

English. The US market had moved on to the writers of the ‘boom’, supported by the Rockefeller-funded Center for Inter-American Relations, which for its own Cold War reasons championed the autonomy of writing and works of imaginative invention. The politically liberal Veríssimo had, ironically, published a book that was too socially committed. Pan-Americanism, as an ideal, was, to all intents and purposes, dead.

*Improvised Continent* is, above all else, a deft history of publishing. In following the changing reception and enthusiasm for works of the visual arts and writing, Cándida Smith has written a keen and sensitive history of how institutions created shifts in public consciousness and perception. There is not much archival research here (Veríssimo’s papers are one exception, and part of what makes his story richly rendered.) But what the book does do extraordinarily well is to follow both the commercial logic of major publishing concerns in the United States and Latin America, and the way that their work intersected with the legitimization strategies of government institutions. In so doing, *Improvised Continent* becomes a valuable intellectual history of the Americas that reveals a deeper foundation of inter-American exchange than is usually assumed. This material history of art and ideas is executed in exemplary fashion, never reductive, making *Improvised Continent* a book that should be read not just by scholars of Pan-Americanism or inter-American relations, but by anyone interested in how institutions shape the diffusion of culture across national lines.

University of Wisconsin

PATRICK IBER

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Morgan James Luker, *The Tango Machine: Musical Culture in the Age of Expediency* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2016), pp. xiv + 218, £30.00; £21.00, pb

This may be yet another book about Argentina’s most popular topic, but it is far from a trite review of tango from the usual historical, aesthetic or national identity perspective. Morgan James Luker’s *The Tango Machine: Musical Culture in the Age of Expediency* examines how contemporary tango music is used and, arguably, abused as a resource for cultural, social and economic development in Buenos Aires. Luker, building on George Yúdice’s *The Expediency of Culture* (Duke University Press, 2003), and through diverse ethnographic examples, addresses the value and meaning of musical culture in the era of commercial convenience. He provides not only rich theoretical analysis, but also robust ethnographic accounts and deep social, economic and musical analysis in his five superbly written chapters.

Luker opens with a critique of ethnomusicology for not paying enough attention to state cultural policies, cultural industries and the non-profit arts sector (pp. 15–16), which he terms the ‘managerial regimes’, influential mediators of cultural practice. He also highlights how Argentina’s neoliberal turn and the 2001 economic crisis reshaped tango values and meanings. Tango cultural production is now in constant dialogue with managerial regimes that have a fundamental impact on how musical culture is nurtured, expressed and animated (pp. 31–2). This discussion is a key contribution to ethnomusicological study, particularly Latin American music research, which is beginning to consider, albeit disjointedly, topics like nation-branding and the link between citizenship and cultural policies.

This book exemplifies scholarly clarity with its articulate, balanced and in-depth analysis of contemporary artistic production as a mode of politics, linking music,

economics, history and cultural policy-making with nation-branding, aesthetics, heritage and citizenship. In addition, it offers a rich array of interviews, music examples and analysis, ethnographic illustrations through the author's music performance, and cultural-policy making insights. The lyrical style frames the academic rigour beautifully, though it does require the occasional double take as it lapses into long sentences.

Chapter 1 examines musical practice and meaning among contemporary tango musicians in Buenos Aires. Luker focuses on the band 34 Puñaladas and examines engagement with tango, not as a way to identify with the nation, but as a way to creatively negotiate anxieties arising from Argentina's neoliberal turn. Here he introduces the dual trend of detachment and connection with traditional repertoires (p. 43) as an interpretative framework to explore contemporary tango music's rupture with its musical past (musicians now working as bands, using new divisions of musical labour and instrumentation, absence of *lunfardo*), and continuities (singers' sensibilities informed by old tango and rock). For the author, the musicians' goal is not to return to or revive the past, but to situate present experience (a 'labour of memory', p. 39) to help Argentines know who they are (p. 60). Tango engages with identity dilemmas following a social crisis in ways that cannot be reduced to a symbolic function; it forges links between old tango marginality and new tango anxiety.

Chapter 2 starts with a journey through tango history. It outlines tango's golden age, the vanguard period (1950–90) with its attempts to turn tango into art music, and contemporary tango (post 1990) with its attempts to return to golden-age tango in order to make tango *música popular* again. Luker uses the Astillero ensemble and its 'tango of rupture' as a case study (p. 75). The author discusses Astillero as an aural reference to Pugliese and golden-age tango (connection). But this is a band that visually uses torn jeans, sweatshirts and dreadlocks (detachment); a band that critiques the vanguard movement and reasserts tango's roots in popular practice, linking it to social movements that emerged in Argentina after the 2001 crisis. Luker explains that bands like Astillero have been excluded from the country's cultural policies, but have created their own spaces for a new tango. This is not necessarily the type of tango that the government wants to promote, deeming it 'too popular' – as in perhaps 'indecent' or 'not worthy'. Exclusion led the band to look for new opportunities in Europe and Asia and engage with broader music circulation, cultural policy-making and global commerce and education (through their tango music school). The empathy and detail of the ethnographic analysis suggests closeness with the music practitioners and repertoire that probably is owing to the author's use of performance as a research technique joining in the music on his bandoneon.

Chapter 3 focuses mainly on TangoVia, a non-profit organisation seeking to highlight tango as 'Argentina's most important cultural contribution to the world' (p. 91). It receives generous government support to 'emphasize the universal value of local culture over the local value of universal culture' (p. 93). TangoVia contributes to digital archives that seek to preserve every tango piece ever made as a means to record the genre's diversity. TangoVia also manages the Orquesta Escuela de Tango (Tango Orchestra School), a no-fee school that redefines tango from the past as a framework for new musical works (p. 110). Luker concludes the chapter with the irony of TangoVia cultivating tango as a nostalgic national genre while positioning it as a national brand, thereby transforming it to suit the values of musical culture in the age of expediency.

Chapter 4 expands on the use of tango transformations by local and international organisations to position the genre as world cultural heritage. Luker discusses tango as

UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage; for him, the listing reduces tango to a slogan ignoring cultural diversity (i.e. the role of Afro-Argentines) and the real variety of local musical practice. It is another expression of neoliberal commodified praise without real recognition for the diverse communities of tango musicians it lauds. The author does not, however, address the risk that when music genres are recognised by UNESCO, the government and public commentary may come to view them as sacrosanct traditions and consider any contemporary musical manifestations with a degree of 'detachment' as contrary to the 'real' patrimony.

The final chapter traces the complications of contemporary governmental cultural policies and the use of cultural diversity as a tool to foster managerial projects (i.e. promotion of tango among owners and employees of independent record labels). Though these policies had a positive impact on contemporary tango artists in Buenos Aires, it reduced them to content providers (not tradition bearers as discussed in Chapter 4) in a setting of commodified cultural diversity, where economic productivity is valued more than musical culture. Tango is used and abused for reasons beyond its musical meaning, and Luker is refusing to ignore those reasons.

The author closes by returning to his first ethnographic vignette, Carlos Gardel's venerated statue in the Chacarita cemetery. Luker considers Gardel the 'ultimate expedient object' (p. 184), the embodiment of different versions of tango imagery ranging from an old crackling recording to an expensive suite at the hip tango-themed hotel in Buenos Aires, an exemplification of the dual trend of detachment and connection, the connection between old and new tango's social essence explored throughout the book. It is a poignant conclusion to a moving ethnography of an urgent social phenomenon that transcends Argentina and Latin America. This is an essential read for ethnomusicologists and cultural policy-makers, and a useful resource for performers, cultural producers and Latin Americanists in general.

*Keele University*

FIORELLA MONTERO-DIAZ