

as thinking itself. While McCormack's project does underscore the importance of engaging affect through the study of movement in geographical and spatial thinking—a concern I share deeply—a more thoroughly interdisciplinary engagement between dance studies, affect studies, and geography might push McCormack beyond the realm of potentialities and keep the experiences of bodies at the forefront.

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Note

1. Debord's manifesto was published in pamphlet form as *Rapport sur la construction des situations et sur les conditions de l'organisation et de l'action de la tendance situationniste internationale* by Debord and the Lettrist International. The translation of the text I am using here appeared in *Participation*, edited by Claire Bishop (2006). This version, in turn, used the translation found in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents*, edited by Tom McDonough (2002).

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Tango Nuevo

by Carolyn Merritt. 2012. Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press. 218 pp., photographs, notes, bibliography, appendix, glossary, index. \$24.95 cloth.
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Writings—be they books, memoirs, diaries, articles, poems, or travelogues—on the subject of tango have become nearly as abundant, and quite frequently as clichéd, as images of the fedora- and fishnet-clad tango dancing couple used to market tango in its renaissance over the past thirty years. Given tango's popularity as both a symbol and site of exoticism, passion, and machismo, approaching the topic from a fresh angle is no easy feat. Nor is it a trivial task to present a serious academic study of tango that does not destroy its appeal through exposition of the mechanisms by which tango seduces its devotees. Carolyn Merritt meets this challenge beautifully in *Tango Nuevo*, an insightful ethnography of tango in Buenos Aires at the height of the tango *nuevo* boom, 2005–2007.

Although even dancers most often cited as its founders—Gustavo Naveira, Olga Besio, Fabian Salas, and Chico Frúmboli—often deny its very existence, tango *nuevo* can be described as a new analytical approach to the study and teaching of tango that, through its systematic investigation of the principles and basic building blocks of tango technique, led to rapid innovations in vocabulary and style. The resulting dance is often characterized by a more open and flexible embrace that requires both partners to maintain their own axis (center of balance); athletic movements requiring extreme torsion; more frequent use of off-balance moves; incorporation of vocabulary from ballet, contemporary dance, and other social dances; and more fluid conceptualization of gender roles. During the mid-2000s, tango *nuevo* was often practiced by younger dancers than the tango had attracted in decades, with the youth popularizing casual dress and electronic tango music.

The birth of tango *nuevo* is frequently traced back to the Cochabamba investigation

group formed in the 1990s, but it was not until the early 2000s that the term tango *nuevo* and its associated controversy began to gain traction. Reactionaries critical of these innovations condemned tango *nuevo* as devoid of feeling, inauthentic, not *real* tango. From their point of view, only close-embrace or the newly coined “milonguero” tango allowed access to an authentic tango experience. Merritt probes deeply into the question of whether or not the phrase “tango *nuevo*” describes an actual phenomenon or is merely a marketing ploy alternately used to discredit its authenticity by its detractors or to attract a younger audience by its adopters. Merritt stops short of coming down on one side of the debate, but she highlights a point raised by many of her informants, who reject the *nuevo* label even as they adopt many of its techniques. To call it “new” is to deny the innovation and experimentation that has characterized tango throughout its history.

In her epilogue, which is based on a 2010 visit to Buenos Aires, Merritt suggests that taste is swinging away from the *nuevo* aesthetic—a trend that I can confirm based on my own research in Buenos Aires in 2012 and 2014, by which time tango *nuevo* had fallen so far out of fashion that dancers referred to it as “vintage” and “antique.” Even though tango *nuevo* is already perceived as outmoded in Buenos Aires *milongas* (tango dances), the issues Carolyn Merritt raises in her thoughtful investigation of its controversial existence are still current. How do tensions between tradition and innovation play out in the evolution of a dance? How is local cultural heritage protected in the midst of its globalization and commodification? How do formerly colonized peoples resist paternalistic gestures from wealthier nations to help protect and preserve so-called traditional culture? These central themes are explored as they relate to the specific case of tango, but Merritt’s insights are relevant to dance, music, and other forms of expressive culture studied by scholars in the fields of dance, ethnomusicology, and cultural tourism.

Readers eager to see Merritt take sides on the debates she presents might be disappointed. Her strength as an author is the balanced and nuanced way in which she presents both sides of each issue, rallying back and forth between the contradictory viewpoints of her informants. She refrains from answering the question that is the subject of

Chapter 5: Is tango a drug or a therapy? It is, of course, both, serving as dangerous addiction and therapeutic comfort to its many followers. In her chapter on gender, Merritt similarly evades a clear-cut answer as to whether or not tango *nuevo* has transcended the sexist structure and history of tango to reflect a more modern and equal relationship between the sexes. Her conclusion to this query might be simplified as, “well, sort of,” but such a blithe summary fails to capture the complexity with which she represents both tango culture and the men and women negotiating their own gender identity within it.

Merritt’s academic training is in anthropology, not dance, but her deep personal experience as a dancer (over 10 years of ballet and tango) and her references to key literature in dance studies ensure confidence that she approaches the subject with sensitivity and respect. Her research in Buenos Aires is deep—two years of fieldwork, and is further informed by many years dancing tango in the U.S. She draws liberally on quotes from formal interviews with informants whose words match Merritt’s in their insight and clarity. It is, in part, the equal footing with which she presents ideas from informants alongside her own observations that earned my trust in the integrity of her research methods.

As an American woman, Merritt is admittedly an outsider to Argentine culture, in contrast to Porteña tango scholars Marta Savigiano or Beatrice Dujovne. Although she never comes off as conceited, Merritt is clearly highly skilled as a dancer, granting her insider access to certain kinds of knowledge that even an Argentine can only earn through many years of devoted study and practice. It is difficult to compare her conclusions to those of Savigiano (2003), whose ethnographic research in Buenos Aires *milongas* was conducted ten years earlier, or to those of Dujovne (2011), who writes about how the culture of the *milongas* is expressed in daily life in Buenos Aires. The work of these three scholars complements each other well, offering three perspectives on different moments in the recent history of Buenos Aires tango culture. Like Savigiano and Dujovne, Merritt balances the challenge of revealing enough personal detail about her own tango seduction to make her a credible source (after all, who could trust an anthropologist who has not become invested enough in tango to fall prey to the drug’s addiction)

without slipping into tango memoir territory. The tango community, not Merritt, is clearly the subject of this ethnography. Merritt's writing style differs from that of Marta Savigliano, whose poetic prose is as hypnotic and ambiguous as tango lyrics themselves. Instead, Merritt writes in less ornate and more straightforward prose, no less captivating and honest, which, in its accessibility, may be more appealing to tango dancers themselves.

Even though the book does include a chapter summarizing one hundred years of tango history, Merritt does not purport to write history. Her historical chapter is the weakest section of the book. Covering too much territory in too few pages, it lacks the key features that make a story compelling: central characters the readers can follow through conflict and struggle. As Merritt notes, the subject of tango's history, especially through its Golden Age (ending in 1955), is already well-documented (see, for example, Denniston 2008; Thompson 2005). This is not to say that valuable historical information is not included in other chapters of the book. In fact, Merritt documents the evolution of tango *nuevo* and the emergence of the tango tourist industry in Buenos Aires more thoroughly than any tango history published in English to date. Her detailed documentation of the roles that specific individuals and venues played in the emergence of tango *nuevo* will likely serve as a key resource for future historians.

For many, tango evokes the mournful cry of the *bandoneón* accompanying a melancholic recitation on lost love. Indeed, tango is music and poetry, as well as dance. Merritt's book is unabashedly focused on dance culture, only

mentioning tango music and lyrics in passing. While several other scholars have skillfully analyzed tango lyrics (Dujovne 2011; Savigliano 1994) and tango music (Thompson 2005), the absence of at least a brief discussion of their intersection with dance would seem to be a missed opportunity. I would like to have seen, for example, a comparison of the reception and impact of dancer Chico Frúmboli to that of composer Astor Piazzolla. Both men were initially rejected and scorned in Argentina, but the innovations each pioneered in dance and music, respectively, propelled tango to new levels of international prominence. Even taking into account this minor point of reproach, *Tango Nuevo* should be celebrated as a major addition to the literature on tango and the commodification of dance culture.

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