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*My Tender Matador: Pedro
Lemebel on Playing the Part*

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*My Tender Matador: Pedro
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with Jon Beasley-Murray

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The social democrats who replaced Augusto Pinochet 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 recovers the radicalism of the anti-Pinochet resistance, and installs new subjectivities and alliances, otherwise often invisible, at the heart of the fray.

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.



NAMES, PLAYACTING, AND EMBELLISHMENT

“*Loca*” is a term used—originally as a slur—for either effeminate gay men or transvestites. The word has been reclaimed 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.

“To the twenty-odd youngsters watching her rush busily around the table, she must have looked like someone’s little old auntie. Or more likely, some kind of androgynous fairy-tale creature that the children 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.

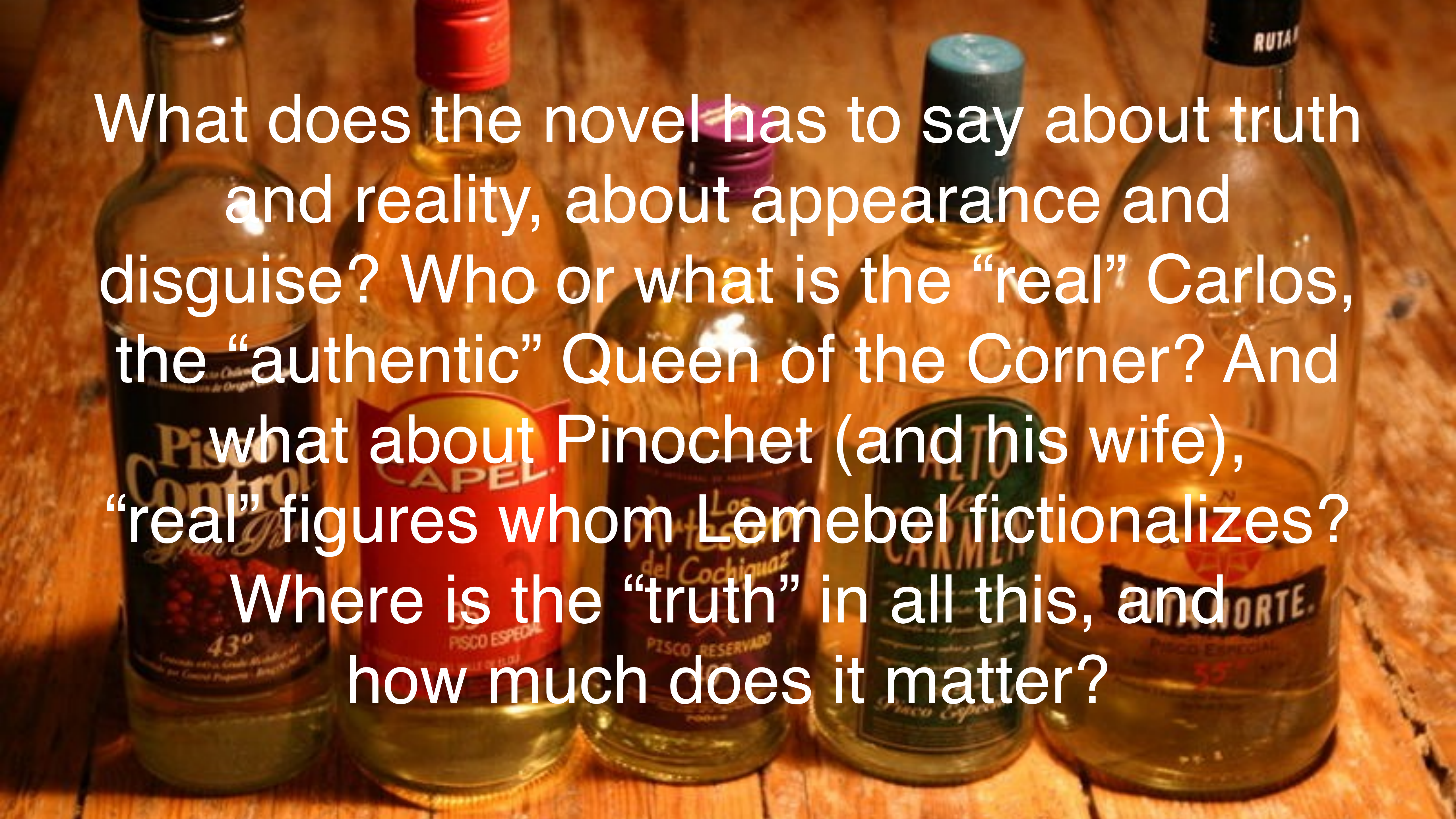
“And what if his name wasn’t Carlos? What if he had lied and his name was Cornelio Sanhuesa, for example. How horrible! How could she still love him if he had the name of a plumber or a blacksmith? She preferred not to know.” (94)

“I would prefer, for security’s sake, that you know me by Carlos, that’s my alias. [. . .] When I performed in transvestite shows I had a nickname, a drag name, the queens call it. [. . .] That’s totally different, darling [. . .] this is political, we use a different name so we can function clandestinely.” (102, 103)

La loca's adoption of a “drag name” is also political, and she is asking Carlos to rethink his conception of what is political and what is not.

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.

What does the novel have 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? Where is the “truth” in all this, and how much does it matter?

The background of the image shows five bottles of pisco liqueur on a wooden surface. From left to right, the bottles are: 1. A dark bottle with a black label that says 'Pisco Control' and '43°'. 2. A bottle with a red label that says 'CAPEL' and 'PISCO ESPECIAL'. 3. A bottle with a purple label that says 'Los Artesanos del Cochiquaz' and 'PISCO RESERVADO'. 4. A bottle with a green label that says 'ALTO del CARMEN'. 5. A bottle with a black label that says 'RUTAN' and 'PISCO MORTO'. The text is overlaid on the image in white, bold font.

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My Tender Matador maintains a delicate tension between fiction and reality, fantasy and truth.

All the effort at concealment is far from
“mere” playacting.

“It looks like a submarine torpedo, she thought, as she peeled off the tape that held on the cover. And what if it is? Doubt stayed her ringed fingers and checked her impulse. [. . .] Better for her just to carry on with her decorative drama.” (13)

It is the “decorative drama” at which *la loca* is so skilled that is the reason why she has been chosen as cover for the guerrillas’ clandestine activity.

“How about you put on your hat? [. . .]
I’m telling you, put it on and do
your drag-queen thing.” (16)

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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.

We are encouraged to take surfaces or appearances seriously in their own right.

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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.

“It was strange, but he felt good 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)

Embroidery is both decoration and elaboration; to embroider is also to dramatize or exaggerate.



**POWER,
PERFORMANCE,
AND IMPURITY**

Lemebel borrows from the tradition of
the Latin American dictator novel.

Acknowledging that writing and power have always gone hand in hand in the region, they aim to subvert dictatorial pretensions from within.

“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)

The dictator, too, has an image
to project and protect.

“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)

“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)

“He walked on and on through the softened asphalt of the city, 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 can find no rest, no security,
even if he does survive the plot to kill him.

“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. Or rather, he didn’t want to move, for he was crouching in the warm paste of his own shit, which ran slowly down his leg, exuding the putrid stench of fear.” (136)

“As if the Communists weren’t bad enough,
now homosexuals are prancing around
the countryside.” (35-36)

“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)


The shit that soils the dictator's uniform
comes from within.

The margins and the centre are
not so far apart.

“What the hell had happened while she was in the movie? [. . .] She heard people talking in low voices and was able to catch a few words [. . .]. It was a miracle [. . .] he must be in league with the devil. [. . .] The guerrillas, did they escape? [. . .] Every single one of them, mister.” (137)

La loca melts into the city (and into the snippets of popular culture, cheesy song) from which she had come.

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.



MUSIC


Fósforo,
“Cochabamba”



PRODUCTION

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