

**‘The Importance of Being Daniel Santos: Popular Modernity  
and the Bolero’**

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**Latin American Music Seminar**

**Institute of Latin American Studies,**

**10 May 2003**

The title of today’s talk is a translation of Puerto Rican author Luis Rafael Sánchez’s extraordinary text *La importancia de llamarse Daniel Santos* published in 1984.

This paper is part of work-in-progress towards a book on constructions of identity and the bolero in Cuba, Mexico, Puerto Rico and possibly the Dominican Republic. It will form part of two chapters: one on modernity and class in Mexico/Puerto Rico and one on masculinities. What I am presenting today is based on two texts about Santos, *La importancia de llamarse Daniel Santos* (obvious play on Oscar Wilde) by Sánchez, *Vengo a decirle adios a los muchachos* (which takes its name from a line from the 1941 Pedro Flores bolero ‘Despedida’) published in 1989 by Josean Ramos and some of the archival material I gathered recently on a three-month research trip to San Juan. This work will also feed in to an article on popular music and literature in Puerto Rico and the Puerto Rican diaspora.

Who then for those of you who may be unfamiliar with him is/was Daniel Santos? Born in 1916 in the poor but highly musically productive neighbourhood of Trastalleres in San Juan, Puerto Rico, Santos led a highly eventful life (until his death from natural causes in 1992) taking in military tours of duty in Korea, extended periods of residency in the U.S., Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia and Cuba. However, today I’m less interested in precise biographical details than Santos the myth. Santos the ‘Jefe’ (nickname given in a bar in one of the poorer areas of Medellín, Guayaquil), ‘protomacho proletario’ (iconic macho), ‘el irresponsable más responsable de la añoranza, promotor de la melancolía y el Gran Gurú de los despedchos’ (Ramos), ‘hombre rebelde y camusiano sin saberlo, fue como un poeta maldito, cual un Baudelaire hirviente en los calores del trópico’ (Rodríguez 1999) ‘el Inquieto Anacobero’ (he was mistakenly announced on Cuban radio using this ñaño term meaning little devil which was actually the title of the song he was

singing) and the singer of 'la plebe de mierda, chusma, morralla, broza, el inefable lumpen' (Sánchez 1989: 90). I'm going to focus on the latter this morning or Santos the rebel with a proliferation of causes.

In their study of popular culture in Latin America, William Rowe and Vivian Schelling describe popular music forms such as the bolero as the soundtrack to everyday life, shaping collective memory, identity and individual desire through the dynamic, material experience of listening to music (1994: 233). They briefly discuss the use of the bolero in novels by Manuel Puig and Mario Vargas Llosa, but concentrate particularly on *La importancia de llamarse Daniel Santos*, a hybrid narrative or 'fabulation' combining novel, dramatic dialogue, chronicle, testimony, essay, travel text, in which they argue the bolero, in the voice of the singer Daniel Santos, functions as a cultural model displaying 'irreverence (in voice), transgression and retaliatory laughter, qualities which are the resources of the poor who are the majority' (1994: 233). As a popular hero or 'mito cimarrón', Santos is marginal to the system and acts outside the strictures of bourgeois morality (Ortega 1991a: 37). Sánchez himself, in his prolific work as an essayist has suggested that he believes 'gozo' or 'pleasure' to be an integral Caribbean cultural form of alleviating political and economic misery. He stresses the importance of hope and passion for everyday life as expressed through popular culture (1991: 240). Indeed in an interview given in Mexico in 1990 about *La importancia de llamarse Daniel Santos* he refers to the text as a response to 'precariousness, hunger and misery' not only in the Caribbean but throughout 'la América amarga, la América descalza, la América en español', a repeated motif in the text. Santos is reclaimed for Latin America as a whole and indeed was an international figure. In the memoirs Santos himself related in Venezuela in 1982, Héctor Mujica states 'los habaneros [lo] creen cubano y los dominicanos aseguran que nació en Santo Domingo. Y no faltará algún despistado venezolano que le ponga a nacer en Muchinga o en El Silencio' (1982: 127). The narrator of *La importancia de llamarse Daniel Santos* interviews fans throughout the continent in his investigation of the legendary singer and their personal identification with Santos suggests a multiple but unified Latin American communality made possible through the sharing of a common cultural space (Perivolaris 2000). In a perhaps rather utopic or romantic vision, music is seen as an integrating or cohesive force across the continent (an idea commonly featured in the Latin American press and the attempt to find a unifying factor for Latin America has been an obsession of essayists). However, whilst suggestive of a collective memory or arena for communal

fantasy and desire, Sánchez focuses on the reactions of particularized individuals and groups who identify with distinct spatial locations: streets, neighbourhoods, cities and countries. Both the texts by Sánchez and Ramos display a polyphonic orality. The fans in Sánchez's text include prostitutes, immigrants and members of other marginalized/peripheral groups. All of them incorporate bolero lyrics/lexicon into their speech. The text subverts conventional literary models through its incorporation of popular musical discourse to represent an intrahistory of the marginal 'cultura barriobajera'. Ramos's text draws on his actual experience as Santos's press secretary during a tour of Colombia in the summer of 1987 with Leo Marini and Roberto Ledesma as 'Los Tres Aces del Bolero' and was completed through a combination of archival research and real-life interviews with record collectors, journalists, radio presenters, musicians, composers, singers but also drunks, housewives, old people, mafiosi and whores (I'm paraphrasing his text) to provide a similar mosaic of multiple voices.

The urban reality or modernity engaged with by Sánchez in *La importancia de llamarse Daniel Santos* is not the brilliant modernity of the American dream cityscape with its glittering skyscrapers but a peripheral and fundamentally popular modernity, vital and insubordinate to the defined order. The processes of modernization are harsh, hard and aggressive for the developing new social class of the urban masses who no longer fit into traditional social structures and in many ways the development of mass culture is a response to their necessity for a way to express their means of understanding the world around them. The bolero in the voice of Santos is depicted as a music of these masses who have been affected by the radical transformations of a process of modernization associated with accelerated change and social fragmentation. It provides a counter-discourse to official history for subaltern classes deprived of social representation opening up a cultural space in which emotion, intimacy and interpersonal relationships are privileged. Family ties and the bonds of friendship and neighbourhood solidarity form a counterpoint to modern social structures and macrosocial processes. Rafael Castillo Zapata, in his phenomenology of the bolero, describes it as a communitary aesthetic practice which responds to the necessity for collective catharsis to alleviate the alienation of urban reality (1991: 37).

The modern Santos is identified with the people from the poorer neighbourhoods or 'barriadas'. Ramos describes them as the 'gran masa proletaria perdida en el anonimato del asfalto urbano' (1989: 152) and Santos

himself explicitly identifies with the poor, criminalized neighbourhoods that have contributed so much to the development of music in Latin America such as his birthplace, Trastalleres in San Juan (Ramos 1989: 133). According to Sánchez, 'Por la sintonía enardecida con la población numerosísima de los pobres, de los que viven arañando, de los cualquiera, crece y se perpetúa la modernidad del Inquieto Anacobero Daniel Santos. Por la sintonía con las marginaciones sentimentales. Por el desembarazo con que Daniel Santos sujeta, domina y arrodilla la bestia arisca que, algunos días, se convierte la vida' (1989: 92). Daniel Santos is representative of this modernity for his capacity to survive the 'isms' of fashion, for his vitality, lower-class origins, daring and love of risk (Sánchez 1989: 80-93). For the Colombian Hernán Restrepo Duque (in his history of key bolero performers and songs), Santos becomes 'todo un personaje para la historia de la música popular en América' (1992: 130). He relates the 'Black Legend' of Santos's donjuanismo, his consumption of drugs and alcohol, his fights, the arrests and spells in jail which resulted in compositions such as 'El preso', 'Regla', 'Cautiverio', 'Los dos amigos' and 'Catapum pa' dentro Anacobero', but also emphasizes his political commitments. In 1957 he composed the song 'Sierra Maestra' on hearing the news that Fidel Castro had supposedly been killed in the Sierra Maestra. He had difficulties recording it but eventually managed in New York and distributed it himself in Miami. He donated all profits from the record to the exiles of the Movimiento 26 de julio. Seventeen copies found their way back to Cuba and the song became a revolutionary anthem played repeatedly on Radio Rebelde and thereby causing C.I.A./F.B.I. interest in Santos. However, it's necessary to point out that Santos was not clearly committed to any one concrete political ideology with the exception perhaps of the cause of Puerto Rican Independence, in particular he identified with Puerto Rican Nationalists such as Pedro Albizu Campos (and the poet Juan Antonio Corretjer) and their demands for Puerto Rican independence from the U.S. (despite ending his days living in Florida). Indeed at his burial the Independence anthem 'La borinqueña' was sung. Santos, repeatedly declared himself not to be a Communist but a supporter of Freedom and Independence. Although he travelled to Cuba on the first of January 1959 to accompany Fidel on his victorious entry into Havana he did not remain there. He travelled throughout the continent, continuing to visit countries such as Nicaragua and Colombia, even in the most violent and turbulent years.

Santos was particularly linked to the composer Pedro Flores whom he described as his lyrical Cyrano and indeed the two are buried next to each

other in the Magdalena cemetery in San Juan. Flores was associated with simple, clear lyrics. His aim was to communicate effectively with the masses and he advised Santos to do the same in his own compositions. Héctor Mujica identifies Santos's lexicon as a key factor in his identification with the 'hampa común latinoamericana' (1982: 116). His language and performances revindicate that which is despised as 'cursi, chabacano, guarango, hortero, huachafo, lobo, mersa, naco'. Flores is also commonly credited by Santos as a decisive influence in his style of singing. He began imitating the popular tango singers of the time in the 1930s but Flores admonished him to develop his own particular style. Santos, ever the 'jodedor' messed about changing final 'As' to 'Os' but Flores liked it and it stuck. He also suggested that Santos sing 'picadito' emphasising individual syllables.

For the Colombian cultural critic, Jesús Martín Barbero urban mass culture combines marked materialism with overflowing sentimentality and passion (1998: 218). Indeed, escapism has been levelled at the bolero as a negative charge, romantic illusion offering temporary respite or cathartic release from material problems of everyday life but no solution to these same problems. However, as well as configuring an alternative escapist fantasy world in contrast with the frustrations of lived experience, these songs are interpolated into the fabric of everyday life, shaping hopes, desires and the discourse with which people express themselves. The pleasures of consumption or evasion interplay with the pleasures of producing meaning, an active process on the part of the listener for whom the experience of listening is a dynamic experience of identity, both individual and collective, constructed materially through music (Frith 1996: 121-4).

Popular urban culture is not simply passively received as is evident from the multiple interpretations/appropriations of the bolero and construction of the collective myth of Daniel Santos explored in the texts of Sánchez and Ramos. Within the processes of recognition and identification there are opportunities for micropolitical resistance. It can be argued that the bolero as sung by Santos (and played on the jukeboxes of innumerable 'cantinas') provides a voice for the expression of resistant popular consciousness within a capitalist society in which divisions of class and race organize hierarchical power relationships. However, the bolero is a particularly complex romantic form. It is a music which appeals not only to the marginalized within society but cuts across classes, in Sánchez's text Daniel Santos is shown to have fans drawn from all sectors: the lumpenproletariat, the middle classes, the oligarchs, the rich

(1989: 90). In contrast to the resistant reading proposed above, the bolero can be seen to embody conservative values particularly with relation to gender. In this respect, Santos, himself, is not a particularly heroic myth. A completely different paper on him would focus on his status as iconic macho. The bolero and its performers offer both liberating and regressive readings and it is this contradictory nature that lies at the core of understanding the complex negotiations involved in determining the meaning of this popular cultural practice.

#### Acknowledgements:

Many thanks to the British Academy for the small grant that enabled me to conduct research in Puerto Rico from January to March 2003.

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