

The Power and Empowerment of Tango in Mayra Santos-Febres's *La amante de Gardel* (2015)

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This article explores the presence of tango music and its relationship to the politics of identity in Mayra Santos-Febres's novel *La amante de Gardel* (2015). Engaging with George Yúdice's (2004) notion of "cultural power" as an extension of biopower in regard to cultural productions, it compares the circulation of music and medicine in global markets and how they work to produce forms of identity for the novel's characters. At a first moment, both ancestral medicine in 1935 Puerto Rico and the genesis of tango in early twentieth-century Río de la Plata involve forms of human relationality that facilitate mutual recognition for the people involved. But later, the eventual commodity forms, such as the birth control pill and music records, circulate in a transnational market that creates problematic networks of representation and alienates their original producers. The article concludes that by demystifying a Latin American music superstar, the novel critically reflects on the effects of globalization and coloniality on the protagonists' self-identification, particularly on the female character's ambivalence toward her own womanhood.

Keywords: Mayra Santos-Febres, tango, biopolitics, cultural power, coloniality

Este artículo explora la presencia del tango y su relación con las políticas de la identidad en la novela de Mayra Santos-Febres *La amante de Gardel* (2015). Empleando el concepto de "poder cultural" de George Yúdice (2004) como una extensión del biopoder con respecto a las producciones culturales, compara la circulación de la música y la medicina en mercados globales, y cómo producen formas de identidad para los personajes de la novela. En un primer momento, tanto la medicina ancestral en el Puerto Rico de 1935 como los comienzos del tango en el Río de la Plata a principios del siglo veinte, implican formas de relacionalidad humana que facilitan el reconocimiento mutuo de las personas involucradas. Pero más tarde, esas formas convertidas en mercancías, como la píldora anticonceptiva y los discos de música, circulan en un mercado transnacional que crea redes problemáticas de representación y enajena a sus productores originales. El artículo concluye que al desmitificar a una superestrella de la música latinoamericana, la novela reflexiona críticamente sobre los efectos de la globalización y la colonialidad en la autoidentificación de

los protagonistas, especialmente en la ambivalencia del personaje femenino respecto a su propia feminidad.

Palabras clave: Mayra Santos-Febres, tango, biopolítica, poder cultural, colonialidad

Introduction: Theoretical Framework

The relationship of the female body, especially the black female body, to the discourses of power that regulate them in the works of Mayra Santos-Febres has been explored by numerous critics.¹ Odette Casamayor-Cisneros, for example, argues that in Santos-Febres's novel *Fe en disfraz*, the black woman's body is at the same time the *other* to the hegemonic white male and the territory where a black woman inquires about herself, self-penetrates, and reinvents herself (2015, 149). Discussing the same novel, Helene C. Weldt-Basson maintains that individual, cultural, and national trauma are made manifest in the experience of the female protagonist (2017, 193), and thus, through her embodied narration, the novel fills the gaps of the historical archive (198). This relationship between body, novel, and history privileges the cultural object as a site of destabilization of norms and behaviors derived from a long history of racism, sexism, and colonial domination. However, the cultural object is not necessarily always a site of hegemonic contestation. In this article, the relationship between the genesis and dissemination of culture, particularly music, will be examined in relation to biomedical discourses of power in Santos-Febres's novel *La amante de Gardel* (2015).

The novel explores how discourse and power mediate the identification of the main character with her womanhood. The novel has not been published in English, but the title translates to *Gardel's Lover*, after Carlos Gardel, identifying its main female character through her relationship with an Argentine tango and movie star of the 1920s and 30s. The novel's narrative counterposes two discourses: tango music and Gardel's 1935 tour of Puerto Rico, and medicine as it relates to colonial experimentation and exploitation. Both have a hand in defining what it means to be a woman. The violence of Western medical practices is presented through a clinic that seeks to extract medical knowledge from ancestral practitioners and instrumentalize it for research on birth control pills. While this happens, the story of the love affair between the black female protagonist and Gardel unfolds alongside a recounting of his life and songs.

¹ In addition to the materials quoted in this text, see the collection of essays compiled by Nadia V. Celis and Juan Pablo Rivera in *Lección errante: Mayra Santos-Febres y el Caribe contemporáneo* (2011), as well as Anisa Farhan Rodríguez's *El cuerpo mutilado* (2016).

Music is often idealized as a form of resistance to political violence, something Julio Ramos calls the “fetish of rhythm” (2012). By this term, Ramos refers to the tendency in philosophical approaches to idealize sonic “prediscursivity” as the embodiment of affects and political identifications (27–28). To avoid this, I examine tango music’s presence in both the characters’ interactions and its larger social circulation. I argue that *La amante de Gardel* traces connections between the commodification of music and medicine and invites readers to question what is repressive and alienating, and what is empowering in their practice.

Arlene Dávila (2012) and George Yúdice (2004) have pointed out the need to be skeptical of increases in the allocation of resources and investments in the arts since the 1990s. Dávila argues that many cultural policies that have been celebrated as a mitigation of social inequalities “necessarily exclude many cultural workers as well as many residents as consumers and beneficiaries” (2012, 189). Similarly, Yúdice argues that, in the global age, culture is utilized as a resource by financial speculators, labeled as “cultural brokers,” who invest in its production. Yúdice argues that even in the case of organizations that work against neoliberalism, for example, NGOs that provide support to Zapatistas in Mexico, they ultimately benefit “market society because [their action] corrects the excesses of the market and thus stabilizes and legitimizes the system” (2004, 93). Yúdice employs the term *cultural power* “as an extension of biopower in the age of globalization” (25) to denote precisely the uses of culture where the power of representation, linked to subjectivity, works to maintain balance within the neoliberal market and limit any true emancipatory potential of culture, as it is always susceptible to be co-opted by the very forces it purports to fight: “The content of culture recedes in importance as the *usefulness of the claim to difference* as a warrant gains legitimacy. The result is that *politics* trumps the content of culture” (23).

From this perspective, artistic practice seems doomed to be tragically reduced to business, and capitalism as a system of value extraction will always tend to treat it as such. However, we can lose sight of what is human in the exercise of creating art if we observe it only from the vantage point of its circulation in the market—a singular, centripetal force that pulls everything around it into its orbit. Lewis Gordon (2021) argues that markets are human-produced relationships that go back thousands of years, but through colonization since the 1600s, the logic of the Market as a model extended to all areas of life: “The logic of the Market over markets demanded an abstraction with its own subject to replace the human ones of prior markets saturated with human sociality. The result was capitalism with its model of the rational being as a selfish creature seeking its own interest premised upon efficient and certain acquisition” (19).

In looking at other markets for the circulation of art and culture, outside those facilitated by cultural brokers, we are looking at human forms of relating that accrue value in other forms rather than as equivalents to their exchange value. In tracing this distinction, two different conceptualizations of power will be useful. On the one hand, power, in a biopolitical sense, refers to the discursive regulation of political life where cultural power is a factor. But on the other, as Gordon argues: “Power need not be exclusively coercive. There is also enabling power, if by power we mean the ability to make things happen, to make the possible actual” (2021, 41). This positive conceptualization of power is often characterized as *empowerment*. In the pages that follow, I will explore the representation of tango music in *La amante de Gardel*, how it circulates in the interactions between characters, how it relates to the biopolitics of medicine, and how the dynamic between power and empowerment is manifested.

***La amante de Gardel*: Characters and Action**

La amante de Gardel is the story of Micaela Thorné, a black woman who, filled with melancholy as she feels her death approaching, returns to her native Puerto Rico and remembers major events from her past. The novel is the narration of a memory: “soy una mujer que recuerda” (11) [I am a woman who remembers],² says Micaela in the first sentence. She remembers two interrelated events in particular: her twenty-seven-day affair with Carlos Gardel and her acceptance into medical school in the United States mainland.

Both events are connected to her grandmother, Mano Santa, a practitioner of ancestral medicine. Gardel seeks a healer to treat a chronic disease, and, due to Mano Santa’s feeble condition, she sends her granddaughter in her stead. Micaela, in addition to treating the singer, becomes romantically involved with him as he tells her his life story. She is also training to be a nurse at a local clinic. The lead doctor there covets her grandmother’s recipe for causing infertility in women, which Micaela eventually trades for acceptance into a US medical school, believing that her desire to “become somebody” can be realized by studying medicine in the US.³ At the end of her life, she questions her decisions as she is overtaken by an emotional emptiness that motivates her recollection. The sign of that emptiness is her grandmother, an absent presence throughout the life that Micaela pursued. She remembers her past upon arriving at La Doradilla, the place where Mano Santa used to live.

² All translations from Spanish are mine unless otherwise stated. For passages from the novel, literal translations were favored.

³ This is not the only case where such a belief is expressed in Santos-Febres’s work. As Nadia V. Celis points out, the main character in the short story “Hebra Rota” understands beauty as a success that will be legitimized only by studying in the United States (2008, 96).

Medical and Musical Discourses

The discourse of medicine in the novel is presented in its violent colonial dimension and serves as a parallel ground for comparison to the internationalization of tango music. Through the narration of her memories, Micaela presents herself as an intelligent and ambitious young girl aspiring to become a medical doctor, but there were no medical schools she could attend in 1935 in Puerto Rico. Micaela believes that at the clinic “todo se hacía con aras del bien común, el progreso y la conquista de la Naturaleza” (42) [everything was done thinking of the common good, progress, and the conquest of Nature].

The modern concept of nature, María Lugones argues, was “central to capitalism” (2010, 745) and functioned to erase other forms of relating to the natural world beyond its conquest and instrumentalization. Nature as a colonial concept served not only to erase ancestral relationships to the land but also to establish a “natural” hierarchy of humanity that set European men as the standard. This human/non-human binary “was accompanied by other dichotomous hierarchical distinctions, among them that between men and women” (743). Lugones calls this the “coloniality of gender.” The distinction between humans and non-humans legitimized violence on colonized subjects: “Indigenous peoples of the Americas and enslaved Africans were classified as not human in species—as animals, uncontrollably sexual and wild” (743). The extent of these forms of colonial violence can be read in the novel’s treatment of the development of the birth control pill, as well as in Micaela’s ambivalent womanhood, as will be discussed later.

Forced experimentation on vulnerable populations treated as less-than-human is presented clearly in the novel: “Hacía ya tres años que un patólogo del Instituto Rockefeller de Investigaciones Médicas —el doctor Cornelius Rhoads— fue designado para conducir unas experimentaciones sobre el cáncer in Puerto Rico. Tomó a trece pacientes y a propósito los inoculó con células de cáncer: murieron ocho” (170) [It had been three years since a pathologist from the Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research—Doctor Cornelius Rhoads—was designated to conduct cancer research in Puerto Rico. He took thirteen patients and deliberately inoculated them with cancer cells: eight died]. After Micaela trades her grandmother’s herbal recipe for infertility, it is tested in human subjects but fails to be instrumentalized. Nevertheless, Micaela gets her scholarship, and, despite the violent history of medical research in her country, she eventually becomes involved in research for the birth control pill, which first had to be tested: “Para que se aprobara el uso de la píldora había que experimentarla en humanos. Más bien en humanas. Puerto Rico fue seleccionado como lugar primario de experimentación porque ya existían en la Isla sesenta y siete centros de control de natalidad operando para la época” (196) [For the pill to be approved, it first had to be tested in humans. I mean, in female humans. Puerto Rico

was selected as the primary place of experimentation because sixty-seven birth control centers already existed on the Island by that time]. Medicine and medical research are presented as a form of knowledge extraction and forced experimentation, two devastating dimensions of colonialism.⁴ They are central technologies, to use Michel Foucault's term (1979, 26), in the construction and regulation of women's bodies and condition the very definition of what it means to be a woman.

Ana I. Ugarte (2018) places the novel among other Caribbean works on "island-laboratories," where their terrains are turned into experimental grounds for corporate interests. Female Puerto Ricans are vulnerable, construed by the medical establishment as having a natality problem—they are having too many children, "muchachos que no pueden mantener" [children they cannot support] (Santos-Febres 2015, 182). Therefore, experimentation and colonial intervention can be seen as benevolent by the colonizer.⁵ Furthermore, the colonial system also gives way to forms of epistemic colonialism. That is, Micaela's desire is framed by the American medical industry; medical practices are validated in her mind in binary terms to the exclusion of the traditional practices she learned from her grandmother. She gives credence to her grandmother's methods only when she can verify them in books (71–72). Ugarte argues that the recipe that Micaela hands over is perforce incomplete because what made the plant extract effective was its relationality with other compounds (2018, 275–276). Michaela was uncertain whether the formula would work but shared it believing that it would. As Ugarte also argues, the melancholy that characterizes the entire novel framed by Micaela's remembering of this time is a symptom of the absence of her grandmother and her impossible return, but also, I would add, of the failure of colonial epistemologies to fulfill the desires produced by the imposition of Western forms of knowledge and their proliferation.

Santos-Febres, in an interview conducted shortly after the publication of *La amante de Gardel*, concurs with the thesis of Puerto Rico as a laboratory for modernity, especially in relation to US policies toward Latin America: "Puerto Rico siempre ha

⁴ Birth control and contraceptives continue to construct the subject of their research in racialized and unequal class terms even to this day. As Chikako Takeshita discusses in relation to the Mirena IUD, "the global political economy of women's bodies . . . renders some as overproducing fertility machines and others as sites of consumption of medical services and devices" (2012, 161).

⁵ Laura Briggs, in a highly influential study on the relationship between birth control and US politics toward Puerto Rico, argues that while liberals in Washington saw Puerto Rican women as victims of their fertility, conservatives saw them as perpetrators. At any rate, the result was the same, and "working class women's bodies were the loci of struggle over class relations and the relationship of the U.S. to the island" (2002, 111). For more on the connection between colonialism and birth control in Puerto Rico, see Ramírez de Arellano and Seipp (2017).

sido la placa de Petri donde se ensayan modelos de modernidad capitalista que luego se exportan a toda Latinoamerica” [Puerto Rico has always been the petri dish to try out models for capitalist modernity that were later exported to all of Latin America] (Santos-Febres and Yamile 2015, 136). While this is clear in the novel concerning the birth control pill and experimentation on women’s bodies, Santos-Febres provides this explanation for Gardel’s tour of Puerto Rico as a testing ground for his upcoming Latin American concerts. The question, then, is how does this biomedical construction of the female subject relate to the one performed by the culture industry? Is there something being tested in Puerto Rico by Gardel’s tour of the island other than the potential success of the concerts?

In parallel to Micaela’s story of how she became a doctor, her love affair with the Argentine tango singer Carlos Gardel is narrated. In 1935, after a long stint in Europe and New York, Gardel tours Puerto Rico. When he arrives, he has his men find a healer familiar with the practices of African descendants in the Americas. We later learn that he had syphilis, which had no cure at the time, and had become dependent on the treatment after being introduced to it by a black prostitute in Uruguay. His men look for Mano Santa, but she is ill and sends Micaela instead. Micaela then accompanies Gardel on his tour of the island, they become lovers, and he tells her how he went from a poor immigrant to an international movie star. Gardel’s story matches the story of tango, from the migrant, transient, and marginalized communities of Río de la Plata, to major films produced in New York that “broadly appeal to Spanish speakers throughout the world” (Poppa 2012, 491) and turn Gardel into a household name.

The selection of Gardel, a global music star foreign to Puerto Rico, has a particular significance as it relates to the erasure of blackness and its connection to the medical practices depicted in the novel. Tango music originated in the port cities of Buenos Aires and Montevideo, and black communities had a major role in its development, despite its later internationalization through white, or white-passing, artists. Anahí Viladrich argues that “despite the efforts to erase the influence of Afro-Argentines from tango music and dancing, recent research reveals their presence in related multifold cultural traditions” (2013, 31). The historical erasure mirrors the forceful suppression of traditional medicine associated with black Puerto Rican populations that transpires in the novel. Even if Mano Santa’s formula for infertility worked, the colonial clinic did not seek to utilize it as such, but as a manufactured commodity that visibly erased its origins.

The text establishes clear connections between music and medicine. A friend of Micaela’s grandmother contends, in relation to Gardel’s singing, that “hay gente que puede limpiarle el alma a una muchedumbre entera; eso también es curar” (59–60) [there are people who can cleanse the soul of an entire crowd; that is healing too],

and Micaela herself describes Gardel's impact on her as: "Las ondas de su voz me llegaron como un baño de ungüentos; una caricia untada con algo" (64) [The waves of his voice reached me like an ointment bath, a caress anointed with something]. But what is more important, tango music, in its global circulation as a commodity produced by large US-based studios,⁶ may "cure" as it influences how people think of themselves:

"Pero el tango también cura", me dijo [Gardel] una noche mientras fui su mujer. ¿Acaso fui mujer en aquellas veintisiete noches que pasé a su lado? ¿Acaso su voz, sus canciones, los bailes que bailamos me curaron de algún mal, o fueron ellos los causantes de esta melancolía que me carcome por dentro? ¿Por qué tuvo ese efecto su cercanía? Nunca lo sabré. Quizás por esto recuento esta historia, para dejar testimonio de lo que nunca sabré: Gardel. (12)

["But tango also heals," [Gardel] told me one night while I was his woman. Was I even a woman those twenty-seven nights that I spent with him? Did his voice, his songs, the dances we danced cure me of anything, or were they the cause of the melancholy that is eating me up from the inside? Why did his proximity have that effect? I will never know. Perhaps that is the reason I retell this story, to give a testimony of what I will never know: Gardel.]

Gardel functions here as what Slavoj Žižek (1989), following Jacques Lacan, calls a *point de capiton*,⁷ which "as a word, on the level of the signifier itself, unifies a given field, constitutes its identity: it is, so to speak, the word to which 'things' themselves refer to recognize themselves in their unity" (105). When Micaela responds to Gardel's call, "Qué rica que estás, negra. Dame acá esas ancas para que veas cómo te monto" (38) [You're so hot, blackie. Bring me that rump over here so you can see how I mount you], she is being interpellated by what Gardel signifies within the ideological structure. She becomes a "woman" within that animalistic frame of reference, and when she later remembers the story, she discovers the limitations

⁶ Matthew Karush, in refuting Michael Denning's argument of the inherent decolonizing potential of tango music, shows that: "Tango music was fundamentally shaped by its origins as a commercial genre as well as its passage through transnational, capitalist circuits. Tango's connections to the local musical culture of Buenos Aires ran deep, but they did not yield a music with a singular, decolonizing political message. On the contrary, tango reflected the deep ideological ambivalence of global capitalism" (2019, 51).

⁷ In his translation of Lacan's *Écrits* (2006), Bruce Fink employs the term "button tie" (681). However, he later clarifies in a note: "A 'button tie' is a stitch used by an upholsterer to secure a button to fabric and stuffing, for example, to prevent the stuffing from moving; it is, I think, the closest English term to the upholsterer's term Lacan uses: *point de capiton*. Russell Grigg, in his translation of Lacan's Seminar, Book III, *The Psychoses* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993), renders *capitonage* as 'quilting' and *point de capiton* as 'quilting point' " (808). To avoid ambiguities and mistranslations, I employ the term in the original French, as does Žižek.

that designation imposed on her experience of being a woman; “Was I even a woman?” she asks. Here, we are witness to the parallels between medicine and tango in the novel. While medicine mediates the identification of women by positing a natality problem and experimenting with new drugs on their bodies, the music industry creates its own frame of reference for womanhood. When Micaela becomes involved with Gardel, her identification as a woman becomes destabilized, which in turn leads her to question it in her later recollection. In both cases, Lugones’s notion of the coloniality of gender serves to illustrate the overdetermination experienced by colonized subjects in the repetition of the gender hierarchies naturalized by European colonization.

In a similar fashion to the Puerto Rican cancer trials, where the cure produced more damage than the nonexistent disease, being brought into Gardel’s circle of influence contributes to the maladies Micaela experiences. The meaning of the novel’s title is revealed in this passage: Micaela’s identity becomes tied to that ideological *point de capiton* that is Gardel, whose name operates as a function of cultural power, to bring back Yúdice’s term, that defines and regulates who she is in relation to it. She is Gardel’s lover and that is what it means to be a woman in this case.⁸ Gardel’s name regulates the signifying structure produced in the novel, but the real person behind the name is ultimately inaccessible, Micaela laments that Gardel is someone she “will never know.” Micaela becomes a woman according to what his songs, his shows, and his movies construct as a woman, which ultimately does not correspond to Micaela’s experience and throws her into the self-doubt described in the passage. Her womanhood does not match the one presented in the discourses of capitalistic globalization as a continuation of coloniality. The question, then, is whether music, in its transit to becoming a global commodity,⁹ is just another element that contributes to colonial structures of desire, or if it also facilitates other forms of relating. This search is at the center of the novel.

Tango and Empowerment

Music, according to Rita De Maeseneer, is a recurrent theme in Spanish Caribbean fiction. She argues that while popular music was a “discurso identitario alternativo” [alternative identarian discourse] (2017, 462) in foundational novels such as Luis

⁸ This is consistent with Žižek’s formulation, by way of Lacan, that “woman” is a symptom of “man” within a patriarchal ideological structure (1989, 76–77).

⁹ Marta Savigliano argues that tango music emerged from marginal areas of Buenos Aires through the interaction of different sectors of society, but that it was not recognized as an identarian trait by the elites until it became popular in Paris: “In the end, the elites opted for co-opting the tango, for dressing the tango in tuxedos and glittery gowns, for accepting and nurturing the Parisian exotic version of the tango, of Argentina, of themselves” (1995, 165–166). This is the version that Gardel exports, the one we see in the novel.

Rafael Sánchez's *La guaracha del macho camacho*, music gradually loses its representative power and becomes, in contemporary literature, "un sustrato más" [just another background] (464). Santos Febres explored the uses of music—and medicine—in other writings,¹⁰ especially in the novel *Sirena Selena* (2001), where the protagonist is a crossdressing bolero singer who, by becoming the other's object of desire through musical performances, transgresses established gender roles. In *La amante de Gardel*, the music genre does not have a Caribbean origin and therefore does not play neatly into national and regional identitarian dynamics. However, throughout the novel, Gardel's narration of his life and rise to fame shows that behind the commodity form of his songs and music, there are myriad people and relationships—often exploitative, as was the case with medicine—that made it possible. Tango's presentation in the novel is twofold: it circulates networks of cultural power that regulate subjectivity and desire, but it also can serve as a form of empowerment among its producers and audiences.

While Gardel's birthplace has been disputed, the narrator in Santos-Febres's novel opts for the "French hypothesis," where Gardel was born Charles Gardés in France and migrated to Buenos Aires as a child. In the story, this hypothesis facilitates two dynamics: first, Gardel's position in Buenos Aires as marginal, distanced from the language by a strong accent; and second, the global dimension of tango even before its internationalization through record labels and movie studios. These two dimensions are revealed in the novel's descriptions of the port spaces of Buenos Aires. Gardel tells Micaela that, growing up there, "el candombe de los puertos resonaba en los traspatios de tabloneros donde quedaban los cuartitos adonde [una prostituta] llevaba su clientela. . . . En los puertos oía murga. Las tarareaba y el viento dejaba de apestar a cosa podrida. Se podía respirar" (37) [*candombe* from the ports resonated in the backyards with makeshift little rooms where prostitutes took their clients. . . . In the docks I listened to *murga*. I hummed along, and the smell of the wind was no longer rotten. You could breathe]. *Candombe* and *murga* are drum-based musical styles, and the gathering places of African descendants in the Río de la Plata area were called by the same names (Goldman 2008, 150). In this way, the novel reincorporates in tango music its African background and influences, and its popularization of the historical figures that appear in the book—Gardel, Alfredo Le Pera, Guillermo Barbieri—suggests that it was the concoction of European descendants. But more importantly, it points to how tango music, at this formative

¹⁰ Of particular interest is her short story collection *Tratado de medicina natural para hombres melancólicos* [Treatise on Natural Medicine for Melancholic Men] (2011), where the author ironically employs a traditional medicinal discourse to address problems of masculinity. In the novel *Nuestra señora de la noche* (2008) [Our Lady of the Night], the life of Isabel "La Negra" Lubenza also has strong connections to ancestral medicine in the formation of her womanhood.

stage, was a form of relating among people under difficult circumstances that made life more bearable, breathable, and even enjoyable.

However, Gardel's recapitulation of his story does not let the reader forget that music also participates in human life as a commodity, despite its efforts to distance itself from that aspect:

La Plaza del Abasto. Aquello era el mundo entero. Adentro bullía todo, como metido dentro de una gran caldera. Gardel nunca había visto tanta gente junta. Nunca había imaginado tantas mercancías pasando de mano en mano. Sacos de trigo y de cebada llegaban de los campos en grandes camiones. . . .

Después llegaba el tiempo de las otras mercancías. Se cerraban las puertas de los puestos. Se abrían las puertas de los bares. Y había bares. Muchos. Al mozo Gardés le parecieron cientos de miles. (96)

[Abasto Square. That was the entire world. Everything was boiling there, as if inside a huge cauldron. Gardel had never seen so many people in the same place. He had never imagined so many commodities passing from one hand to another. Bags of wheat and barley arrived from the country in large trucks. . . .

Later, the time for other commodities arrived. Stores closed their doors. Bars opened theirs. And there were bars. They seemed like thousands to the little Gardés.]

The relationships of the "entire world" are fetishized in the commodity exchange taking place in the market square. When night arrives, which could constitute the suspension of business and precarious working conditions of the daytime, the narrative voice does not let us forget that these nightly activities, with the bars at the center, are also materialized in commodities. Among them are beverages, women as prostitutes, and music, with tango that was consolidating as a genre. Gardel discovers almost by accident that he could make money singing: he sang a song in a bar in Montevideo and "me dieron tres mangos" (99) [they gave me three bucks], he claims with surprise.

Tango presented as a commodity suggests that it is a fetishized commodity, where behind the object are hidden social relations and human activities that make it possible. And among these activities are those that society actively represses: "Los sábados por la noche, el Armenonville era la cuna del tango, pero también de los ricos. Llegaban a hacer lo que negaban que hacían en sociedad. Querían distraerse junto a los inmigrantes, las minas, los payadores, los expresidarios que frecuentaban los teatros, pero no demasiado." (133) [Saturday nights, the Armenonville was the cradle of tango, but also of the rich. They came to do what they denied doing in society. They wanted to distract themselves next to the immigrants, the girls, the poet-singers, the ex-cons that frequented the nightclubs, but not too much].

The space where tango happens is a place of relationality hidden from bourgeois society, where it is repressed and denied. However, this is where Gardel finds the most treasured memories that he recounts to Micaela, about his friends, his mother, love stories, and cooperation and solidarity with other musicians. For example, after returning from a stint in Montevideo and finding his mother has aged, he feels pain and “los bares del Abasto lo apaciguaron. Fue a buscar trabajo. A mirar parejas bailar. Hombres con hombres, hombres con mujeres, cuerpos calentándose. Algún ‘hermano’ alguna vez le echó la bucanada del pucho demasiado cerca de la cara. Algún abrazo de vez en cuando lo sostuvo y le encendió la carne” (103) [the bars of El Abasto calmed him down. He went to look for work. To watch couples dance. Men with men, men with women, bodies warming up each other. Some “brother” sometimes exhaled cigarette smoke too close to his face. Some embrace from time to time sustained him and ignited his flesh].

While the crime and violence that are endemic to places where resources are scarce are not omitted from the recapitulations Gardel makes of the beginnings of his career, the forms of relating among the people that work and live in these spaces tend to favor solidarity and camaraderie. There, Gardel finds people who become his friends, whom he loved as brothers—“que quise como hermanos” (121). When he recounts his memories to Micaela, he still suffers from their absence in his life, a melancholy that he shares with the older Micaela. Among his friends, tango was a relational activity that encouraged mutual recognition on their own terms. When they part, the music that is left becomes a sign of their absence. If *La amante de Gardel* is the search for the absent presence of her grandmother, then Gardel’s story within the story is the search for his own lost and unretrievable past.

During his formative years in Buenos Aires and Montevideo, where Gardel sings in bars and moves among the poor of both cities, he contracts syphilis from a black prostitute. She introduces him to both the disease and the treatment, and since then, Gardel has to seek the medical practices that can keep his symptoms under control in every city he visits. When he arrives in New York, he is forced by his disease to visit “el otro Nueva York” (165). This “other New York” is similar to Buenos Aires: “Las largas calles olían a otra cosa, a puerto, aunque el mar quedara lejos. Eran olores a aceite, a verduras, a caja mojada. Allá arriba, del otro lado de Harlem, la gente hablaba en criollo y las vitrolas sonaban a canciones de regreso” (165) [The long streets smelled like something else, like a port, even though it was far from the sea. It smelled of oils, of vegetables, of wet boxes. Up there, on the other side of Harlem, people spoke in Creole, and jukeboxes played songs about returning]. Again, social relationships are objectivized in commodities that speak to the everyday experience of the people behind them.

When Gardel meets a healer that can help him with his affliction, this one confesses “usted no lo sabe, pero yo soy fanático suyo” (167) [you don’t know it, but I am a fan of yours]. De Maeseneer y Manochak Milkon read this as Gardel being on the side of the subaltern, the poor, the blacks (2021, 251). However, Gardel later confesses that he spent most of his time in Middletown, near the movie studio. What the novel demonstrates instead is the hidden work of oppressed communities that goes into making highly-valued commodities. The work of the doctor who, in the eyes of the medical profession in the United States, is not a real doctor, is what enables Gardel’s singing. His recordings are then marketed to appeal to transnational Spanish-speaking populations and become a form of cultural power that contributes to shaping their subjectivity and incorporating them into the economy through the consumption of music.

Gardel mentions that the songs in the jukebox are songs “about returning,” which is a recurrent topic in many of his hit songs such as “Mi Buenos Aires querido,” “Volver,” “Canción de Buenos Aires”—songs that speak to the themes of migration, displacement, and return that would resonate in Spanish Harlem. At the same time, it is this connection with the doctor that motivates the tour of Puerto Rico and all of Latin America. At a dinner party at the doctor’s house, he meets “un don influyente” [an important man] who tells him: “Quiero que vengas a la Isla. Allá todos te aman” (167) [I want you to come to the Island. Everyone loves you there]. When Gardel’s attempt to transition into English singing fails, he takes the man up on his offer and begins the tour that led him to Micaela. At a basic level, music facilitates relationships among human beings; in New York as in the streets of Buenos Aires, it is a way of relating. However, the products that result from those relationships, such as records, concerts, and films, can and do become co-opted by larger markets that then return them as commodities for consumption within nets of signification that align with colonialist models.

For that reason, when Micaela enters the frame of signification that Gardel produces, when she becomes “Gardel’s lover,” her story as the granddaughter of Mano Santa remains hidden: “Sonreí de placer cuando vi la pulsera, las medias, el vestido. Me lo probé todo frente al espejo del cuarto. No era yo aquello que se reflejaba en el cristal. . . . Aquella era otra yo, quizás la que veía Gardel cuando cerraba mis ojos y me dejaba transitar por dentro” (125) [I smiled when I saw the bracelet, the hose, the dress. I tried everything on in front of the mirror in the room. The reflection on the glass wasn’t me. . . . That was another me, perhaps what Gardel saw when I closed my eyes and let myself be explored on the inside]. Gardel functions as the regulating force for a frame of subjectivity that promotes happiness as the consumption of certain commodities (jewelry, lingerie, clothing). Micaela smiles when she sees herself wearing these objects, she identifies herself with the object of desire of the

Other (capitalized to signal the Lacanian Big Other), centered on the name of Gardel, but also discovers an emptiness in that identification: she does not feel like herself.

Nadia V. Celis has shown how the formation of autonomous female subjectivity in the work of Santos-Febres has its main antagonist in the cultural construction of the female body and what is considered “beautiful” by colonialist standards (2008, 104). De Maeseneer and Milkon, on the other hand, argue that the narrator of the novel grants agency to Micaela even while placing Gardel in the dominant role of the relationship (252). But while that is true, the novel stops short of the celebratory undertones the article attributes to that agency. Yes, voluntarily identifying with the object of desire of the man that all women desired—the *Latin lover* fashioned by Paramount, as characterized by Luego López (2008, 19)—allowed Micaela to take the distance from her family that she craved, momentarily escape poverty, and have some free time to read (De Maeseneer y Milkon 2021, 252). However, we cannot ignore the alienation and conflict that resulted from this experience. The novel ends with a reflection on Micaela’s womanhood that is similar to the one that opened it:

¿Acaso fui mujer los veintisiete días que Gardel estuvo entre mis piernas? . . .
¿Acaso soy mujer ahora que muero sola en este rancho de La Doradilla? ¿Qué es ser mujer en estos tiempos: un juego con la muerte, un eco que resuena en la distancia? Después de todo aquello que viví, ¿acaso es posible el regreso?

¿Ahora que estamos libradas del cuerpo, no es soledad el nombre de nuestro viaje? (197)

[Was I even a woman the twenty-seven days that Gardel was between my legs? . . . Am I even a woman now when I die alone in this La Doradilla ranch? What does it mean to be a woman in these times: a game with death, an eco that resounds in the distance? After everything that I lived, is a return even possible?

Now that we are free of the body, isn’t loneliness the name of our journey?]

This final passage of the novel plays like a tango, a tango about returning. The novel is framed by Micaela’s memory; it is a melancholic story about her past and how she became what she is now. She again doubts that she really was a woman during her time with Gardel, which leaves us with the empty subject that identifies with that image. The parallel between music and medicine also becomes apparent in this last passage. By “being free of the body” she is alluding in part to the birth-control pill, whose inhumane research she helped with, lest she would “perder todo: trabajo, acreditación” (172) [lose everything: work, accreditation]. She sold her grandmother’s secrets to study medicine at an American university, to be recognized by the colonial gaze, and she accomplished what she set out to do. But now, after a successful career in medicine, she links what it means to be a woman to a return that

is no longer possible, a return to the forms of relating fostered by her grandmother in La Doradilla, now dead, and the knowledge that she preserved expropriated by Western medicine.

Final Comments

In the prologue to Yuderkys Espinosa Miñoso's book, *De por qué es necesario un feminismo descolonial* (2022) [Why a Decolonial Feminism Is Necessary], Santos-Febres praises the philosopher's work and points out how her contributions to Latin American feminisms lead to the question of "qué es lo que se nombra tanto política como epistemológicamente bajo la categoría 'mujer' " (Santos-Febres 2022, 14) [what is named, politically and epistemologically, under the category of "woman"]. *La amante de Gardel* is created around a similar question. On the one hand, biomedical research constructs women differentially across geographies, and Puerto Rican women are construed as a problem to justify experimentation and biopolitical control. On the other, the culture industry also contributes to shaping what is named under the category of "woman" as a projection of male desire, symbolized by Carlos Gardel. This connects to what Yúdice labeled "cultural power" as an extension of biopower.

In the interview that followed the publication of the novel, Santos-Febres maintains that *La amante de Gardel* is an attempt to contribute to the resilience of knowledges that cannot be "erased from the map" because they endure in those who have "ancestros que vienen de esos mundos supuestamente 'primitivos' " [ancestors who come from those so-called "primitive" worlds] (Santos-Febres and Yamile 2015, 137). She follows by saying that she knows the negotiations that these ancestors had to make, and her place now is to tell their stories and grant them the recognition that they deserve. The novel precisely sets out on a melancholic quest to destabilize what Euromodern knowledge has constructed, in part through its extension of Western medical practices and its culture industry to colonized territory, as a legitimate subject of civil society. In the fight for survival, many negotiations, often unconscious, are made with the forms of knowledge that overrepresent their subjects, and in the novel, Micaela and Gardel are no exception.

La amante de Gardel exposes two dimensions of culture and politics: one that happens "on the ground," in the effective ways in which people relate to one another, and a second where they are co-opted by large, transnational institutions that seek to extract knowledge and forms of expression to make a profit. This trajectory takes place in the field of medicine, where traditional knowledge embedded in forms of relating between marginalized people is expropriated, and experimentation then treats the colonized subject as a laboratory animal. It is also present in the field of music, where the expressions of marginalized people are commodified into structures

that shape identity as acts of exclusion; it becomes impossible for Micaela to fully identify as a woman in those terms.

The parallel dimensions of medicine and music trace the connection that Yúdice established between cultural power and biopower. At the same time, the novel also shows how what is presented as a commodity masks fetishized relationships among producers. Gardel grows up in places where music brings together people with few options in society; it gathers people from the “other New York” and brings joy to Puerto Ricans as well, even if Gardel—much like Micaela—has also become something besides himself and cannot return to the experiences of the formative years that he melancholically recounts. In fact, the historical Gardel died in a plane crash before ever returning to Buenos Aires.

Music, like many other cultural practices, has the capacity to contribute to systems of oppression and to heal wounds created by that very system, the capacity to exert power and to empower. In *La amante de Gardel*, both of these dimensions are shown, and the story centers on the internal conflict of the main character who seeks to connect with the forms of human relationality and caring that the many dimensions of colonialism, particularly medicine and the culture industry, persistently attempt to erase.

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