

# QUEER CORPORALIZATION IN NÉSTOR PERLONGHER'S CORRESPONDENCE



Corporalização queer na correspondência de Néstor  
Perlongher

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## Resumo

Néstor Perlongher (1949-1992), depois de se tornar um importante poeta na Argentina e um respeitado antropólogo no Brasil, identifica no neobarroco uma forma de expressão secreta e subterrânea que ajuda a articular sua postura de oposição, seu status marginal e seu estado vulnerável. Olhando a correspondência de Perlongher, este artigo explorará sua defesa do barroco, que ele vê como parte integrante de sua expressão criativa. Além disso, como ele defende os direitos das pessoas queer e trans, este estudo examinará as formas pelas quais seu corpo e sua personalidade assumem a apresentação e as qualidades femininas. Por fim, este artigo tomará nota da exotização do Outro racializado pelo autor, que fala da profundidade do racismo dentro da comunidade LGBTQ+ e do pensamento queer.

## Palavras-chave

barroco; queer; masculino; feminino; raça.

## Abstract

Néstor Perlongher (1949-1992), after becoming an important poet in Argentina and a respected anthropologist in Brazil, identifies in the neobarroque a secretive and underground form of expression that helps articulate his oppositional stance, marginal status, and vulnerable state. By looking at Perlongher's *Correspondencia*, this article will explore his defense of the Baroque, which he sees as integral to his creative expression. In addition, as he advocates for the rights of queer and trans people, this study will look at the ways in which his body and personality take on feminine presentation and qualities. Lastly, this article will take note of the author's exoticization of the racialized Other which speaks to the depths of racism within the LGBTQ+ community and queer thought.

## Keywords

baroque; queer; masculine; feminine; race.



**N**éstor Perlongher (1949-92) is a recognized poet, anthropologist and activist who has come to occupy a prominent place within the Latin American intellectual landscape. He is a controversial, abrasive and unapologetic figure whose experimentalist and counter-canonical neobarroso literature and open exploration of gender and sexuality defy heteronormative, misogynist and patriarchal authority. Strong in his defense and advocacy for the rights and freedoms of the most persecuted and marginalized, his life was oftentimes at risk during the military dictatorships of Argentina (1966–73) and Brazil (1964–85), where he lived and engaged in multiple forms of political mobilization, intellectual activism and social criticism.

Here, I will focus mainly on the ways in which Perlongher's body is presented in *Correspondencia* (2016), an illuminating compilation of letters written by the author to friends and family.<sup>1</sup> In his correspondence, he discusses and expands on themes which have been widely recognized and discussed, while presenting additional interests that have remained unexplored or understudied. While the compilation organizes the letters in chronological order, my analysis will engage in temporal jumps, creating connections between letters in order to show recurrent themes.<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of this publication, I will explore his defense of the Baroque, which he sees as integral to his creative expression. In addition, as he advocates for the rights of queer and trans people, I will look at the ways in which his body and personality take on feminine presentation and qualities. Lastly, I will take note of the author's exoticization of the Other.

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that portions of this study appear in my doctoral dissertation, entitled *Queer Baroque*.

<sup>2</sup> For each citation, I provide the recipient's name, the location of the sender, and the date.

### Neobarroso

Baroque art explores the irrational, or that which seems irrational. It allows us to examine that which evades existing classification systems, that which rebels against order, that which transgresses norms. While baroque art may shock or astonish the reader, it is not meant to leave us in a state of perpetual confusion and uncertainty. Instead, baroque art invites us to discover new meaning through experimentation and creative thought. The Baroque encourages us to find, in duplicity and contradiction, unforeseen knowledges and forms of expression. As such, Perlongher recognizes in the Baroque a way of exploring the unexplored, of understanding the misunderstood, of normalizing the abnormal. He reformulates the Baroque in order to shed light on the lives, experiences, and cultures of queer people. The Neobarroso, as he denominates this approach to the Baroque, helps him access and express his points of view, his artistic expressions, his intimate thoughts, and his variable experiences: “Me embarro barroquizándome” (Reinaldo Arenas, São Paulo, October 10, 1985). The Baroque now recreates, deforms, transforms normative thought patterns in order to access and explore queer desire. Early in his correspondence, Perlongher reflects on his literary style, recognizing its ambiguity and obscurity as integral to his self-expression and aesthetic experience. While elaborate and convoluted, his writing reflects his perceptions, emotions, and beliefs. His internal reality, defined by complexity and ambiguity, is reflected in creative thought and action:

Me apresuro a aclarar que mi estilo - que es ciertamente caótico, a diferencia de tu prolija precisión - no es intencionalmente confuso. Sucede que empiezo a escribir y las palabras se me enmarañan y los textos se me pueblan de términos exóticos y no puedo evitar ponerme un poco complicado (y supongo que también pesado). Una solución posible sería tachar y reescribir, pero en ese caso no terminaría nunca. Te aconsejo, por experiencia propia, no preocuparte demasiado si no entendés algo: puede suceder que tampoco yo lo entienda. (Unknown recipient, Buenos Aires, May 31, 1976)

### **Feminization**

The Neobarroso is primarily focused on exploring the marginalized, the atypical, the Other. As he begins to examine the lives of sexual and gender minorities in his anthropological and literary work, Perlongher identifies *femme*, feminine, and women bodies as significant sites of resistance. As such, he embraces his own femininity and queer desire, pleased with contesting and defying cisgender and heteronormative attitudes. In his correspondence, as he communicates to friends and loved ones, he is offered a safe place in which to embrace his unconventional sexual and gender expression. In his letters, he expresses his queerness without shame, presenting a politically-dissent, gender-ambiguous, pleasure-driven body. At the same time, when looking at feminist and queer groups, he becomes increasingly aware of the internal divisions that impede his inclusive and nonconforming vision of society. As many adhere to cisgender, heteronormative and elitist institutions, he takes an outspoken stance in defense of the most vulnerable and under threat.

In his correspondence, Perlongher oftentimes effeminizes himself and the recipients of his letters: “nos tocará seguir escribiéndonos: tocándonos el timbre como vecinas que se piden azúcar” (Osvaldo Baigorria, Buenos Aires, April 25, 1981). Additionally, when referring to himself, the author uses variations of the same feminine sobriquet —La Rosa, Rosa L. de Grossman, Rosinha da Boca, La Rosa Coja, Rosita, Rose— among other assumed names— Perla de Pernambuco, La Lujanera, La Otra. He seems to summon at every chance his glamorous and flirtatious femininity: for instance, before traveling to Buenos Aires, he makes inquiries about safety and security in the following manner:

Dime nena, tendré que sacarme el aro para entrar al país? Las joyas, dejarlas empacadas? llevar el tapado de piel a la heladería? Disimilar la ajorca, los collares de perlas, las esclavas -y, acaso también- los dijes? Alguno que otro dije te podés permitir, ahora la moda la tolera, me insinúan modistas retiradas. Habrá acaso algún desfile de modas donde yo pueda

lucir lo que me traigo? Me lo llevaré todo puesto. (Sara Torres, December 7, 1982)

On another occasion, he compares his desire to hear back from a friend, with his desire to become a woman or a feminized version of the self: “Nena, y a vos como te van las cosas? Sé que esperar que me escribas es tan insensato como mi necesidad de quedar embarazada para obtener la ciudadanía brasileña y poder llamarme Janira dos Santos y haber nacido en Caraguatetubapeipiringa” (Sara Torres, São Paulo, December 4, 1984). When speaking of romantic relationships, even his partners acquire feminine qualities:

Yo esplendida me namoro con un alto caballero alto pendejo a quien había conocido en el 79 pero su madre quemó las cartas que le envié y él no creyó en las promesas de mi amor eterno (hallando que era solo sexosexosexo, y poco seso), bueno, el encuentro fue muy tierno (tanto como una perdiz al chocolate). Y ayí estamos aperdigonadas, ambas: es una princesa africana y vive en un terreiro de candomblé (Sara Torres, São Paulo, March 23, 1983).

Other times, he speaks boldly against the criminalization and pathologization of queer people. Naturally, his tone changes, becoming more serious yet equally fearless. For instance, he recalls a lecture by Félix Guattari in which he decides to confront a fellow audience member:

A una psicóloga que decía que ella no iba a la calle a perseguir homosexuales, atendía a quienes la iban a consultar, le espeté: cuantos senos de travestis son aplastados en los cajones de las comisarías, para que una bicha vaya a tocar el timbre del psiquiatra, queriendo curarse?: ya que el dolor no viene de la locura sino de esfuerzo por controlarla y aparentar normalidad. (Sara Torres, October 7, 1982)

He goes as far as recognizing the multilayered marginalization experienced by trans people within both gay activists’ groups and liberal feminist groups:

Entré en una polémica con una psicoanalista medio feminista a propósito de Roberta Close, un travesti que fue erigido en modelo de mujer nacional, mira vos, provocando la ira de las mujeres progresistas... Los travestis aprovecharon el furor del gay lib (que las excluía por mujeres) para lanzarse a la calle: el

pico del gay fue también el close out de las Closes. Pero las mujeres progresistas no lo entienden y la atacan. (Sara Torres, São Paolo, December 4, 1984)

In addition, in spite of Argentina's transition to democracy, Perlongher recognizes that only traditional heteronormative values have found a place within the neoliberal framework, limiting gender and sexual diversity and creating division within the activist community: "Una esperaba que destapada la olla de la represión venía la orgía, pero no: mataron todo, y eso se nota mucho" (Néstor Latrónico, São Paolo, February 11, 1984). Moreover, the urban and lower classes, which his work is often associated with, can at times lose their radical and reactionary edge, especially when social, political and economic grievances become unresolvable and unbearable.<sup>3</sup> As such, in some cases, the author feels out of place, both within the privileged and the underprivileged:

Con la crisis económica, más el "avivamiento" de los explotados, la guerra social se ha agudizado tanto en el Brasil, que es desfilar por un océano de mendigos, fantaseando manos y uñas ávidas abalanzándose sobre la bijouterie... Concluyendo: en el área pobre me siento rata de otro pozo, y a las gays de clase media no las soporto, ni ellas a mí" (Osvaldo Baigorria, São Paolo, May 7, 1984).

### **Exoticism**

As some readers may have noted, when looking at the aforementioned quotes, while lively and playful, we find touches of exoticism in the author's expression. For instance, when speaking of becoming a woman, the selected/fabricated names used when referring to Brazilian women ("Janira dos Santos") and places ("Caraguatetubapeipiringa") exalt and dramatize their

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<sup>3</sup> In the 1980's, during which the majority of the selected letters were written, "Poverty characterized the lives of the overwhelming majority of Brazilians. Indeed, Brazil did not escape the economic crises shaking Latin America in the 1980s. Its foreign debt ranked as the largest in the Third World. The nation emerged from the period of military dictatorship with a triple-figure inflation. Nor had the military governments resolved the problems of illiteracy, malnutrition, and high infant mortality that plagued the majority of the people" (Burns, 2020).

origin. Similarly, when speaking of his afro-descendent partner, we find the author partaking in racial exoticism by finding voyeuristic and aesthetic pleasure in the nonwestern or nonwhite (“es una princesa africana y vive en un terreiro de candomblé”). In addition, by speaking of his partner’s lack of intelligence, the author’s comments draw on ideologies of racial inferiority (“alto pendejo”, “poco seso”). Thus, through romanticized projections of the cultural Other, he verges on the offensive, engaging in mockery or caricaturization, whether intentionally or not. This, in itself, speaks to the depths of racism within the LGBT+ community and queer thought.

### **Perlongher body**

From the beginning of his correspondence, Perlongher is personally and artistically driven by queer desire and feminine embodiment. Moreover, in order to explore his own nonconformance and deviance, by making use of its destabilizing and decentering nature, he reformulates the Baroque to facilitate his self-expression and self-conceptualization. Lastly, while he stands against leftist groups that adhere to transmisogynist and heteronormative values, he engages in covert aporophobic and racist practices, allowing us to recognize in his writing ideological inconsistencies and implicit biases.

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Enviado: 05/04/2022

Aceito: 05/06/2022