

Review / Reseña

Long, Ryan F. *Queer Exposures. Sexuality & Photography in Roberto Bolaño's Fiction and Poetry*. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 2021. 300 pp.

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Fortunately, as regards the study of Bolaño's work, we are still at a time when, as Iñaki Echavarne declares in the second part of *Los detectives salvajes*, "la Crítica acompaña a la Obra" (484), and still far away from Auxilio's predictions concerning the fate of the oeuvres of famous authors in *Amuleto*. In fact, what initially consisted of rather superficial internet assessments of his novels and short stories, then two seminal and very useful critical anthologies (from Manzoni and Espinosa) and, eventually, comprehensive as well as thematic studies (those of Bolognese, Andrews, and Lainck come to mind) has given way to a critical corpus interested mostly in exploring the workings of philosophical concepts in Bolaño's texts—Ruisánchez's *La reconciliación*, for example—including his poetry. So, while the "Bolaño boom" is certainly over, Bolaño's works continue to grab the attention of critics and readers alike. For instance, the title and the epigraph of Senegalese author Mohamed Mbougar Sarr's superb recent novel, *La plus secrète mémoire des hommes* (2021)—a combination of *Los detectives salvajes* and 2666's "La parte de los críticos" and winner of the prestigious Prix Goncourt 2021—come from *Los detectives salvajes*.

In the abundant body of critical studies consecrated to Bolaño's oeuvre, Ryan F. Long's *Queer Exposures. Sexuality & Photography in Roberto Bolaño's Fiction and Poetry* belongs in the category of critical texts that, while zeroing in on the analysis of certain specific concepts in very concrete textual situations, cover the entirety of Bolaño's production, including a novel, a short story, and a few poems published posthumously but likely written before his best-known narrative texts. In fact, these concepts (especially "exposure"), construed both literally and metaphorically, are, according to Long, ubiquitous in the posthumous "Laberinto" (*El secreto del mal* [2007]) but traceable to the whole of what he calls Bolaño's "constellation of texts." With respect to the "queer" reference in the title, the author's goal is not simply to explore the themes of gender and sexuality in Bolaño's fiction and poetry but also—more originally, in my view—to read Bolaño "queerly," that is, "queerness" as a reading strategy that has the potential to enlighten the works of other writers.

Queer Exposures has six chapters plus an introduction and an unusual conclusion, and each chapter is divided into a series of subsections. In the Introduction, besides presenting the concepts and describing how they operate in Bolaño's work, Long explains how *Amuleto* but especially "Laberinto" and *Los sinsabores del verdadero policía* served as inspiration for his analysis. It is in these two texts, and particularly in the comportment of two gay characters, Goux and Amalfitano, respectively, that the process of exposure is most palpable. The reason the author uses the notions of "exposure" and "queer exposure" specifically is not just because he conceives of Bolaño's oeuvre as open-ended and antithetical to predictability, but also because his texts (albeit inconsistently) offer a critique of "normative narratives and subjectivities" (9). Queerness has to do, above all, with resistance—so, unsurprisingly, Bolaño criticizes the excesses of masculinity. At the same time, the search for utopia is absent in Bolaño's works. Long's major contention in *Queer Exposure* is that Bolaño's fiction and poetry constitute a sustained effort against "totality, teleology, and subjective coherency" (5). To carry out his investigation, he avails himself of concepts such as Eve Sedgwick's "nonce taxonomy," "esperanza queer", and Bolaño's own "intemperie", among several others.

In Chapter One, which is a kind of continuation of the Introduction, the author provides an explanation, via a close reading of "Laberinto", of the queer poetics that he advances in the rest of his study. At the heart of a short story in which an unknown narrator invents stories about various figures in a photograph, he notices a tension that is patent in the vast majority of Bolaño's literary production: on the one hand, a desire

for shelter, “spatiotemporal capture,” and narrative control; on the other, exposure, openness, *intemperie*, and queer waiting. This, in turn, places the characters, Goux and Henric, respectively, in states of “suspension, immobility, in-betweenness, and intermediacy” (33). Now, if, as Long contends toward the end of the chapter, a queer poetics makes it possible to read Bolaño against the current, so to speak, he also underlines how the dynamics causal/casual alluded to by Romero in his dialogue with Belano in *Los detectives salvajes* plays a crucial role in his narrative.

Given the markedly narrative nature of much of Bolaño’s poetic output, it is not surprising that, in Chapter Two, Long should undertake a critical examination of some early poems published in *Los perros románticos* (1995, 2000) and in the posthumous *La Universidad Desconocida* (2007); likewise, he briefly examines *Muchachos desnudos bajo el arco iris de fuego* (1979). Among the poems he scrutinizes are “La novela-nieve”, “Bienvenida”, “Gente que se aleja” (the version published in *La Universidad Desconocida*, not the one in *Amberes*), “Los motociclistas”, “Autorretrato a los veinte años”, “Los perros románticos”, and “Soni”. In general, the author identifies two types of poems: those that evince a longing for “mastery” and those that “foreground incompleteness” (68). If in the first category the usually autobiographical poetic voice expresses the feelings of a male seeking to exert power and domination, in the second there is an abundance of sadness, solitude, and melancholia. In both instances, however, it is the motif of immobility that, just like a photographic image, allows for the potential for “the critique [of] dominant forms of masculinity” (76)—or, as in “La novela-nieve”, the revelation of “androgyny.”

As Long continues to probe Bolaño’s poetry, in Chapter Three he focuses on poems that are more openly homoerotic and homosexual. In his examination of sections 41 and 42 of “Un paseo por la literatura” (from *Tres*), he argues that, by juxtaposing a poem in which the poetic voice’s best friend makes love to Walt Whitman with a poem alluding to poet Roque Dalton having died for a “quimera de mierda” (97), a clear connection is established between queerness and bravery. Regarding “Reencuentro”, indubitably one of Bolaño’s more explicit representations of gay sex, what stands out most, according to the author, is the fact that it contains several well-known themes from other works and also “an itinerary of *intemperie*” (103) characterized by the contrast between the lovers’ pleasure and the narrator’s sister’s pain. In the wonderful poem “El burro”—which of course makes one think of the four *real visceralistas* heading north at the end of the first part of *Los detectives salvajes*—, Long points to the development of “homosocial bonding” (104). Finally, in the two

subsections dedicated to the analysis of “La visita al convaleciente”—an autobiographical poem from *Los perros románticos* which recounts a visit to Darío Galicia, the real Ernesto San Epifanio from *Los detectives salvajes*—, he concludes that Galicia’s trepanation constitutes an act of violence against his homosexuality; similarly, the poem illustrates well that the dream of the revolution has come to an end.

In Chapter Four, the author analyzes the figure of the detective in Bolaño’s poetry and in the short story “Detectives” (from *Llamadas telefónicas*). Although not the first critic to explore this capital figure in Bolaño’s poetry, Long is the first to approach it from the standpoint of queer theory. He assigns particular importance to how the detective’s photographic representation in the poems presents not a subject able to decipher enigmas and find solutions, but rather one who has to perennially deal with what Benjamin called “petrified unrest” (123). He asserts, furthermore, that in the texts he examines in this chapter, the detective—who, as he rightly points out, is frequently a poet—occupies a “detached space” (117) and, likewise, embodies literary possibility, erotic encounter, and openness, all qualities that lead to *Los detectives salvajes*, “the most ambitious and sustained effort on Bolaño’s part to develop the image of the detective” (124). Long focuses his analysis on “El inspector”, “Policías”, an untitled poem whose first verse reads “Resurrección dijo el viajero en la posada”, “El policía se alejó” (or “Tenía el pelo rojo” in *Amberes*), and the poems “Los detectives helados”, “Los detectives”, and “Los detectives perdidos”. In his analysis of the short story “Detectives”, he is especially interested in Contreras’s answer to Arancibia regarding manliness in Chile.

In Chapter Five, Long studies *Los detectives salvajes*. Construing the novel as a series of photographic negatives, he centers his attention specifically on how certain characters, characters whom he places in Judith Butler’s category “community of the vulnerable,” experience exposure. He observes how, in several of these cases, an antagonistic dynamic develops between a push for heteronormativity on the one hand, and a resistance to it on the other. Many of the conceptions the author employs in the previous chapters—such as “ghostly returns,” “moments of immobility,” “misrecognition,” “moments of detachment,” “altered perception”—are also present here. In the case of García Madero, for instance, he shows the way in which queerness subverts his “bildungsroman-like sentimental education” (152). The homosocial bonding that is created between him and Arturo and Ulises in the bathroom takes place at the expense of Brígida, a situation that the author calls here and elsewhere “the trafficking in women” (153). Another important moment of exposure is when San

Epifanio shows García Madero pictures of himself making love to another man. It is here that García Madero's heteronormativity is most challenged. Of the other instances of exposure that Long examines in this chapter—Perla Avilés and Arturo's discussion regarding hermaphrodite poetry, Angélica Font's account of San Epifanio's trepanation, Joaquín Font's "state of vulnerability" (176), Romero's comment on causality and randomness, Cesárea's inhabiting "a state of *intemperie*" (185), among others—, undoubtedly the most important, in the author's view, is the one that occurs in the homosexual relationship between Sebastián Rosado and Piel Divina, which he examines thoroughly.

The last chapter of *Queer Exposures* represents a sort of summation of the previous chapters. In it, the author seeks to place "in erotic encounter" (189) texts that he had not explored before. He claims, for example, that Jacobo Urenda's account (in the second part of *Los detectives salvajes*) occupies "a significant liminal space in Bolaño's constellation of texts" (191), not just because it is the longest but also because, as he correctly states, it is connected to "Fotos". In this story, Belano, exposed to the elements, alone and in a precarious position, remembers his adolescent days in Mexico and—more significantly in Long's view—mistakes the sex of one of the poets in the poetry collection he is holding in his hands, thus emphasizing the subject of androgyny in Bolaño's works. As regards *Amuleto*, he focuses on the subject of time but also on the significance of Auxilio's allusion to the year 2666. Concerning "El Ojo Silva", what stands out is "queer affinity" (199); it is this affinity, in reality, that makes possible the rescue of the two children in the first place. Although the author also analyzes *Estrella distante* and *Nocturno de Chile* in the context of queer exposure, it is his analysis of the character Amalfitano in both *2666* and *Los sinsabores del verdadero policía* that, in my judgement, best encapsulates the book's major arguments.

As stated above, Long's *Queer Exposures* joins a new kind of criticism of Bolaño's works, a criticism that is more philosophical and more theoretical, where literary texts become primary sites in which to test the validity of certain notions and ideas. To some extent, this is understandable, especially given the way in which literary criticism is done today. Nevertheless, what sets him apart from critics who often forget about the text while reflecting on the theory, is that he is able to discuss the theory in tandem with insightful close readings of the texts; and he does it intelligently and coherently. The value of this study, ultimately, is not only to provide the first in depth analysis of queerness and sexuality in Bolaño's oeuvre, but to do so from the viewpoint of exposure and photography. It is indeed this combination that allows the author to

establish novel relationships among such multifarious texts. *Queer Exposures* will be particularly useful to those who already know Bolaño and who, as Long encourages his readers, wish to reread his works in order to find new zones of exposure and new territories of *intemperie*.