Trans Affirmation and Inclusion in Perlongher’s Inner City

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Abstract

In this study, I look at the gendered dimension of the public sphere as presented by Néstor Perlongher. As I examine the sexual economy and structural violence found in the author’s metropolis, I focus on the way in which trans women are presented simultaneously as attractive and as repulsive, wanted and rejected, desired and murdered. In addition, I am interested in the exchange of ideas, production of knowledge, conceptual representations, enactments of desire, and systems of affect found among trans people within the city space. By exploring the interconnections between sexuality, commerce, legality, nation, and gender within the inner city, the author reveals the complex identities of trans people and marginalized minorities. In doing so, Perlongher reveals his vision for anti-identitarian, micropolitical, and subversive approaches to personal expression and experience.

Key Words: LGBT, Transgender, Politics, Urbanity, Sex Work.
Introduction

In this study, I look at the gendered dimension of the public sphere as presented by Néstor Perlongher. As I examine the sexual economy and structural violence found in the author’s metropolis, I focus on the way in which trans women are presented simultaneously as attractive and as repulsive, wanted and rejected, desired and murdered. In addition, I am interested in the exchange of ideas, production of knowledge, conceptual representations, enactments of desire, and systems of affect found among trans people within the city space. While a sense of violence and danger is palpable, the author views the urban setting as a site of agency, resistance, survival, kinship, and self-affirmation integral to the formation of trans cultures and social networks. Instead of seeing the urban setting as inevitably dangerous and debauched, Perlongher recognizes it as a space in which to contest institutional rejection, political invisibility, and self-deprecation. By exploring the interconnections between sexuality, commerce, legality, nation, and gender within the inner city, the author reveals the complex identities of trans people and marginalized minorities. In doing so, Perlongher reveals his vision for anti-identitarian, micropolitical, and subversive approaches to personal expression and experience.

While I will examine various texts within his oeuvre, I will focus on some of his most renowned works. On one hand, I will examine the figure of Argentina’s Eva Duarte de Perón as presented in his renowned and controversial Evita vive (1983). Having been revered by the lower economic classes, in the author’s work, Evita becomes one among the masses—involved in the crime, the drugs, and the sex scene of the city. His transgendering of the First Lady not only distorts the image of a national emblem but creates a space for genderqueer expression; challenging heteronormativity and official discourse in the process. Furthermore, through his alteration of Eva Perón, Perlongher presents obstinate disobedience and satirical exaggeration as part of his Neobarroso approach to art.

On the other hand, I will look into Perlongher’s Prosa plebeya (1997), a set of essays which declare his political and artistic theorization. In these, Perlongher presents his sexo-dissident attitude, non-assimilationist political positioning, distinct understanding of gender nonconformity, and urban deterritoriality and nomadism. His essays, characterized by their vehement expression and experimental ideas, serve to publicly condemn political violence and defend sexual and gender dissidence. His experimentalist Neobarroso approach sets out to explore the low, the dirty, the sexual, and the obscene. In doing so, Perlongher assumes alternative attitudes and ideas found within underserved communities to resist and contest the limiting and detrimental politics of the Argentine nation.

Genderfucking: Travesti Provocation & Desire

Trans people were part of those whose lives Perlongher was interested in exploring through his work. As observed by Ben Bollig, the author’s 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. The absence of government and authority granted by their social position gave trans people the opportunity to explore their desires, regardless of how shocking or perverse these may have been by the general public. Unrestrained by social mores, by expressing their own identity trans people could defend a person’s right to difference even if this meant diverging from the values that society held most dear. At the same time, the effeminacy and passivity that had characterized marginalized groups was reappropriated and reinterpreted to combat the state. By doing so, trans people provided potential
strategies for combating the heterosexist and masculinist order that historically ruled over the nation-the same system of power which persecuted and tortured sexual and gender minorities since its inception.4

To explore the persecuted yet subversive space of gender and sexual minorities, Perlenger 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 regardless of their sexual practices. This can also be perceived in Perlenger’s verse, especially through his particular manipulation of grammar and employment of rhetorical figures.5

Fe/male

Perlenger explores gender nonconformity throughout Austria-Hungria (1980), his first book of poems. In Polvo, what first appears to be an amorous relationship between a man and a woman, suddenly turns into a salacious scene in which the characters’ gender and sexuality become unstable. For the erotic act, the author places the narrators in the darkness and dirtiness of the city streets: “la pared de los patios rayada por los haces de una luz encendida a deshora/ cenciento el terror, ya maculado, unuoso en esas buscas/ a través de los charcos” (18). In this public space, speaking to one another as the two engage in sex, the characters’ gender becomes volatile: “‘Ya no seré la última marica de tu vida’ dice él/ que dice ella, o dice ella, o él/ que hubiera dicho ella, o si él le hubiera dicho: ‘Seré tu último chongo’” (18). While they use the words marica and chongo to refer to one another, labels used to refer to sexually submissive men and sexually dominant men respectively, their manhood is put into question as they both acquire feminine personal pronouns. As their bodies intertwine, their gender roles fluctuate, becoming impossible to differentiate between the two:

“como la leche de él sobre la boca de ella, o de los senos/ de ella sobre los vellos de su ano, o un dedo en la garganta/ su concha multicolor hecha pedazos en donde vuelcan los carreros/ residuos/ de una penetración: la de los penes truncos, puntos, juncos,/ la de los penes juntos.” (18)

The sexual organs and fluids traditionally associated with either man or woman, are displaced. We are unable to trace to whom each bodily element belongs. When presented with two bodies, we come across a pair of breasts and a vagina, which may lead us to think of a woman, yet we are left puzzled by the image of two penises. Also, unable to identify the penetrative role taken by the twosome, the traditional gendered paradigm (feminine entities are receivers and masculine entities are perpetrators) becomes unreliable. In addition, at the moment of orgasm, we are unsure if the poem portrays male or female ejaculation: “en su hondura - oh perdido acabar/ albur derrama el de ella, el de él, el de ella, o él” (18). Furthermore, unlike the penis or the vagina, among the sexual organs registered in the poem, the anus (which can be associated with either men or women) becomes admired and craved: the air that passes through it is described as “dulcísimos pedos” (19). Through the sexual act, the bodies interconnect, blurring and transposing all distinguishing features- ambiguity takes over while certainty is lost. As a result, we are no longer able to rely on binary systems to understand the gender (male/female) and sexuality (dominant/submissive) of individuals. These, on the other hand, seem unrestrained and indecipherable. Interestingly, the poem itself can be described in a similar manner. Perlenger’s distancing from literary tradition can be perceived not only in the poem’s juxtaposition of

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4. For a study on how the homosexual body is perceived during the consolidation of the modern Argentine state as a locus of infection in need of control and elimination, see Jorge Salessi. For a study on the ways in which LGBT+ people were persecuted during the Argentine dictatorship and the rise of the Argentine gay rights movement, see Débora D’Antonio. For complete histories of homosexuality in Argentina, see Jauregui, Bazán, and Melo.

5. This approach is identified as transvesti aesthetics in Bollig’s “Néstor Perlenger: The Poetic Search for an Argentine Marginal Voice”
Personal pronouns to show uncertainty in a subject’s gender, but also in his use of double similes in which a subject is simultaneously ascribed masculine and feminine qualities. In addition, Polvo’s free verse allows Perlongher to abandon stylistic constrictions in order to express intuition and unrestrained thought. It as if, along with the movement of the poem, the characters follow their unconscious (feelings, urges, etc.) as their bodies interact and interpenetrate. On a last note, it is important to keep in mind that, like the poem’s characters, in order for us to recognize each other—to pass on feelings, to become intimate with the other, to experience the thoughts of the other, to understand the self through the other—we must not only engage in sex, but also interact within the cityscape (in the same way that the aforementioned lovers do). For Perlongher, it is in its darkness, indecency, and unpredictability, where we can learn to surrender ourselves, lose ourselves, and connect ourselves with the other.

De/formation

While it is true that unstable textualities and identities may disturb the common reader, it is this very reaction what Perlongher seeks. His writing intentionally challenges self-perceptions and assumptions about the world, especially when it comes to sexual deviation and gender ambiguity. For Perlongher, a person’s gender should be treated as malleable. As individuals, we ought to explore the breadth and depth of gender. In doing so, we could deconstruct and redefine our individuality, thereby achieving self-development and self-governance. As an avid reader of Deleuze and Guattari, Perlongher agrees with continuous deterritorialization (breaking of habits) and reterritorialization (formation of habits); always in the processes of actualization yet never reaching consistency and fixed form. In Los devenires minoritarios, an essay included in his Prosa plebeya, Perlongher proposes “un sujeto —o, mejor, un ‘punto de subjetivación’— que no ha de medirse por el control localizado que ejerce sobre sus deseos, sino valorizarse por la intensificación de las conjunciones y encuentros de que sea capaz” (66). In other words, we must not allow ourselves (nor others) to demarcate, hierarchize, and regulate our bodies and identities. Instead, our sense of self should openly explore the rich and complex flows of human experience—rejecting self-crystallization and embracing self-indiscernibility. Doing so, would bring forward individuals who are “indicando, lanzando, experimentando modos alternativos, disidentes, ‘contraculturales’ de subj etivación” in order to open “puntos de fuga” para la implosión de cierto paradigma normativo de personalidad social” (68). For Perlongher, it is important to reject conventionality and normativity, not by becoming someone else, but by soliciting and giving way to the other. By entering in exchange, while rejecting traditional systems and models, one is able to create innovative alternatives.

With regards to gender, as with Deleuze and Guattari, the author suggests that we take on a progressive stance by embracing womanhood. The author sees gay men and trans women as exemplary of such revolutionary displacement and recodification of femininity. In contrast, resubjectification through the masculine is seen as ineffective, especially within an already patriarchal system: “Puede haber, devenires del hombre, pero no un ‘devenir hombre’, ya que el hombre es el mayoritario por excelencia, mientras que todo devenir es minoritario” (68). Interestingly, while he insists on intensive experimentation, he does not view (nor explore) the male subject as a possible figure of change. One could argue, however, that there are ways in which masculinity can be subversively used. He seems to overlook, for example, women who reject conventional femininity by taking on masculine traits. Also, there are men who objectify the male body by embracing hypermasculinity. On another note, instead of being inherently radical, there are instances in which femininity conforms to prevailing standards. In addition, he compounds feminine trans women and feminine gay men, as if their lived experiences were comparable. While trans women are commonly seen as not ‘feminine enough’, gay men are usually seen as
too feminine. While both may have been assigned male at birth, their particular connection with femininity can be vastly different in intention, identification, and expression (not only as group but from individual to individual). Neither one, nor anyone for that matter, gains immediate subversiveness by entering the realm of femininity. The opportunities described by Perlongher seem more feasible through subtle nuances that deterritorialize the self without imposing unity and consistency. It is when promoting difference over identity, that Perlongher recognizes a variety of possibilities when thinking of gender: “Donde había solo dos grandes sexos molares (serás A o B, serás hombre o mujer), mil pequeños sexos moleculares, en el imperio de la sensación, en lo intensivo” (68). Foreseeing the concept of genderqueerness, the author suggests a spectrum of gender expression in which an individual moves about without affirming a crystallized identity.

All in all, Perlongher rejects all identity categories and labels. For the author, by adhering to these, we delimit our experiences and negate our latent desires. No longer striving for deconstruction and innovation, we settle for pre-established forms of being which are sociopolitically regulated. For example, by identifying as either man or woman, one settles into the roles and expectations which define such labels. The same can be said about categorizations which attempt to combat heterosexist structures, such as gay and lesbian. Under this particular classifying system, fixed limits on sexuality are established while, when recognized by the government, normative coupling standards are expected: sexual exclusivity, sexual position-taking, cohabitation, family development, etc. Through classification and characterization, the state ascribes moralizing conventions in exchange of human rights. To ensure their own safety, individuals who were once rejected by the system, now follow its traditionalist conservatism and regulatory bylaws. Noting a change in regulatory procedures, Perlongher identifies:

[Un cambio de signos que indica el pasaje de una sociología de la norma contra la ‘anomía’, a un modelo de sociedad como un sistema de selves (egos) autoadministrados, pagando el precio de la construcción consciente de una identidad coherente en pos del dudoso premio de un reciclaje ilusorio en los circuitos del orden oficial. (71)]

In the same way that sociopolitical forces interfere and regulate emotional and sexual relationships, law and order is maintained by invading the most intimate of spaces, including the home. In En síndrome de las salas, Perlongher recognizes an obsessive desire for orderliness and cleanliness within the bourgeois residence. Inside this four-walled utopia, its residents uphold strict regulations which punish any attempt at breaking standards of decency and organization. Insisting on obedience and rigidity, the domestic ideal permeates into the masses through hired help (and other services in which the values of the rich are promulgated and enforced onto the poor):

Es sintomático que, para mantener esa sofocante organización, las clases medias de deban recurrir a un verdadero ejército de empleadas domésticas, a quienes pacientemente se enseña y se impone -para que las transporten de paso al seno de sus hogares periféricos y enciendan en la pobreza el digno culto del orden limpio- toda una micropolítica del espacio residencial. (63)

Thus, the urban space is in constant danger of acquiring the same authoritative values that exist within the law-abiding and well-mannered middle and upper classes. Opposed to the sanitary and meticulous space of the bourgeois home, Perlongher is attracted to the unsystematic and undisciplined inner city, even if this implies living in (what is viewed) as obscene and unpleasant. It is important to keep in mind that the author is
not (necessarily) asking us to live in squalor. What he is mostly concerned about is the fact that

El orden doméstico, se presenta a sí mismo como natural, como lógico, como implícito, cuando en verdad, no es nada más que eso; un orden impuesto autoritariamente por los poderes domésticos, tan arbitrario e insoportable como tantos otros, en el ‘panopticum’ contemporáneo. (65)

It is the authoritative regulations which enter the domestic realm that ought to be feared. These enforce values and standards which do not serve the distinct needs and changing interests of the individual. Instead, Perlongher seeks a space in which intuition, innovation, and adaptability are allowed; within the author’s context this can be easily found in the indelicate streets of the urban city. Nevertheless, even the freedom that is found in the working-class space is precarious due to the gentrifying force of the affluent bourgeoisie. Thus, if to remain disobedient and ungovernable is the goal, to interact without imposing points of view, while learning from the other, is the challenge.

In/betweenness

Self-organization promises an enhanced version of ourselves. We wonder, nonetheless, how we may accomplish absolute deterritorialization: Are we prepared to see ourselves as products of constant change? Is being continuously open to further change sustainable? How can prioritizing difference bring about social change? Can destratification, always guided by desire instead of reason, bring about unforeseen dangers? To reflect on these questions, I will observe the ways in which gender de-codes and re-codes the reader in Perlongher’s Evita vive.

In the short story, we are presented with heavily gendered characters. Each section introduces a new narrator, each recalling the moments in which they individually met Evita, a fictionalized version of the First Lady who is portrayed as a trans woman. For the time being, we will focus on the first and third narrator: a feminine marica and a masculine chango. As the reader is exposed to patterns of behavior and forms of expression which correspond to the narrators’ opposing genders, the reader fluctuates among the masculine and the feminine; finding a place of in-betweenness within the text. Accordingly, a tripartite classification of gender is introduced: masculine, feminine, and that which alternates between the two. Nowhere does the narrators’ expression of gender become more apparent than in their treatment of sex, which we shall further examine.

As we begin the short story, we are introduced to our first narrator: a cashier at a night bar. After getting suspended for fighting with a fellow co-worker, he heads back to his temporary residence, a hotel located in el Bajo; the red-light district of the Argentine capital (no longer, however, due to gentrification). Jimmy, a black sailor likely to have arrived at the nearby Port of Buenos Aires, currently lives with the narrator as his lover. As the narrator enters the hotel room, he finds Jimmy sexually engaged with a woman.

While the narrator initially becomes angry, he settles down after realizing that it is Eva Perón who “hasta ese momento tenía la cabeza metida entre las piernas del morocho” (24). Now, in the form of a trans woman, she seems to have risen from the dead: while her emblematic hairstyle, representative of her elegance and effervescence, collapses into a “rodeo todo deshecho” (25), her use of chemotherapy to ward of her eventual death leaves “manchitas del cáncer” on her skin (24). Through her decayed body, we are reminded of both the First Lady’s glorious and heart-rending moments. Neither strictly dead nor alive, she returns to Argentina as a monstrous version of herself. Instead of fighting over
Jimmy, the first narrator accommodates Evita, enchanted by her presence.

Together, they enter into a threesome: “[Evita], tenía las uñas largas... se las cortó para que el pedazo inmenso que tenía el marinero me entrara más y más, y ella le mordía las tetillas y gozaba” (26). In this particular scene, the narrator is penetrated, Jimmy performs the penetration, and Evita assists with the penetration. It may be of no surprise that the narrator takes on the submissive role: after all, we have been told that he met Jimmy “viriando por el puerto” (23) and describes himself as a prostitute or promiscuous woman: “yo soy tan puta” (25). Also, as seen, the narrator continuously refers to himself in the feminine: “una marica” (24), “una bruta” (24), “una puerca” (25), etc. Overall, we are left with the impression that the narrator possesses many qualities that are considered typical of women.

Once we reach the end of the short story, we encounter a much different personality in the third narrator, a masculine sex worker named Chiche who roams the streets of Buenos Aires under the supervision of a procurer, who goes by Alex. To make his workers more appealing: “Alex nos mandaba, cada vez que podía, viejos y viejas, que nos adornaban con un par de palos” (31). In addition, he selects a centrally located spot to make them easily accessible to all city dwellers: “La cosa es que todos -y todas- sabían dónde podían encontrarnos, en el snack de Independencia y Entre Ríos” (31).

While he waits for his loyal clientele, the new narrator is approached by a curb crawler named Francis. As the client solicits Chiche’s services, he explains that there will be an additional person involved in the sexual activity. Beside him, a beautiful woman sits and introduces herself. We learn that she is none other than Evita. Chiche, unhesitatingly, begins to flirt with her and goes on to caress her body in a dominant manner:

“Me llamo Evita, ¿y vos?” “Chiche”, le contesté. “Seguro que no sos un travesti, preciosa. A ver, ¿Evita qué?” “Eva Duarte”, me dijo “y por favor, no seas insolente o te bajás”. “Bajarme?, ¿bajárseme a mí?”, le susurré en la oreja mientras me acariciaba el bulto. “Dejáme tocarte la conchita, a ver si es cierto”. ¡Hubieras visto cómo se excitaba cuando le metí el dedo bajo la trusa! (31)

As seen, Chiche’s demeanor is quite different from that of the first narrator, who had previously expressed admiration and respect towards Eva Perón. Instead, Chiche is forceful and assertive towards her. Evita, on another note, remains as feminine as before. Even her genitalia are described as that of women, despite her transness.

In the following scene, we encounter another threesome; this time between Evita, Chiche, and Francis. On this occasion, however, it is the narrator who penetrates the other two participants. Once treated with amiability and warmth, Evita now encounters an individual who is quite assertive. This is evident in Chiche’s sexual objectification of Evita: “Ella era una puta ladina, la chupaba como los dioses. Con tres polvachos la dejé hecha... La mina era una mujer, mujer” (32). Even though he is hired as a sex worker, due to his dominant nature, Chiche feels confidence in refusing sexual services: “[Evita] me pidió que volviera, si precisaba algo. Le contesté no, gracias. En la pieza había como un olor a muerta que no me gustó nada” (32). While noting her disturbing unduearness, which had not bothered the first narrator, Chiche is arrogant enough to reject Eva Perón. It is true that the first narrator had also been sexually suggestive and sexually aroused yet, unlike Chiche, he was never overbearing or presumptuous. Chiche even takes manlish pride in his own phallus: “el putito [Francis] quiso ver mientras me duchaba y ella [Evita] se tiraba en la cama. También, con el pedazo que tengo, hacen cola para mirarlo nomás” (31-32). Becoming the center of attention, due to his great member, he brags about the fact that he slept with the emblematic First Lady: “Cuando
me lo terminé de garchar me dijo [Francis], con la boca chorreando leche: “Todos los machos del país te envidiarían, chiquito; te acabás de coger a Eva” (32). Most importantly, Chiche did not just have sex with her, which the first narrator had also done, he was able to penetrate her- and in doing so dominate her. Through the phallus, as the transcendent symbol of patriarchal empowerment, Chiche denigrates the most important among women.

As we move from one narrator to the next, the reader begins to perceive an interplay between sex, sexuality, and gender. As the first narrator takes on feminine qualities, thus becoming associated with women, he is penetrated. On the other hand, as the third narrator takes on masculine qualities, thus retaining the status of men, he performs the penetration. Accordingly, one’s perceived gender determines the sexual position taken during sex. In a similar way, when thinking of men who sleep with men within the Latin American context, he who is dominant is not considered homosexual. Instead, it is the man who is penetrated, the one who is ascribed such a label. As a result, both gender (masculinity/femininity) and sexuality (heterosexual/homosexual) are determined within a penetrator/penetrated paradigm. Within this system, there are preset expressions of gender and sexuality which are strictly followed. One ought to wonder if Chiche would have remained a masculine chango, if he would have wanted to be penetrated. The same can be said about the first narrator— would he have remained feminine if he would have taken the active role in intercourse? There is no exploration of what a masculine passive role or a feminine active role in intercourse would look like. Perhaps, this is an oversight explained by Perlongher’s view of femininity as always subversive and masculinity as always conventional (as it was earlier discussed). After all, the author is a product of the messages generated by his culture’s arrangements of sexuality, gender, and sex. As such, he is unable to escape these systematic arrangements to explore their unknown depths.

It is important to keep in mind that, not every act of submission is feminine nor is every act of domination masculine. Our reader moves through a system of gender and sexuality in which two extremes are found at their highest degree of intensity. Along with marginalized discourses, the reader engages with hypermasculinity and hyperfemininity, becoming one with both opposing articulations. The reader, therefore, moves fluidly from one end of the gender spectrum to the other, taking on the discourse of both the feminine and the masculine, experiencing through the narrators both the act of being penetrated and the act of penetrating. It is this entity, which is allowed movement between the male and the female. It is the reader who explores shifts in territorialization by engaging with the text. It is true that neither narrator is able to transcend male and female constructs: they simply reside in one or the other. It is also true that we are not directly presented with the “mil pequeños sexos moleculares” (68) which were promised in Perlongher’s theoretical work. Nonetheless, through the reader, decoding and recoding of the self seems feasible by engaging with the text and its polarities.

Lastly, it is worth mentioning the narrators’ movement through the city’s landscape. The short story is set in criminalized and marginalized spaces, which are frequented by sex workers, pimps, homeless persons, and drug dealers. Nonetheless, while excessive violence and sexual activity is palpable, we encounter individuals who find a site of self-expression in the city. It is within the dirty, dangerous, and destitute that the narrators are able to disengage from social norms. While doing so, they develop intimate relationships and partake in the socioeconomic order in subversive and alternative manners. By bringing the reader into this divergent space, the text allows one to explore different realms of gender and sexuality. In addition, by entering sites of drug consumption and sex work, the common reader disengages from their own experience, being guided by the narrators’ movement, becoming susceptible to change as a
result. It should be noted, that the narrators do not experience change in the same way that the reader may. Even though they do engage in the movement of the city, they remain relatively flat (as opposed to round) throughout the short story. The reader, however, is given the opportunity to explore and interact with the city’s frenzy and enthusiasm, stepping away from the story with a new understanding of the world around them and their own place within it. To conclude, it seems that becoming part of the urban space, in itself, does not bring about immediate change. Rather, while not every reader would be willing to do so, one ought to be open to its flows and variations—becoming one with its unsteadiness, taking the risk of embracing change, while allowing desire to take over.

Trans monstrosity

I would now like to turn our attention to the character of Evita. As seen, there is a notable effort from the author to validate her womanhood. Without seeking qualities that would make her masculine, the narrator instead takes note of her breasts “el flaco de la droga le metía la mano por las tetas” (27) and views her genital area as that of a woman’s: “dejámeme tocarte la conchita” (31). He perceives her as equal to other females: “una flaca entre las tantas” (31) while affirming her authenticity: “la mina era una mujer, mujer.” (32). All this being true, her unsteadiness is an equally important feature of hers. As the reanimation of the First Lady, the character’s body is like that of a corpse. While identified as being beautiful, her foul cadaveric smell scares the third narrator away: “En la pieza había como un olor a muerta que no me gustó nada” (32). In addition, we previously saw signs of Evita’s deterioration in her disheveled hair and skin spots. Even though the author is interested in the supernatural state of the First Lady—in order to present her return (after death) to the Argentine masses—imposing her monstrosity on a trans body seems far from accidental. In a transphobic society, gender-nonconforming people are commonly perceived as unnatural, monstrous, and damnable. By conferring the qualities of a living corpse onto a trans body, Perlongher seems to play along with disparaging notions held about the trans community.

Susan Stryker studies trans monstrosity in her Performing of Transgender Rage (1994). As a trans woman in academia, she denounces colleagues who have viewed or portrayed trans people as monstrous. In particular, some scholars have resorted to Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein (1818) when conceptualizing and defining the trans figure. Like a monster, trans people are seen as individuals with unnatural bodies; products of medical intervention; people without an identity of their own; entities that are less than human. In response, Stryker brilliantly reappropriates monstrosity, taking pride in her atypicality:

I want to lay claim to the dark power of my monstrous identity without using it as a weapon against others or being wounded by it myself. I will say this as bluntly as I know how: I am a transsexual, and therefore I am a monster.” (240)

Aware of her deviant identity, Stryker views trans people as entities that denaturalize ideals which society, counterintuitively and counterproductively, pursues and promotes. In doing so, she condemns the standards of behavior that society imposes on itself and others.

With this in mind, we shall now return to the text. As mentioned above, while portraying her as monstrous, Perlongher does validate the character’s womanhood. It would then seem contradictory if the author’s use of monstrosity was being used to disprove trans experience and gender nonconformity. I would argue instead that, in Evita vive, the character’s monstrosity is used more so for the corruption of an emblematic national figure. Eva Perón was widely regarded, among other things, as a friend of the working-class, a defender of women’s rights, an
enemy of the oligarchy, a beauty and fashion icon, and a figure worthy of canonization. As Perlongher turns such a distinguished person, into a monstrous version of herself, he ridicules that which defines the state, since it is Eva Perón who stands in representation of the nation. Thus, instead of humiliating trans people, he uses their place in society to question the patriarchal order, bringing forward the unorganized and unpolitical as possible sites of change and progress. In other words, Perlongher makes use of the way in which trans people are viewed in society to ridicule the establishment. Instead of denigrating the trans figure, he uses its marginality to adulterate and debase elitist institutions of power; presenting alternative forms of politics and culture in the process.

This is not to say that Perlongher never swayed away from his supporting and validatory stance towards trans people. As seen in Perlongher’s later work, with the rapid spread of AIDS and the hardening of neoliberal policies, spaces of homosexual and transgender desire were no longer seen as promising centers of micropolitical resistance. With time, Perlongher saw transgender people as useful political entities only when in the process of becoming the opposite sex. Once their bodies normalize, readily identified as having a particular gender, they were no longer seen as politically transgressive—they simply reinforced and conformed to social standards. Thus, trans people become only valuable when located in liminal spaces from which to problematize gender. If ever they conform to the norm, they are no longer seen as functional—their dynamism comes to an end. This would be particularly problematic for some trans people since gaining political agency would require an always unfinished gender transition; a process that many long to complete, that shapes their sense of wholeness, and that may protect them from violence.

Seen as focused solely on becoming the opposite sex, Perlongher begins to see trans people as simply artificial. While still provocative and scandalous, they no longer have subversive potential. As an example, in Parque Lezama (1990), we begin to see in the author a different attitude with regards to transness. When looking at Cabezas peinadas, we are presented with three trans women who are getting ready to go to a party. As they do, the poetic voice focuses on remnants of masculinity which are slowly being concealed. First, we take notice of their flat chests as they are being remolded to emulate supple breasts: “Crepé y arroz/ y un alcanfor/ discreto en la entretela/ Croupier que rueda bola de seda en los senos de imitación.” (39) Then, the women become obsessed with their makeup, willing to steal from one another to accomplish ideal beauty: “¡Ay que se me descorre el rouge!/ ¡Pero pásame el kohol!/ ¡No se lo digas a Herminia/ que le he aguachantado el rimmel!” (39). Lastly, their hairstyles are mocked as excessive, unnatural, and bizarre: “Habilidad de erguir píramides/ o complicados mamotretos/ cuyo fleje es el bleuque o el spray/ rubicundo que orea/ Duro, duro/ ¿Es un tejido?/ ¿Es una campanilla?/ ¿O es el pelo peinado con gomina/ tanta que esconde la raya?” (40). In this manner, the women are seen as imitating and hiding their true selves—“que no se note la mata bruta.” (40). Indeed, throughout the poem the trans woman is seen as pentimento, simulacro, simil, mimica. As such, they are not just artificial cabezas tan peinadas, but lifeless cabezas tan vacías.

Where once Perlongher validated their personhood, trans women now appear to be empty receptacles that adhere onto themselves hyperfeminine qualities in order to disguise their true masculine form. By complying to gender norms, Perlongher no longer sees trans embodiment as a transgressive site of micropolitical resistance. Now, it is not that Perlongher was not aware of the ways in which trans people may manipulate the body. However, instead of putting into question gender norms, trans people are now seen as acting in accordance with conventions and standards. To be fair, Perlongher shifts his perspective on all LGBT+ groups who, after the decriminalization of homosexuality and eventual recognition by the state, yield to its traditions and norms (not only trans communities). All in all, his representation of trans people

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7. It is worth noting that neither surgery nor hormones determine a person’s gender identity. For those who do choose to transition, the reasons are often personal and unique. In addition, while one may pursue some aspects of transition, one may also choose to reject others.
seems to fluctuate, walking a fine line between dehumanization and validation.

**Genderbashing: Travesti Violence & Murder**

Thus far, we have observed the ways in which desire impels the individual into de-territorialization and self-development. There have been instances in which, through nomadic movement and interaction with others, the individual shows possibility for discernment and transformation. At the same time, we have perceived certain hesitancy in those who hold on firmly to traditional forms of being, shutting away from that which is different. More interested in defining an identity of their own, they limit their own level of experimentation and creativity, rejecting all that may disturb their sense of order and simplicity. As if afraid to lose oneself in the process of de-territorialization, some individuals hold on to what is safe and ordinary.

Moving forward, I will focus on a different type of danger; one that is more material and palpable. Along with the employment of desire, we encounter violent forces which seek to regulate it. In Perlongher’s work, we specifically come across the police force— a violent instrument used to enforce the laws and regulations set forth by the established sociopolitical order. Failing to notice the presence of the police in the author’s work would be difficult. In his short stories and poems, we discover sergeants, lieutenants, and deputies who terrorize the marginalized people which inspire Perlongher’s work.8

While drugs, prostitution, and poverty bring about their own troubles, nothing compares to the brutality and ferocity of the police, who are out to destroy communities who are deemed unpleasant or abnormal. These officers of the law tackle irregularities and deviations through vilification, beatings, arrests, and murders. Their aggression is viewed as a regulation of desire— that which gives rise to the unfamiliar, the unpredictable, the uncontrolled, and the undisciplined. By not conforming to accepted patterns of behavior, those who act on their desires, are seen as subversive. As such, they ought to be controlled, either through punishment or destruction.

**The police state**

During the author’s time in Buenos Aires, through police edicts and proceedings, the urban space was heavily managed and controlled. As the police force determined and applied its own forms of law, it gained unprecedented power over all city dwellers; especially those belonging to lower classes and marginalized communities. Under the need to control indecent acts, the police particularly attacked gay and transgender people. In Evita vive, we are able to witness the violence exerted by the police onto the citizenry.

With regard to the second section of the short story, we are presented with a drug-addicted narrator who shares blunts and needles with Evita. Interestingly, she is described as a thirty-eight-year-old woman. Considering the fact that Eva Perón died at thirty-three years of age, we are presented once more with a postmortem version of the First Lady. Both the narrator and Evita are accompanied by their lovers. As the group sits on the ground, the couples share affectionate embraces, freely displaying their sexual desire for one another. At first, under the influence of illicit drugs, the group does not realize that at the entrance of the apartment police officers stand watching over their unlawful and lustful acts.

As they make their entrance, the officers immediately use physical force on the group: “Los azules entraron muy decididos, el comi adelante y los agentes atrás, el flaco que andaba con un bolsón lleno de pot le dijo: ‘Un
momento, sargento’ pero el cana le dio un empujón brutal” (27). When the group attempts to defend themselves, the cops pull out their guns. With their lives under threat, the group responds with a weapon of their own— their sexual desire. After arguing with the police, it is Evita who begins her salacious attack on the officers: “le rascó la camisa al cana a la altura del hombro y le descubrió una verruga roja gorda como una frutilla y se la empezó a chupar, el taquero se revolvió como una puta” (28). The particular individual who she sucks onto is none other than the police commissioner. As a senior ranking member of the force, it is embarrassing for him to be assaulted by a drug-addicted travesti. It is even more humiliating, still, to have liked it. Through her attack, Evita makes a puta out of the commissioner. He is feminized, sexualized, and pauperized— he is made out to be that which he and his colleagues reject and punish.

As Evita works to corrupt the image of the police force, the narrator uses his sexual desire to shock and intimidate the officers: “aproveché para chuparle la pija a Jaime delante de los canas que no sabian qué hacer, ni dónde meterse” (28). This time, what is used to frighten the police is the narrator’s homosexuality— an act which had been widely punished throughout Argentina. Sick of the abuse towards LGBT people and seeking validation for homosexual rights, Perlongher took part of various left-wing opposition groups established in the 60’s and 70’s. In the same spirit, the story’s characters parade their deviant behavior in defiance of the collective directed violence at sexual and gender minorities. Attempting to bring about fundamental social change, the author looks at institutions of power— which resort to violence when faced with opposition— using Evita vive to ridicule (and disorient) them. As expected, when removing the lawbreakers, the officers begin to beat them: “los canas se las tomaron, largaron a los dos pendejos que encima se hacian muy los chetos, y ella [Evita] se fue caminando muy tranquila con el flaco [su amante]” (28-29). Even as she and her partner are being arrested and harassed, Evita remains calm. She seems pleased and satisfied with her rebellious act and anarchist stance— standing for change by any means, no matter the repercussions.

Like earlier in the short story, we are reminded once more that we are dealing with a personification of the First Lady. As such, she claims her place as a political emblem who is worthy of respect: “Pero pedazo de animal, ¿cómo vas a llevar presa a Evita?” (28). Speaking in the third person, she signals her own power and status. At the same time, through this act of dissociation, we are reminded that Perlongher speaks, not of Eva Duarte per se. He is more so interested in the First Lady as an emblem— that which she represented for the nation. Thus, what we have before us is not a parody of a single person, but of the political institution she represented.

Moving on, when speaking to the police, Evita attempts to appeal to the officers, reminding them of her goodwill: “Que oigan, que oigan todos—dijo la yegua—, ahora me queréis meter en cana cuando hace 22 años, sí o 23, yo misma te llevé la bicicleta a tu casa para el pibe, y vos eras un pobre conscripto de la cana, pelotudo” (28). First, by being called a yegua, we realize that she is being seen through the eyes of the opposition. Indeed, the term— which denotes a vulgar woman— was commonly used against Eva Perón. It is no surprise that her political inclination made her an enemy of many men who looked down upon her public image. After all, as a woman, she was expected to be au verséd in politics and bound to domestic duties. The term, interestingly enough, was used against others who made immoral or improper use of their femininity; such as effeminate men, trans women, sex workers, erotic dancers, etc. Rejected by the oligarchy, while appealing to the marginalized, Evita became a beloved figure among the lower classes. To some, she became the yegua of all yeguas. Her interest in gaining the support of the masses became apparent in her charity work. As stated in the above quote, she gifted hundreds of bicycles, along with clothing and food to those who were most in need. In doing so, Evita brings to mind significant political acts on
which her good reputation was built. Lastly, through her impassioned plea, she reminds her readers of her memorable political speeches, through which she enthusiastically drew crowds while disseminating political ideals. All in all, while having a transgender version of Eva Perón, we are presented with a heroic image of the First Lady. Through her arrest, the police reject the values for which she stood—considering her benevolence and kindness towards the poor as inappropriate and contemptible.

Her connection to the masses becomes clear when others around her stand up in her defense: “La gente de las otras piezas empezó a asomarse para verla, y una vieja salió gritando: ‘Evita, Evita vino desde el cielo’” (28). In return, as she is being arrested, Evita gives assurance of her return and eternal support:

“Grasitas, grasitas míos, Evita lo vigila todo, Evita va a volver por este barrio y por todos los barrios para que no les hagan nada a sus descamisados”. Chau loco, hasta los viejos lloraban, algunos se le querían acercar, pero ella les decía: “Ahora debo irme, debo volver al cielo.” (29)

Thus, Eva Perón stands as a sign of hope for the masses. It is in her that they see an opportunity for change. It is through her that they are cherished and recognized as part of the nation. Consequently, she stays very much alive in the hearts of the people—even after death. Evita’s place in el cielo, point to her generosity and kindness. By being placed beside God, we are reminded of the people’s desire to canonize Eva Perón. She, undoubtedly, was seen as a blessing—a beacon of hope, of compassion, of progress. By harming her and apprehending her, the police deny the masses of their rightful leader while repressing their desires and demands. However, in this case, our hero is a trans leader who stands for the right to sexual freedom and gender expression. Is this what Prolonger’s queer nation insists on protecting and advancing.

**The alternative state**

While rejected and assaulted by institutions of power, we find individuals who defend themselves by fully pursuing their desires. In *Por qué seremos tan hermosas*,12 we find a poetic voice who ponders in amazement over her own paradoxical experience, which seems simultaneously sad and amusing. She seems to be a woman who freely explores her femininity and sexual desires. Like others around her, she takes pride in her inappropriateness. She is bold, she is fierce, she is silly, she is passionate, she is boisterous—she is the girl from down the block (not to be confused with the girl next door). She is the woman of the lower classes who struts her stuff with ostentatious confidence: “estaremos en esa densa fronda/ agitando la intimidad de las malezas/ como una blandura escandalosa cuyos vellos/ se agitan muellemente/ al ritmo de una música tropical, brasilería” (42). She could be the maid, the hairdresser, the waitress, the sex worker. As a matter of fact, by using the plural tense, she recognizes her experience as shared among others like her. She, in effect, represents them all.

However, while they enjoy who they are, they also understand that with their liveliness and confidence comes danger—it stands around the corner waiting for them to appear in order to regulate their trashy appearance and vulgar demeanor: “abriremos la puerta de calle/ al monstruo que mora en las esquina,/ o sea el cielo como una explosión de vaselina/ como un chisporroteo,/ como un tiro clavado en la nalguita” (42). In an overwhelmingly masculinist world, one in which police have control of every street, they are at constant risk of being stopped, frisked, and arrested: “seremos tan sentadoras, tan bonitas/ los llamaremos por sus nombres/ cuando todos nos sienten/(o sea, cuando nadie nos escucha)” (42). They may be considered overly feminine, overly sexual, overly gaudy, overly flirty—too excessively themselves. They need to be contained,

10. Text found in *Austria-Hungria*. 
controlled, and punished. Still like “masoquistas” (43), they continue to be “tan arriesgadas, tan audaces” (43) always “salpicando, chorreando la felonía de la vida/ tan nauseabunda, tan errática” (43).

These women demand sovereignty over their own bodies. They disavow tradition and coherence to pursue their own understanding of the self, always aware of the dangers that lie ahead. Wishing to risk their lives, we find individuals who stick together (quite literally as shown in the poem), to resist state violence. They are interdependent, they are collaborative—they generate unexpected solidarities and energize struggles against criminalization and assassination. The police, on the other hand, exert violence over the abject—they are afraid not just of the presence of the dissident body, but what this body represents and provokes. It is a body that, despite urban surveillance and militarized police force, demands to be itself.

I will now return to his essays, as the author attempts to trace the roots of police (and state) violence. In El sexo de las locas, the author perceives the underlying presence of homosexuality in the same patriarchal and masculinist institutions which persecute it. He senses, within relationships among (straight) men, an unspoken sexual tension that is acted upon in a concealed manner:

Un fantasma corre nuestras instituciones: la homosexualidad. Habría que retrotraerse al Freud de la Psicología de las Masas (1920) para hablar de la naturaleza homosexual del vínculo libidinal que enlaza a las instituciones masculinas como el Ejército y la Iglesia. Esa homosexualidad es "sublimada", pero el mismo Freud sugiere que el amor homosexual es el que mejor se adapta a esos "lazos colectivos" masculinos. (29-30)

While these flows of desire are detectable, they are also highly forbidden. Once internally recognized, institutions of power distance themselves from homosexual desire by externally destroying it. In other words, it is the masses who receive punishment for the desires which embarrass the conservative ruling classes. Perlongher warns against the thought of homosexuality as only residing within the abject. Instead, by being practiced among the most traditional of men, homosexuality then becomes worthy of being regulated and criminalized. After all, it is they who are highly prone to feeling guilty for enjoying it, and it is they who have the power to attack it and criticize it. Thus, for those who reject homosexuality, it is not about supporting established customs and beliefs, it is more about being frightened of one’s true desires. Lastly, Perlongher also warns against the idea of homosexuality as only a recent phenomenon. Instead, he insists that we look to our history to identify its remnants in the most sacred and official of places. In doing so, he dismantles the idea of homosexuality as something profane and unscrupulous. Rather, it is a desire that lives within us all, yet through regulation and punishment it has become despised.

With this in mind, by identifying the way in which homosexuality has been renounced and targeted, Perlongher recognizes that along with rejection comes a trace of muted yearning. This interconnection between violence and desire is palpable in the urban setting. Along with the detention, imprisonment, and murder of queer people, the author detects repressed desires among those in power. He then asks for people’s acceptance of their own libidinal impulses:

¿Qué pasa con la homosexualidad, con la sexualidad en general, en la Argentina, para que actos tan inocuos como el roce de una lengua en un glande, en un esfinter, sea capaz de suscitar tanta movilización -concretamente, la erección de todo un aparato policial, social, familiar, destinado a “perseguir la homosexualidad”? (31)
He even recognizes this attitude in the same individuals who seem to dismiss sexual and gender norms: “Recuerdo lo que me dijo una vez un muchachito ‘activo’ (vulgo chongo): ‘No me doy vuelta porque tengo miedo que después me guste’” (31). Similarly, he rejects current understanding of sexuality: “cabe cuestionar también la pretensión de clasificar a los sujetos según con quién se acuestan” (30); seeing these as limiting notions that control desire through classification and disaggregation. Additionally, he refuses to see heterosexuality as always “conyugalizada y monogámica” (30) while homosexuality is considered “revolucionaria... reaccionaria” (30). To him, these are ridiculous simplifications that delimit our identities. Instead, he encourages, as the title suggests, *el sexo de las locas*: “la alternativa que se nos presenta es hacer soltar todas las sexualidades... o erigir un modelo normalizador que vuelva a operar nuevas exclusiones” (33). While these ideas are now fundamental in queer and trans theory, Perlongher showed early on a deep understanding of the questions which have defined our field.

In addition, he finds in the urban city, a place in which individuals are able to learn from one another, to become stronger and better. Despite police violence, we find people who embrace each other and themselves. While involved in the realities of the city (its prostitution, its drugs, its homelessness), they generate forms of living and survival, resisting imprisonment and death. It is here, in the city, where Perlongher finds inclusion and affirmation, despite its ever-present dangers.

**Conclusion**

While Perlongher presents changing attitudes towards trans people, and LGBT+ groups in general, he finds in queer experience a salient and meaningful expression of political opposition and dissident citizenship. As trans people deride and criticize the norm, Perlongher recognizes their embedded place within a historical and local reality. By transgendering Eva Perón, Perlongher brings attention to the creative democratic praxis witnessed in the streets of Buenos Aires. Similarly, through his poems and essays, Perlongher exposes mechanisms of discrimination, biopower, and neoliberal governmentality. At the same time, he underscores the strategies being used in the cityscape to fight exclusion and invisibility. Among these, we find solidarity among the marginalized, authenticity despite sociopolitical hatred, and condemnation of state violence and punishment as fundamental for achieving social justice and political change. In addition, Perlongher explores gender nonconformity in order to denounce genderism, transphobia, and gender bashing. Moreover, by exploring its never-ending complexities, gender allows the author to question identity formation, nation-building, citizenship, agency, and culture. Overall, through various artistic practices and political alternatives, Perlongher contests prevailing arrangements of power, authority, and identity. In doing so, well before our current recognition of trans culture and practices, Perlongher presents trans people as leaders seeking to improve their local communities and leave a lasting impact on society, culture, and politics.

13. Considering the author’s relationship to São Paulo, his view of the urban space was equally impacted by the Brazilian metropolis. See Perlongher’s “O negócio do michê: prostituição viril em São Paulo”.


OBRAS CITADAS


---. Caribe transplantino: poesía neobarroca cubana e rioplatense. Iluminuras, 1991


---. Hule. Último Reino, 1989.


