

The Tango Novel as Chaotic Mirror: *El último tango* de Salvador Allende de Roberto Ampuero and *La amante de Gardel* de Mayra Santos-Febres

La novela del tango como espejo caótico: *El último
tango* de Salvador Allende de Roberto Ampúero
y *La amante de Gardel* de Mayra Santos-Febres

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Abstract: This article explores the tango novel as a distinct pan-Latin American literary genre, transcending its Buenos Aires origins to reflect the complexities of identity in Latin America. Focusing on Mayra Santos-Febres' *La Amante de Gardel* and Roberto Ampuero's *El último tango de Salvador Allende*, it examines how tango operates as a narrative and philosophical device, using the concept of the mirror to navigate themes of identity, longing, and the tension between *ser* and *parecer*. Drawing on psychoanalytic theory (Lacan, Silverman) and cultural complexity, this study critiques Zubarik's linear framework, proposing instead that tango novels embrace fragmented, non-linear storytelling. Tango's synesthetic qualities are highlighted as a bridge between individual memory and collective history, underscoring its role in shaping personal and cultural narratives. By positioning the tango novel as a "chaotic mirror", the article offers a new lens for understanding the fluid, hybrid nature of Latin American identity and its interplay with art, music, and literature.

Keywords: Tango novel; Mirror; Genre; Identity; Latin America

Resumen: Este artículo explora la novela del tango como un género literario pan-latinoamericano distinto que trasciende sus orígenes en Buenos Aires para reflejar las complejidades de la identidad en América Latina. Centrándose en *La Amante de Gardel* de Mayra

Santos-Febres y *El Último Tango de Salvador Allende* de Roberto Ampuero, examina cómo el tango funciona como un dispositivo narrativo y filosófico, utilizando el concepto del espejo para abordar temas de identidad, anhelo y la tensión entre *ser* y *parecer*. Basándose en la teoría psicoanalítica (Lacan, Silverman) y la complejidad cultural, este estudio critica el marco lineal de Zubarik y propone que las novelas del tango adopten narrativas fragmentadas y no lineales. Se destacan las cualidades sinestésicas del tango como un puente entre la memoria individual y la historia colectiva, subrayando su papel en la configuración de narrativas personales y culturales. Al posicionar la novela del tango como un “espejo caótico”, el artículo ofrece una nueva perspectiva para comprender la naturaleza fluida e híbrida de la identidad latinoamericana y su interacción con el arte, la música y la literatura.

Palabras clave: Novela del tango; Espejo; Género; Identidad; Latinoamérica.

INTRODUCTION

Jorge Luis Borges once remarked in his lectures on tango: “Uno de los temas del tango es el mismo tango” (Borges 2016, 56). This metafictional characteristic of tango underscores its role as a cultural and literary mirror, reflecting the fragmented and hybrid identities of Latin America.¹ It would be even more fitting, perhaps, to describe tango as a mirror of itself - a concept that reflects not only its musical and lyrical traditions but also in its literary representations. This self-referential quality captures a defining feature of tango texts, which I define as literary works that engage significantly with tango as a genre of music, dance, or lifestyle. Examples include tango lyrics, poetry, and the tango novels explored in this study. Borges was correct in noting that tango texts excel in intertextuality and self-reflectivity. These textual mirrors not only craft their own narratives but, as Vidart (1967) suggests, capture well the broader “world” of tango.

The tango, with its multiple forms and expressions, is a quintessential symbol of Argentina and plays a profound yet underexplored role in Latin American literature and identity. This article examines the tango novel as a distinct pan-Latin American literary genre that transcends its Buenos Aires origins, serving as a unifying cultural force that shapes the emotional and psychological dimensions of its characters. I argue that the tango novel acts as a “chaotic mirror” of Latin American identity, employing fragmented narratives and synesthetic elements to illuminate the complexities of cultural memory, individual longing, and the interplay between personal and collective histories. Focusing on Roberto Ampuero’s *El último tango de Salvador Allende* (2010) and Mayra Santos-Febres’ *La amante de Gardel* (2015),² I analyse the tango novel’s role as a

¹ In Latin American writing, mirrors abound as much as labyrinths, including in Borges’s well-known short story “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” (Borges 1986), Carlos Fuentes’ *El Espejo Enterrado* (Fuentes 2016) and Clarice Lispector’s *A Paixão segundo G.H.* (Lispector 1996), to name only a few.

² For convenience, I will use the abbreviations *UTA* (*El último tango de Salvador Allende*) and *LAG* (*La amante de Gardel*).

mirroring device –reflecting emotional and social experiences– and a vital site for understanding cultural complexity and dialogue within Latin America. Both novels integrate tango music and lyrics to deepen our understanding of identity, memory, and the transformative power of tango music in shaping personal and transnational histories.

This article develops the idea of tango novel as a reflecting device while incorporating Richard Rorty's (1979) and Briggs and Peat's (1989) redefinitions of the mirror –not as a reflection of fixed truth or imitation (mimesis), but as a meaningful metaphor for chaos and self-reflection.³ This perspective, which embraces the idea of cultural complexity, has made its way into Latin America since Benítez Rojo first used chaos theory (in his foundational book *La isla que se repite* [1989]).⁴ It enables a deeper understanding of the tango novel as a “chaotic mirror” and its role in representing the fragmented and fluid nature of Latin American identity. Tango novels, I argue, reflect not a stable truth but a chaotic interaction of desires, memories, and ideological contradictions. I hypothesize that in both novels, the mirror –whether acoustic in *LAG* or existential in *UTA*– creates a disordered yet revealing space where the characters confront their fractured selves and the uncertainties of their historical setting as a reflection of their emotional troubles.

Before analysing the novels, I will explore tango's role as both a localized and globalized mirror of society, linking the texts and their significance to the broader Latin American context, such as the parallels with the bolero. I will critically discuss Zubarik's (2014) definition of the “tango novel” and explore how this literary subgenre, like the tango as musical genre, engages with themes of uncertainty and change. I will argue tango serves as a symbolic catharsis, enabling characters to deal with social norms and internal conflicts.⁵ I will pay special attention on how this mirroring works in the

³ Richard Rorty, in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), challenges this perspective of mirror-as-truth by arguing that it constrains our understanding. He posits that literature and culture should not merely reflect reality but instead create narratives that help us make sense of our experiences. Building on Rorty's argument that mimetic knowledge does not equate to truth, David Briggs and E. David Peat, in their book *Turbulent Mirror* (1989), offer an alternative view, exploring the mirror as a metaphor for self-reflection and understanding. They emphasize that it does not simply mirror reality as a fixed truth; rather, it reveals a chaotic universe, capturing the dynamic and ever-changing nature of existence.

⁴ The relationship between Briggs and Peat's concept of the turbulent mirror and Benítez Rojo's view of Caribbean culture as a chaotic configuration –published the same year– lies in their shared appreciation for complexity and chaos theory, which they apply to the cultural field. Both challenge conventional linear narratives, advocating for multiplicity, interconnectedness, and continuous transformation. The Caribbean as chaotic “meta-archipelago” (Benítez Rojo 1989, 26) can be seen through the lens of turbulent mirror, where its diverse and chaotic cultural formations reflect the fluidity of Caribbean identity.

⁵ See Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (2010) for a detailed discussion of repressed emotions. Similarly, in both the dance and music of tango –along with its lyrics, which function as a poetic text– the tango acts as a symbolic outlet for repressed feelings. The tango, with its sensual and emotional intensity, acts as a symbolic outlet for the repressed desires of the characters, providing them with a medium through which they can “return” to their repressed emotional states.

novels, both on the narrative and synesthetic levels, drawing parallels between Lacan's concept of the mirror stage and Silverman's (1988) acoustic mirror and *chora*.

Tango's evolution reflects both its local roots in Buenos Aires and its global transformation into a hybrid art form.⁶ Conde (2014) asserts that tango lyrics provide Argentines, particularly those in Buenos Aires, with "a veritable mirror in which they can examine themselves, a refuge in which they find comfort and counsel" (51). Tango, he emphasizes, is a culturally significant art form foundational to Argentine identity representing social sensibilities and identities.⁷ Rooted in shared values from 1920 to 1960, many tango lyrics resonate as powerful truths today, even for those unfamiliar with that era. Thompson (2005), in a similar way, argues that "tango texts, like the blues, hold up a mirror to misfortune" (26), challenging the narrative that tango is solely a product of European influence by tracing its roots to African and Indigenous influences in Argentina and Uruguay, following similar studies such as Vidart's *El tango y su mundo* (1967).⁸ Likewise, the tango musician Juan Carlos Cáceres proposed that tango is deeply rooted in the African *candombe* drum and dance traditions brought by enslaved Africans to Buenos Aires and Montevideo, where their descendants preserved these practices.⁹

1. DEFINING THE TANGO NOVEL

In her pioneering article "Zwischen Fremderfahrung und Selbstfindung: Internationale Tangoromane im Vergleich," Sabine Zubarik explores whether the tango novel constitutes a distinct subgenre, defining it as a narrative where tango serves as a significant driving force. Her analysis highlights thematic areas such as the historical portrayals of tango, sociocultural dynamics, and spaces unique to tango, while proposing four narrative phases: Initiation, Outsider Experience, Appropriation, and Self-Discovery

⁶ The extensive literature on tango often emphasizes its *porteño* identity, its status as a national symbol of Argentina, or its global transformation, yet it frequently overlooks its specific Latin American impact. Two important theoretical perspectives illustrate this trend: Thompson's *Tango: The Art History of Love* (2005) focuses on the tango's global reach, African heritage and cultural hybridity, while Oscar Conde's study "Lunfardo in Tango: A Way of Speaking That Defines a Way of Being" (2014) emphasizes its local identity, firmly anchored in Buenos Aires and Argentina. Also see Collier (1992) for a concise history on the popular roots of tango.

⁷ "La poética del tango, en tanto representación social, a través de un sistema literario consolidado ha sabido aportar modelos que hoy están plenamente integrados a nuestra identidad" (Conde 2005, 13).

⁸ Vidart (1967) and Conde (2014) agree that tango reflects the urban soul of the Río de la Plata, despite its diverse origins.

⁹ Cáceres incorporated African rhythms into his music, combining them with jazz and other genres to craft a distinctive fusion. He characterized tango as "three layers of sadness": the sorrow of immigrants, rural gauchos, and enslaved Africans forcibly brought to the region. Over his career, he blended tango with milonga, murga, and eventually electronic and neo-tango styles, sharing his innovative creations in the streets of Paris alongside fellow Argentinian exiles; See Davison (2015).

(Zubarik 2014).¹⁰ While Zubarik's four phases offer a useful framework, they suggest a linear progression that many tango novels resist. This model also prioritizes dance, often overlooking the vital role of music and lyrics in reflecting characters' emotional and psychological complexities. I argue that the thematic essence of tango, with its inherent "turbulent" character, its contradictions and fluidity, often determines the structure of a tango novel, transcending character-driven, linear narratives. The novel's form and progression may mirror the very unpredictability and passion that tango embodies, offering a more intricate and dynamic storytelling experience than Zubarik's model suggests.¹¹ While she frames the tango novel as a linear process of self-discovery, I believe Briggs and Peat's notion of a "turbulent mirror" better captures the genre's essence. Tango novels, with their non-linear structures and interwoven themes of loss and longing, exemplify a reflective process that is dynamic and often unsettling, rather than straightforward.

The themes present in tango lyrics are common in broader Latin American music, including the bolero. Although the tango and bolero are usually seen as very different genres, both in music, and dance, they do share many characteristics which are important from a broader regional pan-Latin American perspective.¹² When Roberto Ampuero traveled from Chile to Cuba as a student, he became deeply inspired by the rhythms of Latin American music—especially tango and bolero—as well as its literature. From the beginnings of his career, Ampuero, himself an avid traveler, recalls that tango is a product of migration, with Gardel embodying the migratory experience and transculturation integral to the genre. Reflecting on his time abroad, Ampuero stated that discovering tango and boleros was a profound way of reconnecting with his homeland.¹³ Similarly, already in her early work Mayra Santos-Febres explored Latin

¹⁰ Zubarik (2014) outlines a four-phase process of appropriation in the tango novel. These phases highlight how characters engage with the tango culture. 1) Initiation: The protagonist is introduced to the tango world by an insider, who imparts knowledge about the dance and its cultural context; 2) Outsider Experience (*Fremderfahrung*): The protagonist observes the tango scene with a sense of alienation, torn between fascination and rejection; 3) Appropriation (*Aneignung*): The protagonist strives to incorporate tango into their identity, facing challenges and experiencing personal transformation through humor and self-reflection; 4) Self-Discovery (*Selbstfindung*): The protagonist integrates their tango experiences into their sense of self, reflecting on relationships and societal expectations.

¹¹ Antonio Lobo Antunes's *A Morte de Carlos Gardel* (1994) offers a compelling example of how tango can structure a novel in a less predictable manner than a traditional linear or phased narrative; each chapter is titled after one of Gardel's tangos.

¹² Cuban composer Osvaldo Farrés blended tango influences into his boleros, exemplified by "Perfume de Gardenias" (1937), which showcases the emotional depth of tango. Floral imagery in his lyrics, commonly found in both genres, enriches themes of passion, desire, and melancholy. The association of gardenias with love highlights the longing for lost loved ones, evoking the ephemeral fragrance that symbolizes absence in both tango and bolero.

¹³ Ampuero recalls: "Cuando yo me fui de Chile y viví mucho tiempo en el extranjero, fui descubriendo el tango y los boleros. [...] el escuchar música, el leer literatura latinoamericana y el escribir, que comenzó con mucha fuerza cuando yo vivía en el extranjero, era como una forma de vivir en mi país o establecer puentes (Ampuero and Moody 2016, 128). In his earlier work, Ampuero already reveals a fascination with Latin American popular music, especially in *Boleros en la Habana*

American music. Her debut novel, *Sirena Sirena vestida de pena* (2000), reflects the genre's sentimentality and gender ambiguity through the cross-dressing performances of the young bolero singer Sirena. The novel underscored the author's connection to popular music and culture, rooted in Afro-Caribbean traditions, which the Puerto Rican writer would further develop in *La Amante de Gardel* (2015). In this novel, Mayra Santos-Febres confronts Latin America's best-known singer, Carlos Gardel, skillfully reworking the myth of the "king of tango" to explore broader themes of gender and race, while reflecting on the significance of cultural icons and stardom in Latin American society.¹⁴

2. PLOT AND *MISE EN ABYME*

While the plots are straightforward, their narrative complexity emerges in characters like Micaela, the protagonist of *LAG*, a proud Black Caribbean woman and the first doctor on her island,¹⁵ who recounts her memories of her encounter with tango legend Gardel during his visit to Puerto Rico. As she reflects on this fleeting episode near the end of her life, the novel explores her journey from traditional medicine, learned from her *curandera* grandmother, to modern medicine, highlighting her personal awakening and lifelong solitude. In *UTA*, Ampuero situates tango within the context of the 1973 Chilean military coup that ousted President Allende. The narrative follows Allende and his friend Rufino, an anarcho-syndicalist baker who shares his passion for tango to support the president during turbulent times. The story combines the musical genre with historic events, with additional depth provided by David Kurtz, a former CIA agent whose self-discovery is guided by Rufino's diary and his search for truth regarding what happened to his daughter Victoria.

Reflecting the turbulent nature of tango, these novels reject Zubarik's framework of the protagonist's linear self-discovery, instead emphasizing ambiguity and contradiction. Their focus on music and lyrics over dance broadens the definition of the tango novel, showcasing its dynamic storytelling potential and its ramifications for the crime novel (Zubarik 2014, 120) and detective genre. *UTA* verges, in many ways on the detective novel, drawing parallels to Tomás Eloy Martínez's *El cantor de tango* (2004)

(1995), featuring private investigator Cayetano Brulé, protagonist in many of his novels. This interest originates from Ampuero's time at the University of Havana, where he immersed himself in Latin American music and literature, as well as with the Cuban Revolution before becoming disillusioned with the movement, as chronicled in his autobiographical work *Nuestros años verde olivo* (1999).

¹⁴ Moreover, the novel focuses on Gardel's status as a transnational performer who helped to express a unifying pan-Latin community, transcending cultural and political borders, not only in Latin America but also overseas (De Maeseneer and Milkon 2022, 249; 252-53).

¹⁵ "(...) primera mujer de color en cortar trompas de Falopio, en acotar contagios de enfermedades de transmisión sexual, en dirigir programas de control de natalidad" (*LAG* 7-8).

which –while not conventionally structured as a detective novel– also incorporates elements of mystery and involves criminal aspects.¹⁶

Moreover, both *LAG* and *UTA* employ a *mise en abyme* technique, layering stories within stories to present events from multiple perspectives.¹⁷ The mirroring effect of *mise en abyme* consists of the ways the themes, characters, or narrative perspectives connect with one another. In novels, this can enhance the reader's understanding of the main plot by paralleling or contrasting it with the inner story. This approach highlights the subjective and non-linear nature of experience, allowing readers to explore the characters' emotional and psychological landscapes in greater depth.

Beyond the narrative *mise en abyme*, the concept of the mirror is crucial for understanding the integration of tango as a reflective device in the novels. In *LAG*, the focus is on the mirroring properties of Gardel's captivating voice, while *UTA* deals with textual mirroring through the dialogues between Rufino and Allende, which are interwoven with tango lyrics and popular song epigraphs. This interplay allows us to see Rufino's unique perspective on Allende, as well as Kurtz's reflections on both characters while he studies Rufino's diary.

3. THE TANGO NOVEL AS MIRROR: *SER V. PARECER*

Tango's deeper meaning lies in its depiction of the characters' existential struggles. Known for its strong emotional resonance, tango connects deeply with dancers and spectators alike. In both novels, tango embodies themes of longing and authenticity, mirroring the characters' quests for their true selves amid societal expectations. This emotional depth serves as a dramatic mirror for protagonists like Micaela and Kurtz, whose deep-seated regrets shape their stories. *LAG* opens with Micaela reflecting on her tragic past as one of Gardel's lovers, while *UTA* portrays Allende gazing at his darkened mansion, embodying existential uncertainty and foreshadowing change. Both Kurtz and Allende refuse to succumb to despair, but their pasts continue to weigh heavily on them. Tango lyrics introduce intertextual references that illuminate their lives, conveying profound resignation. However, both Allende and Kurtz cope with their challenges differently: Allende appears more accepting of his situation, while Kurtz grapples with isolation and sorrow without seeking validation from others. The tango lyrics underscore the difficulties of existence, reflecting their ongoing search for

¹⁶ Both feature protagonists –David Kurtz as an undercover CIA agent and Bruno Cadogan investigating tango singer Julio Martel– who confront personal demons and existential doubts. Kurtz's mission, fraught with guilt over his daughter's loss, prompts deep self-reflection, while Cadogan uncovers the complexities of Martel's life through his interactions. This exploration of identity and morality aligns them to a certain extent with the hard-boiled detective archetype, further enriched by intertextual references to authors like John Le Carré, highlighting *UTA*'s connection to the genre.

¹⁷ On *mise en abyme* see Cohn's classic study *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (1984).

meaning. For example, when Rufino and Allende listen to “En esta tarde gris,” it mirrors both Allende’s precarious political situation and Kurtz’s remorse over his personal losses.¹⁸ This theme echoes in tangos such as Gardel’s “Nostalgias,” which expresses the singer’s lamentation over life’s hardships.

Rufino’s observations reveal the contrast between Allende’s façade as a strong leader and his underlying vulnerability, highlighting the complexity of identity. The tango embodies this duality, reflecting Allende’s emotional struggles and commenting on the sociopolitical dissonance in Chile during his presidency. Although Allende *pretends* to be a strong, rock-solid leader, Rufino’s observations reveal him to be lonely and vulnerable. This duality is reinforced by the epigraph of Chapter 38, which quotes The Platters’ song “The Great Pretender”: “Oh yes, I’m the great pretender / Pretending I’m doing well / My need is such I pretend too much / I’m lonely but no one can tell.” This becomes clear when Allende asks Rufino about his impression of General Pinochet. The baker expresses his dislike and articulates his theory about people who do not appear as they truly are. Allende then inquires whether he himself seems genuine, to which Rufino affirms that he does. Allende expresses his desire *to be seen* not just as a typical president, but as a revolutionary one: “Te advierto que a mí no me gusta *parecer* un presidente más, Rufino. Quiero *ser y parecer* un presidente de nuevo tipo, uno revolucionario” (UTA 37; my emphasis).

This scene underscores Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage (Lacan 1966, 93-100), highlighting the tension between *ser* and *parecer* – the image we present to others versus our self-perception. It illustrates how identity is constructed through recognition, desire, societal roles, and the quest for an authentic self amid external perceptions. Lacan’s theory offers a powerful framework for understanding the fragmented identities depicted in the tango novel. The Imaginary Order, central to the mirror stage, involves a process of identification where the individual bases his sense of self on their reflection, creating an illusory sense of unity.¹⁹ This dual movement between identification and alienation is evident in the dialogues between Rufino and Allende, for instance when they discuss the reasons behind their respective passion for tango: Ru-

¹⁸ Kurtz grapples with remorse for not having listened to his daughter during her short life, reflecting, “Me angustiaba que mi hija no me hubiese mencionado nunca que en los setenta tuvo una pareja chilena. ¿Lo había ocultado a propósito o yo andaba tan sumido en mis conspiraciones que no tenía tiempo para escuchar a Victoria?” (UTA 50).

¹⁹ The mirror stage thus initiates a complex interplay of identification and alienation: the child identifies with the mother, but this process also separates and alienates the infant from her. For the child, this identification with their specular image is made possible by a simultaneous recognition of the Other (typically the mother). The term *image* is fundamental, as it underscores how the child’s identification with themselves is rooted in an illusion of completeness. Lacan defines the Imaginary as a process of identification, “à savoir la transformation produite chez le sujet, *quand il assume une image*, -dont la prédestination à cet effet de phase est suffisamment indiquée par l’usage, dans la théorie, du terme antique d’*imago*” (Lacan 1966, 96; my emphasis and translation). (“Namely, the transformation produced in the subject when it *assumes an image*, whose predestination for this phase effect is sufficiently indicated by the use of the ancient term *imago* in theory”).

fino challenges Allende's purely political motivations for listening to tango, revealing how his fear of romantic tangos limits his understanding of their social and political significance.²⁰ Rufino's critique highlights the gap between appearance and "reality", while Allende's response underscores his struggle to balance personal authenticity with the alienation imposed by societal expectations, reflecting his desire to transcend the image of a typical political leader.

Likewise, Micaela's journey in *LAG* embodies an existential struggle between *being* and *appearance*, particularly in her relationship with Carlos Gardel. She ponders, "¿Acaso fui mujer los veintisiete días que Gardel estuvo entre mis piernas? [...] ¿Qué es ser mujer en estos tiempos, un juego con la muerte, un eco que resuena en la distancia?" (*LAG* 184). These reflections reveal her conflict: can Micaela reclaim her authentic identity, especially in a world where liberation from bodily constraints can feel isolating? Micaela's successful career is overshadowed by unresolved questions and self-doubt, which she confronts in her writing: "¿Por qué quise enfermarme del amor de Gardel?" (*LAG* 175); "¿Qué buscaba yo al correr ese riesgo? ¿Acaso una se arriesga porque quiere?" (*LAG* 9). The novel opens more questions than it gives answers to these existential issues. What is sure is that the poignant lament "Acaso fui mujer" expresses the fleeting nature of her connection with Gardel as opposed to her ongoing struggle for identity, reinforcing the disparity between her public persona (*parecer*) and her inner self (*ser*).

In *LAG*, Micaela's memories of Gardel disrupt her sense of identity, revealing its fragmented nature, while *UTA* weaves together personal and political narratives, highlighting the disorder inherent in self-discovery and historical reckoning. This aligns with the broader view that mirrors reveal not static truths but the dynamic fluidity of existence. Briggs & Peat's metaphor of the "turbulent mirror" (1989) captures well the chaotic process of self-reflection depicted in both novels. The concept refers to the idea that self-reflection reveals the turbulent and fluid nature of identity, rather than providing fixed truths (in line with Rorty's criticism of the mirror as mimesis [1967]), highlighting the complexities and dynamics of existence.

Briggs and Peat describe turbulence as a "strange attractor" (Briggs and Peat 1989, 45) a concept from chaos theory representing complex patterns in chaotic systems. This idea connects to tango music and dance, where the unpredictable yet structured interplay of movements—between dancers but also synchronous and often unpredictable connections between tango singers and their audience—creates complex dynamics. Much like turbulence, tango embodies a fluid exchange, with each movement influencing the other, resulting in intricate patterns that reflect the "strange attractors" of turbulence.

²⁰ "[...] no tengo tiempo, compañero, para dedicarme a letras románticas, por bellas que sean, porque los ritmos de una revolución son apabullantes. Y hay algo más: nada más sublime que la revolución, nada superior que presenciar cómo los trabajadores y las pobladoras hacen realidad sus reivindicaciones sociales—agregó en el tono que le conozco de la radio y televisión—. Palpa aquí—me dijo tocándose el antebrazo y pasando a tutearme—. Soy político en todas mis fibras, no un Romeo ni un Casanova." (*UTA* 45)

4. SYNESTHETIC CONTAGION

On a deeper level, sound diffraction and reverberation, as defined by Michel Chion (1998; 2019), play a crucial role in tango music. Santos-Febres reveals the power of the tango as an “acoustic mirror” in *LAG*, illustrating, through Micaela’s experience, how musical genres in Latin America transcend cultural, social, and racial barriers, leaving a lasting impact on those who experience them.²¹ In *UTA*, Kurtz’s relationship with tango is different; despite initially lacking a direct connection to tango music –unlike Allende and Rufino– or any particular performer’s voice –like Micaela–, he finds parallels between his struggles and the tragedies portrayed in tango lyrics.

While the tango as a mirror in *UTA* is present in the novel as theme and intertextuality (through tango lyrics), *LAG* explores acoustic sound and time, embodying longing and nostalgia. Micaela’s melancholy in *LAG* stems from her internalization of Gardel’s voice and the tango’s rhythmic expression of time’s ebb and flow. During one of Gardel’s performances at the Paramount Theater, Micaela describes how his voice evokes a desire to return to a “dark, protective space” she “barely remembers”:

Era una reverberación robusta pero clara, con dientes y con garras que no incitaban al desgarrar ni al devoramiento, que convidaban a posar el pie, el cuerpo entero sobre el aire, para viajar lejos, hacia adentro. Despertaba ganas de dejarse llevar hasta un lugar oscuro y protegido, del cual una salió hace años y que casi no recuerda. Y, a la vez, su voz era la añoranza que permite olvidar el camino. Una tiene que regresar a ese lugar verdadero, propio; una debe regresar, rota, hecha jirones, pero de vuelta. Eso era su voz. Gardel cantó *Yira*. Cantó *Caminito* y *Rencor*, cantó *El día que me quieras*. Se acrecentó aquella extraña resonancia en mi pecho que era, al mismo tiempo, el pecho de Gardel, la garganta de Gardel, su aire. Poco a poco se fue tejiendo una complicidad (*LAG* 60).

This moment captures how Gardel’s voice resonates deeply within Micaela (“aquella extraña resonancia en mi pecho”), intertwining “su aire” (his breath) with her own. His tangos intensify the echo within her that intertwines with Gardel’s essence – his breath, body, and spirit. The reverberation creates a shared “echo chamber” or “acoustic mirror” between them, aligning with Lacanian theory, where the voice symbolizes a fragmented self in search of wholeness. The acoustic mirror parallels Lacan’s visual mirror in identity formation; just as the visual mirror establishes the ego, the voice (acoustic mirror) reflects one’s identity and emotions. It allows individuals to narrate their identities through self-recognition and reflection.²²

Micaela’s longing for “un lugar oscuro y protegido” connects to Kaja Silverman’s (1988, 73) idea of the voice as *chora*, suggesting that Gardel’s singing allows her to re-

²¹ These elements are explored on a literary level in the bolero in Santos-Febres’ novel *Sirena selenita vestida de pena* (see Van Haesendonck 2008, 65–114).

²² In Lacanian terms, the characters navigate the conflict between genuine being (the Lacanian Real) and the pressures of image and appearance (the Symbolic and Imaginary).

construct her identity within the tango narrative. Drawing on Plato, Silverman adapts Kristeva's notion of *chora* as a protective and generative space for the voice: "the *chora* is more an image of unity than one of archaic differentiation; prior to absence and an economy of the object, it figures the oneness of mother and child" (Silverman 1988, 102). The *chora*'s protective nature can be seen as a space that holds the voice, just as Lacan's mirror stage holds the image of the self. In both frameworks, there is a tension between being present and: being absent; the voice captures presence but also reveals underlying absence, echoing the complexities of desire and subjectivity outlined by Lacan.²³ Gardel's voice embodies both his presence and absence: it carries the potential for adding meaning to her life in a palpable way while also evoking the intangible, fleeting nature of experience and emotion.

Moreover, the protective *chora* in the novel progressively shifts from Mano Santa (Micaela's tutor, grandmother, and renowned curandera on the island) toward Gardel's enchanting voice. Before meeting Gardel, Micaela was influenced by Mano Santa's voice, which served as a motherly mentor in her life. Breaking with Mano Santa's traditional medicine and witchcraft shifts the focus from maternal protection to professional formation and independence. However, after meeting Gardel, the protective layer of Mano Santa's voice begins to dissolve, and Micaela is "invaded" by a voice that would never leave her. Micaela's narrative voice vividly illustrates the hallucinatory impact of Gardel's singing during a spontaneous performance while traveling by car to the next venue. She recalls:

[Gardel] Comenzó a cantar. No recuerdo cuál [canción] fue. Sí recuerdo como si fuera hoy su voz colándoseme entre los dedos. La canción subió brazo arriba hasta el pecho y allí se alojó. Aquel sonido borboteó allí como un chorro de agua densa, pero a la vez como una caricia concreta, no por el tacto sino por otra cosa que operaba en aquel carro; un tacto interno que me hizo vibrar. La vibración de cada nota chocó contra mi piel, traspasándome. Los dedos se me hicieron agua, sudor, palpitaciones, un eco de ondas y de respiros. No pude sostenerle la mirada a Gardel mientras cantaba (LAG 87).

Micaela's narrative voice becomes distinct from Gardel's, yet there are moments when their voices intertwine, causing her to lose her self-awareness. Gardel's voice becomes a tangible yet elusive phenomenon for Micaela, emphasizing both intimacy and alienation, which can accompany deep emotional connections. Her inability to maintain eye contact during his performance suggests a loss of self-awareness - she is captivated and overwhelmed, embodying the tension between her individual identity and the powerful influence of Gardel's voice. Micaela's narrative is reduced to an "eco

²³ Silverman's concept of the voice as an acoustic mirror and Lacan's mirror stage both explore the mediated relationships and tension between self and other, and between presence and absence. The voice conveys presence yet exposes underlying absence, reflecting Lacan's insights on desire and subjectivity. The *chora* protects the voice similarly to how the mirror stage retains the self-image (Silverman 1988, 73-74), suggesting that while the voice fosters intersubjective connection, it simultaneously reveals individuals' inherent separateness.

de ondas y de respiros”: the “tacto interno” of the tango singer’s vocal mirror becomes so profound that his voice becomes intertwined with her very being and this would never leave her.²⁴

Micaela’s description of Gardel’s voice “slipping” through her fingers and “resonating” within her body illustrates a synesthetic palette of sound and touch that extends on the imaginary level: it is an *imagined* contact that evokes *real* emotion (“caricia concreta”). This phenomenon mirrors cognitive studies in psychology (e.g. Anema *et al.* 2012; Kosslyn, Thompson, and Ganis 2006) showing that mental imagery can enhance perceptions of actual stimuli. Micaela’s vivid imagination of Gardel’s singing imbues her auditory experience with tactile sensations, suggesting that the boundaries between sound and touch are fluid in her emotional landscape.

The novel thus explores the synesthetic experience rather than the “kinesthetic”, tactile effect which is a fundamental component of the tango as dance performance.²⁵ Both experiences are expressions of a deeply felt empathy for the other, without which tango (or any dance by definition) would be void of significance. As Zubarik (2013, 276) emphasizes, “in tango the two bodies are so deeply listening to each other while locked in an embrace while moving together to the music, any sense of self is always already an act of reaction to sensing the other”. Building on this argument, Rafaele Rufo (2020, 3) reframes Zubarik’s idea as a form of “kinaesthetic contagion”, highlighting how the duality of giving and receiving sensations in tango dance creates a shared experience that transcends physical boundaries. In *LAG*, the synesthetic experience thus reveals itself as a synesthetic “contagion” that transcends mere physical or acoustic sensations.

Gardel’s voice becomes a transformative force in Micaela’s identity, illustrating the complex interplay of memory, desire, and the search for self-identity within the framework of tango. Although she internalizes Gardel’s voice, which arguably becomes part of her identity, she does not fully discover herself through tango or integrate tango as a holistic experience. Thus, contrary to Zubarik’s definition of the tango novel, the novels present a more ambiguous engagement with the tango than a linear four-fold journey. For instance, Micaela certainly undergoes an outsider experience (phase 2 according to Zubarik) as she observes the tango scene with a sense of alienation, but she does not appropriate (phase 3) tango music or dance in any way. In contrast, Allende, already an *aficionado* of tango, finds it reflects his emotions. Yet, it is challenging to

²⁴ This scene whereby Micaela’s “dissolves” into Gardel’s voice echoes the term *canyengue*, symbolizing her emotional and physical response: “*kanienge* – to melt into the music reinforced by Kimbundu terms for “dance.” Melting, obviously, means getting hot, as when in Kongo an elder cries out Twisa ndungul (Put hot pepper on it!) when he or she feels the dancing is becoming desultory” (Thompson 2005, 10).

²⁵ According to Brandstetter and Zubarik (2013, 3), the act of touching, as “a form of both haptic and affective contact” is “not merely a physical gesture or a pragmatic action. Touch constitutes a complex form of connection in which the relationship between the one touching and the one being touched is almost never clearly defined”.

assert that he “discovers” himself through tango, as his passion existed long before he discussed tango songs with Rufino. Similarly, neither Allende, Rufino, Kurtz, nor Micaela express an interest in tango as a dance, further complicating their relationships with this cultural practice.²⁶

When not performing, Gardel becomes a rather meaningless, incessant talker in Micaela’s eyes. During their travels across the island, she recalls how Gardel would talk endlessly and in an uninteresting manner, as if his life depended on it. This sharp contrast between Gardel’s captivating singing voice as an artist and his insignificant, bleak voice as an ordinary individual mirrors the character of Allende in *UTA*. The president is often portrayed by Rufino in a rather negative light, as confused, mixing up names, in sharp contrast to the leader delivering brilliant speeches to his people. Moreover, Rufino critiques Allende’s idealism, questioning his emphasis on revolutionary ideology instead of giving priority to urgent problems like food shortages (*UTA* 54).

5. THE TANGO NOVEL AND LATIN AMERICA’S BURIED MIRROR

Our exploration of the characters’ individual identity and their self-reflection in the novels leads us to the metaphor of the mirror at the collective Latin American level, which echoes through both *LAG* and *UTA*. The mirror metaphor operates not only at the micro-textual level but also contextually, revealing the complexities of Latin American identity. As Carlos Fuentes suggests in his classic work *El espejo enterrado* (1992), the concept of the “buried mirror” symbolizes significant hidden aspects of cultural identity in Latin America. The tension between *ser* (being) and *parecer* (appearing) is present in both texts, suggesting that understanding Latin American identity through tango, viewed as a chaotic mirror, requires unearthing its buried complexities.

While *UTA* asserts a more explicit political stance, *LAG* focuses on cultural undercurrents that reveal the historical contributions of marginalized groups, such as Afro-Caribbean musicians. Both novels explore how individual memories intertwine and shed fresh light on broader historical narratives, emphasizing tango’s role as a medium for political and social expression. In *LAG*, Santos-Febres distances herself from direct political commentary, instead exploring broader geopolitical implications without explicitly addressing Puerto Rico’s political status. In contrast, *UTA* engages directly with Chile’s historical context and the political ramifications of Allende’s removal, employing tango to enhance the emotional landscape of Allende’s and Rufino’s experiences during this critical moment in Latin American history. *UTA* revisits the coup, using tango as a reflective medium that fosters identification between readers and characters.

²⁶ “[Gardel:] ¿Sabés?, es difícil entender el tango hasta que no lo bailás. —[Micaela:] “Pues no lo entenderé nunca. Te dije que tengo dos pies izquierdos” (*LAG* 98); Rufino observes that Allende “Es un buen político, pero un pésimo bailarín” (*UTA* 32).

In *LAG*, the “buried truth” of tango’s Afro-Latin roots acts as a social mirror, reflecting the often-overlooked complexities of cultural identity. Through the character of Ricardo, Mayra Santos-Febres highlights the historical amnesia surrounding Afro-Argentines, particularly the lesser-known contributions of black musicians in the early 20th century. In chapter 13 (“El Negro Ricardo”), Gardel and his manager José Razzano recognize the exceptional musical talent of the black guitarist José Ricardo and are eager to include him in their group. However, challenges related to Ricardo’s writing abilities lead to tension within the group, likely resulting in his departure from Gardel’s team. *LAG*’s reference to Ricardo is significant, as Afro-Argentines’ contributions to tango remained profound despite their declining numbers. As Vidart (1967), Thompson (2005), Davison (2015) and others highlight, the Afro-Latin influence in tango music and dance was undeniable, and the novel emphasizes their impact on some of the most famous tango songs, including “El Día Que Me Quieras,” “Mi Buenos Aires Querido,” “Volver,” and “Por Una Cabeza”. Through Ricardo’s experience, Santos-Febres draws a parallel with the unrecognized contributions of Afro-Caribbean women, embodied in Micaela. Gardel himself suggests that tango is also a black genre: “Todo el mundo sabe bailar. Además, vos sos negra. Y el tango es negro; no del todo, pero también. Cele Flores, el Negro Ricardo lo hicieron; todos juntos lo hicimos nacer. ¿No llevás ese ritmo en la sangre?” (*LAG* 98).

Furthermore, Micaela’s experience of Gardel’s voice connects her personal identity to a broader narrative of cultural change in the Caribbean as part of Latin America. Gardel’s arrival in Puerto Rico coincides with the advent of modern medicine, symbolizing not just an artistic awakening but also Latin American progress and modernity. Tango, once celebrated as a hallmark of modernity, emerged from Buenos Aires’s vibrant cultural milieu and gained international success, much like jazz did in cities like Budapest, as described in Vilmos Kondor’s *Budapest Noir* (2010). As a vibrant and innovative genre, jazz was cherished by the urban elite and inspired a sense of cosmopolitan identity, which we also find in novels like Cortázar’s *Rayuela*.

In *UTA*, the narrative mirrors a nation grappling with its political past during a crucial time of change for Chile. Rufino’s interactions with Allende and their shared passion for tango and chess reveal how individual experiences intertwine with national identity, echoing the societal tensions captured in tango music. *UTA* reflects the political turmoil of the era, revealing divisions at the national level despite the potential for regional unity. Rufino’s friendship with Allende and Kurtz’s sense of guilt suggest complexity rather than a simple homage. Rufino often critiques Allende’s idealism, questioning his focus on revolutionary ideology over the pressing daily struggles of his people, such as the lack of bread due to flour shortages. Rufino’s reflections highlight the limits of Allende’s vision: “¿Comunismo? No creo que el Doctor aspire o pueda construir aquí una sociedad comunista. Ni siquiera es capaz de destruir a estas alturas la democracia burguesa [...]” (*UTA* 63). Rufino challenges Allende’s belief in a utopian society similar to Cuba, revealing a complex dynamic of attraction and repulsion. Allende’s interest in tango, driven by “social” and “revolutionary” themes, mirrors the

pessimism of Gardel's in "Yira yira" "Que al mundo nada le importa".²⁷ This relationship leads Kurtz to question his own beliefs, aware of the precarity of existence, suggesting that any ideology can be an illusion and that there are no clear winners in the end.

In short, the intimate acoustic and musical mirrors represented by tango extend to broader social and political contexts within Latin America. Tango serves as a powerful acoustic mirror, not only in Argentina (as Conde [2014, 34] suggests) capturing narratives that reflect shared concerns and aspirations across the region. By intertwining personal histories with larger national and cultural narratives, both *LAG* and *UTA* highlight the significance of tango not just as a musical genre but as a lens through which to understand the fluid complexities of identity, memory, and heritage in Latin American society. This exploration ultimately underscores the enduring power of art to reflect and shape collective consciousness in times of upheaval and transformation.

CONCLUSION

By framing the tango novel as a chaotic mirror, this study opens new pathways for exploring how art mediates hybrid identities and cultural memory, both in Latin America and beyond. The tango novel emerges as a powerful literary (sub)genre, celebrated not only for its aesthetic richness but also for its ability to reflect the complexities of Latin American identity. In works like *La amante de Gardel* and *El último tango de Salvador Allende*, tango transcends its traditional role as music and dance to become a narrative and philosophical device. These novels challenge conventional definitions of genre and identity by positioning tango as a turbulent space where history, change, and individual memory intersect with the search for cultural identity.

This exploration highlights how Latin American literature captures the region's fractured yet interconnected identity. Rooted in a hybrid cultural history, drawing from African, European, and Indigenous influences, the tango novel becomes a powerful metaphor for Latin America's enduring struggle with modernity and memory. Much like the tango itself, the genre reflects the contemporary realities of displacement and migration, balancing a sense of loss with a profound yearning for belonging. By focusing on personal narratives and intimate dialogues, the tango novel thus are able to give voice to a wide diversity of characters whose fragmented identities and existential isolation are not isolated depictions but reflect the chaotic experiences of millions moving within and beyond Latin America's borders.

Moreover, the concept of the chaotic mirror offers a more fitting lens for understanding the tango novel's interplay of identity and narrative than Zubarik's linear framework. On a broader scale, the tango novel reflects postmodern literary and theoretical trends that have shaped Latin American literature, particularly through the con-

²⁷ Carlos Gardel, "Yira yira". *Letras.com*. Accessed December 16, 2024.

tributions of Caribbean writers such as Edouard Glissant and Antonio Benítez Rojo, with their emphasis on chaos, fragmented narratives and subjective truths. Themes like *ser v. parecer*, mirrored identities, and existential longing situate the tango novel alongside other cultural narratives that interrogate authenticity and performance.

Ampuero's and Santos-Febres' novels demonstrate the power of art to reflect societal complexities while creating spaces for new interpretations and dialogues. Much like tango itself, the tango novel is dynamic, evolving, and deeply human – reflecting Latin America's ability to continually redefine itself through art and storytelling. By incorporating broader themes such as migration, transculturation, and the human need for connection, these authors speak to both local, regional and global audiences. Finally, by redefining the tango novel as a chaotic literary space of tensions and contradictions, this study highlights the enduring relevance of tango as an integrated artistic, literary and cultural phenomenon - a signifier of diverse experiences across dance, performance, music, and poetry. This relevance is particularly significant in a globalized era, where migration, transculturation, and the universal need for connection become ever more intertwined.

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