

Aesthetics of the Surface: Post-1960s Latin American Queer Rewritings of the Baroque

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## Abstract

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In this dissertation, I examine the ways in which four contemporary Latin American authors have rewritten seventeenth-century Baroque aesthetics, histories, and texts by focusing on the queer body. Rather than following the usual trajectory from the Hispanic Baroque to the Cuban Neobaroque, I trace an alternative path in which I analyze the works of a seemingly disparate group of poets and artists: Néstor Perlongher, Alejandra Pizarnik, Luis Felipe Fabre, and Jesusa Rodríguez. Their texts and performances appropriate not only the structures and themes of the Baroque, but also the minutiae of their source texts. Each writer establishes a practice that draws from Baroque aesthetics and Neobaroque intertextuality—namely its parody, artifice, and proliferation of citations—while more extensively and critically reworking a specific text or group of texts. Rooted in a queer sexuality that is mapped onto the page and materialized as textual play, their rewritings, I argue, structure an aesthetics of the sensuous, material surface. Their rewritings thus constitute a critique of heteropatriarchal cultural legacies and present us with alternative modes of understanding our relationship to literature and history. By weaving together close readings of the source texts and their rewritten versions, I explore how these rewritings carve out a space for non-normative histories, interpretations, and literary practices.

Chapter One focuses on the work of Néstor Perlongher, particularly on his first two books of poetry, *Austria-Hungría* (1980) and *Alambres* (1988). In this chapter, I argue that the queer body serves as the structuring mechanism of Perlongher's *neobarroso* poetics. Through the queer body, Perlongher disrupts and perverts the semblance of realism and normativity. This disruption drives the queering of History through the violent corrosion of language and reimagining of historical figures that results in a queer carnival of pleasure and wordplay in place of linearity and communicative language. This chapter also serves to outline and structure what is meant by queer rewriting throughout this dissertation and serves as a starting point for the construction of an aesthetics of the surface.

Chapter Two studies Alejandra Pizarnik's 1965/1971 short prose text, *La condesa sangrienta*. This chapter explores the connections between Pizarnik's *La condesa sangrienta* and the Baroque; the chapter's aim is to find new affinities in Alejandra Pizarnik's work and to read *La condesa* as a precursor to the *neobarroso*. Chapter Three turns to the work of Mexican poet Luis Felipe Fabre's *La sodomía en la Nueva España* (2010), a poetic text that rewrites the

seventeenth-century history of a group of men who were tried and burnt at the stake for their sodomitic acts in New Spain. My analysis centers on how Fabre's rewriting of these particular texts counter the poetic model that had been at the center of Mexican poetry since José Gorostiza and Octavio Paz. Chapter Four takes up the 1995 performance *Sor Juana en Almoloya (Pastorela virtual)*, written and directed by Jesusa Rodríguez. In *Sor Juana en Almoloya*, Rodríguez imagines the seventeenth-century nun imprisoned in Almoloya in the twenty-first century. The performance structures a critique of the Catholic church and the Mexican state, as well as a critique of the way we have come to understand and historicize the past. Beyond simply appropriating baroque structures and aesthetics, these four authors return to specific historical moments and figures to reread them from the perspective of the body and queer pleasure. Their textual engagement with the surface, both as an act of rendering the hidden visible and as language play that reveals but never resolves paradoxes, thus opens up countless possibilities for non-normative literary and historical genealogies and practices.

To my family.

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## Introduction

In October of last year (2016), I attended a poetry reading in the Mission District of San Francisco for the Señal chapbook series, which at that point was in its second year.<sup>1</sup> Señal publishes two chapbooks per year; it has been the editors' goal "to creat[e] interesting sparks and linkages" between these. In her opening remarks in San Francisco, the poet and translator Jen Hofer, who is one of Señal's editors, framed the night's reading and the chapbook series as one of "contemporary Latin American poetry in translation into English." Among this "contemporary poetry" was the work of Sor Juana. Jen Hofer followed her statement with a provocation: "You might be wondering," she began, "why we think of a person like Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz ... as contemporary. So, we think of the contemporary as what we are reading now ... We're interested in troubling the ideas of what contemporary might mean."<sup>2</sup>

In 2015, Señal's first publications were Luis Felipe Fabre's *Sor Juana and Other Monsters*, translated by John Pluecker, and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's *Enigmas*, translated by Stalina Emmanuelle Villareal.<sup>3</sup> Fabre's *Sor Juana and Other Monsters*, as its title indicates, dialogues with the seventeenth-century poet and with Sor Juana scholars. The internal relationship between Fabre's text and Sor Juana's served Señal as the opening linkage for the series. In his dialogue with Sor Juana, Fabre aims to satirize the topics most Sor Juana scholars engage with—mainly, the nature of her relationship with the Countess of Paredes. While Fabre's attitude toward the question of Sor Juana's sexuality is critical, he nevertheless places sexuality at the center of our reading of history. While Fabre's position is thus a satirical one that questions the very notion of knowing the past, he highlights the role that sexuality plays in our rereading of the Baroque.

This same kind of internal connection between these contemporary authors and the baroque texts and histories they rewrite and the broader relationship between twentieth- and twenty-first-century queer literature and the Baroque—its aesthetics and histories—are the focus of this dissertation. And beyond Hofer's observations highlighted above, I also need to ask: Why return to the Baroque? What is it about the Baroque that feels so contemporary and what aspects of the Baroque are Latin American queer authors interested in exploring and appropriating? And how does sexuality enter to weave the two traditions together?

This dissertation focuses on what I have decided to call queer rewriting. I have opted for this term, rather than *intertextuality* or more technical and specific terms such as Gérard Genette's *hypertextuality*,<sup>4</sup> to emphasize both the notion of repetition and the material task of writing. The adjective *queer* serves as the focal point of the endeavor: not only am I interested in the centrality of non-normative sexuality and pleasures engendered by these texts, but also in the kind of relationship they establish with (literary) history—the ways in which they queer it—and the kind of aesthetics brought about by these texts, which I will call an aesthetics of the surface. By aesthetics of the surface I mean the ways in which language is no longer in service of

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<sup>1</sup> Among the poets present was Luis Felipe Fabre, who is the focus of my third chapter.

<sup>2</sup> An audio recording of the event is available through San Francisco State University's Poetry Center Digital Archive. < <https://diva.sfsu.edu/collections/poetrycenter/bundles/230695>>

<sup>3</sup> In its second year, 2016, Señal came out with *The Rou of Alch* by Pablo Katchadjian, translated by Victoria Cócáro and Rebekah Smith, and *Monitored Properties* by Florencia Castellano, translated by Alexis Almeida; and this year: Soledad Marambio's *Chintungo: The Story of Someone Else*, translated by K.T. Billey, and Marília García's *The Territory Is Not the Map*, translated by Hilary Kaplan.

<sup>4</sup> Genette defines hypertextuality in the following way: "By hypertextuality I mean any relationship uniting a text B ... to an earlier text A, upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary" (5).

communication alone; instead, the focus is on the play with language as a material, sensuous surface.

In this dissertation, I examine the ways in which four contemporary Latin American authors have rewritten seventeenth-century Baroque aesthetics, histories, and texts by focusing on the queer body. Rather than following the usual trajectory from the Hispanic Baroque to the Cuban Neobaroque, I trace an alternate path that analyzes the works of a seemingly disparate group of poets and artists: Néstor Perlongher, Alejandra Pizarnik, Luis Felipe Fabre, and Jesusa Rodríguez. Their texts and performances appropriate not only the structures and themes of the Baroque, but also the minutiae of their source texts. Each writer establishes a practice that draws from Baroque aesthetics and Neobaroque intertextuality—namely its parody, artifice, and proliferation of citations—while more extensively and critically reworking a specific text or group of texts. Rooted in a queer sexuality that is mapped onto the page and materialized as textual play, their rewritings, I argue, structure an aesthetics of the surface: a critique of heteropatriarchal cultural legacies and the neoliberal drive for productivity through rewriting as a strategy that places emphasis on language as a sensuous, material surface. By weaving together close readings of the source texts and their rewritten versions, I explore how these rewritings carve out a space for non-normative histories, interpretations, and literary practices. The work of these four authors does not simply appropriate baroque structures and aesthetics, but also returns to certain historical moments and figures to reread them from the perspective of the body and queer pleasure.

A preliminary question is why the Baroque in particular has appealed to these queer authors and why it became the source of these rewritings. Although there is no single, definitive answer to this question, it's worth reviewing the salient aspects of the Baroque that have been appropriated by the four contemporary authors that this project centers on. What seems to have proven most attractive to these authors is the emphasis on language, excess, artifice, and the senses; in short, the play with surfaces. While these surfaces take on different forms in each of the texts I study in this project, they serve as the main points of departure for the perspective this project takes on the way in which Perlongher, Pizarnik, Fabre, and Rodríguez approach their baroque influences, texts, and histories.

As my individual analyses will show, the attraction to the surface in fact reveals a complex and often contradictory relationship between the notions of surface and depth. The contemporary authors studied in this project are interested in the play with language's materiality and sensuousness, in language play that reaches the point of excess, in the deployment of artifice in poetry. On some level, this seems to indicate that they are drawn to the Baroque for its revelation that depth exists only in appearance and that depth actually reveals itself to be nothing but surface. But my aim is to uncover a more nuanced view of how these authors engage with surface. In fact, and with a certain degree of irony and contradiction, this obsessive lingering on the surface ultimately leads to a deeper rereading of history, which in turn opens this "surface" up to a multiplicity of queer possibilities; it uses the surface to discover new ways to relate to history.

The baroque influences at the center of this project are primarily the authors Luis de Góngora y Argote, Francisco de Quevedo, and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, and painters such as Caravaggio and Velázquez. Their poems, plays, histories, and art will all serve as points of departure and interaction with the rewritings on which this project focuses. While it is no surprise that Góngora should head this list, as he has become the main point of reference when it comes to the Hispanic Neo/Baroque, I am also largely interested in the place of the rest of the

names that populate this period and the role they have played in structuring the contemporary versions of the Baroque and its rewritings. While each of the contemporary authors finds an affinity with a different author, they each take from various texts and figures and there is a significant interplay between the various baroque authors and artists explored in each chapter. That is to say, while Perlongher's greatest affinity is with Góngora, I also explore his affinities with Quevedo; in the case of Pizarnik, Velázquez is the main point of reference, but Caravaggio is also present; for Fabre, it is Quevedo, and also Góngora; and for Rodríguez, Sor Juana is most central, though Quevedo also leaves a mark.

This project begins with one of the authors that has been most heavily discussed in connection to the Baroque since Lezama Lima and Sarduy: Néstor Perlongher (1949-1992). The Argentine poet, sociologist, and queer activist was at the center of the neobaroque aesthetic of the late twentieth century, having named his particular version *neobarroso*—a term he coined in the 1980s. It is no surprise that a project about queer aesthetics and baroque rewriting should open with Perlongher, given that his oeuvre is structured upon these very concepts. Perlongher's first book of poetry was published in 1980 and his last in 1992. During the decade of the 1980s and until his death in 1992, he wrote six books of poetry and published numerous articles on art, sex, and politics. He is known as the “father” of the gay liberation movement in Argentina, though he preferred to say he was the “aunt” of the movement.

The other Argentine poet studied in this dissertation, Alejandra Pizarnik (1936-1972), perhaps the most well-known yet conceivably the most seemingly out-of-place in this project, serves as a counterpoint to the baroque genealogy typically outlined in the twentieth century. This project makes the case for Pizarnik to be considered a precursor to the *neobarroso*. Pizarnik spent a constitutive portion of her life in Paris together with surrealist authors and the big names in Latin American literature such as Octavio Paz and Julio Cortázar. While her connections to the Baroque have not been heavily studied, she was an avid reader of the canon and repeatedly wrote in her diaries about her readings of both Góngora and Quevedo.

The Mexican poet and critic Luis Felipe Fabre (1974-), today one of the most recognizable voices in Mexican poetry, is the focus of my third chapter. Closer to Perlongher than Pizarnik, given his deployment of humor and the mix of popular speech with erudite language, Fabre is an heir of some of the most celebrated queer writers of the twentieth century, including Salvador Novo, Severo Sarduy, and, of course, Néstor Perlongher. While not necessarily read as a writer who directly inherited the Neobaroque or *neobarroso*, his connection to the writing of *neobarroso* authors is clear from his book of essays, *Leyendo agujeros* (2005). At the same time, Fabre's baroque tendencies show up not only in the text on which Chapter Three centers, *La sodomía en la Nueva España*, but also in poems about Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and the ways in which she has been read by scholars since the twentieth century.

This project closes with the feminist and queer performance artist, playwright, director, and activist Jesusa Rodríguez (1955-), whose work has always articulated a queer feminist critique of normativity and the status quo through humor—a humor rendered palpable through language play (largely inherited from the Baroque) and the body. She is known for her strong attacks on the Catholic Church and Mexican politicians. Her performance pieces have, at various times, focused on and explored the figure and work of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz which has allowed her to structure a critique of politics and culture that finds its roots in baroque histories and texts.

These four authors, Néstor Perlongher, Alejandra Pizarnik, Luis Felipe Fabre, and Jesusa Rodríguez, are put side by side in this dissertation as a way to trace a queer aesthetic that is

rooted in baroque aesthetics. While these names placed together might, at first glance, seem disjointed, their relationship to the Baroque is not merely accidental. The Baroque appears in each of these authors and the texts studied in this dissertation as an intentional choice. At the same time, every one of these texts is a rewriting of certain Baroque histories, texts, and figures, which I read not as a coincidence but as an intentionally queer aesthetic that is rendered possible through the rewriting of the Baroque. It is the Baroque's emphasis on surfaces, excess, parody, and play with language that queer authors have found so appealing beginning in the twentieth century. And the baroque rewritings these four contemporary authors perform are no exception.

Chapter One focuses on the work of Néstor Perlongher, particularly on his first two books of poetry, *Austria-Hungría* and *Alambres*. In this chapter, I argue that the queer body serves as the structuring mechanism of Perlongher's *neobarroso* poetics. Through the queer body, Perlongher disrupts and perverts the semblance of realism and normativity. This disruption of realism drives the queering of History through the violent corrosion of language and reimagining of historical figures that results in a queer carnival of pleasure and wordplay in place of communication. This chapter constructs a queer theory of rewriting through Perlongher's essays, particularly the ones that focus on the Baroque, Neobaroque, and *neobarroso*. The chapter is thus divided into three subsections: a genealogy of the *neobarroso*; Perlongher's own theorization of the *neobarroso*, Neobaroque, and Baroque; and a close reading of Perlongher's poetry. This chapter also serves to outline and structure what is meant by queer rewriting throughout this dissertation and serves as a starting point for the construction of an aesthetics of the surface.

In the first part of the chapter, I explore the various "origins" of the *neobarroso*, staying the longest with the Baroque and the Neobaroque. From the Baroque, I argue, Perlongher takes a penchant for artifice and excess and the attention to the surface of language. In Perlongher, the Baroque is always read through the Neobaroque of Lezama Lima and Sarduy; it's always already queer(ed). In analyzing its genealogy, I mark the points of contact and divergences between the Baroque, Neobaroque, and *neobarroso*. In the second subsection, I trace these same topics as articulated by Perlongher himself. In the final section, I look at Perlongher's poetry, focusing on his earliest books, *Austria-Hungría* (1980) and *Alambres* (1988). Through a close reading of these texts, I work through the ways in which Perlongher's appropriation of Baroque and Neobaroque aesthetics and Argentine history forces the reader to question orthodox History and opens up to a multiplicity of queer possibilities.

Chapter Two studies Alejandra Pizarnik's 1965/1971 short prose text, *La condesa sangrienta*. While scholars such as María Negroni and Delfina Muschietti have suggested that Alejandra Pizarnik's final prose works—*La bucanera de Pernambuco o Hilda la polígrafa* and *Los poseídos entre lilas*—should be read as a precursor to the *neobarroso*, *La condesa sangrienta* has not been taken up in this way by scholars. In response, this chapter explores the connections between Pizarnik's *La condesa sangrienta* and the Baroque, traced first through its surrealist pretext and Surrealism's connections to the Baroque; the chapter's aim is to find new—that is, baroque—affinities in Alejandra Pizarnik's work and to read *La condesa sangrienta* as a precursor to the *neobarroso*. In this analysis, I trace the various baroque themes and aesthetic choices at work in *La condesa sangrienta* that connect it to the *neobarroso* through a queer aesthetic of the surface that structures her text. Some of the baroque influences we find in *La condesa sangrienta*—as well as in Surrealism—that can also be traced in the Neobaroque and *neobarroso* are its multiple perspectives, an emphasis on surfaces, the deployment of excess, the obsession with and awareness of death, and the centrality of vision.

Chapter Three turns to the work of Mexican poet Luis Felipe Fabre's *La sodomía en la Nueva España* (2010), a poetic text that rewrites the seventeenth-century history of a group of men that were tried and burnt at the stake for their sodomitic acts in New Spain. Fabre appropriates baroque poetic and ludic strategies and texts that emphasize the surface of language, a poetry grounded in the queer body and its pleasures. My analysis centers on how Fabre's rewriting of these particular texts, poetic devices, and the particular historical moment counter the poetic model that had been at the center of Mexican poetry since José Gorostiza and Octavio Paz. This chapter is divided into three sections, each focusing on a particular baroque appropriation. The first section focuses on the baroque burlesque tradition of sodomitic puns appropriated from Quevedo. The second takes up baroque allegory and its play with paradoxes through the figure of *la Nada*, which allows Fabre to establish a connection between the queer body and (non)productivity, a kind of poetics of rewriting that critiques the neoliberal drive for productivity and originality. The chapter closes with a closer look at the role of artifice both as a dense linguistic and literary surface and as a rejection of Nature and the "natural." This final section makes connections between the Baroque's emphasis on surfaces and excess as well as camp's deployment of exaggeration as a critique of gender as "natural," thus bringing attention to the pleasure inherent in the play with surfaces.

Finally, Chapter Four takes up the 1995 performance *Sor Juana en Almoloya (Pastorela virtual)*, written and directed by Jesusa Rodríguez. In *Sor Juana en Almoloya*, Rodríguez imagines the seventeenth-century nun imprisoned in Almoloya in the twenty-first century. The performance structures a critique of the Catholic church and the Mexican state, as well as a critique of the way we have come to understand and historicize the past. Through an analysis of Rodríguez's rewriting of baroque theatrical forms such as the *pastorela* and the *comedia*, the first section of this chapter focuses on how these allow Rodríguez to lay bare the duplicity of the Church and the State by bringing a hyperawareness to how the supposed depth of the Church's teachings becomes a readily legible surface of hypocrisy and censorship at the very level of form. The second section of the chapter explores the ways in which Rodríguez rewrites baroque humor through a queer lens that questions public intellectuals' ability to know poetic intentionality and their role in constructing heteronormative (literary) histories. The closing section explores the role of drag in the performance and its roots in the baroque *comedia*. Through drag as a focal lens, this section brings to the surface the inner workings of power and exposes larger "truths" of literature, history, and politics as constructions, allowing Rodríguez, through the rewriting of seventeenth-century figures in drag, to question and subvert the very structures of power.

## Chapter 1: Queer Rewriting: Néstor Perlongher's *neobarroso*

As Cecilia Palmeiro has proposed in *Desbunde y felicidad* (2011), Néstor Perlongher's work must be read as intrinsically political and erotic: "la experiencia militante de Perlongher es fundadora de su poética ... [donde] el neobarroso [es una] ... exploración poética de una experiencia que es fundamentalmente erótica y política" (21). His writing is a poetics that passes primarily through—or is engendered by—the queer body, its fluids, and its pleasures. This chapter will thus center on how the queer body becomes the very structuring mechanism of a *neobarroso* poetics, or what I here call a poetics of the surface, and of queer rewriting, which will also serve as the guiding theory for the rest of the chapters that structure this dissertation.

In this chapter, we will explore how a theory of queer rewriting can be constructed from Néstor Perlongher's own theoretical texts as well as his first books of poetry. Though Perlongher himself did not use this terminology, it will allow us to structure our analysis of Perlongher's poetics and its relationship to the *neobarroso* by focusing on the endeavor of appropriating baroque aesthetics and strategies. In order to achieve this, this chapter will first construct a genealogy of the *neobarroso*; second, it will analyze Perlongher's take on the Baroque, Neobaroque, and *neobarroso* (his own reformulation and recontextualization of the Cuban Neobaroque). Once these theories and literary genealogies have been laid out, I will focus on how a theory of queer rewriting can be mapped out of or established through Perlongher's own poetry by exploring how the queer body and its pleasures disrupt a semblance of realism and normativity by queering History through the proliferation of voices, bodily fluids, and surfaces. This chapter attempts to understand Perlongher's *neobarroso* as a queer rewriting of the Baroque (and the Neobaroque) in his poetry, focusing primarily on his second book of poems, *Alambres* (1988), a text that performs a queer rewriting of Baroque poetic models and strategies as well as the Argentine nineteenth century.

By queer rewriting I mean the contemporary rendering of baroque *imitatio* not just as a strategy of intertextuality—as many scholars have noted about the Neobaroque—but as an intimate relationship to an earlier text (or set of texts) and history (or histories) that is centered on queer bodies and queer sexuality and the deployment of baroque poetic and aesthetic practices. Rewriting highlights a certain layer, a texture, a fold, that needs close attention. Ultimately, these strategies present a critical attitude toward the past and our way of constructing and narrativizing it. Queer rewriting proposes alternative ways of reading history; it's not just about how the Baroque makes us understand the present differently but how the relationship between the past and the present also sheds light on the past, its construction, and its (hetero)normative understandings.

In order to arrive at these theorizations, let us first explore the literary history or genealogy of the *neobarroso*.

### A Genealogy of the *neobarroso*

Most often, the *neobarroso* is aligned with the Baroque and the Neobaroque. In fact, we might say, in unison with other scholars, that the *neobarroso* finds its origins simultaneously in the historical Baroque (in Góngora) and the Neobaroque (of Lezama Lima as theorized by Severo Sarduy):

La definición de "barroso" con la que Néstor Perlongher quiso señalar su singular propuesta poética y su modo de filiarse a una tradición no desde el espacio de una isla

tropical sino en la “lama del estuario” rioplatense, convoca a la consideración de los términos a que alude. Y estos serían esencialmente dos: neobarroco y barroco. Podemos decir entonces que en el principio fue el barroco, antes del barroco y entre ambos el neobarroco y además antes, el rescate de la tradición barroca por parte de las vanguardias. (Cella 148)

The chronology proposed here by Susana Cella is accurate, especially in order for the prefix “neo” to make sense; nevertheless, Perlongher himself argued that authors were already writing *a lo Lezama* before they had even read Lezama. Can we then both trace a genealogy and acknowledge Perlongher’s seeming rejection of the Neobaroque and Baroque as “origins”? Perhaps we might want to choose our language more carefully, and rather than call these “origins” opt for a term that allows simultaneous—shall we say, rhizomatic—consideration. I believe that the image of the rhizome might serve us best in structuring this (Hispanic)<sup>1</sup> genealogy—a term that also allows us to bypass chronology, given that a strict chronology might be insufficient for capturing the complexity of the movements.

It has become commonplace in literary criticism to begin a discussion of the Baroque with the difficulty of defining this category. The title of Mabel Moraña’s subsection “El Barroco: ¿un estilo, un periodo, una cultura?” in *Viaje al silencio: exploraciones del discurso barroco* sums up the issue: is the Baroque a style, a historical period, or a culture? The answer is, of course, all three. In this chapter (and throughout this dissertation) we will focus on the Hispanic Baroque mainly as a style or aesthetic practice and also as a historical period. Historically, the Baroque refers to a portion of the Golden Age period spanning from the seventeenth until the (mid-)eighteenth century—plus or minus a few decades in either direction. Aesthetically, the Baroque is seen as “difficult” and “exuberant,” an aesthetic obsessed with death and artifice.<sup>2</sup>

Beginning with the revalorization of the Baroque by the Generación del 27 and continuing through Severo Sarduy’s theorization of the Neobaroque and Néstor Perlongher’s *neobarroso*, Góngora will become a metonym for the Baroque—ininitely more so than Quevedo or any other baroque author. What this means is that Góngora’s poetry will serve as the point of departure and the focal reference for the Neobaroque and *neobarroso*.

Defining the Neobaroque has become equally as (if not more) complex. A long list of authors and artists has been associated with the adjective “baroque” or “neobaroque” and their works structure an ever-growing corpus: “Figures as distinct as Nicolás Guillén, Frida Kahlo, Jorge Luis Borges, Manuel Puig, Pedro Almodóvar and Guillermo Carnero, are . . . ascribed a deeper unity through the baroque,” notes Allen Young (vi); to these we can also add the names of Reinaldo Arenas, Guillermo Cabrera Infante, Julio Cortázar, Haroldo de Campos, and Gabriel García Márquez, for instance, or more current figures such as Diamela Eltit. The authors most often associated with the Neobaroque in Latin America, however, are José Lezama Lima, Severo

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<sup>1</sup> Perlongher does also mention the influence of Brazilian authors, such as Haroldo de Campos, though this analysis is outside of the scope of this project. For more information regarding the connection between *neobarroso* and concrete poetry see, for example, Zaidenweg.

<sup>2</sup> In *Baroque Poetics and the Logic of Hispanic Exceptionalism*, Allen Young succinctly summarizes these two understandings of the Baroque: “as a period, the baroque extends the length of the seventeenth century, give or take a few decades, and abuts the Renaissance on one end and Neoclassicism on the other, sometimes buffered by mannerism or rococo. In stylistic terms, it points to a number of formal and thematic traits: heightened contrast, lavish ornamentation, asymmetry, extreme passion, a taste for the obscure and the exotic, a fascination with the theatrical, a morbid fixation on death, a flair for the monumental and a *horror vacui* or ‘dread of emptiness’” (v).

Sarduy, and Alejo Carpentier. We will focus on these former two, and not on Carpentier, in order to outline the Latin American Neobaroque.<sup>3</sup>

A list of names, however, does not define the Neobaroque, but what does? In his article “La transgresión latinoamericana” published in *Clarín*, Luis Diego Fernández—who echoes various scholars on the subject—outlines three central aspects as constitutive of the Latin American Neobaroque: ambiguity and excrescence, artifice, and parody. Added to or encompassed by these categories are excess, waste, overflow, transgression, parody, carnivalization, and intertextuality. These aspects are a summary of Severo Sarduy’s pivotal essay from 1972, “El barroco y el neobarroco,” often cited as the first formal theorization of the Neobaroque. The first terms, ambiguity and excrescence, have to do with the ideas of excess, waste, and the unproductive, primarily in relation to language and style, where non-binary structures function as a rejection of what is orderly and linear, of a single signifier in favor of its proliferation: “en forma de enumeración disparatada, acumulación de diversos nódulos de significación, yuxtaposición de unidades heterogéneas, lista dispar y *collage*” (Sarduy, “El barroco” 170). What this means for the role of artifice, explains Francine Masiello, is that “the neobaroque (inspired by Lezama Lima) skips over clear referential connections, mixes registers and textures of speech, and emphasizes the artifice of telling; the accumulation of detail [is privileged] over linearity and ‘story’” (70).<sup>4</sup> In the work of Sarduy, the symbol of artifice will become the transvestite body (Fernández). As for the notion of parody, Sarduy says the following: “En la medida en que permite una lectura en filigrana, en que esconde, subyacente al texto ... otro texto ... que éste revela, descubre, deja descifrar, el barroco latinoamericano participa del concepto de parodia” (175). In this sense, intertextuality becomes an inherent aspect of the Neobaroque. In fact, Sarduy makes the point that parody and intertextuality are constitutive of the Neobaroque text, “la obra será propiamente barroca,” he notes, “en la medida en que estos elementos—suplemento sinonímico, parodia, etc.—se encuentren situados en los puntos nodales de la estructura del discurso, es decir, en la medida en que orienten su desarrollo y proliferación” (176); that is, a text is baroque insofar as its constitutive point is parody/intertextuality, which in this dissertation will become rewriting in order to place emphasis on the notion of repetition and the undertaking of writing itself.

While etymologically the Neobaroque is closest to the Baroque, its practice cannot be conceived without taking into account the aesthetic practices that precede it historically. *Modernismo*, in a way, serves as the first bridge between the Baroque and the Neobaroque, given that, as Perlongher states, “[y]a Darío lo había artificializado todo” (*Prosa* 96-97). It was Darío who first revindicated Góngora, as Ángel Rama has contended. Darío, Rama argues in *Rubén Darío y el modernismo*, marks a decisive point in Hispanic literature:

Todo poeta actual, admire a Darío o lo aborrezca, sabe que a partir de él hay una continuidad creadora, lo que ya puede llamarse una tradición poética, que progresivamente fue independizándose de la tradición propiamente española hasta romper con ella en la década del cuarenta, atreviéndose a un cotejo universal. Esta continuidad no la puede filiar en los mejores productos decimonónicos anteriores a Darío

<sup>3</sup> For scholarship on a more global perspective on the Neobaroque, see Omar Calabrese’s *Neo-Baroque* (1992).

<sup>4</sup> In Sarduy’s words: “El barroco, superabundancia, cornucopia rebosante, prodigalidad y derroche ..., irrisión de toda funcionalidad, de toda sobriedad, es también la solución de esa saturación verbal, al *trop plein* de la palabra, a la abundancia de lo nombrante con relación a lo nombrado, a lo enumerable, al desbordamiento de las palabras sobre las cosas. De allí también su mecanismo de la perífrasis, de la digresión y el desvío, de la duplicación y hasta de la tautología” (176).



y los modernistas, y si acaso puede reivindicar repentinos, parciales maestros, en la América colonial, es dentro de la línea que Darío revaloriza antes que ningún otro en la cultura hispánica: la del barroco, con la cual su arte tiene puntos de contacto estrechos, u dentro de la cual elige los cuatro maestros que prefiere de las letras peninsulares:

Gracián, Teresa, Góngora, Quevedo. (11)

Not only does Darío mark the beginning of a truly Latin American literature, but he also serves as the point of contact between what will be most valorized in the Spanish literary tradition: the Baroque. What is of particular interest in Darío's reinvigoration of Góngora for our purposes is that his was a "superficial" return, as Iriarte explains, "[d]e acuerdo con el duro juicio de Dámaso Alonso ..., el nicaragüense de hecho no tenía una información demasiado profunda sobre el período"; moreover, he wasn't particularly interested in it, "Darío no se interesó por estudiar con profundidad el pasado" (107). He was instead interested in reading the seventeenth century through the French symbolists. In other words, "[a Darío] no le interesó el Góngora del siglo XVII, sino el Góngora que se levantaba a través de las refracciones de Verlaine." What Darío instead recovers from the Baroque is the "léxico lujoso que se deleita con la rareza y la innovación verbal. Esta búsqueda está representada por el apasionado interés con que los escritores representan el oro y las joyas" (111). And it is these precious stones (as well as the penchant for strangeness and innovation) that will also draw the *neobarrocos* (and *neobarrosos*) to both the Baroque and *modernismo*.

It is Perlongher who makes the connection between the Avant-Garde and the Baroque, thus broadening the Neobaroque and *neobarroso's* genealogy. In the opening paragraphs of "Caribe transplatino," Perlongher argues that it was in the late nineteenth century that the Baroque was recovered and, shortly thereafter, "todo pasaría a ser leído desde el barroco: el surrealismo, Artaud... El cubismo, arriésgase sería un barroco" (*Prosa* 93). But in what ways has (or can) the various schools of the Avant-Garde be read through the Baroque? What aspects of the Baroque do these retain?

Perlongher stated many times the importance and influence of the avant-garde poet Oliverio Girondo in his work. In fact, Perlongher dedicated his article "El sexo de las chicas" to Girondo. The essay opens by talking about *sensualidad*, which is quite telling given that is one of the most salient qualities of Perlongher's own writing. Not only that, but he also quotes Aldo Pellegrini who highlights that the sensuousness in Girondo is produced through sound (*Papeles* 179). Again, the relationship between sensuousness and sound has often been stressed in Perlongher's poetry by scholars. Another important aspect of Girondo's writing that Perlongher will take up, as Ben Bollig explains in "Néstor Perlongher and the Avant-garde: Privileged Interlocutors and Inherited Techniques," are his "experiments with neologisms, half-words, and the fragmentation of the body" (162). The point of contact that is particularly interesting here between the Baroque and the Avant-Garde is the fragmentation of the body and the presence of neologisms. These were not invented by the Avant-Gardes but were already tools of the Baroque.<sup>5</sup> Though it is worth noting that they are exponentially exploited in the Avant-Garde—

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<sup>5</sup> We can think here of the poems dedicated to women where the poetic voice describes each part of the woman's body, such as in the poems of Garcilaso or the verses that compose Góngora's "Mientras por competir con tu cabello," such as, for example "Goza cuello, cabello, labio y frente." In terms of neologisms, Quevedo readily comes to mind, particularly his satirical poems that include some of the following neologisms: *diabliposa* (a combination of *diablo* and *mariposa*), *quintainfamia* (where Quevedo substitutes *esencia* for *infamia* in *quintaesencia*), to mention only a couple (Alarcos García).

especially by Girondo—and then in Perlongher’s own writing to a much greater degree, as I will discuss further on.

Perlongher’s admiration of Girondo is important because it validates the inclusion of the Avant-Garde in this baroque genealogy. Including the Avant-Garde, in other words, is essential to understanding the origin and development of Perlongher’s *neobarroso* poetics because it entails an aesthetics of sensuality (that will later be transformed into specifically queer sensuality in Perlongher), the fragmentation of the body, low culture, and neologisms—all of which are constitutive of Perlongher’s poetics.

While Girondo is not the only avant-garde influence on Perlongher’s writing—in an interview with the magazine *Babel*, he names Enrique Molina as an important author who nourished his own writing (*Prosa* 14)—he is arguably the strongest and most notably underscored by Perlongher himself. In fact, Ezequiel Zaidenweg also cites Girondo—his work *En la masmédula* in particular—as an antecedent to Perlongher’s *neobarroso*. What Zaidenweg finds most interesting about *En la masmédula* in relation to the *neobarroso* (and the Baroque for that matter) is that, “si bien se trata de un libro fuertemente experimental, en tanto el énfasis está puesto en la materialidad del significante, a nivel prosódico Girondo se ajusta perfectamente a la gran tradición métrica castellana” and adds that “además de una deconstrucción formal del modernismo”—notice here the connection to *modernismo*—“a través de la separación de los hemistiquios heptasilábicos del alejandrino, hay una apropiación crítica de la silva, una libre combinación de endecasílabos y heptasílabos que, en su variante rimada, popularizará Góngora en su obra más conocida y radical, las ‘Soledades’” (438). Insofar as Girondo goes, here we have another point of contact between the Baroque and the Avant-Garde: the adherence to certain metrics privileged by the baroque Hispanic poets, and, more specifically, the influence of the *silva* on the poems of *En la masmédula*. The play with metrics, language, and sound of Girondo’s poetry will also be incredibly important for Perlongher’s own poetry, as we will see in the final section of this chapter.

### Néstor Perlongher’s Take on the Baroque, the Neobaroque, and the *neobarroso*

In the writings of Néstor Perlongher, the Baroque appears both as a period and as a style, though Perlongher is much more interested in it as a style than as an epoch: “Si se acepta que las ondas estilísticas del barroco no dependen solamente de innovaciones individuales, sino que remiten a cierto ‘espíritu colectivo de época’, ¿cómo leer ciertas fuentes barroquizantes ...? No se sabe bien si es una época barroca, o si es el barroco que ‘hace’ una época” (*Prosa* 114). And though we’re inevitably talking about a historical period, we are primarily interested in thinking about the stylistic traits of the Baroque insofar as they are later constitutive—through their rewriting—of what in the twentieth century will become the Neobaroque and, later, Perlongher’s *neobarroso*.

Using Perlongher’s own essays and his responses in interviews as a starting point, we find ourselves with a number of his ideas about the Golden Age Baroque from which we will then identify certain stylistic traits that are important for Perlongher and the connections he will make between these and the Neobaroque and the *neobarroso*.

Similarly to Sarduy’s theorization of the Baroque and the Neobaroque, Perlongher writes in “La barroquización”: “La maquinaria del barroco disuelve la pretendida unidireccionalidad del sentido, en una proliferación de alusiones” (*Prosa* 113). In this sense, meanings are never

singular and rather point in different directions. This also allows for multiplication and excess of a fragmented yet structured kaleidoscopic vision:

El estilo barroco no solo disciplina y disipa los ornamentos, sino arquitecta también una mirada caleidoscópica, que no impone a los fragmentos ... la unidad preconcebida de su propia programación. [E]l barroco [pone] ... todos esos pedazos ... en hilera a su modo, privilegiando la filigrana y las cascadas de tules vaporosos. Es una mirada que va al brillo y al mismo tiempo otorga un brillo a lo que ve. (114)

The filigree is a constant image in Perlongher's theorizations of the Baroque and the Neobaroque, as is in Sarduy's own writings on the topic; the filigree and the see-through tulle place emphasis on the texture of language and the textile it weaves.

These textiles are not only Baroque but also *modernistas*. In this same essay, while Perlongher does not explicitly name *modernismo*, he does point to the term "Neobaroque" as having emerged at the turn of the nineteenth century, citing 1890 as an explicit date. In "Caribe transplatino," Perlongher will add that "el barroco comienza a reemerger ya a fines del siglo XIX, cuando aparece el término 'neobarroco' entre las fiorituras del *Art-Nouveau*" (*Prosa* 93). The names of Darío and Herrera y Reissig will also pop out, here and there, in articles and interviews. Perlongher sees something of the Neobaroque in the artistic movements that precede it historically: "Las poéticas neobarrocas ... toman mucho de las vanguardias, particularmente su vocación de experimentación, pero no son bien vanguardias. .... Se lanza ... a reivindicar y reapropiarse del modernismo, recuperando a los uruguayos Herrera y Reissig y Delmira Agustini, entre otros" (*Prosa* 98). While Perlongher is, in this text, referring to the Neobaroque more generally, José Amícola—whose observations will later resonate with my analysis of Perlongher's poetry—will make a more direct connection between the Avant-Garde and *modernismo* within Perlongher's writing by noting that Perlongher will, in a campy manner, appropriate "Rubén Darío [y] ... Góngora, retomados en una lírica cantada 'a lo *folle*'" in *Alambres* (68); Amícola adds that "[e]n la obra poética de Perlongher hay ... una resignificación de los materiales preciosos ... que puso en texto el modernismo hispanoamericano," and these materials will be resignified into a gay world of kitsch by Perlongher, where "en lugar de los oros y platas modernistas, aparecerán (en un friso barroquizante consciente del kitsch de esos elementos) las lentejuelas, el *lamé* y el *strass*, como los productos emblemáticos del travestismo, unidos a todos los atributos costureros insoslayablemente femeninos como los breteles, el solero y el drapeado" (66-67). The *modernista* world of gold and silver surfaces will become one of sequined textiles in a world of transvestite and other queer bodies. That is to say that Perlongher's *neobarroso* takes on a baroque aesthetic reappropriated as a decorative surface from *modernista* texts and art. Darío's artificialization will become in Perlongher a queer rewriting synonymous with surface, excess, and pleasure.

Perlongher's appropriation of *modernismo* and the Baroque as surfaces of excess stems also from Deleuze's writings on the Baroque. And it is Deleuze's concept of the fold that will become a key feature of Perlongher's poetry. Following Deleuze, Perlongher writes that the fold is an "operación de plegado de la materia y la forma. Los torbellinos de la fuerza, el pliegue—esplendor clarooscuro—de la forma" (*Prosa* 93). The fold is a play with surfaces that gives the appearance of depth.

Perlongher further appropriates Deleuze's terminology to describe the Baroque as a poetics of deterritorialization: "el barroco siempre choca y corre un límite preconcebido y sujetante. Al desujetar, desubjetiva. Es el deshacimiento o desasimiento de los místicos. No es una poesía del yo, sino de la aniquilación del yo" (94). And it was the Baroque that dissolved the

lyric I. In fact, writes Perlongher regarding Góngora's *Soledades*, “[d]el naufrago peregrino ... poco sabemos. Disfrutamos del regocijo de las fiestas populares, las disquisiciones mitológicas, las íntimas iridescencias del paisaje, virtudes de la fauna. Este peregrino que sucumbe bajo el peso de este ‘potlatch’ verbal—derroche, desperdicio de figuras—es un loco, un esquizo” (*Prosa* 116). There are no limits to the self for the self is always becoming; there is no identity but only subjectivation: “El devenir es siempre un proceso fluctuante y no estable, orientado a lo menor que de ninguna manera debe confundirse con la identidad,” explains Palmeiro (23). The Baroque is all about excess (and ecstasy of language): “La del barroco es una divinidad *in extremis*: bajo el rigor maniático del manierismo, la suelta sierpe de una demencia incontenible ... Poética del éxtasis: éxtasis en la fiesta jubilosa de la lengua en su fosforescencia incandescente” (Perlongher, *Prosa* 94). The poetic I dissipates and the reader rejoices in the ecstasy of the play with language.

But it is the Baroque read through Lezama Lima, rather than Góngora directly, that functions as the key point of departure for Perlongher. That is to say that while the Baroque precedes the Neobaroque historically, the Baroque is primarily read already as a rewriting—the Baroque is always already queered. It then becomes almost impossible to read the Baroque as completely independent of the Neobaroque—at least for Perlongher—who emphasizes the aspects of the Baroque that are also constitutive of the Neobaroque. In other words, in Perlongher, we are constantly reading the Baroque through the Neobaroque, since the Neobaroque's rewriting of the Baroque has, particularly thanks to Lezama and Sarduy, permanently affected the way in which we relate to and read the Baroque.

For Néstor Perlongher, this Cuban Neobaroque—which will then find muddy permutations in the Río de la Plata—is directly related to a sexual politics (*Papeles* 225), and is “amanerado” (229). A couple of key aspects of this kind of writing are the absence of a communicative purpose in language, opting instead for a “perversion” of “la buena letra (clara y cristalina),” which elides and fragments the lyric I (229). That is, the Neobaroque text is purposefully unintelligible and muddled, and there is no single subject that gives voice to the text, similarly to the Baroque of Góngora's *Soledades*. Echoing Sarduy, then, Perlongher writes that one of the main differences between the Golden Age Baroque and the Neobaroque is that Góngora's poetry can be “translated”: “Góngora parte de las metáforas en uso en el rebuscado código poético de la época y las eleva al cuadrado, las remetaforiza. Con ese artificio se complica, pero también se resguarda la posibilidad de decodificar” (*Prosa* 115)—here Perlongher is alluding to Dámaso Alonso, who “translated” Góngora's *Soledades* for the modern audience; whereas the Neobaroque, he will reiterate in “El neobarroco y la revolución,” “rompe toda ilusión de traductibilidad a un sentido final” (*Papeles* 229). According to Perlongher and Sarduy, in other words, this kind of “translation” process would be impossible to accomplish with a Neobaroque text.

And, again, though Perlongher credits Sarduy here with the popularization of the term, the Cuban Neobaroque for Perlongher truly begins with and is epitomized by Lezama Lima. In fact, almost every single text that focuses on the Neobaroque or *la barroquización* opens with a reference to Lezama Lima. For example, the first sentence of the essay we're currently discussing reads as follows: “Irrumpe en el corazón del ‘Paradiso’ lezamesco, un carnaval pagano” (*Prosa* 113). And in “Caribe transplatino,” where Perlongher gives what he calls an introduction to “la poesía neobarroca cubana y rioplatense,” he defines the Neobaroque in these terms:

Invasión de pliegues, orlas iridescentes o drapeados magníficos, el neobarroco cunde en las letras latinoamericanas; la “lepra creadora” lezamesca mina o corroe—minoritaria más eficazmente—los estilos oficiales del bien decir. Es precisamente la poesía de José Lezama Lima, que culmina en su novela *Paradiso*, la que desata la resurrección, primeramente cubana, del barroco en estas landas bárbaras. (93)

The Neobaroque, in a sense, resurrects from the dead, as Ezequiel Zaidenwerg keenly points out—“La idea de una ‘resurrección’ del barroco parece implicar de manera necesaria su muerte” (436). The Neobaroque, in this sense, is a kind of disease, a leprosy that eats away at “proper” speech. Just as the queer body will be corroded by the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s (a topic that became central in Perlongher’s last texts), this neobaroque writing functions as a queer “epidemic” that will deform Latin American writing.<sup>6</sup> A few other points to highlight from this quote: Lezama will be a central figure for Perlongher’s understanding and theorizing of the Neobaroque and its *rioplatense* version; the corroding of proper language and style will result in the invasion of the verse by popular speech, or what Cecilia Palmeiro calls “trasheo”— “[t]rashear es ... arrastrar la alta cultura (y la cultura política), en tanto restos, por el barro del Riachuelo para producir la joya ... La lengua literaria mezclada con el lunfardo de barrio ... (de “puto de barrio” ...). Y así como la cultura se hace detritus, basura, el barro se hace joya” (26)—or “lumpenización” of language; and the centrality of the body—a later ailing or infirmed body, eaten away by leprosy (and also AIDS).

But when it comes to the Neobaroque, the question is not how Perlongher defines it but, rather, how does Perlongher define the Neobaroque in contrast with the *neobarroso*? I say this because there are more points of contact than differences, and many of these have already become clear in what we have been highlighting throughout this chapter. I find it more fruitful, then, to focus here on where these two terms diverge, while still stopping to note their points of contact.

Perlongher repeated time and again that the Neobaroque (and the *neobarroso*) wasn’t a school, movement, or style—“[la] denominación [de neobarroco] ... no implica una escuela, ni siquiera un estilo” (*Papeles* 280)—but rather a poetics, an experience, a *flujo literal*. Regarding the Neobaroque, for example, Perlongher emphasizes in an interview with Eduardo Milán, que hay ciertas formaciones escriturales, que aparecen en diferentes lugares con cierta simultaneidad y con influencias muy difíciles de conocer. Inclusive, porque el desencadenante de eso, que es la obra de Lezama—yo creo que se empezó a escribir a lo Lezama antes de que se lo hubiera leído...—revela que hay una especie de flujos microscópicos que están atravesando de una manera medio subterránea las lenguas y los países. (*Papeles* 280)

In this sense, there is a certain elusiveness to the Neobaroque and the *neobarroso*. It is something that is there, that has certain points of contact, and whose origins are at once known and unknown. But if the *neobarroso*, like the Neobaroque, is not a style nor a school, then what is it?

The term was, of course, coined by Néstor Perlongher. As he defined it many times, the *neobarroso* is the *rioplatense* version of the Cuban Neobaroque of Lezama Lima as theorized by Sarduy; that is, upon studying Lezama Lima’s writing, Sarduy formalized the term “Neobaroque” and it is through Sarduy’s Neobaroque that Perlongher then structures his *neobarroso*:

A diferencia del barroco del Siglo de Oro—que describe largas piruetas sobre una base clásica—el barroco contemporáneo carece de un suelo literario homogéneo en

<sup>6</sup> Perlongher’s main text about the AIDS epidemic is *O que é Aids* (1987).

donde mostrar el entretejido de sus excavaciones .... El neobarroco—término popularizado por Severo Sarduy, pero que ya aparece alrededor de 1890 y que se vuelve festivamente “neobarroso” en su descenso a las márgenes del Plata, como un marqués Sebregondi, “homosexual activo y cocainómano”, tropezando en el barro de su estuario—no funciona como una estructura unificada, como una escuela o disciplina estilística, sino que su juego actual parece dirigido a montar la parodia, la carnavalización, la derrisión, en un campo abierto de constelaciones, sobre (o a partir de) cualquier estilo .... La perversión puede florecer en cualquier rincón de la letra. (*Papeles* 115)

What can be gleaned from this? First, the *neobarroco* and *neobarroso* both turn to the historical Baroque of the Golden Age. The main distinction Perlongher makes between the historical Baroque and its contemporary permutations is its grounding: whereas the Baroque of the Golden Age constructs itself from the classical period, including its art, history, and mythology, its contemporary transmutations have no firm grounding and no homogenous source.

Cecilia Palmeiro marks the distinction between *barroco*, *neobarroco*, and *neobarroso* in a way that quite straightforwardly shows their divergences:

El barroco satura el lenguaje “comunicativo” por proliferación significativa, heteroglosia polisémica que anula la referencialidad supuesta por un logos que atribuiría sentido único. La diferencia entre barroco y neobarroco radica en que el barroco tendría una interpretación última, garantizada finalmente por la cosmovisión religiosa del siglo XVII, mientras que en el neobarroco hay una fuga total del sentido, no hay fijación del flujo. El neobarroso, versión rioplatense del neobarroco, estaría jugando con el engañoso efecto de profundidad de la cultura argentina: el fondo de barro del Río de la Plata (o del Riachuelo), en el que las cosas parecen sumergirse cuando en realidad están más cerca de la superficie de lo que parecen. (25)

Even though the Baroque saturates so-called communicative language with a plurality of signification, Baroque poetry can be ultimately interpreted. The difference with the Neobaroque then lies in that meaning, in neobaroque writing, cannot be pinned down since it’s in constant flight. The *neobarroso*, on the other hand, is a poetics of surface that is constantly playing with the effect of depth. The main difference, then, seems to be one of depth: in the Baroque, there is a depth that can be found in the worldview of the seventeenth century; in the Neobaroque, there is a depth of meaning but it can never be pinned down; and, finally, in the *neobarroso*, there is only the illusion of depth brought onto the surface.

But if this is the central divergence, what points of contact can we keep? Of the points Perlongher makes in the above distinctions, I am most interested, for the time being, in its interweavings—*el entretejido*—given that, for Perlongher, one of the main “inventions” of the Baroque was to transform language into texture, into textile<sup>7</sup>—“el barroco,” writes Perlongher in “Nuevas escrituras transplatinas,” “convierte la escritura en una textura” (*Papeles* 243).

Perversion seems to then be at the center of the *neobarroso*, becoming a point of contact between the uneven surfaces of the contemporary Neobaroque, since perversion, says Perlongher, can show up in any text, in any style. But what kind of perversion are we talking about here? What is the relationship between perversion and the *neobarroso*? The main points regarding perversion in the writing of Perlongher (and in his theorization of contemporary

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<sup>7</sup> I will go back and forth between texture and textile, making a connection between these. While I am aware that they are not synonymous with one another, they nevertheless constantly coexist in Perlongher’s poetry and his theorization of the various permutations of the Baroque.

neobaroque practices) are twofold and interrelated: sexual and textual perversion. As Cecilia Palmeiro explains, “[e]n el mundo neobarroso, la perversión de la lengua supone un *socavamiento* que pasa por la corporalización de la escritura” (25); “proper” language is debilitated and subverted in favor of an embodied one. In this sense, writing becomes sensual and sexual: “los poemas de Perlongher no son metáforas sexuales sino sexo caliente” (Rosa qtd. in Palmeiro 26). This is something we have already been discussing, where the texture of language weaves a fabric, but also, going further, is corporalized, embodied. The friction of letters and words are also the encounters between bodies; their fluids make up the poems themselves—“la acumulación de sonidos que producen la sensación de los flujos corporales” (26). In terms of language itself, to pervert it—*socavarlo*, to subvert it—means to “trash” it—to use Palmeiro’s terms—and to turn language and culture into “detritus, basura,” into excess and even excrement: “las eses de las heces,” writes Perlongher about *Alambres*, linking the excess of the play with sound with bodily excess (*Prosa* 139).<sup>8</sup> And this kind of corporalized, perverted writing is necessarily queer: the discourse surrounding homosexuality typically put forward by the medical and psychological establishment in its origins was constructed in terms of a perversion of heteronormative behavior, and thus Perlongher’s poetic gesture involving the body can be considered a queer resignification of perversion. It is the material debilitation of *el bien decir*—as the notion of *la lepra creadora lezamesca* implies—the outer textures, the skin that becomes corroded, rots and falls off. We are then left with the deep cuts of the body, its inner and more bodily—base and infected—materials rendered as base and infected language. Perlongher adds that this neobaroque tendency—or *tendencia neobarrosa*, in the case of Argentina—is “como una especie de ‘operaci[ón] de superficie’” (*Papeles* 280). And it is upon this surface that Perlongher’s *neobarroso* will write itself—writing *as* a surface, a “superficie brillante” (281).

Hence, the difference between Sarduy’s *neobarroco* and Perlongher’s *neobarroso* is one of corporality and the way in which the body’s skin—the surface—is transformed. But this distinction can in fact be traced to Osvaldo Lamborghini’s work, which for Perlongher connects the Neobaroque and *neobarroso*, as the Neobaroque descends into the margins of the Río de la Plata, “como un marqués Sebregondi, ‘homosexual activo y cocainómano.’” This quote comes from the second part of Osvaldo Lamborghini’s novella *Sebregondi retrocede* (1973); in other words, understanding Osvaldo Lamborghini is key to Perlongher’s conception of the *neobarroso*: if Sarduy’s writing is a tattoo, Osvaldo Lamborghini’s is a deep cut, *un tajo*. Language ceases to be a tool—a communicative tool—in order to become nothing but surface and the illusion of depth that weaves a (decorative) fabric; a surface that is violently perverted through a cut that becomes infected.

Let us focus for a moment on Perlongher’s reading of Lamborghini and his place in Perlongher’s theorization of the *neobarroso*. Of Lamborghini, Perlongher writes: “Su obra puede considerarse el detonador de ese flujo escritural que embarroca o embarra las letras transplatinas” (*Prosa* 99). In a sense, Lamborghini’s writing embodies what Perlongher will call *neobarroso*, or is, more precisely, one of the sites of its “birth places”—“El neobarroso transplatino tendría, en verdad, dos nacimientos. Uno, el de *El Fiord* [de Osvaldo Lamborghini]; el otro, el de *La Partera Canta* [de Arturo Carrera]” (99). Lamborghini’s texts mix “todas las jergas, ... todos los códigos: los culteranismos pseudobarrocos se inmisten y se rozan con la vulgaridad más obscena” (*Papeles* 243); his writing, continues Perlongher, “no es una mera

<sup>8</sup> This kind of excess will also be taken up by Luis Felipe Fabre, both in the images and fluids that will structure the scenes/poems of *La sodomía en la Nueva España*, as I explore in Chapter Three.

argamasa caótica, sino que todas [las] ... alusiones están trabajadas en una *textura* ... donde se llega a una especie de barroquización descalsada (o sea, no trabajada con los materiales finos y nobles del lenguaje, sino con los más bajos y vulgares” (italics in original). The way language is worked through or manipulated creates a texture, but rather than the refined materials of the Baroque, Lamborghini’s texture is created through low and vulgar language.

So, what does Perlongher’s reading of Lamborghini tell us? Lamborghini’s writing emblemizes the *neobarroso*’s work with the erudite and the obscene—language, images, tensions—weaving a neobaroque texture or fabric. This same process we will see displayed and carved out in Perlongher’s own poetry. In fact, Perlongher himself describes this concern in his work: “El problema es cómo producir lo sensual en la escritura. Hay que ver de qué modo ciertas acumulaciones de erres, de eles, producen en sí mismas, el ‘drapeado de las telas’. Eso tiene que ver con otro elemento que está presente en mis poemas: la conexión de lo más bajo con lo más alto” (*Papeles* 316). The notion of writing as a texture, the *barroquización* of language through the work with the high and the low, these are all constitutive of both Lamborghini’s narrative and Perlongher’s poetic texts. These accumulations also place emphasis on the sensual surfaces of language and writing. Because, for Perlongher, the *neobarroso* is a writing of the body, a writing made up of bodies—“[s]e trata en el plano de la escritura, de *hacer un cuerpo*” (*Prosa* 140; italics in original)—their fluids, and the surfaces produced by these. In Perlongher’s poetry there is a work with the surface and texture of language that together weaves a sensuous/sensual fabric.

But in what way is Sebgrondi important for Perlongher’s play with language? In the section “El marqués de Sebregondi llega y retrocede” in *Sebregondi retrocede*, which opens with the description of the marquis above quoted by Perlongher, we find some of the key aspects of the *neobarroso* as embodied by Sebregondi: the sexual (and violent) encounter between queer bodies, the wordplay inherited from the Baroque, the jewel that is in fact a rock that does not shine, the artifice/artificial, and the mud(diness) of the waters of *el Plata*—“su enclave [sic] el Plata, su anclaje, y su clave: barrota y agua” (Lamborghini 53). The same aspects of the *neobarroso* embodied by Sebregondi will structure Perlongher’s poems, as we will see in the queer violence of *Austria-Hungría* and in the erudite language and history that is trashed and dragged through the muddy waters of *el Plata* in *Alambres*.

Perlongher reiterated many times in interviews that his naming of that particular kind of Neobaroque found in the margins of the Río de la Plata, the *neobarroso*, was somewhat parodic, as he tells Daniel Molina in an interview in the late 1980s, “[i]ntroducir la perversión a partir de cualquier canto es la experiencia que ya he bautizado, un poco paródicamente, ‘neobarrosa’” (*Papeles* 317). What does it mean, then, that the *neobarroso* is a kind of parody? A parody of what? Is it a parody of the Neobaroque? Of the Baroque? And, if so, what does this tell us? Perlongher defines the *rioplatense* version of a Neobaroque poetics as one that confronts its literary history and reveals its “depth” as a pretense: “En su expresión rioplatense, la poética neobarroca enfrenta una tradición literaria hostil, anclada en *la pretensión de un realismo de profundidad* que suele acabar chapoteando en las aguas lodosas del río. De ahí el apelativo paródico de *neobarroso* para denominar esta nueva emergencia” (*Prosa* 101; emphasis added). The muddiness is both symbolic and geographical and it is a muddiness that reveals depth as a pretense, valuing the surface over supposed depth. Marcos Wasem has explained that “Perlongher dará un giro al lenguaje poético neobarroco arrimándolo a las hablas lúmpenes del Río de la Plata. Su idea del *neobarroso* implica una presión más en el límite del lenguaje, cuando este toma contacto con las aguas marrones y mugrientas de ese río, que agregan un grado



de suciedad extra” (118). Wasem here highlights the presence of marginal, low-class ways of speaking in Perlongher’s poetic texts; in other words, Perlongher’s poetry is a perversion—a muddying or dirtying—of what poetic writing is “supposed” to be.

Parody is not a straightforward term. As Gérard Genette has noted in *Palimpsests*, there are various understandings and disagreements on how parody can be (and has been) defined. Parody, he explains, “is the site of perhaps an inevitable confusion” (10). This confusion is due to its origins, which are Aristotle’s *Poetics*; the problem being that Aristotle had “not developed this part [*parodia*], or perhaps his development of it has not survived.” While there are a number of different understandings of the meaning of parody, Genette arrives at the following ones: “[t]he most rigorous form of parody, or *minimal parody*, consists ... of taking up a familiar text literally and giving it a new meaning, while playing, if possible and as needed, on the words” (16); and “[t]he most elegant parody ... is then merely a quote deflected from its meaning or simply from its context, or demoted from its dignified status” (16-17). More concisely, Genette then “propose[s] to (re)baptize as *parody* the distortion of a text by means of a minimal transformation” (25). According to Linda Hutcheon, the contemporary use of parody “implies a distance between the backgrounded text being parodied and the new work, a distance usually signaled by irony. But the irony is more playful than ridiculing, more critical than destructive” (“Parody” 202). In other words, parody “is the combination of ‘homage’” and a certain amount of irreverence. For both Genette and Hutcheon, parody involves a kind of rewriting. What I want to salvage from these definitions are notions of playfulness and recontextualization contained within parody. And to these we must add parody as a surface that serves as a counterpoint to the supposed “depth” of orthodox historical and literary tradition.

If we are then to say that the *neobarroso* is parodying the Neobaroque and the Baroque, then the *neobarroso* involves a critical and playful attitude toward these styles, histories, movements, and strategies; it is a kind of disrespectful homage to them that is recontextualized into other times, spaces, and histories (into nineteenth-century Argentina, for example, in the case of *Alambres*, as we will see in the section that follows).

### Perlongher’s Queer Rewriting and Aesthetics of the Surface

Perlongher’s return to the Baroque is evidenced from his first book of poetry until his last, published after his death—from *Austria-Hungría* (1980) to *El chorreo de las iluminaciones* (1992). The poem that opens *Austria-Hungría*, “La murga, los polacos” in the first part of the book “Escenas de la Guerra,” already displays the baroque traits or, rather, artifices that will be exploited in excess across his later writings: anaphora, alliteration, and polysemy (to name only a few).<sup>9</sup> The poem opens with the setting of soldiers entering the scene, “*Llegan los soldados*” says the epigraph, followed by the description of what seems to be carnival in Warsaw: “Es una

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<sup>9</sup> The *neobarroso* inherited a penchant for artifice from the Baroque and the Neobaroque, as Tamara Kamenszain notes, “*Aguas Aéreas*, de Néstor Perlongher, [lleva] una cita de Santa Teresa de Jesús .... [que d]a cuenta de un cruce, un trueque o préstamo entre lo natural y lo artificial para que uno parezca—o aparezca—como lo otro. Sobre la extrema artificio del cristal, el agua se naturaliza como luz. En cambio, cuando atraviesa turbia la superficie de la tierra, cae en un cono de sombra que la desluce y la hace parecer agua artificial” (*Lúmpenes* 101). Though Kamenszain is here discussing Santa Teresa, we could nevertheless also focus on the role that water plays in Perlongher’s poetry and poetics: the muddiness of water that makes it seem artificial, which forces the reader to consider whether anything can be said to be “natural”; the artificial subverts the notion of “natural” and highlights the importance of the surface over “depth.”

murga, marcha en la noche de Varsovia, hace milagros / con las máscaras, confunde / a un público polaco” (*Poemas* 17). From these very first lines, there is an element of estrangement, the marching band is a signifier of Argentine carnival, which is why the “público polaco” is confused, as the space of the poem is Warsaw, not Argentina.

The juxtaposition that follows throughout the poem, “Es una murga” and “no es una murga,” further sets up a paradoxical event that both is and isn’t happening in Poland. The first phrase of the first verse reads “Es una murga,” which a few verses later is followed by confused Krakow students who “nunca han visto / nada igual en sus libros” (5-6). What is most striking about these verses is the play between what seems to be a realistic depiction of soldiers in Krakow, which Perlongher then shifts onto the surface of the page through the reference to “en sus libros.” The use of enjambment between these two verses sets up the very question of whether anything at all is being seen. These verses doubly question the realist expectations the poem seems to both set up and reject in a single stroke. The next section reads, “No es carnaval, no es sábado / no es una murga, no se marcha, nadie ve / no hay niebla, es una murga,” which directly contradicts the earlier depiction of the *murga* in Warsaw. This both proposes the impossibility of the *murga* being in Poland, given the specificity of its Argentine context, but also the very reality of whether anything is happening at all. What this brings to mind is both the blind participation of citizens in the horrors of war, while also underscoring the paradox of space through a mixed referentiality—the poem “[e]xceed[s] the limits of territories and maps” (Masiello 70).

Through the image of the *murga*, Perlongher sets up the parallelism between the Nazi invasion of Poland and the Argentine dictatorship. Not being able to speak directly of the horrors of Argentina’s Dirty War, Perlongher transposes us to a Poland that is and isn’t Poland:

[...] una Polonia  
que no es  
que no es  
lo que no es decir que no haya sido, o aún  
que ya no sea, o incluso no esté siendo en este instante (*Poemas* 17)

The back and forth between affirmation and denial allows Perlongher to both recall Nazi Europe in the mind of the reader and, at the same time, to draw the reader back to the Argentine reality through the image of the soldiers that enter the scene as a *murga*.

The use of anaphora sets up a clever play between time and space: Poland is and isn’t the space-place where the poem situates itself and the play with temporality allows for times and spaces to coexist: 1940s Poland can very well be in (then) present-day (1970s/80s) Argentina; as the poem cleverly closes: “puesto que no hay tal murga, y aunque hubiérala / no estaría en Varsovia, y eso todos / los polacos lo saben” (17). The play with parallelisms and contrasts are also important baroque tools, as is the constant play with what is seemingly contradictory in the way the poem sets it up. For example, one of Góngora’s favorite formulas was “A, if not B”—which Quevedo also employed as a way to ridicule Góngora in his satirical poems. While the gongorine complex syntactical arrangement is not present in Perlongher, the negation is nevertheless central from the very first verses of the poem.

Some of the aspects that are central to Góngora’s poetry according to Dámaso Alonso are “contrastos o antítesis,” “a veces el contraste puede ser sólo en parte conceptual y estar reforzado fonéticamente,” and his “uso de la disemia [doble significación]” (97). This is not to say that anyone who appropriates these same mechanisms is turning to the Baroque, but it does point to a rewriting of Baroque formulas and strategies when it is present in extreme, in excess, as we see

with Perlongher. These are clearly evidenced in “La murga, los polacos,” especially the use of *disemia*, which often turns into polysemy, particularly in the moments of enumeration where Perlongher is especially successful in also materializing these visuals into sound through alliteration—one of Perlongher’s poetry’s key traits—and the sensual interaction between the tactile and auditory. Take, for example, “la murga con sus pitos, sus colores, sus chchachás carnosos / produciendo en las aguas erizadas un ruido a salpicón.” These verses produce a sort of synesthetic experience of reading, where the visual is taken over by the audible and rather than *seeing* the *murga*, we *hear* it: we hear the whistles and splashing in the water. At the same time, the experience of color and dance are transformed through the deployment of alliteration of *c* and *ch* sounds—which recalls the centrality of sound in Girondo’s writing, especially in *En la masmédula*. As Francine Masiello reminds us, “Perlongher in poetry cultivates the mask and disguise; he alters lines of signification that have sustained rigid hierarchies of meaning,” which results in “a chain reaction of sounds and syllables that betrays the ‘deep’ meanings of texts” (70). These baroque strategies create an auditory and visual textual surface.

The deployment of polysemy will also be a key characteristic that allows us to enter the world that is and isn’t Poland, a world where we know the contemporary Argentine situation is being alluded to but cannot be directly named: Poland is and isn’t itself, and words like “pitos” will constantly take us into another reality: that of homosexual culture and pleasure, of Perlongher’s queer poetics. In this sense, the *yuxtaposición chocante* of the horror of the Nazi period in Warsaw, together with the pleasure of carnival are what immerses the reader into the artificiality of Perlongher, of a world where pleasure and horror coexist and feed off of each other in a baroque aestheticized world of worlds colliding, of histories that repeat themselves in different times and spaces—rewritten and queered histories and aesthetic practices, where History is exposed and critiqued in a way that reveals a heretofore hidden queerness.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The notion of carnivalization stems from the literary theories of Mikhail Bakhtin, which were principally developed in *Rebelais and His World* (originally published in Russian in 1965). In *Rebelais and His World*, Bakhtin studied the role of carnival and the concept of the carnivalesque in early modern society. According to Bakhtin, during the Renaissance, the “carnival and its related popular-festive forms” become emblematic of “the flowering of a gay, affirmative, and militantly anti-authoritarian attitude to life, founded upon a joyful acceptance of the materiality of the body” (Dentith 64), and, for him, the “carnival [i]s an anti-authoritarian force that can be mobilized against the official culture of Church and State” (71). Another important point about the carnivalesque more generally is that it particularly places emphasis on popular rather than erudite culture—which is central to Perlongher’s theorization of the *neobarroso*. Moreover, what is especially relevant for the way in which Perlongher adopts or appropriates these concepts in his own poetic and theoretical writing is the distinction between the carnival as an exception and the carnival as a constant. In his own essays, Perlongher explores the role of carnival and carnivalization in contemporary society (particularly in Brazil and Argentina). In “La fuerza del carnavalismo” (1988), for example, he makes a clear distinction between the way carnival has been typically understood by official culture and what carnival means for minoritarian subjectivities: “Al revés de considerar al carnaval como una mera inversión de lo establecido, es preciso verlo como una manifestación de toda una estrategia diferente de producción de deseo, que trascendiendo la fugacidad de las serpentinas, escande y perturba constantemente el tejido social” (*Prosa* 60). For Perlongher, carnival is not a moment where the norm is suspended, but rather a constant, “toda una modalidad minoritaria de producción de subjetividad.”

If for Bakhtin carnival is something that occurs at a certain time of the year, for Perlongher it exceeds the boundaries of sanctioned carnival to constitute a whole strategy of becoming (or *devenir mujer*). These festivals and rituals were sanctioned by official institutions, and while they presented a distinct world from that of official culture, it nevertheless appears to be the negative of official culture. In other words, carnival festivities seem to be a response to a certain kind of official logic.

Carnivalization as Perlongher theorizes it is not a reversal of official culture but a whole different modality that functions as its own production of queer subjectivities within an entirely different logic. It is not the negative of official culture and discourse but rather is its own logic, producing alternative queer subjectivities; Perlongher brings

The images of carnival thus set up the encounter of the queer world with that of the military oppression. In “La murga, los polacos,” this scene is both disorienting and enthralling: why is carnival taking place in Poland? Did the soldiers turn into a carnivalesque marching band? The joyful images are contrasted with that of a cold winter in Poland: “son serpentinas, es papel picado, el éter frío”—and let’s not forget that the image of the serpentine was one of Góngora’s favorites. We find the baroque *serpentin*as, the contemporary *papel picado*, and the cold atmosphere of Poland as *éter frío* “como la nieve de una calle de una ciudad de una Polonia,” as the following verse continues the description. A contemporary Argentine and baroque carnival completely out of place in a wintry Poland.

In the words of Palmeiro: “*Austria-Hungría* ... puede leerse como plasmación de esa experiencia de los 70. Es, sin duda, un libro sobre la dictadura, aunque toda intención referencial haya sido desarticulada en función del trabajo con la lengua (barroquización, embarramiento y trasheo, primacía del significante)” (41)—and here I would add, the turn to history. Palmeiro continues, “[e]l título señala una topografía con el nombre de un estado imperial y superpoderoso. Es un libro sobre la dictadura, a pesar de la negación de la referencialidad,” given that the war Perlongher directly references is WWII, and in the poem we have been discussing, more specifically, Warsaw. Palmeiro thus explains the impossibility and rejection of realism, “[la] poética [de *Austria-Hungría*] ... resiste a la tentación del realismo desde la imposibilidad de la murga en Varsovia (yuxtaposición de un elemento característico rioplatense y un locus imposible)” (42). Perlongher forces us to encounter these two historical periods at once, but not through realism, rather through an impossibility that mixes images and sensations that take the reader to the realm of baroque artifice. In fact, Perlongher himself had noted that the Neobaroque ruptures realism into pieces, “el barroco contemporáneo ... [es el p]roducto de cierto despedazamiento del realismo” (*Prosa* 99).

For Perlongher, above all else, the Baroque is a poetics of ecstasy, “éxtasis en la fiesta jubilosa de la lengua en su fosforescencia incandescente” (*Prosa* 94). And what I want to continue tracing throughout this chapter is exactly this, the baroque orgy of language that structures Perlongher’s poetry, as it reveals itself as a queer carnival of surfaces, of bodies and language: a queer rewriting, a queer poetics.

In the poem that follows, “Los orientales,” is where we will first find the figure of the fag: “[l]a figura de la marica sale de aquí” (Palmeiro 42). This fag or *marica* will become a masochist in “Canción de amor para los nazis en Baviera,” where “la violencia militar se conjuga con el goce que le hace frente” (Palmeiro 42). In typical camp fashion, the poetic voice appropriates that of Marlene Dietrich—a central icon in gay culture. The objects of violence (such as the gun that stands in for the phallus) and the symbols (the swastika) and histories of annihilation of marginal groups, the Nazis (who are also here the Argentine military), are mixed with a masochist pleasure, first through the appropriation of Marlene Dietrich’s voice, then through the queer sexual encounter and the description of events:

*Oh no no no es cierto que me quieras  
Ay ay ay me dabas puntapiés*

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Bakhtin’s carnival from the social sphere to a more personal, subjective one, actually affecting physical bodies. For Perlongher, carnival is a queer scene. In “La fuerza del carnavalismo,” Perlongher asks “¿Qué se ve en el carnaval?” and enumerates, among various images: “las cascadas de superficies irisadas: mezcla rara y divertida de travesti de la calle Augusta,” “uniones arrebatadoras, casi orgiásticas, de cuerpos que se entrelazan, dejándose llevar por la irresistible percusión de un *batuque*,” “la rima del bailado, en el ritmo de los roces” (*Prosa* 59). This queer modality is not attained through nor responds to the law but exists wholly outside of it. *El carnavalismo* is not a transgression of the norm but its flight from the norm.

*Heil heil heil eres un agente nazi*

Más acá o más allá de esta historieta  
 estaba tu pistola de soldado de Rommel  
 ardiendo como arena en el desierto  
 un camello extenuado que llegaba al oasis  
 de mi orto u ocaso o crepúsculo que me languidecía  
 y yo sentía el movimiento de tu svástica en las tripas  
 oh oh oh (*Poemas* 19)

Perlongher here arrives at typical baroque wordplay used in burlesque poems: “un camello extenuado que llegaba al oasis / de mi orto u ocaso o crepúsculo que me languidecía.” Here “orto” turns into “ocaso” and then into “crepúsculo.” The enumeration ends with the—baroque burlesque—*disociación* or dissociation of *crepús/culo* that reiterates *orto* as a kind of palimpsest.<sup>11</sup> *Orto*, in Argentine slang, means anus; *orto*’s definition in the dictionary is “Salida o aparición del Sol o de otro astro por el horizonte” (*Diccionario de la lengua española*). We know from Quevedo’s poetry (and Góngora’s as well) that the image of the sun was often used as a metaphor for the anus. An example of queer rewriting and Perlongher’s poetics, *orto* refers back to the baroque tradition of using the sun as a referent of anus, with the added pun that *orto* already means anus in Argentina. As if the imagery were not enough and the anus needed to be multiplied, the sun, the sunset, or its disappearance into dawn, all emphasize, in different ways, the anus, as if the poetic voice had to repeat it to exhaustion, layering a baroque tradition with contemporary street speech. This wordplay is also mapped visually in the *o*’s that are multiplied: the opening and closing of *orto* and *ocaso*, all the way through the final “oh oh oh” both gives voice to queer pleasure and stamps the male orifice of pleasure onto the page.<sup>12</sup> This excess becomes a pleasure of the queer body and of language, a pleasure that is experienced on the page through wordplay and its visual representation of the *o*’s on the page. A history of violent oppression is subverted through sadomasochistic pleasure where the swastika becomes the phallus that penetrates the I, resulting in the final voicing of pleasure in the closing “oh oh oh.” This kind of subversion of history through queer pleasure will also be constitutive of *Alambres*. This poem also emblemizes what we mean by queer rewriting: Perlongher not only rewrites historical accounts by incorporating queer bodies and structuring the horror of history through queer pleasure, but he also appropriates the (already) queer wordplay of baroque poetry.

While *Austria-Hungría* situates us somewhere between Nazi Europe and contemporary Argentina, *Alambres* very clearly inhabits the world of nineteenth-century Río de la Plata. In this second book of poetry, Perlongher rewrites Argentina’s violent history as a queer history:

Este proceso de libidinización de la historia parecería operar del siguiente modo: se trataría de tomar un material ya fosilizado de la historia política y hacerlo proliferar, barroquizarlo, trashearlo ... Se trataría ... de carnavalizar la historia: señalar el artificio y el simulacro de lo que llamamos realidad.

*Alambres* ... parece cumplir esa consigna. Corregir la historia de la violencia (la “virilidad” de la historia argentina poblada de héroes y patriotas) con una historia *queer*

<sup>11</sup> According to Ignacio Arellano, a *disociación* is a kind of pun that emphasizes the last syllable or syllables of a word and separates them from the word’s conventional meaning (*Poesía satírico burlesca* 75). I explore this notion in greater depth in Chapter Three.

<sup>12</sup> This kind of wordplay and typographical mapping of the anus onto the page will be later appropriated and deployed by Luis Felipe Fabre, which I analyze in Chapter Three.

.... *Alambres* ofrece una relectura del siglo XIX, que es también un modo oblicuo de hablar sobre el presente sin recurrir a los artilugios realistas, ... [donde] la virilidad de los héroes se convierte en sensualidad homoerótica. (Palmeiro 50-51)

But how exactly is this queer *barroquización* achieved? Where is the Baroque in this rewriting of or rather *how* is it rewriting the Argentine nineteenth century?

Take *Alambres*' first poem, "Rivera," which opens with an epigraph from *Historia de la Confederación Argentina* that describes the "savage" reality of the nineteenth century through the definition of *pardejón*, stallion. Perlongher will take this stallion as a metaphor of sexual violence, of the "virile" *gaucho*, a history of violence he will rewrite as queer encounters. And rather than a mimetic realism—such as what we would find in an historical novel or in orthodox history—Perlongher will turn these scenes into a visual and textual surface. In the poem, there is a fixation with surfaces, with textures and fabrics: *carpetas*, *manteles*, *chiripá*, *montura*. The history of Argentina is transformed into an impossible love story, a queer story with Fructuoso Rivera, the first constitutional president of Uruguay, as its central historical figure.

While the poem is written as a single stanza, we can roughly divide it into two sections: the first where the poetic voice speaks, through apostrophe, to a you we assume to be Rivera. The poetic voice refers to that you as *pardejón*, which is the nickname Rosas gave to Rivera, alluding to his libidinousness (Velázquez, "India muerta"). The first two verses read: "En las carpetas donde el té se vuelca, en esos bacarats / vencías pardejón? O dabas coces en los establos de la República"; the second section begins with the twelfth verse, where the poetic voice—now Rivera—writes to Bernardina, his wife, and the verse reads like a letter: "Mi muy querida esposa Bernardina." Rather than a lyric I, polyphony—a carnivalesque mixing of voices—structures the poem, which we know Perlongher particularly appreciated about the Baroque; that is, the poem is composed through the destruction of the I. The poetic voice in Perlongher is always multiple, fractured, never single. Against the singular voice of a patriarch, we have the queer voice of the collective homoerotic experience. Queerness here rejects the singular, individual experience in favor of what is multiple—the multiplication of bodily pleasure through the queer reimagining of history. It is not that the neobarroso is all surface without deeper meaning, but that it uses the surface to discover new ways to reach history. This is not a single, fixed masculine voice, but a plural one that is in constant process of becoming and that signals toward queer desire, thus rejecting the notion of fixed normative identities in favor of plural and fluid dislocation of normative gendered identities.

In this poem, military alliances are turned into a kind of love affair: "Por qué Oribe no tomó Montevideo antes de que este amor fuera / imposible?" (10-11). This is the first point where history turns into homoerotic sensuality, as Palmeiro suggests. But what "love" is the poem referring to? Between Rosas and Rivera? And why is such a love invoked in the poem as "impossible"?

Manuel Oribe and Juan Manuel de Rosas' alliance was founded on their disdain for Europeans and *unitarios*. But rather than having a friendship with Oribe, Perlongher wonders about the possibility of a love affair between *pardejón* Rivera and Juan Manuel de Rosas, instead of the ravage that resulted from the disputes between them—or perhaps through these, their encounter becomes a kind of violent and passionate sexual affair. We can thus read the above verse as the reimagined history of Uruguay and Argentina, where Rosas and Rivera could both be enemies and lovers. Here we see a connection between the masochistic queer fantasies of *Austria-Hungria* reimagined in the "virile" history of the nineteenth century Río de la Plata. But this is really a transvestite masculinity, one that will give way to campy and kitschy Hollywood-

esque feminine characters under the names of Daisy, Ethel, Amelia, and so on. In this sense, “[I]a loca y la lengua de la loca, más que replicar en negativo el machismo al que se subordinaría, es la provocación que se ríe tanto de la fuerza del dominio como de su propia aparente fragilidad frente al dominador” (Panesi).

This history is further queered by the fact that Bernardina becomes Bernadotte in the second-to-last verse: “Estamos sitiados, Bernardotte Adonde iremos / después de esta película tan triste” (22-23). Not only are the voices in the poem not fixed, but neither are the figures that populate them, and especially not their genders. And the poem closes with the notion of history as film, as an always already fictionalized reality. In this way, queered history disrupts the realism through which the nineteenth century had been previously written into orthodox history and the literary canon.

Instead of this mimetic realism—an orthodox account of historical events—of focusing on the “depth” of the “virile” Argentine history and literature, Perlongher’s poems will focus on the surfaces of writing and of queer bodies—an alternative way to reach history. His writing weaves a texture, threads a text in filigree. It is there that we find the corporality of language: “Se trata en el plano de la escritura, de *hacer un cuerpo*—y de ahí lo chirriante, lo susurrante, lo fruitivo, el rasguído de las enaguas en el frufrú del rouge, la tensión diminuta del ánade en los tules, los íntimos recovecos del slip, el roce del esmalte en el botón bruñido” (Perlongher, *Prosa* 140; italics in original). The corporalization of the poem is achieved through sound and the textures that language knits, rendered into textiles and feminine clothes that emphasize the surface, language made surface, texture, a sound that becomes sensual, corporeal. The fabrics and skin, makeup and the body, are mixed and transformed. And we see this not only through the amalgamation of textiles in the poems, but through the deployment of artifices, such as alliteration, that make language tactile, sensuous.

The play with the surface of writing, with language and sound in poetry, is, as we explored earlier in this chapter, constitutive of Perlongher’s *neobarroso* poetics, a poetics we see embodied by “Degradée.” The title, “Degradée,” translates from the French as “degraded.” The title itself is quite telling, given what we have been outlining about the *neobarroso* throughout this chapter: it is about bringing the high down to the low and mixing these together, dragging them through the muddy waters of the Río de la Plata. To degrade means to corrupt something, to make it inferior. It also means, in my reading, to degrade the meaning of words, that is, to wear them down to the point that they are stripped off of their common meanings—of their “depth.”

In fact, Perlongher himself makes two points about *Alambres* in his essay “Sobre Alambres” that are particularly poignant: the first, “[s]e trata,” writes Perlongher, “al fin y al cabo, de una lucha solitaria y atroz: *deformar todo, desconfiar siempre de los sentidos dados*, y, simultáneamente, dejarse... *dejarse arrastrar* por lo que nos sacude o nos tremola” (*Prosa* 140; emphasis added); the second point, “es del cuerpo que, al final [...] siempre se trata. Se trata en el plano de la escritura, de *hacer un cuerpo*—y de ahí lo chirriante, lo susurrante, lo fruitivo” (italics in original). The poems of *Alambres* are not bound to their assumed or to a fixed meaning, and, instead, words—as they rub against one another—create a sensuous surface, a body, often through the play with sound. To degrade words is to strip them off their fixed meanings, to corrupt or corrode them to the point where they are emptied of or—paradoxically—saturated with meaning to the point where sound becomes more “significant” than meaning; what becomes “significant” is the *surface* rendered material by the play with language.

In terms of structure, “Degradée” is composed primarily of one heptasyllabic hemistich and one hendecasyllabic—that is, two *heterostiquios*. The metric draws us back to both Góngora and Darío: Góngora employed the Petrarchan hendecasyllabic verse as the perfect meter for sonnets; whereas Darío transformed the meter of the sonnet’s verses into *alejandrinos*. Importantly as well was poetic license for Darío, where often the *alejandrino* can only be so through a pause in the division of the verse into two hemistiches of seven syllables each. Perlongher mixes these two traditions—for the most part—giving us verses such as the one that opens the poem “recorres en espejo | galerías con espejos de mano”—7+11—or “frialdad de ese glacé, | o nomás el incienso de ese humo”—7+11—or “de aquellas piletitas de sarmiento, | hay una madre que”—11+7—(*Poemas* 62). What this points to is, again, an emphasis on the surface, on the body that the poem creates through sound and, in this case, rhythm and meter.

“Degradée” opens with a baroque image and motif, the mirror: “recorres en espejo galerías con espejos de mano” (62). A mirror that here, like in the Baroque, is multiplied. The mirror, in Baroque art, encapsulates the notions of “desdoblamientos, inversiones, equívocos y transposiciones” (Ruiz 182). The world, during the baroque period, is a “mirror of mirrors” (Buci-Glucksmann 30), a world of images. For example, Velázquez’s *Las Meninas* is a game of mirrors where the “oscillation between interior and exterior of the canvas doubles the oscillation between subject and object, painter and painted” (Parkinson Zamora 171). For Baroque artists and writers, Lois Parkinson Zamora explains, the mirror is an “illusionistic surface,” meaning that “[m]irrors reflect only what is visible, whereas only what is *invisible* is lasting and true” (17; italics in original). In other words, the mirror—also a symbol of vanity—reflects a beauty and youth that will fade away. In this sense, “the iconography of *vanitas*,” where we tend to find the mirror, “blurs into *memento mori*,” and hence, in Baroque art, “[s]kulls begin to provide regular company to the mirror, reminding the viewer of the speciousness of pleasure and the falsity of appearance.” The mirror thus points to the unfolding of the self into self-and/as-other(s)—which resonates with the opening idea in “Sobre Alambres,” taken from *A Thousand Plateaus*, “[s]i no hay un yo [...], si somos todos multiplicidades”—the mirror does not faithfully reflect reality but rather raises the question of the very reality we are seeing; it highlights both vanity and the transience of beauty.

The *espejo neobarroso* is a queer mirror that seems to reflect heteronormative images but instead empties them of their realism.<sup>13</sup> This would serve as a political statement that rejects the notion that homosexuality, in a sense, “mirrors” heterosexuality; instead, this is a mirror that empties normativity of its signifying power. Homosexuality is not the negative of heterosexuality but exists wholly outside of it, rejecting any possibility of belonging within a normative social structure.

In “Degradée,” the poetic voice speaks to a you that is nothing but a reflection, nothing but an image. It traverses the gallery of hand-held mirrors, giving the reader a sense that the you is in a maze of mirrors, in which one is endlessly multiplied, endlessly reflected. In the poem, there is no solid *you*, just the reflected image of this unidentified you.

But what is the hand-held mirror for if not to look at oneself? Yet instead of recognizing oneself, there is nothing but mirrors. This renders the mirror both useless and seemingly paradoxical, for what is the role of the mirror if not to reflect? But what does Perlongher’s mirror reflect in this poem? The following verses of the poem fixate on the mirrors themselves, not on what they “should” reflect, that is, a body: “galerías, vítreas, de vidrio y lama, ve / un ‘viril’

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<sup>13</sup> The motif of the mirror will also be relevant in our reading of Alejandra Pizarnik’s *La condesa sangrienta* in the next chapter.



virtuosismo, una vidriosidad de escapulados, / o ‘pulados’: pues” (3-4). These verses describe glass galleries of hand-held mirrors that turn to slime. In other words, not only do they multiply and reflect a body that doesn’t appear to be there, that is, there is no solid body (or no single body), but the mirrors are also turning to slime. There is also an I that speaks, that wants to see him/herself, once in the poem: “el deambular brillante, señas de lona verde / — para un ahorcado verde — , verme, por qué no?” (12-13). But just as the you that is nothing but reflection, the I is nothing but a question about its own image, one that is associated with a dead body through the assonance of *verde* and *verme*. And, like that you to which the poetic voice speaks, which is nothing but a play of mirrors, the language of the poem also starts to lose its solid grounding, its referentiality; it begins to dissolve, to turn to water, to mud, a *chapoteo* that emphasizes or shifts to the pleasure of sound, its resonance.

While the mirror’s stereotypical association—especially the hand-held type—would be to the feminine, here instead what is seen—by whom? We don’t know—is a virile virtuosity. But this virility is also questioned. As *viril* is placed in quotation marks. And what results is a sonorous surface of mirrors—echoes?—through the repetition of *v* and *vi* together with *r*, *t*, and *d* sounds: *vítreas*, *vidrio*, *ve*, *viril*, *virtuosismo*, *vidriosidad*; which then shifts into the repetition of *pu*, once we get to *escapulados*, *pulados*, and *pues*, now sending us into a seemingly religious realm—but, again, Perlongher erodes common meanings and associations—then mixed with the Portuguese *pular*, meaning “to jump.” Both *escapular* and *pular* have to do with “jumping” but here they seem to imply a passive relationship; that is, rather than actively jumping, these galleries break. One of the meanings of *vidrioso* is “[q]ue fácilmente se quiebra o salta” (*Diccionario de la lengua española*). So virility is here equivalent to glassiness, to something that is easily broken, rather than strong or solid—thus emptying it of its traditional meaning, its “depth,” to focus on it as a fragile surface.

Finally, in the fifth verse is a neck—also one of the Renaissance and Baroque poets’ favorite fragmented body parts<sup>14</sup>—but unlike a woman’s beautiful and gentle neck, this is an animalized neck, for the word Perlongher uses is not *cuello*—the more “poetic” and “human” choice—but rather *pecuezo*. The reference to the neck also seems to invert the *preciosismo modernista*, given the elegance of the neck Darío constantly attributed to the swan—in “Los cisnes” he refers to their “encorvado cuello” and “cuello divino,” for example—the *modernistas*’ symbol of beauty. But, in “Degradée,” the neck will quickly devolve to be transformed into a phallic symbol, a tail—in verse sixteen—through the poet’s play with the association of sounds in the word *pecuezo*, turned into *pezcuello*, and then *pez-cola*. *Pez-cola* further plays on the shape of a swan’s neck that, moved further down on an animal’s body, might look just like a tail (a penis?). In terms of spatial location then we move from the more “refined” section of the body to the most “obscene.” Again, everything is dragged down, debased. The neck in the poem begins as a girl’s, but is debased—*degradado*, *degradée*—and dragged through the verbs themselves, from verses five through sixteen, from *pecuezo* to *pez-cola*: *baja*, *jala*, *arrastrar*; and nouns within the same semantic field, such as *ruedo* (which is repeated twice and can also mean “limit” or “end”), “*terminación*,” and *desliz*.

As we continue to be pulled to where the *pez-cola* lies, a detail appears “en ‘purpurina’? sobretatuado en el escote, draga / el seno; de esa que hierre: vidrio cortado, tajo / luminoso e infecto [...]” (17-19). The use of the verb *dragar*—which means to deepen and clean the muddy bottom of rivers with a dredge—reminds us that we are in the bottom of the dirty waters (of *el*

<sup>14</sup> Góngora’s “Mientras por competir con tu cabello” quickly comes to mind, as the poetic voice describes the woman’s neck as a “gentil cuello.”

*Plata?*). And the details we see are questioned, not only are they in quotation marks but are also followed by a question mark: is anything we see in the poem really what we see? Rather than seeing a deep cleavage, the image the poetic voice paints is one of a paradoxically abstracted yet concrete violence: a piece of glass cuts the bosom or core in that cleavage, a cut both shining and infected. The image of the shining and infected cut in an over-tattooed cleavage synthesizes in a single image both the Neobaroque—*el tatuaje*—and the *neobarroso* (following Lamborghini)—*el tajo*. A shining and infected cut that embodies the clash of the high and the low, *el trasheo y la lumpenización*, that is Perlongher's poetry.

The poem takes the reader in different directions, ones which have no solid grounding, since they often end as questions, as in the example of "*purpurina*" and/or are followed by ellipses:

[...] rima su  
 aspeza de pieles vivas, con esa estola de "marrón"  
 con que ella  
 se cubría los hombros?—disimulando esa pilosidad, y lo  
 batracio de ese desfallecer, no lleva  
 a las patitas de yacaré, estagnadas, o colocadas en una  
 cierta inercia?... (25-31)

The poem doesn't make any assertions. Rather, it leaves questions open. In this sense, as soon as images materialize, they also begin to drip and slip through the cracks of meaning, similarly to the floating signifiers of Sarduy's Neobaroque, resulting instead in a plurality of meaning that cannot be pinned down. This kind of instability of language and images functions similarly to the queer notion of *devenir mujer*, a constantly fluctuating and unstable process of becoming. For, where does *ella* end up? Does she become the *yacaré*? Does she resemble a *yacaré*? And is she even really "she" or is her femininity questioned by her hairiness (*pilosidad*)? Is she not a girl but a transvestite, a queer(ed) image? Rather than fixed identities, queerness here means a constant becoming, always in flux.

The jump to different images, through the association of sound also moves to completely different spaces. We go from "her" to mothers at the swimming pools. The water motif continues into the next verses, but now we're not in the river but at the *piletitas de sarmiento*—the jump in sound association from *patitas* to *piletitas*. And suddenly we find ourselves in the Argentine dictatorship (it was during this period that the *polideportivo* Parque Sarmiento was built by the military government), where we see a mother who also becomes an absence, "está esa madre y esa ausencia, el cuadro, enmarcado en / cristal, da el resplandor." The mother/absence who is also a reflection in a mirror gallery (as the poem began) through which she moves or, rather, rolls: "Esa, y acaso la otra / porque ella, al rodar, por esos pasillitos, azogados" (40-41); and this is also a mother/absence who is pure excess, a surface brimming with decorative elements, as the next verses continue: "padecía el ahogo de esas ligas, y la sofocación de esos / panderos, el / pesar de esos brincos, o pendientes, o anillos, ya / excesivos?" (42-45). And doesn't the mother/absence resemble here a drag queen? What we are left with, through this excess of sounds and images? Is the decorative surface of language nothing but an iridescent language that is not the jewel but its cheap imitation with which the poem closes? The "chafalonerías de coral, o / strasses como estros..." (53-54). This is an imitation—*strasses* (we recall here Amícola's argument that Perlongher transforms the gold and silver of *modernism* into cheap materials like lamé and strass)—that becomes as valuable as the high materials—for in Perlongher's poetic

universe, these distinctions have all been muddled, mixed “en una insaciabilidad donde la repugnancia va perdiendo su referencia” (Cangi 272).

The whole poem is “una mirada en dégradée,” to borrow from Adrián Cangi (272). Hierarchies are broken, they disappear, “lo inferior se vuelve iridiscente, lo superior se hunde en los bajos fondos de una necesidad que lo domina” (272). And in this space, language’s sensual potentiality disrupts any possibility of signification or linearity, as Francine Masiello has argued (70). We find ourselves as readers in the dirty waters splashing with the pleasure of “la destrucción de las materias en un éxtasis descendente y corrosivo” (Cangi 271).

## Conclusions

Through an analysis of Perlongher’s theoretical texts, a genealogical deconstruction of the *neobarroso*, and the close reading of some of his poetry, we have seen how Perlongher rewrites the excesses of the Baroque (and its appropriation and revisions through the Neobaroque, *modernismo*, and the Avant-Gardes) as a sensuous, sonorous, and corporeal textual fabric—a queer surface. Perlongher’s poetry also takes Baroque motifs, such as the mirror, and multiplies their effects to the point of delirium. His writing embodies a queer fluctuation that is forever unstable and engages in the pleasure of excess; it simultaneously focuses on and blurs queer images and voices where the self is always becoming (as we see in “Dégradée”)—never singular, always plural; there is no identity, only subjectivation.

Perlongher further appropriates some of the most fertile Baroque artifices, such as anaphora, alliteration, and polysemy, to disrupt the communicative structures of language. In this sense, writing becomes a surface rather than purposeful communication; language is revalorized as part of the very question of how we read and how these normative readings become the facts that structure History. That is to say, Perlongher’s play with language and its surfaces forces us to read the violence and queerness inherent in language, to dig out the (queer) absences created by History and bring them to the surface. Language thus becomes excess and excrement (often rendered as the mixing of registers). “Proper” language and the Latin American canon are corroded and deformed or perverted—queered—and are replaced by the friction of words and sounds, by the friction between non-normative bodies and their fluids. In Perlongher’s texts we find a violent infecting of normative language, social structures, and realism, all in a deliriously queer carnival of pleasure.

Queer rewriting, as explored in Perlongher’s poetry, thus encourages a kind of linguistic freedom in a way that reenacts the Baroque and Neobaroque, but without being constrained by these traditions; it dislodges the past to open up new possibilities and realities. The political implications of queer rewriting, based on my theorization of Perlongher’s poetics, is that rewriting challenges orthodoxy in a way that doesn’t reject it as false, but rather opens the reader—the subject—to the possibility of multiple, ambiguous histories and subjectivities.

Chapter 2: Alejandra Pizarnik's *La condesa sangrienta*

In an article that María Negroni wrote a couple of years before *El testigo lúcido* (2003)—her book of criticism on three of the texts she termed Alejandra Pizarnik's *textos de sombra* (*La condesa sangrienta*, *La bucanera de Pernambuco o Hilda la polígrafa*, and *Los poseídos entre lilas*)—she noted her surprise that Alejandra Pizarnik's oeuvre had never been discussed as belonging to a baroque aesthetic or as a precursor to the Neobaroque or the *neobarroso*<sup>15</sup> (“Alejandra Pizarnik” 170).<sup>16</sup> In *El testigo lúcido*, Negroni asks: “¿Sería posible leer el gótico de *La condesa sangrienta* como antesala del barroco? ¿Ver, en el castillo de Ceszthje [sic], la primera instancia de un gesto depredador que anticipa las convulsiones de Hilda la polígrafa?” (98). I want these questions to guide the path of this chapter: to read the Baroque in *La condesa sangrienta* and follow it to its limits. In a way, this chapter is an attempt to rescue this overlooked side of Pizarnik and, more than that, to see her as a precursor to the *neobarroso*. In this chapter, I lead with the question of what the Baroque makes possible in *La condesa sangrienta* and ask: What does it mean to read *La condesa sangrienta* through the Baroque as an anticipatory gesture toward the complete explosion of language to the point of delirium, as in *La bucanera de Pernambuco o Hilda la polígrafa*? And in what ways does this text function as a precursor to the *neobarroso*?

María Negroni dedicates the final chapter of *El testigo lúcido* to *La bucanera de Pernambuco*. In it, she considers Pizarnik's final prose work as an engagement with and a text about language, with affinities to James Joyce's and Lewis Carroll's work with language, as well as Lautréamont's and Artaud's (105). Some of the prevalent characteristics of *La bucanera*, which further emphasize its point of contact with these authors, are: “los razonamientos falsos, las enumeraciones contradictorias, los sinsentidos, las confusiones entre el sentido literal y metafórico de una misma palabra . . . , la escritura de proliferación, vale decir el uso de aposiciones, neologismos, arcaísmos, abreviaturas y préstamos.” To this list Negroni also adds an emphasis on the hyperbolic, corrosive humor, the incorporation of high literature with burlesque intentions, the view of plagiarism as necessary, the coexistence of opposites, and the resulting grotesque images (106). Negroni concludes these lists by asking, “¿qué otra cosa sino esto han postulado, desde siempre, los escritores del neobarroco latinoamericano?” (106-07).

What are the constitutional ideas of the Hispanic Neobaroque if not ambiguity, excrescence, artifice, and parody? What does the Neobaroque emphasize if not excess, waste, overflow, transgression, carnivalization, intertextuality, ludic language, pleasure, and the unproductive? Why is it, then, that Pizarnik's work is not read next to that of Néstor Perlongher or Osvaldo Lamborghini's? In the words of Negroni, “[n]o deja de sorprender . . . que no se lo mencione [el texto de *La bucanera de Pernambuco*] entre los representantes latinoamericanos de ese movimiento [neobarroco] (junto al propio Sarduy, Cabrera Infante o Lezama Lima, para nombrar sólo a algunos) ni lo reivindicquen como antecedente los propulsores de la poética ‘neobarrosa’” (“Alejandra Pizarnik” 170).

Though the text that interests us here is not *La bucanera* but *La condesa sangrienta*, I open with these questions to trace a bridge from the Baroque to Pizarnik's *textos de sombra* and

<sup>15</sup> As discussed in the previous chapter, the term *neobarroso* refers to the writing of Southern Cone authors whose work is a violent inheritance of the Cuban neobaroque writers José Lezama Lima and Severo Sarduy. The term was coined by the Argentine poet and sociologist Néstor Perlongher. For a more thorough analysis, see Chapter One.

<sup>16</sup> In that same volume of *INTI*, Delfina Muschietti called for the expansion of the term Neobaroque to include the work both of Susana Thénon and Alejandra Pizarnik (“Oliverio” 115).

to dig deeper into the question of Pizarnik's place among the *neobarrocos*. My aim is to focus on the possibility of reading her work in a different way—not just as *la poeta maldita*, *la poeta suicida*, *la poeta-niña*, or even as the last surrealist poet, as she has been seen by scholars.<sup>17</sup> I believe this perspective will allow for more ludic avenues of reading, for the possibility to trace new points of contact, genealogies, and affinities, ones that have not yet been thoroughly explored, and, most importantly, to read *La condesa sangrienta* as a precursor to the *neobarroso*.

In order to trace the Baroque in Pizarnik's *La condesa sangrienta*, I will first talk briefly about *La condesa* in general terms, discussing it within Pizarnik's oeuvre. I will then explore the text's main source, its pretext (or hypotext in Gérard Genette's terminology, a text that precedes another and which a later text transforms),<sup>18</sup> Valentine Penrose's *Erzsebet Bathory, la comtesse sanglante*.

*La condesa sangrienta* was first published in 1965 as “La Libertad absoluta y el horror” in the Mexican literary magazine *Diálogos*<sup>19</sup>—which was directed by Octavio Paz—the same year as her critically acclaimed *Los trabajos y las noches*.<sup>20</sup> *Los trabajos y las noches* was Pizarnik's fifth book of poetry—it had been preceded by *La tierra más ajena* (1955), *La última inocencia* (1956), *Las aventuras perdidas* (1958), and *Árbol de Diana* (1962).<sup>21</sup> In the early 1960s, before “La Libertad absoluta,” she had already published a handful of articles—most of which take the form of book reviews or literary critiques—in other prestigious journals such as *Sur*—directed by Victoria Ocampo.<sup>22</sup> “La Libertad absoluta y el horror” would be again published the following year—1966—under its definitive title in the Argentine magazine *Testigo* as “La condesa sangrienta.” Aside from the correction (or miscorrection) of some typos, such as the date of *La comtesse sanglante*'s publication—in *Diálogos* the date of *La comtesse*'s publication is 1965 and in *Testigo*, 1963<sup>23</sup>—the two versions of this “article” are the same. In 1971, *La condesa sangrienta* came out in book form, published in Buenos Aires by Aquarius.

*La condesa sangrienta* had long been ignored by literary criticism but began to receive some attention in the 1990s. Her other prose works, *Los poseídos entre lilas*<sup>24</sup> and *La bucanera de Pernambuco o Hilda la polígrafa*—both published posthumously—have received even less critical attention. These texts didn't quite “fit” within Pizarnik's poetic oeuvre, even though, as many scholars have more recently pointed out, the same themes and obsessions we see in her lyric poetry also structure *La condesa sangrienta* and are taken to an extreme in the latter two texts. Some of these themes are the recurrence of silence, darkness, night, and death;

<sup>17</sup> In an interview for *Clarín*, Sylvia Molloy speaks of a certain fetishization of Pizarnik that has obscured the “darker” side of Pizarnik's writing: “Confieso que me perturba la fetichización que se ha hecho de ciertos aspectos que se han vuelto icónicos, cierta cosa de la niñez, el trabajo con el surrealismo y cómo se toma ese aspecto sin conectarlo con los demás. Cierta intención de purificarla, viendo por un lado a una Alejandra tremendista y existencial, y por el otro la parte cómica, soez, pornográfica, como si eso fuera inferior” (“Memoria de una juventud en Olivos”).

<sup>18</sup> Or, as Gerald Prince summarizes in the “Foreword” to *Palimpsests*, it is “an earlier text that [another text] ... imitates or transforms” (ix).

<sup>19</sup> In the volume July-August.

<sup>20</sup> César Aira writes that at the moment of its publication, it received unanimous critical acclaim (8).

<sup>21</sup> The books that followed were *Extracción de la piedra de la locura* (1968), *Nombres y figuras* (1969), *El infierno musical* (1971), *Los pequeños cantos* (1971), and the posthumous *Textos de sombra y últimos poemas* (1982).

<sup>22</sup> These articles engage with the work of Julio Cortázar, Henri Michaux, Alberto Girri, and others.

<sup>23</sup> Both are incorrect; the actual date of its publication is 1962; published in Paris by Gillimard, Mercure de France.

<sup>24</sup> This text has also been anthologized in *Prosa completa* (2001) as *Los perturbados entre lilas*. María Negroni uses the former title; since I take her analysis as a point of departure, I also refer to the text as *Los poseídos*, rather than *Los perturbados*.

intertextuality and rewriting; “[l]as duplicaciones del yo” and its unfolding (Dalmaroni 5, 8); “tensión y juego con los límites” (7); a writing “que permanece en el umbral, la frontera, el límite” (Muschiatti, “Alejandra” 235); and the repeated images of the mirror and of *la sonámbula*.

At the same time, many of those who have written about Pizarnik’s appropriation of Penrose have either failed to place emphasis on *La condesa sangrienta* as an appropriation, or have mostly ignored the French text—thus failing to see it precisely as a rewriting. This has led to a reading of Pizarnik’s Countess as if Penrose’s work “no contara, cercenándose la posibilidad de registrar de qué modo Pizarnik se inscribe en una cadena de ventrílocuas femeninas o, como ha sugerido Sylvia Molloy, en un sistema de cajas chinas para el ejercicio de una mirada voyeurística” (Negroni, *El testigo* 15). Luckily, not everyone has ignored *La condesa sangrienta*’s pretext, giving us insight into the points of contact with and the departures from its “original.”

Having been originally published in the book review section of *Diálogos*, *La condesa sangrienta* masquerades as, or, following Sylvia Molloy’s analysis, is a parody, a mock “book review,” of Valentine Penrose’s *La comtesse sanglante* (1962), similar to the “mock book reviews in Borges’s *Historia universal de la infamia*” (“From Sappho” 251). It is clear that *La condesa* is not intended to function as an actual book review, as scholars have noted, by the absence of a critical analysis of Penrose’s text. This is further evidenced by comparing it to other “serious” book reviews in that same issue and prior issues of *Diálogos*.<sup>25</sup> By the following year, though, when the text is published in *Testigo*, it seems to no longer be presented as a book review, but rather as an essay. I believe it is important to think explicitly about genre in order to not take the text at face value and to explore the ways in which parody permeates it. In order to analyze the workings of parody, we first need to look at the textual basis for *La condesa sangrienta*.

As I have mentioned above, *La condesa sangrienta* takes Valentine Penrose’s *La comtesse sanglante* as its pretext. Valentine Penrose, today a largely forgotten figure, was a French Surrealist poet and collage artist, and the author of eight books of poetry and prose.<sup>26</sup> Her absence within the French Surrealist canon is not due to the lack of merit of her writing, but to the oblivion to which most (French) women writers have been abandoned.<sup>27</sup> In fact, she was a well-known member of the Surrealist movement: “[h]er first three plaquettes . . . were published by the Surrealist Editions G.L.M.” (Colville 84), and Paul Éluard wrote the preface to her first book of poetry, *Herbe à la lune* (1935)—Pizarnik calls it a “fervoroso prefacio” (*Prosa completa* 282). Éluard also wrote the preface to her 1951 book of poetry and collage, *Dons des féminines*, which also contained an etching by Pablo Picasso—though Pizarnik does not mention it in her

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<sup>25</sup> We see this from its title—“La Libertad absoluta y el horror”—which does not reference Penrose’s book nor the author’s name; in that same issue, the other book review—by Alberto Dallal—is titled “Sobre dos novelas,” which points more evidently at its purpose; or, if we look at some of the reviews that appeared in the first volume, they include the author’s name, the book title, and the publication information, as we would expect from a book review; for example: Xavier Rubert de Ventós: *El arte ensimismado. Colección Setein, Barcelona, 1963*.

<sup>26</sup> There are very few scholarly texts on Penrose’s oeuvre; the two scholars who have written most extensively about Penrose are Georgiana M M Colville and Renée Riese Hubert.

<sup>27</sup> Georgiana Colville explains: “There is no lack of poetry by women, at any period, in any culture, as the various anthologies of women poets which grew out of the women’s movements of the 1970s have shown. Women are, however, still treated as lack, neglected in theoretical works on poetry, slighted in reviews and underrepresented in anthologies. . . . [W]omen poets in France seem to have been nearly forgotten since the sixteenth century” (“Through an Hour-glass” 81-82).

text. The piece of writing that concerns us here, however, is her 1962 book, *La comtesse sanglante*, “which can best be described as a romanced historical novel” (Colville 89), or, in Pizarnik’s words, “una suerte de vasto y hermoso poema en prosa” (282).<sup>28</sup>

*La comtesse sanglante* tells—and *La condesa sangrienta* retells—the story of the sixteenth-/seventeenth-century Hungarian Countess, Erzébet<sup>29</sup> Báthory, who tortured, murdered, and bathed in the blood of over 600 women. Though for many years—six, according to Pizarnik—she killed women free of consequence, in 1610 she was walled up in her castle as punishment for her crimes and died alone, imprisoned there; her acolytes were publicly tried and burned at the stake.

Pizarnik’s *La condesa sangrienta* rewrites *La comtesse sanglante* in two main ways: first, as direct citations/translations, marked with italics; second, by denarrativizing and dissecting Penrose’s prose, rearranging passages and scenes, picking fragments and reorganizing them. Whereas Penrose’s text is a novel, Pizarnik’s is a short text—a mere fourteen pages<sup>30</sup>—composed of twelve fragments or vignettes (including the introductory one), a hybrid that combines narrative, poetic, and essayistic qualities. Penrose’s novel is made up of eleven chapters, plus an introduction (totaling twelve). Yet Pizarnik’s vignettes do not replicate Penrose’s chapters; in other words, the vignettes are not a miniaturized version of the chapters. Pizarnik’s vignettes rupture chronology in that they not only break away from Penrose’s narrative line—though Penrose’s isn’t necessarily organized along a historical or chronological structure—but there is also no narrative sequence connecting the various fragments. The central difference between the two is that Pizarnik’s text is a collection of focalized frames—predominantly, the scenes of torture—extracted from various moments in Penrose’s novel. In this process of extraction, Pizarnik rids her text of what contextualizes and historicizes Penrose’s narrative. By picking through Penrose’s text and ridding it of the archival research and contextualization, we might say that Pizarnik skims from *La comtesse sanglante*’s surface. In other words, Pizarnik performs a surface reading/rewriting of Penrose’s text (similar to the process advanced by Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, as will be analyzed below). While the notion of a surface reading typically carries negative connotations, Pizarnik chooses it as the focus of her strategy for rewriting. This strategy sets up an aesthetic of the surface that aims its attention on the visible acts of female cruelty and the “now” of Penrose’s text; Pizarnik will forego the more descriptive moments in Penrose’s novel that veer away from the scenes of torture, to highlight and heighten the scenes of female cruelty and desire—the queer moments in the text. This becomes particularly clear when we consider Pizarnik’s relationship to Penrose’s larger oeuvre and the motivation behind writing *La condesa sangrienta*: Pizarnik will solely focus on *La comtesse sanglante* and will not engage with any other of Penrose’s texts.

Pizarnik’s motives for writing this piece are unknown—she does not mention Penrose in her diaries, where she consistently wrote about her reading and writing practices. But it is possible that she learned about Penrose’s novel through Bataille, whose 1961 book, *Les Larmes d’Eros*, contained a footnote announcing the upcoming publication of Penrose’s work on Erzébet Báthory.<sup>31</sup> What is curious about both what Pizarnik herself says—and doesn’t say—about

<sup>28</sup> To simply call it a long prose poem, however, is to minimize the archival work Penrose undertook in order to write the novel.

<sup>29</sup> This is Pizarnik’s spelling, not Penrose’s; I will use this spelling throughout unless quoting directly from Penrose.

<sup>30</sup> This is the page count for the version published in *Prosa completa*; the one that appeared in *Diálogos* was five and a half pages; in *Testigo*, it was nine.

<sup>31</sup> I use the past tense here because in subsequent editions of the book the footnote was deleted (Humphreys 750).

Penrose and what scholars have noted about the relationship between Pizarnik's appropriation of Penrose is that they don't discuss any other works by the French author. Also, while Pizarnik highlights Penrose's poetic genius in the opening remarks in *La condesa sangrienta*, she does so only in relation to the fact that Éluard wrote the preface to her first book.<sup>32</sup> Thus, Pizarnik's engagement with Penrose's work as a whole is one of surface, where Pizarnik skims *La comtesse* from all of Penrose's poetic, narrative, and artistic production; she takes only *La comtesse* as her primary source and sole focus.

Indeed, both Molloy and Negroni have pointed out the similarities and differences between *La condesa* and *La comtesse*, but they do not explore the possibility of a relationship between *La condesa* and Penrose's other texts. The fact is that there is no direct evidence that suggests Pizarnik read the rest of Penrose's work—even if the phrasing “su primer libro,” referring to Penrose's first book of poetry in the opening page of *La condesa*, does take into account that it is the first book among many—since neither Penrose nor the titles of her books appear in Pizarnik's diaries' lists of readings. Nonetheless, I mention this to trouble what we know about *La condesa* and to raise the following question: what does knowing that Pizarnik did not dig “deeper” into Penrose's work tell us?

By destabilizing its relationship to its pretext and influences, we can reorganize and decenter our avenues of reading and our understanding of the construction of Pizarnik's text as a queer aesthetic of the surface. What I mean by a queer aesthetic of the surface is that in her rewriting of Penrose's text, Pizarnik does not incorporate any other of Penrose's texts as intertexts and focuses almost exclusively on the moments of queer eroticism in Penrose's narrative; her reading of Penrose is not “deep” in the sense of an exhaustive—or even comprehensive—study of Penrose's work. Pizarnik picks through *La comtesse* focusing almost exclusively on moments of queer female lust, transformed into brief scenes devoid of background.<sup>33</sup> Pizarnik is not interested in thorough explanations, but rather in rendering surfaces visible, in transforming long episodes into brief, focalized *tableaux vivants* of queer desire and torture.

But what are the points of departure for such an aesthetic? In order to answer this question, I will explore the ways in which a Baroque emphasis on surface rather than depth can guide an understanding of the aesthetic choices Pizarnik makes in *La condesa sangrienta* and how her rewriting of *La comtesse* performs this very aesthetic of the surface. I will thus trace the Baroque in *La condesa* through Surrealism—a movement that heavily influenced Pizarnik's writing.<sup>34</sup> Particularly, I will focus on the way the gaze, *mise en abîme*, excess, death, and melancholy all emerge out of a Baroque aesthetic that is also constitutive of Surrealist art and texts.

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<sup>32</sup> Another author who rewrote *La comtesse* was Julio Cortázar, a close friend of Pizarnik. In *62/modelo para armar* (1968), Cortázar takes up Countess Báthory's story. While I do not analyze *62/modelo para armar* here, it would be an interesting point of comparison for further analysis of *La condesa sangrienta*.

<sup>33</sup> In Chapter One, I lay out the basis for what I have termed a “queer aesthetic of the surface,” which stems from the writings of Néstor Perlongher; there I explore the ways in which language, for Néstor Perlongher, functions not as a communicative tool but one of excess. Similarly to Perlongher, Pizarnik structures her text as an aesthetics of the surface interested only in what is visible—the visual surface—rendering the reader a spectator of scenes of torture repeatedly staged *ad delirium*.

<sup>34</sup> In fact, in an interview with Martha I. Moia, Pizarnik talks about her “surrealismo innato” (Lasarte 868).



## Surrealism and the Baroque

As I have already mentioned, Valentine Penrose was an important member of the Surrealist Paris school. The influence of Surrealism is visible in all her work. Given that Pizarnik rewrites Penrose's surrealist text, it then follows that *La condesa sangrienta* would take Surrealism as a point of departure. If we thus begin with a reading of Pizarnik through the lens of Surrealism, as César Aira has done, we can explore this avenue without limiting ourselves to thinking about Surrealism as a closed school. Though it is worth noting that, according to César Aira, Pizarnik's aesthetic project is constructed within and through the Surrealist one—"A.P. vivió y leyó y escribió en la estela del surrealismo" (11). My intention is not, however, to frame Pizarnik solely within the Surrealist school, but to mark connections between Surrealism and other important influences on her work, specifically, the Baroque. Moreover, Surrealism did not exist within a vacuum. In order to think about the various influences on *La condesa*, we might then begin by tracing the connections between Surrealism and the Baroque.

Let us take Aira's statement as a point of departure to explore Surrealism's own influences, beginning with a key aspect of the Surrealist project: to write the New:

La adopción del procedimiento de la escritura automática obedece a su utilidad para obtener lo Nuevo. Y la importancia de lo nuevo es suprema, es el *sine qua non* para seguir escribiendo. El Surrealismo fue primordialmente un sistema de lecturas, el más rico y productivo de los tiempos modernos. (Esto también forma parte de la contradicción surrealista: fue un sistema de lecturas, y propuso un sistema de creación donde la lectura es tabú.) (Aira 15)

Yet no matter how much the Surrealists intended to write the New, this was founded on contradiction. It is well known and documented that the Surrealists looked back to Baudelaire and Lautréamont as a source of inspiration. But beyond the connection and inspiration drawn from the nineteenth century, Surrealism also has many points of contact with and borrows from the Baroque.

In the Hispanic tradition, Surrealism manifested itself in the Generación del 27. The year that gives name to this generation, 1927, is significant in that it commemorates the third centenary of the death of Don Luis de Góngora y Argote, tying the group's origins to the Baroque. In terms of influences, Baroque writers are central to the group: its members actively studied Góngora and zealously produced annotated editions of his texts. At the same time, the group was highly influenced by and many of its members participated in the Surrealist movement—most notably Cernuda, Lorca, Prados, Aleixandre, Alberti, and Altolaguirre. In this sense, the Hispanic Baroque tradition and its revitalization are closely tied to the Hispanic Surrealist period.

In fact, the group's contemporary visual artists were heavily influenced by Baroque painters such as Velázquez. Arguably the most famous Surrealist painter, Salvador Dalí "was deeply influenced by the artwork that came from Spain during the seventeenth-century," and who even in his own appearance "self-consciously cultivated the style of mustache represented in Velazquez's numerous portraits of Philip IV" ("Dalí and the Spanish Baroque"). In Dalí's paintings, we see a Baroque deployment of religious imagery and figures; the theme of the *memento mori* is also consistently present, which we see in his melting clocks, for example (Fig. 1); he employs the style of *vanitas*, and the technique of *anamorphosis*—all Baroque topics and techniques ("Dalí and the Spanish Baroque"). The Baroque was obsessed with the "illusory and ephemeral nature of experience" (Parkinson 135-36), as we see, for example, in the paintings of

Juan de Valdés Leal such as *In Ictu Oculi* (Fig. 2), which for the Surrealists will translate into the obsession with the unconscious and the awareness of the ephemerality of time—and the question and experience of time will be of especial significance in *La condesa sangrienta*.



Figure 1 Dalí, Salvador. *The Disintegration of the Persistence of Memory*. 1952-1954. Oil on canvas. Salvador Dalí Museum, St. Petersburg, FL. *WikiArt.org*. Accessed 12 May 2017.



Figure 2 Valdés Leal, Juan de. *In Ictu Oculi*. 1670-1672. Hospital de la Caridad, Seville. *Wikipedia*. Accessed 12 May 2017.

The art historian Mary Ann Caws has also explored further connections between Surrealism and the Baroque; many of the points she makes about the relationship between these two schools or movements will be also exploited in Pizarnik's text. Caws opens her book on Surrealist art, *The Surrealist Look: An Erotics of Encounter* (1997), with a chapter titled "Look: Large and Baroque." In this chapter, Caws argues that the Surrealists learned from and appropriated the Baroque ways of seeing/looking, from "its reversals and exuberant ways of thinking and expressing in general" (8). Some of the aspects of the baroque aesthetic that are especially relevant for Surrealism, Caws argues, are the "fascination with what is complex, multiple, clouded, and changeable" (4); "[a] fond[ness] of disguise and of theatrical representation" (6); "a rhetoric of metaphor and *trompe l'oeil*" (Rousset qtd. in Caws 6); the "interplay of form and chaos, surface and depth, transparency and obscurity" (Buci-Glucksmann qtd. in Caws 8); as well as "the play within a play, ... [which] ha[s] definite implications for the *mise-en-abyme*" (6). In other words, all these characteristic aspects of the Baroque are either replicated in or are appropriated and reworked by the Surrealist project.

While not every one of these aspects is constitutive of *La condesa sangrienta*, it is still worth marking this preliminary tie between the Baroque and Surrealism to better understand Pizarnik's project. Some of the links between Surrealism and the Baroque will be particularly important as we make our way through the analysis of *La condesa*: the interest in and importance of vision, particularly as explored through *trompe l'oeil* (as it relates to *mise en abîme*); the interplay of opposites; and the *memento mori*. Outlining these influences can help us draw connections and allow us to begin to open a baroque door that might shed light on some subtleties and certain veiled aspects of *La condesa sangrienta* that have not been previously discussed. It will also allow us to better connect it to the *neobarroso* and find their points of contact through a queer aesthetic that takes many of its cues from the Baroque.

## The Gaze

As I have just outlined above, vision is central in both surrealist and baroque art. Barthes has also asserted that vision did not become a privileged sense until the Baroque period. Not only that, but, most importantly for our purposes, he defines the Baroque as an art of vision: “in the Middle Ages ... sight came only third, after touch. Then we have a reversal: the eye becomes the prime organ of perception (Baroque, art of the thing seen, attests to it)” (*Sade* 65). Marking the link between these two schools, Surrealism and the Baroque, allows us to see more clearly some of the sources of influence in Pizarnik’s writing that have not yet been fully exploited, and we can begin to see how a baroque aesthetic is at work in *La condesa sangrienta*. In particular, we are met in the text with a gaze that focuses on the surface of bodies: it is not interested in either the psychology of the Countess—as is Valentine Penrose—or the interiority of the victims.

*La condesa sangrienta* is a universe of vision. In fact, one way to talk about its structure might be to say that the short sections or vignettes that compose it are frames or scenes that compulsively repeat, only with slight variations. The reader, through Pizarnik’s own organizing gaze—of Penrose’s vision of the Countess—sees the Countess seeing—either herself in the mirror or the women being tortured. In the darkness of the castle’s spaces, we see only surfaces: the paleness of the virgins’ bodies or that of the Countess’ skin and the whiteness of her dress—all of which will be repeatedly stained by the red of blood. The contrast of light and shadow forces our eyes to focus on the repeated scenes of torture, on the tortured bodies and on the Countess herself, who delights in the pleasure of torturing.

*La condesa sangrienta* repeatedly emphasizes the obsession with seeing: the verbs *mirar* and *contemplar* are recurrent throughout the text, and the Countess’ eyes become a central focus. But the emphasis on vision is not solely structured by the inclusion of these verbs or the mention of the Countess’ eyes; it is present, more importantly, in the overarching structure of the text and the careful composition of every sentence. First, the fact that the text is not organized as a single cohesive (or coherent) narrative, but as vignettes disconnected from one another, makes the reader feel present, ambling from room to room, and creates a sense of independent tableaux of which the reader is a spectator and a participant.

Take, for example, the second vignette, “La virgen de hierro,” which follows the introductory remarks. The first paragraph gives the reader a brief background of this instrument of torture (Fig. 3); using the past tense (the imperfect), the paragraph begins: “Había en Nuremberg un famoso autómeta llamado ‘la Virgen de hierro’” (283). Pizarnik proceeds to tell us about the Countess having acquired her own replica of this machine and gives a brief description. As soon as she finishes explaining the mechanism by which the automaton is set into motion, she focuses, in just one brief sentence, on the Countess who sits and watches. At this point, the narrative is in the present tense: “La condesa, sentada en su trono, contempla” (283). This temporal shift,



Figure 3 The Iron Maiden of Nuremberg. *Medievalists.net*. Accessed 12 May 2017.

prompted by a change in verb tense, invites us to watch at the same moment as the Countess, at the moment when the act of torture is taking place. The reader/spectator becomes implicated in the scene.

Sylvia Molloy makes a similar statement on the sentence that closes the opening (introductory) vignette: “Esta sombría ceremonia tiene una sola espectadora silenciosa” (Pizarnik 283). According to Molloy, Pizarnik “writes ... [this] deceptively, for, although obviously voyeuristic, this layered same-sex gaze is, above all, associative: Pizarnik, Penrose, the Countess, her acolytes, and, clearly, their readers are caught up in one continuous, collaborative act of female visual lust” (252)—and what is visual lust if not a focus on the surface of bodies? The fact that Pizarnik refers to the Countess as a spectator gives the reader a sense that this voyeurism is part of a performance of sorts, a spectacle. In fact, the centrality of vision and the role of the spectator cannot be separated: we are all—except for the victims themselves—spectators to these reenacted—rewritten—scenes of obsessive torture.

The sentence that closes the first paragraph connects the gaze of the Countess with that of the automaton whose eyes move thanks to a mechanism.<sup>35</sup> There are multiple perspectives being portrayed at once: the narrator’s, who focuses on the automaton, rather than on the woman being killed, and also that of the Countess, who is the “sole spectator.” These multiple perspectives are also inherited from Baroque art, as Buci-Glucksmann has argued:

the baroque is based on a Keplerian cosmology that substitutes the teleologically perfect circle, with its unique center point for the ellipse, with its double foci, of which one is virtual and absent. The ellipse that one finds in church design and in the paintings of Tintoretto, Rubens, or El Greco ties the geometric space of the body to a rhetoric of the visible and the spoken, indicating a double process of infinitude and ex-centration of space and writing. The capaciousness of the baroque form derives from this. Can we not see the design of Borromini’s church of San Carlino as an anamorphosis of the circle? The question is, does not Bernini’s great architecture create an “unstable” viewer, a cinematography of the visible? (28)

There is not a single center, a single viewpoint; rather, there are multiple decentered perspectives. An example of this visual effect is Caravaggio’s *Conversion of St. Paul*, where the viewer instantly feels cramped and does not know where to look. The viewer’s gaze has to continuously shift in order to take in the whole image (Fig. 4), which creates an unstable viewer, an unstable spectator.

At the same time, the Countess seems to be as immobile as the automaton; she seems to be conflated with the automaton. Through the use of the impersonal construction of “es preciso tocar,” we never see the Countess actually moving, and the section closes with “y la asesina vuelve a ser la ‘Virgen’ inmóvil en su féretro” (283). The word choice further reinforces this reading, given that “la asesina” is the automaton, but, undoubtedly, also the Countess—the eyes of the automaton are conflated with those of the Countess. Vision is multiplied, forcing the reader/spectator to see from all angles, to be implicated in this universe of vision, framed by the plural visual perspectives.

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<sup>35</sup> The automaton of the baroque period will become the mannequin for the surrealists, and the robot later on. I think, for example, of this figure in the abundance of mannequins in de Chirico’s paintings. In de Chirico, the mannequin will serve as a metaphor of the contemporary antihero: “The lyric pathos of de Chirico’s mannequins derives variously from their isolation, their incompleteness (the absence of facial features and limbs), their need for physical support, their inability to move, and their being made of ‘stuff’ ... They prove the perfect metaphor for the modern antihero in a universe where heroism in the form that the antique, indeed, the entire premodern world understood it ... is no longer possible” (Rubin 68).

From *trompe l'oeil* to *mise en abîme*

The universe of vision of Pizarnik's text becomes a *mise en abîme* of female gazes and scenes of torture. Pizarnik begins her own narrative of Erzébet Báthory—once she moves away from the description of Penrose's text—with the Countess' gaze: "Sentada en su trono, la condesa mira torturar y oye gritar" (282-83). This image will be repeated in almost every vignette.

As this image incessantly repeats itself, the Countess' gaze is infinitely multiplied: "(La condesa contempla desde el interior de la carroza)" in the third vignette (284); "Lenta y silenciosa se sienta [la condesa] en un escabel situado debajo de la jaula," and this fourth scene's "ceremony" concludes "mientras su sangre [de la joven desnuda en la jaula] mana sobre la mujer pálida que la recibe impasible con los ojos puestos en ningún lado" (285). And this list goes on, but these handful of examples give the reader a sense of the various scenes that repeat a particular image *ad infinitum*. Similarly, "[t]he baroque dreamed of an eye that would view itself to infinity" (Buci-Glucksmann xv).

At the same time, the excess of the frame is central to the Baroque aesthetic, such as in *trompe l'oeil*; there is a "lack of respect for the limits of the frame—visually and structurally" in Baroque art (Ndalianis, "From Neo-Baroque" 267), which we also see in many famous Surrealist paintings. This kind of excess is also constitutive of Sade's writing, whereby "[h]is ostensible encyclopedic ambition to 'say everything' and 'show everything,'" explains Dalia Judovitz, "results both in the saturation of the classical order of representation and in its actual violation, through the production of an excess that challenges the notion of order itself" (148). Similarly in *La condesa*, the scenes exceed their frames, not only in that one spills over into the next in an endless repetition and circular continuity, but also in their relationship to the spectator: cruelty spills out of the page to involve the reader and to make that reader into a viewer/spectator who is a participant in the acts of cruelty. This is in part achieved through the use of the present tense and the emphasis on the gaze, but also through the deployment of a *trompe l'oeil* aesthetic that becomes a *mise en abîme*.

Lois Parkinson Zamora's definition of *mise en abîme*—which "literally [means] ... set in the abyss"—and *regressus ad infinitum* are especially helpful in our discussion of frames and repetition of acts:

Like *trompe l'oeil*, its [*mise en abîme*'s] primary subject is its own referential status. It, too, invokes infinity, but not through perspectival play or emblematic strategies; rather, it proposes an infinite series of identical, embedded images or texts, one producing the next and nesting within it, *ad infinitum*. We may think of *mise en abîme* as an abstract *trompe*



Figure 4 Caravaggio. *The Conversion of Saint Paul*. Oil on wood. 1600/1601. Santa Maria del Popolo, Rome. *Wikipedia*. Accessed 12 May 2017.



l'oeil, because endless self-repetition can only be imagined, never depicted or described. *Regressus ad infinitum* is closely related to *mise en abîme* in that it, too, proposes an abstract structure of endless self-reflection; the most obvious example is an image reflected in facing mirrors, the multiplication of which appears to regress endlessly into the distance. *Mise en abîme* also implies spatial displacement, but of the embedded Chinese box or Russian doll variety: the repeating images or texts do not so much regress into the distance as successively inhabit one another. (264)

The implications for *La condesa* are clear: the *mise en abîme* of the tableaux in the text is abstract: there is a *sense* of infinite repetition, rather than the achievement of that infinite repetition. *La condesa sangrienta* is both the image reflected on facing mirrors—as we will see when we discuss the role of the mirror in the text—and the Russian dolls inhabiting one another, as evidenced by the vignette “La Virgen de hierro” and the overarching structure of the text itself. That is to say, the various scenes of torture seem to repeat one another, especially given that they describe events that were not isolated: they depict scenes of torture that were repeated over and over throughout the years during which the Countess tortured and killed over 600 women. In this sense, the scenes repeat themselves beyond the boundaries of the text—that is, as historical events—a repetition to which *La condesa sangrienta* points. These scenes of torture become all the more powerful as the text forces the reader to envision these scenes coming to life over and over again; the imagination of the reader/spectator thus gazes at these horrific scenes *ad infinitum*. At the same time, the lack of narrative continuity in the structure of Pizarnik’s text mimics the matryoshka doll as these scenes inhabit one another, as each woman contains all other women and as each scene of torture contains all other scenes.

Returning to the vignette “La virgen de hierro,” we can observe that its third paragraph describes the intricate workings of the Iron Maiden. The focus is on the automaton, rather than on the woman who is about to be killed in the contraption. Pizarnik mentions the woman in passing:

Para que la “Virgen” entre en acción es preciso tocar algunas piedras preciosas de su collar. Responde inmediatamente con horribles sonidos mecánicos y muy lentamente alza los brazos para que se cierren en perfecto abrazo sobre lo que esté cerca de ella—en este caso una muchacha—. La autómatas la abraza y ya nadie podrá desnudar el cuerpo vivo del cuerpo de hierro, ambos iguales en belleza. De pronto, los senos maquillados de la dama de hierro se abren y aparecen cinco puñales que atraviesan a su viviente compañera de largos cabellos sueltos como los suyos. (283)

Notice the juxtaposition of beauty and horror of the automaton through the word *abrazo*, where the cruel wordplay torture delights in irony, and the mention of the machine’s necklace and the noises it makes as it moves. There is also a parallelism between the Countess and the automaton. Pizarnik seems to be playing a game of Russian dolls: the beautiful automaton is of equal beauty to that of the woman who is killed inside it. And, at the same time, the woman who is killed contains all the other women that will be killed, as a single woman tortured and murdered repeatedly. This game of Russian dolls also involves the Countess: the Countess is also the automaton who contains a woman inside her who “contains” all other women.

But, to focus more specifically on *mise en abîme* in *La condesa* as “an infinite series of identical, embedded images,” we have to think about the *tableaux vivants* that constitute the text. In juxtaposition to *La comtesse sanglante*, *La condesa sangrienta*’s vignettes are, almost entirely, brief focalized re-enactments of torture—the longest barely fills two and a half pages and some only span a few paragraphs. Unlike Penrose’s novel, where torture is dispersed

throughout the text and never completely focalized—decentered by parties, gatherings, and historical associations—Pizarnik picks through Penrose’s narrative and extracts the heightened moments of torture to then expose them. The structure of Penrose’s narrative is interrupted in Pizarnik’s text as live scenes of torture, as *tableaux vivants* reminiscent of the Marquis de Sade: “Sade’s novels and the vignettes within them aim to imitate the image, to create a place outside of narrative wherein the object awakens to the senses without any surrounding explanatory or causal apparatus, which inaugurates an ‘enchanted domain’ outside of time” (Freeman 150). These focalized moments are resonant with the baroque spectacle, in that it also involved the spectator, as live scenes that are performed and re-enacted through each reading. Each scene is a *tableau vivant*—Pizarnik herself calls them “cuadros vivos” (287). This is a *mise en abîme* of heightened scenes of torture, an obsessive, infinite reification of cruelty, achieved through Pizarnik’s incessant repetition not only of the scenes of torture but of words and phrases as well. We might read these *cuadros vivos* as the heightened moments of a queer violent eroticism, as a queer aesthetic of the surface, wherein we are not engaged with a “deeper” attempt to understand the Countess or the internal experience of the women being tortured. Instead, this aesthetic allows Pizarnik to focalize the visual and sensual eroticism in the scenes of female cruelty, which provoke a physical response (of shock and pain but also desire), on the part of the reader. These *cuadros vivos* make *La condesa* into an almost exclusively female space of homoerotic cruelty, one in which the reader (imagined here to be a woman) is compelled to be an active spectator. Temporality in Pizarnik becomes a kind of surface, a constant repetition of the now where queer sexual pleasure can be experienced.

Pizarnik’s economy of language, the change in verb tenses during certain scenes, and the constant repetition of words and images allow for each scene to come to life through every reading, as the reader is (un)willingly made participant. This is, in part, achieved through the repetition of images, such as a relentless piercing with needles: “traen fuego, cuchillos, agujas” (283); “la condesa la muerde frenética y le clava agujas” (284); “mediante pequeñas pinzas de plata, hundía agujas, cortaba la piel” (285); “historias que relacionaban a su mujer con mordeduras, agujas, etc.” (289); “Erzébet pinchaba ... con largas agujas” (289). Or, for example, through the continual use of the *atizador* as a tool for torture: “Sus viejas y horribles sirvientas son figuras silenciosas que traen ... atizadores” (283); “[c]omo el atizador o los cuchillos, esas viejas son instrumentos de una posesión” (283); “[r]ojo atizador en mano, Dorkó azuza a la prisionera” (284); “les aplicaban los atizadores enrojecidos al fuego” (285); “[t]ambién empleaba el atizador, con el que quemaba, al azar” (287). Not only are these images repeated throughout the text, but each episode and enactment of torture—even when achieved through different mechanisms—seems to be a part of a single repeated scene—a single surface reproduced—exceeding its frame as each vignette seeps into the next almost *ad infinitum*, as though going from *trompe l’oeil* into *mise en abîme*.

“La virgen de hierro” and “La jaula mortal” are two vignettes which exacerbate this sense of repetition and re-enactment: in both, the victims are killed by apparatuses (the cage and the Iron Maiden), almost effortlessly, and both torture devices imprison within them the young woman who will be “sacrificed” under the gaze of the Countess. These are spectacles of torture to which we, the readers, are spectators. Thus, *mise en abîme* is not only achieved through language—“[e]sta dama metálica [la virgen de hierro] era del tamaño y del color de la criatura humana” (283), “[t]apizada [la jaula mortal] con cuchillos y adornada con filosas puntas de acero, su tamaño admite un cuerpo humano” (284)—but through the images the scenes evoke in the reader of a confined young woman bleeding to death for the Countess’ perverse pleasure. “La

jaula mortal” follows a similar pattern to that of “La virgen de hierro.” They are similar structures that enclose a woman inside them; they both kill the woman by piercing her body—the Iron Maiden with daggers, the cage with knives and sharpened steel spikes.

To contrast these focalized scenes of torture—these *tableaux vivants*—Penrose’s text contains more than just these moments; in fact, the novel is not really focused on them. What is rendered in *La condesa sangrienta* into a vignette of three short paragraphs, “La jaula mortal,” comes out of *La comtesse sanglante*’s Chapter VII. This chapter is divided into eight sections, which narrate how the world’s evil came into being, and the ways in which the Countess’ ancestor, Rodolphe II, would protect himself from evil. Penrose goes into details about books of magic and the importance of precious stones. She then turns to the Countess’ relationship to her family, briefly discusses her daughter’s marriages, and notes that the Countess often had to attend various family events such as weddings. On her way to family events, in the carriage, the Countess would have Dorkó torture female servants with needles. On her way to Pressburg, she would spend time in one of the family’s palaces; it is there, in Blutgasse, that in the middle of the night, Erzébet had a blacksmith forge a special cage:

Un maréchal-ferrant, bien payé et terrorisé par des menaces, avait forgé dans le secret de la nuit une incroyable pièce de ferronnerie d’un maniement particulièrement difficile. C’était une cage cylindrique de lames de fer brillantes maintenues par des cercles. On l’eût dite destinée à quelque énorme hibou. Mais l’intérieur en était garni de pointes acérées. Le moment venu, et toujours de nuit, on hissait l’engin au plafond à l’aide d’une poulie. C’était de là que venaient les hurlements qui réveillaient les moines d’en face et suscitaient leur colère contre cette maudite demeure protestante. (124)<sup>36</sup>

When compared to Penrose’s chapter, Pizarnik’s vignette appears devoid of a backdrop, of “depth”; the description is boiled down to the essentials, and there is no mention of this taking place in any space other than what we assume to be the castle of Csejthe. “La jaula mortal” begins with the following two sentences: “Tapizada con cuchillos y adornada con filosas puntas de acero, su tamaño admite un cuerpo humano; se la iza mediante una polea. La ceremonia de la jaula se despliega así” (284). The lack of an active verb in the first part of the first sentence marks a kind of atemporality in Pizarnik’s version, whereas the events in Penrose’s text take place in a moment in the past through the use of the imperfect. The last part of this opening paragraph in Pizarnik then situates the reader in the present moment of the act: *se la iza, se despliega*. The time of torture becomes the time of the reading; the reader is a spectator to the unfolding of the “ceremony.” The lack of any other description of scenery or background further focalizes the scene of torture that is about to take place, for there is nothing or nowhere else the reader can focus the gaze. At stake in these brief scenes devoid of backdrop is a queer aesthetic that creates a surface rendered into a spectacle that implicates the reader in the act of cruelty. The lack of “depth”—background, description—forces the reader to become a spectator, for there is nowhere else to look. Pizarnik is not interested in the background—a historical “depth”—but only in the visual surface, the “now” that these scenes become.

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<sup>36</sup> Gallego and Reverte’s translation of Penrose’s text published by Siruela as *La condesa sangrienta*, which I will be using in the Spanish translations of the French throughout this chapter, reads as follows: “Un herero, bien pagado y atemorizado con amenazas, había forjado en el secreto de la noche una increíble pieza de ferrería de manejo particularmente difícil. Era una jaula cilíndrica de láminas de hierro brillantes sujetas por aros. Hubiérase dicho destinada a algún búho enorme. Pero el interior estaba provisto de pinchos acerados. Llegada la ocasión, y siempre de noche, izaban el artefacto hasta el techo con ayuda de una polea. Y entonces era cuando empezaban los aullidos que despertaban a los frailes de enfrente y provocaban su ira contra aquella maldita mansión protestante” (142).



The paragraph that follows in *La comtesse* is closely replicated in *La condesa*, though with some key changes:

Quelques instants auparavant, Dorkó avait fait dévaler l'escalier de la cave, la tirant par ses lourds cheveux défaits, à une jeune servante entièrement nue. Elle avait poussé et enfermé la paysanne dans la cage que l'on avait immédiatement hissée jusqu'à la voûte basse. C'est alors qu'apparaissait la Comtesse. Déjà comme en transe, légèrement vêtue de lin blanc, elle venait lentement s'asseoir sur un escabeau placé. (125)<sup>37</sup>

La sirvienta Dorkó arrastra por los cabellos a una joven desnuda; la encierra en la jaula; alza la jaula. Aparece la «dama de estas ruinas», la sonámbula vestida de blanco. Lenta y silenciosa se sienta en un escabel situado debajo de la jaula. (284)

The contrast is particularly sharp in the first sentence: Pizarnik does away with Penrose's "superfluous" details through the elision of adjectives and adverbs such as heavy, unruly, and completely; she also does away with the social context or the class details; we have only the "essentials": the nude woman dragged by the hair is encaged, and the cage is lifted. The scene is also not situated in time, for we are in an almost atemporal present, unlike in Penrose's passage, where the events are organized along a more linear, teleological sequence. The paragraph that describes the woman being driven to her death inside the cage highlights this dissonance between the two texts:

Dorkó, saisissant un fer aigu ou un tisonnier rougi au feu, commençait à piquer la prisonnière, semblable à un grand oiseau blanc et beige, qui, dans ses mouvements de recul, venait se heurter violemment contre les pointes de la cage. A chaque coup s'épaississaient les ruisseaux de sang qui tombaient sur l'autre femme, blanche, assise impassible, regardant dans le vide, à peine consciente. (125)<sup>38</sup>

Rojo atizador en mano, Dorkó azuza a la prisionera quien, al retroceder –y he aquí la gracia de la jaula–, se clava por sí misma los filosos aceros mientras su sangre mana sobre la mujer pálida que la recibe impassible con los ojos puestos en ningún lado. (184-85)

We have here again the shift in temporality through the use of the present tense, rather than the imperfect. Furthermore, the economy of language in Pizarnik is stark in contrast to the emphasis on details and the use of simile in Penrose. We see also the difference in the way the first sentence begins in each instance: in Penrose, the object with which Dorkó jabs at the woman is not always the same, which points to the instance narrated not being the only time the cage is used for the purposes of torturing young women. In Penrose, then, this repetition is one of difference. In Pizarnik's text, on the other hand, the emphasis is on the object with which the woman is walked to her death. Since the paragraph opens with the image of the *atizador*, the focus is not on Dorkó, but on the instrument of torture she holds in her hand. The focus on the

<sup>37</sup> "Momentos antes, Dorkó había hecho bajar por la escalera del sótano, tirando de ella por la pesada cabellera alborotada, a una joven sirvienta completamente desnuda. Había empujado y encerrado a la campesina dentro de la jaula que, acto seguido, habían izado hasta la bóveda baja. Entonces era cuando aparecía la Condesa. Como en transe ya, con un liviano vestido de lino blanco, iba lentamente a sentarse en un escabel colocado bajo la jaula" (142).

<sup>38</sup> "Tomando un hierro agudo o un atizador al rojo vivo, Dorkó empezaba a pinchar a la prisionera, semejante a una gran ave blanca y beige, quien, en sus movimientos de retroceso, iba a golpearse violentamente contra los pinchos de la jaula. A cada golpe aumentaban los ríos de sangre que caían sobre la otra mujer, blanca, sentada impassible, mirando al vacío, apenas consciente" (142).

object of torture allows for the sense of repetition to seem as though it were the same act repeated over and over, a *mise en abîme* performed on the single stage of torture—giving the reader a sense of “timelessness”. It is a constant present that cannot be excavated as can be the past; rather, the reader experiences this scene in the moment, and rather than prompting reflection, the scene is felt, experienced on the surface of the body. In sum, Penrose’s writing prompts reflection on the past on the part of the reader; Pizarnik’s, in contrast, transforms the reader into an active participant in the present.

The narrative voice’s interjection in this section of Pizarnik’s scene seems to mock the very performance of torture taking place. The scene and the object of torture—the cage—are anything but elegant or graceful, as the narrative voice suggests. The function it serves here is to emphasize, once more, the role and centrality of the object of torture, rather than on the woman being driven to her death, as is the case in Penrose’s version. This is also particularly evident through what Pizarnik omits in her version: the prisoner who resembles a large white and beige bird. Again, the focus shifts from the woman who, like a bird, is caged, to the cage—the surface—itsself that encloses a woman for the Countess’ pleasure.

In Penrose, there is also great attention paid to the Countess and her beauty, as Pizarnik notes in her introductory remarks to *La condesa sangrienta*: “La perversión sexual y la demencia de la condesa Báthory son tan evidentes que Valentine Penrose se desentiende de ellas para concentrarse exclusivamente en la belleza convulsiva del personaje” (282). Pizarnik, once again, writes this deceptively; it is not Valentine Penrose but Pizarnik herself who focuses on the “convulsive beauty” of the Countess. The notion of “convulsive beauty” comes from André Breton’s *Nadja* (1928); the concept “describes a surrealist method for presenting the impact that restrictive social mores made on the human psyche . . . As a subject matter for art, it demonstrates the surrealist commitment to compromise traditional aesthetics by shocking audiences with a range of unspeakable human expressions: hysteria, obscenity, pornography, and violence” (Hutchison 212). Pizarnik is the one who writes a prose devoid of background to focus solely on the “unspeakable human expressions” of obscenity and violence, whereas these are more muted in Penrose’s text, lost among the extensive descriptions and details—all of which Pizarnik discards to remain focused on “la imagen de una belleza inaceptable” (296).

In fact, the chapter we have been analyzing ends with a section that focuses on the family gatherings the Countess must attend. Penrose spends a great portion of the section on the description of the carriages in which the Countess would travel in order to attend these events, the detailed entry into the town where the events would take place, and, once there, the elaborate dresses worn by the Countess, and she also highlights the songs that were composed and sung during these events that detailed the Countess’ beauty. All these details are absent in Pizarnik’s text; hers is devoid of any descriptions that are not instrumental to the staging of torture.

What can we say then of this focus on the surface of Penrose’s text, of its rewriting? In “Surface Reading: An Introduction”, Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus explain “surface reading” as follows: “we take surface to mean what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts; what is neither hidden nor hiding; what, in the geometrical sense, has length and breadth but no thickness, and therefore covers no depth. A surface is what insists on being looked *at* rather than what we must train ourselves to see *through*” (9; italics in original). Pizarnik’s rewriting of Penrose seems to function in the same way: she’s not interested in the “depth” of the story or the character. What is of interest are the *visible* acts of cruelty. In this way, Pizarnik structures her text as an aesthetics of the surface, as stagings that are not interested in background, but only in what is visible, what can be seen, what allows the reader to become a spectator of the scenes of

torture staged time and again. In this sense, Pizarnik's aesthetic is not only akin to that of the Baroque fold that suggests it is all surface and no depth, but also to Perlongher's queer aesthetic, of writing as surface, as we saw in the previous chapter. Like Perlongher, whose poetry is structured through an excess of Baroque artifice to the point of delirium, Pizarnik focuses on the visible acts of cruelty, the visual surface, rather than on the interiority of her main character. And similarly to Perlongher, this emphasis on the surface suggests a different kind of depth; Pizarnik's rewriting and the implication of the reader/spectator suggests an ironic complicity, generating disturbing moral confusion.

To reiterate, this is a story that retells a story told by another. These are scenes of cruelty repeated to the point of delirium. Frames within frames. The Countess watches the scenes of torture that she herself stages; we see her seeing, through a gaze already twice removed (first through Penrose, then through Pizarnik). If the Baroque was, as Martin Jay has noted, "a deeply visual ... culture" (43), an "ocular regime" (45), and, as Buci-Glucksmann outlines, the "[s]peculum, mirror, [an] omnivoyant world—all [are] ... topoi of the baroque" (25),<sup>39</sup> then *La condesa sangrienta* enters this seventeenth-century history and reinhabits these spaces with the same visual and aesthetic focus. And we, as readers-voyeurs, cannot help but stare with shock, engrossed in these erotic scenes of female visual lust, these tableaux that seep into one another and seem to replicate each other, giving us a sense of the focalized moments of torture as a continuous *mise en abîme*. This is a highly aestheticized visual frame where the tableaux become one repeated spectacle, a singular performance that implicates the spectator/reader in an excess of horror.

## Excess

The excess of horror in Pizarnik's text is directly related to her deployment of language. While in the Baroque, linguistic excess is typically thought of in terms of overabundance, complexity, exuberance, and artifice, here I will explore a side of the Baroque that renders excess as extreme simplicity.

In his article "Barocos, neobarocos y neobarrosos: extremosidad y extremo occidente," Gustavo Guerrero opens with the concept of *extremosidad* or extremeness, which Maravall saw as intrinsic to the Baroque, and which he opposed to the notion of exuberance. According to Maravall, Guerrero explains, baroque art was not all exuberant: it was either abundant or simple in the extreme (20). Guerrero also makes a point of emphasizing that such extremeness is linked to "la afición de los escritores y artistas de la época [del Siglo de Oro] a provocar en sus públicos fuertes sentimientos de asombro, admiración o espanto." This is important to note because, following this logic, excess does not necessarily mean overabundance: it could just as well point to emptiness. David Castillo makes a similar point in "Horror (Vacui): The Baroque Condition"; he explains that "[w]hether the writer or artist cultivates exuberance or holds to a severe simplicity of form, the key is to pursue either route to the extreme. Thus, an empty wall would be

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<sup>39</sup> Angela Ndalians also writes that the Baroque ways of seeing were central to the baroque project against classicism: "The baroque example of Pietro da Cortona's ceiling painting of *The Glorification of Urban VIII* (Rome, 1633-9) in the Palazzo Barberini is, in many respects, a paragon of seventeenth century baroque attitudes to spectacle and illusionism. The single, immobile viewpoint of the classical spectator is transformed into a dynamic process that changes as a result of its three-dimensional capacity to actively engage the spectator in spatial terms. The Renaissance ideal of a perspectively guided representation (evident in Raphael's *School of Athens*) is replaced by a baroque concern with complex, dynamic motion and multiple perspectives" ("Baroque Perceptual Regimes").

as emblematically baroque as an excessively decorated one, as long as it is perceived to be empty in the extreme, and therefore, to convey the shock of extreme emptiness” (87). Both scholars emphasize the relationship between these strategies—exuberance and emptiness—as aesthetics of shock. Both of these points—that extreme emptiness is also a quality of the Baroque and that its cultivation (as well as that of exuberance) was meant to provoke the viewer, to shock—are key to our reading of *La condesa sangrienta*.

In Alejandra Pizarnik we find not an excess in the form of exuberance in language, but a hyperbolic brevity and conciseness of language. Excess in *La condesa sangrienta* is of body, cruelty, and pain. The language in *La condesa* is not, like in typical Baroque or Neobaroque fashion, exuberant; rather, it is minimalist. But it is exactly this minimalism that marks the excess of cruelty, highlighting it, making it all the more powerful.

To this void we can juxtapose an exuberance that points to what is covered up; both point to that which is beyond representation. In the words of Martin Jay, “[s]eeking to represent the unrepresentable, and of necessity failing in this quest, baroque vision sublimely expresses the melancholy so characteristic of the period” (48). I will defer the issue of melancholy to the next section; what is relevant at this moment is that void and overloading epitomize the inability to represent the unrepresentable. In Pizarnik, excessive cruelty is juxtaposed with an economy of language.

Pointing to a similar perspective, Omar Calabrese writes the following in *Neo-Baroque*: When we speak of an ‘extreme case,’ a ‘limit to tolerance,’ the ‘height of patience,’ or an ‘excess of evil’ we reveal tension, limitation, or the overcoming of the borders of a system of social or cultural norms. The acts that provoke these states are acts that break through the system’s borders, or upset them in some way. In this sense, we can also see how a ‘liminal’ or ‘excessive’ act differs from one of stretching the limit. Stretching against the limit tests the elasticity of the border, but without destroying it. Excess escapes by breaking through. It crosses the threshold by making an opening, a breach. (49)

In other words, excess reveals a limit; but what is that limit within Pizarnik’s text? What is the border whose elasticity is being tested in *La condesa sangrienta*? In part, the limit is the point at which horror becomes unacceptable. In fact, the Countess as a figure is constantly stretching the border of the permissible within the realm of history. Within the world of the text, Pizarnik is constantly testing the reader, wondering at what point the reader might not be able to continue to be a spectator in this world of excessive cruelty and horror. In this sense, the juxtaposition of the economy of language with the extremeness of horror is what allows the reader to exist within this world of cruelty; in fact, the more detailed descriptions are the points when the reading becomes almost unbearable. In fact, it is not the “baroque” forms of torture but the “classical” ones that, in a way, say too much, as I will explain below. In contrast, the Countess’ *barroquismo* is constantly pushing at the limit of the possible.

It is worth looking at the contrast or dichotomy Pizarnik sets up between the “classical” and the “baroque” in the vignette entitled “Torturas clásicas”: “Salvo algunas interferencias barrocas –tales como ‘la Virgen de hierro’, la muerte por agua o la jaula– la condesa adhería a un estilo de torturar monótonamente clásico” (285). In this vignette, Pizarnik proceeds to detail various ways in which the Countess would torture young women. These are much more descriptive than the vignettes in which a single performance takes place, such as the murdering of women with the use of the Iron Maiden or the cage. In fact, the monotony of the more “classical” forms of torture becomes almost unbearable for the reader. Rather than accepting the

role of spectator/participant, the reader feels the need to look away, to not focus on the horrible details of torture. In this sense, whereas the more “baroque” scenes push the limits of human cruelty, the “classical” ones seem to reveal more than one can possibly passively witness. The excessive cruelty forces the reader to look elsewhere in the text. The moments in which the narrative voice interjects are what guide us to the possibility of focusing our attention elsewhere, toward temporality and its relationship to death and melancholia.

### Death and Melancholy

In *Madness of Vision*, Christine Buci-Glucksmann writes the following regarding the presence and structure of time in the Baroque: “the baroque of artifice, metamorphosis, and anamorphosis continues its lineage into the present day. Because from the *Vanities* to the paintings of Caravaggio or the architectural structures of Bernini and Borromini, a culture of time—of ephemeral time, which is often melancholic—creates being, affects and effects” (xv). In this section, I will look at the baroque interplay between ephemerality and melancholy in *La condesa sangrienta*.

The Baroque is marked by the realization of the ephemerality of life, thus pointing to the inevitability of death—something the Surrealists also inherited. This, as Buci-Glucksmann explains, marks the culture of the Baroque in significant ways, notably in that ephemeral time leads to a culture of melancholy. In fact, as I will show, the presence of death and the melancholy that is produced by it structure the interjections by the narrative voice in *La condesa sangrienta*. This is key because the instances in which the narrative voice interrupts the scenes of torture are sparse in the text. Yet there are two particular moments where these interjections are lengthy, and they both relate to these baroque topics: death and melancholy.

While mourning implies the full acceptance that an object is lost in the outside world, melancholia is the refusal or denial of that loss and thus reaches for the psychic incorporation of that object: “[m]elancholy is both the refusal of grief and the incorporation of loss, a miming of the death it cannot mourn” (Butler, *Powers* 142). This refusal is a turn to interiority, an incorporation; in other words, by not letting go of the object it turns into a ceaseless repetition. If something is constantly repeating itself without end, it becomes the impossibility of moving forward, as if time (understood as a forward-moving progression) had been suspended. The time “outside,” what we might also call “normative time,” one ruled by the public sphere, no longer affects the melancholic, for “[i]f the object can no longer exist in the external world, it will then exist internally, and the internalization will be a way to disavow the loss, to keep it at bay, to stay or postpone the recognition and suffering of loss” (134).

The first moment in which we encounter melancholia in *La condesa* occurs in the vignette “Torturas clásicas.” After a description of the most visually horrific and shocking modes of torture implemented by the Countess, the narrative voice tells of a less painful form of torture, which involved simply having the young women undress and continue their tasks in that manner: “Si la condesa estaba en uno de sus excepcionales días de bondad, Dorkó se limitaba a desnudar a las culpables que continuaban trabajando desnudas, bajo la mirada de la condesa” (286). This scene leads the narrator to wonder about the figure of Death: “Esta escena me llevó a pensar en la Muerte –la de las viejas alegorías; la protagonista de la Danza de la Muerte–. Desnudar es propio de la Muerte. También lo es la incesante contemplación de las criaturas por ella desposeídas.”

Death is here personified through a reference to the *Danse Macabre* or the Dance of Death, *la Danza de la Muerte*. In the medieval tradition, the *Danse Macabre* meant that “Death comes to us all, irrespective of age or rank” (Oosterwijk 10). The Dance of Death was represented in a variety of artistic forms, including woodcuts and poems. There is a violent element to the *Danse Macabre*, “[d]espite the ostensible musical/dancing theme, references to violence abound in *Danse Macabre* texts” (27). These images and texts serve as a reminder to the reader/viewer that death is inevitable and that life is ephemeral: “the *Danse* ... sent out a strong message about mortality that had the power to shock each new generation” (42). From this historical perspective, we can outline the importance of the personification of Death, the violence with which it strikes, and the reminder of its inevitability.

Pizarnik picks up on these ideas to contemplate not only the violence inherent in the very thought of death, but also to consider the role of the Countess in this scene, as Death personified: “Pero, ¿quién es la Muerte? Es la Dama que asola y agosta cómo y dónde quiere. Sí, y además es una definición posible de la condesa Báthory. Nunca nadie no quiso de tal modo envejecer, esto es: morir. Por eso, tal vez, representaba y encarnaba a la Muerte. Porque, ¿cómo ha de morir la Muerte?” (287). Death undresses those she will take, similarly to how the Countess has her servants undressed. While this is one of the least violent forms that the Countess’ power takes, it nevertheless serves as a reminder to these young women that violence, cruelty, and death are always near. The Countess is *la Dama* who devastates whenever and wherever she pleases, and this is always clear to those under her control, to the women who know that a painful death awaits them. The Countess seeks to be Death herself as she refuses to die by killing others. Thus the inevitable melancholy: although the Countess seeks to be Death itself, she nevertheless realizes her own mortality, the ephemerality of her own life, which produces the kind of melancholy characteristic of the baroque period.

Before we move on to explore the role of melancholy in *La condesa*, it is important to address the connection Pizarnik makes in this vignette between death and sexuality, which will also later be linked to melancholy. Pizarnik makes a connection between Death and sexuality that is not present in the art of the *Danse Macabre*—there is only a link to the erotic, not the sexual. In this same section, Pizarnik also notes the following: “Pero hay más: el desfallecimiento sexual nos obliga a gestos y expresiones del morir (jadeos y estertores como de agonía; lamentos y quejidos arrancados por el paroxismo. Si el acto sexual implica una suerte de muerte, Erzébet Báthory necesitaba de la muerte visible, elemental, grosera, para poder, a su vez, morir de esa muerte figurada que viene a ser el orgasmo” (287). Severo Sarduy has also written about this same notion of the relationship between death and orgasm. In *Escrito sobre un cuerpo*, Sarduy, discussing Bataille, explores this notion as a relationship between opposites in the subsection entitled “La pequeña muerte.” I want to think about Sarduy’s perspective for a moment as it relates to the issue of violence and sexuality: “Coincidencia de la ‘voluptuosidad, del delirio y del horror sin límites’; similitud ‘del horror y de una voluptuosidad que me excede, del dolor final y de una alegría insoportable’; identidad de la *pequeña muerte* (esa metáfora con que la lengua popular francesa sugiere el acto de la eyaculación) y la muerte definitiva” (15). In a footnote to this passage, Sarduy, following Lacan and Barthes, explains,

No conozco equivalencias de esta expresión en otras lenguas, y, al menos en español, no me parecen probables. En toda la riqueza metafórica que posee el español para designar el acto sexual y sus momentos, nada evoca la idea de una “muertecita”. Por supuesto, nuestra mitología erótica está llena de expresiones como ‘morir de placer’, etc. Pero nada, me parece, relaciona eyaculación y muerte.

While Sarduy focuses here on the very moment of ejaculation—on the male experience of orgasm—it is nevertheless notable that he highlights the relationship between orgasm and death. Yet Pizarnik takes it further; she does not stop at the metaphorical death, *una suerte de muerte*, but goes into the details of the physical experience of the violence and deathlike aspects of sex, of orgasm.

It is clear that both Sarduy and Pizarnik are starting from the French expression, the metaphor for the orgasm: *la petite mort*. Pizarnik opens from this point but takes it into an exploration of the relationship between torture, death, and pleasure. In Pizarnik's reading of the relationship between orgasm and death, she notes that the Countess needed literal death in order to experience the metaphorical death that is orgasm. That is, torturing young women to the point of killing them is what gives the Countess erotic pleasure, according to Pizarnik. There are thus two contradictory forces at work here: death as erotic pleasure and the realization of the ephemerality of life and youth that results in the melancholy characteristic of the Baroque.

It is no surprise, then, that in the section on melancholy, Pizarnik turns back to these questions. I am referring to the vignette titled “El espejo de la melancolía.” In this vignette, Pizarnik attempts to have a deeper understanding of the Countess, even though she performs a contradictory movement: this section at once seems to explain the Countess as a historical figure while also rejecting the possibility thereof: “Si bien no se trata de *explicar* a esta siniestra figura [Erzébet Báthory], es preciso detenerse en el hecho de que padecía el mal del siglo XVI: la melancolía” (290; italics in original). This sentence comes after a paragraph-long discussion of what the Countess' tendency to spend long hours in front of her mirror meant in terms of her sexuality: Was she aware of her homosexuality? Was it something she assumed as her right as a noble woman? In any case, whether she was conscious of it or not, her actions are particularly telling for Pizarnik:

nunca pudieron aclararse los rumores acerca de la homosexualidad de la condesa, ignorándose si se trataba de una tendencia inconsciente o si, por lo contrario, la aceptó con naturalidad como un derecho más que le correspondía. En lo esencial, vivió sumida en un ámbito exclusivamente femenino. No hubo sino mujeres en sus noches de crímenes. Luego, algunos detalles son obviamente reveladores: por ejemplo, en la sala de torturas, en los momentos de máxima tensión, solía introducir ella misma un cirio ardiente en el sexo de la víctima. También hay testimonios que dicen de una lujuria menos solitaria. Una sirvienta aseguró en el proceso que una aristocrática y misteriosa dama vestida de mancebo visitaba a la condesa. En una ocasión las descubrió juntas, torturando a una muchacha. Pero se ignora si compartían otros placeres que los sádicos.

The space is a female one; this space of torture is entirely populated by women. And, as is suggested above, crime is directly linked to the pleasure experienced during sex, the pleasure of orgasm. Pizarnik doesn't merely suggest the Countess' homosexuality, she spells it out. Whether or not the Countess engaged in a homosexual relationship with the aristocratic woman mentioned in this passage, the fact that Pizarnik separates sadistic pleasures from homosexuality is only a parodic move, since these sadistic pleasures are, by definition (given the “telling details” noted before), homosexual.

It is in the moment when the Countess faces the mirror that these questions arise for Pizarnik. What is it, then, about the mirror that allows or encourages such questioning? On the one hand, the mirror functions as yet another form of repetition, reiterating that the events in the castle seem to repeat themselves *ad infinitum*. Also, it functions as a lesbian mirror, as Sylvia Molloy has argued: “[t]he mirror prompt[s] this reflection of/on lesbianism ... also ... held up by

Pizarnik”; in the reflection of this mirror the Countess is “a figure of defiance. Her very excess is a sign of resistance. It is as a figure of disruption that she makes lesbian sense” (254-55). The lesbian mirror thus functions as a form of resistance to normativity: in its reflection, its excess, the Countess transgresses the norm.

*La condesa* is the only text in all of Pizarnik’s work where female homosexuality is explicitly discussed. What is also important to note here is that Pizarnik is not the only one who considers and addresses the Countess’ homosexuality: Penrose also delves into this question in *La comtesse sanglante*. And though Penrose explores the “root” of the Countess’ homosexuality in the same chapter as she discusses melancholy, she does not explicitly connect the two; they merely become two of the various aspects of her madness. Of homosexuality, Penrose writes in Chapter I: “Et, dévoilant sa nature profonde, ce qu’elle devait à son hérédité et à ses astres, la Comtesse maléfique avait un autre secret, secret toujours chuchoté et que le temps n’a pu éclaircir ; chose qu’elle s’avouait ou chose ignorée d’elle ; tendance équivoque dont elle ne se souciait pas, ou encore, droit qu’elle s’accordait avec tous les autres. Elle passait pour avoir été, aussi, lesbienne” (22);<sup>40</sup> a few pages later she adds:

Il y eut une femme mystérieuse, à laquelle personne ne put donner un nom, et qui venait voir Erzsébet, déguisée en garçon. Une servante avait dit à deux hommes, — ils en témoignèrent au procès — que, sans le vouloir, elle avait surpris la Comtesse seule avec cette inconnue, torturant une jeune fille dont les bras étaient attachés très serré et ... couverts de sang .... D’ailleurs, cette femme travestie, mais non masquée, semblait appartenir à la haute société. (29)<sup>41</sup>

The similarities between the two versions are clear. In fact, Penrose also wonders whether the two women enjoyed other kinds of pleasures together: “Alors, quelles étaient exactement les relations entre elle et Erzsébet ? Leurs sadiques plaisirs étaient-ils les seuls ?” (30).<sup>42</sup>

The main difference between the two versions is that Pizarnik has no use for digressions. Nevertheless, Pizarnik takes the most salient moments in Penrose’s narrative to explore the question of homosexuality. Does Penrose pathologize the Countess more than does Pizarnik? Perhaps so. Or is Penrose’s tone parodic? Whatever the answer to these questions, what is relevant to us here is Pizarnik’s take.

In Pizarnik’s text, this is the only moment where she directly discusses the question of homosexuality. Though she is constantly pointing to it, as becomes clear above, where the narrative voice wonders about the relationship between death and pleasure, given that the pleasure felt by the Countess was produced by torturing *women*. After “El espejo de la melancolía,” the question of homosexuality is not directly addressed again; only that of perversion.

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<sup>40</sup> “Y, desvelando lo más hondo de su naturaleza, lo que debía a su herencia y a sus astros, la Condesa maléfica poseía otro secreto, secreto siempre susurrado que no ha podido esclarecer el tiempo, algo que se confesaba a sí misma o que ignoraba; tendencia equívoca de la que no se preocupaba o, quizá, derecho que se concedía junto con todos los demás. Pasaba por haber sido, también, lesbiana” (27).

<sup>41</sup> “Existió una mujer misteriosa, a la que nadie pudo dar un nombre, que venía a ver a Erzsébet disfrazada de muchacho. Una sirvienta había dicho a dos hombres —lo testimoniaron durante el proceso— que, sin querer, había sorprendido a la Condesa, sola con aquella desconocida, torturando a una muchacha cuyos brazos estaban atados muy fuerte y ... cubiertos de sangre .... Por otra parte, aquella mujer disfrazada, pero con la cara descubierta, parecía pertenecer a la alta sociedad” (35).

<sup>42</sup> “¿Cuáles eran entonces con exactitud las relaciones entre ella y Erzsébet? ¿Sus sádicos placeres eran los únicos?” (36).



We began this inquiry by discussing the relationship between death and sex; here, the connection is between violence and homosexuality, and their relation to melancholy. What relationship does Pizarnik posit between these categories? What does the realization of the ephemerality of life say about torture and sadistic pleasure? If melancholy is a product of the realization or is directly linked to the ephemerality of time, how does it relate to the way temporality is portrayed in the text? What the Countess wants is to escape death, to live forever, yet this is in direct contradiction to the understanding of time during the baroque period, where the image of ruin functions as a reminder of “the inevitable passage of time, of our inability to escape from it” (Turner 9). At the same time, there is a conflation of the Countess with death and its embodiment; in order to escape death, the Countess becomes death itself. Yet it becomes evident that her attempts to never age, to not die, result in an impossibility that leads to melancholy.

While Penrose does not see in the Countess’ crimes a moment of escape from the melancholy that inhabited her, Pizarnik finds in the moments of sexual cruelty the possibility to experience life and its temporality differently. The following two passages better illuminate this point:

Cette longue brume [la mélancolie], qu’une suite d’ancêtres germaniques avait laissé traîner en elle, l’empêcha de répondre autrement qu’en une sorte de transe à l’appel de la vie et de la mort, de la douleur et du sang qu’elle entendait en elle. Sa cruauté était l’aboutissement d’une race fondée par des guerrières : les générations de ces temps de Mars. (19)<sup>43</sup>

Un color invariable rige al melancólico: su interior es un espacio de color de luto; nada pasa allí, nadie pasa. Es una escena sin decorados donde el yo inerte es asistido por el yo que sufre por esa inercia .... Pero hay remedios fugitivos: los placeres sexuales, por ejemplo, por un breve tiempo pueden borrar la silenciosa galería de ecos y de espejos que es el alma melancólica .... [P]or un instante –sea por una música salvaje, o alguna droga, o el acto sexual en su máxima violencia–, el rito lentísimo del melancólico no sólo llega a acordarse con el del mundo externo, sino que lo sobrepasa con una desmesura indeciblemente dichosa; y el yo vibra animado por energías delirantes.

Al melancólico el tiempo se le manifiesta como suspensión del transcurrir ... que precede y continúa a la violencia fatalmente efímera .... Y pienso en Erzébet Báthory y en sus noches cuyo ritmo medían los gritos de las adolescentes. El libro que comento en estas notas lleva un retrato de la condesa: la sombría y hermosa dama se parece a la alegoría de la melancolía que muestran los viejos grabados. Quiero recordar, además, que en su época una melancólica significaba una poseída por el demonio. (290-91)

The Countess’ melancholy, in Penrose’s pages, puts her in a trance that she seems never to be able to escape; in Pizarnik’s reading, the melancholic, and therefore the Countess, can experience brief moments of escape from that trance-like state where time seems not to flow and where, she can temporarily experience a delirious kind of energy—“el yo vibra animado por energías delirantes” (291). It is the sexual act in its most extreme violence and cruelty that can allow for

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<sup>43</sup> “Aquella larga niebla [la melancolía], que una sucesión de antepasados germánicos había dejado rezagada en ella, le impidió responder como no fuera en una especie de trance, a la llamada de la vida y de la muerte, del dolor y de la sangre que oía dentro de sí. Su crueldad era el desenlace de una raza fundada por guerreros, continuamente reiterada por esposas de otros linajes guerreros: las generaciones de aquellos tiempos de Marte” (24).

this momentary escape from melancholy. This *acto sexual en su máxima violencia* is, for the Countess, the moments during which she tortures the young women to death.

To return to what we laid out at the beginning of this section, the Countess' main obsession is to not age—"[I]a mayor obsesión de Erzébet había sido siempre alejar a cualquier precio la vejez"—to not die (291). But it is this very awareness of death, characteristic of the Baroque, that becomes the source of her melancholy. Thus, in order to escape death, to forget about the imminence of death, the Countess comes to embody Death by torturing and murdering young women, which momentarily allows her to attain the closest thing she has to immortality, a lasting sense of timelessness through the repetition of torture, through the *mise en abîme* of extreme violence.

## Conclusions

What I have attempted to show in this chapter are the various Baroque devices that structure *La condesa sangrienta*'s aesthetic. While the source of *La condesa sangrienta* may be anchored most immediately in Surrealism, the Baroque aesthetics and modes of comprehending and depicting the world that influenced Surrealism are central to understanding the construction of Pizarnik's text. Some of the devices appropriated or learned from the Baroque we have discussed are the importance and centrality of vision, which also results in a *mise en abîme* of repeated scenes of torture, the role of excess that in Pizarnik's is rendered into extreme simplicity in the conciseness of her prose, and, finally, the baroque awareness of the ephemerality of time that results in the pervasiveness of melancholy. All of these aspects of the Baroque and some of its various structuring devices are rewritten by Pizarnik through the seventeenth-century story of Erzébet Báthory, appropriated from Valentine Penrose, and focused on the heightened scenes of homoerotic—homosexual—pleasure through extreme violence, torture, and murder of beautiful young women.

Pizarnik's rewriting is itself a further *mise en abîme*. The act and the aesthetic of rewriting are for Pizarnik a way to reach outside of history, outside of the confines of time, life, and death, outside of melancholy. Pizarnik takes Penrose's historicity and transforms it into a suspension of time, into *tableaux vivants* endlessly repeated which she as (re)writer and we as readers/participants get to reenact.

To turn back to the opening question of this chapter, in what ways can we think of *La condesa sangrienta* as a neobaroque text, one that functions as a precursor to Perlongher's *neobarroso*? As this chapter has shown, Pizarnik's *La condesa sangrienta* is structured upon what we have called a queer aesthetic of the surface, which derives from the baroque fold that is all surface and no depth. Pizarnik performs a surface reading of Penrose's text, gleaned from it focalized instances of torture, which she further rewrites as devoid of background. In baroque fashion, *La condesa* is a parodic text, a mock book review that lacks a critical analysis of the book it "reviews." *La condesa* also takes many symbols and motifs from the Baroque that allow us to construct a bridge between Pizarnik and a neobaroque aesthetic, such as the emphasis on vision, the way *mise en abîme* structures the text, the image of the mirror, the workings of excess, and the exploration of death and melancholy. Pizarnik's rewriting of Penrose, similarly to the poems by Perlongher that appear in the previous chapter, is made up of surfaces, focuses on an excess of violence and pleasure, and is constantly transgressing the limits of normative sexuality. In this sense, Pizarnik's *La condesa sangrienta* is transgressively queer text built through a Baroque aesthetic of the surface that must be read as a precursor to the *neobarroso*,

thus not relegating this aspect of Pizarnik to obscurity but, instead, seeing this and her later prose texts as a central text in Neobarroque and *neobarroso* literary history.

### Chapter 3: Luis Felipe Fabre's *La sodomía en la Nueva España*

In 2002, the poets Ernesto Lumbreras and Hernán Bravo Varela published *El manantial latente. Muestra de poesía mexicana desde el ahora: 1986-2002*. The anthology received a generalized critique that the image of contemporary Mexican poetry captured was lacking a certain “street aesthetic”; it was too stiff and faithful to its fathers. Its aesthetic did not embrace ludic colloquial language; it was, rather, “un lenguaje de ‘altos vuelos’” (Fabre, *Edad* 8). In the first years of the twenty-first century, this was “the average Mexican poem,” as Luis Felipe Fabre has called it: cosmopolitan, atemporal, ahistorical, and erudite, the sort of poetry interested in the eternal. In other words, the contemporary Mexican poem was the proper and faithful inheritance of Octavio Paz and José Gorostiza.

This critique, however, obscures the fact that among those included in the anthology, there were indeed poets who rejected the conservative, erudite, and sublime poetic model, even if they were in the minority. Of the thirty-eight poets included in *El manantial*, three nonconformist voices stood out in Fabre's eyes: Julián Herbert,<sup>44</sup> José Eugenio Sánchez, and Ángel Ortuño. He expands this list by adding other notable poets whose work marks a transition: “incluso se reconocen atisbos de lo que será ya otra fase en ese proceso de transformación de la poesía mexicana: los poemas de Fernando Altuzar (1976), por ejemplo, o de Hugo García Manríquez (1978). Pero por entonces pocos lo notaron” (*Edad* 8). And, of course, we must add Fabre himself to this list of dissident voices.

Today, Luis Felipe Fabre is among the most recognizable voices in Mexican poetry.<sup>45</sup> His poems reflect a critical and self-conscious attitude toward poetic writing, often expressed through parody and irreverence. This attitude appears to stem largely from his rejection of the legacy of Octavio Paz and José Gorostiza, of what he calls the cosmopolitan, atemporal, ahistorical, and erudite poem. This rejection is sketched out in the prologues to the anthologies of contemporary Mexican poetry he compiled in 2008 and 2012, *Divino Tesoro* and *La Edad de Oro* respectively, where he presented a sample of poets whose own practice materializes what Fabre saw as a widespread discontent with the dominant poetic model of the time. To write differently today, observes Fabre in *La Edad de Oro*, is to also write the past differently (9). This means that these young poets have had to reconstruct and reinvent their genealogies. These young poets, notes Fabre, were creating new traditions, “[t]radiciones que no pasan forzosamente, como venía sucediendo, por Gorostiza o Paz” (9). For the same reason, a previous generation of once marginalized poets was now being popularized.

This irreverence toward the Pazian and Gorostizan model reaches full force in Fabre's own books of poetry. Bypassing Paz and Gorostiza, he charts a new path that moves through the Hispanic Baroque—an ingenious starting place for a poet seeking a counterpoint to the supposed “depth” of the Pazian model—and takes us to the margins of Mexican poetry, where we find figures such as Mario Santiago Papasquiaro and the Infrarrealistas, José Juan Tablada, and Salvador Novo.

<sup>44</sup> In 2005, Julián Herbert, together with Rocío Cerón, and León Placencia Ñol published *El decir y el vértigo. Panorama de la poesía hispanoamericana reciente*. This anthology responded to the criticism *El manantial* had received by opening up a dialogue between Mexican and other Latin American poets.

<sup>45</sup> Luis Felipe Fabre's publications include five books of poetry: *Vida quieta* (2000), *Una temporada en el Mictlán* (2003), *Cabaret Provenza* (2007), *La sodomía en la Nueva España* (2010), and *Poemas de terror y de misterio* (2013); a book of essays: *Leyendo agujeros. Ensayos sobre (des)escritura, antiescritura y no escritura* (2005); and three anthologies: *Divino Tesoro. Muestra de poesía mexicana* (2008), *Arte & basura. Una antología poética de Mario Santiago Papasquiaro* (2012), and *La Edad de Oro. Antología de poesía mexicana actual* (2012).

In fact, it is in Novo's essay "Las locas y la Inquisición" (1972) that Fabre first learns of the history he will rewrite in *La sodomía en la Nueva España* (2010)—the subject of this chapter. In this book, the rejection of the ahistorical poem seeking to capture the "eternal" materializes into a writing of and through the body, grounded in history. As Fabre once noted in an interview, his task was to write a poetic text that violated what poetry is "supposed" to be: "[p]ara *La sodomía* . . . investigué la historia, el discurso histórico, lo cual, en México, casi es ir contra la poesía: un poema con bibliografía, digamos, lo que está muy bien visto para las novelas pero no para la poesía. Y entre otras, ésta es una de mis salidas de tono de la poesía: descreer de la poesía como revelación y encararla, insisto, como trabajo" (Wolfson). In other words, Fabre highlights poetry as work, grounded in the body rather than in the Pazian ideal. To anchor a poem in a bibliography emphasizes the intentionality, rigor, and thoroughness involved in writing (and rewriting)—not only as an excavation of the past, but as a counterpoint to an ahistorical, disembodied view of poetics.

In sum, following Baroque aesthetic practices and the Infrarrealistas' deployment of colloquial language, Fabre's poetry embraces both a ludic dimension and the "estética callejera" that was supposedly missing in the writers of his generation. This aesthetic incorporates *el habla coloquial mexicana* and mixes the "poetic" with the "unpoetic." This refers not just to "unpoetic" language, but also points back to the notion of the poem as frivolity and trash that Fabre gleans from Novo: "El poema como cesto de basura: la frivolidad de Novo como recurso crítico frente a la falsificación de lo profundo" ("Salvador Novo"). Important then for Fabre is what Novo offers as the negative of the profound: the surface, trash, camp.

This chapter will focus on how the "unpoetic," a poetics of surface, an exploration of history, and a ludic approach to poetic writing find their happiest intertextual marriage—or, shall we say, orgiastic joyfulness—in *La sodomía en la Nueva España* (2010). Before delving into this text, I want to dwell briefly on how these characteristics already surface in Fabre's prior writing. In fact, in the selection of his poems that appeared in *El manantial latente*, we already get a glimpse of a colloquial poetic language, a general mistrust of poetry, and a consideration of the present. I should note here that about half of the poems showcased in *El manantial* come from his first book, *Vida quieta*, published in 2000. The first of Fabre's poems in the anthology is titled "Poética":

En éstas andamos: intentando restaurar un decir poético para intentar desdecirlo, al verso siguiente, con los ruidos del mundo: ejercicio de tensión entre lo imposible y lo imposible. Y por supuesto: fracasando. A veces hermosamente, a veces no tanto. Y así hasta nuevo aviso. (341)

This non-versified poem opens and closes with a colloquial, oral tone that is not quite yet the street aesthetic we will find in his later work. What is plainly clear is the sense of mistrust of poetic writing and a desire to renew it, if only to affirm this renewal as an inevitable failure, an impossible task that is, nevertheless, repeatedly attempted. As with the rest of his previously unpublished poems that appear in *El manantial*, this one lacks the complexity and layered playfulness of his later writing. But it does contain an important feature that will become part of what makes Fabre's writing readily recognizable: his use of punctuation, or the surface of language, as a constant play between simile and paradox—here embodied by the colon. In Fabre's writing, the colon, which typically functions as a sign of an explanation or an expansion on an idea, is, instead, a mark of contradiction.

In his second book of poetry, *Una temporada en el Mictlán* (2003), for example, the colon, together with the citation, are key features.<sup>46</sup> The colon is both continuation and break, simile and paradox; it materializes a nexus and, at the same time, a discontinuity that pushes away from one-to-one correspondences between words, images, and ideas, which should also remind us of the Baroque in its metaphorical jumps (as we saw in our earlier discussion of Perlongher's essays on the Baroque in Chapter One).

In 2007, Fabre published *Cabaret Provenza*, which includes both *Vida quieta* and *Una temporada en el Mictlán*, together with four previously unpublished sections. Already in *Vida quieta* we see a fondness for parody and irreverence—key aspects of *La Sodomía*. For example, the section of poems in *Vida quieta*, whose title is in English, “The moon ain't nothing but a broken dish,” appropriates a Beat-style aesthetic. The section's main character, Jack Mendoza, and his experiences function as an ironic commentary on the American Dream. In *Una temporada*, parody and irreverence are also significant, and are especially marked in the closing poem, “Calavera a don José Gorostiza,” which condenses much of Fabre's critique of Mexican poetry (as discussed above) into six humorous verses.

The Mexican *calavera* is a “subgénero satírico que tuvo sus inicios en los últimos años del siglo XIX” (Agüelles). These are poems that take the shape of epitaphs (usually of a living person) and whose form does not have a specific meter or rhyme structure (Agüelles). In Fabre's rendition of the *calavera*, there is no rhymed structure, and the poem is composed of a single stanza. “Calavera a don José Gorostiza” is a satire of Gorostiza's most famous poem, “Muerte sin fin,” whose key symbols, the glass and water, are appropriated by Fabre to denounce the “emptiness” of the supposed depth of the poem. “Muerte sin fin,” which addresses the “big” poetic themes of existence, creation, destruction, and death, is commonly praised for its innovative renewal of poetic language and form (Garza Cuarón 1130). Fabre mockingly turns it instead into a clichéd question about depth versus form:

Cuentan que una noche  
a don José Gorostiza lo despertó la nada  
que en el fondo era sed y en la forma un vaso de agua  
ausente: buscando el vaso encontró su hueco:  
el vacío que al vidrio horma: la muerte  
lo sorprendió rimando: ¿el vaso es fondo o forma? (54)

The puns, in typical Fabre fashion, surface through the play with the colon and the deployment of enjambment and caesura. Through enjambment and caesura, Fabre reverses the meaning of the verses when read as a sequence. Take, for example, the third and fourth verses: the third verse, on its own, would seem to simply incorporate Gorostiza's play with the relationship between the glass and water, and yet, if read as a sequence, the first word of the fourth verse obliterates this image by rendering the glass of water absent, thus placing emphasis on a thirst that is physical rather than metaphysical. Instead of a search for meaning, Fabre's poem renders Gorostiza's devoid of it, a simple cliché of a search for the poetic that is nothing but absence, as the second part of the fourth verse emphasizes, an emptiness that is not death itself but its surprise, which is just as clichéd.

The poems in *Cabaret Provenza* span a broad spectrum, particularly because each section is, in a sense, its own entity. The collection's title already announces a space of pleasure and a mix of styles—the cabaret—that includes music, theatricality, politics, and a plurality of voices. The title also cites one of Fabre's sources: the Provençal poetic tradition, the troubadours. It is no

<sup>46</sup> For a close reading of these features in *Una temporada en el Mictlán*, see Ruisánchez.

surprise that the Provençal poets had been important for the Brazilian concrete poets, whose capacity for condensation is also appropriated by Fabre. The concrete poets' influences are also Fabre's, among which Mallarmé is perhaps the most notable figure. Felipe Zúñiga, in his introductory notes to *Cabaret Provenza*, summarizes: "Fabre concibe el poema tal como lo prefiguró Mallarmé en 'Un golpe de dados'; ... tal como la poesía concreta brasileña en voz, manos y ojos de Décio Pignatari o Haroldo de Campos" (5-6).<sup>47</sup> Mallarmé's use of the space of the page and emphasis on typography, as well as his focus on the visual, begin to take shape in *Cabaret Provenza*, and will become central aspects of *La sodomía en la Nueva España*. In *Cabaret Provenza* we also find the incorporation of music, a play between "high" and "low" language, the brief appearance of a transvestite, and the practice of explicit rewriting in the section "Piedra y otras palabras (Camino a Comala)," Fabre's short six-poem version of *Pedro Páramo*. All these practices, (re)sources, and devices will ripen—to the point of rotting—in *La sodomía*.

The multiplicity of voices in *Cabaret* becomes in *La sodomía en la Nueva España* a hybrid text more akin to Baroque theatre than contemporary poetry—part dramatic play, part poetry, part historical document. It is the culmination of Luis Felipe Fabre's research into historical materials, legal documents, and literary texts about the persecution of a group of fifteen homosexuals, led by Juan de la Vega, in New Spain between 1657 and 1658.<sup>48</sup> The text is divided into two parts. The first, and the focus of this chapter, is titled "Retablo de sodomitas novohispanos (auto sacramental);" the second, "Anexos," is composed of two annexes, "Villancicos del Santo Niño de las Quemaduras" and "Monumento fúnebre a Gerónimo Calbo." In the first part of the text, "Retablo de sodomitas novohispanos (auto sacramental)," Fabre allegorizes the historical figures involved in the trial and prosecution of the fifteen homosexuals. In this poetic-dramatic text, the events of the trial are represented on the inquisitorial stage, with Juan de la Vega, or Cotita de la Encarnación, as the main suspect. He is accused, along with thirteen other men and a boy, of having committed the sin of sodomy: *el pecado nefando*. This section of the book rewrites the accusations and testimonies presented against Juan de la Vega and the others in the form of reenactments interspersed with spontaneous song and dance.

Throughout the "Retablo," Fabre irreverently appropriates the baroque *auto sacramental*, a one-act allegorical play intended to educate the spectator on the doctrines associated with the celebration of Corpus Christi. The culmination of every *auto* was the Eucharist—the transubstantiation of bread and wine into the body of Christ—and communion with Christ (Wilson 181-82).

There are three definitions scholars typically use to describe the *auto*: the first position asserts that the theme of the *auto* is exclusively the Eucharist; the second rejects the claim that

<sup>47</sup> In fact, Fabre's book of essays on twentieth-century Latin American poetry, *Leyendo agujeros. Ensayos sobre (des)escritura, antiescritura y no escritura* (2005), opens with the following epigraph by Pignatari: "En la poesía interesa lo que no es poesía" (9).

<sup>48</sup> In the closing note of the book, Fabre cites the historical and critical sources he used as the basis for *La sodomía*: "La investigación, transcripción y estudio de estos documentos realizada por Serge Gruzinski en su extraordinario trabajo 'Las cenizas del deseo, Homosexuales novohispanos a mediados del siglo XVII' y por Federico Garza en su libro *Quemando Mariposas. Sodomía e imperio en Andalucía y México, siglos XVI-XVII*, construyen, junto al *Diario (1648-1664)* de Gregorio Martín de Guíjo, la base textual de estos poemas. No quisiera dejar de mencionar, entre otros trabajos consultados, el ensayo pionero 'Las locas y la inquisición' de Salvador Novo, 'Conquistadores y misioneros frente al pecado nefando' de Guilhem Olivier, 'Casos de sodomía ante la Inquisición de México en los siglos XVII y XVIII' de Raymundo Flores Melo, 'Los nefandos placeres de la carne. La iglesia y el estado frente a la sodomía en la Nueva España, 1721-1820' de Jorge Bracamonte Allain y *Amores prohibidos. La palabra condenada en el México de los virreyes* de Georges Baudot y María Águeda Méndez" (81).

there had to be a necessary connection with the Eucharist and its teachings; and the third position is somewhere in between: “la relación entre la obra representada y la festividad celebrada podía ser muy tenue. No era necesario que fuera una relación temática, bastaba tan sólo con la ‘alabanza’ que procedía de las circunstancias que motivaban la representación” (Parker 46).

Nevertheless, in the case of Calderón’s *autos*, notes Alexander A. Parker, there was always a clear connection between the play and the religious celebration, “[e]n sus manos los autos nunca corrieron el peligro de perder contacto con lo que debía ser su fin. Siempre tuvo cuidado de evitar que la relación entre la obra y la festividad celebrada fuera meramente accidental procurando, pues, mantener un lazo teológico.” This is significant because, in the seventeenth century, the *auto sacramental* arguably reached its peak in the work of Calderón de la Barca—to the point that most scholarship on the Hispanic *auto sacramental* focuses almost entirely on his work. That is not to say, however, that other famous playwrights of the time, such as Lope or Sor Juana, did not write noteworthy *autos*.

The link between Fabre’s *auto sacramental* and church doctrine is tenuous and profoundly ironic, but not absent in *La sodomía*. As Tamara R. Williams lucidly summarizes in “Queering the *Auto Sacramental*: Anti-Heteronormative Parody and the Specter of Silence in Luis Felipe Fabre’s *La sodomía en la Nueva España*”: “*La sodomía*’s central theme, or *asunto*, is sacrifice and redemption broadly understood. ... [T]he *argumento* ... traces, in poignant allegorical form, the history of the life, trial, and death at the stake of the gay transvestite Juan de la Vega (alias Cotita de la Encarnación)” (110). It becomes clear as we move through the *auto* that the main character, Juan de la Vega, comes to represent a mock Christ-like figure whose life is sacrificed. In other words, one way to read *La sodomía* is to understand that its theme is the sacrifice of “Christ,” told through the allegorical story of Juan de la Vega.

As for the performative aspect of the *auto sacramental*, in the seventeenth century it was a public act, performed on the streets and plazas of the cities, directed at both a royal and a popular audience. Music was also an intrinsic part of the performance, as it “contributed to the total effect, which appealed strongly to ear and eye, not to the intelligence alone” (Wilson 182). These performative aspects are also relevant in *La sodomía* insofar as they highlight the importance of embodiment and the senses—the visual and auditory, primarily—together with the musical, celebratory, and popular aspects of the representation.

While the *auto sacramental* provides the frame for *La sodomía*, many other baroque elements and devices are equally central to the construction of the text. Along with the *auto*, Fabre appropriates the Hispanic Baroque’s satirical poetry, historical figures like Quevedo and Góngora, and burlesque strategies such as scatological wordplay, layered metaphors, and an emphasis on artifice and excess, among which paradox finds its most fertile ground. In this chapter I will focus on three general aspects and strategies of Baroque literature which Fabre appropriates and rewrites in *La sodomía en la Nueva España*: wordplay, paradox, and artifice. These appear under the headings “*Cír/culos*,” “*Nada*,” and “*Artificio*,” respectively.

My task here will thus be to explore the ways in which Fabre appropriates and rewrites seventeenth-century histories, texts, and poetic and ludic strategies: to interrogate how these structure a poetics rooted in the body and its (im)material pleasures, what I here call a poetics of paradox. In order to do this, I’ll be jumping between different moments in Fabre’s text, focusing on the topics outlined, rather than examining the book in sequential order. I will first analyze the ways in which paradox, through various forms of auditory and visual wordplay appropriated from Quevedo’s burlesque poetry, structures and informs the bodily pleasure of the text. The second section engages with the allegorical and paradoxical figure of *la Nada*, through which



Fabre establishes a relationship between the queer body and the concepts of (non)productivity and (un)originality—the paradox of producing both something and nothing, of being at once both original and copy—as fundamental to rewriting. Lastly, “*Artificio*” analyzes the way in which Fabre deploys artifice as both a metaphor and a technique or style to question the very idea of Nature or the “natural.”

### *Cir/culos*

The first part of *La sodomía en la Nueva España*, “Retablo de sodomitas novohispanos (auto sacramental),” similarly to the *autos sacramentales* of the seventeenth century, opens with a short theatrical piece, a *loa*.<sup>49</sup> In Fabre’s version of this early modern form, the *loa* is scene zero. Visually, the zero—which in Fabre’s typography is a perfect circle (Fig. 5)—is associated, in my reading, with two bodily orifices that play with the dialectic between the corporeal and the immaterial: the mouth and the anus. Metaphorically, it is also connected to silence (11).<sup>50</sup>

The zero resembles an open mouth, a claim that Sarduy also makes about the *O* in the word *barroco* (*Barroco* 19). Yet in the first stanza, its lips are kept shut by a lock that painfully pierces through them. This image of the shut lips is reinforced by the fact that the only character in the *loa* is Silence, who does not speak through the entirety of the one-page scene, a silence that the use of the blank space of the page further reinforces. This tension—of the rounded mouth open to enunciation juxtaposed with the silence of the closed lips—thus initiates the reader into *La sodomía*’s continuous play on paradoxes.

This particular paradox is certainly related to Fabre’s dual aims of writing from a historicist and from an embodied perspective. It is clear that the relationship between the zero, Silence, and the forcibly shut lips can be read as a violent repression of Mexico’s silenced homosexual history, of which this text speaks.<sup>51</sup> Tamara Williams takes this position, where the

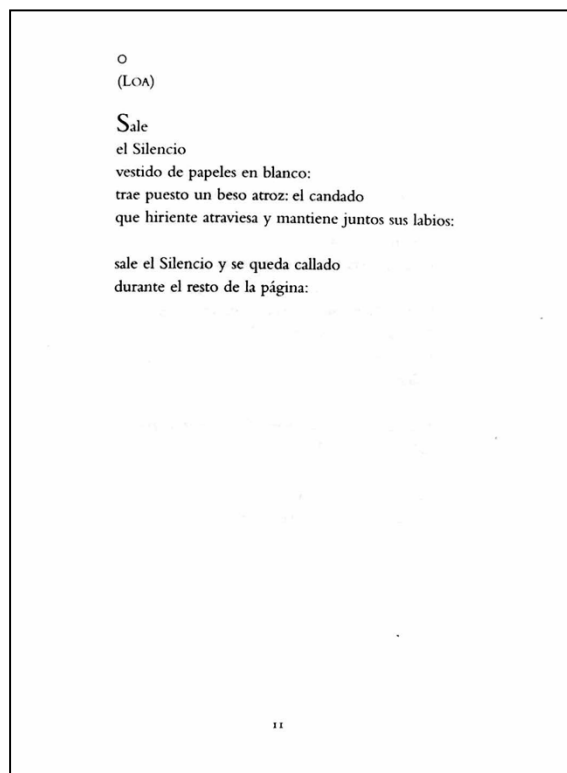


Figure 5 Fabre, Luis Felipe. “(Loa),” from *La sodomía en la Nueva España*. Valencia: Pre-Textos, 2010. 11. Print.

<sup>49</sup> The *loa*, in early modern theatre, was often meant to summarize the theme or argument of the performance that was to follow and to laud—*loa* comes from *loar*—those for whom the performance was being staged.

<sup>50</sup> The act of sodomy, also called “el pecado nefando” further allows us to make this connection, for the definition of *nefando* in *Autoridades* states that it is an act that cannot be spoken of, “de que no se puede hablar.”

<sup>51</sup> Throughout this chapter I use “homosexual” and “sodomite” interchangeably. Although in the seventeenth century the term “homosexual” did not exist, one can argue—as it has been argued by Adrienne L. Martín (46-49)—that there were certainly subcultures in the Early Modern period that can be understood as homosexual, since they go beyond the sole act of sodomy. As for Fabre’s rewriting of this moment in Early Modern Mexican history, while the

zero is seen as a gap in Mexican history that Fabre's text must fill: the zero is "a hole that must be opened—penetrated" (118). Adding to Williams's argument, I propose that there is more within this image than an attempt to break the silence: the relationship zero-silence-mouth points to the paradox of poetry's (im)materiality. I am referring here to a key paradox at the center of Fabre's concept of rewriting: on the one hand, the image of the zero as a mouth that is silenced represents the ineffable, that which cannot be named; yet, on the other, as soon as we read the scene aloud, that silence becomes sonorous and sensuous. What cannot be said reverberates. This is particularly evident when we read the scene number and the opening verses: *cero, sale el silencio*. We hear and feel the alliteration of the sibilant /s/, which asserts that just as Silence refuses to speak, it paradoxically materializes. That is to say, the refusal to speak communicates through a physical experience of the poem.

This material aspect of the poem is felt not only via sound, but also through the other bodily association of the zero: the orifice essential for sodomy, the anus. The anus is a site of waste and excess, which connects it to the exuberance of the Baroque, and it is also a source of physical pleasure. Pleasure, in Fabre, is both sexual and textual: the anus' pleasures together with other corporeal elements are mapped onto the text as ludic devices, where pleasure often becomes synonymous with play or, in this case, wordplay.

In order to explore in some depth the ways in which pleasure becomes materialized as scatological, queer wordplay in Fabre, it is worth analyzing the baroque roots of this technique more thoroughly, particularly through a close reading of some of Quevedo's burlesque poetry. The scatological elements in Fabre can indeed be seen as a direct inheritance from Golden Age satirical and burlesque poetry. In the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries, the scatological is ever-present and constitutes one of the essential techniques of the satirical and the burlesque (Arellano, *Poesía satírica* 22). This might perhaps strike the contemporary reader as somewhat surprising, but, as Ignacio Arellano notes, scatological wordplay was a rather commonplace, yet seemingly endless source of humor in this period (23). The play on and with the scatological and the "dirty" parts of the body, while practically boundless, does tend to follow a certain pattern: "la equiparación del rostro con el trasero es uno de los más importantes, facilitada por la dilogía (metáfora de uso, lexicalizada) de *ojo*" (23). This comparison between the face and the buttocks structures not only the wordplay in much baroque satiric and burlesque poetry, but also the particular ludic devices Fabre appropriates.

In Quevedo, the pattern where, through metonymy, the face is equated with the eye and the eye with the anus is quite recurrent. One of the resources Quevedo employs time and again to create a play on these images is what Ignacio Arellano calls *disociaciones*. A dissociation, according to Arellano, is a kind of pun that emphasizes the last syllable or syllables of a word and separates them from the word's conventional meaning (*Poesía satírico burlesca* 75). Quevedo particularly employs this technique with words that end in *ano* or *culo*, such as "*sicili/ano ... , cir/culo ... , minó/culo ... , veter/ano ... , piá/culos*." The resulting, almost chaotic saturation of scatological elements is particularly evident in the poems he wrote against Góngora and his *culteranismo*. Take, for example, one of the most famous of such sonnets, "Contra D. Luis de Góngora y su poesía." In this poem, Quevedo combines obscene and scatological

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words "homosexual" and "homosexuality" are never used in the poem itself, Fabre does acknowledge that he understands this history as a homosexual one in the Note that appears at the end of the book: "Más que el tema, la encarnizada persecución de homosexuales registrada en la Nueva España durante 1657 y 1658, es, en realidad, la materia de este libro" (81).

allusions, metaphors, and puns to degrade Góngora, poke fun at his pretentious and obscure language and syntax, and accuse him of being a sodomite.

The sonnet's opening verse, "Este ciclope, no siciliano," sets out to refute the legitimacy of Góngora's *Polifemo*, and toward this end already makes use of two of Quevedo's most common ludic techniques: *disociaciones* and double-entendres having to do with the anus.<sup>52</sup> The anus is referenced twice in this first verse: in *ciclope* and *siciliano*. The Cyclops refers to Góngora's *Fábula de Polifemo y Galetea* and, as we know, Polyphemus—the Cyclops—is a one-eyed creature. As Arellano notes, the "eye" was already, within satirical convention, a metaphor for the anus. The image of the anus is repeated in even more obvious form in the final syllables of this verse, which ends with the dissociation *sicili/ano*.

These images continue in the second stanza of Quevedo's sonnet:

...este círculo vivo en todo plano;  
 este que, siendo solamente cero,  
 le multiplica y parte por entero  
 todo buen abaquista veneciano... (qtd. in Fabre 41)

In this excerpt—which Fabre cites in Scene 22 of *La sodomía*, and which is the only section of the sonnet that Fabre quotes directly—the most evident scatological dissociations open and close the stanza: "este cír/culo vivo en todo pl/ano" and "todo buen abaquista veneci/ano." The anus becomes visible not only through the dissociations, but also through the visual images created in these verses: the circle and the zero. Notably, then, the circle functions as a double pun: its shape resembles the anus, and its dissociative play gives us the ending in *culo*. The zero's shape, too, as we have already seen in Fabre's *loa*, resembles the anus. The zero's shape, too, as we have already seen in Fabre's *loa*—which is itself an opening of sorts—resembles the anus.

Quevedo's accumulation of images of the anus is certainly intended as a playful way to insult Góngora. Not only is he turning Góngora's techniques of excess and verbosity against him to mock his style, but the images are also clearly intended to insult Góngora by implying that he is a sodomite. In addition, a further layer of meaning emerges here from the associations of the anus with the zero. The zero points to a lack of value, which is, in this case, literary. A lack of literary value was a common criticism aimed at Góngora by his detractors: "[e]l verso 'siendo solamente cero' alude ... a la inconsistencia de las obras cultas, en este caso concreto del *Polifemo*. Se trata de un reproche muy frecuente en los textos de los opositores de Góngora: sus composiciones gastan muchos cultismos e imágenes rebuscadas y, sin embargo, su contenido es nulo" (Cacho Casal 314). Góngora's poems, according to his fiercest critics, were excessively packed with Latinisms and unnecessarily layered images, while its content was, to them, devoid of any value. Quevedo, on the other hand, creates value through his satirical and burlesque appropriation of Góngora's techniques: his *ingenio*—which comes from this layering of images and puns that ebb into the sonnet's closing verse, where he directly calls Góngora a *bujarrón*, or sodomite—becomes the source of the reader's pleasure. In other words, the pleasure of the poet in attacking his rival becomes the pleasure of the reader, who is in on the joke.

It is no wonder, then, that Fabre chose to open *La sodomía en la Nueva España* with a visual rendering of these puns and allusions, this great source of scatological humor: the

<sup>52</sup> The first complete stanza reads:

Este ciclope, no siciliano,  
 del microcosmos sí, orbe postrero,  
 esta antípoda faz, cuyo hemisferio  
 zona divide en término italiano, (qtd. in Arellano, *Poesía satírico burlesca* 594)

zero/circle/anus. Beyond the more obvious metaphorical notion of the circle as the kind of return inherent in rewriting in a general sense, the zero/anus allows Fabre to align his own rewriting with Quevedo's style of parody. In Fabre's poem, the zero becomes central as the intersection or the locus of tension between a pleasure that is materialized in textual and sensuous forms—the zero-as-anus—and that is, at the same time, denied materiality as a void, a complete lack of value. In other words, pleasure emerges as a play between the material and the immaterial.

Fabre's inclusion of Quevedo's sonnet against Góngora becomes an opportunity for a cameo in *La sodomía*'s Scene 22: Quevedo himself appears “disfrazado de epígrafe” and recites the quoted stanza from his own poem aloud (41). The cited poem allows Fabre not only to appropriate these types of puns in a more overt and exaggerated way, but he goes so far as to place Quevedo and Góngora in sodomitic positions:

o  
ya de plano  
rima en ano: a la manera  
de Quevedo contra Góngora  
o sobre Góngora o bajo Góngora. (41)

The letter *o* that initiates this second-to-last stanza, repeated twice in its last verse, reminds us of the opening *loa*, of the circle, the zero, the anus. The reference to the latter is again reinforced throughout the remainder of the scene in various dissociated words that end in *ano*: *pl/ano*, *Escrib/ano* (repeated four times), and *v/ano*. Importantly as well, *plano*, *vano*, and *Escribano* appear at the end of their verses, in the most emphatic position. As the scene begins to accumulate circular images and anal puns, the sodomitic emphasis is reiterated as rhyme: *vano*, *plano*, *ano*. And, unlike the more static zero of the *loa*, the repeated *o*'s in this scene, together with the prepositions *contra*, *sobre*, and *bajo*—which are an obvious play on Quevedo's sonnet's title—find movement: they materialize an imagined sexual turn to Quevedo and Góngora's antagonism in the form of top/bottom roles. By making this relationship explicitly sexual, Fabre points to the fact that both his own and Quevedo's poem play with and are written through allusions, metaphors, and symbols of the sodomitic body.

Rather than merely imagining these two great literary enemies as lovers, however, their relationship is revealed not as *homosexual* but *homotextual*: “¡Homotextuales!, / exclama la Santa Doctrina: ¡Homotextuales!” (41). This is not just a superficial pun or a clever play on words: through this neologism, and through the metaphor of the queer body, Fabre emphasizes, on the one hand, the homoerotic nature of their antagonism, and, on the other, the material aspect—the physical and quantifiable literary production—that takes place through this rivalry.

When Fabre takes up this imagery and these puns, he is re-producing their writings, but without the notion of biological creation that is inherent in the concept of heterosexual reproduction. It is, rather, putting baroque language and images back into circulation in a new way: re-production, here, is to be understood as a paradoxical creation of both something and nothing, that is both original and unoriginal; a creation that is made possible through the other. It is in contact with the other—both in physical and textual form—that rewriting generates pleasure.

This is precisely what Fabre implies in yet another scene, Scene 6, where he returns to the baroque pattern of metonymy whereby the face is equated with the eye, and through the eye, with the anus, again making use of metaphors and symbols of the sodomitic body. Here, the sole witness to Juan de la Vega's homosexual encounter in the fields, Juana de Herrera, is asked to identify the man Juan was with. Since Juan was the one on top, his cape covered the other man's

face, and Juana de Herrera could not identify him. While Juana is being interrogated, the other man—*el otro*, who then becomes the capitalized *el Otro* standing in for all others—breaks into song:

Y entonces,  
de una frase de Juana de Herrera  
se desprende el otro para glosarse en el Otro:

sale, tapado por la capa del otro, el Otro  
y canta estas coplas:

*Andan pecando dos hombres:  
Juan es uno pero el Otro  
tiene enigma en vez de rostro  
y no se le saben nombres.*

*Ay, tápalo con tu capa,  
Juan, no vaya a ser antojo  
de otros ojos el otro ojo  
de este Otro que el tuyo tapa.* (18; italics in original)

We notice here that *rostro* appears in the third verse of this first quoted stanza, and *ojo* in the third verse of the second one, thus creating a parallel structure that highlights the relationship between the two. Part of the play here is that the face of this other man cannot be seen, making him an enigmatic presence that then places emphasis on the *other* “face,” the *other* “eye”: the anus. What also becomes quite evident is the excess of *o*’s in these two stanzas, particularly in those words that contain only that vowel: *Otro/otro/otros, rostro, ojo/ojos*. Visually and metaphorically, the anus becomes the focal image of these two stanzas.

In the dissociation *ant/ojo*—craving—the eye-anus relationship finds yet another connection. Georges Bataille, in the 1920s and 1930s, had posited the relationship eye-anus as a surrealist and chaotic multiplication of pleasures and orgasm.<sup>53</sup> In my reading of Fabre, *ant/ojo* sets up a relationship between the gaze and pleasure: the pleasure of revealing the Other, the pleasure of the Other’s eye/anus “que el [de Juan] tapa.” The obvious parallel between *capa* and *tapa* might suggest, on the one hand, that the other man cannot be seen because Juan’s cape covers him. On the other, we can read these final verses as depicting the very act of sodomy, where the Other’s “eye” (that is, his anus) is covered because Juan’s member is inside him. By equating the eye/anus with *antojo* and the pleasure of the queer gaze, through the play with *ojo/ojos* and *otros/Otro*, the potential for pleasure in the many eyes-anuses is multiplied. In this orgy, the self, which here is inevitably othered, opens up—the opening of the *o* into an *O*, the orifices that feel and speak—to pleasure. And here the pleasure of the self is also always already the pleasure of the Other, as self and Other are identical. This is iterated in scenes 5 and 6: “se desprende el otro para glosarse en el Otro” (18), “el Otro que siempre es otro / y cuyo emblema / es un espejo frente a otro espejo” (16). The Other is, through a kind of *mise-en-abyme*, multiplied *ad infinitum*, and so are his/their pleasures—recalling the mirror as a Baroque motif.

But Juan de la Vega and the other men must “pay” for their pleasures, their “sins,” “acusados de cometer el crimen contra natura los unos con los otros” (25). In Scene 12, the payment for their sins plays out in the following way:

<sup>53</sup> See “The Pineal Eye” and “The Jesuve” in *Visions of Excess*.

Dice la Santa Doctrina: Si las monedas tuvieran  
además de anverso y reverso,  
inverso,

en esa cara veríamos acuñada la cara  
de Juan de la Vega: la descarada  
reina de los invertidos.

Monedas, dice la Naturaleza.  
Monedas, dice la Carne.  
Monedas, dice la Santa Doctrina.

Dice  
la Santa Doctrina:  
Juan de la Vega y sus bujarrones troquelaban.

Dice: En las festividades de Nuestra Señora  
y en las festividades de los santos  
y en ocasión de celebrarlos:  
¡troquelaban!

Dicen todos: Monedas cuyo metal es la Nada:  
monedas cuya cifra es cero: agujero  
con el que Juan de la Vega  
paga. (26)

If *moneda* and *cara* visually point to the zero-anus relationship, *troquelar* points to the embodied movement of sodomy. The act of sodomy is represented through the movement of the *troquel* as it stamps or perforates coins. “Juan de la Vega y sus bujarrones troquelaban” mimics the motion of the penis inserting itself into the anus: it is a perforating mechanism, back and forth, wherein a long cylindrical piece pierces, goes through, and leaves a hollow circle—a hole—in another piece of metal, the coin. The circular, perforated coins are again associated with the anus, but their value is zero; their substance is the void. The sexual act is thus associated with a monetary exchange, but a paradoxical one whose worth is precisely nil.

In short, this scene of excess pleasure in the act of sodomy is tied to money, and hence carries a connotation of production and productivity. Yet what they produce lacks value: “cero: agujero.” In the same way that the mouth/silence juxtaposition plays with the (im)material aspect of poetry—the mouth whose lips are shut and the sonorous aspect of silence—so does the zero-anus—and so, ultimately, does the act of rewriting—present a similar paradox of a productivity that doesn’t produce anything, reinforced throughout by one of the definitions of sodomy: copulation without procreation.

### *Nada*

The zero-anus, throughout Fabre’s *auto sacramental*, is personified by *la Nada*, a multivalent allegorical figure that embodies multiple paradoxes. The central paradoxes that structure this character are those of materiality versus immateriality and productivity versus

nonproductivity. *La Nada* is (im)material insofar as it is both something and nothing; *la Nada* is (non)productive insofar as it does not create nor produce anything new, while, at the same time, producing the very poem, *La sodomía en la Nueva España*. This section explores the inherent paradoxes in *la Nada* as a character appropriated from the Baroque, and its function as an allegory of both the homosexual body and its sexual acts.

To begin with a historical background of *la Nada (Nihil)*,<sup>54</sup> it is worth noting that in the Baroque it played a central role as a figure that allowed authors to display their *agudeza* and *ingenio*, precisely through its inherent paradox.<sup>55</sup> Quevedo, for his part, is among those who followed in this tradition to exercise his *agudeza* (Cacho Casal 223). This tradition is cleverly explored in “Al repentino y falso rumor de fuego que se movió en la Plaza de Madrid en una fiesta de toros.” The sonnet was written after a stampede in the Plaza de Madrid in 1631 during which many people were trampled to death at the false sign of a fire. The bitter irony Quevedo explores is that many people died for—literally—nothing. While I will not perform an extensive reading of this sonnet, I do want to highlight the moments that are most relevant to my discussion, which are those where *la Nada* appears in the closing tercets:<sup>56</sup>

Ninguno puede huir su fatal suerte;  
Nada pudo estorbar estos espantos;  
ser de Nada el rumor, ello se advierte.

Y esa Nada ha causado muchos llantos,  
y Nada fue instrumento de la Muerte,  
y Nada vino a ser muerte de tantos. (qtd. in Cacho Casal 224)<sup>57</sup>

The verses play with the paradox between nothing having happened, and yet that same “nothing” being the very thing that caused the tragedy—“La recurrencia de *nada*, utilizando su valor ya de pronombre indefinido (‘nada pudo estorbar estos espantos’, v 9), ya como sustantivo en el último terceto, es ... origen de las agudezas finales ... donde se subraya ... la paradoja” (Fernández Mosquera 80). *La Nada* is both the absence of a thing and a thing with agency.

In the second verse of the first tercet, *la Nada* works as an absence or as the impossibility to control fate. That is, *la Nada* has no agency, since nothing could be done to stop the tragedy that befell the Plaza. In the verse that follows, however, *la Nada* is personified, and in the first

<sup>54</sup> *La Nada*’s history goes back to antiquity, before being recuperated in the thirteenth century (see Bakhtin). Before *la Nada*, there was *Nadie (Nemo)*. *Nadie* appears in book IX of *The Odyssey*, when Odysseus and his men find themselves in Polyphemus’ cave. Odysseus is able to escape from Polyphemus’ cave by a clever trick of names. He tells the Cyclops: “Mi nombre es *Nadie*; y *Nadie* me llaman mi madre y mi padre y mis compañeros todos” (124). Once Polyphemus has fallen into a drunken sleep, Odysseus grabs the burning stake he has made and stabs the Cyclops in the eye. In pain, Polyphemus screams so loudly that the rock that blocks the entrance shakes and Odysseus and his men are able to escape. When the other Cyclops hear Polyphemus’ cries, they ask:

“¿Por qué tan enojado, oh Polifemo, gritas de semejante modo en la divina noche, despertándonos á todos?  
¿Acaso algún hombre se lleva tus ovejas mal de tu grado? ¿Ó, por ventura, te matan con engaño ó con fuerza?”

Respondiéndoles desde la cueva el robusto Polifemo: “¡Oh amigos! *Nadie* me mata con engaño, no con fuerza.” (125; italics in original)

And thus no one comes to his aid.

<sup>55</sup> Key to baroque thought is *la nada*, as David Castillo explains: “The notion of nothingness is central to baroque thought and aesthetics. As R. de la Flor writes ... ‘las nociones de vacío, nada e infinito ... son centrales en la construcción de la cosmovisión barroca’” (“From the Bibliotheca” 103)

<sup>56</sup> For a close reading of “Al repentino y falso rumor de fuego” see Cacho Casal and Fernández Mosquera.

<sup>57</sup> Cacho Casal notes that there are two versions of this poem: in the one that appears in *Poesía original completa* (1996) “nada” is not capitalized, the second version is the one cited above, from *Parnaso Español* (1648).

verse of the last tercet, its agency is what controls the fate of those who die in the incident. Then, in the following verse, *la Nada* is not the agent but the instrument of Death, before becoming, in the final verse, Death itself. The innovation that is important to note, explains Cacho Casal, is the following:

la concepción [tradicional de la Nada como instrumento divino para generar la vida] es completamente invertida en el soneto quevediano: la Nada sigue siendo un instrumento de Dios ... pero para ejecutar la muerte.... El resultado es una paradoja .... que pasa a funcionar como imagen de la mano vengadora de Dios y de la muerte. Quevedo aprovecha un juego retórico para transmitir ideas trascendentes ... La fuerza divina es inexplicable, es un concepto inasible, al igual que la Nada. Esa Nada que en el poema quevediano es la otra cara de la muerte. (226-27)

If in the literary tradition of the Renaissance *la Nada* is the divine instrument out of which life emerges, in Quevedo *la Nada* is the ungraspable force that destroys it. *La Nada* thus encompasses both the paradox of creation versus destruction and that of embodied versus disembodied divine force.

In *La sodomía*, Fabre embraces and appropriates *la Nada* as a figure built on paradox, but in his case, it is built on the paradox of the homosexual body in Mexico's colonial history. Furthermore, Fabre's *Nada* allows for the exploration of this very body as a meditation on the limits and possibilities of poetry. In other words, a discussion of the homosexual body's (im)material place in history also means delving into one of poetry's central paradoxes: the (im)materiality of words.

*La Nada*, on *La sodomía*'s stage, is at once the embodiment of the homosexual body and a void, just like the zero is both material (as the mouth) and immaterial (as silence). In a similar sense, *la Nada* as an allegorical figure underpins the notion that what the poem names—the word—is always only a signifier, never the object itself. In some cases, focusing on the word's immateriality means understanding poetry in terms of desire. An example that comes to mind is Alejandra Pizarnik's "En esta noche, en este mundo," where the poetic voice reflects: "si digo agua ¿beberé? / si digo pan ¿comeré?" (*Poesía* 399). Poetry, in this sense, is the struggle of the desire for an object that the word cannot possess. Whereas Pizarnik's focus is on the object whose absence leaves an unfillable void, Fabre's is on the void itself: the allegorical figure of *la Nada*. Thus, a different way to think about the relationship between void and object is to say that while Pizarnik's verse is about desire, Fabre's *Nada* is about pleasure.

In thinking of the relationship between desire and pleasure, Roland Barthes would argue that they are diametrically opposed. In a psychoanalytic (Freudian, Lacanian) and the Pizarnikian sense outlined above, desire is inherently constituted by an ontology of lack: the desired object is, by definition, impossible to obtain. That is, desire cannot be fulfilled. And yet, according to psychoanalysis, one attempts to fill that void by replacing it with other objects that can never be the one that was lost. Desire, for Pizarnik, always has its sight set on the object, rather than on the hole left by the object, which is precisely where Fabre draws our attention.

According to Barthes, "we are always being told about Desire, never about Pleasure" (57). While desire is, for Barthes—and this is the position I also take—never materialized because it "is never satisfied," pleasure has everything to do with materiality (58). An aesthetics of pleasure, writes Barthes in the last pages of *The Pleasure of the Text*, would be something like the grain of the voice: guttural, something that pulses, a "language lined with flesh, a text where we can hear the grain of the throat, the patina of consonants, the voluptuousness of vowels, a whole carnal symphony: the articulation of the body" (66). Pleasure is not only experienced on



and by the body, but the aesthetic it constructs is itself like the sensual—encompassing both the voluptuous and the sensorial—body. The poem of pleasure is a corporeal poem. To read and write through pleasure is not to search for the object that will fill the hole, the void, but, rather, to touch the hole, to linger there.

In my reading of *La sodomía*, to write through pleasure is to fixate on the homosexual body, which is represented by Juan de la Vega—“el principal actor del pecado nefando” (19)—and allegorized through *la Nada*. The relationship Fabre sets up between Juan de la Vega and *la Nada* becomes legible in the portrait the poetic voice paints of Juan de la Vega. In Scene 9, for example, we find the following depiction:

Retrato de Juan de la Vega:  
apariencia de Juan de la Vega sobre fondo negro.

Mas el verdadero retrato de Juan de la Vega  
es  
el fondo negro: el retrato de la Nada:

apariencia de la Nada donde toda apariencia cesa. (22)

The way the scene is described is reminiscent of baroque paintings that portray Christ against a black background.<sup>58</sup> In Fabre’s scene, the light emanates not from a white Christ contrasted with a dark background, nor even from Juan de la Vega’s body, but rather from his clothes: “Un mulato afeminado en traje de indio sobre fondo negro: / / jubón blanco” (22). The image we see appears not to be in the style of chiaroscuro or tenebrism but to be one of negative space. Juan de la Vega is not the pale, barely covered Christ upon whom the light fixates, but a *mulato* whose body resembles, and then becomes, the black background itself. The contrast between the baroque paintings of Christ on the cross and Juan de la Vega’s portrait highlights the relationship Fabre sets up between body and background.

In the portrait, Juan de la Vega is the background itself, the portrait of *la Nada*. In the *Diccionario de autoridades*, we find the following three definitions of *retrato* that I think are worth citing in full to emphasize the parallel points: “[I]a pintura o efigie que representa a alguna persona o cosa”; “[s]e llama la relación, que regularmente se hace en verso, de las partes y facciones de una persona”; “[m]etaphoricamente se dice de lo que se asemeja a alguna cosa.” Juan de la Vega’s *retrato* encompasses all three meanings: that of a portrait or painting of somebody or something; the narration or description in verse of Juan de la Vega; and, in the metaphorical sense, the mirror image of something else—“el fondo negro,” “el retrato de la Nada.”

Juan de la Vega and *la Nada* are further equated with the black background through the concept of *apariencia*, which appears three times: “apariencia de” opens two of the scene’s closing stanzas. Its repetition adds the concepts of surface and depth to the paradox between body and void. As defined in *Autoridades*, *apariencia* has three different meanings: exterior appearance, which usually does not resemble the interior (of a thing or person); pretense; and what we would understand today as “set design.” *Apariencia* as surface or façade emphasizes Juan de la Vega’s skin and skin color; as a decorative element, the concept of *apariencia* forces Juan de la Vega into the background, where he becomes part of the “decorative” element. At the same time, *apariencia* is also used to describe *la Nada*, which highlights its (im)materiality: as surface it can be touched, but as depth—background—it becomes a void, “donde toda apariencia

<sup>58</sup> For example, Velázquez’s *Cristo crucificado* or Zurbarán’s *Cristo en la Cruz*.

cesa.” Through *apariencia*, the body and the void become one and the same. Juan de la Vega—his body—is *la Nada*, which in turn is the black background, which in turn is the absolute void.

The portrait the poem paints is not in search of what is not there; rather, it fixates on the void itself, the homosexual body as void. The homosexual body melts into the black background. The paradox is folded onto itself *ad infinitum*. The body not only *is* a void, it replicates the void: its portrait is something and yet becomes nothing. And this paradox of (im)materiality is further carried on into the next scene:

Sale, de la nada y hacia la nada, la Nada  
envuelta en uno de sus disfraces  
de carne.

Dice

la Santa Doctrina: Es la Carne.

Dice la Carne: Es la Nada. Dice la Santa Doctrina:

Es la carne de los que nada engendran. Dice la Carne:

Es la Nada que en la carne pulsa. Dice la Santa Doctrina: Es el horror. (23)

The personified Nothingness appears—from nowhere, going nowhere—dressed in skin or flesh. In its embodied state, *la Nada* is *la Carne*. *La Nada* goes from being enveloped in flesh to being Flesh itself. As *la Carne*, in the fourth verse of the second stanza, *la Nada* is the embodiment of those who engender nothing, those who do not (pro)create.

The bodies of those who do not engender anything are also, I argue, bodies delighting with vitality and pleasure. In this sense, *la Nada* is equated with pleasure: that which pulses on the surface of bodies as they engage in sex. And while this pleasure is felt, experienced, pulsating on and between bodies, it is as elusive as *la Nada*. And pleasure, or *la Nada*, is equated with horror by *la Santa Doctrina*. Horror highlights the notion of perversion in the sodomitic act—insofar as it goes against “Nature”—and what it produces or, more aptly, does not produce.<sup>59</sup>

Flesh and nothingness, as well as pleasure and horror, are opposed to one another and are, at the same time, versions of each other:

A la manera de la Nada  
que nada engendra  
son sus amores,

si es que son amores

necios humores equivocando el vaso. (15)

In these stanzas, then, *la Nada* is suggested as that which engenders nothing in relation to the sodomitic act. Just as *la Nada* produces nothing, the sexual act between men does not lead to procreation or reproduction.<sup>60</sup> Though sodomy is not explicitly named in these two stanzas, it is named in the opening stanza of this scene. In the section cited here, the euphemism “love” is used. This might strike the reader as an odd choice, since the idea of love is not of much interest

<sup>59</sup> It is interesting to note here what Mary Malcolm Gaylord says about Góngora’s detractors. She explains that the critique of Góngora has been that “his brilliant images and dazzling verbal pyrotechnics not only say nothing new: tied to the sensory and the superficial, they seem to spin over an abyss of nothingness” (222). One could say that while some found his writing to be brilliant, others saw it as a perversion—*el horror*.

<sup>60</sup> “La homosexualidad,” Néstor Perlongher had written in 1981, “no produce—ni reproduce—nada” (101).

in Fabre's *auto*. Yet it functions as an internal rhyme with "humores," which structures a parallelism between the two nouns, thus creating a link worthy of further analysis.

Indeed, the question of whether these acts can even be constituted as "amores" is raised by the following verse through the hypothetical "si" and the definition of the act as "necios humores equivocando el vaso." In my reading, "necios" does not relate to ignorance but to stubbornness; "humores," as defined by the *Diccionario de autoridades*, means "[c]uerpo líquido y flúido"; "equivocar" is to mistake one thing for another; and "vaso" is a drinking glass, more fully defined by *Autoridades* as "[q]ualquier pieza cóncaba de varias materias, como plata, oro, vidrio, ... dispuesta para recoger, y contener en sí alguna cosa, especialmente líquida." In other words, these "amores" are fluids stubbornly mistaking one "glass" for another, whose cylindrical shape resembles both the anus and the vagina; that is, the semen "mistakes" the anus for the vagina, and thus produces *nada*.<sup>61</sup>

But what are the implications of equating *la Nada* with the sodomitic act that does not produce or reproduce? While the above reading suggests that *engendrar* necessarily relates to a biological (in)ability, there is also the possibility to think of this portion of the scene as one about pleasure and its embodiment. That is to say, if *la Nada* is equated with the sodomitic act which is stubborn in its "mistake," it allows us to focus not on the end result, but on the act itself: an act that is stubbornly—pleasurably—repeated. It is an act not of biological reproduction but of repetition, of re-production, the repetitive production of *la Nada*.

Repetition, in turn, becomes re-production as appropriation, or rewriting. In other words, to not focus on what is engendered is to emphasize the pleasure of the repeated act in and of itself, the rewriting of *la Nada*. It is to linger on the pleasure of the play with language, of rewriting as (non)productivity, just as pleasure is inherently (non)productive. Rewriting, in this sense, is akin to what Cristina Rivera Garza says of citationist texts:

Un texto citacionista es, por decirlo así, un texto 'con-ficcional'; y la referencia manual, es decir, física, al proceso de la costura, no es del todo gratuita ... Un texto citacionista nunca es, luego entonces, original. Es más: un texto citacionista descrea, fundamental y radicalmente, del concepto de originalidad. La invención, esa ilusión tan entrañable para el creador del siglo XIX, ha dado lugar así a la apropiación textual como la marca misma de la revolución digital de nuestros días. (81-82)

While rewriting does involve a very physical or corporeal labor, the focus is not on the outcome of this labor but on the act itself, the process, the play with the materiality of language. Rewriting, in a general sense, can be thus read as a rejection of an ideology of productivity and originality. Against the transcendental, ahistorical, atemporal poem, based on a model of poetry as inspiration, *La sodomía en la Nueva España* reveals and flaunts its bibliography, its construction; even in its most "erudite" moments, *La sodomía* brings everything "down" to the body—the scatological—and its excesses and pleasures. As an act of rewriting, *La sodomía en la Nueva España* thus allows Fabre, and the reader, to take pleasure in repeating and reworking the kind of *juegos de ingenio* that reveal a latent queerness in the Baroque, rendered explicit, palpable, pleasurable.

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<sup>61</sup> Adrienne L. Martín notes that the most appropriate way to talk about sodomy in the early modern period was not simply about men having anal sex with men but, more generally, any sexual act that did not lead to procreation; that is, "the spilling of the male seed into an inappropriate vessel" (54). Sodomy was, in fact, the legal term for any kind of sexual act that did not involve reproduction. In fact, *Autoridades* defines *sodomía* as follows: "Concúbito entre personas de un mismo sexo, ò en vaso indebido."

*La Nada*, as Fabre appropriates it, functions as an allegory not only of the homosexual body but also of the sodomitic act and its pleasures, pleasures that are as (im)material and (non)productive as *la Nada*. In the same way, we can read Fabre's rewriting of *la Nada* through the paradox of (non)productivity, where the text that is appropriated and re-produced can be seen as (non)productive insofar as it is (un)original.

### *Artificio*

*La Nada* functions as an allegory of the homosexual body and its physical pleasures, which also become legible, through artifice, as (non)productive textual and linguistic pleasure. Artifice is the materialization of pleasure on the page through the play and work with language. It is thus understood here in primarily Baroque terms, insofar as Baroque texts intend to appeal, as John Beverly notes, "to the difficult, the new, or the highly elaborated" (*Essays* 9), as opposed to the "moderation, symmetry, and attention to proportion of the Renaissance ideal" (Friedman 284). The Hispanic Baroque poets' work with artifice in language is visible in their use of Latinate words (*cultismos*) and syntax (primarily represented by the hyperbaton), ingenious metaphors (*conceptos*), accumulation of paradoxes, polysemy, metonymy, and so on. In short, artifice, in relation to language, is an amalgamation—an excess—of complex literary and rhetorical feats. Artifice is thus here understood as those devices that place emphasis on the surface and playfulness of language, rather than on its communicative aspect.

Artifice creates what Jeremy Robbins, in his writings on the relationship between the Renaissance and the Baroque, calls a "dense textual surface" that displays the labor involved in the poet's task (143). This labor is not, however, what we might call productive, but rather a kind of wasteful play: "todo acto barroco ... implica un apenas disimulado adjetivo: ¡Cuánto trabajo perdido, cuánto juego y desperdicio, cuánto esfuerzo sin funcionalidad!" writes Sarduy (*Barroco* 101; emphasis in original). Sarduy continues: "[j]uego, pérdida, desperdicio y placer: es decir, erotismo en tanto que actividad puramente lúdica, que parodia de la función de reproducción, transgresión de lo útil, del diálogo 'natural' de los cuerpos." In Sarduy's view, the excess in Baroque writing rejects the notion of productivity in favor of a practice of pleasure. The "acto barroco" is a ludic activity that is not interested in the "natural," which Sarduy associates with a reproductive engagement of bodies, a kind of useful act or productive dialectic. Instead, Sarduy focuses on the excesses of these acts, on their waste.

Fabre sets up a similar relationship between (pro)creation, (non)productivity, pleasure, and artifice. In *La sodomía*, Fabre engages with waste and excess in a way that is similar to what Sarduy describes in the Baroque; that is, in *La sodomía* any notion of the "natural" is rejected in favor of the artificial, and language serves not a communicative but a ludic function. In the analysis that follows, I will look at artifice first as a metaphor and then as a poetic technique that undermines the idea of Nature and the natural.

In Fabre, images of nature and its turn to literal waste frequently appear in the form of the cornucopia and rotting fruits in various scenes. The cornucopia, rather than being the image of a plentiful and abundant nature, is "una cornucopia de podredumbres" (22), as *el Escribano* describes in Scene 9. The rotting fruits, in turn, function as metaphors of the male homosexual body. Indeed, Juan de la Vega is associated with rotting and rotten fruits, and with the fruits as an image of transgression and excess. In the three *retratos* of Juan de la Vega, which appear in three different scenes, the cornucopia is either present or represents him: "Juan de la Vega: una cornucopia de frutos prohibidos / remate lisonjera / su retrato" (20); "remate su retrato una

cornucopia de frutas lascivas” (21); “Retrato de Juan de la Vega,” says *el Escribano*, “un mulato afeminado, a cuyos pies yace, a la manera / de una ofrenda, una cornucopia de podredumbres” (22). This image of the rotten fruits also points to the notion of the spilled seeds: the semen that is “spilled,” rather than serving its “purpose,” that is, reproduction.

There is a religious aspect to each portrait that associates the fruits with sin. The cornucopias of scenes 7 and 8 in particular call to mind the original sin in the Garden of Eden. The image depicted by Fabre in Scene 8 appears to take place after the fall from Eden:

Dice  
la Carne:  
Pues Juan de la Vega  
se ha dado a la serpiente  
de la sodomía y se ha dado en abundancia,  
remate su retrato una cornucopia de frutas lascivas.

Dice: Higos que se antojan bultitos obscenos.

Dice  
la Santa Doctrina:  
Manzanas, peras, uvas abandonadas  
a una belleza insana: duraznos negros:  
frutas que el natural no atreve y el tiempo deprava. (21)

The biblical images have all been sexualized here. Juan de la Vega has given in to the sin of sodomy. The serpent is no longer a symbol of temptation, but is instead a phallic symbol, representative of an excess of sodomitic lust and, we can infer, pleasure.

The colors in abundance are not the greens of the Baroque landscapes but the black of the abandoned peaches, figs, and grapes. All the fruits become metaphors for the black homosexual body: the figs—whose outer skin is commonly a blackish purple—are obscene bulges (testicles, the traditional double-entendre of *higos*) craved by others; the creased shapes of the other fruits, particularly the peaches, signal the *mulato*'s buttocks. In Caravaggio's paintings of boys with peaches, for example, the peaches' crease function as a visual representation of the boys' buttocks (Fig. 6). We also cannot ignore that the cornucopia itself, which is in the shape of a horn, is also a phallic symbol. The queer male body is thus associated with the lustful excess and waste of the rotting fruits.

Depicting the fruits as abandoned seems to emphasize their unappealing nature, their blackness as they rot. But there is another possible reading, if we consider the enjambment in verses 10 and 11. If we read these verses in



Figure 6 Caravaggio. *Boy Peeling Fruit*. 1552-1553. Oil on canvas. Royal Collection. Royal Collection Trust. Accessed 15 July 2017.

sequence, as “abandonadas a una belleza insana,” the meaning of “abandonadas” shifts from “left abandoned” to the notion of surrendering or giving in to sin, to a “belleza insana,” an “unnatural” attraction to other men. In time, Juan de la Vega and the other men are corrupted—“que ... el tiempo deprava”—they all surrender, as *el Escribano* reads a couple of scenes later, to the sin of sodomy: “el crimen contra natura” (25). The sodomitic act and its pleasures are a crime against Nature insofar as they go against the teleology of reproduction, in favor of (non)productive pleasures.

But *la Naturaleza*, who comes on stage in Scene 11, repudiates the very idea that homosexuality is a crime against Nature:

Crimen  
 contra la Naturaleza que sale  
 ataviada de follajes pero con la verdura de fuera:

la Naturaleza que sale y dice: No es un crimen  
 contra la Naturaleza pues tal es  
 su naturaleza.

(Carraspeos, risitas, silbidos, abucheos.) (25)

I read this as a parody of essentialist discourses that attempt to find any “truth” to sexuality—whether it’s on the side that normalizes homosexuality or the one that argues that homosexuality is “unnatural.” First, Nature comes out covered with foliage (*follaje* also closely resembles *follar*, meaning to fuck), but with its “junk” out. Fabre plays here with the double meaning of *verdura* as both vegetable and genitalia. The vulgar use of the word to refer to genitalia ridicules the allegorical character, the use of nature as a basis for normativity. Rather than taking seriously Nature’s clichéd discourse about sodomy being “natural,” the scene ridicules it; the parenthetical jeering and laughter—in the diminutive, implying further mockery—could stand in for the reader’s reaction or as the trial’s audience’s laughter, ridiculing the idea that the act of sodomy could be thought of as natural. Beyond merely ridiculing Nature’s discourse, this scene mocks the allegorical figure—the idea—of Nature itself. The scene seems to suggest that nothing could be said to be “natural,” and, if nothing is natural, then is it all artificial?

This critique and paradox of Nature in the *auto* extends beyond the question of sexuality. The crime against Nature is not only sodomy, but also transvestism. Juan de la Vega and the other men are accused of dressing in women’s clothes, performing activities reserved for women, calling each other by women’s—more specifically, prostitutes’ (Gruzinski 273)—names, and dancing with one another: “Juan de la Vega se sentaba / en el suelo en un estado como mujer / y hacía tortillas y lavaba y guisaba ...” (24); Juan de la Vega, alias Cotita, and the other men, “confesaron que se llamaban por los nombres / que usan las mujeres públicas,” and later, “confesaron que unos bailaban quebrándose de la cintura / a la manera de las mujeres y los otros con los unos bailaban” (27). It is precisely because of their deviation from the norm that Juan de la Vega and the other accused men are able to be identified as sodomites not only in Fabre’s *auto*, but historically as well. Their deviation or inversion makes them legible, as Serge Gruzinski writes in 1986:

Parece que para poder expresar su singularidad sexual, el ‘travestista’ escoge los rasgos y las conductas que en su sociedad pertenecen al sexo femenino. Se trata, de hecho, en el contexto novohispano ... de la única alternativa culturalmente estandarizada y codificada que existe a la heterosexualidad masculina, a pesar de la degradación y de la represión

que conlleva esta elección. En otros términos, el travestismo constituye ... una desviación fácilmente identificable por los demás miembros de la comunidad. (273)

The fact that Fabre cites Gruzinski and the legal documents from the seventeenth century that describe these men's deviation from the norm emphasizes the historicity of gender. In other words, Fabre's citations highlight the parody of a discourse in which Nature has a fundamental role in structuring thought. While this critique of Nature is evidently nothing new in 2010, what is interesting about what Fabre is doing in *La sodomía* is that he uses the seventeenth-century documents and literary strategies to parody the normative aspects of both the seventeenth and the twenty-first centuries, and to reiterate what was already visible in 1657: Nature is always already artifice.

Thus far, I have discussed how artifice appears in Fabre's nature-related imagery as excess and waste. I turn now to another aspect of artifice, closely tied to the former both in the Baroque and in Fabre's text: artifice in terms of poetic language, style, and aesthetics. While I have already outlined at the beginning of this section what stylistic artifice meant for Baroque poets, we have yet to address the question of how exactly artifice plays out in Fabre's language. In a way, I have been answering this question throughout this chapter: it manifests as wordplay and paradox, as (im)materiality and (non)productivity. To expand on this a bit further in this final section, I will address Fabre's style as a broader aesthetic of artifice, a queer aesthetic of the surface.

If we recall from the introduction to this chapter, one of the main impulses behind the anthologies Fabre compiled was the desire to (re)introduce the opposite of the well-behaved, erudite voices of Paz and Gorostiza, and to show that there was and is Mexican poetry that embraces “[el] habla y el humor popular [mexicanos],” a language that is ludic and “low,” and that embraces oral tradition and the slang heard on the street, as opposed to the “erudite” and “literary.” In the prologue to *Arte & basura*, an anthology of Mario Santiago Papasquiaro's poetry, Fabre considers Papasquiaro's and the Infrás' *estética callejera*. The Infrás or Infrarrealistas were a group of poets who lived in Mexico in the 1970s, the most famous of which were Roberto Bolaño and Mario Santiago Papasquiaro. Bolaño fictionalizes this group in *Los detectives salvajes* and calls the movement *realismo visceral* in his novel. The Infrás rejected mainstream poetry, embodied by the figure of Octavio Paz, whom they despised. In fact, the Infrás “using underground magazines, counter-poetic boycotts and public readings and performances, tried to criticize Paz canonical configuration of literature” (Medellín iii). Fabre cites and praises the Infrás as a key influence in the generation of Mexican poets included in *Divino Tesoro* and *La Edad de Oro* explaining their aesthetic in opposition to erudite poetry: “Tal vez uno de los calificativos que mejor le siente a la poesía infra sea el de lumpen. A una poesía exquisita, intelectual y cosmopolita oponen una estética callejera” (*Arte*).

Fabre's own style is a sort of blend of baroque and street aesthetics. It oscillates between “high” and “low” language, references, rhythms, syntax, and versification. The mix of “high” and “low” is a common Baroque trope, particularly in its satiric poetry, as Arellano has noted: “[l]a acción de la sátira ... se contrapone a la heroica, ya que consiste en ‘historia de vicios presentes, de hombres viles y [sic] infames’: su estilo, consecuentemente, ‘consiente vocablos bajos algunos’ que ‘son menester para la irrisión’” (*Poesía satírico burlesca* 158). Fabre's “high” vocabulary is Baroque—rather than Pazian—while his “low” language is a synthesis of both the Baroque popular and satirical *estilo bajo* and an inheritance of the Infrás' *estética callejera*.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>62</sup> Through his aesthetic we can also (re)construct an alternate genealogy, similarly to that which he outlines in *La Edad*, one that does not forcibly pass through Paz and Gorostiza.

The mix of colloquial Mexican speech with archaic language is mainly worked into rhymed quatrains that follow the structure of *redondillas*, with an abba rhyme pattern and octosyllabic verses of *arte menor*, the popular poetic and traditional Castilian verse that predominated before the sixteenth-century introduction of the Italian heptasyllabic and hendecasyllabic verse. In the seventeenth century, explains Mary Malcolm Gaylord, “[o]ctosyllabic verse served as the polymetric *comedia*’s default position for representing the speech of characters drawn from a broad social spectrum. Peppered with *sung* snatches of traditional song, verse *comedias*, *autos sacramentales* ..., and *entremeses* ... evince poetry’s close ties to a shared orality, to music, and to social dance” (227; italics in original). Throughout *La sodomía*, there are various instances where the characters or unidentified voices break into song in the form of *redondillas*, with an abba rhyme structure and octosyllabic verse. For example, in Scene 13, after the sodomites confess to performing activities reserved for women—who, in Baroque theatre, spoke in *redondillas*—and to dancing with each other in a lustful way, music is heard and the accused begin to dance:

Y al decir esto el Escribano, suena la música y los acusados  
se ponen a bailar, mientras el Otro, oculto  
tras la capa de la noche,  
canta:

*Qué chacota esta chacona:  
el muchacho que se agacha  
a su son, se alza muchacha,  
mas muchacha mostachona.*

*Juan Correa ya en La Estampa  
se transforma: hasta un vestido  
con su capa se ha fingido:  
¿quién caerá en su hermosa trampa?*

*Baile solo que pareja  
extraña de sí mismo es,  
pues Correa es a la vez  
un mancebo y una vieja. (27-28)*

Here syntactic clarity is sacrificed in favor of rhyme and meter, which make possible a sort of overlap between poetic and bodily form. The third stanza’s hyperbaton can be seen as folding over the sentence’s syntax to mimic the doubling of gender identification and bending of the body. In this sense, the passage is a verbal form of the physical configuration of the body.

The word choice is quite simple here, and, while Fabre does use some dated or archaic words, the language remains (mostly) intelligible to a general audience. The second cited stanza is perhaps the most interesting. The first verse, for example, uses the onomatopoeic *chacota*, which marks—or parodies—the rhythm of the *chacona*, a seventeenth-century dance. Not only are all the verses octosyllabic, but all the words that include “ch” also have three syllables, except for *mostachona*. Lastly, the repetition of the “ch” is very typical of the colloquial speech of Mexico City, particularly in the more vulgar words or in street slang—for example, *chilango*, *chingar*, *chole*, *chafa*, *chupe*, and so on. In fact, it reminds the (Mexican) reader who used to



listen to Café Tacvba's "Chilanga banda" in the '90s, a song about daily life in Mexico City, also written in octosyllabic verses.<sup>63</sup>

There is a certain redundancy to these three stanzas. They all convey the same idea: these men are—in a contemporary understanding—transvestites. Moreover, the scene to which this song belongs already describes the activities of these men. Also, the two previous scenes convey the same information. By the time we arrive at this "chacona," the fact that these men dress as women, engage in women's activities, and dance together has already become clear to the reader. Its sole purpose seems to be its ludic engagement with language and its rhythms.

Fabre's style then works as a kind of wasteful play with excess and surfaces—both textual and bodily—characteristic of Baroque artifice and exaggeration and akin to camp. And what is camp if not artifice? In her "Notes on Camp," Susan Sontag wrote that "the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration" (53). So what exactly is the relationship between camp and artifice? Or, more specifically, what does camp tell us about artifice?

Although Fabre never uses the term "camp," his work with artifice can be read as a camp aesthetic:

A la manera de los perros:  
los sométicos, los sodométicos, los sodomitas.

A la manera de los traidores:  
por detrás.

.....

A la manera de un cáncer pestilente. A la manera  
de unas bubas que se propagan:  
se propagan. (15)

"Amanerado" means feigned, stylized, campy. There is a sense of theatricality, of performance, particularly in the association Fabre makes with aesthetic practices. Fabre creates an equivalence between "manieristas" and "sodomitas." The former, unlike "amanerados" and "amarionados" which mark sodomites as effeminate men, refers to the artistic practice of Mannerism, known for its refinement and, more importantly, its artifice; in art history, Mannerism is known for its exaggeration and the "distortion of the human figure" (Finocchio), similarly to the way drag—camp's favorite performance—is an exaggeration and distortion of normative gender. The aesthetic practices of the Golden Age were full of artifice, with an emphasis on the surface and exaggeration; in a similar way, camp exaggerates bodily gestures and the surfaces through which gender is read, such as makeup and clothing.

While naming the homosexual, the sodomite, may seem to serve as an affirmation of an identity, the anaphora "A la manera de," together with the three different designations for the sodomite, gives the reader a sense of the ungraspable, as if the word, each time it is reiterated, is not the right one. From the very beginning of this scene, "A la manera de" functions as a simile

<sup>63</sup> The song was written and composed by Jaime López. The first four lines are as follows:

Ya chole, chango chilango,  
qué chafa chamba te chutas,  
no checa andar de tacuche  
y chale con la charola ...

that, like Fabre's use of the colon, is both nexus and discontinuity. It pushes the very possibility of naming further away, thus making that attempt paradoxical. While naming allows us to identify something, "A la manera de" equates the sodomite with a style or a practice. And in this inability to name, Fabre aligns the sodomite with the artifice of poetry. By equating Mannerists with sodomites, Fabre implies that there is a particular queerness to artifice; he appropriates artifice as a queer practice. Just like Mannerism is known for the exaggeration of the human figure, camp (through transvestism) exaggerates gendered attributes that highlight the notion that gender is not natural but artificial, a constructed bodily surface. Camp exaggerates bodily surfaces to denaturalize gender and bring awareness to its artifice.

I close the current chapter with this link between camp and artifice because I believe it elucidates the relationship Fabre posits between the queer body and style. Like the transvestite body, artifice is about surfaces: in this case, it involves working with and manipulating the surface of language. This chapter has explored the ways in which Fabre plays with the surfaces of language that are typically invisible. Fabre renders these surfaces legible and makes them central to his project. He highlights excess, thus connecting his play with surfaces to the Baroque and taking from it aesthetic practices that reject a model of poetry interested in "depth." Fabre's *La sodomía en la Nueva España* is all about the (non)productive play with language and the glyphs or marks on the page, the excess of language and writing. For Fabre, these textual marks—such as the colon—take on a central role for the production of a queer aesthetic: a poetics rooted in the body and its (im)material pleasures. Fabre's rewriting of Baroque aesthetic and poetic practices and texts functions as a rejection of a contemporary emphasis on productivity and originality in favor of a ludic writing of excess, surfaces, and artifice.

Chapter 4: Jesusa Rodríguez's *Sor Juana en Almoloya (Pastorela virtual)*

On December 3, 1995, the Mexican ex-president Carlos Salinas de Gortari sent a letter to the media while in self-imposed exile.<sup>64</sup> The letter was meant to exonerate him and clear his name in the economic and political crises the country was facing. It is with this letter that actor, director, playwright, and activist Jesusa Rodríguez's 1995 performance *Sor Juana en Almoloya (Pastorela virtual)* begins. Though in Rodríguez's performance, these events play out as a retrospective; that is, *Sor Juana en Almoloya* is set five years into the future, in the year 2000.

As a stage-right light comes on, we see Sor Juana, played by Rodríguez, at her desk. The scene resembles—or, rather, stages—the iconic Miguel Cabrera painting from 1750 of a learned, studious, cloistered Hieronymite nun in her convent cell: with her extensive library in the background, she appears in a seated position, her gaze directed at the viewer, a large book in front of her on her desk, her right hand turning a page, and her quills in an inkwell next to the book. She wears her nun habit and carries a long rosary, which she touches with her left hand, and her large *escudo de monja* depicting the Virgin of the Annunciation sits on her chest (Fig. 7).<sup>65</sup> In the performance, however, Rodríguez's Sor Juana does not gaze at the spectator; rather, she looks intently at a small computer screen. Once Sor Juana turns to the audience we notice that her *escudo*, rather than an embroidered or painted depiction of the Virgin, has a white background, on which is written the date 12.11.1648 and, under it, ALM-JUA (Fig. 8). 12 November 1648 represents Sor Juana's purported date of birth, and the abbreviations below it refer to Almoloya de Juárez, the maximum-security prison built by Salinas's government, where Rodríguez's Sor Juana finds herself in a prison—rather than a convent—cell.

In her prison cell, Sor Juana reads the news on her computer. Center stage is a projector screen; on it the audience can see what (theoretically) appears on Sor Juana's screen: a newspaper headline reporting Carlos Salinas de Gortari's letter to the media. The headline appears to be an actual newspaper story on the Salinas letter, but it is made into a copy-paste pastiche: on the paper is a picture of the ex-president wearing a superimposed nun habit (Fig. 9). As Sor Juana reads the story, she laughs and exclaims: “¡Qué bárbaro! ... No cabe duda que o él es un genio o sus contemporáneos eran unos pendejos. ¡Qué bárbaro! Un complot. ¡Echeverría! ¡Qué genio! ¡Qué bárbaro!”<sup>66</sup> The audience, too, laughs loudly. The actual letter the ex-president sent to the media had been published only a few weeks prior to the performance at Jesusa Rodríguez and Liliana Felipe's independent theater-bar El Hábito in December 1995.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>64</sup> In March 1995, the ex-president's brother, Raúl Salinas de Gortari, was arrested for the murder of José Francisco Ruiz Massieu. A couple of days later, the ex-president appeared on Televisa's ECO newscast, something previously unheard of in Mexican politics; outgoing presidents had always stepped out of the spotlight once their presidencies ended. Salinas had flown to his home state of Nuevo León to stage a publicized hunger strike in a middle-class neighborhood of Monterrey. He demanded that it be made clear “que él no había obstaculizado la investigación de Colosio y ... que el gobierno de Zedillo reconociera su ‘error’ en la crisis económica del 19 de diciembre de 1994” (Becerril). In order to resolve the situation, Zedillo sent a mutual friend to convince Salinas to come back to Mexico City (Oppenheimer 207). A few days later, Salinas left the country—“hubo versiones señalando que el acuerdo era que Salinas emprendiera un exilio pactado y como gesto gubernamental se deslindaría a éste de cualquier participación en el caso Colosio y de responsabilidad en la crisis financiera” (Becerril).

<sup>65</sup> For an extensive analysis of Sor Juana's *escudo* see Perry.

<sup>66</sup> All quotes, unless otherwise indicated, are from the live performance, rather than the published version in *Debate Feminista*.

<sup>67</sup> This chapter analyzes the performance of December 1995, recorded on video and stored in the Hemispheric Institute Digital Video Library <<http://hidvl.nyu.edu/video/001148708.html>>. The website does not provide the



Figure 7 Cabrera, Miguel. *Portrait of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz*. 1750. *Wikipedia*. Accessed 20 Apr. 2016.



Figure 8 Screenshot. *Sor Juana en Almoloya (Pastorela Virtual)*. 1995. El Hábito. Rodríguez in the role of Sor Juana. *Hemispheric Institute Digital Video Library*. Accessed 20 Apr. 2016.



Figure 9 Screenshot. *Sor Juana en Almoloya (Pastorela Virtual)*. 1995. El Hábito. Superimposed newspaper article with Carlos Salinas de Gortari in a nun's habit. *Hemispheric Institute Digital Video Library*. Accessed 20 Apr. 2016.

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exact date, only the month and year. Though given some of the exchanges that occur on stage, we can deduce that the recorded performance took place around December 23<sup>rd</sup>.

In the letter, Salinas blamed one of his predecessors, Luis Echeverría, who had been president from 1970 until 1976, of conspiring against him, and attributing to him the responsibility for the numerous economic and political problems the country was facing. In the performance's imagined future no one had replied to the ex-president's letter. Thus, in this opening scene, Sor Juana, in response, writes "La Respuest Zopilotea." This obvious allusion to the historical Sor Juana's *La Respuesta a Sor Filotea de la Cruz* is emblematic of the structure of the entire performance as a satirical rewriting of both contemporary and historical figures, texts, and events. In the very act of rewriting, a critique of a certain kind of repetition is embodied: the reproduction in the twenty-first century of a Church-ruled seventeenth-century—a period that Rodríguez's Sor Juana calls in her letter "un imperio de horror y persecución."

What I want to highlight first is the play's creation of a twentieth-century Mexican context for the letter: Sor Juana has been brought to Almoloya by members of the PAN, the "opposition" party to the PRI. And here it is important to note that the PAN's acronym in the play does not stand for Partido Acción Nacional but Partido reAcción Nacional. This renaming of the party highlights both its reactionary politics as well as a sense of repetition. The PAN not only is equated with the PRI, but, in the imagined year 2000, the rule of law has become a *refrito*, a rehashing, of the Church-ruled New Spain. This rehashing is performed through the very act of rewriting. The rewriting of Sor Juana's *Respuesta* performs the critique Rodríguez's Sor Juana outlines in her letter.

In the performance, Sor Juana is imprisoned in Almoloya in order to be tried for her works, which, according to the Attorney General (played by Tito Vasconcelos) in charge of prosecuting the case, are accused of being politically subversive and morally indecent. Lysi (played by Liliana Felipe), the Vicereine, wants to rescue Sor Juana, so she exchanges her clothes with Sor Juana's lawyer (played by Manuel Poncelis), and enters her cell pleading with Sor Juana to recant, for she would rather have Sor Juana alive and free, even if this means the loss of her entire work. Through wordplay, song, satirical humor, and political and literary in-jokes, we find out about the amorous and erotic relationship between the two women, as well as the severity of Sor Juana's case. The play within a play, the *pastorela*, occurs at the midpoint of the performance, after *la Procuradora* has arrived and Sor Juana is trying to plead her case.

Unlike Fabre's rewriting of the seventeenth century, which assumes a much more veiled criticism of or commentary about contemporary Mexico, Rodríguez's performance leaves nothing to the imagination; the links she makes between the historical Sor Juana's life and society and contemporary Mexico are repeated and highlighted through the entirety of the performance through jokes, songs, interactions between characters, and pastiche news reports, to name only a few of the devices of criticism. In fact, this critique is the central point made about *Sor Juana en Almoloya* in Jacqueline Bixler's essay "Pretexts and Anti-PRI Texts: Mexican Theatre of the 90s," where she notes that "[t]hrough pastiche and ironic appropriation, Jesusa satirizes Mexico's current political crisis with a futuristic, technologized view of the country's past and present," adding that, through Sor Juana as a metaphor, "Jesusa is able to critique the repressive and regressive mentality of the PRI as well as that of the rising PAN" (45). To this I would add that it is not only a satire of contemporary Mexico, but also a critique of the ways by which we come to understand and historicize the past. If, following Tamara R. Williams, we see part of Fabre's project as a recuperation of a particular queer Mexican history, Rodríguez's project is not so much a recuperation of the past but, rather, a critique of how this past is excavated and what are the pieces of that excavation put out on display by History, and which remain covered in dust, away from the public's eye.

In this chapter, I will analyze the various tools of power Jesusa Rodríguez appropriates, through rewriting, in order to critique and subvert them. One way to think of Rodríguez's task is as a play on reversals—which is something the Baroque had taught us. Rodríguez will invert texts, situations, forms, and structures of power in order to expose the ways these structures are at work and how, in the Baroque, these structures of subversion were already being deployed. I believe that focusing on the influence and centrality of early modern theatrical forms, such as the *pastorela*, will shed light on important ways in which subversion is materialized on stage. But first, I will give a brief overview of Jesusa Rodríguez's work and trajectory, as well as a bit of a background on her theatrical style and the place it has—and had<sup>68</sup>—in Mexico.

Jesusa Rodríguez began her career at the Centro Universitario de Teatro (CUT), where she studied from 1971-1973 (Alzate 67).<sup>69</sup> In 1980, together with Liliana Felipe—who was to become her life partner—she opened the theatre-bar El Cuervo (Constantino 63). She also formed the theatre cooperative Divas in 1983—which included another famous *cabaretera*, Astrid Hadad. In 1990, Rodríguez and Felipe became the owners of the theatre-bar El Hábito (Constantino 63), the space had once belonged to Salvador Novo, who had conceived of it as a forum for creative expression (“La compañía”). El Hábito was an independent theatre, meaning that it received no support from the Mexican government, something practically unheard of in the arts scene in Mexico. Rodríguez and Felipe managed El Hábito until 2005, and acted in and directed hundreds of performances (Hemispheric Institute).<sup>70</sup>

Rodríguez's first major success—with Divas—came with her adaptation of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, staged as *Donna Giovanni* and comprised of an almost entirely female cast. The show ran from 1983 through 1986, toured Europe, and received great acclaim by both the public and the critics (Alzate 68). The adaptation that followed was Oaskar Panizza's *The Council of Love*, a nineteenth-century drama, set in the fifteenth century, that satirizes Bavarian society and for which Panizza was incarcerated (Franco, “Touch” 49). What is important about these two productions for our purposes is that they display the range of Rodríguez's performance style as well as her understanding and knowledge of classical theatre: *Donna Giovanni* is an opera; *The Council of Love*, a dramatic satire. Gastón Alzate, for example, will point to the prevalence and influence of the operatic tradition in Rodríguez's work. Another aspect of her work that draws us to the sixteenth and seventeenth century is that “particular scenes [in *Donna Giovanni*] reproduced the composition of Mannerist paintings” (Franco, “Touch” 51), already pointing to an early modern visual aesthetic.

The majority of productions that followed, particularly those staged throughout the 1990s, begin to stray away from adaptations of classical theatre and move into the realm of cabaret (although she continued to stage operas as well), with much more direct and explicit

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<sup>68</sup> In 2005, Jesusa Rodríguez and Liliana Felipe said goodbye to El Hábito. Laura G. Gutiérrez summarizes the reasoning behind their decision to end their work in El Hábito: “Rodríguez acknowledge[d] that the work she had been doing in the art world had reached a sort of finale (or a new beginning?). For her, performing the type of political cabaret that she began to do in the late 1980s, which had begun to acquire consistency with the opening of El Hábito in 1990, was becoming tiring” (172). There was work to do outside of the theatre; “Rodríguez had begun to take notice of the fact that her training in theater was useful for more than staging farcical performance pieces in her enclosed theatrical space,” explains Gutiérrez.

<sup>69</sup> Jesusa discusses her time at the CUT in a short documentary film made by Ana Luisa Liguori and Eduardo Sepúlveda. <[www.youtube.com/watch?v=FsO\\_6iv8Ubc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FsO_6iv8Ubc)>

<sup>70</sup> By 1997, Rodríguez and Felipe had produced about 200 shows in El Hábito (Constantino 63). The space is now called El Vicio and is run by the company Las Reinas Chulas. <[www.elvicio.com.mx](http://www.elvicio.com.mx)>

references to the Mexican political, historical, and societal realities.<sup>71</sup> This becomes patent by just reading some of the titles: *La gira mamal de la Coatlicue* (1990), *La Soldadera Autógena* (1990), *La Malinche en Dios T.V.* (1991), *Juicio a Salinas* (1995), *La Chinga (partorela)* (1997), *El derecho de abortar* (1998), *La conquista según La Malinche* (1999), to name only a few.<sup>72</sup>

Yet even in her sketch comedy, Rodríguez never ceases to incorporate aspects of classical theatre; in fact, her versatility, as she “moves effortlessly across the spectrum of cultural forms and theatrical traditions,” has earned her the moniker of Chameleon (Constantino 63). Roselyn Constantino describes this versatility in the following way: “Rodríguez chooses theatrical forms which permit her to render corporeal and, thus, visible, the tensions among the ideological, religious, social, political, and economic discourses operating on and through the individual and collective human body” (63-64). In *Sor Juana en Almoloya*, it is not only through the body but also through voice and the appropriation of theatrical forms that these tensions and critiques are made visible.

While almost everyone who has written about Rodríguez notes her performative range, when it comes to discussing her style, most have talked about the influence of early twentieth-century marginal theatrical forms on her work, such as *el teatro de carpa* and *el teatro de revista*. While these influences are evident and, of course, quite important, the focus on these has obscured other sources that are notable in *Sor Juana en Almoloya*—such as the Baroque theatrical forms I will be exploring later on in this chapter.

Gastón Alzate does note the incorporation of classical forms in Rodríguez’s theatre, though his analysis focuses mainly on the opera:

El cabaret de Jesusa Rodríguez y Liliana Felipe es un debate sobre las formas teatrales contemporáneas y es también un viaje dramático que parte del teatro “tradicional” se detiene en la ópera y la opereta, y finaliza en el cabaret como género madre que los abarca a todos y que le permite al mismo tiempo volver a cada uno de ellos cuando las circunstancias dramáticas lo requieran. Es en este género donde estas dos artistas han consolidado un nombre y en donde han establecido vínculos legítimos entre el teatro clásico y contemporáneo, el cabaret alemán y el teatro de carpa mexicano de principios de siglo. (66-67)

Alzate focuses on the importance of music in Rodríguez’s cabaret—hence his emphasis on the opera. At the same time, Alzate highlights the significance of *el teatro de carpa* in Rodríguez and Felipe’s cabaret trajectory. What Rodríguez has found most appealing in this theatrical form, Alzate explains, “es el espacio escénico en el que se mezclan el circo, la crítica política y el teatro frívolo, un género que se constituyó básicamente en el teatro de los marginados en los años veinte y treinta” (69-70). This genre, Alzate continues, has allowed Rodríguez to explore the possibilities of entertainment as a form of political and cultural dissidence (70), as a form of resistance against the Mexican cultural hegemony of patriarchy (9).

*El teatro de carpa* is where the modern imaginary of the city is first constituted (18). This kind of theatre is born out of the desire for entertainment in post-revolutionary Mexico by the lower social classes who could not partake in the theatre-going of the elite. From the circus and its formulaic clown humor, “el género se ve invadido por personajes que buscaban ser representados. Pelados, jotos, tortilleras, borrachos, Marías, mariguanos, nacos, meros machos,

<sup>71</sup> In 1996 she staged, together with her sister, Marcela Rodríguez, *Funesta: Seis arias sobre textos de sor Juana* (Bergmann 181), and in 2016 she directed a children’s opera (also composed by her sister), *El día que María perdió la voz* (Vargas).

<sup>72</sup> For an extensive list, see her artist profile on the Hemispheric Institute’s website <hemisphericinstitute.org>.

mandilones, todos son caracteres de vecindario que se vuelven legendarios en ese espacio teatral” (19). This portable “tent” theatre is differentiated from other marginal theatrical forms because of its emphasis on “el albur, lo escatológico, lo obsceno,” and will become the stage for the richness of language and the play on double-meaning (20).

While the influence of this kind of theatre will be marked in *Sor Juana en Almoloya*, it is just as important to consider the centrality and influence of other theatrical forms that go beyond *el teatro de carpa* and whose verbose ingenuity is also exploited in Rodríguez’s theatre, such as the baroque *comedia*. Of the *comedia*, for example, Rodríguez will appropriate a mix of high and low language, wordplay, and the deployment of characters in drag. The *pastorela* is another important though marginal early modern theatrical form we find in Rodríguez’s cabaret. Though this has been mentioned by some critics, it hasn’t yet been thoroughly analyzed. I believe that focusing on these aspects of her style—the influence and centrality of early modern theatrical forms—will shed light on important ways in which subversion is materialized on stage. For these reasons, I will focus my analysis on these early modern traditions, lingering the longest on the *pastorela*.

## Form

While in *Sor Juana en Almoloya* Rodríguez appropriates some of Sor Juana’s most famous texts, she also recycles, parodies, and rewrites Baroque theatrical forms and conventions, which is something we also saw in Fabre through his appropriation of the *auto sacramental*. Among these we find the *pastorela* and the *comedia*. What interests me, at this point, is her appropriation of baroque ludic and parodic formal strategies as they pertain to the theatrical, rather than the textual or linguistic—which will be analyzed in the next section of this chapter.

Although *Sor Juana en Almoloya*, in its subtitle, is labeled a *pastorela*, this aspect of the performance has been only partially discussed by scholars. Those who have written about *Sor Juana en Almoloya* usually mention it in passing, or often restate what Rodríguez herself said about the *pastorela* genre and her interest in it in a 1997 interview for the *Latin American Theatre Review*: “a mi [sic] las pastorelas me permiten, por un lado, atacar al clero . . . Por otro lado, atacar a esa fuente de agresión a la población que es el Estado mexicano” (Kelty 125). She further explains that this critique is possible through the *pastorela* “porque al hacer una parodia de una representación religiosa católica me permite hacer inmediatamente una parodia del clero. Pero junto con eso, requiere los tintes de la política nacional del momento.” This is akin to what Linda Hutcheon’s says about parody: “Often the works of the past become aesthetic models whose recasting in a modern work is frequently aimed at a satirical ridicule of *contemporary* customs or practices” (11; my emphasis). In other words, parodying a certain text or form also gives us enough distance from the present to be able to critique it. In a similar sense, the *pastorelas* function, in Rodríguez’s view, as a means to reflect on the year’s major events. A couple of things are clear from Rodríguez’s statements: first, the *pastorela* allows her to attack and critique the Church and the State—which she sees as her chief enemies and the main source of aggression against the Mexican population—through parody; second, since *pastorelas* are performed in December, they allow for a recap of the calendar year’s main events and scandals, which allows Rodríguez to incorporate and satirize various events and scandals that the audience is familiar with and which function as one of the main sources of humor through in-jokes.

What I think is missing both in Rodríguez’s own explanation and the critics’ analyses is an exploration of how exactly the *pastorela* makes such a critique possible. For this reason, I will



highlight some of the aspects of this genre that can elucidate these ideas, and then I will outline those aspects of the *pastorela* that are appropriated in *Sor Juana en Almoloya*, as well as explore how they are at work in the performance.

*Pastorelas*, or shepherds' plays, are performed as part of the Christmas celebrations throughout Mexico every year.<sup>73</sup> In Mexico, the performance of *pastorelas* can be traced back to the sixteenth century. The *pastorela* was one of the didactic methods of evangelization of indigenous peoples by the Spaniards (Romero Salinas 43). In broad strokes, the *pastorela* is a theatrical representation of the nativity scene, as Joel Romero Salinas explains in his historical and literary investigation of the genre, *La pastorela mexicana: origen y evolución*: "la representación teatral [de la pastorela] ... recuerda el Nacimiento de Jesucristo y la adoración de que fue objeto por parte de los pastores que guardaban su ganado en las cercanías de Belén de Judea y a quienes un ángel comunicó lo sucedido" (13). As these gained popularity, "they soon began to incorporate erotic and sexually charged material with the religious content" (Herrera-Sobek 64). This is part of what led to their banning by the Church and colonial authorities during the eighteenth century.

A closer look at the structure of the *pastorela* elucidates this progression. In outlining the general structure and characteristics of the *pastorela*, Romero Salinas notes that much of the humor of these performances comes from the dialogue between shepherds—pastoral characters have had a satirical and comical function since antiquity (Vázquez de Castro 55). In the moments before the birth of Christ, their sins surface. The shepherds, in their actions, embody and portray humanity's seven deadly sins (46). We can imagine how, from these portrayals, the humor would turn sexual in nature if, for example, the sin that was being represented on stage was lust. In fact, this is part of what *la Procuradora* says is immoral about Sor Juana's *pastorela*, which I will analyze later in this section.

The shepherds' dialogue, too, is one of the main sources of the *pastorela*'s humor: "el lenguaje de la pastorela ... es alegórico y pleno de modismos supuestamente propios del 'oficio pastor'" (43), which produces what Romero Salinas classifies as involuntary humor, "por la deformación de los términos cultos en que incurren los trabajadores rurales, especialmente cuando cambia el depositario de la tradición oral" (86). In this sense, the language of the *pastorela* is humorous simply because of its "nature," which is, ostensibly, vulgar, and because of the shepherd's involuntary deformation of erudite language.

While the *pastorelas* or *coloquios* were particularly offensive to authorities of the inquisition during the eighteenth century because of their vulgarity, their banning was also a result of the generalized persecution of Jesuits and the prohibition of Jesuit theatrical representations. The eighteenth century, explains Romero Salinas, "[e]s el siglo de la expulsión de los jesuitas y es también el siglo en que la literatura y el teatro, concretamente la pastorela con el nombre de coloquio, fue perseguida por la inquisición" (45). It seems that part of the reason for their banning had to do with the fact that the general population had come to greatly enjoy and profit from these performances, which were staged without any authoritative figure present. Romero Salinas gives the following example, citing an anonymous complaint from the Inquisition archives: "aunque una u otra vez se representa en las casas particulares y de religiosos un coloquio formado por sujeto instruido, lo más es en los patios de las casas de vecindad en los corrales, haziéndose grangería de ello" (47). In other words, local communities

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<sup>73</sup> Although these are not exclusive to Mexico, they are also performed in some parts of the United States, Spain, and Latin America (Herrera-Sobek 63), my analysis centers on their history only as it pertains to Mexico.

would perform plays that mixed sacred and profane content, much to the offense of the Inquisition and “las buenas costumbres.”

The *pastorela* in the following century became closely tied with the period of Independence, as this genre began to reemerge in the nineteenth century. The fact that political and religious repression had banned the performance of *pastorelas* made their reemergence politically charged. María Herrera-Sobek explains it in the following way: “A cycle developed during the Colonial period where strictly political ‘aesthetics’ dictated the banning of subversive, raunchy shepherds’ plays deemed to offend the ‘buen gusto’” (64). Thus, after Independence, “new literary freedom brought back the *pastorelas*.” And these, in the nineteenth century, “were being performed with great gusto, much raunchiness, and intense political satire” (65).

The key points I want to highlight with regard to the history of the *pastorela* are its religious (and evangelizing) origins, the masses’ subsequent appropriation of the genre, its banning by the authorities during the eighteenth century because of its sexual and political material, and its later recuperation and popularization during the period of the search for a national identity. After their banning in the eighteenth century, the *pastorela* reemerged in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; its content turned political and became an important part of Mexican history, tradition, and national identity (Romero Salinas 51).<sup>74</sup> In short, what is, at least for our purposes, the most significant aspect of the *pastorela* is what Herrera-Sobek very succinctly outlines as its “interplay between politics, subversiveness, sexuality and religious message” (64); in other words, its general affront against “la moral y las buenas costumbres.”

In terms of form, what must be highlighted is that certain Golden Age aesthetic practices influenced the *pastorela*’s evolution, particularly by enriching its language—which is both *culto* and vulgar (also in the sense of vernacular or plebian)—and by adding music to the performance—to which I will turn in the section on humor—through the incorporation of *villancicos* (Romero Salinas 43, 47). The *pastorela* also imitates the baroque *comedia* in its tone and formal structure; it is often divided into three (or four) acts or *jornadas* and its tone is both ludic and moralizing (46, 47). The performances also include *entremeses* and *seguidillas*, both representative of the Baroque tradition. These aspects will all be exploited by Rodríguez, especially the emphasis on language and tone, and the incorporation of music.

How, then, does the *pastorela* play into or structure *Sor Juana en Almoloya* (*Pastorela virtual*)? Jacqueline Bixler notes that *Sor Juana en Almoloya* “inverts the religious objectives of the traditional *pastorela*” (43). If we think of the sixteenth-century history of the *pastorela* I have just outlined, its primary objective was the evangelization of the indigenous populations. In other words, the intention of the shepherds’ play—in its origins in the American continent—was to impart Christian beliefs and indoctrinate the native population. That is, if the objective of the *pastorela* is to indoctrinate the populace in the teachings of the church, its inversion by Jesusa in the performance means to reveal the Church’s mechanisms and lay bare its duplicity. Rather than indoctrination, this becomes a hyperawareness of the Church’s role in censorship. The “depth” of the Church’s teachings becomes a readily legible surface of hypocrisy, whereby certain aspects of these teachings will be censored by *la Procuradora* (such as the birth of Christ) in order to make legible only that which fits within the frame of Christian notions of purity. In turn, *la*

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<sup>74</sup> In sum, what is most interesting is that the *pastorela* was already subversive almost at the moment it arrived in the American continent. By the end of the sixteenth century, the indigenous populations had already appropriated the *pastorela* by incorporating local customs, performing them in indigenous languages, and creating their own versions (Romero Salinas 19).

*Procuradora*'s censoring of this scene will highlight the inherent hypocrisy in the unrepresentability of the culminating scene of the *pastorela*.

That is to say, to include a *pastorela* in *Sor Juana en Almoloya* and to stage the performance itself as a *pastorela* means to both parody and appropriate the genre's strategies and mechanisms to subvert its "original" and "official" purposes—and, as a side note, it means also to appropriate the Baroque "play within a play." In other words, while the *pastorela* had already become a subversive genre through its historical development, its fundamental teachings are also put into question by Rodríguez.

First, with regard to the *pastorela* within the performance—the play within the play—it becomes the focus of *la Procuradora*'s accusations against Sor Juana's writing going against "la moral y las buenas costumbres." Among *la Procuradora*'s complaints are its (supposed) plagiarism (of the popular Mexican saying, which also gives its title to Laura Esquivel's famous novel, *Como agua para chocolate*),<sup>75</sup> the *pastorela*'s sexual and politically destabilizing content, and its vulgar language—the last complaint, as we have seen, has been part of the *pastorela*'s history all along. To illustrate, the exchange about her *pastorela* begins with *la Procuradora*'s criticism about the play's vulgarity:

PROCURADORA. Mire, mire, vamos ya pasando al terreno literario, hermana... Este texto que dice,  
Yo palpito en tus entrañas,  
junto a esa flama que arde  
por la envidia venenosa.

¡Ah! Y la lujuria imperiosa  
que ahora está tan de moda,  
pues todos a toda hora,  
quieren estar en el lecho,  
no en reposo, sino insomnio,  
con tan altas calenturas;  
como si fueran demonios.

SOR JUANA. Yo sobretodo quise desarrollar la entrada en el lenguaje. El verbo "palpitar"—

PROCURADORA. Es un verbo difícilísimo de conjugar.

SOR JUANA. ¿Por qué?

PROCURADORA. Bueno, yo no lo puedo conjugar.

SOR JUANA. ¿Por qué no?

PROCURADORA. La primera persona me está vedada, hermana. ¿Cómo que yo palpito?

SOR JUANA. Bueno, yo palpito, tú palpitas...

PROCURADORA. Es una vulgaridad y una hostilidad, hermana. Y esto está- esto va- va a verse por la juventud mexicana, hermana.

It is important to clarify here that the text *la Procuradora* reads is, in fact, part of the opening lines of a popular *pastorela* that was first staged in 1982, *Chispas, rayos y centellas o, Las esencias del diablo*, written by Mexican author, director, and actor Teresa Valenzuela (Ocampo 108). In the dialogue between Sor Juana and *la Procuradora* we find humor rooted in language play, a central characteristic not only of Jesusa Rodríguez's performances, but also of the

<sup>75</sup> In the *pastorela*, Sor Juana uses the phrase "estoy como agua pa' chocolate," which *la Procuradora* censures as plagiarism of Esquivel, saying "Laurita Esquivel está muy molesta."

*pastorela* genre, and of Golden Age ludic strategies more generally. Rodríguez, in Baroque burlesque fashion, adds her touch of humor through *la Procuradora*, who finds not only the ideas conveyed to be sinful and vulgar, but also the word choice of the verb *palpitar* whose first-person singular conjugation in the present tense ends in *pito*, that is, penis.<sup>76</sup> This exchange, although brief, elucidates the way the *pastorela* incorporates humor grounded in the seven deadly sins—in this case, lust—and in language, which will be further explored in the next section of this chapter.

The lines read by *la Procuradora*, in *Chispas, rayos y centellas* are part of the Devil's opening soliloquy; the Devil addresses the audience, telling them who he is and what he does, and about his relationship to people and their deadly sins. This is important to note because, although *la Procuradora* decontextualizes these lines, they highlight the kind of humor the contemporary *pastorela* inherited from the tradition that was banned by the Inquisition in the eighteenth century.

As the discussion between Sor Juana and *la Procuradora* continues, *la Procuradora* says to Sor Juana that, while she could ignore all the issues of vulgar language, plagiarism, and so on, it is impossible to overlook the fact that her *pastorela* contains two nudes (the partial nude of the Virgin Mary and the baby's total nudity):

PROCURADORA. Mire, mire, hermana. Vamos a hacer de cuenta de que- que- que su pastorela no tuviera nada de lo que ya encontramos, ¿no? Pero tiene *dos* desnudos. Bueno, un semidesnudo y un desnudo integral [...]

SOR JUANA. De ninguna manera [...]

PROCURADORA. Bueno. A parte- a parte, hermana, usted tiene que considerar la [...] calidad profesional, moral y artística de los que integran el espectáculo.

Sor Juana responds by maintaining that there is nothing sinful about her *pastorela*, and asks *la Procuradora* to allow her to perform one of the scenes so she can see for herself:

SOR JUANA. Yo quisiera mostrarle, por favor—

PROCURADORA. El pesebre, vamos al pesebre, hermana. Digamos que todo lo demás ya- ya- ya- ni madres [...]

SOR JUANA. [...] Que la madre vea que no hay nada pecaminoso.

Sor Juana asks *el Licenciado*—who has been and at this point is still pretending to be *la Virreina*, since the two of them had exchanged clothes so Lysi could come in to the prison unnoticed to see Sor Juana—to play the role of the Virgin Mary. They perform the birth of Christ: the Virgin Mary screams as she is giving birth; baby Jesus is born, she pulls out a nude doll from between her legs, and then holds it in her arms (Fig. 10).<sup>77</sup> The scene performs the classical iconography of the Virgin Mary holding baby Jesus (Fig. 11). *La Procuradora* responds by yelling: “¡Cállese ya! Eso no puede ser, hermana. [...] Es el parto, hermana. Eso pertenece a la intimidad de las

<sup>76</sup> This is achieved through the baroque device of *disociación* which we analyzed in the previous chapter; here, the dissociation is *pal/pito*.

<sup>77</sup> The typical *pastorela* tells the story of the birth of Christ, and for this reason its characters are Mary and Joseph, the angels, the shepherds, and the devils (Romero Salinas 47). In the Mexican *pastorela*, the shepherds often are named Bato and Gila. In the nineteenth century, the celebrated Mexican author José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi once noted the following commonality among the various *pastorelas* of his time: “Las pastorelas y coloquios más celebrados tienen su diablo como uno de los actores principales; y algunos no sólo tienen su diablo sino sus diablos, pues suelen tener hasta siete” (qtd. in Romero Salinas 48). In the traditional *pastorelas*, the role of the devil or devils is to tempt and divert the shepherds who are on their way to Bethlehem, which is almost always followed by “the battle between the Devil and St. Michael and or St. Gabriel,” allowing the shepherds to arrive at the nativity scene (Herrera-Sobek 65).

personas humanas. [...] Va en contra de la relación conyugal.” She then suggests that these scenes are solely there to attract a depraved audience, since the baby is completely naked. Sor Juana argues that the baby is nude because it’s the scene of a birth, but that, if *la Procuradora* so desires, they could dress the baby Jesus *in utero*.



Figure 10 Screenshot. *Sor Juana en Almoloya (Pastorela Virtual)*. 1995. El Hábito. Manuel Poncelis in the role of *el Licenciado* wearing the vicereine’s clothes playing the role of the Virgin Mary in the *pastorela*. *Hemispheric Institute Digital Video Library*. Accessed 20 Apr. 2016.



Figure 11 van Orley, Bernard. *The Virgin of Louvain*. Circa 1520. Museo del Prado, Madrid. Accessed 22 May 2016

The baby dressed *in utero* mocks the Catholic—and, by extension, Mexican—anxiety over and hypocrisy regarding nudity or, more specifically, sexuality—and the fear of sexual organs. Rodríguez notes the absurdity of the culminating scene of a *pastorela*, the birth of Christ, as unrepresentable. If Mary is a Virgin, what marks her is her purity. The Virgin Mary is meant to be thought of as a mother, but the “improper” aspects of her humanity must be completely veiled. But the question still remains: isn’t by definition the scene of a birth about bodies, about nude bodies more specifically? And what does it mean to emphasize the need of the baby Jesus to be dressed? On the one hand, clothing makes bodies socially legible—boys are (supposed to be) dressed in blue, girls in pink; on the other hand, it means that, following Christian iconography, the baby Jesus is only legible when his body is concealed. Not only is his humanity, that is, his bodiliness, concealed, but also any mark of race. In fact, *la Procuradora* further complains about the baby Jesus in the *pastorela* being too brown:

PROCURADORA. Pero mire el chamaco. ¡Mire ese chamaco, hermana! ¡Prieto!

SOR JUANA. Pero es hermoso. Es el- Bueno, es prietito porque estamos en México. Ahí sí, para que vea, puedo concederle. Pongamos que el niño sea rubio. Como usted.

In the end, enraged, *la Procuradora* bans the *pastorela*, condemning the play for containing immoral scenes, “capaces de corromper las buenas costumbres.” She then reads an edict that prohibits the representation of the *pastorela*, together with the banning of all of Sor Juana’s oeuvre. The closing of the play replicates the reasoning behind the Church and Colonial powers’ decision to forbid the performing of *pastorelas*. The central parody and irony here is that the very purpose of the *pastorela*—to teach the audience about the birth of Christ—is exactly the

reason why the *pastorela* is banned. This points to an inherent hypocrisy in Christian doctrine whereby birth becomes completely divorced from any focus on sexuality and/or the body.

Amalia Gladhart has previously pointed out that “[t]he subtitle, ‘pastorela virtual,’ implies that the [performance] itself is the work prohibited at the close of the play” (213). But why perform a *pastorela* and ban it within the performance? And why present the performance itself as a *pastorela*? Though *Sor Juana en Almoloya* is not really prohibited, it does point to the fact that “[a]lthough she [Rodríguez] runs an independent theater, the climate of intolerance to which Sor Juana alludes affects Rodríguez as well” (Gladhart 218). This further points to Rodríguez’s critique of Sor Juana as a censored figure, which I will be discussing later in this section. It is no surprise, then, that the *pastorela* as critique and subversion travels outward, onto its structure, as a framing device. That is to say, the incorporation of the *pastorela* not only points to Rodríguez’s experience with censorship in Mexico, but the *pastorela*’s form, its structure, also influences and informs the entire structure of the performance as a meditation on the history of censorship in Mexican culture.

Both Luis Felipe Fabre and Jesusa Rodríguez rewrite religious theatrical performances: Fabre rewrites the *auto sacramental*, Rodríguez the *pastorela*. In Fabre’s rendition of the *auto sacramental*, the central character becomes a mock Christ-like figure who must, in the end, be sacrificed. If the *pastorela* is the story of the birth of Christ, then Rodríguez’s mock-*pastorela* is about the oxymoronic unrepresentability of that which the *pastorela* celebrates. Both of these texts also follow—however loosely—the structure of those traditional religious performances. We should recall that Fabre’s text, following the *auto*’s convention, begins with a *loa*. While the *loa* in *La sodomía* is explicitly marked, we can nevertheless see how the opening scene in *Sor Juana*, similarly to the function of a *loa*, introduces the audience to the general topic of the performance.

According to Romero Salinas, the *pastorela* maintains the following structure (granting that there can be some minor variations): the performance opens with a *loa* or presentation, followed by a procession with song and dance. There is a chorus. The performance contains dialogues between devils or a speech by a devil, as well as dialogues among the shepherds (usually regarding the seven deadly sins). Its plot involves Joseph asking for lodging and Christ is born in a manger; the devil tempts the shepherds and attempts to delay their arrival to witness the birth of Jesus; there is a fight between Saint Michael and the devil; the shepherds arrive in Bethlehem and sing *villancicos*. The *pastorela* closes with song and dance (13). And, we must not forget the relationship between the *pastorela*’s structure and moralizing purpose: “el género ‘pastorela’ y producciones afines se presta al esfuerzo moralizador a través de la experiencia teatral de la que se obtienen enseñanzas y purificación. Y además, seguramente, sobre todo diversión y placer escénico” (Vázquez de Castro 56). Through the performance, the audience gains specific—that is, moralizing—knowledge; however, we cannot ignore the aspect of pleasure that is involved in the performance, the ludic devices that are transformed and materialized as the audience’s enjoyment.

*Sor Juana en Almoloya*’s opening can be read as a presentation or *loa* akin to those in *pastorelas*. In this opening scene, the letter Sor Juana writes to the ex-president functions as a monologue that contextualizes the performance the audience is about to see, much like the *loa* of the early modern *pastorela*. The main difference is that, while a *loa* is intended to give praise to whom the play is dedicated, the opening of *Sor Juana en Almoloya* mocks the ex-president and the entire system he represents. Like the early modern *pastorela*, *Sor Juana en Almoloya* also incorporates sung *villancicos*, yet these function as torture devices, rather than as a celebration of

the birth of Christ.<sup>78</sup> Yet in *Sor Juana*'s closing, unlike in the classic *pastorela*'s, the music is not joyous and there is no dance or celebration. *Sor Juana en Almoloya*, instead, closes with somber censorship. Yet even with the absence of dance, joy, and the final celebration, the songs and poems that comprise *Sor Juana en Almoloya* do provide a structure that parodies that of the *pastorela*.

What must be noted at this point is that *Sor Juana en Almoloya*'s plot does not follow that of the *pastorela*; only the *pastorela* within the play shows us glimpses of a classic *pastorela*—the story of the birth of Christ and the shepherds that travel to witness it. In *Sor Juana en Almoloya* there are no devils—though there are certainly devilish characters. There is no fight between the devil and saints or angels, and no fight between “good” and “evil”; instead, there is a parody of “good” versus “evil,” a battle of power, and the fight between ignorance and knowledge. Finally, many “sins” are portrayed, though not all seven deadly sins.

If we were to describe the overarching structure of *Sor Juana en Almoloya*, Rodríguez's performance would be divided as follows: a monologue, a soliloquy, three songs, three poems, a *pastorela*, Christmas music, and closing music. In sequence, the scenes are: an opening monologue by Sor Juana that rewrites *La Respuesta*; next we have a soliloquy by *el Licenciado* that rewrites that of Castaño's from the third act of *Los empeños de una casa*. The scene that follows is Rodríguez as Sor Juana's rewriting of Sor Juana's “Sonnet 165”—“Detente sombra...”—and the entrance of Lysi, the Vicereine, into Sor Juana's cell, including a parody of Octavio Paz's *Las trampas de la fe*, and an abbreviated version of Sor Juana's “Romance 61.” What follows is a song by Lysi, “Los sexos de Miller,” which rewrites a section of Henry Miller's *Tropic of Capricorn* to the tune of Liliana Felipe's adaptation of Bach's prelude No. 3. Next is a rewriting of “Hombres necios.” In the scene that follows, *la Procuradora* enters and sings the PAN's “hymn” to the tune of Shostakovich's 7<sup>th</sup> symphony. After the song, there is a long exchange between *la Procuradora* and Sor Juana regarding her sentencing, in which Lysi—whom *la Procuradora* thinks is *el Licenciado*—interjects, as does *el Licenciado* as the Vicereine. Then we have the *pastorela*. This is followed by a “compiled” song, “Plancarte,” sung and played by Lysi. In response to the song and the Vicereine's heresy, *la Procuradora* makes the Vicereine listen to bits of three songs from *La Navidad Mexicana* by Óscar Chavez as a torture device. The performance ends with two more scenes: the edict read by *la Procuradora*—as she exits, we hear Shostakovich's 7<sup>th</sup> symphony—and, the final scene, where Sor Juana writes her epitaph, closing with Shostakovich's 7<sup>th</sup> symphony playing in the background.<sup>79</sup> The performance is thus divided into ten or eleven parts (or scenes), depending on how we think of the sung *villancicos* and closing music—we could either separate these according to their scenes, or keep them as a unit, given that they are all playbacks.<sup>80</sup> Though Rodríguez's *Sor Juana en Almoloya* doesn't only reconstruct the *pastorela*, but also the *comedia*. This becomes evident not through form alone but also by looking at the performance's structure together with plot lines and performance strategies such as the use of drag, the specific monologues that are incorporated, and the function of certain characters. Most of these aspects, however, I will be analyzing in more detail in the following sections.

<sup>78</sup> Toward the end of the performance, as punishment for her sacrilege, *la Procuradora* will force *la Virreina* to listen to *villancicos*, torturing her to the point of madness.

<sup>79</sup> Shostakovich's symphony, which is typically thought of as a denunciation of totalitarianism, is inverted here and serves as an oppressive and fascist anthem, a mark of evil and terror.

<sup>80</sup> The characters do not sing these songs; they are played on speakers.

*Sor Juana en Almoloya* appropriates the *pastorela*'s own tools and structure to subvert its original evangelizing purpose. Yet the banning of the *pastorela* within the performance, as Gladhart has keenly pointed out, implies that *Sor Juana en Almoloya* is itself the performance that is banned at the end of the metafictional play. What this points to is a larger critique of the growing influence of the Church in Mexico (and Mexican politics) and the effect it has had on art and freedom of expression. In an interview Jean Franco conducted with Jesusa Rodríguez in 1992, Rodríguez talks about the difficulties she and other artists have had due to the threats made by right-wing Church supporters. Rodríguez points out some of the repercussions: "I believe that here in Mexico it is more a matter of self-censorship than censorship . . . [T]here is the fear of taking risks, or risking one's economic position. I have observed that fundamentally people are more afraid of doing something, of taking risks and seeing what happens" (53). Rodríguez adds, though, that she is not afraid and has "no desire to censor [herself] at all."

Did something change in Rodríguez's perspective between 1992 and 1995? How can we read the role of censorship in *Sor Juana en Almoloya*? I believe that this censorship—the banning of the *pastorela*—rather than pointing to Rodríguez, centers on the figure of Sor Juana and her position in the Mexican cultural imaginary as a censored figure. What I mean by this is that the version of Sor Juana that has been endorsed and cultivated by the State (and the Mexican cultural establishment) is a censored one that aims to promote the values of the State—whatever these may be at different points in time; Sor Juana as a risk-taking poet is censored by the State and is rendered a one-dimensional, overly simplified figure.<sup>81</sup> In my reading of the performance, censorship is working on two planes: the political-religious and the literary. These are never separate in the performance but, rather, we see this dual censorship and critique occurring at the level of the very structure of the play itself. Through her appropriation of classical theatrical structures and religious theatre, Rodríguez's play marginalizes the classical and inverts the religious, thus using these cultural and religious establishments' very own tools to critique and subvert them.

## Humor

In the evolution of the *pastorela*, humor becomes one of its main features. As it turns from a tool of indoctrination to a popular form of entertainment, it begins to mix the religious with vulgar humor. The *pastorela* form thus sets the stage for the way humor becomes one of the central structuring mechanisms of *Sor Juana en Almoloya*, and of Rodríguez's work more generally. But what makes something humorous? What makes an audience laugh?

In "Laughter and Literature: A Play Theory of Humor," Brian Boyd outlines the three main theories that attempt to explain the sources of humor: the incongruity-resolution theory, the superiority theory, and relief theory. For our purposes, I will focus on the first one—since it homes in on the workings of language and concepts—and will only give a brief overview of the latter two. The first theory is best explained by Borges in an essay on Quevedo from 1927,

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<sup>81</sup> As I have argued elsewhere, "Su obra poética [de Sor Juana] se omite en favor de una cierta imagen de la poetisa: sor Juana como ejemplo a seguir, como símbolo de dedicación al estudio. Las complejidades tanto de su obra como de su vida son elididas, remplazadas por una sor Juana unidimensional que favorece al Estado. Esta imagen es la de una mujer estudiosa o, más bien, de un buen estudiante. Así, al borrar la importancia y el contenido de su poesía, las complejidades que ésta muestra de un personaje indómito e insatisfecho con el lugar que se le daba a las mujeres pasa no a un segundo plano sino a ser un simple telón de fondo escaso de elementos precisos. Sor Juana puede entonces ser vista como un lienzo en blanco sobre el cual se (des)dibujan diversas imágenes según las intenciones del Estado" (Bialostozky 194).



“Quevedo humorista.” Borges writes: “La comicidad nace de la percepción brusca de una incongruencia entre un concepto y los objetos reales que pueden ser incluidos en él” (*Textos* 284).<sup>82</sup> What makes something funny, according to this theory, is the incorporation of the unexpected or the incongruent, the break in our expectations.<sup>83</sup> What is also important to highlight here, for our purposes, is that Borges associates this type of humor, by definition, with Baroque ludic strategies.<sup>84</sup> The second of the three theories explains why we laugh at the sudden mishap or misfortune of others. This is the kind of laughter that arises from “slapstick humor, slipping on banana peels, custard-pies-in-the-face, ... as well as laughter as an instrument of aggression, ridicule, satire, censure” (Boyd 4). The third was explored by Freud in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* and in his essay “Humor”; this is the kind of humor that functions as “a source of pleasure. ... [T]his pleasure arises from an economy in psychical expenditure or a relief from the compulsion of criticism” (*Jokes*). Humor or jokes, in other words, give us relief or pleasure because “we can brace ourselves in humor” (Boyd 4).<sup>85</sup>

Borges’s explanation of incongruity is juxtaposed with another kind of linguistic humor he finds to be inferior to that of incongruence: wordplay or, more specifically, *retruécanos*. His disdain for the *retruécano* is succinctly explained as follows: “El chiste es pensamiento; el retruécano migaja aprovechada por la distracción del que no escucha las ideas sino las sílabas,” or, “[e]l retruécano nos desplace por su falsedad, por su ya notoria sofistería de barajar sonido y significación” (285). This kind of humor is disliked by Borges because, for him, there is no real play with logic or imagination, but simply a transposition of sound and meaning. This explains why Borges also rejected certain kinds of rhymes (in Lugones, for example) which do not pay attention to the relationship between objects and ideas, but simply to sound (Pellicer 33).<sup>86</sup> And while Borges acknowledges that Quevedo also employed such kinds of wordplay in his poetry, he highlights that the difference is that he did this as a joke, never seriously—“Quevedo, pese a su facilidad peligrosa, sólo usó del retruécano para bromear” (285). It becomes clear that what was important for Borges was the mental feat involved in the structure of humor. His disdain for wordplay and puns had to do with their simplicity. I find it helpful to start with Borges because it allows us to consider not only how humor is at work in the performance but, more importantly, what the inner workings of Rodríguez’s humor and ludic devices are. As I will show, Rodríguez mixes incongruence with wordplay as two of the main structuring ludic devices of the performance, taken from “opposing” Baroque traditions, a distinction we might describe in terms of “simple” and “difficult” humor.

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<sup>82</sup> Borges takes his ideas from those of Schopenhauer, who was the first to lay out a clear theory of incongruence.

<sup>83</sup> Boyd elucidates this kind of humor with two examples. The first, “Two behaviorists have sex; one says to the other afterwards: “That was great for you; how was it for me?” The second: “Lenny Bruce had a routine about his wife wanting to have a child. His response to her: “*Why bring strangers into the house?*” In the first case, there is a reversal of a familiar question and, in the second, it “appli[es] ... a familiar formula to having a child,” something unexpected (3).

<sup>84</sup> And, at the same time, the relationship between “real objects” and humor places emphasis on the relationship between pleasure and (im)materiality that we discussed in the previous chapter.

<sup>85</sup> Many have argued, however, that none of these theories go far enough to fully explain humor. While incongruity theory has been by far the most influential, “The major weakness of incongruity theory,” writes Jerry Farber, “has been a failure to account adequately for all of those instances of incongruity that are *not* funny: for example, brainteasers, logic problems, and puzzles” (68).

<sup>86</sup> Rosa Pellicer adds that this is why Borges ridiculed Lugones and his “ripios ‘fatales’” and explains that “el rechazo de la rima o, mejor, de rimas no usuales, [en Borges] tiene que ver con la ... unión imposible entre conceptos, que conducen a la comicidad, no al efecto poético” (34).

In this section, then, I will explore the different ludic strategies in *Sor Juana en Almoloya*; more specifically, I will focus on those that relate to language and voice. In order to do this, I will trace Rodríguez's language play back to the Baroque. As we will see, the way in which linguistic humor is deployed throughout the performance incorporates ludic techniques from the Baroque, particularly some of the salient features of the *comedia*, such as its linguistic experimentation, burlesque rhyme that parodies that of the lyric, and a condensed use of *redondillas esdrújulas* (Arellano, *El arte* 46-47). This is not to say that the theatre of the 1920s did not influence the humor deployed by Rodríguez, for it is evident, as Gastón Alzate has noted, that some central elements of the *teatro de carpa* are foundational for Rodríguez's performances, such as its vulgar humor: "en la carpa ... la obscenidad, los chistes escatológicos, las blasfemias y las groserías se usan hasta el paroxismo" (20). But my intent is to explore the intricacies of Rodríguez's humor which, I argue, largely owe themselves to a Baroque ludic tradition, particularly in that most of the humor in *Sor Juana en Almoloya* stems from a play with language learned from the Baroque that, as we saw earlier, Borges disdained: wordplay, linguistic ambiguity, play with colloquial formulas, and the juxtaposition of high and low language.

Let us, then, begin our analysis of humor in *Sor Juana* by looking at the function of wordplay (or what we might more generally call linguistic humor). In fact, wordplay is one of the ludic devices that are most heavily exploited in the performance, beginning with the letter Sor Juana writes to the ex-president in the opening scene of the performance. The letter is a satirical appropriation of one of Sor Juana's most famous texts, *Respuesta a Sor Filotea de la Cruz*, an answer to and a defense against the bishop of Puebla's preface to her *Carta Atenagórica*.<sup>87</sup> From Sor Juana's *Respuesta*, Jesusa Rodríguez will appropriate its exaggerated and mocking tone, as well as her feigned humility, which will be explored below.<sup>88</sup> In his prefatory letter to Sor Juana, which he had signed under the pseudonym "Sor Filotea," the bishop of Puebla admonishes Sor Juana for her secular writings and lack of obeisance to the Church's authority (Arenal and Powell 27).

In the performance, Sor Juana writes "La Respuesta Zopilotea." This first moment of satirical rewriting starts with the title, where the bishop of Puebla's pseudonym, Sor Filotea, with sharp comedic effect, is made into a near-homophone and neologism: *zopilotea*. The humor comes from the play with homophony.<sup>89</sup> *Zopilotea* becomes a composite vulture (*zopilote*)—an

<sup>87</sup> Arenal and Powell explain: "the 'Letter Worthy of Athena,' as the bishop of Puebla titled her [Sor Juana's] critique when he delivered it to the press, appending a letter signed 'Sor Filotea' as a preface. Ambivalent and ambiguous enough to have confused many generations of readers, the bishop's letter was for Sor Juana a purportedly friendly—and therefore wily and more painful—attack" (13).

<sup>88</sup> In all of Sor Juana's writing, we find examples of wordplay akin to those we've discussed in Quevedo and Góngora in previous chapters. More specifically, in her *Respuesta*, we find the deployment of double-entendres, such as in the following example highlighted by Powell and Arenal. This example comes from the *Respuesta*'s introductory paragraph: "El Segundo imposible es saber agradeceros tan excesivo como no esperado favor, de dar a las prensas mis borrones" (38). Powell and Arenal highlight the play with the double meaning of *prensas*, "which referred also to an instrument of torture: things that went to the press could lead to the presses" (30).

<sup>89</sup> In his study of Lewis Carroll's play with and manipulation of language, Robert Sutherland explains that one of the ways in which humor derives from the play with language is through the "manipulation ... on the phonic level," where "[t]he play ... stems from the homophony of lexical items and place names, the puns being revealed in the spelling of key words," such as in the phrase "if you're *Hungary* or thirsty" (22)—homophony, it must be noted, is much more effective in speech than in written form (175). This kind of phonic play is evidenced in the move from Sor Filotea to *zopilotea*, but the play, in this case, must not only be legible but audible, for the pun only works insofar as the audience is able to get the joke by hearing it. Hence why Rodríguez briefly pauses for effect before relaying to the audience the title of her letter: "Ya sé, le voy a dar la respuesta y la voy a titular: [pause] la Respuesta Zopilotea."

animal of prey *par excellence*—and a figure of power in drag by the addition of the final *a*—thus feminizing *zopilote*—which is further reinforced by Salinas appearing on screen in a nun’s habit. While the discussion of drag (and power) will be explored in the next section of this chapter, I want to simply highlight that here Rodríguez is implying that Salinas is a *zopilote* in the sense that he has preyed on the Mexican people, and is a hypocrite in that he hides himself behind a supposed lack of power—like the bishop of Puebla, who is alluded to by Sor Juana.

In the letter, Jesusa’s Sor Juana addresses Salinas de Gortari in the following way: “Ex-celentísimo, Ex-señor, Ex-presidente CSG, Carlos Sinvergüenza y Góngora, Salinas de Gortari, Conde de Sanborns, Marqués de Agualeguas, Virrey de Liconsa y Gobernador actual del yate Eco en las felices costas de La Habana, Cuba” (*Sor Juana*). Rodríguez’s Sor Juana feigns a humility that becomes palpable in the enumeration of exaggerated pseudo-noble titles. These reference different political scandals of the 1990s, and their puns come from mixing aspects of the seventeenth-century nobility titles with the twentieth/twenty-first century.<sup>90</sup>

If we take a closer look, the sarcastic title “Ex-celentísimo” appropriates those superlatives the historical Sor Juana used to describe the bishop of Puebla’s letter: “vuestra doctísima, discretísima, santísima y amorosísima carta” (38). The pun here comes through more clearly in written form rather than orally with the hyphenation of the first syllable.<sup>91</sup> By beginning the first three titles with *ex-*, Sor Juana ridicules his status. She then uses Carlos Salinas de Gortari’s initials, CSG, which are also those of Sor Juana’s contemporary and friend, the scholar Carlos Sigüenza y Góngora, to transform Sigüenza y Góngora’s last name into a near-homophone that accurately and amusingly describes the figure of Salinas as a shameless liar: *sinvergüenza*. (What more precise adjective could depict the character and actions of an ex-president who, through a letter written from self-imposed exile, attempts to clear his name off the numerous corruption scandals of which the public had little doubt he was guilty?) This strategy is similar to one of the *retruécanos* Borges gives as an example in his essay on Quevedo and humor: “bizco y vizconde” (285), which plays on the sound of these words and transposes them into “condes bizcos”<sup>92</sup> (or, if we follow Rodríguez’s formula of contraction, *bizconde*). Here, with the juxtaposition of the two words, *vizconde* ceases to simply signify Viscount to transform into a cross-eyed (Vis)count.

<sup>90</sup> Rodríguez’s incorporation of seventeenth-century titles, Conde, Marqués, and Virrey, again align the seventeenth and the twentieth centuries; these titles recall those of the Viceroy that ruled New Spain during Sor Juana’s time: Tomás Antonio de la Cerda y Aragón, Marqués de la Laguna, Conde de Paredes, Virrey de la Nueva España. With the “noble” title that follows his name, “Conde de Sanborns” Rodríguez’s Sor Juana hints at a critique of the close-knit circle of businessmen that immensely profited from Salinas’s neoliberal policies. A majority of the shares of the ubiquitous department store and restaurant, Sanborns, were acquired by the conglomerate Grupo Carso, owned by one of the world’s richest men, Carlos Slim. The next mock-noble title Rodríguez gives Salinas is Marquis of Agualeguas, his family’s place of origin in the state of Nuevo León (Muñiz). Virrey de Liconsa makes reference to the scandal about the government subsidized milk that turned out to be radioactive; the news’ story broke out in 1988. Finally, the reference to Cuba has to do with the ex-president’s whereabouts while in exile. Though his whereabouts in 1995 weren’t actually known, it was a source of much speculation; some suggested he went from country to country in a yacht, and that he went from the U.S. to Canada to Cuba and stayed some time in La Habana (Proceso). Hence the final title, “Gobernador actual del yate Eco en las felices costas de La Habana, Cuba.” Though the joke doesn’t end at speculative gossip but, rather, makes a subtle stab at the relationship between Mexican politicians and the Mexican media: the yacht, *Eco*, belonged to the Azcárragas, the owners of Televisa (Oppenheimer 329).

<sup>91</sup> In the published version in *Debate Feminista*, we see the typographical marks that highlight the dual pun: the use of *ex* to refer to his status as ex-president and the exaggeration of *excelente* through the superlative *ísimo* (395).

<sup>92</sup> The quote comes from the first verse of a sonnet in *Parnaso español*: “Son los vizcondes unos condos bizcos.”

These points of contact between Baroque and contemporary humor are central in the performance and become materialized into pleasure as the laughter of the audience. It seems that, for Borges, the pleasure drawn from humor comes from the intellectual feat, which is why he dismissed “lower” kinds of humor like wordplay, because they were too easy. Rodríguez, on the other hand, straddles both incongruous humor and “simple” wordplay. Pleasure is then not “intellectual” but, instead, bodily: the enjoyment comes from making queer sexuality and the queer body the sources of humor, laughter, and pleasure, as we will see shortly.

The play with the unexpected—the kind of humor Borges believed to be far superior to that of the *retruécano*—comes through the rewriting of specific poems, where the sudden shift of words or verses brings an otherwise courtly love poem into the realm of comedy, such as the rewriting of “Sonnet 165.”<sup>93</sup> Our expectation is that this is a poem of courtly love, but the break or incongruity comes when Rodríguez alters certain words and parts of verses that change the meaning of the poem entirely, while still retaining some of its structure and language. The sonnet becomes a mocking of the ex-president’s physical—grotesque—attributes (his baldness, for example)—by changing the fourth verse from “dulce ficción por quien penosa vivo” to “mugre pelón por quien penosa vivo”—as well as mocking the policies he implemented during his presidency, his privatization of certain sectors, and his (suspected) ties with the drug cartels.

Another way in which the rewriting of specific texts becomes a source of humor is in Rodríguez’s rewriting of Sor Juana’s “Romance 61.” In this rewriting, humor arises from the emphasis on sound rather than meaning, on “phonic substance” rather than “semantic valence,” thus “privileging ... the acoustic sphere,” as Adriana Cavarero terms it (1, 3). In this sense, humor is derived not from focusing on the actual content of the poem, but rather on what emerges from or is evoked by sound. Rodríguez’s Sor Juana rewrites the poem verbatim, however abbreviated, without altering any of its verses or words, until she arrives at the first word of the eighth verse:

SOR JUANA. Li- No. Sería muy obvio empezar con Lísida, ¿no? Lámina-

Lámina sirva el cielo al retrato,  
Lísida, de tu angélica forma:  
cálamos forme el Sol de sus luces;  
sílabas las estrellas compongan.

LYSI. Es como muy distante, ¿no?

SOR JUANA. ¿Cómo distante? Es esdrújulo.

Cúmulo de primores tu talle,  
dóricas esculturas asombra:  
jónicos lineamientos desprecia,  
émula su labor de sí propia.

LYSI. Émula no va.

SOR JUANA. ¿Cómo no? No le voy a poner fámula, o pólipa.

LYSI. No- no- pu-

<sup>93</sup> This kind of humor also explains what makes certain song mash-ups successful and humorous: “The incongruity in mash-ups is not only that two individually pre-existing songs are combined and moved from their original contexts; it is also between social conventions. Mash-ups often blend samples from what might be perceived to be resolute categories, such as high and low, serious and playful, black and white, rock and pop” (Brøvig-Hanssen and Harkins 90). While the version Rodríguez presents is not a mix of two preexisting poems but, rather, it is a transformation of a preexisting poem by mixing it with twentieth-century historical facts and gossip. In this sense, though there are key differences between the two structures, it nevertheless helps us understand how the blending of a sonnet with political mockery produces a comedic effect that results in the laughter of the audience.

SOR JUANA. *Ínclita*. Aunque suena como a clítoris.

LYSI. ¿*Ínclita*?

SOR JUANA. A mí me late. *Émula*, ¿no? Es una cosa- es una palabra dulce y además evocadora.

Clearly the emphasis is not on the words' semantic value, but on their phonic impressions and what they evoke in the audience, for the two words Sor Juana offers as replacement mean "servant" and "tumor," in a poem that is describing the Vicereine's beauty. Their only relation to *émula*—imitator—is that they are *esdrújulas*. The final suggestion Sor Juana proposes, *ínclita*, meaning illustrious, doesn't evoke the audience's laughter because of its meaning, but because of its phonic evocation of *clítoris*, as Sor Juana emphasizes in the scene.

This poem comes into the performance after some jabs at Octavio Paz—another instance in the performance of the juxtaposition of the high and the low, here allowing a criticism of public intellectuals—which I will be discussing in detail below. What is relevant to note here is that, in the moments before this *romance decasilabo*, Sor Juana and *la Virreina* exaggerate a scene of lesbian passion that mocks Paz's foreclosure of any possibility of a sexual relationship between the two women. This particular poem is one of the strongest examples that allow for a homoerotic reading of the relationship between the two women. In the poem, Sor Juana describes the Vicereine's beauty from head to toe. What is most interesting here is that in Rodríguez's abbreviated version of the poem—what is originally the fourteenth stanza, here is the second and last—the last stanza describes the Vicereine's waist, which has caused a bit of a scandal.<sup>94</sup> And if the scandalous nature of Sor Juana's focus on the beauty of the Vicereine's waist is not readily apparent to the audience, the alternate version proposed by Rodríguez's Sor Juana—to exchange *émula* for *ínclita*—achieves phonically what the "original" might not make readily legible to the contemporary audience. But this, in a way, rather than mocking the "uncultured" audience, mocks Paz's reading: that there is no larger "meaning" behind Sor Juana's poetry but that, in fact, it is all form, a product of the poetic conventions of the time. By emphasizing sound rather than meaning, Rodríguez is allowing us to laugh at the possibility of "knowing" poetic intentionality. Humor thus comes from mocking Paz's authority in the matter and by allowing a queer reading that becomes readily legible through rewriting. In other words, what Paz's reading hides or forecloses becomes evident through a play with sound and the staged performance of a sexual act, thus allowing for a queer reading (through rewriting) of the poem and the exaggerated scene preceding it. In this sense, Rodríguez puts voice and sound on the same level as erudite knowledge, and places humor on par with Paz's authority.

In this sense, Rodríguez criticizes public intellectuals and their role in constructing heteronormative histories—specifically the foreclosure of lesbian possibility between Sor Juana and *la Condesa de Paredes*. In *Las trampas de la fe* Octavio Paz rejects the idea that there could have been any possibility of homosexual desire or a relationship between the nun and the vicereine: "¿Por qué esa negación al matrimonio? Pensar que ella [Sor Juana] sentía una clara aversión a los hombres y una igualmente clara afición a las mujeres es descabellado" (158). In the performance there is not a hint of homosexual desire but a clear and exaggerated passion between the two women. The scene is not subtle—nor sublimated as an offstage voice suggests—but is so explicit that it becomes ridiculous, particularly while juxtaposed with the offstage voice as the two women kiss:

La mayoría de los biógrafos de Sor Juana darían el monto total de las becas y premios ganados por tener la oportunidad de atisbar desde lejos lo que vosotros tenéis ante

<sup>94</sup> See Alatorre.

vuestras narices. Octavio Paz, para no ir más cerca, en su obra *Las trampas de la fe* despeja todas las dudas que pudieran haber respecto de la relación decente, casta y pura que existió entre la Excelentísima Sra. Doña María Luisa Manrique de Lara, Condesa de Paredes, Marquesa de la Laguna, y Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz . . . . Nótese el safismo sublimado . . . Vedlas entregadas a las silenciosas orgías de la meditación. Una monja, la otra casada. ¿Qué podrían hacer juntas?

The revelation rendered visible in this exaggerated scene is not put forward as “truth,” but rather ridicules Paz’s attempt to pin down Sor Juana’s historical experience and serves as a queer exposure of the constructed nature of history.

When the two women leave the cot, Rodríguez as Sor Juana moves to her desk. As a further response to Octavio Paz’s conservatism, she rewrites Sor Juana’s “Sátira Filosófica,” more commonly known as “Hombres necios.” The first two stanzas are rewritten as follows:<sup>95</sup>

Hombres necios que acusáis  
a la mujer sin razón  
sin ver que también las hay  
que sí tenemos razón.

Si con ansia sin igual  
solicitáis el Nobel  
¿Por qué queréis que hablen bien  
si seleccionáis a Paz?

Although some of the rhythm is maintained, form is compromised in favor of content; Rodríguez substitutes words to fit the stab at Paz, creating an inconsistent rhyme scheme. Yet the audience readily recognizes the poem, and the overt attacks elicit great laughter. Rodríguez chooses to combine Sor Juana’s high poetic form with colloquial language that instantly grabs the attention of the audience and highlights the political intention of her rewriting. What I mean by this is that Rodríguez makes accessible as well as historically- and politically-specific Sor Juana’s more abstract “original.” In this way, she takes an already political satire to underscore its contemporary and future relevance.

We mainly see the high/low humor in the play with popular culture and Baroque literature. These kinds of incongruities are also exploited by the characters whose language often doesn’t match our expectation; only Sor Juana’s speech and tone is consistently erudite and temporally out-of-joint, in the sense that she speaks as an imagined seventeenth-century Sor Juana would. The main incongruity comes as *la Procuradora* speaks in a markedly vulgar tone, often cursing, which becomes a central aspect of the humor produced by that character, given that her political and moral positions do not match up with her outward expression (both linguistic and gestural).

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<sup>95</sup> Sor Juana’s sonnet’s first two stanzas are:

“Hombres necios que acusáis  
a la mujer sin razón,  
sin ver que sois la ocasión  
de lo mismo que culpáis:

si con ansia sin igual  
solicitáis su desdén,  
¿por qué queréis que obren bien  
si las incitáis al mal?”

Tito Vasconcelos, in the role of *la Procuradora*, comes on stage in a nun's habit to the tune of Shostakovich's 7<sup>th</sup> Symphony. *La Procuradora* marches through the stage, singing a mock-*panista* anthem—which reads nothing like the “original,” for its meter is meant to fit the rhythm of the 7<sup>th</sup> Symphony, rather than the octasyllabic meter of the PAN's anthem.<sup>96</sup> She is hunched and has a hateful and irate look on her face. Her “*panista* anthem” first reflects and then thrusts forth a mood of censorship to a high point; the song's opening stanza drives the point home: “Mueran los jotos, los invidentes / las prostitutas, las gentes indecentes / que quede limpio el mundo de seres inmundos.”

Shostakovich's 7<sup>th</sup> Symphony was composed before World War II, but is usually dated 1941. Solomon Volkov writes that Shostakovich had the symphony in his mind already by 1937; the Soviet composer was the type who, like Mozart, would conceive an entire symphony in his mind and then simply write it down. Yet the popular narrative is that Shostakovich wrote it *for* the war. Volkov explains:

The main argument of the proponents of a “war” origin for the Seventh Symphony is the official “program” of the first movement. This means first of all the “invasion” episode, in which the grotesque march theme, repeated eleven times, grows in intensity ..., creating a picture of evil forces inexorably approaching. The interpretation of this episode as an illustration of the events of the first month of war with Germany won wide popularity in the Soviet Union and in the West, and for a long time seemed absolutely irrefutable. (171)

Nevertheless, what is relevant for our purposes is the widely accepted or the popularized version of the story. So, let us stay with it. In this story, Shostakovich writes the Seventh (“Leningrad”) Symphony, dedicated to his birthplace, which was invaded by Nazi Germany on June 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1941

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<sup>96</sup> The PAN's anthem, written by Gonzalo Chapela y Blanco, the party's founder, is the following:

“Levantada convicción  
de justicia y de verdad  
varonil resolución,  
nuestra lucha inspirarán.

Los tiranos temblarán  
al oír nuestro pregón:  
¡Una Patria generosa  
y una vida con honor!

¡Libertad!  
¡Exigid!  
¡La Nación!  
¡Proclamad!  
¡Que el oprobio cese ya!

¡Libertad!  
¡Conquistad!  
¡Con acción!  
¡Nacional!  
¡Es la hora de luchar!

Nuestro México ha de ser  
con justicia y libertad  
una Patria para todos  
y un baluarte del ideal.”

(169). After the war, Shostakovich called it an anti-Hitler symphony and noted that its theme of evil and terror was about fascism and totalitarianism (172).

The part of the symphony appropriated in *Sor Juana en Almoloya*, to which Liliana Felipe wrote the lyrics, is exactly the episode which Volkov calls a “grotesque march theme.” If the “official” version of the symphony is a denunciation of totalitarianism, then Felipe’s becomes its inversion: an oppressive and fascist anthem; it is the reinstatement of evil and terror which, in this case, is not the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union but the Inquisition in seventeenth-century New Spain (though *la Procuradora*’s marching and the way she raises her arm, palm and arm extended facing the audience, is heavily reminiscent of Nazi Germany) (Fig. 12). Or, read a bit differently, this could also be a parodic take on the 7<sup>th</sup> Symphony—“A major way that music can comment upon itself from within ... is through parodic reworkings of previous music” (Hutcheon 3). In any case, this anthem is embodied by *la Procuradora*, who is also the embodied contradiction of seventeenth-meets-twenty-first-century: she is supposedly in favor of culture, but is a nun in charge of state censorship.

*La Procuradora* embodies the values of the right—both Church and State. She is the Attorney General, appointed by the PAN, and she is a nun in charge of prosecuting Sor Juana’s case. The song emphasizes a conservative view of sexuality through the use of burlesque rhyme. For example, the song rhymes *asquerosos*, *olorosos*, and *libidinosos*, to talk about sex and sexual organs as meant only for reproduction: “Todos los sexos son asquerosos / son agujeros peludos y olorosos / por si esto fuera poco son libidinosos.” Sex is a threat to “la moral y las buenas costumbres,” which is her main complaint about Sor Juana’s writings and the reason why her *oeuvre* must be and, in the end, is censored.



Figure 12 Screenshot. *Sor Juana en Almoloya (Pastorela Virtual)*. 1995. El Hábito. Tito Vasconcelos in the role of *la Procuradora*. Hemispheric Institute Digital Video Library. Accessed 20 Apr. 2016.

Much of the criticism incorporated into the performance through humor is condensed into the figure of *la Procuradora*. *La Procuradora* comes to stand as the materialization of state censorship, hypocrisy, and the tools of power; she is the performative voice of the state. She is, at the same time, one of the most effective characters on stage in terms of audience response; her character and the scenes of which she is a part produce great laughter in the audience.

In a sense, then, humor here functions as the bridge that allows us to read both political and literary history differently. Is it a coincidence that humor is also precisely what is connected to pleasure? Does Rodríguez’ performance hint at a certain pleasure we take in the notion that we ultimately cannot know history at all? The humor of the performance thus tells us that this opening up of alternate histories is not just a negation of an official version or of a claim to intellectual truth, but a mode of viewing history that allows us to dwell playfully in uncertainty.



## Drag

The same kind of questioning of the idea of truth and history, of stability in general, through camp and baroque artifice is present in the performance through another means: drag. Here, I will explore how drag functions as a key parodic element that draws a multilayered connection, a doubling, between the Baroque and the targets of Rodríguez's critique—politicians, prominent cultural figures, and the structures they represent and construct.

Drag denaturalizes gender by revealing it as a social construction. In other words, drag is a parody of gender, as it mocks the notion of an “original” and reveals that there are only copies.<sup>97</sup> Drag is also a kind of doubling, a folding that reveals that there are only surfaces. Following the idea that drag reveals the constructedness of gender—as Butler has argued—here drag further emphasizes the illusion of “originality” and “truth” that forces us to think about literature's relationship to history, culture, social expectations, and (literary) norms.

The concept of doubling is constant in the performance. In fact, it is a key structuring device that serves as a critique of not only hypocrisy—in the sense that there's always a “hidden” meaning or intent—but of the way history and politics are structured as doublings that seek to keep hidden the workings of power. Yet, when parodied, these are readily visible at the surface—since there is nothing *but* surfaces folded onto each other—which the performance makes evident through drag and the use of screens. There is a constant doubling in the performance that allows for a critique of past and present, and places emphasis on the weight of the past on the present, and, retrospectively, of the present's pull on the past.<sup>98</sup>

Drag serves as an entire framework for the performance, not only in its outlining of the relationship between copy and “original” but also in temporal terms. What this means is that drag serves to reveal the inner workings of gender construction, but also of gender as inscribed by time. Elizabeth Freeman's theorization of what she calls “temporal drag” as “retrogression, delay, and the pull of the past on the present” (62), makes this connection patent and highlights the importance of a temporal understanding of drag.

In the performance, the use of monitors and screens constantly presents a doubling of both time and embodiment: the monitor allows for the (re)presentation of (collaged) news from 1995 to coexist with the present of the performance—the year 2000—and the “drag” or interference and interruption marked by the seventeenth century. In this sense, Rodríguez

<sup>97</sup> As we know from Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*.

<sup>98</sup> I have similarly argued elsewhere: “La tecnología a finales del siglo XX presenta una posibilidad lúdica para Rodríguez, una forma de fusionar temporalidades e historias superficialmente dispares que, al ser mezcladas sobre el escenario, presentan posibilidades de distintas respuestas (y cuestionamientos) político-artísticos. El uso del proyector y la pantalla para confundir la política del XVII con la del XXI, junto con la inclusión del internet, hacen palpable una futuridad presente anclada en un pasado que, antes de la puesta en escena, nos habría podido parecer remoto o hasta irrelevante políticamente.

“Al abrir el performance con la ‘Respuesta zopilotea’, Rodríguez le da a Sor Juana voz para responderle al Gobierno/Iglesia y a los intelectuales mexicanos que han cerrado la posibilidad de diversas interpretaciones a la vida y obra de sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. Las consecuencias de la censura, del rol del Estado ante las artes, tuvo enorme peso para la vida y obra de Sor Juana, lo cual Jesusa Rodríguez resalta doblemente ante la reescritura del personaje histórico y su relevancia para la audiencia del México contemporáneo. El performance nos hace ver cómo la posición que ocupó la Iglesia en el siglo XVII en la vida de la monja puede ser fácilmente transpuesta al siglo XX — o XXI— de manera que la obra de sor Juana esté cargada de un significado sumamente relevante para la política y la estética contemporáneas. Sor Juana deja de ser un personaje unidimensional ... y cobra una voz plural, determinada, crítica y *queer*” (Bialostozky 208).

expands the performance of drag from its focus on the body to include temporality, language, and, also, the power embedded in these. Drag and its various screens serve as interruptions; they constantly pull on the performance, not allowing for any kind of linear understanding of time, politics, or sexuality. Rather than past and present being separate, organized and canonized through history, they are set up as constantly affecting and intervening in each other's structures and the way in which we read, understand, and relate to them.

If we look at the various ways in which drag creeps in and becomes a key parodic and satirical strategy in *Sor Juana en Almoloya*, we find it first in the performance's opening scene. In that first scene, Sor Juana laughs at Carlos Salinas de Gortari's letter to the media. Sor Juana reads on her monitor a news article that includes a picture of the ex-president wearing a nun's habit—the first appearance of drag projected onto a screen. The screen serves as a doubling of surfaces. But how does this doubling affect not only our understanding of the body and time, but also of any kind of representation: monitor, screen, and, thus, any kind of media? The use of monitors, particularly as they present a figure of power in drag, functions as further criticism of the construction and *reception* of discourses that attempt to hide the relationship between power and gender.

Rodríguez's rewriting of Sor Juana's *Respuesta* engages with this play on surfaces. Sor Juana's *Respuesta* is both a direct response to the bishop's letter and a more general defense against her detractors—Núñez de Miranda, her ex-confessor; Aguilar y Seijas, the Archbishop; and Fernández de Santa Cruz, the bishop of Puebla, who “wanted Sor Juana to stop writing and publishing with the latitude she had exercised,” and “to be more like other women in the convents of Spanish America” (Arenal and Powell 5). These detractors meant “to serve as agents of the church's mission to Christianize heathens; to guard orthodoxy; and to ensure social obeisance” (6). In her answer, Sor Juana defends her—and women's—right to knowledge and intellectual pursuits. The letter, like the screens, serves as an interruption that creates a double text: one that parodies the past, while, at the same time, functioning as a critique of the present. The audience is constantly made aware of these doublings, of the intimate relationship of the past, present, and future, and of their influence and effect on one another. That is to say, the past has as much of a pull on the present as the present does on the past—of our reading of the past in the present.

But this is only the beginning of the many-layered and complex relationship Jesusa Rodríguez suggests—through drag—between the seventeenth-century Church in New Spain and contemporary Mexican politicians. What, then, does it mean for Salinas de Gortari to be equated with the seventeenth-century bishop of Puebla? What are the parallels and intersections Rodríguez forges—or simply highlights?—with her “*Respuesta Zopilotea*”?

These questions draw us back to the bishop of Puebla's pseudonym, and the relationship of power his letter and Sor Juana's response structure. In *Plotting Women*, Jean Franco employs the term “transvestite game” to elucidate the uneven power structure that is revealed in Sor Juana's *Respuesta*. Franco explains:

Professing to write to Sor Filotea with “homely familiarity” and “less (fear of) authority [...]” Sor Juana plays a game of abolishing the hierarchical difference and then restoring it again [...], thus playing the transvestite game in such a way that the unequal power relationship is exposed. The transparent fiction of the pseudonym “Sor Filotea” is turned into a double-edged weapon, permitting an exaggerated deference to the recipient who is supposed to be a powerless woman and thus exposing the real power relations behind the egalitarian mask. (44)

By signing his commentary under the pseudonym “Sor Filotea,” the bishop attempts to disguise his authority and speak to Sor Juana as a friend and an equal. But, as Franco clearly points out, “[e]ven as transvestite the bishop still wields male authority” (43). By responding to and addressing the bishop as Sor Filotea, Sor Juana appropriates the same mechanisms he employs in order to expose, through parody, the very hierarchy of power the bishop seeks to hide. In her reply, Sor Juana reveals the bishop’s “institutional authority that no woman could possibly have” (43).

So what are the mechanisms and strategies at work in Rodríguez’s “Respuesta”? Though the ex-president’s drag persona is not addressed again in the letter, the parallel Rodríguez draws between him and the bishop of Puebla is patent. While the ex-president had not, in fact, published his letter under a pseudonym, nor was he actually disguised as a nun, Rodríguez’s strategy—to alter the newspaper image so that Salinas appears in a nun’s habit—performs her appropriation of Sor Juana as a visual materialization of her critique. That is, she dresses the ex-president in drag to visually perform the connection she suggests between the ex-president and the bishop of Puebla. To dress the ex-president in drag allows Rodríguez to critique contemporary politics through analogy.

Through this use of drag, and by rewriting Sor Juana’s historical letter to respond to the ex-president’s claims, Rodríguez builds a series of connections between the ex-president and the bishop, and between twentieth/twenty-first- and seventeenth-century Mexico/New Spain. Drag functions overall as an attempt to disguise (male) power. Yet through this very attempt, drag becomes the precise embodiment of unequal power, thus exposing the ex-president’s authority, and ridiculing his contention that he lacks any power or influence, and, more importantly, that he should be cleared of any blame. Drag is a way of *revealing*, of denaturalizing; just as drag denaturalizes gender, revealing it as a social construction, a copy of a copy, so does the figure of the president in drag reveal the constructedness of power relations and places emphasis on male power. Just as satire and parody are a way of making visible something that previously went unnoticed, drag places emphasis on the role of gender in power relations still in place in contemporary Mexico. In this sense, drag is not only a way of showing the constructedness of gender but also the way power is embedded in gendered relations.

On a basic level, Jesusa Rodríguez is showing and critiquing that nothing has changed in Mexico. On the surface, Rodríguez’s performance reveals the immediate Mexican reality, which is where the political comedy comes in, but we also find complex and thoughtful reflections on art and literature, on history and culture. She brings to the fore the increasing influence of the Church in contemporary Mexico, and, as Amalia Gladhart has pointed out, the constraints of the arts: “Rodriguez’s recourse to the figure of Sor Juana, and the placement of the historical character in prison, also point to the constraints on her own writing. Although she runs an independent theater, the climate of intolerance to which Sor Juana alludes affects Rodriguez as well” (218). This is then materialized in another figure in drag.

*La Procuradora*, the Attorney General in charge of prosecuting Sor Juana’s case, becomes the personification of the bishop’s pseudonym on stage. Tito Vasconcelos, in the role of *la Procuradora*, is dressed as a nun, making the Attorney General the embodiment of both State and Church power. In fact, Sor Juana addresses this issue in her letter to the ex-president by noting the following: “Escribo desesperada porque hoy la procuradora (que aunque no lo creáis el PAN ha puesto una monja al frente de la PGR)<sup>99</sup> habrá de dictar sentencia sobre mi caso y

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<sup>99</sup> PGR stands for Procuraduría General de la República, the governmental body in charge of prosecuting federal crimes.

temo con fundamento no me dé oportunidad siquiera de defenderme.” On stage, she is also referred to, at different points in the performance, as *madre superiora* and Sor Margarita Lozano Gracia—in reference to Antonio Lozano Gracia, who was a member of the PAN, the Attorney General appointed by Zedillo at the beginning of his presidency.

Her role is to represent the State/Church and to impose its ideas by censoring and “cleaning up” anything that goes against “la moral y las buenas costumbres,” in an attempt to reinstitute these in Mexico. Similarly to Sor Filotea, *la Procuradora* Sor Margarita Lozano Gracia both hides and exerts her power over Sor Juana. At various times in the performance she tells Sor Juana that she is there to help her because, she says, “[n]osotros estamos a favor de la cultura, hermana, a favor de la cultura.” Just as the bishop of Puebla, writing under the pseudonym Sor Filotea, seeks to hide his power through drag and pretends to be on Sor Juana’s side as an equal, so does *la Procuradora* attempt to hide her power by appearing to be on Sor Juana’s side. Yet she is the embodiment, insofar as she stands in for the State’s authority, of the very workings of power.

Drag, in this sense, functions as performative rewriting, as a reconstruction and recreation of historical and political characters, and the facts and events to which they are tied. It both serves to critique the present, as well as the weight of the past on the present. As Elizabeth Freeman has argued, drag functions “as a *productive* obstacle to progress, a usefully distorting pull backward, and a necessary pressure on the present tense” (64). The past is never completely gone or static: it continues to influence and shift our “reading” of the present, which drag brings to the fore.

What must be noted is that the use of drag in theatre was already a Baroque ludic strategy. In fact, one of the characteristics of the *comedia* is its deployment of drag. With Vasconcelos, then, Rodríguez is more than placing a version of Sor Filotea on stage, she is, in fact, going back to an important theatrical tradition.

In Golden Age theatre, cross-dressing had a prominent place.<sup>100</sup> The staged *comedia* was, unlike written texts, geared toward a mixed audience, both cultured as well as uneducated (Donnell, *Feminizing* 25). The *comedia* was also a commercial medium, which meant that it was subject to censorship by the state, which is the way most scholars explain why the genre is seen as adhering to propagandistic structures/performances, and why it consistently has a heteronormative closure: the promise of marriage. But Sydney Donnell argues “that cross-dressing in both text (reading and writing) and stage performance served [in the Golden Age] as one of the principal means of exploring variant signs of identity and of interrogating the dominant discourse that supported the ruling elite” (26).

What this means for *Sor Juana en Almoloya* is that drag similarly serves to interrogate dominant discourses by revealing the inner workings of power and employing these as a source of critique. But the *Procuradora* is not a character who hides her identity by cross-dressing, as do other characters in the play—and as is characteristic of the *comedia*—rather, this is a camp strategy, for it is the actor, not the character, who is dressed in drag.

Part of what we see with camp is the play between the high and the low—which we also discussed with regard to linguistic play. This is seen beyond language, as camp heightens the emphasis on the body and its gestures. This is also where excess comes in as grotesque—that is, bodily—humor. These camp aspects are also performed by *la Procuradora* as she snorts cocaine

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<sup>100</sup> In his scholarly writing, Sidney Donnell has analyzed the role of the transvestite (or cross-dressed) subject in the works of Lope de Vega, Sor Juana, and Calderón de la Barca, for example.

on stage and then farts loudly while passed out from taking too many drugs. *La Procuradora* embodies the hypocrisy that satire feeds on.

Through the role of *la Procuradora*, *Sor Juana en Almoloya* appropriates both Baroque strategies and a camp aesthetic, stressing the connection between these two practices. Camp rewrites the Baroque's emphasis on the body and its use of transvestism to highlight the exaggeration and artifice of gender. In the case of *la Procuradora*, this exaggeration and artifice functions as a critical rewriting of the ways in which power is exercised. If we think back to Sor Juana's *Respuesta*, the bishop of Puebla uses a female pseudonym and speaks to Sor Juana as an equal in order to disguise the power s/he has and is, in fact, exercising over Sor Juana. Yet the use of a drag pseudonym only more clearly reveals the mechanisms through which power operates.

Camp brings attention to gender and sexuality, and the Baroque does not simply provide the historical context, but, more importantly, the layers of subversive critique that satire and parody render possible. Together, surface and excess reveal "deeper" issues, both past and present; on the one hand, camp allows us to review the past/present with a critical eye focused on gender and sexuality, while on the other hand, the Baroque sheds light on the deceptively simple. Camp brings attention to gender and sexuality, and focuses on the queer body;<sup>101</sup> in the case of the epistolary exchange between Sor Juana and the Bishop of Puebla, who attempts to hide the gendered inequality of power, in his appropriation of the Bishop, transformed into a contemporary version of the seventeenth century Church power, *la Procuradora* exaggerates the gendered appropriation, thus placing emphasis on that which the historical character sought to hide. Every aspect of the "nun"-to-nun relationship is exaggerated in the performance as a parody of the seemingly unimportant role of gender throughout history. This relationship is re-created on stage, highlighting the hypocrisy of those who represent Church/State power. Just as the Bishop of Puebla and the other men who represented the Church in New Spain sought to stymie Sor Juana's literary and creative endeavors by hiding behind a veil of friendship, *la Procuradora*, too, hides behind a mask of powerlessness and friendship. But camp emphasizes this hypocrisy by denaturalizing gender, bringing attention to the body in drag and, through these mechanisms, also brings attention to the theatricality behind these seemingly erased structures of power. In this way, camp brings attention to the contemporary state of independent art in Mexico, but also works as a retrospective commentary on power and gendered relations in Mexico's past, the place of Sor Juana in Mexico's cultural history, and the image put forth by the State's cultural establishment.

We have thus seen how, through the use of form, humor, and drag, and the recycling and rewriting of Baroque strategies in each of these, Jesusa Rodríguez's *Sor Juana en Almoloya* parodies not only the rule of law in contemporary Mexico, but, on the same plane, the ways by which we come to read and historicize the past. Through her exploration of Baroque theatrical forms, Rodríguez establishes a connection between the seventeenth and the twentieth/twenty-first centuries, and also sets the stage for a critique of and a subversive attitude toward literary form in general, exposing the contradictions embedded among the layered histories of the *comedia* and the *pastolera*. Humor becomes a further tool for critique, as Rodríguez uses it to undermine expectations and traditional ways in which we come to value, judge, and assign meaning to literature, history, and dominant discourses. Drag performs a similar role: its primary

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<sup>101</sup> In my reading of camp, it is always necessarily related to queer notions of sexuality and the body. José Amícola, for example, marks the difference between kitsch and camp in the following way: "el camp recicla el kitsch, pero acentuando el significado de construcción de las imposiciones de *gender*" (16).

function is a bringing to the surface, wherein the larger “truths” of literature and political history are exposed as constructions. *Sor Juana en Almoloya* thus constantly emphasizes on the pull of the past on the present and the way the present appropriates the past as a way to question and subvert the structures of power.

## Conclusions

I began this dissertation with the question of why the Baroque in particular has been so important for queer contemporary authors: Why return to the Baroque? What is it about the Baroque that feels so contemporary, and what aspects of the Baroque are Latin American queer authors interested in exploring and appropriating? And how does sexuality enter to weave the two traditions together? In order to talk about these returns and the relationship between contemporary authors and the Baroque histories and texts on which they focus, I have used the term “queer rewriting.” Queer rewriting emphasizes the centrality of sexuality, the notion of repetition, and the task of writing itself.

The chapters that structure this study have proposed that the Baroque’s penchant for excess and artifice and its emphasis on the sensuous surface of language are what have primarily drawn the writers and artists at the center of my analyses: Néstor Perlongher, Alejandra Pizarnik, Luis Felipe Fabre, and Jesusa Rodríguez. In my readings of their rewritings of the Baroque, I focused on the notion of surface to emphasize the ways in which the work and play with language carry meaning. While this play with the surface might seem to reject the possibility of “depth,” ultimately, these authors delight in the playfulness of the Baroque to present us with alternative modes of understanding our relationship to literature and history. It is this very engagement with the surface (of language, of history, of bodies) that allows us to discover new understandings and more nuanced readings of the past and its effects on the present.

These four authors’ rewritings place sexuality—queer sexuality—at the core of our relationship to history and literature. Through this focus on queer bodies as they are mapped onto the page through wordplay, perversion, artifice, excess, and/or humor, these authors carve out a critique of heteropatriarchal cultural legacies. Perlongher, Pizarnik, Fabre, and Rodríguez each linger on specific historical moments to not only mock normative and orthodox History, but to reimagine alternative possibilities and highlight an inherent queerness that has often been overlooked or foreclosed.

As a way to open these avenues of reading and rewriting, this dissertation began with the work of Néstor Perlongher, who served as my point of departure for a theorization of queer rewriting. His own writings on the Baroque allowed me to map out the main characteristics of the Baroque that have been appropriated by queer authors in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. His play with surfaces allowed me to raise questions about linearity and communicative language, while his play with excess and complex syntactical structures opened up avenues of reading that reject normative understandings of history and literature and the way these have been canonized.

From Perlongher, I gained a deeper understanding of how a focus on the queer body and its pleasures disrupts a normative reading of history. In other words, Perlongher allows/forces his reader to raise the question of the place of sexuality in History and the way in which a focus on queer sexuality both highlights and disrupts particular moments and readings of Historical events and characters. His essayistic and poetic writing has further served as a way into the baroque inheritances of queer Latin American authors. His theorization of the Baroque and the Neobaroque thus functioned here as the foundation from which I began to dig into and (re)envision contemporary Latin American queer literature and its genealogies.

My first step in outlining this queer genealogy was to read Alejandra Pizarnik’s later work, in particular *La condesa sangrienta*, as a precursor to Perlongher’s *neobarroso*. By reading Pizarnik’s text through this perspective, this dissertation has resituated her queer writing as

fitting within a Neobaroque lineage in which she has been largely overlooked. In *La condesa sangrienta*, Pizarnik performs a surface reading/rewriting of Valentine Penrose's *La comtesse sanglante*. The text establishes an aesthetic of the surface that aims its attention on the visible acts of female cruelty: Pizarnik foregoes the descriptive moments in Penrose's novel—those that veer away from the scenes of torture—to highlight and heighten the scenes of female cruelty and desire—the queer moments in the text. Pizarnik is not interested in thorough explanations, but rather in rendering surfaces visible, in transforming long episodes into brief, focalized *tableaux vivants* of queer desire and torture. Pizarnik's text focuses on an excess of queer violence and pleasure; her text is constantly transgressing the limits of normative sexuality and claiming a space for non-normative practices within literary history.

This notion of violence and its place in history is also a central aspect of Luis Felipe Fabre's *La sodomía en la Nueva España*. Through his poetic restaging of a historical episode of queer persecution in the seventeenth century, Fabre forces the reader to engage with parts of history that have been “erased.” But whereas Pizarnik works with queer histories through a horrific lens of queer violence, Fabre's tone is much more playful, more akin to Perlongher's campy appropriations of Baroque language play. He directly inherits this strategy from Quevedo's burlesque poetry, wherein he finds the irreverent, sardonic humor characteristic of *La sodomía*. Through an exploration of queer pleasure and its characteristic (non)productivity, Fabre's text becomes a play of paradoxes that, rather than being resolved, lead to a sort of fruitful ambiguity and allow for acts of creation that do not rely on normative notions of originality.

In *Sor Juana en Almoloya*, ambiguity also plays a central role, but Jesusa Rodríguez uses it to explicitly question the ways by which we have come to understand and historicize the past. The performance stages Sor Juana's silencing within the intellectual community of the seventeenth century as a literal imprisonment in a futuristic twenty-first century. Whereas Fabre's text is playful, Rodríguez's is more overtly subversive and critical of contemporary Mexico. Through her rewriting of Sor Juana's life and texts and of baroque humor and theatrical forms, Rodríguez brings the past to the surface to critique both heteronormative readings of Sor Juana's life and the hypocrisy inherent in contemporary politics and literature. These strategies further serve as tools to expose the constructed nature of literary and political history and subvert the structures of power.

In sum, this dissertation has found in the rewritings of a seemingly disparate group of contemporary Latin American writers and artists various modes of returning to the Baroque—to its emphasis on surfaces—that open up non-normative ways of reading literature and history. This dissertation's guiding questions—Why return to the Baroque today? How does the Baroque enable queer rewritings?—have led me from Perlongher's disruption of History through the queer body to Pizarnik's rendering visible the place of transgressive queer female cruelty in literary history, Fabre's ludic engagement with erased histories, and Rodríguez's subversive critiques of historical and contemporary power structures. Their textual engagement with the surface, both as an act of rendering the hidden visible and as language play that reveals but never resolves paradoxes, has thus opened up alternative possibilities for non-normative literary and historical genealogies and practices.

In terms of situating this dissertation within a broader field of study, it has been my aim to engage with queer theory without relying exclusively on Anglo-American or European theorists. That is, while Anglo-American queer theorists such as Judith Butler and Elizabeth Freeman were significant in unpacking some of the questions raised by this dissertation, I



purposefully focused on generating a Latin American queer theory that stems directly from the main texts studied here. I also explored the work of other queer Latin American scholars, such as Sarduy, Perlongher, Novo, Gruzinski, among others, whose ideas on sexuality were foundational for the authors on which this study is centered. The historic, linguistic, and cultural specificities of the queer theory that was brought about in these pages are essential to continuing to structure a discussion of sexuality and literature in Latin America. It is my hope that together with the more theoretical texts written by Perlongher and Sarduy, the poetic and performance pieces of Fabre, Rodríguez, Pizarnik, and other Latin American artists begin to circulate more freely among queer scholars who are interested in the way the sensuous play with language and history force us to work with ambiguity and find pleasure in contradiction.

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