

Santa Teresa out of the closet: queer intertextuality and the performance of Latin American identity in Roberto Bolaño's 'Amalfitano cycle'.

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ABSTRACT: Amongst many skeletons buried in Sonora's desert, the sexually dissident one is the least predictable. Nevertheless, in the Mexican parts of Bolaño's *2666*, the reader witnesses an authentic flourish of queer allusions, placed in decidedly strategic moments, always referring to the tragicomic questioning of the Latin American clichés crystallized in the most famous literary series of the Sixties and the Seventies. The queer, indeed, represents one of the possible variations of that characteristic *lumpenism* that imposes a necessary downgrade on Bolaño's characters, making them reach a limit state where every cultural alibi loses consistency.

In the posthumous novel that retrospectively reveals some of the secret reasons for his behavior in *2666 – Los sinsabores del verdadero policía –*, Amalfitano is discovered by his young gay lover "as a continent is discovered". Following the indication of this enlightening simile, I will study the paths through which Bolaño leads one of his most authorized aliases on a visit to the museum of static artifacts of Latin American performativity, denuding them of its characteristic pomposity with the help of a disruptively sharp queer eye.

KEYWORDS: Performativity; Latin American Identity; Roberto Bolaño; Intertextuality; Latin Queer.

En la raíz de todos mis males se encuentra mi admiración por los delincuentes, las putas, los perturbados mentales [...]. Cuando adolescente hubiera querido ser judío, bolchevique, negro, homosexual, drogadicto y medio loco, y manco para más remate, pero sólo fui profesor de literatura.

(BOLAÑO 2012: 127)

INTRODUCTION

Increasingly visible in contemporary Latin American literature are motifs and formal elements that share with queerness an emphasis on provisional and unstable subjectivities, places, and temporalities. More precisely, in a rich and complex corpus of texts (approximately from the past thirty years)¹ – which sees in Pedro Lemebel's pioneering *Loco afán* both a crucial inter-text and

¹ To name a few: Diamela Eltit's *El cuarto mundo*, Lina Meruane's *Las infantas*, Gabriele Cabezón Cámara's *La Virgen Cabeza*, Giuseppe Caputo's *Un mundo huérfano*, Claudia Hernández *El verbo j*, Mario Bellatín's *Salón de belleza* and *Flores*, Lucía Puenzo's *El niño pez*.

a campy patron saint –, the thematic obsession with the opaque, incongruous, mischievous body overtly exceeds LGBT specific concerns and seems to be used as a vital strategy for questioning old (and suggesting new) forms of citizenship, first of all within the nation itself but, even more decisively, repositioning the role and the aims of local, peripheral agencies in the global geopolitical checkboard. In a consistent number of contemporary queer narratives, the concept of ‘Latin America’ is indeed re-located in a central position after a season of both literary and political invisibility. Even more so, precisely the queer becomes a chance for experimenting with new poetics and politics of representing Latin American collective identity: in such new context, both a critical response to and an ingenious continuation of traditionally fostered cultural constructs such as crossbreeding and heterogeneity seems to be developed.² In consideration of this, it is getting crucial to give a theoretically hybrid frame of reading to a literary series which is becoming more and more relevant, one where postcolonial discourse mixes with queer studies, in order to deconstruct and reconsider our idea of the ‘New World’, and, by doing so, to spread the inherent cultural value which is embedded in the very idea of *performing Latin America*.

In this paper – an anticipation of the larger, more panoramic investigation that will hopefully follow in the form of a book –, I decided to focus on maybe the one giant of Latin American contemporary literature, an author who has hardly been ‘under suspicion’,³ and whose oeuvre, in fact, shows the tendency to fall insistently under the spell of a viciously perverted and vitally disturbing *queer eye*.

More specifically, my aim here is to use the performativity theory to try to account for the productive ambiguity that permeates one of Roberto

² I am referring here to the ‘classical’ cultural theories that, all along the Twentieth Century, have ignited the debate on Latin American identity’s specific features (from Fernando Ortiz to Antonio Cornejo Polar, from Walter Mignolo to Néstor García Canclini). As Diego Falconí Trávez suggests, the two constructs that bear the name of ‘queer’ and ‘Latin America’ seem to match together quite smoothly, as both deal with an identity sign that is devilishly non-systematic, perversely on the move, structurally irreducible to any attempt of homogenization, clinging to their paradoxical “potencial (des)(anti)identitario” (2014: 10; but see also 2016 and 2018). But, in fact, as I will try to demonstrate in the next pages, a certain tension emerges in my corpus, as the texts I am considering seem to be triggered by the urgent need to debilitate a series of closed, oppressive mirror images, if not monolithically essentialist *per se*, at least working as one unescapable vicious circle of obligated repetitions.

³ In addition to the first fruits of my own research, I can only count three other critical proposals analyzing Bolaño’s literature from a queer point of view: AMÍCOLA 2013; LONG 2015; 2017.

Bolaño's core literary devices: the 're-writing' element, a compulsive drive which the Chilean novelist uses both as a way to *refer* to 'other' textual practices, but also as a form of auto-incest, and which – anything but by chance, in my opinion – is triggered with a certain frequency by the appearance of the ghost of a distorted sexuality.

1. *DEBAUCHING* THE MASTER NARRATIVE OF THE SUBALTERN

The queer option in Bolaño – that, nonetheless, represents a crucial under-current of sense even when 'disembodied' –, when it is recognizable as a motive, a more or less stereotyped option within the LGBT spectrum, also stands for more, it appears as a revelatory indication of a characteristically ambivalent way of inhabiting space, time (and the text). In other words, it can be read as a strategy aimed at troubling a certain tradition, without never presuming to sever it, for when it shows is to warn the reader about the activation of a textual appropriation procedure, marking it as unstable and ambivalent; or again, the queer behaves as a catalyst for the transgressive recoding of some of the most emblematic narratives of Latin American Twentieth Century canon, both acknowledging and twisting the effects of the cultural politics to which they refer.

In particular, Bolaño's oeuvre – precisely making good use of the fecund indecisions and half-tones that the queer code actually ensures – finds its real focus in the constant challenging of an especially lumbering and 'emasculating' old literary series: the one drawn with a steady hand by the so-called boom generation, i.e. the golden age of local literatures, against which, approximately by the end of the Eighties, many descendent, minor branch writers began to take parricide measures.⁴ I am addressing a chain of monumental texts doubly bound with the American quarrel, written from a postcolonial point of view, vocationally dedicated to the construction of a specific imagery, a group of magisterial authors who, single-handedly investing themselves of the mission of rediscovering the Continent from within, actually find, as a marvellous accident (a new Western India), a grand editorial achievement, a horn of plenty of cultural products so

⁴ I am talking about a whole generation of young novelists from the Nineties – who, especially at the beginning of their literary trajectories, tend to work in 'crowds' such as the Mexican *Crack* or, as I will soon explain, *McOndo* –, who provocatively undertake the ambitious project of dismantling their geographical and cultural traceability, burning the bridges with boom generation's traditionally local patterns.

temptingly exotic to sell like hot cakes in the European and US market between the Seventies and Eighties.⁵ Suffice it here to mention Magic Realism, the carnivalesque literary mode born to record the American ‘novelty’ in all its extraordinariness, as an intertwined hotchpotch of facts and fictions which aims at apprehending the American vicissitude, according to the formula prescribed by an emblematic writer, whom, at some point, one of the young iconoclasts – the Mexican Jorge Volpi – suggestively renames Gabriel García *marketing*. It could be helpful then to go back to the foundation of Macondo – the imaginary city built to summarize the defining features of the *homo americanus* – and re-approach the fatidic *fiat lux* of an almighty narrator, gifted with generative powers, that, almost literally, gives origin to a line: *Cien años de soledad*’s incipit introduces the reader to a Continent who is still convalescent from the Colony and its binds, but is being regenerated, reconstituted according to its own rules by means of the Supreme Architect’s generous creative propulsion: an act of ‘magical pollination’ the “prehistoric egg” of pre-Columbian isolation. In Doris Sommer’s words, we are dealing with some authentic *foundational fictions* – or re-foundational, re-discovery narratives – that give *el Gabo* and his generational companions the role of the illuminated literary *caudillos*, turning them into patriarchs – or founding fathers – of sorts, to whom to pay tribute on Independence Day as with the *libertadores*.

In one of his essays – always a suitable location for his notoriously ‘serene’ outbursts⁶–, Roberto Bolaño defines García Márquez and his worthy partner Mario Vargas Llosa the self-satisfied “dueto de machos ancianos” of Latin American literature (2010: 542), suggesting the idea of an encrusted authority, a natural right upon the life and death of the creole literary family exercised by the two indisputable ‘alpha males’ of the canon, as well as insinuating the opportunity of a programmed sterilization of their unbearable – *insufrible* – generative power. Not such an innocent joke if we consider the insistent playing with gender and sexuality that imbues Bolaño’s entire oeuvre, one that, moreover, winks at the nickname

⁵ On this topic see LÓPEZ DE ABIADA 2005.

⁶ The suitably titled “Los mitos de Chthulhu” counts as one of his most emblematic and poignant essays, working as a declaration of war towards the editorial industry in general and, more precisely, the sprawling, infiltrating power of certain fashionably lucrative models. It is notable that, when compiling the list of the ‘lost’, the invisible or forgotten authors who went *gone with the boom*, Bolaño cannot help but name, almost exclusively, some queer related ones such as Reinaldo Arenas, Copi, and Manuel Puig.

that David Forster Wallace – another refined connoisseur (as well as caustic scourge) of his nation’s literary tradition – gives John Updike, i.e. “The Great Male Narcissist”, indicating the will of both to divert the old guardians of the canon from the ecstatic contemplation of their own image, and also from the vice of compulsive reproduction. All of the above by weakening their weight or, better still, *debauching* their paradigm.

In a passage of *Los detectives salvajes* – which will be reprised in the post-humorous *Los sinsabores del verdadero policía* –, just in the middle of a literary gathering, a gay poet indulges in the following delirious critical scrutiny:⁷

Ernesto San Epifanio dijo que existía literatura heterosexual, homosexual y bisexual. Las novelas, generalmente eran heterosexuales. La poesía, en cambio, era absolutamente homosexual, los cuentos, deduzco, eran bisexuales, aunque esto no lo dijo. Dentro del inmenso océano de ésta, distinguía varias corrientes: maricones, maricas, mariquitas, locas, bujarrones, mariposas, ninfos y filenos. Las dos corrientes mayores, sin embargo, eran las de los maricones y los maricas. Walt Whitman, por ejemplo, era un poeta maricón. Pablo Neruda, un poeta marica. William Blake era maricón, sin asomo de duda, y Octavio Paz marica. Borges era fileno, es decir, de improviso, podía ser maricón y, de improviso, simplemente asexual. Rubén Darío era una loca, de hecho la reina y el paradigma de las locas.

[...]

El panorama poético, después de todo, era básicamente la lucha (subterránea), el resultado de la pugna entre poetas maricones y poetas maricas por hacerse con la palabra (BOLAÑO 1998: 83).

Besides the *infinite jesting* on the semantic ambiguity of the word *género* – which in Spanish means both genre and gender – and the parody on classificatory ostentation, a lot more is happening here. By way of the virtual *homosexualization* of Latin American and universal poetry’s genealogical tree, literary pedigrees and hierarchies in general are mocked, as well as the whole system of (more or less supposed) paternities and filiations which gives anthologists their criteria: the notion itself of the transmitting of the model (the same idea of originality vs imitation) loosen, as the evolutionary line of literary periodization is turned into a proper gay orgy, promiscuous, synchronic and proudly non-productive.⁸

⁷ This is intended as a sort of pedagogical lecture for the training poet who serves as a narrator all along the first part of the novel.

⁸ Much could be done about this passage using Halbelstam’s notions of queer failure and unproductive, perennially in-waiting queer time (2011; 2005).

Taking into account the contemporary sons and daughters of those old-fashion typical male models are specimen such as Ángeles Mastretta, Isabel Allende and Luis Sepúlveda, the option of a programmed chemical castration of their masters could even become immediately appealing, but Bolaño's point is not just to offer the global reader a salvific way out from the worn out sequels of boom generation – trimming for good *The Autumn of the Patriarch(s)*–, but even more so to stigmatize the narcissism of a specific imagery: the one that was originally conceived as a mirror for *The Kingdom of this World* and which instead, from the viewpoint of the foreshortening of the century, only managed to produce instead a fundamentalist mystification of sort, a series of formulae – more or less magical –, or skeleton key images of Latin American collective identity which ended up working as both superficial and absolutist patterns.

As a matter of fact, in the prophetic vision of its founder, Macondo was the village with the mirror walls, where the American subject, who has inherited a defining crisis of presence from the Colony, could look directly at himself being finally set free from any triangulation of the gaze. In other words, what is under discussion is not just the proverbial anxiety of influence towards the Fathers, neither a strict repertoire of mandatorily autochthonous topics and techniques (indigenism, folklore and revolution with a touch of magic, perfectly in style with an exotic jumble sale), but rather, deeper still and even more radically, the real challenge is clearing Latin American literary soil of the *automatism of identity*, opting for declining, once and for all, the mission of giving a symbolic home to a collectivity of heterogeneous bodies scattered throughout a boundless Continent. Bodies that are diverse in more than one sense and that, saying it with Mario Vargas Llosa (1971), at some point, turn into citizens of Macondo, are lead to live within a thematic park animated by all sorts of local attractions, or better still, get deported to a concentration camp of *pure* Latin Americanism.

Identity narratives who have developed a suspicious tendency to the sclerotic reproduction of an identical gene: so far so problematic, both aesthetically and politically, as Bolaño does not omit to spot in *La literatura nazi en América*, the book that – even if in disguise – triggers the paradoxical short-circuit of the fascist drifting of the mirror images of peripheral identity.

Nevertheless, the point I am willing to stress in order to demonstrate the fertility of a queer approach to Bolaño's work is more nuanced than that.

Obviously, one can work with the queer without betraying its original vocation in order to tarnish Macondo's fortress crystal walls, and so unmask Latin American performativity, denaturalizing its fetish representations, which, from liberating exercises of self-determination, have turned, at best, into a fashionably shabby wallpaper for wannabe revolutionaries and, in the worst case scenario, have become binding diktats, ultimately responsible for all too delicate memberships and painful exclusions. Actually, it does not cease to be urgent to free the variably *different* Latin American subject from the pressing of group enrolments and corporative obligations, from a collective *must be* that can turn out as especially tricky when it comes to sexually divergent departments, on which, like Gabriel Giorgi remarks in his seminal book, the young creole democracies traditionally tend to unleash their *Sueños de exterminio*, condemning their associates to a virtual invisibility within the local option, or rather forcing them to a physical or symbolic exile outside the imagery of the homeland, and compelling them to bet instead on a problematically global system of loyalties.

However, in my opinion, Bolaño's works powerfully illustrate an even more idiosyncratic use of the queer. I am referring to the chance to keep on working *from within* a cultural alliance or even a 'category', one intended as freely chosen as a form of collective resistance to the homogenizing and annexationist corrections circulating all along the peripheries together with the global discourse. The fundamentalist idea of Latin America – the essentialist, core-centered, substantial, old-school Latin Americanism – can be dismantled maybe as a necessary passage before putting it back together reassembling its pieces as a self-aware peripheral construct, setting up an unnatural Latin American performance bound to disturb other, maybe even more menacing affiliations, operating at a higher, geopolitically binding level.

Indeed, if we try to map the tendencies at work in the strictly contemporaneous literary landscape, we realize that the urge to tear down the old walled towns of Latin Americanism and the need to dismiss the brands of solitude go hand in hand with a just as strong denial of the opposite alternative: that of the *na(rra)tion without frontiers* which dominated the Nineties (NOGUEROL 2008), an ephemeral decade of anti-localist itches and mystifications, whose cultural tendencies are perfectly resumed in Alberto Fuguet and Sergio Gómez's "Presentación del país de McOndo", a parodic, deconstructionist, new textual homeland meant to represent Latin America

as an integrated branch of the global village.⁹ On the contrary, it is a fact that none of the youngest intellectuals – possibly looking at Bolaño as their elusive and *distant* guiding star – is vaguely interested in giving up on the ‘Latin American project’: we are addressing a sort of third generation,¹⁰ one that has already seen (and dismissed) both the *Macondian* and the *Mcondian* version of Latin America and, right now, while recovering from a double let-down, is reconsidering the whole postcolonial matter through a ‘queer eye’, that is intertwining a playful post-identity disenchantment with a politically-charged awareness of their place in the world and in History.

2. COLOMBO BACK AND FORTH: A VOYAGE OUT (OF THE EGGSHELL)

In the case of Bolaño – an author that especially international, non-Latin American scholars tend to associate with the *global novel* brand –, I would rather suggest the notion of a Latin Americanism refunded on the basis of a total lack of innocence, grounded on the invention of a new sense of communitarian citizenship: long gone the longing for the pristine, ‘authentic’, old-fashioned Latin America, after the unregretful declassification of its referential images, under the guidance of the illuminating discovery that *purity is pure faggotry*,¹¹ Santa Teresa can finally be born, as both an anachronistic homage and a mockery to a dignified series or, better still, the distorted, hallucinatory last link of a glorious chain.¹² This monstrous

⁹ The furiously urban and playfully post-modernist short stories collected in this groundbreaking anthology fit perfectly in the (dispersive) mold of the two prologists generational manifesto. On the invisible – read neoliberal – politics embedded in this restyling of the ‘folkloric’ Subcontinent of old, see no further than PALAVERSICH 2005.

¹⁰ In a recent interview, Pablo Montoya Campuzano, maybe the one Colombian writer to watch right now, whose style is even more recognizable than Bolaño’s as a continuation of boom generation’s glorious line, splitting the difference between heritage and imitation, refers to Gabriel García Márquez as “el Papa Grande” “de la literatura, al que hay que cuestionar siempre” (Olivero ACOSTA 2019).

¹¹ In the fifth part of *2666*, from among the ruins of the aftermaths of World War Two, this is how a character – an important one, considering the fact that he gives the mythical novelist Archimboldi his first typewriter – summarizes the Nazi delirium.

¹² I do not miss the point that the “*extensa ciudad en el desierto*” (BOLAÑO 2004: 152) is not a totally imaginary city, as it also stands for a real one, aims to be a precise transcription of Ciudad Juárez’s multiple miseries. Anyway, the introduction of a visionary element is totally crucial, as its name seems to indicate: if, on one hand, “Santa Teresa” could pass for a trivialization or a serialization of sort of a typical Mexican (or just colonial) instalment, on the other, the allusion to Santa Teresa de Ávila’s mystical, hallucinatory experience cannot be ignored, and becomes an evidence in the episode of Florita Almeda, the tv clairvoyant hired by the police to resolve

cross-border metropolis of the global age – designed to turn red hot the sick, cancerous *ligaments* that imperfectly bind contemporary Latin America to the world, serving both as an in-between, purgatorial city and a disorientating sprawl of mere tie-ins between different parts of the same nothingness – does become a paradoxically agglutinant space for a whole collectivity of variously unaccountable bodies. All of them, magnetized by its ambiguous call, are invited to stand for the law of eternal questioning, to cling to their precariousness and turn it into a flag, assuming a collectively oblique position that twists the *straightness* which is required in order to stand in line and perform as a member of an invisible but mandatory category: the one prepared to order the ‘natural’, non-problematic, inherently right, participation of any peripheral compartment to the operations of the global machine.

By territorializing – paradoxically leading back to a specific territory – the fluid mobility of queer identity, Bolaño elects Latin America as a symbolic *motherland* of the resistant struggle against any kind of discursive colonization, as an uncomfortable shelter for all those that do not fit loudly in any of the socially constructed slots which, ambiguously, protect us: a *queeramerica* without capital letters and symptomatically out of focus, an indefinable universal margin that attracts and connects a number of diverse marginalities, and whose anarchic identity – too elusive and inconvenient to be turned into a fetish – manifest itself as an exemplary exposure to inclemency,¹³ a sacrificial vocation, an inescapable and qualifying appointment with systemic violence.¹⁴

In other words, activating a dialogue with the whole sequence of the capital texts of Latin American identity, referencing both the foundation and the completion era, and positioning his own Latin American visions in an uncertain territory which can be seen as a brave new world where what is proudly undistinguished can freely manifest itself (BIZZARRI 2017),

the *murders* in the fourth part of the book. This supernatural factor, obviously, leads back to the foundation of Macondo and proves Rodrigo Fresán’s argument, when he claims that it is all but accurate to indiscriminately read Bolaño as “aquel que viene a prenderle fuego a Macondo, cuando en realidad lo que hace es irse de allí para trepar y vivir en un árbol cercano. O atravesarlo, una y otra vez, con una locomotora loca que echa fuego por su boca” (2013: 15).

¹³ The word *intemperie* – that here I am trying to translate – is a recursive and poignantly thematic one all throughout Bolaño’s oeuvre.

¹⁴ This is where queer rebellious unaccountability meets with visions of precariousness and vulnerability, revealing a notable touching point between Bolaño’s treatment of the topic and the epochal switch of emphasis that marks the passage from Butler’s *Gender Trouble* to *Precarious Life*.

Bolaño proves to be an acute reader of *performativity*, making the most of the glimpse through the system of sclerotic repetitions that organizes and regulates the Latin American *class* and turning that inhibitory spectacle into a chance for *deciding to perform* an unnatural and unshaped new version of the scheme, intended as a temporary and insubstantial act of collective self-determination.

To support my argument, I will briefly focus on one of the most known short stories in Bolaño's canon in order to prepare the soil for the analysis of the two crucial texts of my queer corpus, which I will refer to as *The Part(s) about Amalfitano*, i.e. an intertextual and, at times, *palimpsestuous*¹⁵ narrative cycle that inhabits a sort of a middle land between the two post-humous novels *2666* and *The Woes of the True Policeman*.

In "El Ojo Silva", from the *Putas asesinas* collection, the one automatic identification to be twisted – or to be queered – is left-wing militancy. Mauricio, one of many "luchadores chilenos errantes, una fracción numerosa de los luchadores latinoamericanos errantes" (BOLAÑO 2010: 217), one of the glorious super heroes that, in Mexico, shares the frequentation of the exile circuits with the narrator, seems to poison, with the suspicion of his homosexuality, the rarefied, vaguely sacral atmosphere of those untouchable environments, which in the text, in fact, are treated as proper circles of hell, self-celebratory and endogamous, where genuine revolutionary principles are often traded in for a martyr insignia to show.

The operation attempted – through the disturbing introduction of the inverted subject within the holy precincts of a collective identity invigorated and turned yet more exclusive as a consequence of the persecution its members had to suffer – concerns the sterilization of a whole genealogy, a bloodline, whose narcissism has begun to give birth to monsters both in the political ("gente de izquierda que pensaba, al menos de cintura para abajo, exactamente igual que la gente de derecha que en aquel tiempo se enseñoraba en Chile", BOLAÑO 2010: 216) and in the aesthetical realm, spreading clichés on Latin America and its calamities just as exotic as the second hand magic of the worst macondian imitations. It seems significant that, in those same years, one of the few last brave, recommendable authors in Bolaño's opinion – Pedro Lemebel, Chilean literature's *loca local* –, self-defining his

¹⁵ I propose here the idea of an *incestuous palimpsest*, in order to map Bolaño's morbidly unproductive technique of recycling and textual lingering.

stage persona as proudly proletarian, homosexual and *mapuche* – and so, virtually inaugurating the peculiar Latin American performance we have been referring to until now –, publishes his most direct manifesto, the long poem “Hablo por mi diferencia”: from that tribune (“uf, y ahora los discursos”, as he remarks in the epigraph), giving his speech to the father figures of Latin American revolution, he poignantly and not so politely asks permission to queer – *amariconar* – the hammer and sickle flag, begs for the chance to inhabit *obliquely* those homogeneous red skies, just loosening a bit the straight poses – maybe the *rigor mortis* – of the photogenic heroes portrayed (and reproduced) in every t-shirt. In Bolaño’s short story, it is indeed the possibility to shred the identification documents, recovering a mobile attitude, and giving up being ‘Latin American’ in the respect of the category, what enables the character to properly *become* what he should be naturally, as a birthright. Mauricio’s coming out, in effect, results in an even more radical exile, a definitive exposure, a *never being there* which is declined as for any class of belonging, according to a choice that gives him the chance to retrieve a rebellious efficacy which *in loco* was being lead back to a standard, or was becoming a mere decorative element. In order to follow in those glorious steps, it will be urgent to go astray, to live outside the labels, to go on incessantly searching new names and new shapes for that counterfeit precariousness... the Latin American destiny of this nomadic subject will finally only be fulfilled in the faraway lands – the Eastern India of an upside down *colombiade* – that Mauricio reaches in an attempt to free himself from the Mexican paralysis and get back to the trench where *violence, real violence* resides, the one impossible to shake off, the one who touches as a stigma and mobilizes as a call to arms especially “los nacidos en Latinoamérica en la década de los cincuenta, los que rondábamos los veinte años cuando murió Salvador Allende” (BOLAÑO 2010: 215). The *passage to India* of this reporter equipped with a symptomatically oblique gaze – an idiosyncratic queer eye –, as it is predictable, will actually happen far from the orientalist cliché (the one his publishers recommend him, avidly craving for some picturesquely lucrative postcard from the slums) and will rather have much more in common with an uncompromising *crossing* – of the gender, of the role, of any given category – that will make him witness and experience the structural vulnerability to which the lack of a solidly recognizable identity set fatally exposes. His Latin American adventure in the Far East will actually deal with the casteless

condition, with the *discovery* of the state of radical abandon intended for the precarious lives that societal powers struggles to recognize. In some unnamed, solitary Indian Macondo, Mauricio will indeed happen to put up an outrageously ambiguous family setting, one where he acts as the healing mother for two undistinguished body-children, two sacred eunuchs prostitutes, and by doing so, gets to inhabit the open wound of a totally unprotected relationship, whose alternative emotional system – his loving care –, when intercepted and if judged by the rules of social surveillance, can be read as a red herring for any sort of abuse. Systematically tending to the de-localization of the autochthonous tropes, Bolaño cannot help but transforming that remote *emergency* in a sparkling new signifier of the Latin American condition.

3. SANTA TERESA OUT OF THE CLOSET

It is almost impossible to address the identity topic in Bolaño without mentioning Oscar Amalfitano, the protagonist of the second part of *2666* and, more generally, one of the two dislocated subjects – the two ‘flying’ Chilean – whom we can consider as the markers for the author’s autobiographical exile. When it comes to him, it is not the case of burning in the juvenile pyre of the poetic trip, to easy ride on the road like a ‘romantic dog’ – that side of the story better suits Arturo Belano –, but, on the contrary, in his storyboard, what it looms is the coming to terms with the trauma of the lost or betrayed origin, in a coming and going of emotions suspended between resentment, guilt and homesickness. As a matter of fact, in *2666*, the mature literature professor, as a consequence of the spectacular – and quite mysterious – collapsing of both his professional and private life in Barcelona, goes back to Latin America or, better still, is fatally called to move his steps in the direction of the new mythical city of collective self-discovery which Bolaño invents in an ambiguous homage to the undisputed classics of peripheral modernity. The narration of his staying in Santa Teresa takes the shape of a disturbing psychotic dialogue with the restless ghosts of both his family’s story and the Subcontinent’s collective past, raised, like an army of undead, in the folds of a hallucinatory landscape. The pressing, urgent voices of his ancestors, resurrected to inquire about his absences and failures, are uniformly, associatively masculine: his grandfather, the brave commanders of political militancy, Independence’s patriarchs, *mapuche* tribal chiefs, some of the most emblematic figures of Chilean folklore

and, most characteristically, the textual echoes of some notorious series, malevolently called to resonate within the sclerotic circularity of a corporately (hetero)normative discourse.¹⁶ At some point, in a climate of brutal trivialization of the heroic pattern of the *nostos*, it does not even seem strange that the spirits of the land, talking through the quintessential voice of the Father, happen to ask Amalfitano if he is a faggot.

In the meantime, from in-between the rotten wastes of Latin American discipline, timidly begins to emerge “algo que no entendía y que llamaba historia descompuesta” or “historia desarmada y vuelta a armar”, “una carcajada que tardaba a apagarse”;¹⁷ that is, unexpectedly, Bolaño recovers out of the landfill the mirror of collective identification, making it shine anew with reflexes that seem to be all but conditioned: “una especie de azogue, el espejo americano, [...], el triste espejo americano [...] de las continuas metamorfosis inútiles, el espejo que navega y cuyas velas son el dolor”, a moving, blurry projection screen suitable for a new, peculiar offspring of symbolic citizens, “los viajeros [sin descanso], los aventureros del intelecto, los que no pueden estar quietos mentalmente”, who can identify with an un-identification plan.

If there would be still any doubt about Bolaño’s will to create a bind of vital complicities between the re-signification of an exhausted referent – ‘Latin America’ – and the queer alphabet, in *Los sinsabores del verdadero policía* – the second posthumous entry in the Chilean author’s always expanding bibliography, which, with a touch of irony, we can consider Amalfitano’s coming out novel –, the character’s crucial travel to Santa Teresa gets coded both as a homecoming, and an additional, *deeper* exile, a metaphysical voyage adrift, far from any hope of re-founded stability; but, most of all, a cause and effect relation with the untimely apparition – in the

¹⁶ On the topic of boom generation’s textual echoes embedded in Bolaño’s literature as an essential raw material to play with constantly, see BIZZARRI 2017. Here, suffice it to mention that in the incipit of “The part about Amalfitano” one can appreciate the resonance of the one Mexican narrative about the searching of the Father –Juan Rulfo’s *Pedro Páramo* – (with all directions and purposes lead astray, obviously). Compare the assertiveness of Juan Preciados’ monologue (“Vine a Comala para buscar a mi padre”) with Amalfitano’s imprecise and schizophrenic mumbling, one that, moreover, introduces in the scheme the suspicion of an unspeakable truth firmly hidden in the closet: “No sé que he venido a hacer a Santa Teresa, se dijo Amalfitano al cabo de una semana de estar viviendo en la ciudad. ¿No lo sabes? ¿Realmente no lo sabes?, se preguntó” (BOLAÑO 2004: 211).

¹⁷ This specific passage can maybe recall Macondo’s languorous, interminable agony, one that “no acaba de acabarse nunca” in the last chapters of that immortal book. Exactly the same can be said about its heritage, in spite of all attempt to get rid of it.

dissident intellectual's stagnant routine – of a mysterious entity which the text names “el dios de los homosexuales” is established (BOLAÑO 2012: 75).

By disarming him of all of his shields, estranging him from his genealogy, laying all of his red herrings open, it will be precisely the following of its exigent cult the one thing that will facilitate Amalfitano's reconciliation with the meaning of his problematic ‘Latin Americanness’.

During their first erotic intercourse, Joan Padilla – the lumpen poet in a perennial state of Dionysian fury who is responsible, in the new textual environment, of the homosexualizing of the genetic tree of Latin American poetry that I quoted at the beginning – *discovers Amalfitano as a Continent is discovered*.¹⁸ The simile is deeply suggestive because it intertwines the collective identity discourse (or layer of meaning) with the sexual identity one, combining them under the sign of performative demystification: evidently, there is no ‘discovery’ but just cultural construction, pure narration – maybe a temporary thickening of an unstoppable *becoming* that gives no results, effects or products – in neither of those ‘Colombian eggs’, which can be seen as mere viscous fluidities with no genetic heritage to transmit. Only after this necessary *tabula rasa*, sailing back to the Hesperides becomes thinkable again.

When Amalfitano reacts to the collapse that the scandal imposes to the social construction of his subjectivity, enumerating one by one, throughout an entire chapter, every brick of the imaginary building whose name used to be his own, along with the shameful degeneration of “el sudaca desvergonzado, el sudaca mariquita, el sudaca pervertidor de menores, la reinona del Cono sur” (BOLAÑO 2012: 46), the well-known, perfectly recognizable segments of a whole cultural history also break down soundly:

Yo, pensó Amalfitano, que fui un niño inventivo, cariñoso y alegre [...], yo que aprendí a bailar el bolero y el tango, [...] la cueca [...], yo que entré en el Partido Comunista y en la Asociación de Estudiantes Progresistas, yo que escribí panfletos y leí el Capital [...], yo que fui expulsado del Partido y que seguí creyendo en la lucha de clases y en la lucha por la Revolución Americana [...], yo que predije la caída de Allende y que sin embargo no tomé ninguna medida al respecto, yo que fui detenido y llevado a interrogar con los ojos vendados y soporté la tortura cuando otros más fuertes se derrumbaron [...], yo que me pasé varios meses en el

¹⁸ This is literally translated from the original, where Amalfitano, mumbling in consternation, defines himself “descubierto por Joan Padilla como quien descubre un Continente” (BOLAÑO 2012: 46).

campo de concentración de Tejas Verdes, yo que salí con vida y me reuní con mi mujer en Buenos Aires, yo que seguí manteniendo lazos con grupos de izquierda, una galería de románticos (o modernistas), pistoleros, psicópatas, dogmáticos e imbéciles, [...] yo que hablé en tardes sofocantes con los nuevos carboneros de Latinoamérica, yo que vi salir humo de un volcán y mamíferos acuáticos con forma de mujer retozando en un río color café (BOLAÑO 2012: 41-43).

In the detailed description of the pathetic shipwreck of the American coat-of-arms, *Revolution* goes back to back with the distant echo of folkloristic dances and, most significantly, with the disenchanting spell of the natural marvel cliché, as is proved by the almost literal quotation of the episode of the founding of Macondo in the emerald green heart of a suspended territory. All those images – being they mirrors, mirages or cul-de-sacs in helping the collective identification of a whole Continent –, when crossed by the excruciating sword of that troublesome divinity, are spread out like a book left outside exposed to the desert wind – as it literally happens in the one most iconic episode of *2666*'s “The part about Amalfitano” – and open to a deconstruction which is, at the same time, traumatic and invigorating.

Actually, in Padilla's bed, “convertido en un mar de dudas”, Amalfitano learns to deal with the wandering ghosts of his origins, to shake off from his back the intrusive, cannibalistic shadow of the “machos latinoamericanos de verdad”, the pompous sequel of revolutionary idols and martyrs who “le jodieron la vida a Reinaldo Arenas” (BOLAÑO 2012: 125),¹⁹ and gets ready to re-draw, now with a shaky hand, the map of the land of the one thousand and one utopia, the “país donde los hombres amaban a los hombres” (74) – described by Amalfitano with an enigmatic formula behind which it is virtually impossible to decide if it is humanitarian socialism we are talking about, or maybe faggotry.

The gay lover turns into both the trigger and the ideal addressee of a brand new narrative of Latin American identity, one that will make Amalfitano re-achieve the right of asylum in the homeland of choice for all those who “siempre estaremos afuera”, “los parias”, “los que no tenemos absolutamente nada que perder” (BOLAÑO 2012: 126).

¹⁹ In the context given by this quote, the name of Amalfitano's homosexual partner cannot help but intercept the not so distant echo of the ‘Padilla affair’ – i.e. the imprisonment, in the late Sixties, of Cuban poet Heriberto Padilla for criticizing the Castrist government –, a real *casus belli* after which the left wing politics advocated by most *engagé* intellectuals of the boom generation started to crack.

Just when his identity trouble seems to be touching an unbearable apex, while he is roaming aimlessly between the puzzling, maybe just plainly insane, twists and turns of the labyrinthine urban fabric of one peculiar sector of Santa Teresa, Amalfitano is allowed to approach something that is not too dissimilar to an epiphany.

The heart of the new Latin American city beats in the red district. The syntagm “zona roja” gets ruminated, filtered through Amalfitano’s present state of both liberating and piercing existential bewilderment, and finally, literally left to hang on a wire: the distant memory of the ‘hot zones’ of the political struggle – “los campos liberados por la guerrilla”, described as “enormes barrios de putas disfrazados de Retórica y Dialéctica” (BOLAÑO 2012: 112)–, blurs into a different kind of conflict area for which one could even maybe dust off the ‘militancy’ construct. At the tail of a dead-end alley, where he is ambiguously taken by the hand (to contemplate this unique station of the Latin American *via crucis*) by a starving, indigenous child unlikely dressed in a Wisconsin University’s sweatshirt, Amalfitano witnesses the last gasps of a dying trans:

De pronto la calle se quedó en silencio, como encogida sobre sí misma. [...] escucharon unos gemidos. Amalfitano se detuvo. No es nada, dijo el niño, vienen de ahí, de la Llorona. La mano del niño indicó el zaguán de una casa en ruinas. [...] Es la loca de la calle que se muere de sida (BOLAÑO 2012: 114-115).

The apparition of a representative figure of Latin American folklore *en travesti* is highly significant.²⁰

Between the debris and the misfortune stigmas of an emblematically exposed creature – delving with both hands in the open wound of queer vulnerability –, Amalfitano rediscovers – as an artifice displayed – a belligerent Latin America emblem of conquest and abandonment, a worn-out *colonial* archetype, whose haunting lamentation re-semanticizes a long-lost

²⁰ Just in the midst of two highly memorable and emblematic sketches – the sexual offers Amalfitano receives from the native child (that makes him cry desperately, triggering the memory of Silva’s Indian misadventure) and the spectacle of the dying trans prostitute –, Amalfitano seems to finally understand the meaning of the puzzling motto Padilla uses as a misty identifier for the *God of Homosexuals*: “*Su identidad es el misterio*” (BOLAÑO 2012: 114). Pedro Lemebel is just around the corner, for all reasons, not least for the fact that “Misterio” is the nickname he gives AIDS in *Loco afán*.

story of unequally asymmetrical contacts (between genders, between cultures), disturbing the circulating propaganda of the perfect neutralization of the local/global (center/margins) dispute. Mirroring in the desperately violent eyes of the transvestite *Llorona*, after a long course of alternate vicissitudes, second thoughts, reformulations and denials, Amalfitano is finally ready to *perform* – fully aware and totally free – a new revolutionary Latin Americanism.

It is almost impossible not to close with Pedro Lemebel, under whose persistent spell this revealingly queer addenda to Amalfitano's file seems to constantly fall:

Quizás América Latina travestida de traspasos, reconquistas y parches culturales – que por superposición de injertos sepulta la luna morena de su identidad – aflore en un mariconaje guerrero que se enmascara en la cosmética tribal de su periferia (LEMEBEL 1991).

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