

Article

## Queering the Margins: Pedro Lemebel's *Loco afán*

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Chile ha pasado de una sociedad en que el homosexual, el travesti, y la lesbiana desafiaban los modelos fijos de sexualidad y de género, y por lo tanto existían en formas semiclandestinas, marginadas, a una sociedad en que los grupos antes excluidos son acogidos por lo menos a nivel del espectáculo, y cuya forma de vida es capturada y administrada. Esta es la transición que ha captado Pedro Lemebel en sus crónicas.

Chile has gone from being a society in which gays, transvestites, and lesbians defied established models of sexuality and gender, and as a result were relegated to marginalisation and semi-clandestinity, to being a society into which these formerly excluded groups have been admitted, if only at the level of entertainment, and whose way of life has been captured and administered. This is the transition that Pedro Lemebel captures in his chronicles.<sup>1</sup>

PEDRO LEMEBEL CAME TO PUBLIC ATTENTION in Santiago de Chile in the late 1980s in the art collective, *Las Yeguas del Apocalipsis* [The Mares of the Apocalypse], founded with the poet and artist Francisco Casas. Practitioners of performance, transvestism, photography, video and installation, *Las Yeguas del Apocalipsis* presented approximately fifteen public events between 1987 and

1997.<sup>2</sup> In 1995 Lemebel also became known to the public as a writer with the publication of his first collection of chronicles, *La esquina es mi corazón*.<sup>3</sup> This was closely followed in 1996 by *Loco afán: crónicas de sidario*, a collection of interrelated vignettes of the lives of impoverished, marginalized gay men, taken from his own life experiences on the fringes of Chilean society.<sup>4</sup> Various descriptions of Lemebel as a writer, chronicler, social historian, performance artist, transvestite, spokesperson for the fringes, and gay, indigenous and working class, the author of *Loco afán* inhabits a myriad of roles.

The aim of this brief biographical outline is to contextualise two important features of Lemebel's literary production, and indeed of his aesthetic activity as a whole: his propensity to hybridity and mobility. The flexibility with which he has moved between art practices, and across social markers of identity must, I think, be considered in light of the tumultuous period of Chilean history in which he has lived. Born in 1955, Lemebel experienced the Socialist government under Salvador Allende, the military coup of 1973, the period of dictatorship under Augusto Pinochet, the fall of the dictatorship and the neoliberal economic and social reconstruction during the transition to a democratic government in the 1990s. The importance of a backdrop of upheaval and of changing national identities, where survival was closely tied to the ability to assume, or at least simulate certain social identities, is of particular relevance here in the analysis of Lemebel's literary representation of the shifting boundaries of social identities.

This article examines the play of identity and the complex mappings of social identification in the first two chronicles of Pedro Lemebel's *Loco afán*, 'La noche de los visones' and 'La Regine del Aluminios el Mono', revealing unlikely associations and unexpected schisms with and between social groups. The two main aims of this article are, firstly, to consider the way in which identifications intersect, and thus fulfil or disrupt expectations of solidarity and betrayal between and within social groups of class, gender, and sexuality; and secondly, to examine the way in which Lemebel reconciles the dilemma of intersecting identifications through the use of a certain notion of 'becoming' as a paradigm for marginal identities. Borrowed from a Deleuzian notion of 'becoming', Lemebelian 'becoming' is defined by Lemebel's professed affinity with an idea of femininity which indeed underpins Lemebel's wide-ranging aesthetic project. The conclusion considers the problematic ambiguity of Lemebel's citation of femininity as a model for marginal identification by examining the models of femininity referred to in *Loco afán*, and identifies the deconstruction of vertical power hierarchies at the heart of Lemebel's queering of the margins.

*Loco afán* is a collection of thirty-one chronicles which relate with poignancy and acerbic wit the experiences of a group of impoverished, HIV-positive, transvestite, gay men. Combining elements of various discursive styles, including fiction, journalism, poetry and public address, Lemebel's literary hybridity reflects his aforementioned hybrid subjectivity. One of the immediately striking features of *Loco afán* is the merging of the narrative voice with that of the author, an overlapping that Lemebel's apposition of fictional and non-fictional texts cultivates rather than discourages. The inclusion of texts such as 'Manifiesto (Hablo por mi diferencia)' and 'Loco afán' (which appear with footnotes providing details of their original presentation as public

addresses) alongside fictionalized chronicles problematizes the separation of the narrator's voice from the author's, and as such are here considered to be indistinguishable. The aesthetic drive that underlies the transvestite men's gendered self-transformation is reflected both in Lemebel's transformation of their experiences into an aesthetic product (the text) as well as in Lemebel's own cross-dressing, performances and public appearances (the latter two being arguably indistinguishable from one another). Indeed, the narrative merging that blends Lemebel's private role (as a working-class gay man of indigenous descent) and the public one (as a writer and public figure) is at the heart of the representation of identity in *Loco afán*. The implicit narrative 'we' of *Loco afán* designates a constantly shifting referent, and it is precisely in the instability of this sense of collectivity that the singularity of Lemebel's voice lies.

*Loco afán* portrays the lives of a group of transvestite men during the years of the dictatorship and the outbreak of AIDS in Chile, two events which were experienced through and defined by the social groups with which they were associated. Jeffrey Weeks describes the anxieties 'which revolve around questions of boundaries that separate one group of people from another, and identities that merge them', and which are equally visible in the play of identity at stake in *Loco afán*.<sup>5</sup> In particular, Lemebel raises doubts about the viability of speaking of a 'gay community', and the idea of a singly defined identity based on sexuality irrespective of social, political and historical factors.<sup>6</sup>

Lemebel's chronicles dispute the notion of a 'gay community', a label which homogeneously and arbitrarily groups together those for whom the only commonality is the fact of same-sex partners, a misconception explored by Judith Butler when she asks, 'What, if anything, can lesbians be said to share?'.<sup>7</sup> Much as Butler raises the question of what the identity category actually refers to—whether an act, a gender, a certain anatomy or a structure of fantasy—Lemebel implicitly challenges the feasibility of speaking of a sexual identity category that subordinates other aspects of identity, such as ethnicity, gender or class background. By foregrounding affinities of class, race, and political conviction that dissect affinities of gender and sexuality as seen in the passages discussed below, *Loco afán* highlights the way in which identities are elastic and complex, and underlines the myriad identifications which coincide in the construction of a coherent sense of identity.

Lemebel draws attention to a rupture at the heart of the 'gay community' in Santiago in the very first chronicle of *Loco afán*, 'La noche de los visones' ('The Night of the Minks'), set in the extremely volatile political climate of the eve of the new year, 1973, that would see the overthrow of democracy and the installation of the military dictatorship that would last until 1989. The two groups depicted by Lemebel are referred to throughout the chronicle as 'las rotas' and 'las regias' (the latter also referred to as 'las pitucas'). The two highly localized and colloquial terms, immediately recognisable and extremely evocative for the Chilean reader, refer to the transvestite guests at a New Year's Eve celebration, and which allude, respectively, to the working and middle classes.<sup>8</sup> Lemebel uses the two terms in such a way that the label 'las rotas' evokes the myth of an essentially Chilean sense of identity with its roots firmly drawing on a national heritage and an associated sense of patriotism. Despite connotations of poverty and criminality, the potent trope loses its derogatory

tone when used in self-designation, and taps into an underlying pride at a more 'authentic' Chilean national identity, whilst 'las regias' (or 'pitucas') carries with it mocking connotations of snobbery, a slanted grasp of reality, and a limited sense of 'Chileanness'.

Such a divide amongst gay men also reflects a wider social division in the Santiago of the novel's setting on the brink of the 1973 *coup d'état*, with Lemebel's use of these terms illustrating how class affinities echoed the contours of the conflicting political affinities at the heart of the decade's political turmoil. The *roto*, often of indigenous descent, belongs to an under-privileged working class which inhabits the *poblaciones* (Santiago's shanty towns) on the physical as well as the social margins of the city, with the privileged, middle-class *pituco* (or *regio*), on the other hand, linked with the ruling elite. Often of European descent (even though this may be at a remove of various generations, and may only be manifest in a surname with Basque, Italian, French or British overtones), and in a denigration of national culture, the *pituco* is depicted as tending to look overseas, in particular, northward, for his or her cultural ideals. It follows that the *roto* was most often sympathetic to Allende's Socialist government, and the *pituco* supportive of its overthrow by Pinochet and a return to what they saw as greater stability and order after the privations of Socialist rule. These wider socio-political divisions are textually manifested in 'La noche de los visones' by Lemebel's use of the terms *roto* and *pituco*, and the characterisation of each group's representative members.

The *regias* (interchangeable with *pitucas*) of Lemebel's chronicles are characterized through an abundance of symbolically rich textual detail, which establishes a clear dissociation between them and their working-class counterparts. In 'La noche de los visones', the *regias*' social status as members of the wealthy elite is clearly indicated in their attire, as indicated by la Pilola Alessandri's mink coats: 'las inmensas pieles sustraídas a la mamá' ['the extravagant furs pilfered from her mother'] (LA 15). They are also associated with an access to commodities, as a reference to 'el perfume francés de los maricas del barrio alto' ['the French perfume of the upper-class fags'] indicates, and their social status is further reinforced by the inference of their political loyalties: 'las mismas locas jai que odiaban a Allende y su porotada popular' ['the same upper-crust queens who hated Allende and his common mob'] (LA 18, 15).

Lemebel's own identification with the *rotas* is clearly signalled. The approximation of the first person plural and the *rotas*, albeit in the dialogue of his characters (in this case, la Chumilou): '...para nosotros los maricones pobres' ('...for us, the poor fags') (LA 14) places Lemebel at the heart of that 'we'. This is reinforced by the use of the third person plural to refer to the *regias*, for example, as they walk past the police station on their way to the party: 'las regias se adelantaron para no tener problemas, pero igual los pacos algo gritaron' ['the *regias* hurried past so as to avoid any trouble, but the cops still called out to them'] (LA 15). Apart from the narrator's tendency to refer to the *regias* collectively, with the exception of la Pilola Alessandri who is individualized (in contrast to the *rotas*, who are primarily represented as individuals), it is above all the general tone of derision with which the middle-class *regias* are represented in the text that conveys the author's ridicule. As

well as constituting a discursive strategy of distanciation through which to recount the devastating effect of the AIDS crisis in Chile, humour is a fundamental element of Lemebel's narrative style which, rather than light-heartedly portraying the extreme marginalization of many gay men during the period of military rule, functions to ridicule and undermine the beliefs and assumptions that upheld such a regime. Implicit in Lemebel's mockery of the middle-class *regias* is an accusation of a lack of solidarity with the 'maricones pobres': the *regias*' pride in their class origins is implied to be at odds with the alienation they experience within their own class group, to which their presence at the lower-class New Year's Eve party testifies.

The text's allusion to a lack of solidarity resonates with the question Weeks poses when he asks: 'Is being a member of an ethnic or racial minority community more important than a sexual identification?'<sup>9</sup> Is class identity privileged over gender identity, or sexual identity over ethnic? Whilst Lemebel's implicit denunciation of the notion of a 'gay community' would posit sexual affiliation as a myth, the underlying accusation of the *regias*' betrayal of the *rotas* seems to problematize this position somewhat, by implying the wishful expectation of a fundamental sexual allegiance that would override class loyalties.

In her study of the working-class homosexuality in *Loco afán*, Diana Palaversich argues that 'the first loyalty of the Latin American homosexual is to his social class'.<sup>10</sup> Whilst apparently precluding the existence of a female Latin American homosexual, such a claim also seems to simplify the play of identifications at work in Lemebel's text by distilling its complexity to an essence of class affiliation. I would argue that in Lemebel's case, class is merely one of the marginal groups to which he feels loyal, as illustrated in his frequent self-designation as 'maricón, pobre, sudaca y "aindiado"' ['a fag, poor, South American, and of indigenous descent'].<sup>11</sup> The primacy with which Palaversich attributes gay men's class origins would appear to designate 'belonging' as a primary condition for identification, a notion that Lemebel radically subverts when he expresses an identification with *lo femenino*. The author's identification with 'the feminine' aligns all marginal identities in a more general sense (gay, working class, Third World and indigenous) with a Deleuzian notion of identity by which minority groups negotiate their way to a coherent sense of identity through, and in spite of, the hegemonic power structures.<sup>12</sup>

Lemebel further problematizes any attempt to tie him down to any fixed dialectical position and attribute him with a categorical rejection of the notion of a 'gay community' when he posits the ties between the *regias* and the *rotas* as symbiotic as well as antagonistic. For all Lemebel's derision of the *regias*, there is also a tangible sense of admiration of their elegance and their attainment of a transvestite aesthetic that is financially and culturally unattainable to the *rotas*: 'llegaron hasta Recoleta con abrigos de visón, como la Taylor, como la Dietrich, en micro. No te digo. El barrio se despobló para verlas, a ellas, tan sofisticadas como estrellas de cine, como modelos de la revista *Paula*' ['they turned up in Recoleta in their mink coats, just like Liz Taylor, or Marlene Dietrich, on the bus. Just imagine. The whole neighbourhood turned out to see them, as sophisticated as film stars, like models from *Paula* magazine'] (LA 15–16). In

the eyes of the other transvestites and spectators of the poor neighbourhood of Recoleta, the presence of the *regias* confers upon them and their neighbourhood some of their glamour and worldliness. In much the same way that the *regias* bring glamour to the slums, this very same place offers the *regias* a space where they can perform their enviable middle-class tranvestism that is most certainly denied them in their own middle-class space. It is in this sense that both groups serve a facilitators for the other—the *rotas* provide a space where the *regias* can perform their transvestite magnificence, and the *regias* provide a gay model in which the *rotas* can be proud, and indeed aspire to, as indicated by the description of la Palma, 'que quiere pasar por regia' ['trying to pass herself off as a *regia*'] (LA 14). Yet the symbiosis that exists between the different social groups of transvestites not only relies upon but also firmly sustains the class rift between them. The unattainability of passing oneself off as a *regia* is clearly formulated in the use of the pejorative 'pasar por', and additionally contains an implied accusation of inauthenticity and betrayal of one's own class origins that accounts for Lemebel's transvestites' tendency to remain loyal to the social group of origin.

Despite the economic and social rift in the 'gay community', which disrupts the capacity of sexual identity, in isolation, to function as a cohesive label of social identity, he does not altogether abandon the hope for an overarching 'gay community'. The fact that the New Year's Eve party depicted in 'La noche de los visones' is a point of encounter for gay men from vastly diverse backgrounds (Lemebel very consciously and precisely delineates the different quarters of Santiago from which those present at the party come), the insistence on inclusivity is however suggestive of a vision of an overarching, albeit heterogenous community.

If there is one narrative element which Lemebel could be said to exploit for its inherent sense of collectivity and space of commonality in *Loco afán*, it is the portrayal of the sinister effect of the AIDS crisis on gay Chilean men, which, unlike social hierarchies, does not distinguish between class, ethnicity, gender or sexuality. The reader must be wary though of anticipating Lemebel's ducks and dives, as whilst he certainly describes the pervasiveness of HIV/AIDS in Chile in the 1980s, he also identifies HIV infection as another site of difference between the two main groups of gay men who feature in *Loco afán*. The photo of those reunited at the party, which serves a visual mnemonic to the narrator and inspires the reminiscence that constitutes the chronicle, provides a graphic illustration of the insidious nature of the crisis, as the narrator points to those lost to AIDS-related illnesses (which is most of the transvestites present, both *rotas* and *regias*). Yet he is quick to point out the disparity in the impact of, and response to AIDS by those at different ends of the socio-economic scale. By and large, the working-class gay men are depicted as falling victim as the result of a background of economic need and deprivation.

Transvestite prostitute, la Chumilou, is described in 'La noche de los visones' as having been infected by a 'gringo', i.e. a foreign, but the implication is that he is North American, both because of the common use of the derogatory term in Chile (as well as more widely in Latin America) to refer to North Americans, and because of the dollars that he offers to la Chumilou. Deprivation, poverty and naïve aspirations are offered by way of motivation for

la Chumilou accepting the risky proposal of unprotected sexual intercourse with the foreign client: 'Y eran tantos billetes, tanta plata, tantos dólares que pagaba ese gringo [...] Eran tantos sueños apretados en el manojo de dólares' ['And it was so much money, so many dollar bills, so much cash that that *gringo* was offering [...] So many dreams squeezed into that fist of dollars'] (LA 22). This account of HIV infection can be compared to that of la Pilola Alessandri (one of the *regias*): 'Ella se compró la epidemia en Nueva York, fue la primera que la trajo en exclusiva, la mas auténtica, la recién estrenada moda gay para morir' ['She bought the epidemic in New York, an exclusive, she was the first to bring it back, the original, the latest gay fashion in death'] (LA 19). The agency conferred on la Pilola Alessandri is strikingly apparent in the metaphorical use of the reflexive verb in the opening words of the statement (ella se compró/she bought [herself]). Equally notable is the representation of New York as the cutting-edge in style and fashion, disturbingly in this case including the wave of HIV infection, as Lemebel refers with shockingly acerbic wit to death from AIDS-related illnesses as the latest gay fashion. New York is tagged here (and elsewhere in the chronicles) as the site of origin of the HIV epidemic, although it is unclear whether Lemebel refers to 'the fact that the epidemic was first identified in the early 1980s in the gay male communities of North America',<sup>13</sup> or whether he creates a metaphor of the US as the noxious origin of many of the ills of Chilean gay society, thus replicating a reactionary knee-jerk anti-Americanism prevalent in Latin America at the outbreak of the virus. La Pilola Alessandri is implicitly accused of bringing AIDS back from New York with her to Chile, and along with her middle-class peers, is consequently denounced for turning to the US for cultural models and ideals, and of infecting Chile with its 'poisonous' cultural baggage.

Lemebel thus depicts the spread of the HIV virus in Chile as emblematic of another kind of cultural infestation which corrodes Chilean society through the metaphor of colonisation. The *regias*, those with economic and cultural access to the US, are also accused of facilitating what Lemebel refers to as 'una nueva forma de colonización por el contagio' ['a new form of colonisation by contagion'] (epigraph, LA 11). The metaphor of biological colonisation is extended to the cultural when the narrator refers to 'una nueva conquista de la imagen rubia' ['a new type of conquest by an ideal of blondness'] (LA 27), thus consolidating the articulation of a sense of betrayal by the *regias* of their lower-class peers. This betrayal is depicted as a form of abandonment by the middle-class men, who are seen to 'seek to move into the oppressor class, rather than to work collectively with the oppressed to end the system of oppression'.<sup>14</sup> Lemebel interprets the spread of the HIV virus in Chile as merely another symptom of the gay 'cult of masculinity' imported from the US and facilitated by the middle-class *regias*. Jeffreys comments on this cult, and with particular pertinence to *Loco afán*, stating that the 'cult of masculinity [of] dominant gay culture was a problem [...] because it achieved the opposite of happiness for any men too sensitive or not physically perfect enough to reap the benefits—i.e., most gay men'.<sup>15</sup>

Lemebel sustains the metaphor of colonisation with an extremely loaded reference to 'el arribismo malinche de las locas más viajadas, las *regias* que copiaron el modelito en New York y lo transportaron a este fin de mundo' ['the

disloyal ambitions of the most well-travelled queens, the *regias* who copied the look in New York and brought it back with them to the antipodes'] (LA 27). With his reference to la Malinche,<sup>16</sup> Lemebel infuses the text with a multilayered criticism of the superficial aspiration to false ideals, a historical legacy of female betrayal and duplicity, the facile adoption of new behaviours, and the incongruence of naively adopting the norms of a geographically and ideologically distant 'other', and as such accuses the middle-class *regias* of disloyalty to their impoverished counterparts through their active participation in what is perceived as both the physiological and cultural contagion of the Chilean 'gay community'.

Where earlier the notion of allegiance arose in the form of a sexual allegiance, here the notion of solidarity arises again in the form of national, or cultural allegiance. The recurrence of the theme of betrayal is figured here in terms of abandonment of a national model to privilege the normative gay ideal that mainstream US culture offers. The denunciation of the subscription of middle-class Chilean men to this imported gay model indicates the narrator's frustration with their dismissal of a national, or even Latin American gay identity, in favour of a hegemonic, imported version. The play of identifications thus remains complex, and to a large extent unresolved, as not only do identifications shift, but different aspects of identity—social, sexual, cultural, and national—are shown to be privileged at different moments in *Loco afán*. Perhaps an affiliation which only the most insightful reader would forecast is that which is staged between the poor transvestites and *locas* of Lemebel's chronicles, and their heterosexual, working-class counterparts in Santiago, as thematized in 'La Regine de Aluminios El Mono' ('La Regine of the El Mono Aluminium Factory'), the second chronicle of *Loco afán*. Having said this, Lemebel also problematizes the designations of 'heterosexual' and 'homosexual' in this chronicle, where apparently heterosexual men take part in homosexual activities without in any way self-designating as homosexuals.<sup>17</sup> 'La Regine' is set in the Mapocho district of the enormous popular farmers' market of La Vega, located in the working-class centre of Santiago, where la Regine is portrayed as a much-loved local resident: 'Todo el barrio Mapocho conoce y ama la caminada de la Regine' ['the whole Mapocho district knows and loves la Regine's mincing gait'] (LA 30).

La Regine gloriously displays her transvestism in la Vega where her marginality in terms of wider Chilean society is largely unapparent. The openness with which la Regine's sexuality, cross-dressing and prostitution is carried out in the Mapocho district is portrayed as the result of a mutual respect and affection between her and her marketplace neighbours. Whilst la Regine's overwhelmingly positive reception might be dismissed as coloured by an idealistic nostalgia (the reader must bear in mind the twenty-year gap between the setting of the chronicles and the moment of their publication), the assertion of class complicity is nevertheless clearly articulated. The dominant identification at play here is effectively one of class, to which sexuality and gender take a secondary defining role. An even more striking indication of the prevalence of class identification is the working relationship established in la Regine's brothel, where a standing agreement has been established between la Regine and military troops on leave of duty, who turn to the brothel to 'pasar un



rato a descansar' ['pop in for a break'] (LA 31). If the language at this point is euphemistic, there is no equivocation in the following description of the sexual nature of the soldiers' visits to la Regine.

Lemebel establishes a common ground between the male prostitutes and the military men in the fact that both disenfranchised groups are subjects of the oppressive ruling elite that orchestrates and monitors their marginalization. In this case the overriding commonality, which obscures political and social identities and roles, is a shared space of instrumentalization by those in power. If the poor and working-class were enlisted in the military during the right-wing dictatorship regardless of their political affiliation, so too did military officials hypocritically endorse behaviours not otherwise tolerated in the armed forces for the sake of maintaining and pacifying the troops. The character of Sergio, a low-ranking soldier and client of la Regine, provides an example of the not insignificant number of soldiers who found themselves caught up in the violence of the dictatorship against their will: 'el Sergio nunca quiso hacer el servicio militar, odiaba a los milicos y estaba en ésa sólo por obligación' ['Sergio never wanted to do military service, he hated the army and was only there out of obligation'] (LA 32). Sergio is haunted by images of the violence he has perpetrated in his role as safekeeper of the military state, and there is a strong sense of empathy between his character and la Regine, as both see themselves as pawns in the repressive regime of dictatorship and state oppression due to their membership amongst the lowest socio-economic groups of society. Yet, characteristically of Lemebel, class loyalty is not straightforward but intercalated with conflicting political alliances. The apparent collusion between la Regine and the low-ranking soldiers is disrupted by the reminder of their relative location at opposite ends of the political scale, with the soldiers embodying the right-wing oppression of the military leaders, and the site of la Regine's brothel the 'subversive' left-wing space which was quashed and partly eradicated during the years of military rule. The encounter is only revealed as surreptitiously hostile years later, after la Regine's death, 'Cuando los calambres y sudores fríos de la colitis les dieran el visto positivo de la epidemia' ['when the cramps and cold sweats of colitis revealed their infection by the epidemic'], thus marking the soldiers out as also infected with HIV. Sergio is the only one of the soldiers not to contract the virus, although it is unclear whether this is through safe sex practices or abstinence, as conflicting references in the chronicle to both condoms and 'platonic love' leave this unresolved. Yet la Regine's obvious empathy for Sergio leaves no doubt that this is not casual. La Regine's efforts to spare Sergio from infection introduces a further axis of identification into Lemebel's chronicles, in that Sergio is described as a southerner, and 'negro como cochayuyo' (LA 31) in order to highlight the dark skin of his indigenous background, one of the four markers by which Lemebel has been seen to stake out his own identity. Sergio is thus distinguished from his military comrades by virtue of sharing not one, but two of Lemebel's marginal markers of identity: the socio-economic and the racial. As seen in the complex play of identification in 'La noche de los visones', affinities in 'La Regine de Aluminios el Mono' are also prioritized in terms of their measure of marginality against a hegemonic centre. This occupancy of a space of marginality is configured by Lemebel in terms of a process of 'becoming'.

Lemebel uses a certain notion of becoming to portray identity as a fluid and ongoing process rather than a static state of being. Lemebel's complex affinity with women and *lo femenino* (where this refers to an abstract idea of 'woman', and what it is that characterizes 'womanhood') permeates his cultural production, and indeed the construction of his own identity, providing a paradigmatic model of identification which can be said to condense his various marginal identities. Lemebel often cites Gilles Deleuze, whose analysis (with Félix Guattari) of marginality and minorities, and in particular the notion of 'becoming-woman', could hardly fail to appeal to him. Lemebel's articulation of a marginalized, non-hegemonic gender identity can be said to point towards a Deleuzian notion of 'becoming-woman', which 'more than any other becoming, possesses a special introductory power', in so far as 'all becomings begin with and pass through becoming-woman[, i]t is the key to all other belongings'.<sup>18</sup> Deleuze and Guattari designate a process of identification which is defined not by the imitation or the assumption of femininity, but by the movement toward or into proximity with femininity, and by the relation to a state or standard of a majority that is occupied, or represented by a white, adult, male dominant. Against such a majority all else can be said to be minoritarian, and 'It is', according to Deleuze and Guattari, 'perhaps the special situation of women in relation to the man-standard that accounts for the fact that becomings, being minoritarian, always pass through a becoming-woman'.<sup>19</sup> Lemebel's rejection of his paternal surname (Mardones) in favour of the maternal (Lemebel), his cross-dressing, his involvement in the Chilean feminist organisation, La Morada, and the disruptive, contestatory nature of his writing and performances draw a line of contiguity between his marginality in relation to a white, male, heterosexual majority, and the similarly minoritarian historical positioning of women.

Lemebel has stated in interviews that due to similarities in their relations to power, gay men and transvestites pass through a 'becoming-woman', thus accounting for his alignment with the marginal position of 'woman', which he posits as what could be termed a 'dominant subordinate'. Rather than a misogynist reinforcement of a subjugated female subject, Lemebel suggests that it might be possible, after all, to achieve the idealism of Deleuze's horizontal imperative by converting the vertical hierarchy of power into a horizontal one that celebrates its margins. In doing so he designates 'woman' as a kind of subordinate luminary, and sets such a notion of becoming as a benchmark for all marginal identities. Lemebel discursively constructs an identification between the transvestite characters of *Loco afán* and 'woman' through an emphasis on the *locas*' effeminate nature (marked clearly by the sharp contrast with the cited hyper-masculine US gay male model) and a clichéd female enthusiasm for outfits and appearance. But perhaps more significant to the expression of identification with the feminine is the process of naming, as staged in the chronicle, 'Los mil nombres de María Cameleón' ('The Thousand Names of Maria Chameleon'), which illustrates the assumption of feminine personas by gay men, a feminization also apparent in the use of the feminine 'loca' as a term which the characters use to refer to each other.

Yet the general identification that Lemebel posits between marginalized gay men, and women, and the correlation between their experience in the

process of identity construction against a man-standard, becomes, upon examining more closely the female types referred to in *Loco afán*, an identification with a more restricted idea of womanhood: Lemebel's model of 'woman' shrinks from 'woman' to 'woman as popular cultural icon'. Elizabeth Taylor, Marlene Dietrich, Mae West, Marilyn Monroe, Madonna, Carmen Maura, and Lola Flores are amongst the female icons referred to in the chronicles, figures who embody a retrospective, nostalgic, romanticized notion of woman shaped by heteronormative and patriarchal norms. I would argue, however, that Lemebel appropriates these models of womanhood in a highly parodic way that decisively subverts and profoundly queers the handed-down ideals of womanhood. What is more parodic, after all, than femininity as it is embodied by transvestites in so far as the performance of gender imitation isolates and exaggerates the clichéd signs of femininity?

Any exploration of the hybridity and mobility of identifications in Lemebel's *Loco afán* must take into account a reflection on Lemebel's own changing sense of identity and his heterogeneous identifications with different groups within Chilean society. With an increasing readership, a shift from small independent publishers to larger publishing houses, and an increasing scholarly interest in his texts, Lemebel himself provides evidence of the kind of shifting, elastic identifications that are problematized in his chronicles. 'Hablo por mi diferencia' ('I Speak from my Difference') (LA 93), the sub-title of a 'Manifiesto' presented at a meeting of the left-wing political movement in Santiago in 1986, communicates not a desire to relinquish a minority position, but to appropriate the alterity therein and to speak from that very position. It is not so much his place on the margins that Lemebel wishes to denounce or deconstruct, but the vertical hierarchy of power that elevates the white, male, heterosexual to the majoritarian man-standard, and subordinates the non-white, the non-male, and the non-heterosexual. The rhetorical position expressed in 'Hablo por mi diferencia' sums up Lemebel's literary project of stretching the boundaries of canonical Latin American discourse to bring the margins into the focus of representation, whilst maintaining a contestatory and peripheral place in Chilean society and culture. In a national literary and political tradition that is represented by the predominantly white middle and upper classes, Lemebel's originality 'ha sido la puesta en la escena nacional de este otro Chile' ['has been to place that other Chile on the national stage'].<sup>20</sup> Lemebel incorporates not only Chile's indigenous and mixed race population, but also includes its economically deprived, its sexually marginalized, and its alternatively gendered populations in his distinctive discursively hybrid chronicles. Rather than attempting to integrate the margin, Lemebel argues for a solidarity of the margins, thus positing the positionality of centre and periphery as the dominant dynamic which subtends and governs all marginal identifications.

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## Notes

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1. Jean Franco, 'Encajes de acero: la libertad bajo vigilancia', in *Reinas de otro cielo: modernidad y autoritarismo en la obra de Pedro Lemebel*, ed. by Fernando A. Blanco (Santiago: Lom, 2004), pp. 11–26 (p. 12) (my translation).
2. For an account of the origins and interventions of the duo, see 'Las Yeguas del Apocalipsis', <[http://www.memoriachilena.cl/temas/dest.asp?id=pedrolemebel\(1955-\)-yeguas](http://www.memoriachilena.cl/temas/dest.asp?id=pedrolemebel(1955-)-yeguas)> [accessed 4 January 2011].
3. Pedro Lemebel, *La esquina es mi corazón* (Santiago: Cuarto Propio, 1995). To my knowledge there is, as yet, no English translation of this work.
4. Pedro Lemebel, *Loco afán: crónicas de sidario*, 2nd edn (Barcelona: Editorial Anagrama, 2000) [First edition, Santiago: Lom, 1996]. To my knowledge there is, as yet, no English translation of this work, and all translations are my own. All citations are taken from the 2000 edition (hereafter *LA*). Further references to this work are given after quotations in the text. The title, *Loco afán: crónicas de sidario*, could be translated as *Mad Desire: Chronicles from the Sidarium*, where 'sidarium' is a neologism, as is 'sidario' which is based on the Spanish acronym for AIDS, 'SIDA'. The Latinised neologism 'sidario' suggests a place of exclusion to which HIV positive men are banished, and its phonetic proximity to 'sanatorio' [sanatorium] bears overtones of the sinister irony that is characteristic of Lemebel's writing.
5. Jeffrey Weeks, *Invented Moralities: Sexual Values in an Age of Uncertainty* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), p. 24.
6. The phrase 'gay community' will continue to be used throughout to refer to a non-homogeneous gay community, as it is understood by Lemebel, in a way that is mindful of the problematic homogeneity that the term 'community' may imply.
7. Judith Butler, 'Imitation and Gender Insubordination', in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. by Diana Fuss (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 13–31.
8. Lemebel's use of the feminine 'la/s rota/s' and 'la/s regia/s' to refer to his characters does not necessarily designate a transvestite subject, but reflects a wider tendency for gay men to refer to themselves and each other in the feminine in Spanish.
9. Weeks, p. 88.
10. Diana Palaversich, 'The Wounded Body of Proletarian Homosexuality in Pedro Lemebel's *Loco afán*', *Latin American Perspectives*, 29.2, Special issue: Gender, Sexuality and Same-Sex Desire in Latin America (March 2002), 99–118 (p. 107).
11. The translation of 'sudaca' as 'South American' lacks the pejorative value of the Spanish term that is perhaps most closely captured in the US English term 'spic'.
12. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, '1730: Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible', in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (London: Athlone, 1988), pp. 256–341.
13. Weeks, *Invented Moralities*, p. 16.
14. Sheila Jeffreys, *Unpacking Queer Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), p. 135.
15. Weeks, p. 65.
16. La Malinche, or Malintzin Tenepal, Hernán Cortés' indigenous translator-cum-mistress during the conquest of Mexico, has historically been perceived in terms of duplicity due to her divided loyalties between the indigenous Mexicans and Cortés (and by extension, Spain), and has thus been associated with the betrayal of her people.
17. Donald E. Hall discusses the problems associated with the simple binary distinction of 'homosexual' and 'heterosexual' in 'A Brief, Slanted History of "Homosexual" Activity', in *Queer Theories* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), pp. 21–47.
18. Deleuze and Guattari, p. 274, p. 306.
19. Deleuze and Guattari, p. 321.
20. Franco, p. 21.

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