

# 14 | Nineteenth-Century Afro-Argentine Origins of Tango

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The history of the Argentine tango is entwined with and indebted to the history of the Afro-Argentine community of Buenos Aires, or *Afro-porteños* (*porteños* are residents of that port city). Tango's imbrication with the Black community was hardly news to late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century observers. Yet a century later, scholars, practitioners, and activists struggle to make tango's African and Afro-Argentine components audible and visible. When UNESCO inscribed the tango on its "List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity" in 2009, declaring it the special patrimony of Argentina and Uruguay, its Afro-Argentine origins and ongoing influences were barely discernible.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, as tango became the national dance of an Argentina imagined as white and European, it too was whitened, stripped of musical and choreographic components considered African and of once-copious references to Black Argentines and their cultures. In the following decades, most narrators of tango's history increasingly minimized, forgot, or disavowed its Black roots in favor of European ones.<sup>1</sup> Dissenting scholars and practitioners have pointed to the importance of Afro-Argentine musical and dance traditions, especially early nineteenth-century *candombe*, in the rhythms and dance innovations behind *milonga* (a word likely of African origin), the immediate precursor to the Argentine tango in the late 1800s. Others credited *milonga*'s syncopated rhythms and hip-forward choreographies to the Afro-Cuban *danza* or *habanera* (also known as a Cuban tango). A few highlighted the presence of Afro-Argentines – as composers, musicians, and dancers – in the early days of tango's formation, as it emerged from the *milonga* and moved from margins to mainstream.<sup>2</sup>

Yet even these accounts of tango's Black roots often reiterated elements of Argentina's dominant racial narratives. The entrenched myth of Afro-Argentines' "disappearance" over the nineteenth century (supposedly due to wars, disease, and displacement by European immigrants) makes it difficult to tell a continuous story of Afro-Argentine influences in the tango from the nineteenth century onward.<sup>3</sup> In particular, the idea that

*candombe*, as a distinctly Afro-Argentine dance and music form, faded after the mid-1800s has at worst precluded close examination of its connections to tango; at best, it has cast *candombe* as a minor tributary in tango's development. The conviction that Afro-Argentines and their cultures "disappeared" from modern Argentina, moreover, has made it difficult to narrate Black influences on tango past 1900, when the genre's history began to be documented. When authors do record the presence of Afro-Argentines in the twentieth-century tango as dancers, composers, singers, and musicians, they tend to imagine them as isolated individuals rather than part of a centuries-old community that never stopped playing and dancing.<sup>4</sup> Finally, several early studies that challenged tango's whitened history nonetheless internalized ideas about the unrecoverability of Argentina's Black past. Their reconstructions of Black music are frequently shrouded in myth, short on documentation, riddled with stereotypes, and populated by undifferentiated masses.<sup>5</sup> These challenges to narrating tango's Afro-Argentine roots mirror those of writing about Blackness in that supposedly white nation. To the extent that tango crystallized as Argentina's national rhythm as part of the same processes that stamped Argentina as homogeneously white, these challenges are perhaps especially acute. The paucity of sheet music or recordings from the 1800s that pinpoint Afro-Argentine contributions exacerbates these difficulties.

Recent work helps paint a more fine-grained, evidence-based history of Black contributions to the tango. This newer history draws from historical archives, personal collections, the *Afro-porteño* press, and oral histories with the *Afro-porteño* community to locate the tango's rise not just in the better-known *academias* (dance halls offering lessons for pay), *peringundines* (dives), theaters, and brothels, but also in the social clubs, basements, tenement quarters, or living rooms of *Afro-porteños*. And it helps close the stubborn conceptual chasm between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

This chapter introduces readers to that rich history through a multigenerational case study of one family of *Afro-porteño* musicians, the Grigeras. Their story is remarkable but not unique: many Afro-Argentine families produced generations of renowned musicians, and contemporary accounts acknowledged their musical talents. The Grigeras' story spans the long nineteenth century: from an African-born man's founding of a storied gathering site for *candombe* music and dance in the 1820s, to the musical experimentation of his son and grandson at the helm of that establishment as it evolved through the 1880s, to his great-grandson's rise to stardom as a Black tango icon in the 1910s.<sup>6</sup> This case study is not a definitive history of tango's

Afro-Argentine influences. Rather, it illustrates the potential of grounding tango's past in the documented social history of *Afro-porteños*, in the hope that future investigations will yield a fuller picture of the cultural exchanges behind Argentina's world-famous dance form.

### **Tango, Tambo, Nación, Candombe: Early Nineteenth-Century Afro-Argentine Dance, Music, and Associational Life**

Before coming to denote Argentina's national dance at the turn of the twentieth century, "tango" had various meanings, all involving the music and dance of Africans and their descendants. The earliest documented use of "tango" in the early 1800s described the meeting grounds of African ethnic associations on the city's margins. There, newly arrived African captives and their local-born descendants gathered to play music for ritual and secular festivities. Some scholars have suggested that the word is of African origin, while others hypothesize that it evolved from an Afro-Argentine pronunciation of the Spanish word for "drum" (*tambor* rendered as *tambó*). More important is that in the first decades of the 1800s, "tango" became synonymous with *nación*, *tambo*, and *candombe* – all terms describing both the meeting grounds of African ethnic associations and the music and dance performed therein.<sup>7</sup>

The first protagonist of our multigenerational history, a man known in Buenos Aires as Antonio, was born in Africa in the early 1780s. He was taken to the Río de la Plata during the peak in human traffic that transported an estimated 70,000 enslaved individuals to Montevideo and Buenos Aires between 1776 and 1810, the last decades of Spanish rule. In 1818, an appraiser listed him as being thirty-five years old and "of the Mina nation," suggesting he was among the minority embarked to the region from present-day Ghana and parts of the Bight of Benin. At this time, people of African origin accounted for at least 30 percent of Buenos Aires's inhabitants, about 11,837 individuals. Most were enslaved, including Antonio, who labored in the orchards of José Mariano Grigera in Flores, just outside the city limits.

Antonio appears to have gained his freedom following the deaths of the couple who held him in bondage, and, once free, to have taken their surname (a common practice). In 1823, he founded a *nación* or African ethnic association in Montserrat, one of the city's heavily African neighborhoods on the south-side of Buenos Aires. These *naciones* – also known as *tangos*, *tambos*, or (later) *candombes* – had existed since the late colonial

period, providing spaces for Africans and their descendants, enslaved and free, to pursue the shared goals of survival and solidarity, community-building, and the maintenance of spiritual ties with ancestors and with Africa. Members regularly gathered on the *naciones*' grounds to celebrate feasts, stage Carnival parades, elect ceremonial kings and queens, bury the dead and honor ancestors, and raise money to buy members out of slavery or assist them during illness. Although they typically took the name of an ethnic group ("Congo," "Benguela," "Mina"), in practice these associations amalgamated people of various ethnic or linguistic backgrounds.

But the African associations were best known for weekly dances that drew hundreds or thousands and involved call-and-response chanting, drumming, and dancing in rounds or occasionally in pairs. The music, according to contemporaneous accounts, featured polyrhythmic percussion – drums of different shapes and timbres accompanied by marimbas, bones, gourds, and *masacallas* (shakers). These dances earned the area of Montserrat and Concepción, where most of the *naciones* were located, the nickname *el barrio del tambor* – the neighborhood of the drum.

The *naciones* and their dances were extremely visible, audible, concentrated Black urban territories, and spaces of relative freedom, not unlike maroon communities elsewhere in Latin America. Colonial authorities cracked down on the dances repeatedly, characterizing them as indecent and politically dangerous (contemporary reports suggest authorities encountered runaways and fugitives, plots for uprisings, and armed resistance). After independence from Spain in 1816, republican authorities permitted the *naciones* to operate provided they registered with the police, adopted charters modeled after the mutual-aid societies of European immigrants, controlled their members, and submitted to police supervision. This was the context in which Antonio Grigera founded his *nación*.

By 1829, the *naciones*' status improved with the rise to power of Juan Manuel de Rosas, who permitted them to hold dances unobstructed – including, at least once, in the city's posh central square. Rosas also famously received the leaders of *naciones* in his residence and visited their grounds with his wife Encarnación and his daughter Manuelita, whom he allowed to dance with Black men and women (scandalizing his white enemies and endearing him to many Afro-Argentines). During his rule (1829–1832, 1835–1852), the term *candombe* was increasingly used to denote both a *nación* and the kind of dance and music performed therein.

Antonio's *candombe* became famous in its time – reportedly a favorite of Manuelita Rosas. The *Candombe de Grigera* (as it was known) was, in the words of one influential ethnomusicologist, one of "legendary"

proportions: “a candombe that had its history and that made history.”<sup>8</sup> It stands out not least for its longevity: it functioned until 1901. In its early years, it appears to have been located at what is today México 1265 (Fig. 14.1). The building survived at least until 1970, and so did memories of its historic function as the Candombe de Grigera.

Little is known about this candombe in the first decades after Argentine independence. But Antonio Grigera appears to have created a candombe whose members “acted according to the most pristine traditions of the [African] continent,” observing them with “discipline and diligence.” Indeed, the Candombe de Grigera’s unorthodox name – a surname, rather than the usual ethnonym (as in *nación Benguela*) – suggests just how much respect Antonio commanded as a community leader.

### *Candombe, Milonga, Tango: A Nonlinear History*

Tango’s history did not proceed in neat, linear stages from *candombe* to *milonga* to modern tango, shedding ever more African components along the way. But the presumption that *candombe*, along with Afro-Argentines, vanished in Argentina after the mid-nineteenth century has become



Figure 14.1 “México 1265, con Candombe de Grigera,” n/d (ca. 1900).

a lasting obstacle to tracing Black contributions to the tango. The narrative of *candombe*'s demise emerged in the nineteenth century, in the writings of hostile witnesses who saw it as the essence of a "barbaric" African population – foreign, animalistic, and politically dangerous – which they hoped would rapidly disappear after Rosas' fall (1852). These writers bequeathed a static picture of Argentine *candombe* defined by what struck them as most troublingly salient: its loud drumming, absence of melody, and open-air setting. To the extent that *candombe* evolved outside these stereotypes, it ceased to be perceived as a *candombe*, allowing detractors to declare it disappeared.<sup>9</sup>

The Candombe de Grigera's nineteenth-century evolution helps illuminate how *candombe* persisted by shifting shape and becoming less readily legible through racial stereotype. It shows that *candombe* was not a time-bound stage deep in tango's prehistory, but a living musical and dance genre, embedded in a vibrant *Afro-porteño* community, that continued to feed into and from tango into the early twentieth century.

By the mid-1800s, Antonio's freeborn son Domingo (ca. 1828–1886) led the Candombe de Grigera. Its membership would have been increasingly Argentine-born and free. Slavery was not abolished in Buenos Aires until 1861, but by then most Afro-Argentines had achieved freedom through gradual emancipation laws, service in wars, or manumissions granted or purchased. Domingo Grigera was a well-respected member of the *Afro-porteño* community, a former soldier wounded in battle, and a pianist by profession. For observers steeped in the stereotypical definition of *candombe* bequeathed by the Rosas era, Domingo's instrument might make him unthinkable as a *candombe* leader. But the Candombe de Grigera was a memorable association precisely for being a "candombe with a piano."<sup>10</sup>

This detail sheds crucial light on the history of *candombe* and its relationship to the Argentine tango. *Candombe* music and dance (with drumming still a central feature), and the African ethnic associations that originally hosted it, continued to exist in the middle to late decades of the nineteenth century, as scores of articles in the *Afro-porteño* press of the 1870s and 1880s attest.<sup>11</sup> But *candombe* as a music and dance practice was gradually shifting shape, sounds, and sites.<sup>12</sup> The disapproval of *Afro-porteño* community leaders who stressed respectability led many to abandon, conceal, or transform its practice, driving it metaphorically underground. Yet the shift also reflected musical evolution, including experimentation with new instrumentation and melody. *Candombe*, it turned out, was difficult to eradicate, even among the community's self-appointed elite, and it was highly adaptable. Alongside more traditional *candombe* danced primarily by community

elders at the meeting grounds of surviving *naciones*, at least three new, hybrid, and overlapping variants were taking shape: camouflaged *candombe*, orchestral *candombe*, and Carnival *candombe*.

In the first variant, the maligned drums were supplemented with, or supplanted by, other forms of percussion and performed less publicly, yielding a camouflaged *candombe* blended with rhythms considered more socially acceptable. This was the case in private parties hosted in *Afro-porteño* homes or tenement quarters. These soirées might begin with popular musical styles like Afro-Cuban *habaneras* (written for piano), *tangos* (a term used to describe festive satires of “Black” music, written for piano or strings, discussed later in this chapter), and *milongas* (a combination of *habanera* with the rural music of the hinterlands, usually for piano or guitar). But they often ended with full-blown *candombe*. Not only did the camouflaged *candombe* go “underground,” then; by adopting new melodies and instrumentations built around Domingo’s instrument, we might say that it became “*candombe* with a piano.”

Similar dynamics likely played out in more public establishments, like *academias* or *peringundines*, in which Afrodescendants played key roles as musicians and *maestros de baile* or dance instructors. These establishments brought together people from the city’s *orillas* (margins) – knife-toting *compadritos* (street toughs), soldiers, sailors, cart drivers, workers, and others – with slumming *niños bien*, the children of the elite. Extensive multi-racial and cross-class exchanges in these spaces have been credited with birthing *milonga*, tango’s most direct predecessor, in which the rhythmic and choreographic elements of *candombe*, along with the Afro-Cuban influences of the *habanera*, were palpable.

The second (orchestral) variant of *candombe* appears to have flourished in elegant dance salons, in parties organized by upwardly aspiring *Afro-porteños*. These featured orchestras with respected *Afro-porteño* musicians and playlists with European styles like the waltz, polka, can-can, and mazurka, as well as the wildly popular *habanera*. Domingo’s two sons, Estanislao and Pedro, would play the piano at such events. Yet even these soirées, for all their sophistication and aspiration to respectability, were sometimes criticized by disapproving *Afro-porteño* commentators as nothing but “*candombe* with orchestras” rather than drums.

The third and most public-facing variant of *candombe* emerged through the performances of Carnival *comparsas* (parade troupes) made up of *Afro-porteños*. Some *comparsas* played *habaneras* or other Europeanized styles on string and wind instruments as they marched through city streets. Others joined a new trend that swept Buenos Aires in the 1860s and



1870s: performing mockeries of “Black” or Africanized music during Carnival. Some of these musical styles were generically referred to as “tango,” in an updated use of the colonial-era term for African dances and dance sites, and in confluence with a new use in contemporary Spanish and Cuban theater (which reached *porteño* stages) to refer to Black dances in a broader Atlantic context. As part of these trends, white *porteños* created *comparsas* with names like *Los negros*, in which elite young men blackened their faces and imitated *Afro-porteños*’ perceived speech patterns, songs, and dances. Authors of Carnival hits played with metaphors of slavery and Blackness, using the figure of the “*negro*” who desperately pursued the untouchable white *amita* (master’s daughter) as a metaphor for white men’s own frustrated romantic longings. These *comparsas* of “false” or “cork-blackened” *negros* both belittled *Afro-porteños* and *candombe* and acknowledged their importance in the city’s popular culture. In this context, some younger *Afro-porteños* also put on blackface and dressed up in ostensible “African” style while drumming and dancing a caricatured version of *candombe* and singing in exaggerated dialect, performing their own distance from that maligned custom, but also updating it.

The pianists in the Grigera family, acknowledged by musicologists as important figures in *candombe* and by contemporaries as respectable musicians, operated at these intersections. If the Candombe de Grigera provided a space where the music and dance of earlier generations of *Afro-porteños* intermingled with newer forms of popular dance music, it would have done so just as commentators began to declare *candombe* “disappeared.” Yet the Candombe de Grigera, with Domingo’s piano-based *candombe*, along with other establishments like it, may have been key to the musical innovations that emerged before the birth of the Argentine tango and fed into it. Some music scholars have argued that the drumbeat of the early *candombe* echoed in the percussive bass-clef piano chords of a *habanera*, the bass lines of a Carnival tango, and the strumming of the guitar in a *milonga*.<sup>13</sup> In this way, the underlying rhythmic “grammar” of *candombe*, with its syncopations and off-beat accents, made its way into contemporary popular music even as the once-defining drums dropped away.<sup>14</sup> As one account explains, “The rhythms of tango, which stem from Black influences, are characterized by a special polyrhythm arising from all the melodic and harmonic instruments together, due to the disappearance of the drums.”<sup>15</sup> A pianist at the head of a *candombe* in these critical middle decades of the nineteenth century helps us understand these musical innovations happening in spaces continuously known as *candombes*, and



not just in *academias*, *peringundines*, *comparsas*, or salon dances envisioned as separate or posterior.

Domingo passed away in 1886. If the Candombe de Grigera continued to operate for another fifteen years, it must have done so under his eldest son Estanislao Grigera (1856–1935) – a classically trained pianist, composer, piano instructor, and church organist (WP 14.1). Estanislao had received formal musical training at one of the nation’s most prestigious conservatories. He was part of the group of elite-trained *Afro-porteño* musicians who disdained the open-air *candombe* dances and musical performances still held at the *naciones* in the late 1800s; his close friend, the famous *Afro-porteño* pianist and composer Casildo G. Thompson, derided these as “the semi-barbaric practices of our ancestors.” But that does not mean that Estanislao and his generation did not experiment with the new forms of *candombe* that involved more “refined” melody and instrumentation and shifted percussion to the piano.

What might this Candombe de Grigera, now two generations removed from African leadership, have looked and sounded like? No recordings from this era survive, nor any sheet music explicitly labeled “*candombe*.” Yet Afro-Argentine musicians often interpreted or improvised upon popular music forms by playing them in a 2/4 time signature, in line with *candombe* meter. The *Afro-porteño* press published Carnival song lyrics in the 1870s and early 1880s, offering some insight into rhythmic phrasing, but not scores. Using oral history, musicologist Norberto Pablo Cirio has reconstructed the music for one such song, “Bum que bum” (ca. 1871–1873). As the title suggests with its onomatopoeic invocation of drumming, the song was understood as *candombe* – tellingly, the bassline resembles that of the early tango.<sup>16</sup>

The *Afro-porteño* press offers other important social and sonic clues. On December 10, 1881, according to the newspaper *La Broma*, Estanislao Grigera and his wife Alejandra hosted a private party at which Estanislao’s pianist friends supplied the music: Casildo G. Thompson, Cayetano Olivera, Juan Espinosa, Lorenzo Espinosa, and Prudencio Denis. We have already heard one *Afro-porteño* reporter dismiss as “*candombe* with orchestras” precisely these sorts of aspirationally refined performances. So it is possible that outsiders to the *Afro-porteño* community, or younger *Afro-porteños* who later acted as informants for early twentieth-century ethnomusicologists, interpreted the percussive piano sounds coming from Estanislao’s house in the 1880s and 1890s as “*candombe*,” explaining how the Candombe de Grigera was seen to last until 1901.

But if the family's links to previous forms of *Afro-porteño* music and dance are suggestive, those to new musical forms are even more so. One historian, identifying little-known Afro-Argentine pioneers of the tango, highlights most of the pianists who played the party at the Grigera home: "the brothers Espinosa, Casildo [G.] Thompson, [Cayetano] Olivera." He singles out Juan Espinosa – godfather to one of Estanislao's children – as "the first composer of a tango" ("La Broma," 1876, dedicated to the eponymous newspaper) to sound like what the genre would become: a melodic style with an orchestra including violins, flutes, clarinets, cello, and bass.<sup>17</sup> With this in mind, *La Broma's* description of the music and dance at Estanislao's party begins to sound familiar: a "harmonious" sound with a "pulsing" rhythm, to which people delighted in "swinging" in a close embrace. That these descriptions make it difficult to distinguish the outlines of the "orchestral" or "camouflaged" forms of *candombe* from the rhythmic, melodic, and choreographic innovations that birthed the *milonga* and early tango is precisely the point.

Accounts that credit the influence of *Afro-porteño* music and musicians in the birth of the Argentine tango toward the end of the nineteenth century typically highlight Rosendo Mendizábal (1868–1913), whose tango "El Entrerriano" "The Man from Entre Ríos," a province northeast of Buenos Aires) (1896) inaugurated the genre's so-called *guardia vieja* (Old Guard). Mendizábal played piano in cafés, *academias*, and upscale brothels. But *La Broma's* account of the party in Estanislao's home in 1881 suggests that everyday gatherings like that one, alongside the *comparsas*, *academias*, and brothels usually credited with the tango's emergence, provided spaces where classically trained *Afro-porteño* musicians could apply their talents and varied instrumentation (piano, strings, or winds) to popular dance music, some of which had itself absorbed *candombe's* influences in earlier decades. The resulting music, known variously as *candombe criollo*, *milonga-candombe*, or *habanera con corte*, became increasingly channeled into denominations bearing the term "tango" by the turn of the century: *tango-milonga*, *tango canyengue*, and *tango arrabalero*.

### Into the Twentieth Century: *Candombe* as Tango, Tango as *Candombe*

The Grigera family's musical traditions continued into the twentieth century, by then tightly connected with the emergent Argentine tango, through two of Estanislao's sons: Luis Estanislao Leandro (1879–?), a noted pianist, music teacher, and tango composer, and Raúl Grigera

(1886–1955), who, after a tumultuous youth, rose to fame as a dandy and icon of the city’s nightlife.

“Tango,” by the second decade of the century, came to denote something like what it means today: a sensual dance in a close embrace marked by *cortes* – stops, turns, and other embellishments, such as entangling of the dancers’ legs – and *quebradas* – a “breaking” or swiveling of the line of the hips, performed with the upper bodies in full contact. In other words, the label *tango* was increasingly, after 1900, applied to the dance style that had been known as *milonga* in the 1880s and 1890s.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the associations among Blackness, *milonga*, and tango were strong. As the ability to execute those dances became a currency of a form of tough masculinity, *Afro-porteños* “commanded respect in the dance that had been created with their rhythmic and choreographic elements.”<sup>18</sup> So close was the association between Black people and tango prowess that “outdoing oneself in daring, showy turns was called ‘dancing Black’ [*bailar a lo negro*].” Popular theater at the century’s turn portrayed *Afro-porteños* as unsurpassable tango or *milonga* dancers. And, as we have seen, many *Afro-porteño* men were pioneer musicians and composers in the genre increasingly consolidated as the Argentine tango. This included Estanislao’s son Luis Estanislao Leandro, who in 1914 composed a *tango criollo* called “Unión Comunal” (“Municipal Union”), named after a new political party. Even into the early decades of the twentieth century, tango’s Black variants and practitioners – along with the nickname “*negro*” itself – acquired a “heretical charge,” functioning as emblems of a populist, off-white pride among some *tangueros*.<sup>19</sup>

The world of the early tango thus provided a unique space, in a society committed to whitening, in which a Black man like Raúl Grigera could rise to fame as a popular icon. In 1912, Ángel Bassi composed a tango (without lyrics) titled “El Negro Raúl: Seventh Tango Criollo for Piano” (WS 14.1). This tango was, like others in the *guardia vieja* years, upbeat, festive, cheerful – nothing like later tangos famously described as “a sad thought that is danced.”<sup>20</sup> Featuring Raúl as the subject of this composition was also in keeping with the times. Early tangos were peppered with references to Black culture and folkloric Afro-Argentine “types” and imaginary characters. But Raúl Grigera stands out as a living, modern Black person, and as the rare celebrity who was visibly Black. Unlike some of his *Afro-porteño* relatives or acquaintances, he gained renown not as a creator or interpreter of popular music, but as its acclaimed subject.

Raúl’s Blackness, in these years when tango’s Afro-Argentine roots were still widely acknowledged, appears to have bolstered his fame. Decades

later, essayist Ezequiel Martínez Estrada looked back on Raúl's appeal in precisely these terms, albeit through a contemptuous lens: "El Negro Raúl," he claimed, was a "slave to the fad that took root among young lads who lacked any decorum, long before Josephine Baker became all the rage; idol of the adorers of tango [and] *candombe*[".]"<sup>21</sup> Though Martínez Estrada found this embrace of Black culture revolting, the "fad" he identified – the "adoration" of tango and *candombe* by some young white men – discloses a selective fascination with Blackness within Argentine popular culture in the early 1900s.

It's no coincidence that subsequent critics (and admirers) of Raúl Grigera linked him to tango and *candombe* alike. His seamless movement between these forms reveals them not to have been as distant as subsequent accounts have imagined; indeed, tango and the updated forms of *candombe* that fed into and from it were, for some time and in some spaces, contemporaneous and coexistent. During the Carnival season of 1915, one of Buenos Aires' leading newspapers, *Crítica*, reported that the famous theater El Nacional on Corrientes Street was hosting a series of "candombes" (for-pay parties featuring *candombe* music and dance) for the city's "people of color." The coverage that followed this announcement provides new information on how *candombe* spanned the birth of the new century not just hidden in basements or backyards, but at the center of Buenos Aires' downtown nightlife.

The "candombes" ran for several weekends in January and February of 1915. They were, according to *Crítica*, organized by the management of El Nacional in conjunction with Raúl Grigera and a man known simply as "el negro Andrade." Andrade was the chief doorman at El Nacional. As such, he had the power to control who attended and entered the dances, and appears to have used it to grant entry to *Afro-porteños* not usually welcome in large numbers in public establishments. Raúl was presented variously by *Crítica* as a guest of honor who gave the dances their "luster," and as the dances' "director," "leader," "*bastonero*" (in nineteenth-century *candombes*, *bastoneros* were masters of ceremony who used a large cane or stick [*bastón*] to conduct the music and dance), and "Menelik" (the late king and emperor of Ethiopia).

These references were partly *Crítica's* sarcastic riff on old stereotypes of Africans and Afro-Argentines who gave themselves airs of royalty as "kings" or "queens" of the *candombes* of yore. Yet these statements held truth, beginning with Raúl as the *bastonero*. *Crítica's* repeated portrayal of Raúl as a "leader" and "director" of the dances suggests he might have officiated as master of ceremony at El Nacional. We know very little about

what Argentine *candombe* looked like in 1915, but in neighboring Uruguay, the *bastonero* became a stock character of Carnival *candombe* after the 1870s. This character embodies a particular kind of Black male power: youth, dancerly grace, and sex appeal. Raúl, who in his childhood would have learned to dance the era's favorites (*habanera*, *milonga*, and of course, *candombe*), may have been a *bastonero* in this sense as well. Perhaps his alluring performances as a Black dancer explained the "luster" he brought to these interracial spaces.

Likewise, the quip that Raúl was Black royalty, and thus well-situated to convene fellow Black *candomberos* to dance, may have been a fair description. As the descendant of generations of *candombe* leaders and part of a family of pianists, Raúl certainly would have known enough musicians who could play at these events. Though laden with derision, then, *Crítica's* claim that Raúl and Andrade worked together to organize these dances offers glimpses of how *Afro-porteños* mobilized familial and social networks to project their community's dances into the city's nightlife well into the twentieth century's second decade.

But perhaps the most interesting thing about the dances that *Crítica's* theater pages labeled "*candombes*" is that less-hostile sources, like the daily *La Nación*, announced these simply as dances featuring "tango." In fact, the city's major theaters advertised nothing but "tango" – the style was becoming all the rage – during Carnival. *Crítica* itself began to report on the city's Carnival dances as "*El mundo del tango*" ("The world of tango"), a rubric that, tellingly, included the "*candombes* at El Nacional." This suggests there may have been other dances attended or organized by "*gente de color*" ("people of color") in these years, with more Africanized variants of tango or even *candombe* as their musical fare, that still pass unnoticed among countless announcements for "tangos" in the city's theater pages. *Crítica's* coverage thus offers a priceless glimpse into how tango's "whitening" in the mid-1910s may have occurred alongside a palpable Afro-Argentine *collective* presence, with the community actively engaged in defining the sounds and silhouettes of the thing we now know as "tango."

The interchangeability of the labels "tango" and "*candombe*" to describe what people danced at El Nacional suggests how strong the association between tango and Afro-Argentines still was in 1915. If this association was controversial, it was not for lack of evidence; elite critics of tango complained precisely about its African origins. In one account, tango's "lubricious" mixture between "the contortions of *negros*" and the coarse music of immigrants made it an "immodest *mulata*" from the slums.<sup>22</sup> The same year that *Crítica* covered the "*candombes*" at El Nacional, another

newspaper noted (disapprovingly) that tango was a dance “cultivated principally by the *gente de color*.”<sup>23</sup> So the fact that the dance styles at El Nacional, advertised as “tangos,” were dubbed “*candombes*” by *Crítica* probably means that the dancers were disproportionately Afro-descendant, or were lower-class *porteños* dancing in ways that appeared markedly “Black” – or both.

Perhaps revelers at El Nacional danced the style that observers and composers began, around 1915, to label *tango canyengue* (a word of African origin), also known as “*candombe* rhythm.”<sup>24</sup> Musically, it was characterized by percussive slaps to the strings or body of a bass or guitar, or even kicks to a piano, to create deep, syncopated beats, an innovation credited to *Afro-porteño* bassist Leopoldo Thompson. Choreographically, *canyengue* featured pronounced pelvic movements, hunched torsos, protruding rear ends, and various accentuations of the downbeats. One present-day Afro-Argentine commentator recalls a similar style, *milonga-candombe*, in which her elders recreated “the beat of the [absent] drum by striking the floor with the heel of the shoe.”<sup>25</sup> Contemporaries recognized these “Black” forms of tango (and *candombe* itself) as the gritty, authentic origin of what was becoming a stylized, upright, stiff-hipped dance considered more elegant by the Europeanized elite, the so-called “*tango de salón*” (salon tango) or the more stripped-down “*tango liso*” (smooth tango).<sup>26</sup>

Indeed, even as *Crítica*’s coverage of the dances at El Nacional reveals the depth of tango’s imbrication with Afrodescendants in the mid-1910s, it simultaneously exposes the processes by which many white *porteños* tried to force the two apart to shore up tango’s acceptability. These processes involved making Blackness hyper-visible or hyper-audible the better to segregate it, as in *Crítica*’s attempt to degrade the dances at El Nacional by calling them “*candombes*,” or the contemporary relabeling of some tango variants as *canyengue*. Explicitly classifying these tango variants as “Black” excised them from what increasingly became the white, unmarked, “normal” Argentine tango. At other times, ensuring tango’s acceptability involved downplaying Blackness, rather than casting it out. In contrast to its depiction of El Nacional’s disqualifying “Blackness,” *Crítica* reported benevolently on dances at nearby theaters, despite the band directors in charge at each – Carlos Posadas and Manuel L. Posadas – being *Afro-porteños*. These renowned masters of the tango were part of Estanislao Grigera’s tight-knit group of *Afro-porteño* artists and intellectuals. Yet in *Crítica*’s eyes, their presence did not “Blacken” dances at those nearby theaters, perhaps due to their arrangements and instrumentation, their classical training, or their position within a respectable *Afro-porteño* elite.

As in Argentine society more broadly, in the world of tango the overt labeling of some subgenres and people as “Black” worked together with racial silence to minimize and marginalize Blackness and normalize whiteness.

## Re-Blackening Tango’s History

The alchemy that began to meld tango, Argentineness, and whiteness in the mid-1910s made Afro-Argentines both hyper-visible and invisible in the tango world. On one hand, ascendant narratives of Black “disappearance” cast visibly Black Argentines, like Raúl Grigera, as the “last” of their kind. In Raúl’s case, falling fortunes in the 1920s and 1930s turned him into the subject of derisive tangos. Alfredo Gobbi’s “Las aventuras del Negro Raúl” (ca. 1929, named after a 1916 comic strip in which Raúl Grigera was the main character; WA 14.1), for example, recreated the blackface mockery of nineteenth-century Carnival tangos, with Raúl’s character speaking in exaggerated Afro-Argentine dialect and breaking into childish, deranged laughter; Sebastián Piana and León Benarós’ “Ahí viene el negro Raúl” (“Here Comes El Negro Raúl,” 1973) cast Raúl as a “*títere roto*” (“broken puppet”) – the pathetic, witless plaything of rich *porteño* playboys. On the other hand, those narratives made it increasingly difficult to discern the presence of Afrodescendants in the world of tango, or the African origins of some of its foundational composers, interpreters, and dancers. Raúl’s eldest brother, Luis Estanislao Leandro, offers a case in point. In 1994, a writer for the popular history magazine *Todo es historia* puzzled over the freshly unearthed sheet music for a “tango criollo” by one “E.L. Grigera.”<sup>27</sup> This was Luis Estanislao’s “Unión Comunal,” recorded for Discos Odeón around 1914. The writer could find no information on the composition’s publishing house, publication date, or “any other data that would enable me to situate it within the history of the tango.” Turning to an encyclopedia, he found biographies of illustrious white agriculturalist and military man Don Tomás Grigera (1755–1829) and his descendants, and assumed that “E.L. Grigera” was one of them.

This mistake illustrates how attenuated the association between Blackness and tango became by the end of the twentieth century. Tango’s taken-for-granted whiteness deprived this author of the framework necessary even to imagine that the composer, far from being a member of Tomás Grigera’s elite landholding family, might be a descendant of one of the people they enslaved. No one attempting to situate an unknown musician



within the history of US jazz music, Brazilian samba, or Cuban *danzón* could have gotten away with the same assumption.

To be sure, in the twentieth century, as tango became the national rhythm of a population comprised primarily of European immigrants and their descendants, its Afro-Argentine imprints may have waned. But accounts of Black absences in the last hundred years of tango's history are exacerbated by the myth of Afro-Argentines' "disappearance," the official invisibility to which they have been subjected, and the paucity of sources preserving Afro-Argentine voices. Ethnographic work, oral histories, and a newly unearthed twentieth-century *Afro-porteño* press are revealing dozens of tango musicians and composers who straddled the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and shedding new light on the trajectories of famous *tangueros*, like Horacio Salgán or Enrique Maciel, who were deeply embedded in their community's musical traditions, especially *candombe*.<sup>28</sup> As twentieth-century Afro-Argentine collective presences continue to be documented, more individuals will surely come to light who occupied salient places in the overlapping worlds of tango and other forms of *Afro-porteño* music and dance. And as an increasingly visible and vocal Afro-Argentine community continues to reinterpret tango for a more diverse Argentina, researchers may soon have to shift from unearthing tango's deep Afro-Argentine roots to describing its living, evolving Afro-Argentine branches.

## Notes

1. Many specialists denied tango's African roots, at best conceding them in the (African) realm of rhythm, not the (European) realm of melody. See Carlos Vega, *Danzas y canciones argentinas* (Buenos Aires: Ricordi, 1936); Jorge Novati and Inés Cuello, eds., *Antología del tango rioplatense*, vol. I (Buenos Aires: Instituto Nacional de Musicología Carlos Vega, 1980); and examples in Óscar Natale, *Buenos Aires, negros y tango* (Buenos Aires: Peña Lillo, 1984), 251–252, 257n6. For overviews of these debates, see Natale; Fernando Guibert, *Los argentinos y el tango* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Culturales Argentinas, 1973); and Omar García Brunelli, "Bases para una aproximación razonable a la cuestión del componente afro del tango," *Revista Argentina de Musicología* 18 (2017): 91–124.
2. Early examples include Vicente Rossi, *Cosas de negros* (Buenos Aires: Taurus, 2001 [1926]); Héctor Bates and Luis J. Bates, *La historia del tango* (Buenos Aires: Taller Gráfico de la Compañía General Fabril Financiera, 1936); Vicente Gesualdo, *Historia de la música en la Argentina*, vols. II and III (Buenos

- Aires: Beta, 1961); Néstor Ortiz Oderigo, *Calunga: croquis del candombe* (Buenos Aires: EUDEBA, 1969); Néstor Ortiz Oderigo, *Aspectos de la cultura africana en el Río de la Plata* (Buenos Aires: Plus Ultra, 1974). More recent works are cited throughout this chapter.
3. On this myth, see George Reid Andrews, *The Afro-Argentines of Buenos Aires, 1800–1900* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1980).
  4. For example, Natale, *Buenos Aires, negros y tango*, ch. 11; Gustavo Varela, *Tango. Una pasión ilustrada* (Buenos Aires: LEA, 2010), ch. 8.
  5. Especially Rossi, *Cosas de negros*; Bernardo Kordon, *Candombe: contribución al estudio de la raza negra en el Río de la Plata* (Buenos Aires: Continente, 1938); José Luis Lanuza, *Morenada* (Buenos Aires, Emecé, 1946).
  6. This chapter draws from the author's book on the Grigeras; for further details and source references, see Paulina L. Alberto, *Black Legend: The Many Lives of Raúl Grigera and the Power of Racial Storytelling in Argentina* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).
  7. For clarity, I italicize *candombe* when referring to the music/dance, but leave it unitalicized to refer to the site or meeting grounds. *Milonga* retains the same double meaning today, as both a music/dance form and a place where people gather to dance tango. On the associations, music, and dances described in this section, see Ricardo Rodríguez Molas, *La música y la danza de los negros en el Buenos Aires de los siglos XVIII y XIX* (Buenos Aires: Clio, 1957); Hugo E. Ratier, "Candombes porteños," *VICUS Cuadernos* 1 (1977): 87–150; Andrews, *Afro-Argentines*; Oscar Chamosa, "'To Honor the Ashes of Their Forebears': The Rise and Crisis of African Nations in the Post-Independence State of Buenos Aires, 1820–1860," *The Americas* 59, no. 3 (2003): 347–378; Pilar González Bernaldo de Quirós, *Civilidad y política en los orígenes de la nación argentina: Las sociabilidades en Buenos Aires, 1829–1862* (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2008); Alex Borucki, *From Shipmates to Soldiers: Emerging Black Identities in the Río de la Plata* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2015).
  8. Néstor Ortiz Oderigo, "Las 'naciones' africanas," *Todo es historia*, November 1980, 34, cited here and below.
  9. Alejandro Frigerio, *Cultura negra en el Cono Sur: representaciones en conflicto* (Buenos Aires: Facultad de Ciencias Sociales y Económicas de la Universidad Católica Argentina, 2000).
  10. Estanislao Villanueva, "El candombe nació en África y se hizo rioplatense," *Todo es historia*, November 1980, 46. Although Uruguayan *candombe* has a bass *piano* drum, the term is not used in Buenos Aires.
  11. For reconstructions of this "ancestral African" *candombe*'s sounds, see Norberto Pablo Cirio, "Ausente con aviso: ¿Qué es la música afroargentina?," in *Músicas populares: aproximaciones teóricas, metodológicas y analíticas en la musicología argentina*, ed. Federico Sammartino and Héctor Rubio (Córdoba: Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, 2008), 81–134.

12. Discussion of changing practices of *candombe* in the next paragraphs draws from Lea Geler, *Andares negros, caminos blancos: Afroporteños, estado y Nación Argentina a fines del siglo XIX* (Rosario: Prohistoria Ediciones/TEIAA, 2010). See also Gustavo Goldman, *Lucamba: Herencia africana en el tango (1870–1890)* (Montevideo: Perro Andaluz, 2008); John Charles Chasteen, *National Rhythms, African Roots: The Deep History of Latin American Popular Dance* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004); Andrews, *Afro-Argentines*; Gesualdo, *Historia de la música*, 1961; Natale, *Buenos Aires, negros y tango*; Ricardo Rodríguez Molas, “Los afroargentinos y el origen del tango (sociedad, danzas, salones de baile y folclore urbano),” *Desmemoria* 7, no. 27 (2000): 87–132.
13. For musicological analysis, see Goldman, *Lucamba*.
14. On the underlying “grammar,” see Brunelli, “Bases.”
15. Juan Carlos Cáceres, *Tango negro. La historia negada: orígenes, desarrollo y actualidad del tango* (Buenos Aires: Planeta, 2010), 98.
16. Norberto Pablo Cirio, *Tinta negra en el gris del ayer: los afroporteños a través de sus periódicos entre 1873 y 1882* (Buenos Aires: Teseo, 2009), 74. For a musical description of these “traditional Afro-porteño” *candombes*, notated in a habanera rhythm in 2/4 meter, see Cirio, “Ausente con aviso.”
17. Rodríguez Molas, “Los afroargentinos,” 105–109.
18. Kordon, *Candombe*, 60, cited here and later in this chapter.
19. Matthew B. Karush, “Blackness in Argentina: Jazz, Tango and Race Before Perón,” *Past & Present* 216, no. 1 (2012): 227. For further reading on Afro-Argentines in tango in the early decades of the twentieth century, see Norberto Pablo Cirio, “La presencia del negro en grabaciones de tango y géneros afines,” in *Buenos Aires negra: Identidad y cultura*, ed. Leticia Maronese (Buenos Aires: CPPHC, 2006), 25–59; Norberto Pablo Cirio, *La historia negra del tango* (Buenos Aires: Museo Casa Carlos Gardel, 2010); Robert Farris Thompson, *Tango: The Art History of Love* (New York: Pantheon, 2005).
20. Attributed to the tango poet Enrique Santos Discépolo.
21. Ezequiel Martínez Estrada, *La cabeza de Goliat: microscopía de Buenos Aires* (Buenos Aires: Nova, 1957), 154.
22. Leopoldo Lugones (1913), cited in Gustavo Varela, *Tango y política: sexo, moral burguesa y revolución en Argentina* (Buenos Aires, Argentina: Ariel, 2016), 56.
23. “Nuestra escuadra sirve para fiestas y bailes,” *La Vanguardia*, 7 Dec. 1915.
24. On the word’s origins in the Kimbundu “ka-llenge,” a Congo funeral dance practiced in the Río de la Plata, see Néstor Ortiz Oderigo, *Esquema de la música afroargentina* (Buenos Aires: Universidad Nacional de Tres de Febrero, 2008), 176–178, 205–210, 231–232.
25. Quote by Carmen Yannone, interviewed by Lea Geler, August 3 2021.

26. See especially Viejo tanguero (pseud.), "El tango, su evolución y su historia," *Crítica*, September 22, 1913.
27. "Unión Comunal": Un tango criollo de Estanislao L. Grigera." *Todo es historia*, no. 328, 1994, 63.
28. Cirio, *La historia negra del tango*; Alberto, Paulina L., Lea Geler, and Chisu Teresa Ko, "In Defense of the People of Color of South America': A New Source for Twentieth-Century Afro-Argentine History and Thought." *Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies*, 2023. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17442222.2023.2246898>. Maciel was also one of several twentieth-century Argentines (with Sebastián Piana, Juan Carlos Cáceres, Facundo Posadas, and others) who highlighted tango's Black roots and connections to *candombe*, musically or choreographically.

## Further Reading

- Alberto, Paulina L. *Black Legend: The Many Lives of Raúl Grigera and the Power of Racial Storytelling in Argentina*. New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022.
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