

Tango, Gendered Embodiment, and Acousmatic Listening in Argentina

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ABSTRACT: This essay considers the modernist cultural production of tango within the contexts of broadcast radio and popular print in the 1920s and 1930s, when both tango and radio were reaching their heyday. Because of its deep engagement with the changing social, economic, and media dynamics of Argentine modernity, its emphasis on cultural “newness” and experimental forms, as well as its play with matters of identity, embodiment, and belonging, tango deserves to be considered among the forms of Argentine modernism. I explore the connections between *tango-canción* (tango song) as broadcast on the radio, cultural conceptions of voice, and the new and changing understandings of gender identity, embodiment, and women’s roles as they emerge in popular magazines of the time. When we consider the modernism of tango or the shifting notions of embodiment, intimacy, and relation that accompany broadcast radio in the early twentieth century, we must recognize popular print as central to those developments and part of an intermedial nexus of responses to the situation of Argentine modernity. By examining the changing roles of tango’s *cancionistas* (female singers) in the twenties and thirties in the context of writing about women in the popular press, I show how the protocols and practices of radio and popular print offered crucial challenges to existing notions of gender in the mediascape of 1920s and 1930s Argentina.

AT THE VERY END of the 1933 film *¡Tango!*, Argentina’s first made with full optical sound, the celebrated tango star Azucena Maizani appears onscreen to sing a well-known song, “Milonga del 900” (Milonga of the 1900s). Dressed in a man’s suit, fedora cocked rakishly over one eye, Maizani sings against a black background, creating a powerful final spectacle in the star-studded though sometimes lackluster film. The absence of dramatic purpose in this final scene and the absoluteness of the black staging create a supreme stop-action moment

of what Laura Mulvey would call “to-be-looked-at-ness,” where the spectacle of a woman performing calls us to drop our expectations of narrative interaction and look at nothing but her.¹ Even in the context of a film constructed largely around dance and song performances by its celebrated cast, this final moment stands out for its starkness and disconnection from the plot. Looking at Azucena Maizani and listening to her glorious rendition of the *tango-canción* (tango song), we drop out of the previous moment of narrative resolution and into another world, one of pure performance and spectacle.

Yet, that is not all. While Mulvey described how visual pleasure emerges out of framing and objectifying women’s bodies in these stop-action, spectacle moments, here Maizani’s body captures our gaze while clothed as a man and singing about unrequited love from a male perspective. “La quise porque la quise / y por eso ando penando — / se me fue ya ni se cuando, / ni se cuando volverá” (I loved her because I loved her / and ‘cause of that I’m hurting now — / she’s left me and I don’t even know when / don’t even know when she’ll come back), she sings.² Maizani shows up in a suit, takes a stance, and sings, calling into question the conventionally gendered plotlines of the film that has come before. Her performance resists being contained within the common codes of performative femininity and creates frisson from its very flaunting of those codes. In its simplicity, the invitation to look and listen feels both irresistible and potentially transgressive. Maizani also appears in the opening credits of the film, attired in a dress, singing a work of her own composition, “La canción de Buenos Aires” (The song of Buenos Aires). Whichever way she was dressed in this film, Maizani’s soprano voice would have been recognizable by her many fans at this point in her long career. The final performance marks a moment when a female tango star demonstrates her successful claim to the previously male-dominated realm of tango stardom and uses it to place pressure on long-standing binary gender expectations.

This performance also — and not coincidentally — draws on the transformative power of the mediated sound environment that surrounded and propelled tango in the first decades of the twentieth century, here now for the first time fully paired with film. In the twenties, the *tango-canción* emerges from earlier improvisational musical styles and becomes a mode of popular song available to be performed, recorded, covered, distributed as sheet music, reprinted in the emerging popular song magazines, or broadcast on the radio. As Donald Castro puts it, “the massification of the tango . . . began with its transformation into a popular song form, the *tango-canción*, after 1917, when it began to be disseminated through the new electronic media of radio, film, and sound recordings. By the 1930s, the popularity of sound films and radio made the *tango-canción* a national (and international) popular culture phenomenon.”³ While record players were still luxury items, in 1925 Argentines bought 500,000 records, 90 percent of which were tangos.⁴ The advent of commercial broadcast radio after 1923 and the rapid expansion of sales of radio receivers in the early thirties made broadcast tango widely available, eventually supplanting records and live performances as the primary way that Argentines encountered this beloved national music.⁵ By the mid-twenties many of the radio stations had a regular group of tango stars who performed

¹ See Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975): 6–18.

² Lyrics by Homero Manzi, translation by Derrick del Pilar, accessed October 29, 2020, <https://poesiadegotan.com/2009/05/13/milonga-del-900-1933/>.

³ Donald S. Castro, *The Argentine Tango as Social History, 1880–1955: The Soul of the People* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen Press, 1991), 7.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁵ According to Castro, as broadcast grew, record sales diminished.

for broadcast; by the second half of the decade many superstars were under contract to the stations, while the cinema and recording industry produced popular films and tango records in an effort to compete with imports from the United States. At the same time, there was an explosion of popular print media surrounding both tango and radio more generally. Shifting attitudes toward women's bodies, women's work, and women's civil rights in these magazines helped shape the ways in which the sounds of women's voices in tango resonated with listeners and readers. Together the radio broadcasts and radio magazines helped shape the way that *tango-canción* and the new *cancionistas* (female tango singers) were understood, offering crucial challenges to existing notions of gender in the mediascape of 1920s and 1930s Argentina.

Historian Matthew Karush suggests that “record companies, radio programmes, fan magazines, lyricists, and performers all actively positioned the tango as an alternative modernism, just as modern as jazz and yet authentically Argentine.”⁶ In defining an “alternative modernism,” Karush draws on Miriam Hansen's now-classic 1999 discussion of “vernacular modernism” in global cinema and also builds on her attempt to break the hegemony of US and European cultural forms over the term “modernism.”⁷ While developments in modernist studies since Hansen's work have widened our understandings of modernisms around the world, it is still the case that non-Anglophone modernisms from the Global South figure less often in discussions taking place in the Global North and that popular modernisms, especially those occurring in nontextual media, are often marginalized. This essay hopes to further ongoing attempts to provincialize Euro-American modernism and especially the “high modernism” of old, to push back once again on the primacy of Global North modernisms, and to counter the dominance of the English language and particularly the BBC in global radio studies. Here, I claim that because of its deep engagement with the changing social, economic, and media dynamics of Argentine modernity, its emphasis on cultural “newness” and experimental forms, as well as its play with matters of identity, embodiment, and belonging, tango deserves to be considered a form of Argentine modernism, without the addition of qualifiers like “vernacular” or “alternative.” It was a deeply innovative, widespread, and influential cultural response to modernity in twentieth-century Argentina.

As I have argued, modernism might be best understood as a dynamic set of relationships, practices, problematics, and cultural engagements with economic, social, and cultural modernity as it emerges in particular and varied ways worldwide.⁸ In its most capacious definition, modernism is a mode that shows us “a form of life, of a general environment for living—for thinking, perceiving, sensing, feeling” (in the way that W. J. T. Mitchell and Mark Hansen define the concept of a medium)—and it does so through its engagement with aesthetic and communicative materials and practices, as well as the systems of relations that accompany them.⁹ In that sense, modernism must be recognized as engaging deeply and throughout its history of practice with what Damien Keane calls the “total communicative context” of surrounding sound media

⁶ Matthew Karush, *Culture of Class: Radio and Cinema in the Making of a Divided Argentina, 1920–1946* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 136.

⁷ Miriam Hansen, “The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism,” *Modernism/Modernity* 6, no. 2 (1999): 59–77.

⁸ Jessica Berman, *Modernist Commitments: Ethics, Politics, and Transnational Modernism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 7.

⁹ W. J. T. Mitchell and Mark B. N. Hansen, introduction to *Critical Terms for Media Studies*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell and Mark B. N. Hansen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), xii.

protocols and systems.¹⁰ Expressed as a mode of thinking, living, and feeling as well as writing, modernism is therefore inseparable from the protocols of recorded sound and radio and other mediated contexts of communication, identity, and social relation of the mid-twentieth century.

This essay will consider the modernist cultural production of tango within the contexts of broadcast radio and popular print in the 1920s and 1930s, when both tango and radio were reaching their heyday. I will briefly explore the connections between tango broadcast on the radio, cultural conceptions of voice, and new and changing understandings of gender identity, embodiment, and women's roles as they emerge in popular magazines in early to mid-twentieth-century Argentina. As John Durham Peters has argued, media are "civilization ordering devices."¹¹ Media connect and guide our embodied practices of everyday life. At the same time, as Lisa Gitelman puts it, media "are very particular sites for very particular, importantly social as well as historically specific experiences of meaning."¹² By examining the changing roles of tango's *cancionistas* in the twenties and thirties, I hope to show how the protocols and practices of radio, including the popular magazines that surrounded broadcast, affected the cultural construction of voice, habits of listening, and practices of gendered embodiment in early twentieth-century Argentina.

After a period of remarkable population growth in the late nineteenth century fueled primarily by immigration, Argentina underwent dramatic social, economic, and cultural change, along with a period of intense investigation of national identity and "*argentinidad*," in the early to mid-twentieth century.¹³ The enormous number of immigrants from Italy and Spain fueled clubs and associations tied to ethnic heritage but also helped solidify and support the role of those immigrants in Argentine society. According to Karush, by 1914 "foreign-born men outnumbered native-born men in Buenos Aires. . . . That same year 80 percent of the Argentine population was composed of immigrants and the descendants of people who had immigrated since 1850."¹⁴ Italian and Spanish customs, like listening to opera, began to become mainstream; the Lunfardo slang, which owes a great deal to Italian, became the lingua franca of the Buenos Aires streets and of tango. At the same time, submerged in the focus among historians on these immigrant groups and the celebration of growing Argentine unity in the period, there persisted the marginalization of indigenous Argentines, who were brutally persecuted in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as well as the continuing role of Black Argentines whose ancestors had been forcibly brought to the country and who remained a steady portion—if declining in terms of percentage—of the population in the twentieth century.

Discussions about immigration, ethnicity, and Argentine identity in this period also necessarily intersect with questions of gender and the status of women. Because most immigrants to Argentina at the end of the nineteenth century were men, they were often forced to find partners, marry, and create families outside their ethnic group. Especially in Buenos Aires, where there was less ethnic segregation than in many other global cities, this led to more rapid "Argentinization"—or integration into the broader society—and a more rapid rise in social and

¹⁰ Damien Keane, *Ireland and the Problem of Information: Irish Writing, Radio, Late Modernist Communication* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014), 10.

¹¹ John Durham Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 5.

¹² Lisa Gitelman, *Always Already New: Media History and the Data of Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 8.

¹³ According to Karush (*Culture of Class*, 23), between 1875 and 1930 Argentina's population grew from 2 million to 12 million.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

economic status among immigrants.¹⁵ At the same time, this period saw newly focused debate surrounding the position of women in Argentine society, including in the domains of employment, entertainment, and intellectual and public life. In intellectual circles, the journal *Sur*, founded in 1931 by Victoria Ocampo, became a beacon for new, experimental writing, catapulting Ocampo to the frontlines of Argentine literary life, even as she herself became increasingly vocal as a feminist. More generally, in Argentina in the period, women began to be accepted into a wider variety of workplaces and entertainment venues, including, by the thirties, in tango, even as discussion of women's roles and rights occupied an increasing place in popular publications, new media, and public debate.

As its reach expanded in the twenties, broadcast radio, in concert with the print publications that emerged alongside it, became a vector for and an indicator of women's changing roles. We can see its effect through the ways that audiences for tango evolved in the period, which in turn served as both a cause and a sign of broader societal changes. As Castro puts it, "when the tango entered the... household via the radio, a new audience was also brought to the tango—women."¹⁶ Tango on the radio reached ordinary, everyday women, whether in their homes or in workplaces, where they were increasingly present and where radio music was often played throughout the workday. Broadcast tango not only drove the development of expansive new audiences for tango but was inseparable from profound gender shifts in tango performance and listening, as well as women's access to the public worlds of work and entertainment in the twenties and thirties—a topic of much discussion in the popular magazines.

Mediated tango also opened paths to acoustic encounter and intimacy that transformed the moment of performance and response while creating a space for more far-reaching gender trouble. Having heard her recorded and broadcast voice over and over during the years of her ascendance to tango superstardom in the twenties, Maizani's fans would have become practiced in acousmatic listening, easily able to recognize her voice without her image before them. We might therefore be tempted to say that Maizani's performance in the film *¡Tango!* reinforces the acousmatic situation of listening—that is, "sound heard without accompanying visual impressions of its cause or source"—in that it allows the voice to be disassociated from its expected body.¹⁷ Yet I'd claim the opposite: the mediated situation of listening creates a potentially new understanding of the acousmatic body that releases it, at least in part, from limiting expectations of embodiment. By associating her voice with the masculine-attired figure on the screen as they view the end of the film *¡Tango!*, Maizani's fans are reversing the acousmatic scene, reinscribing the voice into a body, and in the process allowing it to challenge normative gender assumptions. In other words, I would argue, the habit and experience of acousmatic listening by way of recording and broadcast help make possible a more fluid, flexible, or potentially transgressive gender attitude, one that is not limited to the stop-action moment of film spectacle or the visual presence of bodies onstage or onscreen. We might note this transgressive attitude as one of the marks of tango's modernism.

¹⁵ Ibid.; and Eduardo José Miguez, María Elba Argeri, María Mónica Bjerg, and Hernán Otero, "Hasta que la Argentina nos una: Reconsiderando las pautas matrimoniales de los inmigrantes, el crisol de razas y el pluralism cultural" [Until Argentina brings us together: Reconsidering the marriage patterns of immigrants, the melting pot, and cultural pluralism], *Hispanic American Historical Review* 72, no. 4 (1991): 804–7.

¹⁶ Castro, *Argentine Tango as Social History*, 140–41.

¹⁷ Sam Halliday, *Sonic Modernity: Representing Sound in Literature, Culture, and the Arts* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 13–14.

Indeed, I will claim that the modern habits of listening engendered by recorded sound and broadcast radio participate in new ways of understanding embodiment, intimacy, and relation in Argentina in the twenties and thirties. Acousmatic listening emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century and, as Sam Halliday argues, in the twentieth century became a key experience of modern life.¹⁸ Not only did broadcast sound change ways of understanding the relationship between voices and their origins, emphasizing the extent to which voice is culturally constructed, but it also created new structures of relation among (gendered and raced) bodies while influencing notions of social identity and national community emerging in the period. These are visible not only in the shifting ways that women sound their presence in the world of tango but also in the ways that magazines from the period weave textual relationships between radio stars and their audiences, along with the wider Argentine reading public. These new ways of understanding embodiment, intimacy, and relation became legible as part of what Lisa Gitelman calls media “protocols”: the “vast clutter of normative rules and default conditions, which gather and adhere like a nebulous array around a technological nucleus. Protocols express a huge variety of social, economic and material relationships.”¹⁹ They emerged not only out of moments of performance or broadcast but also out of the print publications that supported, enveloped, and extended them within a sound-mediated, acousmatic modernity in Argentina in the twenties and thirties.

Further, exploring issues of mediated sound, embodiment, and social relations on broadcast radio and within popular magazines in Argentina in the early decades of the twentieth century, as this essay will do, immediately and irrevocably raises questions surrounding intimacy and the asymmetrical relations of social and political power in the period when Argentine nationality and the matter of the populace were being (re)constructed. Following Lisa Lowe, I understand intimacy to mean more than the “liberal interiority or domesticity” possessed by individuals. Rather, it includes the broader “constellation of asymmetrical and unevenly legible ‘intimacies’” linking people, political economies, and systems of social relations, showing us the intrinsic and insistent political valences connected to shifting patterns of association and the importance of cultural practices as matrices of social relations.²⁰ In other words, radio is both intimate and social work. By considering matters of gender and embodiment in the protocols of radio and popular magazines, this essay will suggest how acousmatic embodiment, intimacy, and radiogenic social relations became crucial to Argentine modernism at the intersection of sound and text.

ACOUSMATIC EMBODIMENT

I begin with a paradoxical point: when bodies—particularly women’s bodies—are out of the picture, as they are in all acousmatic media, they are nonetheless central to the complex intermedial nexus of discourse and sound that surrounds Argentine radio. As Christine Ehrick puts it, “when considering a woman’s voice on the radio, it is both helpful and important to think of women’s radio speech as a performance of the gendered body and as a challenge to a regime where women are disproportionately expected to be silent (or at least quiet). . . . A woman’s voice on the radio was no full-throated battle cry against patriarchy, perhaps, but it was a challenge to the gendered

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Gitelman, *Always Already New*, 7.

²⁰ Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 18.

soundscape with far-reaching implications.²¹ Discourse from the twenties surrounding the “true nature” of tango link primitivist notions of race and gender embodiment irrevocably, whether addressing the roots of *tango-danza* (tango dance) or the changing nature of twentieth-century *tango-canción* (tango song). And at least until its global explosion in the thirties, tango was tied to the working classes or what were often termed *los orilleros* from the marginalized outskirts of Buenos Aires.²² In the attempt to focus on the true heart of tango—male attitude, skill, and emotional control—not only were Black people coded as primitive, but women who danced tango were understood to be unfeminine, or “masculinized,” and all were imagined to be connected to a netherworld of lower-class violence.²³ Tango’s famous machismo, whether in the world of *tango-danza* or *tango-canción*, has this race/gender/class matrix at its core.

In that final stop-action moment of the film *¡Tango!*, Maizani in her tuxedo becomes, in Karush’s analysis, “a symbol of the tango itself, using hypermasculine imagery to tell the story of a man who cannot forget the woman who has left him.”²⁴ But it’s hard to imagine how “tango itself” becomes embodied here. Rather, I’d claim, Maizani’s performance in men’s attire complicates and disrupts tango’s presumed hypermasculinity even as it plays with the objectifying power of the cinematic gaze. By wearing a man’s suit, singing a song made famous by a celebrated man (Carlos Gardel, tango song’s ultimate superstar), and inhabiting its first-person male perspective, Maizani twists the spectacle of female tango performance on display earlier in the film into a moment of gender challenge where the category of the hypermasculine can be inhabited by a woman and a woman’s voice can carry a man’s complaint. In this way she plays with the cultural construction of how a woman sounds and what she sings about. Her performance asks us to consider how conventional tango styles in song, film, and on air perform, codify, and reproduce traditional gender roles even while they provide an opening for drag, trans, and other alternative gender stylings.

This is not the only moment when Maizani performs in male attire, nor is Maizani the only female tango star who used her performances to challenge binary gender and tango’s machismo. While Maizani composed songs under her own name, many of the early women in tango, like Eloisa d’Herbil de Silva (1847–1953) and María Luisa Carnelli (1898–1987, one of the most prolific lyricists of her day), often wrote under male pseudonyms.²⁵ As Sirena Pellarolo notes, many *cancionistas* in the 1920s and 1930s used their “bold exposure of their femininity on stages traditionally reserved for men and their occasional use of drag [to introduce] the negotiation of alternative corporeal female styles.”²⁶ According to Anahi Viladrich, both Rosita Quiroga, the first female vocalist to break onto the Buenos Aires scene, and Azucena Maizani, who followed shortly afterward, became known, even when they wore standard female clothing, for their *varonil guapeza*

²¹ Christine Ehrick, *Radio and the Gendered Soundscape: Women and Broadcasting in Argentina and Uruguay, 1930–1950* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 17.

²² This term is often used pejoratively, but in the context of tango it can take on more nuanced valences. For example, Borges applies the word to the men from the outlying working-class neighborhoods in his appreciation of tango; see Jorge Luis Borges, *Evaristo Carriego: A Book about Old-Time Buenos Aires*, trans. Norman Thomas di Giovanni (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1984). *Los orilleros* was also the title of a screenplay by Borges and Adolfo Bioy Casares, later turned into a film (see <http://shipwrecklibrary.com/borges/borges-film-los-orilleros>, accessed June 7, 2021).

²³ Marta Savigliano, *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion* (1995; New York: Routledge, 2018), 42.

²⁴ Karush, *Culture of Class*, 102.

²⁵ Anahi Viladrich, “Neither Virgins nor Whores: Tango Lyrics and Gender Representations in the Tango World,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 39, no. 2 (2006): 281.

²⁶ Sirena Pellarolo, “Queering Tango: Glitches in the Hetero-national Matrix of a Liminal Cultural Production,” *Theatre Journal* 60, no. 3 (2008): 410.

(virile or male flashiness, daring, or boastfulness in the slang of the day; tied to the *guapo*, a male type similar to a *compadrito* or *orillero*).²⁷ The use of this phrase shows the ways in which female bodies and voices in tango song became masculinized and tied to masculine types no matter their attire or the gender nonconformity of their performances.

In the thirties, Maizani sang frequently in a man's suit and also in the garb of a male gaucho, enacting through her attitude and songs not only male loss but also sometimes masculine violence. At other times, Maizani attempted to create a nongendered or nonbinary lyric perspective, avoiding mention of the singer's gender and focusing on the love object instead. A quick web search shows not only the prevalence but also the popularity of these roles even today. Collections of Maizani's recordings are assembled under an image of her in a suit, and video clips of both the end of *¡Tango!* and other cross-dressing cinema moments rise to the top of any image search. Karush notes that in this period "Maizani enjoyed dressing as a man so much that she came up with the idea of performing tango dressed as a soccer player" but was guided by her promoters instead into a more conventional role as spurned lover. In Karush's words, "Maizani's enthusiasm for transvestism reveals how confining tango's gender code was: in order to represent the tango and to avoid the role of passive victim, female singers needed to sing as men."²⁸ In other words, for Maizani and the other female tango singers who performed in drag, including Ermelinda Spinelli and Mercedes Simone, cross-dressing arose from masculine dominance and female exclusion in tango lyrics, performance, and culture.²⁹

Yet, this comment does little justice to the complexity of Maizani's performances, which, along with those of other female singers, raise issues of not only the female passivity presumed in tango but also the power of the gender binary in all aspects of the performative situation of tango. By donning not only the attire but also the attitude of the song's masculine protagonist, Maizani placed pressure on the gender position of viewers and listeners. If her soprano voice, as Karush notes, was "unmistakably feminine" (and we should question the notion that soprano voices are always marked feminine, given the prevalence of falsettos, countertenors, castrati, and other male sopranos throughout music history),³⁰ then viewers and listeners of Maizani's performances were immersed in a gender queer moment, which demanded a mixed positioning from its audience in response. Viewers might have chosen to imagine they were watching Maizani as a "female" star simply costumed for transgender spectacle. Or perhaps instead they considered that they were listening to the traditional male tango narrative "I" albeit sung by a female-coded voice. Either way, there is no simple, gender-binary option. If, as Mulvey puts it in her "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,'" the "female spectator's phantasy of masculinisation is always to some extent at cross purposes with itself, restless in its transvestite clothes," here, the transvestite clothes of the female performer unsettle the spectator's fantasy

²⁷ Viladrich, "Neither Virgins nor Whores," 280. *Guapear* is considered a verb denoting boastfulness in the *Diccionario del habla de los Argentinos* [Dictionary of Argentine speech] (Buenos Aires: Academia argentina de letras, 2003), 334, although the literary examples given are all from a much later period. Thanks to Patricia Novillo-Corvalan for providing this reference and to her and Teresa Chisu Ko for help on Argentine usage.

²⁸ Karush, *Culture of Class*, 102.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ See also Judith Ann Peraino, "Listening to Gender: A Response to Judith Halberstam," *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 11 (2007): 59–64.



FIGURE 1 Azucena Maizani.

Image accessed June 15, 2020, via Creative Commons license from https://www.researchgate.net/figure/figura-2-azucena-maizani-con-vestuario-teatral-masculino_fig2_327354469, from Natacha Lopez Gallucci, “Voces y cuerpos femeninos: Educación y resistencia en el cine argentino” [Women’s voices and bodies: Education and resistance in Argentine cinema], *Educar en revista* 34, no. 70 (August 2018): 85–100. Original source: *Revista cine argentino*, no. 73 (1939).

of determinant gender identity.³¹ They transform the moment of spectacle from one that fixes woman as the static object of masculinized attention to one that enlists listeners and viewers in a reciprocal performance of gender queerness.

The many complex ways that these *cancionistas* pushed back against gender norms as they participated in tango culture and performed onstage, onscreen, and in front of the radio microphone seem to demand a different, more capacious terminology than transvestism or even drag.³² I would argue that the cross-gender performances of Maizani, the antitype styles of singers considered to have *varonil guapeza* or simply to be ugly,³³ the ventriloquism of male perspective by many other female tango singers, all gesture toward what today we might call trans attitudes and identities. While neither Maizani nor the *cancionistas* discussed here attempted to shift their gender identities permanently or to “pass” as male in everyday life, their use of a male subject position which critiques binary gender norms common to tango deserves to be accorded more significance and understood as a mark of their modernism. When Karush and Viladrich characterize these performances as pure costume or occasional transvestism,³⁴ they dismiss the real and ongoing challenge the performances pose to the assignment of the *cancionistas’* bodies in performance as irrevocably female. They also dismiss the capacity of the category *varonil guapeza* to create an alternative way of performing gender not tied to clothing or visibility but part of a

³¹ Laura Mulvey, “Afterthoughts on ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,’ Inspired by ‘Duel in the Sun,’” *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 15/17 (Summer 1981): 15.

³² I turn away from drag as the best way to understand these performances in part because of their general lack of the periodic or camp element often displayed in drag. I also rely on Halberstam’s discussion of a drag act in relation to the cover song as “a way of inhabiting another persona or body or voice, and it is a way of doing so while self-consciously registering the performance rather than merely blending into the original” (J. Halberstam, “Keeping Time with Lesbians on Ecstasy,” *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 11 [2007]: 53). While the cross-gender performances of Maizani and others clearly register *as such*, in other ways they often appear to want to downplay that aspect by turning away from ironic or camp attitudes.

³³ Others simply embraced the “ugly” label as potentially liberating. See Viladrich, “Neither Virgins nor Whores,” 285, on Tita Merello.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

challenge to gendered assumptions about voice and sound more generally. Making her performance only about *transvestism*—that is, only about clothing—is to say that if Azucena Maizani hadn't made herself visible in a man's suit, the gender play of her tango singing would somehow be less salient. But, of course, the full range of gender challenge among the *cancionistas*—including deploying male pseudonyms, inhabiting male perspectives, and refusing conventional feminine standards of beauty—was certainly not limited to displaying a body in male clothing.

One corollary practice might be the rejection of female standards of beauty and behavior among the *cancionistas*. Singer Tita Merello, who also appeared in the film *¡Tango!*, created a long career for herself by emphasizing her supposed ugliness and deeper voice, in effect creating the “reverse image” of tango's femme fatale and challenging its dominance.³⁵ Her trademark 1943 song, “Se dice de mi” (It is said about me), begins:

Se dice de mi,
 Se dice de mi,
 Se dice que soy fiera,
 que camino a lo malevo,
 que soy chueca y que me muevo
 con un aire compadrón,
 que parezco Leguisamo,
 mi nariz es puntiaguda,
 la figura no me ayuda
 y mi boca es un buzón.

[It's said about me
 It's said about me,
 It's said that I'm ugly,
 that I walk like a quarrelsome person,
 that I'm bowlegged and that I move
 with a conceited attitude,
 that I look like [jockey Irene] Leguisamo,
 my nose is pointy,
 the silhouette doesn't help
 and my mouth is like a mail box.]³⁶

Although it disappears in this official translation, the song not only proclaims the singer's ugliness or, more literally, that she is “*fiera*,” or wild (which, importantly, heightens her sexuality), but also likens her to “*un malevo*,” “*un compadrón*,” and (the jockey) Leguisamo—all male figures represented in Spanish with masculine nouns. The first two are common tango figures—male thugs or gangsters, often called *compadritos*—tied to the rough culture of tango's early days when it was dominated by gauchos come to the city, impoverished immigrants, and other inhabitants of the *conventillos*, or tenements, of Buenos Aires. These are often the protagonists of tango

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 283.

³⁶ <https://letrasdetango.wordpress.com/2013/08/24/se-dice-de-mi/>, accessed July 1, 2020. While not always literal, the translation included here is by the tango historian, teacher, and dancer Alberto Paz and is the one included in the subtitles of the film, *Mercado de abasto*, in which Merello sings it.

songs—the very perspectives that Maizani and other women sometimes inhabit and subvert. The invocation of these male characters as comparisons for the ugly-fierce woman who, unusually, is the first-person narrator of this song shows the complexity of the composition.³⁷ Here, she not only reverses the femme fatale role but creates an empowered and potentially dangerous, masculinized woman in its place—one who displays what we might call a *varonil fiereza* (virile and bold ugliness) rather than a *varonil guapeza*. In either case, becoming possessed of either *varonil guapeza* or *varonil fiereza* means constructing a gender position outside the binary male/female and its expectations for embodied identity, able not only to cross over or perform the opposite but also to confound and confuse the categories themselves.

It is important to note that, as many theorists have argued, what we understand to be “[t]ransgender . . . is context-dependent” and multiple, taking on different forms and guises in different situations, locations, and historical moments.³⁸ Within the context of tango in Buenos Aires in the 1930s and its expectations for women, Maizani’s performances might be understood as what Roshanak Kheshti calls a “transgender move”³⁹—one that does not necessarily accord fully with transgender identity as we understand it in the contemporary United States and Western Europe but that nonetheless crosses over the gender divide in its performance, opens up gender identities that do not necessarily accord with those assigned at birth, and challenges the irrevocability of binary gender. Without discounting the specificity of the lived experiences of transmen and transwomen and their ongoing struggles for recognition and justice, we can also recognize that the different gender contexts of early twentieth-century Buenos Aires, especially within tango culture, created a different set of parameters for trans expression and recognition.⁴⁰ So, too, transgender identity expresses itself in a variety of ways and in conjunction with a variety of affordances and constraints across time and place, yielding what we might understand as a continuum or range of trans possibilities.

Historian Jen Manion uses the verb “transing”—the active deployment of cross-gender practices—to discuss the gender identity of people born female who married and lived as husbands in the early United States.⁴¹ Manion makes clear that the gender challenge posed by these female husbands placed them in a trans position, whether or not they understood themselves that way or were understood by others in those terms at the time. In asking us to think about female husbands in the context of “transing” rather than in terms of a set trans figure or identity, Manion shows how the trans rubric can be open, processual, and flexible and applicable to a variety of different historical contexts. “To say someone ‘transed’ or was ‘transing’ gender signifies a process

³⁷ The song was written by Francisco Canaro and Ivo Pelay in 1943.

³⁸ Susan Stryker, “De/Colonizing Transgender Studies of China,” in *Transgender China*, ed. Howard Chiang (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 289.

³⁹ Roshanak Kheshti, “Cross-Dressing and Gender (Tres)Passing: The Transgender Move as a Site of Agential Potential in the New Iranian Cinema,” *Hypatia* 24, no. 3 (2009): 173.

⁴⁰ Here I wish to acknowledge my position as a cisgender feminist woman who has learned much from trans people and who believes that trans theory deserves to be more broadly acknowledged and mobilized in wider contexts. I have tried to write this article in the spirit of Jacob Hale’s “Suggested Rules for Non-transsexuals Writing about Transsexuals, Transsexuality, Transsexualism, or Trans—” (<http://sandystone.com/hale.rules.html>; first published 1997, revised 2006). As Cressida Heyes (“Feminist Solidarity after Queer Theory: The Case of Transgender,” *Signs* 28, no. 4 [Summer 2003]: 1097) points out, “Non-trans feminists have a responsibility . . . to consider trans issues” in light of the specific social realities lived by trans people. I have tried to be mindful of that responsibility in drafting this essay.

⁴¹ Jen Manion, *Female Husbands: A Trans History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 6–7.

or practice without claiming to understand what it meant to that person or asserting any kind of fixed identity on them.⁴² While I will not argue that the Argentine *cancionistas* in question here were transing outside of their tango performances or across their life courses, I claim that their practices deserve to be accorded the agency, meaning, and disruptive power we might associate with that verb and that it is central to the way we should understand tango as a multiply mediated cultural response to Argentine modernity.

Crucially, the gender challenge of the *cancionistas* is a matter of voice as much as visual spectacle, which becomes especially significant when we consider the enormous expansion of tango sound as it was disseminated by recordings and sent out on the early radio airwaves. This legacy makes clear that the potential mismatch between voice and lyric perspective does not depend on viewing the singer nor does the disruption of female singers within the world of the tango song depend on cross-dressing and that instead mediated sound plays a crucial role. Indeed, though I have opened this essay with a discussion of cinematic cross-dressing, I contend that the priority on the visual in questions of drag or trans performance distracts from the salience of other modes of making, performing, and challenging gender and especially from the importance of mediated vocal sound. The development and spread of acousmatic listening via recorded and broadcast sound in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries meant that listeners became more and more accustomed to the separation between bodies and their voices and also more astute about the ways that context and perception affect what we hear and how we construe voices. But this is not often enough acknowledged in the way that scholarship handles voice. As Judith Peraino puts it, “the aural dimensions of gender and sexuality—voice and music—have haunted the margins of theory but have seldom factored as centrally as the visual.”⁴³

In other words, we must be careful neither to privilege sight in the construction of gender identity nor to apply a biological gender frame to the matter of voice, especially as we engage with it in and through various sound media. Indeed, Nina Sun Eidsheim reminds us that the very idea that we can know the identity of a speaker or singer from their voice without seeing them rests on the presumptions about the “naturalness” and stability of identity more generally. “The acousmatic situation arises from the assumption that voice and sound are of an a priori stable nature and that we can identify degrees of fidelity to and divergence from this state. This position is grounded in a belief—and truth claims—about the voice as a cue to interiority, essence and unmediated identity”—as well as, I would add, stable gender.⁴⁴ But the reality is the opposite. The reason “we ask *Who is this?* when we listen to voices is precisely that we cannot know the answer to that question.”⁴⁵ Acousmatic listening experience brings to the fore but does not create the difficulty of knowing others—or our constant need to try to determine human essence. When we call into question our capacity to truly know other people, or the naturalness and stability of categories like race or gender, we also call into question the assumption that voice gives us access to the truth of identity. The rise of acousmatic media like broadcast radio highlights but does not create this problematic.

⁴² Ibid., 11.

⁴³ Peraino, “Listening to Gender,” 59.

⁴⁴ Nina Sun Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 2.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 3.

Further, while we often presume the naturalness or even immutability of voice, it is instead one of the aspects of embodied identity that is subject to confusion, manipulation, or change. On the most obvious level, everyday voices and vocal stylings within song are created through the interaction between the biology of vocal cords and the performative techniques of breath and using one's voice. Even on the biological level, voice is not static and is shaped and trained by contexts like hormones, access to nutrition, and fresh air. As Eidsheim reminds us, "vocal tissue, mass, musculature, and ligaments renew and are entrained in the same ways as the rest of our bodies"; "the voice [is] an overall continuation and expression of the environment in which it participates."⁴⁶ Further, vocal entrainment, whether formal or informal, affects how we sound. From those taking classical singing lessons to those wishing to change the gender attribution of their speaking voice, people can learn to shift registers as well as intonation, timbre, and style. Transgender people often work with a vocal coach to implement techniques to adjust their vocal style, paying attention to several characteristics beyond pitch that listeners use to assign gender to a voice.⁴⁷ But all of us learn to use our voices in various ways throughout our lives, constantly adjusting our vocal performances to changing aspects of our bodies, material environment, and social setting.

To a large extent, then, as the situation of the *cancionistas* makes clear, voice is cultural and mediated. It is created as much by conditions of listening and reception as by those of production of sound. Since "neither speakers nor singers use the entire range of their voices' infinite timbral potentialities," our cultural expectations guide how we entrain our voices and which aspects we develop or express.⁴⁸ Even more importantly for our consideration of the *cancionistas*, cultural expectations and conditions of listening guide how listeners perceive characteristics like pitch or breathiness as well as shadings of timbre.⁴⁹ While most people would denote pitch as the most obvious or "natural" distinction between male and female voices, men and women overlap significantly in pitch range, and many vocal characteristics, including timbre, are often equally important in our efforts to identify vocal gender.⁵⁰ For example, as Eidsheim points out, the singing of African American jazz vocalist Jimmy Scott, who sang in a high, contralto register but without the use of falsetto or other pronounced vocal habits, "disqualified [him] from the category of male jazz singer and also from the category of female jazz singer; his timbral evenness across vocal registers and his self-presentation together create a significant timbral ambiguity" onto which listeners projected their raced and gendered expectations in varying ways.⁵¹ There is very little that could be called "natural" about it.

Atypical gender styles have allowed singers both to become successful pop stars and to challenge categories of race, gender, and sexuality among their listeners, as falsetto singers like Prince attest. J. Halberstam remarks of falsetto in the essay "Keeping Time with Lesbians on Ecstasy" that "the falsetto also shifts the scale of gender and creates a queer soundscape within which all the voices sound queer."⁵² While falsetto is our most prominent contemporary example, queer atypicality in vocal range alone includes a wide set of examples, including high-voiced male singers like Jimmy Scott, women singing in low registers like Nina Simone, and women

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴⁹ See also Eidsheim's nuanced discussion of matters of race in African American music.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁵² Halberstam, "Keeping Time," 55.

mezzo-sopranos in operatic “pants roles” (think Frederica von Stade as Mozart’s Cherubino). When Tita Merello sings the phrase “camino a lo malevo” (that she walks like a tough), she instantly creates a queer mismatch or dissonance between her female protagonist and the masculine identity of the tough. Her deeper, alto voice adds another dimension to the dissonance. This vocal dissonance was even more striking because many tango stars of the time, male and female, sang with higher voices. Tita Merello’s lower voice helps set her apart from the crowd. But when Azucena Maizani sings “Milonga del 900,” made famous by Carlos Gardel, the ultimate tango superstar, in a soprano that rivals Gardel’s own high tenor, she also provokes queer auditory dissonance.⁵³ Listeners searching for ways to understand singers in discrete gender categories find those efforts blocked. The addition of visual spectacle simply creates an additional layer to these stars’ already compelling (and popularly successful) queer interventions in tango culture.

This kind of gender play might seem at odds with tango, whose lyrics often glorify machismo and the masculine *compadrito* figure even as its dance moves seem to stylize the tension between male and female partners. As anthropologist Julie Taylor puts it, “the tango refers to men and women, masculinity and femininity, male and female in the context of traditional and many-layered lore. *Tangueros* and other Argentinians often concern themselves with defining gender identities and roles they see as central to the genre. . . . [in a] world in which the idea of two genders is central.”⁵⁴ But from its start tango’s culture of mixing created a much more fluid world of embodiment, sound, and performance than is often understood. Emerging from the music of displaced gauchos in Buenos Aires’ most impoverished neighborhoods, and born in the blend of African-influenced rhythms drummed by the descendants of formerly enslaved people with the European folk styles played by the immigrants who flooded Argentina at the end of the nineteenth century, tango and milonga, its precursor, have always been inescapably hybrid and seen as dangerous to the status quo.⁵⁵ While tango’s early connection to the brothels has been contested, it certainly arose outside respectable Buenos Aires and thrived on alternative corporealities, homosociality, and sexual promiscuity.⁵⁶

The presentation of a coded-female voice singing tango startled listeners in the Buenos Aires clubs and cabarets on into the thirties, and we might certainly say that the growing presence of such voices contributed to shifts in tango culture bemoaned by those like Borges.⁵⁷ Indeed, as its popularity grew both at home and abroad, tango was increasingly enlisted into the national project, including its complicated relationship to race and class. It became both a sign of Argentina’s modernity and a beacon of nostalgia for its essentialized folkloric past. Still, the voices of the

⁵³ It would be interesting to compare high-voiced male singing among tango stars with that among African American pop and jazz singers. Both seem to capitalize on a certain disruption of expectations and the creation of a new set of singing parameters for their popularity.

⁵⁴ Julie Taylor, *Paper Tangos* (1998; Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), xxi.

⁵⁵ There has been much discussion of tango’s roots in a mixture of gaucho culture, milonga, Andalusian tango, the Cuban habanera, and African-Argentine *candombé*, among other traditions. See Castro, *Argentine Tango as Social History*, 93–96; Karush, *Culture of Class*, 145–48; Victoria Fortuna, *Moving Otherwise: Dance, Violence, and Memory in Buenos Aires* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 117.

⁵⁶ It’s important to note that, much like jazz in the 1920–30s United States, tango was also appealing to some middle- and upper-class audiences because of its very association with dangerous bodies and sexuality. Just as New Yorkers might go “slumming” in Harlem, white middle-class Porteños might go visit tango cabarets. See Savigliano, *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion*, 137–68.

⁵⁷ Borges preferred the earlier form of the milonga to the evolving twentieth-century tango. See Borges, *Evaristo Carriego*, 86–89; Michelle McKay Aynesworth, “Borges and Tango: Imagining Argentina,” *West Virginia Philological Papers* 53 (2006): 55–60.

cancionistas as they insinuated themselves into tango culture and insisted on cross- and transgender attitudes posed the possibility of an alternative sound and shape for Argentine modernism.

PROTOCOLS OF SOUND AND PRINT

Although, as I have argued, sound and the matter of voice are crucial to how we understand the gender challenges of *tango-canción* in the 1920s and 1930s, it is impossible to isolate broadcast sound from the print media that surrounded, informed, and extended it. As many scholars have made clear, what we think of as “radio” stands instead for the complex collection of media protocols and practices that surrounds the production, dissemination, and reception of broadcast sound as well as the texts and other media that support it. Those media protocols, to use Gitelman’s terminology, include the production of scripts and radio schedules, the entrainment of voices for vocal acting and hosting at the microphone, and the playing and recording of music for current or later broadcast.⁵⁸ They also include the intermedial complex of relations between what was broadcast on air and what was printed in the many popular magazines, like *La canción moderna* and *Radiolandia*, that sprang up around radio and accompanied its rise, and the responses of listeners/readers, many of whom actively participated in radio/periodical culture. When we consider the modernism of tango or the shifting notions of embodiment, intimacy, and relation that accompany broadcast radio in the early twentieth century, we must recognize popular print as central to those developments and part of an intermedial nexus of responses to the situation of Argentine modernity. In particular, shifting attitudes toward women’s bodies, women’s work, and women’s civil rights in these magazines helped shape the ways that the sounds of women’s voices in tango resonated with listeners/readers. While we cannot always find direct commentary on the *cancionistas* or their voices in these magazines, I will here briefly suggest how, as part of the protocols surrounding radio, they were crucial to the gender-challenging mediascape of 1920s and 1930s Argentina.

The interrelationship between radio and periodical publishing in Buenos Aires started with *La canción moderna*, which began in 1928 with a focus on popular music and its stars. In 1934 it transformed into a successor journal, *Radiolandia*, one of Argentina’s most popular periodicals of the time, with a circulation of 450,000 by the 1940s.⁵⁹ In the thirties, titles such as *Sintonía* (1933–) and *Antena* (1931–) offered readers a variety of feature stories about radio and film, while the popular general-interest women’s magazine *Vosotras* (1935–) regularly covered radio celebrities and serially printed radio plays. None of these periodicals made radio their exclusive focus, but, like *Radiolandia*, the titles of the magazines *Antena* and *Sintonía* make clear their primary audience: radio listeners. As the editors of *Radiolandia* later recalled, they took seriously their mandate to be journalists rather than simply promoting the stations or purveying gossip. They occupied the space between radio and the public, enhancing listeners’ knowledge and experience.⁶⁰ Indeed, *Sintonía* helped popularize the new verb for the activity of listening—*sintonizar*, “to tune in”—an activity both intimate because interior to each listener and integrally connected to the public and to a collective audience. *Vosotras*, for its part, showed the importance of radio listening to

⁵⁸ Gitelman, *Always Already New*, 7.

⁵⁹ Karush, *Culture of Class*, 138.

⁶⁰ *Radiolandia*, no. 1000, cited in Andrea Matallana, “*Locos por la radio*”: *Una historia social de la radiofonía en la Argentina, 1923–1947* [Crazy for radio: A social history of radiophony in Argentina, 1923–1947] (Buenos Aires: Prometro Libros, 2006), 55.

women's domestic and professional lives and increasingly connected the various media environments of print, broadcast, and film in promoting rights and better conditions for Argentine women. As Matallana says of *Radiolandia*, like the other magazines, it "contactaba, informaba y complementaba a la radio" (connected, informed, and complemented radio). The magazine's own statement of purpose from 1947 points out that it collaborated in developing radio through constructive criticism and assistance in connecting with the listening public.⁶¹

All these periodicals understood that their power over listeners and readers derived from both their connection to the radio environment and their position slightly adjacent to it, allowing the overlapping audience community access to information and viewpoints not covered on air or extending coverage and conversations begun in front of the microphone. All devoted pages to editorializing about radio programming and policy with greater or lesser frequency, and all contained significant content unrelated to broadcasts. At the same time, as Debra Rae Cohen, writing of the BBC periodical *The Listener*, points out, the intermedial environment between radio and periodicals creates an endless looping flow, where radio and text refer back and forth to each other even as, in their serial quality, both kinds of media link the past to the future with episodes and issues unfolding in time.⁶²

Content moved not only from the radio to the magazines in the form of publication of song lyrics or serialized radio plays but also in the other direction, from print to the airwaves. Ehrick shows how the radio celebrity and author Silvia Guerrico built her career through an innovative combination of on-air appearances, regular columns and other pieces in periodicals, and book publications, providing an apt example of the multidirectionality of the combined, intermedial protocols of radio. Guerrico's radio talk show *Cartel sonoro*, one of the first so-called "magazines of the air," inspired extensive commentary in the radio press and also included broadcast of her poems, which later appeared in print.⁶³ In 1939 *Radiolandia* and then *Vosotras* serially published her novel *Soledad* (Solitude) at the same time as it was appearing as a radio play. It later also became a stage play and, in the late forties, a movie. In the early forties, Guerrico's popularity took another leap as she scripted broadcasts for a new radio network and supported its expanding fan club before she went into exile from Perón's regime in 1946. Guerrico's very career and the constant swing of content, promotion, and celebrity from radio to print and back to radio speak loudly about relationships within the complex mediascape of this period in Argentina.

In addition to highlighting upcoming notable programs or devoting photospreads to radio stars, the magazines commented on the format, style, and quality of radio programming. *Sintonía* often opened with a critical or historical viewpoint on radio. For example, in October 1935, a year after the new radio regulations known as "the instructions" were handed down and as listening to shortwave was increasing in Argentina, *Sintonía* raised the question "What kind of influence will foreign shortwave transmissions exercise over our broadcasting?" (¿Qué influencia ejercerán las transmisiones extranjeras de onda corta sobre nuestra broadcasting?). *Vosotras* tracked the arrivals and departures of on-air personalities, while printing and supporting those writers, like Guerrico, they thought would most appeal to their women readers. Its early issues included a spread, *Del ambiente radiotelefonico* (From the radiotelephonic environment), devoted to

⁶¹ *Radiolandia*, no. 1000, cited in *ibid.*, 56.

⁶² Debra Rae Cohen, "Strange Collisions": Keywords toward an Intermedial Periodical Studies," *ESC: English Studies in Canada* 41, no. 1 (March 2015): 99.

⁶³ Ehrick, *Radio and the Gendered Soundscape*, 40–41.

upcoming performances of interest, while many of its serialized stories, like Guerrico's *Soledad*, were in some way connected to radio. For example, in its first year (1935), the magazine published a short story by the well-known radio reporter Emilio Ramirez, "Una mujer sin importancia" (An unimportant woman), and advertised it through reference to his radio work.

But beyond their roles editorializing, supporting, and enlarging the reach of broadcast radio, these magazines helped develop the very act of radio listening (*sintonizar*) and the construction of the radio listener. They emphasize the fact that "radio" encompasses not only its own production, broadcasts, and the surrounding print media but also the community of listeners who complete it. They help make clear that radio does not exist without a reception community of listeners who know how to tune in, recognize the aims and ambit of the programs, and respond to them. Print periodicals were vital to the construction and education of this listening community, which in turn was crucial to the success and expansion of radio in the period.

Radio and its associated publications helped to develop and sustain an Argentine listening public that directly participated in the wide-ranging reconstruction of Argentine national identity in the twenties, thirties, and into the forties that I have discussed in the context of tango. As Gitelman claims, "all new media emerge into and help to reconstruct publics and public life," which "has broad implications for the operation of public memory."⁶⁴ Although not all scholars agree, Robert Claxton argues that radio in Argentina led to enhanced national pride, greater unity across the country, and centralization of government, even as many other social divisions continued to grow throughout the period.⁶⁵ Women's periodicals helped to broaden the scope of radio programming beyond entertainment, linking it by way of the other articles appearing in their pages to issues of internationalism, women's and workers' rights, and patriotism. For example, from the beginning *Vosotras* harbored a less traditional perspective on women's roles. "Su discurso es menos rígido y menos moralizante" (Its discourse is less rigid and less moralizing), and its readership was primarily working women.⁶⁶ In 1939 alone, the *Vosotras* regular spread *Semanario femenino* (Women's weekly) covered a wide range of public and political issues, from how women should prepare for war to the case for a higher living wage and the need for Argentine women to defend their rights.⁶⁷

All the magazines also offered ways for readers to respond to radio programming, whether in letters to the editor or the regularly appearing contests, through which thousands of listeners/readers voted for their favorite star or program. The print media thus expanded and helped sustain the sense of intimacy and relation generated by radio, which in turn fed back into the popularity of the broadcasts. In 1936–37 the weekly *Cara y caretas* "published coupons by which radio listeners could vote in a 'plebiscite' ... for their favorite female vocalist."⁶⁸ The radio fan club Club de la amistad (Friendship club), supported by on-air "shout-outs" from Guerrico, grew

⁶⁴ Gitelman, *Always Already New*, 26.

⁶⁵ Robert Claxton, *From Parsifal to Perón: Early Radio in Argentina, 1920–1944* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007), 90. Claxton also makes much of radio's value as a territorial and linguistic unifier in Argentina (91–100). At the same time, scholars like Karush (*Culture of Class*) point to continuing and even widening social fissures in the period.

⁶⁶ Eliana Bonifacini, "Representaciones de la mujer en las revistas femeninas: Vida cotidiana y consumo en la década de 1935–1943" [Representations of women in women's magazines: Daily life and consumption in the decade from 1925–1943], *XIV Jornadas interesecuelas / Departamentos de historia* (Departamento de historia de la Facultad de filosofía y letras, Universidad nacional de Cuyo, Mendoza, AR, October 2013), 3.

⁶⁷ *Vosotras* 5, no. 203 (August 18, 1939): 74; *Vosotras* 5, no. 199 (July 21, 1939): 74.

⁶⁸ Claxton, *From Parsifal to Perón*, 124.

exponentially in the early forties, counting, by 1946, 85,000 mostly teenaged girl members. Those girls not only functioned as a disseminated fan community but also came together in community activities, mobilizing in support of the victims of the 1944 major earthquake—an activity also crucial to the rise of Juan Perón—and forming a chorus to perform live in Buenos Aires.⁶⁹ In other words, the “friendships” created and mediated by radio and print became the basis for artistic and civic agency in public life. In the words of Julio Korn, editor of *Radiolandia* magazine, “*Radiolandia* inventó el pueblo, muchos años antes que el peronismo” (*Radiolandia* invented the people many years before Peronism did).⁷⁰ By bringing together a broad swath of the Argentine population around the paired activities of listening and reading, generating shared interests and opinions, and sustaining connection through two-way interaction, the radio mediascape created affective communities among the Argentine public—and among women in particular—that sustained and nurtured new and evolving social identities and relationships.

One way that scholars have marked the mediated shifts in *argentinidad*, or civic identity, particularly among women in the early twentieth century, has been by tracking attitudes surrounding women’s work, women’s participation in the public sphere, and women’s right to vote. We have already seen the impact of women’s entrance into the tango world as *cancionistas*. Ehrick points to retrenchment in the acceptance of women as on-air radio presenters, with attacks in the press on their vocal sound and professionalism at about the time (1933–34) when Guerrico was being pushed off the air. The 1934 regulatory “instructions” not only asserted moral censorship over tango lyrics, comedy, and commercials and tightened rules against broadcasting slang but also restricted the presentation of medical and other information to those with the proper education, dictating who was able to speak on air and challenging the extension of vocal authority that had been offered by radio up until then.⁷¹ As Ehrick points out, “the Decree’s emphasis on *expertise* and defining who had the credentials to speak authoritatively on the air had certain gendered (as well as class) implications.”⁷² It pushed back against the expansion of women’s roles on air by tying the use of their voices more directly to their embodied social roles and especially their lack of professional, credentialed status as experts. The more regulated and professionalized the airwaves became, the less hospitable they were to women’s presence in that public sphere, which had proliferated in the earlier, less codified era.

However, the retrenchment was not complete. Attitudes toward women’s work, which had been changing throughout the century, shifted more dramatically in the 1940s and can be clearly seen in the commentary carried in *Vosotras*, which became increasingly assertive in its support for women in public spheres. In 1939 the *Semanario femenino* claimed, “Deben ser mejorados los salarios de las mujeres” (Women’s salaries should be improved), attacking the fact that women always received lower wages than men and arguing that dignifying women’s waged work would solve a lot of social problems and also improve the overall situation of women in Argentina.⁷³ By 1946 a headline runs “¿Por qué gana la mujer menos sueldo que el hombre realizando idéntico trabajo?” (Why do women earn less than men doing the same work?), and the tone is much

⁶⁹ Ehrick, *Radio and the Gendered Soundscape*, 65. Significantly, Perón’s response to this earthquake helped launch his rise to national power.

⁷⁰ Julio Korn, interview by Cecilia Helvstein, 2000, quoted in Matallana, “*Locos por la radio*,” 56.

⁷¹ On these rules, see Matallana, “*Locos por la radio*,” 46–47; Ehrick, *Radio and the Gendered Soundscape*, 55; Claxton, *From Parsifal to Perón*, 163.

⁷² Ehrick, *Radio and the Gendered Soundscape*, 55.

⁷³ *Vosotras* 5, no. 202 (August 11, 1939): 74.

more direct, calling the situation absurd and the result of prejudice.⁷⁴ The same is true for the question of women's vote, which was much debated throughout the thirties and in the period before suffrage was granted in 1947. In 1939, after a commission on women petitioned Congress to demand the vote for women, the magazine's *Semanario femenino* offered lukewarm support, but by 1946, in a time of intense political turmoil after Péron's ascent, the magazine wondered, "el nuevo parlamento argentino otorgara el voto a la mujer?" (will the new Argentine parliament give the vote to women?) and launched a series of articles discussing the question of the vote with some of the most prominent women in the country.⁷⁵ In September 1946, after the new coup that brought Perón to power and a Senate session proposing expanded rights for women, a two-page spread argued, "Dentro poco la mujer argentina podrá ser presidente de la nación" (In not too long an Argentine woman might be president).⁷⁶ While many factors contributed to the growing support for women's work and women's right to vote in the early forties, the protocols of radio foregrounded women's voices and identities in the context of their broader social and political roles, making use of the intimacy generated among listeners and readers to help reimagine women's roles and the social situation of their bodies. Collectively, these periodicals became not only a sounding board for civic discussion but also a multifaceted medium for challenging existing notions of gender and imagining the Argentine woman of the future.

Clearly, radio and its protocols emerged during a period in Argentina when shifting notions of identity and embodiment held important civic and social implications.⁷⁷ Foregrounding the matters of "who is speaking or singing?" and "who is listening?," as radio and the radio press so often do, transforms the question of "who?" from an individual matter of identity to a processual and collective sense of relationship that has implications for civic identity, as Benedict Anderson's work long ago made clear. The gender-challenging performances of the *cancionistas*, along with other radio broadcasts and the radio press in the thirties and early forties, participated in a mediated process of ongoing and entangled becoming that foregrounded voice as a sign of a newly embodied and differently empowered modern Argentine woman and a new sound for Argentina's emerging modernity. A

⁷⁴ *Vosotras* 12, no. 566 (August 2, 1946): 4.

⁷⁵ *Vosotras* 5, no. 210 (October 6, 1939): 74; *Vosotras* 12, no. 559 (June 14, 1946): n.p.

⁷⁶ *Vosotras* 12, no. 571 (September 6, 1946): 4. It is certainly possible that images of Eva Duarte alongside Juan Perón helped make a woman president seem possible.

⁷⁷ See Claxton, *From Parsifal to Perón*; Karush, *Culture of Class*; and Ehrick, *Radio and the Gendered Soundscape*; among others.