

Tropical Encounters and National Identities: The Neobaroque and Buenos Aires



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Giselle Román Medina

Haverford College

Buenos Aires’s self-image is often one of exceptionalism: that of a “European” city located in Latin America. The anxiety of remaining part of Western culture from a very peripheral location has shaped the identity of the city, often extrapolated to the entire Argentine country. This Europeanist identity has had its anti-models, so to speak. Such is the case of the “tropical,” which is typically perceived as the opposite of European values—that is to say, as exuberant nature that counteracts civilization, and as the natural site for nonwhite people. Argentine poet Néstor Perlongher, though, refashioned a different idea of the “tropical,” one that provided a new way of representing the city, whose writers he characterizes as “desconfiados por principio de toda

tropicalidad” (PERLONGHER, 1997b, p. 97).¹

Perlongher was a political activist for sexual minorities in Argentina during the 1970s, and an anthropologist in Brazil during the 1980s. After he died in 1992, his *neobarroso* poetry, inspired by Cuban neobaroque poetics, started to draw the attention of literary scholars. In the process of converting the neobaroque into *neobarroso*, Perlongher departed from one of the possible etymological origins of the word *baroque* as traced by Cuban writer Severo Sarduy: “Nódulo geológico, construcción móvil y fangosa, de *barro*, pauta de la deducción o perla” (PERLONGHER, 1997b, p. 167).² The *neobarroso* privileges “barro,” alluding to the characteristic clay silt of Buenos Aires’s river, el Río de la Plata (p. 97). Perlongher’s book of poetry, *Parque Lezama* (1990), exhibits this link with the neobaroque through a homage to the Cuban poet José Lezama Lima. Scholars have overlooked that his original adaptation of neobaroque poetics is strongly related to the role of tropicality in his work. This refashioning of the “tropical” is what I have focused on: in particular, I look at how it is profoundly intertwined with an atypical way of imagining Buenos Aires, resulting in an innovative approach to the relationship between representations of landscape and identity.

Linked to its role as the capital of Argentina, Buenos Aires had traditionally been conceptualized through a center–periphery axis, and its variant, city versus country. As critic Beatriz Sarlo has shown, Jorge Luis Borges avoided these dichotomies by drawing an Argentine *orilla*³—the shoreline or the bank of a river—from which the universal and the local could be conceptualized simultaneously. But once Borges had recharted the city, and Julio Cortázar’s and Juan José Saer’s literary projects had followed a similar line, what else could be done? Perlongher provided an answer by opening the Argentine shoreline to cultural spaces and readings that neither Borges nor his immediate

1 “Suspicious, on principle, of any tropicality.”

2 “A geological node, a mobile and muddy construction, from *barro*, pattern for the deduction, or pearl.”

3 When Sarlo says “Borges es un escritor de orillas,” she means that he writes from the periphery. She is also alluding to the shoreline of Río de la Plata as a physical representation of that periphery. That periphery represented by the river, however, provides a channel that allows the circulation of universal subjects.

literary successors had considered. Perlongher's recharting of Buenos Aires avoids those simple dichotomies, but unlike Borges, he does not attempt to conceptualize the *universal*. Instead, once we look beyond his initial exoticization of the tropics, we can see that Perlongher cultivated the idea of a shoreline that stimulates intra-Latin American flows. He established this shoreline through his literary readings of the Caribbean during his exile in Brazil. Thus he was influenced by two cultures marked by a strong African component and by their tropical geography.

Perlongher exoticized and sexualized Brazilian racial difference in order to emphasize what Buenos Aires lacked. For him, São Paulo was more livable because of its black population. After a trip to São Paulo in 1979, Perlongher wrote in a letter: "la pasé bárbaro en los trópicos ... Quedé muy apegado a la democracia racial brasilera, a la que conocí—presumo—demasiado de cerca" (PERLONGHER, 2003, p. 34–35).⁴ He was disappointed with Buenos Aires, which he described as "snuffed out," and this motivated him to pursue graduate studies in "esas zonas de climas más cálidos, como ser los brasiles, paraísos terrenales" (p. 34).⁵ Perlongher calls himself a "sexual exile" (BRAVO, 2002, p. 60). This self-labeling can be understood in two ways. On one hand, it suggests that the persecution Perlongher experienced in Argentina motivated him to find another space; he was arrested several times in 1981 for what he described as his "marica" or "faggoty" appearance (BRAVO, 2002, p. 256). On the other hand, Perlongher also presents himself as a sort of pleasure-seeking tourist. His tendency to exoticize these spaces is in constant dialogue with his uses of tropical imagery, not only in a way understandable to Western audiences, but one that is also used by people in these countries as a strategy of self-representation.

In contrast to the above-cited passage, Perlongher did not limit his idea of what is "tropical" to stereotypes, but in fact resignified it through his appropriation of Lezama Lima's poetics and Sarduy's neobaroque. In a 1987 interview, he made his foundational choice explicit:

4 "I had a wonderful time in the tropics ... I became quite attached to Brazilian racial democracy, which I got to know—I presume—much too well." The irony of this apparently exoticizing sentiment lies in the ambiguity of the term "bárbaro," which can mean both "wonderful" and "savage."

5 "In warmer climates, like the Brazilian ones, earthly paradises."

Parque Lezama viene de la revolución (de la perturbación) que fue para mí zambullirme en Lezama Lima ... Esa imantación irresistible coincidió con que yo ya estaba en Brasil. ... *Parque Lezama* es, también, un parque de Buenos Aires, donde vaya si anduve... Y es justamente en el sitio hoy ocupado por ese parque donde se fundó la ciudad de Buenos Aires.

(PERLONGHER, 2004, p. 322)⁶

While in Brazil, Perlongher initially planned to write an essay on Lezama, but eventually opted for poetry (PERLONGHER, 2004, p. 322). In other words, his interest in Lezama stimulated a poetic practice. The double meaning of “Lezama” enabled both an obvious interaction with the Cuban writer’s poetry, and a way to channel his ideas regarding the tropical towards Buenos Aires.

In *Parque Lezama*, the Buenos Aires or “good airs” that give their name to the city are transformed into “tropical airs.” The trope of “air” is fundamental in Lezama’s poetic system.⁷ Perlongher transformed it into tropical or humid air, and likewise intertwined it with the tropes of water and fish, which represent the Río de la Plata. As my analysis shows, water and fish are marks of an Argentine territoriality that would be reshaped with Lezama’s air. The poem “Trópica” posits air as poetry’s beginning, and as a key element of tropicality:

El aire de los trópicos es denso.
 Reblandecidos chocolates medran en esa densidad
 frutillas se relajan en la adherencia
 de la pelambre lúcida o sombría,
 luminiscencia que ese aire
 carga con un presagio de cenizas.

(PERLONGHER, 1997a, p. 199)⁸

⁶ *Parque Lezama* comes from the revolution (from the perturbation) that diving into Lezama Lima was for me ... That irresistible magnetism coincided with my being in Brazil ... *Parque Lezama* is also a park in Buenos Aires, where of course I have spent some time ... And where the park is today is exactly where the city of Buenos Aires was originally founded.

⁷ Regarding Lezama, María del Valle Idarraga writes, “the privileged instance of the invisible in this poetic system is the air” (60).

⁸ I have not translated the poems I analyse. In order to facilitate their reading, I provide a gloss of them either in the footnotes or as part of the close readings. In the poem quoted here, the air is defined as “dense.” In this warm and humid density, chocolates melt and strawberries expand (“se relajan”). These strawberries and chocolates stick to the body hair (“pelambre”), which is characterized as “light” or “shadowy.” The air fills the luminescence—the rays of light that appear among the shadows—with an omen of ashes.

The opening verse of the poem offers a definition marked by the linking verb: “aire,” referring to both air and style, *is* dense. The density corresponds to a hermeneutic process that uses obscurity as a metaphor of the difficulty of reading Lezama’s and Perlongher’s poetry.

The poem reads as a complex interplay between density and lightness, clarity and obscurity. This dense or compact air involves an antithesis: it is supposed to be a light element, but because of its density, it approaches the liquid and solid states. This air melts or softens the chocolate; judging by this effect, it is warm. The heat expands the chocolates, changing them from solid to liquid state. Two reverse gradations occur. The humid air approaches the liquid state and the chocolates spread out. The humid body and the chocolates meet in the fluid. The dense, compact air melts the chocolates. The sticky aphrodisiac candy sticks to the “pelambre,” or fur, excessive hair that implies an animalization as one of the components that trace the erotic image. The antithesis, “pelambre lúcida o sombría,” or “lucid or shadowy fur,” is resolved: dark fur, what was hidden, is now in sight. This interplay of light and shadows is continued in the luminescence, which are visible rays in the dark. The ash in the air contributes to its density and can be seen through the light in the shadows. The air of the tropics becomes a metonymy of poetry. The poem is dense, and its fur, dark, hairy foliage.

The air can be read in two ways: as meteorological, and as a synonym for style. The first meaning refers to the natural qualities of the tropics, where the air is thick with humidity. This first reading might come from a travel guide or weather report. This is only a starting point, however, for the elaboration of the poetic meaning of the tropical. Expressed in this way, a hasty reading would lead to the conclusion that the air of the tropics, this natural factor, determines a style or a type of writing. These two senses of “air” are analogous to the double meaning that Parque Lezama embodies, as a foundational locus in Buenos Aires and as Lezama’s poetics. The air as climatic factor belongs to a place, while style belongs to poetics. However, tropical air does not belong or is not “natural” to Buenos Aires. The goal of this poetics is not telluric coherence. The tropical air from Cuba and Lezama’s dense tropological style is a coincidence of language and

not a causal relationship. By moving Lezama's tropological density to Parque Lezama, Perlongher's writing undoes the illusion of a style determined by nature. In the opening poem, "Abisinia Exhibar," the tropicalized air manifests itself through an ambivalent use of the Spanish term "oleo," and is also a way to introduce the Argentine territorial tropes of "water" and "fish:"

Oleo moreno, alza los peces de las ollas.
 El que camina sobre el agua, coge la liza en el
 [desliz,
 liza amorosa, riza los remolinos del calambre,
 rasguña el anillo bañado en oro colomí.

(PERLONGHER, 1997a, p. 187)

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The first verse allows, in the most literal sense possible, at least two readings that have to do with the beginning and the end of fishing. The "oleo," or action of the waves, facilitates fishing, as the fish rise from the depths of the "ollas," or eddies in the river. The invisible presence of the air is visually manifested in the movement of the waves caused by the wind, and aurally, through the sibilant alliteration of the verses. "Oleo"—or "óleo"—also means oil, and the most common meaning for "olla" is cooking pot. Hence, the verse also refers to the cooking process of the fish. This oil is brown ("moreno") due to use, but even more interesting is the fact that the word "oleo," or "waves," refers to the particular color of Buenos Aires's Río de la Plata, due to the silt. The "oleo" also points to the lubrication of the body or sexual arousal; moreover, the term "alzado" ("oleo alza") means "to be aroused" in the Spanish of Río de la Plata. The polysemy of words that refer to the aquatic and the carnal at the same time creates an effect of formal proximity between these two corporalities. The properties of water and the body may be the same, or at least are fused. Spasmodic waves, or "calambres," are analogous to the movement of the water, likewise possibly caused by the current. Finally, we can think of "oleo" as oil painting, which suggests that this Río de la Plata is not part of nature, but of the landscape in a pictorial or poetic sense. Here again, the thickness and heaviness of this oil, the polysemic density of the "oleo," casts its light upon the city.

The Lezamian air puts difficulty on display. This style produces the "oleo" or waves which cause the fish to rise to the surface. In Spanish, the verb "pescar," "to fish," can also mean to understand

something. This allows the reader to perform the not-so-easy task of fishing for meanings. This fishing becomes the literary enactment of a theory of reading that recalls Lezama's famous opening sentence in his essay "La expresión americana:" "Sólo lo difícil es estimulante" (PERLONGHER, 1997a, p. 359).⁹ By playing with the connotative possibilities of fishing, it is transformed into a poetic performance of the search for meaning. One can intend to "pescar" or understand something, but ultimately one might "no pescar nada," or not understand anything. As well, one might "pescar," to get or understand something, without trying to. "Pescar" also means to discover somebody and to surprise him or her doing something that was not supposed to be seen. As with fishing, since the fish does not necessarily let itself be easily caught, the search for meaning is also presented as an act of inventiveness, full of surprises. Through the paronomastic relationship between words such as "deslizar," "to slip," and "liza," which means mullet (the fish), a false etymological relation is suggested. Despite their appearance, "deslizar" and "liza" do not share the same etymological origin. However, stressing the aural similarity is a way of foregrounding that the "liza" is a slippery fish. The fish functions as a trope of the meaning that emerges from the depths to the surface, but that easily slips away, "se desliza." These unfished fish that slip away indicate the many other senses that escape in the interpretive act. The process of getting the fish and eating it posits Perlongher's interpretation of Lezama as a digestive act related to taste and to the body. This could even be read as an internal joke among those familiar with Lezama's famous appetite, and his conception of culture as a "banquete" or banquet. Lezama's poetics is conceived by Perlongher as a "banquete" full of possibilities and surprises, but not necessarily an easy one. The possibility of reading "por gusto," that is, for pleasure, as a digestive process, coexists with a difficulty that is both challenging and stimulating.

The refounded Buenos Aires produces a different kind of mechanics, one of openings. In the poem "El deshollinador," or "The Chimney Sweep," dark bodies work to open the city to the new tropical airs:

¿He de esperar al deshollinador
de las siete cuando ya a las cuatro

⁹ "Only the difficult is stimulating."

el humo nos ha sofocado?
 No: voy a llamar a las chimeneas
 para que me manden un suplente;
 el suplente es un moreno aceitunado
 que tiene tiznados los resortes[...]

(PERLONGHER, 1997a, p. 196)¹⁰

These workers uncover the entrances to the chimneys, which represent the pores of the city. These dark bodies are no longer strange or exotic in the context of the refounded Buenos Aires. They are, rather, a workforce opening the city. From their marginal position they introduce a remedy for Buenos Aires's phobia against what was considered the anti-model, the tropical and its nonwhite bodies. In *Parque Lezama* they are visualized as part of the refounded city and national landscape.

The poetic tropicalization of Buenos Aires is Perlongher's most radical expression of his reconceptualization of the neobaroque and his importation of this poetics to the Río de la Plata. But what should we understand by (neo)baroque/*neobarroso* in Perlongher, and what does its relationship with the tropical consist of? It is certainly not new in Latin American literature. Alejo Carpentier makes the connection, in his own way, in the essay "Lo barroco y lo real maravilloso" from 1975: "nuestro mundo es barroco por la arquitectura—eso no hay ni que demostrarlo—por el enrevesamiento y la complejidad de la naturaleza y su vegetación" (CARPENTIER, 2003, p. 84).¹¹ Carpentier links the tropics, defined as exuberant nature, to the baroque, an excessive form of writing. For him, the natural world determines writing. In contrast, Sarduy, in the essay "El barroco y el neobarroco" from 1972, restricts the term *baroque* to a series of tropological operations that foreground the plasticity and self-referentiality of language, questioning the possibility of realistic writing (SARDUY, 1994, p. 167-184). Perlongher also emphasizes the artificial nature of the baroque, and moves away from Carpentier's perspective: "Mientras

10 The poetic voice wonders whether to wait for the chimney sweep until seven, since by four the smoke has already suffocated some "nosotros" (we), but decides to call the "chimeneas," apparently meaning the company, to send someone else. This "suplente deshollinador" is black, and also "tiznado" or dirty. The "resortes" or "springs," a machine part, indicate a commodification.

11 "Our world is baroque because of its architecture—this goes without saying—the unruly complexities of its nature and its vegetation" (*Magical Realism* 105).

que el realismo maravilloso es un realismo tropical, un realismo con un poquito de follaje[, el] barroco es poético” (PERLONGHER, 2004, p. 343).¹² He defines the baroque as “una operación de plegado de la materia y la forma” (PERLONGHER, 1997b, p. 93) that in the *neobarroco* is applied to “toda la dispersión de estilos contemporáneos” (PERLONGHER, 1997b, p. 101).¹³ Despite Sarduy’s influence, there is a special twist in Perlongher that comes from his participation in the Argentine literary tradition. While he refuses the essentialized relationship between the American space and baroque language that Carpentier proposes, Perlongher converts the empirical features of the geographical tropics into something poetically productive. Indeed, the Argentine writer reclaims tropicality and plays with the ambiguities of this term in his essay “El neobarroco y la revolución” (1986) where he qualifies Lezama’s writing as an “exuberante explosión del artificio barroco en la isla tropical” (PERLONGHER, 2004, p. 232).¹⁴ The idea that the baroque has been cultivated on a tropical island suggests the connection between natural excess and poetic excess. In other words, Perlongher’s underlining of the excessive tropology of the baroque is linked to the tropical landscape, as if its geography were conducive to baroque poetic writing. At first glance, this poetics does not appear significantly different from that of Carpentier. However, the restoration of tropicality becomes clearer when we remember that Perlongher intends to import it to the Río de la Plata. Renaming *neobarroco* as *neobarroso* not only highlights the shift between Cuban literature and Argentina, but also the changes involved in its transfer or translation to the new region. The river’s geography is not tropical, and shows the unnatural correspondence between excessive language and excessive nature. In other words, although he is writing from Brazil, Perlongher emphasizes that language, precisely because of its plasticity, can simulate that natural correspondence, which is not due to a causal relationship, as in Carpentier, but rather, is achieved poetically.

On one hand, the tropicalization of Buenos Aires challenges the traditional Eurocentric conceptualization of the city and connects it to a Latin American tradition. The poetic tropics are spaces of

¹² “While magical realism is a tropical realism, a realism with a bit of foliage [, the] baroque is poetic.”

¹³ “A process that involves folding matter and form”/ “the full spectrum of contemporary styles.”

¹⁴ “An exuberant explosion of the baroque device on the tropical island.”

greater porosity, where wet contact between heterogeneous elements is exhilarating. Inserted into this new shoreline of Buenos Aires, this ensures the flow of bodies and ideas and constant exposure. The founding of a community that is becoming tropical opens the pores of a city drawn by literary history. Thus, Perlongher finds creative solutions to avoid the dichotomous paradigms of center and periphery, and country versus city, in a different way than Borges did. The resulting output is the porosity coming from the tropics. On the other hand, the tropicalization of Buenos Aires performs a radical act: the tropical is ‘de-natured’ as a response to the naturalization of the baroque. Perlongher emphasizes the sense of “tropicality” as a rhetorical act, while the geographical sense participates in and advances the process of artificialization. This thematic and rhetorical tropicality is the differential element Perlongher inserts in his poetic version of Buenos Aires, traced out as a connotative community where its elements flee from “fixity.”

In short, Perlongher’s poetic act foregrounds the artificiality of representations of landscape and identities: if Buenos Aires can be represented as tropical, why couldn’t Cuba or Brazil be represented as non-tropical? Perhaps the set of characteristics attributed to the people of the tropics as traits determined by nature are not that natural, but are the result of cultural repetition, of troping (from which stereotypes often result). The process of de-naturalization is a return to the etymological meaning of *tropics*, as *trope*: which is to say, as poetry.

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