

Dissidences

Hispanic Journal of Theory and Criticism

Volume 2 | Issue 4

Article 2

November 2012

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Recommended Citation

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Available at: <https://digitalcommons.bowdoin.edu/dissidences/vol2/iss4/2>

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Forging (Comm)unity through Hybridity, HIV, and Marginalization: Pedro Lemebel's Loco afán: Crónicas del sidario

Keywords / Palabras clave

Loco afán, Lemebel, HIV, Hybridity, Marginalization

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*Forging (Comm)unity through Hybridity, HIV,
and Marginalization:
Pedro Lemebel's Loco afán: Crónicas del sidario*

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“...los enfermos se confunden con los sanos
y el estigma sidático pasa por una cotidianeidad de club...
que frivoliza el drama. Y esta forma de enfrentar la
epidemia pareciera ser el mejor antídoto para la depresión
y la soledad, que en última instancia es lo que
termina por destruir al infectado.”
Pedro Lemebel, *Loco afán*

In the face of the AIDS epidemic, writers from across the globe have depicted the disease from diverse, and often divergent, perspectives. One such approach is an assertion of agency to create a unified front within the existent political and social body. Providing an illuminating example of this confluence of community and writing is Pedro Lemebel's stunning collection of chronicles about the

effect of AIDS on the transvestite community in Santiago de Chile, entitled Loco afán: crónicas de sidario [1]. The collection details the fate of the homosexual, transvestite community (or “las locas” in Lemebel’s terms) from the fall of Allende, through the Pinochet dictatorship, and into the transitory period of democracy that followed in its wake. During that tumultuous social and historical time in Chile’s history, the protagonists faced yet another force capable of disrupting their sense of self and altering the notion of community: HIV/AIDS, a central topic in the lives of Lemebel’s protagonists. Lemebel’s use of language creates an extremely rich and detailed portraiture of the locas who inhabit his texts, alternating between the colloquial speech emanating from their lips to a philosophical discourse illustrating the author’s own perspectives on the many ills befalling his homeland. I will illustrate how the text appropriates the liminal spaces of national and individual identity construction to insert the HIV-positive, transvestite community into the literary history of Chile.

Through various metaphors and stunning visual imagery, Lemebel creates for the reader a remarkably thorough snapshot of his protagonists’ lives, manipulating language in what has been called “...un estilo que depende de una estrategia poética encubridora, que impide el decirlo todo directamente” (Atenas 132). Literary critic Ángeles Mateo del Pino has described Lemebel’s works as “...un discurso íntimo, a medio camino entre la poesía y la prosa” (18). I recur as well to Mateo del Pino’s apt description of the sensation that Lemebel’s technique produces, asserting that Lemebel uses “...un registro que bien podríamos llamar filmográfico. Cada crónica es como un *sketch* que reproduce un aparte de la ciudad santiaguina: ...Un cuadro de sus habitantes... la prostituta, el travesti, el milico...” (24). While Mateo del Pino is referencing Lemebel’s earlier crónica, La esquina es mi corazón here, his description could also apply to Loco afán and the plurality of characters represented through Lemebel’s prismatic writing.

As a result, Lemebel's work has begun to garner a good deal of critical attention, particularly since the publication of Loco afán in 1996. Lemebel's career has been as multi-faceted as his work, beginning first as Pedro Mardones, the performance artist and member of "Las Yeguas del Apocalipsis", a group of poets dedicated to video productions, performance art and art actions during the years of the dictatorship. With an alteration in surname in an attempt to pay homage to and connect with his maternal lineage, Pedro Lemebel the writer was constructed. He continued to employ a variety of techniques and genres, experimenting with poetry, short stories, pamphlets, oral dissemination of his thoughts and ideas (primarily through the radio, in which he still participates), and eventually the urban crónica that became his genre of choice through three collections of works [2]. He has since delved into the long story/novel [3] format as well as an historical study on the history of homosexuality in Chile [4].

This diversity of technique as well as the plurality of voices and hybridity of genres presented within the works is one of the central characteristics of Lemebel's work, as is his unwavering dedication to what he terms "el mariconaje guerrero" or a more militant form of homosexuality that strives to uncover the multiple layers of segregation that the transvestite endures in Chilean society, as well as combat the aggressively negative language and imagery used against homosexuals (Jeftanovic 76). He does this through an unapologetic glimpse at urban life, uncovering those characters and scenarios that don't adhere to the traditional notion of nation. This study illustrates, through a detailed examination of the sketches depicted in Loco afán, is how Lemebel's textual project seeks to combat a predominant cultural nationalism that has consistently erased homosexuals and transvestites from the national "family".

I utilize the theories of Homi Bhabha, particularly those expounded in Locations of Culture, to show how Lemebel's text takes advantage of the liminal space produced between the pedagogical and performative aspects of national identity to insert itself as an alternative cultural history. By utilizing this space, Lemebel continually employs the notion of hybridity to achieve his project and write the transvestite community into the literary history of Chile. There are multiple manifestations of this hybridity, but I will focus on six specific examples, each illustrated in Lemebel's work, although not necessarily in this order. First, the genre of the text itself, the *crónica*, is an amalgam of many different genres, making it the ideal structure to carry out Lemebel's narrative project. Secondly, we can examine the notion of gender, a sexual hybridity that is depicted by the transvestites who protagonize the works [5]. Third, there are multiple urban spaces represented in the text, providing no centralizing location, but rather shrouded locales and undisclosed spaces that the characters traverse in their daily encounters. Historical time is also multiple, with flashes back to pre-dictatorship, references to the regime and the indeterminate current reality of the "transition", an unstable political and social climate. There is national-transnational hybridity in the cultural influences examined in the text and the interplay between external-internal cultural factors. Finally, the influence of AIDS creates hybrid bodies- blurring the boundaries between illness and health, youth and old-age, life and death. In this sense, its presence becomes a constitutive force of the community that is constructed both because of and in spite of the virus. In the end, by uncovering national subjects that have been wholly erased or intentionally overlooked in the predominant cultural nationalism, particularly that of the dictatorship, Lemebel's text functions as a counter-narrative that challenges dominant images of Chile, giving voice and creating imagery of individuals often left outside of traditional communities, thus forging a unique community of those affected by AIDS and dedicated to Lemebel's version of "mariconaje guerrero".

I am approaching the formation of community from the perspective of theories of nation building, particularly postmodern versions such as Bhabha's that take into account the unique identities of developing countries and the diverse citizens within them and reject some of the totalizing views projected in early theories of nation-building, such as that of Benedict Anderson in Imagined Communities. I concur with literary critic Sophia A. McClennen's conclusion that "the inception of nationalism was central to the formation of modern nations because it described the inalienable ties between the subject and the state. Nevertheless, while nationalism projected a unified national body as part of its ideological persuasion, such unification rarely, if ever, existed" (53). Despite this apparent disconnect between theory and reality, I believe there still are usable aspects of Anderson's theory, in particular, the notion of an imagined linked between fellow members, allowing for the construction of a coalition or community between disparate individuals who may never meet one another, but who prescribe to the same concept of nation. However, Anderson's focus is on the emergence of nations during the 18th century as they fought for independence and tried to surface from under the cloak of religious dominance and governance. Essentially, nationhood was linked to modernity and connected to capitalism, the capacity to communicate through print, and the demise of linguistic diversity and thus, the emergence of language communities.

While these elements certainly provide a scope through which to view the creation of nation, they lack in their ability to adequately address the concept of community for those who fall outside of the traditional definition of the nation's members and exist in the margins. Their concerns often have less to do with the interrelation between nations as with the connection between others in their cultural community and the coexistence of that group within the larger context of nation. Essentially, with the relative stability of sovereign nations in the Latin American contexts, the notion of nation building is no longer as relevant as that of "construction" or "production" of national

identity or the national subject, particularly in the contexts of the dictatorships of the 1970s as well as the transitions to democracy that followed. (Kaminsky 25).

Kaminsky reminds us of the multiplicity of interpretations of nation, depending on the group doing the defining. She also reflects that during the Southern Cone dictatorships of the 1970s “the state took as its task the absolute and complete assimilation of the nation to its definition of itself, emphasizing the subjection of the individual to the state in the term ‘national subject’” (25).

McClennen adds that authoritarian nationalism projected a totalizing view of its citizens, with dictatorships opting to “appropriate nationalism to repress and contain national identity...” (59).

This conceptualization is pertinent to our discussion given the historical context of Lemebel’s work, spanning both the transitions from socialism to authoritarianism and authoritarianism to democracy, essentially a period from 1972 to the early 1990s. During the vast majority of that period, the protagonists, like the citizens of Chile, were subjected to a controlling nationalism that discursively “linked the family with the nation, the dictator with father and the people with children”

(McClennen 55). Given this situation, it is necessary to ask: How was this nationalism consciously exclusionary? What happens to those who don’t fit the traditional roles projected by the “nation”?

How do they participate in the construction of national identity when they are not recognized as members of that fabricated space? How can they insert themselves into both the literal and figurative communities within their nations?

The answers, I believe, lie in Homi Bhabha’s theories on liminality and hybridity and their relation to nation-building. In his provocative work, The Location of Culture, Bhabha contends that:

It is in the emergence of the interstices—the overlap and displacement of domains of difference—that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated. . . . Terms of cultural engagement, whether antagonistic or affiliative, are produced performatively. The representation of difference must not be hastily read as the reflection of pre-given ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition. The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation (2).

These “interstices” have also been referred to as liminal spaces or hybridities, in which there is a constant sense of movement, overlap, convergence, and negotiation. According to McClennen, it is through this aperture and from within this ambivalent state that the colonized is able “to challenge the colonizer through the construction of ‘counter-narratives’” (67). While the protagonists of Lemebel’s work are not true colonized subjects, I believe that the dynamics articulated by Bhabha and McClennen of colonized-colonizer is parallel to that of the margin-hegemony seen in Lemebel. Furthermore, Lemebel himself envisions AIDS and the subsequent marginalization it caused as a new form of colonization [6]. The commonalities between social marginalization and colonization derive from the power structure at play and the social positioning that results from that differential. In both, there is an inherently unequal balance of power, in which the hegemony (and the colonizer) wields that control in an attempt to subjugate and marginalize those in the subordinate position. What Bhabha’s theory provides is a way to see how the individuals in the subjugated position, whether they are colonized subjects or those demonized and shunned by the dominant society, are able to appropriate their position as a way to create a space for themselves within society. What we see in Lemebel is the production and manipulation of multiple hybridities, all with the end goal of counteracting the hegemony and forging a cultural identity out of the triply marginalized homosexual, transvestite, and HIV-positive protagonists who inhabit the text. Instead of hiding or

erasing this ambivalent space, Lemebel shines light on it through his text, illuminating the characters who populate it and giving voice to their histories. He embraces and celebrates the interstitial margin, accentuating the multiple hybridities that are played out within it.

Perhaps another way to envision Lemebel's protagonists' reality and the way in which Lemebel codifies it in his work is through Emily Hicks' theories from Border Writing: The Multidimensional Text. According to Hicks, her critical project is concerned with addressing thinking about culture without the boundaries imposed by nation. At the core of border writing is the border metaphor, which relies on cultural borders more than physical ones. I recur to this theory here as one way to approach Lemebel's work in constructing a cultural community of individuals residing on, and often way beyond, the cultural borders of Chilean society. It provides one way of conceptualizing the marginal existence of the locas in these texts, with the idea of margins being just another way of referring to the cultural borders implicitly defined by society and beyond which Lemebel's locas live, work, and survive. At this cultural border, edge, periphery, or margin, depending on the perspective of who is imposing the name, culture and identity are not fixed entities, but rather remain in flux, in constant negotiation both within the community and in dialogue with the mainstream society.

Lemebel's text is, in my opinion, a prime example of border writing: it is multidimensional in its execution, allowing the reader to view "the rest" of Chile through the prism that is the transvestite culture he depicts, and focusing in on that culture against the backdrop of other markers of Chilean society.

Furthermore, his protagonists represent decentered, nationless subjects; having been relegated to (and beyond) the cultural margins by a society that shuns them, the locas struggle to recreate a sense of community or nation under their own terms. Lemebel himself recognizes the multiple borders

that separate his protagonists from “mainstream” cultural agents and even those who navigate borders slightly closer to the center. He affirms that:

...hay minorías dentro de las minorías, lugares que son triplemente segregados como lo es el travestismo. No el travestismo del show que ocupa su lugar en el circo de las comunicaciones, sino que el travestismo prostibular. El que se juega en la calle, el que se juega al filo de la calle, ese es segregado dentro del mundo gay, o también son segregados los homosexuales más evidentes en este mundo masculino (Jeftanovic 76).

As we can see, there are multiple borders and layers of marginalization; it is this plurality and hybridity that Lemebel so deftly explores in his work and what ultimately provides a fissure through which a discourse that challenges the hegemony can emerge, or as literary critic Dino Plaza Atenas puts it “de lo que se trata es de la posibilidad de constituirse como un sujeto que acepte la ‘diferencia’ como un otro legítimo” (123).

Textual Hybridity: The Crónica

The first such hybrid space is the text itself, or more precisely, the heterogeneous genre that Lemebel utilizes: the crónica. The initial avenue to explore is why Lemebel chose what he himself has termed a “subgénero o intergénero” such as this. Atenas believes that, like all of the literary and artistic projects undertaken by Lemebel, it is a very intentional selection, to allow Lemebel to “romper con los lugares sacralizados de la literature...” (123). In fact, Lemebel himself admitted that he found that this genre “le convenía a su escritura en tanto ella es una estrategia de micropolítica... (de) devenires minoritarios...” and that he chose it “porque tiene que ver con algo de biografía, con algo de narrativa, con una poética como coraza escritural frente a los poderes de la literatura”

(Lemebel [7] in Atenas 123). This textual plurality allows Lemebel the freedom to navigate both textual and cultural borders, delving into his topic from the angles that give him the tools to capture the stories he intends to share. This calls to mind the hologram metaphor that Hicks uses in describing border writing, noting that a hologram has the capacity to create an image from more than one perspective at the same time. The same is true of Lemebel's text. He is not limited by one strict genre, but instead can operate within the fluidity that this hybrid genre affords him, one that he arrived at because "llegó un momento en que el cuento no se ajustaba a mis necesidades de realidad, de denuncia, de biografía, y la crónica me vino como anillo al dedo" (Lemebel in Jeftanovic 78).

While it is clear that the crónica, as Lemebel envisioned it, served his particular goals as a writer and story teller, I'd also like to examine both the historical uses for the form and the way in which Lemebel is restructuring it to accommodate his contemporary literary and cultural project. Literary critic Ángeles Mateo del Pino offers this definition of the form:

...la crónica es documento, ejercicio sano-terapia- de un sujeto que no quiere olvidar.... Subjetividad configurada a partida de la realidad que se le ofrece a su pupila de testigo...narrador que actúa, organiza y disecciona unos acontecimientos con el escalpelo de su palabra lírica, poética, lúdica, irónica, transgresora y subversiva, al socavar la objetividad de aquello que describe (18).

Some of the more traditional crónicas were more historical accounts of the Discovery and Conquest. In the contemporary landscape, the most notable chroniclers are, according to Mateo del Pino, Carlos Monsiváis (México), Edgardo Rodríguez Julia (Puerto Rico) and Pedro Lemebel (18-9), all of whom utilized the genre to create a more heterogeneous account of their respective societies. What becomes clear is that Lemebel's interpretation of the form deviates significantly from the traditional

texts that essentially served to record and witness important historical, political or cultural events. In fact, according to Lucía Guerra Cunningham, Lemebel's crónicas completely subvert the traditional genre, in a way that:

...contradice las formas tradicionales, tanto con respecto a lo fijado en la escritura como al principio que las organiza. Ubicándose en la ladera opuesta de las crónicas de la Conquista, lo heroico y memorable es aquí desplazado por lo cotidiano en los espacios marginales de la ciudad que subvierten no sólo las normas impuestas por la moral dominante, sino la cartografía misma del espacio urbano (83).

Essentially, Lemebel has taken an historical form typically reserved for commemorating the lives and deeds of significant people and utilized it to delve into an up-close and very personal look at “una pleyade de antihéroes, personajes malditos que han sido expulsados del paraíso-espacio público, entes desposeídos que habitan en los márgenes, en los bordes, en la periferia” (Mateo del Pino 22). In short, his hybrid genre and border writing allow him to capture those who inhabit parallel spaces, or those defined precisely by the same multidimensionality and fluidity as the genre used to depict them. By matching text with subject, Lemebel creates a space in which to write the diverse individuals that make up the liminal environs to which they have been relegated.

Additionally, Lemebel takes advantage of this traditionally historical form to offer a textual record and serve as a witness to a very significant historical and cultural event in Chile, but one that, according to cultural critic Adela H. Wilson [8], “la sociedad chilena pensó que no era un tema que debería abordar con fuerza y, como casi siempre, por debajo asomaba la verdad de una realidad escamoteada y oculta. La negación de la enfermedad que mató y sigue matando a cientos de personas” (143). That topic is AIDS, particularly as it affects those who are already seen as

peripheral citizens, such as homosexuals and transvestites. The *crónica*, as a document that serves as a textual record of an historical moment, affords Lemebel an avenue to record the effect that the epidemic has had on the transvestite community in Chile and to uncover a topic that has been so shrouded in taboos and silencing, not only in Chile, but throughout Latin America (and many other parts of the world). Wilson affirms that “El sida es...la enfermedad más cargada de connotaciones morales negativas y rechazo social de que se tenga noticias en la historia de la humanidad” (145). This additional moral burden further relegates an already sensitive topic to the margins, precisely where Lemebel picks it up and unabashedly reveals it for all to see. His text, then, is a timely record of a specific social moment, one that has wide-reaching consequences for those touched by the virus. It is not only an historical record of the effects of AIDS, but, through the plurality of voices and the multitude of vignettes, offers a testimony to a specific, traumatic moment in time, one that Lemebel himself has likened to another form of colonization: “La plaga nos llegó como nueva forma de colonización por el contagio” (*Loco afán*, epigraph). Like chroniclers before him, Lemebel witnesses that colonization and uses his text to give voice to those who are the targets; in doing so, he advocates for his community and offers them a path of resistance not only against the morbid reality of AIDS, but the society that ignores the plight they face.

Diachronic Time: Then and Now

Historical time is very central to this work, serving as a frame for both the individual texts and the work as a whole. In this sense, Lemebel adheres to the notion of *crónica* as a document that provides a record and testimony to a specific historical period. For Lemebel, that period covers the span of 1972-1995, and due to the specificity of his text to Chile and the focus on the AIDS epidemic, represents a particularly tumultuous time period not only nationally, but internationally as

well. In the realm of Chile, 1972 represented the second year of Allende's socialist government, one that at least presented the ideal of a unified society providing for more equality among all individuals. After Allende's assassination and Pinochet's coup in 1973, Chile took a drastic swing away from the ideals promoted by Allende. Instead, "the doors opened for international business investment and the cultural climate stagnated under extreme repression and censorship" (McClennen 53).

Pinochet became "the self-proclaimed 'Father of the Nation'" (McClennen 53), and in doing so, he eradicated the possibility of an egalitarian organization and societal structure, instead promoting a strictly patriarchal paradigm that anchored a strong, male figure at the top with power trickling down to those below, if ever reaching them. Under this structure, the father figure not only controls, but configures, his version of family, something that Pinochet executed through the brutal disappearance and elimination of thousands of citizens who didn't fit his vision of nation or family. As a result, those who failed to meet the criteria of acceptable national citizen were cast out of the national community both literally and figuratively. They either fled Chile as exiles or moved into the margins and inhabited the shadows outside the space occupied by the hegemony. For Lemebel's protagonists, this was their reality from 1973-1989, while Pinochet authoritatively controlled his country and his "children".

The text is also concerned with the post-dictatorial period when the nation slowly began to transition back to democracy. This period from 1989-1995 (when the work was published) makes up the majority of the "present" period in the text and is colored with both the vestiges of the dictatorship as well as the bittersweet memories of the Unidad Popular. It is this period that represents the hybrid historical time from which Lemebel's text emerges. It is straddled between two

distinct pasts, a tenuous present, and a very unclear future. With no clear definition of nation or community at this point, as well as the abandonment of the strict patriarchal hierarchy that preceded the period, Lemebel has the opportunity to textually insert himself and the gay community into the emerging national identity through the aperture provided by this ambivalent historical period. In essence, he can contribute to the construction of a new nation, one that perhaps provides the possibility of societal participation for him and his compatriots.

Lemebel envisions the gay community as one that, despite its position at the periphery of society, is undeniably interconnected and affected by the larger political and social forces at work. That is not to suggest that the governments, particularly the dictatorship, were explicitly concerned about the possible negative impact that policy decisions would have on the gay community, but rather, is intended to show that, despite the perceived distance between mainstream Chile and the gay community, that distance did not provide insulation against the harsh social climate of the dictatorship. Despite efforts to erase the transvestite community from the national project, they not only remained but continued to be influenced by the multiple changes occurring in Chilean society. Lemebel is conscious of this fact and his text explores the pre-dictatorship era, the Pinochet years and the transitional period that represents the “present” in the text. All impacted the gay community and were factors in the degree to which they participated in and envisioned themselves as part of the national project.

The first text, “La noche de los visones” is the most demonstrative of this consciousness of political time. It recalls a black and white photograph depicting the last party of the Unidad Popular, providing a very cohesive, almost utopic, snapshot of the transvestite community, assembled in a public space and mingling openly with the proletariat. The use of the word community is intentional

here because Lemebel describes a scene in which locas from all different classes and areas of the city are present and “todas se juntaban en los patios de la UNCTAD para imaginar los modelitos que iban a lucir esa noche” (12) [9]. The celebratory scene highlights the cohesion that was possible among the community during Allende’s government, which is connected to the color white (of the photo and as a symbol of purity) “para despedir el 72 que ha sido una fiesta para nosotros los maricones pobres” (13). Lemebel considers the photo itself to be the “...último vestigio de aquella época de utopías sociales...” (21). However, the night also serves as a harbinger for the drastic change just over the horizon, with the color black providing an omen “para recibir el 73, que... se me ocurre que viene pesado” (13). This sense of foreboding made it feel “como si viniera una guerra” (13). Shortly thereafter, Pinochet’s brutal dictatorship took over and:

desde ahí, los años se despeñaron como derrumbe de troncos que sepultaron la fiesta nacional. Vino el golpe y el nevazón de balas provocó la estampida de las locas que nunca más volvieron a danzar por los patios floridos de la UNCTAD. Buscaron otros lugares, se reunieron en los paseos recién inaugurados de la dictadura. Siguieron las fiestas, más privadas, más silenciosas... (14)

This shift is significant because it effectively erased the gay community and more specifically, the transvestite sub-community, from the public sphere, pushing them into the shadows and the margins, preventing them from being a visible force in Pinochet’s Chile. Without this public presence, the sense of community diminished somewhat as the distinct factions searched for less ostentatious places to continue to live their lives. As a result, there were fewer central spaces and no sanctioned public spaces to come together as one. It is that lost sense of community that Lemebel’s text strives to recreate by providing a centralized textual space to unite and recount the episodes that have left their mark over the years. Unfortunately, one of those is the emergence of AIDS and the

overwhelming impact it had on many of the protagonists depicted in this work. In essence, it was one of the factors involved in the creation of a new sense of community, one devastated by but determined to overcome the relentless progression of the virus. Because of AIDS, these protagonists unwittingly became linked once again, not only by their lifestyles and marginalized status, but now by their battles with a potentially fatal virus. Bhabha reminds us that “political empowerment...come(s) from posing questions of solidarity and community from the interstitial perspective” (3). The loss of public space forced these protagonists into a liminal space. Rather than disappear, they utilized that perspective to combat a common enemy, AIDS, and through this text, to make their voices heard in society.

The Emergence of AIDS in the Chilean Context

The notion of historical time is additionally echoed in the portrayal of the AIDS epidemic. In 1972, the specific moment of the first text in *Loco afán*, AIDS, of course, did not exist; it did not enter the worldwide scene until 1981. In the Chilean context, the first case was reported in 1984.[10] However, the earlier date of emergence proves to be more significant for the protagonists in these texts because of their international connections and the fact that the majority of them who fell ill contracted the virus abroad, rather than in Chile. The pre-AIDS era that is depicted in this work coincides initially with the Allende years, which are remembered as utopic years. Repression, illness, and a divided community existed on the horizon, but for those who lived those years, there was, according to Lemebel’s description, a joyous celebratory atmosphere that united gays and transvestites from diverse backgrounds into a cohesive community. They lived in a time “donde el territorio nativo aún no recibía el contagio de la plaga, como recolonización a través de los fluidos corporales” (22). In essence, the social liberties that were celebrated under Allende were mirrored in

the sexual liberties that many of these individuals enjoyed. That sense of civic equality and freedom was eroded by Pinochet's repressive dictatorship, with the sexual freedom diminishing with the arrival of yet another oppressive force: AIDS.

In the first *crónica*, the aforementioned "La noche de los visones", Lemebel presents a diachronic vision of the Chilean political and social climate as well as the epidemiological shift due to the emergence of HIV. The event that is remembered is firmly grounded in the "before", but despite the fact that HIV and AIDS are not physically present yet in 1972, they hang like specters over the photo. Subtly, Lemebel refocuses his textual gaze, allowing the sharp memories of the Allende years to fade to the background as the more immediate past comes into focus, providing a glimpse of what became of those pictured in that early photo. What follows is an enumeration of the central figures that were infected by the virus and eventually succumbed to it, depicting not only a loss of the freedoms and liberties that were abundant in the time period of the photo, but also a loss of innocence. True to the *crónica* genre and its multiple purposes, these references serve as a type of testimony about the impact of the virus on the community, humanizing it and giving voice to individuals who would otherwise end up as mere statistics, if that.

The first member of those in the photograph to bring the virus back to the community was Pilola Alessandri, who, as Lemebel reveals with a great deal of irony, "se compró la epidemia en Nueva York, fue la primera que la trajo en exclusiva, la más auténtica, la recién estrenada moda gay para morir" (16). Also infected abroad was la Palma, who contracted the virus in Brazil and "volvía a la arena, repartiendo la serpentina contagiosa a los vagos, mendigos..." (17). Shortly thereafter, Chumilou became infected, because "eran tantos billetes, tanta plata, tantos dólares que pagaba ese gringo" and despite the fact that she [11]was out of condoms on that particular night, she believed

that “no podía ser tanta su mala suerte que por una vez, una sola vez en muchos años que lo hacía en carne viva, se iba a pegar la sombra” (18-19). These vignettes manage to not only humanize the people behind the statistics, but also serve as an intimate portrayal of the epidemiological history, depicting not only how the virus was transmitted in these particularly instances, but why. Particularly in the case of Chumilou, the reader is privy to her thought process before making the decision that eventually led to the contraction of HIV. Here we can see a mixing of textual strategies: diverging from the strict crónica, Lemebel incorporates fictional narrative strategies as well as psychological viewpoints that allow him to provide a plurality of perspectives. Again, this sort of hybridity calls to mind Hick’s metaphor of the hologram; here, each pane reveals a different perspective regarding AIDS; taken together, they present a more complete picture of the AIDS epidemic and the complexities that are inherent.

This presentation becomes yet another one of the functions of Lemebel’s crónicas. Despite the fact that AIDS was envisioned as another form of “colonización” or “repartidor público ausente de prejuicios sociales” (23) and certainly not a welcome immigrant to the gay community, Lemebel recognizes the importance of studying, revealing, and presenting this alternate history of AIDS in Chile, one that is unlikely to be heard in other arenas. The work becomes not only a textual history and testimony of the gay and transvestite communities, but also a written account of the epidemic. It serves a social function through the blend of accurate historical information combined with personal testimony regarding the AIDS epidemic. However, it also retains some elements of fictional literature, drawing upon multiple narrative strategies as well as literary embellishments that make it difficult at times to accurately distinguish between what is fact and what is fiction. Perhaps, for that reason, Lemebel chose a genre that tends to lend more credence to its content by virtue of its traditional connection with historical events. Like the rest of this work, the fuzziness is intentional,

thus allowing Lemebel to continue to straddle multiple arenas at one time. In fact, Lemebel admits that “cruzo temas como el Sida y la homosexualidad, pero el Sida desde los cuerpos vivos, no desde la medicina y el virus” (in Jeftanovic 78).

This affirmation is central to understanding the way AIDS is treated in this work. Despite the fact that it was most definitely not a positive change for the community, Lemebel’s work strives to present life with AIDS, as well as the way that the community, displaced and divided by the dictatorship, slowly began to reunite because of AIDS and the commonality that it created among disparate individuals. Even if we look back at the depictions of Piloli, Chumilu and la Palma’s methods of contracting the virus, the tone alternates between sarcastic and humorous, celebratory and defiant. Unlike other authors Lemebel doesn’t tend to recur to any of the predominant negative metaphors about AIDS that are used to euphemistically reference the disease while refusing to name it [12]. Instead, AIDS is named so many times in this text that it loses its shock value. It exists, period. It has affected this community in countless ways.

Metaphors are used, but they become one of the ways in which Lemebel manipulates language and plays with his topics to tease out unique perspectives. He uses countless direct references to AIDS as well as clever puns that often add humor to the text. An example of this is his sarcastic letter to Elizabeth Taylor, asking her to donate her emeralds to him so that he can use them to buy AZT. He closes, assuring her that “Te estaré eternamente agrade-sida,” (56) illustrating one of many instances where he consciously utilizes references to AIDS to not only call attention to the situation of his protagonists, but to discharge some of the symbolic weight that the words carry. His strategy seems much the same as that employed in La esquina es mi corazón, where Lemebel intentionally uses derogatory and inflammatory “...palabras de agresión a lo homosexual, como coliza o tereso, que al

usarlas yo las descargo de esa energía brutal” (in Jeftanovic 76) In much the same way, Lemebel plays with the word “sida” and the imagery surrounding it in so many different ways that it begins to become impotent, thus permitting the individuals behind the virus to re-emerge and continue living their lives and communing with others, whether ill or healthy. As a result, Lemebel’s focus is instead on capturing the way in which AIDS is lived by these protagonists and the effects it has on the group as a whole, particularly in relation to their position on the periphery.

HIV and AIDS contribute to the notion of liminality as well in that they create an existence for those infected that often is a state of limbo. Particularly in the beginning of the trajectory of the personal experience with the virus, the individual can continue to appear and feel healthy, either unaware or not feeling the need to attend to the illness that traverses his/her blood. Yet, as more and more friends, lovers and acquaintances perish as a result of the illness, death beckons those infected, thus influencing the way life is approached and lived. Those infected stand on the fringe of life and death, navigating the interstitial space with resistance, friendship, love, and community. Most importantly, the topic does not remain shrouded in silence, either because of the openness among friends and colleagues or because “en el ghetto homosexual siempre se sabe quién es VIH positivo...los rumores corren rápido...” (69) As a result, everyone shares in the reality of the epidemic, either through first-hand experience or through the companionship created among the locas. Lemebel asserts that:

...los enfermos se confunden con los sanos y el estigma sidático pasa por una cotidianeidad de club, por una familiaridad compinches que frivoliza el drama. Y esta forma de enfrentar la epidemia, pareciera ser el mejor antídoto para la depresión y la soledad, que en última instancia es lo que termina por destruir al infectado (69).

Because the virus has become so omnipresent in the community portrayed in Lemebel's work, he strives to capture the responses to it, expressing them in the plurality of voices that emitted them, thus uncovering rather than shrouding the reality, all the while celebrating the lives of those portrayed rather than prematurely writing their deaths. What he reveals is that those infected recognize death as an imminent threat, but shift their focus instead to the other side of the gap that they straddle: life. We hear this echoed in the opinions captured by Lemebel: "El mismo SIDA es una razón para vivir. Yo tengo SIDA y eso es una razón para amar la vida. La gente sana no tiene por qué amar la vida, y cada minuto se les escapa..." (71). One extreme example of this insistence on life over death is the ignorance portrayed by one of the protagonists, la Loba, when she discovered she was HIV-positive: "La Lobita no tenía cabeza para relacionar el drama de la enfermedad con el positivo del examen. Ella creía que todo estaba bien..." (42). This denial apparently served her well, causing her roommates to wonder whether "...la Loba tenía pacto con Satanás" (43) because, despite her HIV-positive status, she lasted impossibly long without any medicine, projecting a healthy image that masked her physical deterioration. In Loba's case, denial and refusal to truly contemplate death allowed her to live her remaining life more fully, even fooling those around her into believing she was healthy when they knew she was gravely ill.

Still others viewed AIDS as an advantage in a society that otherwise affords little or no support: "Me hace especial, seductoramente especial. Además tengo todas las garantías... como portador, tengo médico, sicólogo, dentista, gratis" (71). Furthermore, the promise of a premature death is seen by some as an additional benefit because "nunca seré vieja, como las estrellas. Me recordarán siempre joven" (72). For the locas in this text concerned with artifice and performance, as well as the conscious manipulation of outward appearances, the promise of eternal youth is particularly alluring.

It allows them to live an eternal present, adhering to the principles of carpe diem, rather than fearing the inevitable decline and loss that accompanies aging.

What we see from these perspectives is a deliberate choice: when faced with the bifurcating roads that represent the options present to one with AIDS, these protagonists chose life, and they chose to live it in the most ostentatious way, inviting all of their friends as if it were a party. In fact, critic Margarita Sánchez has studied this performative, celebratory aspect of AIDS and concludes that “los síntomas de la enfermedad se convierten en vestuario, el cuerpo pálido y enfermo un monumento estético, la medicina en bebida embriagadora” (25). An important tenet that I would add to this reference is the fact that the make-up, outfits, and other external performative accoutrements are all intended for an audience, thus indicating the fact that these protagonists do not function in solitude. For each, their created selves not only reflect the individuals they strive to present publicly, but are their tools for seducing clients and are their common interests within their community. What we find is that all of the facets that would traditionally alienate and marginalize these protagonists from society (AIDS, homosexuality, transvestitism, prostitution, and overt sexuality) are precisely what joins them and foments the creation of community.

In certain instances, the disease also became an instrument of resistance to be used by the gay community, as Lemebel portrays in the vignette “La Regine de aluminio el mono,” in which the members of the military regularly visit Regine and use sex as an amnesiac for all of the atrocities they committed, for which they showed no remorse. Her space infiltrated by representatives of the “enemy”, Regine utilized the scant tools at her disposal to subtly control and manipulate those who lived under the illusion of absolute domination. She used sex to moderate their bravado, all the while

conscious of her secret weapon, AIDS, which leaves her with the certainty that the soldiers “salían tocados levemente por el pabellón enlutado del SIDA” (27).

This device was freely transmitted to all but one soldier, Sergio, who frequented her; the lone soldier was the only one to show any sort of remorse or sense of conscience over the torture in which he participated. Regine and Sergio developed a platonic relationship that the other soldiers never understood and frequently criticized. Regine, however, was comforted by the thought that “mucho después que pasó la dictadura, el teniente y la tropa iban a entender el amor platónico del Serio y la Regine. Cuando los calambres y sudores fríos de la colitis les dieron el visto positivo de la epidemia” (30). Despite her compromised position serving representatives of a government that brutally repressed her and her companions, Regine found and used the one weapon she possessed, her fatal disease, to silently fight back against the repressors. Ironically, it was her embodiment as a female that gave her the ability to use her sexuality to her advantage; she used this constructed identity to attract and seduce the soldiers, and ultimately, to transmit AIDS to them.

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The Locas: plurality of gender

Lemebel’s text has as its central thrust gender-crossing and transvestism, actions defined by plurality and ambivalence. The outward projection is female, a constructed self achieved through artifice, make-up, and at times, medicine. Under it all there are hidden male markers of identity, utilized

during sex and revealed discriminately. Judith Butler, in Gender Trouble, through an analysis of drag, asserts that “we are actually in the presence of three contingent dimensions of significant corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance” (137). In the context of Lemebel’s protagonists, we can examine each of these three realms. All of the protagonists are anatomical males, but little to no emphasis is placed on this biological fact. Instead, all project a feminine gender identity, referring to themselves and each other as women. There is no instance in the text when they consider themselves men dressing as women; instead, they interact and communicate based on the premise that all identify with the female gender rather than the male gender. Furthermore, in the public sphere, this female gender is performed by the protagonists as they carefully strive to project a female visage to the world.

Lemebel’s text, then, focuses on gender identity and performance rather than anatomical gender. This is further supported by the manner in which Lemebel references the protagonists, consistently choosing female-gendered pronouns and suffixes to demarcate the gender identity of his protagonists. Self-identification as a female while outfitted as such require the use of “she”, “her” and other female grammatical referents. This becomes more apparent in Spanish where articles and adjectives additionally announce the gender of the subject. Lemebel announces the projected gender of the protagonists through his choice of words and suffixes. I have also upheld this convention throughout my analysis by referring to the protagonists as “she” as a manner to codify the gender identity and the performed gender rather than the anatomical gender. Although a simple change in pronoun cannot change the anatomical gender of the referent, it does call into question the constructed nature of gender itself.

Judith Butler expounds upon this concept in both Gender Trouble and Bodies that Matter. In the latter, she strives to clarify and provide a more in-depth articulation of the theories posited in Gender Trouble, primarily those concerning the performative nature of gender. She explains that performativity:

must be understood not as a singular or deliberate 'act' but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names..."(and that) "...the regulatory norms of 'sex' work in a performative fashion to constitute the materiality of bodies and, more specifically, to materialize the body's sex... (Bodies that Matter 2).

Literary critic Ben. Sifuentes-Jáuregui further elaborates on this notion in his study entitled Transvestism, Masculinity, and Latin American Literature, asserting that "transvestism is a performance of gender" (2). Utilizing both Butler and Sifuentes-Jáuregui's theories, we can see how Lemebel's protagonists reveal the very constructedness of gender itself through the performance of female gender in the private and public spheres vis-à-vis the act of transvestism. Butler describes this potentially subversive potential of drag by noting "drag is subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality's claim on naturalness and originality" (Bodies that Matter 125). I agree with Lucía Guerra Cunningham's assertion that "La loca, en la ambigüedad subversiva de El/Ella, es el desecho de la cultura y el patrimonio nacional...desafiando roles genéricos y esfumando fronteras" (87). By projecting a feminine gender identity despite their understood, but ignored, masculine anatomical identities, these protagonists present a challenge to the hegemonic tendency to identify individuals through the categories into which they can be inserted. Instead, the protagonists function as the

consummate border crossers, capable of inhabiting the worlds of both genders, comfortable with a plurality of identity and resistant to an overly reductionist sense of self.

Even the name chosen by Lemebel, *locas*, to refer to these individuals resists categorization. This choice of terms merits some further discussion. There is quite a diverse range of terminology throughout literature and criticism to refer to varying tendencies toward cross-dressing by both heterosexuals and homosexuals. Butler discusses drag and the implications it has for gender performance. She reiterates, however, that many individuals who participate in drag are heterosexuals, thus disconnecting it from an inherent relationship with homosexuality. Sifuentes-Jáuregui's study utilizes the term "transvestite", again never connecting it specifically to hetero- or homosexuals. Lemebel opts for the term *loca* to distinguish his protagonists from the more general category "gay", while at the same time illustrating the interconnectedness of the two identities: "La loca y el gay apolineo son categorías distintas pero no contrapuestas, en todo gay hay una loca que se desviste frente al espejo privadamente. Pero también en ese fetichismo de la femme exagerada también hay un enganche de la madre, un lugar emotivo" (Lemebel in Jęftanovic 76). As this statement illustrates, the *loca*, as Lemebel posits it, is not only is the constructed female identity of his homosexual male protagonists, but a way for them to connect with their emotional, maternal side. This importance of the mother and femininity to the construction of identity calls to mind another *loca* in the Southern Cone context: Las madres de la plaza de mayo, who were often disparagingly referred to as *locas* by the Argentine government in an attempt to discredit them and counteract the power they had acquired through unified, public protest. While that term was aimed to destruct a legitimate, increasingly powerful figure in Argentine dictatorial society, in Lemebel's context, he uses the term in nearly the opposite way. It is celebratory rather than derogatory and it has as its goal the construction of a category for previously illegitimate, displaced citizens.

In fact, Lemebel has consciously crafted this figure and reflected the multiple reality of this individual in his literature to resist the totalizing vision that was projected for Chilean society, particularly under Pinochet. As we recall, Pinochet sadistically tried to meld Chilean citizens into a homogenized citizen that represented the patriarchal, family-centered ideal that he projected. Obsessively driven by this objective, he subsequently cast out all those who did not fit his model, attempting to physically erase the errant individuals in his search for his illusive model of societal perfection. Lemebel intentionally works to expose this strategy and criticize it through the exaltation and unapologetic celebration of a multiply marginalized being. In fact, literary critic Sandra Garabano affirms that “...le interesa la figura del travesti por la fuerza desestabilizadora que la misma encierra” (48) and that Lemebel feels that this figure “es una construcción cultural y existencial poderosa, un regalo visual en este paisaje homogéneo y torturante” (in Garabano 48) [13]. Garabano continues that “Lemebel ha transformado la figura del travesti en ícono de resistencia frente a la uniformidad del consenso político chileno” (48). The body of the transvestite “lograría revisar ciertas categorías tradicionales que definen lo femenino y lo masculino. La loca siempre está en proceso de construirse y como metáfora, se encuentra siempre en proceso de resignificación” (Garabano 50).

This central figure not only represents hybridity, but is hybridity, presenting him/herself as both genders, navigating an epidemic that puts questions of life and death on the table, inhabiting a society in which “...es un ser negado por la sociedad. Nadie quiere saber de él, pero todo el mundo aprecia la figura femenina que el mismo ha creado para la pantalla” (Atenas 130). As such, s/he is elusive, resisting categorization and definition, failing to fit into any predefined societal space. As a result, this prismatic individual has the option of creating a desired version of self and projecting

that identity back toward a society that at once rejects and embraces the image that is created. This becomes a central facet of Lemebel's literary project- by focusing on an individual so imminently attached to the border and margin, yet so incapable of being pigeonholed into any one specific category, he is challenging the hegemonic discourse that assumed a homogenous society and refused to recognize individuals such as these protagonists as members. Instead, Lemebel's text is an aperture through which they can be written into society and Chile, following their own rules rather than those imposed by the patriarchy. Instead, the locas have placed greater emphasis on creating a community centered on the importance of the female figure, starting with those that they themselves project.

This connection with femininity begins with Lemebel himself, who sees females as his allies, and constitutive of the majority of his interlocutors. This is because, according to Lemebel, "precisamente por la relación con el poder, toda minoría gay, sexual étnica, pasa por el devenir mujer" (in Jeftanovic 76). There is a circularity to this logic, with the female entity being the link between all elements of humanity. This vision breaks with the traditional paradigm of the patriarchy that sees a hierarchical distribution of power, centered and controlled by the male figure. Instead, by invoking femininity in his particular expression of homosexuality, or what he calls "el mariconaje guerrero que practico..." (in Jeftanovic 76), Lemebel is able to use homosexuality and transvestism as a counter-discourse to patriarchy and hegemony.

His texts are not simply about what the characters do, but rather, about what they mean to society and how their actions can be read in relation to that which surrounds them. Lemebel asserts that "me interesa la homosexualidad como una construcción cultural, como una forma de permitirse la duda, la pregunta; quebrar el falologocentrismo que uno tiene instalado en la cabeza" (in Jeftanovic

76). Accordingly, "...la loca no es real, es más bien una metáfora sobre la homosexualidad y la femineidad" (in Jeftanovic 77). This textual figure as cultural border crosser permits a free exploration of gender conflation, sexual fluidity, and social dynamism. S/he resists strict definition and represents the juxtaposition of previously separated contexts or ideals. By presenting such a figure as the central protagonist of these works, Lemebel is openly questioning the rigid delineation of sexuality and gender that Pinochet and others attempted to indoctrinate into society. He offers an alternative to multiple binaries, providing evidence of the possibility of crossing previously unbreachable borders. Multiplicity is permitted, accepted and celebrated in this textual world. Moreover, healthy and ill bodies merge in a celebration of life while in the presence of death. Sexuality resists strict rules that seek to police its expression; instead, these protagonists comport themselves in a way that defies and subverts society's rules about sexual conduct and selection of partners.

Perhaps most importantly, there is a firm credence in the ability and the right to invent oneself, whether through external corporal preparation and presentation or through linguistic manipulation carried out in the process of renaming. The former is intimately connected to the figure of the loca, particularly the public persona whose acts and performances are crafted with an audience in mind. For many of these protagonists, they construct an identity based on international female icons, particularly those from Hollywood. This image appropriation illustrates an international and intercultural awareness that serves as evidence of Chile's gradual transition toward globalization, particularly post-dictatorship. As the nation becomes a player on a world-wide scale, its inhabitants become international consumers, particularly susceptible to the images projected by such heavyweights as Hollywood. The uniqueness evidenced by Lemebel's protagonists, however, lies in the fact that female images are being appropriated rather than the "...imágenes posmodernas de

Rambo y Schwarzenegger, por los espectros hiperbólicos del macho recio y musculoso que circula en afiches y videos, en el cine...” (Cunningham 87). Madonna finds her Chilean form in one of the locas who obsessively copies her image. Liz Taylor is the recipient of a sarcastic letter from another, urging the star to send an emerald that she can use to pay for AZT. Throughout the letter, the writer exhibits an intimate knowledge of Taylor’s filmography, her choice in friends and her philanthropic endeavors. These intercultural dialogues and the desire to mimic these iconic female figures is a way of creating a female-centered global awareness, one that finds its expression in the community of locas who reject the male-anchored images pervasive in Chilean popular culture.

In addition to the appropriation of female images for the reinvention of self that many of these protagonists undergo, they also rename themselves in what Sánchez has called “...su modo de resignificar la ceremonia del bautismo” (32). In this traditional catholic ceremony, the child is anointed by a male church figure into the religious doctrine, receiving a name as a symbol of that initiation. The priest or “father” presides over this ceremony, officially recognizing the name that was selected and imposed by the familial father. Conversely,

al (des) bautizarse y anular la inscripción paterna, el travesti elige un nombre que lo hace parte de otra comunidad. El uso del apelativo femenino en este caso, rompe el pacto social familiar y genera un pacto con la comunidad travesti. De hecho, al desaparecer el nombre ‘legítimo’ el travesti elige estar afuera de la ley social que reconoce a los individuos a partir de una imagen, un número y unas huellas digitales. Cuando tacha uno de estos elementos, el travesti se reconoce a sí mismo como parte de una nueva comunidad regida por códigos propios (Sánchez 33-4)

This process was undertaken by Lemebel himself before being textually reproduced. While a member of “Las Yeguas del Apocalipsis”, Pedro Lemebel was still known by his paternally-imposed

name, Pedro Mardones. Around 1986-1987, according to Lemebel, “me empezó a cargar ese nombre legalizado por la próstata del padre” (in Blanco and Gelpí 93). As a result, he decided to reject that name in favor of his mother’s last name, Lemebel, a process he describes in an interview with professors Juan G. Gelpí and Fernando Blanco: “...desempolvé mi segundo apellido: el Lemebel de mi madre, hija natural de mi abuela, quien, al parecer, lo inventó jovencita cuando escapó de su casa” (94). He envisions this gesture as a manner of forming an alliance with “lo femenino”, thus reinscribing himself into a gynocentric linguistic history. By opting for a name not only connected to his maternal lineage, but also commemorative of a woman he describes as a “huacha”, he is choosing to align himself with a subordinate citizen. Two ways of interpreting this appellative are its connection to labor, i.e. “washer”, and its connotation of a person with no family lineage, or an “orphan” [14]. His mother, as a woman working in menial physical labor after fleeing from her family home, would have been seen by a traditional family as an outcast for leaving home at a young age, thus converting her into a family-less individual or orphan. However, in the eyes of Lemebel, she is yet another member of the margin, particularly those who create their own rules, regardless of society’s attempts to impose a life upon them. As such, she becomes representative of that which Lemebel himself strives for and expresses in his texts: a celebration of the inhabitation of the liminal social space while creating alliances with others who operate outside of social norms. Lemebel sees his appropriation of the maternal name as a way to “reconocer a mi madre huacha desde la ilegalidad homosexual y travesti (Blanco and Gelpí 94), thus connecting three distinct types of marginalities: femininity, homosexuality, and transvestism, all of which find their expression in this text.

In much the same way that Lemebel himself rejected the paternally inscribed moniker attached at birth and recognized by traditional society, each of his protagonists also participates in renaming

herself to encapsulate the being she becomes as a transvestite. While striving to choose their personally selected names, each undergoes a process that is detailed and complex: “No se arregla solamente con el femenino de Carlos; existe una gran alegoría barroca que empluma, enfiesta, traviste, disfraz, teatraliza o castiga la identidad a través del sobrenombre” (*Loco afán* 58). Lemebel highlights the most popular ways people arrive at their new names. Some simply choose the feminine form of their male names, primarily by adding an –a to the end. Others rename themselves as family matriarchs (“mamita” “tía”, etc), thus embracing a female-centered community. Still others (particularly the more innocent ones, in Lemebel’s estimation) appropriate names from folklore, creating “Chelas” and “Rosas” based on popular female figures. This allows them to insert themselves in popular culture and tradition, thus finding a place for themselves in a previously inhospitable social custom. For the most sophisticated, Chilean imagery is not enough; instead they turn their gazes outward and rename themselves in honor of the great women of Hollywood, thus imitating and recreating “la Monroe, la Dietrich, etc” (59). Regardless of the name chosen, this process is of utmost importance for these individuals striving to create a new community comprised of those rejected by the hegemony. Naming is like starting over again, except this time the *locas* assume creative and linguistic control over their lives, projecting unto others the exact image they choose to craft. There is a very deliberate air to this systematic deconstruction of the markers of the patriarchy that were initially imposed and which, through naming, make-up, clothing and performance, each carefully works to reconstruct through an exaltation of femininity.

This process becomes even more important for those suffering from AIDS, a disease that threatens, through its fatality, to erase the identity markers that have been created. Furthermore, given the gravity that being a carrier can potentially bring, many see the process of naming as a way “...para conseguir que se ría de sí misma, que se burle de su drama. Empezando por el nombre” (58).

Lemebel suggests such pun-filled names as “La María Sarcoma”, “La Mosca Sida”, “La Venseremos”, “La Sui-Sida”, reiterating that “se hace más útil un stock de nombres para camuflar la rotulación paterna, a medida que se requiere más humor para sobrellevar la carga sidosa” (60). Furthermore, by naming the self (often multiple times) and rejecting the signs imposed by others, these protagonists allow themselves a fluidity of identity that permits them to navigate multiple spaces, projecting a modified self crafted for each situation or space. This notion of social space and place becomes yet another example of the plurality that these protagonists encounter on a daily basis.

Private and Public Space: Limited Options

Ever since the fall of the Unidad Popular and that utopic night frozen in time in the commemorated snapshot, the public space that was once open to all citizens, in accordance with the ideals of socialism, abruptly became controlled by the regime. As a result, the city “vigila” and “impone el control” by attempting to regulate who is considered part of the national project (Atenas 129). This became rather overt under Pinochet, with the government physically removing, torturing, and killing those considered “subversive” or detrimental to the construction of nation. The *locas* inadvertently became part of this outcast group, relegated to the physical and social margins of society, no longer freely able to navigate the myriad of public spaces in the more restricted Chile of the dictatorship.

As a result, they found the need to carve out whatever space they could salvage from the forbidden territory of authoritarian Chile. Sánchez summarizes this displacement and the strategies used to overcome it as she explains:

La desaparición del espacio abierto dio lugar a la creación de otros lugares que, además de representar una alternativa de subsistencia, fueron locus de desafío contra el poder absoluto a través de actos prohibidos. La celebración travesti continuó en las esquinas oscuras, las discotecas subterráneas, los burdeles sin nombre (50).

In essence, the remaining public spaces available to the protagonists are those that have either been set aside to accommodate those in the periphery or, more frequently, spaces that have been appropriated and created despite the increasing repression from the hegemony. The underlying consequence of this ever-shrinking public sphere is a growing sense of cohesion and community among those forced to seek refuge in places that are effectively invisible to the dominant culture; in other words, in places that mimic the socio-cultural position of these protagonists and are predominantly liminal entities with undefined boundaries.

One of the most visible public locations still occupied and frequented by these protagonists is “el disco gay”, which Lemebel calls “el pecado festivo” (51). It is a place that belongs to the gay community, in which these individuals that don’t “fit” in other areas of society are at home and can be and act as they wish. It also functions as a place to connect and unite with old acquaintances or to find a potential partner, particularly for casual sex. People go to see and be seen. Lemebel succinctly summarizes the primary function of this definitive public space for the gay community: “La barra de un disco gay es el lugar de encuentros, el sitio más iluminado para reconocer a la bruja que se creía bajo tierra, como raíz de un filodendro sidoso” (52). At the bar, potential lovers can “cruzar miradas y exhibir la oferta erótica” (52). Lemebel is quick to point out the similarities between these gay discos and those catering to heterosexuals throughout the city, thus establishing a commonality between two disparate groups. He also recognizes the distinctions between the two, humorously

pointing out that “si no fuera por el ‘ay’ que encabeza y decapita cada frase, podrían verse sumados a la masa social de cualquier discotheque...” (53). This example shows that despite similar behaviors and goals, particularly when in a pick-up bar, few ever look past small details such as this verbal tic to forge any connections. As a result, the gay community continues to be marginalized and to strive to make connections within, rather than without, their social group.

One of the most profound impacts of the loss of public space was the lack of a central location to organize, protest, and engage in critical discourse, particularly that aimed against the government. With their freedom impinged, their speech severely censored, and their place in the society effectively erased, the gay community had little springboard from which to foment activism. Consequently, the few public spaces available to them, such as the disco, became even more important because “...se institucionaliza como escenario de la causa gay...Así, los templos homo-dance reúnen el ghetto con más éxito que la militancia política, imponiendo estilos de vida y una filosofía de camuflaje viril que va uniformando, a través de la moda, la diversidad de las homosexualidades locales” (53). It was the only public space in which to exchange ideas and share strategies of resistance, and more importantly, survival. Otherwise, the locas were forced to turn inward and unite in private, thus forging connections with others on a smaller and more intimate scale.

One such locale was the whorehouse, a unique space in which interior and exterior worlds collided and differences were nullified by the common currency of sex. Here, the locas intermingled with the victimizers, literally sleeping with the enemy. However, it was their turf, and as such, “...el prostíbulo...representa un espacio de trueque sexual donde aflora la vulnerabilidad del enemigo” (Sánchez 45). Here, Lemebel depicts men who consider themselves heterosexuals succumbing to the

seduction of the locas and disregarding the obvious males behind the female façades, uniting via sex with individuals they would likely avoid or scorn in public. In the whorehouse, the transvestites have the power and use it control and manipulate their clients. In that unregulated space, sex and money are more important than social and political differences.

Moving to yet a more private space, we can also delve into the apartments shared among friends and the gift from Chumilou after she died, bequeathed to “...las colas travestis. Les dejo la mansión de cincuenta habitaciones que me regaló el Sheik. Para que hagan una casa de reposo para las más viejas” (19). This gift of a private, communal space provides a way to care for one another in the most needy moments- when ill or facing death, a scenario many encounter due to the prevalence of AIDS in the community. The choice to rely on one another rather than the external sources of assistance and care during these critical times belies the distrust felt toward the dominant society and conversely, the trust bestowed upon friends and those who share common bonds. In the vignette “El ultimo beso de Loba Lamar”, Lemebel explores the intimate relationship between roommates, occurring within the privacy of a shared apartment, relatively insulated for the outside world. Loba’s final days fighting AIDS illustrate the importance of the community to the individual in need and the use of the private space of an apartment to compensate for each other’s weaknesses without the repressive or judgmental input of the members of the dominant society.

Despite Loba’s rapid decline due to the progression of AIDS, she shuns official sources of help, seeing them as simply another space designed to segregate and stigmatize rather than unify and help: “Tampoco soportaba esos centros de ayuda a los enfermos. Parecen campos de concentración para leprosos” (43). Consequently, Loba turns to her roommates and friends, who unwittingly find themselves playing the role of “...sus nanas, sus enfermeras, sus cocineras, la tropa de esclavas que

la linda mandoneaba con sus aires de Cleopatra...” (44). Because of the segregation and marginalization of this community, friends perform multiple roles in such dire situations, at times subordinating their own needs and desires to serve those in need, particularly recognizing that nowhere else would their friend or loved one receive the type of dotting and loving treatment that they could provide. The situation with Loba hyperbolically shows the extreme sacrifice that friends make for one another, feeling duty-bound to perform even the most menial tasks. In the case of Loba and those that helped her, their patience was pushed to the limit, finding themselves needing to count “hasta veinte, veinte veces para no apretarle el cogote” (44) particularly because they felt sleep deprived from spending so many consecutive nights tending to her “larga agonía” (44). This community is shown to be remarkable in their willingness to placate the dying person’s needs: in the case of Loba, venturing out in the middle of winter to find fresh peaches to satiate her cravings, withstanding her dramatic tantrums and unrealistic expectations.

In addition to tending to her physical needs, such as bathing, feeding, and alleviating her pain, the friends serve as counselors, dealing with the delusional thoughts that befell her in her final days, when Loba acted:

como si la enfermedad en su holocausto, se hubiera convertido en preñez de luto, invirtiendo muerte por vida, agonía por gestación. El SIDA para la Loba trastornada se había transformado en promesa de vida, imaginándose portadora de un bebé incubado en su ano por el semen fatal de ese amor perdido (44).

Rather than confront her on this illusion and create chaos and conflict in her final days of life, the *locas* instead dedicate themselves to the fruitless task of knitting hats and booties for the “baby” and

singing lullabies for the gestating “fetus”. They also refuse to shatter her new-found illusion of self, covering all of the mirrors in the house “para que la Loba no regresara a buscar su imagen” (45). They recognize that she has already dissociated with the dying self, and therefore, they focus all of their energies on making her comfortable and providing companionship as she quickly approaches the end of her life.

On the night of her death, they are still there, resolute, refusing to leave her side despite the obvious strain that her hospice care has put on them. They accompany her through her agony, “enjugándole el sudor, rezando Ave Marías y rosarios colas como música de fondo...Todas allí...esperando el minuto, el segundo que partiera la loca y se acabara el suplicio” (45). This reference to “todas allí” illustrates how AIDS and the premature deaths that it has wrought on this particular group of individuals has had an unexpectedly positive effect of bringing the members even closer together, solidifying their love and support for one another and helping them to construct a true sense of community, in which they think of each individual as a part of the whole. Sánchez adds that:

el efecto de solidaridad que produce la invasión de la enfermedad es reiterativo en las crónicas. Pensando en que la soledad es lo que realmente mata al infectado, los travestís establecen conexiones, se unen para batallar, para darle la mano a su compañera contagiada y sostenerla en el ‘baile’ hasta el final (54).

They provide for one another what society cannot and often, will not. They sacrifice their own selves to make sure that the days and weeks approaching death are not only bearable, but if possible, enjoyable. Despite their complaints to one another about the toll it takes on them, they never reveal to the departing member their feelings, protecting her from any and all negativity. Their loss is very real and deeply felt, regardless of the frustration they expressed toward the merciless demands of the

dying person. When Loba dies, they all protest her departure and try in vain to “bring her back” by begging her, rubbing her hands and feet and showering her with hugs. When this is obviously unsuccessful, they go back to work, for the task of preparing her body also falls on them, making them not only pseudo-nurses, nannies, doctors, priests, psychologists, but also funeral directors and morticians. Their ritual of preparation resembles that used to create the female image in life. Each aspect is of utmost importance, all with the express intent of projecting the appearance of a healthy being, despite the illness that befell her. In the end, they achieve the desired look, content that the body they have prepared is exactly how Loba would have wanted to look for her next public appearance: her funeral.

The funeral, being an event that has become increasingly frequent in the lives of these protagonists due to AIDS, represents an intimate public event that has been redefined and re-inscribed by the locals to subvert the macabre, depressing aura typically surrounding it. Despite the official discourse that tends to ignore and underreport the number of people falling victim to AIDS in an effort to cover “una realidad escamoteada y oculta” (Wilson 143), these protagonists refuse to pass from this life silently. Their most defiant moment is the funeral- one that celebrates life in an extravagant gala-like affair. Even before death occurs, the protagonists relate to one another exactly how they envision this culminating event. In the case of Chumilou, who died the same day that democracy arrived in Chile, she demanded a grand event that united all members of the community. She was quick to point out that her body should be prepared so that “ni rastros de la enfermedad” (20) remained, thus projecting an image of health, beauty and serenity despite the obvious agony she underwent. The protagonists must rely on one another to meticulously attend to each detail of beauty and presentation in the same manner that they would have done if they were alive. This perpetuation of the female image, one unmarred by illness and untouched by age, is vitally important

to the constructed identity of these individuals. The funeral is the last public space in which to project that identity and as such, is viewed not as a depressing event, but rather “los funerales de una loca contagiada por el SIDA, se han transformado en un evento social” (75).

This “event” status is particularly true in the ‘90’s when the negative stigma attached to the early manifestations of the epidemic in the ‘80s has long since passed. Appearance is paramount, not only for the deceased, but also for the attendees, who spend their time “...esperando paciente el deceso para ponerse el modelito guardado especialmente para la premier luctuosa” (75). This reference to “premier” catapults the event to a near-Hollywood-esque status, painting the dead as the star and the mourners as her loving, adoring fans. No one in the community would dream of missing such a vital chance to show off the latest fashions and thumb their noses at death in this ultimate defiant act. Everything is choreographed as if it were a true performance, knowing that it will be judged afterward by all attendees, because “ahora la muerte sidaada tiene clase y categoría...por eso el adios-AIDS es inolvidable en su fulgor momentáneo” (75).

They convert the act of mourning into a perpetuation of all of the image-constructing elements that the departed would have loved or coveted herself:

De esta forma, las locas engalanadas con el drama han hecho de su muerte su tablao flamenco, una pasarela de moda que se burla del sórdido ritual funerario. Más bien, revierten la compasión que pesa como un juicio pecaminoso sobre el SIDA homosexual, lo transforman en alegoría...amortiguan el duelo, lo colorean, lo refulgen, lo descargan de esa fetidez piadosa (76).

In the process, they re-semanticize death itself, converting it into a moment of resistance and defiance toward the imposed social codes of comportment. It also becomes a marker of community and a chance to strengthen the bonds that are already shared. They are initially connected by their marginalized status as homosexuals who have chosen to construct a female identity through transvestism, but AIDS and the rites of death are events that the majority also share, aware that with each funeral, they could very well be the “next” to be visited by death, repeating the creed: “hoy por ti, mañana por mí” (76). This intimate knowledge of death, disease and marginalization, as well as their common philosophy of celebratory, performative resistance bonds these protagonists in their struggles against social and biological repression.

Community: Local and Global

Much as there is an awareness of shared bonds between the members of the community depicted in this text, Lemebel also exhibits a consciousness of global connections between these protagonists and others around the world suffering from similar plights. Throughout this text there is an awareness of the need to insert this local community into the national and international discourse through the only aperture possible, which has been the blurry, undefined space of the border, both literal and figurative. As border dwellers, these individuals, according to critic Dino Plaza Atenas, appropriate the only “terreno que le parece posible para existir y éste es el espacio del Otro” (134). They are exceedingly aware of their differences from the mainstream society and the hegemony’s attempts to use these as justification for repressing and casting them out of the definition of nation. However, as we’ve seen throughout, they take advantage of this liminal space and marginalized status, choosing to celebrate and exalt it rather than to simply succumb to the pressures of the patriarchy. Bhabha captures this tendency, noting that “...the boundary becomes the place from

which something begins its presencing..." (4). In other words, these individuals, relegated to the boundary of a society that would like to erase their existence, instead have created their own definition of community and in a sense, have constructed their own nation within the borders of Chile, but operating according to their own ideals and standards. The epoch captured in this text represents a nation and individuals in a time of extreme transition, on social, political, cultural and epidemiological levels. According to Garabano, during this time period "el mapa de la nación cambia, las fricciones entre el centro y la periferia se rearticulan alrededor de un nuevo proyecto político en el cual el corpus de la cultura gay...ayuda a crear una subjetividad conectada a los movimientos internacionales de liberación sexual" (53).

This growing global consciousness and interconnectivity is evident in Lemebel's work, particularly as it relates to not only the status as "other" in a repressive and dominating culture, but also in reference to the AIDS epidemic that has affected people on a global scale. Rejecting much of the common cultural currency of modern-day Chile, particularly because it refuses to recognize these locas as part of the nation, they instead adopt a more transnational attitude, one that according to theorist Sophia A. McClennen, opposes a strict cultural nationalism in that it projects a cultural identity that is devoid of any "myth of origins" (54). She goes on to posit that transnationalism is often representative of the exile because s/he is someone "who has lost national ties..." (48). However, she also concurs with cultural critic Rosalba Campra that the Latin American national essence "is a cultural hybrid" (Campra in McClennen 46), one comprised of many different influences. Therefore, even those who still reside within the physical borders of a nation experience varying degrees of hybridity. What we can see in Lemebel's protagonists is a multiplication of hybridities on many different levels. They refuse to be bound by specific national constraints or any imposed markers of self. As a result, in their creation of personal and communal identity, they

continue to cross borders, forming alliances with national and international subjects, thus projecting a diverse community that is influenced by and dialogues with both the Chilean dominant culture and multiple global movements, particularly in the realm of HIV and AIDS.

AIDS is an international health and social issue, and as such, it links the locas to millions of others infected worldwide. This profusion of information and images is depicted by Lemebel both as a common theme understood by individuals from divergent backgrounds and also as a theme that “...da para instalar un super mall, donde las producciones sidáticas se venden como pan caliente” (67). The exploitation and commercialization of the topic becomes a focus of Lemebel’s wrath, filling an entire chronicle in which he laments this excessive promulgation of imagery and information, fearing that the overkill will lead people to ignore the important messages being transmitted. On the other hand, he spends time highlighting such projects devoted to the memory of those who have died from AIDS, such as the international AIDS quilt and a local project in which families of AIDS victims created tapestries as a physical memory of their family members. The parallel projects, one global and one local, illustrate the common theme of remembrance, one experienced by all affected by AIDS. On this level, there is an inter-cultural understanding produced via the negative experiences of the epidemic.

Even though they are united in actions and feelings, in the end there is recognition of the need for a local coalition to affect change in one’s own community. Lemebel appears to advocate a more local approach to AIDS education and prevention, promoting “...pequeños esfuerzos, cadenas de solidaridad y colectas chaucha a chaucha que algunos grupos de homosexuales organizan para palear el flagelo” (68). Against the backdrop of an international struggle and aided by information and experiences garnered from individuals both in Chile and across the world, these activists work to

change their particular part of the world, focusing their efforts on their own communities and thus, making small steps of progress. As a result, they become more inter-connected locally as they unite in their fight against this disease.

Although Loco afán advocates for more local activism on the part of autochthonous groups, it stops short of showing this philosophy in action, instead focusing on the process of forming a cohesive consciousness by way of intra-community cooperation and assistance. The type of community that these protagonists have not only imagined but created aligns itself more with Bhabha's theories than with Anderson's original concept of imagined communities. Perhaps Bhabha summarizes it best when he notes that:

The currency of critical comparativism, or aesthetic judgement (sic), is no longer the sovereignty of the national culture conceived as Benedict Anderson proposes as an 'imagined community' rooted in a 'homogenous empty time' of modernity and progress. The great connective narratives of capitalism and class drive the engines of social reproduction, but do not, in themselves, provide a foundational frame for those modes of cultural identification and political affect that form around issues of sexuality, race, feminism, the lifeworld of refugees or migrants, or the deathly social destiny of AIDS (5).

Lemebel's work, in my estimation, exemplifies what Bhabha theorizes: it depicts a group of individuals marginalized by issues of sexuality and AIDS and illustrates how they have utilized the liminal spaces they inhabit to inscribe themselves into the social narrative. Lemebel's protagonists have joined with one another to face a brutally tumultuous political epoch, followed by a devastating pandemic that hit this community particularly hard. Refusing to allow these individuals to be completely erased from a society that preferred to relegate them to (and beyond) the periphery, Lemebel appropriates this liminal space vis-à-vis the *crónica* to construct their own version of nation,

one defined by multiplicity of gender, time, and space and united by difference, transvestitism and AIDS. Instead of conforming to the version of nation imposed by the hegemony, these protagonists forge their own collective space out of the precise “differences” that were cause for their persecution by the dominant culture. Within that nascent community, the inter-connectivity provides the support necessary to keep on resisting the numerous repressive forces at work in the Chilean society which continue to be obstacles to countless individuals lacking the collective strength of community.

Notes

[1] I am sensitive to the plurality of terminology surrounding those who cross-dress, recognizing that some critics use “drag” or “cross-dresser” over “transvestite.” I have opted for transvestite in the general sense because Lemebel himself makes references to this term. His preferred term, however, and one that I will use throughout the majority of my study is “locas”. It also should be noted that while I recognize that in society transvestites may be hetero-, homo- or bisexual, in this work, all of the transvestites (or “locas”) are homosexuals. Therefore, I will reference the “transvestite community”, “gay community” and “locas” as inter-changeable entities in this work only because all three referents are utilized by Lemebel himself.

[2] In addition to the text to be analyzed in this chapter, Loco afán, La esquina es mi corazón and De perlas y cicatrices also employ a tendency toward the chronicle genre.

[3] I refer to “Tengo miedo torero”, which Lemebel has called either “un cuento largo” or “novela breve” about the assassination attempt on Pinochet in 1986 (Jeftanovic 78).

[4] While this biographical information comes from a variety of sources, the primary source is Andrea Jeftanovic's interview with Lemebel, which was published in 2000.

[5] It is interesting to note that in Spanish, both genre and gender are expressed by the root word "género", with "género sexual" used to demarcate sexual gender. In this sense, the first two hybridities are defying attempts at categorization, both textually and sexually.

[6] In the epigraph to the work, which I reference later in this chapter, Lemebel asserts that "La plaga nos llegó como nueva forma de colonización por el contagio."

[7] Taken from an interview in "La Epoca: Suplemento Ideas", Domingo, el 21 de septiembre, 1997.

[8] This name is a pseudonym under which a gay Chilean woman published a detailed and unapologetic study on homosexuality and AIDS in Chile. It is significant that she chose a pseudonym, illustrating her personal fear of reprisal and exemplifying the degree to which the topic of homosexuality and AIDS has been silenced in Chile.

[9] All quotes come from Loco afán: crónicas del sidario, unless otherwise mentioned.

[10] <http://www.uic.edu/sph/AITRP/Chile.htm>

[11] I use the feminine pronoun here and throughout this article to reflect not only the convention used by Lemebel in his text, but also to call attention to the fact that these protagonists do not

reference their anatomical identities, but rather refer to themselves and others based on the female identities that they have constructed.

[12] See Susan Sontag's seminal work, AIDS and its Metaphors for a detailed discussion of the metaphorical and euphemistic language utilized to discuss the epidemic.

[13] This original reference appeared in an interview that Claudia Donoso conducted with Lemebel in Paula, July 2000, p 84.

[14] The first definition comes from Harper Collins Spanish-English dictionary, while the second, less literal connotation is a reference uncovered in other Chilean texts by Ksenija Bilbija (personal correspondence, 2004).

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