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LITERATURE AND CULTURAL STUDIES

A Failed Link between Chilean Workers' Subversive Past and Submissive Present in Diamela Eltit's *Mano de obra*

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Mano de obra is one of the most studied novels written by the Chilean author Diamela Eltit (b. 1949). Scholars have paid particular attention to the novel's socioeconomic commentary at the level of the plot. They have not, however, conducted a close examination of how the novel expresses this criticism through its narrative form. Nor have they explored the relationship of the novel's literary techniques to the politico-cultural context that it portrays. This article engages in a close reading of the literary techniques that *Mano de obra* employs to depict a certain social context. It also addresses some politico-cultural implications of the novel's narrative form in the context of Chile's contemporary society to demonstrate that the novel foregrounds a sense of pessimism and hopelessness about linking Chilean workers' subversive past with their submissive present.

Mano de obra es una de las novelas más estudiadas de la escritora chilena Diamela Eltit (1949–). Los comentarios sobre esta obra han prestado especial atención a la crítica socioeconómica que esta presenta a nivel de su trama, sin llevar a cabo una examinación profunda de cómo lo hace a través de su forma narrativa. Ha quedado también si explorar la relación entre la técnica literaria de la novela y el contexto político-cultural representado por la obra. Este artículo realiza una lectura detallada de las técnicas narrativas que *Mano de obra* emplea para retratar un cierto contexto social y cuestiona algunas implicancias político-culturales de la forma narrativa de la novela en el contexto de la sociedad chilena neoliberal de la postdictadura. El trabajo se propone demostrar que *Mano de obra* resalta pesimismo y desesperanza en cuanto a la posible reconstrucción de una conexión entre un pasado obrero subversivo y su presente sometido.

Published in 2002, *Mano de obra* is one of the most discussed novels written by Diamela Eltit (b. 1949). She is an influential Chilean writer, particularly in the intellectual and academic spheres. She was a state schoolteacher and is currently a tenured academic. She has also been a visiting professor at various internationally renowned universities and in 2018 won Chile's National Prize for Literature. For Eltit, reading and writing are political activities, and she has publicly recognized her commitment to social equality from a leftist feminist perspective (Posadas 2003).[1]

This article engages in a close reading of the literary techniques that *Mano de obra* uses to portray a certain social context, with special attention to the use of enumeration, repetition, parentheses, and titles of the workers' press (*prensa obrera*). It also addresses some politico-cultural implications of the novel's narrative form in the context of contemporary Chilean society. It aims to demonstrate that *Mano de obra* underscores a pessimistic view of the contemporary labor system and workforce and foregrounds a hopeless reconstruction of the link between the workers' subversive past and submissive present.

The novel is divided into two parts, both with a male narrator. Its title, which may be translated as "The Labor Force," is an evident reference to the workforce, and the story is mostly set in a supermarket in an undetermined time and place. However, it refers to twentieth-century Chilean history in the titles of the

[1] Critics also agree that Eltit's work is permeated by this view of reading and writing as entailing a political function and project (Green 2007, 2; Llanos 2009, 166; and Richard 1993, 49–50).

Chilean workers' press, which head each section of the novel as well as the subsections of part 1. These titles belong to workers' newspapers, which abounded in the context of the social struggles of the Chilean workers' movement of the beginning of the twentieth century. However, the labor context described by the novel is influenced by a neoliberal free market economy that results in poor working conditions and a consumerist society with competitive individuals and workers who need to look obsequious to keep their jobs.

Chile's Postdictatorship Neoliberal Society

Chile is the world's most extreme neoliberal experiment. Neoliberalism refers to economic policies that stand for a reduction of the state's role, privatization of public assets, and cuts in public expenditure. Other characteristics of neoliberalism are the depoliticizing technique of governance, the decollectivization of society, and the goal of restoring class power guided by business elites and international institutions (Undurraga 2015, 13–14). In Chile, this free market economy was enforced during Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship (1973–1990) in the late 1970s under the guidance of the so-called Chicago Boys, a group of technocrats educated at the Economics Department of the University of Chicago, following Milton Friedman's principles of a free market and economic freedom. Under conditions of political impunity, social discipline imposed by the armed forces, and the weakening of unions, the dictatorship implemented neoliberal policies without obstruction (Lazo-González 2020, 124–125). This free market economy had a strong impact on labor policies, which in 1987 were made more flexible, and various workers' and union rights were repealed to benefit companies and reduce even further the cost of cheap labor. Neoliberal reforms meant the weakening of labor unions by abolishing most of the benefits that workers had gained during the democratically elected socialist government of Salvador Allende (1970–1973), a period in which workers reached historic heights of income, political organization, power, and influence (Winn 2004, 15–19).

Nevertheless, once democracy was restored in 1990, subsequent governments opted, with little variation, to maintain the free market model and the promotion of a consumerist and demobilized society (Undurraga 2015, 21–27). In the past thirty years, the neoliberal Chilean society has witnessed the privatization of basic services—even basic human needs such as water—and the pension system; the overexploitation of natural resources for the profit of national and transnational companies; and the development of one of the most unequal societies in the world.

Despite stable levels of economic growth, Chile is the world's seventh most unequal country (World Bank Group 2016, 84) and the most unequal among the wealthiest nations, where the incomes of the richest are more than twenty-five times greater than those of the poorest.[2] Chile's per capita GDP is over US$15,000, but 50 percent of workers earn less than $500 per month, moderately above the minimum monthly wage of gross $388. Even more, seven out of ten workers receive around $670 a month (Durán and Kremerman 2018, 3), while 50 percent of pensioners receive $180 monthly (Gálvez and Kremerman 2019, 3), the average pension being $286 per month (Barría 2019). About the cost of living, however, the price of a one-bedroom apartment in a metropolitan area, for instance, is around $433 a month (Barría 2019), and the cost of an average shopping trip is $83.[3] These facts may explain why 82 percent of the country's adults are currently in debt and why those living with lower incomes go into debt with retail companies to buy items such as food, medicines, clothes, and education (Fundación Sol 2019).

Another outcome of the neoliberal model is the depoliticization of society, with the view that political parties are useless. This has caused a profound break between Chile's political society and party politics. Chile's political party system before the dictatorship had been a solid structure capable of expressing, aggregating, and conducting Chile's historically pluralist project for the nation (Garretón 2008, 243–244). However, in the postdictatorship's incomplete form of democracy, the democracy of the agreements, ruled by Pinochet's constitution and marked by the lack of national debate toward a project for a new society and by the impact of corruption in politics, party politics has proved unable to interpret and channel contemporary social demands (Garretón 2008, 260–265; 2016, 12–15).

This rupture is evident in Chile's most recent social uprising of October 2019, which was initially triggered by a rise in the Santiago Metro's fare but has its roots in the inequalities that the neoliberal model has caused. Despite brutal repression from the right-wing government of the billionaire Sebastián Piñera,

[2] OECD, "Inequality and Income," http://www.oecd.org/social/inequality.htm (accessed May 28, 2020).

[3] "Estudios: Vivir con el salario mínimo en Chile," *América Retail*, January 15, 2019, https://www.america-retail.com/estudios/estudios-vivir-con-el-salario-minimo-en-chile.

millions of people in Chile have remained on the streets to demand the end of the neoliberal model and the abolition of Pinochet's constitution.[4] For Gabriel Salazar, this revolution, as he puts it, originated by the social crisis provoked by the inability of the political elites to canalize the demands of the people (Carvajal 2019). And accordingly, with historical levels of rejection of the political party system—from the left to the right wing—by December 2019 Piñera's approval rating was only 6 percent, while the number of people who significantly trust the Congress and political parties plummeted to 3 percent and 2 percent, respectively (CEP 2019).

These most recent developments partly question the idea of a depoliticized Chilean society and place the focus on the aforementioned split between Chile's political society and political party system. Although Chile's current mobilization has complex roots in the multiple legacies of neoliberalism (and with the caveat that it is still too soon to embark on conclusive analysis), for commentators such as Manuel Antonio Garretón, it speaks of a *sociedad atomizada* rather than *politizada*, that is, divided rather than politicized, which may actually increase inequality precisely because of the lack of a political structure able to channel and protect the demands of the streets (Garretón 2019, 61). These recent and unprecedented developments further support the idea of a close link between *Mano de obra* and the specific sociopolitical context from which it emerges. The novel was published in the hopeless, demobilized sociopolitical atmosphere of a country ruled by a socialist president, Ricardo Lagos (2000–2006), whose presidential campaign slogan was *Crecer con igualdad* (grow with equality) but who nevertheless defended the interests of the private sector and consolidated the neoliberal policies of the dictatorship (Lazo-González 2020, 126–127). This is the context and the pessimism, as the analysis will demonstrate, that permeate *Mano de obra*'s story and narrative form.

Enumeration and Repetition in a Neoliberal Labor System

A prominent characteristic of the novel's narrative technique is the enumeration and repetition of products. By repeatedly mentioning and listing things commercialized at the supermarket, the novel underlines a relationship between workers, their labor routine, and products. The protagonist-narrator of part 1 states: "Ordeno una a una las manzanas. Ordeno una a una las manzanas. Ordeno una a una (las manzanas)" (Eltit [2002] 2011, 45).[5] In this phrase, the repetition and rhythm of the prose provide the reader with a sense of monotony and of the sameness of everyday life, and especially of the work routine. These notions are accentuated by the use of parentheses, which break the rhythm of the reading by allowing the reader to take a breath, or a break. Such a break reminds us of the repetitive nature of the tasks performed by this worker, and it also gives the impression of fatigue and boredom. It seems to suggest that such a break is available to the readers but not to the narrator.

In the light of a repetitive and monotonous role, the absence of creative activity at work makes the protagonist apparently forget to overtly mention the obvious last part of the repetition, *las manzanas*, which is therefore put in the parenthesis that makes the repetition slightly different. Such a difference is not linked to the activity, the verb, but to the product, which is, however, the same in the whole example. This subtle contradiction, the same product in a slightly different format (parenthesis), stresses the idea that no matter the type of product, this worker has to permanently repeat the same mechanical activity. The placing of the products in parentheses, that is, separated from the activity performed by this worker, points to this worker's alienation from the products commercialized in his workplace.

The separation of the worker from the product of his labor nods to Karl Marx's theory of alienation, which states that in a capitalist society, it is the capitalist class and not the worker that owns the product of labor and controls its full production, manual and intellectual, to maximize profits. The impossibility for workers to participate in this process, since they only have to execute repetitively the specific tasks they have been assigned, produces their estrangement from the product of their labor (Marx [1844] 2010, 270–282). For Marx, the consequence of labor being external to the worker is that he is miserable; he "does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind" (Marx [1844] 2010, 274). Similarly, in *Mano de obra*, the narrative techniques of repetition and enumeration leave us with a feeling that the narrator is bored with both the work done and telling us about it, which accentuates even further the sense of monotony and sameness.

[4] As a consequence of this uprising, in October 2020 a national plebiscite was held to define whether a new constitution would be written. A majority of 78 percent voted in favour of a constitution to be written by a Constitutional Convention formed by members elected directly for this purpose. This Constitutional Convention also ensures gender parity and includes seats reserved for indigenous peoples (Gobierno de Chile, "Proceso constituyente," https://www.gob.cl/procesoconstituyente, accessed June 16, 2021).

[5] Subsequent references appear in parentheses indicating the page number only.

In this part of the novel, the repetitive naming of the products, that is, their supremacy within the labor context depicted, contrasts with the anonymous nature of its narrator-protagonist, about whom the readers do not get any personal information. Such anonymity, linked to the overwhelming presence of products, represents the objectification of this worker but also suggests that the limit between the products and the worker's individuality is blurred. Although part 2 identifies the characters by providing their first names, in contrast to the anonymity of the protagonist of part 1, they still can be seen as objectified and in a similar position to that of supermarket products. They are moved by the supervisors from store to store or from section to section as if they were products (64, 100, 103). Also, both characters and products are crowded in their habitat and come in and out of the novel's setting. This temporary and sometimes noncontinuous presence of the characters as well as the frequent incorporation of new ones, even near the end of the novel, produce an effect of confusion and give the impression of the assimilation of these workers, as the readers cannot easily distinguish their individualities at all times. Confusion and assimilation also point to a similarity between these people and the supermarket products, which helps to blur the limits between the supermarket, the home, and people. People are interchangeable, as are products.

Further evidence is given in part 2 in the following words by the narrator: "Hileras de mujeres o de hombres (ahora, para controlar el proceso los clasificaban por sexo, por peso, por porte, por salud, por edad, por oficio) parados en medio de un frío inacabable. Una helada que blanqueaba el entorno hasta la confusión. Pero allí estaba, alineados, buscando trabajo por horas" (111).

By referring to queues of people, their classification according to anatomical facts and skills, the image of "un frío inacabable … que blanqueaba el entorno," this example reminds us of cinematic images of the concentration camps of World War II, bringing the readers back to a recent context of slave labor when all sorts of civil and human rights were violated. A similar reference is highlighted elsewhere in the novel by the mention of the lists of workers to be made redundant (96, 97, 121) and the characters' fear of being put on those lists. But these bellicose words, which bring to mind crude images of abuse and dehumanization, are actually about the many people who come to the supermarket to apply for a job or who have been recently hired by the supermarket, for dismissals occur very frequently. In the example, the repetition of the preposition *por* to refer to the classification of workers' attributes and the enumeration of their characteristics further stress the link between them and products. Enumeration and repetition help the readers to focus on the similar treatment that products and workers are given in the labor system depicted by the novel, leaving us with an overwhelming sense of the objectification and dehumanization of workers.

The process of recruitment also suggests the similarities between people and goods that come in and out of the supermarket. The workers are given fewer hours of work, the longer-serving workers are made redundant, and more new workers come to work casual hours (83, 85, 87, 91). This stressful labor environment places the characters in a permanent state of alert and in fear of losing their jobs, which contributes to their obsequiousness and complete identification with the workplace, as if they had no other role to play in society than that of a supermarket worker. They have transferred such a single role to the domestic sphere, too, and the house they share has become a place very much like the supermarket. They all live crowded together and accumulate goods (96), and the affection among the housemates is mediated by their working capacities (107).

This labor context echoes Chile's postdictatorship neoliberal society and the core aims of the dictatorship: the supremacy of the market, the flexibilization of labor, and the weakening of workers' unions, as well as a consumerist, demobilized, and disciplinary society. The novel's narrative technique plays a central role in stressing the portrayal of this market-driven labor force. Through the use of enumeration and repetition, which blur the limits between workers and products and foreground the objectification of the working force, *Mano de obra* underscores a context characterized by the centrality of commercialization, the supremacy of goods over people and the abuse of workers. The suggested link between people and products provides a firm and pessimistic view of a dehumanizing and oppressive neoliberal labor system.

Parentheses in the Portrayal of the Labor Force

Another characteristic of *Mano de obra*'s narrative technique is the use of parentheses, which recur more often in part 1, as the narrator's interior monologue prevails here. Offering a deeper level of his subjectivity through the use of parentheses, the novel suggests the notion of a person going through a process of awareness linked to extreme fatigue and, above all, the human nature of this worker.

An example is found in the following words of the narrator: "Estoy enfermo, necesito con urgencia un permiso, un médico, una revisión total de mi anatomía, un examen biológico, el desmembramiento hostil, una radiación completa que me permita unos días de tregua. Estoy, lo he dicho, completamente al margen

de las mercaderías y de los sonidos intermitentes del súper. Estoy enfermo. Me muevo hoy con los horribles estertores que caracteriza a un herido (de muerte)" (43).

Through the agitated rhythm of the prose, given particularly by the use of parataxis framed by the phrase *estoy enfermo*; through the repetition of that condition and the contrast between *enfermo* and the parenthesis (*de muerte*); and through hyperbole found in phrases such as *desmembramiento hostil* and *radiación completa*, the passage shows the protagonist's awareness of the impact that his work has had on him, so much that he openly asks for sick leave. He also requests *un examen biológico*, which points to his need to be viewed and regarded as a human being. One can also read such stress on human nature from the emphasis that this example shows on this worker's sick body. He also refers to the leave he needs as a *tregua*, a word that also has a warlike connotation. Thus, he feels he is fighting some sort of battle, in which he openly declares himself ill and hurt. And importantly, the parenthesis (*de muerte*) foregrounds such a self-characterization by providing further clues as to how definite he feels his fatigue is. Here, he also seems aware of potential consequences (dismissal maybe) if he does not get this *tregua*, as the exaggeration of *de muerte*—or the end, perhaps—suggests.

Although the novel is full of references to people's objectification and their submissiveness to work, in the above example, one finds a person tired of a life entirely dominated by work. The use of words related to human biology and medical terms, and the emphasis that comes from the accelerated rhythm of the prose, help the reader to focus on this person's human nature. The example also suggests that the narrator is aware of his declining status due to the exhausting demands of the labor system he is inserted into, awareness that produces, again, a sense of alienation, and he thus feels *completamente al margen de las mercaderías*. As stated earlier, in *Mano de obra*, the separation that the protagonist of part 1 feels from the goods commercialized in the novel's supermarket—commercialization that is core to the working system he needs to cope with—echoes the Marxist theory of alienation. This reference can be taken as a critique of a labor system that uses workers for purposes unconnected to them, a system in which workers need to participate to earn a living, but which does not provide significant benefits to them, other than monotonous, fatiguing, and unsecure jobs they are in constant fear of losing. But importantly, in the novel, this estrangement also underscores the thinking nature of the worker and reveals some awareness of his political position within the labor system.

A further notion of this worker's process of awareness and disconnection with his workplace is found in the following words: "Me torno ajeno. Desorientado busco un norte, cualquier miserable referencia entre esta multitud que me avasalla y me golpea con sus carros. Y como si fuera un guerrero capturado me empuja hasta el centro de la arena. A combatir (entiendes, supongo, de qué hablo, comprendes que me refiero a mi puesto de trabajo). No a combatir sino a enfrentarme pasivamente con la fiera" (56).

The narrator uses words such as *multitud*, *golpear*, *carros*, *guerrero capturado*, *arena,* and *combatir*. All of these are, again, bellicose terms that leave the impression that he feels he is fighting a battle. But this is not any battle; it is an ancient one that subjugates him. The term *arena* brings to mind the Roman Colosseum and with it, the early Christians fed to the lions. This reference is also supported by the last part of the example, as the protagonist prepares himself to confront a *fiera* and leaves us with the image of innocent victims sacrificed for a cause, both in ancient and contemporary times, which is connected to the novel's relationship to past *obrero* resistance.

In the context of the Chilean *movimiento obrero* of the beginning of the twentieth century, for example, on December 21, 1907, hundreds of striking workers demanding better working and living conditions were killed and thousands were injured by the Chilean Army in what is known as La Masacre de la Escuela Santa María de Iquique (Devés 1988, 196–199). As a result of these social struggles, certain working conditions were established by law in Chile for the first time. In 1907, the Sunday break was granted; in 1916, an act on work accident compensation was passed; and in 1917 childcare was encouraged in the form of the right of women to breastfeed at work for one hour (Poblete Troncoso 1924, 15–24). Nonetheless, the above example suggests that the battle the novel's contemporary worker is fighting is still the same one that the old *movimiento obrero* fought and poses the question of good versus bad *multitudes*: of workers fighting for their rights versus consumers. With a pessimistic tone, this image suggests the lack of political aims of a neoliberal society's working class. It shows that in *Mano de obra*'s contemporary setting, workers do not get together to demand *obrero* political goals, but rather to consume.

In the example, as the protagonist is apparently unable to find the connection with his workplace he is looking for, he prepares to fight back. At this point, once more, important evidence is provided by the narrator's deeper level of subjectivity in the parenthesis. The phrase *entiendes de qué hablo* is a rhetorical question that attempts to remind him and the readers that he is not actually at a battlefield but just at his workplace. Accordingly, following this process of self-awareness, the narrator concludes that he is not

fighting against anybody and that he just must face another day of work, or face a labor routine that seems to him like an indomitable *fiera*. The disconnection, caused by extreme fatigue, that the protagonist feels from his workplace and that leads him toward a process of self-awareness shows us, on the one hand, the pensive nature of this worker and, on the other, it emphasizes the cruelty of the labor system that the novel portrays, which does not permit a dialogue between a subversive memory and a submissive present. This is further evidence of the novel's pessimistic view of the system in which the characters are immersed, which does not provide them with any space for rebellion.

Toward the end of part 1, the exhausted protagonist can be seen getting drunk on *pisco*, a cheap and popular alcohol in Chile, as a way of coping with the extensive hours of work and the obligation to perform at the Christmas nativity scene despite his fatigue (51), as the following example shows:

> Mi Dios (mi Diosito lindo) me lo concede porque yo soy el padre de su hijo y como suplemento (no me digas que Dios se va a privar, no te atrevas a decir que Dios haría una cosa así) cumplo con el oficio histórico que le fue asignado a la puta. Yo soy (también) la niña obscena que va a enderezar su alicaído senil miembro. Me he vestido con el disfraz que mejor me representa y Él me ha reconocido. Aquí mismo. Yo, su padre. A la entrada del súper encabezo el pesebre disfrazado como un santurrón de pacotilla. (52)

In this example, in a rather obscene image, one can read God as old, or *alicaído* and *senil*, indifferent and dirty. He does not identify his creatures, and to be recognized by God, the narrator needs to use the costume that he thinks best represents him: that of a *santurrón de pacotillas*, or an obsequious worker, willing to meet the demands of the labor system without question. This link between a legal drug like alcohol, religion, God, and a market-driven work system again points to a critique of neoliberalism and the omnipotence of the market.

For Marx, religion, meaning Christianity, was "the illusory happiness of the people," the "sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of spiritless condition. It is the *opium* of the people" (Marx [1844] 2010, 176, 175, emphasis in the original); for Friedman, however, free market economy can deliver such heavenly happiness on earth (Boer 2018, 2). He views the free market as an all-powerful, all-knowing force capable of providing, without intervention, anything that humans need, including the freedom to choose, which would eventually lead to happiness, security, and stability (Friedman and Friedman 1980, 2–5). However, *Mano de obra* suggests the opposite and presents us with a more critical and pessimistic view of both the free market and religion.

Roland Boer argues that Marx's view of religion as the opium of the people is ambivalent, as this metaphor alludes to both negative and positive connotations. In nineteenth-century Europe, opium was regarded negatively as a drug that dulls the senses, but it also had a more positive side for it was used as cheap medicine that provided relief to the lower classes. Thus, the use of the opium metaphor implies the same ambivalence in the case of religion: something that dulls the senses but also a form of relief that helps people cope with the miseries of life (Boer 2017, 10–12). But in *Mano de obra*, religion is not presented in such ambivalent terms, since the power of the market-driven labor system is all-consuming. The protagonist's devastating exhaustion provoked by his daily work routine—at a place where the commercialization of products seems to be more important than people—along with the image of a blind, dirty, and insensitive God, provides us with a sense of profound hopelessness and of the impossibility of religion as a source of relief and succor in a neoliberal labor context. The protagonist finds no comfort in his workplace nor in any divinity, and he is left with a nondivine and mundane way of relief: *pisco*. Similarly, in part 2, most of the characters succumb to drugs as a way of coping with their labor routines and relating to each other (133–134).

Through the suggested link, the novel comments on the impossibility of the free market to provide positive outcomes for workers. Unlike the kind of power that Friedman attributes to it, in *Mano de obra*, the system implemented by his Chilean disciples is a powerful entity, though not one that leads to happiness, security, or stability. The outcome of a market-driven labor system is extreme tiredness, abuse, insecurity, and hopelessness as a result of nearly slave labor. Even more, in the story, the jobs offered by a neoliberal labor system could be regarded as the opium of the people, or illusory happiness in Marxist terms. At first sight, it might be thought that these jobs provide a certain relief to the characters, as they can rely on an occupation and income to make a living. But such potential stability that might eventually lead to happiness is only apparent, illusory, and annulling. Supported by flexible labor policies, based on cheap labor, and in a context of weak labor rights and unions, these occupations keep workers obsequious and in permanent fear of losing their jobs. In line with its pessimistic view, the novel's neoliberal working system is an omnipotent

entity that has the all-consuming power to oppress and subjugate the labor force. Furthermore, though this proposed link, the novel comes to question the moral underpinnings of neoliberalism.

In the name of fair competition among free individuals, the neoliberal view regards people as liable for the outcomes of such competition (Amable 2011, 4–6, 25); that is, individuals are responsible for their own economic success or lack thereof. The dissimilar results of competition would then reflect differences in individual merit, abilities, effort, self-discipline, hopes, and aspirations, which assumes that people can self-determine their mental states to reach economic success (Dixon 2012, 3). But none of the aforementioned characteristics are absent from the personality of the novel's characters. They are ambitious, hardworking, competitive, individualistic, and more committed to work than to their workmates. *Mano de obra* reminds us that the moral assumptions of neoliberalism entail placing enormous trust in market forces and reject the fact that competition is influenced by social determinism, by external structural factors such as cultural, economic, gender, ethnicity, and class circumstances that have great impact on inequality (Dixon 2012, 1–8). In the novel, the vulnerable and helpless position that workers find at work, in contrast to the all-powerful brutal nature of the neoliberal working system, reinforces *Mano de obra*'s critique of neoliberalism while pointing to its senseless moral underpinnings. Again, with a pessimistic view, the novel firmly shows that in such a context, workers remain subject to the cruelty of labor abuse, no matter how capable or loyal to this system they may be.

Although the narrator of part 1 refers to himself in masculine terms (15, 45), this example carries a gender component in the references to *la puta* and *la niña obscena*. It is a reference to female prostitution and the need to perform degrading sexual activities not expected from a supermarket worker. It suggests that these workers need to prostitute themselves to be part of the novel's depraved labor system. They need to be willing to play a role in the abuse conducted against them, and they are therefore indirectly forced to "sell themselves" in order to keep their jobs. This is further emphasized by the word *suplemento* and the parenthesis (*también*). That is, this willingness of workers to compromise their own dignity and to accept bad and denigrating labor practices is an addition that should not be taken as constitutive of a worker's role. Moreover, this kind of prostitution is an *oficio histórico*, it derives from a historical trajectory.

By incorporating a female subject, the parenthesis (*también*) further accentuates the overall human nature of the protagonist, a protagonist-narrator that may represent above all any human being, who is feminized, too. But this worker is surrounded by the notion of prostitution. At first sight, this reminds us of the Marxist view of prostitution as symbolizing workers' exploitation under capitalism, since, as Carole Pateman states, "for Marx, prostitution was a metaphor for wage labour" (Pateman 1988, 209). However, Pateman (1988, 201–202) also highlights the irony behind representing the worker by the figure of the female prostitute, for in political philosophy "the worker" has historically been male. In her influential work *The Sexual Contract* (1988), Pateman explores the relationship between sex, slavery, and capitalism and links prostitution to the implicit sexual contract on which contemporary patriarchal societies have been constructed, which is based on the subjection of women, male fraternity, and men's sex-right over women (Pateman 1988, chap. 7). This sexual contract is the origin of all gender inequalities in contemporary societies, such as women's lower salaries, higher workload, gender violence, rape, femicide, and women's lower access to land and property. At the core of this contract, Pateman sees prostitution as an "integral part of patriarchal capitalism … men can buy sexual access to women's bodies in the capitalist market" (Pateman 1988, 189). And in line with this link between a female subject, labor abuse, and prostitution, Isabel, the product promoter, is described in the novel as having to perform sexual favors for the managers, something that no male character needs to do, in order to keep her job and for the necessary money (63, 64) that allows her to remain in the house with her baby.

This emphasis on gender differentiation provides hints of the different treatment that men and women receive within the novel's working environment. It alludes to a labor system that has historically abused women in specific ways and workplaces that are unhealthy particularly for women. The psychology of the workplace in which the novel's female characters are trapped points to a tough environment that includes extreme levels of work demands, labor insecurity, sexual harassment, gender stereotypes, and humiliation, conditions that have a negative impact on women's mental health, identity, and self-esteem. What is more, women are affected by these kinds of environmental factors in the workplace and in the family as well, given that they continue to be responsible for unpaid domestic labor (Cifre, Vera, and Signani 2015, 177–179). Therefore, the negative implications of unhealthy workplaces hit both women's psychosocial well-being and work-life balance. This combination of features that impact working women in particular ways places unhealthy levels of stressful demands on them as they are also required to maintain "smooth, or preferably

imperceptible, transitions between the worlds of home and work life" (Cifre, Vera, and Signani 2015, 178). This is clearly suggested by the novel when it barely mentions Isabel's role as a young single mother.

In the example, the reference to prostitution, the image of an indifferent and obscene God, and an abusive labor system leave us with a sense of the complete abandonment of the worker in a system that requires workers to wear the costume of submissiveness and obedience in order to be somehow recognized by it and to earn a living. But this is a costume that only *represents* the worker; it is not quite him, and obsequiousness may not be his true nature. Accordingly, the narrator is aware of his status and is not fully happy with this role he has been assigned; he is somehow critical of it and of himself as his self-judgmental words *santurrón de pacotilla* reveal. Although the worker is forced to play the role that has been dictated for him, the narrator still reminds us that he feels *al margen* and that he has been abandoned by both God and this nearly divine, all-powerful, and all-consuming system.

So far, the analysis demonstrates that *Mano de obra* denounces the brutality of a neoliberal labor system. It proves that a pessimistic point of view prevails in the novel, which highlights the hopelessness of a contemporary neoliberal and oppressive work system that does not provide workers with any space for subversion. But at the same time, the novel highlights the humanity of the labor force. It uses pessimism to emphasize the brutality of a system that dehumanizes workers; concurrently, the use of parentheses stresses the humanity of a pensive, exhausted, and suffering worker who may be going through reflection and to some extent criticism, despite the fact that he is inserted in a monotonous and repetitive labor routine. In the depiction of a cruel working system, the novel's use of parentheses comes to foreground the oblivion of an apparently obvious fact: it reminds us *entre paréntesis* that workers are human beings and, as such, subjects of some basic rights, which they do not enjoy in the novel's contemporary neoliberal labor system.

Prensa Obrera Titles: The Link between Past and Present

The novel's relationship to history is suggested in the titles of its two parts. In part 1, "El despertar de los trabajadores" and the titles of its subsections are all names and dates of old Chilean newspapers, which belong to the period of the *movimiento obrero* that flourished in the first half of the twentieth century and was an important precursor to Allende's Popular Unity government.[6] Similarly, the title of part 2, "Puro Chile (Santiago, 1970)" alludes to one of the newspapers that supported Allende's government. However, although in part 1 the titles make reference to a time of rich community ties underpinned by political aims, what the novel portrays in both parts is actually the absence of these sorts of relationships. This contradiction is a striking image of the fatalistic way in which the novel depicts the development of past forms of sociopolitical and communal bonds, introducing a sense of disconnection between the subversive past that the novel brings to mind by naming the *prensa obrera* titles, and the actual story related.

With regard to the novel's use of *prensa obrera* titles, several critics comment on the importance of memory in their references and the potential or path for resistance symbolized by them, which supposedly resist oblivion (Blanco 2006, 177; Carreño 2003; Luna Escudero-Alie 2007; Forcinito 2010, 91–92; Olea 2002; and Tompkins 2004, 116).[7] For example, Ana Fornicito (2010, 96) states, "Para Eltit es la memoria la que tiene el poder de restituir esos lazos significativos entre los sujetos sociales." She reads in the novel a space of resistance that evidences the impossibility of repeating the norms of the economic model depicted and thus of the potential failure of this oppressive labor system (Forcinito 2010, 97, 103). Similarly, Nelly Richard argues that the novel's constant reference to *prensa obrera* is a *recurso de emergencia* that resists the oppression of the dominant free market economy.[8] However, this idea of the novel as suggesting spaces or paths for resistance or escape is questionable, as what prevails in the text is an overwhelming sense of pessimism and hopelessness through the view of an oppressive labor system that does not provide any room for rebellion. There is no connection between the *prensa obrera* titles and the story related. Also, the characters and narrators are not aware of the existence of the past of *obrero* rebellion and are all depicted as submissive workers.

The disconnection between the politicized past of the newspaper titles that refer to *obrero* rebellion and the story alludes to the alienation of the worker from other workers, which is another important aspect of Marxist theory. In a capitalist system, where the product of labor does not belong to the workers, antagonisms

[6] For a detailed account of the importance of the socialist and anarchist press in the Chilean *movimiento obrero*, see Arias Escobedo 1970.

[7] See also Nelly Richard, "Tres recursos de emergencia: Las rebeldías populares, el desorden somático y la palabra extrema." *Letras.s5.com, proyecto patrimonio*. http://www.letras.mysite.com/eltit091202.htm (accessed May 28, 2020).

[8] Richard, "Tres recursos."

inevitably arise among fellow human beings. As a result, relationships among people are hostile, since somebody else either controls and owns the product of labor or competes for the wage that results from it (Marx [1844] 2010, 278–279). *Mano de obra*'s workers also seem to be alienated from other fellow workers. In part 2, they are unable to form relationships different than the roles they play at the supermarket, and although they share a home, they do not trust each other (95). And in the novel's competitive, consumerist, individualistic, and depoliticized society, the characters do not seem to know about the *obrero* insurgence of previous generations of workers.

This disconnection between the titles and the story told can be regarded as an emphasis, perhaps even a critique, of the contemporary lack of historical memory, but it still leaves us with a major sense of disillusion and a feeling that whatever these *obreros* of the past fought for, it was not worth it and does not make sense in the novel's contemporary setting. In part 1, the narrator states, "Me obligo a la mansedumbre (ya no me cuesta nada, nada en absoluto. Quizás finalmente sea manso, ¿no?)" (20). Importantly, here, the parenthesis provides information about the narrator's reflection on his accepting that he has gotten used to work submissiveness, which at first sight might refer to notions of past workers' resistance, as it might be implied that in the past, submissiveness was more difficult for him. However, this potentially lower earlier degree of submissiveness has been completely annulled by the system portrayed.

Therefore, in *Mano de obra*, the labor subjugation model is repeated, and thus it could not be stated that the system fails in its oppression. There is no evidence that memory may have the power to restore past sociopolitical bonds or resistance; the novel remains a work of denunciation framed by pessimism rather than a suggestion of potential spaces of resistance or escape inspired by Chile's subversive *obrero* past, as the critics above propose. This is not to say that a work of fiction must suggest models for resistance per se. It rather acknowledges the relevance of paying attention to a particular text's political commitments beyond the overtly declared political standpoint of its author.

Various critics have argued that commitment does not necessarily come from an author's subjectivity or intention, but from their attention to the object, their study of society, and the way they represent it (Booth 1961; Eagleton 2002; and Moretti 1988). The literary choices that an author makes to portray the fictional social contexts of their narrative will bear a specific view of the world. It is thus relevant to pay close attention to these literary choices, for writers may deploy strategies to either disseminate, perpetuate, or resist given cultural models. The analysis makes it relevant to reconsider, from a close reading of the novel's narrative form and its relationship to certain sociopolitical attachments, the question of whether *Mano de obra* indeed suggests paths for resistance.

Even more, the way the novel uses the *prensa obrera* titles—disconnected from the actual story told—has some politico-cultural implications in the context of Chile's postdictatorship neoliberal society. Following Suzanne Keen, narrative fiction involves the idea of a "practice," that is, the co-creation between writers and readers. In her words, it involves the "reader's complicity in responding to cues in order to participate in fictional worldmaking" (Keen 2015, 10). In a similar sense, in her work on the image of the mother in Eltit's first novels, Mary Green (2007, 2) states that "the interplay between text and context is crucial to any reading of her novels." She links the political function of Eltit's writing project to such interplay and to her dense and hermetic language, which in Green's view constitutes the political and revolutionary potential of her work (Green 2007, 15). Through a postcolonial approach, Green states that, in Spivak's terms, Eltit's purpose is "to allow the subaltern to speak." Nonetheless, although it is widely recognized that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1988) essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" is an influential source for the question of the voice of the subaltern (the economically dispossessed), Spivak also posits the question of the ethical problem that arises from the representation of the subaltern by people writing from positions of privilege, particularly from the intellectual elite (Spivak 1988 and 1993, 17–43); and Eltit is part of the Chilean intellectual elite. These premises lead us to some politico-cultural implications of *Mano de obra*'s narrative form.

By using newspaper titles associated with past *obrero* resistance but which lack a link to the contemporary setting of the novel, *Mano de obra* leaves the potential reconstruction of such a missing link to the readers. Thus, the novel (or literature more broadly) may be or become the main, if not the only, meeting point between an activist and politically resistant *obrero* past and the cruel present of the contemporary worker. This idea is also supported by the novel's self-referential words with which each section ends: "Hay que poner fin a este capítulo" (60) in part 1 and "Demos vuelta la página" (140) in part 2. This self-reference keeps the readers' attention on the text, as a way of emphasizing or placing the novel as the only remaining link between subversive memory and an oppressive present. As much as the narrator of part 1 seems to somehow develop a rather more critical view of his own status as a worker, tracing the clues left by the novel might lead the readers to reflect on and question certain aspects of the story. For example, one might

question why the newspapers' titles head each section of part 1 if they do not seem to have any connection to the story told—to question the lack of an overt link between those references to memory and the portrayal of the workers' obsequious present.

Nevertheless, the question arises of Eltit's readership and the significance of an analysis that combines both text and context, which takes us to the politico-cultural implications of one of this novel's most prominent narrative technique, the use of the *prensa obrera* titles. About her readers, Eltit has said, "I work with an ideal, abstract reader, who operates critically while I write my books. But not real readers" (Green 2005, 79). Though this is a common practice among writers, such an expectation of critical awareness may be counterproductive in Chile's postdictatorship politico-cultural context.

About the context that *Mano de obra* emerges from and dialogues with, it is important to point out that, in line with the neoliberal goal of a depoliticized society, the Chilean education system is based on cultural and educational policies that have significantly discouraged the arts and humanities in general and literature and literary studies in particular, while favoring market-focused subjects. This is a politico-cultural stance inherited from the dictatorship, which has influenced greatly Chile's post-transition literature produced in the new millennium (Lazo-González 2020, 123–127).

In Chile, for example, books carry 19 percent value-added tax, which makes the cost of literature very high, and consequently the acquisition of literature has proved not a priority for the lower classes. Unsurprisingly, in the past decades, the habit of reading fictional literature became primarily a taste of the Chilean higher classes.[9] Exemplifying the results of these neoliberal cultural policies, Grínor Rojo (2012, 1) shows that in Chile, 52.8 percent of people in general and 40 percent of students finishing primary education state that they do not read *at all*, and 49 percent of people declare that they do not read news about politics; predictably, in the last presidential election in December 2017, there was a 51 percent rate of abstention.[10] These figures are frustrating if we agree with Rojo that "razón, libro y lectura constituyen así una tríada indisociable" (Rojo 2012, 3). Similarly, anarchist and socialist histories—those to which *Mano de obra* alludes—have been broadly avoided in the state school curriculum, as are many other politically controversial topics. For instance, just in 2009 was the teaching of the historical period of the dictatorship and the return to democracy incorporated into the education curriculum.[11] And only in 2016 did the government, motivated by the high level of abstention in public elections, reincorporate the teaching of *formación cívica* at schools.[12] All of the aforementioned factors have helped create the popular saying that Chile is *un país que no lee*.

This context underscores the significance of the debate around the political project of Eltit's literature and her readership. If, as Eltit and commentators recognize, reading and writing imply a political activity, beyond the mastery of her prose, the question of effectiveness linked to a specific national context is unavoidable. Such politico-cultural effectiveness refers to the capacity that the writing of an author like Eltit—who was trained and has worked as a state educator, has openly declared concerns for social equality, and whose source of inspiration is Chile's extended unprivileged classes—has to overcome cultural and economic barriers and potentially reach the types of subjects from which her writing gets inspiration: the marginalized, the *obreros*, the *pobladores*. The question remains of the potential or even the intention to integrate these subjects into a literary project that is actually about them, so they are also (eventually), in Green's terms, permitted to collaborate in the production of such a political content (Green 2007, 19). This issue becomes problematic, for it validates the creation not only of economic and social ghettos, which most scholars agree Eltit's work responds to, but cultural ones as well.

This is not to say that Eltit is responsible for decades of cultural policies aimed at depoliticizing Chilean society or that the whole of her work should be considered inaccessible to the many. Eltit's writing style has been mostly praised by scholars as a strategy to challenge the dominant forms of socioeconomic power (Richard 2011, 50–53; Olea 1998, 47–50). Regarding criticism of elitism, Bernardita Llanos thinks this represents a gender bias, since the need for effort on the part of readers is regarded as a strength rather than a weakness in the case of male authors (Llanos 2009, 165). However, though not untrue, still this view does not question the politico-cultural and educational context of Eltit's work, as it fails to address language and

[9] However, some important initiatives of *bibliotecas populares*, where books cost less, have been developed in some lower-class towns to narrow this gap: for example, Recoletras, created in 2019 in Recoleta, Santiago, by the town's communist mayor, Daniel Jadue.

[10] Servicio Electoral de Chile, "Elección de presidente 2017," https://historico.servel.cl/servel/app/index.php?r=EleccionesGenerico/Default/MesasElectores&id=216&Ext=1 (accessed May 28, 2020).

[11] Ministerio de Educación, "Decreto 256: Modifica decreto supremo N° 40, de 1996, del Ministerio de Educación, que establece los objetivos fundamentales y contenidos mínimos obligatorios de la educación básica y fija normas generales para su aplicación," July 1, 2009, http://bcn.cl/1uw6a.

[12] Ministerio de Educación, "Ley 20.911: Crea el plan de formación ciudadana para los establecimientos educacionales reconocidos por el estado," March 28, 2016, https://www.leychile.cl/Navegar?idNorma=1088963&idParte=.

access to literature as a social barrier or as a mark of social class and vulnerability in Chile's current neoliberal society. As noted earlier, precisely because narrative fiction may resist or perpetuate certain cultural models, it is pertinent for critics to question the way a piece of narrative fiction does or does not do so. *Mano de obra* emerges from and dialogues with the sociopolitical context of one of the most unequal societies in the world, a context in which literature has become pretty much unreachable for the unprivileged. It becomes therefore ethically pertinent for critics to enquire about the politico-cultural implications behind a work so much influenced by the various legacies of the dictatorship—including cultural—written by an author who has openly declared her commitment to social equality and who has built a successful and influential writing career depicting the Chilean subaltern.

Regarding *Mano de obra*, it is relevant to ask what kind of readers would be in a position to question the novel's lack of a link between the *obrero* subversive past and submissive present, and would be able to reconstruct it. Could the novel's important political messages reach ordinary readers such as supermarket workers; those educated at state schools in which until some years ago there existed no civic education or teaching of Allende's socialist government and the subsequent dictatorship; the 52.8 percent who do not read at all; or the 51 percent not interested in voting in the last presidential election? Or the many educated at Chilean state schools (not unfamiliar to Eltit), where neither literature in general nor progressive literary works in particular are encouraged? The question of the sociopolitical observer, or reader, remains central to this piece of fiction. To be able to regard it as a bridge that allows the reconstruction of a relevant political link between memory and the present, as has been previously proposed, this novel's readers need to have a significant level of awareness of Chilean social and political history in the twentieth century. The newspaper titles do not say much by themselves. It is their link to history that speaks volumes, their pointing at an insurgent *obrero* past. Readers need such an awareness to uncover the significance of these titles, to reconstruct the missing story of the influence of the dictatorship in Chile's current neoliberal system of work, and connect these to the present that the story narrates.

An expectation of the awareness and knowledge needed to unpack the core political messages of a piece of narrative fiction is controversial in the case of Chile's neoliberal society *que no lee*, which inherits such a cultural legacy from the dictatorship. Owing to this expectation, *Mano de obra*'s narrative technique perpetuates instead of challenging that cultural model; it may become its own barrier for the novel's political preoccupations to reach wider, less learned, and more diverse audiences. This is further evidence of the novel's pessimistic view of a neoliberal labor system and workforce as well as its hopeless stance on a potential link between Chile's *obrero* subversive past and submissive present.

Conclusions

Mano de obra's narrative form on the one hand denounces and criticizes a certain socioeconomic context and, on the other, in light of the politico-cultural context it addresses, it (re-)creates a cultural barrier. The novel remains a fictional work of political denunciation, which has been demonstrated by the close reading of its narrative techniques in combination with its sociopolitical attachments. This analysis shows that the novel does not suggest any paths for resistance, as commentators have previously proposed, and that an overall pessimistic perspective prevails.

The novel's narrative form has political implications in the context of Chile's postdictatorship neoliberal society, as it hinders interpretation of its important political messages by less erudite readers, reserving them for a few. By perpetuating this cultural barrier, the novel leaves us with an overwhelming sense of hopelessness regarding the potential reconstruction of a link between an *obrero* subversive past and the workers' submissive present. Thus it cannot be considered to progress toward the elimination of a significant form of cultural inequality in postdictatorship Chile: the social barrier, and often the sociocultural stigma, that access to literature (and thus its commitments) currently implies.

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