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**Kin to the Habanera: The Paradox of Primitive Modernity in Early Tango and Samba**

The translation and publication of Florencia Garramuño’s *Modernidades primitives: Tango, samba, y nación* (2007) signals an important acknowledgment of, on the one hand, the need for a substantive bibliography in English on the histories of tango, samba, and other Latin American popular music, and on the other the stir that Garramuño’s original text caused among scholars working on these topics in Spanish (and perhaps, to a lesser extent, Portuguese). *Primitive Modernities: Tango, Samba, and Nation* is a welcome tool for students without access to those languages in such fields as Brazilian and Latin American cultural studies, ethnomusicology, and literature; it is also an intriguing read for scholars of nationalisms more generally. The interdisciplinary nature of Garramuño’s work is unusual in the context of regional or national studies, and provides a good example of why we should examine any cultural object as part of an intense interactive process. *Primitive Modernities* is all the more rare for its focus on two types of music from two national traditions that share many features, though not a common language. One of the strongest features of this study, then, is its revelation of how modernizing efforts in Latin America involving popular music superseded geographic, linguistic, disciplinary, and even sonic boundaries.

Garramuño examines how from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century, in tango and samba music, as well as in their myriad figurations in novels, essays, films, paintings, sheet music, and even advertising, primitivism was initially shunned and later progressively appropriated as part of the modernist project to define national identity in Brazil and Argentina. Although both musical forms purportedly grew out of the Cuban habanera, which was also associated early on with the “primitive” and “low” culture of the popular masses, each was ultimately mobilized as a positive signifier of local identity. Garramuño’s central question—“how does a cultural form come to be transformed into a national one?” (p. 4)—proves to be surprisingly multifaceted. Her answer encompasses many prickly paradoxes, not just of the appropriation of “primitive” culture in these modernist projects, but also of the unresolved tensions between national and cosmopolitan circuits, and between the sometimes opposed disciplinary terrains of Latin Americanism and comparative studies. The author wants us to focus on tango and samba not as finished products of national assimilation, but as arenas for the dynamic negotiation of cultural differences. Given the stereotypes and superficiality that have characterized consumption of these music and dance forms outside their countries of origin, *Primitive Modernities* implicitly insists that readers in the United States and the rest of the English-speaking world fruitfully complicate their understandings of tango and samba.

Part 1, “Primitives,” considers the “civilizing mechanisms” by which tango and samba became progressively more sophisticated and acceptable as markers of the national. These include the new media of recorded sound
and radio, but also older media, such as novels and paintings. As examples of the “autochthonous exotic,” samba and tango represent conflictive and conflicted readings of the national character in the writings of Aluísio Azevedo and Mário de Andrade in Brazil, and Jorge Luis Borges and Ricardo Güiraldes in Argentina. In her discussion of these texts, the author proposes we reconsider “cosmopolitanism” as a term that references Latin America’s colonial history and its uneven cultural exchanges with Europe. “In avant-garde terms, Latin Americans are seen as cosmopolitan when they refer to Europe, but Europeans are seen as primitivists, not cosmopolitan, when referring to Latin America or Africa” (pp. 48-49). In the work of these writers and their avant-garde artist contemporaries, such as Emilio Pettoruti and Cecilia Meireles, the primitive aligns with the modern and the fashionable and thus becomes an “amphibious” signifier (p. 74).

Part 2, “Modernities,” reveals how the acceptance and avid consumption of tango and samba by European and American audiences was crucial to their repurposing as celebrated signifiers of national identity. What makes the “exportation voyages” of Argentine and Brazilian musicians, writers, and painters so radically modernist is that such journeys “invert the postulate of cultural voyages; the musical travelers no longer made the voyage to learn or absorb knowledge that would be more advanced in Europe, but rather fundamentally to export their music, now deemed a national product like any other raw exportable material, cultural rather than natural” (p. 80). Garramuño looks to Immanuel Wallenstein, Walter Benjamin, Theodore Adorno, and others to understand how the writings and artworks of Argentinians and Brazilians in the early twentieth century became valued commodities in a Paris sick of Parisian art or a New York enamored of Carmen Miranda. It was thanks to these inverted relationships that Argentine national identity could become paradoxically anchored, for example, in the experience of living abroad, epitomized in the lyrics of the 1931 tango “Anclao en París” (Anchor’d in Paris) written by Enrique Cadicamo.

The second chapter of part 2 focuses on “novels of degeneration” from the 1920s and 1930s in which tango or samba function as a kind of shorthand for general corruption or the downward spiral of the protagonists. Such characters as the doomed “milonguitas”—women “on the threshold of perdition” who seek in the tango world a way to improve their precarious economic lot at a moment when Buenos Aires was the world capital of prostitution—populate literary works as well as tango lyrics, complicating the distinctions between high and low culture. Bringing together these and other documents, Garramuño displays a particular deftness with literary analysis and a welcome sensitivity to the ways gender interpolated the appropriation of tango and samba in these nationalist projects.

The final chapter of the “Modernities” section plumbs yet another paradox: tango and samba figure prominently in early histories of film in Brazil and Argentina, even in the era of silent film. As live musicians accompanied the projection of silent films in both countries with tangos or sambas, they helped legitimize both music genres within the context of the modern invention of cinema. What’s more, publics previously barred from experiencing these types of music in the unsavory peringundines (sketchy dives) and other marginal venues where they were performed previously could now enjoy them openly at the movie theater. Thus, as spectators of silent films, “decent” middle-class women, for example, could now hear live tango. Nor is it a coincidence, Garramuño suggests, that the first Argentine feature-length sound film was Tango! (1933). That picture as well as films starring Carlos Gardel, tango’s most famous vocalist, progressively associated tango with an urban and modern identity in the images projected on the big screen and in the posters that publicized those films on the street. Ultimately, tango and samba helped nationalize their respective cinemas, and in turn, the cinema contributed to the increasingly close association of each musical form with national identity.

Primitive Modernities concludes with a short coda that considers the documentary Notas de Tango (2000) with which few English readers will be familiar, and an appendix that situates the unfolding of modernity in Brazilian literature following the principal period of study. Some forty pages of notes as well as a lengthy bibliography mark this as a well-researched and erudite exercise informed by broad familiarity with a wide range of theory. The ambitious translation by Anna Kazumi Stahl admits English readers to all the scenarios described above, providing them with a good taste of the transnational and transdisciplinary fields in which each of these national icons was established. Kazumi Stahl’s version also reveals—perhaps unwittingly—the limitations of describing such complex cultural matrices in the alien terrain of English. Reading “syncope” as syncopation and poetic “quartets” as stanzas or quatrains may help make the English version flow better. Given the inevitable quandaries of translating such a highly academic text dealing with localized phenomena (not the least of which is
the preponderance in many tango lyrics of lunfardo, a local vocabulary of the Río de la Plata region itself closely identified with tango). *Primitive Modernities* would have benefited from the parallel inclusion of the original song lyrics and other texts in Spanish or Portuguese with their translations. An index (not part of the Spanish original) and perhaps a glossary also would have made the text more accessible. But there is something to be said for the ultimate untranslatability of the multipartite cultural phenomena on display here. Garramuño’s rich interdisciplinary study leaves no doubt that while nations may be nothing more than “imagined communities,” national music serves as a lively stage for the “complex process[es] of cultural disputes” in which such imaginaries are constructed (p. 12).

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