

# ***Milonguitas: Tango, Gender and Consumption in Buenos Aires (1920-1940)***

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines gender representations conveyed in tango, showing that its lyrics targeted consumption desire as one of the main causes for the reprehensible behavior of *milonguitas* (cabaret women). While the literature has emphasized the criticism that tango lyrics made of the changing sexual mores and the social ascendancy phenomenon that characterized Buenos Aires of the 1920's and 1930's, the paper sheds light on the less explored fantasies of easy wealth that *milonguitas* embodied. Tango lyrics depicted them as women who aspired to a prosperous life and used their sexuality to fulfill their materialistic ambitions. Examining gender representations conveyed in tango lyrics, as well as the few voices left by some actual tango women, this paper aims to understand better the role of consumption when defining womanhood, thus contributing to a growing historiography interested in analyzing the gendered dimension of consumption from a socio-cultural perspective.

**Keywords:** Gender, Women, Consumption, Tango, Argentina

## **Resumen**

Este artículo explora las representaciones de género presentes en las letras de tango y muestra cómo estas definen el deseo de consumo como uno de los rasgos más reprochables en el comportamiento de las *milonguitas* (mujeres del cabaret). Si bien la historiografía ha hecho hincapié en la crítica que el tango hizo de los cambiantes comportamientos sexuales y del fenómeno del ascenso social que caracterizó a Buenos Aires en los años veinte y treinta, aquí se pretende analizar las menos exploradas fantasías de riqueza que encarnaron las *milonguitas*. El tango las describió como

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mujeres que aspiraban a una vida próspera y que usaban su sexualidad para lograr sus ambiciones materiales. A través del análisis de representaciones de género presentes en los tangos, como así también de las pocas voces dejadas por algunas mujeres del tango, este artículo pretende examinar el rol que el consumo tiene en definiciones de feminidad, para así contribuir a una creciente historiografía interesada en analizar la dimensión genérica del consumo desde una perspectiva sociocultural.

**Palabras Claves:** Género, Mujeres, Consumo, Tango, Argentina

The tango *Aquel tapado de armiño* (That Ermine Coat) (Manuel Romero) was released in 1929. Its central topic revolved around a woman's fascination for a fur coat. The storyteller begins the tango narrating how displeased he is to see the woman he is in love with leave the cabaret wearing the fur coat that he himself had given her as a present. Feeling betrayed, he remembered the time when they were together, the disappointment she felt when he could not afford the desired item of clothing, and the loan he had to take out to finally buy it. Still, she had abandoned him for somebody else and he finds himself paying off the loan for the fur coat that she is wearing. This tango, like many others, had the theme of love, betrayal and material ambition as its main topics. These tango songs were public confessions of abandoned men who reminisced with both nostalgia and resentment for the women they used to love. While the men of tango longed for the idealized time when the couple shared a brief moment of happiness, their rage emerged when they realized the true sensual and materialistic nature of *milonguitas*. Inexorably –these tangos went on to say – these cabaret women would find the promise of a luxurious lifestyle provided by these wealthy men more appealing than the love offered by their poor suburban partners.

Popular culture's fascination with the lifestyles of cabaret women was a global phenomenon during the interwar years. One among the several manifestations of the modern girl figure, these women emerged as a trendy icon in major international cities. Cabaret women all over the world shared some similar characteristics. As modern girls, they had a distinctively fashionable style: short skirts, sleeveless dresses, bobbed hair, high-heeled shoes, a cloche hat, lipstick and dark eye shadow. They also shared being seen as challenging figures, mainly because of their sexual transgressions. Whether the *fichera* of Mexican popular culture or the dancehall girl of interwar Japan or Cuba, critical depictions of cabaret women were employed to address, among other issues, notions of sexual propriety and to express society's anxieties over changing gender norms.<sup>2</sup>

*Milonguitas*, the local version of cabaret women, have awakened much scholarly interest, and have been analyzed as metaphors for anxieties raised by the changes in the city of Buenos Aires during the interwar period. More specifically, some scholars have stated that tango lyrics expressed a misogynistic

view of the disruption in customary codes of gender behavior.<sup>3</sup> In the 1920's women began experiencing a more open romantic and sexual life, especially those who worked and had therefore gained personal autonomy and economic independence. This enabled them to socialize with men without the supervision of the family.<sup>4</sup> Tangos provided a way of settling this gender disruption by offering the audience stable moral values, highlighting the importance of chastity, domesticity, respectability and fidelity – values rooted in an idealized past that *milonguitas* challenged when they decided to abandon the suburbs and their partners. For other scholars, the ascendancy and inevitable fall of *milonguitas* reflected not only gender concerns but also the anxieties raised by an unstable society, addressing a history of social mobility from a critical perspective.<sup>5</sup> The rapid economic growth of the 1920's mobilized many sectors of society. While many inhabitants of Buenos Aires benefited from these changes, viewing it as the product of a new set of values based on the ideals of self-improvement and respectability, others did not.<sup>6</sup> For those who suffered the consequences of this rapid economic and social transformation, values such as hard work and individual effort did not make much sense. Tango lyrics reflected precisely this last point of view, as these scholars have stated. They belonged to a melodramatic tradition, which shaped Argentine popular culture, and portrayed a society divided into two antagonistic moral poles: pretentious and arrogant rich people, who enjoyed all sorts of advantages; and generous and selfless poor people, who suffered the consequences. Through the description of failed interclass relationships between wealthy men and beautiful poor young women, these scholars have argued that tango songs condemned upward social mobility, and promoted the image of a society with a rigid social structure, in which social striving was not only impossible but also undesirable.

While the literature has emphasized the criticism that tango lyrics made of the changing sexual mores and the social ascendancy phenomenon that characterized Buenos Aires of the 1920's and 1930's, this paper sheds light on the less explored fantasies of easy wealth that *milonguitas* embodied, contending that tango targeted female material desire as one of the main causes for *milonguitas'* reprehensible behavior.<sup>7</sup> Tango songs depicted them as women who aspired to a prosperous life and used their sexuality to fulfill their materialistic ambitions. Examining gender representations conveyed in tango lyrics, as well as the few voices left by some actual tango women, this paper aims to understand better the role of consumption when defining womanhood, thus contributing to a growing historiography interested in analyzing the gendered dimension of consumption from a socio-cultural perspective.<sup>8</sup>

## Gender Characters and Tango

Tango emerged around 1880 in the poor outer districts of Buenos Aires, portraying the life of crime and prostitution. While at first tango was disdained by the *porteño* elite, who considered it an immoral lowbrow dance associated with the life of prostitutes and pimps, it gradually gained social prominence. Through its combination of the traditional and the modern, tango eventually turned into the most popular Argentine musical form, as well as a national emblem.<sup>9</sup> An important factor in tango's acceptance was its transformation into a mass cultural product capable of appealing to a vaster domestic audience. Cultural critics organized various campaigns designed to sanitize, moralize and elevate tango, purging it of its immoral topics and its plebeian language. Refining tango's gender characters and reducing the sensuality of tango movements was one of the best ways for tango to gain respectability.<sup>10</sup> Tango characters changed accordingly, passing from the "ruffianesque" (villain) style at the turn of the century, also known as the *Old Guard* tango, populated by prostitutes and pimps, to the romantic tango style of the interwar period, identified as the *Epoca de oro* (Golden Era) of tango. The *Old Guard's* main male protagonists were the *compadrito*, the analogous *guapo* and the *rufián* (pimp), tough men and pimps with an unbreakable sense of honor, also known for their courage, physical strength and sexual appeal. Proud and independent, *rufianes* lived from the profits of prostitutes who work for them, while *compadritos* were young men, usually elegantly dressed, who aspired to live as *rufianes*, and were prone to settling matters of honor with the knife.<sup>11</sup> Tango's female characters were often prostitutes, such as *la Moreira*, a female stock character of the first tango songs, who also engaged in criminal activities with her partner, a *rufián*.<sup>12</sup> These women could be *mestiza* (Creolian) or have Italian or Uruguayan ancestry, and were portrayed as almost slaves of their men, who could physically punish them, even to death, if they dared abandon them.<sup>13</sup> As Marta Savigliano has pointed out, "when [...] tango and the middle classes got together, a new perspective on love was introduced into tango lyrics. Vengeance and resentment were transformed into melodrama and nostalgia."<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, male characters were gradually replaced by romantic heroes "in search for happiness through romantic love," longing for tenderness, companionship and intimacy, while the prostitute of the old tango songs gave way to the *milonguita* character, the woman who left the *barrio* for a life in the city and especially in the cabaret.<sup>15</sup>

### *Milonguitas* as subjects of consumption

The *milonguita* became one of tango's most renowned characters, reaching its peak of popularity during the 1920's and appearing frequently in tango lyrics until the Peronist era, when *milonguitas*, as well as the success of tango began to diminish. While the prosperous economic situation during the Peronist decades has been signaled by some scholars as the main reason for tango's decay – for prosperity can hardly be compatible with the sadness and fatalism of tango lyrics –, other scholars believe this was due to the fact that domestic migrants arriving in Buenos Aires during the 1950's felt more identified with folk music than with tango.<sup>16</sup> Regardless of the character's destiny, during its peak of popularity, the *milonguita* appeared in almost every tango that spoke about love and betrayal.

*Milonguitas'* own voice and own experiences are very illusive, as they have been usually portrayed in the writings of other people. José Gobello and José Barcia have stated that it would be an impossible task to trace the real existence of the young woman whose life would have inspired *milonguita's* character.<sup>17</sup> However, their labor conditions give some clues to hint at their daily lives. According to the press, there was an important though hardly quantifiable number of women who worked in the several cabarets and *Academias de baile* of the city during this period. They were paid 10 pesos per night for talking and dancing tango with clients and 50 cents for every drink they had, a sum that, at the end of the night, was split and shared with the owner. Their working day was from six in the evening, when they would walk the tables and entertain customers, until four in the morning, when they would dance the last tango.<sup>18</sup> These women usually worked in the cabarets, but they could also be employed at the *Academias de bailes modernos* (Modern Dance Academies), where they would give tango lessons for comparatively little money.<sup>19</sup> Despite being described as a low-paid job, close to slavery, *milonguitas* actually earned a better salary than the average typist or salesgirl.<sup>20</sup> However, the yellow press tended to repeatedly report their bad working conditions, denouncing the *milonguitas'* use of drugs at the cabarets.<sup>21</sup> In her memoirs, Tania, a famous tango singer of the 1920's, recalled life in the cabaret and the sharp status distinction between singers like her, the *coperas* who entertained customers, also called *milongueras*, and the *mantenidas*, the mistresses of rich men that frequented the cabaret.<sup>22</sup> While *milonguitas* typically worked in the cabaret and ended up as mistresses, exchanging sexual favors for material gains, they were never called prostitutes. In fact, wearing nice dresses and perfume and attending regular appointments with the hairdresser and the manicurist were inescapable requirements for *milonguitas*, expenses that they themselves covered with their salaries unless they had stable lovers who took care of them.<sup>23</sup>

While the yellow press showed indications of the daily lives of these cabaret women, and especially of their working conditions, tango was the main genre devoted to portraying the character of the *milonguita*. She was usually described as a young, sensual and self-confident woman, born into a lower-class family, who escaped from the *barrio* and from a future as housewife, in exchange for a life of excitement, luxury and pleasure in the cabarets of Buenos Aires.<sup>24</sup> In the most typical tango lyrics that speak of *milonguitas*, the narrator, usually a single man who grew up in the *barrios* and who belonged to the lower classes, complains about a young woman from his neighborhood abandoning him while depicting her life with either resentment or pity.<sup>25</sup> Almost always, it is from the male singer's vantage point that they narrate *milonguitas'* journey from the *barrio* to downtown cabarets.<sup>26</sup>

Among the first tangos to describe a *milonguita's* life was *Milonguita* (Samuel Linnig, 1920), which initiated hundreds of tangos inspired by this character. The lyrics read:

Do you remember Milonguita? You were / the prettiest girl of Chiclana, / the short skirt and the braids, / and in the braids a kiss from the sun. [...] Little Esther! / Today they call you Milonguita, / flower of luxury and pleasure, / flower of night and cabaret. / Milonguita / men have hurt you / and today you would give up your whole soul / to dress in percale.<sup>27</sup>

According to the male viewpoint of this tango, the *milonguita* regrets having left the *barrio* to be part of the decadent city life of Buenos Aires, longing now for an idealized life she has forever lost. The suburbs were the place of innocence where she was called by her real name, Esther, she had long braided hair and wore simple cotton (*percale*) clothes. Tango songs' recurrent contrast between the *milonguita's* past and present was usually illustrated as a confrontation between the suburbs, the lost paradise, and the city center, the site of perversion, constructing the *barrio* as a 'pre-modern' myth that was ultimately destroyed by the modernization process, of which tango, paradoxically, was the most genuine product, as Adrián Gorelik has shown.<sup>28</sup> Women like *milonguitas* were the ones who dared to move from one space to the other, forgetting their humble origins while embracing the decadent life of the cabaret. Tango authors signaled that rich men could trigger *milonguitas'* decision to leave the *barrio*, captivating them with their charm, as the tango *Mano Cruel* (Cruel Hand) (Armando Tagini, 1929) shows when stating "you were the spoiled girl of Pepirí street / [...] and because you were cute and good / a crazy young man / made you the queen of compliments / with very charming verses / [...] the man who offered you wealth

lied to you / and with a cruel hand abused your grace and your virtue.”<sup>29</sup> Savigliano has argued that tango narrators condemned the *milonguita*’s decision not only by casting it as sexual treachery but, what was worse, as a betrayal to class loyalty.<sup>30</sup> Once the *milonguita* crossed over from the *barrio* to the city, there was no turning back. *Pompas de Jabón* (Soap Bubbles) (Enrique Cadícamo, 1925) sings “think, poor girl, that your beauty one day will fade away / and your crazy illusions will die / as flowers that wither. / The old wealthy man that pampers you with money / one day will get bored / and then, as many mud flowers / you will go through the streets to beg.”<sup>31</sup> By criticizing the *milonguita*’s life in the cabaret, which usually consisted in foretelling a tragic and lonely life, tango songs clearly denounced her open sexuality, which she exercised with men from higher social classes, something that made matters worse for tango men.

While *milonguitas*’ sexual freedom was claimed to be one of the reasons why they left the *barrio*, their intrinsic materialism was also cast as another factor, as they preferred the company of wealthy men who could in turn satisfy their material desires. Almost every tango that mentioned the *milonguita* also addressed her obsession for luxury goods. The tango *De tardecita* (Late afternoon) (Carlos Álvarez Pintos, 1927), for example, states “downtown’s lights made you believe / that the joy you were looking for / was far from your *arrabal* / and you wore silk, not percale / lavish dresses and great luxury bewitched you with ambition.”<sup>32</sup> In *Flor de trapo*, (Duster blossom) (Luis Roldán, 1920), in turn, the narrator was even more specific, stating that “the influence of silk was fatal / you turned into hell your Eden / because drunk on orgies and luxury / you fell into the hands of that *niño bien* (rich boy).”<sup>33</sup> As in *La mina del Ford* (The Woman in the Ford) (Pascual Contursi, 1924), several tangos principally denounced the materialistic orientation of the *milonguita*. She was cast as an unscrupulous woman who used her sexuality to afford an ostentatious and luxurious lifestyle. This was evident in the tango *Margot* (Celedonio Flores, 1919), where the *milonguita* appeared as making a conscious choice when deciding to abandon her suburban life.

They are lies, it was not a handsome and arrogant layabout / nor an expert pimp who threw you to vice / your rambling was your own fault, you didn’t do it innocently / the whims of a rich girl came into your head / since the day a millionaire dandy romanced you / [...] I remember, once you didn’t have a thing to wear / and now you are dressed in silk and roses / Your presence annoys me... I would pay not to see you / [...] you’re no longer my Margarita, now they call you Margot!<sup>34</sup>

The reason why the *milonguita* became a fallen woman was her desire for material gains, represented by the silk clothes that she was now used to wearing, and not the charming promises of a deceiving man. These women not only abandoned their suburban partners, the *barrio* and its domestic values, but did so in order to pursue economic well-being. As the lyrics of the tangos highlighted again and again, it was these women's fascination for a glamorous lifestyle that made them abandon their former lives and live as the lovers of wealthy men. By taking advantage of men, *milonguitas* were able to enjoy material gains and a luxurious lifestyle. The 'whiny' characters of tango songs were in fact the abandoned lovers that longed for the lost love of *milonguitas*, expressing their anger by forecasting a tragic life for them.

Some tangos cautioned young women to restrain themselves before it was too late: for instance, in *¡Atenti pebeta!* (Careful Babe!) (Celedonio Flores, 1929), the narrator advises on how to avoid becoming a *milonguita*.

When you are on the sidewalk and a bigwig gawks at you, / play  
stupid and don't give him any notice; / don't let him figure out  
that you fall easy on the first try / and that at the sight of a pair of  
ironed lions you give in [...] / Lower your skirt's hem to the ankle,  
let your hair grow and make it into a bun / buy an iron corset with  
rivets and screws / and forget about powder, cream or lipstick.<sup>35</sup>

A desirable fur coat appears invested with the power of corrupting this young woman's honest soul, launching her into a path of hedonistic consumption that would drive her into downtown cabarets. The author, while acknowledging the spell that the mere view of luxury goods provoked in her, cautioned her to look more conservatively in order to dodge the presence of deceiving men who would tempt her into a corrupted path. In *No salgas de tu barrio* (Don't Leave your Neighborhood) (Arturo Rodríguez Bustamante, 1927), the narrator, through the voice of an experienced *milonguita*, warned a young woman "do not leave your neighborhood and be a good girl, / marry a man who is like you, / even in misery you will know how to overcome your sorrow / and a day will come when God will help you."<sup>36</sup> These tangos, as many others, expressed lower-class men's anxieties over the *milonguita*'s predisposition towards conspicuous consumption, which could drive their natural partners away and into the arms of rich men. As Mathew Karush has stated, tango transformed class conflict into a competition over women.<sup>37</sup>

When portrayed in their elegant clothing and expensive jewelry, *milonguitas* seemed to have moved up in the social ladder. Savigliano has convincingly argued that in fact they did move closer to enjoying wealthy lives; however, this did not



mean social status, as they were never accepted as legitimate members of the upper classes. Status and wealth played against each other, turning *milonguitas'* social mobility into something precarious. This fact was at the center of tango lyrics, which described *milonguitas'* wealthy lives as something temporary that would vanish when they got old and their rich lovers abandoned them.<sup>38</sup> Tango songs not only cast *milonguitas'* new luxurious lives as temporary, they also stated they could not hide their roots. Even if they tried hard by dressing in expensive clothes, some details gave away their true lower-class identity and origin. The tango *Margot* begins by affirming that “anyone can tell from afar, foolish rich wannabe, / that you were born in the misery of a shanty house / because there is something that gives you away, maybe it’s your gaze / the way you sit, look, stand / or that body accustomed to cotton clothes.”<sup>39</sup> According to tango songs, *milonguitas* were materialistic women pretending to be somebody they were not, and were betraying their origins every time they dressed lavishly. Tango actually ridiculed lower-class women who passed themselves off as affluent by mocking their looks. The tango *Carnaval* (Francisco García Jiménez, 1927) sings, “you’ve gone places, girl! / You’ve replaced cotton with silk / you look beautiful and young in a wealthy woman’s attire / it is the best [costume] I’ve seen during carnival.”<sup>40</sup> Men of tango seemed to know from the beginning that *milonguitas'* social rise was an illusion, telling them so in almost every tango that had them as their main subject. This awareness made it even more difficult for them to understand why women continued to abandon their poor neighborhoods, families and partners to live as prostitutes and wealthy men’s lovers.

What they were somehow missing was that the prospect of a wealthy life, even though it was not accompanied by status, could be satisfying enough for *milonguitas*. At least, this is what some of the few tangos written by women stated, challenging the victimization of lower-class women that most tango lyrics expressed.<sup>41</sup> In *Se va la vida* (Life flows by), (María Luisa Carnelli, pseudonym Luis Mario, 1929), the female narrator advises poor young women to enjoy life. “Life is fleeting, / is fleeting and will never return. / Listen to my advice: / if a rich man promises to set you up, / don’t hesitate, just go for it. / Life is fleeting, fleeting, / and not even God will stop it. / The best you can do / is to enjoy and forget your sorrows and pains / [...] you must fully live your youth.”<sup>42</sup> Instead of condemning *milonguitas'* dreams, this tango encourages them to get the most from men who offered a life of luxury and pleasure. In *Pipistrella* (Goofy Girl) (1933), the popular Tita Merello, who wrote and performed the tango, embodied a *milonguita* who told the audience she preferred to pass as foolish because it was easier to trick men. Feeling tired of the poor suitors who surrounded her, she wished she had the money to buy a pair of shoes and a hat in order to catch a gullible man of the city and leave behind the humble men of the suburbs. These

tangos expressed the centrality that consumption, and the possibility of affording luxuries, had in the lives of these young women, who were also conscious that their sexuality could be used as a ticket to a wealthy life.

The importance of consumption desire becomes more evident when comparing the *milonguita* with the *bella pobre* character, who was also a beautiful young woman from poor families in the *barrios* and the heroine of weekly novels, popular serial romance literature. While the former used men in order to enjoy a wealthy life, the latter pursued romantic love, wealth and social status. By hoping to marry the men they fall in love with, often men of a higher social class, the *bella pobre* also expected to move up in the social ladder, becoming part of the upper class. But their dreams clashed with the fact that social barriers were stronger than love, and these young women often found themselves cheated and abandoned.<sup>43</sup> The *milonguita*, in contrast, had less conventional dreams, as she went through several transitory love affairs in order to fulfill her consumer desires. Although male narrators forecast a tragic destiny, her story was indeed one of success, as the *milonguita* did achieve her dreams of enjoying material gains. In other words, while the *bella pobre* aspired to status and wealth but could not realize her dreams, expressing certain skepticism about the possibility of upward mobility, *milonguitas* only sought an affluent lifestyle, expressing fantasies of acquiring instant prosperity. Both hopes, however, were understood as a betrayal to a working-class identity.

Most critical discussions of *milonguitas* have focused on their open sexuality as a symbol of changing sexual mores. However, equally crucial was the *milonguitas*' status as a consumer. Tango lyrics tackled *milonguitas*' consumption wishes as a problem, as it was their hedonistic desire that made them use their sexuality to satisfy material needs, raising serious moral consequences. Rita Felski has stated that the figure of the voracious female consumer that appeared very often in the late nineteenth-century French novels, and the discourse of the consumerism that framed her, was a way of tackling the topic of female desire, both for sex and for consumption. Sex and money become closely associated through the figure of the insatiable female consumer, who used the men who pursued her as a way of gaining access to money and commodities.<sup>44</sup> According to Felski, the growth of consumerism was seen as "engendering a revolution in morals, unleashing egotistic and envious drives among [...] women, which could in turn affect the stability of existing social hierarchies." Men, in turn, reacted anxiously to mass consumption as they saw it as a threat to men's customary authority over women.<sup>45</sup> In a similar vein, tangos expressed poor men's disapproval toward the *milonguita*'s thirst for luxury, as it allowed rich men to drag poor women into what they considered dishonorable lives. From this male point of view, the material gains that the *milonguita* obtained from the affairs

with wealthy men were no substitute for the true love and devotion they professed for them. When faced with the fact that these women had chosen a new lifestyle, these men felt abandoned, they resented *milonguitas* and foretold a tragic destiny for them. According to tangos, poor young women, led by their unstoppable drive for consumption, were challenging notions as enduring as women's natural tendency to faithfulness, predisposition to housework, inherent modesty and maternal abnegation.

The idea that women were naturally predisposed to consumerist excesses not only appeared in tango songs. Several male readers' appreciations of women's consumption choices published in specific sections of magazines highlighted a direct relation between women and conspicuous consumption, condemning those who had material ambitions as frivolous and materialistic. A male reader, for example, stated "my advice to a woman is that she should not like luxury and dancing."<sup>46</sup> Others linked material ambitions directly to the modern woman: "I hate the passion for luxury, dresses and cinema of the modern woman," proclaimed a reader.<sup>47</sup> When asked about the qualities of their ideal women, men usually criticized the passion for shopping and praised humble women. "She should be enemy of luxury, modest, educated, hard-working,"<sup>48</sup> said one reader, while another one added, "I condemn the dolls that stroll down Florida Street, looking for the highest bidder, but worship those female workers that deprive themselves for the sake of their old parents and little siblings."<sup>49</sup> These appreciations indicate that there was a vast male audience that shared tango songs' message, as well as a wider spectrum of women, besides those tempted by the prospect of a life in the cabaret, to whom this message was addressed. Indeed, many young women were entering the workforce during the 1920's and began enjoying a new sense of independence and autonomy from the family, taking advantage of the consumption opportunities that their salaries permitted.<sup>50</sup> For many, economic independence meant the possibility of affording indulgences, spending part of their wages on clothing, beauty products, magazines and gifts for their friends.<sup>51</sup> The material goods that working women bought (or desired to purchase) seemed not so different from the ones *milonguitas* so intensively aspired to buy.<sup>52</sup> Fur coats, for example, were a long-awaited item among female workers, especially schoolteachers who, thanks to an increase in their salaries and to the new credit system, could afford these luxurious items, which have been usually targeted to the upper class.<sup>53</sup> Other female workers who could not afford this type of garment tended to wear cheap versions of expensive clothes. The emergence of a consumer society caused the democratization of fashion, which in turn created certain uniformity in clothing and made more blurry indicators of class distinction. The fact that a working-class woman could pass as a wealthy one caused celebratory remarks, but also concern, since for many

upper-class observers, class distinction was getting lost under the pressure of a consumer society.<sup>54</sup>

Many magazine articles concurred that once working women got used to their economic independence, they would find it difficult to give up these little luxuries in order to get married, advising female workers to weigh the pros and cons of married life. A journalist from *Para Ti*, for example, reminded female readers that quitting their jobs would mean renouncing the comforts they could afford as single working women, for they would become economically dependent on their husbands, allocating their tight budget to home and family needs.<sup>55</sup> Another journalist stated that the dream of marrying a wealthy man who would rescue the female worker from wage-labor seemed unlikely. It was more realistic to think that the future husband would likely be an employee that could probably not afford alone the little luxuries the female worker was used to, and she advised the reader to take the chosen profession seriously and not as a pastime. “In these days we ask of life much more and so we should pay for those things,” concluded the journalist, unambiguously.<sup>56</sup> From these journalists’ point of view, some women’s choice to work – even after marrying – showed that several considered material desires as equally desirable as marital life. Even if this was the journalists’ opinion, it probably reflected the point of view of working women, who found consumption so gratifying that it was hard to renounce it.<sup>57</sup> These female employees surely listened to tangos that portrayed the tragic lives of *milonguitas* who, having dreamed of escaping the suburbs for a life of excitement and luxury, ended up feeling remorseful and abandoned. *Milonguitas*’ inevitable moral fall was a cautionary message for female workers who, through their jobs, began enjoying not only their new conquered freedom, but also the pleasures that consumption entailed. Some men understood these changes in gender roles as a threat to their patriarchal privileges, put in words their feelings and made tango flourish, spreading its message not only among working women, but also across the society.

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According to tango lyrics, *milonguitas*’ tragic destiny was the outcome of their thirst for luxury, which drove them away from their true loves, their poor neighborhoods and their families to live as wealthy men’s lovers. Their materialism and their open sexuality were cast as both their defining and more challenging trait, as these young women seemed more interested in material goods than in any sort of family life. For male protagonists of tango lyrics, it was clear that consumption desire had serious moral consequences. While men forecast for *milonguitas* a life of isolation and misery, product of their class and sexual betrayal, the possibility to afford luxury was central for these women.

*Milonguitas* seemed aware of the power of their beauty and sexuality, both being the tickets to a wealthy life. Instead of victims of deceitful and wealthy men, *milonguitas* were indeed determined and manipulative, using men in order to achieve their material dreams.

Tango lyrics dealt with the social and moral changes that Buenos Aires underwent during the 1920's and 1930's. While they described customary moral values, usually through the depiction of the life in the *barrio*, where women were abnegated, modest and frugal, tango lyrics also critically spoke of the social transformations that these alleged quiet suburbs were going through. The *milonguita* was a key figure to articulate the tension between the past and present, the old and new. Thorough the *milonguita*'s open sexuality and material ambitions, tangos expressed criticism towards changing sexual mores, social instability and the rise of a consumer culture. Within the world constructed by tango lyrics, *milonguitas*' actions were understood as a double betrayal to working-class identity, as they not only sexually deceived poor men by having affairs with rich ones, but they also morally cheated on working-class values when pretending to be something they were not. It was not until Peronism that the image of *milonguitas* began to vanish from the popular imaginary, being replaced by a less tragic version, as Natalia Milanesio has shown.<sup>58</sup> In the mid-twentieth century, due to an increase in their salaries, the poor sectors of the population gained full access to the world of consumption, turning their involvement in the consumer market into a massive phenomenon. Concomitantly, working-class' consumption desires began to be understood as social rights and their participation in the national market started to be celebrated. In this context, the *milonguita* metamorphosed into the figure of a materialistic woman who, in contrast with women of the cabaret, and though manipulative and frivolous, at the end could find redemption for her material sins.

## Notes

- 1 I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.
- 2 For the Cuban case, see Lisabeth Lotz, *Leading the Life of a Modern Girl: Representations of Womanhood in Cuban Popular Culture, 1919-1929*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2008), pp. 160-203; for Mexican *cabaretera* films, see Joanne Hershfield, *Mexican Cinema/Mexican Women (1940-1950)* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1996), pp. 77-105; for the Japanese dancehall girl, see Vera Mackie, "Sweet, Perfume, and Tobacco. The Ambivalent Labor of the Dancehall Girl," in Alisa Freedman, Laura Miller, and Christine Yano (eds.), *Modern Girls on the Go: Gender, Mobility, and Labor in Japan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), pp. 67-83. For a global approach to the modern girl phenomenon, see Alys Eve Weinbaum, et al. (eds.), *The Modern Girl Around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Global-*

- ization (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008). For cultural representations of modern young women in Buenos Aires of the interwar years, see Cecilia Tossounian, “Images of the Modern Girl: From the Flapper to the Joven Moderna (Buenos Aires, 1920-1940),” *Forum for Inter-American Research*, 6. 2 (2013), pp. 41-70.
- 3 Eduardo Archetti, *Masculinities: Football, Polo and the Tango in Argentina* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 1999), pp. 136-60; Donna Guy, *Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires: Prostitution, Family, and Nation in Argentina* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), pp. 146-52. See also Daniel James, *Doña María's Story: Life History, Memory and Political Identity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), pp. 244-80.
  - 4 Dora Barrancos, “Moral sexual, sexualidad y mujeres trabajadoras en el período de entreguerras,” in Fernando Devoto and Marta Madero (eds.), *Historia de la vida privada en la Argentina: La Argentina entre multitudes y soledades* (Buenos Aires: Taurus, 1999), Vol. III, pp. 199-225.
  - 5 Blas Matamoro, *Ciudad del tango: Tango histórico y sociedad* (Buenos Aires: Galerna, 1982), pp. 116-46; Matthew Karush, *Culture of Class: Radio and Cinema in the Making of a Divided Argentina, 1920-1946* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), pp. 89-105. For a similar approach applied to the *bella pobre* female figure, see Beatriz Sarlo, *El imperio de los sentimientos* (Buenos Aires: Norma, 2000) (1985), pp. 19-30, 62-6
  - 6 For a point of view that emphasizes successful stories of social mobility, see Luis Alberto Romero, “Sociedad democrática y política nacional y popular: la Argentina en la primera mitad del siglo XX,” *Estudios Sociales*, 46 (2014), pp. 145-170. For a more critical approach, see Karush, *Culture of Class*, pp. 23-42.
  - 7 Consumption is defined less as the economic act of satisfying a need and more as a tool for constructing social identities and for expressing a sense of belonging and distinction. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), (1979).
  - 8 For Argentina, see Natalia Milanesio, *Workers Go Shopping in Argentina: The Rise of Popular Consumer Culture*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2013); Rebekah Pite, *Creating a Common Table in Twentieth-century Argentina: Doña Petrona, Women and Food* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013); Inés Pérez, *El hogar tecnificado: familias, género y vida cotidiana (1940-1970)* (Biblos: Buenos Aires, 2012); Valeria Manzano, *The Age of Youth in Argentina: Culture, Politics, and Sexuality from Perón to Videla* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014); Isabella Cosse, *Mafalda: historia social y política* (Fondo de Cultura Económica: Buenos Aires, 2010); Paula Bontempo and Graciela Queirolo, “Las ‘chicas modernas’ se emplean como dactilógrafas: feminidad, moda y trabajo en Buenos Aires (1920-1930),” *Bicentenario. Revista de Historia de Chile y América*, 2, (2012), pp. 51-76. For a founding contribution to the study of consumption in Argentina, see Fernando Rocchi, “Consumir es un placer: La industria y la expansión de la demanda en Buenos Aires a la vuelta del siglo pasado,” *Desarrollo Económico*, 37: 148 (1998), pp. 533-58.
  - 9 Florencia Garramuño, *Modernidades primitivas: tango, samba y nación* (Buenos Aires: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2007).
  - 10 Guy, *Sex and Danger*, pp. 146-50; Archetti, *Masculinities*, pp. 136-60. For an approach that contends that tango's success was less due to its sanitization and more to tango's capacity to offer an alternative modernism, see Karush, *Culture of Class*, 43-60, 87-105 and Garramuño, *Modernidades primitivas*.
  - 11 Simon Collier, “The Popular Roots of Argentine Tango,” *History Workshop*, 34: 1 (1992), pp. 92-100; Julie Taylor, “Tango: Theme of Class and Nation,” *Ethnomusicology*, 20:

- 2 (1976), pp. 273-91. For gender characters of the Old Guard tango, see also Domingo Casavedall, *El tema de la mala vida en el teatro nacional* (Buenos Aires: Kraft, 1957); Raúl Campodónico and Fernanda Gil Lozano, "Milonguitas Encintas: La Mujer, el Tango, el Cine," in Fernanda Gil Lozano, Valeria Pita, and Gabriela Ini (eds.), *Historia de las Mujeres en la Argentina: Siglo XX* (Buenos Aires: Taurus, 2000), Vol. 2, pp. 136-53; Marta Savigliano, "Whiny Ruffians and Rebellious Broads: Tango as a Spectacle of Eroticized Social Tension," *Theatre Journal*, 47: 1 (1995), pp. 83-104.
- 12 For *La Moreira*, see José Sebastián Tallón, *El Tango en sus Etapas de Música Prohibida* (Buenos Aires: Instituto Amigos del libro, 1964) (1959), pp. 37-54.
- 13 Domingo Casavedall, *El tema de la mala vida* (Buenos Aires: Kraft, 1957), pp. 59-60, Savigliano, "Whiny Ruffians and Rebellious Broads," pp. 86-9.
- 14 Savigliano, "Whiny Ruffians and Rebellious Broads," p. 99; Noemí Ulla, *Tango, rebelión y nostalgia* (Buenos Aires: CEAL, 1982) (1967), p. 36, 77.
- 15 Archetti, *Masculinities*, pp. 151-53. See also Savigliano, "Whiny Ruffians and Rebellious Broads," pp. 83-104.
- 16 Pablo Vila, "Tango to Folk: Hegemony Construction and Popular Identities in Argentina," *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture*, 10 (1991), pp. 107-39; Oscar Chamosa, "Criollo and Peronist: The Argentine Folklore Movement during the First Peronism 1943-1955," in Matthew Karush and Oscar Chamosa (eds.), *The New Cultural History of Peronism: Power and Identity in Mid-Twentieth-Century Argentina* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 113-42.
- 17 José Gobello and José Barcia, *Tango y Milonguita* (Buenos Aires: República de San Telmo, 1972).
- 18 "Hay esclavas en el cabaret," *Crítica*, 4405, 9 November, 1925, p.10.
- 19 "Milonguita se quedó en el peor recodo de la mala vida: la academia de bailes," *Crítica*, 4582, 7 May, 1926, p. 10.
- 20 An average female employee earned between 130 and 150 pesos per month during this period. See Graciela Queirolo, "Empleadas administrativas: la construcción histórica de una inequidad, Buenos Aires 1910-1950," *Mouseion*, 18 (2014), pp. 133-47.
- 21 "La simple historia de alias Pirula, cocainómana," *Crítica*, 4672, 5 August, 1926, p. 11; "Ha muerto Coralito, la muñeca del cabaret," *Crítica*, 4340, 5 September, 1925, p. 3. For illicit organizations and prostitution, see Guy, *Sex and Danger*, pp. 37-75.
- 22 Tania, *Discepolín y yo* (Buenos Aires: La Bastilla, 1973), p. 29-33.
- 23 "Juan Pueblo farrea esta noche," *Ahora*, 25, 16 September, 1935, pp. 44-5.
- 24 Archetti, *Masculinities*, pp. 140-7.
- 25 Anahí Viladrich, "Neither Virgins nor Whores: Tango Lyrics and Gender Representations in the Tango World," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 39: 2, (2006), pp. 272-93, here p. 277. See also Diego Armus, "Tango, gender and tuberculosis in Buenos Aires, 1900-1940," in Diego Armus (ed.), *Disease in the History of Modern Latin America: From Malaria to Aids* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 101-29.
- 26 Archetti, *Masculinities*, p. 150. See also Savigliano, "Whiny Ruffians."
- 27 Te acordás, Milonguita? Vos eras / la pebeta mas linda'e Chiclana; / la pollera cortona y las trenzas / y en las trenzas un beso de sol [...] / Esthercita, / hoy te llaman Milonguita, / flor de noche y de placer, / flor de lujo y cabaret. / Milonguita, / los hombres te han hecho mal / y hoy darías toda tu alma / por vestírte de percal.
- 28 Adrián Gorelik, *La Grilla y el parque. Espacio público y cultura urbana en Buenos Aires, 1887-1936* (Buenos Aires: Universidad Nacional de Quilmes, 1998), p. 371. For tango and the city's spatial division, see also Ulla, *Tango, rebelión y nostalgia*, p. 36.

- 29 Fuiste la piba mimada / de la calle Pepirí, / [...] / y porque eras linda y buena, / un muchacho medio loco / te hizo reina del piropo / en un verso muy fifi. / [...] Mintió aquel hombre que riqueza te ofreció, / con mano cruel ajó tu gracia y tu virtud.
- 30 Savigliano, "Whiny Ruffians and Rebellious Broads."
- 31 Pensá, pobre pebeta, papa, papusa / que tu belleza un día se esfumará, / y que como todas las flores que se marchitantes locas ilusiones se morirán. / El "mishé" que te mima con sus morlacos / el día menos pensado se aburrirá / y entonces como tantas flores de fango, / irás por esas calles a mendigar.
- 32 La luz del centro te hizo creer, / que la alegría que vos querías / estaba lejos de tu arrabal / y vestías sedas, y no percal / Ir bien vestida, llevar gran lujo, / era el embrujo de tu ambición.
- 33 De las sedas fatal fue su influjo / y trocaste en infierno tu edén / pues borracha de orgías y lujo / diste en manos de aquel niño bien.
- 34 Son mentiras, no fue un guapo / compadrón ni prepotente, / ni un malevo veterano / el que al vicio te lanzó. / Vos rodaste por tu culpa / y no fue inocentemente, / berretines de bacana / que tenías en la mente / desde el día que un magnate / de yuguillo te afinó [...] / Yo recuerdo no tenías / casi nada que ponerte; / hoy usas ajuar de seda / con rositas rococó. / ¡me revienta tu presencia... pagaría por no verte / [...] ya no sos mi Margarita, ahora te llaman Margot! Celedonio Flores' lyrics were well known for exalting its plebeian roots and topics. See Karush, *Culture of Class*, pp. 100-03, 137.
- 35 Cuando estés en la vereda y te fiche un bacanazo, / vos hacete la chitruela y no te le deschavés; / que no manye que estás lista al primer tiro de lazo / y que por un par de leones bien planchados te perdés. [...] / Abajate la pollera por donde nace el tobillo, dejate crecer el pelo y un buen rodete lucí, / comprate un corsé de fierro con remaches y tornillos / y dale el olivo al polvo, a la crema y al carmín.
- 36 No salgas de tu barrio, sé buena muchachita / casate con un hombre que sea como vos / y aún en la miseria sabrás vencer tu pena / y ya llegará un día en que te ayude Dios.
- 37 Karush, *Culture of Class*, p. 101.
- 38 Savigliano, "Whiny Ruffians."
- 39 Se te embroca desde lejos, pelandruna abacanada, / que has nacido en la miseria de un convento de arrabal... / Porque hay algo que te vende, yo no sé si es la mirada, / la manera de sentarte, de mirar, de estar parada / o ese cuerpo acostumbrado a las pilchas de percal.
- 40 ¡Qué progresos has hecho, pebeta! / Te cambiaste por seda el percal... / Disfrazada de rica estás papa, / lo mejor que yo vi en Carnaval.
- 41 Most of the tangos were written by men and, with some variations, reproduced the destiny of the *milonguita* in fatalistic terms. For female tango singers, see Viladrich, "Neither Virgins nor Whores."
- 42 Se va la vida... / se va y no vuelve. / Escuchá este consejo; / si un bacán te promete acomodar, / entrá derecho viejo. / Se va, pebeta, / quién la detiene / si ni Dios la sujeta, / lo mejor es gozarla y largar / las penas a rodar / [...] viví tu juventud.
- 43 Sarlo, *El Imperio de los sentimientos*, pp. 135-6, 169-78.
- 44 Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 77; 60-90.
- 45 Felski, *The Gender of Modernity*, pp. 65-6.
- 46 "Observaciones, advertencias y comentarios del hombre a la mujer," *Atlántida*, 98, 12 February 1920, p. 98.



- 47 “Observaciones, advertencias y comentarios del hombre a la mujer,” *Atlántida*, 93, 8 January 1920, unpaginated.
- 48 “Carta lectores: ¿cuál es tu mujer ideal?” *Mundo Argentino*, 470, 14 January 1920, unpaginated.
- 49 “Observaciones, advertencias y comentarios del hombre a la mujer,” *Atlántida*, 98, 12 February 1920, p. 98.
- 50 Statistics in recent studies on female labor in Buenos Aires show that in 1914 27.9 percent of the economically active population of women held factory, commercial and service jobs, while by 1947 this figure had risen to 55.8 percent. At the national level, in 1947 1.2 million women worked, 59 percent of them in the tertiary sector and 27 percent in the manufacturing sector. Susana Torrado, *Historia de la familia en la Argentina moderna 1870-2000* (Buenos Aires: De la Flor, 2003), p. 211-15.
- 51 Elena Camper, “La empleada que se casa,” *Para Ti*, 911, 24 October 1939, p.17; “Mama es demasiado exigente conmigo,” *Para Ti*, 251, 1 March, 1927, p. 40.
- 52 Camper, “La empleada que se casa”; “Mama es demasiado exigente conmigo”; Cartas de Jacqueline, “El hada del teclado,” *Para Ti*, 141, 20 January 1925, p. 22. See also Josué Quesada, “Melenita,” in *Alma de mujeres* (Buenos Aires: Tommasi, 1926), pp. 95-123.
- 53 See Paula Caldo, “El “hábito” hace a la maestra. Hacia una historia de las prácticas de consumo de las mujeres dedicadas a la docencia en Argentina, 1939-1943,” *Naveg@mérica* 10 (2013), online; Gisela Kaczan, “Estampas del deseo y del desear. Imágenes de moda en Argentina en las primeras décadas de 1900,” *Cadernos Pagu*, 41 (2013), pp. 121-157.
- 54 For the emergence of an Argentine consumer society, see Fernando Rocchi, *Chimneys in the Desert: Industrialization in Argentina during the Export Boom Years, 1870-1930* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), pp. 49-85.
- 55 Camper, “La empleada que se casa,” p.17.
- 56 Ursula Bloom, “Suponiendo que os caseis,” *Para Ti*, 465, 7 April, 1931, p. 33.
- 57 For female consumption and changing gender roles under Peronism, see Milanesio, *Workers Go Shopping in Argentina*, pp. 158-89.
- 58 Milanesio, *Workers Go Shopping*, pp. 158-89.

