

My Tender Matador: Pedro Lemebel on Playing the Part

Pedro Lemebel's *My Tender Matador* (*Tengo miedo torero*, literally "I'm Scared, Bullfighter," 2001) features an unlikely hero(ine) who plays an unsung part in a political plot designed to bring down the Chilean dictator, Augusto Pinochet, in spectacular fashion. The plot, based on an assassination attempt undertaken by left-wing guerrillas in September 1986, fails in its objective: Pinochet survives, shaken but otherwise virtually unscathed; eventually he was able to leave power more or less on his own terms, four years later, after losing a plebiscite on the continuance of military rule. The social democrats who replaced him were lauded for managing a bloodless, "pacted" transition from dictatorship to democracy, which relied on savvy public relations and use of the media that channelled widespread public disaffection by peaceful means. But Lemebel returns to the more extreme—and desperate—measures employed by some to bring down tyranny. He recovers the radicalism of the anti-Pinochet resistance, and installs new subjectivities and alliances, otherwise often invisible, at the heart of the fray. The result is in part a narrative of radicalization, and in part a love story, both of which disturb the illusion of bland consensus and enforced political amnesia that would hold sway once democracy returned. Imagining and embellishing a flutter of queer subversion at the heart of both the resistance to Pinochet and the dictator's inner circle itself, Lemebel reclaims history, turning failure into a kind of success, much as gay men and others have reclaimed the slurs and insults thrown at them, to undermine the supposed certainties of a society that tries to keep them at the margins of what is "really" going on.

1. Names, Playacting, and Embellishment

We do not know the true names of either of the two key characters in Lemebel's novel. The main character is known only as the "Queen of the Corner," though during the course of the narrative she is given other epithets, from "princess" to "*maricón*" ("faggot"). In the original Spanish, she is "*la Loca del Frente*," which translates literally as "the madwoman from the front." "*Frente*" or "front" is both an indication of spatial positioning—she is out front, in front of us—and also perhaps a hint to the fact that over the course of the narrative her story becomes wrapped up with that of the *Frente Patriótico Manuel Rodríguez*, the Manuel Rodriguez Patriotic Front, the guerrilla organisation plotting to take out Pinochet. "*Loca*," meanwhile, is a term used—originally as a slur—for either

effeminate gay men or transvestites. In Chile and elsewhere, the word has been reclaimed (as has “queer” in the English-speaking world) and is often worn as a badge of pride, not least because, with its connotation of disruption and dissidence, it retains the notion that there may be something subversive about non-normative sexualities and/or gender presentations. *Locas* tend to be marginal figures, often (as here) associated with street hustling and prostitution. Lemebel, however, has placed a *loca* firmly at the centre of his narrative. For the most part, we see the world through her eyes—and accordingly I am using feminine pronouns (she/her) to refer to her, even though others with whom she interacts sometimes use their masculine equivalents (he/him). More generally she makes us question the dichotomy of male and female. For the local children, for instance, she is “some kind of androgynous fairy-tale creature that [they] delicately addressed as they saw fit” (74). It is from this uncertain and unstable positioning that we are encouraged to identify with her point of view, and to see both the Chilean dictatorship and the anti-Pinochet opposition aslant, from the margins.

The other key character in the story is Carlos, the young revolutionary who initially asks *la loca* to store some bulky boxes in her flat, telling her that they are “books, just censored books” (4). But she knows, and we know, that there is something that Carlos is not telling her, and it turns out that one of those things is his real name: “Carlos” is but a pseudonym, a *nom de guerre* he uses as part of his activity in his revolutionary cell. One day, *la loca* finds he has left his identity card behind, but she chooses not to look at it in case it breaks the spell of her growing affection for him: “And what if his name wasn’t Carlos? What if he had lied and his name was Cornelio Sanhueza, for example. How horrible! How could she still love him if he had the name of a plumber or a blacksmith? She preferred not to know” (94). Later, she tells him she has his ID, and he asks whether she wants to know his real name, with the caveat that “I would prefer, for security’s sake, that you know me by Carlos, that’s my alias.” *La loca* says she understands: “When I performed in transvestite shows I had a nickname, a drag name, the queens call it.” He protests that “That’s totally different, darling [. . .] this is political, we use a different name so we can function clandestinely” (102, 103). But perhaps it is not so different after all: *la loca*’s adoption of a “drag name” is also political, and she is asking him to rethink his conception of what is political and what is not. Long before “Carlos” embarked upon his cloak-and-dagger conspiracies to bring down the dictatorship, the older *loca* already had

a lifetime's experience of manipulating names and identities, of risking her skin in public and private. She is hardly the *naïf* that Carlos sometimes takes her to be, though if he wants her to play dumb, for him she will take on that role, too.

Both *la loca* and Carlos, then, are playacting: playing a part, or multiple parts, for each other and for others in what is a complex game, or perhaps a dance, a seductive but risky *pas de deux*. Given this, I wonder what you think the novel has to say about truth and reality, about appearance and disguise. Who or what is the "real" Carlos, the "authentic" Queen of the Corner? And what about Pinochet (and his wife), "real" figures whom Lemebel fictionalizes, taking the liberty allowed by literary fiction to portray them as we may not have seen them before. Where is the "truth" in all this, and how much does it matter? Pause the video, and write down some ideas; add them also in the comments if you wish. While you do that, I'll have a pisco and soda, but I'll be right back.

Drinks Pairing: Pisco and Soda

For Carlos's birthday, *la loca* organises what we are told is a Cuban-style party, to which the neighbourhood children are invited for cake and candy, hot chocolate and party games. Once the kids have left, she puts on the record-player the song that gives the novel its title, "My Tender Matador" (in the original, "Tengo miedo torero"), and declares that "Now it's time for a grown-up surprise. And with one quick movement, she pulled away the napkin to reveal a bottle of pisco, a bottle of soda, and two glistening glasses" (76-77). Under the influence of the alcohol—in the form of Chile's national spirit—more revelations follow. *La loca* asks for "the gift of a secret. Something you have never told anybody else" (77). Carlos, his head feeling "like a merry-go-round of pisco-soaked cotton" (78), replies with a story of a youthful gay experience, as a kid in the countryside. Then, in a scene that probably does not pass muster in 2022 as easily as it did in 2003 when the novel was published, *la loca*, turned on "to the very tips of her false eyelashes" (80), takes advantage of the fact that Carlos has passed out through drink to undress him and give him a blowjob, leaving him "sprawled out like a Christ disjointed by the pisco's alcoholic onslaught" (84). It is not exactly *in vino veritas*, but the drink allows *la loca* to strip Carlos of some of his customary defences, in a kind of redemptive sacrifice.

My Tender Matador maintains a delicate tension between fiction and reality, fantasy and truth. It does matter, for instance, that the boxes that *la loca* is asked to look after contain (presumably) munitions, rather than books, and that the “heavy metal tube” (12) that Carlos and a friend bring by later contains (again, presumably) a rocket launcher. It matters because these are the weapons that will be employed in the attempted assassination of the dictator, and it is vital for all concerned that this truth should not be revealed. All the effort at concealment is far from “mere” playacting. And perhaps it is better not to know what hides behind it. *La loca* is tempted to unpack the tube that “looks like a submarine torpedo. [. . .] And what if it is? Doubt stayed her ringed fingers and checked her impulse. [. . .] Better for her to carry on with her decorative drama” (13). She puts the thing in a corner and uses it as the pedestal for a flowerpot. It is the “decorative drama” at which *la loca* is so skilled that is the reason, we sense, for why she has been chosen as cover for the guerrillas’ clandestine activity. Similarly, when she and Carlos head out to the countryside, to reconnoitre the isolated road leading to Pinochet’s rural retreat, where the ambush on his convoy will take place, at a police checkpoint Carlos encourages *la loca* to play up her difference: “How about you put on your hat? [. . .] I’m telling you, put it on and do your drag-queen thing” (16). The malleability of her identity enables both her and those around her to pass for what they are not.

On the other hand, and precisely because neither the novel nor its characters spend much time in revelation or rationalization (the details of the assassination plot, for instance, are never explained), we are encouraged to take surfaces or appearances seriously in their own right. *La loca* is not simply “pretending.” She invests herself (invests her self) in a performance from which she constructs a new identity, new habits and relationships, such as the kinship relations she establishes with her *loca* friends, Rana and Lupe. Visiting them, even Carlos feels at home “in this lair of *maricones*, as if in some other life he had known Rana, that huge fairy godmother dressed in pants and a black shirt who looked at him with warmth and affection” (114). It is Rana who teaches *la loca* to embroider, giving her a skill and helping to take her off the streets. Embroidery is both decoration and elaboration; to embroider is also to dramatize or exaggerate. In Spanish, moreover, the word “*bordar*” carries with it an echo of the “*bordes*” or margins that the *locas* inhabit. *La loca* makes a living from such embellishment, and her clients include the highest echelons of the military. As a small act of resistance, however, she decides not to hand

over the tablecloth she has embroidered for “Doña Catita,” on which in any case she had refused to add the Chilean coat of arms (“I just thought it would have looked a bit overdone [. . .] how can I say it? . . . tacky” [38]), a tablecloth that would have been the *pièce de résistance* at a celebration of the September 11, 1973, coup to which Pinochet himself, and his wife, have been invited. For *la loca* is not the only person to take appearances seriously.



Demonstration against Pinochet dictatorship, Santiago de Chile

2. *Power, Performance, and Impurity*

Interspersed with the story of *la Loca del Frente* and Carlos, the unlikely revolutionary and her unlikely lover, are a sequence of vignettes told from the perspective of Augusto Pinochet himself. In placing us in the position of the general, Lemebel borrows from the tradition of the Latin American dictator novel: examples include the Guatemalan Miguel Ángel Asturias’s *The President* (*El señor presidente*, 1946) and the Paraguayan Augusto Roa Bastos’s *I the Supreme* (*Yo el supremo*, 1974), as well as García Márquez’s *The Autumn of the Patriarch* (*El otoño del patriarca*, 1975). Many of these novels take real-life historical

dictators from the region and ventriloquize them, imagining sovereign power from the inside, at its most intimate and vulnerable moments. Acknowledging perhaps that writing and power have always gone hand in hand in the region, they aim to subvert dictatorial pretensions from within.

Lemebel's Pinochet is henpecked and emasculated: his wife's "irritating chatter" scarcely allows him a moment's rest; she will not stop "chirping from morning to night" (31). Foremost among her obsessions is the advice handed out by her personal "stylist," Gonzalo. She bombards the general with an endless flow of his recounted comments and recommendations: "Week after the week the same conversations filled his head. Gonzalo told me, Gonzalo says, Gonzalo thinks [. . .]. And he says that everything, absolutely everything, is a question of aesthetics and color. That people aren't really unhappy with you or your government. That the problem is the gray color of your uniforms" (21). Via his wife, in other words, Pinochet is at the receiving end of a barrage of tips and tricks from a Chilean version of "queer eye for the straight guy." And while not all of Gonzalo's observations may be on point—changing the colour scheme of the army's uniforms is not going to stop the wave of protests against the dictatorship that is engulfing the city—he, and the general's wife, are surely right to point out that the dictator, too, has an image to project and protect.

The First Lady notes, for instance, that it was hardly a good look when Pinochet and his entourage received a chilly reception even in apartheid South Africa (in fact, here Lemebel is rewriting the story of the general's abortive trip to the Philippines under Ferdinand Marcos in 1980, when, as Tobias Rupprecht reports, he ended up stranded on the tarmac of an airfield in Fiji ["The General on his Journeys" 424]): "It seemed like we were going to spend our lives flying around without anybody letting us land [. . .]. Because nobody likes you now, it's not just the Communists anymore" (34). Similarly, she nags him about the famous photograph, taken soon after the coup, in which Pinochet appears at the forefront of a phalanx of military men, sitting down, arms crossed, dark glasses covering his eyes: "Why did you wear dark glasses that day even though it was cloudy? his wife had demanded of him. Don't you see how the Communists use that picture to attack you. You look like a gangster, a Mafioso, with those ugly glasses" (125). Now, however, the general puts on his glasses so he can take a quick nap behind them, to escape his wife's constant commentary, although his dreams as he snoozes are full of

nightmarish images of his own funeral in which he is “sinking up to his knees in a sea of pitch and tar, cadavers, bones, and fleshless hands that pulled him down until he was drowning in the thick molasses” (56). The dictator, in Lemebel’s imagining, can find no rest, no security, even if he does survive the plot to kill him planned by Carlos and his friends.

Lemebel reimagines the failed assassination attempt from the inside of Pinochet’s armoured limousine as a humiliation that reveals the general’s weakness and terror: “In the back seat, the Dictator was trembling like a leaf, not daring to utter a word, paralyzed, unable to get up off the floor.” Worse—or better—still: “He was crouching in the warm paste of his own shit, which ran slowly down his leg, exuding the putrid stench of fear” (136). The novel delights in undoing, or taking us behind, Pinochet’s performance of *macho* military valour, to show us that it was all just an act. Lemebel even implies that, despite his reiterated homophobia (“As if the Communists weren’t bad enough, now homosexuals are prancing around the countryside” [35-36]), the general is not immune to the charms of a handsome young cadet: “he kept a close watch out of the corner of his eye on the cadet as he walked away down the thin finger of sand along the banks of the river, his adolescent figure bending over like a flamenco from time to time to pick a flower he chewed on in his watermelon-colored mouth” (122). Pinochet has the boy discharged almost immediately, but this attempt to purify or cleanse his immediate surroundings is doomed to fail. The shit that soils his uniform comes from within.

The novel cuts cinematically straight from the shit-stained general in his limousine to *la loca*, in a seedy “pick-up theater” (126) that likewise smells of shit, “mixed with [. . .] semen, deodorant, and male cologne” (136). The margins and the centre are not so far apart, and indeed the movie theatre is around the corner from Santiago’s central square or “Plaza de Armas,” where she can anxiously enquire “What the hell had happened while she was in the movie?” The dictator is still alive, she hears (“a miracle [. . .] he must be in league with the devil”), but the guerrillas have also escaped, “Every single one of them, mister” (137). Now it is time for everyone to scatter, and the *Loca del Frente*, potentially compromised because of her involvement in the plot, also has to move on, with time only for one last meeting with Carlos, on the beach in the resort town of Viña del Mar. We know nothing of what happens next—in actuality, some of the guerrillas involved in the 1986 attack on Pinochet were rounded up and killed, but others got away.

Carlos invites *la loca* to join him as he flees for asylum in Cuba, but instead she melts into the city (and into the snippets of popular culture, cheesy song) from which she had come, leaving nothing behind but the tablecloth, repurposed for her romantic farewell with her almost-lover, the doe-eyed revolutionary. Its embroidered finery is left to the incoming tide. She, for her part, vanishes without a trace, and we still do not know her name. But by writing a role for someone like her into the script of Chile's history, otherwise forgotten behind the screen of the democratic transition's willed amnesia, Lemebel queers the memory of the anti-Pinochet opposition, while making scatological fun of the dictator's façade of *macho* virility.

works cited

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Image:

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Resistencia_a_Pinochet_\(Alameda_en_Santiago_de_Chile\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Resistencia_a_Pinochet_(Alameda_en_Santiago_de_Chile).jpg)

Song: "Tengo miedo" (Sara Montiel)