

Introduction

Dancing Argentinean tango¹ is a global phenomenon. Since its origin among immigrant workers living in the slums of Buenos Aires and Montevideo, it has crossed and re-crossed many borders. However, never before has tango been danced by so many people and in so many different places as it has today. In the wake of its latest revival, tango has become both a cultural symbol of Argentinean national identity and a transnational cultural space in which a modest yet growing number of dancers from different parts of the globe participate.

Dancing tango enables a passionate encounter, in which two individuals join each other on the dance floor. This passionate encounter embodies a mixture of tango music, a style of dancing, a community of dancers, and a shared imaginary. The music is characterized by its hybridity, nostalgic lyrics, and soulful chords that seem to express the loneliness and longing of those who are far from home. The dance form involves a couple, one leading and the other following, who enter into an intimate embrace, bodies touching and legs entangled, improvising steps in wordless communication with each other and the music. The tango community is composed of individuals of different genders, class and ethnic backgrounds, sexual orientation, and national belonging, who meet in dance venues across the globe, secure in the knowledge that they will not only be able to dance tango together, but will probably also share the same kinds of desires, hopes, and expectations about what makes dancing tango worthwhile. And, finally, tango is irrevocably entangled in cultural imaginaries that evoke intense passion, (hyper)heterosexuality, and dangerous exoticism. Dancing tango epitomizes desire and difference, sensuality and antagonism, connection and loss. It promises togetherness, and yet it is always a togetherness that

requires a bridging of differences, through the dance and for as long as the dance lasts.

In this book, I explore Argentinean tango through the eyes of those who love to dance it—the *aficionados* and *aficionadas* for whom tango is more than a hobby and, at times, even a way of life. Their passion for tango raises several questions. For example, why does tango appeal to dancers in so many different locations? What are these individuals looking for when they dance tango, and what happens to them as they become embroiled in its culture? What do they gain, what do they give up, and when, if ever, do they reach that for which they are so passionately longing? And, last but not least, how do they negotiate the ambivalences, contradictions, and hierarchies of gender, sexuality, and global relations of power between North and South² in which Argentinean tango is—and has always been—embedded?

Before tackling these questions, let me begin my foray into the world of tango with three personal stories—stories that not only chart my own engagement with Argentinean tango but also provide the thematic and theoretical framework for the present inquiry.

Getting Started: Three Stories

My first encounter with Argentinean tango happened in the late 1980s as I was walking around Amsterdam with a friend on a Friday night. We stumbled across something called a “tango salon” that was being held in a cultural center called Roxy (since burned down and forgotten). I will never forget walking into this room with couples circling the dance floor to the scratchy strains of tango music from the 1930s and ’40s. They were a motley crew—all sizes and shapes, different ages and from different walks of life, some elegantly dressed and others in jeans, although all the women seemed to be wearing high heels. I was particularly entranced by a young couple, both with Punk hair, she in a short black leather skirt and he with multiple earrings and tattoos. What were they doing in *this* place, dancing to *this* music? I would have expected them at a rave, pogo’ing to the tunes of Sid Vicious and the Sex Pistols. And yet as I watched them and the other couples, I was struck by how totally absorbed they were in the music, in the dancing, in one another. Even the ones who clearly were having trouble with the

steps were engrossed in the encounter. Their feet were stumbling, but in their faces you could see the dream of better times. And then a couple sailed by who clearly knew what they were doing. In tune with each other, moving together in the music, they had become one body. I still remember the woman's face with her closed eyes and expression of pure and utter joy. It made me want to feel that way, too.

While it was many years before I actually decided to learn to dance tango myself, I never forgot that evening. I often wondered what it was about this dance that made such a diverse group of individuals want to get out on the floor and dance to such unfamiliar music from another era whose lyrics must have been incomprehensible to their Dutch ears. I asked myself what it was that they were dreaming about as they stumbled through dance steps that were clearly more challenging than the kind of dancing most of us were used to at the time. But, most of all, I kept thinking about that woman's face, trying to imagine how she must have felt. Ultimately, I discovered what dancing tango felt like, but only after many years of taking lessons, practicing steps in my living room, frequenting tango salons on a regular basis—first in Amsterdam, later in other parts of Europe and the United States, and, last but not least, in the birthplace of tango, Buenos Aires.

The second story involves an incident that took place several years after I had taken up tango. I was having dinner with some colleagues, following a conference. While we had attended many such conferences together in the past, this was one of the first times that we strayed from our shared academic interests and began talking about other aspects of our lives. Inspired by the relaxed atmosphere of the meal, I launched into an account of my passion for tango, describing my experiences on the dance floor and my frequent trips to Buenos Aires “just to dance.” While most of my colleagues appeared to be mildly entertained by my story, one sociologist looked at me with undisguised dismay: “But, Kathy . . . tango? How can *you* possibly be involved in something like tango? You're a *feminist*.”

My colleague's reaction confronted me with the fact that my passion for tango had taken me into a subculture that was incomprehensible to the non-initiated. At the same time, the question of whether a feminist should be dancing tango provided a glimpse of the cultural imaginary that automatically comes into play the moment one hears the words

“Argentinean tango”: macho men in black shirts with chests thrust forward and their hair slicked back, and hyperfeminine women in revealing dresses with side splits and stiletto heels. Tango is the symbolic embodiment of traditional notions of gender—the man leads, the woman follows. He is active, calling the shots, moving purposively across the dance floor. She is passive, waiting for his signals, eyes closed. Tango is aggressively heterosexual, with its public display of eroticism and passion. No wonder my colleague was shocked that a longtime feminist like me could so eagerly throw herself into such a blatantly sexist dance.

It wasn't until many years later that tango became a potential research topic for me, and how this came about is my third story. During one of my annual trips to Buenos Aires, I stayed with a group of Dutch tango dancers in a shabby tango hotel in San Telmo.³ One of the women in our group became romantically involved with an Argentinean man whom she had met in one of the *milongas* (venues where people get together to dance tango). Their affair started with an offer of private tango lessons and ended in bed. I watched with a certain amount of envy as she was whisked away on the dance floor in his capable arms and, later, commiserated with her despair when he turned out to be married with children. I found myself taking a closer look at the tourists in the *milongas*, in many cases “women of a certain age,” white Europeans or North Americans, dressed in sexy clothes and expensive shoes, dancing with eyes closed and ecstatic expressions on their faces. Their partners were seasoned local tango dancers, clearly less affluent than the tourists. They appeared to be working very hard to maneuver their less adept partners around the floor. They did not look particularly happy, let alone ecstatic. Instead their expressions were deadpan, bordering on the pained, or even the outright bored.

These discrepancies were disturbing on several levels and added some uncomfortable dissonances to my experiences with tango. While tango brings strangers together in a seemingly intimate embrace, it does not necessarily have the same meanings for partners who are separated by gender, social class, age, ethnicity, and national belonging. What is the significance of these divisions to the image of tango as a dance of passion? How do differences between dancers get played out in their encounters on the dance floor? What kinds of excitements and tensions do they generate, and how are they negotiated?

These stories all raise issues that clearly require a more analytical and, at the same time, more critical approach to tango. However, tackling these issues is not an easy undertaking and, indeed, presents what at first glance seems like an intractable dilemma to the would-be tango researcher who also dances tango.

On the one hand, as a dancer, she may worry that a scholarly, analytical approach to tango will interfere with her passion for dancing. If she views tango as an important part of her life, even as something essential to her happiness and well-being, she may be concerned about spoiling her pleasure in dancing and becoming critical of her own undoubtedly complicated desires. She will probably wonder whether it is possible to be a participant observer in a tango salon and still experience the same excitement and sense of adventure she craves as a tango dancer.

On the other hand, as a researcher, she may be concerned that her passion for tango will cloud her vision and prevent her from producing the critical ethnography of Argentinean tango that she envisions. She may fear that she is too much of an “insider” to the tango scene to be able look at it with the proper analytic distance. Indeed, she may wonder whether it is even possible, let alone desirable, to do research on a subculture of which she is a member. An even thornier problem, long familiar to the feminist researcher, concerns the difficult enterprise of situating herself as a white European academic writing about the non-European “Other.” How can she acknowledge her own complicities in the economic disparities and global imaginaries that shape relations between Argentineans and non-Argentineans and still engage in the passionate transnational encounters that dancing tango enables?

Between Passion and Critique

The dilemma between being personally involved (as insider, albeit slightly “off center” [Creff, 2000]) and being reflexively critical (as outsider with the necessary skills of self-critique) is familiar to ethnographers. Most ethnographers provide lengthy accounts of how they manage their identities as insider and outsider. For example, Eduardo Archetti (1999), writing about masculinity in Argentinean football, reflects on being an “insider” as an Argentinean-in-exile who has always been interested in football. When he started interviewing

Argentinean men of his own class, age, and education, he stressed being on home turf, with all the advantages of language, social contact, and knowledge of the cultural context. At the same time, his training as an anthropologist, not to mention his long-term residence in Europe, set him apart from his football buddies. Ultimately, he concludes—drawing on Strathern (1987) for help—what ultimately makes his ethnography acceptable is his ability to produce through football a sociologically informed account of masculinity that organizes his informants' stories in ways that correspond to and enhance or deepen their own points of view.

Not every ethnographer is as optimistic as Archetti, however. Feminist ethnographers have been considerably more wary of whether it is possible to do critical ethnography at all (Stacey, 1988; Abu-Lughod, 1990). Ethnographic encounters are so permeated with differences marked by conflict, domination, and objectification on the side of the researcher and her informants that it is hard to see how one's status as an insider (woman) or even well-intentioned critic (feminist) can make for accurate representations of the subject at hand. Kamala Visweswaran (1993) adopts a radically deconstructionist approach to ethnography that focuses on “betrayals, refusals, and impossibilities” as the only point of entry into the field, the only way to make dominant discourses and power inequalities visible. That this sometimes occurs to the detriment of thick descriptions⁴ and ethnographic detail is just the price one must pay. However, despite these differences in approach, the conclusion seems to be that the combination of passion and critique is less a problem to be resolved than a set of issues to be discussed.

Ethnography, Carnal and Global

In this research, I have taken a different tack, drawing on two recent—and some might argue incommensurable—branches of ethnographic research.

The first is “carnal sociology,”⁵ which addresses the way bodily practices (the work of the body as sentient and embodied praxis) constitute social formations (Crossley, 1995). I have drawn upon my embodied experiences as a dancer, my encounters on dance floors around the world, conversations with fellow *aficionados*, as well as my frequent

trips between Europe and Argentina, to understand the contradictory meanings of tango, here and there, now and then. In this, I have been particularly inspired by Loïc Wacquant's (2004) study of the boxing world in which he himself was an active participant for many years. His ethnography is not a run-of-the-mill description of life in a Chicago gym catering primarily to lower-class African American men. By entering this scene with "body and soul," Wacquant provides a visceral account of what it actually feels like to fight (the "taste and the ache" of being in the ring). He allows the reader to enter the boxer's body, to understand the discipline and the training required in learning to master the "manly art." Based on this study, he makes an argument not for a sociology of the body but rather one *from* the body. In his view, sociologists have to immerse themselves as "deeply and as durably" as they can into the microcosm they are investigating if they want to convey to the reader what is at stake in social practices that are passionately pursued (Wacquant, 2005:468).

Wacquant's ethnography of boxing provides a useful model for investigating tango as a preeminently embodied practice, passionately pursued by a select group of enthusiasts. Like boxing, tango also requires a long and difficult apprenticeship, through which the practitioners learn the complex techniques of the dance. Like the gym, the social order of the *milonga* has its own rules and regulations that need to be learned and negotiated. While boxing produces a specific variant of masculinity—one that is inflected by race and class—tango also entails the ongoing performance of masculinity and femininity, a performance that is shaped by intersections of race, class, and age and that takes different forms depending upon the historical and social context in which it is enacted. From the perspective of carnal sociology, my own passion for tango is not only desirable; it is a requirement if I am to understand and consequently be able to describe what my informants tell me about their involvement. In the microcosm of the tango world, my position as insider lends me credibility. And, indeed, many of my informants noted that it was easy to talk to me because "of course, *you* know what I'm talking about." Being an insider also allowed me easy access to the field. I had no problems spending time in *milongas* and approaching potential informants about the subject we all most liked to talk about anyway. Even in Buenos Aires, where I am clearly an outsider, a visitor,

albeit one who reappears regularly year after year, I had no difficulties finding fellow dancers who were more than willing to talk to me.

And yet, this is more than a carnal ethnography à la Wacquant, who has been criticized—and rightly so—for his lack of reflexivity about his own position as a white academic interacting with lower-class African American men. He can leave—and will—as soon as he finishes his book. His boxing informants, however, will have gone on to lives constrained by poverty, racism, and hardship. I would display a similar lack of reflexivity if I were simply to assume that I am an “insider” in my research on the tango. I also want to use tango as an opportunity to think analytically and critically about the politics of passion and about gender relations in all their complicated intersections—intersections that will, from time to time, also situate me as an “outsider” vis-à-vis my informants. Moreover, I want to explore the ways in which the North and the South have historically been and continue to be linked through the tango, the configurations of power that have emerged in these passionate encounters, and the ways its *aficionado/as* are differently embedded in global hierarchies of power.

In order to investigate these linkages, I draw upon *global ethnography*. This unconventional form of ethnography, inspired by the work of Michael Burawoy et al. (2000), extends the representation of a local setting, the bread and butter of ethnographical research, beyond national and cultural borders, grounding it both in local histories and in the changes that have been and continue to be wrought by processes of globalization. Global ethnographers employ three strategies for “extending out” their ethnographies into the world. They delve into the *external forces* that shape individuals’ everyday lives. They explore existing *transnational connections* between different sites. They uncover shared *global imaginaries* that people employ in different ways to make sense of their worlds (Burawoy et al., 2000:25). One of the refreshing features of this approach to ethnographical research is the refusal to either idealize or demonize globalization. The authors assume that globalization is experienced differently in different contexts. Globalization may be perceived as an external force to be resisted or accommodated. People may participate in the creation and reproduction of connections stretching across the world in ways that are empowering or disempowering. Global imaginaries are often mobilized in ways

that are beneficial, but they may also become objects of protest and contestation.

Global ethnography has enabled me to think about the history and practice of tango as a global phenomenon. I examine how external forces—for example, the growing global tourist industry—has allowed tango to become a commodity for relatively affluent and highly mobile individuals across the globe who are searching for a specific kind of “tourist experience” as part of their cosmopolitan lifestyles (Urry, 2005; Anzaldi, 2012b). Recurrent economic recessions in Argentina due to neo-liberal policies (“dollar democracy”) as well as the desire for “innocent” symbols of Argentinean identity in the wake of the military regime of the 1970s have also attributed to the recent revival of tango as export item and tourist attraction. I investigate the transnational connections that have emerged through tango, as *milongas*⁶ across the globe are transformed into transnational spaces. Tango produces encounters across national and cultural borders, between visitors who travel to Buenos Aires to learn to dance or simply to watch tango and Argentinians who open up their tango salons to them or, in some cases, travel to Europe to teach and perform tango. I explore how these differently located dancers think about their experiences and identities as dancers, as well as their encounters with one another on the dance floor. And, finally, I use the methodology of global ethnography to take a critical look at how global imaginaries produce a global tango dance culture and shared community while re-creating tango as a specifically Argentinean cultural product, a symbol of *argentinidad*.⁷ I show how dancers from different national and cultural as well as gender and class locations negotiate in specific and contradictory ways the tensions between their cosmopolitan sensibilities and their desire for authenticity.

Tango as Global Dance

Tango is both the symbol of Argentinean national identity and a global dance (Pelinski, 2000). Argentinean tango (sometimes referred to as *Tango Argentino*) is different from the ballroom dance version of tango that has recently become popularized in the TV series *Dancing with the Stars*.⁸ For more than two centuries, tango has been appropriated and reappropriated throughout the global North and South. Never

the province of one culture or geographical region, it has made multiple crossings of class, racial, and national borders, becoming refined, “whitened,” and desexualized or, alternatively, eroticized and exoticized (Desmond, 1997). These appropriations and reworkings continue to characterize the global tango culture today.

According to most histories,⁹ tango has its roots in the rhythms and movements of the African *candombe*,¹⁰ but its birth tends to be fixed at the turn of the twentieth century in the dockside neighborhoods of Buenos Aires, where it was the dance of migrant workers and prostitutes. Early tango was danced cheek-to-cheek, with partners glued together, rocking and zigzagging in dialogue with the music, and with lots of leg play, for example the man thrusting his leg between the woman’s, and vice versa (Thompson, 2005:233). In the 1920s it traveled to the fashionable salons of Paris, London, Tokyo, and Istanbul, where it became popular in leisure class and bohemian circles. The dance was “smoothed out” (“Euro verticality with Afro bent knees and legs intermingled”) and new steps were introduced (Thompson, 2005:243). It then returned to Argentina, where respectable and more affluent Argentines, once skeptical of this “immoral” dance, proceeded to embrace it as part of the universalist conception of modernity to which they aspired. The “Golden Age” of tango (1935–52) marked a boom in the dance in Argentina with the emergence of new tango orchestras, composers and songwriters, and dance venues. Tango was becoming a popular dance for urban elites throughout the metropolises of Europe and North America. While tango had previously appealed to members of “high society” interested in some “spicy entertainment” under President Juan Perón, it was reappropriated as the very cornerstone of Argentinean working-class culture, allowing it to become a symbol of the national identity, the essence of *argentinidad* (Anzaldi, 2012a).¹¹ However, in the 1960s and early ’70s when rock ’n’ roll was imported from the United States, becoming a popular dance for Argentinean youth, tango once again fell out of fashion. Following the defeat in 1976 of Perón’s second wife, Isabela, who had assumed the presidency after his death in 1974, and the installment of a military dictatorship under General Jorge Rafael Videla with its repressive “Dirty War,”¹² dancing tango became even less popular as a terrified populace fearfully avoided any social gathering in a public place. Following the demise



Figure I.1. Benito Bianquet “El Cachafaz” and Carmencita Calderón, a well-known Argentinean tango couple at the turn of the twentieth century. They taught tango in Paris and are credited with shaping the “look” of the dance to make it more refined.

of the military regime in 1983, a battered nation emerged from the reign of terror and a renaissance in the arts marked a national effort to retrieve unsullied Argentinean traditions. Tango made its appearance, once again, when a group of Argentinean dancers and musicians put together a dance and music show, *Tango Argentino*, that toured Europe and North America. Political refugees had already begun to introduce tango (as popular music and dance) in many European cities as part of their survival strategy in conditions of exile. Recurrent economic crises compelled their compatriots to follow suit, and they, too, began to look to Europe and North America as places to teach and perform the tango. Tango has, once again, become a global dance, with a growing subculture of fervent fans willing to devote a considerable part of their everyday lives to dancing, listening to tango music, traveling to salons, and, of course, ultimately making their way to the mecca of tango: Buenos Aires.

Given the history of tango and its travels, appropriations, and reappropriations, it is clear that tango cannot be pinned down to one time or place. It would, therefore, be impossible to understand the most recent tango revival in Europe without understanding tango in Argentina, and vice versa. More generally, the premise of the present inquiry is that the transnational encounters that tango engenders provide insights into the ways cultural practices travel, the processes by which they are rearticulated and transformed, and the implications this has for how we think about the relation between the global and the local.

From the Politics of Passion to Passion across Borders

It would be impossible to write about tango as a transnational phenomenon without taking into account Marta Savigliano's seminal book *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion*. Her book, which appeared in 1995, has been the undisputed touchstone for recent tango scholarship. Moreover, it is the obvious starting point for any critical investigation of tango as a global dance. Savigliano provides a critical reading of tango that draws upon feminist theory, on the one hand, and postcolonial theory, on the other. She explores the history of tango during the first half of the twentieth century, drawing upon the lyrics of the music and the representations of tango in literature and popular culture. In

her analysis, the culture of machismo is central, whereby the figure of the knife-wielding *compadrito*¹³ who competes with other men for the affections of women is replaced by the more acceptable but still macho “whiny ruffian” who merely laments his betrayal by duplicitous females (Savigliano, 1995:40–72). The female counterpart was the “rebellious broad,” a working-class woman who had left home (maybe just to dance) in search of autonomy, adventure, and the chance for social mobility. For Savigliano, tango reflected the gender and class tensions at a particular moment of Argentinean history when industrialization and women’s entrance into the public sphere had made gender relations precarious and even antagonistic. These representations of macho men and victimized yet recalcitrant women were recycled as tango moved to other places and became entangled in the global legacies of imperialism and colonialism. The crux of Savigliano’s argument is that tango’s popularity outside Argentina was just one more case of cultural imperialism—an unequal encounter whereby the political, historic, and economic asymmetries between the North and the South were played out on the dance floor (Savigliano, 1995:73–106). In her view, tango generates a political economy of passion that draws upon the same rules of exoticism which are part of any colonial and imperial project (Young, 1990). It feeds the fantasies and desires of the white European or American colonizer for the exotic/erotic Latin “other.”

Savigliano’s reading has much to recommend it, both as an account of tango’s early history and as a critical perspective. However, it also leaves some pieces missing. For example, she focuses on the *politics* of passion while leaving the *experience* of passion unexplored. This leaves one wondering how it might actually feel to be passionate about tango and what this passion means for the *aficionados* who love to dance tango and take every opportunity to do so. Moreover, gender relations take shape under very different conditions now from what was the case during the early days of tango in Buenos Aires. While there are still tensions in relations between the sexes in late modernity, they are configured differently than they were at the turn of the twentieth century, both inside and outside Argentina. Because Savigliano is predominantly concerned with the way tango has historically been represented and performed, she does not do justice to the recent global revival of tango that has, as Deleuze and Guattari (1972) would put it,

so thoroughly “deterriozalized” tango that it can no longer be neatly encompassed by North–South divisions. The globalization of tango requires an approach to tango that connects the personal to the political, the experiential to the performative, and the local to the global.

The present inquiry focuses on two tango “centers.” The first is Buenos Aires, the historical and symbolic “home” of tango; the second is Amsterdam, which is a typical European tango center. While Amsterdam has its own local specificities as a tango scene, it is similar to many urban centers across the globe where flourishing tango communities exist, replete with professional dancers and teachers, multiple dance venues and *milongas*, and a sizeable and avid community of dancers. In this sense, Berlin, New York, San Francisco, Montreal, Sydney or, for that matter, Seoul, Tokyo, or Singapore would have been equally good sites for the kind of ethnography envisioned in this book. They all share an orientation toward Buenos Aires as the home of Argentinean tango and have a population of dancers with enough time and money to dance and the desire for the kind of social outlet that tango provides. The present inquiry uses ethnographies of two specific locations—Buenos Aires and Amsterdam—in order to explore the ways in which tango cultures in a globalizing world become connected and mutually interdependent in and through tango dancing. Thus, it is framed as a transnational encounter, a coming together of two places in a shared cultural space, a confrontation between “here” and “there” as well as “now” and “then” rather than a comparison between tango communities across the globe.¹⁴

While I begin the book with an ethnographic description of two tango cultures, those of Buenos Aires and Amsterdam (chapter 1), my treatment of these sites has not been symmetrical in the rest of the book. Depending on the focus or theme of the chapter, I have concentrated in some cases more on Amsterdam (chapters 2 and 4) and in others on Buenos Aires (chapters 5 and 6). Because the dancers are a highly mobile group (chapter 3), they do not permit themselves to be neatly pinned down to one place. Thus, while I have encountered them in one of these two sites, they have hailed from all over the world—from Morocco to Russia, from Japan to Canada. My research has been largely ethnographical, involving many hours of participant observation in *milongas* in Buenos Aires and Amsterdam and interviews with

tango *aficionados* as well as some dancers who have made tango their profession.¹⁵

I have organized the book around three separate, but interrelated themes: passion, gender, and transnationality. Drawing upon Savigliano's work, I have treated these themes as essential for any analysis of the politics of tango. However, I have elaborated them in order to understand why people in different parts of the world are so enthusiastic about dancing tango.

Passion is what is performed when tango is danced. It is how dancers describe what they experience in one another's arms. It is the metaphor for tango in popular discourse, literature, and the media. Passion is central to the politics of gender and transnationality in which tango is embedded. Critical feminist and postcolonial scholars have devoted considerable attention to the problematic ways in which passion is mobilized as part of a binary with reason in constructing gender and race. Reason and rationality are linked to white, Anglo-European masculinity, while passion is the domain of women, people of color, and non-European "others." Situating herself in this tradition, Savigliano assumes that contemporary dancers simply cannot dance tango without drawing upon the exoticized/eroticized images that are part of tango's imbrications in the gendered, racialized legacies of colonialism. As she puts it, they "*cultivate* passion, passionately" (Savigliano, 2003).

This book takes a different tack. Beginning with the standard definition of "passion" as "a strong feeling or enthusiasm for something,"¹⁶ I explore what a passion for dancing tango means for the people who are attracted to it. What are the ingredients of this passion, and how does the actual activity of dancing tango generate it? My approach is similar to the one taken by Claudio Benzecry (2011) in his ethnography of hardcore opera fans in Argentina. While he uses the term "love" rather than "passion" to explore his informants' strong attachments to opera, his insights have inspired me to take the passion of tango enthusiasts more seriously than I might otherwise have done. This has meant recognizing that being passionate about something means, first and foremost, loving to do it. Passion is not only an activity (something that is done with great enthusiasm) but also and, more important, a sensation (excitement, pleasure, joy) and an experience (as lived, subjective, embodied event). Passion may begin as a liking that gradually grows

in intensity until it resembles an addiction or even an obsession, or it may emerge suddenly as a love at first sight, as the thing the person has been waiting for all her life. Either way, passion uproots a person from her ordinary life, dissolving the boundaries of her normal self-identity and taking her outside herself. In chapter 2, I put the embodied component of tango passion (i.e., how it feels to dance) under scrutiny along with the conditions that enable the production of the experience of passion. I show how a passion for tango can produce a liminal experience that allows the dancer to transcend the mundane, to go beyond the ordinary.¹⁷ A passion for tango (as is the case with any strong feeling or enthusiasm) will affect dancers' identities, their relationships on and off the dance floor, sometimes spilling over into their everyday lives in unexpected ways. For many philosophers, passion is potentially disruptive, confusing, and overwhelming. It prevents people from acting rationally—that is, with moderation or in accordance with their ideals (Sabini and Silver, 1996). However, passion is also fabulous and sublime. It is what makes life worth living (Unger, 1984; Philippe et al., 2009). In chapter 3, I explore how dancers negotiate the paradox of passion (as unsettling and even a bit dangerous and yet essential for happiness and well-being) within the constraints of their everyday lives. In fact, dancing tango can become a trajectory that has dramatic consequences for their lives, their relationships, and their sense of self.

Tango seems to be the ultimate embodiment of (heterosexual) masculinity and femininity, shaping the ways dancers encounter one another on the dance floor as well as their interactions within the culture of the salon. It would be impossible to investigate tango without exploring the ways in which tango mobilizes cultural meanings associated with gender. In this sense, Savigliano's (1995) thesis that social tensions (around gender, class, race, and nationality) are played out in eroticized encounters on the dance floor continues to be salient for a critical analysis of the gendered underpinnings of tango. However, while her analysis of "whiny ruffians" and "rebellious broads" was emblematic for how gender manifested itself in tango in the first half of the twentieth century in Argentina, times have changed, as have contemporary configurations of masculinity and femininity, both in Argentina and abroad.

In this book, I show how tango dancers take up tango's iconic images of masculine machismo and feminine rebelliousness and give them a modern twist (chapter 4). I analyze how the dynamics and meanings of gender in tango have been transformed in accordance with the constraints and enablements of late modernity with its fluidity, individualism, and transformations in intimacy (Giddens, 1992; Bauman, 2000). As a case in point, I take a closer look at one of the more recent transformations of the performance of gender in tango—queer tango—which explicitly aims at sanitizing tango of its heteronormativity and gendered inequalities of power (chapter 5). In addition to being an interesting case for examining tango's multiple origins and trajectories (queer tango has its origins in Europe and subsequently traveled to and became popular in Buenos Aires), it provides a site for analyzing the ways tango can (or cannot) be subversive in the domain of transnational gender relations.

As a global dance, tango increasingly involves *transnational* encounters. It has always been a global dance, moving from Argentina (where it was also the dance of immigrants) to Europe and back again. However, international tourism and a growing contingent of relatively affluent individuals with a cosmopolitan lifestyle in search of a specific kind of touristic experience have made tango one of Argentina's most important export items as well as a significant source of revenue at home. A postcolonial reading à la Savigliano that frames tango as a relic of an imperialist and postcolonial past does not do justice to these more contemporary realities. For example, her emphasis on the problematic complicity of Argentineans in the colonializing practices of exoticization and “othering” does not take into consideration the active, eager, and creative participation of contemporary Argentineans in transnational encounters through tango. Nor does her analysis leave much space for the possibility that passionate encounters between Argentineans and tango *aficionados* from other parts of the world are not only asymmetrical in terms of power, but also mutually beneficial and—in some cases—conducive to new forms of community.

In this book, I explore tango as a transnational cultural space for passionate encounters (chapter 6). Drawing upon Burawoy (2000), I show

how tango enables transnational connections at different levels—economic and historical (through international tourism), interactional (through encounters between locals and visitors on the dance floor), and imaginary (in representations of tango as “authentic” expression of *argentinidad* or as cosmopolitan experience *par excellence*). These encounters are never free of power, and yet, as I will demonstrate, they also provide possibilities for excitement, interaction, and a shared sense of community across the very differences that divide the participants from one another.

I began this Introduction with a story about how I entered a *milonga* in Amsterdam by chance and was puzzled at what an antiquated dance from another continent could possibly have to offer the thoroughly modern residents of a metropolis like Amsterdam. In the pages that follow, I will be embarking on a journey—both personal and intellectual—that will allow me to reframe this puzzle, moving the story from what is so fascinating about tango, to what this fascination tells us about the transnational connections engendered by and reproduced in and through tango. To do this, I will use and, at the same time, critically interrogate my own passion for dancing tango—a passion that has both helped and hindered me in untangling the complexities and contradictions that emerge when differently located people from different parts of the world come together to dance tango.