

**‘Tears and Screams: Performances of Pleasure and Pain in the Bolero’ (1)  
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As we’re in a stream about queering practice and a session about transgressing gender boundaries, let me begin by setting out some parameters. In this paper I will be interpreting queer as the unsettling of traditional, binary categorizations of gender and sexuality. My aim is to demonstrate that the bolero song genre traverses such boundaries through the semiotic uncertainty of its lyrics and the camp nature of the performative style of many singers, particularly women associated with the ‘filin’ or ‘feeling’ movement. ‘Feeling’, as its name suggests, is a more emotional or expressive style of singing achieved through various techniques (Rico Salazar 73). It can be characterized not only by features of composition (for example the use of impressionistic or jazz-inflected harmonies) and vocal technique (varying tempo and stress), but also by its performance style. For the Cuban musicologist Natalio Galán ‘filin’ demonstrates a camp sensibility, particularly associated with the highly dramatic, gestural performances of certain popular female singers (296-99).

The use of exaggerated vocal techniques, lush big band orchestration and excessive gestures by singers such as the Cubans La Lupe (Guadalupe Victoria Yoli Raimond) and Olga Guillot would seem to fit in with Susan Sontag’s description of camp as “a love of the exaggerated” (279). Indeed, Sontag includes La Lupe as part of the canon of camp in her classic 1964 essay, “Notes on Camp” (278). As a linguist I want to pause briefly and consider what I mean by the term ‘camp’. The etymological origin of the term ‘camp’ can be traced

variously to the Italian 'campeggiare' meaning 'to stand out', to the French 'se camper' meaning self-conscious posturing (Ross 157) or the Indo-European root 'kamp' signifying curved, flexible, articulated (Cleto, "Queering the Camp" 29-30). Like queer, camp calls into question fixed positions. However, the self-conscious theatrical nature of camp does not preclude it being sincere or politically motivated. In his analysis of a camp sensibility in cinema Jack Babuscio rephrases Oscar Wilde, "the importance of being artificial" is to force the audience to question their assumptions (128). The stylization of camp can act paradoxically to both distance and engage the audience. Similarly, Richard Dyer describes queer culture as demonstrating an acute awareness of surface, construction and play which is characterized by an urgency or edge because 'mattering matters'(284). The frivolous becomes serious, to take up Babuscio's contestation of Sontag's categorization of camp as failed seriousness or as Fabio Cleto argues, camp traverses the polarities of seriousness and play; you cannot camp what you do not take seriously ("Queering the Camp" 25-28). Through the explicit emphasis on deliberate performance 'filin' provides a queer cultural space in which gender identities and sexual roles can be destabilized and singers such as La Lupe, Guillot and Chavela Vargas in Mexico have become camp icons or divas in the Hispanic world.

Over the course of its history the bolero has shifted from the relatively private (or semi-public) performance of the serenade with simple guitar accompaniment to the public stage and wider audience of theatres, radio, film and eventually television. The sonic requirements of the new performance arenas and early recording techniques influenced the change in instrumentation with the use of piano, orchestras and big bands which has paradoxically served to place increased emphasis on the vocality of the performer who becomes the focal point for audience identification. As the bolero was internationalized the original rhythmic hegemony of the 'cinquillo cubano' (five notes value: long-short-long-short-long) was lost and melodies increasingly followed the prosody of the lyrics; the voice

and timbre of instruments such as the violin were more closely identified in the production of an apparently intimate sound. To turn to the voice in the bolero, it may be seductive, offering images of the ideal other and promises of eternal love. Indeed, the bolero is commonly conceived of as a discourse privileging unrestrained romanticism or sentimentality (Campos 637), and love in its multiple variations is the predominant, although by no means the exclusive, theme of the bolero. However, it is important to note that many boleros deal with the flipside of romantic love: deception and disillusionment, jealousy, abandonment and betrayal. According to the Puerto Rican critic Iris Zavala, the bolero speaks the language of desire, of its absence and presence, of illusion and disillusionment and is therefore not so much about love or pleasure but about a desire that by definition is impossible to realize: the pursuit of the unattainable other (1991). It would thus seem to express modern theories of desire in its tension between absence and desire for presence. This psychoanalytic interpretation of the bolero is further explored by Karen Poe (1996) who examines the discourse of the bolero, the grain or erotic texture of the voice and the attempt to erase difference through the closeness of dance, in relation to the oneiric world of dreams and a return to the space of the maternal semiotic in an attempt to transgress the limits of the 'ego'.

Following on from Poe's analysis of the depiction of femininity as the repressed other or Freudian 'dark enigma' in bolero lyrics, many critics have interpreted the bolero as a conservative genre in terms of gender politics (Aristizabal; Campos, Monsiváis). In other words the desire being articulated is resolutely male and heterosexual. However, the bolero is far from being an exclusively male-produced discourse. As well as numerous female performers, there were many famous women composers of boleros such as the Mexicans María Grever and Consuelo Velázquez, and the Cubans Isolina Carrillo and Marta Valdés, to name but a few. Frances Aparicio engages in a more nuanced reading of the bolero that attempts to take into account the ambivalences inherent in the genre with regards to gender

(1998). Along with Zavala (1991) and Poe (1996), she traces the development of bolero lyrics from the Western tradition of courtly love through the ‘modernista’ imagery of poets such as Rubén Darío in which women are idealized and mythified as almost divine figures, eternal and unattainable seductresses, objects of male unrequited longing or unconsummated love (Aparicio 125-28). In contrast many lyrics feature a rather decadent ‘femme fatale’ drawn from the nineteenth century romantic tradition of poems dedicated to ‘fallen women’. Whilst this would seem to fall into the typical dichotomy of woman as angel or whore, the latter is often celebrated rather than denigrated. Prostitutes and relationships outside the legal confines of marriage were particularly immortalized in the boleros of the prolific Mexican composer Agustín Lara who began his career as a pianist in locales of ill-repute. In these boleros the motifs of absence, separation and abandonment are central and Aparicio suggests that they are a reaction to the increased access of women to public spaces as Latin America became increasingly industrialized and urbanized through the course of the twentieth century. In contrast to these narratives of loss, Aparicio argues that women composers and singers break with social norms in boleros which often take up this motif of separation to voice women’s desire for an alternative, independent path in life in which the emphasis is on mobility and freedom of movement clearly subverting the gendered binary division of masculine activity and feminine passivity (130-32).

However, Aparicio’s reading of the libidinal economy inscribed in the bolero begins by examining songs in which the power differential between men and women is articulated through a discourse of male sexual domination. The synecdochal representation of women through fragmented eroticized body parts, particularly the eyes, lips, mouth and hands, would again seem to take up a longstanding poetic tradition harking back to the troubadours in which women are portrayed as fetichized objects of male desire and fantasy. However, in an inversion of traditional male-female relationships in a patriarchal context, the male in the

bolero is frequently presented as suffering and vulnerable, victimized by the female (Campos 638). Aparicio draws on Zavala's discursive analyses of the bolero (1990, 1991) which focus on the gender fluidity of the central signifiers or semiotic shifters, 'yo' [I] and 'tú/usted' [you]. The majority of boleros are not addressed to a specific named, and therefore gendered, subject. This indeterminacy permits the relatively easy regendering of lyrics, allowing male and female performers to interpret the same song. A space is opened up through the ambivalent gender politics of the discourse of the bolero for a strong female voice which may be accusatory or passionate and erotically transgressive. For example, the imperative lyrics of Consuelo Velázquez's "Bésame mucho" [Kiss me a lot] premiered by Chela Campos in 1941 openly express sexual desire through a repeated series of exhortations which suggest rather more than a chaste kiss on the mouth.

Whilst the bolero can contest patriarchal categories of gender by subverting the binary of masculine activity and feminine passivity, thereby allowing women to express sexual desire, passion and anger, traditionally masculine qualities, its conventions also provide a sanctioned musical space within which men can cathartically express their emotions and sensitivity, traditionally feminine attributes. Big boys can and do cry. It is a discourse of affective self-disclosure in both the public and private realm as romantic music is not just used as a background sound for courtship in Latin America; as Deborah Pacini Hernández notes it may be used actively as a surrogate voice which articulates emotion and negotiates relationships through acts such as dedicating a song on the radio, giving a record or serenading a loved one (192). René Campos argues that the masculine voice expresses both passion and vulnerability through the bittersweet lyrics of the bolero and vocal techniques such as portamento, the lengthening of syllables at the end of a phrase (638), although I would add that this technique is by no means exclusive to male singers. It is a feature of the singing style of Olga Guillot whom I mentioned earlier. Interestingly, the blurring of traditional

gender attributes that occurs within the lyrics and the performance onstage on the whole does not necessarily seem to compromise the perceived masculinity of the singers offstage or affect their popularity. The 'Inquieto Anacobero' [Devil that never stands still] Daniel Santos, also known as the 'Ace of Hearts' or 'Charming Voice', was a legendary Don Juan figure (in)famous for drinking to excess, brawling and getting arrested. As captured in the iconography of his record covers, his image is that of the hard-drinking, smoking man frequenting 'cantinas' and listening to boleros on the jukebox (the 'victrola' or 'vellonera'). His position as a crooner of romantic songs such as "Dos gardenias" [Two gardenias] (Isolina Carrillo, 1947) did not interfere with his status as iconic macho par excellence. A perhaps more obviously 'romantic' heartthrob is Lucho Gatica who with his suave, brilliantined image was allegedly the dream man of thousands of female admirers. However, his clear dominion of high registers could be described as feminine. Whilst on the one hand he is identified as the heterosexual, attractive 'galán' [heartthrob], as José Quiroga notes, the "Gentleman of Song" is a potential border crosser with whom a homosexual audience has also identified (161). Even more fascinating is the process by which an openly effeminate performer like Juan Gabriel (whose closeted homosexuality has been described as a 'secreto a voces' [open secret]) has gained the affections of the Mexican public in a society perhaps more noted for its overt homophobia and machismo. (2)

However, on the whole, the bolero performers who have become icons of the Hispanic gay community are women associated with a camp style of performance. They are divas as defined by Alberto Mira in his dictionary of Hispanic gay and lesbian culture:

Quizá la clave que define a la diva es el modo en que habita su propio mito, el modo en que su vida supura en sus creaciones. (235)

[Perhaps the key to defining the diva (as opposed to the star) is the way in which she inhabits her own myth, the way in which her life oozes through her creations.]

The blurring of private and public life has marked the careers of La Lupe and Chavela Vargas, both gay icons in the Hispanic world who found themselves marginalized by the mainstream (although Chavela found success again in the 1990s through her recuperation in the films of the highly successful Spanish film director, Pedro Almodóvar). The fascination these wounded divas exert for gay audiences is complex and the identification is not necessarily on the level of gender or sexuality. It may be accounted for by many factors including: identification with the marginal and a capacity to survive difficult circumstances, with an aesthetics of emotional suffering and intense pain, with risqué eroticism and excess, with the semiotics of glamour. La Lupe's stage show was marked by her aggressive performative style which was excessive in both vocal technique and bodily display, and highly erotically suggestive breaking with social norms of decorum and passivity for women in Cuba in the 1950s. Her flamboyance called attention to the artifice of presumed natural gender roles through its acting out of images of excess. However, both her fans and detractors describe her in terms conventionally associated with feminine emotion and irrationality: scandalous, eccentric, mad, hysterical. The identification of her vocality with a violent, uncontrollable female sexuality seemed to provoke both desire and fear. Like La Lupe, Chavela Vargas was censured for her openly sexual stance in 1960s Mexico but in her case that stance was overtly lesbian ('macha' or butch). She 'lesbianized' lyrics alluding to heterosexual masculine subjects of desire and identified with a masculinized eroticism -grabbing her crotch in performances and posing caressing a guitar (traditionally sexualized as the body of a woman)- and macho culture of smoking/tequila. Like La Lupe, the materiality of Chavela's voice transcends the lyrics being sung to communicate emotion and eroticism through the body.

There are passionate breaks in register and a whole gamut of (guttural) sounds are employed including sighs, moans, groans, grunts, laughter and cries.

Many bolero lyrics make no explicit reference to gender whatsoever allowing for multiple meanings which shift through performance depending on who is singing, who is listening and whether the listener identifies with the singing 'yo' [I] or the 'tú' [you] being addressed thereby facilitating both hetero- and homo-erotic identifications. For example "Tú me acostumbraste" by Frank Domínguez (1955) includes no gendered adjectives and has been recorded by diverse artists such as René Cabel, Lucho Gatica, Elena Burke and Olga Guillot without requiring any morphological transformation. In its oblique references to 'esas cosas' or 'un mundo raro' it opens up possibilities for resemanticization as a homoerotic articulation of desire (Zavala, "El bolero" 76-78). In a fascinating article about melodrama and nostalgia the Puerto Rican critic Eliseo Colón Zayas discusses a number of recordings in which the binary divisions of gender and sexuality are clearly broken down: Linda Ronstadt (U.S.) singing "Perfidia" [Perfidy] which is addressed to another woman without a regendering of the singing subject, Juan Gabriel (Mexico) and Rocío Durcal (Spain) singing "Fue un placer conocerte" {It was a pleasure to meet/know you] in unison thereby making both the subject and the object of the bolero simultaneously male and female, Gilberto Santa Rosa and Tito Rodríguez (Puerto Rico) singing "En la soledad" [In solitude] as a duet (made possible through digital technology some twenty years after Rodríguez's death) in which two male voices sing to each other thereby displacing heterosexual discourse altogether (1995). A fluid space is created for diverse subjectivities to be expressed.

To conclude, the bolero remains a semantically unstable site of semiotic excess, slippery in its resistance to easy categorizations. It is a complex and contradictory form, a potentially conservative gendered discourse that simultaneously provides the opportunity for resistance to structures of domination. The power of the music is enhanced by its direct appeal

to the listener creating a sense of belonging through affective investment. Through performances of erotic pleasure and emotional pain by men and women, male and female voices and bodies provide a potentially empowering site for a range of listeners identifying with the multiple positions held open in the bolero song form. To fully understand this phenomenon we need to engage in an analysis that goes beyond lyrics and musical features to examine closely performance style (including costume) and the materiality of the voices/bodies of the bolero.

#### Notes

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2. I am grateful to Rodrigo Laguarda for a copy of his unpublished paper, “Vamos al Noa Noa: de homosexualidad, secretos a voces y ambivalencias en la música de Juan Gabriel”, presented at the IV conference of the Latin American IASPM branch, 2-6 April 2002.

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