

*Alejandro Zambra: Landline Storyteller*

Interview by: José Simián

Alejandro Zambra (1975) showed up a few minutes late to our interview. The Oyster Bar in Grand Central Station seemed like the kind of place a character from one of his books would choose, often trying to act older than they are, as if they could fool reality by impersonating their future, more mature selves. And there we were: two Chilean writers who never crossed paths while in Chile, now ordering food and drinks in Manhattan's underbelly during the madness of a weekday lunch hour. But both his choice of place and his delay had more mundane explanations: the writer had spent the morning waiting for some official documents to be stamped at the Chilean consulate, only a few blocks away.

Inevitably, the conversation began in a mutual reminiscence of such Chilean tradition: bureaucracy. New York had brought that afternoon a nostalgia that many a times Zambra brings to his characters. Chile, the country where he was born, grew up, and eventually, where he took the literary world by assault with his debut novella *Bonsai* in 2006, is also the setting for all of his narrative work; an unlikely starting point for a crossover international success that includes critically-acclaimed translated versions of his works *The Private Lives of Trees* (2007), *Ways of Going Home* (2011), and the short-story collection *My Documents* (2013). In *My Documents*, the short story "Camilo", is an original take on the coming-of-age story, only with a slight twist: this one takes place under a dictatorship. For Zambra, his motherland is also his setting, the point of reference, and also the place to always go back to.

JOSÉ SIMIÁN There's something bleak yet incredibly moving about "Camilo." Where did it come from?

ALEJANDRO ZAMBRA I don't know how I built story the way it is. I was in Brussels thinking about that map of the Chilean exiles [from Pinochet], the map you find if you travel through Europe. It's the same as if you travelled through Chile, different social classes and forms of speaking Spanish—but you also notice that these exiles and their children keep speaking Spanish the way it was spoken before they left Chile, even with old slang. It is really strange to be in Brussels and talk to someone who is sixty years old and has kept his Chilean accent. I guess "Camilo" also has to do with a feeling of loneliness as well as this notion of exile. A feeling related to childhood, to those people who were very important at some point in your life and then, for some reason, disappeared. We didn't necessarily have landlines at that time, much less cellphones, so back then people would just show up at your doorstep and ring the bell. Kids today find that mind-boggling.

There's obviously a nice side to that, but we were also living under a dictatorship, which made our notion of safety and security different. Yet the day was open. All of that is a really curious connection to the world we grew up in, because the day was open. There was this feeling that someone could just show up.

JS That's a good point. Back then, Chile was sort of dead in many ways, specifically in terms of culture. And sometimes as a kid you would spend the whole day watching Don Francisco on TV because there was no better option. But paradoxically,

because there was nothing going on, anything could happen.

AZ I'm thinking of an image from *Ways of Going Home*, where the kid is just wandering through the gated community he lives in. It was a delimited territory, perhaps 200 small houses, but we were kids back then and we could spend hours on the street—we somehow transcended the boundaries that had been set for us. I wondered, how was that possible?

In general, I write because I get stuck in certain atmospheres that I don't know how to explain. And that's when the narration emerges.

JS “Camilo” seems like a perfect short story to me because it manages to touch upon a great number of topics in such a short amount of time: exile; this lost world in which you and I grew up, before the Internet, before cellphones; the issue of trying to find an older brother figure when you didn't have one; the issue of sexual awakening and a certain sexual ambiguity; the connection of soccer and manhood; soccer itself; having a compadre and a godfather, and also having a father figure when you've lost your own father. There's also this story of how the Chilean national soccer team was prohibited from playing international tournaments for several years after our hero goalie “Cóndor” Rojas was caught in a cheating scheme that included cutting himself in Maracaná stadium to win a match by forfeit. Somehow you manage to throw all these things out there and tie them together at the end. How does this happen to you as a writer? Do you start with a plan, or does it all work on a more subconscious level for you?

AZ I don't know if it's on a subconscious level, but I'm very open to the subconscious. It's always been an interest of mine. That's a poet's trait that still remains with me.

"Camilo" is a story that came out very naturally. I rewrote it several times, but it was always the same story—the one that had shown up the first time around. I believe in that. And, sure, there are lot of details and memories from my childhood, but it's tiresome to talk about the autobiographical elements in your prose, how much of it happened to you. But I did learn some things as I wrote it, and in that sense it's very autobiographical. I understood how I experienced certain things. And I thought of two or three people who played that role of an older brother to me, and who disappeared from my life later on. People without whom you wouldn't really be able to explain your own life, but who are not a part of it anymore. It's odd. You may even forget they were there once upon a time.

JS I also love "Camilo" because it is a short story that contains many other short stories within it, almost invisibly. One of them is the coup of 1973 and subsequent exile, which is in a way symbolized by the break-up between these two *compadres*, the father of the narrator and the father of Camilo, who were so close but end up fighting over a soccer match and never saw each other again. It's a metaphor for things that somehow got broken and can never be put back together. The different ripples caused by Pinochet's coup appear all over your writing, from *Bonsai* on.

AZ The way I see it now, *Bonsai* was a spontaneous book, a place where I would sort of play around for many years, this idea of a bonsai was a bit ridiculous to me, but it made everything else appear for me.

I wasn't really thinking that I wanted to be a writer of fiction. I was writing poetry, and belonged to that particular community. I was trying to become a regular writer in newspapers and magazines, looking for work, and also had a parallel life as a professor, which was actually a life I wanted to have. And all of a sudden, an image would appear, an image that was in some way troublesome for me. And that, in turn, would trigger a narrative desire in me. I've always written in that way, like trying to—

JS Listen to your impulses?

AZ Well, I think I had a certain dislike for storytelling. It may have had to do with my formation as a poet. I was also much more of an intellectual when I was younger—eighteen or nineteen years old—and I sort of frowned upon stories, novels. But in that distance I kept from storytelling there was a certain amount of fear.

JS You were working as a literary critic.

AZ Exactly. I would have preferred to be a critic of poetry, to be honest, but there was a certain fear there—before I became a critic. Maybe not fear, but a certain feeling of impropriety. I was afraid of not having anything to say. I

think the generation [of Chilean writers] that came before mine had many cinematographic references, and so did I, but those references were not interesting to me in artistic terms. I liked movies, but I never aspired to make a film. To me it was all about literature, and it had to do with the word.

JS Perhaps this unconventional path to storytelling explains, in part, that your first book was something as unconventional as *Bonsai*.

AZ I think that as time goes by, you build an explanation for things, but it's all mostly false. What I'm thinking right now (and it's an idea I took from psychoanalysis) is that the scorn I felt towards storytelling was a form of desire, a repressed desire that had to do with repression itself.

I mean, why was I interested in bonsais, which if you think about it is a tree that has been forced to grow in a certain way? It's sort of like those trees in the public squares I played in as a child, where new trees were tied to the stick of a broom so they would grow straight. I didn't see it like that back then. It all started with a photo of an exhibit by Christo and Jeanne-Claude titled *Wrapped Trees*. That image of a tree that was trapped struck me, which I connected with bonsais. I didn't know if I liked bonsais, really. I thought they were beautiful, but also monstrous, and immoral to a certain degree. That's why I started thinking of bonsais: because they're tortured trees; trees with wounds.

JS Narratively speaking, the idea of the bonsai as a tied-up tree brings to mind Oulipo, the French group of writers who used constrained writing techniques.

AZ Exactly—writing through a set of self-imposed limitations. Yet *Bonsai* had a foot in both worlds, because it was a very playful novel, too.

JS But you could see your other works through the prism of self-imposed constraints. Your story “Memories of a Personal Computer” is told through the relation of the protagonist with his computer—something that Georges Perec could have done perfectly. I wonder if it’s a conscious decision of setting some rules for yourself before writing.

AZ Yes, but I don’t know if I would call them “constraints.” I’m more driven by obsession than by method. Sometimes I surprise myself. When I’m working on a text, sometimes I rewrite it by changing it from the third to the first person, or by omitting one of the characters from the narration and seeing what happens. Sometimes I discover that that character wasn’t necessary. In that sense, I don’t have a very typical writing procedure.

JS Speaking of writing based on events from your own life, I remember an interview in which you talked about the novel *Camanchaca* by the Chilean writer Diego Zúñiga, and about how when reading one scene in it, where the father of the protagonist buys him some books and then proceeds to judge

them by the thickness of their covers (instead of their literary merits), you knew that he hadn't made that up—that it was something that had actually happened to him.

AZ Maybe he did make it up. There could be a “reality effect” there. What is it that you actually make up in the end? You build a feeling.

JS But perhaps that anecdote of you knowing that he hadn't made that up stuck with me because of another thing: you've written about the difference between houses with books and without books. In one of your novels, you mention a library formed by books that came for free with a weekly magazine.

AZ In my case (and I figured this out recently, during a bout of insomnia), in my home, I realized that I didn't get to literature through books, really. I think my path to literature is marked by oral stories, the ones that my grandmother would tell me about the people who died in the [Chilean] earthquake of '39, and the radio broadcasts of soccer games. And jokes, too.

I loved telling jokes when I was a kid; I would spend a lot of time working on jokes. And I remember when I discovered that adults would laugh with the jokes you'd tell even if you fumbled them, because they were celebrating the fact that you were telling a joke, not the joke itself. So I remember when I challenged myself to provoke actual laughs. And if you think about it, jokes are the first narrative structures that children learn. (After you learn the structure, you need to learn how to tell them well.) In radio broadcasts of soccer matches, my dad

always remembers the fact that I would record the broadcasts to listen to them again later. My dad thought it was the stupidest thing ever because you knew the result already, but there was—

JS Control of the dramatic tension?

AZ Well, every single resource you find in literature: metaphors, the notion of rhythm, style—a radio broadcaster has a style that is not the repetition of the same traits, but changes as the match progresses. It works just like a literary text in many ways. But I also got into literature through another way: the language of mass.

I quote this at some point in *My Documents*: every time language was a bit odd, it piqued my interest. The solemnity of the mass, the anti-solemnity of the narration of a soccer radio broadcast, and more than anything, music. When people ask why you became a writer, the answer is, basically, when you failed at other things. I would have preferred to be a soccer player or a rock musician.

*His latest book, the unclassifiable Facsímil, written in the format of the language section of the Chilean SATs that Zambra took as a high school senior in 1993, will be published later this year by Penguin as Multiple Choice.*