

Women's Political Status: Female Difference and Public Involvement in Diamela Eltit's *Fuerzas especiales*

El estatus político de las mujeres: Diferencia y participación de las mujeres en lo público en *Fuerzas especiales* de Diamela Eltit

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Abstract

This article analyzes *Fuerzas especiales*' representation of women's political status and public involvement. From a close reading of the protagonist-narrator's role as the breadwinner of her family and drawing insights from feminist political theory, this work conducts a theoretically-informed textual analysis of the novels' view of female public involvement at work in a context of state repression. It aims to unveil the way in which the novel engages critically with the ambiguities of a model of women's political participation based on female difference and the politics of motherhood.

Keywords: Diamela Eltit, *Fuerzas especiales*, women's political status.

Resumen

El presente artículo explora la manera en que la novela *Fuerzas especiales* representa el estatus político de las mujeres y su involucramiento en lo público. A partir de una lectura detallada del rol de sostenedora de la familia de su protagonista-narradora y acercamientos desde la teoría política feminista, se realiza un análisis textual teóricamente informado sobre el planteamiento que la novela hace del involucramiento de las mujeres en lo público a través del trabajo en un contexto de represión estatal. El objetivo de este análisis es desvelar la manera en que *Fuerzas especiales* se involucra de manera crítica con un modelo de participación política de las mujeres basado en la diferencia y la política maternal.

Palabras clave: Diamela Eltit, *Fuerzas especiales*, estatus político de las mujeres.

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Introduction

Diamela Eltit (1949-) is one of the most influential contemporary Chilean writers. Among other accolades, in 2018, she was awarded the Chilean National Prize for Literature and her fictional work has attracted the attention of scholars from various approaches internationally. Although diverse, comments about Eltit tend to agree on highlighting the way in which her work places the public space as a central site of intervention and resistance (Brito 111). The *plaza* in *Lumpérica* (1983), the supermarket in *Mano de obra* (2002) and the *población*¹ in *Fuerzas especiales* (2013) are a few examples of such spaces, which are located in what Gareth Williams describes as nameless, geographically and culturally indistinct cities, inhabited by the *lumpen* or people from the margins of the city and society (Williams 125). In this context, Eltit's literary politics has also been discussed by scholars. Various commentators note that her literary politics consists of placing women as the main figure in Chilean literature not only as author, but importantly, as narrator and protagonist. Furthermore, Eltit's literary political project shows a notorious interest in women from the marginal positions of the *lumpen* heroine. This alliance with characters from the margins of society as well as Eltit's rich and intellectually demanding writing style have been praised by critics as a reaction against traditional standpoints in Chilean literature, a challenge to contemporary neoliberal literary canons (Brito 117; Green 17; Llanos 116; Olea 60-80).

Published in 2013, *Fuerzas especiales*² is one of the most recent novels by Eltit. Its themes and narrative techniques provide us with fruitful insights into the above questions already noted by scholars. Accordingly, commentaries on this novel have especially explored the vulnerable and precarious public spaces portrayed by the story, underscoring a relationship between repression and the potential of resistance that these spaces suggest in Eltit's fictional worlds (Barrientos; Espinosa; Navarrete Barría; Scarabelli). This article will examine the way in which Eltit's literary politics, in *Fuerzas especiales*, revolves around the political status of women in a repressive, capitalist and digital context, with a focus, however, on how the novel critically revisits the actual potential of female political emancipation.

The novel has a female first-person narrator, who is also the protagonist. The novel employs a formal language register with only few expressions representative

1 *Población* refers to socially stigmatized lower-class neighbourhoods, which in Chile may have formal or informal origins. They may be state housing projects or informal slum settlements.

2 This article refers to *Fuerzas especiales*'s edition published by Planeta, Seix Barral Biblioteca Breve in Santiago, Chile in June 2013. Subsequent references to the text will be given in brackets by indicating the page number only.

of the Chilean lower-class sociolect despite being set in an unnamed Chilean *población* that is besieged by the police forces. This language register is supported by the fact that the narrator dedicates her spare time to do extensive online reading. She has access to various kinds of information and can be read as an educated person, though not through traditional schooling. The narrator lives with her sister, mother and father, who are confined to their apartment, waiting for the police to come and take them. The absence of los *niños*, who have been already taken away by the police, has left permanent marks on the family and the protagonist takes care of them, as her sister and mother some days are unable to get out of bed (11-3). The protagonist is also the only one who goes out of the apartment to work; she rents a cubicle in a cybercafé administered by her friend El Lucho and prostitutes herself at a very cheap rate, an activity that her friend El Omar also does for a living.

Women's Political Status: The Public and the Private

Feminist political theorists have extensively explored the link between the public and the private with regard to women's political status. Carole Pateman points out that "the public" cannot be comprehended in isolation and needs to be understood in its relationship to "the private". The "individual", so prominent in liberal political theory—a model on which most contemporary democracies are based—is sexually indifferent only if it is disembodied. She notes that only men are born free and equal, and that they constructed sexual difference as a political difference; this is a difference based on men's alleged natural freedom and women's natural subjection (Pateman 3-5). This is the sexual contract upon which the social contract has been historically built. As she puts it, "The story of the sexual contract reveals that the patriarchal construction of the difference between masculinity and femininity is the political difference between freedom and subjection, and that sexual mastery is the major means through which men affirm their manhood" (Pateman 207). Liberal theory accepts that some rights are inviolable for they exist in a private sphere; those are marriage, family, household and childcare, where the state cannot interfere. Thus, identifying politics with "the public" denies the pertinence of gender and defines politics and democracy as male-centred (Phillips 6). Liberal individualism promised equality between women and men as naturally free individuals, but at the same time, due to the "natural" subordination of wives to husbands, women have not enjoyed the opportunity to develop capacities in the public space, which has been traditionally denied to them (Pateman 217). The public and the private need to be viewed as a single side of liberal patriarchalism (121-2).

In Latin America, important changes for women have taken place in the last decades, such as the decline in fertility, rising levels of education and employment, a weakening in patriarchal household arrangements, upward trends in divorce, increase in the number of female-headed households and, to some extent, a crisis in masculine identity (Chant 2-4). However, despite this changing situation, the exclusion of women from politics and the public arena, and the view of women's identity as linked to motherhood are still predominant (Chant 9-10). Therefore, a central concern for theorists of the political status of Latin American women also is the expansion of what it is understood by the term "political". The strict division between the public and the private in understanding the political produces an essentialized account of women's public involvement and stresses the simplistic view of "public man/private woman" (Cubitt and Greensdale 53-5). This is especially significant for a region where motherhood is central to women's identity. Women's political status is intrinsically connected to private matters, such as motherhood, rape, sexual abuse, sexual rights, domestic violence and domestic labour, among others.

In Latin America, the emphasis on motherhood as central to women's identity has resulted in women also focusing on social or domestic issues when they become involved in politics, and parties and regimes of all political tendencies have adhered to the idealization of motherhood as the "destiny" of women (Craske 5-6). This has opened some spaces of political involvement for women, especially in cases of armed and social conflict, when women have been able to make political demands on behalf of others, of human rights and community welfare, but it also means an exclusionary identity for women (Franceschet 208-9). Women's political participation in Latin America and especially in the Southern Cone, has been traditionally framed by the politics of motherhood. The politics of motherhood is closely related to the "militant mothers", which is the idea that women's resistance to military authoritarianism was justified by their traditional responsibilities as mothers (Alvarez; Pieper Mooney 104). Examples of women's movements based on the politics of motherhood in Chile during the second half of the twentieth century include: the cacerolazos or "pots and pans" demonstrations by women who protested against Allende's government and questioned the masculinity of the members of the armed forces, mocking them and demanding that they seize power; human rights groups led by women protesting during and after the dictatorship over the disappearance of their relatives; and organizations of poor urban women who worked together to mitigate the effects of the economic crisis of the late 1970s and early 1980s, such as the *ollas comunes*, *comprando juntos* and the *cooperativas de aborro para la Vivienda* (Montecino 96-108). These women's movements

have in common a political motivation based on their role as mothers and political strategies viewed as an extension of the roles that women have traditionally occupied in the family and as providers of welfare to the community. A similar focus on women's political status and female public involvement is suggested by *Fuerzas especiales* in the representation of its female narrator-protagonist as the breadwinner of her family in a setting of state violence and repression, as the analysis below will show.

Prostitution in the Depiction of a Woman's Work

Fuerzas especiales suggests female agency and public involvement, with the idea of the protagonist being the one who supports her family by prostituting herself; in her own words:

Voy al ciber como mujer a buscar entre las pantallas mi comida. Todos se comen. Me comen a mí también, me bajan los calzones frente a las pantallas. O yo misma me bajo mis calzones en el ciber, me los bajo atravesada por el resplandor magnético de las computadoras. En cambio, el Omar o el Lucho solamente se lo sacan, es más fácil, más limpio, más sano, provistos de la cómoda seguridad de que nada les resulte destructivo o verdaderamente insalvable (11-2).

The protagonist's financial responsibilities and the fact that she is the only one in the family who leaves the home to do paid work may carry, at first sight, a notion of gender equality in terms of participation in the labour market. This is a perverse type of equality though, awful for everyone, as both men and women are forced to put up with abuse in order to survive economically. On the one hand, the narrator tells us *me bajan los calzones*, which stresses female subjugation and sexual exploitation, while on the other, her words *o yo misma me bajo mis calzones* may be ambiguously read as both the acceptance of her vulnerable status and a notion of potential female agency when she presumably authorizes access to her body. But the protagonist's words also underline gender inequalities. Both male and female characters are oppressed and need to prostitute themselves, however, there is still a difference in the abuse suffered by the female protagonist in contrast to that of her male friends. There is a stronger sense of nakedness and greater vulnerability in the idea of the protagonist having to take off all her underwear in order to prostitute herself in contrast to her male friends, who do not need to be left in such a physical exposure. This varying degree of nakedness points to protection in the case of men. They are all subjugated but, in this labour market, there is still an emphasis on men's greater

safety, as the male characters do what they do for a living “provistos de la cómoda seguridad de que nada les resulte destructivo” (12).

The narrator suggests the social magnitude of the abuse that she suffers when she prostitutes herself. She relates, “Llevo diez minutos exactos sentada arriba de un lulo que se clava adentro de mí como si recibiera el impacto de una sucesión de balas de alto calibre, una y otra, una detrás de otra. . . me duele, me molesta, me amenaza el lulo” (100). The word *lulo* in Chilean Spanish is one of the many infantile names commonly used to name the male organ. It is a word with a colloquial and lower-class register but not a swearword, as opposed to the word *pivo* that the protagonist frequently uses to refer to El Omar when she says that he is a “chupapico” (15). The choice of this less vulgar word tempers its sexual connotation and therefore the *lulo* may be said to represent more than simply the male organ. It is a symbol that signals the totality of the abuse suffered, that is, the idea that it is both physical and social as that there is a relationship between sexual abuse, social oppression and state repression. This is evident in words by the narrator such as, “tenía la boca amarga como si hubiera chupado un montón de pistolas oxidadas” (97), which clearly show the relationship between the physical abuse and state violence; “Es la hora del lulo./ El sonido rrrrr del cierre” (105), which reflect a “rrrrr” sound that resembles that of submachine guns; and “En medio de un paisaje nos penetran enjambres de cascos, de armas de servicio y el caos ante la posición amenazante de las lumas” (111), image in which the police helmets that penetrate and the *lumas* (police truncheon) in a threatening position seem to have both sexual and social connotations.

This relationship between prostitution and a woman’s public involvement through work points to the former as an allegory or a symbol for the status of the novel’s contemporary *pobladores* and workers within their socio-economic and labour contexts. The idea of prostitution as a symbol of the degradation of workers in capitalist systems is well-established in Marxist thought. Marx claimed that “Prostitution is only a specific expression of the general prostitution of the labourer” (Marx 295). But this is a complex association, for there is irony in representing “the worker” with the image of a female prostitute, as in political philosophy the worker has historically been male (Pateman 201-2). And *Fuerzas especiales*’ representation of the relationship between female prostitution and work in contemporary times and fictional-virtual realities echoes such complexity.

Paula Bianchi proposes that current representations of female protagonists that prostitute themselves are ambiguous in the Latin American literature produced after the 1990s, in a globalized region marked by capitalist economic development

and social inequality (Bianchi 8-10). She notes that current depictions of female prostitution incorporate notions of the prostitute's sexual pleasure, agency and lack of guilt, especially due to the influence of capitalist societies, since "ante la culpa impuesta por la concepción judeocristiana, se superpone la concepción del placer, un placer que además cotiza y genera ganancias en esta sociedad capitalista" (Bianchi 14). Two examples of this type of depiction are found in the novels *Vaca Sagrada* (1991) by Eltit and *Demasiado amor* (1990) by Sara Sefchovich (1949-). Bianchi concludes that these characters may be read as "víctimas no victimizadas que se asumen como mujeres, prostitutas, hijas, amigas, hermanas y que disfrutaban plenamente de aquello que eligen, incluso las que se prostituyen porque no encuentran otra salida mejor" (16). But this stance assumes that subordinate positions are taken by choice and *Fuerzas especiales'* literary representation of women's prostitution contradicts such assumption. Its protagonist, though active and courageous, does not enjoy such occupation and is indeed a victim of a complex system of abuse, repression and oppression that includes sexual and institutional violence.

When examining the intertwining of sex, slavery and capitalism in the development of the sexual contract which is the basis of modern patriarchy, Pateman states that:

The patriarchal assumption that prostitution is a problem about women ensures that the other participant in the prostitution contract escapes scrutiny. Once the story of the sexual contract has been told, prostitution can be seen as a problem about men. The problem of prostitution then becomes encapsulated in the question why men demand that women's bodies are sold as commodities in the capitalist market. The story of the sexual contract also supplies the answer; prostitution is part of the exercise of the law of male sex right, one of the ways in which men are ensured access to women's bodies (193-4).

Fuerzas especiales' depiction of prostitution as a type of abuse faced by male and female characters in principle nods to the Marxist view that prostitution may represent the economic coercion, abuse and alienation of workers (Pateman 201). But the novel also differentiates their degree of vulnerability including in their need to prostitute themselves. Prostitution thus becomes an allegory that underscores the idea that the sexual contract continues to get reproduced in the current modern, urban and digital era. It moves the focus away from a presupposed freedom of choice that the protagonist might have when allowing access to her body in exchange of money to support her family, placing the attention on what provokes the need to cope with

sexual abuse in order for a woman to be economically active. In Pateman's terms, the novel scrutinizes men in the question of the relationship between prostitution and work or, in other words, the structural patriarchal violence that requires that women put up with abuse when engaging in a public role. In this way, *Fuerzas especiales* accentuates the focus on the intrinsic connection between the public and the private in a woman's political status and public involvement. Even more, its representation of the link between female prostitution, or sexual abuse, and women's labour echoes Chile's contemporary market-driven work system, in which women face greater levels of vulnerability and inequality by being exploited at work and, additionally, charged with unpaid care tasks at home. Nikki Craske points out that women's burden of reproductive labour has increased due to shifts in state responsibilities as a consequence of the neoliberal economic restructuring. This has resulted in women's heavy workload with a double burden (Craske 58-68). As the novel shows in the following example:

Este papá que tengo y que cuando entre al departamento me dirá con una voz desgastada, cruzado por un matiz de desorden y de confusión: y tú, qué andái haciendo en la calle, que no te dai cuenta que tenemos hambre. Había doscientas treinta bombas W71. O no te dai cuenta que te estamos esperando pa que hagái la comida. Había mil bombas W79. O acaso no entendís que tu mamá está enferma, tiritando, más perdida que nunca (27).

These expected words from the father carry a colloquial register evident in the use of the Chilean Spanish *voseo*, an accelerated rhythm and a crude tone. They also reveal an inquisitive, recriminating, manipulative and demanding approach with an attempt to make the protagonist feel guilt for, supposedly, neglecting her family and her sick mother. A core characteristic of this example is that the father's imagined speech is interrupted by two impersonal mentions of nuclear weapons that unobtrusively interfere with this inquisitive, demanding and accusing male voice, adding overt signs of violence to it. The example shows a mix of the protagonist's voice and that of the father, but when he comes to speak and gives orders in a domestic context, the impersonality and power of the mentions of weapons interpose themselves, linking armaments to the father's domestic voice. This alternation makes the rhythm of the father's voice resemble the repetitiveness and crudeness of a bombardment, and this bombardment frames the burden of women's workload composed of both paid work and unpaid domestic labour. This woman's double burden is evident from the contrast between the phrases *qué andái haciendo en la calle* and *que hagái la comida*. The protagonist does both paid and unpaid caring work; she is the only one who goes out to the streets to make money to feed her fa-

mily, but at the same time in the novel she is ordered by the father to stay at home to take care of sick family members. The example reminds us of a contemporary Chilean society in which, for example, employed women carry out an average of 41 weekly hours of additional unpaid domestic labour in contrast to 19.9 of men's (Barriga et. al 36). The mentions of police armament that help shape the male voice, provide further hints of a relationship between gender, domestic and state violence, suggesting, again, the structural-institutional basis of the sexual division of labour that forces women into exploitation both at work and at home. It clearly underscores the way in which the novel uses the allegory of female prostitution to foreground the link between the public and the private as both inseparable from a woman's political status.

Women's Difference and Political Participation

Fuerzas especiales offers a view of male-female difference that leaves a more positive perspective in the case of women. Female strength in contrast to male weakness is emphasized by the narrator in phrases such as, "Pienso en las costillas de mi padre y me invade la tristeza, pero cuando pienso en las costillas impecables de la guatona Pepa me disipo" (77). La Guatona Pepa is lonely and unfriendly, since her mother is dead and her father is in hiding (124-5). Also, the protagonist's mother and sister are sick and housebound since the time when the children were taken away, and the mother suffers from panic attacks (157), but still, they are "Más jóvenes y mucho más sólidas que mi padre" (16), the narrator tells us. These female characters are presented as stronger than the father, and in the case of La Guatona Pepa, this is done by subverting a traditional religious image that, in the Christian creation myth, presents women as created from a man's rib. The belief in this myth is a primary source for women's subjugation in societies that follow the views of Abrahamic religions, like Chilean society, since it implies women's dependency on men. But the novel alters this gender relation and, precisely through the father's broken ribs, suggests that women are physically and emotionally stronger than men.

In the protagonist's words from another example:

Pero nuestra gordura, provocada siempre por infames circunstancias, era necesaria porque así nos parecíamos como mujeres y sabíamos que ese exceso, esa grasa y esa precisa azúcar nos iba a proteger ante los pacos y los tiras pues nos volvíamos indistinguibles. Nos convenía ser un bloque. Mi padre no, él tiene una figura distinta. Elocuente. Su aspecto nos pone los nervios de punta porque se puede destacar mientras baja las escaleras del bloque (56).

On the one hand, this extract leaves us with an impression of women as indistinguishable entities, but strong and cooperative on the other. Through the image of fatness, women are at first sight presented as oppressed, as the narration informs us that their fatness is caused by *infames circunstancias*. However, these women also understand the potential of their sameness and size, as the emphasis in *nos convenía ser un bloque* shows. The recognition of resemblances among women is presented in a positive way as such mutual understanding provides them with protection against the state violence of the police forces. In the above example, there are also notions of female solidarity and gender awareness in the idea of these women knowing that their fatness was necessary for them to stay camouflaged by making them indistinguishable and thus providing some protection from police repression and oppression; actually, such fatness has rescued La Guatona Pepa from prostitution, as there is not enough room in the cybercafé cubicles for her and she lost her space there (125). This somehow positive view of fatness, one that many indigenous groups and contemporary feminists hold, contrasts to current market-driven standards of female beauty that highly value thinness and a weakened image of women.

Female solidarity and sisterhood are suggested elsewhere in the novel, in an episode when the protagonist defends her sister from the insults of a neighbour whom she respects, for he is “el que mejor resiste la ocupación” (113). But although she feels that her sister provoked the insults by making fun of him, she takes her sister’s side because “si no lo hacía nos volveríamos más débiles” (113). This episode reminds us of the complex relationship that feminists have historically had with the left. Catherine MacKinnon asserts that both Marxism and Liberalism coincide on questions of sexual politics, in terms of the attitudes governing the relationship between men and women. Both trends maintain the separation between the private and the public, which fails to acknowledge for intimacy, or the private, as a political sphere, as “a sphere of battery, marital rape, and women’s exploited labor; of the central social institutions whereby women are deprived of (as men are granted) identity, autonomy, control, and self determination” (MacKinnon 657).

Maxine Molyneux argues that Marxists link gender oppression to class oppression with a view that women’s emancipation can only be achieved by the creation of a new socialist society (Molyneux 239). But socialist countries have interpreted socialism as merely the socialization of the economy and have failed to implement the democratization of political power (Molyneux 243). She notes that leftist revolutions have tended to view women’s emancipation as ultimately subordinated to class struggle. She exemplifies it by revealing that although women were an important component of the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua and that the Sandinista

government was sympathetic towards women's emancipation, when economic problems, counterrevolution and military threat put at risk the Sandinista ideals, discourses encouraging women's emancipation were tempered within the government and women's movements themselves. Strategic gender interests —that is, interests that entail goals towards women's emancipation, for they derive from “the analysis of women's subordination and from the formulation of an alternative, more satisfactory set of arrangements to those which exist” (Molyneux 232)— tended to be replaced by policies that rather targeted at practical ones. This implies that gender interests are not viewed as an independent political cause, but as subordinated to the broader one: the defence of the revolution (Molyneux 237-51).

In Chile, women's emancipation and liberation have historically been linked to political movements of the left, but not without a troubled relationship between feminists and political parties (Agosin 139; Frohmann and Valdés 281). Women in Chile have also questioned the assumption that social class would be the only determinant to female political mobilization (Kirkwood 33). Julieta Kirkwood, a pioneer of gender studies in the Chilean academia, claims that:

Las formulaciones más combativas en el discurso izquierdista-progresista radican en la disputa, con la derecha, de la condición de adalid de la defensa de la familia —léase la familia proletaria— que es definida como “núcleo revolucionario básico”, pero dejando intocadas las redes interiores jerárquicas y disciplinarias que conforman históricamente a la familia (51).

An example is given by Karin Roseblatt in her study of political cultures in Chile between 1920-1950. She explores the relationship between feminists and the left in the period of the Frente Popular, a coalition that united middle-class reformers and the labouring classes. It was composed of the Radical, Socialist and Communist parties, who ruled Chile under Pedro Aguirre Cerda's government between 1938 and 1941, and was supported by many feminists. During this period, a core reform was the family wage system, which provided men with wages that allowed them to support dependant family members. But this reform excluded women from the labour market; it subordinated women by identifying them with the home and defining them as non-workers and dependant to men (Roseblatt). Following this historically troubled relationship between women and the left, through the episode in which *Fuerzas especiales's* protagonist clearly understands that not staying by her sister's side in the case of conflict with a resistant neighbour debilitates them even further, the novel contributes to considering that female solidarity and sisterhood are above all core determinants to female liberation. The

protagonist does not approve of her sister's treatment of the neighbour, but still, strategically, she takes her side. This episode points to understanding female solidarity and sisterhood from a feminist and not a feminine perspective, that is, not in sentimental terms, not as an essential characteristic of women who are, presumably, a source of succour and protection for other women. It rather underscores that women are indeed capable of critically revisiting the actions of other women but also have the political capacity to plan strategically for the sake of an organization that potentially leads towards women's emancipation, not without sharp but constructive criticism though.

The notions of belonging and communal support do not include the father. In the above example from the novel, the protagonist lets us know that her father is *elocuyente* and *se puede destacar*, which contrasts with women shown as blocks and camouflaged. But, although the father's individuality and voice may at first sight seem positive, they are not necessarily such in the novel's repressive context. The narrator asserts that the father's singular appearance *nos pone los nervios de punta*, as he is clearly distinguishable when coming down the staircases to leave the home. Such individuality is not positive in a repressive context in which leaving the protection of the family home means going into streets full of police awaiting people to violently take them away. Thus, as opposed to the strategic invisibility of women, the father looks weak and unprotected. His physical weakness contrasts with the protagonist's courage, size and inner strength when, in a context of repression and violence, she takes the risk to leave the protection of the family home in order to look for food for her and her family, which also includes submitting herself to sexual abuse.

Although the father is apparently *elocuyente*, his voice in particular and the male voice in general are not much heard throughout the novel; and when the male voice is heard, it shows a colloquial register, unlike that of the narrator which is formal and educated. For example:

Tai loca tú, no te dai cuenta que se me perdió un kilo de carne molida, que me la robaron los pacos o los tiras o los perros que andan de un lado a otro o acaso no sabís cuánto gasto en gas. Y justo ahora me venís a pedir descuento. Tai loca. Cuánto tenís. A ver, cuánto tenís. Inmersos en la ceremonia de los lunes. El rito de las monedas. No puedo, no, empezar el día sin mi frica (80).

Through imagined indirect speech, this example shows what the protagonist expects El Cojo Pancho, who has a stall and sells bread, will answer to her request for a discount. The words carry a colloquial register evident again in the use of

the Chilean Spanish *voseo* and therefore, the protagonist is the receiver of a type of language that she almost never employs. The words that she imagines hearing have an aggressive and somehow offensive tone as well as an accelerated rhythm. But when she presents her own thoughts towards the end of the example, she does not adopt the same tone and register as El Cojo Pancho. Her words carry a more formal register and a calmer rhythm, or perhaps a more pacific tone. Those words also show the protagonist's self-awareness of her own dependency on the bread she eats daily. The linguistic contrast between these words by the protagonist-narrator and those of El Cojo Pancho emphasizes female difference in a positive way as well as the potentials of a female, educated, self-aware and pacific voice.

The fact that she does not reply to her interlocutor using a similar tone does not imply that she does not have the strength or words to do so, and actually throughout the novel she can be read as mastering language and employing a wide range of vocabulary. Rather, it has to do with the omnipotence of the repression and violence that surround her. Furthermore, El Cojo Pancho's tone and rhythm resembles that of the father earlier discussed as well as that of the police forces. In indirect speech retold by the protagonist, in her imagination the police forces address her with words such as “¿cómo te llamái?, ¿cómo te llamái?” (53). These words show a colloquial register evident, again, in the use of the Chilean *voseo* as well as an aggressive tone and accelerated rhythm that she feels would scare her so much that “yo no pueda contestar por la invasión de un extenso blanco cerebral que me doble la lengua en un espasmo a causa de un pánico incontrollable” (53). The violence reflected in these masculine voices is male, institutional and historical. It is marked by the use of the Chilean *voseo*, which puts the focus on the particular history of Chilean Spanish.

Chile's most common form *voseo* is a combination of the second person singular pronoun *tú* and the Castilian verb conjugation for the *vos* pronoun that was the main form of second-person formal address by the time the Spaniards invaded the American continent. It is widely used in Chile's sociolects but remains colloquial (Rojas 89). And as an omnipresent force, the historical and institutional masculine voice depicted by the novel paralyzes the protagonist at diverse moments, from the specific situation of having to deal with police forces to the annulment of her capacity to contest everyday interactions. This contrast between the narrator's voice and the male ones further stresses female difference and the link between gender inequalities, male violence and state forces.

The novel also suggests female awareness and reflection, which, however, drifts from acceptance to questioning. The protagonist thinks, “No puedo rebatir la im-

portancia de sus mil pesos. . . su vaho influye hasta en el impulso mecánico de mi pierna cuando subo la escalera con la bolsa. La misma bolsa que llevo hasta el cíber y que después lleno hasta la mitad con el pan que compro en el almacén” (105). These words reveal that the narrator is aware that she has to accept sexual abuse in order to survive economically and therefore, at first sight, she seems to recognize the value that the money provided by this abuse has for her and her family. But she is also trying to persuade herself in order to admit such a value. One can read this self-persuasion in the phrase *no puedo rebatir* and in the fact that she needs to remind herself of such a value when she returns home with *la bolsa* containing the family food. The reflective character of the protagonist is emphasized elsewhere in the novel, when she wonders, “¿Por qué acertamos el lulo y yo? o ¿cuándo aprendimos a acertar el lulo y yo? O más bien ¿acertamos el lulo y yo? Estas son las preguntas importantes o tontas o estériles que me hago” (108).

Fuerzas especiales' protagonist-narrator shows notions of awareness of her disadvantaged position, though there are also hints of misery. Nonetheless, she can still be read as a clever, informed and reflective woman. Her capacity for quiet thinking in dealing with her cruel context is further evidence that the novel portrays female difference in a positive way. It shows the potential of a female voice that is self-aware and pacific through this capacity of women to survive in the complex and harsh context portrayed. However, although the novel clearly portrays female agency through an active protagonist who, besides being in a position of vulnerability, is the only breadwinner of the family, her public involvement takes a maternal position based on her caring responsibilities. She is a female breadwinner, but she is also the only member of her family required to take care of the sick and, importantly, she bears great sense of responsibility for them, evident in words such as, “¿Qué haría yo si el bloque se despeña con toda la familia adentro mientras yo estoy en el cíber? Muertos o gravemente heridos o terminales. . . Yo me debo a la familia que me queda” (48).

There is ambiguity in the representation of the protagonist-narrator's public involvement. On the one hand, despite the complex and oppressive context she is immersed in, she shows hints of agency, strength to face her own vulnerable situation, awareness of the disadvantages of her political status and strategic planning, providing notions of the potential that female difference has for resistance. Nevertheless, on the other hand, such a potential is never actually realized in the novel and in some passages, she can be also read as depressed, doubtful as to the viability of resistance and motivated above all by the wellbeing of her family. Her public involvement is therefore based on politicized motherhood and female difference, which do not necessarily lead to women's equal political status nor target

at strategic gender interests. This is the historical approach of women's political participation in Chile.

Chilean women's movements were crucial to the overthrow of the dictatorship. Nonetheless, during the transition to democracy they used discourses rooted on a militant motherhood that were based on the idea of women's "difference", a strategy that makes it difficult for women to argue for and gain political power (Franceschet 209). For these women, demands for power were seen as "too narrow and also as conforming to the masculine-defined model of politics, which the Chilean women's movement rejected through its style of 'difference' feminism and politicized motherhood" (Franceschet 213). The consequence of this strategy was the lack, for several years, of fundamental conditions for women's empowerment such as, a divorce law, which was finally passed just in 2004; the lack of a gender quota law for parliamentary elections until 2015; and the penalization of abortion under any circumstances until 2017.³

Similarly, the protagonist's ambiguous public involvement and agency are not inspired by an overt desire for mobilization and political equality, but by her sense of responsibility towards her family. Her participation in an abusive labour market follows a pattern inherited from the traditional division of gender roles that dictates that women primarily provide caring work, but in the context of social and political conflict or in the case of the lack of a male breadwinner, they may also fulfil obligations as providers, which is still based on their maternal responsibilities. One can read this pattern towards the end of the novel when the protagonist relates "el Omar y yo somos ciber, no calle, no. Calle no. Había cincuenta mil sistemas de defensa antiaérea Tor M-1. Odiamos las veredas y los recodos" (156). These words emphasize the difference between the protagonist's place of work, *el ciber*, and *la calle*. They let us know that she actually hates *las veredas* and *los recodos* or, one may interpret, the public space and the tricky roles she needs to play there in order to survive. These roles derive from the overall symbol of prostitution discussed earlier, as real and virtual, occurring inside and outside the cyber, which stresses that, although the protagonist is, apparently, free to go out onto the streets to do some kind of paid work, to play a public role, she is still trapped by the only kind of role she is left with in the repressive context of the sexual division of labour: that of providing pleasure and welfare to others. And therefore, her workplace, her engagement with the public, is just another space of oppression and abuse. Again,

3 Only in September 2017 was an abortion law passed in Chile. However, it offers women access to abortion limited to three cases: i) when the mother's life is at risk; ii) in case of foetus inviability; and iii) in the case of rape.

the novel foregrounds the centrality of the link between the public and the private for women's political status.

Heidi Tinsman and Rachel Schurman argue that in Chile, neoliberalism has had a complex impact on women. They note that women have been exploited in the workplace for the sake of profit, but have also been offered spaces to participate in the labour market and gain greater levels of economic independence (Tinsman; Schurman). Nevertheless, *Fuerzas especiales* questions the emancipatory potential of such participation through a link between prostitution, structural violence as well as work and domestic exploitation. The novel portrays an ambiguous female agency, which may, by analogy, be indicative of the difficulties for women of true public engagement in conditions of equal political status. One can understand this portrayal of an ambiguous and never fully realizable female leadership as related to the in-between stage of women in contemporary Chilean society, a context in which women might enjoy the possibility of participating in the labour market (which in principle may be thought to be liberating), but still cannot abandon their domestic burdens. The novel poses the question of women not having reached emancipation yet, though they are part of the economically active population. They are still trapped in a double workload, which is just another modern form of abuse and oppression.

Still, the novel leaves us with clear notions of positive female difference, which contributes to the creation of an alternative social imaginary in which traditional views of gender difference are altered. In *Fuerzas especiales'* fictional world women are the stronger sex and the breadwinners; they have a reflective nature with a clear capacity to develop thinking, awareness, questioning and planning. The novel denounces social abuse against women, both at home and at work, disrupts traditional views of female body and leaves us with an insurgent sense that emerges from the potentials of female solidarity and sisterhood not as posed from the perspective of an alleged essentially female sensitivity and a view of women as source of succour, but from the perspective of their strategic and subversive potential to lead themselves towards female liberation. As such, *Fuerzas especiales* contributes to the creation of an imagined world in which patriarchal stereotypes are denounced, questioned and subverted. But importantly, the novel's fictional universe is also one in which models of female political involvement and the goals towards women's political empowerment remain under strategic scrutiny by female voices themselves.

Conclusions

Fuerzas especiales portrays a non-traditional femininity and suggests the potential of female difference to resist a difficult environment of state violence and oppression. It has a female protagonist-narrator who shows hints of agency. She is the main voice heard throughout the story, the one who takes care of her sick family members, the only provider for her family and the only one who is strong enough to face danger and abuse in order to do so. The novel stresses female difference with a positive view, in contrast to male weakness, and suggests female strength as a way to resist oppression. There are clear notions of female solidarity, strategy and resilience, all of which open the question of the potential capacity of female organization and, eventually, resistance, though the novel is not emphatic on such potential. It does, however, emphasize a connection between the public and the private for any consideration of women's political status, but despite the strength of its protagonist-narrator, her public engagement cannot be said to lead to political equality, as it is significantly linked to prostitution and results anyway in abuse, subjugation and exploitation.

The novel's portrayal of female public involvement is ambiguous, as it is based on the politics of motherhood and female difference, which in Chile were the typical approaches of the political involvement of women's movements during the dictatorship and transition to democracy, and do not lead necessarily to political empowerment. The novel never completely abandons pessimism and through it, it comments on the Chilean contemporary in-between stage of women's political status. Notwithstanding, this piece of fiction also proposes us to imagine a world in which there is still hope of resistance from the margins of society, from the overlooked. And importantly, this is a world in which female solidarity, sisterhood and a critical view of models of women's political empowerment carried out by female voices themselves are fundamental to women's liberation.

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