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Lorenza Böttner: Capitalist Success and (Queer) Failure in Chile's Dictatorship

As with any cultural history, the matter of creating one about Chile's dictatorship is fraught with a number of political problems; the matter of creating a *queer* cultural history of the dictatorship is a somewhat related task, and as such it is all the more difficult. Cultural histories are often linked to literary canons, of course, defined as much by whom they exclude as by whom they include. In her 2011 book *The Queer Art of Failure*, Judith Halberstam connects the writing of queer historiography, and its ensuing canonical implications, with capitalist rhetoric of success and failure: critiquing the way "we are so endlessly seduced by the idea that sexual expression is in and of itself a revolutionary act" (150), she cautions against the cliché of describing "early narratives of gay and lesbian life as 'hidden from history,'" based on ideas that render "gay and lesbian history as a repressed archive and the historian as an intrepid archaeologist digging through homophobic erasure to find the truth" (148). Those recovered are the "winners," written into history and posterity; but Halberstam is also interested in the "failures" in queer history, that is, those whose narratives are not necessarily politically convenient or "palatable." My aim here is to intervene in the queer cultural history, and the canon, of Chile's dictatorship; however, I am going to be wary not only of writing a clichéd

paper that, as Halberstam says, “locates the plucky queer as a heroic freedom fighter in a world of puritans” (150), to invert the “winners” and “losers” in historical and political narratives.

Lorenza Böttner, who was born in 1959 as a boy named Ernst to German parents in Punta Arenas, at the southernmost tip of Chile [SLIDE], will be the focus of my analysis, in this sense. As a boy, Ernst had an accident where he was electrocuted; his arms were amputated as a result. At the age of 14, in 1973, he left Chile for Germany, where he later became a painter and a cabaret-based performance artist. Here [SLIDE], we see images from an article in a children’s magazine, which Isabel Allende edited at the time, and already this rhetoric of “exemplarity” and “modeling” is used in association with Böttner: visiting Santiago on his way to Germany for rehabilitation—curiously just two months after the military coup, even though no mention is made of the political situation in the article—his “struggle” is presented as an inspirational “example” for children. Once in Germany, he studied at the School of Higher Education for Fine Arts in Kassel, and later at NYU [SLIDE]. *She*, because by this time she was occasionally dressing as a female, also spent time in the western US, before returning to Germany in the late 1980s. She participated in the film “Wall of Ashes,” a six-DVD epic made in San Francisco in the late eighties, and she also played the part of “Petra,” the mascot of the 1992 Special Olympics in Barcelona, Spain [SLIDE]. She died of AIDS in January of 1994. Lorenza is something of a mythical figure, a specter even, on the periphery of the cultural history of the dictatorship, because she spent very little time in Chile after 1973; and yet, her story has been appropriated by several writers and artists who are interested in exhibiting her more centrally, as an “example” of their counterhegemonic versions of the dictatorship’s artistic canon. In what follows, I will counterpose the way Lorenza’s story has been told by others to the way I have found that she has told her own story, in order to argue that her global mobility and visibility, as

well as the way she has been politically fashioned by others, have implications for how we read the history of the dictatorship in Chile, particularly from abroad.

Many critics and writers sought to put together canons of “dictatorship” writers and artists that “countered” the rigid, closed political situation during Chile’s right-wing military regime, but some were also critical of the canonical history of those leftist re-readings. Roberto Bolaño, for example, who spent the dictatorship in exile, wrote condescendingly about what he considered to be the closed-minded mentality of artists who used the justification of having stayed in Chile and resisting the dictatorship from within, to impose their position of supposedly greater “commitment” to Chile over those who left, and then define the national canon accordingly. Pedro Lemebel, meanwhile, who stayed in Chile during the dictatorship, was also critical of canonical constructions by this Left, but for different reasons: he felt, rightly, that it was building a coalition to fight the dictatorship that could include gays, but that it would return to its intolerant ways once it won democracy. In this sense, Lemebel’s book of chronicles *Loco afán* (a title that translates to something like *Unruly Desire*), and Bolaño’s novel *Estrella distante* (*Distant Star*), both published in 1996, have a similar mission: to create a canon of sorts to intervene in the cultural history of the dictatorship, against Pinochet first and foremost, but also against a Left that they both considered to be insufficiently inclusive. *Loco afán* contains a section that tells the stories of queer artists and writers in Chile and beyond, all men, aimed at reminding the cultural “powers that be” in Chile of the more marginal, queer subjectivities that made their voices heard during the dictatorship. Bolaño’s novel, meanwhile, poses an alternative, semi-apocryphal canon of Chilean poets and artists—also all men, curiously enough—who contributed to Chilean art while in exile abroad and who have been supposedly “forgotten” and ignored by an artistic “establishment” that remained in the country during the dictatorship.

Lorenza is included in both works, positioned by Bolaño as an artist forgotten because of her exile, and positioned by Lemebel as an artist forgotten because of her queerness. But Lorenza is a figure of somewhat ambiguous resistance to the dictatorship: aside from the ways she is presented in the two aforementioned volumes, no one else in Chile seemed to know anything about her. Was she the “plucky queer” revolutionizing Chile’s repressive dictatorial apparatus from abroad through her radical corporeal performativity, and as such, worthy of a more prominent, “exemplary” place in the canon of dictatorship art and literature? Or were her performances and art more difficult to instrumentalize for political means, and if so, did this make her any less worthy of placement within Chile’s archive of anti-dictatorship cultural history and canonical recognition? Her main medium of art, other than her painting, was the performance of everyday, routine tasks, such as dressing herself and making coffee: her life itself. Lorenza is clearly conscious of her status as a model of gender non-conformity, as well as of the power of her performances, and her life itself (often the line between the two was very blurry), to resist people’s preconceptions of gender, as seen in Michael Stalhberg’s 1991 short film *Lorenza*: [CLIP FROM STAHLBERG, stop at 6:40]. And yet her “political stance” here includes no mention of Chile—she talks about the importance of exposing facades of “bourgeois” respectability, but not in connection to any specific place other than where she is at the time, which is Germany. Her will to disrupt preconceptions is certainly the theme of her performance shown in Garvey’s film [CLIP FROM GARVEY]. Here, she wears an outlandish dress, almost a wedding dress, and parades around an area of alfresco dining frequented by businesspeople in San Francisco, and clearly rattles some of them. This scene is interspersed with shots of her writing a biographical statement of sorts with her foot, and here she does reference where she was born: the only reference to Chile that I found Lorenza herself making.

Lorenza presents herself as a model of ingeniousness, and perhaps of the disruption of predetermined notions about gender and “bourgeois” complacency in general, but placing her in Chile’s literary and artistic canon, the way Bolaño and Lemebel do, is a somewhat riskier bet.

Halberstam has quite a bit to say about challenging canons and cultural histories: she makes a case for “failure” because it can be a counterbalance to capitalistic success, which she equates with “specific forms of reproductive maturity combined with wealth accumulation” (2). However, the virtues of failure ennobled by Halberstam, such as “undoing, unbecoming, and violating” (4), “illegibility” (10), and “improbability” (21), all are luxuries that only the top 1% of the pyramid of academia can afford. The rest of us cannot write books for Duke University Press in which we advocate for adding *Dude, Where’s My Car?* to the canon, if our aim is to make a place for ourselves in academic institutions like the one that employs Halberstam. It would thus be easier to conclude that Lorenza “fails” to earn her place as a canonical member of the artistic resistance to the Pinochet dictatorship, which is not necessarily a bad thing: it can be a way to “resist mastery” (11) and remain free from the boundaries of canons in general. On the other hand, “freedom” from such institutionally bound canons can run the risk of replicating the logic of neoliberal individualism. Lorenza did defy the gender binaries and canonical strictures that existed in Chile at the time, but she does not appear to be conscious of that, and very few people in Chile know about her. Lorenza’s was a labor in the darkness that fails, but not illegibly or self-effacingly—in Garvey’s film, she still writes her name for all to see.

Bolaño’s words about the contradictory essence of Chile itself are reflective of the nature of Lorenza’s legacy: “This is where the charm, the strength, of the country lies: in the will to go under when it can fly, and in the will to fly when it is irreversibly sunk. In its taste for blood

paradoxes” (Bolaño 2004: 73). This motif of sinking and flying is an optimal way of concluding, since one of the myths of Lorenza’s life inscribed by Bolaño is an attempt to drown herself:

But it’s hard to be an artist in the third world if you are poor, have no arms, and are gay to boot. [...] Her disappointments (not to mention humiliations, put-downs, and insults) were terrible, and one day...she decided to kill herself. One particularly sad summer evening, as the sun sank into the Pacific Ocean, Lorenza jumped into the sea from a rock used exclusively for suicides (every self-respecting stretch of Chilean coastline has one). She sank like a stone [...]. Suddenly drawing courage from nowhere, she decided she was not going to die. Now or never, she thought, and began to swim back up. It seemed to take forever to reach the surface and then she could hardly manage to keep herself afloat, but she did. [...] In the current socio-political climate, she said to herself, committing suicide is absurd and redundant. Better to become an undercover poet (Bolaño 72-3).

If life was Lorenza’s main art form, nothing can be more life-affirming than this, a sinking that ends in a redemption of sorts. This probably did not happen—Lorenza left Chile just after the dictatorship started, and also, if she had jumped into the Pacific near Punta Arenas she would have frozen to death in a matter of seconds, even in the summer—and yet Stahlberg’s film of Lorenza’s life makes a similar reference to sinking and flying [CLIP STAHLBERG: stop at 18:15]. Here, Lorenza jumps into water—a pool, in this case—and like Bolaño, Stahlberg re-signifies this breathtaking jump into a sensual, life-affirming gesture with which he concludes his film. With a body in which art and life converge, Lorenza demonstrates that the binary rhetoric of inclusion and exclusion of canons and cultural histories—and the work of queer studies to politicize sexuality—is often inadequate, as are Halberstam’s terms of success and failure. Lorenza serves as a warning about the dangers of carelessly “rescuing” heroic queer subjects from the obscurity of history, which can result in silencing those subjects themselves, thus reproducing the dictatorship’s logic of censorship—the fact that Bolaño’s and Lemebel’s “alternative canons” exclude women is another aspect of this silencing gesture. By performing an

archival rescue of Lorenza from obscurity, my aim is more to bring up more questions about how we construct canons—queer, national, and otherwise—than to make any sort of definitive case for her canonical “success” or “failure.”