

## ***Seropositivo: Queer Solidarity & Survival in Severo Sarduy's Fiction***

**Huber Jaramillo Gil**  
The Graduate Center, LAILaC  
[hjaramillogil@gradcenter.cuny.edu](mailto:hjaramillogil@gradcenter.cuny.edu)

### **Introduction**

With the onset of the HIV epidemic, to prevent transmission, the Cuban government aggressively tested its sexually active population, sending infected people to live in quarantined sanitariums. It is in these establishments, in which an HIV-ridden Sarduy sets his posthumous novel, entitled *Pájaros de la playa* (1993). In the novel, the reader witnesses the degradation and disintegration of the body, which irremediably and inexplicably ages prematurely due to *el mal*, a mysterious disease that affects all of the patients in the sanitarium. Many of these people, have been forcibly hospitalized and isolated, taken away from the citizen body to die and putrefy without infecting the healthy— the culturally principled, the politically manageable, the economically profitable, etc.

### **Necropolitics**

Within the walls of the sanitarium, beside the sick, we find medico-political representatives that attempt to manage and supervise the ill bodies. These are known, among the patients, as *vampiros* for their obsessive interest in the blood of the sick (this being the avenue for illness and infection). They are the health professionals who, working closely with the government, manage how *el mal* and those afflicted by it are to be interpreted, explained, regulated, and restrained. Through these medical figures, Sarduy identifies not only the ways in which the contemporary body depends on medicine, but how it is defined and controlled by it.

In the novel, the patients' existence is managed through pharmaceutical and technological entities and devices which are meant to help them. Nonetheless, as we read along, we find doctors who propose newfangled countermeasures and make false promises, while benefiting from the sickness and death of the patients. While doing so (or to be able to do so), they help support the State's surveillance and removal of disease-stricken peoples from the nation body. Complicit with the State, they provide discursive ammunition for the elimination of HIV-positive persons. Lastly, while their credibility is supported by (what is understood as) scientific observation, study and experimentation, Sarduy goes on to question their motives and qualifications.

In the novel, two medical figures appear: Caballo and Caimán. They are two sides of the same coin. Caballo is associated with traditional medicine (*medicina clásica*), while Caimán relies on fringe medicine (*medicina verde*). Both claim to know how to treat disease and relieve pain, yet neither present their patients with credible and effective results. They promise to help the sick with their weight loss, night sweats and fatigue. However, by the end of the novel, their only accomplishment is to raise false hopes while taking control over the sanitarium and its residents. In doing so, due to its insufficient action when faced with an epidemic, Sarduy discredits the power and prestige of the medical field.

Out of fear, patients would make every attempt recommended and imagined to stay alive. For example, some would weigh themselves “early in the morning, before defecating, to add that laughable and fetid dead weight—or their underpants and socks—to today's calculation” others “stood on the scale leaning on their right leg, to unbalance discreetly the verdict of the numbers” (54). Out of desperation, the patients made every effort at avoiding the systems and apparatuses of

measurement which were used by the scientific community to determine their proximity to death. This was vital, since the opportunity to be seen (by others and oneself) as human would wither as their bodies grew more and more feeble. Throughout the novel, they would push their already weakened bodies to the limit; anxiously accepting all offers made by the medical community. Faced with inhuman and degrading treatment, they were used more as experimental subjects than seen as human beings; they were blacklisted and turned into administrative detainees; they were made stateless people within hospital-prison walls.

Like those dying of HIV, the patients of *el mal* placed their trust in the medical community, yet their health was never fully restored. In cahoots, neither the medical nor the governmental systems, whose sole purpose is to protect its citizens' natural and legal rights, showed interest in helping the sick. Both seemed unwilling to carry out their bestowed duties and responsibilities. Instead, due to their prejudice and neglect, they created a necropolitical system of power, which contributed to the annihilation of minoritarian populations.

### **Pharmacopower**

Despite the dominant medico-political order, which has been the focus of several studies regarding this novel, several characters in *Pájaros* produce critical and political strategies to resist and dismantle the violence and repression within the sanatorium. We have, for example, those who create networks in which to exchange ideas and experiences. Fighting through the weakening effects of *el mal*, the patients found it helpful to come together, interact and share: "Throughout the interminable day the recluses gathered under the linden trees... they opened the woven dried pal leaf pouches they had brought with them... [which contained] small loaves of raisin bread and soft drinks" (143). While doing so, as a group, they condemned medical wrongdoing and contested harmful political maneuverings. The sick would talk about Caballo and Caimán, aware of their unethical and neglectful behavior: "they were driven by something unappeasable: the flip side of everything medical... the delight of corruption" (144). They would imagine how Caballo and Caimán would return "sick, like everyone else. To see their own bodies from without, like objects of experimentation, while the malady carries out its patient work. They'll apply to themselves what they learned from us" (144); wishing upon Caballo and Caimán the same pain they inflicted on their own sickened bodies. Thus, by creating a sense of community within a repressive system, the patients found ways to communicate their frustrations, develop forms of resistance, manage their vulnerability and consider different forms of survival.

Among these strategies of empowerment, we find characters that reclaim medical technologies, reutilizing the same subjectification tools used against them to combat institutions of medico-political power and their mechanisms of control. Thus, foreseeing Paul Preciado's biotechnological resistance within a pharmacopornographic regime, Sarduy presents characters that "through the strategic reappropriation of biotechnological apparatuses" are able to "invent resistance, to risk revolution" (Preciado 344). Early on, we find characters whose bodies are connected to medico-technological devices, such as the adolescent woman that appears throughout the novel, identified easily by her blond hair. At the beginning, she is as deteriorated as her peers: she is balding, she is losing her vision, she is disheveled. Beside her, "on her left arm, she neglectfully wears the complex rolling apparatus of her own transfusion" (15). There are times in which, instead of carrying the IV pole, she grasps on to it in fear of losing her balance and falling. Her dependence on the medical device becomes essential enough for her to become known as *the one with the transfusion*.

Suddenly, without explanation, the woman lets go of the IV pole, showing tremendous improvement in health: “Liberated from her apparatus, the gal with the transfusion ran through the corridors” (29), as if gaining the mobility of the wheeled device. As she presents noticeable improvements in health, she helps those who have become dependent on medical equipment (especially those with wheelchairs), becoming herself an instrument of relief for the sick. Interestingly, she does not only perform as a medical tool/device, she also gains behavioral features associated with (medical) machines: her own equanimity and impassiveness makes her seem robotic at times, as if with her regained health she also gained biomechanic qualities. In fact, there are instances in which she becomes machinelike: such as in the scene in which she makes an announcement “‘News,’ she uttered, poker-faced. She too had become an apparatus, one that mechanically reproduced the voice” (29). In addition to helping the sick, she teaches others how to incorporate technology, and achieve cyborgization as a result. After the young woman helps transport a sick patient, the patient states: “Soon I’ll be able to express myself thanks to a machine that synthesizes sounds [of the voice] and which I had to invent, since these scientists are such prudes” (80), acquiring the same enhanced manipulation of sound as the young woman by enhancing his own human physiology through self-invented technologies. It is important to note that he reappropriates medical technology in an auto-experimental manner, creating new forms of medico-political dissidence through the transformation of his body.

With regards to the young woman, thanks to her extraordinary (yet unspoken) knowledge and employment of biotechnology, she does not only help others find ways of reappropriating it, but is also able to free herself of it altogether: with time “the Pre-Raphaelite blonde had been discharged and, struck with wanderlust, she appeared only now and again” (88). Out of all the characters in the novel, she is the only patient to be released from the hospital, perhaps after learning how to truly reverse her symptoms, experimenting on her own until finding a solution (many AIDS victims outlived their median survival time by self-medicating). Moreover, after gaining her freedom, we are told that she returns to the hospital, wandering around its halls, perhaps helping others find their own freedom through biotechnological appropriation and self-experimentation. Through this young woman and her pupils, Sarduy alludes to a posthumanist vision of the world in which we find free and open use of medical technology being utilized to reinvent and reassert a self-designed and unimpeded subjectivity.

In addition to combating pharmacopower by reappropriating it, we find individuals who use it as a weapon with which to attack the medico-political regime directly. Unsurprisingly, both Auxilio and Socorro make an appearance in *Pájaros*. These two characters, thought to be twin sisters, both transgender *and* cross-dressers (two terms that must not be conflated), reappear in most of Sarduy’s novels, always performing as catalysts to the plot. Here, they serve as pseudo-nurses who assist Caballo and Caimán in their misdeeds. After working under their supervision, however, Auxilio and Socorro unhesitatingly get rid of Caballo and Caimán at the end of the novel. Perhaps, as witnesses of the abuse performed by the corrupt doctors, Auxilio and Socorro felt animosity towards them. Possibly, as two older women who have also used medicine to remodify their bodies, they may have sided with the patients.

Either way, after the pseudo-doctors engage in a physical brawl and lose consciousness, Auxilio and Socorro take the opportunity to drug Caballo and Caimán with a concoction of their own making: “the luxuriant salamanders... had seasoned the juice with a potent hallucinogenic destined... to provoke [in Caballo and Caimán] edenic visions with thousands of colors and little lights” (137). As planned, when the doctors regained consciousness, they are confronted by bizarre hallucinations. Afraid and confused by the strange images, Caballo and Caimán break through a

window and run from the sanatorium, never to be seen again. In this way, by using the same medicinal substances introduced by Caballo (*la medicina clásica*) and Caimán (*la medicina verde*), the clever and manipulative twins combat their toxic presence. In doing so, they seize pharmacopower to resist the same medico-political system that benefitted from the intimidation, humiliation and marginalization of the most vulnerable.

### **Conclusion**

Even when he is on the brink of death, Severo Sarduy is committed to the lives of his community. He provides gender and sexual dissidents with a vision of themselves that does not compromise their queerness while confronting institutions of power and social control which have repressed their bodies: police enforcement, state regulation, medical negligence, etc. Severo Sarduy dares to be transgressive in order to enact a creative exploration of existence. In doing so, he presents the possibility of reinvention through subversion and appropriation. Through his work, he presents a group of abject bodies that refuse to be killed, even when they are savagely deteriorating. Severo Sarduy recognizes that being acknowledged by the patriarchal order is not useful enough. Instead, one interacts with the world and finds a place in it by being resourceful and creative, and by forming communities of empowerment and healing.

### **NOTE**

Please be aware that the previous piece of writing is accompanied by a visual presentation, which you can access on CUNY Academic Works: [academicworks.cuny.edu/gc\\_pubs/563/](http://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_pubs/563/)

### **Bibliography**

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