimate community nature of our orchestra, being in the Colón seemed to be a test of our strength in a much more unfamiliar context. However, as I learned that day, sometimes in the strangest of contexts, we learn the most about ourselves and our values.



Figure 5.4. The Vardaro with Amores Tangos in Cafe Vinilo. (Photo courtesy of Carlos Zito, 2012.)



Figure 5.5. Two Members of Amores Tangos Playing Accordion and Melodica as Part of the Performance in Cafe Vinílo. (Photo courtesy of Carlos Zito, 2012.)

Since our role in this show was to be the backing orchestra to a selection of contemporary tango artists under the independent tango cycle *TangoContempo*, we had been rehearsing with different artists each week to pull together a huge repertoire of complex music in a very short amount of time. Although the artists we were working with were among the best and most renowned tango players in the city, the context of rehearsing in the club had created a sense of informality that had lessened the anxiety of this daunting endeavor. As we walked onstage for the dress rehearsal the day of the concert, all of the intimacy and informality that defined the experience of our orchestra immediately faded away.

I sat in the back of the second violin section on the far left of the stage, next to Marcela Vigide, a young woman my age who was one of the original members of the orchestra. In front of us sat Christine Brebes, a woman who had been my first tango contact in Argentina in 2005

and who is now the violinist of the country's largest rock star, Charly Garcia. Next to her sat Ernesto Tito Gómez, another active and accomplished player in many tango formations, and the list goes on. Instead of the casual attire we wear in many shows, that day we were all in concert black, complete with sparkling rhinestone jewelry appropriate for an opera house performance. In front, at the head of the first violins, sat Lucas Furno, director of the orchestra, and standing looking at us all was the worried face of Juan Pablo Gallardo, the pianist of the Trio BGG (Boero Gallardo Gómez) and also our orchestra's conductor. As we began to run through the songs, many of them full of difficult, chromatic string passages (typical of tango), and complex and atypical rhythmic syncopations (typical of many modern tango compositions that draw from folklore and other genres), things started to go to pieces. My friend was right, I had never felt so alone playing with so many people at the same time, and I was not the only one to feel that way. It felt like the sound of my violin echoed through the theater and I struggled to hear the soloists or even the other violinists in my section. Tension was thick and time was running short.

After a few rocky songs Lucas stood up, in a manner familiar to all of us, and launched into one of his famous inspirational pep talks. I cannot remember the exact words but it was something along the lines of, "I know this space is overwhelming, I know it's hard to hear but we are not listening to each other. To play together, we have to listen together. We are an orchestra, a single unit, so stop playing your individual parts and let's start playing music. Now grab your chairs and make a ball. I don't care how it looks. We are a group so let's huddle together, blend our instruments and make this happen and enjoy it. Together we can do this." And we did. We picked up our chairs and shrunk the orchestra into a concentrated ball in the middle of the stage and tried again. Perhaps it was the chairs, perhaps it was the pep talk, but all of a sudden things felt different. Playing with this orchestra taught me that the strength that comes with the feelings of collectivity can be incredibly strong and transformative, and that those feelings often come as a result of direction and leadership. In the Orquesta Elvino Vardaro, as with so many other

projects in Almagro, Lucas always had a way of refocusing and bringing that collectivity out of us when it was most needed.

A few hours later we stepped onto the stage again, this time for the performance. Pushing back the heavy velvet curtains, we walked out into the bright yellow heated lights of the stage to the sound of an entire opera house applauding. I took a deep breath and looked out at the rows and rows of people, the ornate decorations on the walls and the paintings on the ceiling. It was like nothing I had ever felt before. Enjoy this, I thought to myself. So many artists dream to be on this stage, a stage that has historically shunned tango for being popular and not classical music, and here we are, our neighborhood orchestra, started by friends, run entirely independently through voluntary efforts, bonded by a love of tango and music and sustained by the collective efforts of the group members.

For the next three hours we played music together, listening to each other, winking and smiling at each other after every piece, hearts racing and fingers flying, and listening to soloists of incredible caliber playing into a room that was actually designed with acoustics in mind. The experience was unforgettable. After the show we caravanned back to Almagro to the club to drink and dance and celebrate late into the night. Even though our orchestra was dedicated to playing in small spaces and making orchestral tango performance in accessible community settings, there was no doubt that playing in such a historic venue connected us to a much larger history of music making in Argentina. Furthermore, since the list of tango performances ever to occur in the Colón was so limited, (among them Astor Piazzolla in 1972 and 1983, Sexteto Tango in 1972, Osvaldo Pugliese in 1985, and a tribute to Horacio Salgán that occurred earlier in 2012) this opportunity was nothing short of a tremendous honor.



Figure 5.6 and 5.7. The Vardaro performing in the Teatro Colón During the 2012 Annual Tango Festival and the Vardaro and Members of *TangoContempo* Standing for Applause. (Photos courtesy of *TangoContempo*, 2012.)

The day after the show, as we were all enjoying the glow of our collective accomplishment and recovering from our night of festivities, another moment of terror hit. This time, instead of the sound of my solitary violin in one of the most beautiful opera houses in the world, it was the critics. Specifically, it was Pablo Kohan, a musicologist and music critic for the mainstream conservative newspaper *La Nación* and also the director of a classical music radio program on *Radio Nacional*. The article he wrote about us was titled “Tendencies of Contemporary Tango and Discursive Monotony,” or in Spanish, “*Tendencias del tango actual y monotonía discursiva*.”²⁰ It was not a rave review. Kohan accused the soloists of looking too closely at their music and not playing loudly enough. He accused Pablo Agri, son of Astor Piazzolla’s violinist Antonio Agri, of copying his father’s style and said that even though the night was dedicated to contemporary tango, he would have liked to have seen classical tangos interpreted by contemporary players instead of a repertoire of strange, new tangos nobody knew. He finished saying that it would have been nice if we had played “Garúa,” a tango written in 1943 with music by Aníbal Troilo and lyrics by Enrique Cadícamo.

Somewhat shocked, I finished reading the article and felt disappointed. What a sad way to sum up an event that was a product of such an incredible collective effort. It was a feeling many of us shared that day as we called one another, passed the article link back and forth on Facebook and read it over and over again trying to pull constructive criticism out of a review that seemed more like an insulting jab in the side than a constructive critique.

The next morning, on August 23d 2012, Lucas once again stood up to make a statement of response and much like the time when we were afraid in the Colón, pulled us back to our center. His response, posted as a note on Facebook, was so articulate and so indicative of the

²⁰ Kohan, Pablo. 2012. “Tendencias del tango actual y monotonía discursiva.” *La Nación*, 22 August.

kind of leadership and language that he used to run the orchestra, I have translated it in full below.

The Difference Between Throwing Shit and Constructing Something

August 23, 2012 at 1:39pm

What a job, that of the critic! Giving opinions about the work of others, sharing thoughts with the masses and coming up with ideas that are paid for by legal employment. What a luxury. Over time, the power of the critic becomes networked and positioned and he becomes a referent for people who need someone to think for them. And then that small man, fattened by his own ego, ends up vomiting words that gratify him, feeding his noble followers who feel represented in his spittle of sour milk, so common in those limited "elitist" minds of the European tradition.

In Tango we've lost our critics. We almost lost our musicians, lyricists, and singers, but little by little they've begun to reappear. We have a few masters left to teach us, and a new generation with a hunger to learn, but there are no more critics in tango. Maybe, for this reason, when a so-called major newspaper writes a piece about tango, something that only rarely happens...the ignorance begins. From the critics, tango coverage takes either the form of an article applauding and celebrating a tango "cover" of the rock group the Redondos as if it were a major and innovative musical success, or an article by a critic infuriated at the invasion of a dirty popular genre in the immaculate Teatro Colón. We should remember that these critics don't show their faces in the tango scenes, not even by

chance. So I ask myself, why don't we have specialists about our genre in the mainstream information networks? We have these "tango" critics, that know nothing of our genre and come out to give their opinions about things that they hardly listen to and have no context to understand. It wasn't long ago that an article came out about the recent resurgence of tango and of new lyricists, where the sound lack of information the author had on the subject was painfully clear (a great poet of ours wrote a response explaining that his discovery had come a little after the fact).

Speaking of musicians in general, the sensation that we have is that of being orphans that raised ourselves. We started more than 10 years ago, it was a very different time, trying to learn this difficult genre for which there were hardly any books and very little access to sheet music and information in general. Each one of us found our own place: In the EMPA (The Avellaneda Popular Music School), in different typical orchestras with older musicians that could transmit knowledge to us, in places like Roberto's bar, the Tango Machine, or working with one another.

But the scene grew, and grew, and grew, and today luckily things have changed. The orphan children came to understand that organization and hard work together are fundamental to create an alternative, and the wheels began to turn. Schools were made and places to play like the CAFF (The Fernández Fierro Athletic Club), the Goñi, and now the Almagro Tango Club and the Escuela de Tango Osvaldo Ruggiero. Organizations of musicians were made like the UOT (Union of Typical Orchestras), TangoContempo, ConCiertos Atorrantes. Meeting and so-

cializing places were created like Roberto's Bar, Sanata Bar, El Faro, Malevaje, each one with distinct ways of understanding tango, and with distinct personalities. Hundreds of CDs are being recorded, all self-produced, concert cycles are created in bars where no one was playing tango. Festivals are being created, first with the Independent Tango Festival and then one in Almagro, in La Boca, in Valentín Alsina, pushing to create visibility, to connect tango with different neighborhoods. A few years ago radio programs started like Fractura Expuesta (Exposed Fracture), or more recently Volver Ni a Palos (We'll Never Go Back), independent magazines like Tinta Roja, and friends that stay out late listening to all the tango concerts that they can in an evening.

Now, returning to the topic at hand, all of this was done without "critics" and definitely without the support of mainstream media. A well-argued negative opinion is always understandable, at times even enriching, offering a different vision about what someone is doing. But to throw down a classist bag of sour milk, that seems enraged at the intrusion in a space like the Teatro Colón (his mention that we are sitting in front of a designer curtain acts as an example of this), is just rude. A critic that defines as "inaudible" a violin solo (recorded on so many cameras and with an ovation in the middle) or accusing another violinist of doing what his father did, "playing virtuosically accompanied by strings" as if it were something derogatory, or criticizing a famous bandoneon player for staying glued to his sheet music (an old man who had the greatness to play a piece composed by someone from the new generation of musicians). In our rehearsals, all of the string players in the Vardaro were fascinated and overjoyed to play with these masters. They are referents and bridges that we need between the past and the

present. It is remarkable how someone would attack these tango giants, that came to support us and to play by our side, which in and of itself is something of so much value, in a moment of generational transmission, in a moment of learning and meeting one another. What is impressive is the reaction, in the face of an “invasion of some guys playing strange and monotonous tango” that we received from a popular audience (even worse, the Colón “packed” with an entire audience of people who didn’t pay an entrance fee). And for the most comical and contradictory finale, in response to the clearly established proposal of TangoContempo for playing new music, appears the counter-proposal to play Garua as if it were a banner for the conservatives (just like the old ladies in classical music that keep asking to hear Verdi). If we had done arrangements of classical tangos the critique would have said we lacked new compositions, if not something worse, because sometimes throwing shit becomes something of a sport.

Tango is not going to stop growing. The critics can have their great theater, we have our clubs in the neighborhoods, we have our groups, our schools, our ideas, our media, our human resources and the energy to continue. Things that didn’t exist before. So keep watching from far away, ignoring, classifying, fattening your egos and throwing shit for the sake of throwing it. We are choosing to build and construct instead. Long live tango!

(Posted as a Facebook Note on August 23, 2012)

Just like his pep talk before our concert, once again his leadership skills succeeded in lifting our spirits, bringing us together, and shifting things back into focus. Within a few days Lucas’ note had 153 likes, 65 shares, and hundreds of comments in support of what he had written. I asked

him why he posted it to Facebook and not on *La Nación's* comment box under Kohan's article and he said he did not write it for Kohan. He said he honestly cared very little about what Kohan wrote and it had not surprised him at all coming from someone with such an elitist classical music background. He wrote it for us, for the orchestra, for our fans, and for everyone who read it and felt disappointed, to remind them of what was important about what we were doing and to put things into perspective. He reminded us that our project was not just a musical one but a social and political one as well. He reminded us that while we were being criticized by an art music critic, we were practitioners of *música popular*, and that *música popular* is, as Luker defined it, "a form that is at once and irreducibly both musical and social." Through this note, circulated through our community's social networks, Lucas successfully recontextualized and relocated our project geographically, socially and politically.

When I talked to other friends and acquaintances about the concert everyone agreed that the show had been a success. The only criticisms were that the repertoire lacked a bit of "tango." What this meant to my peers was that the focus on contemporary composers from the avant-garde tradition had left people missing some of the grit, liveliness, and techniques of more popular tango performances. Unlike Kohan, they were not looking to hear classical tangos, but were a bit disappointed that the repertoire chosen for the concert prioritized pieces that sounded more avant-garde and classical and lacked the sounds and techniques of more popular new tango styles. Because our orchestra frequently performed contemporary tango repertoires that were written in a more popular style, people were a bit surprised to find such a classical and avant-garde presentation at the Colón. For myself and others, this criticism was much more constructive than Kohan's comments. In fact, it is an opinion that many of us in the orchestra shared and had discussed frequently while preparing the concert repertoire. When I discussed this critique with Lucas he agreed saying he felt the same way and that it was for that reason that he identified more with *ConCiertos Atorrantes* (a group that embraces popular as a social

and musical aesthetic) than with *TangoContempo* (an initiative that falls more in line with Piazzolla's avant-garde musical understandings of the popular).

It is essential to point out here that while the Vardaro orchestra is more a child of the *ConCiertos Atorrantes* cycle, a cycle that traditionally hosted festive and youthful concerts in Sanata Bar, the cycle associated with the presentation in the Teatro Colón was *TangoContempo*. Esteban Falabella, the director of *TangoContempo*, knew the organizer of the festival, Gustavo Mozzi, and thanks to this connection had been able to negotiate with him to make this event possible. Since *TangoContempo* is associated with avant-garde contemporary tango composers of a higher brow, it was less of a stretch to bring their name to the opera house than, say, the carnival orquesta Amores Tangos, or, Almagro's 84-year-old renowned neighborhood singer, Osvaldo Peredo.

In many ways, in order for us to play in the Colón, we had to mask certain elements of who we were and what we represented as an orchestra. Similar to going to an opera with your grandmother in that fancy outfit you might not normally wear and hiding your new tattoo, when we went to the Colón we had to act according to certain accepted rules. Because Esteban Falabella of *TangoContempo* was in charge of the event instead of Lucas Furno of *ConCiertos Atorrantes*, the tone of the performance was kept much more neutral and less political. Lucas is more of an activist by nature, Falabella is more of a diplomat. I can only imagine what Lucas would have said had he been given the microphone before the show instead of Falabella. Instead, Falabella formally introduced the orchestra and the groups saying that they represented a panorama of the contemporary tango scene in the city. I wonder too if Lucas had done the introductions if perhaps Kohan would have had a clearer idea of the symbolic collaborative efforts that went into making that performance possible and would have been able to critique the performance from a different place.

Analysis

An analysis of the experience playing in the Teatro Colón with *TangoContempo* is significant for a number of reasons. It represents a moment when the orchestra came in direct contact with a world external to the neighborhood and independent scenes, and in particular in a context associated with the classical music world. For many, it was a reminder of the unfortunate disconnect between neighborhood initiatives and the often rigid mainstream ideas and preconceptions of tango culture. The experience also served to illustrate some key debates occurring in the neighborhood scenes over the last few years. In particular it exposed the tensions that exist between defining tango as popular music or art music and the efforts of certain artists to rethink the traditional sonic, aesthetic and social boundaries within those categories. As a somewhat shaky encounter between the popular tango underground, the city and the world of art music, participation in the festival in the Colón was an important milestone, but far from a totally harmonious experience. Interestingly, the event was the only musical event to occur in the Teatro Colón that year as part of the tango festival that year, or in years to come.²¹

The experience of the Vardaro Orchestra playing in the National Theater represented a new stage in the continued development of local tango scenes. The letter that Lucas wrote in response to Kohan's critique was a form of political protest in support of the social activism that occurs in the everyday horizontal practices of the orchestra as musicians work collaboratively and with little to no pay to find places to rehearse and perform, month after month, to bring visibility to new tango compositions in a city that constantly limits live music performance spaces. The actual performance in the Colón was about music making, about recognition, perhaps

²¹ Since our 2012 performance, the city has opened a new performance space in the Boca neighborhood called *La Usina del Arte* which features a mix of popular and classical music concerts (once again leaving the Colón for primarily classical music performances).

about proving ourselves, challenging norms, and about demonstrating to a general public the kinds of music and the kinds of musical relationships being fostered in independent tango cycles like TangoContempo and *ConCiertos Atorrantes*. It really may have been more about infiltrating into the belly of the beast than leading the revolution, although our performance definitely challenged both ideas of tango and ideas of what music “belongs” in the Colón. For the Vardaro, the concert in the Colón was not about proving itself through one large performance but about exposing the musical accomplishments of this locally organized horizontal orchestra to the greater community of Buenos Aires.

Ultimately the tensions surrounding the performance in the Colón offer interesting insights into the production of value within contemporary independent and mainstream tango culture. In the neighborhood scenes where I do my research, value in tango music performance has come to take on new meaning, a meaning that is flexible and adaptable to multiple situations. These understandings of value distance themselves from competitive and hierarchical classical music ideologies where value is associated solely in relation to technical merit and notoriety. Within neighborhood tango scenes and promoted through the culture of this orchestra value becomes a blend of aesthetic, social, and political practices based in contemporary notions of *música popular*.

The events surrounding this performance at the Teatro Colón demonstrate some of the tensions that exist in contemporary tango scene today as artists struggle to blend ideas of the popular from the avant-garde musical legacy of Piazzola with sounds and feelings associated with old popular tango songs. Finding ways to negotiate and communicate both of these understandings of *lo popular* within the political and social imaginaries of the present Argentine sociopolitical moment is a difficult task.

Horizontality and Autogestión: From Theory to Practice by Way of Conclusion

In 2012 I joined the Vardaro to perform a concert with Quinteto Viceversa, one of the founding groups of the *ConCiertos Atorrantes* cycle. The concert featured compositions by the quintet and also a repertoire of Astor Piazzolla's music. As their bandoneonist is currently considered one of the best interpreters of Piazzolla's style alive today the concert was a great success. As someone who had recently arrived on the scene, to be able to play with musicians of such caliber was an honor. Furthermore, to be able to do so with no formal audition and in such an informal setting in Almagro made the experience even more meaningful. The day of the concert we filled the small performance space of the casa del tango, charging an accessible fee of 30 pesos a ticket for the show (roughly 5 dollars). The audience was multi-generational and made up of a our friends and family, local musicians and tango fans who followed the orchestra and the quintet, and regular attendees of the events at the Casa del Tango. From 2011 until the present, the orchestra continues to charge only 30 pesos for performances, under half the price of most formal tango concerts.

I have been in the Vardaro for two years, now entering into my third. Over this period I have been able to watch as the values of the orchestra continue to be defined and embodied through our different concerts and activities. Although I was told the orchestra was horizontal and *autogestionado* from the beginning, as the years have passed I have watched these philosophies develop and become more ingrained into the everyday politics of the orchestra. If members were too competitive, they were often not asked back. If they seemed interested in networking but not in the social project of the orchestra, they were not invited back. If they were not responsible in attending rehearsals and performances, they were not invited back. Essentially, if individuals demonstrated too much individualism and a lack of interest for thinking and

acting as a collective, they were either not invited back, or left on their own, not finding what they were looking for in the project. Over time as members have come and gone, an increasingly strong and seasoned group of core members sustains the project.

Through the Vardaro individuals learn to understand and practice orchestral tango as a form of activism, a form of socialization, a form of cultural transmission and training, and as a form of “popular” music. As a participant in this orchestra I was able to experience firsthand how the founding political and symbolic ideologies of the orchestra play out in everyday experiences of music-making, experiences which in turn produce musicians with a more deeply engaged social and political consciousness. As the same individuals grow and create new projects and initiatives as artists and activists, their identities build off and speak to their social, political, professional, and artistic lives. As with many projects in contemporary neighborhood tango culture, these projects were not envisioned to replace employment in export industries, which continue to be a necessity for many musicians. Instead, they provide alternatives to those forms of employment by creating musical projects driven by the values and aesthetics of tango as a local *música popular*, not a music for-export.

Although this chapter has focused on horizontality and collective activism, it would be false to imply that everyone has put equal effort into running and managing the orchestra over the years. In many ways, Lucas spent 2011 and 2012 instilling philosophies of horizontality and *autogestión* into the members of the orchestra while doing a large percentage of the organizational and management work himself. It was not until 2013 when, overwhelmed with other projects, he decided to leave the orchestra. Without a designated leader the values of cooperative management went through their first real test. Over the course of the year it was empowering to collaborate with my peers to carry forward a project without the constant presence of our previous director. We proved that we were capable of sustaining the orchestra as a horizontal and self-managed collective. Whereas the previous year I had found myself wondering how

much horizontality there really was in a group that was so clearly directed by one individual's vision, last year I was able to see how these values had become foundational to the group as a whole. In having to carry the project forward without a leader, the values and founding philosophies of the project were strengthened for those who remained in the orchestra.

The Elvino Vardaro Tango String Orchestra offers a rich example of what Marina Sitrin calls the everyday “r”evolutions characteristic of Argentine activism in recent years. Quoting Halloway and Palaez’s, Sitrin reminds us that the concept of revolution with a small “r”, “refers to present existence, not to future instrumentality” (Halloway and Palaez 1998:167 in Sitrin 2012:6). Through this lens, a horizontal string orchestra becomes more than a place to play music. It informs a way of life, a way of living, and a way of making music that is shaping new ways of thinking about music-making, tango, and popular music and neighborhood culture in Buenos Aires today.

As with all of the projects discussed in this dissertation, my discussion of the Vardaro must be seen as just one of the many artistic activities musicians engage with in their daily personal and professional lives. These activities are not intended to replace musicians’ other daily jobs within or outside the realms of music. Instead, these kinds of projects based in post-neoliberal values merit attention because they help create alternative musical spaces in the city that come to hold symbolic significance for many tango musicians today. While they may not yet have changed the city’s mainstream understandings of popular music, on a local level they are contributing to shaping a generation of artists who are socially engaged, politically informed, and committed to practicing popular music as a localized and community-based musical and social form of artistic expression.

Chapter 6

Tango in Almagro's Garden of Forking Paths: From Post-Neoliberal Imaginaries of resistance to the Everyday Realities of Transformation in a Neighborhood Music Scene



Figure 6.1 and 6.2 Sanata Bar overflowing during an Amores Tangos show, and the more formal setting of the Almagro Tango Club set up for an evening show (2012).

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*I always sum up [Sanata Bar] with the phrase “all roads lead to Sanata” because at one point that’s what started to happen. After work on a Saturday during the ConCiertos Atorrantes concerts the whole colony shows up. Maybe some of the young guys play one night with Dino Saluzzi<sup>1</sup> somewhere else and they end up bringing him to the bar. Maybe he didn’t even know where he was going but, you see, he ends up here because he heard, or someone told him, or someone brings him here, that’s just what happens. At some point it will end and things will move to another place, but that at one point “all roads lead to Sanata” was real. - Martin Otaño<sup>2</sup>*

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¹ Dino Saluzzi is an old revered bandoneon player who would not normally frequent the alternative tango circuits.

² Taken from 2011 Interview with Martin Otaño, the artistic director of Sanata Bar. Translation by the author.

Introduction

Live music scenes in cities are living sites of constant social, artistic, economic, political, ideological, and geographic tension which, if carefully examined, tell many stories of how and why people bother making music at all. Their histories are not linear, but instead are written through the intertwining and overlapping everyday practices of people as they weave through the messy politics of urban landscapes looking for gigs, attending and organizing events, dealing with venue permits, working, studying, rehearsing, recording, promoting concerts, and searching for meaning in the social experience of live music.

Within any given scene there are many histories to be narrated. There are histories of bars, histories of individuals, histories of bands, histories of festivals, of neighborhoods, of urban policies, of political movements, of tourism, and of economic changes and transnational flows. Depending on whom you ask and even what day you ask them, playing tango can be many things to many people. It can be a form of politics, a search for mastering a tradition or a musical instrument or about creating new sounds. To some it is a form of social life, to others a source of income. To most of the people I met throughout my research, it is some combination of all of these things. Nonetheless, sharing these common goals does not mean sharing a unified vision of music-making. In fact, just as external forces like official government politics and economics can lead to changes in music-making practices, music scenes are often shaped and transformed as musicians define themselves with and against each other along many converging and diverging paths.

Much of this dissertation has focused on the collective imaginaries, efforts, and political struggles of musicians as they revive and shape new tango practices in the neighborhoods of Buenos Aires. However, while scenes are generally understood as places of social belonging, my experiences in Almagro have taught me that they are often wrought with internal conflict and tensions as many of the participants struggle to realize individual and group goals, some very

contradictory to one another. Just as solidarity and collective resistance lead to social transformation, these internal conflicts also serve as a motor for growth and change. In order to begin to understand these internal dynamics, one must also look for places of conflict and tension within larger seemingly unified struggles. My experiences as an active member of Almagro's neighborhood tango scene as researcher, performer, and audience member, have allowed me to experience and analyze these tensions from multiple points of view.

Throughout this chapter I will argue that by conceptualizing music scenes as products of plural and not singular narratives and subjectivities, ethnographers can better represent the way that scenes mean many things to many people, and are produced at the crossroads of many overlapping worldviews and motivations. This approach counters the temptation to think of music scenes as homogenous entities with common goals and instead presents them as complicated networks and circuits of human relations. Over time these networks and circuits morph and change as different individuals and groups come together and move apart in solidarity and conflict, organizing and shaping the way music is understood and practiced within a given place.

Looking at the recent transformations in the Almagro tango scene and in particular to the musicians collective *ConCiertos Atorrantes*, I will argue that despite the seemingly dividing nature of certain kinds of conflicts, they often result in transformations that eventually feed into the larger goals of a collective movement. In particular I will discuss a project that involved creating a neighborhood tango club run by a group of 17 musicians that ultimately fractured and led many musicians not only to leave the club they had created but to start organizing a new cultural center in a completely different neighborhood. While the two primary venues that resulted from this conflict stand for many conflicting aesthetics, values and social goals, they each continue to serve the needs of the growing neighborhood tango music community. Being able to zoom in and out of these conflicts and understand their micro and macro significance in relation to tango culture today is invaluable to understanding the social meanings and functions of music

scenes and how they change and transform over time. These conflicts can also illuminate rich political, social, economic, and cultural debates shaping cultural production in a given community. Whereas previous chapters have focused more on the way local tango scenes fight to define themselves against the exoticizing stereotypes of tango culture promoted by international stereotypes and the city tourist industries, this chapter looks at how local ideas of tango music are also being formed and transformed through internal conflicts and tensions within the scene itself.

From Resistance to Resistances

The need to understand social conflict in complex and multilayered ways has been addressed by social scientists interested in themes of resistance and social struggle. This need arises from the reductive and homogenizing macro “us vs. them” approaches often used by social scientists when analyzing social tensions between groups. In his 1985 book *Weapons of the Weak*, James Scott criticizes these black-and-white macro approaches to understanding social struggles and emphasizes that much can be learned by studying the many ways individuals engage in social resistance in their everyday lives (1985). In the 1990s and 2000s, anthropologist Sherry B. Ortner and historian William Sewell further contributed to this discussion through the growing field of practice theory. Their writings emphasize the necessity of acknowledging the internal struggles found within most resistance movements in order to avoid polarizing binaries such as dominant/subordinate or the people vs. the state. In her work, Ortner calls for the need for more ethnographic detail in studies of resistance to better portray the complexity of the social processes in any given ethnographic situation (1995). Similarly, Sewell reminds his readers, “cultural worlds are commonly beset with internal contradictions” (2005:170). Contemporary Latin American scholar Sujatha Fernandes (discussed in chapter four) addresses similar issues in her study of urban social movements in Venezuela, using the idea of “everyday wars of posi-

tions,” as a way to talk about the many everyday processes through which social tensions are negotiated in cultural movements (2010).

In the field of ethnomusicology, Timothy D. Taylor takes up these issues in *Global Pop*, looking at the many complex ways people communicate messages of social resistance through music. Similar to Ortner and Sewell, he criticizes music scholars who generalize about musical practices. Instead, he suggests that finding acts of resistance in everyday lives and musical practices can expose interesting social processes. If musics of struggle are understood through reductive binaries of hegemony and resistance, Taylor warns, “we are only assuming that disempowered peoples are totally caught up in resistance, not totally caught up in leading their lives, only part of which may involve resistance” (1997:69).

In the neighborhood tango scenes of Buenos Aires playing tango music can mean many things. In chapter four I discussed at length how music-making practices have become intertwined with collective political movements advocating post-neoliberal ideologies of cultural practice and the revitalization of neighborhood-based practices of musical socialization in the city. However, the musicians who participate in these scenes do not think of their music as an expression of collective political resistance all the time. Tango musicians, like most musicians in the world are, as Taylor says, “caught up in their lives,” which involve many things including training, working, performing, providing for themselves and their families, organizing events and struggling to make ends meet. Music scenes are then competitive, fragile, and constantly transforming social settings where large numbers of struggling artists come together often from very different backgrounds and where collective goals and ideas of resistance are only one piece of a much more complex social and cultural puzzle. In music scenes like that of Almagro some artists share in similar struggles but not everyone has the same goals. Even when they do, these goals often shift over time. Accounting for this plurality of perspectives and world views

makes studies of scenes, and especially studies of scenes that are part of larger resistance movements, much more interesting.

The Garden of Forking Paths

“The Garden of Forking Paths” is a short story by renowned Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges. Within the story, one of Borges’ characters writes a labyrinth-like novel called *The Garden of Forking Paths* where time, instead of moving linearly, is presented as a process of constant bifurcations. Whenever there are two possible outcomes for an event in the novel, both occur, creating multiple narrative universes. Much like a labyrinth, as certain paths divide, others converge. In the story, Borges explains the idea behind the novel stating, “the garden of forking paths is an incomplete, but not false, image of the universe... an infinite series of times, in a growing, dizzying net of divergent, convergent and parallel times” (1941:9). This rich, visual metaphor challenges the idea of history as a single path or a linear process and suggests instead that time and history advance non-linearly as a series of overlapping events and forking paths.

Applying this to the study of music scenes and understanding that scenes and movements are full of overlapping narratives and conflicting histories helps counter homogenizing tendencies and provides the ethnographic specificity that Ortner, Sewell, and Taylor have all argued for in their work. Just like the grand and exoticizing narratives of tango culture and history must be challenged to allow multiple and plural histories and identities of tango to emerge, contemporary tango scholars must be careful not to assume that independently organized tango movements are actively engaging in social resistance all the time.

Studying Music Scenes as Gardens of Forking Paths

In a recently published interview, French musicologist and tango scholar Esteban Buch explains why he enjoys studying controversies. “Controversies” he says, “offer a privileged window into the intelligibility of social dynamics...” (in Zubillaga and Barbosa 2013:15)³. Instead of studying discourses or narratives as ideological abstractions, he prefers to study how social actors employ discourses in their everyday lives and how these then shape social conflicts. This approach “take[s] seriously what actors say, instead of supposing that people do not know what they are doing and are just victims of the ideologies that surround them...” (15). In general, ideological discourses layer on top of one another in messy and overlapping ways in urban music scenes while simultaneously mixing with the pursuit of various forms of social, economic and cultural capital. Thinking of controversies as privileged windows into the intelligibility of social dynamics, I will tell the story of the making of the Almagro Tango Club in hopes of illustrating how often interpersonal conflicts are fueled by and in turn shape much larger ideological controversies about music-making and the nature of popular culture.

While focusing on internal conflicts and transformation, this chapter will also continue to explore the dynamic and constantly shifting processes that affect the production of locality within neighborhood tango scenes. What, where and who feels local within a music scene cannot be summed up in an all-encompassing narrative, and what dynamics produce feelings of locality are quite different from one place to the next. Locality, like history itself, is plural, subjective, dynamic and constantly evolving. In trying to make sense of Almagro’s garden of forking paths, I will propose that as music scenes grow, they often develop multiple smaller circuits within them reflecting the different values, aesthetic tendencies and economic goals of venue participants and organizers. Mapping the way different circuits form and change under the larger umbrella of

³ Translation by the author.

a scene allows us to see along what lines people draw their affiliations and how these affiliations shift over time and in space.

For the past eight years I have watched people—high-brow, low-brow and everything in between—buzzing around, living their lives and making different tango projects come to life within the labyrinth which is Almagro’s tango music scene. In those eight years I have also buzzed around myself, bouncing from place to place, learning about tango, forming groups, leaving groups, and participating in, watching and organizing events. For the duration of my year of formal fieldwork in the city I became particularly involved with the projects of the *Conciertos Atorrantes* collective, including the 2012 Almagro Tango festival, the different concerts put on by the Elvino Vardaro Tango String Orchestra and the making of the Almagro Tango Club. Through these many processes I have experienced the full spectrum of the remarkable, the everyday, and the at times extremely frustrating elements of life in a neighborhood tango music scene.

In 1964 Merriam wrote that music “exists only in terms of social interaction; that is, it is made by people for other people” (1964:27). Urban live music scenes highlight this fundamental social component of music-making, illustrating the many ways musical practices need people just like people need music in order for a scene to thrive. People come into music scenes because they fulfill basic human needs and desires, but these needs and desires take many shapes and forms. Studying the overlapping processes that go into shaping, organizing, and transforming these needs into successful venues, localities and musical and social projects can teach us a great deal about people, music-making, political, musical, and social values, city life, and the dynamic and non-linear ways urban culture evolves.

Throughout this dissertation I have tried to present tango culture as an active and evolving process and not a product. Dealing with a genre that has been so commodified and packaged over the years, this shift is crucial in trying to relocate tango as a living form of urban cul-

ture and not an abstract idea or object. Thus, in this chapter, instead of telling *the* history of the Almagro tango music scene in recent years, I will show that even when looking at a small group of artists the multiple narratives, subjectivities, and conflicting world views shape the way musical projects unfold. Returning to Borges, my goal is to offer an “incomplete, but not false, image of the universe,” in this case the universe being the social worlds of tango music in contemporary Buenos Aires, and the incomplete images being the histories of the some of the individuals in the Almagro scene.

From History to Histories and from Scenes to Circuits: Envisioning the Dynamic Spatial Histories of Urban Music Scenes

Throughout my fieldwork I have struggled with the issue of how to address time and how to create coherent chronologies of the development of Almagro’s tango music scene. I discovered that attempting to write a singular history of a scene, even in a reduced geographic area like a neighborhood, is a task wrought with incompleteness. The rise and fall of certain bars, the popularity of certain musicians or bands, the changing political ideologies, the kind of music being played and the ways the scene expanded and transformed were not easy to document as linear processes. I realized my many attempts to construct an all-encompassing linear narrative of the scene’s development produced *one* history of the scene, but not one that applied to everyone. The more I tried, the more I realized that many musical and other factors play a part in bringing about the transformations that lead to where and how people choose to play or experience tango music all within a single neighborhood of Buenos Aires.

These frustrations reflect issues of representation regarding music scenes in space and time. This is where Borges’ metaphor becomes helpful. Much like the dynamic labyrinth-like novel in his story, I began to think of Almagro’s tango scene as made up of multiple overlapping, bifurcating and converging histories, with multiple subjectivities, narratives, aesthetic tenden-

cies, artistic and social goals, economic needs, and ideological orientations. Instead of telling *the* history of the scene, this approach has allowed me to trace trajectories of musicians as they navigate through and shape these paths. Highlighting where certain individuals and groups come together and diverge in these processes allows more nuanced and specific histories to emerge.

Since the Almagro scene is situated in a physical neighborhood, the metaphor of forking paths also helps conceptualize the multi-directional ways a scene expands and transforms not only over time but in space. Whereas much has been written about the way tango moves in transnational patterns (Pelinski 2000, Goertzen and Azzi 1999), less focus has been placed on how tango practices move within specific areas of Buenos Aires (see Cecconi 2009, Liska 2012). Resisting the temptation to draw linear chronological maps of the evolution of Almagro's performance venues, I want to suggest a multilayered framework to emphasize that as new bars become popular, old bars often continue with their own histories, attracting new audiences and performers as well as keeping old ones. The process of conceptualizing a dynamic spatial history of a neighborhood tango scene involves taking into account the movement of people from one venue to the next, and acknowledging that not everyone moves in the same way. Replacing the term scene with words that imply movement, fluidity and dynamic change can be helpful in this process.

In a 2002 article, Will Straw speaks to the ambiguity associated with the term scene. He asks: "Is a scene the group of people, as they move from place to place? Is it the places through which they move? Is it the movement itself? (2001: 249). He continues stating that the "risk in speaking of 'scenes' is that the word will become little more than the latest concept deployed to convey the messy indeterminacy of urban life." In current discourses of tango, the city's contemporary tango culture is often referred to as the *escena actual* (contemporary scene), but the smaller neighborhood units are referred to more frequently as *circuitos* (circuits). This terminol-

ogy emerges in everyday conversations, such as “I mostly belong to the queer tango circuit,” and in different forms of public media such as newspaper articles that might mention the upcoming independent festival of La Boca, organized by the “Boca tango circuit.” More general references to the *escena* (scene) would include things like, the official tango festival this year “has more representation than ever from musicians from the independent tango scenes,” or articles that talk about the new lyrics being written by artists from “the contemporary tango scene” in the city.

Unlike the more amorphous and abstract term scene, circuit evokes a sense of geographic location and also emphasizes the way people physically move from place to place while performing or listening to tango music. Especially when dealing with larger scenes that have many smaller worlds within them, talking about different circuits offers a productive way to describe the physical and social paths that connect musical activities within specific geographic areas. More often than not music scenes are full of internal conflicts and differences. Looking at the specific circuits and how they form offers a way of studying processes of cultural conflict and transformation. A circuit might involve anything from a few bars in one neighborhood, a network of bars across multiple neighborhoods, or any number of places connected within a larger urban area. Since these terms are flexible and established by different individuals subjectively, how people understand and group together ideas of different circuits can be illuminating.

As independent tango scenes have grown in recent years, I have observed an increased fracturing and dividing of scenes into multiple smaller and sometimes overlapping circuits. These circuits form around a number of different social, musical and aesthetic values ranging from places that cater to tango instrumentalists or vocalists, tango traditionalists and modernists, locals and tourists, older and younger generations of individuals, or people from working or middle class backgrounds. In the late 1990s, the lack of tango venues and economic resources brought together many of these diverse groups in places like Roberto’s bar, and later

Sanata, creating a particularly vibrant social milieu which was a product of certain artistic, economic and social processes and in turn shaped others. Now that the city's tango scene has grown, people have gained the ability to be more selective about what kinds of events and venues to attend, leading to the emergence of multiple tango circuits defined along different social, ideological, economic and aesthetic lines.

The garden of forking and converging paths once again becomes an applicable metaphor when imagining the plurality of these routes and looking at what causes shifts in how individuals navigate urban space. While it would be both confusing and difficult to map all the overlapping circuits that create Almagro's dynamic musical history, what is possible is to zoom in on certain groups of musicians and follow how they move through and shape these complex networks, along paths that involve spatial, economic, ideological, social and musical histories. This brings us to the story of the Almagro Tango Club, a venue created primarily by the artists of the *ConCiertos Atorrantes* musicians collective, the same musicians responsible for organizing the Saturday night concert cycle in Sanata bar, the Almagro festivals, and the Elvino Vardaro Tango String Orchestra discussed in previous chapters.

The Almagro Tango Club: From Utopian Visions to Everyday Realities

Over the course of 2012, I witnessed and participated in a collaborative effort by a collective of 17 professional tango musicians to open a self-run live music tango club in Almagro. Frustrated by the noise levels in their previous haunt, Sanata bar, a group of the core performing musicians and regulars from the bar, including the groups from the original concert series, decided to open their own venue as a collective. The idea was to create a space that would strive to maintain the social and popular feel of neighborhood bars like Roberto's and Sanata, but would offer a more formal theater atmosphere in order to improve the quality of performances. Before the project began, the organizers explained to me that unlike Roberto's and

Sanata, the idea of the club was to charge a cover to help pay rent costs, pay musicians, and filter out noisy audience members. Once the formal shows ended they would open the doors and allow the space to become a place of informal social encounter and informal music-making like Sanata, with no cover charge. The rest of the rent would be covered by a tango school run by the musicians where they would teach tango technique as well as arranging, improvisation, and tango music theory.

Although making a little more money through cover charges was a bonus, the main impetus for the project grew out of the musicians' collective frustration with the noisy bar environment of Sanata. With high noise levels and no cover charge, it was often difficult to convince older and more professional musicians to come play in the concert series. Similarly, the environment often made it difficult to really listen carefully to performances amongst all the social chatter. Whereas this noisy environment was perfect for bands like Amores Tangos that turned the bar into a festive dance party, it was less than ideal for groups like the Trio Boero Gallardo Gómez who played contemporary virtuosic tango arrangements for bandoneon, bass, and piano. Making matters worse, Sanata had never had a real piano which also detracted from the quality of performances. Since the original concert cycle in Sanata had been put together as a way of getting young people interested in tango, the musicians of the cycle decided that it was time to grow into a place that could cater to their new musical needs.

After years of organizing in different clubs and spaces in the neighborhood and struggling as performing musicians in a city lacking concert venues for tango performance, the musicians were elated to finally have the opportunity to run their own space. It was not only a musical project but an ideological one—driven by a desire to further unite the tango musicians community and create more spaces for popular music performance in the city. Among the 17 musicians were the members of the *Conciertos Atorrantes* collective, the members of the *Tango Contempo* collective (who had collaborated with the festivals and also with the Elvino Vardaro

Orchestra), and a handful of other musicians from the local scene. The new venue, called the Almagro Tango Club opened September 22, 2012 in what had previously been a local retirement center about seven blocks to the Northeast of the older Almagro tango bars. The fact that the space had been a renowned community center for the elderly only enhanced the idea that these musicians were going to create a new social hub on top of an old one, in the spirit of the old *clubes de barrio* (neighborhood social clubs) so characteristic of neighborhood social life in times past. The name of the venue, the Almagro Tango Club, was a reference to these old clubs (for more information on the social significance of these clubs in the 1920s-1940s, see Gutiérrez and Romero 1989).

On the opening night of the club, after months of hard work cleaning, furnishing, painting, remodeling, and organizing, it felt like a dream come true. To inaugurate, they invited Guillermo Fernández and the Christian Zárate Quintet, one of the most famous tango singers of the generation of the 1980s and 1990s and one of the most noted virtuosic pianists of the same era. These guests were accompanied by our tango string orchestra, *La Orquesta de Cuerdas Elvino Vardaro*, another project started by the *Conciertos Atorrantes* and *Tango Contempo* collectives the previous year. Speaking to a dark room overflowing with an excited audience made up of the usual neighborhood suspects plus many fans of the featured artists, Guillermo's introduction spoke to the sense of collective accomplishment and connectedness many of us felt that night.⁴

Welcome to the opening night of this place, a place that brings pride to all of us that are tango activists. Playing tango is not the same as being a tango militant and I believe that this group of incredible human beings, who have supported not the creation of this place

⁴ Although I was never officially a part of the organization or the official decision-making of this space, I, and many members of the Elvino Vardaro orchestra put many hours into collaborating in its creation. As a volunteer, I did everything from performing to bartending, hosting, cleaning, painting, documenting, promoting, and running errands as part of the collective spirit of the club. For this reason, it comes more naturally for me to use "we" instead of "they" in many of these accounts.

but an entire movement, represent something that is happening in our genre that only happened in the 1940s and 50s, where a group of musicians join together to try to carry forward something as transcendental as our music.⁵

September 22, 2012 felt like a night when many different musical, social, ideological, and spatial paths came together in the tango garden of Almagro. The venue was full of older professional musicians like Guillermo Fernández, string players from all over the city from our string orchestra, the *Conciertos Atorrantes* and the *Tango Contempo* musicians collectives, the usual bar regulars from Sanata, and other musicians and eager audience members excited for the show and there to support this new project. As an ethnomusicologist interested in studying the production of urban spaces of musical belonging, I was equally excited to have contributed to making a space that would be a motor for learning, making music, organizing, and living tango as a form of everyday social life, building and reinforcing social and musical ties in the neighborhood.

The club opened in September 2012, and by January of the following year things had begun to fall apart. Running a club is hard work, and sustaining a self-run club with 17 managers turned out to be a recipe for disaster. At the beginning of 2013 I left Buenos Aires to spend spring quarter at UCLA. When I returned to Buenos Aires in June, I was surprised by how much things had changed. The venue as I had known it had completely transformed. Out of the original 17 musicians, only four remained. Some of the founding members, including those who had run our string orchestra, had become so fed up with the politics that they left not only the club but the entire neighborhood of Almagro and started organizing in the next neighborhood over, Villa Crespo. Many of the other founding members had moved on to other projects with varying degrees of resentment towards those who had stayed to run the club.

⁵ Translation by the author.

The politics affecting the controversies in the club had not arisen exclusively out of events that occurred within the venue. Besides running a club, many of these musicians worked together on a daily basis in the tourist tango shows downtown, performed together in their various musical projects, often went on tours together and had been friends for years. As such, the controversies that arose in running the club were really the manifestation of many issues that had been present among them for some time. The issues involved money, ethical codes, artistic differences, power dynamics, and aesthetic disagreements. Specifically, these issues became magnified when two members of the club became involved in a labor dispute. Frequently, members of tango bands end up working together at tango tourist shows as a source of steady income. In this case, a dispute arose between two of the club's co-founders who had for some time played together at the same tourist house and also played together in an independent tango group. When one club co-founder decided to leave their shared independent tango group in search of new musical horizons, he was immediately fired from his paying job by the other co-founder who also happened to be the musical director at the tourist house where they both worked. Since musicians often work without contracts in these kinds of establishments, little could be done. Infuriated by losing his job and exacerbated by the politics of the club, he and a group of others decided to leave the Almagro Club. Even though these individuals had worked together for many years to realize common visions, finally, their differences had come to outweigh their common goals.

Because the *ConCiertos Atorrantes* musicians had become such an important organizing force in the neighborhood, this dispute and the subsequent falling apart of the Club as a collective created a big stir in the community making it hard to stay completely neutral. Gossip and hostility circulated through the scene and through social media, with accusations flying back and forth on both ends. In general, the members who stayed with the club were those more interested in reaching out to renowned professional musicians, charging higher cover prices and partic-

icipating in the creation of a tango venue that felt more formal and highbrow. Many of those who left were the ones that from the beginning had advocated that the club have youthful aesthetics that reflected the initial social and artistic goals of the *Conciertos Atorrantes* cycle in Sanata club in hopes that it would become a financially and socially accessible neighborhood hub for popular music in the ideological sense of the word.

This division along differing aesthetic, social, and economic values was not really a surprise. Throughout the fall of 2012, these differences had begun to bubble up in the everyday politics of the club. In one instance, some of the members had wanted to hang colorful triangular flags across the ceiling, a visual symbol associated with popular culture and festive environments used in many places of popular culture around the city. While some agreed, other members had objected saying it made the club look and feel unprofessional. Later, debates over what kinds of artists should be invited to perform resulted in more conflict. Was it a club for singers or for instrumentalists? Was it okay to invite upcoming bands, or only well-established accomplished ones? How many bands should play in a night, and how much of a cover should be charged? Did it make sense to have one night a week where no cover was charged to attract the neighborhood regulars? Depending on whom you asked, there were different answers to these questions. Catering to these different visions, the founders decided to divide up the days of the week so that each could organize in the way they wanted on separate nights.

At the heart of these debates was a divide between the aesthetic and social goals of the club. While the priorities of some were to make a club that was a reputable live music venue that offered “quality” tango performances to a general paying public, others continued to view the space as a social hub for the neighborhood, prioritizing a more popular, informal, festive and financially accessible atmosphere. When discussing this divide with pianist Juan Pablo Gallardo, who was part of the group that had hoped the club would become a welcoming neighborhood social hub, he was careful to explain that the kind of popular music he sought to write was

neither amateur nor simple. For him, popular music was about creating an atmosphere that feels popular, while still striving for musical excellence. In his case he had spent much of his formative years as a musician participating in the informal musical encounters of the renowned folklore group, the *Huanca Hua*.⁶ This group, known for their highly creative vocal arrangements of folk music, had been an enormous inspiration for Gallardo in his own musical path. The group had taught him that musical excellence and innovation can go hand in hand with feelings of social inclusion and popular culture. In the tango world, this debate between tango as “popular culture” or “high art culture” had been present for years in the collective projects of these musicians, but in running a venue together and with monthly bills and rent to pay, these issues intensified.

While the club was falling apart as a collective enterprise, similar debates were occurring in the collaborative musical projects of certain individuals in the collective. These kinds of controversies over the identity of tango culture not only manifested themselves in the aesthetics of venues, but also in the artistic projects of musicians. After years of playing together, some musicians felt that these musical projects were becoming too erudite and wanted to find musical ways to connect further with tango as a form of popular expression. Others continued to run groups that drew musical and aesthetic inspiration from classical and art music genres, following the philosophical and aesthetic orientations of Piazzolla who had adamantly advocated for tango to be an art music for listening and not dancing. Among those who wanted to get away from what they felt to be art music philosophies, some had started a new orchestra that was intended to perform at milongas for dancers, reconnecting tango music with dance.

Ultimately, the popular culture versus high art culture debate, along with the practical difficulties of running the club fractured the founding core of the club and sent the members down

⁶ The *Huanca Hua*, led by Chango Farías Gómez begun their musical career in the 1960s and were an influential group in the Argentine folk music revival, especially recognized for their modern, polyphonic vocal arrangements of traditional folk songs.

different musical and social paths. While they had shared in the collective desire to create a venue that was self-run and offered a higher acoustic standard to musicians than Sanata, their common goals were overcome by their differences.

The Almagro Tango Club itself, despite falling apart as a large cooperative, continues to run booking weekly acts of generally avant-guard and well-known professional tango musicians. Without the collective and festive spirit originally motivating the project, and because they continued to only invite bands they felt to be “of quality,” many local musicians began referring to the club as elitist and exclusive. Instead of achieving its goal of being a neighborhood social hub, they felt it had become just another venue in the area. Even though the remaining organizers continued to host a Saturday night concert cycle under the name *Conciertos Atorrantes*, between the high cover charges and the formal atmosphere, little remained of the social aesthetics and feel of the original Sanata concert series.

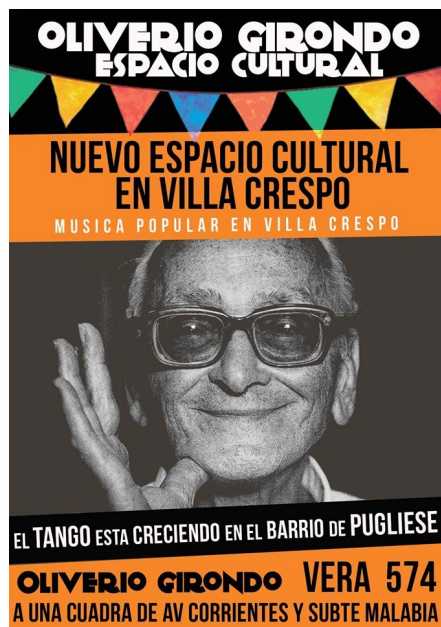
I had spent almost a year documenting, assisting, and supporting the creation of the Almagro Tango Club only to return and find out that the people in the collective whose ideological perspective fell most in line with my own had left the venue and the neighborhood. My initial reaction was to think, what a waste of fieldwork. While the club was being formed other musicians had been skeptical of the club's ideological outlook saying that in a short time it would become just another overpriced venue. Short-lived revolutions were not so uncommon in the tango venues of the city after all. Perhaps it was naïve to think that the idea of a club could work that paid musicians well (70% cut of the cover), offered affordable cover charges so that other musicians and young people could attend concerts (roughly 30 or 40 pesos, about US\$6-8), and also operated as a place of learning and space of social encounter in the neighborhood.

From Almagro to Villa Crespo

When I returned to Buenos Aires in 2013 I began rehearsing with the Vardaro string orchestra in a new bar in the Villa Crespo neighborhood, about ten blocks from the club but outside of the boundaries of Almagro. Following the orchestra's founder, Lucas, the orchestra and members that had left the club had relocated to a new bar called *Centro Cultural Oliverio Giron-do* (The Oliverio Girondo Cultural Center). The space was owned by a couple who had opened the previous year but were having trouble gaining publicity, so they welcomed the Almagro musicians and gave them freedom to rehearse in the space and organize concerts and milongas. Oliverio Girondo is big and open and has a nice covered patio in the back so it works well for concerts and dances, and as a bar. The rustic décor of the venue made it feel less formal than the club and this attracted many audience members who had never made the shift to the club because they had felt it was unwelcoming. Many of the Almagro club's critics explained to me that if they had wanted to pay for a formal and more expensive show, there were other venues that offered better services. Lucas and Juan Pablo and the members of their new *Orquesta Típica Almagro* (the Almagro Typical Orchestra) began a milonga at Oliverio Girondo on Wednesday nights with a free entry and a pass-the-hat policy, which made the venue welcoming again to those unwilling or unable to pay cover charges. When the string orchestra performed we would charge a cover of 30 pesos, a symbolic fee used to cover costs for the orchestra.

It was amazing to watch as Lucas, previously such a driving force in Almagro's scene, began inventing Villa Crespo as a new tango neighborhood. He made multiple new Facebook groups, one being *La Zurda del Tango* (the Left-Wing of Tango), and another for the milonga with the catch phrase, *El Tango está Creciendo en el Barrio de Pugliese* (Tango is Growing in the Pugliese's Neighborhood) (see figures 6.3 and 6.4). Osvaldo Pugliese, the renowned and idolized communist orchestra leader from the golden years of tango, was once again a perfect symbol to publicize the values of the ex-Almagro crowd.

Figure 6.3. and 6.4. Facebook announcements promoting the new Villa Crespo tango scene using the face of Osvaldo Pugliese, colorful triangle flags signifying popular culture and the catch phrase, “Tango is Growing in Pugliese’s Neighborhood.” (Courtesy of Lucas Furno, 2013.)



By programming many other upcoming bands from the more popular Almagro circuits in the Wednesday milonga, the new venue quickly caught on and established itself as the new location for the new *Orquesta Típica Almagro* (Almagro Typical Orchestra), and for the Vardaro.

With a sense of intentional irony, the second album of the *Orquesta Típica Almagro*, to come out this coming February was almost called Villa Crespo. Currently, the organizing members of this new space are busy organizing the first neighborhood festival of Villa Crespo (see figure 4.1 in Chapter Four), a festival that instead of being an exclusively tango festival, is dedicated more broadly to *música popular de Villa Crespo* (popular music of Villa Crespo). For the individuals organizing this new festival, their goals have never changed. Villa Crespo was just the latest chapter in their search to find a venue where artists were not exploited, the sound system worked, and tango was used as a way of generating festive, popular, accessible and community-oriented socio-musical experiences. Their experiences with the Almagro Tango Club only further refined this vision. While they continued to position themselves against the city governments initiatives to close down live-music venues and against the idea of tango as purely “export” culture, their latest efforts (seen in the above posters) also contained underlying attitudes of resistance towards what they saw as the elitist values and practices of some of the musicians with whom they had founded the Almagro Tango Club.

Sometime after returning to the city I decided to go to back the Almagro Tango Club to see Osvaldo Berlingeri, one of the original pianists for the world-famous stage show *Tango Argentino*, renowned by many as the show that brought tango back to life. Since the people I was closest to, including our entire string orchestra, had all left the club in a somewhat dramatic exodus, it felt a bit like walking into enemy territory. The club, a place that had been so familiar and home-like to me, felt cold and strange. There were few familiar faces behind the bar, at the door, or even at the tables. The cover charge had doubled so that very few young people were in the audience. Like so many times before throughout my research, the words of Arjun Appadurai on the production of locality came to mind: “locality is an inherently fragile social achievement” (1996:179). Nonetheless, the venue filled and the concert was incredible. All the time and collective effort put into the acoustics of the space and the sound equipment had paid

off creating a concert venue with great acoustics. I left that night thinking that while the club no longer felt like a place where I belonged, at least it had become a neighborhood tango venue capable of hosting and producing an excellent show.

Conclusions

As the months passed and the hysteria and drama surrounding the club calmed, I realized that perhaps my fieldwork was not such a failure after all. In comparison to 2005, and even since 2011, there were more bars than ever operating around the city, and not just in the Pugliese neighborhood. The Almagro Tango Club continued to run offering a venue for bands with an excellent sound system and a possibility of making extra money by attracting higher paying audiences. In Oliverio Gironde, the members of the *Orquesta Típica Almagro* and the Elvino Vardaro Orchestra continued brainstorming to achieve their goals of reviving the social spirit of Sanata, but with a larger stage and a better sound system, and this time with more dancing. In many ways the conflicts among the *ConCiertos Atorrantes* members had ultimately resulted in the scene growing and expanding, not failing. Even the fact that our orchestra had left the club and the neighborhood inspired another musician to start a very similar project called the *Camerata Almagro* (The Almagro Camerata) based out of the Almagro Tango Club, drawing in more string musicians interested in participating in this kind of community-based project.

In a February 2012 interview with Martin Otaño, the original concert manager of Sanata, he explained the goals that lay behind the making of Sanata and the original *Conciertos Atorrantes* concert series:

The biggest challenge is renovating what happens below the stage, making it more massive, so that you don't have to invite your uncles and mom and dad and the few people that like tango just to have an audience.⁷

⁷ Martin Otaño, interview by the author, February 10, 2012, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

As Martin mentions in the quote at the beginning of this chapter, while Sanata had succeeded in becoming a place where all paths led, it would not remain that way forever. Five years later, the original collective had fractured into multiple different paths, colored by different musical projects and different ideological and economic values. Yet the fact that all the members were still organizing events in different spaces in the city meant that their original goals had not been lost. Today, with more venues and a less concentrated core, Martin's words again ring true. Maintaining a steady audience is always a challenge. However, now with years of experience, a larger tango community and many possibilities for publishing events through social media, the challenge is not as difficult as it once was.

The story of how Almagro's tango scene moved from Almagro to Villa Crespo this year is only one of many possible narratives describing the transformations of the city's neighborhood tango scenes. It reminds us of the multi-dimensional nature of scenes and that, once again, the labyrinth has forked so that now the possible tango circuits for one to navigate have become even larger and more complex. Today, in 2014, Sanata continues to feature live music seven days a week with no cover. Other classic Almagro venues like Roberto's bar or *La Catedral* (The Cathedral) milonga continue to attract crowds, although at times with more tourists than locals. The Almagro Tango Club continues to offer weekly concerts although they have struggled to establish a steady audience base willing to pay higher cover fees. Oliverio now is hosting milongas three days a week and has become the latest trend in the area for much of the community that used to regularly gather in Sanata. The Vardaro also continues to perform once a month. New venues such as *La Ventanita de Arrabal*, *La Vieja Guardia*, and *Cúrcuma* have also begun to establish themselves as places for live music, socializing, and sometimes dancing.

These are just a few of many small venues offering live music today. To tell the story of the *zurdos* of tango (the leftists of tango), one can look to the Oliverio Gironde at Villa Crespo. To document historic concerts of the renowned aging legends, the Almagro Tango Club contin-

ues to invite older performers and contemporary virtuosos. Those interested in a larger variety of upcoming bands, open mics and late-night singing sessions may go to Sanata, or even to the original neighborhood hub, Roberto's. Although many of the organizers of these venues are currently not on speaking terms, musicians and audience members move between them quite fluidly. A musician may get a gig to play at the Almagro Tango Club, go the following week to see a friend's new group debut in Sanata, and then head to Villa Crespo to hear the Almagro orchestra perform or to dance in the milonga. If friends come from out of town, frequently *La Catedral* and Roberto's are added to this mix in a tour of iconic neighborhood spots. As individual histories expand along parallel and interlocking lines, new circuits form, wrapped up in the much larger labyrinth of the contemporary citywide tango scene.

The story of the Almagro Tango Club—its origin, successes and ultimate fragmentation as a collectively run business—serves to illustrate some of the complex tensions that go into the creation of tango music venues today in a neighborhood like Almagro. It also illustrates some of the everyday realities of musicians and the ideological, economic, social, and aesthetic values at play that drive the creation and transformation of these kinds of social and musical projects. As ethnographers of music, many of us hope to document utopian musical projects and prove to the world that they exist, and that collaboration is possible. The story I found was equally inspiring, but much more complicated.

In the fall of 2013, Martin Otaño, the concert manager of Sanata, and the unofficial MC and poet for countless events in the Almagro neighborhood, passed away after a yearlong battle with cancer. As a person who dedicated his life to bringing the tango community together, organizing events, opening concerts and spreading his love of art, bohemia, poetry, music and nightlife, his passing was devastating to all. Watching the comments on Martin's Facebook feed over the subsequent days, I noticed I was not the only one reflecting on the underlying humanity beneath all of the petty day-to-day challenges, arguments and roadblocks facing artists living in

a big city like Buenos Aires. In song, poetry, photography, and prose he was being recognized and mourned as a person who gave so much to the community and who would be remembered as the one who brought life to the tango community and brought us all together, time and time again. Togetherness, like locality, is a fragile social achievement and requires constant maintenance and upkeep often by a few very dedicated individuals who act like the glue that keeps people connected. In talking to Juan Pablo Gallardo, one of Martin's good friends, I mentioned Martin's passing seemed to make all of the fights and feuds of the past year seem a bit meaningless. He agreed but then after a pause said, "Honestly, I don't regret any of the fights I've had, not one." Reading between the lines of his comment led me to think about how music scenes are shaped and defined just as much through conflict as through solidarity and unification.

My experiences in Almagro taught me that some of the most insightful moments of my fieldwork occurred at the bifurcations of musicians' paths—not when things were peaceful but when tension and change were in the air. These were the moments when the cultural world of tango revealed some of its internal contradictions. It was in those moments I became most aware of what kinds of processes brought people together, and set others apart. Each time a musician leaves a group, collective, or space and in turn joins or creates another, it represents a bifurcation and often the opening of a new path. As new venues or bands form, old places and bands remain, and their histories continue to transform alongside newer projects. Looking behind these bifurcations, one finds the commonalities and differences that come to shape music scenes, circuits, movements, venue and communities. Over my years in Almagro I have seen how as some paths drift apart, others drift together; nothing is set in stone, not even the worst of rivalries.

Music scenes, much like life itself, are complicated. They are made up of good moments, bad moments and everything that happens in between. The fights that occur in Almagro

between musicians, venue owners, local government regulations, organizing committees and neighborhood audiences are not just daily soap operas but are the moments when the values and world views of the scene are negotiated and transformed. They are the times when the scene grows and changes, moves from place to place, and redefines itself. If I left out the internal fights and only talked about the opening nights and the magical intimate performances, half of the story of this scene would be missing. It was after my conversation with Juan Pablo that I began envisioning the Almagro scene not as a unified whole but as a complicated, incomplete, and constantly changing and subdividing living urban labyrinth made up of many ideas, places and practices, subjectivities and narratives. A labyrinth like that described by Borges in his short story.

The story of the Almagro Tango Club serves not only to explain the complex dynamic of music scenes but also to illuminate specific tensions shaping scenes from within such as the aesthetic debates between tango as popular music or art music. While the story of the Almagro Tango Club shed light on these specific tensions, it is only one of the many issues negotiated on a daily basis in the Almagro scene. In each bar where I conducted fieldwork, different tensions and controversies arose, all of which could have served just as well to illustrate how much can be learned from taking these controversies seriously in ethnographic writing: tensions between tourists and “locals,” between older and younger generations, between musicians from different class backgrounds, between audience members and performers, between the organizers of festivals, between bar owners and musicians, and the list goes on. Ultimately, through the experience of these everyday conflicts and negotiations day after day, week after week, year after year, it becomes clear why the magical opening nights, or the meaningful performances when feelings of connectedness and solidarity are truly achieved, are so important for the health and survival of these kinds of fragile social communities.

To highlight these meaningful moments, I have put together a sequence I have called “Los Locos de Almagro” (The Crazies of Almagro) (at www.jenniegubner.com). Whereas this chapter has focused on discussing and theorizing conflict and transformation within music scenes, sensory filmmaking is particularly effective at highlighting those other moments when togetherness and intimacy proliferate over conflict and tension. Those magical moments and meaningful performances co-exist with these moments of conflict and tension and emerge as a product of equally complex and layered social and musical interactions. Keeping the tensions discussed in this chapter in mind, I suggest now watching this film and hearing how musicians like Osvaldo, Lucas, and Juan Pablo piece together Almagro’s musical labyrinth. Similar to my discussions of conflict and transformation, this film also highlights how these projects emerge not as isolated events but as layered progressions existing within complex social and spatial histories and circuits of music-making.

~ ~ ~

*I thought of a labyrinth of labyrinths, of one sinuous spreading labyrinth
that would encompass the past and the future and in some
way involve the stars.*

Jorge L. Borges, “The Garden of Forking Paths” (1941)

~ ~ ~

Chapter 7



Figure 7.1 and 7.2. Paintings of Rúben Juárez and Elvino Vardaro on the walls of The Almagro Tango Club and a tango written for Roberto's bar framed and hung on the walls of Roberto's (2012).

Conclusions: Relocalizing Tango Music through Participatory Music-Making, Musical Activism, and Visual Ethnomusicology in the Neighborhoods of Buenos Aires

In this dissertation I have argued that neighborhood-based tango music movements like those in Almagro have become a powerful motor in the revitalization of tango music as a localized form of popular youth culture in Buenos Aires today. Through practices of participatory music-making and different forms of musical activism, these movements are using music as a vehicle for social reintegration in a city often characterized by fragmentation, disintegration, and social and political instability. I have emphasized that while tango has been increasingly embraced as an economic resource for the city of Buenos Aires over the past two decades, it has simultaneously been embraced as a form of cultural activism by a generation of young artists seeking to rebuild local tango scenes and contest for-export models of urban cultural politics.

The mobilization of tango artists against for-export models of urban cultural politics has not emerged in a vacuum. Chapter One illustrated how these movements are connected to

much larger efforts to contest the neoliberal cultural, political, and economic ideologies and agendas promoted by President Menem in Argentina in the 1990s and still being promoted by the current city government of Buenos Aires. Chapter two discussed how tango emerged in the late 1990s in Buenos Aires as both an local form of participatory urban socialization and a marketable cultural resource for export. Because tango reemerged as both a product of, and a reaction to, the neoliberal agendas of the 1990s, and because tango's revitalization coincided with a period of particularly intense political and economic turmoil in Argentina, I have argued that tango offers a rich zone of debate through which to study the changing social, political and cultural imaginaries of city life in Buenos Aires.

Through my analysis of the everyday musical practices and projects occurring within different neighborhood-based tango music scenes, I have shown that the models of social re-integration and localization employed by these movements have drawn heavily from post-neoliberal discourses, ideologies, and imaginaries of urban life. These can be seen in the participatory and inclusive experiences of tango bar culture discussed in chapter two and three, the organization of neighborhood tango festivals discussed in chapter four, the politics of the horizontal string orchestra discussed in chapter five and the ideas standing behind the creation of the Almagro Tango Club in chapter six. Through these examples I have argued that neighborhood tango music practices, informed by post-neoliberal imaginaries of the city, are contributing to the construction of alternative spaces of socialization in the neoliberalizing urban landscape of Buenos Aires. Furthermore, understanding that sensory experiences of participatory music-making have the potential to inform how we perceive and act in our everyday lives, I have suggested that the politicization of tango through these everyday experiences of music-making has led to the production of a generation of artists that see themselves as active producers and not just performers of urban cultural practices.

Studying the role of urban imaginaries in the production of city life and the role of music in producing communities of belonging and locality in modern cities, I have analyzed the neighborhood location of these scenes not only as a physical space where alternative tango cultures developed, but also as a new symbolic imaginary where musical and social practices are being constructed on top of shared historic ideas of the city. Tango's physical and symbolic "return to the neighborhood" has involved blending nostalgic imaginaries of social intimacy and social inclusion characteristic of representations of the neighborhood produced in the 1920s and 1930s with contemporary activist imaginaries connected to recent political movements based in ideologies of cooperation and horizontality. The result has been the production of new localized, and contemporary ways of knowing and experiencing both tango music and contemporary neighborhood culture.

Instead of arguing for any all-encompassing explanation for the revitalization of tango as a form of neighborhood culture, I have offered various ethnographic examples where artists evoke imaginaries of the neighborhood while simultaneously advocating post-neoliberal ideologies of urban life and urban tango politics. Through these processes and in these specific contexts, ideas of the neighborhood are not limited to fixed geographic locations but come to be representative of certain sensory experiences of socialization and urban intimacy that are often defined against alienating consumer-models of urban life. In Spanish, this shift can be noted by thinking of neighborhood not as a noun, *el barrio*, but as an adjective, as in things that have the quality of being *barrial* (having a neighborhood quality).

These revitalized understandings and practices of tango as a form of neighborhood life have provided a rich counter-imaginary to the exoticizing imaginaries associated with postcard tango and tango for-export. Using writing, images, and films, I have looked beyond these postcard representations and sought to evoke new sensory understandings of tango as a dynamic and constantly transforming zone of urban socialization and artistic expression in these neigh-

borhood contexts. Through my research, I have tried to show how these processes of knowing, imagining, and sensorially experiencing tango as a cooperative, neighborhood-based cultural practice have become one way of contesting individualistic and consumer-oriented neoliberal models of cultural production in modern Buenos Aires. As Martín, the MC and organizer at Sanata Bar used to say when welcoming people to his bar, “Remember in the ‘90s when they tried to convince us to live in high-rise apartments and eat sushi at fancy restaurants? Well, for some of us the era of individualism didn’t work. That’s why we’re here tonight.”

Making Music in the Post-Neoliberal Imaginary

In his recent essay “Music in the New Capitalism,” my advisor Timothy D. Taylor writes that capitalism is in the driver’s seat of modernity and that “all we can do is hang on and hope to find some good tunes on the radio along the way” (2013:167). Despite the overwhelming and seemingly here-to-stay nature of neoliberal capitalist models, one of my goals throughout this dissertation has been to argue that there is a lot we can do—and a lot that many people in fact do do on a daily basis—to counteract the negative, exploitative and monopolizing tendencies of industries that view music first and foremost as a consumer commodity. Capitalism is not going away anytime soon. However, just as Taylor’s recent works illustrate the way neoliberal capitalism has had a profound impact on the nature of contemporary music industries, I think there is much we can learn from looking at musical movements around the world that are finding ways to propagate ideologies and practices of music-making that interact with, and simultaneously create, alternatives to commercial music markets operating within the logics of neoliberal capitalism. Shifting my gaze away from tourist agencies and official government agendas and toward localized and neighborhood-based grassroots music movements, I have sought to document the kinds of agency and mobilization emerging from these alternative music-making practices in the context of modern day Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Looking at the economic and political state of the world from a bird's-eye perspective, it is easy to feel powerless in the face of the overpowering social inequalities and exploitative economic models that dominate our world. Surely this has been the case throughout history. For many today this feeling arises from a sense of helplessness in the face of the polarizing inequalities produced by uncontrolled free market capitalism. In other times, however, colonialism or powerful politicians with extremist ideological agendas have posed an equal threat to issues of social equality in society. Just as many scholars today are studying the powerful negative effects of neoliberalism on political, social and cultural systems around the world, in and outside academia there are many individuals who have begun studying and theorizing strategies that might lead to the creation of a healthier, and more socially inclusive societies.

In his conclusion to the book *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, David Harvey writes that since the 1980s oppositional movements to neoliberalism have been growing around the world. He suggests that finding pathways of resistance to the negative effects of neoliberalism must involve both the production of critical scholarly analysis of the nature of neoliberal capitalism and studies of actual existing oppositional movements actively engaging with these issues through everyday forms of activism (2007:198). As I have tried to argue throughout this dissertation, processes of seeking alternatives to the negative effects of neoliberal capitalism in cities must also involve finding ways to imagine and experience alternative forms of socialization that change the normal everyday relations in city life.

British social theorist Nick Couldry has written extensively on the state of politics in neoliberal times. In his recent book, *Why Voice Matters: Culture and Politics after Neoliberalism* (2010), he argues that one of the major effects of neoliberal economic and political models has been the silencing of any ideological voices that fall outside of the logics of free market capitalism. Especially silenced, he writes, have been the social role of collective voices that at so many other times in history have been so politically important. In his opinion, the best way to advocate

for a politics that looks beyond neoliberalism or that in some way challenges neoliberal models is by recovering the role of the voice—individual and collective—in the politics of everyday life.

As a scholar of music, this has led me to ask, what and how can music contribute to processes of re-voicing society, and how can music be an instrumental vehicle in the creation and unification of new voices seeking alternatives to big market capitalism? In his latest book, *Together*, sociologist Richard Sennett writes that “modern society is ‘de-skilling’ people in practicing cooperation,” and that re-skilling people in practices of social cooperation could “generate new ideas about how cities might become better made.” (2012: Preface). He defines cooperation broadly as “an exchange in which the participants benefit from the encounter” (Introduction) but proposes the term as a way to think about how society might find ways to be more inclusive and less individualistic. Central to the production of cooperation, he says, is ritual. Ritual, he explains, “enables expressive cooperation in religion, in the workplace, in politics in in community life” (Introduction). Using the example of a classical orchestra rehearsal, he explains that musicians are often particularly skilled at cooperating because the art of making music is often contingent upon ritual acts of cooperative music-making. If modern society is indeed “de-skilling” individuals in the art of cooperation and musicians continue to learn this skill in order to produce their art, one can see how musicians—under the right conditions—could have quite a bit to offer the process of re-voicing society and encouraging less individualistic and more cooperative forms of socialization.

Instead of speaking in generalities, I believe these kinds of discussions, as with any kinds of discussions of studies of cultural resistance and transformation, are more meaningful if addressed through specific concrete examples and not only through theoretical hypotheses. Buenos Aires, because of its recent history, offered a particularly rich cultural and political landscape to study post-neoliberal ideologies of music-making in the modern city. This history includes the dramatic implementation of neoliberal agendas in the 1990s, the subsequent eco-

conomic crash and impoverishment of the middle class, and the widespread growth of social, political and cultural initiatives seeking alternatives to what they saw as the alienating and polarizing effects of neoliberal models on city life.

These reactions and subsequent political ideologies and models of activism arising in Argentina in recent years led Alejandro Grimson and Gabriel Kessler to characterize the present Argentine moment as post-neoliberal because neoliberalism in Argentina no longer seen as only way to establish the limits within which the socio-political imagination functions. Post-neoliberal also because collective action and changes in political imagery offer an alternative reaction to the negative effects of neoliberalism. Whereas Couldry hypothetically theorizes that a return to the voice is what is needed in order to begin generating alternatives to neoliberalism, Grimson and Kessler use the term to refer to the specific historical events of Argentina in recent years, offering historic specificity and context to Couldry's hypothesis.

Instead of studying Buenos Aires as a city post-crisis, I have attempted to investigate how post-neoliberal urban imaginaries and ideologies are being promoted and put into action through everyday musical practices in the city. Beyond asking how post-neoliberal ideologies are shaping the musical cultures and practices of Argentina, I have also tried to address how the social and musical practices of a traditional popular music culture like tango (from learning to collectively listen and perform together in informal tango bar settings to the cooperative politics of orchestra leaders like Osvaldo Pugliese) are participating in shaping ideologies and practices of post-neoliberal urban cultural movements. If we always look to politics to explain musical practices and ideologies, and do not open up to the possibility that music also plays a role in shaping political subjectivities, practices and ideologies, we are only seeing one side of a very complicated two-way street.

In Argentina, similar to many Latin American countries—and unlike the United States—cultural politics play an important role in society. Traditionally, government-run cultural agendas

have utilized culture as an internal way of engendering feelings of national identity and national pride. In recent years cultural agendas have increasingly influenced budgets by supporting the idea of culture as an industry for tourism. Much like governments in places like Costa Rica have heavily invested in promoting eco-tourism, countries like Argentina have invested heavily in promoting Buenos Aires as a cultural mecca for “tango tourism.” The close relationship between culture industries and government agendas means that many artists look to and depend on the state for employment and for funding their cultural activities. Most of the Argentine musicians I know either work in the tourist industry or work for the city or state in government-funded youth training orchestras, various symphonies and philharmonics and/or public schools. In these situations artists tend to be more involved in political matters than in the United States since their livelihoods are often immediately affected by budget adjustments and policy changes in the cultural sectors of government.

In my years in Argentina, participating in the production, growth and maintenance of local neighborhood tango scenes, I have seen first-hand how the rise of post-neoliberal narratives has played a central role in shaping musical practices and solidifying tango movements around the city. I have also witnessed artists negotiate between their political, professional, social, and artistic lives—identities which sometimes coalesce but oftentimes rub together in complicated and not totally harmonious ways. Furthermore I have been able to see how the individuals in these movements draw their inspiration from a wide range of sources, some deeply connected to the social traditions of music making in Argentina, others directly inspired by the more overtly political discourses of Argentine and Latin American contemporary politics, and many combining the two. Through these experiences I have been able to see how the participatory and collaborative nature of music-making has played an important role in the revitalization of tango and in the production of meaningful environments of socialization in Buenos Aires today. Collaboration is hard work. It does not always go well. However, it tends to get better through trial and error,

and through ritual practices of collaboration people become more in tune to the benefits of participating in such kinds of social networks and experiences.

Argentina is far from a utopian society. While it has been recently recognized as a particularly vibrant locus for social movements and alternative models of political organizing, these models emerged in the wake of political terrorism, extreme hyperinflation, radical and poorly implemented economic policies and much internal corruption. These hardships have had a profound affect on how Argentines—the once “Parisians of South America”—now see themselves and envision their political, cultural and social worlds. Whereas many Argentines artists have chosen to use dark, pessimistic, and fragmented social imaginaries to process the everyday realities of their times, others have begun to cooperate in the production of new social worlds that use art as a powerful medium through which to imagine and experience a less polarized, less individualistic, and more collective ways of living. Through ethnographic case studies, I have tried to show that, while far from utopias, these artists are using music to make big things happen in small places.

From Global Economies of Passion to Local Economies of Feeling Through Sensory Filmmaking and Visual Ethnomusicology

There are people that with just one word

give life to fantasy and roses.

People that with just the smile from their eyes,

invite us to travel to other places, to live magic.

There are people that by taking your hand,

they set the table, serve the stew and hang the garlands.

That just by picking up a guitar,

can make a homemade symphony.

*There are people that just by opening their mouths,
can reach the limits of our souls,
water the flowers, invent dreams,
and make the wine sing in its bottles.
And then afterwards, they are there,
as if they'd done nothing at all.
We each unravel our love story with life,
escaping a solitary death because we know that,
just around any of these corners,
there are necessary people,
like Osvaldo Peredo.*

The crowd broke into applause under the deep blue and yellow light of dusk as Martín finished his recitation of the poem “Necessary People” by Hamlet Lima Quintana. He then hoisted Osvaldo up onto the temporary stage on the edge of the Almagro plaza, and smiling, kissed his cheek and patted his face as if to say “thank you” for so many things. Wearing a white T-shirt that read “Almagro Tango Festival 2012,” Osvaldo took the microphone, and Juan Pablo Gallardo played the first notes of “Cosas Olvidadas” on the piano, the first tango in his set. For the next half hour, Osvaldo serenaded the plaza full of friends and neighbors with an intimacy reminiscent of a grandfather telling bedtime stories to his grandchildren. As usual, the tangos that he interpreted had that bittersweet melancholy to them. Even though he once told me that to sing tango you have to be an actor, you could see in his eyes that there are certain tangos that have little acting and a lot of history and weighted memories connected to the life a man born in 1930 who, now in his 80s, lives alone in a small room that he rents from a widow.

*After so much, so much time,
we finally speak again.
Hearing your voice,
it feels like it could be just yesterday.
You see, I'm a much older man now,
and you, you look the same as back then.
Oh how you loved me so, now nothing is left,
it has all gone away.*

*Just old memories, of old loves,
as as we remember better times,
our stares become cloudy.
They are just old memories,
that return now faded,
and in the solitude of our lives,
they open the wounds of our hearts.*

Just as Osvaldo's serenades evoke real and imagined stories of his and our own pasts, watching him sing "Cosas Olvidadas" in my film Sunday in Plaza Almagro on the small rectangular YouTube screen of my computer evokes memories of many stories, and not just those of lost love. It evokes memories of the year the Almagro Tango Club opened and how we spent much of that year's neighborhood festival celebrating and promoting the venue's inauguration. It evokes memories of playing with the Almagro Typical Orchestra and Osvaldo that night and feeling like I had found my way deep into the heart of my research just a year after arriving in the city. It evokes memories of countless nights spent in Roberto's bar on the corner of the

plaza, learning about tango and neighborhood life as we invented it under the dust-and-smoke-covered whiskey bottles that lined the shelves of that old bar. And it evokes memories of Martín, who no longer spontaneously shows up at tango gatherings around the city to recite poems, MC events, and breathe life and color into the everyday practices of life in a neighborhood tango scene. “There are people that just by opening their mouths, can reach the limits of our souls, water the flowers, invent dreams, and make the wine sing in its bottles. And then afterwards, they are there, as if they’d done nothing at all.” Much like Osvaldo, Martín was an indispensable person in the revitalization of neighborhood tango culture in this city.

When Martín was diagnosed with terminal cancer in 2013, one of his closest friends, Moscato, a well-known tango guitarist from the local scene, called everyone to Sanata bar to raise money for his family and his medical costs. That night as everyone packed into the overflowing bar, he greeted the crowd, saying “Thank you all for being here. I don’t care what they say about the Internet, being together means being together in this room and that is why we are all here tonight, to be together for Martín.” Pushing past the sadness, the room soon transformed into an explosion of music and song and we sang, played and listened together, deep into the night. A lot of money was raised that night, and even after his passing many similar events have been hosted to raise funds for his family.

Today, Martín’s memory lives as a reminder of the values he fought for in the neighborhood tango movements. It reminds us of the importance of local organizing, the importance of being together and collaborating to make things happen, the importance of live music events and the importance of transforming tango into a intergenerational expression of community and neighborhood locality. To Martín the neighborhood tango movements were about honoring tango as an intimate and inspiring form of artistic expression, celebrating tango as a festive music of social encounter and mobilizing tango as a form of resistance through which to envision and enact ways of imagining and living art as daily life in this huge and often overwhelming city. He

was a perfect mix of optimism and hard work with a heavy dose of artistic eccentricity that made him a constant motor of creation wherever he went and an inspiration to those around him. He was that one person who managed to avoid the petty fights and feuds and seemed to be a peacekeeper and connector between everyone. His memory lives and radiates from the walls of Sanata where he worked, in the minds of all who knew him, and in the many neighborhood tango movements around the city of Buenos Aires that continue to realize and stand up for these goals. He was a poet and an artist, and he brought poetry and art to the lives of those around him.

Like so many people and symbols and ideas that define contemporary neighborhood tango music culture in Buenos Aires, Martín is not remembered in silence. Last year the annual neighborhood festival of the Boca neighborhood where he lived, honored Martín by putting his face on the festival flyers and hosting a poetry event in his memory (see figure 7.1). This year, Romiro Boero, one of the original members of the ConCiertos Atorrantes cycle, published a photo on Facebook of a new piece he was finishing for Martín called “Bocha de Tango” (a play on words using Martín’s nickname, Bocha), announcing that it would be performed at this year’s annual citywide tango festival in Martín’s memory. Then, Ricardo Crespi, a painter who helps run Sanata and who is responsible for all the colorful murals covering the walls of the bar, painted a mural of Martín just a few meters from Sanata where Martín had worked for years (see figures 7.3 - 7.5). Just like Crespi had painted Rubén Juárez, Osvaldo Pugliese, and so many other faces of the greats of tango’s past on the walls of the bar, Martín was now a part of the visual history of the neighborhood. This year in September when a surprise birthday party was organized for Osvaldo in Sanata, the flyer sent out read, we’ll meet at eleven, under Martín.

Martín’s story is only one piece of a constantly growing and expanding symbolic and multisensory web that informs the local economies of feeling used to define, experience and

practice tango as a form of localized, neighborhood culture in these local music scenes. Only a year earlier, Martín himself had been a part of a collective effort to remember another great figure in the neighborhood scenes, the late bandoneon player and singer, Rubén Juárez.¹ To see how these memories of specific people mix with imaginaries of the neighborhood carried through lyrics and sounds and become reified through participatory and intimate performance practices, I ask that you now watch my final film, *The Procession of the White Bandoneon* (at www.jenniegubner.com).



Figure 7.3 The 2013 Boca Neighborhood Tango Festival, Dedicated to the Life of Martín Otaño. (Design Patra Garcia, 2013.)

Figure 7.4. Ricardo Crespi Painting the Mural of Martín Otaño in Almagro, Near Sanata bar. (Photo courtesy of Claude Mary, 2014.)

¹ Martín had been Rubén Juárez's personal assistant and manager for many years. His experiences working with Juárez deeply influenced his understanding of neighborhood tango as a form of late-night social life that lay at the heart of his contributions to the scene.



Figure 7.5. The Finished Mural of Martín Otaño, at the Corner of Sanchez de Bustamante and Valentín Gomez. (Photo courtesy of Carlos Zito, 2014.)

These memories of Martín, Osvaldo, Pugliese, Juárez, the bars, the neighborhood, and so many others are what feed the local economies of feeling that I have shared through the pages of this dissertation and through the scenes of my films (see figures 7.1 - 7.4). These people, places, and projects are all building blocks that have become part of the foundations for a generation that has reclaimed tango music as a meaningful, living, dynamic, local form of neighborhood culture in Buenos Aires. This is not the tango of red roses, fedoras, greasy hair, and high-heeled shoes. This is the tango of Almagro, of Sanata, of Roberto's, of ConCiertos Atorrantes, of the neighborhood festivals, of all the magical moments and the horrible fights, the failed projects and the successful ones that mean so much in the lives of so many individuals in this city. In studying the production and dissemination of these local economies of feeling I have tried to reframe forms of tango culture and practices of neoliberal resistance as they play out from a street-level perspective, and through the immediacy of everyday practices of urban music-making that allow music to emerge as a complex and often non-verbal form of sensory experience.

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