

Presentation Title: “Las Letras”\* are conversations”

Beginning with a comparison between tango-dance and tango-lyrics, I argue] that both expressions are conversations between two people, or between one person and a variety of inanimate objects, which stand for people or the world at large. Both facets of tango, I argue, occur in an embrace.

In *Las Letras* the author through the protagonist invites the listener to a sort of embrace getting him close to his heart.

I review lyrics published prior to 1917 when *Mi Noche Triste* was born. None of Angel Villoldo’s lyrics (1903 to 1917) were conversations. I read Villoldo’s *El Porteño* (1903), *Yo soy la Morocha* (1905), and *Pobre Percanta* (1917), to show they are *descriptions* or presentations, not conversations.

Conversations in lyrics begin with Pascual Contursi’s *Mi Noche Triste*. Most of his *letras* are conversations: *Ivette* (1920), *Te doy lo que tengo* (1920), *La Cumparsita* (1924), *Pobre corazón mio* (1926), *Ventanita de arrabal* (1927), *Bandoneón arrabalero* (1928). Exceptions: *La he visto con otro* (1926) and *Qué lindo es estar metido* (1927)

From 1917 on lyrics begin to be more like we, porteños are, they become extensions of who we are. We are neither distant nor descriptive. We like intimacy. We open up to friends and strangers. We like to engage in conversation. We even have an institution for conversation *el café*.

With the introduction of conversation begins a new relationship paradigm between protagonist and listener. For the first time both of them are in interaction, in mutual emotional engagement. Contursi is the first *letrista*\*\* to communicate with millions of men who are lonely, feel abandoned and marginalized by society. He accomplishes this feat by showing his own sentiments and sharing his anxieties in the language of the common person.

During the twenties conversations in lyrics becomes contagious. Practically all *letristas* dialogue with good people and *malevos*\*\*\*, with the barrio, the bandoneón, the street corner ... and with any object that becomes sentient in their imagination. Even with god.

The wide appeal of the tango-dance among the popular masses is documented as early as 1900 in newspapers of the city. The wide popularity of the music is documented as well.

I propose that from 1917 through the late 30s, *Las Letras* might have served a

social function for the working class masses that loved the music and dance. The *Letras* probably provided a mirror to their problems and predicaments. They probably fostered a sense of cohesion and identity. Similar functions were provided from the 40s through the 60s by a radio program *La familia de Los Perez García* that was religiously followed by a growing middle class that identified with middle class' protagonists. It mirrored their daily problems, much like tango lyrics mirrored the problems of the lonely protagonists of the *arrabal*\*\*\*\*.

Listening to tango lyrics might have been a psychologically important activity. When the deluge of immigrants begun to decrease by 1917, lyrics probably begun to mirror the anxieties of the working class, their internal realities and sentiments. They probably touched hundreds of thousands of people with shared stories. It is possible that their new conversational style engaged people who worked unregulated hours and had no weekend rest. Under those circumstances, how could people find the time or the occasion to engage in conversation with anyone?

Tango lyrics might have offered badly needed dialogue, relieve lonelins, and help develop a sense of belonging to something.

*Las Letras* \*. Tango lyrics

*letrista* \*\*. Author of tango lyrics

*malevos* \*\*\*. Bad lives

*arrabal* \*\*\*\*. Working-class suburbs around the outskirts of the city which begin to disappear in the 1930s.