



# Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies

ISSN: 0826-3663 (Print) 2333-1461 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rcic20>

## The Latin American Queer Aesthetics of *El Bolero*

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To cite this article: Roberto Strongman (2007) The Latin American Queer Aesthetics of *El Bolero*, Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies, 32:64, 39-78, DOI: [10.1080/08263663.2007.10816927](https://doi.org/10.1080/08263663.2007.10816927)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08263663.2007.10816927>



Published online: 07 May 2014.



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# THE LATIN AMERICAN QUEER AESTHETICS OF *EL BOLERO*

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**Abstract.** This article assembles a queer interpretive apparatus facilitating our examination of the non-heteronormative politics of various late 20th-century cultural products indebted to the Hispanic Caribbean musical genre of the Bolero. It provides a critical analysis of the history of the Bolero in order to argue that this musical genre is supported by an underlying queer aesthetic that exposes gendered and sexual identities as constructed. The essay proposes that naming this rhetorical tool *Bolereo* highlights its presence in musical, literary, and filmic discourses that may not otherwise be perceived as resisting compulsory heteropatriarchy. The essay foment the view that *Bolereo* functions as a systemic anti-hegemonic aesthetic movement through a hermeneutic analysis of songs performed by Eydie Gormé, Toña La Negra, and Chavela Vargas; novels by José Donoso and Manuel Puig; and movies by Pedro Almodóvar and Arturo Ripstein. Not unlike the way in which many of the Bolero's most famous vocalists have utilized the tropes of this musical genre to open up a space for sexual deviance within a predominantly heterosexual discourse, Donoso and Puig's queer characters—La Manuela and Molina—are presented as reinterpreting the Bolero in order to make the heterosexual discursive world they inhabit more livable for them. As such, *Bolereo* is a distinctive feature of Latin American queer subjectivities that destabilizes heteronormativity and recentres these marginal subjectivities by exposing desire as socially constructed and deploying the theme of tragedy to protest heteropatriarchal violence.

**Resumen.** Este artículo ensambla un aparato teórico maricón para facilitar un estudio de las motivaciones anti-heteronormativas de varios productos culturales que surgen del género musical Caribeño del Bolero durante la segunda mitad del

siglo XX. Provee también un análisis crítico del Bolero para argumentar que este género musical esta apoyado por una estética mariconesca que expone la construcción de identidades de género y orientación sexual. El ensayo propone que al darle el nombre de *Bolereo* a esta instrumentaria retórica se subraya su presencia en discursos musicales, literarios y filmicos que de otra manera no serían percibidos como resistentes a la heteropatriarquía compulsoria. El ensayo fomenta la idea de que el *Bolereo* funciona como un movimiento estético anti-hegemónico sistémico por medio de un análisis hermenéutico de canciones de Eydie Gormé, Toña la Negra y Chavela Vargas; novelas de José Donoso y Manuel Puig; y películas de Pedro Almodóvar y Arturo Ripstein. Asimismo como muchos de los más famosos vocalistas han utilizado la temática de este género musical para abrirle brecha a las sexualidades desviadas dentro de un marco discursivo predominantemente heterosexual, los personajes maricones de Donoso y Puig—La Manuela y Molina—se presentan como reinterpretores del Bolero para hacer más tolerable el mundo discursivo heteropatriarcal en el que viven. Por lo tanto, el *Bolereo* es un elemento distintivo de la subjetividades latinoamericanas mariconas que desestabiliza la heteronormatividad y centraliza a estas identidades marginadas al exponer el deseo como una construcción social y al emplear el tema de la tragedia como protesta a la violencia heteropatriarcal.

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Our early 21st-century critical vantage point allows us to understand that one of the most provocative areas in Latin American cultural studies during the 1980s and 1990s was devoted to the Bolero. Parallel to a popular re-emergence of the genre that participated in the general postmodern recycling of cultural artifacts from the mid-century, academic research on the Bolero during these two decades focused on its history, its gendered qualities, and its ability to stimulate literary production. I wish to advance these thematic strains by proposing that there is an underlying queer aesthetics to the Bolero that functions as a strategy of performance that reveals gendered and sexual identities as constructed.

I call this aesthetics *Bolereo* and define it as a discursive strategy whereby a seemingly straightforward heterosexual narrative dances alongside the perversion of its own queer meaning. *Bolereo* opens up a temporary space of affirmation for dissident sexualities through its questioning of reproductive heteropatriarchy, but is ultimately unable to provide a more permanent resolution—thus its theme of tragedy, nostalgia, and loss. Furthermore, I propose that *Bolereo* can be considered a systemic aesthetic movement that underwrites cultural

discourses beyond the musical, as it is also an important component of literary and filmic production.

In this article, I utilize the *Bolero* as queer interpretive perspective to read songs performed by Eydie Gormé, Toña La Negra, and Chavela Vargas; novels by José Donoso and Manuel Puig; and movies by Pedro Almodóvar and Arturo Ripstein. At the same time, I want to argue that *Bolero* is always already woven into the fabric of these cultural products with the intent to destabilize heteronormativity and validate queer identities through an exposure of desire as socially constructed. *Bolero* exposes this construction through an appraisal of desire's ambiguous grammar and by highlighting the narrative excesses of courtly love conventions. Moving beyond mere sentimentality, *Bolero* deploys the theme of tragedy to protest the violence that heteropatriarchy inflicts onto queer bodies.

### ***Es la historia de un amor: A Brief Critical History of the Bolero***

Properly speaking, the Bolero is a musical genre from the Spanish-speaking Caribbean that flourished between 1930 and 1960. Courtly love themes constitute a mainstay of this genre, which had as its audience urban middle-class Latin Americans who were exposed to it through the then-new phenomena of the radio and the jukebox. Traveling musicians, certainly, collaborated with these technological developments in the propagation of the taste for this novel musical form. Originating in Cuba, it traveled to many places in the Caribbean where it was modified and further polished to the classical style that was popularized in its three golden decades of glory. In Puerto Rico, it acquired orchestration, and entering Mexico through the port of Veracruz, the Bolero obtained a more refined lyricism (Leal 1992, 29). Currently, it can be considered a "closed genre"; its repertoire consists almost exclusively of "classics" composed during this brief period of intense Bolero production and popularity.

In tracing the history of the Bolero, Caribbean musicologists have remarked its non-correspondence to the European musical form also called "Bolero."

En la isla sonaba el Bolero español, así como los polos y las tiranas, pero de aquel sólo incorporó el nuevo género criollo

el nombre, ya que su estructura, en compás de dos por cuatro, difería aparte de los otros aspectos constitutivos, del tres por cuatro del baile español. [Just as the *polos* and *tiranas*, the Spanish *bolero* was heard in the island, but from this form the creole genre only incorporated its name, since its structure, in a two by four beat, differed in addition to other constitutive elements, from the three by four of the Spanish dance.]<sup>1</sup> (Orovio 1995, 7)

The mystery of the Bolero's origins can be found through an engagement with that foundational work of Caribbean musicology: Alejo Carpentier's *La música en Cuba*. Because the work was published in 1946—during the period of the Bolero's ascendancy to musical prominence—it is unable to speak with the wisdom of hindsight on the genre and does not make direct references to it. Nevertheless, most Bolero critics build upon Carpentier's work because of his insights on a precursor of the Bolero: *el cinquillo*. Of this earlier musical genre Carpentier tells us that “El cinquillo es evidentemente de origen africano. Tiene la regularidad rítmica, la simetría de ciertas percusiones rituales del vodú [The cinquillo is evidently of African origin. It has the rhythmic regularity, the symmetry of ritual Vodou percussion]” (Carpentier 1988, 117). A significant amount of time spent in Haiti in 1943 acquainted Carpentier with Vodou culture, a religious tradition that figures prominently in his novel *El reino de este mundo* (1949). This Vodou-inspired fictionalization of the Haitian Revolution presents us with an illustration of the migration trends that brought the *cinquillo* from Saint Domingue—renamed Haiti after independence in 1804—to the island of Cuba. In that text, St. Méry, the slave protagonist's master, travels to the eastern part of Cuba, as do a great number of French colonial planters, fleeing the massacres of whites at the hands of rebellious slaves. Mexican musicologist Pablo Dueñas reminds us that the Saint Domingue planters brought to Cuba many of their musical traditions: “The Bolero is born in the 1880s in Santiago de Cuba as a result of the arrival of the Contradanza francesa brought over by St. Domingue settlers fleeing the Haitian Revolution” (Dueñas 1993, 13). This assertion is corroborated by Helio Orovio, who tells us that “El cinquillo proveniente de las músicas folklóricas de Saint Domingue asentadas en la parte oriental, fijó al género en su inicio, como hizo con las otras cuba-

nas [The cinquillo, derived from the folkloric music of Saint Domingue that settled in the Eastern part, marked the genre from the beginning, as it did with other Cuban musical forms] (Orovio 1994, 4). Therefore, one of the great advances of Bolero histories in the 1990s was to prove that its lineage was African and Haitian rather than Iberian.

If musicologists were industriously tracing the origins of the Bolero in the 1990s, this was in response to the curious emergence of the genre in the literary arena in the previous decade. Beginning in the early 1980s and continuing into the late 1990s, there was a “boom” in Latin American novels with Bolero themes, an artistic phenomenon that literary criticism has not yet sufficiently addressed. My reading of José Donoso’s *El lugar sin límites* (1995) and Manuel Puig’s *El beso de la mujer araña* (1994) in the final section of this article seeks to understand the origins of this understudied literary movement. Enabling my reading of these texts, Vicente Francisco Torres provides an incipient understanding of the incursion of the Bolero in literature through this elaboration of the concept of the “novela Bolero”:

Utilizo la expression novela Bolero porque éste fue el título que le dio un grupo de escritores venezolanos, quienes advirtieron la afinidad de un conjunto de libros que podían estudiarse debido a varios elementos comunes, pero también a algunos elementos variables. Se trata de un puñado de novelas marcadas en su ritmo, en su argumento o en su tema por la música, las canciones, la vida de los músicos y los ídolos populares. [I utilize the term “Novela Bolero” because this was the title given by a group of Venezuelan writers, who noticed the relationship between a group of books that could be studied together along certain commonalities and differences. These are novels marked in their rhythm, in their argument, or in their themes by the music, songs, and lives of their musicians and popular icons.] (Torres 1998, 20)

The very titles of these novels alert us to the prominence of the Bolero in the narratives: *Sólo cenizas hallarás* by Pedro Vergés (1980), *Te trataré como una reina* by Rosa Montero (1983), *Porque mi vida se apaga* by Juan Ramón Iborra (1984), *Arráncame la vida* by Angeles Mastretta (1986), *Bolero* by Lisandro Otero (1986), *Los duros de la Salsa también bailan Bolero* by Laureano Alba (1987), *La importancia*

*de llamarse Daniel Santos* by Luis Rafael Sánchez (1989), *Ritos de Cabaret* by Marcio Veloz Maggiolo (1991), *Musiquito* by Enriquillo Sánchez (1993), *Te di la vida entera* by Zoé Valdés (1996), *Ella cantaba Boleros* by G. Cabrera Infante (1996), *Boleros en La Habana* by Roberto Amapuero (1997), *La amigdalitis de Tarzán* by Alfredo Bryce Echenique (1999), and *Nosotras que nos queremos tanto* by Marcela Serrano (1998).

David William Foster has addressed the queer component of one of the most important of these novels, Sánchez's *La importancia de llamarse Daniel Santos*—a Caribbean parody of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Ernest* based on the life of the famous Puerto Rican Bolero singer Daniel Santos:

When Sánchez begins to describe the eroticization of the Bolero, as sung by a man for another man, the reader understands that here is another example of the queersome potential of popular culture. (Foster 1997, 18)

His brief comment served as a catalyst for an understanding of the Bolero as queer, for in the late 1990s there appears a third strain of Bolero scholarship that begins to take account of the musical genre's sexually dissident possibilities. Along these lines, various scholars have been concerned with a certain hermaphroditic quality to the Bolero singer's voice:

[Lucho Gatica's] voice was always compared to a silky surface—it was not a falsetto, but it was almost feminine in its command of the high registers. There was no doubt as to Gatica's masculinity, but it was clear that the performance of his masculinity was contingent on the almost feminine delicacy of his voice. (Quiroga 2000, 161)

The transgressive qualities of the voice of the *bolerista* that Quiroga notices are not restricted to male singers. Iris Zavala increases our understanding of this lyric transvestism by taking account of the female singer's potential to embody and produce what she calls "the androgynous voice:"

El bolerista tiene una voz andrógina—he ahí Pirela, Machín, Bola de Nieve, Los Panchos ... son las grandes constelaciones,

voz casi de castrati. Y ¿la bolerista? ... contralto pura y dura, mujer de pelo en pecho como se las llamaba antes, donna di gamba se dice en italiano. [The male bolero singer has an androgynous voice—there is Pirela, Machín, Bola de Nieve, Los Panchos ... these are the great constellations, almost castrati voices. And the female Bolero singer? ... Pure and hard contralto, the proverbial hirsute woman of yore, *donna di gamba* in Italian.] (Zavala 2000, 23–24)

In addition to her elaboration on the possibilities of the androgynous voice in male and female Bolero singers, Zavala makes an important point, which I develop at a later point in this article, on the queer ability of the Bolero to sing from multiple gendered perspectives: “Este ‘bésame mucho’ se volatiliza, y ya puede ser la mujer quien pide los besos, o el hombre. Insisto en que el sexo del personaje del Bolero depende del oyente” [This “kiss me much” becomes volatile, and it can be the woman as well as the man who asks for the kisses. I insist that the sex of the bolero’s protagonist depends on the listener] (Zavala 2000, 32). But perhaps more important than merely transposing gender identities is the potential of the Bolero to expose gender itself as social construction: “Thus, male listeners identify this affective language as theirs, as a sort of gender capital, simultaneously evincing that this language of the Bolero actively constructs masculinity in Latin America” (Aparicio 1998, 137). Contextualizing Quiroga’s and Zavala’s arguments, musical critic Salvador Oropesa places this process of denaturalization within the Bolero’s emergence in the 1930s and 1940s in Mexico:

The 1930s to 1940s period is the moment when an intense debate between virile and feminine art took place in Mexico. The painter Diego Rivera (1886–1957), among others, denounced the feminization of Mexican art and proclaimed the virile values of the Revolution. Boleros represent a twist in this debate, to the extent they are feminine. Although Boleros do not challenge the virility of the Revolutionary system, by singing or listening to Boleros men can give freedom to their “feminine,” sentimental side. Agustín Lara is at the same time feminine and a virile Don Juan, and he represents the deep



and agonizing crisis of the patriarchal government. (Oropesa 1996, 150–151)

While the Boleros of the 1930s and 1940s allowed for a certain transposition of gender identities, the queer aesthetics of the 1990s' Bolero allowed for a transcending of binary categories of gender by focusing on same-sex desire. In his famous essay, "Bolero: A History," Carlos Monsiváis emphatically declares that "[t]he Bolero has not disappeared, and continues despite the mummified nostalgia of many fans, renewing itself in new contexts . . . Cultural perception changes, rapture persists" (Monsiváis 1997, 195). That the Bolero resurfaced again in a variety of discourses during the 1990s is indisputable, but it remains to be studied how and why this Bolero returns as queer. As Quiroga provocatively suggests: "Boleros appear as a voice in the 1990s via the melancholic homosexual as a polemical figure of mourning and celebration" (Quiroga 2000, 149).

Clearly, in the face of such innovative uses of the Bolero, traditional theoretical approaches are insufficient to a full understanding of the genre. In much the same way as "gay" or "lesbian" often function as inexact categories to explain the lived subjectivities of Latin American non-heteronormative sexualities, so does the terminology of "kitsch" fail to capture the cultural specificity of the Bolero and its uses. Addressing this issue, Rafael Castillo Zapata writes:

Es en este sentido, al concebirlo como práctica estética comunitaria que el Bolero no puede ser considerado en la dimensión del arte de la *modernidad* occidental, y, por consiguiente, no puede ser tomado en cuenta simplistamente en relación con fenómenos a los que, no sin motivos, suele adscribirse con cierta frecuencia, tales como el *melodrama* o el *kitsch*. [In this sense, in seeing the Bolero as an aesthetic communal practice, it cannot be considered within the dimension of Western modernity. Therefore, it cannot be accounted for in relation to phenomena to which, without motive, it is often associated, such as *melodrama* and *kitsch*.] (Castillo Zapata 1991, 33)

In light of the inability of available theoretical terminology to explain Latin American queer aesthetic sensibilities, I extol efforts such as those of Cecilia Rosales to coin a more accurate and local theoretical repertoire out of the lived experiences of Latino/as:

*Chueco* is the Spanish word for “crook” or “crooked.” It can be used as a noun or as an adjective, and it refers to that which is not straight or aligned; that is, anything bent, curved, angular, twisted, or distorted; or to any act or person who is false, tricky, dishonest, fraudulent, or deceptive. In Mexican slang, *chuecho* also refers to the practice of a transvestite passing as a woman, be it on stage, on the streets, or in bed, which represents the ultimate *chueco* achievement. (Rosales 1999, 27)

“Chueco” carries a subversive connotation that a translation such as “bent” simply fails to convey. It also shows how the element of passing makes “chueco” distinct from First World bourgeois forms of gay subjectivity. Highlighting the importance of subversive practices in queer musical performance and interpretation, Wayne Koestenbaum, in his treatise on homosexuality and opera, *The Queen’s Throat*, foregrounds the necessity for queerness to engender what he calls “outwitting techniques:”

Pretend for the moment, that homosexuality, like falsetto, is not an identity but a useful pleasure with a bad reputation: pretend it is a technique, a sideline, a way to outwit a taxing vocal situation. (Koestenbaum 1993, 164)

I propose that *Bolero* is one such outwitting technique utilized by queer latina/os to subvert the established heteronormative discursive order. It builds on the transgressive qualities of Rosales’ “chueco” by making it more pertinent to the performative qualities of musical production. The Bolero lends itself to the creation, formulation, and definition of a distinctive Latin American queer aesthetic. It is clear that the Bolero musical genre displays a type of queer aesthetic that, from a U.S. perspective, might be tempting to label as a variation of “camp.” Nevertheless, it is clear that this Latin American queer aesthetic employs strategies that are so distinct and different from this particular North American gay aesthetic that it would be erroneous to conflate them in such a way. Even if camp and this Latin American queer aesthetic were not as distinct as they do appear to be, naming one cultural form by a foreign-formulated appellation rings once more of colonization. In the absence of a native designation for this type of Latin American queer aesthetic, a coinage of some sort appears to be in line. I propose naming this particular rhetorical stance, this queer

reappropriation of heterosexual narratives, this performative exposure of the constructedness of heterosexuality for queer *assujétissement* and resistance, *Bolereo*. At a time when the nascent field of Cross-Cultural Lesbian and Gay Studies is forming, it becomes important to have the vocabulary to speak of cultural forms of same-sex desire that might be different from those found in English-speaking North America. As such, *Bolereo* describes a certain distinct Latin American queer sensibility that is found in its most expressive manner in the musical genre from which it derives its name. Nevertheless, instances of *Bolereo* can also be found in other forms of cultural production such as the novel.

As we have seen, up until now research on the Bolero can be understood as having taken three main routes, each with certain limitations, to understand the full queer potential of the genre. First, there are histories of the Bolero that have not looked at the novel or at gender at great length. Second, there are queer analyses of Boleros, but these have neglected looking at the Bolero as anything other than a musical genre. Third, while there have been analyses of the Bolero as a full artistic movement that includes literature, these studies have not taken into account gender and sexuality as integral parts of the movement. I wish to advance these thematic strains by proposing that there is an underlying queer aesthetics of the Bolero—*el Bolereo*—that functions as a strategy of performing and revealing gendered and sexual identities as constructed. As such, it engenders queer musical, filmic, and literary discourses that not only resist heteronormativity, but also mobilize a politics of queer Latin American resistance. In order to achieve this challenge to heteropatriarchy, *Bolereo* exploits the “discordant emotions” that Pérez Firmat sees as crucial to the genre of the Bolero:

Not only does the Bolero’s wordiness contrast with the mambo’s laconism; the genres also serve as vehicles for discordant emotions. If the central preoccupation of the Bolero is loss, the central impulse of the mambo is conquest. (Pérez Firmat 1997, 246)

*Bolereo* capitalizes on the discordant emotions of the genre, on its ambiguities, ambivalences, and instabilities to produce an aesthetics that enables same-sex desire to be read within and alongside a tradi-

tional heterosexual narrative. “Loss” emblemizes the fleetness of a respite limited by the brevity of a song. Portaccio Fontalvo expands on the Bolero’s thematic of “loss:”

El Bolero siempre fue el sedante o el refugio para resistir los duros golpes que presentase la vida. Nos sumerge en una nostalgia de ensoñación sin saber explicar por qué se sentía aquello, solo felicidad de llorar y gozar con las notas de aquel Bolero. [The Bolero was always the sedative or refuge to fend off life’s hard punches. It submerges us in the slumber of a nostalgia in which we don’t know how to explain those feelings, only the happiness of crying and rejoicing with the notes of that Bolero.] (Portaccio Fontalvo 2001, 1)

*Bolero* reinterprets the pain that Portaccio discusses as an articulation of the suffering of queer subjects marginalized by violent heteropatriarchal systems. It provides a space of solace from the condition of sexual abject by coding the genre as queer and transforming a nominally heterosexual musical narrative into a distinctly queer Latin American strategy. De La Peza Casares presents us with the traditional reading of the Bolero by mainstream Latin American audiences:

Los resultados de esta investigación llevan a pensar que la nostalgia bolerística individual y colectiva son formas del pensamiento conservador ... [Según los informantes] antes existían “valores” que ahora han desaparecido. Según ellos existía más respeto a la autoridad de los adultos, no existía la homosexualidad o al menos no era tan descarada, las mujeres eran más recatadas, más románticas, no había relaciones sexuales antes del matrimonio, o al menos no eran abiertas, etcetera. [The results of this research lead us to think that the individual and collective nostalgia of the bolero are forms of conservative thought. According to the informants, the “values” of the past have disappeared. There was more respect for adults; there was no homosexuality—or, at the very least, it was not as shameless—women were more modest, more romantic; there was no pre-marital sex—or at least not out in the open, etc.] (De la Peza Casares 2001, 427)

*Bolereo* accounts for the vacillation between heterosexist and queer readings of the Bolero by highlighting its avowal and disavowal of same-sex desire. As De la Peza's informants narrate, the Bolero transports them to a space devoid of sexual dissidents, where they can be affirmed in their sexual normativity. However, the semantic and performative ambivalence of *Bolereo* perverts and subverts this primary reading as it foments a queer deployment of the genre that exposes the constructed nature of this sexual normativity.

Building upon its contestation of sexual normativity, *Bolereo*'s most politically enabling characteristic lies in its ability to expose the constructedness of desire. The constructedness of this desire becomes evident in the reinterpretation of the painfulness of unrequited or lost love to express the oppression experienced by queers. The Bolero is never a happy song; it expresses the sadness, anguish, and anger of rejection, parting, or falling out of love. The Bolero's world is dominated by the cold, unfaithful, or frivolous lover who is full of contempt, disdain, and disregard for the narrator-singer. The extreme representation of pain in these songs is consistent with a certain representation of queerness in which the stigma brought upon same-sex relationships makes their loss all the more difficult to console and to recover from. While the impossibility for the assumed heterosexual union is explained by the non-reciprocity of affection, by its extra-marital condition, or by distance, the queer reinterpretation of the Bolero finds in the impossibility of the union the societal sanction against same-sex desire. Moreover, *Bolereo* exposes the constructed nature of desire through an exposure of the courtly love conventions of romantic love. The Bolero relies on the exaggeration of love, on the intensification of certain tropes that characterize the Western idea of romantic love, such as feelings of hopelessness, fear of loss, unattainability of the beloved, frustration, despair, nostalgia over lost love, the idea of love as "addiction" and "sickness," and so on. An exposure of the many elements that make up this concept of romantic love serves to de-naturalize it and fosters a view of heteronormative and non-heteronormative sexualities as constructed forms of desire in which any claim to legitimacy based on ideas of "the natural" or "the real" would be rendered useless. Furthermore, *Bolereo* exposes the constructedness of desire by cultivating an extravagance and exaggeration of sentiment that magnifies attributes traditionally associated

with femininity. The resultant hyper-feminine force of the performance produces an androgynous space that is conducive to questioning normative heterosexuality. For this reason, the Bolero is the most popular musical genre in Latin American drag performances. The extreme magnification of the tropes of heterosexual love in the original Boleros and the dramatic, theatrical, operatic qualities of contemporary drag performances parody the discourse of normative heterosexuality by presenting heterosexuality as mere cliché. Moreover, the slippery correspondence between heterosexual lyrics and cross-gendered singers in transvestite performances underscores the parodic relationship which the Bolero has towards heterosexuality.



*Dancing across gender boundaries: The Queer interpretive strategy of Bolero reveals the constructed nature of heteronormative desire in mid-20th-century Latin American popular musical culture.*

## ***¿La quiero o lo quiero?: Queering Grammatical Gender***

While the aesthetics of *Bolereo* allow male performers to critique heterosexuality through drag, it opens up avenues for female singers to critique heteropatriarchy through a particular type of cross-gender impersonation that allows female singers to perform Boleros written from a male point of view, making usage of grammatical gender-markings in order to frustrate expectations of heterosexuality. For instance, it is acceptable within the genre of the Bolero for a female singer like Chavela Vargas to refer to herself with a male-gendered noun like “injusto,” and to speak of her lover with the feminine pronoun “ella.” In an equally transgressive fashion, female singers may opt to change a male Bolero perspective by making it feminine.

These manifestations of *Bolereo* can be best illustrated through an explication of several Boleros that employ the technique. “Noche de Ronda” is one such piece. This classical Bolero piece, written by the most famous Bolero songwriter of all times, the Mexican composer Agustín Lara, speaks of the loneliness, dejection, and pain of being overlooked and bypassed by love, which in the song takes the form of a group of musicians serenading. The traditional custom of the *ronda* or the “serenade” is very popular in countries like Spain and Mexico, where it is rigidly gendered. Groups of young men move from house to house singing to women of marriageable age for whom they have romantic interests.

In one of the most famous renditions of the song, Eydie Gormé and Los Panchos emphasize the traditional gendered duality of the *ronda* by having one of the Panchos provide a male-voice accompaniment to Eydie Gormé’s female voice. Different-gender third-person pronouns are used in the refrain to maintain the heterosexual impetus of the *ronda*: Eydie Gormé sings to a putative male lover and the male Pancho sings to a female figure. Because the Bolero was written to be sung by a male singer, alterations to the lyrics needed to be done to accommodate the heterosexual performance of Eydie Gormé. Her re-dressing of the lyrics is marked in bold type:

Noche de Ronda  
Que triste pasas  
Que triste cruzas

por mi balcón  
 Noche de Ronda  
 Cómo me hieres  
 Cómo lastimas  
 mi corazón.  
 Luna que se quiebra  
 sobre la tiniebla de mi soledad  
 adónde vas?/en dónde estás?  
 Dime si esta noche tú te vas de ronda  
 como **él/ella** se fue  
 Con quién está  
 Dile que **la/lo/le** quiero  
 Dile que me muero de tanto esperar  
 Que vuelva ya  
 Que las rondas no son buenas  
 Que hacen daño  
 que dan penas  
 y se acaba por llorar.

[Night of Serenade/ How sadly you pass by my balcony/ Night  
 of Serenade/ How you hurt me/ How you injure my heart./  
 Moon that breaks through the darkness of my solitude/ Where  
 do you go?/ Where are you?/ Tell me whether tonight you are  
 leaving on serenade/ like **he/she** left/ Who is he/she with?/ Tell  
 him that I love **him/her**/ Tell him that I die of so long awaiting/  
 To come back soon/ Because serenades are not good/ They are  
 harmful/ They bring pain/ and end up making one cry.]

In the same way in which male bodies utilize the Bolero to perform femininity and female voices are allowed to sing Boleros from a masculine perspective, so does the Bolero serve as a medium for the impersonation of ethnicity. Eydie Gormé did not speak Spanish (Restrepo Duque 1992, 93), but was able to sing Boleros so well she passed for a native speaker. Current lip-synching performances of her songs only serve to magnify Eydie Gormé's parody of authentic identities. The devoted queer following of Eydie Gormé thrive on those rare moments in her performances in which she reveals English as her native language. Whenever Eydie trills a flap /r/, flaps a



trill /r/ or diphthongizes palatal consonants—as is the case in “danio” instead of “daño” or “iorar” instead of “llorar” in the song “Noche de Ronda”—these fans revel in their ability to peek through the masquerade of a very clever act. Every instance in which she reveals her non-native proficiency in an otherwise impeccable Spanish speaks to the necessity to find and apply critical pressure on the weak spots of discursive and counter-discursive structures, exposing the falsity of their “naturalness.”

Eydie Gormé and Los Panchos’ *Bolereo* interpretation of “Noche de Ronda” provides a good point of comparison to a different usage of *Bolereo* in another artist’s rendition of the same song. The Mexican singer Chavela Vargas takes a more direct challenge to compulsory heterosexuality in her rendition of “Noche de Ronda.” In it, she disrupts this heterosexual narrative by maintaining the male subject positioning of the narrator and by her use of female pronouns to refer to the beloved object. This classic type of *Bolereo* characterizes most of Chavela Vargas’s performances.

The self-referential aspect of the song itself further complicates the workings of gender in “Noche de Ronda.” In the Bolero, the singer can hear the *rondas* being sung by a group of young musicians. This “night of serenade” is experienced also by the listener to the Bolero who is, in turn, serenaded by the performer, Eydie Gormé or Chavela Vargas. This triangular schema breaks up the traditional gender division of the *ronda*, as the female performer of the Bolero plays both the feminine role of being serenaded to and the masculine role of serenading the audience of her performance, thus becoming an androgynous performer.

Both Chavela Vargas’s and Eydie Gormé’s version of “Noche de Ronda” allude to being bypassed by love’s progress in similar ways, “que triste cruzas por mi balcón,” and by being abandoned by a former lover, “como él/ella se fue,” as the cause of the loneliness the performer presents. Nevertheless, the overt masculinity in the performance of Chavela Vargas seems to be more effective than Eydie Gormé’s at seducing the audience. Moreover, in the case of Chavela Vargas’s performance, it would appear that the flaunting of the male musicians’ privilege to serenade their girlfriends in the streets—and not within the restricting confines of the Bolero genre, as is the case with the queer subject—is part of the grief conveyed in the performance.

The sensitive, first-time listener to Chavela Vargas is alerted to the queer sensibility of her performance by the forceful masculine qualities of her delivery and the discursively male subject position she assumes in her songs. Such suspicions are confirmed in her use of male-gender pronouns, adjectives, and nouns. Singing another Bolero, C. Sanchez's "Anillo de Compromiso," Chavela Vargas's performance alerts the listener to a possible upsetting of traditional gender roles by utilizing the formulaic male rhetoric of claiming ownership of women through the placing of the ring during the marriage ceremony. It is uncommon in heterosexual romantic discourse to hear a female voice referring to her lover as unreachable and virtuous and herself as unworthy of her lover's affection. This constitutes a reversal of acceptable representations of masculinities and femininities within the Western idea of romantic love. The listener's suspicions as to a certain dissonance between the gender of the performer and the expectations of that gendered voice within the Bolero find support in Vargas's use of the male noun "injusto" to refer to herself. Other male nouns further confirm this cross-gendered performance: "al pobre," "un mendigo."

Anillo de bodas  
que puse en tu mano  
anillo que símbolo de nuestro amor  
que unió para siempre y por toda la vida  
a nuestras dos almas delante de Dios.  
Hoy vives sufriendo  
nomás por mi culpa  
perdona lo **injusto** que fui sin querer  
creyendo que sólo con mucho cariño  
podía darte toda maldita mi fe  
Anillo de compromiso  
cadena de nuestro amor  
Anillo de compromiso  
que la suerte quiso que uniera a los dos  
Soy pobre muy pobre y tu ya lo has visto  
Te he dado miserias, te he dado dolor  
Y aunque yo te quiera, que vale el cariño  
Sino no puedo hacerte feliz con amor  
Si algún día recuerdas **al pobre** que sueña

que lucha y se arrastra por querer vivir  
 jamás lo maldigas que al fin fue **un mendigo**  
 que quiso elevarse por llegar a ti.

[Wedding ring/ That I placed on your hand/ Ring, that symbol of our love/ which joined for always and for all our lives/ our two souls before God./ Today you live suffering due to my fault/ forgive how **unjust** (grammatical male marking) I was without intending to be/ thinking that only with a lot of affection/ I could give you all my damned faith/ Engagement ring/ our love's chain/ engagement ring/ With which luck wanted to join to the two of us./ I am very poor as you have already seen/ I have given you misery and suffering./ And even if I cared for you, what's affection worth/ if I can't make you happy with love/ If some day you remember **the poor one** (grammatical male marking) who dreams/ who struggles and who crawls along the ground for the desire to live/ never curse him/ for in the end he was only a **beggar** (grammatically male marking)/ wanting to rise up to the place where you were.]

Chavela Vargas's reappropriation of the heterosexual wedding and her translation of it into a queer narrative point to the potential for subverting dominant ideologies by transforming the discourse that maintains these ideologies in place.

"Mía Nomás" by Agustín Lara is another Bolero that has earned an important place within this musical genre. It displays the anxiety over losing one's beloved that characterizes the Bolero.

Latieron dos corazones  
 juntando su desvarío  
 uno había de ser el tuyo  
 el otro debía ser mío  
 y quiso la vida juntarnos  
 como el amargo a la miel  
 y nadie, nadie podrá separarnos  
**si tú eres mujer, mujer**  
 Yo quiero que nunca me dejes,  
 que nunca te alejes de mí  
 que sean tus palabras las dulces promesas que yo te pedí

querrás de tu pecho la queja de mi alma como una oración  
 que no me traiciones que me lleves dentro como una obsesión  
 Yo quiero pedirle a la vida clemencia una vez nada más  
 y que ella en voz baja te diga si acaso me ha visto llorar  
 llorar de tristeza, llorar de alegría  
 sabiendote ajena, sintiendote **mía**  
 pero **mía** nomás.

[Two hearts beating/ joined in disharmony/ one had to be yours/  
 the other had to be mine/ and life wanted to join us/ like bit-  
 terness to honey/ and no one, no one will be able to separate  
 us/ **if you are a woman, a woman**/ I do not want you to ever  
 leave me/ for you to be far from me/ let your words be the  
 sweet promises I asked you/ you will want from your bosom  
 my soul's complaint like a prayer/ that you will not betray me  
 and that you will carry me inside like an obsession./ I want  
 to ask life for clemency only once/ and allow it softly to tell  
 you whether it has seen me crying/ crying of sadness/ crying  
 of joy/ knowing you someone else's/ feeling you **mine**/ only  
**mine** (grammatically marked feminine)]

Like other Boleros, “Mía Nomás” has a history of cross-gender lyric performance. Toña La Negra, “la mulata veracruzana,” was one of the Bolero’s most outstanding vocalists. The power of her delivery and her stage presence made her an instant sensation. Toña La Negra’s reputation as a natural can be appreciated in the popular story recounting what her vocal teacher once told her: “Estás loca, muchacha, tu voz es así, natural, nunca se te ocurra estudiar ópera ni nada, así eres perfecta en lo tuyo” [Are you crazy, girl! Your voice is like that, natural. It should never cross your mind to study opera or anything of the sort. You are perfect in what you do] (Castillo Zapata 1991, 75). Toña La Negra also managed to forge an individual style by taking on a repertoire composed in its entirety of Agustín Lara songs.

Her rendition of “Mía Nomás” displays a *Bolero* aesthetic similar to that found in Chavela Vargas’s songs. The speaker never has the opportunity to disclose his/her grammatical gender in the song. Nevertheless, feminine gender markings—the possessive pronouns “mía”—used to describe the beloved, within a traditional heterosexual reading, demand a male lover-narrator—an expectation that Toña La

Negra's rendition of the song fails to fulfill. The disappointment of heterosexual expectations enacted by Toña La Negra's singing about her lover with feminine possessive pronouns is further magnified by the open and outright necessity that her lover be a woman: "si tú eres mujer." A queer reading of the Bolero could not escape an analysis of "Mía Nomás" even if it were sung by a man. What is implied by a song in which a male singer asks his lover to be a woman? "Si tú eres mujer" speaks to the multiple possibilities of gendered object choices that are available outside of heterosexual pairing. Interestingly, "Si tú eres mujer" codes this message within an injunction for women to behave according to traditional roles, "as women should." Finally, the song's comment on the need for the beloved to be a woman so the relationship can endure begs multiple readings that conform to the queer aesthetic of *Bolereo*. When Toña La Negra sings "nadie, nadie podrá separarnos/ si tu eres mujer, mujer," she is singing of queerness as the true love that is not shaken by outside influences and survives in spite of societal attempts to separate the partners. When a man sings



*Miguel Bosé makes an appearance in drag, lip-synching Lara's bolero "Piensa en Mí" in Almodóvar's film Tacones Lejanos.*

“si tú eres mujer,” the Bolero replicates certain representations of queerness as tragedy, for then the Bolero says that—unlike the same-sex couple—it is the heterosexual couple that will remain undisturbed and be allowed to grow, free from the discrimination and prejudices of heteropatriarchy.

## ***El Bolereo de Almodóvar***

As a full cultural movement, *Bolereo* is not restricted to musical performance but is also employed in other media such as film and the novel.<sup>2</sup> In fact, much of the Bolero’s current queer revival has become most visible in the films of Spanish film director Pedro Almodóvar. With his films *Matador* (1985) and *La Ley del Deseo* (1986), Almodóvar began his incursions into the Bolero for the purposes of undoing heteronormative gender roles.

*La ley del deseo* (1986), una de las películas más importantes de Pedro Almodóvar, cuenta entre otras cosas la historia de un triángulo amoroso homosexual; acompaña a Antonio Banderas en su papel de asesino pasional *Lo Dudo* (1954), un Bolero de Chucho Navarro. Al año siguiente, y con ese mismo desparajo se presenta a Carmen Maura como una mujer abandonada por su amante, quien en *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* llena de rencor su recién estrenada soledad cantando *Soy infeliz*. [*Law of Desire* (1986), one of Almodóvar’s most important movies, recounts among other things the story of a homosexual love triangle. A Bolero by Chucho Navarro accompanies Antonio Banderas in his passionate murders. Next year, and with the same playfulness, Carmen Maura appears as a woman abandoned by her lover, singing of her solitude through the Bolero “I Am Unfortunate” in the film *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*.] (Bazán Bonfil 2001, 69)

Nevertheless, it was *Tacones Lejanos* (1991)—released in English as *High Heels*—that made the most inventive and significant use of this musical genre. The performances by Marisa Paredes and Miguel Bosé lip-synching the famous Agustín Lara Bolero “Piensa en Mí” have become cult standards among Latin American queers. The intensely

melodramatic performance in which the camera follows the trajectory of a tear from Marisa Paredes's eyes to her bright red lips and then onto the stage's floor satirizes certain socially accepted forms of conduct of expressing love's suffering in Latin America. This scene made Luz Casal, the singer who lent her voice to Marisa Paredes's lip-synching act, an immediate star. While her popularity speaks to a widespread interest in the Bolero, it is necessary to highlight the great importance which Luz Casal's "Piensa en Mi" has for queer communities in Latin America.. The anthem-like qualities of the song speak to the importance of the Bolero in uniting and forming imagined and concrete queer communities that can potentially lobby for legal and political gains.

*Bolereo* aesthetics becomes clear in the following anecdote of an exchange between Pedro Almodóvar and Chavela Vargas:

[I]nstead of flirting with women in the audience, Chabela [sic] exchanged innuendos with Almodóvar, seated at a table with actresses Victoria Abril and Bibí Anderson of *Tacones*, who wept their way through Chabela's [sic] rendition of "Piensa en Mi." When Chabela [sic] suggested to Almodóvar from the stage that they get married and have lots of "Pedritos" [little



*¡Ay Chavela, tú eres capaz de hacer Milagros! Almodóvar and Chavela Vargas in Buenos Aires in 1998.*

Peters], the reply queered the religious lexicon of the Spanish press coverage, calling attention to the singer's advanced age and his/their own sexuality: "Ay Chavela, tú eres capaz de hacer milagros" [Oh Chavela, you are capable of making miracles]. (Yarbro-Bejarano 1997, 34)

The assertion of Vargas's and Almodóvar's queerness through a jocular public conversation on reproductive heterosexuality vividly epitomizes the emancipatory praxis of the *Bolereo* aesthetics: the subversion of sexually normative paradigms for the creation of a social space for queer subjects.

### Queer Donoso: *El Bolereo sin límites*

While the films of Almodóvar have been instrumental in the redeployment of a *Bolereo* aesthetics that is concurrent with the explosion of Bolero novels in the 1980s and 1990s, two of the most important Latin American queer novels offer for consideration an even earlier case of such usage. José Donoso's *El lugar sin límites* (1966) and Manuel Puig's *El beso de la mujer araña* (1976) use the Bolero to create a space in which queerness can thrive by using this musical form as a discursive tool that can stand up to the dominant ideology of compulsory heterosexuality. José Donoso's *El lugar sin límites* is the first Latin American novel in which a *maricón* character is the central figure of the narrative, beginning a long-standing concern on the part of the author for queer subjects in his texts. As González Mandri remarks on *El jardín de al lado* (1981): "The interaction between the male and female voices and their modes of expression produce the androgynous dialogue that form Donoso's novel" (González Mandri 1995, 109). In *El lugar sin límites*, "La Manuela" operates a rundown, rural brothel in La Estación El Olivo, a small provincial town forgotten by progress. "La Manuela se deja llevar por su actitud carnalesca y desafía el mundo represivo, y dado el código realista que impera en la obra, se hace necesaria su destrucción" [La Manuela lets herself be carried away by a carnivalesque attitude that defies the repressive world. Given the novel's realism, her destruction becomes necessary] (Sarrochi 1992, 132). Don Alejo, the most powerful landowner in the area, secretly plots to maintain the town in its precarious state in order to



buy the townspeople's few remaining properties at a discounted price. La Manuela, La Japonesita, and the rest of her employees struggle to retain their property and their business and to bring electricity to La Estación El Olivo. La Manuela's attempts to enlighten their bleak and dreary existence are constantly frustrated by Don Alejo's successes at keeping electricity from the village.

La Manuela and La Japonesita's main interest for bringing light to El Olivo are linked to their business's necessity for music. La Japonesita believes that the salvation of the brothel is the purchase of a Wurlitzer jukebox, which is, of course, dependent on electrical power:

En cuanto electrificaran el pueblo iba a comprar un Wurlitzer. Inmediatamente. No, antes. Porque si Don Alejo le traía esta tarde la noticia de que el permiso para la electrificación estaba dado o que se llegó a firmar algún acuerdo o documento, ella iba a comprar el Wurlitzer mañana mismo. [As soon as electricity reached the town it was necessary to buy a Wurlitzer. Immediately. No, sooner. Because if Don Alejo brought that very afternoon the news that the authorization for electricity



*Flores Negras: La Manuela's (Arturo Cobo) life as Bolero in Ripstein's 1977 adaptation of Donoso's novel El lugar sin límites.*

getting to the town had been granted or that some settlement or agreement had been signed, she would buy the Wurlitzer tomorrow without delay.] (Donoso 1995, 43)

Later, when she finds proof to support her suspicions of Don Alejo's conspiracy against electrical power reaching their city, La Japonésita's dream of a successful business with lights and good musical entertainment are shattered:

La electricidad y el Wurlitzer no fueron más que espejismos que durante un instante, por suerte muy corto, la indujeron a creer que era posible otra cosa. Ahora no. No quedaba ni una esperanza que pudiera dolerle, eliminando también el miedo. Todo iba a continuar así como ahora, como antes, como siempre. [The electricity and the Wurlitzer were nothing more than a mirage which, luckily, for a very brief moment led her to believe that something else was possible. Not now. There wasn't any hope left which could hurt her, eliminating in this way also pain. Everything would continue in just the same way as it is doing now, as it did before, and as it has been always.] (Donoso 1995, 57)

The aspirations for the Wurlitzer contrast with the phonograph they rely on for music. Disappointed over Don Alejo's machinations against them: "La Manuela fue a sentarse al otro lado del brasero y también se inclinó sobre él. La Cloty puso 'Flores Negras' en la vitrola y el disco comenzó a chillar. Las demás putas desaparecieron" [La Manuela went to sit on the other side of the hearth and reclined upon it. La Cloty put 'Flores Negras' on the phonograph and the record began to shrill. The rest of the whores disappeared] (58). The playing of the famous Sergio de Karlo's Bolero "Flores Negras" is of special significance here because it more than just frames the mood of disappointment felt by La Manuela: it illustrates how the novel operates according to nostalgic and social constructionist elements of *Bolereo* aesthetics. In this scene, the refrain: "Flores Negras del destino/ nos apartan sin piedad/ pero el día vendrá en que seas para mi nomás, nomás" [Destiny's Black Flowers/ Keeping us apart without mercy/ But the day will come when you will be mine, only mine] loses its connection to

the idea of romantic love and instead becomes an illustration of the deferred attachment to the Wurlitzer. The parallel drawn between the Wurlitzer and the desired person of which the Bolero speaks enacts an objectifying and consumerist transformation of an overly sentimental discourse and serves to undo the illusion of love as a coherent and unified formation. The possibilities that such an understanding of love allowed by this use of the Bolero include a reappraisal of dissident sexualities. It is for this reason that, throughout the novel, La Manuela is so strongly associated with the Bolero and brings the narrator to describe La Manuela's life as song: "Vieja estaría pero se iba a morir cantando" [She might be old, but she would die singing] (Donoso 1995, 16).

From the outset of the novel, the Bolero is used to paint a portrait of La Manuela as someone with a distinct relation to the dominant discourse of gender and sexuality:

La Manuela ... acercándose para ver si estaba lavando ropa de las otras putas, alzó sus cejas delgadas como hilos, y mirándola con los ojos fruncidos de fingida pasión, entonó:

Veredaaaaaaa

Tropicaaaaaaaaaal.

[La Manuela ... coming up close to her to see if she was washing the other whore's clothes, raised her thread-thin eyebrows and looking at her with half-closed eyes of feigned passion, sang: Tropicaaaaaaal Roooooooooaaaaaad.] (Donoso 1995, 17–18)

La Manuela's singing the famous Gonzalo Curiel Bolero, "Vereda Tropical," is presented, together with his plucked eyebrows and mannerisms, as a sign of effeminacy. Furthermore, the association of La Manuela's singing of Boleros while performing household chores serves to establish an association of the Bolero with masculine effeminacy:

puso los carbones sobre las cenizas del brasero y encima colocó la tetera. Cortó un pan por la mitad, lo enmatequilló y mientras preparaba el platillo, a cuchara y taza, canturreó muy despacio:

... tu la dejaste ir

vereda tropical ...

Hazla vooolver

Aaaaaaaaaaaaaa mí ...

[She put the charcoal on top of the hearth's ashes and placed the teapot on top. She cut a bread in half, buttered it, and while she prepared the cup, its dish and spoon, she softly sang: ... You let her go/ tropical road .../ Make her come baaaaaack/ Tooooooooo me ...] (Donoso 1995, 16)

This strong identification established between La Manuela, his effeminacy, and the Bolero continues in the depiction of La Manuela as a controlling agent of the phonograph's performance. La Manuela appears to be constantly dictating what records should and should not be played: "Elvira, cambia el disco, ponme 'Bésame mucho,' ay no, otra cosa mejor, algo más alegre" [Elvira, change the record, put on "Bésame Mucho," no something better, something happier] (Donoso 1995, 53). On another occasion: "Saca el disco, Cloty, que no oigo" [Take off the record, Cloty. I can't hear] (Donoso 1995, 58). Yet again, La Manuela "fue a la vitrola a poner otro disco" [She went to the



*Bolereo exposes the constructedness of courtly love in Ripstein's adaptation of Donoso's El lugar sin límites.*

phonograph to put on another record]. She plays “Flores Negras” and after only a couple of verses of that Bolero, she decides she does not to want to hear that Bolero anymore: “La Manuela detuvo el disco” [La Manuela stopped the record] (Donoso 1995, 60). La Manuela, the queer literary subject, in a capricious manner, exercises his will over the Bolero and attempts to make it work for his purposes because he recognizes the Bolero as his domain. Nevertheless, La Manuela is not able to arrest the tragic cycle in which his life is spiraling with the same success as he is able to stop the maudlin tunes of the Bolero. In fact, La Manuela’s constant changing of tear-jerking records illustrates his desperate attempts at deferring a woefully melancholy fate determined by a social masculinist order requiring an abject queerness in order to exist. La Manuela’s life as a doleful Bolero involves being rejected by the desired object, the manly Pancho—who after flirting, carousing, and sexually teasing La Manuela, beats him and leaves him for dead outside the city limits. Thus, *Bolereo*’s nostalgia emblemizes the queer desire to occupy once again the short-lived respite that its sentimentality provides from hostile heteropatriarchy.

Emblematizing La Manuela’s bashing, the old phonograph is suddenly presented in the last chapter as a collection of mechanical fragments scattered throughout the brothel’s living space. As casualties of Pancho’s *machista* rage, the metaphorical link between the phonograph and La Manuela arrives here at its culminating point. In his death, La Manuela is finally identified with the now also defunct Bolero-playing phonograph as the narrative source of the Bolero itself.

Octavio, quizás Pancho el primero, azotándolo con los puños ... lo encontraron y se lanzaron sobre él y lo patearon y le pegaron y lo retorcieron ... castigándolo ... castigándola ... castigándose. . .el cuerpo endeble de la Manuela que ya no resiste ... la Manuela apenas ve, apenas oye, apenas siente, ve, no, no ve, y ellos se escabullen a través de la mora y queda ella sola junto al río. [Octavio, maybe Pancho first, hit him with their fists ... they found him and threw themselves on him and kicked him and hit him and twisted him ... punishing him ... punishing her ... punishing themselves ... the frail body of La Manuela cannot take it any longer ... La Manuela barely sees, barely hears, barely feels, sees, no, cannot see, and they

flee through the bushes and she is left alone next to the river.]  
(Donoso 1995, 126–127)

La Cloty le dejó la victrola en la mesa frente a Don Céspedes que siguió desatornillando, abriendo, cortando con un cuchillo de cocina con mango de madera grasienta. Ya no fabrican repuestos para esta clase de aparatos. Mejor que la tires al canal. No sirve para nada. [La Cloty left the phonograph on the table in front of Don Céspedes, who continued unscrewing, opening, cutting with a greasy wooden-handled kitchen knife. They no longer make spare parts for this type of appliances. It will be better for you to throw it away in the canal. It is worthless.]  
(Donoso 1995, 129)

Within the geography of *El lugar sin límites*, the river stands as the dumping ground, the space for lynching, the village's Gehenna. The fact that this is the place where La Manuela's body is left by Pancho and his men contributes to a presentation of La Manuela as an abjected being. The fact that this is also the place where Don Céspedes suggests that the destroyed phonograph be discarded as rubbish serves to reinforce the connection between La Manuela and the Bolero-playing phonograph.

After La Manuela's bashing, El Olivo's state of stagnation is not disturbed in the least. La Japonesita has resigned herself to the fact that the electricity will not arrive to the town anytime soon. To Don Céspedes' remark that "Falta poco para que pongan electricidad" [It won't be long before the electricity arrives], she responds "Ya no. Don Alejo me vino a decir hoy" [Not anymore. Don Alejo came to tell me today] (Donoso 1995, 130). And she has forever given up the hopes for the Wurlitzer: "nada de Wurlitzers. Sólo la victrola de segunda mano para reponer ésta que rompió Pancho Vega" [No more Wurlitzers. Only the second-hand victrola to replace the one that Pancho Vega destroyed] (Donoso 1995, 131). A particular emphasis is made on the fact that the phonograph will be replaced by an identical "victrola de manivela"<sup>3</sup> (Donoso 1995, 130), so that it may function within the unchanged technological situation of the village. The fact that the spare parts for this type of phonograph are no longer available, as Don Céspedes points out, and that La Japonesita is forced to look for it in second-

hand stores because this type of manual phonograph is no longer sold in downtown stores points beyond the archaic nature of the phonograph. While a pessimistic interpretation underscores the feelings of hopelessness experienced by the residents of El Olivo—who interpret their condition as backwards and technologically undeveloped—the aesthetics of *Bolereo* allow us to conceive how playing these songs with recycled equipment speaks to the importance of reinterpreting heteronormative narratives undeterred by patriarchal orders.

### ***La otra Manuela: Manuel Puig***

Manuel Puig's *El beso de la mujer araña* follows Donoso's *El lugar sin límites* in the chronological development of the queer Latin American novel. The works of both authors are intertextually linked through Puig's adaptation of Donoso's novel for the screen. *Bolereo* aesthetics of ambiguity, playful identities and eventual tragedy are evident in this filmic adaptation by Manuel Puig:

After the script was taken out of his hands and worked over by the Mexican writer José Emilio Pacheco, Manuel asked that his name not be included in the credits. Pacheco and Ripstein had agreed on making it clear to the spectator that Pancho kills La Manuela, whereas Manuel wanted to preserve the original's ambiguous ending—which left La Manuela's fate to the reader's imagination, and also left open the possibility that Pancho's brutality would go unpunished. Though the film was “overdone, like an El Greco painting,” Manuel ultimately regretted withdrawing his name from the credits. (Levine 2000, 287)

Puig's vacillation, rejection, and ultimate regret over his manuscript evidence the *Bolereo* aesthetics that permeate his work. *El beso de la mujer araña* is structured as a dialogue between Molina, a *maricón* sex-offender, and Valentín, a Marxist revolutionary, inside the cell of a prison in Buenos Aires:

Un homosexual y un disidente político se han constituido en el otro para la norma autoritaria. Por su práctica sexual uno, y por sus ideales políticos el otro, se enfrentan al intento homo-

geneizante característico del autoritarismo. [A homosexual and a political dissident have been become “the other” of the authoritarian order. Through the sexual practices of one and the political ideals of the other, both confront the homogenizing ideals that characterize authoritarianism.] (Rosenkrantz 1999, 50)

As such, the novel is a commentary on the polarization of Latin American masculinities that attempts to fill the gap between certain binary distinctions such as that occurring between *el macho* and *el maricón*, and between the political activist and the aesthete. The conversation in the prison cell becomes reminiscent of the *Arabian Nights* as Molina, Scheherazade-like, begins to narrate movies to Valentín in order to pass the time, as a survival mechanism for mental stimulation in their situation of confinement.

Like Donoso's *La Manuela*, Manuel Puig's Molina is surrounded by the passionate, gushy, syrupy tunes of the Bolero. Throughout *El beso de la mujer araña*, Molina is repeatedly presented singing Boleros:

—“Querido, vuelvo otra vez a conversar contigo ... La noche, trae un silencio que me invita a hablarte ... Y pienso, si tú también estarás recordando, cariño ... los sueños tristes de este amor extraño ...”

—¿Qué es eso, Molina?

—Un Bolero, *Mi carta*.

—Sólo a vos se te ocurre una cosa así.

—¿Por qué?, ¿qué tiene de malo?

—Es romaticismo ñoño, vos estás loco.

—A mí me gustan los Boleros, y éste es precioso.

[—“Darling, I begin to speak with you again ... The night brings a silence that invites me to talk to you ... And I wonder whether you are also thinking, darling ... the sad dreams of this strange love ...”

—What is that, Molina?

—A Bolero, *My letter*.

—Only you would think up such a thing.

—Why? What's wrong with that?

—It's teary sentimentalism, you are nuts.

—I love Boleros, and this one is lovely.] (Puig 1994, 137)



José Amícola utilizes this scene in order to further his interpretation that “El juego de espionaje se transforma bajo el alma atosigada de ‘Kitsch’ de Molina en la persecución de una confesión amorosa [For Molina’s kitsch-drenched soul, the spying game becomes a chase seeking a declaration of love] (Amícola 1992, 121). I would like to propose that rather than “kitsch,” Molina is deploying here the queer aesthetics of *Bolereo* in order to expose the social constructedness of gender, thus opening spaces for sexually non-compliant subjects. Valentín, speaking from a masculinist and Marxist revolutionary perspective, is compelled to express his view of the apparently non-political Bolero as simply nauseating. Conversely, Molina is not afraid to admit he likes them; in fact, he confesses to knowing all the Boleros by Agustín Lara (Puig 1994, 142). The fact that Molina, the *maricón*, is represented as being more in touch with his feelings through his greater sense of appreciation of the Bolero than the masculine Valentín serves to establish the close connection between a queer sensibility and *Bolereo* aesthetics. As far as their different valorizations of the Bolero are concerned, Molina is able to convince Valentín of the inherent worth of these sentimental songs. After achieving a greater understanding of his own feelings through listening to Molina’s Boleros, Valentín admits: “Sí, me parece que no tengo derecho a reírme del Bolero” [Yes, I don’t think I have the right to laugh at that Bolero] (Puig 1994, 140). In all of this, Molina makes a particular effort to make sure that Valentín understands that the Bolero is not just a tear-jerking, mawkish musical genre. Molina tells Valentín: “Pero tonto, es que los Boleros dicen montones de verdades, es por eso que a mí me gustan tanto” [Don’t be foolish. Boleros say lots of truth. That’s why I like them so much] (Puig 1994, 143).

The movie plots that Molina narrates to Valentín are full of *Bolereo* sentimentality. One of them, for instance, takes place in tropical Veracruz, the Mexican port known to have inspired many Boleros and the place where many Bolero composers and singers come from. As the plot unravels, several characteristic themes of the Bolero—star-crossed lovers, painful love, nostalgia, and tragic fate—become evident. The unnamed lovers meet during the last night of carnival a few instants before the sun begins to come up, announcing Ash Wednesday. In disguise, their identities remain a mystery to one another as they dance. Taking off his mask, he begs her to let him see her face but she refuses,

arguing that theirs has been the perfect carnival evening and that their anonymity should remain so as to not spoil the fantasy. Shortly thereafter, she leaves to freshen up her make-up and never returns to the dance. Disappointed, he returns to his job as a journalist in Mexico City. He recommences his routine until one day at work he runs across a folder containing photos that will be used for an article intended to incriminate a certain retired female singer in some kind of scandal. Recognizing the ring on the finger of the famous star in the picture as being the same one that his masked lover wore in Veracruz, he steals the folder from the office, finds the singer, declares his love to her once more, and assures her that her complicity in this scandal will not be made public. She realizes she still loves him, but is unable to leave behind the wealth provided by her current husband, who sees singing as a lowly and unfit career for his wife and has forbade her from pursuing it. Eventually she leaves him and begins singing again, only to have her career sabotaged by her husband. In the meantime, another journalist manages to force open the locked drawer in which the compromising photos were kept and the article is scheduled to be printed in the next issue. Just in time, our journalist manages to destroy the malicious presses with a hammer before the issue is printed. Discovered in the act, he is fired, moves to Veracruz to live amidst the memories of that wonderful evening of carnival, and begins a bout of drinking that leads him to a severe illness. By a twist of fate, she discovers him in Veracruz and attempts to nurse him back to health through the money she has been earning with the only job she could find, prostitution. Finding out about her nightly employment, he decides to ease her financial burden by leaving her. When she finds him again, it is too late. He dies in a hospital bed in her arms.

This maudlin soap-opera narrative operates as a parable of Molina and Valentín's relationship in the jail cell. In order to secure food for themselves, Molina finds himself obligated to become a spy and surrender to the jail director any information that Valentín might have confided in him about his revolutionary organization. In the same manner as his fabricated female character, Molina must perform a duty perceived as dishonorable and ignoble. Their occupational degradation as sex-workers and spies loses its stigma and grants Molina and his filmic alter ego the sacrificial status of martyrs once their motivations are revealed. Like the virtuous prostitution of the film, Molina's spy-

ing exhibits certain qualities that mark it as a possible form of sexual infidelity. Valentín's emotional response to Molina's spying would undoubtedly have been that of a complicated and kind betrayal. That was the response given by the journalist upon finding out about his lover's prostitution. He sings "Noche de Ronda," the same Bolero that Chavela Vargas gives a queer interpretation, and, perversely, re-signifies the title to mean "night of prostitution" rather than "night of serenade" (Puig 1994, 244). Moreover, the sexual aspect of Molina and Valentín's relationship in the novel serves to strengthen the idea of Molina's spying as a potential act of unfaithfulness. Nevertheless, the fact that Molina refuses to hear from Valentín any information that could be valuable to the authorities—to whom he never does surrender any useful information—serves to vindicate his loyalty toward his friend Valentín.

This parallel tale can be construed as an example of Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*, encapsulating a song within a film within a novel, a trope that is extended *ad infinitum* if one considers its framing in Hector Babenco's 1985 film *Kiss of the Spider Woman*. This *mise-en-*



*Molina (William Hurt) narrates to Valentín (Raúl Juliá) movie plots based on Boleros in Hector Babenco's 1985 film version of Manuel Puig's El beso de la mujer araña.*

*abîme* contributes to the sense that *Bolereo* is a full aesthetic movement beyond the purely musical. The plot and scenario of the movie that Molina narrates are those from the so called golden era of Mexican cinema that was co-existent with the Bolero's popularity peak in the 1940s and 1950s. Therefore, the singing of Boleros plays an integral part of Molina's narration of the movie. The plot of Molina's film allows him plenty of opportunities to perform the Bolero and to, therefore, surround himself and Valentín within a discourse that Latin American queerness reclaimed and appropriated as its own. From the outset of Molina's film, the Bolero becomes a primary rhetorical tool in the narration. As the lovers dance during the last few hours of carnival, she comments on the beauty of a certain musical piece and laments the fact that there are no words to it: "ella dice que esa pieza es preciosa, y qué lástima que no tenga letra" [She says that this piece is precious and that it is a shame that it does not have any accompanying lyrics] (Puig 1994, 227–228). In the midst of his despair after leaving Veracruz, he turns to drinking. At a bar, coincidentally, he hears that same tune she so loved and begins to compose lyrics for it:

No sabe que hacer, y se va a tomar a una taberna, donde encontré un pianista ciego, que toca esa misma música tropical muy lenta, muy triste, que él bailo con ella en el carnaval. El muchacho toma, y toma, y va componiendo versos para esa música, pensando en ella, y canta, porque es un galán cantor: "Aunque vivas ... prisionera, en tu soledad ... tu alma me dirá ... te quiero." [He doesn't know what to do and goes to drink at a tavern, where he sees a blind pianist who plays that same slow, sad tropical tune he danced with her at carnival. He drinks and drinks while he composes verses to that tune, thinking of her and he elegantly sings: "Even if you live as a prisoner in your loneliness, your soul will tell me: 'I love you'." ] (Puig 1994, 229)

Something in our memory tells us that it has not been a very long time since we last heard these lyrics. Molina's selection of "Flores Negras" as one of the songs around which his narration is structured is of great importance when one considers that this was also one of the phonograph records which was strongly identified with La Manuela. Both

*El beso de la mujer araña* and *El lugar sin límites* identify a certain intensification of the queer aesthetic of *Bolero* in “Flores Negras” and use it in order to illustrate their narrations:

Me hacen daño tus ojos, me hacen daño tus manos,  
 me hacen daño tus labios que saben fingir,  
 y a mi sombra pregunto si esos labios que adoro,  
 en un beso sagrado, podrán mentir ...  
 Aunque viva prisionera  
 en mi soledad, mi alma te dirá:  
 “Te quiero”;  
 nuestros besos guardan flama  
 de un beso voraz  
 que no olvidarás mañana.  
 Flores negras del destino  
 nos apartan sin piedad,  
 pero el día vendrá en que seas  
 para mí nomás, nomás. . .  
 [Your eyes harm me, your hands harm me,/ your feigning lips  
 harm me,/ And to my shadow I ask if those lips that I love/ in a  
 sacred kiss, could lie .../ Even if I live as a prisoner in my soli-  
 tude, my soul will tell you: “I love you”;/ Our kisses keep the  
 flame/ of a voracious kiss/ that you will not forget tomorrow./  
 Destiny’s black flowers/ keeping us apart without pity,/ But the  
 day will come in which you will be mine, only mine.]

Certainly, Molina is the “prisionera” of the Bolero. Puig himself used feminine language to refer to certain men: “He always referred to himself as ‘this woman,’ and he was merciless with closeted writers: quite perversely, he would refer to them as ‘she’” (Manrique 1999, 40). It is also possible to extend this idea of imprisonment to La Manuela, who is incarcerated by Pancho Vega’s machismo and Don Alejo’s despotism within the regressive and undeveloped confines of La Estación El Olivo. The title and the refrain “Flores Negras” anticipate the tragic death of both characters in the texts. La Manuela dies as a victim of machismo’s homophobia. Molina, on the other hand, appears to have been shot to death by Valentín’s comrades in order to ensure his silence regarding secrets Molina could have learned from him while in prison.

“Me hacen daño tus manos” speaks to the ambivalent disposition of fear and attraction that La Manuela has towards Pancho Vega, at whose hands she dies at the end of *El lugar sin límites*. It is difficult not to read the “beso” which the songs alludes to as the “beso de la mujer-araña” [the kiss of the spider-woman]. At the text’s erotic climax, during Molina and Valentín’s love-making, Molina asks Valentín for a kiss (Puig 1994, 267). Are Molina’s lips, which kiss Valentín, able to also keep secrets that could jeopardize the life of the revolutionary in jail? Are Molina’s kissing lips also able to lie and deceive? And if so, who would they deceive: Valentín or the jail authorities?

During the conversation at her house when he realizes she is not ready to leave her rich husband, the journalist exits the house but leaves behind a copy of the Bolero “Flores Negras,” only one of the many Boleros that he composes for her (Puig 1994, 233). In maudlin fashion, she picks up the paper: “se lleva ese paper todo estrujado al corazón, que a lo mejor está tan estrujado como ese papel, tanto ... o más” [She takes this crumpled up paper to her heart—a heart which is probably as crumpled up as, if not more than, that piece of paper] (Puig 1994, 233). If the journalist is constantly composing Boleros, she is often presented performing them. As the narrator of the movie, Molina is given the opportunity to sing these Boleros to Valentín: “Todos dicen que la ausencia es la causa del olvido, ... y yo te aseguro que no es la verdad, ... desde aquel último instante que pasé contigo, mi vida parece ... llena de crueldad” [All say that absence is the cause of forgetfulness, ... and I assure you it is not true, ... since that last time I spent with you, my life seems ... full of cruelty] (Puig 1994, 240). Even at the moment of his death he is softly whispering the lyrics of Boleros he has composed and that he wants her to sing (Puig 1994, 261–262).

The queer characters in Donoso’s *El lugar sin límites* and in Puig’s *El beso de la mujer araña* circulate within *Bolereo* aesthetics. Not unlike the way in which many of the Bolero’s most famous vocalists have utilized the tropes of this musical genre to open a space for sexual deviance within a predominantly heterosexual discourse, Donoso and Puig’s queer characters—La Manuela and Molina—are presented as reinterpreting the Bolero in order to make the heterosexual discursive world they inhabit more livable for them. As such, *Bolereo* is a distinctive feature of Latin American queer subjectivities that exposes

the constructedness of gendered and sexual identities and practices. This strategy of simultaneously uncovering and perverting queerness at the very heart of heteropatriarchal sentimentality operates as a communal choreography of queer resistance that dances to the paired rhythms of this fruitful ambivalence. An understanding of these uses of *Bolereo* in musical performance, literature, and film contributes to a fuller understanding of Latin American queerness and of the ways in which this strategy of cultural resistance might be able to preclude the full absorption of Latin American non-heteronormative sexualities by the sexual categories from the industrialized world that are, as of now, transforming the gender landscape of the globe.

## Notes

- 1 All translations are my own.
- 2 Mexican cinema of the 1930s propagated the Bolero throughout Latin America (Malavet Vega 1988, 25). It is important to remember that in 1950s Daniel Santos appears in a Cuban movie called *Ritmos del Caribe* with Rita Montaner, Amalia Aguilar, and Rafael Baledón (Malavet Vega 1988, 41). Also, the Boleros “Bonita,” “Momento,” and “Superstición” appear as background music in the film *La Tarea* (1990) by Jaime Humberto Hermosillo (Bazán Bonfil 2001, 69), the same director who produced the important Mexican film *Doña Herlinda y su Hijo* (1986).
- 3 A phonograph operated by a hand-held crank.

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