

BIOPOWER, BODY COMMODIFICATION, AND DEFIANCE OF NEOLIBERAL LOGIC IN *IMPUESTO A LA CARNE* BY DIAMELA ELTIT

Biopoder, mercantilización del cuerpo y desafío a la lógica neoliberal en
Impuesto a la carne de Diamela Eltit

NANCY TILLE-VICTORICA

ARMSTRONG STATE UNIVERSITY (EEUU) nancy.tille-victorica@armstrong.edu

Profesora de Literatura Latinoamericana en Armstrong State University, especializada en novelas contemporáneas del Cono Sur escritas por mujeres. Su trabajo de investigación se enfoca en representaciones literarias del cuerpo y del dolor, así como en la creación y difusión de teorías culturales, literarias y de género en Latinoamérica. Ha publicado artículos en varias revistas tales como *Ambitos Feministas*, *Argus/a*, *The Latinamericanist* y *The Coastal Review*.

RECIBIDO: 31 DE MAYO DE 2017

ACEPTADO: 21 DE OCTUBRE DE 2017

RESUMEN: Este artículo propone un análisis de la novela *Impuesto a la carne* (2010) de Diamela Eltit. Basándose en parte en conceptos de biopoder propuestos por Foucault, se demuestra cómo el marco del hospital donde el sufrimiento extremo y el abuso prolongado infligido sobre los cuerpos posiblemente indígenas de la narradora y su madre, le permite a Eltit remitir a la versión silenciada de la historia de Chile y especialmente a su reciente pasado totalitario. Eltit expone cómo el modelo neoliberal vigente es dependiente de los cuerpos humanos para funcionar, y denuncia algunos de los procesos usados por el estado-mercado para excluir, explotar y beneficiarse de lo que considera cuerpos marginados. Este artículo revela también cómo, en su escritura, Eltit recalca el poder de resistencia del cuerpo materno y su potencial para crear conexiones significativas entre seres humanos. En este sentido, la novela anuncia la emergencia de un tipo renovado de activismo que une a las comunidades marginalizadas para denunciar la naturaleza corporalizada de las injusticias sociales creadas y reforzadas por el sistema neoliberal.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Literatura, Chile, cuerpo, género, marginalidad, neoliberalismo, resistencia.

ABSTRACT: This article analyses the novel *Impuesto a la carne* (2010) by Diamela Eltit. Drawing on recent biopolitical concepts by Foucault, Tille-Victorica demonstrates how the hospital setting in Eltit's novel allows her to embody neoliberalism and account for the usually invisible bodily experiences of racialized and gendered patients/citizens, while simultaneously showing that the neoliberal model, in its quest for continuous expansion, is now colonizing the inner spaces of the corporeal body. This article also briefly shows that, through her writing of the maternal body, Eltit highlights its potential for resistance and for meaningful connections to other human beings. Her novel thus calls for the emergence of a renewed type of activism that brings together marginalized communities to denounce the embodied nature of social injustice created and reinforced through neoliberalism.

KEY WORDS: Literature, Chile, body, gender, marginality, Neoliberalism, resistance.



Published in October 2010, one month after the bicentennial celebrations of Chile's independence from Spain, Diamela Eltit's *Impuesto a la carne* invites us to reflect upon the historical circumstances that have led to the rise of Chile's current market-state democracy and especially upon those groups that have persistently been exploited or left behind in the postcolonial and in the neoliberal eras. The novel narrates the painful "recorrido (humano)" of two unnamed women, a mother and her only daughter, who have been wandering about in a hospital since their common birth some two hundred years ago (Eltit, 2010: 9). Old, sick and marginalized for their short stature and dark skin color, these two women are at the mercy of white doctors, their staff and "fans," who constantly monitor their physical health and subject them to frequent dubious medical treatments and countless phlebotomies (Eltit, 2010: 33). The mother, who is repeatedly described as an anarchist, was not only (re)born when she gave birth to her daughter, but is also living inside her daughter's body. The daughter, who is narrating their survival in the first person singular and plural, focuses especially on their memories of the physical traumas that they both endured during her birth, on their relationship, on their suffering and loneliness over the years, as well as on her plan to eventually denounce the constant abuse that they have long experienced in the hospital.

The predominant allegorical interpretation of the novel reads the hospital, its doctors and their medical procedures as the unofficial history of Chile that, from its birth as a nation until its present condition as a neoliberal state, has controlled and taken advantage of the bodies of its marginalized population as a way to avoid social unrest and feed its modernization project. The main characters bicentennial bodies are thus a personification of the past two hundred years of this unofficial history. While taking into consideration this main allegory, my reading focuses more closely on a sub-allegorical interpretation that centers on the past forty years of Chile's history in which the novel "rescues" the defeat of the dictatorship "out of oblivion" in an effort not only to mourn and come to term with Chile's recent violent past, but to expose the residues of authoritarian practices in Chile's present market-state economy.¹ Indeed, the for-profit hospital with its white male doctors and their (mis)treatment of chronically ill non-white female patients can be read as today's Chile, in which economists, entrepreneurs and politicians, empowered and inspired by the economic reforms of the recent military junta, as well as by centuries-old discriminatory practices, continue to impose neoliberal policies that mercilessly abuse and profit from the flesh (*la carne*) of its racialized, gendered, and economically underprivileged citizens.²

In *Bodies in Crisis* (2010), Barbara Sutton's analysis of women's resistance in neoliberal Argentina shows that "the neoliberal globalization model is built on a disembodied approach to the social world." Sutton draws a parallel between the disappearance of many people who, during Argentina's last dictatorship, were opposed to the military regime and its ideology, including the free-

¹ The military coup of September 11, 1973 and the violent death of democratically elected socialist president Salvador Allende Gossens had a profound effect on Eltit whose writing consistently pointed to this event as a "historic rupture and the defining moment of Chile's democracy" (Lynd 13).

² These neoliberal policies are part of and endorsed by the globalized free-market economy, which greatly contribute to their legitimacy.

market socioeconomic organization it stood for, and what the disappearance of human bodies under current neoliberal logic (Sutton, 2010: 39). While Sutton's work focuses specifically on Argentina and its severe economic crisis of 2001, her analysis rings true for Chile, whose embrace of neoliberalism came about during Pinochet's dictatorship and has now permeated every corner of society. The hospital setting in Eltit's novel therefore allows her to embody neoliberalism and account for the usually invisible bodily experiences of racialized and gendered patients/citizens, while simultaneously showing that the neoliberal model, in its quest for continuous expansion, is now colonizing the inner spaces of the body.

In this article, I demonstrate how *Impuesto a la carne* exposes the dependency of the neoliberal model on human bodies in order to function and denounces the violent processes used by the market-state to exclude, exploit, and profit from what it considers "bad" or rebellious bodies, thereby perpetuating and exacerbating a hierarchy of bodies that has promoted racial and social inequalities throughout Chile's history.³ I also briefly show that through her writing of the maternal body, Eltit highlights its potential for resistance and for meaningful connections to other human beings. Thus the novel calls for the emergence of a renewed type of activism that brings together marginalized communities in order to counter society's apathy towards inequality, denounce the embodied nature of social injustice inherited from the dictatorship period and exacerbated through neoliberalism, as well as to potentially attain the social equality that many civil organizations under Pinochet had fought for and had hoped would materialize with a return to democracy.⁴

COMMODIFYING THE MARGINALIZED BODY

As various scholars have noted, including Patricia Weiss-Fagen and Luis Cárcamo-Huechante, the recent military dictatorships in Argentina and Chile used a rhetoric of illness and contamination to justify state-sponsored violence, as well as the torture and physical disappearances of many of its citizens. Indeed, "the image of the state as a human body suffering from the infection of subversion came to permeate the public statements made by Southern Cone leaders" (Weiss-Fagen, 1992: 45). This use of medical terminology, which is reminiscent of nineteenth-century positivist speeches made by founding figures such as Domingo Faustino Sarmiento in Argentina in their quest to subdue native populations, was also an important part of the discourse and imagery used by foreign and Chilean

³ Although Chile was considered one of the least unequal countries until the late 1960s thanks to several successful welfare programs introduced between 1930 and 1970, a 2002 report by the Human Rights Documentation notes that the only significant actions to improve the situation of the Mapuches since the late 19th century were those undertaken by Salvador Allende during his brief tenure from 1970 to 1973. Since the arrival of the Spanish and under the pretext of promoting civilization and Christianity, the Mapuche people have suffered territorial conquest, military aggression and persecution resulting in the destruction of entire communities. Following the Pacification of the Araucanian at the end of the 19th century, many indigenous people were either killed or forced from their homes to live impoverished lives in small rural communities and in the cities (Mariqueo, 2002).

⁴ According to Pino-Ojeda: "Luego de haber cumplido un papel fundamental en la desestabilización de la dictadura, la actividad de la sociedad civil se vio significativamente disminuida, al punto de que por muchos años se ha hablado de apatía, sobre todo en la juventud" (Pino-Ojeda, 2011: 49).

economists in the 1970s to justify and impose their free-market economic model.⁵ Furthermore, a rhetoric of “reconciliation as healing” was adopted by Argentine and Chilean civilian leaders during both countries’ transition back to democracy. While politicians used these healing metaphors to help address the challenges caused by collective memories of state violence, they unintentionally carried on the previous totalitarian narrative of the nation as a “body subject to intervention” (Frazier, 2003: 398). In Eltit’s novel, the tall white medical doctors, their followers, and the various treatments they ascribe to in order to cure dubious illnesses remind us of the US and US-educated doctors in economics who, backed and admired by the Chilean military junta, relentlessly tried out new neoliberal policies that, in their view, would restore Chile’s economic health and bring about prosperity. The portrayal of an omnipotent medical institution in which white male physicians have complete and permanent control over their racially-marked female patients is also evocative of Foucault’s framework of biopower and findings on the Western biomedical model to unveil methods of social control that enable the state to shape and discipline docile bodies.⁶ Yet, *Impuesto a la carne* also simultaneously highlights the continued significance of direct physical violence as a way to silence racialized and gendered bodies and demonstrates how the rise of the neoliberal state has led to a new formulation of the clinical gaze that specifically seeks to violate and colonize marginalized bodies, not necessarily to improve or assimilate them, but rather to use them as the ultimate commodity and profit from them.

The narrator’s traumatic hospital birth in the early nineteenth century coincides in time not only with the birth of Chile as a nation, but also with what Foucault refers to as the birth of modern medicine. In his canonical work *The Birth of the Clinic*, first published in French in 1963, Foucault outlines the biomedical perspective and explains the history and nature of the implicit contract that existed until recently between the individual and the Western state in the provision of health care.⁷ In order to obtain and maintain its citizens’ loyalty, the state provided them with protection and care through its institutions such as hospitals and asylums. Foucault notes however that this relationship was often conflictive because, due to the state’s limited resources, decisions had to be made in regard to the availability of treatment, and patients’ needs and expectations could not always be met. Most

⁵ Between 1930 and 1970, the Chilean economy was under a government-controlled model in which several welfare programs were introduced and administered by the state. Upon his election in 1970, socialist president Salvador Allende Gossens implemented a series of new welfare policies based on the principles of equitable distribution of wealth. Following the brutal military coup of 1973, however, the conservative regime of Augusto Pinochet immediately sought to reverse Allende’s socialist policies. Under the guidance of a group of young Chilean economists trained at the University of Chicago, the regime launched a new free-market model that was heavily influenced by the writings and policy proposals of US economists, especially those of Milton Friedman, who was awarded the 1976 Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences.

⁶ “Foucault coined the term biopower to address that form of power which takes population as its object and operates primarily through the norm (biopower bridges biopolitics and anatomo-politics)” (Holmer Nadesan, 2008: 21). Foucault first used this term in his lectures at the Collège de France. It appeared in print in *La volonté du savoir* (1976), the first volume of *Histoire de la sexualité*.

⁷ Although Foucault’s work focuses on French history and on the French biomedical model, it has been widely accepted that, given the popularity and application of his work in Western academia, part of his findings can be generalized to other Western states.

importantly, Foucault's findings show that the biomedical model used in Western medicine since the early nineteenth century seeks to achieve knowledge and control of the patient's body through the clinical gaze. In today's medical context, the clinical gaze refers to "the day-to-day rational-scientific practices associated with the work of doctors in the hospital or clinic," which include modern tools and tests used to diagnose patients' illnesses. In this sense, medical institutions "exercise power not through overt coercion but through the moral authority over patients associated with being able to explain individual problems (such as an illness) and then provide solutions (i.e. treatment) for them" (Crinson, 2007). According to Foucault, the clinical gaze creates the empirical vigilance of the state and the hospital is therefore intrinsically connected with larger social and political structures that operate in society. Eltit's novel highlights these connections through the representation of Chile as a hospital.

Since Foucault's various publications and lectures on this topic, much research has been undertaken internationally in the humanities and the social sciences to show how Western biomedical models routinely objectify and dehumanize patients through a number of procedures that include the regulations of food, sleep, activity, dress, and environmental setting. These techniques of biopower whose aims are to monitor, discipline, and contain perceived dysfunctional bodies are common to institutions such as hospitals and asylums, and are done to manage diseases. Research also has shown that "biomedical models constitute a powerful means by which knowledge and ideologies, particularly about gender, race, and other measures of 'normal' bodies are produced and circulated" (Gabbert, 2009: 209). As I will show in my subsequent analysis of Eltit's novel, race and gender are crucial factors in the ways doctors not only perceive their patients, but also in the kind of care they prescribe.

While Western biomedical models are still powerful in today's globalized free-market economy, neoliberal ideologies and practices have greatly weakened the tacit "contract" that existed between the individual and the state in the provision of health care and have broadened the empirical vigilance of the state to benefit other players. One of the fundamental goals of the neoliberal project in Chile was to limit the state's responsibility for social programs. To that end, the new economic policies and practices implemented during and after the dictatorship transformed the existing national public health program into a dual health care system that consisted of public and private structures, and infused competition and individualism into a vast array of new activities, including healthcare (Solimano, 2012: 39). As Eltit's novel points out, the neoliberal system is founded and thrives on centuries-old discriminatory practices that are rooted in the body and, as such, cannot equally reward all individuals in the same ways.

Foucault, who also lectured extensively on the topic of neoliberalism at the Collège de France, explained that: "in practice, the stake in all neoliberal analyses is the replacement every time of *homo oeconomicus* as partner of exchange with a *homo oeconomicus* as entrepreneur of himself, being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of [his] earnings" (Foucault, 2010: 226). The success of the neoliberal *homo oeconomicus* is therefore based on the individual's human capital, which is made up of innate elements, including genetic make-up,

and of other elements acquired through education and adequate care. This human capital is then embodied in the ability to perform labor so as to produce economic value.

Both innate and acquired elements of human capital consequently vary greatly among individuals at any given time. Furthermore, the ability and opportunities that one has to acquire and improve on one's competencies to produce economic value depends in part on whether or not the market-state is sufficiently investing in human capital and whether these investments, which are made through economic, social, cultural, and educational policies, equally benefit all individuals. In terms of health care, for example, Foucault states that analyzing medical care and all the activities concerning the health of individuals enables society to improve on, preserve and employ human capital, and that therefore all the problems of health care and public hygiene can be reviewed as elements which may or may not improve human capital (Foucault, 2010: 230). While the neoliberal ideology appears to support policies that are oriented towards improving human capital and promotes the idea of individual economic responsibility, the experiences that the narrator and her mother undergo in Eltit's novel demonstrate that the neoliberal paradigm not only continues to discriminate against some of its subjects, but paradoxically also intentionally sacrifices some of them to economic marginalization and dependency.

Indeed, while racism and sexism have obviously existed in Chile for well over two hundred years, the current neoliberal discourse does little to account for the impact that these discriminatory practices have on a person's potential for economic success. Advocates of capitalist globalization and neoliberal development strategies, such as those implemented in Chile, are usually concerned with "market indicators, communication and technological innovations, business infrastructure, and profits" (Sutton, 2010: 38). Given that the neoliberal globalization model is built on a disembodied approach to the social world, the neoliberal discourse is therefore highly conceptual and often fails to understand how people experience capitalist globalization in and on their bodies. Yet, in practice, the globalization of the free-market economy hinges on human bodies (Sutton, 2010: 38). Therefore, while the neoliberal model might not take into account the bodily experiences of the people adversely affected by economic globalization, its policies and individualistic philosophy, "facilitate the exploitation and deterioration of some human bodies" (Sutton, 2010: 39). Indeed, as my analysis of Eltit's novel will show, the new market-state, while focused solely on measures that have economic impact, continues to discriminate on the basis of innate elements of human capital, namely racial traits and gender. Furthermore, and in terms of health care, the clinical gaze in the hospital/nation seeks to improve the human capital of some at the direct expense of others. As I now move to the dysfunctional hospital portrayed in the novel, it is important to keep in mind that it is primarily used as a metaphor for Chilean society during and after the dictatorship period, and not as a realistic representation of medical institutions in Chile.

RACIALIZED BODIES

Zillah Eisenstein notes that “racism uses the physicality of bodies to punish, to expunge and isolate certain bodies and construct them as outsiders” (Eisenstein, 1996: 21). From the moment they are born, the mother and daughter in the novel are diagnosed by white medical doctors with what they believe to be physical disabilities that impede them from living what the market-state considers, healthy productive lives. First, these doctors deem their short stature and especially their dark skin color as serious, repulsive, and potentially contagious infirmities:

Ese es un aspecto de nosotras que les molesta (a los fans y a los médicos) de manera maníaca, los altera al punto que turba sus miradas y después de examinarnos se lavan y se lavan y se lavan las manos que tienen de manera agresiva. [...] Clasificadas en sus archivos así: curiches, curiches, curiches, nombradas como curiches por esos hombres que proyectan un fluorescente halo médico, un halo empecinado que nos desdeña y nos margina de los asientos más cómodos de sus consultas. (Eltit, 2010: 33)

These physical attributes point to the probability that the narrator and her mother are of Mapuche origin and consequently part of Chile’s lowest economic stratum.⁸ The term *curiche*, originally a Mapudungun word meaning dark people, is used in Chilean Spanish today as an offensive and derogatory term to describe a person of dark or black skin color. As the narrator suggests in the previous quote and by constantly calling them “*negras curiches*” (Eltit, 2010: 33), not only do the white doctors diagnose them as being ill for physical attributes that are inherent to their identities and origin as possible Mapuche Indians, but they are treated differently because of these features. Their access to medical care is delayed and compromised by doctors who, unwilling to view them as equal human beings, only see the potential benefits that they can extract from their racialized bodies. As the narrator explains, “Tenemos que darle la sangre nuestra, la última para que la comercie sin argucia alguna. Que una de las enfermas sencillamente venda la sangre como cualquier producto y no tenga que fingir que cumple un protocolar trabajo hospitalario” (Eltit, 2010: 72).

As doctors draw ever more blood from the narrator’s and her mother’s bodies and subject them to painful procedures, the two feel increasingly sick, confused, and lonely. Furthermore, despite their resistance to the (mis)treatments they receive, they have become dependent on doctors and medicine for survival and at times even have adopted the medical lingo and negative vision of themselves that the medical community has been using to identify them: “somos cuerpos hechos para la medicina” (Eltit, 2010: 52). It is therefore also possible to view these racialized bodies as the

⁸ “The Mapuche people were the first inhabitants of half of the area today known as Chile and Argentina. Before the Spanish arrived in 1541, the Mapuche occupied a vast territory in the Southern Cone of the continent and the population numbered about two million. At present they number approximately 1.5 million in Chile, and two hundred thousand in Argentina. The Mapuche nation now constitutes the third largest indigenous society in South America” (http://www.mapuche-nation.org/english/html/m_nation/main/history.htm). The Mapuche language is called Mapudungun.

ancestral land of the Mapuche people who over the past two hundred years, but especially in the last four decades, has been expropriated and exploited by the Chilean government.⁹

As Eltit's novel illustrates, today's modern Western biomedical system is what Anthony Giddens calls an "expert system," which "heavily depends on specialized and expert knowledge of disease, meticulous and disciplined scientific reasoning, and the discovery and application of technology" (Giddens qtd. in Gabbert, 2009: 211). In this model, which in many ways is in direct opposition to the Mapuches' traditional vision of health, "disease is defined as deviancy from an idealized model of health and is explained by focusing on physiological processes and biochemical mechanisms" (Gabbert, 2009: 211). Yet as the novel shows, notions of "an idealized model of health" or of "disease" are extremely problematic, as they are increasingly dictated by economic factors and shape societal norms. Furthermore, for some this idealized model is simply unattainable. In the novel's hospital/nation, no adequate medical treatment will "cure" the mother's and her daughter's bodies "diseased" by old age, low class status, and Mapuche origin. The numerous doctors, nurses, and followers are trained to observe their patients as dismembered bodies and to assign economic potential to specific body parts or organs, rather than to understand or potentially help them. As the narrator explains: "entendí con una claridad iluminada que ese médico iba a poner precio a mis órganos" (Eltit, 2010: 102). And, as she wonders which of her organs is most profitable for the doctors: "mis retinas," "mis poderosos pulmones," she knows that her reproductive organs have no commercial value as no one would wish to replicate her, if not even partially: "los ovarios valen una miseria" (Eltit, 2010: 102).

While the exploitation and appropriation of these women's body parts parallels what recently occurred to the Mapuche ancestral land, these methods also refer to the booming red market, a global and multi-billion dollar industry that illegally trades blood, bones and organs by exploiting desperate donors in dire situations. Indeed as Dianna Niebylski eloquently remarks:

Viewing organ trafficking from the viewpoint of those too ill, too poor, or too old to have any say about the fate of their organs while alive or dead, Eltit's novel shows no ambivalence on this account. In the novel's hospital the medical personnel intent on bribing the neediest, ailing, and aging bodies to give up the few remaining healthy organs they possess appear as nothing if not criminal. (Niebylski, 2011: 114)

It is undeniable that Eltit's fiction sadly illustrates real-life practices that have become common around the globe. According to Nancy Scheper-Hughes: "The sale of human organs and tissues has resulted in certain disadvantaged individuals, populations, and even nations being reduced to the role of 'suppliers.' It is a scenario in which bodies are broken, transported, processed, and sold in the

⁹ A 2002 report by the Human Rights Documentation Center (HRDC) notes that since the late nineteenth century the only significant actions to improve the situation of the Mapuches were those undertaken by Salvador Allende. During his brief tenure, Allende "sought the restitution of ancestral lands and the recognition of the Mapuche's autonomy" (HRDC, 2002). Yet, these efforts were undone by Pinochet, who in 1979 enacted a decree "which broke up communal reducciones [reserves - comunas] into private plots and gave wealthy Chilean farmers title to the land. According to one government official, 'over a 10-year period [the government] took away 5,300 cooperative farms [and acquired] 400,000 hectares (988,000 acres) ... by pure fraud'" (HRDC, 2002).

interests of a more socially-advantaged population of organs and tissues receivers” (Scheper-Hughes, 2002: 64). Scheper-Hughes, who goes as far as calling this practice “neocannibalism,” exemplifies her findings with specific occurrences in Brazil and Argentina, including the horrific account of how the Montes de Oca state mental asylum near Lujan in the province of Buenos Aires stole blood, tissue, and organs from the bodies of mentally ill, but otherwise physically healthy patients throughout the 1990s. A night nurse and ward supervisor explained: “hospital staff members commonly take blood from living inmates and remove cornea from the deceased, almost always without consent.” She further justified these practices as “‘payback’ for the inmates’ care at the state’s expense” (Scheper-Hughes, 2002: 71). In her view, the mentally ill are taking advantage of the system and deserve repressive interventions, in the same way that the medical personnel in Eltit’s novel view the racially and class-marked bodies of the mother and daughter who have lived in the hospital their whole life. Echoing the nurse’s statement above, as well as the title of the novel (*Impuesto a la carne*), the narrator explains the looting of her own body as a financial transaction: “Ofrecer como pago o deuda o soborno el máximo de sangre que nos queda y corresponder así al prolongado saqueo de nuestros órganos” (Eltit, 2010: 72). The bodies of these invisible subjects must therefore be commodified to get a financial return for the “care” that was provided and to improve the human capital of “responsibilized” subjects elsewhere who have the means and power to make such investments.

GENDERED BODIES

As with racial issues, Eltit’s novel connects past and present mechanisms of discrimination and violence to show how today’s free-market Chilean society continues to purposefully ignore women’s voices and experiences. Indeed, the language of intense physical suffering used throughout the novel also appears to connect the corporeal pain that tortured bodies went through during the dictatorship to the suffering that certain neoliberal practices cause to the female body and to a woman’s subjectivity.

First, the narrator makes it clear that the male doctors are in charge of the hospital, its management, staff, and patients. While this reflects the patriarchal nature of Chilean society since its inception, it is also representative of today’s globalized economy which profits from various forms of gender inequalities. As Eltit explains in her 2008 essay “Contante y sonante”:

la economía mundial y globalizada que rige la actualidad está sustentada en la explotación virtual de un cuerpo multitudinario (las mujeres somos numéricamente más que los hombres) y más allá de las desigualdades internas (la obrera vs la ejecutiva) experimentamos una misma irregularidad. Estas desigualdades salariales son ultra lucrativas para sostener los sistemas mundiales. (Eltit, 2008: 390)

Yet, the omnipotent power that the doctors enjoy in the novel’s hospital/nation, especially the first one who treats the main protagonists, goes beyond the representation of gender inequalities and is especially reminiscent of Pinochet’s absolute rule: “(él [el médico primero] tenía el poder o la gracia de permitir la vida y decidir la muerte)” (25). Similarly, the nurses’ and fans’ role, while

representative of the way many Chilean women over the years contributed and continue to participate in their own subjugation, is also suggestive of the military personnel, prison guards, and various supporters of the regime, who, during the dictatorship, especially mistreated fellow Chilean citizens who would not conform to dictatorial expectations.

Labeled as anarchists, the mother and daughter do not benefit from any favoritism and are in fact subjected to severe and repeated gendered violence. The narrator recounts the traumatic experience that her mother went through for what could be seen as a possible rape, a failed abortion procedure, or the birth of her daughter:

Con una precisión documentalista, mi madre me contó que el médico, el primero que se apoderó de nuestros organismos, la miró despectivo o no la miró, sino que se abocó a la estructura de sus genitales y al conjunto tenso de los órganos. Lo hizo con una expresión profesionalmente opaca, distanciada. Y luego se abalanzó artero para ensañarse con ella de un modo tan salvaje que en vez de examinarla la desgarró hasta que le causó daño irreparable. Mi pobre mamá se sentía morir molecularmente y ese médico provisto de todo su poderoso instrumental le arruinó el peregrinaje ambiguo del presente y toda la esperanza que había depositado en su futuro.

Por culpa del médico quedamos solas en el mundo mi mamá y yo. (Eltit, 2010: 13)

Gendered violence during the early regime of Augusto Pinochet included rape and forced abortions, and many detained women also gave birth under horrific conditions without ever being able to see and care for their babies. Moreover, some of these procedures, as well as others used against male and female detainees, were done at the hand of medical doctors who used their professional training to torture and carry out their government's repressive policies. The co-optation of the medical profession is one of the dark secret that enabled the long standing and ruthless military regime to be so effective (Horton, 2009). Furthermore, from 1973 to 1981, the leadership of the Chilean Medical Association was appointed by the military junta and consequently remained silent about the extensive involvement of military physicians in torture (Achtenberg, 2011).

Although possibly the most traumatic event in the novel, the narrator's account of her mother's birthing experience is only one among many moments in which pain and suffering are described in bloody and organic terms. Throughout her narration, the narrator relies on images of gruesome and dehumanizing physical pain to denounce the exploitation of their and other female bodies: "Mujeres enfermas que mugeen sus dolores, asombradas por sus trágicas amputaciones, esperando, esperando, esperando, esperando que se curse el milagro de la cicatrización" (Eltit, 2010: 153). It is clear however that these physical wounds cannot heal, just as the emotional wounds inflicted during the military regime still pain many of its survivors. As many of the women die, mother and daughter desperately seek to tell their story: "tenemos la misión que acompaña a los sobrevivientes [...] debemos dar cuenta de la historia y detenernos en cada uno de los episodios turbios o en aquellos que portan una metafísica falsificada" (Eltit, 2010: 33). Yet, echoing the fate of women's writing over the ages and that of survivors' testimonies in the post dictatorship era, the narrator's desperate efforts to chronicle their experiences and find justice appear to remain in vain: "Nunca va a circular ni un

pedacito de palabra. La nación o la patria o el país van a aplastar la revuelta de la sílaba” (Eltit, 2010: 31). This silencing is also especially symptomatic of the market-state, which, in its constant quest for profit, demands that the past be forgotten. As Idelber Avelar explains in a related context, the neoliberal economy consigns memory to oblivion and imposes forgetting not only to erase the reminiscence of its violent origins under dictatorship, but also because living in a perpetual present, in which new commodities constantly replace previous ones, is an inherent characteristic of the market (Avelar, 1999: 4). As the doctors and nurses silence their female patients by slowly killing them through the removal and sale of their body parts and fluids, the novel shows that the tortured bodies of the mother and daughter represent a violent past that must not only be forgotten, but should also profit the present market-state. Furthermore, through the hyperbolic representation of the nation as a dysfunctional hospital, this work of fiction suggests that despite a return to a peaceful democratic rule in 1990 and the ascendance of some women into prominent political positions, including the presidency in 2006, neoliberal policies implemented during the brutal years of the dictatorship have led to a milder and more covert type of gendered violence.

Sutton explains that following the Dirty War, the newly democratic Argentine state together with strong economic interests played an active role in institutionalizing a different kind of violence, which also affected the female body: “economic violence.” In her view, this kind of violence came from the drastic structural adjustment promoted by the advocates of neoliberal globalization and their economic policies that “undermined the quality of life and survival possibilities of a large sector of the population.” These measures especially affected female corporeality and increased the work burden of poor women (Sutton, 2010: 8). While Sutton’s research focuses on the Argentine socioeconomic context, I believe that many of her findings on the bodily implications of the neoliberal economic restructuring are true for poor Chilean women too.

Indeed, Eltit’s novel tackles through fiction two current issues that affect poor Chilean women in the neoliberal economy and that have also been the focus of recent scholarly research: the quality of obstetric care and the importance that the globalized market-society places on women’s physical appearance. For both categories, the privatization of health care led to the popularization of medical and surgical procedures that are profitable for the medical community, yet not always necessary for the patients. Furthermore, these procedures are directly related to the social regulation of women’s bodies. For instance, the birthing experience in the novel is revealing of the traditional Western biomedical view of childbirth as a potentially dangerous event that requires medical intervention and must occur in a hospital setting at the hand of trained doctors whose practices should not be questioned. As the narrator explains, the male doctor not only ignores his patient’s suffering but adds to it by mistreating her: “El médico le realizó una terrible intervención mientras le ordenaba: No grite, no grite, cálese ahora mismo. Y mi mamá, medio muerta por la hemorragia, se entregó a su desangramiento” (Eltit, 2010: 13). Although Western doctors have resorted to medical and surgical assistance during childbirth for decades and have certainly saved countless lives over the years because of it, recent advances in technologies and the advancement of women as medical doctors have not drastically improved this practice in terms of allowing women to take charge of their own

deliveries and in viewing pregnancy and childbirth as a healthy and positive bodily experience. In her 2012 study on the experience of childbirth in Santiago, Susan Murray reports that while some women are now able to choose where to give birth (public or private hospital), they cannot choose the type of birth (irrigardless of their class, social status, or education level) and that during the birth process, the medical community treats them simply as patients subjected to medical decisions (Murray, 2012: 335). Furthermore, it has been widely reported that since the launch of the private health insurance fund in early 1981, Chile saw a dramatic increase in the practice of caesarean sections. It now has “one of the highest rates of cesarean births in the world (40%), with a strong difference between public hospitals (28%) and private clinics (60% or even 80%)” (Murray, 2012: 321). The novel’s description of a traumatic and bloody childbirth could therefore also be viewed as a satirical portrayal of a medical system that, due to its excessive reliance on practicing caesarean sections on rich women, has become inept at assisting poor women with natural childbirth.¹⁰

The various ways in which the hospital/nation in Eltit’s novel excludes and profits from its patient/citizens’ bodies based on their race, gender, and class therefore show how neoliberal and globalization economic processes perpetuate and are dependent upon a hierarchy of bodies that has existed in Chile and globally for centuries. Moreover, by linking the corporal violence and suffering experienced by perceived dissidents during the recent dictatorship to the physical depletion and commodification of those unable to conform to today’s free-market expectations, the novel not only denounces the dictatorial origins of current neoliberal policies in Chile, but also points to the vulnerability of citizens under both authoritarian dictatorship and free-market democracy. While democracy has brought freedom and an end to the horrifying practices used during the dictatorship, through its exaggerated vision of the nation as a dysfunctional hospital, *Impuesto a la carne* not only suggests that both political structures resort to effective techniques and a rhetoric of biopower in order to achieve the subjugation and control of marginalized bodies, but it also hints at the fact that, while clearly being the preferred repressive method during the dictatorship, direct physical violence, albeit in a much subdued and different form, still happens under neoliberal democratic rule.

In this sense, the novel presents a hospital/nation that is in a permanent state of exception in which the law of the land (the constitution) and the neoliberal policies both created under Pinochet’s totalitarian regime have become a prolonged state of being.¹¹ This extended state of exception operates in the text’s for-profit hospital/nation to deprive some individuals of their organs,

¹⁰ According to a 2000 study, the rate of women with private health insurance was double that in women covered by the national health insurance fund. It also noted, that women’s choice was unlikely to be the primary explanation for this high rate but rather caused by “the requirement by private health insurers that an obstetrician, rather than a midwife, should be the primary care provider; women’s expectations of personalised private care relationships; and the peripatetic work schedules of many obstetricians” (Murray, 2000: 1504). These factors which empower medical doctors and reward for profit-hospitals and private health insurances show how the free-market society relies on the Western biomedical model that Foucault described and that I summarized earlier in order not just to control women’s bodies, but also to profit from them.

¹¹ In 1980, a non-democratic plebiscite approved a new constitution that granted Pinochet complete executive power until 1990. Although various amendments have been made to it over the years, this 1980 constitution, which provided a legal framework for the military regime, is still in effect as of 2017.

citizenship, and human rights. Furthermore, by representing time in which past, present and future coincide into a “perpetual present” of violence, abuses, and suffering reminiscent of what occurred during Pinochet’s regime, Eltit’s novel also shows that the various historical crises and events that Chile went through since its inception culminated with the Pinochet dictatorship and today’s sustained state of exception.¹²

MATERNAL/FEMALE BODIES AS SITES OF RESISTANCE

While Eltit’s narrative demonstrates how the racialized female body is subjected to material and rhetorical abuse under dictatorship, as well as within democracy, it also highlights the fact that it is more than a site of oppression. Indeed, by focusing on subjugated and mutilated bodies, the novel also shows that resistance is grounded in the body itself. Despite centuries of abuses, mother and daughter are still alive and it is the daughter’s emphasis on their physical pain that brings to light the body’s potential to adapt and resist economic, political, cultural, and medical violence and discourses that cast it as a mere commodity. Furthermore, it is through the body and the narration of their physical experience that the daughter, following her mother’s anarchistic tradition, is able to tell their story and verbalize her intention to write it someday: “Voy a escribir pausadamente los hechos que conocemos para dejar por escrito su importancia y su existencia. Voy a escribir con la voz de mi madre clavada en mis riñones o prendida en mi pulmón más competente. Voy a escribir la memoria del desvalor” (Eltit, 2010: 155). Mother’s and daughter’s embodied memory of the past two hundred years of oppressive and discriminatory practices against racialized, gendered, and lower-class groups serves therefore as counter-memory and counter-discourse to the official (hi)story of Chile that was put forward by political and economic forces over the years, specifically in regards to the past forty years and especially during the bicentennial celebrations of 2010.

The fact that the mother lives within her daughter’s body also denotes a powerful familial relationship that grants them both a maternal corporeality. It is precisely their close mother-daughter bond and maternal body that make them a “micro-comunidad” able to survive and resist long-standing patriarchal oppression at the hand of the state (Richard, 2012: 381). The novel’s familial representation also defies the traditional notion of the family. Mary Green explains that during the dictatorship, the institutions of family and motherhood were of significant symbolic importance and that the military regime actively glorified woman as wife and mother in order to uphold the traditional nuclear family structure (Green, 2007: 4). Richard further notes that these traditional social values did not change during the Transition period in which influential Catholic beliefs led to “una fuerza política normativizadora que censura sexualidades, cuerpos e identidades” (Richard, 1998: 204). As an emphasis on the importance of the family remained a strong political argument in the

¹² This concept is loosely based on Giorgio Agamben’s 2003 book *State of Exception*. In an interview with Ulrich Raulff, Agamben explains: “the state of exception or state of emergency has become a paradigm of government today. Originally understood as something extraordinary, an exception, which should have validity only for a limited period of time, but a historical transformation has made it the normal form of governance.” Agamben uses the Nazi camps and the detention camp at Guantanamo Bay Naval Base as examples of states of exception (Raulff, 2004: 609).

postdictatorship period, Kemy Oyarzún also points to the paradoxical view of promoting the perpetuation of outdated gender roles while simultaneously praising the social progress that neoliberal values supposedly encompass (Oyarzún qtd. in Green, 2007: 7). While the concept of nationhood (“la patria”) in the novel is that of patriarchy, as has been the case throughout history and especially during the dictatorship period, the mother-daughter family unit does not include a paternal figure and as such challenges the predominant Chilean nationalist discourse that still views the nuclear family as a married heterosexual couple and its children.

Furthermore, the maternal role portrayed in the novel is nontraditional, since it is the daughter who is carrying the mother inside of her and not the other way around. The daughter’s body thus hosts within it past, present, and future. It is her body that enables her mother to live in the present and continue to survive. Yet, the daughter is also dependent upon her mother’s past experience to survive the present. At the same time, the mother’s menacing and discouraging comments to her daughter in regards to her plan to write their story and seek justice symbolize a long-standing lack of confidence in women’s ability to subvert the system and an unconscious passivity and complicity on their part in maintaining and propagating patriarchal and authoritarian values over the years: “Tendrás que ser tonta o retardada, me dice mi mamá, para profanar la burbuja histórica de la nación, del país o de la patria médica, así que te repito, cállate la boca y déjalos en paz, que hagan lo que quieran, lo que se le antoje” (Eltit, 2010: 35). Yet the daughter’s narration in the present tense and her firm intentions to eventually testify to their ordeal in writing open up a space for woman’s self-expression and retaliation that expands her maternal role beyond traditional responsibilities.

The maternal body shared by mother and daughter in the novel is also a symbol of deep connection between human beings, a connection that rarely exists in today’s individualistic neoliberal society. Indeed, it is possible to interpret the shared body in the novel as a model of subjective relations based on Julia Kristeva’s analysis of the maternal body with its two-in-one or other within. As Kristeva explains, “It is in motherhood that the link to the other can become love” (Kristeva, 1980: 9). Yet, motherhood, or “the maternal function” as Kristeva also calls it, should not be viewed as limited to mother or woman. As the French philosopher suggests in “Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini,” anyone can fulfill this function, men or women. This is also reminiscent of Sara Ruddick’s definition of mothering as a practice and collective human activity separate from the identity of the mother. For her, to engage in maternal practice is to be committed to the three demands of the maternal work of preservative love, nurturance and training (Ruddick, 1989: 19). While the novel does not idealize the mother-daughter relationship or even the maternal function, the possibility for connection, love, and survival that the reciprocal mother/daughter’s corporeality offers represents a hopeful sign of a more just and inclusive society in which people would actively care for and about each other.

In her presentation of Eltit’s novel, Nelly Richard also alludes to the nurturing opportunities of the mother-daughter bond:

Frente a la gran escala del capitalismo planetario, la pequeña escala de esta micro-comunidad de la sangre y de los órganos responde a la máquina deseante de un *estar-en-conjunto* que se vuelve abarcador y multiplicativo. Un estar-en-conjunto que se apoya en las figuras asociativas de la mutua y del mutualismo, para favorecer la reciprocidad de la ayuda entre desprotegidos. (Richard, 2012: 381)

According to Judith Butler, “seeing ourselves as socially vulnerable is integral to beginning to share loss and grief as communities” and “feeling shared intercorporeality through vulnerability is critical to this challenge” (Butler qtd. in Palmer, 2008: 19). The togetherness that Richard alludes to and the recognition of our “corporeal vulnerability” as represented in the novel point thus to fundamental elements for the development of new ethical relations and practices that might potentially transcend violence.

Therefore, despite a pessimistic ending in which the narrator predicts that their dead body will serve as fertilizer in a distant Chinese cemetery, it is through their communal maternal body that mother and daughter offer a glimpse of hope for the advent of a new ethical and social movement, a “mutual del cuerpo y de la sangre,” that might protect marginalized bodies from and stand against the abuses of the neoliberal paradigm: “en la patria de mi cuerpo o en la nación de mi cuerpo o en el territorio de mi cuerpo, mi madre por fin estableció su comuna. Se instaló una comuna en mí rodeada de órganos que se levantan para protestar por el estado de su historia. [...] pronto iniciaremos la huelga de nuestros líquidos y el paro social de nuestras materias” (Eltit, 2010: 183-84). While allusions to “comuna,” “mutual,” and “huelga” might be perceived as nostalgia for a type of predictorship socialism, the novel never idealizes any period of Chilean’s history and, although the current neoliberal order was first implemented during the Pinochet regime and has since permeated every corner of Chilean society, the novel’s two-hundred-year-old characters make it clear that neoliberalism is the culmination of a capitalist order that started during colonial times.

The organic union that the narrator alludes to therefore is about making a direct use of our corporeality and practicing mothering to challenge existing power structures and become what Sutton calls an “activist body” (Sutton, 2010: 205). As Richard notes about the novel’s main characters: “Ambas quieren reapropiarse del cuerpo de la nación, re-nacionalizar el cuerpo de la patria, y también, hacer del cuerpo propio, el de la revolución de los órganos, una zona de resistencia tenaz al capitalismo intensivo” (Richard, 2012: 379). In her book, Sutton explains that activists in Argentina use the phrase “poner el cuerpo” to express that bodies are relevant to political contestation and that “activist engagement itself entails embodied actions and dispositions that may contribute to changing how the body, and life in general, is experienced by activists” (Sutton, 2010: 205). Eltit, who has stated in an interview that women led the majority of organizations that defied the dictatorship and that the votes of women brought about the electoral majority against Pinochet in the plebiscite, clearly believes in the changing power of activism (Green, 2005: 167). Yet, she also notes that these women were excluded from the new political pact when the transition to democracy began and that there has been a dissolution of the militancy of women’s activism since 1990 (Green, 2005: 167). The narrator’s hope for a “comuna del cuerpo” that could “poner en marcha la primera sede anarquista para contener la sangre del país o de la nación” therefore brings into focus the urgent need

for a renewed type of activism in which marginalized bodies unite and resist together as the only possible and significant action to denounce the embodied nature of social injustice created and reinforced through neoliberalism, to challenge long-lasting state and economic violence, and to start a process of decolonization that might finally bring about social equality and justice.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ACHTENBERG, Ben. "Disciplining Physicians for Complicity in Torture: The Historical Record is not Encouraging". *Physicians and Torture* (2011).
- AGAMBEN, Giorgio (2005). *State of Exception*. Kevin Attell (trad.). Chicago: U of Chicago P.
- AVELAR, Idelber (1999). *The Untimely Present: Postdictatorial Latin American Fiction and the Task of Mourning*. Durham: Duke UP.
- CÁRCAMO-HUECHANTE, Luis E (2007). *Tramas del mercado: Imagen económica, cultura pública y literatura en el Chile del fines de siglo veinte*. Santiago: Editorial Cuarto Propio.
- CRINSON, Lain. "Sociological Conceptualization of Medical Knowledge and Power". *Health Knowledge* (2007).
- EISENSTEIN, Zillah (1996). "Writing Hatred on the Body". *Hatreds: Racialized and Sexualized Conflicts in the 21st Century*. New York: Routledge.
- ELTIT, Diamela (2008). "Contante y sonante." Sonia Montecino Aguirre (eda.) *Mujeres chilenas: Fragmentos de una historia*. Santiago: Editorial Catalonia: 389-393.
- ELTIT, Diamela (2010). *Impuesto a la carne*. Santiago: Editorial Planeta Chilena.
- FOUCAULT, Michel (1976). *Histoire de la sexualité I: La volonté de savoir*. Paris: Gallimard.
- FOUCAULT, Michel (2010). *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France*. Burchell, Graham (trad.). François Ewald, Alessandro Fontana y Michel Senellart (eds). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- FOUCAULT, Michel (1994). *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archeology of Medical Perception*. A.M. Sheridan Smith (trad.) New York: Vintage Books.
- FRAZIER, Lessie Jo (2003). "Medicalizing Human Rights and Domesticating Violence in Postdictatorship Market-States". Arturo J. Almada (ed.) *Violence and the Body: Race, Gender, and the State*. Bloomington: Indiana UP: 388-403.
- GABBERT, Lisa and Antonio Salud II (2009). "On Slanderous Words and Bodies out-of-Control: Hospital Humor and the Medical Carnavalesque". Elizabeth Klaver (eda.) *The Body in Medical Culture*. New York: State U of New York P.
- GIDDENS, Anthony (1990). *The Consequences of Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford UP.
- GREEN, Mary. "Dialogue with Chilean Novelist Diamela Eltit". *Feminist Review* (2005): 164-71.
- GREEN, Mary (2007). *Diamela Eltit: Reading the Mother*. Rochester: Boydell & Brewer.
- HOLMER NADESAN, Mejia (2008). *Governmentality, Biopower, and Everyday Life*. Hoboken: Taylor & Francis.
- HORTON, Scott. "A Medical Murder in Pinochet's Chile". *The Stream. Harper's Magazine* (2009).
- HUMAN RIGHTS DOCUMENTATION CENTER. "Pinochet's Legacy Still Haunts Mapuche." *Human Rights Feature Quarterly* (2002): n.pag.

- KRISTEVA, Julia (1980). "Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini." Jardine, Alice y Gora, Thomas y Roudiez, Leon S. (trad.) Leon S Roudiez (ed.) *Desire in Language*. New York: Columbia UP: 237-70.
- LYND, Juliet. "Writing from the Margins of the Chilean Miracle: Diamela Eltit and the Aesthetics and Politics of the Transition." *Post-Authoritarian Cultures*. Luis Martin-Estudillo and Roberto Ampuero (eds). Nashville: Vanderbilt UP, 2008. 12-33.
- MARIQUEO, Reynaldo. "The Mapuche Nation". *Mapuche International Link* (2002).
- MURRAY, Susan. "Childbirth in Santiago de Chile: Stratification, Intervention, and Child Centeredness". *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 26 (2012): 319-337.
- MURRAY, Susan. "Relation Between Private Health Insurance and High Rates of Caesarean Sections in Chile: Qualitative and Quantitative Study". *BMJ [British Medical Journal]* 321 (2000): 1501-505.
- NIEBYLSKI, Dianna. "Blood Tax: Violence and the Vampirized Body in *Impuesto a la carne*". *Arizona Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies* 15 (2011): 107-21.
- PALMER, Victoria. "[Un]feeling: Embodied Violence and Dismemberment in the Development of Ethical Relations". *Review Journal of Political Philosophy* 6.2 (2008): 17-33.
- PINO-OJEDA, Walescka (2011). *Noche y niebla: Neoliberalismo, memoria y trauma en el Chile postautoritario*. Santiago: Editorial Cuarto Propio.
- RAULFF, Ulrich. "An Interview with Giorgio Agamben – Life, A Work of Art without an Author: The State of Exception, The Administration of Disorder and Private Life". *German Law Journal* 5.5 (2004): 609-14.
- RICHARD, Nelly (2012). "Una alegoría anarcobarroca de Diamela Eltit". Julio Ortega (ed.) *Nuevos hispanismos: Para una crítica del lenguaje dominante*. Madrid: Iberoamericana: 377-83.
- RICHARD, Nelly (1998). *Residuos y metáforas: Ensayos de crítica cultural sobre el Chile de la Transición*. Santiago: Cuarto Propio.
- RUDDICK, Sara (1989). *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace*. Boston: Beacon P.
- SCHEPER-HUGHES, Nancy. "The Ends of the Body: Commodity Fetishism and the Global Traffic of Organs". *SAIS Review* 22.1 (2002): 61-80.
- SOLIMANO, Andrés (2012). *Chile and the Neoliberal Trap*. New York: Cambridge UP.
- SUTTON, Barbara (2010). *Bodies in Crisis: Culture, Violence, and Women's Resistance in Neoliberal Argentina*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP.
- WEISS-FAGEN, Patricia (1992). "Repression and State Security". Patricia Weiss Fagen, Juan E Corradi y Manuel Antonio Garretón (eds). *Fear at the Edge: State Terror and Resistance in Latin America*. Berkeley: U of California P.