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Author

Peery, Robin

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Sex, Drugs & Rock n'Roll: Sexuality, AIDS & Urban Decay in Caio Fernando Abreu's *Onde andar  Dulce Veiga?*

ROBIN B. PEERY

In *Onde andar  Dulce Veiga?* Caio Fernando Abreu constructs a contemporary urban epic reflecting the social and health crises plaguing 1980s metropolitan Brazil. Revitalizing the detective novel formula, Abreu infuses his narrative with abundant intertextual, topographical and cultural references. While the novel's central plot concerns an unnamed journalist's attempts to uncover the truth behind the disappearance of a late 1960s cult lounge singer, it also addresses urban decay, violence, and the increasing AIDS/HIV panic of contemporary public discourses. By the novel's end, Abreu's narrator has traversed three of Brazil's most distinct regions and, via flashbacks and intertextual interludes, pieced together twenty years of political and social strife, resulting in a nuanced depiction of urban life and sexual transgressions. This article will focus on the text's distinct narrative structure and its portrayal of Brazil's largest urban locale, S o Paulo, before relating its literary construction to the aesthetic motives and themes of the text.

Fl nerie and the Dialectics of Happiness

The novel, occurring one hot February week in the late 1980s, charts the cynical journalist's urban trek in a survey of Brazilian metropolitanism, contemporary socio-political history and global popular culture. Although the protagonist meticulously narrates his whirlwind excursion, we are only made privy to his biographical and biological self through analeptic interludes linking interviews, conversations, and voyages. Approaching forty, he keeps an untidy apartment in a run-down building in downtown S o Paulo, abandoned some time prior by a former lover, L dia. A fervent consumer of popular culture, he is skilled in the language of camp, kitsch and cinema. He is undeniably bisexual, wrestling with questions of sexuality and same-sex desire in the crucial early years of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The narrative trajectory begins when he is assigned to write a newspaper article about an up-and-coming rock band, *M rcia Fel cio & the Vagina Dentatas*. Once it is discovered

that Márcia's mother was the popular lounge singer and actress Dulce Veiga, who infamously vanished some twenty years earlier, the narrator attempts to solve the novel's eponymous question. Employing narrative flashback in a restaging of his personal interactions with Dulce Veiga, as well as unrelated sexual encounters, the protagonist intersects his biographical experience with a much greater narrative discourse that examines a tumultuous transitional period in Brazil's recent history. Such intersections will address political persecution under the military junta and the nation's subsequent re-democratization while experiencing high economic inflation and stagnancy, urban decay, and spikes in drug trafficking and police violence.

Before entering our discussion of the narrative's exploration of environmental, architectural and urban signifiers, we must first analyze Abreu's characterization of his narrator-protagonist. He is an unnamed journalist working for the São Paulo daily, *O Diário da Cidade*, talvez o pior jornal do mundo, (Abreu, *Dulce Veiga* 16). Considering the novel's vast number of secondary characters and its breathless intertextual and cultural references, Abreu's reluctance to name his protagonist is of no small consequence. In a letter to his friend Maria Lídia Magliani,¹ he describes the character:

Ele é um jornalista chegando nos 40 anos (hmmm...), publicou um livro de poemas chamado *Miragens*, a vida toda viajou de um canto para outro, sem se fixar em cidade nenhum, em amor nenhum, homem ou mulher. Ele nem sabe direito da própria sexualidade, na verdade o romance inteiro é o pobre buscando a própria *anima*. (243)

This brief description of the protagonist-narrator indicates the self-aware similarities between the author and his character's biographies. During the 1970s, Abreu had self-exiled in Europe, spending time in England, Scandinavia, France, and Spain; upon returning to Brazil, he famously drifted between Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, his native Porto Alegre, and Campinas. Since the 1960s, Abreu supplemented his literary career by writing for pop culture magazines like *Veja* and *Pop* as well as the newspaper *O Diário de Estado de São Paulo*. Though the novel was not completed and published until 1990, he began working on its first incarnation in 1984 and 1985, at the age of 36 (243). In regards to the protagonist's undetermined sexuality, we are reminded, as Fernando Arenas has written, that throughout his lifetime Abreu maintained a critical stance against the "monolithic categories such as 'gay,' 'bisexual' or 'heterosexual'" (*Utopias* 43). Furthermore, one cannot read the

narrator's obsessive and fearful anxieties concerning his unknown HIV status without finding these passages informed by Abreu's own struggles with HIV/AIDS (from which he would eventually die in 1996).

Despite the autobiographical elements linking author to narrator, I will not insist on a reading of the protagonist as Abreu's literary avatar. Rather I suggest that the narrator-protagonist be interpreted as a Brazilian socio-politically specific variation of the Baudelairian *flâneur*. In his essay "On the Image of Proust," Walter Benjamin contemplates the author's narrative complexities in regards to social commentary and autobiographical (or autofictitious) representation. For Benjamin, Proust's *À la recherche de temps perdu* demonstrates a singularly innovative approach to narrative standards: "From its structure, which is at once fiction, autobiography, and commentary, to the syntax of boundless sentences, (the Nile of language, which here overflows and fructifies the plains of truth), everything transcends the norm" (237). With its homosexual subtext, physical and memorial trek through the Parisian landscape and landmark depictions of sensate elements (in particular the Proustian madeleine), *À la recherche de temps perdu* exemplifies a modernist, pre-queer predecessor to *Onde andarà Dulce Veiga?* As Benjamin indicates, Proust's intricately woven *textum* is the result of two juxtaposing yet interlinking dialectical plays. The first is, of course, the dialectics of life and memory, in which Proust describes, "not a life as it actually was [*wie es gewesen ist*] but a life as it was remembered by the one who had lived it...the important thing to the remembering author is not what he experienced, but the weaving of the memory" (238). Both countering and complimenting these memories recalled by "the-one-who-has-lived them," Benjamin indicates a dialectic of happiness he categorizes as the hymnic and elegiac. The former presents happiness *in flux*, unprecedented, seemingly at the peaks of a Lacanian *jouissance* while the latter is "the eternal restoration of the original first happiness" through which the author "transforms existence into a preserve of memory" (239). The dialectical framework at play in Proust's magnum opus can easily be appropriated to *Dulce Veiga's* narrative structure. The protagonist's first-person account is frequently interrupted by analeptical episodes depicting various subjective experiences spanning over twenty years of recent history. When such flashbacks intersect with the protagonist's memory, we become privy to Abreu's expression of Benjamin's "weaving of memory." Furthermore, the breadth and specificity of the characters' individual

experiences purposefully allude to crucial moments in contemporary Brazilian history. As demonstrated by a series of vignettes, in the late 1960s, the narrator unintentionally leads undercover military police to Dulce Veiga and her politically dissident lover, Saul, to her apartment:

Não lembro se foi quando o elevador chegou lá embaixo ou se quando abriu a porta no andar onde eu estava...saíram quarto ou cinco homens apressados, vestidos de terno, um deles tinha uma arma na mão, e me jogaram contra a parede. O apartamento da cantora, perguntaram, o guerrilheiro, onde mora Dulce Veiga, o terrorista, onde é a casa daquela puta, daquele comunista, e sem saber direito o que significava aquilo, era tudo rápido demais, eu não tive culpa, eu falei o número, sem querer, acho que era setenta, eu disse: é lá que eles moram. Os homens saíram correndo, eu fui embora...ouvi os homens dando socos e pontapés na porta do apartamento. (Dulce Veiga 172)

Saul's time in prison as a socialist enemy of state, tortured by the military junta, leads to his permanent drug-addled state. Holed up in a run-down tenement building, he now spends his days in drag, answering only to the name Dulce Veiga, in constant need of another heroin fix. Márcia's own drug addiction reflects the increase of narcotics trafficking and consumption in Brazil in the 1980s, while her and the narrator's concerns regarding their HIV status mirror the public health crisis and social panic that began to crescendo during the decade's latter half.

The novel further evidences Benjamin's notion of Proust's dialectics of happiness with juxtapositions between characters' memories and their actual ontological experiences. For Abreu's narrator, these initial moments of happiness would correspond to moments in early adulthood, particularly in his two brief encounters with Dulce Veiga and early homoerotic encounters with Saul. Abreu heavily aestheticizes the narrator's nostalgic happiness:

A primeira vez que vi Dulce Veiga...ela estava sentada numa poltrona de veludo verde. Uma berge, mas naquele tempo eu nem sabia que se chamava assim. Sabia tão pouco de tudo que, na época, quando tentei descrevê-la depois na mente e no papel, disse que era uma dessas poltronas clássicas...até hoje, ao pensar nela penso também inevitavelmente num filme qualquer, em preto-e-branco, de década de 40 ou começo dos 50... Não estou absolutamente seguro que, de algum lugar no interior do apartamento, viessem os acordes iniciais de Crazy, he calls me, na gravação de Billie Holiday, e poderia ser também Glad to be unhappy, Sophisticated lady...Tudo isso que agora parece clichê banal, naquele

tempo—repito e não me canso, porque é belo e mágico em sua melancolia: naquela época tudo era novo. (38-40)

Reminiscing about his first encounter with the singer conducting an interview for a daily journal article, the protagonist employs his most aesthetic and sensual language yet—from the colors of Dulce’s dress to the scent of her perfume, the ache of Billie Holiday’s voice to the velvet touch of Dulce’s velour couch. Throughout the text, such vivid moments of sensate memory are recalled rather than experienced directly including the narrator’s second meeting with a drug-addled Dulce and Saul and his own passionate weeklong love affair with another man, Pedro, several months earlier. These vignettes of happiness and sensorial-overload demonstrate what José Geraldo Couto has dubbed Abreu’s “ritmo cinematográfico” (5). Furthermore, an “escritor cinéfilo...Caio explora de forma consciente a linguagem audiovisual e a escrita, servindo-se das experiências mais fecundas de uma e de outra para ampliar seu instrumental expressivo e aproximar-se do coração selvagem da vida” (6). As such passages evoke intense sensate imagery and cinematic precision, I would venture that through the process of revisiting earlier (though not necessarily happier moments), the narrator channels his elegiac happiness, an eternal return to the original happiness that he experienced some twenty years before. This attempt at retaining the hymnic happiness is further demonstrated by the protagonist’s treacherous weeklong undertaking to track down Dulce, for such a task would justify prolonging the pleasurable nostalgia that permeates the text. Nostalgia here, not *saudade*, can be linked to the simplicity and romance of Golden Age Hollywood cinema, novels depicting epic love stories like *Out of Africa*, even the delightful decadence of countercultural icons of the 1960s like Mick Jagger. Unsurprisingly, the majority of such points of nostalgia coincide with socio-cultural movements like the free love or hippie subcultures, all predating the genesis of the HIV/AIDS crisis. Throughout his literary career, Abreu frequently included cinematic motifs within his novels and short stories; several texts even feature overt intertextual references to classic films. The use of vivid cinematographic language is an essential component of Abreu’s construction of urban spaces that I will revisit in the following pages.

Another element of the novel’s language based on cinema and popular culture deviates from simple yet frequent displays of intertextuality. As Charles Perrone has posited, references to Virginia Woolf or Shakespeare, although displaying affinities to

certain plot moments or thematic devices, are not pivotal to the text (54). Sampled lyrics of contemporary musicians like Jim Morrison and Lou Reed demonstrate conscious allusions to international figures of counter-culture and social transgressions. Perrone also links the inclusion of certain Brazilian songs, such as “Aquarela do Brasil,” to the novel’s exploration of nationalism and post-dictatorial unification (54). Interesting as such subtle moments may be, they pale in comparison to the narrative’s copious references to classic and contemporary popular culture, particularly gay-friendly films and celebrities or those appropriated by gay culture. Although the list is exhaustive, the narrator-protagonist frequently mentions an array of female pop stars, actresses, writers, public figures, and cinematic personages both in passing and as reference points. Gay-friendly or camp icons like Vanessa Redgrave, Greta Garbo and Audrey Hepburn, Madonna and Carmen Miranda, amongst others, are mentioned as well as notable contemporary or early public homosexual figures—Rupert Everett, Patricia Highsmith, Almodóvar, Pessoa, and Agenor Miranda Araújo Neto, aka Cazuza.² Though the novel seems oversaturated with cinematic, literary and musical intertextuality, Abreu has not chosen these references arbitrarily. Although a few of the textual exchanges fully embrace aspects of camp discourse between characters, principally those of the narrator Dulce’s flamboyant ex-husband Alberto and a young black *travesti* neighbor Jacyr,³ *Dulce Veiga* is not a camp novel. Rather, it is highly informed by gay sensibility and the conventions of gay culture. As Mark Finch has aptly observed:

Gay culture means something more specific than it pretends: a discursive system developed out of metropolitan, white, middle-class and male gay community. Gay culture speaks from and to this position; it describes a socially-defined audience and an attendant cluster of texts....gay culture is the prerequisite of political formation; it admits to our existence, interprets that fact in relation to the rest of the world, and provides us with pleasure in the process....Traditional gay culture is neither necessarily produced by nor addressed to gay people: it is high straight culture or showbiz and always an identification with the ‘feminine’: *Madame Butterfly*, Judy Garland and E.M. Forster. (143)

Should we follow Finch’s logic, *Dulce Veiga* resembles both a postmodern gay narrative, one streaming from the metropolitan, white and gay middle-class perspective, and a traditional gay perspective, which consistently recycles high straight culture’s treatment of the feminine. It is precisely this “identification with the

‘feminine’” (and queer) that informs and guides the novel’s aesthetic motifs and intertextual references, a technique further accented by Abreu’s strategic selection of female cinematic, literary and music icons like Madonna, Hepburn and Miranda with huge gay followings as well as LGB entertainers themselves.

For Benjamin, the archetype of the *flâneur* extends far beyond the model of the well-dressed gentleman strolling the city streets. Rather the figure becomes essential to understanding the complexities of modern urban life. As opposed to the dandy, the *flâneur* maintains a general detachment, observing and socially engaging within the city. Because of the industrial and socio-historical advancements that transformed the urban space, Baudelaire’s *flâneur* represents “the cruel *aperçu* that the city changes faster than a human heart” (Benjamin 265). In Benjamin’s assessment of Franz Hessel’s *Spazieren in Berlin* he posits that “*l’esprit de la flânerie*” is not regulated to the classic locale of Paris’s *spleen* but can be effectively appropriated to 1920s Berlin. This concept can be further extended to Abreu’s post-*abertura* São Paulo, a city in distinct modes of sociological transformation as an ever-expanding megalopolis of urban decay and demographic isolation. As I will argue, the narrator-protagonist furthers his idiosyncratic appropriation of the *flâneur* in a return to the Proustian dialectical modes of construction.

An Abject Urbanity

The majority of the protagonist-narrator’s weeklong odyssey (four and half days) is spent negotiating São Paulo’s massive urban terrain. Here São Paulo of the late 1980s stands as a national microcosm for urban development, internal migration and subalternity. As Fernando Arenas proposes, “this is the urban site where the vast array of cultural, socioeconomic, and political differences that make up the Brazilian nation converge and collide most dramatically” (*Utopias* 50). Abreu’s São Paulo reflects a homogenous, if not socioeconomically divided, depiction of contemporary urban demographics. We encounter Japanese-Brazilians, Argentine émigrés, mixed-race *nordestinos*, and Southern *gauchos* representing diverse sexual orientations, a component that traverses diasporic or socioeconomic urban borders. While Arenas associates the abundance of *nordestinos* as representative of the megalopolis’s subaltern economic reserve (51), he neglects to comment on certain character’s class and racial status as well as their sexual value or libidinal economies: the narrator’s Argentine

neighbors working as personal trainers-cum-gigolos, a gaggle of *travesti* prostitutes gathering outside of his building at night and his Northeasterner neighbor Jandira's son moonlighting as a transvestite prostitute.⁴ After nearly a year since his last sexual encounter, the narrator employs the services of a Southern prostitute, Dora. In this brief passage, he demonstrates both his homosexual tendencies and misogynistic social prejudices as Dora fellates him:

Branco canalha, rainha do frevo, ô Dora, sulista escroto, gaúcho metido, Dada Corisco, fodendo o agreste. E lá no fundo da garganta, quase gozando e rindo, olhos fechados para ver longe dali, sem que nada no corpo dela, além da boca, tocasse meu corpo além do pau, desta vez deliberadamente, com todos os detalhes, enquanto enchia sua boca de esperma, continuei a lembrar de Pedro. (Abreu, *Dulce Veiga* 126-127)

This *jouissance*-induced stream of conscious thread demonstrates a richly intimate glimpse into his own psychological complexes, including (homo)sexual repression and class and regional discriminations. As Karl Posso has indicated, the protagonist's inability to fully acknowledge his own homosexuality ironically elaborates "an implicit society-bred resistance to homosexuality" (171). Moreover, such resistance first creates a discursive distance between the narrator and the imminent dangers of gay sex: "*Eu gostava de mulher, eu tinha medo. Todos os medos de todos os riscos e desregramentos*" (Abreu, *Dulce Veiga* 129). Nevertheless, as Dora fellates him, he ignores all body contact with her and fantasizes about Pedro in a moment of erotic transference.

We could read the narrator's encounter with the prostitute as a continuation of his supposedly first homosexual love affair, though not his only homoerotic encounter, as he has subsequently kissed his coworker Filemon (71), fantasized about his Argentine neighbors and will later thoroughly and quite explicitly describe gay content of Alberto Veiga's queered restaging of Nelson Rodrigues's *O beijo no asfalto*. Despite a previous renouncement of homosexuality, the narrator's unconscious desires and sexual nature lead him to inevitable moments of homoerotic arousal. When he attempts to visualize the butterfly tattoo previously revealed between Márcia's breasts, his thoughts wander to the muscular chest of one of his Argentine neighbors (49). Only by the novel's end, when Márcia inquires about the protagonist-narrator's sexuality, is he able to discursively realize his doubts and possibly, if at all, begin to acknowledge his unknown sexual orientation (189). In addition to

his internalized homophobia, the narrator's social and sexual prejudices extend to his desires and erotic fantasies. He consciously demeans Dora morally (as a prostitute), regionally (she as *gaucho* to his *paulistano*), in terms of gender (she is a woman, e.g., *not* Pedro), and possibly ethnically (as indicated by her red hair and curls, she is likely of German or Polish ancestry, and therefore an "other").

Just as he allows himself to coincide these radicalized prejudices with sexual pleasure, he easily sexualizes the Argentine neighbors on more than one occasion. For the narrator, sex workers, regardless of their gender, racial origins or sexual orientation, can be easily objectified for his own sexual gratification. Such specificities demonstrate his refusal and incapacity to relate to subaltern denizens and those of a "lower" status, but continue a problematization of his contradictory self-identification. As Posso assesses:

although ostensibly he is ideologically "at home" with the hegemonic hetero-sexist State in wanting to conform, 'unclassified' but acted-upon desire prevents him from aligning with social parameters: he desires both conformity and men, and as a result soon finds that although incapable of identifying as homosexual, he is unable to continue intimating heterosexuality. Differentiated, therefore, from these axiomatic (productive) categories and the modes of desire they unsuccessfully contract into a binary, [he] slides into the "smooth" exteriority of continuous variation between them: he becomes a vector of transformation between molar coordinates. (173)

The narrator-protagonist's seemingly fixed position, trapped between a binary of self-imposed desires, not only prohibits him from identifying with or including himself in São Paulo's social-economic, ethnic, racial or sexual subalterns/minority populations but also produces two other separate narrative effects. Firstly, it establishes a greater distance between the narrator and the urban denizens (ranging from marginalized individuals to the bourgeois hegemony) with whom he interacts. Such an element elaborates upon the notion of the *paulistano* megalopolis as representative of the nation. Not only is he excluded from his immediate environment, but from his country as well. The narrator's general apathy adds a further dimension to this textual *flânerie* as he stands at a distance, self-excluded, observing the cityscapes before him. Furthermore, Posso's estimation of the narrator as "a vector of transformation between molar coordinates" can be further explored as a locus of psychological and sexual distress.

The protagonist's same-sex desire and need to conform to heteronormative social conventions implement a dialectical force that provokes a performance of "assumed" heterosexual masculinity. Readers, as well as characters like Márcia, are aware of the impending failure of such a performance, which becomes further negated by his sexual fantasies and his abstinence in the year since Pedro's departure. This desire leads to a general insertion into what Judith Butler refers to as the production of the heterosexual matrix, resulting in the melancholy of heterosexuality. As she states in her landmark *Gender Trouble*, "the melancholy refusal/domination of homosexuality culminates in the construction of discrete sexual 'natures' that require and institute their opposites through exclusion" (69). According to Butler's assessment of Freud's Oedipus complex, same-sex gender identification is contingent upon an unresolved homosexual cathexis with the father. In forfeiting mother-object, the child internalizes such a loss through identification with her, or "displaces his heterosexual attachment, in which case he fortifies his attachment to his father and thereby 'consolidates' his masculinity" (76). Although the narrator maintains a fixed gender identity, his sexuality grows increasingly unstable as his institution of "opposite nature" (homosexuality) becomes less of a cultural and repressed prohibition and instead emerges as a realization of his own homosexual tendencies. Such a notion is further evidenced by his anonymity, which, at first, appears concealed in order to protect himself from what can easily be interpreted as looming homophobic threats of patriarchal and hegemonic castigation. However, it is later revealed that, since Pedro's disappearance, "*perdi meu nome. Perdi o jeito de ser que tivera antes de Pedro, não encontrei outro*" (Abreu, *Dulce Veiga* 130).

If the narrator-protagonist's self-realization, or lack thereof, problematizes his identification with other urban minority communities, he is not privy to the socioeconomic blindness or cultural amnesia permitted to the bourgeois and elite classes. The first introduction to the narrator-cum-*flâneur's* urban trek occurs when he leaves the downtown office buildings of *O Diário da Cidade*. Though the newspaper is fictitious, it is possible to envision this building in a downtown skyscraper, surrounded by smog and, as is the case of the majority of Brazil's metropolitan city centers, a plethora of commuters, migrant workers, *moleques* and *moradores da rua*. The protagonist illustrates such a situation as he first commences his journey to find Dulce Veiga's history and whereabouts:

Até encontrar um táxi, passei por dois anões, um corcunda, três cegos, quarto mancos, um homem-tronco, outro maneta, mais um enrolado em trapos como um leproso, uma negra sangrando, um velho de muletas, duas gêmeas mongo-lóides, de braço dado, e tantos mendigos que não consegui contar. A cenografia eram sacos de lixo com cheiro doce, moscas esvoaçando, crianças em volta. (26)

Illustrating Abreu's cinematographic language and celluloid-informed prose, this passage depicts a bleak urban demographic that, while exaggerated, is not entirely unlikely. This brief description, written in the style of a quick-panning camera eye, presents more than just a glimpse into the physical "freaks" that spot the urban landscape. We are lead again to a distance between the narrator and those of a lower socioeconomic status and the physically and mentally disabled.

Though ripe for a critique of Brazil's social policies and an exploration of the analogy between AIDS/HIV and physical/mental handicap, the passage illustrates an abject reality, that of the true subaltern subject, the urban reject. In direct contradiction of the social derelicts, queer outlaws or economically disadvantaged, this brief sampling of the demographic demonstrates a theoretical intersection between the Kristevian abject and Spivak's characterization of the subaltern. Abreu's urban reject relies upon the most fundamental aspect of Kristeva's theory of the abject. These individuals—diseased, disabled, poor, uneducated—lie outside of the symbolic order, far beyond the laws and norms of hegemonic and bourgeois society. Therefore, to directly acknowledge their existence would represent an essentially traumatic experience (Kristeva 1). Such profound negation and conscious repression leads to these denizens' characterization as subaltern subjects. In Spivak's appropriation of Gramscian designation of subalternity, e.g. non-elite groups, the subaltern becomes categorized as representing the demographic difference between an entire population [Indian] and those described as elite. Despite the abundant and highly subjective assignment of subaltern status since the 1980s, no doubt exists that these anonymous street characters embody the abject subaltern of the São Paulo cityscapes.

As an urban Brazilian *flâneur*, Abreu's narrator also interacts with and observes other members of various social and ethnic classes. Alberto, Dulce's gay ex-husband, is a privileged aesthete channeling the bohemian counterculture of the late 1960s. After her mother's disappearance, he sends Márcia to live with his mother, a

wealthy Portuguese widow, in Copacabana. When the grandmother is killed in a vehicular accident, Márcia then lives with her maternal grandmother in Góais, afterwards she is off to London to finish her education. There she meets Pátricia, her current manager and lover who hails from a wealthy artistic family in Leme (Rio de Janeiro), and Ícaro, a former lover who has since died of a heroin overdose. The three drift to New York, consuming drugs, playing music, and living off of familial wealth and allowances (Abreu, *Dulce Veiga* 104-108). Undoubtedly, their privileged upbringings afford them such a listless bohemian existence. Nevertheless their continuous drug abuse and musical forays into punk rock indicate a continued desire to transgress the norms and mores of high bourgeois culture. In addition, the narrator interacts with Rafic, certainly the text's most privileged character. The proprietor of the *Diário da cidade*, Rafic lives in São Paulo's sophisticated Morumbi district on the Avenida de Magnólias. Despite his considerable wealth, Rafic is not immune to the socioeconomic disparities of the *cidade partida*, a rhetorical value assigned to Brazil's major cities since the 1980s. As Marta Peixoto has assessed, the metaphor of the *cidade partida* is not new but gained. Despite the economic and political gains reestablished post-*abertura*, an elusive idea of Brazil is still fraught with experience of violence and bourgeois fears of violence (170). Rafic's home falls victim to such disparities:

Samambaias verdejantes despencavam em cascatas no jardim suspenso, mas insuficientes para ocultar o grafite no muro daquele bolo de cimento coberto de antenas parabólicas. Com spray vermelho alguém escrevera *Turcão Bundão*, bem ao lado de um enorme falo esporando notas de cem dólares. Rico como era, não entendi por que ele não mandava pintar ou raspar aquele negócio. Mas talvez, fui pensando, talvez achasse excitante aquele falo, aqueles dólares. (115)

Rafic's wealth backs up his flamboyant personality allowing him to offer the narrator a hefty incentive to continue his transnational search for Dulce Veiga. Once Dulce's lover, a jealous Rafic used his economic and political influence to have Saul arrested by the military police. With closed circuit security, a fine taste in liquor and art and a highly disposable income, Rafic exists as a sharp contradiction to São Paulo's urban, abject poverty.

In addition to the São Paulo elite and subaltern demographic, the narrator interacts with citizens of the lower-middle and lower classes, particularly in his own apartment building. In addition to

the Argentines, his neighbor Jandira has occupied the tenement building for some time. A *mulata nordestina*, she works as an oracle while her son Jacyr cleans houses and moonlights as a prostitute. The bleak contrasts along socioeconomic and racial divides are demonstrated; members of the lower, urban classes are of mixed race or African roots. As mother and son exploit their bodies (mystically or sexually) in order to gain economic capital, the reverse proves true for their elite counterparts for whom capitalist exploits provide disposable income spent in a variety of ways. For instance, Pátricia, Ícaro and Márcia's abuse heroin and cocaine. Saul has a twenty-year heroin addiction. Most notably, Rafic has an exquisite home and provides an endless bankroll for the protagonist's journey.

The socioeconomic disparities within the urban demographic further isolate the narrator from the various classes and social categories he describes. His role as a reporter grants him access to exclusive bohemian circles and the extremely wealthy. He snorts cocaine with Márcia, drinks Rafic's imported liquor and accepts his patronage. Nevertheless these moments serve as brief vignettes linking his topographical and textual trek throughout São Paulo. He maintains his residence in a dilapidated downtown apartment building, left to him after Lídia's abrupt departure. Seemingly inaccessible by public transportation, it is located in a labyrinth of backstreets and alleyways. This interim apartment and its unidentifiable urban locale demonstrate the narrator's individual dislocation. As evidenced by his *flâneur* status, he exists within a state of constant inertia, neither here nor there. Oscillating between the past and present, weaving in and out of diverse social circles, the protagonist maintains his psychological and physical distance, unable to engage and truly identify with his fellow characters.

São Paulo seropositivo

An analysis of urban space in the novel is inseparable from the topical issue of HIV/AIDS infection. Themes and imagery of infection, contamination and deterioration permeate the narrative. While I am not interested in drawing parallels between Abreu's own experience living with AIDS and the protagonist's own possible HIV-positive status, certain similarities cannot be denied. Abreu insisted on an AIDS-focused reading of the narrative, "É importante dizer que *Dulce Veiga* já é um romance sobre a AIDS. O narrador talvez seja seropositivo e Márcia também é. É uma história de amor entre dois contaminados" (Castello, n/p). Although the characters'

serostatuses are the obvious literary explorations of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, they represent mere fragments of an endemic-focused reading. As Marcelo Secron Bessa observes, readers may perceive such characteristics as simple social references or distractions from the narrative's central plot. However, these intricate topical and personal preoccupations illustrate the social concerns of 1980s urban Brazil.⁵ As he explains, the notions of contamination and disease extend to descriptions of a gritty, fragmented São Paulo. In the novel's first such depiction, the narrator observes the cityscape from his skyscraper office building: "Atrás da mesa dele os vidros imundos filtravam a luz cinza da Nove de Julho. A cidade parecia metida dentro de uma cúpula de vidro embaçada de vapor. Fumaça, hálitos, suor evaporado, monóxido, vírus" (Abreu, *Dulce Veiga* 20). Symptoms of urban dystopia such as pollution, contagion, and disease deceptively appear as an outside threat. Yet we soon learn that the narrator himself is not immune to AIDS panic permeating gay and bisexual communities.

In *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, Susan Sontag posits that the AIDS epidemic lends itself to the construction of several metaphors generally applied to discussions of the body and disease. For Sontag, these common metaphors are regulated to military tropes and motifs of plague, invasion, and pollution. Though she insists upon an exhaustion of such rhetorical devices, particularly that of the military metaphor,⁶ they are nevertheless prevalent in our discussion of *Dulce Veiga*. Sontag writes that HIV infection signifies an outing of sorts:

To get AIDS is precisely to be revealed, in the majority of cases, as a member of a certain "risk group," a community of pariahs. The illness flushes out an identity that might have remained hidden from neighbors, jobmates, family, friends. It also confirms an identity and, among the risk group...most severely affected in the beginning, homosexual men, has been a creator of community as well as an experience that isolate the ill... (182)

Within the narrative context, infection adheres to and defies Sontag's metaphorical assignment. The narrator's increasing terror of contamination indicates his fear of being "outed." Likewise Márcia's unknown status would indicate her affair with the now-deceased heroin-abusing Icáro. Additional symbols designate a further metaphorical designation of disease within the cityscape.

Returning to the narrator's description of urban rejects, we can easily read his portrayal of the subaltern demographic as a

representation of clichés like urban “blight” or a “social cancer,” undesirable consequence of contemporary issues. In *Illness as Metaphor*, written a decade prior, Sontag illustrates the parallels between the two paradigmatic and symbolic diseases of the 19th and 20th centuries, tuberculosis and cancer. For Sontag, cancer and TB metaphors “imply living processes of a particularly resonant and horrid kind” (9). While lightly touching upon the aesthetic traits of tuberculosis in 19th century arts (15), she discusses the semiotic values assigned to disease as representative of character lifestyle and sexual activity. Aesthetic portrayals of these diseases employ an obvious series of physical characteristics and clichés, such as a pallid complexion, increasing thinness, chronic wasting and hair-loss. With cancer and HIV come more gruesome physical consequences, amputations, stark contusions, glands swollen with tumors, and AIDS-related Kaposi’s sarcoma lesions. We can easily associate the novel’s urban abjects—the blind, cripples, amputees, lepers, and the developmentally disabled—e.g. victims of genetic disorders or infectious diseases, cast-off and seemingly invisible, as representative of urban blight and decay. In an AIDS-centered reading of Abreu’s São Paulo, these subaltern denizens can be interpreted as symbolic manifestations of the visible physical effects of disease within contemporary urbanity.

The metaphorical contamination of the cityscape extends beyond its demographic as the narrator describes the contemporary disease of the city, its architectural and structural decay. His own apartment building presents such a motif: “Era um edifício doente, contaminado, quase terminal. Mas continuava no mesmo lugar, ainda não tinha desmoronado. Embora, a julgar pelas rachaduras no concreto, pelas falhas cada vez mais largas no revestimento de pastilhas de cor indefinida, como feridas espalhando-se aos poucos sobre a pele, isso fosse apenas uma questão de meses” (Abreu, *Dulce Veiga* 43). The narrator’s dilapidated apartment easily reads as an AIDS metaphor, in its sarcoma-like wounds. Like a diseased, wasting body, this malfunctioning building is beyond condemnable and faces impending destruction. Abreu continuously inserts analogies between urban decay and disease throughout the text. In one brief but loaded passage, he describes the conditions of the downtown borough of the Sé, specifically its *Bexiga*⁷ or Bela Vista. Historically one of São Paulo’s most ethnically diverse districts first catering to Brazilians of African, indigenous, and Portuguese descent, the Sé would later see the arrival of multiple European immigrant communities with Spaniards, Germans, and Italians the

most prevalent—and develop into a renowned theatre district. Despite its popularity and cultural relevance, the narrator’s description of the neighborhood demonstrates its inevitable decay:

Era um casarão caindo aos pedaços, numa travessa do Bexiga, quase embaixo do viaduto. Espiei pelas grades da bilheteria, não havia ninguém por trás da placa escrita “Não me peça para dar a única coisa que tenho para vender”. Os únicos sinais da vida recente naquele buraco escuro eram uma revista de teve com Lilian Lara na capa, um maço de cigarros e um cinzeiro cheio...Tudo cheirava a mofo, mas talvez pelas fotografias, pelas douraduras espatifadas no veludo bordô das poltronas e cortinas, ainda havia restos de nobreza pelo ar. Isso era sempre o mais melancólico. Em tudo, aquela memória de outros tempos mais dignos, escondia ali no teatro...por toda parte...tempos melhores. (141)

Abreu correlates urban decay with an unequivocal dissipation in the high cultural arts, a critique of the national post-*abertura* arts scene that experienced a decreased interest in domestic, local arts in favor of international cultural events. He also alludes to the disproportionate number of gay men suffering from AIDS/HIV who contributed to the thriving performing arts scene both in Brazil and other countries. After an interview with Alberto Veiga, the narrator surveys his environs:

O céu tão claro lá fora. Nem uma nuvem no céu de fevereiro. Parado na frente do teatro, dentro do calor mais leve de quase cinco da tarde, escutei uma espécie de silêncio. Que talvez estivesse dentro de mim—um pouco escurecido pelo mofo do teatro...Encostei na parede, acendi um cigarro, fiquei olhando os viadutos. Na calçada oposta, em câmera lenta, o corpo todo coberto por sacos de farinha, uma mendiga arrastava um saco cheio de jornais velhos. Parecia a imagem da Morte numa gravura medieval, faltava apenas a foice. (151).

Death permeates the cityscape and maintains a strong presence throughout gay-oriented urban areas. Historically, the Sé suffered from symptoms of urban decay before a mid-1990s gentrification, and Abreu attempts to marry local history with a metaphorical commentary on a public health crisis. Meaning balloon or bladder, the borough’s nickname, *a Bexiga*, alludes to a local epidemic of bladder infections in the early 19th century, a further parallels to contemporary AIDS metaphors. Not only does the nickname references a vital internal organ and the oral histories of a localized

bladder infection, it also functions as a reminder of early modern social diseases that have affected the cityscape. It is possible that Abreu provides for two distinct interpretations of social health and its relation to urban development. First by referencing past health epidemics, particularly ones easily remedied with modern medicine within a matter of generations, the author possibly suggests an optimistic future for both the victims of AIDS/HIV, a likely cure, and a remedy for urban decay via gentrification through the cultural arts. On a more cynical note, we can return to Sontag's contamination metaphor. The *Bexiga* is a small but vital neighborhood in the Sé borough, a historically and culturally important component in the São Paulo megalopolis. If the *bexiga* as a necessary internal organ is tainted and infected, literally falling to pieces as Abreu has written it, then it is only a matter of time before the contamination spreads to the greater metropolitan organism, eventually causing its death.

In Abreu's final interviews, published in *O Estado de São Paulo*, the author reflected heavily on the topic of AIDS, particularly in ecological terms. As Fernando Arenas has assessed, Abreu drew strong analogies between the crises of the human immune system and those of the contemporary global system, such as climate change and pollution. Furthermore, he resisted the glorification of being a person living with AIDS, rejecting heroic or divine associations. Nor did he attempt to hide "a sense of tragedy and misfortune that accompanies the disease. Ultimately though, he believe[d] that in the face of the disease, the human condition is innocent" (Arenas, "Small Epiphanies" 238). The metaphorical and visual motifs of impending death and destruction are manifest throughout Abreu's cityscape. In one of his final *crônicas*, published in *O Estado de São Paulo*, the author revisited his descriptions of a desolate and abject São Paulo. The city is now reduced to a state of apocalyptic disarray: "Minha primeira impressão de São Paulo foi que uma bomba explodira e todos corriam sem saber pra onde" (Abreu, *Caio* 3D 129).

Abreu's inexhaustible knowledge of popular culture further heightens the AIDS-tinged air of impending death permeating the São Paulo megalopolis in *Onde andará Dulce Veiga?* In the novel's fourth chapter, the narrator-protagonist takes a taxi to his first meeting with Márcia and her band, suddenly the Japanese cabdriver: "Ligou o rádio, rezei para que não sintonizasse num daqueles programas com descrições hiper-realistas de velinhas estupidadas, vermes dentro de sanduíches, chacinas em orfanatos. De repente a

voz rouca de Cazuzza começou a cantar. Vai trocar de estação, tive certeza, mas ele não trocou” (Abreu, *Dulce Veiga* 27). The allusion to Brazil’s first celebrity AIDS casualty sets the stage for Abreu’s construction of the disease-ridden city. At the novel’s end, after the narrator has found Dulce in a small Goiás village, she gives him a birthday present, a small kitten named Cazuzza. Though she has named all of her domestic animals after pop stars, this symbolic gift, dutifully received by the narrator, signifies his final acceptance of his probable HIV-positive status.

Of course Abreu’s urban odyssey offers further glimpses into a variety of components of the Brazilian contemporary metropolis. His dialectical portrayal of Rio de Janeiro both challenges and reinforces its stereotypical tropes of tropicalism and violence. Nevertheless, the depiction of late 1980s’ São Paulo stands as a uniquely queered and urgent portrait of a cityscape teetering dangerously on the edge of collapse. Representing the socioeconomic inequalities of the *cidade partida*, contemporary popular culture and the impending AIDS crisis, the novel’s portrayal of São Paulo captures a now-bygone moment of a city overwhelmed with decay, discrimination and disease. While Abreu’s São Paulo may seem unfamiliar for the contemporary reader, he has nevertheless captured an historic moment in the city’s literary history.

NOTES

1. The author writes Magliani for permission to fictionalize her experience of abandoning São Paulo for the interior of Minas Gerais in his construction of Lídia’s story (Abreu, *Onde* 243).

2. Openly bisexual, Cazuzza was initially infected with the HIV in 1985 but would not reveal his positive status until 1989. He would die the next year. Nevertheless, his public acknowledgement of being a person with AIDS would help change Brazilian perspectives of HIV/AIDS recognition and prevention (Trevisan 315).

3. I use “camp” here in reference to Susan Sontag’s now-classic 1964 essay, in particular her 36th note concerning camp tragic and comic sensibilities: “the sensibility of failed seriousness, of the theatricalization of experience. Camp refuses both the harmonies of traditional seriousness, and the risks of fully identifying with extreme states of feeling” (Sontag, *Against* 287).

4. Jacyr is never openly identified as a *travesti*. While he first insists on being called Jacyra, he is seen both in and out of women's clothing and makeup throughout the novel, also he is referred to with the masculine subject pronoun [*ele*]. His possible prostitution is evoked by his frequent nocturnal disappearances, adolescence and the narrator's intertextual depiction of Jacyr as "Jodie Foster em *Taxi Driver*, versão mulata" (54).

5. See Secron Bessa 110-11.

6. See Sontag, *Illness* 182.

7. Also popularly spelled *Bixiga*.

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