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Tracing Trans Bodies in Neobaroque Literature

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Tracing Trans Bodies in Neobaroque Literature

Intro

This study analyses the ways in which trans people have been written through Baroque aesthetics in the social and cultural imaginary of Latin America, despite the various unjust forces that have attempted to make them invisible and exclude them from the national narrative. The differences between Severo Sarduy's Neobaroque, Néstor Perlongher's Neobarroso, and Pedro Lemebel's Neobarrocho will be analyzed, while exploring their individual limitations and potentialities for voicing the joys and pains of being trans in an exclusionary society. The selection of these three authors is not done at random. Together, they fully demonstrate the connection between Baroque and transness. They explore different forms of trans expression while keeping in mind their particular cultural contexts. They allow us the opportunity to trace motivations for exploring trans experience and attitudes towards trans identity which, originally shaped by medico-judicial and masculinist discourses, were drastically challenged and reshaped as trans people were given the opportunity to write their own (his)stories. By thinking of them collectively, we are able to better understand the trans subject and fully grasp its unstable, combated, and reinscribed place in the Latin American imaginary. We are able to trace the slow yet significant progress of trans people as they attempt take their rightful place in society, despite the constant and recurrent pushback from both left and right-leaning groups across Latin America.

Neobaroque Literature

During the 18th century, as the principles of rationalism and empiricism of enlightened thinking gained ground, Baroque excessiveness and dissonance gained a negative connotation. Nonetheless, important artists, philosophers, and historians demonstrated throughout the 20th century, each through different approaches, an interest in recovering the Baroque- a movement now referred to as the Neobaroque. It is recognized for its self-reflexive character, its exuberance and, to a certain degree, its political opposition towards traditional identities and discourses. In Latin America, the Neobaroque has been commonly identified as having a decolonizing role by presenting the consolidation of varied cultures. This presentation, however, examines the ways in which gender nonconformity and Neobaroque appear and interact in the work of three recognized literary figures of late 20th century Latin America: Severo Sarduy, Néstor Perlongher, and Pedro Lemebel. For the purpose of this presentation, without engaging in close readings of each authors' work, I present overarching principles and observations with regards to the aforementioned.

Severo Sarduy

Severo Sarduy (1937-1993), a well-renowned Cuban novelist and critic, looks at the Baroque with queer intent. Due to its linguistic artificiality, Sarduy recognizes in the Baroque a tendency towards decentralization. Metonymic displacement of the signifier, as an expansive process of the signified, serves as a strategy of extension and transformation. As a result, the Baroque provides the illusion of an expansive space, without direction or destination, in continuous metamorphosis. Contrary to communicative language, the Baroque indulges itself in linguistic overabundance and wastefulness. By disrupting linguistic norms, the Baroque creates a space of play and unimpeded motion. Through this use of the Baroque, Sarduy explores that which is irrepresentable and disarticulated, especially when it comes to human experience. Thus, by

interrupting norms through Baroque language he creates new subjectivities that are capable of reconfiguring personhood, privileging experience while subverting legitimacy.

In his novels, we find divergent and subaltern subjects that, as such, are excluded from normative social spaces. There is special emphasis in the presence of trans figures that transgress, through their ambiguity, the gender roles of heteronormative culture and demonstrate the artificiality of gender identification. Without being restricted to the binary limits that define Western societies, the trans subject serves as an entity that allows the reader to recognize the inconsistency of identity as a whole. The trans body expresses itself as multifaceted totality that embraces within itself traits that are found to be socially dichotomized. Due to this, identity divisions are destabilized and eradicated to create a subject that is not consistent with a normative form of identity. It is an entity that touches certain limits without transgressing them completely.

Sarduy's work, by analyzing the trans subject, forces us to recognize features of our identity and behavior that we adopt due to the social needs and expectations that we confront on a daily basis. The reader recognizes in these works a lack of consistency that prevents it from reducing its identity to its most essential. Sarduy's work presents an entity that is placed outside of the national, cultural, sexual, and gender constructs that have been forcibly applied to it. No identity label would be adequate since it would not recognize the complexities and potentialities of the individual. Thus, Sarduy's work proposes a transformative entity that questions the autonomy and homogeneity of the individual that separates itself from certain cultural and national allegories, that materially or plastically rejects misogyny, that proposes alternative or problematic sexualities.

Sarduy, however, like other queer theorists of his time looks at trans people as ideal figures for deconstructing and reconstructing identity due to their apparent in-betweenness.

However, as Jay Prosser insists, we must not lose focus of what inspires, influences, or affects trans people if we are to speak of them. By placing his interest in what trans people may tropologically represent in the symbolic realm, at times, Sarduy loses important insight into their lives and presents them as solely artificial, especially in his earlier work.

Néstor Perlongher

Unlike other writers who sought in the Neobaroque a delocalized expression, the work of the poet and anthropologist Perlongher and his peers centers itself on the subcultures of a particular location: Argentina. This, in fact, is what brings forward the term *Neobarroso* to speak of baroque reformulations that are unique to Perlongher's homeland. Faced with the violence of a military dictatorship and the imposition of neoliberalist policies, Neobarroso authors act in opposition of official culture and discourse to explore, within marginalized communities, alternative attitudes and ideas that would resist and contest the limiting and detrimental politics that had developed and prevailed over the Argentine nation. By doing so, they ventured into the irrational, the unconventional, the extravagant, and the unofficial. It is this move towards underground cultures, urban environments, alternative sexualities, lascivious behavior, paraphilia, and sexual fetishism that makes Argentine recovery of the Baroque, as the term suggests, *barroso*- muddy, foul, lewd, vulgar, or obscene.

Trans people were part of those whose lives Perlongher was interested in exploring. Uncontrolled by social mores, by expressing their own identity trans people could defend a person's right to difference. At the same time, the effeminacy and passivity that had characterized marginalized groups could be reappropriated and reinterpreted to combat the state. To explore the persecuted yet subversive space of gender and sexual minorities, Perlongher commonly presents them as the narrators and characters of his literary work. In most cases, he portrays them as

promiscuous and unscrupulous in sexual matters. Engaged in non-productive pleasure, they disregard their partners' sex and gender identity and defy the penetrator/penetrated paradigm. At the same time, a character's gender becomes skewed and put into question. Unconcerned with traditional masculinity or femininity, those that appear as cisgender can suddenly be perceived as transgender. This can be perceived in Perlongher's verse, especially through his particular manipulation of grammar and employment of rhetorical figures.

Perlongher values the identity and practices of trans people, seeing in them the possible subversion of the state's masculinist and heterosexist order. Furthermore, he recognizes that trans people are not only excluded from state institutions but from political opposition groups as well, withstanding a multilayered marginalization. He even acknowledges that, since they are affected by its social and economic inequalities, trans people are to be considered part of the nation- not insignificant and unwanted others. Nevertheless, Perlongher does rely on an oversimplified understandings of trans people to speak of them as political subjects. His interest in marginalized groups arose above all from anarchist ideals. From his point-of-view, being excluded from both conservative political factions and opposition political groups provided individuals in absolute marginality a sense of freedom. Therefore, trans people are only valuable when they are located in liminal spaces from which to problematize gender. If ever they conform to the norm, they are no longer functional- their dynamism comes to an end. This would be particularly problematic for transsexual people since gaining political agency would require an always unfinished gender transition; a process which many long to complete, which could shape their sense of wholeness, and may protect them from violence. It is also true that, by presenting transgender people as inevitably rejecting social sexual norms, he seems to conflate gender and sexuality. In addition, while he recognizes them as being part of a national socio-economic system, he pays little attention

to the struggles faced exclusively by trans people. Last but not least, Perlongher has a tendency to portray trans people as provocative and scandalous. He attempts to understand their identity through the clothing and the makeup they wear, instead of keeping in mind their experiences and individuality.

Pedro Lemebel

Pedro Lemebel, one of the most recognized writers, activist and performance artists to emerge in Chile at the end of the 20th century, has been associated with the recovery of the baroque. While he does not establish a movement around his distinct use of it, such as Perlongher did, he is known to have read and be stimulated by neobaroque authors. Critics, such as Carlos Monsivais, have recognized the baroque in his linguistic play, crossing of literary genres, satirical technique, kitschy artifice, use of melodrama, excess and ornamentation, combination of opposites such as the high and the low, the sacred and the profane, the formal and the colloquial, etc. Furthermore, critics have recognized that Lemebel's use of the Baroque is unlike others in its exploration of the Chilean landscape. Without a doubt, Lemebel's work attempts to examine the nation's capital in its entirety- moving both through the most impoverished and privileged of neighborhoods, interacting with its many peoples and their different linguistic registers, making temporal jumps through spontaneous recollections of the past- presenting in baroque fashion a multifaceted image of Santiago de Chile which highlights its volatility and contradiction. By doing so, Lemebel destabilizes the ordered and classed city, exposing its socioeconomic inequalities, unearthing suppressed histories, bringing to light silenced subjects and revealing rejected desires which challenge official discourse, patrimonial history, and neoliberal ideals. Soledad Bianchi coins the term *neobarrocho* to speak of his baroque style: the prefix neo alluding to his affinity for

the neobaroque and barrocho to reference the river which runs through the nation's capital. Other artists, contemporary to Lemebel, have been similarly linked to a form of Chilean neobaroque.

Lemebel displays uncommon insight and compassion for gender-variant people. Instead of allegorizing their experience or interpreting their identity as performative, he humanizes trans people by placing them at the center of his narrative. From this point of view we come to understand that trans people are socially marginalized not because they intrinsically are a destructive force. Instead, aggressive political processes make them seem socially insignificant and uninvolved- denying them of citizenship and belonging. Reminiscent of Perlongher, Lemebel recognizes the exclusion of trans people within the LGBT+ community. He especially expresses great disapproval of homosexual men who embrace neoliberal values, masculinist models, heteronormative ideals, and white privilege. This being true, however, within their marginality, trans people negotiate with and contribute to the state. At the same time, as they partake in society, trans people challenge its political rhetoric- providing an alternative vision to how a citizen is to interact with and react to national discourses. Furthermore, as a strategy of survival, trans people are seen as forming communities with other marginalized groups who experience similar discrimination and hardship. What is more, the familial bonds made within members of the trans community allows for the creative development of a common culture, methods for building resilience, protective and supporting relationships, etc. Nonetheless, while connected by their transness, Lemebel shows variety and discord within the gender-variant community. Instead of being perceived as a monolithic group, trans people are seen as having differences in political inclinations, class backgrounds, childhood experiences, use of linguistic registers, and identity expressions. Lemebel attempts to show trans subjects in all their forms: in early life and old age, liberal and conservative, feminized and masculinized, impoverished and wealthy, etc. All in all,

by exploring what makes them both peculiar and ordinary, by recognizing their interpersonal and social struggles, by providing a more complete image of their lived experiences, trans people are seen as human instead of a convenient allegorized or political figure. This is not to say that Lemebel provides us with a comprehensive image of what it means to be trans in Latin America, yet he does show a more humanized and accurate representation without, simplifying, exoticizing or idealizing trans existence. By exploring, in baroque style, trans experience in the nation's capital, Lemebel makes note of the sociopolitical presence of trans people, justifying and legitimizing their existence as a result.