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Gay Proletarian Memory: the Chronicles of Pedro Lemebel

Walescka Pino-Ojeda

Pedro Lemebel, Chilean visual artist and writer, has become one of the most provocative and wrenching voices in the contemporary literary culture of Chile and Latin America in general. His chronicles direct their most confrontational barbs towards practices that regulate the traffic of memories, linguistic purism, political reconciliation and sexual 'decency'. In the 1980s he began his artistic work with the group *Las yeguas del Apocalipsis* (The Mares of the Apocalypse) where, together with Francisco Casas, he exploded onto the scene of the expiring dictatorial regime through photography, video and performances which unapologetically exposed the political nature of sexual-erotic conduct, bringing to the public forum the gay subject through the installation of its subjectivity in the socio-political arena.

In 1986 he published a book of short stories, *Incontables* (Editorial Ergo Sum), which has been followed by four compilations of chronicles, the genre that Lemebel has cultivated with much success: *La esquina es mi corazón: crónica urbana* (The Corner is my Heart: Urban Chronicles, Editorial Cuarto Propio, 1995) recounts recent Chilean history from the perspective of marginalized youngsters of the poor neighbourhoods; *Loco afán: crónicas de sidario* (Mad Urge: AIDS Chronicles, LOM, 1996) focuses on cultural and political memories recounted from the perspective of gay marginal subjects, who participated as peripheral witnesses in casual events that, nonetheless, contain political relevance. *De perlas y cicatrices: crónicas radiales* (Of Pearls and Scars: Radio Chronicles, LOM, 1998) compiles a wide variety of topics dealing with popular culture icons and events, all of which were written to be read at Radio Tierra where Lemebel conducted a live programme for several years. *El Zanjón de la Aguada* (Zanjón de la Aguada Neighbourhood, Planeta, 2003) offers an autobiographical account that has as its centre this neighbourhood, a space whose trajectory from an expropriated land to its present semi-urban neglected form symbolizes the current faces of marginality, presenting at the same time a sort of sociological genealogy of squatters' lands. His novel *Tengo miedo torero* (Seix Barral,

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2001) has given him international notoriety and has been translated into English (My Tender Matador, Grove Press, 2003), French (Je tremble, ô matador, Denoël, 2004), Italian (Ho paura torero, Marcos y Marcos, 2004) and German (Träume aus Plüsch, Veröffentlichung, 2006). In 1999 he was awarded the Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship, participating since then in numerous literary forums and seminars in Chile and the United States.

Although his visual work, performances and literary production since the 1980s has not been part of a gay political agenda movement per se, it is certain that Lemebel's discourse is a precursor for organizations such as MOVİHL (Movimiento de Integración y Liberación Homosexual; Movement for Homosexual Integration and Liberation) created in 1991, which is fulfilling an important role in the cultural democratization process in Chilean society. In this respect, Lemebel's *Manifiesto (Hablo por mi diferencia)* (Manifesto (I Speak about/from my Difference)) has to be acknowledged as one the most important political statements in the history of the homosexual liberation movements in Chile. The text, read in public in September 1986—one of the harshest years of the dictatorship—in a forum organized by a coalition of left-wing parties, states: 'I did not receive my manhood from the political party, since they rejected me many times with chuckles. I learned my manhood participating in the hard times of those years, and they laughed at my faggish voice while yelling "(the dictatorship) it's going to fall, it's going to fall". My manhood is to accept my difference.'

In the 'renewed' political and social atmosphere in Chile, Lemebel's writing is nothing short of an act of aggression because of his declared gay identity. However, his writing also encourages us to remember the vibrancy that other literary codes once had, such as the chronicle. At the same time, his work renews our familiarity with the literary work of authors who, although they might not have explicitly assumed a gay literary subjectivity, are part of a corpus of gay writing in the Latin American literary scene, such as the Mexicans Salvador Novo, César Moro, Xavier Villaurrutia, the Cubans José Lezama Lima, Severo Sarduy, Virgilio Piñera, Reinaldo Arenas, and the Argentineans Manuel Puig and Néstor Perlongher.

The first part of this conversation took place in Santiago, Chile, in October 1999, which was followed by several telephone communications and a final meeting in March 2003.

WPO: *I suggest we focus our conversation on two topics. First, I would like to explore the location of the subject constructed in your chronicles, which is defined through an identity we might sum up as 'proletarian homosexual', and then I'm interested in your treatment of memory, the retelling of events in your writing. In several interviews you have given in the last three or four years you have maintained that the subject constructed in your writing could be defined as 'lower class, coloured (aindiado), South American (sudaca), gay.'*¹ *What is the purpose of this self-definition?*

PL: Sounds like a criminal profile, doesn't it? All we need is 'HIV positive ...' [laughter].

WPO: Well, that's what you said, I'm only quoting! [Laughter]

PL: It seems to me that in some ways, the range of adjectives used to describe this supposed subject reflects different times, different moments in which I have singled myself out with those definitions. But it's really a strategy to appropriate a territory that's sometimes a little essentialist, but it's a tactical essentialism.

WPO: *To appropriate, or to recuperate?*

PL: I don't know if it is to recuperate . . . I think to appropriate but just for a while because this is a chameleonic exercise. This realm of the imaginary corresponds to a political façade of discourse which is necessary at the moment.

WPO: *At what moment?*

PL: At the moment in which the question—in this case the journalistic question—places you—indirectly at times—in that location. In the end, all answers are the question. In this sense, I revert to a reterritorialization of the subject the way that indigenous people sometimes do when they are before a white, blond, or tourist. It is the only place in which the Indian can remain somewhat intact facing the colonization of the question. This self-definition of the Indian can manifest itself visually—for example—in not looking directly into the other's eyes because that way he/she is protected, since the foreigner does not know the cultural codes of their 'Indianness', of their 'hood' or of—in my case—homosexuality. Faced with a homophobic question, I reterritorialize myself as the last fag on earth, and the greatest one. That position is my power, my small power. This is a transitory essentialism. That's also what squatters (*pobladores*) do to recover their profile. One time, I was asked about 'gay pride', what I thought about that concept, and I responded that it was necessary much like the label 'black is beautiful'. I am not sure if it was so much pride, as pride of being. Now I ask myself: what's next?

WPO: *That is an important and necessary self-questioning . . .*

PL: Of course, girl, because there are fascist fags, gays who are pigs, who have been involved in all the terrible history that has occurred in this country (Chile), and just because I am gay doesn't mean I will sympathize with them, ever.

WPO: *Have you talked with people with whom you have more affinity, for example, because they are homosexuals as well? Has your self-positioning been different in those cases?*

PL: A bit. There are codes that alter even the interview; they change the question and answer. There are no longer any defendants or . . .

WPO: *Do you feel as if you are on trial with me in any way?*

PL: No, not necessarily, but there is always an atmosphere of . . .

WPO: . . . *suspicion . . .*

PL: Yes, suspicion. There is something of the courtroom . . .

WPO: *Do you think that it's the courtroom or just curiosity, or interest?*

PL: At least here, in this country, it is [the courtroom], where these issues are just entering in a twisted way into a collective subjectivity that could include them as part of a national project, for example; of course one is always slanting things.

WPO: *It must be an exhausting exercise.*

PL: Yes, but it's also a game since it has a game's dynamics. You play with ways of presenting the truth. So, it's not exhausting, not like needing a different life preserver every moment. It's not that, it's more like developing into something else, letting your hair down. For a woman, of course, there are other codes.

WPO: *Of course, there is a process of developing into something else, but—in any case—there is also a subject there, who keeps camouflaging, masquerading, playing, developing.*

PL: Or the other way around. It could also be a striptease. Why a masquerade? Why rely on an essentialism of the subject?

WPO: *Theoretically, you can attempt to postpone an essential form of being, but we are always essentializing ourselves, in one way or another. The very fact that you feel the need to change your positioning is because there is something of a centre, a sort of depth to which Doris Sommer—*

referring to the *testimonio* of Rigoberta Menchú—called ‘the secret of Rigoberta’.² Implicit here is an essential component and, of course, from the perspective of an ‘other’ (the academic in this case), who in this instance goes to suggest a metaphysical meaning in the silence of the indigenous testimonial subject.

PL: Of course!

WPO: *From your perspective, how do you evaluate the fictional subject that Chilean narrative has developed, generally? From your position as a subject who is oblique, mobile, a chronicler-writer-artist, do you find similar projects in Chilean literature?*

PL: I think that the only thing that can interest me at this moment is—of all the shit I read at school and that I would not read again—the only thing, and mostly for its theatricality, is Manuela in *El lugar sin límites* (Hell Has No Limits), by José Donoso.³ I think that she is the only one who could interest me, as construction, as a theatrical subject.

WPO: *But Donoso as a heterosexual self-located subject, in that sense the character of Manuela would be a fictionalization, a possible version of . . .*

PL: . . . I don’t know. I am not going to talk about the sexuality of Pepe (José) Donoso, but I think that there is still much to discover there, and not only in the character Manuela, but also in *El obsceno pájaro de la noche* (The Obscene Bird of Night). There is an atmosphere of incest in the social and cultural environment of Chile that permeates this reflection on homosexuality that allows for such a believable character as Manuela.

WPO: *Do you think she is really a believable character?*

PL: Yes, I know a lot of people like Manuela, and I think that the actor who played the role in the Mexican movie with the script by Manuel Puig did it very well.

WPO: *You mention Puig. How do you read him?*⁴

PL: I view Puig from more of a distance than Donoso. He seems more cultural, more . . .

WPO: . . . *more manufactured?*

PL: Yes, more manufactured in his construction of novels, in his faggish architecture. His characters always have imported, elegant perfumes. Here they have to be made of cinnamon and *quillay*.⁵ In poetry I like the Argentinean Néstor Perlongher. He is more messed up because he is a poet, an anthropologist, and his entire life was his own work. He does not work with such fictitious, literary subjects; in poetry in general the subject is a mixture of emotions. Perlongher has a magnificent poem called ‘Cadavers’, from the book *Alambres* (Wires).⁶ In this poem he narrates the search for the disappeared and asks himself where they are, those who are not here, those who will never be found because they were buried at sea, and responds: they are in the look of the landowner, in the corner of the smile of the Minister of Internal Affairs, in the cavity of that tooth, in the elastic footprint that remains, in that dirt, in the dust that collects, that’s where cadavers are. This poem is so magnificent because he creates a panoptic journey through places in which there could be cadavers, he dares to explore that. I find his urban poetry impressive. Néstor always wanted to join the Communist Party; he was already a militant homosexual in the 1970s and finally the Party said, ‘All right, come in comrade.’ At that time he read a speech of gratitude for his admittance and at one point he said: ‘I don’t want to be understood, I want to be fucked’ [laughter]. With that he broke the formalities, with the use of nonsense.

WPO: *[Laughter] That attitude is also in your work, which is part of its attraction. At least in my case there is the wish to understand something, but there are also some voyeuristic aspects, the need and fascination—through these explorations—to be able to displace oneself, looking for other facets of oneself.*

PL: You go there as well?

WPO: *Of course, to see through the eyes of another, at least to rehearse that possibility. Although it seems to me that at present it is possible to establish a sort of canon for gay Western writing, at least that seems to be the role and achievement of the queer studies programmes in US/UK universities, it is not clear that a canon exists for what could be called ‘proletarian homosexuality’, which is the*

framework in which you have situated your own work. Would you yourself risk providing a sort of distinction between a gay proletarian writing and one that is not? A few minutes ago you made reference to the fascist gays and how your subject distances itself from them and proposes a proletarian homosexual. I think your chronicles are situated at this crossroads.

PL: To continue with the established canon would mean supporting those outrageous faggot falsities of certain literature where all of them descend from daughters of princesses. There is a whole ambience of pretence coming from certain homosexual writings, located especially in Argentina and Cuba, where all the Latin American baroque is present, like a sort of *bijouterie* that covers up a Latin American drabness with its shimmer. And so we have the dinners, the feathers, that literary construction of the Lezamian baroque, that becomes much more muddy in Perlongher, as we have already said.⁷ He, on the other hand, drags the taffeta tail through the mud. Another Argentinean, Osvaldo Lamborghini, presents a man-to-man homosexuality, very tangoesque, where he reproduces the enormous attractiveness of that virility that wants to fuck himself, extremely narcissistic, that in this case borders on violence, like receiving so many stabs, but metaphorically they could be stabbing meat. That is very Argentinean.

WPO: *Something of that interpretation can be seen in the movie Tango, by the Spanish director Carlos Saura.*

PL: Well, here in Latin America there is a new twist on this, performed with baroque flair and also—along these lines—this baroque has the same sort of bourgeois style as some neoliberal gay literature that we see in Jaime Bayle, for example, who writes from the position of the most disgusting social class in Lima, that bourgeoisie whose ancestors were viceroys and all that crap, in a country where poverty is so aggressive.⁸ In this case my heart is on this side, a fag's heart shaded with the sadness of the people. It is a feeling of generosity that supersedes the narcissism of the homosexual who admires himself in the mirror. Like Puig says, homosexual love always goes through a stage of seeing oneself in another. Of course, you love that six-foot tall man because he is what you want to be, you love yourself in the other; you don't construct another. I think the film they made based on Manuel Puig's story was wonderful, just wonderful. The thing is that there is not a construction of another. In *El beso de la mujer araña* (Kiss of the Spider Woman) that's the thesis you find, where the fag gives up who she is to become a guerrilla, in spite of everything. So, that's what interests me, especially in these games of subjects. I like to make that absent place in Latin American homosexuality shine because it is the place of a poor transvestite.

WPO: *But I think it is not just an interest, but above all a being 'from' that place. Your writing always emphasizes the cement high-rise buildings (bloques), the dusty ground ...*

PL: Oh! But that could be a lie! I could be a yuppie [laughter]! You want to associate me with the biography of the poor, pathetic person, you want me to cry for you, but I don't cry ... splendid, that's what I am ... you want me to cry dirty tears for you ...

WPO: *No, I don't want to take you any place ... It is enough to read your chronicles. Well, the truth is that one thing that attracts me to your work is, exactly, the proletarian element. What interests me about your work is the adjective 'proletarian' because—and this is my own feeling—I am up to here with literature written from the 'upper class'. That is why your chronicles are unique in view of what's happening in Chile, and not only because you locate yourself as gay, but also because of the social viewpoint of that subject. The recovery of the epithet 'proletarian' puts in motion an act of dislocation because that word it is not used by anyone anymore, it is ...*

PL: ... archaeological ...

WPO: *Precisely! That is why I insist that is not only an attempt to be in solidarity ...*

PL: That's really nice, you know? Because the Communist Party never liked me. I was just thinking that now that it all fell apart, I get all dressed up in those archaeological ruins; I put on the hammer and the sickle as an earring ... [laughter].

WPO: *At the moment it seems more subversive to say you're proletarian than just gay.*

PL: So it seems, right.

WPO: *That is why your writing leads me to doubt that what you do is just an act of solidarity with poor people. I don't think you can fake it, at least the way it appears in your writing.*

PL: It is difficult. I was talking about that the other day with Paz (Errázuriz), that it is difficult for yuppies to pose as poor because you can tell, like in the case of this TV Show presenter, Morandé, who is a pretty boy who wants to look like common folk using a certain language, expressions, movements, and tries to move and dance, but coming from him it is grotesque, vulgar.⁹ It is difficult to fool people. Poverty is a place, built with beatings, floods, earthquakes, hunger, terrible dangers [laughter] . . . The poor communities have built a sort of border, and I see it in the use of certain masks, like you were saying, certain gestures: one can try to cross over, smuggle one's poverty to other spaces, but with sarcasm, not with a backstabbing get-rich-quick mentality.

WPO: *You have mentioned gay literature from Argentina and Cuba, specifically Lezama Lima. Now, focusing again on the proletarian subject: how does your work relate to the autobiographical subject of *Antes que anochezca* (Before Night Falls), by Reinaldo Arenas.¹⁰*

PL: With Reinaldo Arenas I have always had the enormous doubt about his actions on the Island, in Cuba. I have never known how much, how many Cubans she really screwed . . . so much suffering and pleasure at the same time! Obviously, *Before Night Falls* is like a last will, or a farewell letter, like most of the latest novels by homosexuals who have died of AIDS, their last writing always become that, an epitaph.

WPO: *Arenas has willed this text to someone: Do you feel in some ways the addressee, since you read it like that?*

PL: To some extent. There are some aspects that cannot be denied, like the left's macho repression of homosexuality, that cannot be erased since there are still plenty of traces of that, they look at you in a different way, with suspicion because of the belief that homosexuality is a bourgeois vice, etc. If you react to that stating you are a writer and homosexual . . . for instance, Cubans have so much respect for culture, the ballet, the opera, which for me is quite contradictory . . . when I arrived in Havana, a gay friend gave us, Pancho (Francisco) and myself, two tickets to go to the ballet and I asked, why ballet?¹¹ I have never gone to the ballet, or the opera to listen to those fat women scream like warblers, those bourgeois things make me laugh. I don't have that nirvana . . . [laughter].

WPO: *But the complicity with Arenas in the proletarian aspect . . . To get back to that issue.*

PL: But I want to take a different direction . . . Like I was saying, there is always this immediate acceptance when you say that you are a writer: 'Pedro is homosexual, but he is also a writer', like if because of that they would forgive that 'imperfection' of yours, that little scratch . . . And I wonder why that still continues on the left, since for me it is exactly the same; it should be the other way around. That irritates me, the fact that they accept you because you are an artist when there are those fags in the poor neighbourhoods who had never been able to finish a formal education because of social problems, and ended up as stylists, making curls, writing on the heads of the clientele. That is why I care about the illiteracy of the fags in poverty, bums . . . but who were able to create a different world as a response to that double or triple social segregation, and created their own world, a particular way of talking, of building their binding existence, of the poor in Latin America, where nothing is so sure, where there are always strategies, a task, passion for . . . I don't know, to cross a certain border . . . That is what moves me, my fag friends from the Zanjón neighbourhood (which my last book deals with and has been named after), there, where you can find the prostitute transvestites. I am not interested in those who perform in shows in discos; I have nothing to do with that, nothing. What interests me is the prostitute, the one who gambles her life in the street, a life for at risk . . .

WPO: *And not in a metaphorical sense.*

- PL: Not as a metaphor. The street is cruel. I turn my writing into this: a sharpened way of seeing oneself in these spaces.
- WPO: *You already referred briefly to other writings with which your own finds affinities, but to summarize: with which aesthetic questions, authors do you feel yourself in a confrontation or dialogue ... Because you don't feel totally alone in this, do you?*
- PL: Hmm. No, I think that there are links with other writings, political complicities with some female writing and chronicles, like Carlos Monsiváis, for instance, or José Joaquín Blanco. There are some writings that are playing with the possibility of fracturing the canon. I play more with writing itself than with the literary pyramid, the institution bores me. In Chile what interests me in terms of writing is the work of Diamela Eltit; it is the most interesting for me. There are some poets as well, such as Carmen Berenguer, I like their minds.¹²
- WPO: *What about their sensitivity?*
- PL: Of course, sensitivity expressed in their language. There are also texts from the political realm that are important for me, like Tomás Moulian's.¹³ I like these writing positions in critical moments, a certain confrontational mood with some political discourse that in a particular time are necessary.
- WPO: *I have the impression that in Chile, especially in the generation that at the moment is between 25 and 35 years old, there circulates a sort of anxiety, a desire for this confrontation, which is restrained, forced into composure.*
- PL: Yes, there is an anxiety, but that makes it very easy to be co-opted by the system, because in the same way Moulian publishes that book, the right wing tries to imitate the gesture. Since my writing has been confusing, ambiguous, it has been difficult to locate me in a specific place. For instance, this statement of the proletarian flag is very confrontational, as if we were to paint the Colo-Colo flag pink.¹⁴ It produces that sort of challenge, especially when no one wants to admit that he/she is poor in this country, least of all the fags. Thus, for example, after being on a TV programme talking about these topics of poverty, high-rise buildings, rust, the swamp of dead dogs [laughter] ... my neighbour the following day did not say hello to me, the same lady who greets me everyday, so I asked her: 'What happened Mrs. Maria that you don't say hello to me anymore?' 'No'—she says—'because you were saying the other day on TV that we are poor, and we are not poor!' I was floored! I replied to her: 'How much money does your husband earn monthly?' '\$150,000 [US\$250 per month]'—she replies. 'Do you know that Cecilia Bolocco earns 20 million [US\$33,000 per month]?' 'No'—she tells me—that is a lie, that can't be true.¹⁵
- WPO: *Self-defence strategies.*
- PL: Yes, and I understand when she says that. I understand why the poor person does not want to be labelled as such; there is a part of that that I understand, like the indigenous person who changes his/her name, it is not just a 'Malinche' (Uncle Tom) attitude:¹⁶ it is very hard to survive being poor, homosexual, leftist. It is complicated.
- WPO: *You of course define yourself as a leftist?*
- PL: Absolutely, is the colour that looks best on me! [Laughter]
- WPO: *You're right, it suits you really well! [Laughter] Well, to continue with this idea of proletarian homosexuality, I would like to shift the conversation a bit: the proletarian subject between your fictional and autobiographical chronicles is located in a very specific historical circumstance, and from that place he confronts a significant range of progressive artists, who worked very openly against the authoritarian regime in Chile. I am now thinking in one particular chronicle 'Fru-fru exile'.*
- PL: Were you exiled? [Laughter]
- WPO: No, I left Chile in 1989, two months before the elections ... Oh, you think that is the reason I am asking about it! No, no ... I find this chronicle fascinating, especially this section which I will

quote: 'Many who cried, like myself, with the chords and lyrics of "When I remember my country" (*Cuando me acuerdo de mi país*), never thought that the exiled generation was going to return to the country as a political class, reiterating the colonizing attitudes learned in the "Old World", probably adopting them to acclimatize themselves, but also likely due to the cultural snobbism which they always carried within' (p. 43).¹⁷

PL: Ah! And you paid attention precisely to that! Look, what I am going to say might sound terrible, but, there were so many leftist people then . . . well, I guess it was in fashion . . .

WPO: You are referring to the post-hippy period.

PL: Yes, the post-hippy moment, there were so many leftists, probably because they had no alternative. I realize that this is a very categorical comment, but the thing is, I don't think people can change that much. I don't think it is easy to come back to the country as a returnee after been in exile for your socialist ideals, put on the neoliberal miniskirt, or have coffee with the enemy, with those who supported the Pinochet dictatorship and, in many instances, continue to defend and justify it as a necessary regime. That for me is obscene. In that sense, I respect far more the old communist fellow who stayed here (in the country), frozen. There is something there, something nice, a stubbornness that reacts against this very hypocritical and commercial environment that has been set up in post-authoritarian Chile.

WPO: Well, in this chronicle you get into this very fundamental issue, which can be summarized in: 'the cultural snobbism that they always carried within'. It seems to me that this comment allows us to return, to remember and rethink over and over the distance that exists between art about the proletarian and another 'from' it. This statement in your chronicle is coming from someone who is referring to the proletarian, but speaks from that position.

PL: Is the same situation with Camilo Escalona.¹⁸ There is a decency to survive in these conditions. There is something I have noticed among some people, who returned from exile, that their change was so fast, so vertiginous, that makes me believe that French exile suited them very well, and really, I think it was the fashion they always wanted to follow. Do you remember what happened in the World Cup in 1998 when many poor people were in line to go to France?¹⁹ I wrote that chronicle thinking especially of the French exiles, for all that it meant, the imported poetic idea in film, painting, the glamour, that snobbism that makes us want to preserve, for instance, all the mansions of the bourgeois in Ejército street in Santiago, because they have something European, the rococo covered with pigeon shit, all that is to be preserved, the Chantilly cake of so much social injustice. Nevertheless, other neighbourhoods such as Santa Rosa, Lira, simple places, with no architectural 'importance,' ghettos, all that is destroyed to preserve the 'neoclassical'.

WPO: In the same line of thought, I also think this chronicle allows us to see and confirm the messianic feeling towards the proletarian coming from some higher social class groups, with liberal political ideas. At this moment the sympathetic 'inclination' is clearly in crisis, harder to sustain, exhibits more clearly its vulnerability since there is a less radical, more relaxed political context. I'm thinking specifically of the Chilean neoliberal amnesia hoopla.

PL: It is messianic when it is 'about' the proletarian, like in the case of Raúl Zurita, for instance, in his poetry the commiseration is quite visible. When it is 'from', I don't think it is messianic.²⁰

WPO: I referred to that distinction earlier. In the context of a literary discourse that defines itself as homosexual proletarian, this chronicle points out, it is addressing that redemptionist sector from the left that looks to the proletarian from their leather sofa, thus, years pass, they return and constitute themselves as the Paris exile elite.

PL: Very stupid. If I had been exiled in France, I would have come back with a perfume, 'Exile in Paris' [laughter].

- WPO: *Tell me how it felt to make the transition from the chronicle to the novel [Tengo miedo torero (My Tender Matador)], in the sense of taking on a story with a longer narrative, which is sustained mainly by fiction.*
- PL: Well, now I view the novel somewhat at a distance. It sold like hotcakes, pirated copies too, almost like *Mafalda* [laughter].²¹ After finishing it I went immediately back to the chronicle, for my own survival, because of the energy that has. With respect to the fictional side . . . Well, some chronicles develop that fairly well. To write a novel was a more demanding exercise, very complicated at times because I had to expand a story that was woven together in just 20 pages, all the pieces were there in code.
- WPO: *Is it very autobiographical?*
- PL: A lot more than I would like to admit, but far less than one might think. The experience of the novel has affected my perception of my own writing in critical terms, since it was translated, that is, they have used it for marketing purposes in a way that didn't happen with my chronicles before.
- WPO: *To what do you attribute this?*
- PL: Someone once said that it is a 'parody of a novel' because that narrator would have been impossible in that era, perhaps because it is a stylized sketch of what might be a narrative voice camouflaged in its own paranoia.
- WPO: *I think that unlike the chronicles the fag is narrativized here with a certain interest in monumentality. Its journey through episodes of recent history, a kind of clandestine protagonism from the margin, through critical facts of Chilean history (in the attempt on Pinochet's life), has hints of monumentality.*
- PL: Yes, it's hard for me to speak about the novel because it was such a demanding task, or too much of a restrained retention in the midst of the most exhausting fusion, writing with one hand and answering the telephone with the other, or giving a tablet to my mother, with a very heavy weight of contingency, of domesticity.²²
- WPO: *Soon Planeta will publish your new set of chronicles El Zanjón de la Aguada. What is the theme that unifies them?*
- PL: I can already see them criticizing me for this [laughter]: 'it is a romanticization of the most abject poverty'. This book is a recompilation of the chronicles written from 1998 to the present. *El Zanjón* traces an historical and biographical trajectory of this place, this rural/urban landscape, which is what I did in my first writing. This crossroad is difficult to perceive, but it is here that I create another drawing of the fake city, where the limits have been contaminated.
- WPO: *In the last three years we have seen an avalanche of artistic production and events that have centred on sex or the body. In a way, we have been forced to see the relevance of this topic in the public space. For example, the image of mass nudity in June 2000, in which 4,000 volunteers participated in the Spencer Tunick project, and the influence that it had on Chilean photographers. More recently the films The Sentimental Teaser (Cristián Galaz), Sex with Love (Boris Quercia) and The Debutantes (Andrés Weissbluth). Do you think that your writing and personal position have contributed to creating a space for this topic in the Chilean socio-artistic scene?*
- PL: I have worked on that topic but I also have an ethical position with respect to many things. In this sense I think that I have infected the emerging spaces of this new rage.

Translation from Spanish by Kathryn Lehman, with the author

Notes

- [1] Lemebel states this in interviews given to *La Tercera*, Sunday 21 Sep. 1997, p. 44, conducted by Andrés Gómez: 'soy pobre, homosexual, tengo un devenir mujer y lo dejo transitar en mi

- escritura' (I am lower class, gay, and with a feminine demeanour that trespasses my writing). A similar statement is offered to Maureen Shaffer for *Revista Hoy*, no. 1072, 9–15 Feb. 1998, pp. 57–58, when he answers the question of whether his writing displays autobiographical elements: 'La biografía de un hombre pobre, sudaca y "aindiado" siempre pasa por un gesto de confesión. Yo evito el testimonio real ... pero tampoco podría negar mi origen y lo evoco en la escritura, travestido, multiplicado en un tornasol engañador' (the biography of a lower class, South American (*sudaca*), and coloured (*aindiado*) person always passes through a gesture of confession. I avoid any real testimony ... but at the same time I cannot deny my origins, so I bring them back in my transvestite writing, intensified through a deceiving glitter).
- [2] I am referring to the article by Doris Sommer, 'Los secretos de Rigoberta', in *La voz del otro: testimonio, subalternidad y verdad narrativa*, eds Hugo Achugar and John Beverley (Latinoamericana Editores, Lima, 1992).
 - [3] José Donoso (Chile, 1924–1996), with Mario Vargas-Llosa, Gabriel García Márquez, and Carlos Fuentes, among others, was part of the Latin American literary boom of the 1960s and 1970s. In 1962 he was awarded the William Faulkner Foundation Prize for *Coronación* (Coronation), the first of his novels to be published in the United States, recently made a feature film by Chilean director Silvio Caiozzi. He received Guggenheim and Woodrow Wilson Fellowships twice and was visiting lecturer at the Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa from 1965 to 1967. Other books include *The Obscene Bird of Night* (1973), *Sacred Families* (1977) and *A House in the Country* (1983), which was awarded the Critics' Prize in Spain.
 - [4] Manuel Puig (Argentina, 1932–1990), novelist and screenplay writer. Perhaps one of the most influential artists in the establishment of a gay literary discourse in Latin America through the combination of topics such as political commitment, popular culture and social repression. His first novel, *La traición de Rita Hayworth* (Betrayed by Rita Hayworth, 1968), was followed—among others—by *Boquitas pintadas* (Heartbreak Tango, 1969), *The Buenos Aires Affair* (orig. title, 1973), and *El beso de la mujer araña* (The Kiss of the Spider Woman, 1976), adapted to film in 1985 by Brazilian director Hector Babenco, starring William Hurt, Raul Julia and Sonia Braga.
 - [5] *Quillay*: a word from the *Mapuche* people, Mapudungun (*cúllay*), which designates the tree from the rose family from whose bark scents are extracted to manufacture perfumes, soaps and shampoo.
 - [6] Néstor Perlongher, Argentine essayist and poet, militant of the 'Frente de Liberación Homosexual' (Homosexual Liberation Front), who explored historical and political subjects in his work such as the Falklands War (Guerra de las Malvinas), Eva Perón and the disappeared. The poetry collection *Poemas completos* [Complete Poems] (Seix Barral, Buenos Aires, 2003) gathers his most important poetic work published in the volumes *Austria-Hungría*, [Austria-Hungry], *Alambres*, [Wires], *Hule*, [Oilskin], *Parque Lezama*, [Lezama park], *Aguas aéreas* [Aerial Waters] and *Chorreo de las iluminaciones* [Gushing of the Illuminations].
 - [7] José Lezama Lima (Cuba, 1910–1976), poet, novelist and essayist, one of the most influential Cuban writers and intellectuals of the twentieth century, especially for his baroque aesthetic, who, together with Alejo Carpentier, took Cuban literature beyond the local and continental conventions of the time. His novel, *Paradiso* (1966) is considered one of the masterpieces of Spanish-language literature. His major poetic work is compiled in *Poesía Completa* [Complete Poems] (1970, reprinted in 1973).
 - [8] Jaime Bayly (Peru, 1965), novelist and TV presenter. Some of his novels are: *No se lo digas a nadie* (Don't Tell Anyone, 1994), *Yo amo a mi mamá* (I Love My Mom, 1999), *La mujer de mi hermano* (My Brother's Wife, 2002), and *El Huracán lleva tu nombre* (The Hurricane Has Your Name, 2004).
 - [9] Paz Errázuriz (Chile, 1944), photographer, whose work centres on the margins of the community. Her focus on social spaces as circuses, amateur boxers, the insane or transvestites,

also displays disappearing forms of life. In the 1980s she was co-founder of the Association of Independent Photographers. Her work has been exhibited in the Americas, Europe and in Australia: *Art in Chile: Margins and Institutions*, Adelaide, 1986, *A Marginal Body*, Sidney, 1987, *La Manzana de Adán* (Adam's Apple), Centre for Photography, Sydney, 1989, and *Los nómadas del mar* (Nomads of the Sea), Melbourne, 1997. She has also published *La Manzana de Adán* (with Claudia Donoso, Chile, 1990), and *El Infarto del Alma* [Heart Attack of the Soul] (with Diamela Eltit, Chile, 1994).

- [10] Reinaldo Arenas (Cuba, 1943–1990), poet, novelist, and playwright. His opposition to the political regime established by Fidel Castro and his open homosexuality forced him to leave Cuba in 1980 along with 120,000 Cubans who arrived at the United States via the Mariel boatlift. Arenas settled in New York where he lived until his death from AIDS. His major works include: *Otra vez el mar* (Farewell to the Sea, 1982), trans. Andrew Hurley, 1987, *El portero* (The Doorman, 1989), trans. Dolores M. Koch, 1994, and his autobiography *Antes que anochezca* (Before Night Falls: a Memoir, 1990), trans. Dolores M. Koch, 1994, adapted for film under the title of the same name by director Julian Schnabel in 2001.
- [11] Francisco 'Pancho' Casas, the other member of 'Las Yeguas el Apocalipsis'.
- [12] Carlos Monsiváis (Mexico, 1938), historian, essayist and chronicler, the founder of popular culture studies in Mexico. His works include *A través del espejo: el cine mexicano y su público* [Through the Looking Glass: Mexican Cinema and its Audience] (1994), *Los rituales del caos* [Rituals Chaos] (1995), *Nuevo catecismo para indios remisos* [New Catechism for Remiss Indians] (2001), and *Mexican Postcards*, trans. John Kraniuskas, 1997. José Joaquín Blanco (Mexico, 1951), essayist, poet, and playwright. He received the Ariel Award for the script work for the movie *Frida, naturaleza viva* [Frida, unstill life]. Carmen Berenguer (Chile, 1946), essayist and poet. Her publications include *Bobby Sands Desfallece en el Muro* [Bobby Sands Weakens on the Wall] (1983), *Huellas de Siglo* [Traces of a Century] (1986), *Naciste Pintada* [You Were Born Painted] (1999), and *La gran Hablada* [The Great Conversation] (2002). She received the John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship in 2002. Diamela Eltit (Chile, 1949), novelist and performance artist. Her work spans the period of the dictatorship (1973–1990) and re-democratization (1990–). Her novels include *Lumpérica*, 1983 (E. Iluminata. Santa Fe, NM: Lumen Inc., 1997) *Vaca sagrada*, 1990 [Sacred Cow] (NY: Serpent's Tail, 1995), and *Los trabajadores de la muerte* (The Workers of Death, 1998).
- [13] Tomás Moulian, Chilean sociologist, academic and political activist. In 1997 his book *Chile Actual: Anatomía de un Mito* [Present-Day Chile: The Anatomy of a Myth] initiated an intense debate about the state of the political and cultural democratization process in Chile. In 2004 he was nominated by the Communist Party as a pre-candidate for the presidential elections to be held in December 2005 as part of the PODEMOS coalition (Poder Democrático y Social — Democratic and Social Power), which gathers the left-wing political parties not affiliated with the present centre-left alliance that rules the country.
- [14] Colo-Colo, the most popular soccer club in Chile, named after the *araucano* chief, a character of the epic poem *La Araucana* by Alonso de Ercilla y Zúñiga. Following such tradition, this soccer club represents the popular Chilean sectors, and displays clear warrior and macho elements in which both encounter mythical indigenous pride and proletarian identification. This is in opposition to the two other teams, the *Universidad Católica*, which appeals to the religious upper middle class, and the *Universidad de Chile*, which appeals to the secular middle class.
- [15] Cecilia Bolocco was a TV presenter for the channel of Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile and also for CNN en Español in the early 1990s. In 1986, one of the cruellest years during the dictatorial regime, she became Miss Universe. This year coincided with the period in which two youths were burnt with gas during one of the protest rallies. One of them, Rodrigo Rojas de Negri, died as consequence of injuries received, and Carmen Gloria Quintana survived the

burns, although her face stills shows 'la cara en llamas de la dictadura' (the flaming face of the dictatorship), as Lemebel himself states in one of his chronicles. He devotes a chronicle to each of these two women in his *De perlas y cicatrices*, as examples of different life experiences back then. In 2001 Cecilia Bolocco married Carlos Menem, former Argentinean president and presidential candidate in the 2003 elections.

- [16] Lemebel refers to 'La Malinche' to describe cultural betrayal. 'La Malinche'—also known as Doña Marina—was an indigenous woman who became Hernán Cortés's interpreter and lover. The importance of her role in the colonization of the 'New World' has located her as an allegory of cultural betrayal, an aspect that was reinforced in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, the influential book by the Mexican writer Octavio Paz, in which he devotes a chapter to this topic.
- [17] Patricio Manns is the composer of this song. As part of the 'New Chilean Song' musical movement, Manns was expatriated to France, where he had an essential role in the Chilean art developed in exile, especially through his work with the group Inti-Illimani, then residing in Italy. The military coup of 11 September 1973 forced thousands of union leaders, politicians, academics and artists into exile. The recuperation of democracy in March 1990 allowed for the return of many of them into the country. By then, neoliberal economic policies had gained strength, having been implemented during the dictatorial regime. The arrival of some of the exiled generation, most of them from Europe, confronted the authoritarian dissidents settled overseas and those who remained in the country, with the consequent ideological differences after 17 years of political and personal changes.
- [18] Camilo Escalona is the current president of the Chilean Socialist Party. Since 1990 he has served in different offices in the three coalition governments. In 1999 he published the book *Una transición de dos caras: crónica crítica y autocrítica* (A Twofold Transition: a Critical and Self-critical Chronicle) (Editorial LOM, Santiago de Chile).
- [19] The 1998 Soccer World Cup, held in France, created an enormous commotion among soccer fans, especially because the national team managed to be selected. The high demand among lower middle-class people to go to France was interpreted as an indication of the improvement in the economic conditions of the country, but here Lemebel interprets this as the ideologically cultural snobbism imposed by the high social classes.
- [20] Raúl Zurita (Chile, 1951) has been described as the most important contemporary Chilean poet after Nicanor Parra. His main works include *Purgatorio*, 1979 [Purgatory] (A Bilingual Edition: Latin American Literary Review Press, 1986), *Anteparaíso*, 1982 [Anteparadise] (A Bilingual Edition: University of California Press, Reprint edition, 1986), *El amor de Chile*, 1987 [The Love of Chile], *La vida nueva*, 1994 [The New Life]. He has been awarded the Guggenheim Fellowship, and in 2004 he received the Chilean National Literary Award (Premio Nacional de Literatura), the most important life achievement literary prize in the country.
- [21] *Mafalda*, the name of the comic strip created in 1964 by Quino (Joaquín Salvador Lavado, Argentina, 1932). Following Charles Schulz's work, *Peanuts*, *Mafalda* presents political commentaries about Argentine society, which is easily applicable to the rest of Latin America. *Mafalda* is perhaps the most important Spanish-language comic strip, widely known and translated into 30 languages.
- [22] Only a few weeks after the novel was released, Lemebel's mother died following a prolonged illness.