

Baroque Cross-dressers in the Orient: Severo Sarduy and Pierre Loti

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What counts is the question, of what is a body capable? And thereby Spinoza sets out one of the most fundamental questions in his whole philosophy by saying that the only question is that we do not even know [*savons*] what a body is capable of, we prattle on about the soul and the mind and we don't know what a body can do.

— Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza et le problème de l'expression*

The perambulatory gesture [...] is in itself the effect of successive encounters and occasions that are constantly altering it into the advertisement of the other, the agent of whatever may surprise, cross or seduce its route. These aspects establish a rhetoric; they even define it.

—Michel de Certeau

Ir más allá es un regreso.

—Severo Sarduy

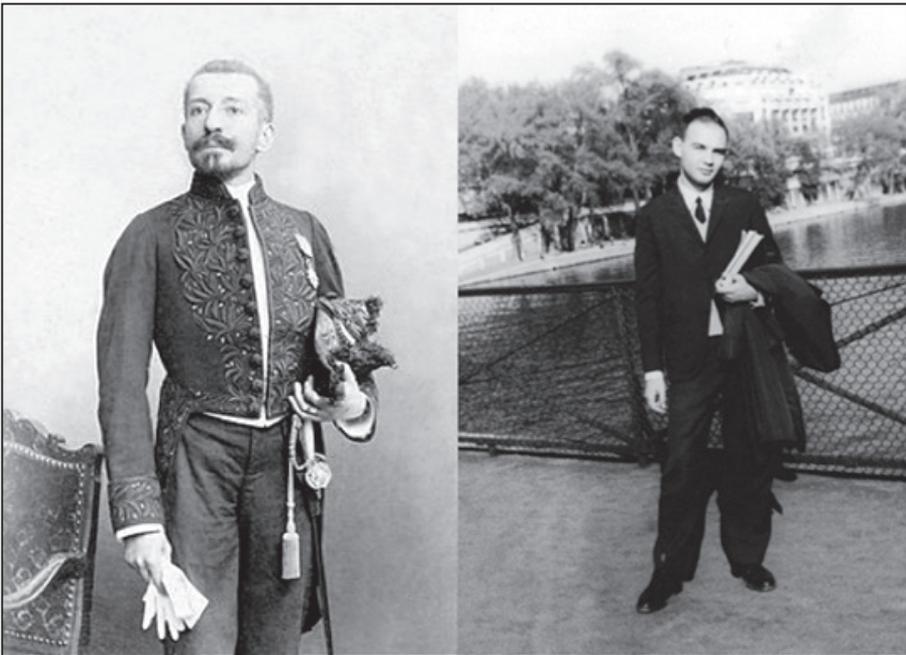
Abstract: The Cuban neobaroque nomad-writer Severo Sarduy's (1936–93) “Oriental” journeys started in the Middle East, precisely in 1961, in Turkey. Going back one hundred years in time, a similar pattern is observed in the life and works of the renowned French travelogue-writer Pierre Loti (1850–1923), who arrived in Constantinople in 1876. For these writers who both tackled the notion of sexual and national identity in their works, the “Orient” represented a journey, a quest, a moving away from the *Center*, as well as a cruise towards self. This paper investigates this overlooked connection and argues that the Ottoman practice of *tebdil-i kıyafet* (cross-dressing; self-disguise) plays a crucial role in the formation of Severo Sarduy's neobaroque aesthetics, whose idea of the “Orient,” as I will argue, subconsciously replicates nineteenth-century French Orientalism reverberated in Loti's writings. To demonstrate this, I compare parts of Sarduy's masterpiece *De donde son los cantantes* (1967, *From Cuba With a Song*) to Pierre Loti's well-acclaimed novel *Aziyadé* (1879) and zoom into two core gestures found in these texts: a strategical (mis)use of the local dressing practices and an exotic conceptualization of the “Orient,” which go hand in hand. As the paper brings together these two writers who have never been studied together, it analyzes their desire to travel along a route *vers l'est* and capture the allure of “Oriental” places. In turn, I conceptualize the notion called “transgressing/transdressing baroque aesthetics” and use it to identify traces of the traveler's quest to access alternate forms of self-making and identity-building in the “East.”

Keywords: baroque, cross-dressing, queerness, Orientalism, Latin American literature, French literature

Putting Loti and Sarduy Side by Side

Pierre Loti and Severo Sarduy share many undiscovered commonalities in their writerly aesthetics and life stories. Louis Marie Julien Viaud, or by his *nom de plume* Pierre Loti, was born in Rocheford in 1850 to Protestant parents. When he was sixteen, he

moved to Paris to study at the French Academy and became acquainted with acclaimed writers and artists of the time. Although he was a denizen of the Parisian literary scene, he felt estranged and fell into a crisis of life, faith, and identity. Shortly after, Loti laid the foundations of his exilic life by beginning a naval career that entailed long absences from his home country. In a way, this was a conscious decision on Loti's part that reflected his desire to be far away from France as he was at odds with the heteronormative codes predominating the social and quotidian grounds of the *fin-de-siècle* society.¹ Like Sarduy a century after, Loti never stopped traveling, painting, writing, and having photographs taken dressed in “exotic”² costumes. For much of his life, he travelled to places like Turkey, Tunisia, Morocco, Indochina, and Japan, all being pilgrimages resonating with Sarduy's nomadic life and his route across the Orient. Loti spent much time in Levantine ports, the Far East and died in 1923 at his house in Rochford, France. The house was a unique place that reflected his passion for collecting “exotic” objects from his travels. He created ornamental rooms adorned with statues, masks, and all sorts of paraphernalia to replicate the interiors he had loved in places like Istanbul and Tokyo, all expressions of Loti's performative and baroque³ sensibility.



Sarduy's life story began approximately a century after Loti's, in Cuba. Born in 1937 to working-class parents from Camagüey—one of the most traditional of the Cuban provinces, as Roberto Gonzales Echeverría has pointed out—he did not come from a privileged background, unlike most of his artistic contemporaries, which is odd given Sarduy's own effete, aggressively postmodern, anti-conventional aesthetics. He relocated to Havana to study medicine to satisfy his parents' wishes, and the move became his ticket to the heart of the Cuban literary scene. There, he earned a living as a copy editor and became a regular contributor to literary magazines such as *Nueva Revista Cubana*, *Ciclón*, *Revolución*, *Lunes de Revolución* and *Artes Plásticas*. 1959 was a pivotal year in Sarduy's life as he left for Paris to study the arts at the Ecole du Louvre. There, he worked with notorious French intellectuals as well as apostles of Latin American literature like Julio Cortázar, Pablo Neruda, Gabriel García Márquez, Carlos Fuentes,

Mario Vargas Llosa and Octavio Paz. At the time, these names had converged in Europe due to Latin America's turbulent political climate marked by the reverberations of the Cuban Revolution. With an increasing number of exiled writers and self-exile artists, Europe, and especially Paris, had become the hub of suppressed voices from Latin America, which later gave birth to *boom latinoamericano* (the Latin American boom). Sarduy was an on-site witness to this historical period and literary blossoming. He had stayed in France due to the political turmoil in Cuba, the disbanding of the newspapers for which he wrote, and the spread of anti-homosexual propaganda of the Castro regime. This was also the year in which Sarduy's nomadic life began as he burnt his *guayabera*, the traditional Cuban shirt, and decided to not return to Cuba ever again.⁴

Like Loti, Sarduy's literary muscles were developed primarily within the artistic scene of Paris. He was associated with the French school of thought and befriended members of the progressive literary magazine *Tel Quel* like Roland Barthes⁵, Julia Kristeva, and Philippe Sollers. Rolando Pérez notes that "it is his connections with the French writers that have led many critics to accuse Sarduy of being more French than Cuban" (2004: 96). In fact, it was in Paris that Sarduy wrote his first novel *Gestos* (Gestures, 1963). Then why did Sarduy, as a Paris-nourished intellectual producing art freely at the epicenter of Europe, leave the comfortable shores of France for an unknown, murky future in the "East"? Or in Gustavo Guerrero's words, "¿por qué el Oriente de Severo Sarduy?" (2008: 19). Guerrero, an authoritative figure in the discussion of "el Oriente de Sarduy," wants us to note that "este cubano que viaja por Oriente y se disfraza de oriental es un contemporáneo del Mayo francés y de los hippies"⁶ (2008: 24). In a way, he implies that Sarduy's interest for the "East" should primarily be thought of in relation to the times in which he lived, when there was a crisis of morality and dissatisfaction with Occidental values. It is true and already given that Sarduy was a product of his time, mainly influenced by anti-Occidentalists thinkers and artists like Juan Goytisolo, Roland Barthes, François Cheng and Wilfredo Lam, as well as his French and North American contemporaries who dreamed of "un utópico porvenir no-occidental" [a non-Occidental utopian futurity; *my translation*] (ibid.). However, there is a need to move beyond Guerrero's sound yet insufficient analysis in order to make nouvelle interpretations about the overlooked queerness behind Sarduy's writings about the Orient that cannot solely be explained via history-based inferences.

I believe that Sarduy's interest towards the Orient⁷ had to do, first and foremost, with his search for the "true" meaning of *cubanidad*; an amalgamation of African, Chinese, and Spanish heritage, or what he calls *curriculum cubense*⁸ (Cuban curriculum). Tied to this, his second and more important concern was to discover his self, and relatedly, his desires. Here, I would like to draw on queer theory to clarify what I specifically mean by the consanguinity between selfhood and desire. In an early-1990s discussion about the functionality (or utility) of queer thinking, Lee Edelman noted that "queer theory might better remind us that we are inhabited always by states of desire that exceed our capacity to name them" (1995: 345). By raising the question "can desire survive its naming?" (ibid.) Edelman argued against using "queer" as an all-encompassing identity category. For him, "queer theory [could] only remain a desire, and like desire, it depended [...] on the impossibility of knowing its boundaries" (ibid.). Accordingly, he proposed that the task of queer theory, though impossible and self-deconstructive, should be "to interrogate the contradictory directions in which *desire and identity*⁹ always operate" (ibid.).

In line with Edelman, who offered an avant-garde understanding of queerness based on anti-identitarian politics and the relationality between "desire and identity," Louise O. Vásvari put forward a conceptualization of queerness based primarily on desire. Expanding on Rusty Barrett's definition of "homogenius" speech community,

Vásvari argued that “[queerness] is centered in desire rather than in identity” (2006: 2). However, “the differences in how one directs desire, as well as how one is faced by others,” as Sara Ahmed points out, “can move us and hence can affect even the most deeply ingrained patterns of relating to others” (2006: 545). Therefore, “the desire of, and for, queer theory demands continuous—and continuously unsettling—challenge to the institutionalization of pleasures” (1995: 345). The deinstitutionalization of pleasures and relationality between desire and identity is what we observe in Loti’s and Sarduy’s writings mainly via unnamed characters with fluid sexualities. In *Aziyadé* and *De donde son los cantantes*, the protagonists roam in the “East” by camouflaging themselves, engage in carnal activities not necessarily heteronormative, discover their non-linear desires as a result, yet never categorize or institutionalize themselves around pre-defined identities or nameable desires.

Using queer theory in the analysis of Loti and Sarduy is further meaningful, for both writers had problematic relationships with their national and sexual identities. To them, the “East” simply acted as a gateway through which they discovered their “desires and identities” in a wor(l)ding that did not necessarily classify their queerness as deviance or aberration. In fact, bringing queer theory into a comparative reading of Loti and Sarduy is congruous since “the study of norms and deviance,” as Heather Love points out, “is central to the intellectual genealogy of queer studies” (2015: 74). Additionally, queer theory’s emphasis on deviancy dovetails with the baroque vein of both writers mainly because the baroque, as Monika Kaup points out, was stigmatized as decadent in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, though recuperated by a broad range of twentieth-century philosophers (2006: 129). Sarduy, as a twentieth-century neobaroque aesthete, and Loti, a nineteenth century baroque writer, move towards the “East” with the hopes of drifting apart from the socially constructed expressions of heterosexual desire. In line with this, there is particular emphasis on the cross-dressing protagonists of Loti’s *Aziyadé* and Sarduy’s *De donde son los cantantes* as individuals who embrace their decadency and harken their desires.

A Common Urge to Write the Orient

Like Loti, Sarduy was in his mid-twenties when he began his “Oriental” journeys. He chose Turkey as the starting point for his travels in the Middle East—again, just like Loti. Though both were naturalized French citizens, they spent their lives mostly on the road, perpetually displacing themselves from one place to another. Towards the end of their lives, both settled in France to lead a sedentary life. India, Morocco, Algiers, Tunisia, Iran, Indonesia, Ceylon, China, and Japan were amongst the places their roads intersected unknowingly. The same places they visited in different eras became blueprints for their writerly aesthetics and autobiographical novels. Given the fact that numerous writers’ paths have also coincided on the route *vers l’est*, what makes Sarduy’s and Loti’s intersecting journeys special?

The first striking commonality between Loti and Sarduy that concerns this study is their urge to not only experience, but to copiously write and describe the Orient. This inscriptional drive is reminiscent of the graphomania that nineteenth-century Orientalists manifested via travel writings, memoirs, diaries, and photographic journals. The question of how Loti and Sarduy inhabited (*habiter*) and in-habited (*habiller*) “foreign” lands constitutes the second and more striking commonality between them: they used cross-dressing, camouflage, and self-disguise as a quotidian strategy and literary motif while they lived in and wrote about the Orient. What I mean by cross-dressing here is not “the act of wearing clothes usually worn by the opposite sex” (Cambridge English Dictionary). Accordingly, my use of the term “cross-dresser” is not synonymous

to a person “who is satisfied to wear feminine finery and assume female mannerisms” (Oxford English Dictionary). What I mean by cross-dressing is rather a self-disguising strategy driven by the desire to discover oneself by acting and dressing up like the *other*. As a notion, therefore, cross-dressing is about the will to know oneself from the lens of the *other's* texts and textiles (and therefore wording and worlding). Contrary to the current lexical definitions of “cross-dresser,” hence, my understanding of the term is not bound by a drive to ooze into the realm of the opposite sex, nor is it based on a dichotomous thinking.



If so, how can we make sense of Loti’s and Sarduy’s resembling fascination with the Orient? I suggest that the similarities between how Loti and Sarduy obsessively write the Orient can best be understood via the Ottoman practice of *tebdil-i kıyafet*¹⁰ (cross-dressing; self-disguise). Though I will unpack this notion shortly ahead, *tebdil-i kıyafet*, simply put, was the strategy of changing clothes to inhabit social spheres that one would not normally be allowed to. In Ottoman society, both men and women disguised their bodies and titivated themselves with the necessary attires so as to easily shift between religiously, politically and sexually encoded, sealed spheres.¹¹ The dressed up, performative, jeweled nature of Loti’s and Sarduy’s baroque prose style is reminiscent of the Ottoman self-camouflaging strategy. In a similar vein, both writers tried to surpass the rigid spatial and gender boundaries of “Oriental” societies by cross-dressing. This is best seen in *Aziyadé* and *De donde son los cantantes*, where Loti and Sarduy create fictional characters who camouflage themselves to surpass spatial and gender boundaries during their time in the “East.”

As Edward Said’s discussion on Orientalism informs us, describing the “Orient” or narrating the *Other* is always an attempt to define oneself. It is a systematic exercise in identity construction based on dichotomous thinking and self-reflexive fantasies. Seen from this perspective, Sarduy’s and Loti’s common urge to “write” the “Orient” reads as a quest to (re)write oneself. However, Said’s analysis of Orientalism cannot simply be transposed to countries like Mexico and Cuba as Rubén Gallo points out, mainly because these countries “have never invaded, colonized, or attacked other nations (but

have themselves been the object of many colonizations, attacks and invasions” (2006: 64). Thus, “unlike Flaubert’s writings or Napoleon’s *Déscription de l’Égypte*, Mexican depictions of Eastern cultures cannot be related to real-life imperialist designs” (ibid.) Gallo’s point also applies to Cuba as it has historically been the object, and not the subject, of a systematic colonization process. Still, this leaves us with the paradoxical case of Sarduy; a *cubano* who attempts to “write” the “Orient” during the twentieth century, one hundred years after Loti, with motives only slightly different from Loti’s. Even after we recognize Sarduy’s distinctive neobaroque aesthetics, how do we make sense of the Cuban writer’s “belated,” Lotiesque orientalism?

Loti in Sarduy’s Words

In an interview with Julia A. Kushigian, Sarduy expresses his view that in Latin America, the first genuine preoccupation with “el oriente verdadero” (the real orient) started with Octavio Paz and that he personally feels more on Paz’s side. He adds: “El Oriente de Darío, o el vago oriente de Lugones, o el oriente de Neruda, o incluso el oriente de Lezama son un poco bibliográficos, a pesar de que Neruda estuvo en Birmania, Ceilán, Indonesia”¹² (2016: 48). Following this, Kushigian drops a “pero” (but) and reminds Sarduy that “el orientalismo de los franceses, digamos el siglo XIX, también es bibliográfico”¹³ (ibid.). The writer then affirms Kushigian’s point and brings Pierre Loti into their discussion about Orientalism in Latin America: “Claro, claro, también. Como es de sobra conocido, Pierre Loti, por ejemplo, trabaja más con un código de papel, como decía Roland Barthes, y con la Biblioteca Nacional, como con Jules Verne, que con el Oriente de verdad”¹⁴ (ibid.). While it is unclear what Sarduy means by “the real Orient” here, it is observable how he tries to distance himself from nineteenth-century bibliographic enquirers of the “Orient” like Loti. This impulse of Sarduy is understandable as Loti’s reception had dramatically changed in the wake of Said’s *Orientalism*, with which Said demonstrated how British and French writers distorted the East with a romantic lens made up of their fantasies. Concomitantly, Loti became one of the writers that this nouvelle deluge of criticism has wiped away in the 1980s and onwards.

Sarduy’s above statements, however, do not provide sufficient evidence to claim that his writerly aesthetics were free from bibliographical French Orientalism from which he tried to distance himself. To understand this, I insist on going back to his lexicon and zoom in to his use of the following expressions: “El oriente verdadero” and “el Oriente de verdad.” Semantically speaking, the word “verdadero” (meaning “true,” “real” or “veritable”) implies the existence of a cardinal reality inherent to the object described. It comes from “verdad,” which means “reality” in Spanish. For instance, “This bag is hundred per cent real leather” or “The film we watched was based on a true story” would both point out to the veritable quality of the objects described based on facts. Therefore, when we put “verdad” next to the word “Orient,” the expression “el Oriente verdadero” implies the existence of a “real Orient” based on objective facts. Social sciences and humanities have long proven that this is not the case and that the “Orient” is no one geographical entity whose characteristics can be based on facts, but rather, as Said argues, an ideological grid based on colonial fantasies. Thus, this small lexical analysis shows that Sarduy’s neobaroque aesthetics, contrary to what he claims, embodies fragments from nineteenth-century French Orientalist discourse. Seen from the axis of world-making/word-making, moreover, Sarduy’s linguistic use lays itself bare as one that resonates with the Orientalist *langage*.

The “hidden orientalism” in Sarduy’s speech is also observed in the latter parts of his interview. He reiterates his ideological approximation to Paz as follows: “Yo debo el Oriente a Octavio Paz, en ese sentido. Quiero decir, es el primero de los occidentales.

En tanto que mexicano, ya estaba muy próximo ama esa cultura, pienso, según pienso”¹⁵ (ibid.). A closer reading of this statement reveals the author’s hyper-preoccupation with clarifying that his “Oriente de verdad” is informed by Paz, and therefore the Occident. This is mainly because he defines Paz as “the first of the Occidentals” in Latin America. However, this also creates a direct paradox with Sarduy’s former statement regarding his dissociation with nineteenth-century Occidental writers whom he describes as more “bibliographical.” A closer look at Sarduy’s above remark lays bare that this Cuban writer’s “teacher of the Orient” was a world-renowned Mexican occidentalist, namely Paz. Yet, the expression “Mexican Occidentalism” remains problematic. In his essay called “Mexican Orientalism,” Ruben Gallo notes that “unlike Flaubert’s writings or Napoleon’s *Déscription de l’Egypte*, Mexican depictions of Eastern cultures cannot be related to real-life imperialist designs” (2006: 64). He underlines that this problem has been tackled by several critics, including Kushigian’s *Orientalism in the Hispanic Literary Tradition*, in an attempt to interpret the predominance of Eastern themes in the writings of Latin American writers. After all, the following questions remain unanswered: how can we make sense out of Sarduy’s above self-contradictory statements about his own “Orient? To be more precise, what does Sarduy’s Orient mean? And what kinds of parallels does it share with that of Loti?

The Orient as a Neobaroque Journey Towards “Self”

I believe that the answers to the above questions are found in Sarduy’s cross-dressed, abundant, hyper-expressive, daring neobaroque stylistics that encode a turbulent cruise towards his self and desires. Though the neobaroque is quite a personal phenomenon for Sarduy, it is also the sign of the twentieth century, and its invention means a passage. He explains this in his essay called “El barroco y el neobarroco,” where he defines the conceptual basis of his understanding of the neobaroque. Sarduy posits that the neobaroque derives its crux from the Baroque, which means “la ambigüedad de la difusión semántica” (the ambiguity of semantic diffusion) and “el matiz progresivo del sfumato para adoptar la nitidez teatral” (the progressive tint of sfumato to take on theatrical sharpness) (1988: 168). Sarduy underlines that baroque is also pure “outlandishness, extravagance and bad taste” (Martínez Amador) as well as “shocking bizarreness” (Litré). Tied to this, neobaroque becomes the pure energy of a decentralized world in the Sarduyian cosmos: “El barroco, superabundancia, cornucopia rebosante, prodigalidad y derroche—de allí, la resistencia moral que ha suscitado en ciertas culturas de la economía y la medida como la francesa—irrisión de toda funcionalidad, de toda sobriedad, es también la solución a esa saturación verbal, al trop plein de la palabra...”¹⁶ (*Barroco* 247).

What Sarduy means by superabundance, as Djelal Kadir eloquently unpacks, is where “heterogeneities constitute the ever-shifting foundations of a discursive praxis, a heterotopia of poetic language, a sanctioning discourse whose paramount characteristics are ex-centricity, diffusion, random accretion, and prodigal agglomeration” (1986: 87). In other words, Sarduy’s world is “a sea of language turned loose by the undoing of similitude, the shattering of a one-to-one correspondence in representation, the depletion in the ‘naïve’ adequacy of language to orderly resemblance between world and symbol, history and nature, the visible and the invisible, space and image, sign and meaning, signature and signator” (ibid.). This meticulous interpretation by Kadir compels me to raise the following question: what does it mean to create an ekphrastic meditation, or an ornamental bricolage of the “Orient” in the twentieth century as a neobaroque Cuban writer?

Going back to Guerrero, we should not forget how “este Cubano” (this Cuban), who traveled in the East and disguised himself as an Eastern, was a contemporary of the

French May and the hippies (2008: 6). Sarduy's Orient represented "algo más que un objeto científico o una destinación turística: es la posibilidad misma de construir sobre bases nuevas relaciones entre coincidencia, lenguaje y mundo"¹⁷ (ibid.). Thus, Sarduy was "writing" the "Orient" during a crisis of culture informed by post-1968 era and the turbulent political climate of the early 1970s Europe. If so, how did Sarduy position himself as he criticized the Occident: as a Cuban or as a French? Put differently, from *where* was Sarduy speaking when he had turned his face toward the East to dream "un utópico porvenir no-occidental?" Or from *where* did Sarduy speak as he wrote *From Cuba with a Song*? To dream a "non-Occidental utopic futurity" necessitates one to have poetic license to not only speak *from*, but also *for* the *Center*. This shows that Sarduy's ideological positioning was more likely to be welded from the *Center* rather than the periphery. In a way, this also explains how the East was more than a touristic destination for him. As Guerrero notes, the East for Sarduy was a "posibilidad de fundar otra civilización despojándose del apretado corsé judeocristiano"¹⁸ (ibid.). Therefore, his Eastward looking face also denoted his search for an alternative reality free(d) from the puritanism and (hetero)normativity that informs Euro-centric Christian thinking. Sarduy's neobaroque cosmos is a realm in which he meticulously works on and writes about the possibilities of constructing new relations based on hybridity, fluidity, assemblages, networks, and interrelatedness.

In the Sarduyian cosmos, the neobaroque becomes the paradigm for defining a new threshold of modernity different than that of the *Center*, and the "East" is a gateway through which one enters into that "utopic horizon." To do so, no method could be more a propos than a twentieth-century revindication of the baroque in Latin America, which, in Irleamar Chiampi's words, enables "an archeology of the modern [and] allows us to reinterpret Latin American experience as a dissonant modernity" (1998: 508). In addition to being a style and a desire for excessive decoration, the baroque, as César Salgado explains, has been seen—by the great Latin American essayists such as Pedro Henríquez Ureña, Alfonso Reyes and Ernesto Picón Salas, and then the neo-Baroque poets José Lezama Lima and Sarduy—as the art of "counter-conquest" (1999: 318). In other words, it represented the Creole will to create a Latin American culture, essentially hybrid and decentralized, destabilizing the metropolis.

In a Sarduyian text, "crossroads of signs and temporalities, aesthetic logic of mourning and melancholy, luxuriousness and pleasure, erotic convulsion and allegorical pathos reappear to bear witness to the crisis or end of modernity and to the very condition of a continent that could not be assimilated by the project of the Enlightenment" (Chiampi 509). Thus, the Sarduyian text is a non-linear, chaotic, and abundant script that cross-dresses itself to transgress the rigid boundaries of genres and genders, as well as texts and textiles. *De donde son los cantantes* ultimately exemplifies this thematically and stylistically tries to defy the phallogentricity of language and hegemonic "regimes of knowledge" (Foucault) by using cross-dressing (*tebdil-i kıyafet*) as a strategy. In *De donde son los cantantes*, Sarduy envisions to break away from the series of irreconcilable binary oppositions, like East/West, barbarism/civilization, darkness/light, domination/subordination, fantasy/reality and homosexual/heterosexual—all produced and reproduced by the Orientalist discourse itself, upon which Sarduy self-contradictorily draws.

For Sarduy and Loti, the "Orient" is also a "utopic" place. It is rather a heterotopia where the writer can freely write, invent, disguise, cross-dress and re-invent himself, which eventually translates into a perpetual process of doing and undoing his identity. Loti does this in *Aziyade*; an erotic tale or a pseudo-historical novel depicting the non-normative love affair between a British soldier, his young male server and a Circassian slave woman married to a Turk, who in the end kills herself in despair after her British

lover is sent back to Europe. The protagonist, who is thought to be Loti, often cross-dresses to see his lover, disguising himself in Oriental fabrics. In an essay about about *Aziyadé*, Roland Barthes, who was Sarduy's tutor in Paris, famously writes: "Loti est dans le roman [...]; mais il est aussi en dehors, puisque le Loti qui a écrit le livre ne coïncide nullement avec le héros Loti"¹⁹ (*Nouveaux essais critiques* 336). I disagree with Barthes' stance since we see autobiographical traces in *Aziyadé* that directly resonate with Loti's heterodox life in Istanbul.

In Constantinople, Loti was known as a man who often cross-dressed to fulfill his queer desires. Diana Knight calls "this insistence on the impossible desire to represent reality in words 'the utopian fiction of literature'" (1997: 9). The reality of Loti's words may have supplanted the reality of his existence (Armbrecht 4), which resonates with Sarduy's life and writings. Yet Sarduy differs from Loti in his awareness of what Barthes called "l'inadéquation fondamentale du langage et du réel,"²⁰ or in other words, "des utopies de langage"²¹ (Lecon 806). This is mainly due to Sarduy's neobaroque aesthetics and his almost proto-postmodern understanding of language as a medium that constructs and deconstructs the self. I propose that the use of *tebdil-i kıyafet* (cross-dressing) is a means to achieve this in Sarduy, both thematically and stylistically.

From *Tebdil-i kıyafet* to Sarduy's Neobaroque Cross-dressing Practices

I shall flesh out the implications of my title's key term for the argument that follows: "baroque cross-dressers." How do the terms "baroque" and "cross-dresser" serve as useful conceptual tools for comparing Sarduy's conjunction of neobaroque with Loti's Oriental fantasies and Ottoman fetishism? *Tebdil-i kıyafet* is a quotidian strategy that originates in the Middle East. Etymologically, the word *tebdil* or *tabdil* means "transmutation" and is frequently featured in late-Ottoman Turkish and Arabic texts. *Lisan al-arab*, one of the most comprehensive Arabic dictionaries written by Ibn Manzur in 1290, defines *tabdil* as the change from one form (*surah*) to another. Another source, *Kamus-i Turki*, a crucial Turkish dictionary written by Şemseddin Sami in 1901, defines *tebdil* with similar terms. Finally, a key word that comes across in the lexical definition of *tebdil* is *surah/suret*. It means image, guise, copy, and cloth (*kılık/qiyāfah*). On the other hand, it can also refer to literary forms or genres in various Arabic and Turkish writings. More than anything, however, *tebdil* denotes the strategy of cross-dressing to hide one's identity and thus to move around freely in disguise. For example, it is known that the Ottoman sultan, Selim III, (1789-1824) often disguised himself as a poor merchant and engaged in *tebdil* to control the quality of bread in Istanbul (Tızlak 337). Thus, clothes were instruments that gave people the ability to move in new social milieus. Therefore, individuals in Ottoman society cross-dressed to move around, blend in and adapt to communities foreign to them.

Texts too can engage in *tebdil* as they disguise themselves or change appearance strategically in order to live in "foreign" cultures or social environments that they are not allowed to do so. Therefore, it is meaningful to draw an analogy between the words "text" and "textile" in English, mainly departing from their lexical—and ideological—consanguinity. Similarly in Arabic, there is a very close and curious relationship between these words. *Surah* and *suret* both mean "cloth" and "genre." Hence, words such as cloth, text, textile, genre and gender are also at play with each other in Arabic. This is also what inspired me to draw a connection between *tebdil-i kıyafet* and Sarduy's Oriental(ist) neobaroque aesthetics that always encapsulate the theme of self-camouflage. In *De donde son los cantantes*, the characters and narrative perpetually change appearance and cross-dress, emphasizing a strong semantic connection between text and textile.



According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a “cross-dresser” is “a person, typically a man, who derives pleasure from dressing in clothes primarily associated with the opposite sex.” Unlike the OED lexicographers, Sarduy understands a cross-dresser to be someone who does not abide by conceptualizations based on dichotomous thinking, like man versus woman. The cross-dresser, which we encounter in the form of *travesti* in his writings, is a crosser of social boundaries and a subverter of limits. He describes *el travesti* as follows:

El travesti no imita a la mujer. Para él, *à la limite*, no hay mujer, sabe – y quizás, paradójicamente sea el único en saberlo–, que *ella* es una apariencia, que su reino y la fuerza de su fetiche encubren un defecto [...] El travesti no copia: simula, pues no hay norma que invite y magnetice la transformación, que decida la metáfora: es más bien la inexistencia del ser mimado lo que constituye el espacio, la región o el soporte de esa simulación²² (*Simulación* 98).

This passage shows that Sarduy’s baroque simulation, in Gilles Deleuze’s words, “has an operative function” (*Le pli* 6). By grouping them in the same energy of simulation drive, it connects dissimilar phenomena coming from heterogeneous and apparently unconnected spaces that go from the organic to the imaginary, from the biological to the baroque. Concomitantly, we often see Sarduy using animal imagery, tattoos, makeup, masks, “exotic” objects, textiles, local costumes, Mimikri-Dress-Art and anamorphosis, which all together form a *trompe-l’oeil*. In fact, Sarduy unpacks his view in an essay called “Escritura/ Transvestismo”²³ and defines the transvestite as a person who carries the experience of inversion to the limit. He then concurs that *travesti* is the best metaphor for writing. I would like to slightly expand Sarduy’s statement by adding that *el travesti*, in Sarduy, is the best metaphor for writing the self through the Orient. *De donde son los cantantes* exemplifies my point. As I will show below, the novel is a rather carnivalesque world of performers and cross-dressers who all live in the “Orient.”

“Where Are the Cross-Dressers From?”

De donde son los cantantes is a hard-to-define text for it thematically and stylistically suspends reason, and strongly resists classifications. Roberto González Echevarría once declared that it is “probably the most aggressively experimental text in contemporary Latin American literature” (1985: 566). In an attempt to sum it up, it is an amalgamation of metaphors framed within the holy trinity of Cuban identity: Spanish, African and Chinese. The text’s aim is to baroquify *the curriculum cubense* as well as to blur the boundaries between the sacred and the profane. Therefore, the main questions that make up the core of the text are “Who is the Cuban?” “What is *cubanidad*?” “How is the ‘self’ constituted?” and “How does writing play a role in the process of self-formation?” In order to further complicate these questions, but not give direct, satisfactory responses to the audience, Sarduy divides *De donde son los cantantes* into three chapters, each representing the three intertwined cultural identities that constitute “Cuba as fiction.”²⁴

The dioscuric twins Auxilio and Socorro are the main characters who wander between the Orient and Occident, writing almost the metahistory of Cuba. The protagonists do not conform to standard novelistic requirements as they perpetually change appearance and disguise themselves, mainly with ornamented paraphernalia from the Orient. This is most prominent in the last chapter called “La entrada de Cristo en La Habana” which is interwoven with Sarduy’s statement about the history of Cuba starting in Andalucía. What is omnipresent here is a colonial center (Spain) influenced by Arabs and an abundance of culturally mixed signifiers travelling through Cuba:

Ese vino hizo de provincias virreinos, ennobleció generaciones de traficantes y negreros. Buscan un imposible, es cierto, pero van muy bien pertrechadas. Mendigan avisos por garitos y colmenas –los burdeles malagueños–; en esas celdas, pordioseras apócrifas, cartománticas, celestinas, sobornan princesas negras, huríes de harenes magrebíes, eunucos mal castrados que les responden con sus voces contralto. (178)²⁵

The passage is loaded with imagery that garnishes fantasies about an unknown land. Alcohol, traffickers, blacksmiths, Malagan brothels, cartomantics (fortune tellers), Palestinian beasts, bribed black princesses, hurries of Maghreb harems and poorly castrated eunuchs. As stated, all these signs “look for an impossibility” (buscan un imposible). Furthermore, the cardinal adjective that defines the tone of this passage is “apocryphal,” meaning “doubtfully authentic.” While the overall verisimilitude of this geography cannot be questioned on Platonic grounds due to the baroque quintessence of the text, one can still spot the fantasizing tone as nouns, adjectives and verbs used here evoke nineteenth-century Orientalist jargon utilized to describe the “East.” The following passage from *Aziyadé* mirrors this situation. It is the January of 1871 and Loti is strolling around the streets of Constantinople in a dark-skied afternoon. He sees a marble bridge of “Arab taste” that allows sultanas to pass from one to the other without being seen from the outside, and he ponders:

Des soldats et des eunuques noirs gardaient ces entrees defendues. Les styles de ces portiques semblait indiquer lui-meme que le seuil en etait dangereux a franchir; les colonnes et les frises de marbre, fouillees a jour dans le gout arabe, etaient couvertes de dessins etranges et d'enroulements mysterieux (104).²⁶

Though the time period and geography are definite here, contrary to what we see in Sarduy, this passage contains surprisingly common imagery with Sarduy’s text: eunuchs, black servants, sultanas, and princesses. A close-up of the adjectives lay bare another layer of similarity in tone: dangerousness, mysteriousness and forbidden-ness of the East. Both writers use “foreign,” unknown, ambiguous imagery to fashion their texts. While Loti installs these images in an orderly fashion, Sarduy’s style is rather disordered

and chaotic. In fact, the “exotic” paraphernalia that Sarduy sketches side by side would hardly make sense in an “actual” local setting in the Middle East, Africa, or Asia. Thus, Sarduy mutates into a collector who adorns his text with miscellaneous paraphernalia to create an aesthetics of abundance. This is reminiscent of Loti’s obsession of creating baroque rooms in his Rocheford house, which, as we know from historical documents and photographs, were filled with exotic objects. As Loti wrote in his journal in 1881, he decided to create “un petit appartement mystérieux ou [il] pourrait [s’]enfermer pour rever de Stamboul”²⁷ (Journal 243). Armbrecht reminds us that “it is this desire to return, mentally, if not physically, to Turkey that must have encouraged Loti to start building the apartment as he started writing. In fact, there is evidence that the two creative efforts were mutually dependent” (2003: 5). Even though Loti’s aspirations for authenticity can sometimes be limited to a romantic desire to create “exotic” interiors, what we see in common in Sarduy and Loti is two craftsmen weaving their texts with Oriental textiles. Furthermore, Sarduy’s cross-dressers in *De donde son los cantantes* transcend the social boundaries in the “East.” Socorro confirms this for she utters as follows: “Yo, la transcendente, la necia.” Likely to the self-disguising protagonist in *Aziyádé* who wears his naval uniform during the day, yet puts on a shalwar with a fez at night, Sarduy’s cross-dressers transgress the opaque social boundaries by transdressing themselves. The transvestites Auxilio and Socorro are pure actors. Their essence consists in the performance of themselves, hence their artificial speech and an obsession with makeup. These two characters are pure allegories, like the characters of the Shanghai Theater in the novel. Yet, they are not so much confronted with the cruel reality that mistreats them as grotesque characters, but, rather, are exemplary figures in their own worlds. Auxilio and Socorro’s cross-dressing practices also operate on a linguistic level. They deliberately talk in an artificial manner and use a wide range of familiar expressions derived from politics, literature, movies, as well as from European and North American pop music.

Echevarría notes that Auxilio and Socorro “include not only the author, who sometimes identifies himself as ‘I’ and who pretends to explain the work in a note at the end, but also the reader, who occasionally complains about something the other characters do” (1985: 567). Parallel to these characters’ vesting of their identities in flux with *vestidos*, they fashion their *lenguaje* with vulgarism or *chusmería*. The language, which is a rhetorical *vestido*, helps characters mask their different identities and cross rigid spatial boundaries. Pérez notes that according to Sarduy, culture and language are modes of disguise; fictions which oftentimes pretend to be otherwise (2013: 12). Thus, Cuba is the product of figural and literary cross-dressing. This pattern is also found in Loti’s novel for he uses different types of linguistic *mis en scene* for the diverse spaces the protagonist (himself) inhabits in Istanbul like *kıraathanes* (coffee house), *mahalles* (neighbourhood), *hamams* (the Turkish bath), homes and *tavernas* (tavern). Comparatively speaking, the practice of cross-dressing in Loti and Sarduy has an operative function in Deleuzian sense: it operates to saturate, to queer, to baroquify the reality of the language used for the cross-dresser’s own imagery.

Such a baroque fascination with the “Orient” and cross-dressing is also present in another work of Sarduy titled *Cobra*. Published in 1972, *Cobra* is one of the most radical works of Sarduy. The anagrammatic title itself represents the first disguise: “obra” and “baroc,” which together hint at the baroque vein of the piece as an “obra baroc.” The protagonist of the novel is a *travesti* actor who suffers a painful sex-change operation. The setting is a *travesti* theatre, and several episodes take place in India and China. The *travesti* theater mirrors the Cuban burlesque theater which was known to be notorious in Havana for its vulgarity. In the novel, however, this space becomes a place of transformation generated by desire. Desire and death are the two main elements that

bring about transformations. The distance and the strangeness of “Oriental” culture make deception possible, as much the result of desire as of death, which is a projection of an intensely metaphoric version of the Shanghai theater.

In Loti, *taverna* is the equivalent of the burlesque theater. It is a place of utmost coexistence where the people of Constantinople with different social, ethnic and sexual identities carouse together. *Köçeks*, young dancer boys dressed in women’s clothes, are the cardinal representatives of deception and desire in these spaces of encounter. The protagonist Loti disguises himself at night and seeps into these performative, abundant, baroque underworlds, which Sarduy himself describes as follows: “[...] el festín barroco nos parece, con su repetición de volutas, de arabescos y mascaradas, de confitados sombreros y espejantes sedas, la apoteosis del artificio, la ironía e irrisión de la naturaleza. La mejor expresión de [...] la artificialización (J. Rousset)” (Barroco 168). In this *trompe-l’oeil*, movement, dynamism, contradiction, and ambiguity operate together and break the barriers between the text, author and the world.

Transgressing/dressing Baroque Aesthetics

“¿Bajo que categorías podemos situar al Severo viajero?” (2008: 75) asks François Wahl. It is hard to define Sarduy as his works transgress and blur the boundaries of fiction and non-fiction, as well as reality and fantasy. Harking back to the Argentine poet Nestor Perlongher who defines the nomad as the person in-between, I would like to situate Sarduy as a territorial and linguistic nomad. This is mainly because the very act of crossing boundaries and cross-dressing plays a central role in his writerly aesthetics. Furthermore, Sarduy himself is a cross-dresser. One can best see the reflections of this in *De donde son los cantantes*, where he actively disguises his characters and vests their language to saturate physical and linguistic barriers. By way of incorporating neobaroque aesthetics, he perpetually moves away from the *Center* and differs meaning. In this sense, Sarduy’s cross-dressers from the Orient are queer(ing) hermeneutic workers who demystify and baroquify propagandas of normalization. They avail themselves of baroque illusionism, the distinctive baroque awareness of the kinship between appearance and reality, in which self-evident certainties are unmasked as fabrications and lies. The utopic space of possibilities that enables the realization of these baroquifying endeavors is the “Orient” both in Sarduy and Loti. Within this panorama, traveling means welcoming unknowability and becoming unknown. Travel awakens all possible forms of being the *other*, and the Orient is the locus of this experience. In a similar fashion, Loti meditates as follows in *Aziyadé*: “Quelque chose comme de l’amour naissait sur ces ruines, et l’Orient jetait son grand charme sur ce reveil de moi-meme, qui se traduisait par le trouble des sens”²⁸ (10).

I would like to close my discussion with a circular motion by going back to the epigraph I used in the opening: “Ir más allá es un regreso.” “Going further is a return.” Likewise, going to the “East” is always a return to the “West,” and cruising towards the *other* is always a cruise towards the self. This baroque motion is also inscribed in our daily lives, where we dress and cross-dress ourselves everyday as part of our identity performances or identities-as-performances.

Notes

- ¹ I consulted Edward D'Auvergne's *Pierre Loti: Romance of a Great Writer* (2002) and Yves La Prairie's *Le vrai visage de Pierre Loti* (1995) for my biographical summation of Loti.
- ² I draw on Tzvetan Todorov conceptualization of the "exotic" found in *Nous et les autres* (1989). According to him, the "exotic" is more a formulation of an ideal than a critique of the real.
- ³ César A. Salgado is a scholar who worked extensively on (neo)baroque literature as well as Sarduy. Therefore, I would like to hark back to his succinct explanation of this multilayered term here: "The term baroque was first used to designate a stylistic period of extravagant artificiality and ornemantation in post-Renaissance European art and literature, and to characterize the doctrinal and iconographic strategies of Counter-Reformation" (1999: 317). Around the early 2000s, however, the term baroque has come to describe particular instances of Latin American cultural alterity in the discourse of what Salgado calls "New World baroque theory." As he explains, the baroque, within this discourse, "functions as a trope or adjective for the region's complex ethnic and artistic *mestizaje* (racial mixture) rather than as a reference to exclusively Western cultural forms" (ibid.).
- ⁴ Further biographical information about Sarduy can be found in the *Encyclopedia of Latin American History and Culture* under the entry "Sarduy, Severo (1937–1993)."
- ⁵ Interestingly enough, Barthes, who was Sarduy's tutor at College de France, had already written extensively on Loti before Sarduy did. In fact, Barthes was known to be the French poststructuralist who followed Loti's steps in writing about the "East," and in particular Japan. Though these nuances fall outside this paper's focus, I think that it is still important to keep them in mind to understand Sarduy's orientalist gestures.
- ⁶ "This Cuban who travels through the East and disguises himself as an Oriental is a contemporary of the French May and the hippies." (my trans.)
- ⁷ Much has been said about Sarduy's Oriental journeys. Julia Kushigian's work *Orientalism in the Hispanic Literary Tradition: In Dialogue with Borges, Paz and Sarduy* (1991) is one of the earliest studies that touch upon the orientalist vein of Sarduy's texts. A more recent and extensive study on this topic is the book called *El Oriente de Sarduy* (2008). Though it illuminates numerous overlooked points, it still leaves out the Sarduy-Loti connection I'm looking at in this paper.
- ⁸ This is an ironically jocos expression by Sarduy to refer to Cuba's three existing cultures/ethnicities. In a note at the end of *De donde son los cantantes*, he writes: "Tres culturas se han superpuesto para constituir la cubana—española, africana y china tres ficciones que aluden a ellas constituyen este libro" [Three cultures, at least, have been superimposed to constitute the Cuban—Spanish, African, and Chinese—; three fictions alluding to them constitute this book] (1993: 154). Thus, Sarduy's Cuba was Europe, Africa, and Asia at once. The expression in question is also the title of a story by Sarduy that appeared in *Revista Sur* printed in Buenos Aires (1965: no. 297).
- ⁹ My emphasis.
- ¹⁰ *tebdil-i kıyafet* derives from Arabic *tebdil* (to change) and *kiyāfet* (attire).
- ¹¹ In "Change of Attire, Conversion, and Apostasy" (2012), Irvin Cemil Schick provides a detailed account of the historico-religious background of *tebdil-i kıyafet* in the Ottoman society.
- ¹² "The Orient of Darío, or Lugones' vague Orient, or the Orient of Neruda, or even the Orient of Lezama are a bit bibliographic, despite the fact that Neruda was in Burma, Ceylon, Indonesia." (my trans.)
- ¹³ "The orientalism of the French, let's say the nineteenth century, is also bibliographic." (my trans.)
- ¹⁴ "Sure, sure, that too. As is well known, Pierre Loti, for example, works more with a paper code, as Roland Barthes said, and with the National Library, as with Jules Verne, than with the real Orient." (my trans.)
- ¹⁵ "I owe [my understanding of] the Orient to Octavio Paz, in this sense. I mean, he is the first of the Occidentalists. As a Mexican, he was already very close to love that culture, I think." (my trans.)
- ¹⁶ "The baroque, superabundance, overflowing cornucopia, lavishness and waste — hence, the moral resistance that has aroused in certain cultures of economics and moderation such as the

- French — ridicule of all functionality, of all sobriety, is also the solution to that verbal saturation, to the *trop plein* of the word.” (my trans.)
- ¹⁷ “The Orient represents something more than a scientific object or a tourist destination: it is the very possibility of building new relationships between coincidence, language and the world.” (my trans.)
- ¹⁸ “the possibility of founding another civilization by shedding the tight Judeo-Christian corset.” (my trans.)
- ¹⁹ “Loti is in the novel [...]; but he is also outside of it since the Loti who wrote the book does not coincide with the hero Loti.” (my trans.)
- ²⁰ “the fundamental inadequacy of language and reality.” (my trans.)
- ²¹ “utopias of language.” (my trans.)
- ²² “The transvestite does not imitate the woman. For him, at the limit, there is no woman, he knows—and perhaps, paradoxically, he is the only one to know it—that she is an appearance, that his kingdom and the strength of his fetish hides a defect [...] The transvestite does not copy: he rather simulates, since there is no norm that invites and magnetizes the transformation, that decides the metaphor: it is rather the inexistence of the pampered being that constitutes the space, the region or the support of that simulation.” (my trans.)
- ²³ This essay can be found in *Escrito sobre un cuerpo (Written on a Body)*.
- ²⁴ Sarduy argues that the *curriculum cubense* is what constitutes Cuba as a fiction (See Footnote 5 for the original quote).
- ²⁵ “That wine made of viceroyalty provinces, ennobled generations of traffickers and slave traders. They are looking for an impossible, for sure, but they are very well equipped. They beg notices for gambling dens and beehives—the Malaga brothels—in those cells, apocryphal, cartomantic, celestian beggars bribe black princesses. Houris from Maghreb harems, badly castrated eunuchs respond to them with their contralto voices.” (my trans.)
- ²⁶ “Black soldiers and eunuchs kept these forbidden entrances. The styles of these porticoes themselves seemed to indicate that the threshold was dangerous to cross; the marble columns and friezes, excavated in the Arab style, were covered with strange designs and mysterious windings.” (my trans.)
- ²⁷ “a mysterious little apartment where he could lock himself up to dream of Stamboul.” (my trans.)
- ²⁸ “Something like love dawning on ruins, and the East cast its great charm on this awakening of myself, which resulted in the disturbance of the senses” (my trans.)

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