



Intimacy, Memory and Revelation: HIV/AIDS Representations in Néstor Perlongher's and Caio Fernando Abreu's Epistolary Writing

*Intimidad, memoria y revelación: representaciones del HIV/SIDA
en la escritura epistolar de Néstor Perlongher y Caio Fernando Abreu*

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RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza la obra epistolar de los escritores Néstor Perlongher y Caio Fernando Abreu. Ambos autores comparten sus experiencias diarias con el VIH / SIDA en su correspondencia personal que ha sido publicada recientemente en diferentes editoriales de São Paulo y Buenos Aires (editor Agir y Santiago Arcos). Este artículo lee este archivo afectivo que ambos autores dejaron para la posteridad, y sugiere que Perlongher y Abreu tienen un sistema de escritura contrastante sobre la representación de la epidemia y su significancia en comunidades de hombres gays en la región. A pesar de ser autores que siguieron diferentes caminos para desarrollar sus intereses literarios, Perlongher y Abreu dejaron para la posteridad un archivo que brinda una comprensión integral de los aspectos sociales, médicos y políticos de vivir con el VIH / SIDA en América Latina.

Palabras clave: HIV/SIDA; género epistolar; Abreu; Perlongher.

ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the epistolary works of writers Néstor Perlongher and Caio Fernando Abreu. Both authors share their experiences living with HIV/AIDS in their personal correspondence that has been recently published in different publishing houses in São Paulo and Buenos Aires (Agir and Santiago Arcos editor). This article delves into the affective archive that both authors left for posterity and suggests Perlongher and Abreu have a divergent system of writing about the epidemic and what it represented for gay men in the region. Despite being authors that followed different paths to develop their literary interests, Perlongher and Abreu left for posterity an archive that provides a comprehensive understanding of the social, medical and political aspects of living with HIV/AIDS in Latin America.

Keywords: HIV/AIDS; epistolary genre; Abreu; Perlongher.

Introduction

The intimacy of epistolary writing allows authors to reveal their desires, fears and uttermost secrets. Nora Bouvet, in her exploration of this modality of communication, explains that writing letters is a relationship between ghosts –those of the sender and the addressee– that seek to communicate despite distance and solitude (28). This article explores the correspondence of two authors of a more recent time period–the end of the twentieth century in Latin America, which is a time marked by the steep decline of epistolary writing due to digital technological advances. Néstor Perlongher and Caio Fernando Abreu –avid letter writers– lived at the edge of this transition, and their epistolary archives have been published in recent years. For instance, Italo Moriconi edited a volume of Abreu’s letters in Editora Aeroplano in 2006. In the case of Néstor Perlongher, Adrián Cangi and Reynaldo Jiménez published *Papeles insumisos* (2004) in Santiago Arcos Editor, a remarkable compilation of lesser-known documents by Perlongher that contain the letters addressed to his intimate friend Sara Torres from 1981 to 1992. Most recently, Cecilia Palmeiro edited a new volume of letters entitled *Néstor Perlongher, Correspondencia* (2016) that was published by Argentine publishing house Mansalva. The editorial and critical interest in the private correspondence of both authors is understandable when considering their posthumous status as exemplary figures of the intersection of queer sexualities and literature.

In the context of this article, Perlongher’s and Abreu’s letters constitute a valuable resource to delve into two different modalities of HIV/AIDS writing in Latin America. Despite being authors who followed different paths to develop their literary interests, Perlongher and Abreu left for posterity an archive that provides a comprehensive understanding of the social, medical and political aspects of living with HIV/AIDS in South America. Both writers lived during an important part of their careers in São Paulo –Perlongher as an Argentine exile who established ties with the Brazilian public university¹– and Abreu, a talented,

¹ Perlongher studied anthropology at the University of Campinas. He also taught courses in this institution during his years of residence in Brazil.

well-traveled, and ambitious writer and journalist who moved away from the restrictive reality of his small hometown in Rio Grande do Sul. Reading through these affective archives, there is evidence that Perlongher and Abreu had divergent systems of writing about HIV/AIDS. After his untimely diagnosis, Perlongher –known for his dedicated political activism and his conviction that a revolution was not possible without sex– hesitates about some of these early ideals and seeks refuge in the syncretic religion of Santo Daime². In one of his letters, Perlongher writes, “ahora que me veo en la proximidad de la muerte, me cuestiono todo lo que pensaba y escribía y me aferro a la religión del Santo Daime” (*Correspondencia* 132)³. Adrián Cangí, in his analysis of Perlongher’s writing, explains that “el punto cúlmine de la enfermedad supone un fuerte viraje y olvido de la deriva libidinal, para desarrollar el que sería su proyecto más ambicioso: el viaje extático [...] su metamorfosis consiste en la trascendencia del cuerpo singular y el abandono de la deriva erótica” (17-18). For instance, Perlongher’s early concerns with physicality and eroticism (i.e. his anthropological research on male prostitution in São Paulo) mature, at least in his letter writing and poetry, into a deep interest in the mystical to reach a superior state of ecstasy through *Santo Daime*. However, as it is later revealed in his epistolary exchanges, this mystical conception is in direct conflict with the advance of the viral disease within his body. The author and his writing retreat into a deep state of individuality and intimate confession that departs from his earlier political radicalism⁴. On the other hand, Caio

² Brad Epps has defined Perlongher’s early radicalism as an “ethics of promiscuity”. In *Un militante del deseo* (a militant of desire), the Argentine writer focuses many of his early political writings in the intersection of desire and politics. However, Adrián Cangí states that this stage undergoes a transformation: “Del imaginario de Genet al de Santa Teresa, Perlongher produce un cambio en la disposición del cuerpo, que va del terreno de la orgía como pulsión voluptuosa y festividad erótico-sensorial al de los brebajes para celebrar la nada, desde la poesía como liturgia cantada” (18).

³ Founded in 1930 by Mestre Ireneu (Raimundo Ireneu Serra) in the western state of Acre, Santo Daime is a syncretic religion that mixes elements of Catholicism, Afro-Brazilian traditions (Candomblé), and Amazonic Shamanism, among others. Their members promote the consumption of Ayahuasca in their rituals to create states of trance and mystic revelation.

⁴ Interested in the configurations of the HIV/AIDS epidemic since its very beginnings, Perlongher publishes a book related to the topic entitled *El fantasma del SIDA* (1988). The book was originally published in Portuguese

Fernando Abreu, a writer known for the metaphorization of the virus in his literary writing, turns to disclosure when he is diagnosed in 1994. As one of the first Brazilian writers to address the epidemic, in the last years of his life, Abreu reaches a recognizable status as a public figure living with HIV: “together with Brazilian pop star Cazuzza, and writer and political activist Herbert Daniel, Abreu was one of the earliest and most outspoken cultural figures to address the general public in Brazil concerning the AIDS experience” (Fernando Arenas 238). Maybe the most important public disclosure of his HIV positive status took place in his three chronicles entitled “Cartas para além dos muros” published in *O Estado de São Paulo* between August and September of 1994.

Despite their differences in dealing with the HIV diagnosis in their writing, Perlongher’s and Abreu’s correspondence gives intimate portraits of the joys of friendship, the fears of solitude and the recognition of mortality. Reading their epistolary archive reveals a myriad of affective relationships, including those rooted in queer attachments. This is especially powerful in the case of Abreu who feels compelled to memorialize a community of gay men (e.g. friends, lovers, writers and artists) that had already succumbed to the virus.

Ecstasy, Daimé and AIDS: Néstor Perlongher’s Correspondence

En saudades extensas anegada, rauda en noche de domingo (en casa, siempre en casa) invoco el afecto del recuerdo.

Néstor Perlongher, *Correspondencia*

Néstor Perlongher is a key figure to understand the configurations of early gay activism in Latin America. A non-conformist,

under the title *O que é AIDS* (1987). His book starts: “Un fantasma recorre los lechos, los flirts, los callejeos: el fantasma del SIDA. La sola mención de la fatídica sigla [...] basta para provocar una mezcla morbosa de curiosidad y miedo” (5). In this witty appropriation of the Marxist Manifesto, Perlongher compares the epidemic as a specter that haunts the urban cartographies of desire.

the Argentine writer defied notions of normalcy and morality in moments of political turmoil in his native Argentina and later in his “deterritorialization” in Brazil. Perlongher’s personal correspondence sheds light on many of the challenges he faced during his life: “la anacrónica moralina de las dictaduras y su penalización de toda disidencia, la normalización y estabilización de la identidad gay en el contexto de las transiciones democráticas, y la crisis del Sida” (Palmeiro 13). Although this personal archive covers different stages of life –his early activism in Argentina, his relocation to São Paulo, the onset of the disease in Paris, and the return to the Brazilian metropolis where he died in 1992– this article explores the author’s epistolary writing related to his experience with HIV/AIDS. During his untimely diagnosis in France in 1990, he writes constantly to his intimate friends Sara Torres and Beba Eguía. This epistolary exchange continued until the end of his life.

Written in his opulent *neobarroso* style, Perlongher sends numerous letters to his dear friend Sara. She is not only a *confidant*, but also a familiar bond to the reality of Argentina. His letter writing is campy, and in some letters, Perlongher’s voice assumes the alter ego of a woman named Rosa L. de Grossman. He signs his letter closings as Rosa, Rose and Rose La Lujanera, and addresses Sara as Sarette, Soul Sister, compatriota, Ginger and Diosa Sariana (Goddess Sara) to express his endearment to his beloved friend. Néstor tells her all: his latest literary and academic projects, his everyday life in São Paulo, his latest romantic affairs, and his innermost fears and hopes regarding his HIV infection. As readers, we do not have access to Sara’s responses, but we can infer that those were not as often as Perlongher wanted them. In December 1984, Néstor writes, “Nena y a vos cómo te van las cosas? Sé que esperar que me escribas es tan insensato como mi necesidad de quedar embarazada para obtener la ciudadanía brasileña y poder llamarme Janira dos Santos y haber nacido en Caraguetubapeipiringa” (72). Through the years, he demands Sara to write back and more often, to reciprocate his affection and confidence. As Bouvet states, “la práctica epistolar amorosa [in this case based on friendship] se reduce al verbo intransitivo ‘escribirse’ o ‘cartearse’; expresiones como ‘te escribo’ y ‘escribime’ [...] introducen a los interlocutores en un universo discursivo que pone a

prueba el poder dialógico del lenguaje” (94). Perlongher’s letter writing had many interlocutors over the years: Osvaldo Baigorria, Tamara Kamenszain, Roberto Echavarren and even Cuban writer Reinaldo Arenas⁵. But there is no doubt that the most intimate revelations of Perlongher’s psyche are found in his epistolary exchanges with Sara Torres and Beba Eguía. Some specific aspects stand out in these communications, such as a rather complicated relationship with the traditional medical discourse on HIV/AIDS, a clear positionality of difference and foreignness in the metropole (Perlongher’s stay in Paris), and a fixation on the description of the flesh and its transformation with the advance of the illness. As Lina Meruane—pioneering scholar of research on the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Latin American literature, has stated the establishment of a gay identity in the early 20th century created “a sexual community [...] [and] the demarcation of spaces of specific sexual actions and interactions, places where those men made dates and practiced what Néstor Perlongher called *nomadismo erótico*” (86). In the late 20th century, the epidemic suddenly constitutes an experience of trauma for this sexual community, and fosters the reconfigurations of affects and kinships based on aspects of survival, memory and death.

In November 1989 –thanks to a scholarship– Perlongher moves to Paris to study a doctorate of anthropology under the guidance of Michel Maffesoli. He leaves his city of São Paulo, his home university, and his dear lover “Luizmar”. In February 1990, he soon writes to Sara confessing the bad news of his recent HIV diagnosis:

Sara del Alma. Divina hermana: Qué situación! Qué lejos estamos! Adónde me ha llevado esta desterritorialización insensata. En el 1er y único llamado te largo esta noticia terrible. La

⁵ Palmeiro’s edition of Perlongher’s correspondence includes two interesting letters that reveal an affable epistolary exchange between Néstor Perlongher and Reinaldo Arenas. Perlongher writes to the Cuban author: “Te admiro como espejo que se unta [...] siento en tus textos cierta disolución de lo social, como si los dicharacheros manierismos migrasen, sin perder el nacarado translúcido (Caribe platinado, un matiz de esmalte para zarpes?) [...] ¿Porqué no nos ponemos de acuerdo (tenemos que vernos, que conocernos, que curtirnos) a organizar un periplo tuyo por el Brasil? Casa donde quedarte tienes (la casa de la hada de Jorge Schwartz)” (76-77).

situación es la siguiente. Todo comenzó con unas manchas blancas en la lengua. Era la temible candida (un hongo típico del virus). Fui a un hospital donde me hicieron el test y dio positivo. El 5 de febrero Luizmar llegó y me está ayudando mucho. Pero la depresión corre por abajo. En un típico acto de boicot destruí la máquina de escribir [...] Todo entre brumas: un mar de culpas y arrepentimientos. Muy confuso (131).

It is evident that the news of the disease was devastating for Néstor in a time when the diagnosis of the illness was equated with certain death. Since the onset of his symptoms in France, Perlongher is specific about one aspect: he wants to keep his condition a private matter. He is emphatic to Sara: “Nena, te pido por favor que no comentes nada porque quiero evitar que se cree una atmósfera negativa que parezca y llame a la catástrofe” (131)⁶. He is also wary about the use of allopathic medicine to treat HIV. In the development of Perlongher’s political writing, there is a denunciation of the power of medicalization to control queer sexual conducts: “Pienso que hay un proyecto abierto para modificar comportamientos. Hay una medicalización de la existencia y hay una medicalización de la sexualidad. Esta medicalización implica una discusión del valor de la vida. La vida es medida por su extensión, por la cantidad de años vividos aún si son en agonía, y no por un criterio, un valor intensivo” (*Papeles insumisos* 362). This opposition to traditional medicine had also its roots in Nestor’s personal discovery of *Santo Daime* in Brazil. In his communication with his friend Sara, there are vivid anthropological-like accounts of his travels to Acre to immerse himself in the world of this religion. *Santo Daime* is a syncretic faith founded in the Brazilian state of Acre with teachings centered on the consumption of ayaahuasca, a brew made of the yagé plant with hallucinogenic properties leading to a trance-like and spiritual ecstasy known as

⁶ This is not the only instance in which Perlongher seems worried about the revelation of his HIV positive diagnosis to people outside his circle. He writes to Beba Eguía: “Veo que la noticia de mi enfermedad se ha expandido más de lo debido. Me dicen que en la Argentina todo el mundo lo sabe. Un horror. Cómo enfrentar eso? Me muero de miedo” (167). In October 1990, he writes to Sara Torres: “Deseo preguntarte y que me respondas con sinceridad: cuál es la difusión de mi estado de salud? Hay mucha gente enterada? No me gustaría que se esparciese la noticia pero si se ha desparramado mejor saberlo” (166).

mirações. Perlongher's interest in this religious group is documented long before the onset of the disease. For instance, he describes to Sara one of his excursions to visit members of Daime in 1989: "Tras cinco o seis horas por el río enorme, se entra en un arroyo, el Igrapé Mapía [...] son campesinos metafísicos todo el tiempo hablando de la luz, el cosmos, las estrellas, dios, en fin, filosofías teológicas. Y todos reciben himnos por inspiración divina, poetas muchos de ellos analfabetos, eso es impresionante" (125). Influenced by his involvement in the religion's teachings, Perlongher initially refuses to take the AZT medication prescribed by his doctors in France. In his epistolary confession to Beba Eguía, he explains,

Mi entrevista con la médica que me trata no fue muy tranquilizadora que digamos... Al mismo tiempo me quiero volver (lo he decidido haciendo el pedido de un pasaje) para hacer un trabajo de cura en el Santo Daime y también ir con vos a ver la Padre Mario al Bajo Flores (133).

Perlongher resists AZT, believing instead that his devotion to Santo Daime would help him with his illness; however, after a rapid advancement of symptoms, he acquiesces and takes the drug. One of his main concerns was the side effects he was feeling in his body. He writes,

Tomo AZT a título preventivo. También me han dado antibióticos. Todo ello me cae como una patada en el estómago y en la conciencia, pues mi resistencia a la medicina alopática es considerable. Ese cansancio ojeroso; no se sabe si es la enfermedad, la depresión o ambas cosas [...] La sensación de derumbe (141).

He also comments about the change of his intellectual pursuits in the same letter: "mi cambio de tema [referring to his doctoral research] ha sido demasiado abrupto: de la sexualidad a la religión. De un tema en el que era especialista a otro en el que no sé nada" (141). One can argue that the reality of the disease was transformative in many aspects of his life. In a 2014 television documentary aired in Argentina, Sara Torres comments about this stage of her friend's life: "la época que más discutimos fue cuando decidió dejar el tratamiento e incorporarse

al tema del Santo Daime [...] ya a esa altura él tenía una cosa mucho más mística que era rara para mí por su formación marxista. Yo no lo podía entender” (n.p.). Although this analysis does not attempt to rebuke Perlongher’s personal turn to the mystical, current scholarship has argued that this exploration should not be deemed a passive embrace of religious spirituality—at odds with the author’s political and ideological legacy. For instance, Jorge Ignacio Cid Alarcón explains that “Perlongher se acerca al *Daime* no sólo por una curiosidad dogmática, sino más bien porque vio en él una nueva lengua en constante desvanecimiento capaz de reflejar el cuerpo en trance sexual, fronterizo, de enfermedad y místico que se constituye a lo largo de su poética” (379). This can certainly be argued in the aesthetic choices that infuse Perlongher’s penultimate poetry book *Aguas aéreas* (1991). In this work, ecstatic neobaroque language describes the experience of consuming the “sacred” brew of ayahuasca. In a revealing interview with Edward Mac Rae, Perlongher expounds that the liturgical language of *Santo Daime* is a syncretic combination of marginal elements of aboriginal and African cultures. This *caboclo-Amazonian* language is alluring because it echoes the potentiality of Perlongher’s *neobarroso* that, in this case, is created with the muddy waters of both the Amazon and the sacred libation. The writer’s devotion to *Santo Daime* was not, however, devoid of criticism. Perlongher says,

Para mi es difícil mantener la creencia, creer. Y acá viene otro problema: hay toda una moda esotérica, que es muy oportunista, y el Daime en las ciudades entra dentro de esa corriente...quedé muy despersonalizado y excesivamente autocrítico [...] Creo también que ese viaje a Francia fue muy destructivo (393).

Perlongher’s period in Paris was a difficult time marked by constant outbursts of desperation and sadness. Luizmar, Sara and Beba Eguía are his immediate network of support. In his correspondence with the two women, he complains of his inability to adapt to Paris. In this European venture, he is confronted with his own radical difference (as a gay man, as a person living with HIV, and as a Latin American who does not

master the local language and culture). In a letter dated May 1990, he tells Sara:

Sara, amada, entré en terror y llanto, y en el hospital no querían atenderme por falta de turno [...] El problema es que pocos médicos entienden de SIDA. [Francia] es el paraíso de la más cruel alopátia. Lo cual mi extranjería complica, pues me tratan cual a un fugitivo otomano. Y mi francés sigue pésimo! (138).

In a similar fashion, he communicates to Beba Eguía his disdain for Paris: “Ya no aguanto más estar aquí. Parte considerable de mi depre, la achaco a esta ciudad hostil, donde impera una ética del maltrato y una estética del disimulo” (135). Paris was an epicenter for HIV research in the 80s and 90s; however, Perlongher is highly critical of contemporary French society. He writes a chronicle titled “Nueve meses en Paris.” It is an illuminating text that reveals Perlongher’s opinion on French scholarship and society. He considers French intellectualism as an isolated world of “fiefdoms” unable to dialogue with each other. France is also a place full of racial tensions. Paris is described as an inhospitable city, especially for the Arab diaspora, despite their strong historical connections to France. During this time, Brazil is idealized as a better place to live as it is closer to friends and, most importantly, closer to Argentina.

After his return to Brazil, Perlongher has a rush of professional productivity. He writes poetry and publishes his anthropological thesis *O negócio do michê* in Spanish. In addition, in April 1992, he travels to New York as an invited participant in a poetry symposium organized by Roberto Echavarren at New York University. Just few months before his death, he is awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship thanks to the support of writers: Tamara Kamenszain, Ricardo Piglia and Josefina Ludmer. His correspondence at this stage shows periods of emotional and physical stability that would suddenly be interrupted by intense anxiety and bodily deterioration. In Brazil, he is able to reconnect with the practices of *Santo Daime* and even try new healing methods based on shamanism. In a letter to Sara, he explains his experience:

he hecho este final de semana una experiencia de iniciación chamánica [...] Con la ayuda de un tamborcillo, y varias danzas, se entra en un trance leve, durante el cual los más felices vislumbran un túnel subterráneo que da acceso al mundo profundo, de donde se rescatan los animales de poder que nos protegen (146).

But shamanism is not the only experimental practice he sought for the possibilities of healing. In the 90s, most of Perlongher's epistolary communication with Beba Eguía has references to *El padre Mario*. In one of the editor's notes, Palmeiro explains that this religious figure was famous for his alleged abilities to heal through his hand's touch (128). Believers from all over the country went in pilgrimage to his charity foundation in González Catán, province of Buenos Aires, seeking to benefit from his miraculous abilities. On many occasions, he writes to Eguía: "Por favor pedí por mí en tus peregrinaciones al milagrero Padre Mario. Te lo agradezco de alma" (153). In a letter dated September 1991, Perlongher is content due to the stabilization and improvement of his medical condition. He writes:

Gracias a Dios, al Padre Mario y al AZT, estoy bastante bien. No tengo en este momento ninguna infección ni enfermedad oportunista [...] Mi conteo de células de células T4 (aquellas que el virus invade) subió espectacularmente de 100 a 500 (lo normal es 1000). Yo te juro que estoy optimista y esperanzado como te acordás no lo estaba. Pienso que el Padre Mario me dio una nueva y maravillosa vida. Vamos a ir con mi amiga Beba a verlo todos los viernes a González Catán (185).

One of the reasons for Perlongher's renewed enthusiasm has to do with his amalgamation of healing traditions in a moment of crisis. He combines allopathic medicine (AZT) with Santo Daime, Shamanism and even a type of pseudo-Catholic mysticism. In contrast with his stay in Paris, where he felt that his only option was to take AZT, he was able now to experiment with a wide array of possibilities integrating many worldviews. Although here I have no interest in vouching or rebuking Perlongher's choices of belief, I do argue that his move of combining all these "irreconcilable" elements echoes, in part, the author's interest with the "baroquization" of existence. It

follows Perlongher's common operation of "bastardizing" established systems of thought, of undermining fixation with nomadic multiplicity. It can be argued that these integrations were made out of a moment of personal crisis undermining Perlongher's past of sexual radicalism, but still they need to be acknowledged, in concordance with Ben Bollig's argument that "he [Perlongher] exhibited an awareness of the radical way that the virus had changed the possibilities of sex as a form of political resistance" (78).

In one of Perlongher's last essays, entitled "La desaparición de la homosexualidad," Perlongher is certainly less enthusiastic about the political potentiality of sexuality, but his criticisms and warnings about AIDS remain sharp. In the context of his writing, the author explains how the epidemic has paved the way for a repressive planning of all aspects of gay sexuality (87). Gay people are under the scrutiny of modern medicine and vulnerable to the social changes brought about by the intensification of neoliberal projects around the world. Although Perlongher is aware of the overwhelming medicalization of life and the advancement of a sterilized sexuality without risks and using lots of latex, "esto no quier[e] decir (confies[a] que no es fácil) estar contra los médicos, ya que la medicina evidentemente desempeña, en el combate contra la amenaza morbosa, un papel central" (88). This is one of the dilemmas in the history of AIDS and medicine: the difficult task of developing a system of medical cure devoid of social, sexual and economic biases. In an epistolary exchange with Sara Torres in March 1991, Perlongher makes an insightful comment about his relationship with medicine and medication: "[E]stoy un poco más optimista (ligeramente sin exagerar) con relación a mi salud [...] Pero completamente entregado a la medicina y tomando como 15 comprimidos diarios, no soy yo, es una combinación química que deambula" (153). He recognizes the effect of pharmacological substances in his body, and the dependence of a strict medical regimen to keep his life afloat. The problem does not lie in the consumption of "drugs" altering his internal chemical composition, but how these regimens of health are based on the "industrialization and privatization of the body as a product" (Preciado 342). In the acclaimed book *Testo Junkie*, Paul Preciado advances the conception of a "pharmacopornographic" age

in which the AIDS epidemic has been under the surveillance and administration of “biomedical models, advertising campaigns, government health organizations [...] pharmacological industries, intellectual property, and so on” (337). Perlongher is aware of these configurations of social and medical control. In 1991, Perlongher complains about the cost of paying for medical treatment and his inability to look for other options to access it: “Tengo que pagar un convenio de salud carísimo, pero no me animo a abandonarlo pues, en caso de internamiento, la red pública sólo cubre 25% de los gastos. Un verdadero horror. Con el AZT no hubo caso, hay que pagarlo nomás. Carísimo y aumenta todos los meses [...] no hay otra alternativa que pagar” (193). This position of precarity during a moment of social crisis allowed, in many cities around the world, a unique and necessary intervention in the medical discourses of medicine. Enraged by the lack of social and political action to fight against HIV/AIDS,

los enfermos de SIDA, en el sentido clínico de término, rechazan la posición de enfermos y reclaman ser considerados como usuarios del sistema de salud, expertos en el proceso de toma de decisiones, piden intervenir en la producción de conocimiento científico [...] Los activistas del SIDA son los primeros que están entendiendo que el aparato de verificación que produce lo normal y lo patológico con respecto al SIDA está desplazándose desde la clínica al mercado farmacológico (Preciado *Muerte* 28-29).

In Perlongher’s case, the author also questions the authoritative discourses of traditional medicine. In a moment of scientific and medical uncertainty with fighting the HIV/AIDS epidemic, the Argentine author intervenes in his own processes of cure by combining a wide array of alternative knowledges and systems of belief. Though Perlongher’s incursions to alternative therapies can be controversial from the standpoint of modern scientific evidence, his willingness to destabilize the spheres of action and authority of contemporary medicine echoes the experience of many infected patients in the first years of the epidemic. Terminally ill people around the globe sought for their own solutions to reclaim life and health due to the limited

efficacy of AZT⁷.

Although Perlongher's latest years were characterized by episodes of productivity in his literary and academic projects, the advance of the disease seriously undermined his physical state and his emotional life in the last months of 1991. In one of the few analyses of Perlongher's correspondence, Javier Gasparri writes about the emotions that pervade the author's final letters: "[...] la escritura de la angustia y de la soledad son el 'dolor de abandono' cuya percepción recorre estas cartas (abandono de los otros, abandono de la poesía, abandono de los proyectos y tal vez de la idea de futuro a largo plazo)" (126). Perlongher is aware of his diminished physical capabilities and fears the possibility of solitude in his apartment of São Paulo. In many instances, he invites Sara to come over to Brazil, so they do not rely only on letters to communicate with each other. Though it is not completely clear due to the absence of Sara's epistolary responses, there seem to exist periods of disagreement and silence among them. During his last trip to Argentina [at least the one last documented in the correspondence], Perlongher writes to many people back in Buenos Aires looking to stay a few weeks with them. He has difficulty finding a host. In the past, he would always stay with his dear Sara, who would open the doors of her place to her exiled friend Néstor. In one of his letters to Beba Eguía in July 1991, he writes in good spirits about having his first computer – "un Toshiba portátil milagro de la japonesería ya que no de la chinoiserie" – and mentions his concern for Sara and her possible anger towards him: "temo que [Sara] no haya aguantado mis críticas y decida no recibirme [en Argentina], será?" (161). It is not clear the main reason for their disagreements (if any), but in a letter dated August 31, 1992 (roughly three months before his death) a reconciliation is suggested. He writes, "Enorme alegría me causó tu llamado, conmovente [...] En tu llamado sentí que nos habíamos del todo reencontrado, después de ese furioso brote que padecí, que ahora lo sé responde al nombre de la manía" (234). Perlongher is also

⁷ It is important to point out that azidothymidine (AZT) was a medication more effective than a placebo. However, it was highly toxic, and unable to prolong the life of the patients to a considerable extent.

emphatic about his feelings of solitude and his need for companionship and support: “Preciso un poco de mimo, porque en general me siento solo. Esta enfermedad provoca un aislamiento progresivo porque uno no consigue acompañar el ritmo de los otros y uno va quedando rezagado” (234).

His final epistolary exchange with Sara is perhaps one of his most dramatic ones and constitutes a representative example of HIV/AIDS intimate writing. One of the major features of this modality of writing is the focus on the somatic and the medical. There is an obsession on expressing the progression of the disease in all the crevices of the body and making use of medical terminology to make sense of the experience of decay and precariousness. In Perlongher’s final letter to Sara Torres, he makes a recount of his precarious condition. His enumeration of symptoms is similar to those of a medical report: cytomegalovirus, microbacterium, constant diarrhea, sarcoma, T4 as 14 out of 1000, and cryptosporidium are just some of his latest conditions (234). Perlongher also writes a heartfelt letter to his father dated on August 1992. The document is dramatic. His father, an old man, is sick, and Perlongher responds telling him all about his state. Both seem to be dealing with cancer: “Perdone que no te escribí, pero estoy tan mal que a veces no tengo fuerzas para sentarme ante el computador. La mayor parte de los días no consigo hacer nada [...] Siento mucho que no estés bien. Yo también empecé a hacer quimioterapia, pero tuve que pararla por mi estado de debilidad” (231). The Argentine writer dies in São Paulo a few months later, in late November 1992.

Living with the Revenants of the Past: Abreu’s Epistolary Writing and the Politics of Hope

In Latin America, another writer also developed a significant epistolary writing until his death due to AIDS-related complications in 1996. Born in 1948, Caio Fernando Abreu was a nomadic artist who spent periods of his life in his native Rio Grande do Sul, São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, London and Paris. His literary oeuvre is known for his combination of pop culture elements (e.g. music, film and literature) and urban Brazilian settings. Also recognized for his writing on alternative sexualities, Fernando Arenas explains that “Abreu’s textual space is

populated by subjectivities representing a wide and fluid spectrum of genders and sexualities that escape facile containment within easy binaries” (243). Part of the *post-mortem* recognition of Abreu’s works comes from both “[his] introspective and profoundly lyrical prose [...] certainly an heir to Clarice Lispector’s resplendent writing” (Arenas 238), and his ability to convey the social changes and political challenges experienced in Brazil’s post dictatorial society.

Using Perlongher’s epistolary experience as reference, this is an analysis of Abreu’s letter writing during the twilight of his life. Similar to the Argentine writer, Abreu enjoyed writing letters to his closest friends even during the hardest years of his illness. The collection of letters published by Aeroplano provides a detailed look into the author’s personal and artistic evolution over many decades. In contrast with Perlongher, Abreu is predominantly recognized for his literary works and not necessarily for a legacy of political or sexual activism. Even though the *gaucho* writer did include HIV/AIDS representations in his work (perhaps the first ones in Brazilian literature), Abreu’s first period of AIDS writing is dominated by a conscious metaphorization of the illness⁸. Many of his short stories, plays and his last novel are marked by the overwhelming presence of a symbology of decay created by the use of rich allusion (e.g. skin lesions, urban deterioration and stained walls) and highly figurative language. There is an evil that has not been yet named, but lurks within the lives of many of his characters. For instance, in his 1990 novel *Onde andar Dulce Veiga?*⁹, readers

⁸ In one of the foundational texts of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in critical theory, Susan Sontag, after experiencing herself the myriad of metaphorizations given to cancer patients, delves into the complex meanings of the new epidemic in the discursive setting of the late 80s. The American scholar sees a similar metaphorization of the new virus: “AIDS has a dual metaphoric genealogy. As a micro-process, it is described as cancer is: an invasion. When the focus is the transmission of the disease, an older metaphor, reminiscent of syphilis is invoked: pollution” (105).

⁹ At the end of Abreu’s novel, the main character (an urban journalist) takes a trip to the northern state of Gois. There, he finally finds Dulce Veiga. The singer is living in a Santo Daime community. There, she offers him a “tea” that is obviously ayahuasca. In Abreu’s autobiographical book, Paul Dip states that Abreu participated in activities related to *Santo Daime*. Although there is no epistolary evidence to affirm that this also took place during the last years of his life, Dip explains, “A beleza dos rituais o fascinava, talvez mais que a f, crena em algo maior. E assim, pela beleza do ritual, ele chegou a frequentar

are gradually introduced to an urban world of destruction that is stricken by disease and fear. In the first pages of the novel, one of the main characters, a journalist, describes the state of his apartment building and the city of São Paulo: “it was a sick, contaminated building, almost terminal. But it was still in its place, it hadn’t collapsed yet. Even though, judging from the cracks in the concrete, by the ever-widening gaps in the indefinably colored tile facing, like wounds spreading little by little on the skin, it was only a matter of months” (25). This “bodily” description of a place is provided early in the novel when we are still unaware of the infected status of most characters. The building is, however, a telling description of a “contaminated” human body that is not only suffering a lethal illness as AIDS was in the late 80s and early 90s, but also endures the typical symptoms of the malaise. We are able to perceive that the wounds spreading in the “skin” (walls) of the apartment are a representation of the feared Kaposi sarcoma that invades the skin of the sick. There is a poignant sense of defeat and decay that surrounds most spaces of the story. As Leticia Gonçalves states in her analysis of the Abreu’s autobiographical aspects in his literary writing, “Caio Fernando Abreu [...] demonstrou por diversas vezes, em sua carreira de escritor, o interesse por uma escrita mais confessional e, mesmo nesse contexto delicado, Caio não abdicou de sua preferência por textos intimistas, embora neles tenha tratado o assunto da AIDS, na maioria das vezes, de forma implícita” (133). In fact, it can be argued that many of Abreu’s readers were unaware of the dramatic social phenomenon that he was trying to depict in his writing. One may wonder if the stigma related to the virus and the widespread misinformation among the public prevented Abreu from portraying a franker portrait of the illness in his literature.

Similar to Perlongher, Abreu exchanges correspondence with a close circle of intimate friends: Maria Lidia Migliani, Jacqueline Cantore, Gerd Hilger, Luiz Arthur Nunes, Luciano Albrase and Hilda Hilst, among others. Sometimes, in his epistolary writing, he creates a campy feminine persona named Marilene (similar to Perlongher’s epistolary style) and relates

também o Santo Daime, que virou moda entre os intelectuais e artistas do Rio de São Paulo no final dos anos 80” (144).

his life to the melodramatic experiences of artistic divas such as Carmen Miranda and Marlene Dietrich. In his letters, he addresses himself as Linda Lamar, Santa Tereza d' Avila and Marilene Fraga. His most intimate letter writing is usually addressed to three important women in his life: Maria Lídia (a painter from Rio Grande do Sul), Jacqueline (a young woman who was Caio's roommate in São Paulo during the 80s), and his German translator, Gerd Hilger. When he writes, Abreu uses a myriad of names (Magli Magoo, Maglim, menina-loba, Levíssima, Jackie C and Jacqueline Bisset) to address these friends showing fondness and familiarity. Letters are an effective means of communication to make all types of private confessions: new lovers, gossip about their circles of friends, and comment on their travels and latest personal projects.

In 1988, Abreu is aware of the devastation caused by the epidemic, and describes his encounter with Brazilian singer Cazuza during a concert in São Paulo. The singer was one of the first public figures to openly disclose his HIV positive status to bring attention to the reality of the disease and hopefully find a cure. He writes, "Aí fui dar uns amassinhos [a Cazuza], no final. Luciano, Cazuzinha está com no máximo 50 quilos. Lindo, vital, sereno. Mas você olha a cara dele e vê a cara da morte [...] Ritual da vida e morte, naquele menino definhando en cima de um palco" (162). In this letter, a concerned Caio expresses his admiration for Cazuza's resilience; however, the public media could not be more different when in 1989, *A Veja*, one of Brazil's most important magazines, "aterrorizou os leitores ao apresentar, numa capa, o rosto desfigurado do cantor Cazuza, já muito doente, com a manchete 'Uma vítima da Aids agoniza em praça pública'" (Trevisan 451-52). As in many countries around the globe, the public discourse on HIV/AIDS in Brazil was often mediated by the dissemination of sensationalistic news and misinformation that only stoked public fears of the disease. As a queer person at the onset of the epidemic, Abreu also feared the virus, and his letter writing in the early 90s is a reflection of that. His hesitancy with disclosing the harsh reality of HIV/AIDS and his "reading between the lines" approach to representing the epidemic in his literary writing mirrors his own hesitation with knowing his status. In many of his epistolary exchanges, Abreu complains of sudden infections that are difficult to cure. Fearing

a fatal diagnosis, he postpones his own HIV test for years. In August 1990, he writes, “[A] Sandra-médica está começando a idéia [...] de fazer O Teste. Eu não sei se quero. Seria como querer um papel timbrado, firma reconhecida, dizendo que vou ser atropelado (‘por esse trem da morte’, como dizia Cazuzza) daqui a algum tempo” (224). This passage reveals the official formality of a positive HIV test as an inescapable death sentence. It conveys the fear of receiving a piece of news that can modify the individual perception of time, death and self-worth. In 1992, Abreu writes again to Maria Lídia to tell her about a new episode of illness. He is taking multiple antibiotics to tackle yet another infection; however, Caio confesses the underlying cause of his physical debilitation: “Mas continuo achando que o problema é que definitivamente NÃO SUPORTO OUVIR A REALIDADE. Acho que não tem cura” (232).

After the publication of his second novel *Onde andara Dulce Veiga?*, the Brazilian author gains recognition abroad. His novels are published in French, German, English and Dutch. Abreu travels often to Europe to attend conferences and book releasing events, as well as meet with translators. Sadly enough, it is during this moment of literary recognition that his HIV diagnosis becomes inevitable. In 1994, Abreu sends a letter to his German translator, Gerd Hilger, and their epistolary exchanges were often marked by hilarity and queer camaraderie. In this exchange, after describing his flirtations in a dingy gay bar, he comments on being bedridden again: “De volta a São Paulo me aguardava uma gripe enorme que durou três semanas (positiva!), conhecida como CPI, que derrubou meio país, depois uma crise de otite (velha!), depois um surto depressivo (neurótica!)” (283). In the words that were written before his official diagnosis, Abreu uses feminine adjectives to describe himself as “positive,” “old,” and “neurotic.” This self-deprecating description provides more evidence of Caio’s recognition that something with his health was amiss, but his attempt to make a campy moment out of it are an effort to delay the truth of his state a little longer. The following months after the writing of this letter, Abreu travels to Paris, Lisbon, Stockholm and Skejeborg, Norway. During this time, he often sends letters to his friends back to Brazil. Contrary to Perlongher, Caio loves Paris, where he receives much public recognition for his translated

work. His books were reviewed in the local newspapers, and he even receives invitations to be interviewed on French TV. Almost 50 years old, Caio believes he is finally receiving the overdue recognition that he had not been offered back in his native country. Nevertheless, once he returns to São Paulo in the month of June, his health seriously deteriorates. In a matter of weeks, he loses eight kilos, and cannot get better despite treatment. In a letter sent to Maria Lídia in August, he confirms what he had delayed for so many years: he has been diagnosed HIV positive. He writes, “Pois, é, amiga. Aconteceu –estou com AIDS– ou pelo menos sou HIV+ (o que parece + chique...), te escrevo de minha suíte no hospital Emílio Ribas, onde estou internado há uma semana” (311). In this epistolary exchange, he also reveals that according to his doctors he probably has been living with HIV for the past ten years. Now in these crucial moments of his life, he wants to write: “Eu só quero escrever. Tenho uns quatro/ cinco livros a parir ainda, chê. Surto criativo tipo Derek Jarman, Cazuzza, Hervé Guibert, Cyril Collard” (312).

In Abreu, there is a need to document and narrate their own personal experiences for posterity. But Abreu does not only want to write privately –he goes public with his HIV positive status. Whereas Perlongher is initially concerned about any rumors or public disclosure of his affliction, Abreu does not have any worries about revealing his recent diagnosis: “Nada disso [Abreu’s HIV status] é segredo de Estado, se alguém quiser saber, diga. Quero ajudar a tirar o véu de hipocrisia que encobre este vírus assassino” (313). The purpose of pointing out these contrasting views is not to judge or assess Perlongher’s legitimate choice of confidentiality or Abreu’s lack thereof, but to track dramatic changes in the representation of the epidemic in their own writing projects, and the possible tensions that arise between their public personas and their intimate selves. As Alberto Giordano insightfully points out:

el interés crítico de los “actos autobiográficos” depende de las formas en que su textura manifiesta la tensión entre procesos autofigurativos y experiencias íntimas, es decir, de las formas en que las experiencias de algo íntimamente desconocido de quien escribe su vida presionan indirectamente y desdobl原因an la instancia de la enunciación, provocando el desvío [...] la

suspensión de los juegos de autofiguración en los que se sostiene el diálogo de los escritores con las expectativas culturales que orientan la valoración social de sus obras autobiográficas (3).

In his confessional letter to Maria Lídia, Abreu mentions that he has been admitted to the Emílio Ribas hospital in São Paulo. It is in this place of seclusion where he writes three letters for his readership in his weekly column in *Estado de São Paulo* between August and December 1994. These letters, posthumously published in a collection of chronicles, constitute an original way to make a difficult and intimate revelation to a large audience. In the first letter titled “Primeira carta para além dos muros,” the author wants to transmit a sense of confusion and perplexity. He pens: “Alguma coisa aconteceu comigo, alguma coisa tão estranha que ainda não aprendi o jeito de falar claramente sobre ela. Quando souber finalmente o que foi, essa coisa estranha, saberei também esse jeito. Então serei claro, prometo. Para você, para mim mesmo” (106). Although there is no direct reference to his diagnosis yet, one can infer that the writer is secluded in a hospital and desires to communicate a message that transcends the imprisoning walls of his reality. The writer is in pain after being pricked with syringes and writes while tied to a bed after having suffered what seems to be a nervous breakdown. Reading this letter in the light of Caio’s epistolary conversation with Maria Lídia, it is evident that he is writing about his difficult time when he first learned that he had contracted HIV. According to Abreu, he was able to keep serene after receiving his test results, but during his third day in the hospital he was on brink of madness. Some weeks later, Caio releases his “Segunda carta além dos muros”. In the analysis of the representation of HIV/AIDS in his literary project, this text may be one of his most valuable ones. Full of nostalgia and melancholia, Abreu positions himself within a genealogy of queer men who experienced the most difficult years of the epidemic and left behind an artistic or social legacy of queer worldmaking. In this second letter, Abreu is a patient isolated in the hospital nostalgically recollecting all the angels that he encountered along his difficult passage to hell. These angels are not celestial, but rather carnal and worldly. Their wings protect him from his

very own fall. He evokes their memory:

Reconheço um por um [os anjos da noite]. Contra o fondo blue de Derek Jarman, ao som de uma canção de Freddy Mercury, coreografados por Nureiev, identifico os passos bailarinos – nô de Paulo Yutaka [...] Wagner Serra pedala bicicleta ao lado de Cyril Collard, enquanto Wilson Barros esbraveja contra Peter Greenaway, apoiado por Néstor Perlongher. Ao som de Lóri Finokiao, Hervé Guibert continua sua interminável carta para o amigo que não lhe salvou a vida. Reinaldo Arenas passa a mão devagar em seus cabelos claros. Tantos, meu Deus, os que se foram. Acordo com a voz safada de Cazuza repetindo na minha orelha fria: “Quem tem um sonho, não dança, meu amor” (110).

In the previous passage, Abreu exposes the HIV/AIDS epidemic as a truly transnational phenomenon that fosters the creation of a community of remembrance. In this period of personal hardship for Abreu, he reaches out to the memories of “fallen angels” who lived and died among the most dramatic years of the epidemic. For a general audience, some of these figures may not be easily recognizable, but they are certainly important for the Brazilian author and for the queer historiography of AIDS. Like Caio Fernando Abreu, most of these men were salient figures in their respective cultural worlds: British filmmaker Derek Jarman, whose last film *Blue* was a narration set on a blue background commenting on his own mortality; the French writers Cyril Collard and Hervé Guibert, important public voices for AIDS awareness in their own country; and the Russian dancer Rudolf Nureyev, one of the most important ballet dancers of the 20th century, who died in 1993. There is also a mention of Néstor Perlongher and Cuban writer Reinaldo Arenas, whose autobiography *Antes que anochezca* is a widely known piece of gay literature in Latin America. Finally, Cazuza, one of the most famous singers of contemporary Brazilian rock, who died in 1990, is also evoked in his pages.

For Abreu, there is a significance in the power of evocation. After the devastation and death left by the epidemic, remembrance is necessary to bring back memories of those gone. The AIDS epidemic left a traumatic wound in the core of the

queer community that still lingers in the present day. Dealing with the specters of the past –in Abreu’s case, a recent one– proved to be a way of celebrating lives soon to be forgotten and recognizing that he was not alone in trying to deal with the hardships of his diagnosis. The past can be useful for identifying moments of resistance, shared dignity and community building. For instance, in Abreu’s and Perlongher’s correspondence, there are many evident moments of solidarity and queer remembrance amidst adversity. The fact that their affective archive is worthwhile to study in the present reveals the potentiality of thinking under *queer* time. If one would endorse a teleological order of progress in which the past of HIV/AIDS is forgettable, many of the identities and struggles that shaped progress in the dignity of queer people would be relegated to oblivion. Living and thriving in *queer* time echoes directly Walter Benjamin’s disavowal of a traditional conception of history as a successive linearity of progress. Benjamin evokes the figure of Klee’s *Angelus Novus* as the best depiction of the “angel of history”. He writes,

[the angel] is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees a single catastrophe which keep piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise [...] This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress (257-58).

Interestingly, Benjamin’s reference to the “angel of history” mirrors Abreu’s representation of his *queer* family of “*anjos*.” An angel can be understood as ephemera –as a type of specter that comes to inhabit the physical world to disrupt the idealizations of normativity and progress. As María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren argue,

spectrality is used as a conceptual metaphor to effect revisions of history and/or reimaginings of the future in order to expose and address the way certain subjectivities have been marginalized and disavowed in order to establish and uphold a particular norm, as well as the way such subjectivities can

never be completely erased but insist on reappearing to trouble the norm (309-10).

In the last letter sent to his intimate friend Jacqueline Cantore, Abreu reveals a poignant awareness of learning to live with those specters of the past that insist on reappearing in his own life. In the letter, the Brazilian author writes:

em quem está com AIDS o que mais dói é a morte antecipada que os outros nos conferem [...] Sei disso porque assim me comortei, por exemplo, com o Wilson Barros, de quem fugi como diabo da cruz. Como o Paulo Yutaka, sem ir vê-lo no hospital. Não respondi as cartas do Wagner e só telefonei um dia depois que ele tinha morido, por saudade intuitiva. E tardia (330).

All these men, despite their physical disappearance, have lingered in Abreu's memory and influenced his take on acknowledging a queer past that ought to be recognized. In September 1994, in his last letter to his readership in *O Estado de São Paulo*, Abreu reveals that he has just recently been diagnosed with HIV, but assures that his life is far from over. For him, "a luta continua". Abreu's writing not only adds visibility on the phenomenon of AIDS, but also creates a sense of resilience and self-confidence.

Caio Fernando Abreu's writing reveals unique moments of *queer* relationality that can transcend death and time. Despite their disparate origins and distinctive linguistic traditions, the Brazilian writer establishes a dialogue with the ghostly presence of Cuban writer Reinaldo Arenas –one of the most recognizable Latin American figures in the literary representations of the epidemic. In 1992, Abreu is in France as an invited writer at the Maison des Écrivains Étrangers et de Traducteurs in the city of Saint Nazaire. He writes to Portuguese-Brazilian playwright Maria Adelaide Amaral about his latest activities in Europe, and mentions that writers such as Ricardo Piglia and Juan Goytisolo also lived in the French city as guest writers in previous years. He also mentions Reinaldo Arenas' participation in this program, and his interrupted stay at the *Maison*. According to Abreu, Reinaldo leaves due to his suicidal ideations that will finally materialize six months later in New York (Arenas dies in

December 1990). In November 1994, some months after knowing he was living with the virus, Abreu wrote a short chronicle entitled “Um uivo em memória de Reinaldo Arenas” [A Howl in Memory of Reinaldo Arenas]. In this text, there is a fictionalization of Abreu’s residence as a guest writer in Saint Nazaire. Maybe the most salient aspect of this work is the spectral encounter he has with Arenas. He writes,

Encontrei Reinaldo Arenas numa madrugada de novembro de 1992 em Saint-Nazaire [...] Insone fiquei lendo *Méditations de Saint-Nazaire*, de Arenas, que só vagamente conhecia. Impressionado com o texto, decorei suas últimas palavras: ‘Aún no sé si es este el sitio donde yo pueda vivir. Tal vez para un desterrado –como la palabra lo indica– no haya sitio en la Tierra. Sólo quisiera pedirle a este cielo resplandeciente y a este mar, que por unos días aún podré contemplar que acojan mi terror’. Repeti feito oração, e dormi. Acordei ouvindo o ruído da máquina de escrever do escritório. Fui até o corredor, espiei. Em frente à janela, um homem moreno contemplava a tempestade enquanto escrevia. Estremeci, ele desapareceu. Tô pirando, pensei. E voltei a dormir (128).

Later in the morning, Abreu describes his eerie experience to French poet Christian Bouthemy, who believes he has seen a man similar to the late Reinaldo Arenas. Despite all the possible fictional elements that pervade in this chronicle, there are many valuable moments of queer identification and anticipatory revelation. Abreu’s fascination with Arenas’s literary passage is telling especially in its references of feeling out of place, of being exiled of one’s home. This nomadic spirit, this feeling of not fitting within a national context is a shared experience among many queer Latin American writers including Abreu, Perlongher, and most certainly Arenas. Writing in 1994 about a past experience, the Brazilian writer re-inhabits a place of memory, and establishes an affective bond with a writer that also lived the experience of AIDS in his own skin. In this chronicle, Abreu wants to transmit his admiration and appreciation for Arenas, to recognize the Cuban’s powerful writing that he feels compelled to translate, and to howl “para o infinito em memória desse cubano lindo, desventurado, heróico” (129).

Based on Perlongher’s and Abreu’s final correspondence,

their emotional outlook on the advancement of the disease differs significantly. As has been already stated, Perlongher suffered bouts of high emotional distress during his last years and there is much pain and solitude depicted in many of his epistolary conversations. Abreu's outlook after his traumatic diagnosis is far more optimistic and transformational. For instance, in a letter dated on September 1994, he writes "[eu] consegui transmutar o HIV numa coisa boa dentro de mim" (316). In the face of death, Abreu feels enthusiastic about continuing to live and battle the disease. In the first months following his diagnosis, Abreu is still relatively healthy and travels to Germany to present public lectures at Frankfurt's book fair. Upon his return, Caio moves back to Porto Alegre to be close to his family. Many of his letters during this time follow a pattern. He is content with his life in Rio Grande do Sul, and the possibility of being close to his family and friends. He pens, "Adoro Porto Alegre [...] sempre quis ter um jardim; sempre quis escrever o dia inteiro; sempre quis, bem tia, acompanhar o crescimento de meus sobrinhos" (319). In another letter, he describes his daily routine in his new home –he writes and takes care of a garden, practices yoga, and reads Nádía Gotlib's biography of Clarice Lispector (*Cartas* 326). Abreu, however, is aware of the transient state of his recently acquired sense of happiness. He insightfully states: "Ando com uma felicidade doida, consciente do fugaz, do frágil" (327). This comparison does not intend to legitimize one way of dealing with illness over another one. As previously explained, Perlongher experiences his most precarious moments away from his native Argentina. At least, in the evidence of the epistolary archive, his network of support in these last years seems to have been more fragile than Abreu's due to the geographical separation of loved ones and the nostalgic nature of the exile. Perhaps one of most valuable aspects of exploring these intimate archives it is to recognize the multiplicity of life stories and emotional attitudes dealing with the diagnosis of HIV/AIDS in the late 80s and early 90s.

As physical health starts to deteriorate, writing becomes an ideal tool to expose the suffering of the flesh. Similar to Perlongher's painstaking accounts of his somatic state, Abreu provides many details of his physical evolution to his closest friends. In mid-1994, he writes to Maria Lúcia to tell her about

his blood tests after starting AZT: “Hoje peguei o resultado do primeiro exame de sangue pós AZT e plaquetas leucócitos e Tês-4 e todas aquelas coisas sanguíneas, segundo a médica, estão maravilhosos” (314). In a postcard sent to a friend just before his last European trip, Caio complains about a sarcoma appearing in his nose and his next steps to treat it (317). With echoes to Perlongher’s last letter to Sara Torres, Abreu’s final letter addressed to his German translator Gerd Hilger in early January 1996 can be read as a type of medical report: “Andei mal: duas semanas no hospital para extirpar a vesícula. 3 cirurgias, oito transfusões de sangue, pressão a três [...] Fraco fisicamente, fortíssimo no espírito. Hoje recomecei a combinação AZT-3TC. Vamos lá, tenho fé” (347). Abreu’s passage reveals important details like his relentless optimism to continue fighting for his life, as well as the significance of the historical moment in which he lives. According to the letter, he had just started to take one of the early combination therapies that will transform the landscape of AIDS in 1996. By the time Caio is penning this letter, protease inhibitors will soon become a reality prolonging the lives of many, creating an even more complex conception of temporality in the lives of survivors. Unfortunately, Abreu dies on February 24, 1996, just a few weeks after writing this letter, so he didn’t benefit from these new breakthroughs. In this correspondence, Abreu writes a beautiful last message, his year of 1995 has been a complete dedication to his “saúde, o jardim e a literatura” [his health, his garden, and his writing] and he wishes in the first day of 1996 a wonderful new year “cheio de Axé!” to his dear Gerd (347).

In his *Exercises d’admiration*, philosopher Emile Cioran makes a piercing argument about epistolary writing: “the letter, a conversation with an absent one, constitutes a capital event of loneliness. The truth about an author should be sought in his/her correspondence, and not in his/her oeuvre. The oeuvre is often a mask” (my translation, 125). Although there can be a refutation of Cioran’s idea of an essential “truth” in any artist’s literary project, private correspondence can be valuable to understand writers’ evolutions throughout the years, their intimate changes of heart, their explorations in new aesthetic modalities, their allegiances to literary circles and even the origins of a specific piece of writing. It can also be argued that

epistolary writing should not be considered as a separate aspect of an author's work. Both Caio Fernando Abreu and Néstor Perlongher were prolific letter writers throughout their lives. They exchanged correspondence with intimate friends, fellow writers, artists and family members. With their current posthumous status as crucial figures to understand the configurations of gender and sexuality in the contemporary literature of Brazil and Argentina, Abreu's and Perlongher's epistolary writing is a window of opportunity to establish a critical comparison of representations of HIV/AIDS in modern Latin America.

After exploring their epistolary archive, it becomes clear that both authors share a fair number of similarities: both men spent important periods of their lives in the metropolis of São Paulo. (It would be indeed fascinating to have evidence of any interactions between them in this period.) Sharing a similar queer sensibility, their epistolary writing is highly confessional, campy at times, melodramatic and literary, and conscious of its role of narrating a dramatic experience of illness. Interestingly, their respective HIV diagnoses don't stall their writing; on the contrary, it triggers an urgent need to narrate their viral experiences, to tell their own stories maybe as an antidote to transcend oblivion and corporal death. On the other hand, the intimate experience of the epidemic is transformative in their approaches to representing their conceptions of queer sexuality and stigma. Perlongher's early defense of alternative sexualities and pleasures as key elements to any possible liberation, his "ethics of promiscuity" as defined by Brad Epps, wanes or at least transmutes into a preference for the mystical, for a syncretic combination of cultural elements that could ease his desperation of living with a terminal illness that at least initially he prefers to experience privately. In Abreu's case, his veiled representations of the disease in his literary writing, and his personal fears to name and face the reality of the virus, change after his diagnosis in 1994, when he becomes a public figure for a national discussion of the epidemic. Their approaches, their epistolary writing, their unique life stories constitute a space where memory and intimacy co-exist. Both are valuable voices that still resonate in the present and foster an intergenerational dialogue to better understand the transformations of the epidemic through its history. This analysis of intimate letter writing is also an exercise

at unearthing memories of the past. Memory is a valuable tool to discuss the importance of talking about the epidemic even in the current post-antiretroviral era¹⁰.

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