The Wounded Body of Proletarian Homosexuality in Pedro Lemebel's *Loco afán*

by
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In his two collections of chronicles, *La esquina es mi corazón* (1995) and *Loco afán: Crónicas de Sidario* (1996), Pedro Lemebel describes a Santiago not depicted in news bulletins and in the discourses of the Chilean economic "miracle," a Santiago populated by beings marginalized as much by their socioeconomic position as by their sexual orientation. From his perspective as the homosexual "other," Lemebel redraws the map of Santiago from its margins, revealing and redefining sites and subjects that have been neglected by both high culture and the communications media: the buses, the football stadiums, the B-movie theaters, the parks, the lower-class suburbs, the *locas* (queens), the most vilified and disparaged group of Latin American homosexuals, and those living with HIV and AIDS.[1]

In *La esquina es mi corazón*, Lemebel's gaze sensualizes the city it observes and colors it with a homoerotic textuality:

> Despite the tickling heat that sends drops of sweat sliding from their burning crotches, despite the stickiness of bared torsos, excitedly wet, the boys embrace, squeezing tremblingly together after the forward's cannonball shot rips through the hymen of the anus-goal. (1995: 27)
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> *La cueca* is a dance, a reenactment of the Spanish conquest, performed by the queenly-mannered peasant in his flamenco outfit, a two-piece, button-laden suit which goes so well with the tassled, wide-heeled boots. A laborer on a *latifundio*, the peasant dolls himself up coquettishly, his jacket cinched at the waist the better to display his little butt. (1995: 49)

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Lemebel also exposes the existence of a cultural and political transvestism that manifests itself in an array of settings: a beauty salon in which the hair stylist transforms "dark, Latino mud into Nordic gold . . . as if, with this conjuring art, the lightening rinse dissolved economic scarcity and the sadnesses of race and class" (1995: 55), a flea market where the nouveau riche come to blow over the "paltry left-overs of the high bourgeoisie . . . and invent aristocratic pasts for themselves" (1995: 76), and a Christmas night for poor children: "slum brats who decorate a cart to resemble a sleigh. Dusty sparrows who wash their faces before receiving a plastic ball at the neighborhood center. Prematurely aged children swarming through the city, sucking in the shopwindow displays" (1995: 80). In Lemebel's Santiago, the street corner celebrated in his book's title functions as a strategic site from which he can observe the failures of neoliberal triumphalism and thus bring into view such "besieged terrains as poverty, homosexuality, women, ethnicity" (Risco, 1995: 16). For Lemebel, poverty is not the exotic and romantic territory that it is for the Chilean literary elite (Casas, 1995: 35); rather, it constitutes the very matter of lived experience (Mansilla, 1996: 22):

> I was born in Zanjón de la Aguada, not a suburb but a slum in the southern part of Santiago. My first house was a section of wall that my grandmother, Olga Lemebel, bought. She rigged up some sheet metal, a few poles, a piece of plastic, and there she sheltered her family.

Loco afán: Crónicas de Sidario also redeems and rescues subjects and spaces that the neoliberal mainstream neglects, but this collection is focused mainly on transvestites, the *locas*, and each of the vignettes devoted to particular individuals is written in the context of a difference that shatters the currency and existential coherence of a uniform, homosexual identity. In fact, *Loco afán* is written as an homage to a dozen or so *locas*, most of whom have died of AIDS-related causes. Lemebel not only evokes their lives but in their deaths accords them the fame and grandeur to which they aspired. Speaking of his concern for transvestites, Lemebel has said (Iñiguez, 1996: 42):

> I locate my writerly heart next to the transvestite for one social reason. AIDS is principally decimating the most unprotected groups, in the same way that tuberculosis and syphilis eliminated primitive peoples. AIDS has inflicted its greatest wounds in the world of transvestite brothels, where absolutely no preventive measures have been taken.

Lemebel's controversial choice of topics has been received with reticence, if not coldness, by the Chilean cultural establishment. This attitude is best exemplified by the vitriolic attack of Enrique Lafourcade (1996: 25) not only

on Lemebel the writer but also on Lemebel the performance artist and member of the performance group known as Las Yeguas del Apocalipsis (The Mares of the Apocalypse):

> They were a group committed to aesthetic provocations. . . . They interrupted solemn events by screaming and dropping their trousers in order to display their rather undernourished buttocks, generating panic among academics and chaste women—until someone explained to them that this sort of thing was very common in the United States and that imitating the Yankees constituted a form of colonialism. . . . Now, at least one of these "horsey mares" has taken up the pen. . . . Lemebel plunges us into the quagmire of AIDS, a disease that is dispensed nightly in a grandiose Santiago setting of thirst and lamentation. Fortunately, this is a minority problem . . . [and his chronicles] bear witness to a prose of hatchings and putrefactions unparalleled in our literature.

Lafourcade's reaction, besides betraying an obvious homophobia, confirms that the literary establishment continues to cultivate the difference between high and low art forms, between "true" literary themes and styles and those other concerns that allegedly plunge us into the quagmire of the political. Lemebel himself anticipates a certain marginalization of his books when, referring to *Loco afán*, he claims: "The book is going to have its own readership, but I am not going to enter the Great Academy of Chilean Literature. In high heels they wouldn't let me in!" (Gajardo, 1995: 15). With this statement, Lemebel alludes to the fact that despite the significant circulation of his books, published by the reputable Cuarto Propio and Lom Ediciones, and despite the recent translation of some of his chronicles into English, he continues to occupy a problematic place in the world of Chilean letters.

Lemebel's left political leanings, his sexual orientation, and his solidarity with "the last *locas* of the world's south" (Iñiguez, 1996: 22) make him a writer who is barely acceptable in a cultural climate that has preferred to eulogize the young writers of the publishing house Planeta known as "Los chicos del Planeta," whose postmodern texts sit comfortably with neoliberalism. For example, Alberto Fuguet, the most celebrated writer in this group, constructs his own map of Santiago whose boundaries coincide with those of the upper-class suburbs. He creates a world isolated from the radically different realities experienced by the majority of Santiago's, and indeed Chile's, inhabitants. Lemebel's texts dispute and dispense with these privileged cartographies, which not only erase Latin American differences but represent Santiago as part of a prosperous, postmodern global village.

This predilection for marginal subjects, the use of a plurality of interpretive codes, and the fragmented nature of the narratives will undoubtedly lead some critics to identify these texts as typical examples of postmodern gay

writing. However, it is precisely the politicization of Lemebel's writing—undertaken not only as a homosexual but also as a leftist—that prevents it from being neutralized within the ideologically laissez-faire frame of postmodernism. Indeed, Lemebel is a writer whose affinities are better linked to the testimonial and contestatory literature of the 1970s and 1980s, given his preoccupation with uncovering the hidden side of official reality and his need to denounce the amnesia of the Chilean postdictatorship.[2] As he says, "a country without memory is like a blank slate on which one can write whatever one wants, reinventing history in agreement with and at the discretion of the powers currently in vogue" (Novoa, 1996: 29).

This political stance has two implications for attempts to position his work. On one hand, the commitment to the traditional causes of the left evident throughout Lemebel's work impedes that work's absorption into a postmodernist framework. On the other hand, Lemebel's opposition to the globalizing and normative gay model imported from the United States also impedes any simplistic subsumption of his work under an essentially conservative, mainstream gay culture. Furthermore, his insistence on examining homosexuality in relation to concepts such as social class, exploitation, and colonization—concepts proclaimed to be obsolete in the celebrated discourses of postmodernism and neoliberalism—makes it also unlikely that his texts will be co-opted by the increasingly popular field of gay and lesbian studies.[3]

In this analysis, I propose to examine some of the key features of Lemebel's position that form the basis for a Latin American homosexual manifesto in clear opposition to the influential North American gay discourse. That is, my focus is on how Lemebel articulates what is, in effect, a double manifesto. The first is sexual and advocates a particular Latin American homosexual identity characterized by resistance to the growing hegemony of an imported master narrative of gayness. This gay model is currently adopted by middle-class gays in Latin America as the only acceptable form of homosexual identity. The second manifesto is political and consists of both a social critique and a proclamation of Lemebel's own ideological position. He insists on relating homosexuality both to the problems of social class and to a cultural imperialism manifested as the imposition of a hegemonic gay identity over local sexual identities. In opposition to North American critics who tend to treat homosexuality in isolation from other social determinants, Lemebel rejects disciplinarian ghettos. At the same time, he emphasizes the necessity of seeing the homosexual, particularly the poor homosexual, in the context of other experiences of marginality, exploitation, and abandonment that afflict all social groups pressed to the margins of the capitalist system.

LEMEBEL'S LOCALIZED ASSAULT ON "GAY" GLOBALISM

The stance taken by Lemebel with regard to homosexuality could be defined as anticolonialist, given its defense of local "queer" culture. Yet his stance could be regarded as retrograde, because he also defends the Latino model of homosexuality, which is widely regarded as hierarchical and anachronistic. This Latino model is characterized by what is perceived to be an unequal relationship between the *macho* (active, virile, unstigmatized) and the *marica* or *loca* (passive, effeminate, stigmatized).[4] Nonetheless, Lemebel's endorsement of this working-class model of homosexuality, in tandem with his cultivation of the feminine in the image of the *locas*, signals an act of resistance against the increasing imposition of a North American gay ideal. This ideal privileges the masculine side of identity and proclaims the sexual and social equality of two partners.

Lemebel is critical of the fact that in the climate of gay political correctness, the North American homosexual has purged his image of all traces of the feminine, converting himself into a faithful copy of the macho heterosexual, thereby erasing his transgressive difference and potential. For Lemebel, the ultramacho gay man, exemplified by the images peddled by the Village People, is a mere "truck-load of muscles, chains, moustaches, and heavy boots that carries to the extreme the masculinization of the 'gay' man manufactured in 'Yankeeland' " (1996: 100).[5] He completely rejects North American and Western European theorists' reading of the masculinization of the homosexual as a subversive reconstruction of a new, ironic gay masculinity. (Jeffrey Weeks, for example, speaks of the macho style as an example of the semiotic war waged against the prevailing masculine order, while Richard Dyer suggests that the appropriation of eroticized masculine signs in homosexual contexts undermines the bases for defining the male in heterosexual societies [in Weeks, 1985: 191].) Instead, Lemebel understands the display of ultramasculine signifiers in terms of an inclination toward machismo that, rather than destabilizing the heterosexual ideal, pays homage to it and betrays an amorous identification with the "enemy." Contrary to this macho ideal, in his own personal appearance as much as in his portrayal of the *locas*, Lemebel celebrates the feminine as an expression of the most sensitive and caring aspects of being.

Lemebel's rejection of the imposition of a unitary gay identity as another example of the cultural imperialism emanating from the United States has provoked the anger of middle-class Chilean gays, who have accused him of perpetuating the stereotype of the effeminate homosexual, a figure disparaged by heterosexual society. To the accusation that "on concerning himself

with nothing more than caricatures, he perpetuates the grotesque, Manichean image of the homo," Lemebel responds (Mansilla, 1996: 23):

> The caricature of the homo is also the "clone" in New York: the masculine ideal, with short hair and a little earring, in white T-shirt, jeans, and sneakers. The shops sell this masculine homo. I did not see *locas* in New York. It unnerved me to come across this Olympian man, with his leathers, his muscles. I reject this ideological construction, and I ask myself to what extent homos have been co-opted by the system. I believe that to liberate oneself from the macho ideal that fills one's head is to affirm [a truer] identity.

He laments the gradual disappearance of the diversity of homosexual identities in the face of the increasing imposition of the gay model, which he perceives as another aspect of the globalization that is economically, politically, and culturally homogenizing the world (Mansilla, 1996: 23):

> Gay discos have existed in Chile since the '70s, but only in the '80s were they institutionalized as stage sets for the gay cause that reproduces the Travolta model for men only. In this way, the temples of "homo-dance" unite the [gay] ghetto more successfully than does political militancy—by imposing lifestyles and a philosophy of virile camouflage, so that by means of a fashion the diversity of local homosexualities is homogenized.

For Lemebel, the increasing commercialization of gayness and its conversion into a style that can be emulated and bought leads to the disappearance of the homosexual within the heterosexual mainstream, thereby rendering ineffectual any subversive gay potential. This is particularly evident in rock music, where the performers flirt with gay imagery but fail to inscribe any subversive content within the music's favored macho codes (Mansilla, 1996: 99):

> [Rock music made use of] an intersexual imagery that on being exploited by the market was transformed into a recipe for success, a seductive marketing ploy for millions of fanatics. . . . The sheer excess of its montages provided a means of erasing those first outlines of homosexuality in rock music. The retouched plagiarism of a minority difference, the articulation of a macho transvestism through makeup . . . in the end becomes a mere mask, a mere "makeup" . . . a purely theatrical "queerification" . . . like Mick Jagger's sodomitic pose, sucking off the microphone as if it were a prick. . . . A body homosexualized by supply and demand.

On exposing the complicity of gay culture with the capitalist system and its rampant consumerism, Lemebel sees the history of gay culture to be a problematic trajectory that, from radical beginnings, became a marketing strategy that has failed to challenge unjust social structures. Indeed, he asserts that gay

culture has become placidly complicit with inequitable social structures, creating what Néstor Perlonguer would call a "parallel normality" (see Perlonguer, 1997: 33) as gay men and lesbians increasingly present themselves as "ordinary people" (workers and consumers) who want the same rights as everybody else, thus leading to such demands as acceptance in the military and gay marriage.

There is no doubt that many North American gay activists would disagree with Lemebel's rather monolithic picture of U.S. gays, which disregards the existence of more radical, nonmainstream groups such as Queer Nation and ACT UP. For Lemebel, the self-processed radicalism of these groups is dubious, as he sees them as politically ineffective and ultimately implicated in both consumerism and U.S. patriotic jingoism.[6] The negative positions regarding the concept of gayness adopted by Lemebel and Perlonguer coincide with those taken by certain dissident gay voices in North America and Western Europe, who have also attacked the new alliance between market forces and homosexuals (Weir, 1996: 26-27):[7]

> Homosexuality is being repackaged and resold to Americans as a traditional value. And homosexuals are emerging as the yuppies of the 1990s. They are a new class of urban professionals with money to spend and aggressively marketed products to choose from.

Nevertheless, the great majority of gay theorists have rejected this critique of gay participation in the market economy—one that underlines class differences and confirms the privileged economic position of many gay men in the United States as part of the new right's superfluous dissemination of "the myth of economic advantage [that] counters any claim that lesbians and gay men are discriminated against" (Robson, 1997: 172).

However, it is necessary to point out that the criticism that recognizes the existence of a chasm between class and homosexuality originates less from the new right than it does from homosexuals who are also members of the less privileged ethnic groups in the United States. It is these homosexuals, in fact, who have questioned the tendency on the part of white, middle-class gay men to propose their experiences and identities as universals. This is exactly what the African American writer Joseph Beam draws attention to when he states, "We ain't family. Very clearly, gay male means: white, middle-class, youthful, Nautilized, and probably butch, there is no room for Black gay men within the confines of this gay pentagon" (Seidman, 1993: 119). A similar opinion has been expressed by Essex Hemphill, for whom "gay signifies the experience of a white, middle-class, urban culture organized around sex, consumerism, and civil rights" (Seidman, 1993: 120). Such statements from

African American gay men align with the position adopted by Lemebel, according to which the gay identity becomes an unattainable luxury for a poor homosexual who cannot even hope to satisfy his most basic needs in a distinctly class-differentiated society. Only from a position of social privilege is it possible to make Michael Denneny's claim that "being gay is a more elemental aspect of who I am than my profession, my class, or my race" (Altman, 1982: 73-74).

HOMOSEXUALITY AND CLASSED IDENTITY: A CRITICAL AXIS

The axis of Lemebel's criticism of the North American gay model is constructed, therefore, around the problem of social class, a consideration often glossed over in the theoretical discourses about gay identity because of a North American resistance to dealing with the category of "class" as a social determinant.[8] Lemebel underlines the inherent classism and Anglocentrism of the "gay" concept, which is widely thought to transcend any considerations of class or race, by pointing out the extent to which social class in Latin America determines the type of homosexual identity that can, in fact, be adopted. According to Lemebel, the gay ideal can only be faithfully imitated by individuals from the wealthier classes, in what he calls the "new conquest of the blond image that was taking root in the pretentions and treacheries of the most well-traveled queens, the beautiful, chic ones who aped the little New Yorkean model and transported it to this end of the world" (1996: 22). As a consequence, the *loca* identity is almost exclusively reserved for the homosexual poor.

It must also be recognized that the North American gay ideal has become the only acceptable model of homosexual identity in the gay bars of the upper-class suburbs of Santiago and of Latin America in general. Indeed, in the 1990s there has been a notable and increasing gulf in status between homosexual bars according to the district of the city in which they are located and their clientele. Young middle-class men who project a masculine gay image do not visit the same bars as either transvestites or the young men of the lowest socioeconomic levels who do not define themselves as homosexuals. The gay bars in which masculinity is valorized do not admit *locas* because, in the words of Carlos Muñoz, "being seen as effeminate began to be equated with being ugly or poor" (1996: 115).

With regard to the difference between the types of homosexuality that exist in Chile, Lemebel also describes a "Mafia" of upper-class, closet homosexuals whose sexuality is known but spoken of by no one: "Nowadays there

is a large homo Mafia in the highest echelons: high-court judges pressured by the CNI [Central Nacional de Información] not to become involved in political crimes; bankers, economists, bourgeois shits, married to women, cruising in their luxury cars for poor adolescents" (Salas, 1989: 27). As an example of a closet homosexual, the servant and accomplice of whatever regime is in power, Lemebel names the celebrated Chilean fashion stylist Gonzalo Cáceres, who today hosts his own television program. In one vignette from *Loco afán*, he portrays Gonzalo as a symbol of political and sexual chameleonism and transvestism (1996: 123-124):

> As if nobody could remember his elephantine silhouette applying makeup to the face of dictatorship, covering that crack, that crease, that dirt in the corner of the tyrant's mouth, when, on television, he spoke ironically of the exact numbers of the disappeared. . . . No one knew how Gonzalo, taking advantage of local amnesia, . . . switched his allegiances by clutching at the butt of democracy as it was welcomed in. Not to mention how he insisted, making himself as pure as Andean snow, that he wasn't homosexual but rather asexual, for that is why he had no problems adapting to political changes.

For Lemebel, it is precisely this distinction between social class and ideological affiliation that militates against the formation of a gay group with shared interests and goals, particularly given that the first loyalty of the Latin American homosexual is to his social class. The priority of class identity over sexual identity and the impossibility of creating alliances based exclusively on the sexual is well illustrated in the first chronicle of *Loco afán*, titled "Night of the Mink Coats (or The Last Party of the Unidad Popular)." Here the author recounts an incident involving a group of shabby queens (*rotas*) and a group of *regias*, "the chic queens, the famous, cultural snobs . . . the 'hai'-society queens who hated Allende and his bean-eating crowds" (1996: 13). The two groups meet at a party and, despite their sexual affinity, are soon in conflict because of the irreconcilable ideological differences between them. When one of the *rotas* places the Chilean flag on an ominous sculpture constructed from the bones of a recently consumed turkey—a sculpture that anticipates the deaths that will occur under the military dictatorship and in the AIDS era—the *regias* become hysterical, defending "the military who did so much for the fatherland" (1996: 14). The ensuing fight, in which the *rotas* steal or "disappear" the chic queens' mink coats, is transformed into a symbolic conflict: the turkey bones and the fur coats function as potent metaphors for the conflict that was to erupt between the two social classes in the years of the military dictatorship.

Reacting against the disparities of class, Lemebel refuses to defend the universal homosexual cause promoted by the North American gay movement

and now adopted in Latin America. He is not overtly critical of the homosexual liberation movements in Chile and Latin America, but because of his identification with transvestites—whose interests are excluded from the demands of the gay movement—his work contains an implicit critique of the rather elitist character of such organizations. The militant members of these groups like to regard themselves as a sophisticated vanguard that scorns homosexual popular culture.[9] The demands of Latin American gay liberation movements do not differ greatly from those of gay movements in the United States. They both lobby for the recognition of human rights, the promulgation of laws specifically designed to counter discrimination on the basis of same-sex desire, the right to marry, the right to adopt children, and so on. In short, they principally appeal to matters of concern for the middle-class gay men and lesbians whose main aim is to be integrated into mainstream society, not to question other social injustices or broader socioeconomic structures. These factors make it difficult for a figure like Lemebel, quadruply marginalized for being, as he himself says with a certain irony, "homosexual, poor, Indian, and badly dressed" (Iñiguez, 1996: 42), to defend a universal homosexual cause. And even when Lemebel recognizes the difficulties that the left has traditionally had in accepting homosexuals, it does not prevent him from continuing to identify with the left's traditional causes or from claiming that his primary loyalty is to his own social class (Iñiguez, 1996: 42):

> My heart will always be on the left, beside the humble and the poor, and therefore I am not interested in defending the homosexuals of the right. They have their own public spaces in which they appear camouflaged as hairdressers and fashion gurus. But they are not concerned with human rights, and, with their status made comfortable by proximity to power, they prefer to dance in discos, to use French perfumes, and to put down the poorest *locas*.

The text that explicitly explores the tenuous relation between Lemebel and the Chilean left is a poem called "Manifesto (I Speak in the Name of My Difference)."[10] The poem functions as a political manifesto that, while confirming Lemebel's ideological affinity with the socialist cause, also attacks the left's traditional rejection and distrust of homosexuals. The addressee of the manifesto is the Chilean left, which Lemebel regards as traditionally machista, sexist, and homophobic. The Chilean left rejects homosexuals because it conceives of homosexuality as a sign of bourgeois decadence or the effeminized degradation of the male and is therefore incompatible with the revolution and its (ultra)masculine signifiers.

Lemebel modifies the narrow definition of the marginalized advocated by the left in order to acknowledge the poor homosexual as a doubly

marginalized being: "But don't speak to me about the proletariat/Because to be queer and poor is worse" (1996: 83). He articulates the silenced experiences of the homosexual "other" and questions the validity of the collective liberty-and-happiness formula promised by the Marxist revolution. This is why he asks: "What will you do with us, comrades/Will you shackle us by our plaits en route to a Cuban AIDS camp?/ . . . won't there be a fag standing on a street corner/who will endanger the future of your New Man?" (1996: 85). Lemebel attacks the hypocritical attitude of the macho heterosexual who monopolizes the expression of desire but reacts violently if another man regards him as the object of desire: "If I speak to you and look at your crotch/I am not a hypocrite./Isn't it true that women's breasts make you lower your sights?" (1996: 86). Lemebel also disputes the key leftist allegation that homosexuals embody a lack of masculinity, a claim that has been used to justify the rejection of homosexuals as possible revolutionaries or guerrillas. He does so by highlighting the "manliness" of the homosexual who, from day to day, deals with the jokes, discriminations, and opprobrium of society in general (1996: 87-88):

> I learnt manliness at night/behind a post . . . /I didn't receive my manliness in the party/ because they rejected me with sneers/ . . . the gibes bit into my manliness/I reined in my rage to stop myself from killing everybody/my manliness is accepting my difference/to be a coward is much tougher/I do not turn the other cheek/I turn my butt, comrade,/and that is my revenge.

Disillusioned by the projects of a stagnant, unimaginative left and by the conservative gay movement, Lemebel finds a potential political ideal in the Zapatistas and in Subcomandante Marcos, exemplars of a revolution that diverges from strict Marxist models—one in which discrimination on the basis of ethnicity or class is regarded as one among many injustices to be rectified. Lemebel's affinity with the "cross-dressed" guerrilla also owes much to the fact that the two men share an unorthodox attitude with respect to the social movements in which they are involved. Both Marcos and Lemebel practice a perpetual "queering" of sociopolitical space and possess a broad vision of revolutionary agency.[11]

LEMEBEL'S *LOCAS*: NOMADIC IDENTITIES

The fact that social class shatters the myth of the unitary gay subject is best illustrated by the *locas* who are the central characters of the chronicles in *Loco afán*. In this text, the North American ideal of the muscular gay Apollo,

dressed in jeans and a white T-shirt, who spends his pink dollars on consumer goods is countered by the image of the malnourished, poverty-stricken Latin American *loca* struggling to survive just like any other marginalized person on the continent. Indeed, Lemebel's use of the *loca*'s very name has two highly charged effects: the *loca* is depicted as a subversive identity category in which gender fixities have become unintelligible and connotes a challenge to the notion of an irreducible gay identity. Lemebel focuses on the *loca* not because she is representative of the homosexual in general but because she provokes the greatest rejection and discrimination not only from heterosexual society but also from homosexuals who adhere to a Western gay model. For the latter, the effeminate queen signifies both a violation of the masculinity cultivated by gays and a loss of status.

The *loca*, with her falsetto voice and painted face, represents a challenge to cultural homogenization. This is evident in the pages of *Loco afán*, where *locas* parade in a chain of nomadic identities in constant flux and displacement, none of which can be absorbed into the fixed, "hygienic," and domesticated terrains of a gay identity: La Regine and her soldier Sergio, who, despite being inseparable, are never surprised in the sexual act; La Madonna mapuche, who dreams of being a friend of her famous namesake; La Loba Lamar, who in her moribund queeniness imagines herself as the vessel of a baby incubated in her anus; the blond, armless La Lorenza, transforming her naked self into a constantly changing work of art; Miguel Angel, who, by means of the Virgin's "intervention," becomes a flesh-and-blood woman; La Berenice, doubly "transvestized" as a woman and as a domestic servant, who in order to satisfy her maternal desires steals the child she is employed to care for.

If the act of consumption and adherence to a unitary and uniform identity confirm a homosexual "normality," then the *loca*—with her outlandish appearance and her marginal economic status—remains excluded from the circuits of privilege announced by "gay." On this point, Perlonguer has argued that the current normativization of gay enacts the exclusion of other homosexual identities, especially those associated with the lowest classes: "Normalization functions by casting into society's edges the new marginals, those excluded from the party: transvestites, *locas*, *chongos*, *gronchos*—those who, in general, are poor and who represent the very prototypes of underclass sexualities" (1997: 33). The *loca*, the unintegrated subject par excellence, exists in clear opposition to the gay subject who has been tamed to such a degree that he has become acceptable even in a society as antihomosexual as Cuba. There, according to Perlonguer, "the extinction or 'invisibilization' of the classic and scandalous Cuban *loca* and the replacement of age-old lewdness by modern, 'gay' discretion, has made a viable

prototype of the less transgressive, meticulously presented, aseptic, and well-educated homosexual" (1997: 124).

In *Loco afán*, Lemebel pays homage to the homosexuality of the *loca* and presents her as an identity in danger of extinction. He revives this proletarian homosexual difference, whose radicalities are evident, as we have seen, in a range of oppositions: to an imported gay paradigm, to a gay militancy preoccupied with middle-class problems, to the respectable homosexual in his suit and tie, and to the obligatory masculinization of the homosexual. The *loca* sexuality represents an escape from normativizing codes and, as such, serves as a symbol of the freed sexuality that the dominant gay model attempts to exclude. In this sense, the Latin American *loca* with her "folklore" and her local queen culture, defined by gay men as kitsch or retrograde, represents an expression of a revolutionary, rather than reactionary, identity (1996: 153):[12]

> If it weren't for the fact the queen's folklore still survives as decoration for homo culture; [for] the deliria of the *locas* flapping their wings in the disco's mirrors; [for] that Last Dance starring the final sighs of a *loca* shadowed by AIDS. If it weren't for that, for the queen's incendiary parties that the gay market consumes in its sweaty-muscled transactions, . . . [for] that life sparkle, that humor, and that slang, [there wouldn't be] a difference that can be politicized.

According to Lemebel, the *loca* does not simply define a particular homosexual identity, for the term also has currency as a metaphor that describes the ways of thinking of other minority groups, those that defy and undermine the codes of "normal" society from the margins. As he says of the *loca* (Risco, 1995: 16):

> [She possesses] a brilliant means of perceiving, and of perceiving herself, of constantly reaffirming her imaginary as a strategy for survival. The *loca* is continually zigzagging in her political-becoming, she is always thinking about how to endure, how to pass, with a bit of luck without being obvious, or too obvious. And she is a type of nomadic thinking; she is not the fixed, solid form of macho reasoning. The *loca* is a hypothesis, a question about herself. Women and children also practice such zigzaggings.

Lemebel pays homage to the *loca* as the only remaining nonconformist and radical homosexual identity, one that remains outside the negotiable circle of gay identity. Nonetheless, for Lemebel, the defiant and subversive *loca* sexuality and identity is threatened not only "by the imported model of 'gay' status, so fashionable, so penetrating [because of] its dealings with the power of the new homosexual masculinity" (1996: 22), but also by AIDS. He approaches the problem of AIDS with a particular political agenda in mind: to represent the disease as the latest stage in U.S. colonization and as a potent

symbol of the decadence of capitalist society.[13] By locating the center of the infection in the most powerful country of the First World, Lemebel inverts the narrative of AIDS current in the United States, which regards AIDS as a contaminant introduced by an external agent, African or Haitian. In his treatment of this topic it is evident that Lemebel is less interested in analyzing the concrete circumstances surrounding AIDS in the two Americas than he is in constructing an "AIDS mythology" that will fit his emplotment of Latin American history as a story of pillage, exploitation, and "contamination" by foreign powers. Lemebel merges his story of AIDS—a narrative of colonization via body fluids—with the "black legend" of European conquest, but here the Spanish are replaced by North Americans, the native population by the homosexual poor. As a result of this conceptualization, Lemebel relegates pre-AIDS Latin America to an idealized virgin territory, free of the latest plague that was brought by the colonizers. Similarly, the homosexual inhabitants of this pre-AIDS paradise are conceived as beings who enjoy an authentic identity uncontaminated by an imported model. This is the paradise revealed by Lemebel's description of a photograph that captures *locas* at a party celebrating Allende's victory (1996: 22):

> The photo farewells an era with the *locas* in frayed plumage still twisting, still folkloric in their illegal poses. The photo resembles an archaic frieze in which the intruding "gay" model has not yet made its mark and native territory has not yet received the plague's contagion, a recolonization achieved through body fluids.

But Lemebel also confronts the theme of AIDS with defiant humor as he describes those courageous moments in which "the zero-positive queen laughs at herself, mocking her own dramatics" (1996: 58). The paleness of a *loca* sick with AIDS is greeted with: "You look great in that sarcoma, darling!" (1996: 69). The drama of the sickness is challenged and rendered frivolous with a series of names designed to help all concerned endure the virus: "La María Sarcoma, La Mosca Sida, La Frun-Sida, La Lúsida, La Zoila Kapposi, La Sui-Sida, La Insecti-Sida, La Depre-Sida, La Ven-Sida" (1996: 61). Furthermore, the funerals of those lost to AIDS have been drastically altered. While in the 1980s the coffin was accompanied by a few tolerant relatives and "some *loca* camouflaged in a three-piece suit," in the 1990s the same *locas* make of the funeral a "*tablao flamenco* . . . a fashion catwalk that sends up the sordid funerary ritual" (1996: 75-76). This change has occurred, says Lemebel, because "not everybody can bid farewell to the world with the same Hollywood glamour that carried off Hudson, Perkins, Nureyev, and

Fassbinder. Imagine it, not everybody can show off that leopard-spot look, that AIDS tattoo that never fades!" (1996: 76).

In language adorned with feathers and linguistic sequins that in themselves signal a *loca* style and aesthetic, one that Perlonguer would classify as *neobarroso*, Lemebel says his farewells to a dozen *locas*, a group comprising both the sick and those already lost to AIDS.[14] Perlonguer's *neobarroso* is transformed into "slum baroque" (*barroquismo pobla*). This is a style of writing that deploys excessive flourishes in order to transvestize the material poverty of the *locas* and of a vast stratum of marginal beings—in short, all those whose existences shatter the myth of the Chilean economic miracle and the conversion of Chile into a First World nation, its back turned on the rest of the continent.

Lemebel's brand of political commitment, his analysis of the relationship between class and sexual identity, and his full-frontal clash with both the left and the right distinguish him from the majority of North American gay writers, whose concept of the political is often limited to the sexual and to the personal. In today's sociopolitical climate, in which ancient Marxists are converted into postmodernists and homosexuals are reborn as gays, Lemebel dares to write from a position that could be designated "politically incorrect." Against the dominant strain of gay politics, his writing points out the limits of an identity politics exclusively rooted in sexuality. Lemebel reacts against the prevailing attitude of North American gays, according to whom their visibility as homosexuals automatically grants them a certain radical aura. He rejects this simplistic equation between sexual and political transgression, arguing that transgression is ineffectual unless it is accompanied by the capacity "to question the roots of social injustice with respect to the poor and to minorities, whoever they may be" (Valdivieso, 1996: 23).

Lemebel asserts that what today passes for a distinct gay identity and sensibility is really a clutch of white middle-class values and tastes that have been naturalized into an authentic gayness. The imposition of a unitary identity, he argues, has contributed to the marginalization and annihilation of other homosexual identities in Latin America and elsewhere. In the context of Latin American cultures, he points to the necessity of making a distinction between a discrete gay culture that operates with few obstacles within neoliberal systems and the transgressive culture of the *locas* outside mainstream society. As portrayed by Lemebel, *loca* culture not only rejects mainstream society's morality but returns to that very mainstream a parodied version of its own paradigmatic values and tastes, thereby carrying kitschiness and theatricality to new, politicized extremes.

There is no doubt that *Loco afán* contains a good dose of nostalgia for the times when a pre-gay, pre-AIDS, and supposedly authentic homosexual identity existed, a time when "the darling Chilean queen [*maricada*] wove her future and daydreamed of her emancipation alongside other social causes" (1996: 22). However, it is important to note that Lemebel locates these "happy times" for lower-class Chilean homosexuals not in an imprecise and romantic past but in the concrete historical moment of Allende's revolution. This does not mean that he is unaware of the fact that the Chilean *maricada* faced exactly the same discrimination and ostracism in the Allende era as before and after it. However, this deliberate glossing over of the specific problems faced by homosexuals because of their sexuality once again confirms that for Lemebel class identity takes precedence over sexual identity.

Beyond the nostalgic, Lemebel's defiant book politicizes homosexuality while simultaneously championing and defending a particular Latin American homosexual identity. *Loco afán* serves to confirm the realities of difference in an increasingly homogenized, uniform world. Whether this authentic identity, uncontaminated by external pressures and influences, constitutes a viable response to an ever more hybrid world remains a matter for future debate.

NOTES

1. Speaking of the chronicle as a genre that in the 1990s replaced testimonial narratives in terms of its range and critical attention to surrounding reality, Jean Franco writes (on the jacket of *La esquina es mi corazón*): "It is interesting that a literary genre that captures the spirit of the times, without subordinating itself to those times, is the 'chronicle,' which also appears to be capable of escaping from the neoliberal net. Carlos Monsivaís, Edgardo Rodríguez Julia, and the Chilean Pedro Lemebel are among its most devastating proponents." Lemebel explains his preference for this genre: "I work, in part, with materials drawn from reality that have been manipulated by the communications media; I rescue and recycle them. . . . The chronicle allows me to politicize my writing, to give it an existential weight in keeping with my literary obsession" (Iñiguez, 1996: 42).

2. I am not opposed to the use of the term "postmodernism" when applied to those works of Latin American literature that display strong metafictional characteristics, question all ideological constructions, and reject the notion of extraliterary referents. However, I find it inappropriate when applied to testimonial and pseudo-testimonial narratives that create their own master narratives and vindicate the notions of subject, historical referent, and truth—notions repudiated by postmodernists. Arguments that I have applied elsewhere to the positions of Eduardo Galeano, Rigoberta Menchú, and Domitila Barrios de Chungara are also valid in the case of Lemebel's antigay, anti-imperialist, and antineoliberal narratives (see Palaversich, 1995).

My intention here is not to assert that there is an inherent relationship between postmodernism and neoliberalism. I am establishing this link specifically in the context of Chil-

ean literature, where, for example, the literary project of Planeta is in clear contrast with Lemebel's ideological position. Planeta challenges the stereotypical image of Latin America as the land of magical realism, revolutions, and poverty, claiming that the contemporary culture of the continent can best be described as defined by MTV, McDonald's, the Internet, and North American movies.

3. John Champagne indicates that the field of gay and lesbian studies is now running the risk of becoming entrenched as an academic discipline, co-opted by the very same system it sought to contest. He points to the danger of creating and positing a unified gay subject in the place of Western man. This unified subject erases all cultural, racial, and class differences among gay men and contributes to the creation of a particular cultural climate "in which a limited number of privileged culture artefacts created by queers are imbibed with authority and value, the result of which is the formation of a queer canon" (1993: 167).

4. Carlos Muñoz points out that when, in the 1980s, he interviewed a group of homosexuals in Montevideo, they still described themselves in terms of the ideal typology, that is, in terms of their passive or active sexual roles. However, this is not to say that all of those individuals regarded such roles as completely rigid. Rather, the men always identified themselves within the perimeters of the "Latino" schema of homosexual identity (see Muñoz, 1996: 109).

5. Certain features of the deliberate kitsch favored by this group are to a great degree culturally unintelligible in Latin America.

6. Similarly, Paul Allatson (1999: 226) has remarked: "Queer Nation's activities and ironic, icon-appropriating rhetoric—'I pledge allegiance to the f(l)ag'—are framed by a peculiarly American discourse of transgression as compulsive, excessive consumption. Thus the suspicion arises that Queer Nation's agenda has been damaged by its failure to interrogate what either *flag* or *fag* might signify beyond the United States."

7. It is of note that the first gay clubs opened in Chile during the 1980s under the military dictatorship. As Robles has observed, the appearance of these venues did not reflect official tolerance but rather reflected the impact of the free-market ideology, which tacitly recognized the homosexual as a potential consumer (1998: 37).

8. In the past few years a number of publications have appeared in the United States that purport to deal with the relation between social class and homosexuality. Yet, although such titles as *Queerly Classed* and *Homo Economics: Capitalism, Community, and Lesbian and Gay Life* promised to discuss a problem glaringly absent from gay and lesbian studies, the authors of these volumes in fact admit the difficulty if not impossibility of dealing with class in a society like that of the United States, where, as Stephen Edgell puts it, "classlessness is congruent with the basic tenet of the American creed, namely, civic equality, and with the defining values of American society, notably equality of opportunity and individual success" (1993: 121).

9. For details of the internal conflicts in the Movimiento de Liberación Homosexual (MOVILH) in Chile, which derived from the different positions taken with respect to AIDS, transvestites, and social class, see Robles (1998). See also Muñoz (1996: 99), who speaks of the Uruguayan example, also valid for other Latin American countries, where there is a notable absence of a unified homosexual movement and where gay men, lesbians, and *locas* tend to organize themselves separately. The limited representativeness of the gay movement points to the existence of a chasm between militant elites and other homosexuals.

10. Elsewhere, Lemebel has stated: "I don't like to speak of any social or political responsibility, or to speak for those who have no voice. In some ways, to do so seems to be a messianic dream, but I do think it is important to take another look at certain sites obscured by the triumphal economic splendor of the system today" (Novoa, 1996: 29). This refusal to speak in the name of the "other" marks the main difference between *Loco afán* and the testimonial genre with which it

shares a passion for denunciation and for drawing attention to experiences disregarded by offical history.

11. Some scholars view the heterogeneity of the Zapatistas' political platform as exemplifying the emergence of a postmodernist form of political agency and mobilization (see Beverley, 1995: 12; Burbach, 1994). Others, such as Harvey (1994), argue that the Zapatista uprising is the latest round in a cycle of rural rebellions that have characterized the history of Mexico and Latin America. Gosner and Ouweneel's (1996) collection represents Zapatismo as an attempt to recover indigenous ideas and practices. I see it as a movement inspired by the indigenous cultural traditions and the revolutionary models of the 1960s that were championed by Che Guevara and Mao.

12. Whether the transvestite phenomenon signals a subversive appropriation of the feminine constructed by patriarchal society or a mere imitation of the worst feminine stereotypes, culminating in a joke on women, is a debatable issue. While some studies, for example, Judith Butler's (1993), tend to emphasize the parodic and subversive potential of transvestism, others, such as Leo Bersani's (1995), argue that through the appropriation of hegemonic norms transvestites simply reidealize the rules of heterosexual society. As has been made evident in this analysis, the *loca* culture described by Lemebel is not equivalent to drag culture in the United States, in which such manifestations have for the most part ceased to be a way of life and have become, instead, mere commercial enterprises. However, as could be seen in Jennifer Livingston's film *Paris Is Burning*, drag culture is still cultivated as a way of life and as an expression of a particular identity among lower-class African American and Latino gays in the United States.

13. It is important to note that when Lemebel talks about AIDS as a symbol of capitalist decadence, this does not mean that he considers the disease to be a "bourgeois illness." Rather, he suggests that AIDS was first "imported" into Chile by local middle-class homosexuals who traveled to the United States or by North American tourists who purchased cheap sex in Latin America. From there it "traveled" into a lower socioeconomic stratum, where it is having a much more devastating effect. Ironically, the fact that in the United States AIDS is now having the greatest impact among ethnic minorities of low economic status and that the spread of the disease among the white middle classes appears to have been to a large degree contained would seem to support Lemebel's argument.

14. Perlonguer speaks of neobaroque writing, particularly that which emerged in Cuba, as an eminently homosexual style. When such highly ornamental writing begins to "splash" in the mud of the River Plata, it confronts a hostile literary tradition and transforms itself into the "*neobarroso*": "baroque [*barroco*]: irregular pearl, nodule of mud [*barro*]" (1997: 101).

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