

Expressions of National Crisis: Diamela Eltit's *E. Luminata* and Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*

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Can an obscure literary text from the pen of a Chilean third world author be elucidated via the aesthetic rendering of a world famous Spanish canvas? What can the work of a writer dedicated to protesting against women's oppression have in common with the perspective of a womanizer? How can avant-garde art help make the complexities of postmodern literature less intimidating for readers? Worlds apart, separated by historical period, artistic media, gender, nationality, class and world perspective—(one representative of the Spanish colonizer and the other of the colonized)—Picasso's *Guernica* and Eltit's *E. Luminata* speak in a similar voice across all these apparent divides.¹ Picasso and Eltit share a style and a tendency for symbolic representations that dissolve their major differences. I propose here Picasso's widely known *Guernica* as a visual aid in understanding the fragmented and abstract nature of Eltit's first novel, *E. Luminata*, a text which—as is typical of her writing—the reader should not expect to understand entirely.² Hence this study approaches the challenges of teaching and elucidating Eltit's book by drawing historical and artistic parallels with Picasso's well-known mural, a painting that has come to symbolize an anti-war cry in its depiction of man's inhumanity to man, and woman, and child—the essence of a recurrent theme in this Latin American writer's books.³

Diamela Eltit, author of seven novels and two non-fiction books, emerged as a writer during the turmoil and repression of General Augusto Pinochet's dictatorial rule (1973-1989). She managed to

carve out a place for herself within Chile's predominantly male literary establishment while challenging its mainstream cultural apparatus with a female-centered postmodern writing very different from that of compatriots like best seller Isabel Allende in the United States and Marcela Serrano in Chile. While never courting popular readers, Eltit has drawn interest among Latin Americanists in the United States, some of whom are Chilean exiles who kept abreast of literature produced back home during Pinochet's regime and introduced writers like Eltit into North American academe.⁴ Over the years distinguished Latin Americanists during their tenure at prestigious U.S. institutions have invited Eltit to give presentations on her work and conduct courses.⁵ But despite many such academic sojourns and a prolific pen, for many years Eltit's work received relatively little attention outside of Chile, in part because the hermetic quality of her first books set the stage for alienating readers and critics alike.⁶

Eltit, who was born in Santiago, Chile in 1949, published *Lum-périca* in 1983 (trans. E. Luminata, 1997). The book baffled Chile's literary intelligentsia with a narrative that defied the traditional notion of the novel. Almost seven years in the making, *E. Luminata* was marked by some critics as difficult, experimental, cryptic and even unintelligible (Rios S. Patricio 30). Despite the reviews, Eltit continued to plunge ahead with a writing project that led to her receiving in 1985 the coveted Guggenheim award, becoming the first woman in Chile thus honored.⁷

In an observation about *Guernica* that can easily be adopted to describe Eltit's novel, Ellen C. Oppler notes that "It is Picasso's best-known painting. . . . Yet it is a problematic work, stylistically complex, with images difficult to decipher, whose meaning is unclear" (47). Not coincidentally, at the time of execution both Eltit's novel and Picasso's painting were anchored in a country's political crisis.

On April 26, 1937, during the Spanish Civil War, General Francisco Franco gave orders for the German air force to bomb Guernica, a town of little military importance but the ancient capital of the Basques and cradle of a culture strongly rooted in the spirit of independence. Historians have documented that Guernica "was honored throughout Spain as the oldest center of democracy" (Oppler 57). As then Basque President José de Aguirre declared at the

time of the incident, for the Basque nation (self-denominated Euzkadi) Guernica represented "the very sanctuary which records the centuries of our liberty and our democracy" (Steer 163).

Similarly, in Santiago, Chile, the military air strike of the Presidential Palace on September 11, 1973 marked an assault on Chile's long-standing tradition of democratic government, one unparalleled among other Latin American countries in the region. Chileans were astonished and shaken by the coup-d'état that ousted the democratically elected president, Salvador Allende.⁸ Under the orders of General Pinochet, who emerged as leader, a wave of violence and repression swept over the country as rapidly as the bombs that exploded in Guernica. And it was no less destructive to the population; during Pinochet's regime thousands of Chileans sought exile. Many others would lose their lives or were tortured and left physically and mentally maimed for life, victims of the State's repressive campaign.

Commenting on political circumstance at the time of Picasso's *Guernica*, Allen Oppler notes that given Hitler and Mussolini's early involvement in aiding the Insurgents and the then Soviet Union's siding with the Republic, "the civil war did not remain an internal Spanish struggle" (48). At the root of Picasso's artistic rendering of what happened to the town of Guernica lies a reminder of how intervention and the use of modern warfare by a foreign ally can intensify a national conflict. The tragic chapter in Guernica's history came to be written as a result of Germany's involvement in Spanish affairs. This situation parallels the United State's active but then secret machination to undermine the Chilean government. Indeed, it was foreign intervention that led to the collapse of the country's economy and the military coup that ousted Allende.⁹ Without Washington's economic backing and the CIA's strategic support, Pinochet's dictatorship may not have become a dark chapter in Chile's modern history.

Based on the historical circumstances just described, we know that the figures of Generals Franco and Pinochet, respectively, loomed over Picasso's and Eltit's creative process. However, the dictators' presence, the immediate power behind a people's devastation, is above all symbolic in both the painting and novel. Neither Eltit's *E. Luminata* nor Picasso's *Guernica* comes across as glaringly politi-

cal in nature, yet each manifests an intellectualized protest universal enough to transcend particular national borders. Both Eltit and Picasso achieve a seemingly apolitical cultural artifact, which is bound to make a profound impact on its viewer/reader, although not necessarily a pleasant one.

We have some idea of the general response to *Guernica* from Josep Lluís Sert, an exiled Spanish architect who designed and oversaw construction of the Spanish Pavilion where the painting was first displayed at the 1937 World's Fair in Paris. "It was curious to observe in the months that followed—and I lived there constantly—in reviewing the exhibits in the Pavilion, to see the reaction of the people. The people came there, they looked at the thing and they didn't understand it. The majority didn't understand what it meant. But they felt that there was something in it. They did not laugh at *Guernica*. They just looked at it in silence" (Sert 199-200). Amadée Ozenfant, a painter, also recorded his observations: "Sunday. I am writing at a little table in the Catalan café of the Spanish Pavilion. . . . Some lady goes past my table. . . . She looks at *Guernica* and says to her child: 'I don't understand what is going on there, but it makes me feel awful. It's strange, it really makes me feel as if I were being chopped to pieces'" (Ozenfant 214-15). Picasso was not immune to public opinion. "Everyone wants to understand painting," he is quoted as saying. "Why don't they try to understand the singing of the birds? Why do people love the night, a flower, everything that surrounds them, without trying to understand them? But painting—that they must understand" (Wilhelm Boeck and Jaime Sabartès 505).

When asked to recall *E. Luminata's* reception, Eltit responded that "There wasn't really a reaction per se. Three or four cautiously positive articles appeared. Some people who mattered to me, like Nelly Richard, thought well of it, and this helped to protect my ego" (Juan A. Piña 236).¹⁰ Raquel Olea points out that during those years the intellectual Left in Chile boycotted writing they considered avant-garde, experimental or elitist because books such as Eltit's did not meet with their criteria of a direct and politically engaged literature responsible for denouncing the dictatorship (84). Such historical circumstance contributed to the "no se entiende" or comprehensible label attributed to the author. "I don't believe that what I

do cannot be understood," Eltit has countered when broached about narrative difficulties in her writing, "because if a person is versed in the language, if s/he understands Spanish, s/he can understand what I have written. . . . Of course, I admit that when [*E. Luminata*] appeared and I heard 'cannot be understood, cannot be understood,' I felt guilty. Eventually I got used to it" (Piña 237).

At publication *E. Luminata* was a first novel by an unknown writer and Eltit's book did not command the backing that Picasso's *Guernica* garnered from early apologists who argued that the painting could be meaningful to the masses (Oppler 197, Max Aub 205). We need to consider that in its day Picasso's *Guernica* also had its critics, and for the vast majority of viewers it necessitated explaining.¹¹ "Look at this painting attentively, profoundly; let us not be intimidated by its difficult appearance and extreme colors," exhorted the speaker who addressed French construction workers completing the Spanish Pavilion in July 1937 (Aub 204-05). In a London newspaper Herbert Read pointed to *Guernica* when challenging an art critic who saw in another of Picasso's work "genuine, but useless horror," with symbolism that "cannot reach more than the limited coterie of aesthetes," (218). "It has been said that this painting is obscure," argued Read in defense of Picasso's *Guernica*, "that it cannot appeal to the soldier of the republic, to the man in the street . . . but actually its elements are clear and openly symbolical" (218).

Detractors and defenders of *Guernica* alike echoed arguments that surely apply to Eltit's novel as well—shockingly anti-establishment, difficult to understand, yet imbued with a universal symbolism inclusive of the oppressed. Hence, the difference between Picasso's notoriety and Eltit's anonymity when *Guernica* and *E. Luminata* first appeared publicly made little difference to those who reacted negatively. After all, these works were anomalies vis-à-vis mainstream standards in art and literature. Despite the similarities noted thus far, let us briefly consider the differences in the environments in which these works were produced.

Picasso, settled in Paris since 1904, had shown little interest in the politics of his native country (or even in the First World War, for that matter), until the civil war when, "the painter was torn between his passionate reactions to the destructive and cruel events in Spain, and his concern as an artist of his exceptional status to do some-

thing that in itself, as an act of creation, and by its theme would counter the horrors" (Reinhold Hohl 313). His self-imposed exile in France permitted him the artistic liberty, for example, to produce the etchings *Dream and Lie of Franco* in 1937 (Oppler 98-99). Such open expression of protest, although until then not typical of Picasso, was practically impossible for Eltit, who chose to stay in Chile and hence wrote during a time when books had to pass through a State censorship office. The careful handling of political references in the novel was a necessity. As Robert Neustadt points out, "By not naming the military, Eltit writes around the dictatorship, and [*E. Luminata*] escapes governmental censure" (34).

The Chilean author's mental tiptoeing around the powers that be, in an ambiance of fear further compounded by a full time teaching schedule, the responsibility of supporting children in a one parent family and the need to secure basic commodities in a city plagued by shortages, strikes, and a curfew explains the book's long gestation.¹² While Eltit eked out a living in Santiago, where paramilitary units routinely raided the homes of those suspected of political dissension, Picasso lived far removed from the hostilities that wreaked havoc in his homeland. When in early January 1937 the artist was approached "to participate in a project of great symbolic significance for the Spanish Republic," Picasso's "response was typically noncommittal" and he was comfortably working in a "studio on the top floor of the fashionable apartment building at 23, rue la Boétie, on the right bank in Paris" (Herschel B. Chipp 3-4). Known for his aloofness to any official political allegiance, "He hesitated to join his countrymen and fellow artists . . . [because] the project was obviously intended as political propaganda for the Republic and was to be part of a world's fair, normally a place for popular entertainment and edification" (Chipp 4). One could argue that the Spanish Civil War provided Picasso with an opportunity to unwittingly further his self-promotion. Although his sensibilities were not inclined toward mundane matters of common politics and people, he eventually agreed to contribute a piece for the exhibit—perhaps prompted by an awareness of the alarming events on Spanish soil and his innate sense of "Spanishness."¹³ In any case, *Guernica* marked a deviation from Picasso's customary self-absorption in his art and apolitical public stance.

Like Picasso, Eltit avoided official party association, but during the dictatorship she did show socio-political engagement as a member of CADA (Colectivo de acciones de arte) and collaborator in *Por la vida* movement, which organized demonstrations to publicize the disappearance of thousands of Chileans (Jean Franco 70).¹⁴ Nelly Richard points out that during the early part of the dictatorship CADA was part of the Chilean art scene and a radical group whose experimental projects aimed to undermine the traditional art establishment. It attempted not only to bring the "museum" to the people, but also make people on the street the subject of art production; hence, CADA rejected the elitist space of art in society and called for the "fusion of art, life and politics" (Richard *Insubordinación* 37-41). This calls to mind Picasso's break with mainstream art and that *Guernica* was first exhibited in a pavilion at a world's fair and not in a prestigious institution. Among its goals, CADA proposed to dismantle and desacralize all realms of art perceived as aristocratic and that left out or marginalized the masses in its representations (Richard *Insubordinación* 38). The museum and literary canon "masterpiece" were to be reconsidered and the subgenres of popular culture recognized as art forms. This socio-aesthetic reformulation of art was an avant-garde stance for Chilean society in 1979 when the group began working on its various campaigns (Richard *Insubordinación* 38).

As depicted in *E. Luminata*, street people are represented and made subjects of literary and, hence, cultural production.¹⁵ The novel's original Spanish title, *Lumpérica*, suggests social consciousness—an underclass (lumpen) and a violated territory often turned self-selling whore (perica) (Robert Neustadt 58). The issues and indictments contained in Eltit's books in general, and not just in *E. Luminata*, open a discussion about a broader Latin American state of affairs. Taking into account the author's public voicing of concern for the downtrodden, the book's Spanish title, *Lumpérica*, also implies the inclusion of "América" as Third World territory. "The fate of the dispossessed commands an urgency in the conscience of *Lumpérica*'s protagonist and in the art of its author," observes Kadir; that "urgency of the human predicament portrayed in the novel" can be applied to Picasso's depiction of the bombing in *Guernica* and the dictator in *Dream and Lie of Franco* (183).¹⁶ Daniel-Henry

Kahnweiler points out that “the Lumpen-proleteriat of Barcelona, with its beggars, blind people, cripples and prostitutes” had affected the young Picasso long before the events of the war (220).

The Basque’s sense of nation and fierce defense of democracy together with their peripherality within Spanish society—which General Franco aimed to homogenize under Castilian language and culture—parallel the nationalistic fervor of the Chilean working-class depicted in Guzmán’s *The Battle of Chile*. Guzman captures in the film just how hard the poor, jobless, and hungry Chileans afflicted by the economic crisis rallied as the nation’s proletariat to keep the democratically elected Allende in office. In the aftermath of the coup and the fall of democracy they are the street people represented in Eltit’s novel, “America’s lumpen [inhabit]. . . . a shadowy world of humanity alienated from the ‘real’ social order” and thus are marginalized and mistreated as were the Basques in Spain at the time of General Franco (Kadir 182). Picasso’s canvas also depicts what Kadir describes in Eltit’s square as a “phantom space, the symbolic negative image of the civic and civil arena, the ghostly forms of society’s closet skeletons. . . . There they become defined and identified as society’s pallid and insubstantial otherness. . . . Having transformed the town square into the locus and symbolic object of interrogation, . . . the very existence of civic life and the foundations of civilization are put into question” (185-86). Within their respective historic circumstance, both Basques and disenfranchised Chileans constitute a national Other; Picasso’s canvas and Eltit’s book interrogate “human civility on the one hand, while on the other, human civilization itself is deemed questionable in the face of so little humanity and civility so mooted by the exercise of unmitigated power” (186).

Now let us turn to the avant-garde nature of the works themselves. Broadly speaking, as a cubist-influenced painting *Guernica* visually captures what Eltit does with a literary text. Moreover, what Cubism represents—an intellectual revolt against mainstream artistic expression of previous eras—also correlates with Eltit’s radical break with traditional Chilean narrative. “I believe the national novel is tremendously repressive [in Chile],” Eltit has stated in reference to *E. Luminata*. “In my attempt to structure a work without the familiar roadblocks I have borrowed here and there from different genres like poetry, drama and the essay” (Rios S. 30).¹⁷ In addition to

this patchwork of genres, discussed again later in their connection to the collage, Eltit consciously set out to situate *E. Luminata* within the limited space of a public square. Its physical boundaries can be likened to the frame of an artist's canvas. "I have always tended to work within very small spaces," she admits.

In this novel it happens to be a plaza; I had to keep the protagonist there for the span of 200 pages. Believe me, it was not easy. I knew I was literally writing on a square space within which I had to weave my novel. I had to invent, imagine everything that a character could do within that square and in one night. That is to say, I was full of limits, the most marvelously difficult limits that a writer can impose on herself: one space, one character, and a defined length of time (Piña 236).

Introduced by Picasso in his 1907 painting *Les Femmes d'Alger* and further developed in collaboration with George Braque, Cubism focused on the representation of objects from different angles simultaneously as the mind, and not the eye, perceives them.¹⁸ This revolutionary composition exploded space by depicting the three-dimensional object as fragments assembled from multiple points of view (Catherine Fox 9). In Eltit's novel, camera shots and multiple film takes capture different poses or perspectives of the female protagonist in a public square. As a correlate of the many "composition studies" that preceded the finalized version of *Guerinica*, in *E. Luminata* Neustadt sees "a kind of narrative photo album" (28). Furthermore, given that in the novel the protagonist, in the middle of the plaza and under the light of the giant neon light, performs as if on stage and while being filmed, the visual notion of photos—like the still pictures taken of Picasso's work-in-progress—literally turns into "motion" pictures, or "units of movements"¹⁹ when "the perpetual re-representation of [*E. Luminata*] in a series of different perspectives, viewpoints and media" is read as "spectacle" and "performance" (Neustadt 28). As I will detail later, when the reader considers the direct link between the text and Eltit's photo in the book, and the "video still from *Maipu*—a double projection of Eltit's face—on the cover," *E. Luminata*'s visual components can no more be ignored than those of Picasso's painting (Neustadt 59-60).

E. Luminata as textual artifact shows visible signs of a fragmented construction reminiscent of cubist art. The book largely consists

of numbered sections. Within the sections, pages vary greatly as to the amount of print on them. Some may feature a few sentences, or merely a phrase or a fragment of a sentence. Other pages are formed by clusters of paragraphs headed by numerals or are interspersed with capitalized headings. Variations in margins, font size and page layout, as well as distorted syntax and lack of punctuation contribute further to the visually unconventional nature of Eltit's text.

The collage, a common cut and paste technique in modern art, is a legacy of Picasso's innovations within Cubism. "A man with a voracious and expansive aesthetic curiosity," writes art critic Margaret Fox, "he worked in any and every medium. . . . [and] routinely collapsed boundaries between art mediums" such as painting, sculpture, ceramics, photography and print (9). In the same vein, Eltit's *E.Luminata* can be described as a "written collage" which partakes of Picasso's assemblage or montage technique. "I join various literary genres: from the novel, poetry, theater, essay, the language of visual media and cinematography," Eltit explained in an interview with Ana María Foxley; "It is a way of shattering the novel as a monolithic form of chronological storytelling" (41). Conscious or not, at the time it was also a way of depicting a shattered Chile, a country in crisis.

One must keep in mind that in the aftermath of the bombing of the presidential palace in Santiago and the collapse of democracy, chaos and fear swept the capital and provinces.²⁰ Supporters of Unidad Popular, the coalition of parties that had led Allende to power, immediately became dissidents and targeted for repression. While on the one hand the paramilitary units secretly institutionalized disappearance, imprisonment, torture and murder as methods for securing ideological hegemony, on the other there was an attempt to maintain a simulacrum of "order." To this end, the regime aggressively campaigned for Chileans to espouse traditional values connected with the family, the Catholic Church and patriotism. Women were praised for their role in the home, recruited for volunteer work in charitable organizations and urged to model in their families support for the greater Chilean family, the homeland (Neustadt 26-29). Borrowing Neustadt's phrase, "confusing signs"—apt descriptor of abstract/cubist art as well—enveloped a Chilean society whose government clandestinely committed crimes against humanity as it

publicly promoted morality and family values.

Within this national climate Eltit launched *E. Luminata*, an artistic coup no less dramatic than Picasso's turn of the century cubist deviation from tradition. The complex multi-genre novel with ambiguous and nonstandard language, no detectable plot, fragmented narrative and distorted syntax reflected the Chilean State. "One way to read Eltit's experimental style . . .," observes Neustadt, "would posit that she mimetically represents the confusion of a society that has been blown to pieces. . . . Eltit discursively opposes the neo-fascistic sense of order imposed by the military dictatorship" (26-27). As previously noted, this "sense of order" included the government's push to keep women at home.

Eltit responds with a female protagonist who erotically displays herself in a city plaza during curfew. *E. Luminata* subverts patriarchal dictates of female appropriate space and mainstream novelistic construction. But, like in the many angles and perspectives depicted in a cubist painting, there is a lot more going on simultaneously in that plaza. In broad terms, and by no means all inclusive or independent of each other, within the square's confines Eltit represents: a feminist perspective that liberates the female subject, a socially conscious recognition of the underclass, gestures of political intolerance, the undermining of religious icons, the fusion of reality and fiction, a dismantling of standard language and dominant discourses, a recasting of Western male constructs of the female as cinematic object, a multi-genre and multi-media novelistic coup, and a challenge to the literary establishment—in sum, an enactment of "an all-out confrontation, not mere resistance, that assails the institutional foundations of Latin American culture and political structures" (Kadir 180).

In Santiago's literary circles, Eltit's unconventional writing made her as much a "revolutionary" and an "anarchist" as Picasso had been reputed to be in his time (Oppler 56). The depth of symbolic quality in both Picasso's painting and Eltit's book is an important common denominator in the works of these artists. It defines their style at this particular time in their artistic development. Neither depicted life mimetically as in traditional realism. In each case the multiple layers of meaning contribute to a level of abstractness that is challenging for the viewer/reader. As Rudolf Arnheim explains, while

“every work of art is symbolic by its very nature,” every work of art varies in its “reality level,” or the level at which its representation is anchored in reality (15). *Guernica*’s visual images and *E. Luminata*’s text must be “read” differently because their obscure nature admits manifold meanings. In Eltit’s novel the very text warns readers that they will encounter “writings open to more than one interpretation . . .” (199).

On more specific terms, the action in both works takes place in a public setting, a plaza in Santiago, Chile and the streets of *Guernica*; however, Picasso’s painting may also depict *Guernica*’s plaza since we know that the Germans bombed the town precisely on market day. A similar focal point in both Picasso’s and Eltit’s work is an electric light that looms over the street scene. In *Guernica* one stark bulb on the large canvas sheds light over the dark chaotic scene of destruction. Picasso’s monochrome palette in contrast with the centrally located light bulb creates the illusion of a night raid. The different shades of grays and blacks give the panel a somber appearance in keeping with the morbid scene it represents.

Similarly, *E. Luminata* takes place at nightfall in a public square with one neon light flashing rhythmically, illuminating the body of the female protagonist who is identified by the same name as the novel’s title. Like Picasso’s panel, Eltit’s palette is monochrome and her images defy the traditional model of beauty. The cropped-haired protagonist is clad in a long gray shapeless dress cinched at the waist with a cord, a garment reminiscent of monastic garb in its austere design and color. Her lack of female attractiveness clashes with the woman’s provocatively erotic demeanor.

Given *E. Luminata*’s comportment in a public place and within a patriarchal society, the intermittent spotlight acts as a God-like incriminating eye.²¹ But whether this artificial eye is interpreted as a mechanism denouncing a female’s inappropriate behavior or, on the contrary, a light aimed at drawing attention to the female’s subversive posture or even the God-like eye of a dictator’s vigilance over the population, the spotlight features prominently in Eltit’s book. This source of light emanating from above the square parallels Picasso’s light bulb in *Guernica*, painted up high on the canvas with radiating beams that make it look like a human eye gazing over a chaotic night scene. Directly related to this, *Guernica* and *E. Lu-*

minata solicit a spectator's gaze; both works are themselves spectacles. Swiss art historian Reinhold Hohl has noted that "Looking at *Guernica* we are participating, so to speak, in one of those theatrical events that Antonin Artaud envisioned in his manifesto of 1932, 'The Theater of Cruelty'" (319).

Hohl's reading of Picasso's painting as "a staged drama" also applies to Eltit's novel. Again, in *E. Luminata* the public square acts as a stage for the protagonist and as stage lighting there is the illuminated neon sign flashing from atop a nearby building. The adjacent street "appears like a set and in the same way the pedestrians, actors crossing it. It is a ghostly set in its desolation, its emptiness" (192). Besides the illuminated advertisement acting as stage light, the first chapter, replete with references to "poses," "spectacle," "film shot," "show," "framing," "screen," and "cameras" also includes sections remarking on various "takes" and "scenes," which serve to emphasize the text's visual component. Furthermore, the derelicts that congregate in the square at night play the role of spectators or film extras in *E. Luminata*'s performance. Identified as "the ragged people of Santiago . . . [and] generically named the pale people, . . . [they] have clustered around *E. Luminata* merely as visual complement to her forms" (14-16). Hence, the novel turns artifact to be viewed. Under "NOTES FOR THE FIRST SCENE" we read: "To cinematically compose something like a *mural* in the public square, highlighting what's marginal in the *spectacle*" (my emphasis 21).²²

Throughout Eltit's writing the inclusion of disadvantaged sectors of society articulates her concern for the dispossessed of Latin America. Poor, disabled, incarcerated, homeless, indigenous and abused people find representation in her books. In the novel, the vagrants of Santiago, "pale and stinking" are a socially disenfranchised, displaced lot, literally embodying a huddled mass of human calamity and devastation no less tragic than the war victims depicted in *Guernica*. Through their respective media, Picasso's painting and Eltit's novel speak of man's disregard for the dignity and value of life that lies at the root of the horrors committed by tyrants and those who uphold their power.

Artaud's "theatre of cruelty" aimed to disturb the audience and destroy the semblance of civilized human behavior, returning man to a primitive state lacking morality or reason. In order to accom-

plish this, Artaud stressed the importance of violence as a theatrical device. As Hohl points out, "The audience was bombarded with inescapable, realistic shock effects from all sides, from on stage and in front of it: piercing screams, the sight of blood, and blinding spot-lights" (319). Screams, blood and bright light are visible elements in *Guernica* and inscribed in *E. Luminata* as well.

With exception of the bull and the dead baby, the human and animal figures in *Guernica* cry out, mouths gaping in pain and despair. One of the multiple sections early in Eltit's novel deals with "production of the cry" (28). The text, turned script for a scene to be filmed, can be compared to Picasso's visual representation since what the writing describes is meant to be viewed and not read. In order to produce the cry, cameras close in on the protagonist as *E. Luminata* "stretches herself out face down on the ground . . . raises her head . . . and violently smashes it against the ground," thus lacerating her forehead so that it bathes her in blood (28). Parallel to the numerous cries in *Guernica*, "the cry [in the novel] will be produced again and again . . ." and continually amplified by technology up to an earsplitting level and transformed "from the feminine timbre to different masculine cries. . . . Until finally they begin to superimpose cry upon cry as well as to annex her voice in extreme distortion" (29). Further on we read: "The sequence's power is the cry. . . . [S]he . . . will revert to the primal howl" (29-30).

In Picasso's mural too, the "primal howl" escaping from the mouths of man, woman and beast makes us sympathize with the horrified faces. The power of *Guernica* lies in Picasso's ability to capture "the production of the cry" in those gaping mouths, which stand out within the expansive conglomeration of superimposed, ambiguous figures.²³ The illusion of agony is emphasized with sharp, angular images. Tongues, flames and breasts are painted to look like blades; a spear pierces the horse; the hand and arms of the fallen male figure are crossed with cuts, and his head and arm appear severed from his torso.

The violence and corporal mutilation depicted in *Guernica* has a correlate in *E. Luminata*'s various incidents of bodily disfigurement. Even before the scene which records *E. Luminata*'s injuring her forehead for the "production of the cry" we read: "Her hands reach out, she grasps the nearest tree and brings her face toward it. . . .

She smashes her head against the tree. She smashes her head against the tree again and again until the blood overflows the skin, it bathes her face that blood . . ." (24). Later another self-inflicted wound, similar to Artaud's theatrical devices, shocks the reader: "[F]acing the fire she brings her hand near, stretches her hand out over the flames. . . And her hand open over the flames changes color, her face also turns red. She looks at her hand, the blisters that are rising, the contraction of the fingers" (41-42). These scenes, too, reflect Eltit's style—shocking the reader with allusions to pain and anguish, as did Picasso in the visual depiction of *Guernica* as war site.

These apparent masochistic scenes spill into reality in chapter eight, titled "Dress Rehearsal." Recalling the criss-crossing gashes on the arm of Picasso's male figure, an ambiguous black and white photograph of the author shows Eltit exhibiting bloody cuts on her arms.²⁴ "Dress Rehearsal," studied in detail by Neustadt as "performance art" describes and meditates on the six cuts that the right hand inflicts on the left arm ((*Con*)*Fusing Signs* 47-54). In 1980, three years before the book's publication, Eltit actually cut and burned her arms and then read part of the manuscript in a brothel. Its filming resulted in the video, *Maipu*.²⁵ The photo negative of this one image from Eltit's "performance," with a small superimposed video still of the author's face taken from *Maipu*, became the book cover of *E. Luminata*, thus thrusting the cuts of human mutilation onto the unsuspecting (English) reader's gaze—just as the disturbing figures in *Guernica* jump out at the viewer. Picasso's painted subjects and Eltit's photo converge as visual components that directly link each work to the creator's representation of reality—specifically human suffering.

Besides the brothel, as a place of exploitation and misery, at the time Eltit also worked with other socially marginal areas such as psychiatric hospitals, flop houses, and jails which she calls "zones of pain." "My concern is to expose these places," Eltit is quoted as saying, "to become one with them by my physical presence. My wish is not to morally change them, but only to show that they actually exist . . . It is a form of individual pain confronting the collective pain" (Richard *Margins* 73). Again, let us not forget that at the time of military rule widespread fear and violence literally had turned the whole of Chile into a "zone of pain," valid description for the town

of *Guernica* as well.

Eltit's use of her body as artistic slate bridges the written medium of the novel and the visual and plastic arts. In this regard the author joins the ranks of European and American women artists who have engaged in various forms of "body art" (Lippard 121).²⁶ In the "rehearsal" turned-ceremony, the knife replaces the pen, cutting substitutes writing, the body becomes the page or a canvas: "[T]his third cut . . . is scarcely graffiti on the skin of the arm . . ." (150).²⁷ Scarring the arms is an extreme expression of the author's connectedness with the pain and suffering inherent in sexual exploitation, social marginalization and political repression. Just as Cubism's disfiguring of the body—as a retaliatory statement against the Greek model of beauty—is associated with Picasso's style and served him well in his politically-laden work of art, so too Eltit's linguistic distortions serve as a break from literary conventions, which became her trademark.²⁸ Let us keep in mind that the author's self-scarring reflected a nation's reality at a time when the mutilated bodies of tortured Chileans were routinely found dumped in public places.²⁹ Despite the differences in historical moments, gender positions and name recognition, if we focus on technical composition and theme, we come back to *Guernica* and *E. Luminata* as cultural artifacts anchored in the violence of their particular epoch, yet universally provocative beyond any one tragedy.

The theme of sacrifice, specifically Christ on the cross, is yet another point of intersection between Picasso's and Eltit's works. The self-mortification portrayed in the novel suggests a ritual exorcism, a purification, which from a religious perspective evokes a Christ-like sacrifice. Coincidentally, the only time Eltit's protagonist speaks in the novel is after each incident of violence—the head wound(s), the burned hand. The two words she exclusively articulates are: "—I'm thirsty—" (25, 29, 42, 48, 100). Insofar as the Spanish phrase "tengo sed"/I'm thirsty in an erotic context communicates sexual desire, the following passage implies the prospect of satisfaction: "If she's to repeat in the story—I'm thirsty—anybody, even the most ragged of them, [would anoint her lips] in order to leave her satisfied" (34).³⁰ These same two words, however, are uttered by Christ on the Cross, and his lips are also moistened: "Jesus, aware that all had now come to its appointed end, said in

fulfillment of Scripture, 'I thirst'. A jar stood there of sour wine; so they soaked a sponge with the wine, fixed it on a javelin, and held it up to his lips" (John 19:28-29). Evidently, the words "tengo sed" fuse the erotic and religious elements of textual construction.

E. Luminata emerges as both whorish and Christ-like. She is a "public" woman, a woman who expresses her sexuality in a public square. Written into her script is the punishment for the sins of the body, for lust and carnal pleasure. Christ's script had also been written for him, his suffering for the sins of humanity came to pass "in fulfillment of Scripture." *E. Luminata*, like Christ, delivers her message in public; similarly the poor, the homeless, the sick, "the ragged people" make up her audience. From a feminist perspective, the underlying implication in this dual female image is the shattering of the traditional stereotypes of woman as either whore or Madonna.

As to *Guernica*, art historians have traced the connection between Picasso's mural and the Crucifixion, a recurrent theme illustrated in a cycle of thirty-nine canvases completed by the artist over the span of six decades, from 1902-1959, and a common preoccupation in Spanish art (Frank Russell 11). Studies of *Guernica* dissect an array of symbols, poses, gestures, and images resembling a modern representation of Calvary (Russell 10-42). For the layman's eye, however, it is the bereaved mother holding the dead child in *Guernica* that most readily conjures the image of the suffering Madonna, but one visibly more disturbed than in the *Pietà*.

In the mural, the bull and horse also embody sacrifice as tragic participants in the traditional Spanish "corrida"—recurrent object of the painter's tribute to Spanishness throughout his career (Russell 43). But, whereas in the ring the bull charges, gores, stamps and uses his brute strength against the taunting of the picador's lacerating pike, the defenseless picador's horse, a scapegoat for the infuriated beast, is a passive, Christ-like victim of the spectacle. Hoisted and impaled by the bull's horns, the horse often dies from his wounds. His martyrdom serves to weaken the bull sufficiently so as to give the "banderilleros" and the "torero" an edge; the picador's mount is sacrificed so that the "banderilleros" and the "matador," on foot in the bullring, have a chance to survive (Russell 45). Notably, Picasso displaced the bull to one corner of the mural and granted the horse's passion a central position in the work.

Similarly, as if in a plaza “de toros” filled with spectators, one chapter in *E. Luminata* depicts the lighted square with the protagonist-turned mare at its center and the “ragged pale people” as onlookers; all have part in “the dramatic stage of a society’s passion play” (Kadir 184). Given the erotic content of Eltit’s novel, the protagonist’s metamorphosis into a horse represents the unleashing of her “sexual” passion. However, for a female, sexual autonomy can become object of exploitation as suggested by allusions to prostitution and pornographic filming:

In her animal course she is gaited slow as though she really were an offer, twitches off flies for lined-up lumpen, her haunches tremble to transport them; she becomes stained, broadens, fattens grows stronger to really support this mounted pack, approaching neighs at them, moos at them, scraping the concrete with those hoofs/trots/gallops to fire them up, tempting them with such business. . . . Two mountings: the rider himself and the other who aims at her with the camera, but not at the whole beast, just at the flank. . . . They walk by and check, they line up to mount her, the lumpen itself is roaring/ is about to jump the fence. (64-72)

Determined to achieve autonomy, however, the mare intends to undermine her rider’s control: “If . . . mounted . . . she would stop following orders, would twist her path by threatening to crash into the trees or rather against benches instead, always disobey the command of other legs, so that her feet would mark a path different from the mounted’s” (65). In a symbolic rejection of the phallus, by “Bucking, shaking, throwing that rider off her haunch” (71), the mare takes back control of her body and puts an end to its exploitation and the injury caused by “the rage of the spurs” penetrating her sides. Ultimately, one can interpret the mare’s wild, provocative revelry as a symbolic representation of Eltit’s desire to break free from the dictates of a stiflingly provincial Chilean literary establishment.

As we know, Picasso too felt stifled in Spain and compelled to self-exile in order to develop his talents further and experiment with innovative aesthetic styles. *Guernica*, like *E. Luminata*, stands as exemplar of the artist’s determination to veer off the traditional path. Neither work was initially understood. Each creator withstood criticism, rejection and isolation. Each, driven by artistic integrity,

has contributed an unorthodox cultural artifact that inscribes national expressions of crisis extending beyond geographic borders and able to communicate the universal. The historical and aesthetic connections drawn here between *E. Luminata* and *Guernica* hope to invite further readings and other approaches to teaching Eltit's book, a text rich in interpretative possibilities, whose conglomeration of themes, genres and mediums are sure to frustrate and captivate readers.

Notes

1 I intend to explore the connections between these two avant-garde works to expand on a reference about *Guernica* that Djelal Kadir makes with respect to one scene in *Lumpérica* (*Other Writing* 186).

2 For *Guernica* and other virtual images of Picasso's work see Texas A&M University's On-line Picasso Project <http://www.tamu.edu/mocl/picasso/> headed by Enrique Mallen. I am not trained as an art historian and do not attempt or claim such an approach for analysis here. My aim simply entails a suggestion: elucidating for students of literature Eltit's difficult text by using *Guernica*—a work known widely and appreciated by a diverse population—as a useful tool for understanding what appears obscure.

3 When asked if Picasso's *Guernica* had influenced her textual construction, Eltit responded that she did not consciously have it in mind while writing the book, but the connections I described interested her.

4 As prime examples, María Inés Lagos introduced Eltit to graduate students when teaching at Washington University in the 1980s and Juan Carlos Lértora of Skidmore College edited *Una poética de literatura menor: la narrativa de Diamela Eltit*, a first Spanish language book on Eltit's work and made it available to the U.S. market through the distribution house *Paratextos* that he and Patricia Rubio, his wife and colleague, founded in order to disseminate Chilean literature in North America.

5 Besides visits to U.S. institutions as key-note speaker at conferences or other speaking engagements, Eltit has held posts as writer-in-residence at Brown University, Yale University, Washington University, Columbia University and University of California, Berkeley <http://www.clas.berkeley.edu:7001/People/visiting/fall03-spring04/>.

6 Before my publication of *Marginalities: Diamela Eltit and the Subversion of Mainstream Literature in Chile*—a first book-length study of Eltit’s work in English that attempted to redress this dearth of critical attention—a handful of North American critics had published books with a chapter dedicated to Eltit’s writing. Among these are Djelal Kadir’s *The Other Writing* (1993), Mary Beth Tierney-Tello’s *Allegories of Transgression and Transformation* (1996), Idelber Avelar’s *The Untimely Present* (1999) and Robert Neustadt’s *(C)onfusing Signs and Postmodern Positions* (1999). Notably, by the time the earliest of these became available to the literary market in 1993, ten years after Lumpérica, Eltit had published four other books.

7 In connection with Eltit receiving a Guggenheim Fellowship, Djelal Kadir observes the “all too often ironic fate that befalls ‘Third-World’ writers” since in Chile The Guggenheim Foundation operated the Anaconda Mining Company, whose great fortune was “built with the lifeblood of her people” (181-82).

8 In *The Battle of Chile: the struggle of an unarmed people* Patricio Guzmán films throughout Chile to document the social, economic, and political upheavals that led to the bombing of the presidential palace.

9 For further insight into the 1973 Chilean coup backed by US intelligence and capital see writing by Petras and LaPorte, Teitelboim and also U.S. Senate *Hearings*.

10 Unless otherwise noted, all comments by Eltit are my translations.

11 In his 1979 study of Picasso’s cubist years Pierre Daix notes the serious division “between the champions of traditional painting who persisted in the belief that Picasso’s work was rubbish, that he was no more than a fringe phenomenon, a practical joker or, at best, a liquidator, and those who . . . saw this breakthrough in contemporary art as a phase in the whole history of mankind” (7).

12 Eltit has commented on the difficulty of depicting what daily existence was like under dictatorship. The insufficiency of language to capture “that nightmarish life that one lived without trivializing it is a dilemma for a writer . . . [because] if you narrate it, you will fall short. You have to leave it open because it’s so difficult [to recount]” (“Diamela” 5).

13 Regarding his involvement in war efforts, “D.H. Kahnweiler, his oldest friend and patron,” stated that Picasso was the most apolitical.
<https://www.britannica.com/entry/david-hugues-kahnweiler/overview>
DOI: 10.4148/2334-4415.1637

cal man he had ever known" (Chipp 6). It was not until the Second World War that Picasso experienced the hardships of life in occupied Paris. In 1944, after the liberation of Paris, he joined the French Communist Party and thereafter took part in various public events promoting social justice. His true loyalty to party ideals, however, became a debatable issue from the start and a topic of irresolvable contention (O'Brian 371-375, Chipp 195-96, Penrose 67-68).

14 In her books, *Margins and Institutions: Art in Chile since 1973* (53-57) and *La insubordinación de los signos* (37-54), Richard describes the various art-based actions that members of CADA took in order to manifest social commitment. See also *Conversaciones con la narrativa chilena* (Piña 233, 237).

15 This is the case with *El Padre Mío* (1989), a seventy-page book of transcriptions that gathers a homeless man's speech as recorded by Eltit during a span of three years. For more detail see the chapter in my book, *Margin-alities*.

16 See Oppler for the text of Picasso's poem, one whose stream of consciousness appealed to the Surrealists and calls to mind Eltit's postmodern writing in *E. Luminata* (184-86).

17 Writing in North American academe many years after the publication of *Lumpérica*, Idelber Avelar notes that of all the literature analyzed in *Untimely Present: Postdictatorial Latin American Fiction and the Task of Mourning* "Eltit's is doubtless the one that goes furthest in breaking down the boundaries of genre, especially those that separate poetry, prose, and drama" (165).

18 Also befitting Eltit's first novel, Pierre Daix notes the "intellectual courage" of *Les Demoiselles D'Avignon* as initial cubist incursion. The painting dropped like a bombshell on the art community and remained rolled up in Picasso's studio for many years until Jacques Doucet bought it in 1920 (Pierre Daix 62-63, 1965, O'Brian 151). "With this painting, which was not understood even by broad-minded contemporary artists," Boeck relates that "Picasso entered a period of 'horrible moral solitude'" (Boeck and Sabartès 147). Coincidentally, the painting's theme and title, "which refers to a brothel in Carrer d'Avinyó (Avignon Street) in Barcelona" (Boeck and Sabartès 142), parallels *E. Luminata's* connection with the video *Maipu*, titled after Maipu Street in Santiago and location of the brothel where Eltit filmed her reading of the unfinished manuscript (Neustadt 25, 58-59).

19 See feminist film critic Teresa de Lauretis's *Alice Doesn't*, 43.

20 Unidad Popular included Allende's Socialist Party; the CP, Communist Party; the MIR, Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria; the MAPU, Partido Mapu Obrero Campesino; and other leftist groups.

21 When not underlined *E. Luminata* refers to the novel's protagonist.

22 The mention of "a mural in the public square, highlighting what's marginal" calls to mind the visual images of peasants and indigenous elements depicted by Mexican muralists like Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros and José Clemente Orozco, who were mindful of making art accessible to the population at large by painting on the walls of public buildings.

23 Picasso emphasizes this element in the text of his poem "Dream and Lie of Franco," which was written in conjunction with the etchings about the then Spanish dictator: "... cries of children cries of women cries of birds cries of flowers cries of timbers and of stones cries of bricks cries of furniture of beds of chairs of curtains of pots of cats and papers cries of odors which claw at one another ..." (Oppler 186).

24 This picture, which originally appeared as part of the text in *Lumpérica*, was also featured in *E. Luminata*'s 1997 book cover.

25 In *Margins and Institutions: Art in Chile since 1973* Richard identifies Diamela Eltit and her ex-husband, Raúl Zurita, as two Chilean writers who engaged in painful "acts of resignation ... modeled on *sacrifice* or *martyrdom*" (66). Richard's book contains several pictures of Eltit. Among them is the one on the original Spanish book cover, which is actually the projection of her face on a wall opposite the brothel where she read her work. Another is a different version of the picture displaying her cut arms that appears in the novel. There is also one of Eltit washing the entrance to the brothel, and another of her inside reading from her work-in-progress.

26 Lippard records the various ways women have used themselves in attempts to de-censor the female body. Like Eltit, French artist Gina Pane "has cut herself with razor blades, [she has also] eaten until she was sick, and subjected herself to other tortures" (Lippard 135).

27 Actually the bodily scarring is not introduced until the last page of the chapter, where we read: "She keeps her sight fixed with quick blinks. The fingers of her right hand hold up the small sharp blade. Without looking she brings it toward her hide; The Dress Rehearsal is going to begin" (165).

This nonlinear sequencing is in keeping with Eltit's subversion of "order" discussed earlier and also comparable to the nontraditional visual perspective in cubist art.

28 In fact, "Dress Rehearsal" does not begin with corporal, but with linguistic deformation: "She moo/s/hears and her hand feeds mind-fully the green disentangles and maya she erects herself sha/m-an and vac/a-nal her shape. She anal-izes the plot = thickens the skin: the hand catches = fire and the phobia d is/members" (150-51).

29 As the only two writers among the members of CADA, Avelar suggests the importance of "the polis as *wounded body* permeating Zurita's and Eltit's early work, as well as these works' offer of an aesthetic ritual that might effect a redemptive, quasi-religious form of redemption. . . . In a time when art no longer sang epic praises of political hope but could not avoid coming to terms with its social mode of existence either, self-sacrifice often became the privileged gesture of immersion into the collective" (168-69).

30 I insert "would anoint her lips" as my own translation of the Spanish "le untaría los labios" (*Lumpérica* 34) because the published translation ("even the most ragged of them, will join lips to hers") does not convey the religious allusion captured in the original Spanish.

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