Savigliano, Marta E.
Nocturnal Ethnographies: Following Cortázar in the Milongas of Buenos Aires
Trans. Revista Transcultural de Música, núm. 5, junio, 2000, p. 0
Sociedad de Etnomusicología
Barcelona, España

Available in: http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=82200508
Nocturnal Ethnographies: Following Cortázar in the Milongas of Buenos Aires

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An Anomalous Project

How to write an ethnography and a critique of the ethnographic predicament at the same time? How to create ethnographies, the descriptions and interpretations of something exotic brought into the familiar or of something familiar turned into exotic, while simultaneously addressing the ideological traps and the political stakes of the ethnographic enterprise? How to deliver an ethnographic product that retains the tension of the ethnographic encounter, the romance and the falling-outs, the fascination and the disgust, the wealth and the poverty of ethnographic knowledge—and the differences for its participating subjects and objects? An enumeration of some approaches to ethnographic writing might help to clarify what I am struggling to get at. I do not mean, for example, the inclusion of acritical perspective within an ethnography—as in 'for starters, be aware dear readers that I know that ethnographies are problematic intellectual exercises.' And then, after a self-reflexive statement (more or less elaborate, more or less incisive, more or less honest and devastating) a switching into the ethnographic mode, framed by a mixture of resigned resentment and vindictive nostalgia—as in after all I have spent all these years perfecting the arts of representing others, identifying and analyzing their otherness, and there is an audience out there made up of academics, amateurs, and even some of those very others who I am representing ready to consume my ethno-product so, here it is. Nor I am making reference to an ethnography that in incorporating critical statements would promise to deliver a new ethnography, as if ethnography could run against itself (its premises and practices) and still claim an ethnographic status—as in getting away with ethnographic murder, if not in actual practice at least in its intentions. My list of neithers and nors also accommodates the possible critiques of ethnography that 'other' ethnographers and their writings,
dealing at the distance with the past history of ethnographic enterprises and/or ethnographic futurology. Innovative recipes without the actual experimentation—as in 'here are the problems' followed by some examples, 'here are some possible solutions; now you try it out'—would also be ruled out.

I do not wish to condemn any of these approaches to ethnographic writing or its critiques, nor to judge what they have to offer to either the reproduction, the revolution, or the death of ethnography. Such an assessment would require engaging with a moral ground and a technical investigation that would take me away from the questions posed in the beginning. How to identify and represent otherness while conducting a resilient study of ethnographic representation, its uses of fiction and its scientific pretensions? Is it possible to make an ethnography that works against ethnographic authority? Can an ethnography retain its seductive powers if its Eurocentrically-defined organizational concepts (alterity, orality, timelessness, and unreflexivity) were persistently exposed? My purpose here is to generate an ethnographic anomaly. The topic and the setting of my fieldwork, the milongas of Buenos Aires, as well as my nightmarish ways of engaging with them have led me into what I will call a nocturnal ethnography. Imagine an ethnographic ghost haunting daytime ethnographies when the world turns dark. An ethnography that occupies the same space as traditional ethnographies and yet transforms that space by taking place later, much later. This ethnography will then move almost blindly in the ethnographic night, a time when strange things happen or at least when stories about strange things are told. (For a footnote: See de Certeau's 'Story Time' 1984: 77-90.) Nocturnal story times could produce ethnographic accounts in which the critique of ethnographic doings would be as vivid and present as the seductive narrative, so integrated to the story as to make it incomprehensible without its very questioning. The ethnographic object, othered, (a)temporalized, (over)spatialized would return reciprocating ethnographic gestures (For a footnote: Fabian 1983; Thomas 1996: 1-17, 117-127; de Certeau 1988: 209-244). The ethnographer now situated in a slightly recognizable place, after hours, will stumble; the ethnographic writing will stutter, the ethnographic project will lose ground and coherence. An ethnography finally othered, at least for the night? A nocturnal ethnographic anomaly?

Writing at night—the ethnographer thought and wrote—might bring these writings closer to what they are supposed to do. At midnight. Right before sleep starts to sink in and after a day of futile overwork and frustration. Kept awake long enough to fantasize about another life. Not the afterlife, but a parallel one out there in the dark, one that starts happening when the inhabitants of the everyday retire and seclude. Curiosity. An other life, nocturnal, stirs up the hopes for wonders pushing you out of boredom. You
drop the chance for promising dreams and choose to join the restless, out there, in that obscure reality. You are on your feet. Freshened up, you get ready to meet not the dead but not the quite alive either, who now populate the city at their own risk. ... This failed experiment--no point in concealing the result here, she thought and wrote--requires an adequate environment and a loyal accomplice for the attempt if not the outcome to be successful. The nights of Buenos Aires will be the place to start; my co-perpetrator, Dr. Marcelo Hardoy. I was the one who thought of this nocturnal adventure but Dr. Hardoy, I must admit, had initiated similar activities, as far as I know, half a century ago. In order to delimit the scope and thus intensify the depth of our potential insights we happened to coincide in the choice of research terrain. (I would also soon discover that although our objects of inquiry pretty much overlapped, our manifest interests were rather different.) The milongas of Buenos Aires--the nature and culture of which will occupy the rest of these writings--attracted both of us. He declared that in his case mostly because of boredom and curiosity. In my case, the reasons have already been exposed. (For a note card on methodology: Dr. Hardoy was more of a witness than an accomplice. He was dead by the time I (we?) began the work.)

An Elusive Field

Milongas, in the current tango lexicon, are the tango joints--a space and a time when and where tango bodies get together to produce tanguidad (tanguity, tango-ness). They are the physical site of the corporeal, temporary encounter of the practitioners of the tango dance. The milongas of Buenos Aires are a slippery landscape. They are invisible to eyes untrained in tango and elusive to those who do not keep up with current milonga tips. Every time I go back--Elvira Díaz reflected and jotted down--, usually once a year, I find that some milongas have folded, others have moved, and new ones have opened. The next time, old ones have reopened, new ones have disappeared, established ones are there but the clientele has changed. Milongas go through persistent transformations in terms of where they are located, what they look like, who attends them, and how they operate.

There is no generic milonga except for the fact that in order to be identified as a milonga, a gathering of tango dancers of some sort has to occur. Milongueros and milongueras (milonga habitues) actually make the milongas wherever they go and settle for a while. The physical requirements for the locale (the location in the city, the material conditions of the building, the size of the dance floor, the quality of the music equipment, et cetera) are very elastic. What matters is who goes there and how often. The crucial figures
are the milonga's organizer and the disc-jockey, who have the power of convoking the milonguera clientele, a rather small and capricious crowd. A milonga--Elvira struggled to specify--can be a year-long, seasonal, weekly, daily, frequent, sporadic or one time occurrence in a dance hall, a night club, a social club, a private house, a patio in a tenement house, a park, or the streets. It can be loosely or well organized. The decor can be run-down, kitsch, luxurious or insipid. The ambiance can be decadent, pretentious or cool. The purpose, however,--Elvira analyzed--is clear: tango will be danced (not just played or watched as in a tango show), and the participants will perform to the best of their abilities. In the milongas the participants are, simultaneously, the performers and the audience of the tango spectacle.

Milongas are definitely social events--Elvira clarified and classified--although the opportunities for socializing are rather restricted. Tango is not strictly a social or ballroom dance. (From a note card: Check the lengthy discussions on this topic on the e-mail tango List, May 1996.) Milongas are not attended to get to know anyone, really. They are a site of performance, of watching and being watched dancing tango and all the rituals that go with it, including the careful construction of paradigmatic tango characters--milongueros and milongueras of different types. Milongas are usually not a recreational or entertaining activity either, given that a fair amount of the dancers take them as the most serious things in their lives. (For a footnote: See Harris 1992: 147-174 for an account of leisure studies in the British context, and especially his discussion of Chris Rojek's figurational sociology. Rojek asserts that the disciplining of emotions and regulations of spontaneity 'help deny that leisure is free time at all.' The activities in question 'express an historically specific affect economy of balances and restraints' (164). Also, see Barthes 1977: 83 for an analysis of what constitutes the boundaries between work and pleasure. In his discussion of Fourier, Barthes addresses the ambition to transform work into pleasure (and not to suspend work for the sake of leisure time). Milongueros seem to be invested in the opposite. They transform leisure into work, and thus attain pleasure--the pleasure of doing at least in that other life of the night a pleasurable work by working at what gives them pleasure.) Performing at the milongas requires dedication, effort, preparation, hard training. If we were to locate milongas in the leisurely, as opposed to laboring side of everyday (or every night) life--Elvira pondered--, then the trying work involved in the pursuit of pleasure must be emphasized. Milongas are clearly an Aesclapist@ activity, but the tango-laboring body--and not the relaxed, disengaged body of the one seeking relief from efforts and preoccupations--is at the center of the milongas' economy and politics of pleasure. (For a footnote: Cf. Dyer 1992: 11-35.) At the milongas the tango bodies are monitored and evaluated in terms of weight, strength, responsiveness, flexibility, focus, dancing style and choreographic skills. The
measuring sticks are gender specific, and I will address these issues later--Elvira pointed out and restrained herself from running down a tangent. My point here is that the milongas demand the presence and circulation of tango bodies ready to sweat their way into the milongas' political economy of pleasure, an economy that pivots on the use value of tango bodies only occasionally associated with monetary exchange. (From a quick note scribbled on the margin: On prostitution and drugs. To be addressed in a lengthier report? Also cheap entrance fee, cheap drinks, overall little circulation of money.) The rewards of tangoing at the milongas are very tangible to its participants, but they are not easily attainable. The milonga delivers its pleasures only with the investment of time and bodily work.

What characterizes the milongas, then,--Elvira summarized--is the presence of devoted milongueros and milongueras, tango music, and open floor space for dancing the best possible tango. Prácticas (practice sessions) and tango lessons do not count as milongas. The milongas are a site of tango dancing as performance, a public exhibition of tango dancing skills. Training and practicing takes place somewhere else (not necessarily in some other space, but if in the same space, at a different time, where/when either the presence of money in payment for classes or the absence of risk entailed in the prácticas changes the nature of the dancing event).

If you stride across the Buenos Aires milonga scene, from the point of view of an on-looker, difference is what will strike you and not just among milongas. The eclecticism is also to be found within: the ages and social classes as well as the nationalities of the habitues defy all classificatory rigors. And yet, all milongas are identified as such for their combination of intensely technical and transcendentally mystical investments in the tango dance tradition. They conform a parallel world devoted to the reproduction of tango skills and the cultivation of its affects. Milongueros and milongueras easily switch between materialistic and metaphysical discourses in order to account for their experiences at the milongas. Thus, at times milongas evoke images of small, labor intensive tango factories crowded with male and female workers striving to produce the best possible tango bodies, and at other times, they recall isolated shrines peopled by local worshipers and by foreign pilgrims of the tango cult. To its participants, milongas are a source of mixed pleasures and displeasures, a complex politics linked to the disciplining of the tango body and to the rewards that the trained tango body is capable of delivering. (For a footnote: See Mercer 1983 and Jameson 1983.) When looked at from the point of view of its displeasures, milongas emerge as a rough, shady world, highly competitive and hierarchical, codified in terms of selfish interests, male dominance, and even moral corruption. Milongas, as sites of pleasure, are regarded as democratic, even revolutionary experiments that allow for age
and class differences to blur, male and female differences to explode and yet seductively combine, self-interests to cede to the higher common purpose of keeping tango alive, reasserting the capacity to produce a local cultural form in the midst of bombarding foreign influences, of providing a non-monetary based source of leisure and even an elusive, yet very real, experience of passion. As sites of both pleasure and displeasure, milongas' outlooks change as the events of the night develop for each participant, meeting or defying their expectations. Romantic and harsh views of the milonga pervade the night, and the habitues cherish their moody and inconsistent judgements. (From an underlined note on the margin: Check with 'informants' if they would liked to be mentioned by their real names or if they would rather choose pseudonyms.) This is especially true when in the presence of interested outsiders whose beliefs will be systematically tested, contested, and unsettled. Milongueros and milongueras seek to prove the complexity of the milonga world, and its impermeability to the analytical eye. Milongas are to be judged by the irresistible seduction that they are capable of exerting beyond, and because, of its risks. They can not be contained by logical interpretations. Proving oneself at the milonga--risking not being recognized as a worthy dancer--is what ultimately constitutes the pleasure. To the milongueros, an outsider who settles for a seduction-resistant interpretation of the tango world is sure to miss the best of it, namely the pros and cons that engender the formation of the milonga's pleasures.

A Questionable Source

Julio Cortázar--Elvira wrote under a new, tentative headline--published in 1951 a poignant description of a trashy milonga of the 1940s in downtown Buenos Aires. (Insert footnote on Julio Cortázar, an Argentine novelist, etc., born in 1914 in Brussels to Argentine parents, raised in the Province of Buenos Aires and educated at the Universidad de Buenos Aires, moved to Paris in 1951, the same year Bestiario--the collection that includes 'Las Puertas del Cielo'--was published, died in 1984, etc.) His story 'Las Puertas del Cielo' (The Gates of Heaven) (1993: 117-137) presents the ambivalences to which an outsider is drawn in trying to deal with the milonga world. Cortázar's story offers the opportunity to look at quasi-ethnographer at work, fascinated and scandalized by an underworld that escapes his judgements as it conforms to his categories of analysis. I will follow the descriptions/interpretations of his fictive milonga as a pseudo-milonguera (an aspiring milonguera, partially saved from the milonga's harsh judgements of tango skills because of my anthropological interests and yet questioned, at least by some--including myself--because of living the milonga in order to
write about it). I will undo his analysis with my own judgements, and by updating what he 'saw' fifty years ago with what I have seen and heard in the milongas of the 1990s. (From a note on post-it attached to a scratch book: Include references to anthropological uses of fiction writings, fiction as anthropological documents, anthropological representations as fictive (including Cortázar!) in García Canclini 1968, Appadurai 1991: 202-205, and Archetti 1994: 16-21.)

Dr. Marcelo Hardoy, a practicing lawyer and collector of social curio, is Cortázar's chosen narrator. He is introduced into the milonga scene by two former clients, Mauro and Celina. They both belong to a different Buenos Aires world, marked by lower class and cheaper tastes than his. Celina, whose wake is set at the beginning of the story, was a dancer and hostess at a slumish bar. Mauro had rescued her from prostitution. Mauro is presented as a demure, working class guy who trades produce at the central market (El Abasto). Dr. Hardoy, a decadent professional disenchanted with the life of his own class, introduces himself as a 'one who watches from aside their hard, hot happiness' (120). (For a footnote: All quotes are my translation.) Like an ethnographer, he struggles with his voyeuristic and vicarious doings: 'I leaned on them to be witness of what they themselves were never conscious of' (120). Mauro and Celina, his key-informants, lived that life while Dr. Hardoy confesses, in a self-reflective and self-pitiful mood, that 'it made me sick to my gut to think like that--for other people it's enough to feel that way, I have to think it' (120). And he apologetically continues, knowing that his is a rather questionable anthropological experiment: 'Mauro and Celina had not been my guinea pigs, no. I loved them. I still love them, a lot. Only I could never enter their simplicity, only I saw myself forced to feed myself on the reflection of their blood. [...] I know that my curiosity lies behind all this, notes that fill my files a bit at a time' (120-121). Dr. Hardoy dives into the often unaddressed practices of othering, identifying otherness only to rush into collecting it, characteristic of the ethnographic enterprise: 'They came a little closer to me, but I was as far from them as ever' (122). Dr. Hardoy, the ethnographer qua seducer, entered into their lives in order to watch them live. ('We went to the dances together and I watched them live' (122).) Finally, in a torturous, honesty-driven declaration he addresses the thorny issue of ethnographic writerly appropriations: 'It was an ugly thing to realize, but what I was doing, really, was collecting and reordering my data on Celina; they'd never been written out but I had it all in my head' (122). The fieldwork experience of collecting headnotes that eventually will enter the composition of the ethnographic text. (For a footnote: See Sanjek 1990.) The anguish entailed in the reporting and in the interpretation of the other. The piracy, the appropriation for dubious scientific purposes bordering self-interest and narcissism. The multiple betrayals at stake in the written representation, the
imposition of an unsurmountable interpretive distance after a temporary, sought-after immersion as a participant in the experiential world of the ethnographic other.

Dr. Hardoy's self-reflections are triggered by the traumatic event of Celina's death. It is as if her ghost would lead him into the fatality of both, the self-analysis of his ethnographic motives and the ethnographic reporting in itself. In an attempt to console Mauro for his irremediable loss, Dr. Hardoy drags Mauro (and you and me)--Elvira noted--into the world of the milonga: the Santa Fe Palace. Eventually we, the readers, will get a glimpse of what at least for the Celinas and Mauros are the gates of heaven--but like Dr. Hardoy, as outsiders, we will only observe with difficulty the politics of pleasure rather than live pleasure in itself.

In my note cards I have a good description of the Santa Fe Palace, whose name is not Santa Fe nor is it located on that street, but on one nearby. A shame that none of that can really be described, not the modest facade with the promising posters and the sign falling apart, even less those hangers-on killing time at the entrance and who check everyone out from hat to shoes. What follows is even worse, not that it is bad because in those places there's nothing that's precise; but rather the chaos, the confusion rearranging itself in a false order: hell and its circles. (127)

Cortázar's narrator, with the care of an ethnographer concerned with protecting the privacy of his research subjects, names and un-names, locates and displaces the Santa Fe Palace. We, the readers, follow his Dante-esque steps from the outside to the core of the milonga: a hellish chaos. And from then on, we will be walked through an eerie experience, where the detailed observations noted on his cards try to undo the fascinating mystery of the milonga (a mystery that he also builds up for us). Dr. Hardoy, like an ethnographer, aggressively pierces into the scene: analyzes, interprets, judges the milonga and its strange population. He fights the convictions and the ease with which the milonga's fauna moves in its territory, now his 'field.' His mistrust, his skeptical detachment, his disgust, struggle against the insiders trust in tango's power to transport them to the realm of pleasure (their heaven, his hell). And we, readers, are left to decide whom to follow--Elvira reads and writes, swinging undecidedly between positions: the gifted outside observer (who, after all, opens up this world to us) or the enraptured participants (that manage to betray the writer's efforts to contain them, even when we get to know about them only through his manipulative text.) (For a footnote: See Bakhtin 1981: 301-331.) Like the readers of any ethnographic text, here we are, situated at the 'entrance,' the threshold between two worlds, a threshold to which we will be continuously returned if we manage to
read between the lines. The 'hangers-on,' at the milonga’s entrance are measuring him (and us) 'from hat to shoes.'

At this point in Cortázar's story we (or they) are literally situated at the door of the milonga, paying our entrance fee--a different one according to our gender--to a slummish looking hell that is also heaven:

A hell of an amusement park for a two fifty entrance fee and ladies zero fifty. Badly isolated compartments, sort of successive covered patios where in the first a típica [tango] band, in the second a característica [all purpose] band, and in the third a norteña [folkloric] band with singers and malambo [gaucho dance]. Located in an intermediate hall (l, Virgule) [for an asterisk: Dr. Hardoy's reference to Virgil the poet or to Virgil, the poet who appears in Dante's Divine Comedy, also divided into three circular domains?] we could hear the three musics and we could see the three circles dancing; then you could choose your favorite, or your could go from one dance to the other, from one gin to another, looking for tables and women. [...]

I took him by an arm and set him on the way to a table because he was still distracted and looked at the balcony where the típica played, the singer holding the microphone with both hands and shaking it slowly. [...] The table was right by the dance floor, on the other side there were chairs against a long wall and a bunch of women renewed itself with that absent air of the milongueras when at work or at play. There was not much talking, we could hear the típica very well, overflowing with bandoneones (concertinas) and playing with heart. [...] (127-128)

I will interrupt Cortázar's Hardoy here, as a dancer responds to a corte, an abrupt halt in the tango trajectory--Elvira mimetically choreographed her written partnering--, and take the opportunity to tell you, readers of my readings of Cortázar's fictive milonga of the 1940s that in the 1990s milongas of these characteristics are not to be found in Buenos Aires--Elvira, back down to earth, from evocation to realism. Live bands and singers have been replaced by disc-jockeys, very few locales have more than one dance floor, tango rarely shares the same space with other music genres (and when it does, it is usually with 'tropical' music, jazz or rock and roll). But the rest of the setting is still pretty accurate--Elvira checked her fieldnotes, 1996, vol. 2--: tables by a central dance floor, chairs against the surrounding walls, and crucial to my own ethnographic piercings intruding the contemporary milongas in counter-point to Cortázar's Dr. Hardoy, the gender dynamics. The difference is established from the beginning by the admission fees. Then, men wandering like casual hunters 'looking for tables and women', women sitting in oblivion, 'with that absent air,' like enticing preys. And 'there was not
much talking,' a deliberately rare occurrence of conversations when argentinos get together, those people renown for their love of talking for talk's sake. Following the rules of the milonga, however, I will allow Dr. Hardoy, my male ethnographic tango partner--Elvira, repeat offender, flew again into tango evocations--, declare his own interests and make his seductive steps before producing my own analytical counters.

**Alter-Time and Its Monsters**

At this point I believe it is good for me to say that I went to this milonga because of the monsters, and that I don't know of any other where so many can be found together. They show up by eleven at night, come down from vague regions of the city, paused and secure in ones or twos [...]. (129)

Dr. Marcelo Hardoy arrives early to his chosen milonga with his working class acquaintance Mauro. It is early enough to watch the 'monsters' marching in, 'paused and secure,' in contrast to the state of anxiety that invades outside observers like himself, prompting headnotes that will fill note cards, that will deliver written stories, that will keep a breathing space open between those monstrous others and himself--keeping his own monsters at bay? What makes them monstrous--Elvira confronted her self-appointed dance partner and ethnographic accomplice--, what gives them appalling monstrosity, is their gathering. At night, after eleven, they come 'together.' The light of day, tired of running order safely, relaxes. The darkness, then, fills in the emptiness with chaos and its monsters, who were being kept isolated, in their daytime places, under control.

Milongas are nocturnal and not evening events. They are not a continuation of the day or even the end of the daily routines; they are la noche, the life of the night. (For a footnote: See Ferrer 1995, and Arlt 1993.) A life that occurs not only at a different time but in a different dimension from the daily one. When milongueros and milongueras enter the milonga, they enter a different world. If one were to locate it somewhere in reference to the world of everyday life routines, milongas would be placed in the dark, smoky side of things. Under. Milongas are a permanent site of symbolic inversion. Unlike Carnivals or other seasonal festivals where normal life is interrupted and the status quo reversed for a set amount of time, milongas occur continuously and in parallel through the year. Milongueros and milongueras step in and out of the milongas, these places where a slice of life happens following a different time. (From the back of a note card: Might be useful to include a reference to de Certeau's (1984) concepts of 'stratified places' and 'casual
time' regarding the 'ubiquity' of places and the gaps of time observed in everyday life. On stratified places: 'This place, on its surface, seems to be a collage. In reality it is ubiquitous. A piling up of heterogenous places. Each one [...] refers to a different mode of territory unity, of socioeconomic distribution, of political conflicts and of identifying symbolism' (201). On casual time: 'Casual time appears only as the darkness that causes an 'accident' and a lacuna in production. It is a lapse in the system and its diabolic adversary' (202). ) A time with a different rhythm, not only slower but also productively unproductive, a time that stretches through the night connecting the present with the past rather than with the future. In this sense, the milongas are 'conservative' reservoirs of the practices of every night life. They are sites of enduring micro-history, composed of anecdotes rather than events, that run underneath grand, fast-paced history. Milongas preserve porteño cultural resources, traditions, the old and their wisdoms. (For a footnote or two: Here I have been following Braudel 1981, and Foucault 1972. Commenting on Foucault's conceptualization of history, according to which history would be the result of an accumulation of sedimentary strata rather than a single-layered process, Angela Dalle Vacche observes: 'The traditional document belongs to the realm of fast-moving surface events. Ironically, it is the movement of the dancers themselves that [...] inhabits the level of the apparently immobile'. Dancers can represent layers that move slowly and thus tell a history of looks, gestures and movements, situating these elements on the edge between truth and fiction, writing and living, acting and being. Movement, however, has been rarely considered an acceptable historical document. See Dalle Vacche 1992: 282. Specifically on tango's relation to time and history, Castilla asserts that 'tango has fulfilled its mission in a highly satisfactory manner. I say 'has fullfilled' and yet I do not mean that it is dead, although it is not quite alive either. Tango is enduring, like so many other things, because it is deeply rooted in the porteña soul and because much is done so that it will last and even revive' (1968: 438). ) Milongas run against the hectic pace of productivity and even against what milongueros recognize as the 'real world', a world ruled by parameters of success that they can rarely reach. Everyday alienations are confronted with the milongas: every night possibilities of revindication.

The time at which one enters a milonga is crucial. (Dr. Hardoy calls attention to this fact. I will elaborate with the aid of my scratch notes.) At the beginning of the night (which is rarely before midnight), the milonga is pure anxiety. Expectation. It is a time of great visibility, and not everyone wishes to be noticed right away. An early arrival has its advantages. There is less competition both for asking and for being asked to dance. In addition, the dance floor will be less crowded allowing for more comfortable dancing and requiring lesser skills at navigating the dance floor. Access to a good location
(from which to monitor good dancing partners) is easier. All these advantages, however, can be a sign of the milongueros: insecurity. If you are important enough, a table will be reserved for you, or anyone at a well located table will accommodate you when you arrive, or you need no special location because you will be detected and sought after anyway. An early arrival entails the anxiety of being able to break with the day, to contribute from the start to create the night. Usually the most accomplished tango dancers (and the ones in the prime of their milonga life) choose to slip into the night, when things are already flowing, happening. The milonga environment has been built up. The competition for partners and space on the dance floor is at the max. You sense, and show that you know that you can do it--Elvira fell back into her memories of participant-observation. Leaving the milonga is another difficult decision-making process. The whole thing combined (when you arrive, where you locate yourself, how much you choose or can dance, with whom, and when you leave) makes up your style. Also how relaxed or anxious you are during the whole process. Talking, drinking, smoking, and especially consuming drugs will be read as signs of lack of interest or commitment to what really counts in the milonga: dancing tango. These activities are present at the milonga, but they should be interrupted whenever the opportunity for dancing arises. What you do and what you look like at the milongas becomes spectacularized. To an outsider like Dr. Hardoy--Elvira distanced herself from her ethnographic and dancing partner--the inhabitants of the milonga are gendered, racially marked, nocturnal monsters--the presence of the night fetishizes their monstrosity.

[The women almost dwarfs and mestizo-looking, the guys like javanese or mocovíes (native South Americans), bound into tight checkered or black suits, hard hair plastered down with fatigue, drips of brilliantine catching blue and pink reflections, the women with enormous, tall hairdos that make them look even shorter, laborious hairdos of which they retain the tiredness and the pride. The guys nowadays have a thing for loose hair and high in the middle, enormous and effeminate bangs that have nothing to do with the brutal faces below them, the wry faces of aggression ready and awaiting their hour, the efficient torsosset on thin waists (129).]

Dr. Hardoy, coming from a different (class/race) world, is fascinated. He will tell us--Elvira flexed her knees before jumping at her partner's throat--, his allied readers gathered on the non-monstrous side of things, what these monsters look like: their hairdos, their dressing styles, their dimensions and proportions, their racial and ethnic resemblances, their cross-gendered features, so that we can answer the question haunting monstrosity. (For a note card: Cortázar/Hardoy's insistence on marking racial differences associated with class could be making reference to the 'invasion' of cabecitas.)
negras (mostly mestizo-ancestry or mestizo-looking people from the interior, less developed provinces of the country) that took place during the years of Peronist government (1946-1955). The wave of migration from the impoverished, rural areas into the city and suburbs of Buenos Aires was prompted by the expansion of the labor market due to the government's investments in industrialization and import substitutions. This working-class population became visible in the city, as outsiders to well-established porteños like Hardoy.) For what is the opposite of a monster? And how can we tell one from another without even a formal name for the non-monstrous condition? Know your monsters, especially as they dangerously gather, and you will know yourself. Cortázar's Dr. Hardoy takes us to the milonga 'because of the monsters'. A most sincere declaration of the ethnographic predicament. But once declared, all responsibility vanishes in that Abecause, as if the monsters were there calling for his curiosity to awaken, waiting to be written about in order to exist. And how interesting--Elvira shook and threw them both off balance--that the 'monsters' rarely see the Drs. Hardoy or ethnographers as monsters. Oddities, different animals, even coveted prey, yes, but not monsters.

Cortázar's Dr. Hardoy introduces the milonga's monsters by proving that monstrosity resides on the surface, the milonguero's and milonguera's bodies and their looks, as if monstrosity were an issue of aesthetics rather than of ethics, or as if the ethics of monstrosity would be embedded in monstrous aesthetics--Elvira, on all fours, proceeded to bite Dr. Hardoy's calves. He presents the bodies as definitely grotesque--an elaborated production of mismatches where, contrary to Bakhtinian teachings, the emphasis is placed on overdoing the upmost body parts, especially the hair. (For a footnote: See Stallybrass and White (1986).) What seems to follow smoothly, however, the politics of the carnivalesque is the presence of symbolic inversions deployed over the monsters' bodies: they wear the wrong outfits, the wrong make-up, the wrong hairdo for their class and its racial associations. Their grotesque looks are the result of the appropriation of demode or misinterpreted high class (classy) trademarks by low class (declasse) looking bodies. The aesthetic result provokes a distasteful effect in those who recognize the distorted appropriation that stands out as a tension between the two symbolic registers of distinction, high and low. Milonga aesthetics, like camp and rascuachismo, challenge the status quo in that it shows that low bodies, despite their deprived social conditions, can display excess by putting it on.

From this point of view--Elvira, back on her feet, recomposed her hairdo and attire--, the milongas I attended in Buenos Aires in 1996 do show the presence of monsters, but they are referred to as milongueros and milongueras. Those terms are marked enough to denote the eye-catching
aesthetics and also the ethics that characterize this core group within the tango world. The aesthetics, however, are different nowadays, although the impact for an intruder like Dr. Hardoy remains roughly the same. More than elaborate hairdo, what calls the attention (of both the milongueros and the outsiders) is the women’s use of body revealing attire: see-through and/or cropped blouses, very short mini-skirts or, more rarely, full-length, tight skirts or slacks slitted almost to the waist or made of translucent fabrics. Next, and also in contrast to what women wear in everyday life, come the three plus inch high-heel, strapped shoes. Female haircuts, rather than complicated hairdo, show a preference for short lengths in disproportionate numbers when compared to what one can see any day in the streets. And make-up, in contemporary milongas, is not particularly striking. When asked about these aesthetics choices, both milongueros and milongueras stress the fact that, although these attires respond to fashionable trends, what matters is that they are comfortable to dance in: the skirt does not get in the way of the legs entangling along the tango walks and during the figuras; the high heels facilitate pivoting on the ball of the foot so that the body can promptly switch directions, and they also help to tilt the body’s axis toward the partner in the tight tango milonguero (tango de apile); short hair does not interfere with the milongueros’ sight, given that their heads are held in contact (cheek to cheek either facing the same or opposite directions), thus helping to prevent collisions with other couples on the dance floor. The see-through materials or skin-tight cuts, as well as the cropped blouses and even the extreme shortness of some skirts, are considered a current milonga fashion that has adopted some of the most sensual looks of the mainstream trends (some of them reminiscent of a pre-Evita Madonna).

What makes them monstrous--Elvira hesitated on whether to question the milongueros' uncritical objectification of the female body or whether to continue pressing Dr. Hardoy’s neck (where she located his prejudices); she opted for the latter--to use Cortázar/Dr. Hardoy’s term, is that these fashion indices in the milonga are redundant: too many women wear them at the same time in the same place--as in Cortázar/Hardoy’s monstrous gathering of monsters--, and that they are worn by mature women, women who have passed the mini-skirt, cropped, see-through look prime time in most public spaces except the milonga. The mismatch is to be found in this age transgression, where the appropriate age fit between the attire and the body who carries it is being transgressed. As a result, the display of mature women's bodies (women in their 40s and up to their late 60s) is what calls the intruder’s attention--Elvira pushed Dr. Hardoy off the dance floor. The milonga environment is thus charged with a female sensuality that is beyond everyday life parameters, and the women who practice it enjoy it. It is a practice of pleasure. In the milonga not only do they have the choice to publicly expose
their body shape with an aesthetic that defies otherwise accepted age parameters of old and young and their corresponding ethical (mis)judgements (as in 'only whores dress like that'), but this practice also asserts their ability to compete with younger milongueras' strategies of visual seduction. In the milongas, mature women are still in the running. Plump, bony, or 'out of shape' female bodies are not to be concealed because what (really) matters is the confidence with which the milonguera moves her body on the dance floor. Thus, in the milonga, an otherwise grotesque body becomes beautiful by the way it engages with the tango dance. She must be light but she should be fully 'present' by investing effort in her arms and thrust in her legs; she is expected to be focused, quick in responding to the marcas, and to give her weight to her partner and yet not fall easily off balance. The decisive moment for the judgement of the milonguera's beauty resides in movement, not in the still pose as is the case with pin-ups and models.

Milongueros also cultivate this age transgression by wearing toupees, dying their white hair and even, occasionally, penciling in their thinning moustaches—Elvira wrote on a napkin and reflected on the feminization of macho hypermasculinity. Their appeal, however, is more related to their ostensible efforts in dressing-up for the milonga. Casual attires (jeans, T-shirts, tennis shoes and the like) are ill-regarded in most milongas (with the exception of a couple of milongas de jóvenes). Milonga etiquette requires well-pressed jackets, ties, dressy pants, and shinny laced shoes with leather soles. In the milongas, male attire asserts the values of tradition, concerned with good manners (care as opposed to sloppiness), and with class. A milonguero's wardrobe is a noticeable monetary investment. As a matter of fact, many milongueros are blue collar workers, small shopkeepers, salesmen, or white collar workers in low positions, and a good number of them are retired or unemployed. Their jobs rarely require of them to wear ties and jackets. This is an investment that they make for the purposes of the milonga. Hair neatly combed back or to the side, rather short, and well shaved faces; gold jewelry (pinky rings and chains) are also a milonguero trait. The availability of cash to buy drinks, take taxis, and, in general, to look good contribute to the milonguero's appeal—Elvira took a drink, compared her headnotes, and decided that in the milongas femininity is assessed by focusing on the female body in movement while masculinity resides in a combination of money exhibitionism and ability at strategizing the couple's displacements on the dance floor. Milongueros' body features are rarely at stake. Their ability to move in the dance floor and to relate politely to their female partners is what counts. And here, an important observation about the milonga tango style must be made. A milonguero is appreciated by his ability to 'navigate' in often crowded dance floors, protecting his female partner—who walks backwards and thus can not monitor the movement of the couples ahead—from bumps and collisions. This
ability to monitor the scene while performing improvised movements in unison with others is the key to a milonguero's success with the milongueras.

These men, who often are unable to hold any successful control over their lives--think of their fragile employment situations--do excel at controlling their bodies and those of their partners in the milonga. The 'monstrosity' in this--Elvira rushed on to the dance floor with someone else--if one were to follow Cortázar's Dr. Hardoy some 50 plus years later, is the time and effort that milongueros devote to this 'unproductive' dancing skill that often draws them to overlook their working responsibilities. (Milongueros are known for fleeing their jobs during working hours in order to attend prácticas; they stay up late almost every night milongueando and skip or arrive late to work.) This situation is more frequent among milongueros than milongueras because it is said that men require constant practice at doing the tango in order to maintain a high level of performance, while women need to devote less time and effort to maintain comparable levels of achievement. (Women are not required to navigate the dance floor or marcar (to prompt or 'mark') the figuras. Their responsibilities during the dance, often referred to as 'following the marks' are considered less demanding.) In sum--Elvira took a break--, to contemporary outsiders, milongueros do not stand out so much for their appearance or aesthetic, but rather because of their strange (work) ethics. In addition, there is a strong sense of grotesque mismatchment in the milonga in the way in which the dancing couples are formed, that strikes the outsider's eye once milongueros and milongueras enter in twos into the dance floor. But I will follow, once again, Cortázar/Dr. Hardoy's marca, showing his proposed steps into this terrain before responding with my own--Elvira consented to dance with him once again; she could not resist this tango.

Let us recall that we were already taught that milongueras and milongueros at the Santa Fe Palace carry two distinctive attitudes before stepping into the dance floor: the women, an 'absent air' as they sit on the chairs by a long wall; the men 'wry faces of aggression,' erect over alert torsos ready to move on 'thin [thus, well trained] waists'. Milongueros wander around the dance hall studying the terrain, milongueras wait, passively, to be discovered. I have to say that this is pretty much the case today, at least as a first impression (and by this I don't mean a wrong one). A closer look--Elvira sat down at a table with other milongueras; she turned her back to Dr. Hardoy to avoid being disturbed--, assisted by conversations with the milonga habitues on the subject, suggests a more complex gender dynamic. Milongueras' absentmindedness is a watchful attitude. They observe the movements and gestures of their potential male dancing partners in order to actively ignore those emitted by the ones they are not interested in dancing with. At the same time, milongueras are busy not missing the inviting winks of the
milongueros they like, and also sending encouraging looks toward them. Milongueras even report that they can keep male dancers hostage in the milonga, by nailing them song after song with their sole eyes and thus preventing that milonguero from asking anyone else to dance. It is not in good taste to ask someone to dance verbally. Approaching a chosen partner with words and/or physical presence (as in walking to someone's table or chair) is an often unwelcome move, or a sign of 'unprofessional' behavior left to milonga newcomers--those who do not know how to read the glances. Physical or verbal impositions break the magic, the freedom of choice based on the sole appetite to dance with someone. That freedom is compromised when a physical approach, noticed by the ones surrounding the potential couple, puts one of them at risk of being publicly ashamed if a rejection were to occur. Only dancers insecure of their merits press their chosen partners into that uncomfortable situation. Under those circumstances, the dance is usually accepted, and if the milonguera dislikes her partner, she will excuse herself after the second or third tango (before the set is complete). The milonguera signals her intention to abandon the dance floor with a squalid 'Thank you'. Some milongueras call this a 'sitting him down' move, alluding playfully (and vindictively?) to the reversal of gender roles--Elvira and her female companions at conversation exchange noisy chuckles.

Cortázar/Dr. Hardoy establishes a contrast between the milongueras' apparent absentmind-ness and the milongueros' faces, wry and ready with aggressive intentions. Male faces, at the milongas I attended, show more grave brows and sometimes scornful mouths than aggression. They seem to imply that they are serious at this business of dancing tango and, simultaneously, that they challenge women into taking the risk of embracing, tightly, and following the marcas of a male stranger. In addition, some milongueros point out--Elvira, situated at the milonga's bar interrogates some milongueros on what she perceived as hostile yet inviting male posturing--that many of the women who attend the milongas would be absolutely unavailable to them in other contexts because of their class and or age difference. Invitations and acceptances to dance in the milonga can also mean a transgression of everyday life social barriers, a matching of (socially) odd parts. The milongas and their danced tangos are, from this point of view, a revolutionary experience--Elvira, surprised, jotted down the milonguero's use of the term 'revolutionary'.

Unreliable Words, Incongruent Bodies

I couldn't avoid anticipating Dr. Hardoy's questions here, but guessing one's
partners next step is one of the milonguera's required tango skills--Elvira shared another tango with Hardoy, tempted by the memory of prior pleasurable dances.

They recognize and admire each other in silence without giving away understanding, it is their dance and their encounter, the night of color. (For a note card: Where do they come from, what professions hide them during the day, what obscure servitudes isolate and disguise them.) That's what they go for, the monsters lace into each other with grave discipline, song after song they gyrate spaced out without talking, many with their eyes closed finally enjoying parity, the completion. (129-130)

Cortazar's Dr. Hardoy lets us know that, finally, he is captivated by the dancing. The monsters slip together into motion. They look enraptured, as if in a state of 'completion'. But it is 'their dance' not ours, and we should avoid falling for the trance by thinking on the note cards, focusing on the possible clues that lay behind this enigmatic effect. Like an ethnographer, he struggles trying to keep his mind clear and his inquiries sound. I will follow those milongueros' 'closed eyes' and speculate on that state of 'completion'--Elvira excused herself from dancing with Hardoy by saying that her feet were aching. This is the state sought in and through the dance, when two bodies communicate perfectly (and look perfectly and beautifully matched overcoming mismatching heights, weights, energy levels, thrusts, and mistrusts). Milongueros and milongueras describe it nowadays as calm and fluid, comforting, as when things finally fall into place, difficulties are left behind and the reward is a transporting, corporeal serenity. Absentmindedly, tightly embraced, their torsos tilt toward each other in a delicate balance, their legs tracing sinuous paths on the dance floor, muscles fully alert to the doing and undoing of mutually provoked entanglements. Their improvised steps surprise each other, and yet the music (the rhythm and the melody, they insist) hold them together, prompting the smooth continuity of the conversation between these distinctly gendered bodies. Dr. Hardoy notices these gyrations 'without talking,' and so do the milonga habitues. The lack of verbal exchange is considered a tango trademark.

Tango is acorporeal dialogue, or that is what it should be. It is a dialogue that in order to be perfect prescribes the absence of words, avoids the verbal pollution of the event, the awakening of intellectual sources that, inevitably, reproduce miscommunication. So the particularity of the tango resides in the purely chemical mix of bodily physicalities, and words are a matter of a different kind. Verbalizations are products of the mind, and as such, amount to either intrusive accelerators or breakers of the tango chemistry. Words irrupt the nature and speed of tango bodies' exchange of sweat (bodily fluids),
of heat (bodily temperatures), of weight and balance (bodily gravities), of tensions (bodily strengths and efforts), of aesthetic intentions (bodily shapes and trajectories). Words are mistrusted in the milonga, but not so much because they lie while the bodies 'speak' the truth. Rather, the problem resides in words' competitive effect vis a vis bodily conversations; as a matter of fact, words retain the authority over truth-telling and carry the capacity to disrupt the lesser truths of the bodies, of those tango bodies whose radical physicality constitutes the matter, the surface without unmaterial depth, that allows milongueros and milongueras to truly live their fantasies. It is as if words would tell too much unwanted, not untrue, information. Information powerful enough to break the ignorance on which the fantastic communication among tango bodies is sought to build up. Words tell the truth about class differences, age mismatches, ethnic conflicts, ideological incompatibilities, not necessarily in stronger terms than the bodies do but rather in more precise terms.

The bodies 'speak' a lesser language, equally codified but more diffuse; the bodily surfaces tell in a way that invites misrecognitions because it is easily subjected to fragmentations, each body part or accessory telling a different story. The leg of a mature milonguera might indicate youth by its strength and aggressive projection, while her hairdo points towards an old fashioned, now lower class taste, and the length of her dress or her jewelry will provoke mixed reactions as well. In addition, a milonguero's heaviness, noticeable dye job or flashy pinky ring might provoke class and generational associations, appealing to some and distasteful to others, but combined with agile feet and a firm gait while dancing will erase most misgivings and set aside most misapprehensions. Not only that the tango bodies, both male and female, are perceived in less seamless or fragmented ways than are allowed by speech (which regardless of the presence of contradictions must retain some coherency in order to (mis)communicate) but also, milongueros and milongueras are particularly attracted to bodily contrasts and incongruencies. The milonga environment rewards transgression when it comes to bodies out of place and bodies doing the unexpected. Words become uninteresting because they speak too clearly and always about something else. This does not amount, however, to a totally speechless situation but to a highly codified conversational system usually restrained to the moments in between dances. At those moments, short phrases are exchanged, frequently geared towards commenting on the pleasure or displeasure of the dance and on the dancers abilities. Sometimes they include flirtatious connotations, testing the availability of the dance partners for romance or sex. Whether welcomed or unwelcomed, rarely do the words outweigh the pleasure of having danced well and the promise of attaining that pleasure once again. In the milongas, words are not the site of creativity, of that which is being judged through what
the bodies accomplish together on the dance floor. As a matter of fact, citation of tango verses, folkloric refrains, and cliches pervade the milonga's linguistic economy of scarcity. Brief, bold remarks, with such a history of telling tales that say almost nothing about the sayer, and whose lack of effect on the listener is taken almost for granted. In the milonga, words are a wild try. Milongueros and milongueras focus on and work with the body. (From my fieldnote booklet III, 1996, pp. 31, 33, 44-46, 52, 61, 79.)

Addictive Enigmas

They recuperate during the intervals, at the tables [...] In addition, there's the smell, the monsters can't be thought of without that smell of wet powder against their skin [...]

He watched the dance floor just like me. [...] Many were sweating, a china [mestiza] about the height of my jacket's second button passed by the table and I saw the water pouring out of the roots of her hair and running down the nape where a roll of fat made a whiter channel. There was smoke coming in from the room nearby where they ate parrilladas [charcoal-broiled meats] and danced rancheras, the asado [barbecue] and the cigarettes laid a low cloud that distorted the faces and the cheap paintings on the opposite wall. [...] It seemed as though a moment of immense happiness had descended upon the dance floor, I tooka deep breath as if to participate in it and I believe I heard Mauro doing the same thing. (130-134, 135)

In the milongas of contemporary Buenos Aires tango is referred to as a drug and the practice of tango, as an addiction. (For a long footnote or integrate into the text: Drugs have always been present in the tango world. Lyrics, plays, memoirs, literary texts, and gossip mention their use among milongueros/as and musicians as well as the presence of drug-traffickers in the milonga scene. See, for example, the plays Los Dopados ([1922] 1968) by Alberto T. Weisback and Raúl Doblas, Nobleza de Arrabal ([1919] 1968) by Juan A. Caruso; the poem El Violín del Diablo, Maipú Pigall by Enrique González Tuñón ([1926] 1967). I wish to focus, however, on a different tango-drug connection, one unmediated by the consumption of substances. And this is also a connection that has a long history. René Briand, for example, in his racconto of early tango times, writes: 'This time she fastened herself to his body, completely abandoned in his arms but obeying all of his dancerly orders. He made her knit a labyrinth of footwork, commanded by his right arm connected to the blond's waist. The two swung in ecstasy, as if they were drugged by those perforating sounds that resembled syringes filled up with
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heroine inoculating innocent bodies. The youngsters' contortions attracted the attention of other dancers that looked at them with envy (1972: 84). In Psicopatología del Tango, Roberto Puertas Cruse writes: 'That is why a woman listens to tango with that dynamic ravishment of the dance, or with the psychic giddiness that it provokes, given that it works on her dearest emotions as a narcotic' (1959: 17). In 'Elogio del Gotan', Last Reason (pseudonym for Máximo Sanz) ([1926] 1968) writes: 'Tango is the boss. Tango has intoxicated the couples with a strong poison of suffocated desire, and when the music stops, his eyes and hers, they are still wandering in the somber world of sensual ecstasy' (Lara and Panti, 1968: 323).) Tango, however, does not fall into the category of intoxicating products, the simple consumption of which generates an altered state of consciousness. The access to the tango ecstasy (Cortázar/Dr. Hardoy's 'immense happiness') requires much preparation and much practice; a carefully crafted road that involves highly developed skills on the part of its practitioners. The tango 'high' (and this is a rather bad choice of a word for reasons I will soon explicate) comes, takes hold of the tango dancers somewhat like a trance, a state of possession that is achieved with much effort and usually not at all. The tango 'trance' is, thus, a promise, nurtured by the milongueros/as' memory of past experiences or by the memories passed down to them by other, more experienced tango dancers.

This interpretation of tango, that lures practitioners and critics into the fascinating terrain of the occult, is, of course, strangely generative--Elvira, back at her desk (in body and soul) got carried away with her readings of Spinoza (1989) and of Deleuze's readings of Spinoza (1988)--in the sense that it provides a mysterious explanation for tango's addictive powers that shapes the awaited effects. After being hooked-up, obsessed, irresistibly drawn to cross, again and again, the border from the everyday world into the tango world, risking family ties, breaking friendships, failing work engagements, ignoring coup d'états and other social and moral obligations, the milongueros and milongueras feel compelled to explain, to identify a cause and to invest it with insurmountable power. Their tango doings, thus become passive undertakings compelled by the force of an intoxicating agent. Paradoxically, this force is not an external substance as the tango-drug association would lead us to believe. The drug is the tango itself, that is an activity that requires the dancers involvement in order to exist; the tango dancers produce, simultaneously, the drug and their addiction to it by dancing tangos. The flaw of the metaphor is precisely what creates the enigmatic nature of the tango endeavor.

For lack of a better word, this special tango 'state' is referred to as passion. And I emphasize the imprecise nature of the 'passion' word/concept as
ascribed to the tango in an attempt to echo that moment of hesitation, that searching of the mind's archives and of the taste of words in the mouth that takes place whenever I ask tango dancers to explain what is it that they are looking for, night after night, in the milongas. Passion, they repeat.--Elvira moved, secretly, from citing milongueros to interpreting them; marked-up books on her shelves suggest she had been consulting Lebrun (1987), Heller (1979), Greimas and Fontanille (1993), Baudrillard (1984), Triás (1991), and Savigliano (1995), among others--as in taking hold of something somewhat recognizable, open and ambiguous enough to accommodate a wealth of feelings, both positive and negative regarding what it takes to get there, to live with it, and to survive the consequences. For, let me remind you, tango dancers pursue passion, the sparkle of the passionate event in their lives, as addicts, as if against their will, as if they could not help but search for it. Performing tango steps, they cultivate passion, passionately. The passion is already there, in the attempt, and yet it is displaced to that fortuitous moment of condensation, consecration--that moment at which a particular, stabilized, experience of passion is achieved. That moment, that event, is what I improperly termed the tango 'high'. Improperly, because it is not euphoric, bubbly or happy, supernaturally transcendent or otherworldly. The tango bodies are the site of the tango 'high'.

The tango 'high' is a paradoxical state of abandonment and full control--Elvira flipped through her fieldnotes (vol. 1), trying to elucidate if these remarks were based on milongueros= actual, verbal statements, on tango literary sources, on her own experiences at the milonga, or on her interpretive imagination--, of bodily awareness and mental disengagement. The feet seem to be making all the necessary decisions. Bodies propose and respond to each other, without words and even without eye contact, as if the intellectual capacities would be channeled from the usual brain-language and soul-eyes connections into other organs and senses articulated on the skin's surfaces of different body parts with coordinated minds of their own. Tango bodies practice a corporeal sociality. Milongueros and milongueras undoubtedly construct their version of the body, just like everybody else. Their conceptualization of the tango bodies conforms a strange philosophy, where ultraphysicality leads into a metaphysics of the corporeal. A belief in transcendental corporeality?--Elvira slipped back into spinozist musings. But regardless of its constructivism, tango practitioners dance their bodies with these corporeal concepts, physical investments and metaphysical purposes not in their minds but somewhere else, wherever the body seems to be intelligent at the time. Seeking for 'natural-ness' in the tango dance does not amount to leaving the bodies to themselves, but to recognizing and thus reallocating intelligence to them, crossing over the mind/body divide, not avoiding the tension but rather attaining its comfortable manipulation. This is
not an innate ability, but rather a skill painfully gained through experience. Experience in dancing tango, experience in the tango world, experience in the world at large: street-wiseness. It is a very ambitious state, no doubt, given the precarious material and emotional conditions under which most Argentine tango practitioners live. Which takes us back to Dr. Hardoy's note cards: 'Where do they come from, what professions hide them during the day, what obscure servitudes isolate and disguise them?' (130). Milongueros and milongueras cultivate the enigma.

The smoke was so thick that the faces on the other half of the floor were blurred, so much so that the area of the chairs for those who were sitting it out could not be seen, what with the bodies in between and the haze. [...] Celina who was on the right side of the floor, moving out of the smoke and whirling obediently to the lead of her partner, stopped for a moment in profile [...] I say: Celina; but it was a vision, a knowledge without understanding it [...] Celina there without being there [...] drinking in the tango [...] [H]appiness transfigured her face in a hideous way [...] There was nothing to stop her now in her heaven, her own heaven, she gave herself with all of her flesh to that joy [...] It was her hard-won heaven, her tango played once more for her alone and for her equals. (135-137)

There is something other-worldly about the milongas, and they also join the porteño underworld. In the milongas you encounter faces, bodies, attitudes, behaviors, and existential plateaus that do not pertain to everyday, busy Buenos Aires. Cortázar's Dr. Hardoy goes to the extreme of bringing Celina back from the dead and into the dense atmosphere of the Santa Fe Palace in order to convey the milonga's uncanny (to him, to us) version of heaven and its fleshly joys. But I wish to call attention to Celina 'moving out of the smoke' in a tango. Dr. Hardoy explains with difficulty that Celina, at that moment, is 'there without being there'. She is 'a vision'. The milonga is represented as a place and a time in between the real and the unreal. In 'The Gates of Heaven' the fact of Celina's death dramatically asserts the power that tango exerts over certain bodies, enough to transport the dead and the living into a common ground of nocturnal collapse. (From a note card: Cortázar/Hardoy's approach to the milongas' enigmatic pleasures seems to follow the utopian principles of a Barthes reading Fourier: 'Pleasure overcomes Death (pleasures will be sensual in the afterlife)...[Pleasure is] what operates the solidarity of the living and the dead (the happiness of the defunct will begin only with that of the living, they having in a way to await the others: no happy dead as long as on earth the living are not happy.)' (1977: 83). ) Dr. Hardoy stresses the tango connection between the living and the dead, and the milonga as a space where/when this strange encounter is likely to occur. The presence of an otherwise absent Celina, conjured by the tango into taking...
possession of a body in movement at the dance floor (not anybody, for the bodies she takes hold of are of a certain gender, class, and racial/ethnic features) signals the existence of a dimension outside daytime. La noche is central to this occurrence and to Cortázar/Hardoy's project situated at the periphery of the day and of social order. (For a quote: '[Tango] calls attention to the things that die every day and that still come back, generating the enigma of being alive' (Ferrer 1995:13).) But the knowledge that Celina is dead also distracts us--Elvira thought and wrote--from further analyzing what makes the living milongueros and milongueras, 'her equals,' capable of transporting and transforming themselves when at the milonga. 'Where do they come from?' reads Dr. Hardoy's note card. Like an experienced ethnographer, Dr. Hardoy thinks of jotting down questions that, in surrounding descriptively what he really wants to know, eventually will deliver the awaited response to 'who are they?'

My own nocturnal incursions into the milongas of Buenos Aires, as an aspiring milonguera and an anthropologist (although milongueros insisted in interpreting my work as philosophy) kept me trying to understand how tango dancers go about constructing these spaces and states of alterity for themselves. Even the milonga habitues often reflect on this matter. 'Where are these people during the day?'; they ask as they pan over the dance hall's interiors, amazed at the collection of milonguero/a characters of which they are a part. Every one seems to be playing a part for everybody else. Some unusual looks are cultivated, but what magnifies the artificiality of the scene is the fact that all participants are conceitedly on display, willingly offered to visual inspection. Everybody is ready for a close-up shot that will not amount to a revealing look. Milongueras and milongueros pursue close-ups that remain locked on their surfaces. (For a footnote: See Deleuze's discussion of the affect-image and the use of close-ups in cinema (1991).) The visual scrutinies should not break into disbelief, but rather render a sparkling object suited to a fantasy that, upon the detection of the object, immediately wraps around it. In the milonga seeing and knowing are never collapsed. The point is to believe. And yet, there is a keen cultivation of skepticism. Everybody wants to be a fetish, an object of someone else's desiring fantasy, and a fetishist, a desiring subject that controls and contains his/her object of desire within an auto-generated fantasy. So, imbedded in this control/containment lies the suspicion that the fetish is unreal and that the whole thing is a game. (For a footnote: See Apter & Pietz 1993.) Nevertheless, the skeptical fetishist finds pleasure in the game itself because despite the fact that the fetish and the game are just that, namely fabrications, the pleasure attained is real--or to put it in other words, it works. Like a successful experiment, it delivers what is expected: in this case, a pleasurable tanguidad beyond regular reach.
(From a note card indicating 'For an Introduction, a conclusion, a quote, or a footnote':

'Tango may not be important; its only importance is what we attribute to it. This is not unjust, but it applies equally to everything under the sun. [...] Tango can be discussed and we discuss it but it hides, like all truths, a secret. [...] It might be said that without the sunsets and the nights of Buenos Aires no tango can be made, and that a platonic idea of the tango, its form universal [...], awaits us argentinos in heaven, and that this thriving species, however humble, has its place in the world' (Borges 1984: 147-148).

--Elvira modified a bit the translation and went to bed at dawn.

Habitual Elucidations

Several months later, on a bright and sunny afternoon in Southern California, Elvira struggles to conclude her ethnographic account. She becomes aware of her own educated compulsion to shed light on the milonga scene by connecting tango nocturnality to everyday life in Buenos Aires in 1996. She shuffles through note cards and mental notes: 'the milonga as sacred space/time: communitas, liminality, reaggregation (Turner 1987),' 'similarities between milongas and carnival: resistance or accommodation? (Da Matta 1991, Scheper-Hughes 1992: 480-504), 'José Limón on Mexican dancing as manual laborer's joyous assertion of victory over capitalist claims on all their energy (1994: 165).'</Elvira writes an illuminating conclusion, reciting the last twenty-five years of Argentine history in two or three sentences: the 'Dirty' war and state terrorism, redemocratization, neo-liberal policies and privatization, political corruption, unemployment ... For whom is she writing? Elvira recalls a Dutch tango-tourist she interviewed in a milonga in Buenos Aires. 'I dance tango because it is dark and my soul is dark.' She remembers the Australian journalist who interviewed her in a tango club, encouraging Elvira to associate--in fifteen seconds or less--the tango revival in Buenos Aires to the mourning over the desaparecidos. Elvira imagines that some European readers--who are, after all, more informed than most norteamericanos--will read a connection between Celina's apparition in the Santa Fe Palace and the demand of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo for 'reaparición con vida' (re-apparition with life). She thinks of those milongueros and milongueras who proudly declare themselves apolitical, of those who consider milongas the only truly democratic space they have ever known, of those others who live the milongas as cultural bastions of an endangered national identity, and of the ones who value tango as a nomadic art and tango practitioners as an adventurous species proving transcendental beliefs in an art form that transcends national borders. She shudders. She sighs. She submits her
Ps. This paper has been published first in *Etnofoor*, X (1/2): 28-52

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