

THE TANGO ARCHIVES: LYRICS AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY OF BUENOS AIRES BETWEEN 1890 AND 1940

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The Tango Archives evolved out of the Mega City Form course. This paper investigates issues of collective memory and the appearance of unconventional archiving methods so prevalent in mega cities. This paper explores how these issues play out in Buenos Aires, where tango lyrics serve as an archiving phenomenon.

IMMIGRANT ERA OF THE LATE 1800S

While the history of Buenos Aires began in 1536 with Don Pedro de Mendoza and the arrival of his Spanish fleet, the Buenos Aires of this paper awoke in the late 19th century with the thousands of immigrants streaming in from Europe and Africa. Seeking opportunities to work and own land, immigrants flooded the 77 square-mile region of the Rio de la Plata at a rate of three immigrants for every one *porteno*—a Buenos Aires local. This eclectic populace not only laid the groundwork for what would become a conurbation surpassing 13 million people, but without their influence, the tango would be an illusion and the city largely forgotten.

Before the immigrants arrived, the landscape existed as *la gran aldea*—or big village (Keeling 1996, 20). It was not until their arrival that Buenos Aires shed its parish cocoon and came into its own. *Portenos* attribute their city's maturity to the *barrio*—or local neighborhood unit. The immigrants, especially European immigrants, carried with them the essence of this unit.

Aside from the energy and activity, the principle feature of the city was the changes in lifestyle along the [road], those changes as you go from one neighborhood to another. This is a peculiar characteristic of Buenos Aires, which distinguishes it from other major capitals in the western hemisphere. The quality of neighborhood life, lacking in most other large cities, is, I believe, very important for an understanding of contemporary Buenos Aires (Tulchin 1982, 153).

Ubiquitously superimposed upon the city's landscape, the *barrio* single-handedly chiseled neighborhoods out of an undifferentiated terrain, reshaping the urban landscape of Buenos Aires.

The *barrio*, however, did more than merely dissect the city. Like a phoenix, out of this partition emerged a pulsating neighborhood scene—the kinetic city brought to life. As foreigners attempting to acclimate, they fused their familiar habits from home with their new foreign posts. The immigrants made Buenos Aires a place worth remembering and preserving. This world of 19th century immigrant celebration reigns as the golden era of the city.

PARIS OF THE SOUTH

Unfortunately this reign was short-lived and, in a way, mutinous. While the lower class immigrants brought Buenos Aires to its apogee, the wealthy immigrants simultaneously dismantled their framework. It was the upper class' attempts to mimic their European counterparts that instigated the mass homogenization of Buenos Aires.

As students of Parisian trends, the upper class immigrants revered Haussmann's massive overhaul of 20th century Paris. If Buenos Aires was to be considered the true "Paris of the South" it required a trans-Atlantic Haussmann. While no one in particular filled those shoes, "Baron Georges Haussmann's late nineteenth century Parisian designs provided a template for urban renovation. *Portenos* expressed their admiration for French culture and society by attempting to give the Hispanic colonial city a more Parisian feel" (Keeling 1996, 28).

Architects inundated the landscape with grand boulevards, European architectural styles, sidewalk cafés, and street trees. The landscapes of Buenos Aires and the landscapes of Europe were synonymous, like "a mirage; we could be either there or in Madrid, Palermo, Paris, or London" (Borinsky 1996, 419). But such glory was predictable and routine—a successful European xerox. With every grand boulevard, the fabric of the city became a composite of homogeneity and concrete perversion—the austere staleness sanitizing the city of immigrant electricity.

Asphalt and concrete covered the *barrios*, the neighborhoods that were half-city half-country, where local soccer teams played in empty fields on weekend afternoons while families drank *maté* under grape arbors, and sweethearts arranged to meet in the evenings in entryways beneath the streetlamps (Taylor 1987, 483).

Urban growth coated the *barrios*, immobilizing their pulse; their boundaries became more nebulous and their culture more tenuous. This imprisonment inevitably prompted an immigrant reaction and a verbal revolution.

LYRICAL LAMENTATION

Armed with words, text became the conduit to both commemorate and resuscitate the beloved Buenos Aires of the *barrio* era. This text took the form of tango lyrics.

There is no possible return to that intimate Buenos Aires. Its recovery is left up to memory; reliving it is left up to nostalgia... Nostalgia for the things that have happened, Sand that life carried off, Grief for the *barrio* that has changed, and bitterness for the dream that has died (Arocena 1982, 172-73).

Thompson punctuates the interconnectedness of nostalgia and tango stating, "If nostalgia is a country, tango is its capital" (Thompson 2005, 25). Not only does the aforementioned tango lyric explain the origins of the nostalgic phenomenon, but as a literary form, tango also functions as an outlet to document the vanishing city.

Tango was the obvious outlet as it had served a similar purpose in the past. Tango emerged in the backstreet brothels of Buenos Aires. There, forlorn and disconcerted immigrants commiserated, washing away their disappointments of relocation with rum, camaraderie, and song. The tango

emerged from their cries for a sense of belonging. Over the years, tango lyrics continued to serve as vernacular release valves for the immigrants—only this time their words decried the destruction of, rather than the adjustment to, their newfound homeland.

Their cries, however, were bittersweet. Their lyrical angst not only lamented the deleterious effects of urban growth, but they also celebrated their darling city. “In fact, between the 1920s and the 1940s, the best efforts of Argentinean lyricism dealt with the rediscovery of the city” (Arocena 1982, 1976). The following tango by Enrique Cadicamo reads like a postcard from a distanced *porteno* to her beloved Buenos Aires and attests to the impression that her cherished city bestowed.

ANCHORED IN PARIS

Distant Buenos Aires, how pretty you must be!
It's going on ten years since you saw me weigh anchor.
Here, in this Montmartre, sentimental district,
I feel that the memory digs its dagger in me.

How must have changed your Corrientes Street!
Suipacha, Esmeralda, your very own suburb!
Somebody has told me that you're flourishing
And a set of streets run in diagonal.

You don't know the desire I have to see you!
Here I am stopped, without money or faith.
Who knows, one night death takes me away
And...so long, Buenos Aires, I don't return to see you!

(Cadicamo, Enrique. “Anchored in Paris.” Trans. Alberto Paz. Planet Tango. Feb 23, 2007. <<http://www.planet-tango.com/lyrics/anchoredinparis.htm>>.)

SOFT CITY

Tango documents the rediscovery of the city through its texts, and succeeds because of the images they invoke. The images of the tango, however, are different from standard photographic images. Like the glossy finish of a photograph, the text coats an image with an additional layer of meaning. It constructs a more holistic image, providing insight into artifacts, meanings, sounds, smells, and memories. Text paints a personal history of the city, where a bound collection of lyrics acts as a biography of the city. The text of tango taps into the individual's city, the city of memories, the seemingly ethereal and kinetic city, the city Jonathan Raban describes as the soft city—“the city as we imagine it, the...city of illusion, myth, aspiration, nightmare” (Raban 1974, 10). But this city “is as real, maybe more real, than the hard city one can locate on maps in statistics, in monographs on urban sociology and demography and architecture” (10).

Cities exist as a composite of complex layers—layers that become increasingly more intricate in mega cities. In cities of such magnitude, the boundaries between the static and kinetic collapse—distinctions blur. While national archives document the administrative city of Buenos Aires and picture books capture the aesthetic elements of its static city, the soft city gets lost. The seismic conditions of a mega city prohibit the comprehensive preservation of its past, while conventional means assuredly neglect its soft memory.

According to Jonathan Raban, “There is no single point of view from which one can grasp the city as a whole. That, indeed, is the central distinction between the city and the small town. For each citizen, the city is a unique and private reality; and the novelist, planner or sociologist finds himself dealing with an impossible tessellation of personal routes, spoors and histories within the labyrinth of the city” (Raban 1974, 272). Extrapolating from Raban’s juxtaposition of the city to the small town, a similar relationship emerges between the mega city and the city. The dynamic complexity of the mega city defies singular vantage points and singular histories. What emerges within this “labyrinth,” rather, is an intense collection of unique memories and individual experiences. Any effort to record this city, therefore, demands alternative archiving methods. For Buenos Aires, tango lyrics do just that.

The lyrics capture personal accounts of life—irreproducible memories specific to the history and evolution of the city. Tango serves as an archiving method unique to Buenos Aires that suggests an alternative way to record and read the soft traces of the city. While Buenos Aires appears to be an impenetrable mass, beneath its calcified armor brims a city whose pulse enlivens its authoritative veneer. While conventional means of archiving cement images of the concrete city, the text of tango—in its typically sinuous style—maneuvers its way past those walls into the soft city and records the often-neglected and otherwise-forgotten undercurrents of the kinetic city and its evanescent form.

TANGO AS DOCUMENTATION

At times it seems as though there are as many tangos as there are memories, and these memories are bound up in text, memorialized. “City and personal life constitute an inseparable whole in the *portenos*’ experience. The city is not just a physical environment for the events of city life; it is more, much more. It is felt as part of life; it is life itself in the expression of its efforts, achievements, and failures. This communion between *portenos* and their Buenos Aires has been offered up, and is offered up, as a constant in many fine examples of Argentine [tango]” (Arocena 1982, 170). “Much more” here refers to the soft or kinetic city, which coats the text of tango. For instance, in *La Musa Mistonga*, Julian Centeya documents a series of personal, kinetic memories:

LA MUSA MISTONGA, (THE MUSE OF THE POOR)

The muse of the poor in the *barrios*
Writes in a droll fine vernacular...
Unaware of the glories
Of life in Versailles,
She goes out happy, when the night comes,
To watch the boys’ street games
To study the smiles of couples sitting down
And the face of heaven, turning dark with the stars
And listen to old tunes.
An organ-grinder plays, inspired by Carriego.
The muse of the *barrio* is quite unaware
Of the grief of a princess
Who had an affair
With a blonde, handsome pageboy
But she will get upset
At a milonguita’s misstep
And weep, crying outrage.
(Thompson 2005, 34)

Centeya provides images of “boys’ street games,” “couples sitting down,” and an “organ-grinder” playing Carriego. Standard archival methods fail to detect these undercurrents, inadvertently eliminating the city’s memory. However, in this instance, the kinetic city lives because of Centeya’s personal documentation of this *barrio*.

Tango not only records the kinetic city, but it also creates it. In the *barrios*, especially the *barrios* of La Boca and San Telmo, tango escapades break out in the streets and plazas. There, every additional onlooker contributes to the creation of an informal stage. Only occasionally does a member of the audience cross the threshold and brave the pseudo-spotlight. Homero Manzi and Carlos Cesar Lienzi document this phenomenon in *Tango* and *Adios Arrabal*:

TANGO

Lamplight at the corner, male serenaders, calling out
Compliments to good-looking women
Dance and song.

(Manzi, Homero. “Tango.” Trans. Alberto Paz. Planet Tango. March 20, 2006. <<http://www.planet-tango.com/lyrics/vozdetango.htm>>.)

ADIOS ARRABAL, (FAREWELL, SUBURBS)

The dancing at “Rodríguez Peña”
Mocho and Cachafaz
Of the milonga of Buenos Aires
That will never return
Carnivals of my life
Brave nights and at the end
Being stood up by the women
In that old Buenos Aires suburb.

(Lienzi, Carlos Cesar. “Adios Arrabal.” Trans. Alberto Paz. Planet Tango. Feb 23, 2007. <<http://www.planet-tango.com/lyrics/adiosarr.htm>>.)

CELEBRATION

What initially emerged as a form of lamentation evolved into a means of celebration. The street games, the organ-grinder, and the dancers compose Buenos Aires’ soft center—the vanguard of the kinetic realm. These images and their kin repeatedly appear throughout tango lyrics as well as the physical city. So persistent is their presence that they, at times, outlast their static incubator. Neglecting to document these images would leave but a shell of the city’s history and remnants of a truncated mythical identity. Traditional forms of city archiving cannot keep pace with the exponential speed of mega cities, but the tempo of tango catches its slack, documents the memories, and memorializes the city.

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