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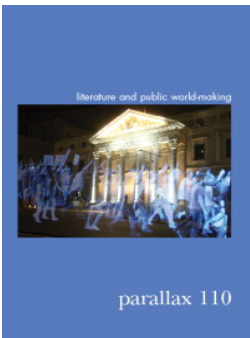
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Public Things, Public Squares: Aesthetic Democracy in Diamela Eltit's *E. Luminata*

Monique Roelofs

Contemporary aesthetics frequently sidesteps questions of the public. This does not come as a surprise in a society awash with technology where imaginaries and taste often lock into the marketplace, apparently unmoored from the public apparatuses that since the Enlightenment have undergirded forms of creation and identification. Nonetheless, loops between the aesthetic and the public channel crucial cultural lineages in which art and capital, literature and neoliberal entrepreneurship, history and presentism attain reciprocal orientations toward one another. Philosophy thus needs to develop conceptual frames that acknowledge these routings. This essay aims to advance this project.

My analysis focuses on a field of practices I call aesthetic publicness. This term denotes aesthetic conditions and forms that index a public domain. In particular, I have in mind aesthetic constellations that posit a sphere of public interactions as a structural ground for the varieties of normativity and relationality that they put forth and presuppose. Enlightenment philosophy has forged a genre of aesthetic publicness based on the figure of the general observer. By reference to this idealised perceiver, concrete aesthetic norms and relationships could be construed on a universalist model, where experiences, values, and modes of creation and reception aspire to validity for everyone, regardless of their social position, geographical location or place in history.¹ An important problem with this paradigm, as is widely recognised, is that what was billed as a generally accessible forum is actually a site of fundamental exclusions. Hence, the notion of the public has fallen into disfavour.² Surrendering aesthetic publicness comes at a price, however. A loss is incurred. Agency shifts.

In this essay, I turn to a literary text that probes these consequences, namely Diamela Eltit's novel *E. Luminata*. The novel's conjectures about the public become visible if we read the work from a fully fledged, unabashedly aesthetic perspective, which, to my knowledge has not yet been done. From this perspective, neglecting publicness is not an option.³ Indeed, society requires aesthetic publicness precisely in order to grapple with the problems that have led present-day critical discourses away from the public domain in a substantive sense of the term. In addition to building this case through my reading, I emphasise the need to reconstruct aesthetic publicness on new terms. My discussion then highlights elements of the work that gesture toward such alternative formations.

First published in 1983, at the time of the Pinochet dictatorship, Eltit's novel contemplates the takeover of the Chilean polity by a neoliberal world system ruled by technology.⁴ A commercial sign towers over a public square in Santiago, where it beams its advertising slogans onto the crowd below. The eponymous protagonist, a bag lady, stars under the sign. Enthralled by the projections lighting up from the surfaces of their bodies and the objects in the square, the Chilean people exchange their social roles and historical positions for an identity in the global marketplace. They engross themselves in the latest technology. Literature and cinema aid the sign in its subjectifying project. The people come into their own as the glorious populace they long to be.

The novel is what philosophy calls a thought experiment. It conjures the spectre of society's total governance by a neoliberal world system overrun by technology. The reader is urged to explore the conceptual implications of this state of affairs and to devise a response. Light and the plaza are the driving metaphors through which Eltit's text gives expression to the pivotal bodily, societal and aesthetic reverberations. The contents emitted by the sign are set free from the creative and receptive labours supporting them. Their 'home' is the commercial world that has supplanted the polity. Subjectivity, thus, amounts to immersion in a capitalist order. *E. Luminata* is a late twentieth-century moment in a theoretical and political lineage that goes back to Greek antiquity. Commencing with the idea of the Athenian *agora*, philosophy has recognised the public square as exemplary of publicness and has virtually equated this figure with the governance model termed democracy. The novel participates in this historical heritage.⁵ But Eltit's thought experiment also resonates with an actual socioeconomic experiment that was being carried out to devastating effect at the time of the novel's writing. As many have documented, Chile of the 1970s and 1980s served as a testing ground for neoliberal policies that subsequently found worldwide allegiance and underwent institutionalisation across the globe. Through the fragmented style of avant-garde fiction writing for which she is known, Eltit explores how these dynamics play out in aesthetic territory.

We live in an era of democratic backsliding. Autocracies and right-wing populisms are seeing a heyday in many countries. These developments are tied up with an explosive ascendancy of technologies that generate contents disassociated from their societal contexts and local modes of production. Aesthetics is barely beginning to reckon with these developments. *E. Luminata* speaks to them. In a prescient fashion, the novel brings to a climax longstanding tensions that have only intensified today. It lays out in stark outline choices we have knowingly or unknowingly been making. And so philosophy has a lot to gain from this dense literary work, whose opacity is a match for the most hermetic theoretical treatises. Giving a new spin to the foundational philosophical metaphors of light and the square, Eltit furthers the critical sensibilities

and vocabularies on which we can draw when tackling controversies of our times. The upshot of my analysis is that we can breathe fresh life into literature as a site of critical invention. On top of this, we will spot distinctive cultural mechanisms whereby the aesthetic participates in the workings of what Bonnie Honig calls ‘public things’ and functions as a democratising force.

Before I begin to delve deeper into Eltit’s novel, let me describe *E. Luminata*’s basic structure and plot. The text is divided into ten sections. As per Eltit’s signature method of linguistic fragmentation, they shy away from a chronological order. Most are unnamed. Several do bear names, which without exception refer to aesthetic categories, namely: notions of the image in literature, of where the story might be going, of a multiplicity of theatrical or cinematic scenes, and of a dress rehearsal, respectively.⁶ Even within sections, the text is divided into subparts headed by titles denoting aspects of aesthetic production, such as ‘remark on the second scene’ and ‘mistakes in the third sequence’.⁷ Numerous paragraphs introduced by the phrase ‘that’s why’ launch into explanations that push the boundaries of intelligibility.

It is evening. The action occupies a single night. Scenes are designed for the camera, spectacles are staged, performances are happening. The setting is a public square in the city of Santiago, Chile. Lording over the plaza, there is an advertisement sign atop a building. It casts its projections onto the space below. The characters: a bag lady named E. Luminata, who is acting in the plaza; the Chilean people who draw to her, mesmerised. Confrontations and rapprochements between the antagonistic pair of illuminated ones, the masculinised sign up above and the female protagonist down below, pervade the text. The crowd is pulled between these two entangled opponents. The novel tells the story of the place of the people, that is, a nation, in a globalised economy. And it is a tale about gender: stretches of fantasy centred on the bag lady break open the ways in which a gendered imaginary shapes social being as a form of embodiment. The reader can discern these plotlines by taking up the labour of composition in their own right. Narrative coherence and ready-made comprehensibility are resisted. In this way, the novel enlists the reader in the construction of the fiction. To speak with one of the section titles, the question ‘Quo vadis?’ (‘Where are you going?’) remains open in the planes of form as well as content. Reading the work is a project of exploration, orientation and disorientation that calls into question the mechanisms of literary writing and interpretation.

Assuming an Identity in the World of the Sign

The novel takes as its premise the neoliberal overwriting of historical paths of subjective becoming. A mass of bodies called the ‘pale people’ come to the square to rejoice in the colour and life that the sign grants them.⁸ Indeed, the sign offers the people an identity in the global marketplace. Nocturnal enlightenment yields a state-of-the-art, technologically mediated form of embodiment and social existence.⁹ This arrangement is open to everyone.

The multitude collectively craves it. However, the sign's gift comes at a price. 'The ragged people of Santiago arrive, pale and stinking, in search of their space: the name and alias that like a token will guarantee them a trip, but one calculated in terms of their previous expenditure of flesh until they are shod with light from the neon sign.'¹⁰ The city swaps one socioeconomic system for another. A new remuneration system takes effect. Labour ceases to be the product the people provide in exchange for a civic identity. Under the sign's rule, the old principles of productivity make way for the maxims of a consumption society, where the luminescent images the sign disburses provide the materials for appearances and roles that are determinative of the people's passage through life, their 'trip'. The people trade in their positions in prior systems of meaning – ones that may involve vocations – for a rapturous connectedness to the sign, which grants them incessantly renewing possibilities for being.¹¹ The sign, then, remains as the decisive caller. The people find a new kind of agency.

They create their own performance in the square, occasioning a shift in the 'norms of experience'.¹² And so, they metamorphose from conquered into conquerors. They become beautiful. 'Their identities are being celebrated.'¹³ Being, for them, from now on equates their being interpellated by the technologically dominated marketplace. For an instant, they are the owners of the commodities that they are, '[p]roprietors out of sheer desire as they sell themselves to the sign like merchandise'.¹⁴ Hardly any time passes, however, before seller and sold, user and used, collapse into one upon the completion of the transaction.¹⁵

The new price the Chilean people are paying for their transformed identity in the realm of the sign is forgetfulness. Eltit writes,

They await their turn for the illuminated sign to confirm them as existence, that is, name them another way: they are reborn that way in this purifying passage, less impalored now, because it blots out their color, confirming the voluntary loss of their civil records. That's why in the square that encloses them they prowl in the direction of the light, restoring them to an ancient happiness. Incubated anew, they get life from technology.¹⁶

The people's 'civil records' are obliterated. Cultural memory dwindles. Recollection of antagonism and violence fades with the imposition of a neo-liberal economy, as Nelly Richard has documented.¹⁷ Individualised roles slip away.¹⁸ Social strictures loosen as updated modes of subjectivation become available that energise 'ancient' forms. The new is old even if – and partially because – it banishes memory. Under the regime of a technocratic marketplace, a modernist framework takes root within which the people are considered ancient or primitive. They become transparently legible as such.¹⁹ This representational operation is a dispensation of consumption society. The people are reborn as consumers.²⁰

By way of the image of the identity-disbursing sign, Eltit offers a reading of the subjective implications of the repressive order instituted during Chile's experiment with neoliberalism. At massive human cost, the country's trial run laid the grounds for significant social and economic overhauls worldwide in subsequent decades. The novel's polysemous text engages this overwhelming historical reality, which not only continues to stir right-wing militant zeal in the region but also keeps tearing at deep wounds incurred by survivors and subsequent generations.²¹ The sign's interpellative stratagem marks a narrowing of public life. Captivated by an amplified field of identificatory options, subjectivity in effect curtails itself.

The projections glowing from the surfaces of the people's bodies absorb them to the point of self-loss. The gaze engenders disorientation, even stupefaction. 'Those who have received their own names by birthright can never know anything about the daze from being so lost in different residues that only the climax of paleness remains as an alternative, as mere disposable flesh.'²² Technologically saturated neoliberalism establishes an interdependency between an enthralling plenitude and a self-abandoning absence of colour or existential lack. According to this logic, one either subscribes to the market or belongs to the abject horde made up of the pale people, also called the 'lumpenpack'.²³ Within the rule of the sign, one cycles through these two mutually co-constitutive and exhaustive positions, which feed into each other. Other stances have been jettisoned with the relinquishing of the people's 'civil records', the effacement of their historical citizenship. What philosophical lessons can we reap regarding the idea of the square as a pillar of public participation and democracy? What happens to the nation, and how can literature and the arts reply to this state of affairs?

Time, Space, Rational Order and Language

The sign runs in accordance with its own programme. This programme jettisons the 'rationality of a Chile that halts its rhythms at night'.²⁴ The day-night opposition ostensibly belongs to an obsolete epistemic and ontological schema. For the marketplace continues its operations at night, whether within or outside national boundaries. It is indifferent to natural rhythms. This irrelevance infiltrates both the time and the space that the nation can claim for itself and the standards of coherence and reasonableness by which such claims can be legitimised. A kind of rationality presumed as common sense is given up in the world governed by the sign.

Rationality is punctured in the plane of linguistic form as well. Eltit keeps open the question of meaning and defamiliarises interpretive reason through faux explanations, prefaced by phrases such as 'that's how' and 'that's why'.²⁵ These expressions typically do not signal intelligible explanations or factors to be explained but give rise to more 'how' and 'why' questions than they answer. In this way, Eltit underscores the bounds of evidential and instrumental reasoning and challenges the reader to produce a new kind of sense.

The novel's disjointed narration demands an intense interpretive effort, which dramatises the uncertainties and complexities of the problems the text opens up. At the level of suspense, Eltit's intricate style brings home the urgency of imaginative thinking and the necessity of enquiry beyond established conceptual parameters and vocabularies. Through fragmented sentence structures and by averting linear plots, *E. Luminata* energises language's palimpsestic multiperspectivalism.²⁶ Words are wrenched away from their ideologically congealed meanings to perform bewildering verbal feats calling for decipherment. Despite the reader's feverish interpretive endeavor, the work's syntax consistently shatters comprehension. Voices are heard but rapidly vanish into other voices. Dependable strategies of philosophical meaning making are under pressure; the notion of a public space harbouring cultural and political life appears to have lost its tenability and societal relevance.

Eltit's thought experiment pairs an aesthetic of opacity with one of clarity and immediate legibility. In contrast to the linguistic mayhem, the text evinces a systematic plan, as noted before. The numbered sections and their subdivisions give the sense that we are dealing with a theoretical treatise, a policy paper, a report, a flyer or a manual. At the same time, Eltit's genre-bending disquisition turns into a script for a film, a play or a performance.²⁷ For instance, two consecutive chapters comprise three Dress Rehearsals and fifteen Scenes, respectively.²⁸ Indeed, the former opens with a photograph of the author displaying incisions in her arms while doing a performance based on portions of the novel's manuscript.²⁹ But the narration often transgresses such frames, as when, having apparently reached the end of the third and last Dress Rehearsal, we are told that 'The Dress Rehearsal is going to begin'.³⁰ The novel's order evidently is infected by its disorder. Nonetheless, it solidly sits in place. It sticks, it guides, it contains and separates. All the while we are in aesthetic terrain. The consistency of aesthetic categories, like political ones, is called into doubt.

Intimations of violence, surveillance and control infiltrate both the novel's disjointedness and its methodical organisation. We are neither dismissing perplexity nor clarity if we read Eltit's dense text as a commentary on the forced realisation of a market society in Chile in the aftermath of the 1973 coup.³¹ *E. Luminata* delves into the affective and corporeal implications as well as the relational facets of the capitalist arrangement cemented under the dictatorship. The reader's mystification mirrors the daze in which these transformations leave the people who have convened in the city square. The clarity of organisation resonates with the oppressive transparency the lumpenpack enjoys in consumption society as an 'ancient', 'primitive' being, a massified population relegated to a liminal state of aliveness. The airtight, numerical scheme that frames the narration also echoes the top-down hierarchy of a cultural system lorded over by a masculinist advertisement display. The novel's formal order thus is imprinted with a violence that its self-displacing narration rejects. Simultaneously, the text's disorder is contaminated by a violence

that its order is instrumental in challenging. Both bafflement and lucidity carry traces of violence and seeds of an ethical and political responsiveness. The novel's philosophical import reaches beyond its take on these aesthetic categories, however.

As I have observed, from *E. Luminata's* angle a neoliberal economy implements revised criteria of rationality and uproots temporal and spatial templates aligned with the nation. Eltit subverts a progressivist conception of this transformation by way of strategies of temporal dislocation. I have already mentioned the dress rehearsal that is about to begin when it nears its end.³² If the market fantasises a seamless coexistence of old and new or a production of the new that smoothly assimilates the old while creating a disposable population along with a field of residual practices, then Eltit undercuts modernist market-inspired temporal progressions by dismissing originality,³³ dissociating cry from wound,³⁴ and wrenching the cry away from the crier's meaning by transferring its expressivity, its status as a sign, to the sign writ large.³⁵ Through these measures, along with recurrent tropes of the retroactive production of inaugural moments, she voices a critique of a progressively unfurling consumption society. The text continually undermines the grounds on which temporal, causal, symbolic, explanatory, readerly and purposive orderings become possible. Nevertheless, as we will see, some structural devices that precede the sign's strobing remain in place.³⁶ These will turn out to be crucial to the novel's philosophical outlook on the potentialities of public life.

A Contest in the Plaza

The extended spectacle of movement, sound and language unfolding among sign, *E. Luminata* and people produces an atmosphere of chilling restlessness: the sign always finds more to bring within reach, more to make happen. While offering us an image of the sign's total control over public life, Eltit also limits its leverage, pushing back against the dominance of the marketplace. As I have indicated, the sign has no use for the people's civic identities, which it unsparingly erases. Nonetheless, one register of the civic record persists: gender. The novel repeatedly refers to the sign with the pronouns 'he/his' in contrast to *E. Luminata's* 'she/her'.³⁷ The sign relies for its workings on gender allocations. These designations fall outside the sphere of its control. The sign turns out to be one source of gender performance among others. It is far from the sole originator of shared meaning and subjective being. Its hegemony reveals yet further cracks.

The sign takes the public plaza as its domicile and stage of operation. It depends on the public square and other items that are part of the environment: benches, trees, pavement, lights, lighting cables, urban design and architecture. Like gender, these structural elements participate in the conditioning of the sign's workings, its simultaneously archaic and contemporaneous commercial production of the people.

Accordingly, aesthetic publicness is never banished. The sign institutes its own type of aesthetic publicness, supplanting antecedent configurations. One prior arrangement is the literary enterprise, which, as an indispensable pillar of the colonial apparatus, established the cultural formation that the Uruguayan critic Ángel Rama termed the lettered city.³⁸ This is a constellation of power and knowledge fostered by all manner of lettered practices that underwrote colonialist positions of authority and modes of epistemic and political legitimation. It is a centuries-long cultural institution that is to be decolonised, a project that has been under way for quite some time and is ongoing across sectors of the society. The sign has different ideas, however.

The radiant electronic display fills a glaring gap left by literature, which after all had never 'portrayed [the people] in all their immeasurability'.³⁹ Under the sign, splendidly, garishly, the people are finally offered the aura they had been denied. 'He' reigns in the square. Indeed, the sign is highly efficacious. It generates E. Luminata's lips. It 'pin[s] down her anatomical parts'.⁴⁰ Literature is superseded as a mode of corporeal stylisation and self-formation. It loses its sway over the society.

And yet, literature is far from eradicated. The sign employs a variety of media in the construction of the spectacle in the plaza. Besides light, it helps itself generously to literary forms and strategies, along with sound, and, I imagine, movie titles.⁴¹ Literature has become a serviceable tool for the sign. Having conspired with coloniality in the formation of Latin American societies since the sixteenth century, as Rama observed, it presently delivers the Chilean people up to an insatiable capitalist machinery. Or might there be a glitch in this story? Was something forgotten? Is there a correction or a note to be made? After all, these kinds of things happen repeatedly in the novel.⁴²

The sign is powerful, but it has to contend with a counterpart: bag lady E. Luminata. She performs in the plaza. Lit by the sign, which casts its luminous emissions in alternating rhythms and hues, she passes through stages of segmentation and recomposition revolving around body parts such as fingernails, legs, wounds, waist, hands, the already mentioned lips and other erogenous zones. The splitting and reassembling resonate with two interrogation sequences to which she is subjected, which blur who is who. At one point, E. Luminata is about to be subdued or put away by being sedated in a hospital. She crosses species in a feminist human/animal galloping that extends over a full chapter. She tries to seduce the sign, becoming mater/madonna/madonna to his pater/*patria* (fatherland).⁴³ She morphs through countless sexual/writerly identities. Bodies rub up against each other. And they rub against the pavement. They establish relations with the concrete, the grass in the square, the benches. E. Luminata traverses states of assembly and dispersal with the people. Her poses, fashioned with the help of the sign and perceived and responded to by the people, mediate between the two. At the end of the novel, which occupies a single night, she sits in the square while passers-by hasten to work.

E. Luminata takes up many kinds of literary writing. The people are eager for it: ‘They shine whole, their desires for fiction like orifices.’⁴⁴ Writer and people jointly make a stab at producing a narrative ‘that takes as its model a ragged bag lady’.⁴⁵ What might such a story look like? Can the lettered city open itself up to the people whom it had previously banished without surrendering literature and the plaza to the sign? What reconfigurations of the public square does this demand?

E. Luminata devotes her authorial efforts to working out a fiction that is ‘her own’, one that balances the fiction ‘desired by externals’ with another fiction that ‘she did not recognise as such’.⁴⁶ She neither opts for unadulterated literary heteronomy nor its opposite, autonomy. Instead, she prefers a narrative that has it both ways. The Enlightenment template of aesthetic publicness, here, makes its appearance. In this scheme, which rejects heteronomy in order to make room for autonomy, literature is a public practice that pursues its sui-generis values at a marked distance from the lives of the writer and her audience. Juggling between two polarities that are a hallmark of Enlightenment philosophy, E. Luminata comes up with her ‘own’ creation. The fiction she favours presumably runs by its internal codes, but these protocols hook into external realities that Enlightenment views of aesthetic normativity consign to the sidelines.

We are given intriguing hints as to what the bag lady’s own kind of fiction might imply: Chilean writing, in E. Luminata’s hands, enacts a feminist vision that gives articulation to a female subaltern aesthetic. It constitutes a site of Latin American writing that is at once world literature, created in engagement with figures such as José Lezama Lima, James Joyce, Pablo Neruda, Juan Rulfo, and Alain Robbe-Grillet.⁴⁷ It is indebted to Amerindian voices and figurations, as when E. Luminata becomes a Mapuche shaman, performing a healing dance.⁴⁸

E. Luminata both revels in and rebels against the interpellations that the sign makes available.⁴⁹ Through self-undercutting literary forms, imagined as graffiti, she exposes the ethical and political questionability of the lettered city – that colonial construct to which literature has historically lent its energies. This latter literary undertaking, which the sign assimilates and updates with its electronically fuelled powers of subjectivation, is vast. E. Luminata’s writings challenge it with their equally momentous, baroque creativity. She furnishes counterstatements to the sign’s deployments of literature.⁵⁰ As she lets the colourations wash over her, she assumes many other generative modes of public comportment, recognising her agency, pursuing her desires, making her language her own. The bag lady circumvents the sign’s auratic subjectivation procedures. Her performance wrests social imaginaries and scenarios of sensation and feeling away from the sign’s determinations.

The sign fails in its takeover of literature and public life. We have already seen how its rule is curtailed by its dependency on the public square and on

genderings lodged in the public domain. Over and above this, the sign's subjectifying mission presupposes a whole cultural apparatus: it partakes of multiple languages and literary genres, including graffiti, and additionally makes use of bodily resources, class hierarchies, ethnicity and the nation.⁵¹ The spectacle in the square is framed through cinematic takes and retakes.

While the sign effaces pre-existing aesthetic formations as the novel's premise stipulates, it is simultaneously parasitic on them. The text wrings its premise through a *reductio ad absurdum*. But what of that other reduction? Where does Eltit leave the marginalised groups whom the global marketplace reduces to being 'lumperrants'?⁵² They are enthralled by E. Luminata's performance, craving a narrative that takes her as its model. Why this fascination with her and her story?

The novel's film tropes give a clue. From the beginning, poses are struck for the camera, staging is happening. E. Luminata and the people are engaged in the building of scenes, the setting up of shots. Under the cinematic gaze, we readily imagine the body as striated and parcelled out by lights: as the subject of surveillance, the subject of torture. The abundant filmmaking represents the public square as a cinematic production: the plaza is in the process of being composed. As such, it is a fabricated set in which premeditated sequences are realised, and simultaneously a place where people can design public life, the nation, the lettered city. The public square supports the people's aesthetic agency.

The sign, likewise, bolsters aesthetic agency. It gives the people an updated aesthetic identity. They acquire 'autonomy'.⁵³ It emancipates those who had been abandoned by the lettered city and the Enlightenment public sphere. A colonial problem is solved. The Global South gains autonomy in relation to the Global North. Yet, in the very gesture of granting aesthetic agency, the sign retracts it with the eradication of historical identities, the people's 'civil record'. They see E. Luminata as an alternative. The bag lady, whom it is hard to profit from, has found a way to fashion her own aesthetic agency. She gathers herself as an aesthetic agent in the square. Her attraction is irresistible.

Reading the Marketplace

The novel's last section has E. Luminata mesmerised by the sign:

Letter by letter, word by word, during those hours when she wore out her gaze letting her eyes wander over the neons, avoiding the apparent messages that might have led her astray if she had remained on the surface of the text.

But no.

She had succeeded in uniting the most far-apart letters, the turned on and the switched off, the crisscrossing of the two, the signs they constructed in between, the apparent blanks, the interchange between message and message.⁵⁴

Here E. Luminata may once again be enjoying the ‘daze’ of being ‘lost in different residues’ provided by the projections of the sign onto the city.⁵⁵ She is making do with the figurations that the global marketplace makes available in the square. Chilean inhabitation of the market is derivative from first-world models that prescribe cultural canons and implement criteria of beauty. The aesthetics of the sign yields neither contemporaneity nor novelty but enacts a belated, programmed spectacle. Roles are allotted, scripts pre-planned, as we are told in the second interrogation scene.⁵⁶ How then, as the novel proposes, can a bag lady in a Santiago square provide a ‘model’ for the construction of a narrative?

E. Luminata is a reader of her aesthetic environment who is ready to propose errata for the visual forms she registers, effecting creative ruptures in the rule of the sign. ‘[I]n truth, that lighted advertisement had a defect: the height of the building on which it stood. It was not sufficient and that’s why the neons were not being diluted as they ought to have been but, like the sun’s rays, painted their surroundings.’⁵⁷ The sign, E. Luminata notices, relies on antecedent aesthetic modes: it paints. It is supported by an architectural design. It cannot carry its rationality independently but banks on the sun, which produces night as well as day and causes night to be followed by day. In its painterly practice, the sign even mimics the style of the sunshine. E. Luminata creates a reading that historicises the sign. She situates it in its aesthetic underpinnings, its material and symbolic location in the square.

E. Luminata carries on with her reading. The square assists in shaping her perspective, her voice.⁵⁸ She looks at the projections of the sign onto her grey dress. Trying to make them out, she finds the place where the light of the sign is the strongest, ‘managing to denote some letters that, very diluted, never succeeded in forming words. But the writings open to more than one interpretation occurred there. Each one of them contained more than a single letter’.⁵⁹ Further interpretive determinacy is not really achieved by changing position. A different viewpoint only allows her to see how the letters that fall onto the center of the square are ‘presupposed by the reading she made of the ones emanating from above’.⁶⁰ A supposedly better perspective fails to permit disambiguation. E. Luminata becomes aware of the inescapable equivocality of the sign’s emissions.

She realized [...] that it was impossible for her to specify an accurate combinatorial with certainty. Which two, three, or four letters might fall on her if she stayed in one definite spot. And even more than that: owing to that same distance, some letters piled on top of others, giving rise to complete words, which

beyond any clear or precise meaning established links among themselves.

Besides, all this depended on her absolute rigidity, which was totally impossible because of the prevailing cold and each one of her movements would permit the appearance of other signs and that way of various words.⁶¹

The aesthetic model that the bag lady supplies is a language of ambiguity, fissure, reinvention and corporeal locatedness. At one level, this form, as Richard observes, restores emotional and bodily excess and failure to the codifications of utilitarian language, seeking out what the marketplace cannot anticipate and what escapes its transparencies.⁶² But at another level, it is a form that parallels the emotional intensities of commodified experience with a far richer and more expansive affective palate.⁶³ It realises a pliability and imaginative pluriformity that run athwart both the rigidities and the flows, the minimalisms and the maximalisms projected by neoliberalism's instrumental schemata.

A reader of literature and culture, E. Luminata is also proficient in the cinema. She activates the potentialities of film and other media for the design of the nation and the public square. In the novel's final pages, she does herself up with the instruments she has in her paper bag. She takes out a mirror and cuts her hair with a pair of scissors. She puts on a necklace over her grey dress. As she fashions her body, dawn arises. Cars encircle the square. People walk to work. Daybreak follows night. Early and late technologies coexist. E. Luminata's adornment, the urban setting, the streetlights, the walking paths of the passers-by, the lettering flowing from the display, and the electricity cables powering the advertisements collaborate to engender the aesthetic constellation that is the square. Satirically reimagined, enlightenment, the public sphere and the lettered city reveal their corporeal and social investments. Showcasing the previously outcast subaltern female body, indeed, hosting a celebration of their historical other, these structures, newly aestheticised and imagined in alternative terms as the plaza, can also animate the people's powers of reading and self-making.⁶⁴ Literature on the model of a ragged bag lady tells them as much. And it communicates this to us, Eltit's readers. 'Imagine a square space', she writes, challenging us to situate literature in the aesthetic location that is the plaza, and enlisting us in the labour of aesthetic reimagination.⁶⁵

The Public Square as a Site of Aesthetic Agency

The plaza, which hosts the play of light, form and bodies, is a site of aesthetic bonding and contestation, of memory and forgetting. It is essential to the recuperation of the historical record, which is under threat by the sign. The square can be given over to the sign, but it can also support a historical sensibility, conceived not in a totalising Hegelian sense but as a state of awareness

with jagged edges that both draws from and nourishes contingently emerging experiential horizons. On the one hand, the sign is not entirely foreign to this historical consciousness. On the other hand, literature, as produced, appropriated and imagined anew in the square, is part and parcel of our ability to grasp the sign's workings and to self-reflexively apprehend its rewriting of the society.

At one point, E. Luminata spells out 'Where you going?' in the sky. A bit later she chalks it in large letters on the ground.⁶⁶ The people rub it out. She writes it again. Together with the people, she scours it off. Subsequently there is more writing, more brushing away. The square upholds these endeavors. They are ongoing. Literature is made and remade, apprised of mistakes, blotted out, and reinvented on a new model. The square has resilience; it is multiplicitous. New stories, new meanings can take root there. But to write is to play with fire and to cut into the skin. The ragged bag lady injures herself. Gestures of burning her hand by dunking it into the flames⁶⁷ and cutting lines into her arm⁶⁸ correlate with moments at which she opens up flows of literary and performative possibility.⁶⁹ Writing is a form of embodiment. Writing a different story is a way of redoing our bodies, of rearranging the plaza.

E. Luminata finds pleasure in modalities of discovery, play and connectedness that circumvent the sign's indifferent strobing. The square, meanwhile, is itself in motion. Film gives a frame, or rather multiple, evolving frames, for the square, which itself is a frame for creation and participation. The framing, the takes and the scenes are constantly confronted with errors and adjusted. The public square offers a stage for writing, performance, reading and display that is liable to editing, redoing and all manner of uptake. It is a platform of multimodal aesthetic experience, where all formal and sensory modalities can potentially engage one another. Undergirding their interplay, the square is assembled and 'reassembled'.⁷⁰

Eltit locates subaltern aesthetic agency in her bag lady, offering her ragged protagonist as a mirror image of a technologically advanced consumption society, which never has enough and is always poor. Consumerism, after all, keeps up with the times at the very moment of running already behind them, necessitating the next item, the next purchase. E. Luminata and the people negotiate this paradoxical temporality.⁷¹

The bag lady's narration both reflects and differs from the story Eltit tells, as suggested by the following pair of lines, which dismiss restrictive notions of literature as the author's meaning, a blank page or a corpse/corpus:

Her soul is being E. Luminata and offering herself as another.
Her soul is not being called diamela eltit/white sheets/cadaver.⁷²

By having E. Luminata's tale at once reflect and go aslant the author's text, Eltit embeds her work in the social thematic it problematises. The very public

novel we are reading is not exempt from the workings of the marketplace. In the form of E. Luminata's fiction and, implicitly, Eltit's narrative, literature enacts a decolonial feminist stance. Eltit confronts the output of the marketplace with her invented character's performance, pushing back against the reductions and effacements perpetuated by the global economy. The marketplace requires the aesthetic, and the aesthetic may deploy the marketplace, but the latter cannot wholly control the invention of new forms. The public square harbours the tangle of opposing forces that ensues.

Aesthetic Publicness

Eltit's square connotes a form of aesthetic publicness that surpasses the models established by the Enlightenment, the lettered city and the sign. Architecture embodies the frictions on display in the plaza. The square has a dual lighting system.⁷³ One is public, feeding the streetlights; the other is implemented by the sign. Both conspire in the making of an aesthetic identity that is at once local and part of a globalised economy. The antagonisms and splits encoded in the urban design are ineradicable elements of the identifications and gatherings that unfold.

The aesthetic dimensions of the square, such as framings, scenography, listenings, gazes, material supports and holdings, interpretations, performances and displays, are key to the forms of subjectivity, relationality, embodiment and sexuality that become possible in the nation and the globe. Aesthetic norms and forms shape the registers of autocracy or democracy that the people can participate in, and are, in turn, marked by these registers. As political theorist Bonnie Honig underscores, public things are items from which democracy is forged.⁷⁴ They engender collective attachment and contestation. People constellate around them. Honig has in mind entities such as railroads and parks. Along the lines of her incisive analysis, the plaza, like the streetlights and electricity cables feeding them, is a public thing. Crucially, however, as Eltit's novel impresses on us, it is also an aesthetic thing. While Honig presumably counts certain kinds of films under the umbrella of public things, she, by contrast to Eltit, does not explicitly call attention to the aesthetic norms and forms instantiated by public things.⁷⁵ These elements, however, are part of the resources and forces on which public phenomena like the plaza and the polity congregating around them draw as they galvanise new ways of coming together and dissenting. Aesthetic publicness enters the scene of people and things as a constellation that forges loops between aesthetic and public modes of responsiveness. Following Eltit, it needs to be reclaimed as such.

Invoking the spectre of a totalising marketplace that appropriates and supersedes the Enlightenment public sphere and the lettered city, Eltit supplements these three figures with the public square where the resulting conflicts and transformations play out. The plaza, in conclusion, is a platform for aesthetic publicness. In other words, it is a forum where aesthetic experience unfolds in shifting structures, in multiple modes and media. This happens in

tension and collusion with the scripts of interpellation fostered by the global economy. Confronting the Chilean people with two mutually entangled alternatives, *E. Luminata* shifts the primary locus of aesthetic agency from the sign's emissions to the bag lady's creativity. The novel counters modernist progressions and their attendant sexual, gender and class positionings with corporeal imaginaries and temporal disjunctions that reframe the relations among sign, protagonist and crowd. The bag lady, as we have seen, invents her 'own' fiction, toggling between 'external' desiderata and internal criteria. The former valorisations introduce cultural exigencies pertaining to global and local hierarchies as well as to the allure of the marketplace. The latter valorisations carry the day in Enlightenment aesthetics. The upshot for public life rings powerfully: public existence is a fundamentally aesthetic playing field, whose possibilities are caught up with aesthetic norms and forms. We can reap a philosophical take-away for the notion of aesthetic publicness specifically: besides instituting curtailments of subjectivity and cultural engagement, aesthetic publicness features decolonial aesthetic stances that partake of registers of autonomy and heteronomy alike, that interweave aesthetic distance with aesthetic connectedness, and, as a result, engender critical reconfigurations of collectivity, signalling necessary lines of democratisation.⁷⁶

Aesthetic publicness is a vital work in progress required to counter the encroachments of technologically regulated market rationality on society. It encompasses the ways in which the aesthetic and the public route through each other in the fashioning of selves and objects, the designing of sociality, and the modes of caring attentiveness, concern and critique we exercise. To be sure, aesthetic publicness harbours states of indifference to violence and complicity in oppression. It is neither unproblematic nor unwaveringly on the right side of history. But, as my reading demonstrates, it is crucial to our attempts to wrestle with the predicaments that tempt contemporary aesthetic discourses to pull away from thick and substantial notions of the public. By jettisoning or diminishing aesthetic publicness, we play into economic frameworks and institutions that must be challenged. And we ultimately deprive ourselves of powers needed to contest coloniality. Aesthetic publicness yields forums for aesthetic experience and address that condition the aesthetic activities on which these forums subsequently depend. They are thus of enormous importance to the project of cultural criticism.

While undeniably intertwined with terrorisation, sexual violence and carcerality – a point that merits repeating in the face of enduring forces of denial and forgetfulness – aesthetic publicness, as a historically situated formation, also hosts symbolic and communicative actions that bring to articulation these intertwine-ments. More than that, it comprises platforms in which actors can give expression to lifeworlds, enter into contact with each other's experiences, and intone demands for cultural infrastructures that are conducive to people's flourishing.

The aesthetic is central to publicness. As my analysis has brought out, the contest over the public unfurls in aesthetics terms. It is a struggle over

aesthetic forms and contents and their cultural underpinnings and possibilities. People and things exist within aesthetic matrices that mark their relational positionings vis-à-vis other people and things, and registers of time and space. We never precede nor shake off these matrices. Aesthetic publicness is a pillar of collective existence. While both the Enlightenment and the lettered city ultimately provide inadequate models of aesthetic publicness, ones that are complicitous with coloniality and late capitalist structures of subjectivity, race, gender and nation, and while these complicities, as I have indicated, require alternative constructions of aesthetic publicness, this does not mean that aesthetics needs to be jettisoned. The same goes for literature. Eltít's novel self-reflexively enacts this awareness. Indeed, my uptake of her thought experiment attests to the centrality of the aesthetic as an encompassing cross-genre, intermedial, multitemporal formal repertoire, at once locally emplaced and global in reach. As such, the aesthetic can encroach on zones of forgetting and enlist material life in the creation of an alternative social body. Backed by the aesthetic, literature can function as a contemporary site of critical political agency. It yields indispensable resources for the actualisation of a democratic citizenry and a multi-voiced public domain.

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Notes

¹ David Hume and Immanuel Kant are proponents of this approach. For analysis, see Monique Roelofs, *Arts of Address: Being Alive to Language and the World* (Columbia University Press, 2020), pp. 60–87; and Monique Roelofs, *The Cultural Promise of the Aesthetic* (Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 5, 29–56, 195, 202, 205–06.

² For examples of this tendency in postcolonial and decolonial studies, see Monique Roelofs, 'Decoloniality, Identity, and Aesthetic Publicity', *Contemporary Aesthetics*, 10 (2022), notes 1 and 3. Accounts of aesthetic experience and qualities in analytical philosophy, in contrast, often downplay questions of the public by presupposing and reiterating Enlightenment paradigms, thus shirking complexities surrounding the notion of the public.

³ Eltít's novel joins other important, recent cultural productions in its insistence on aesthetic publicness. See Roelofs, 'Decoloniality, Identity, and Aesthetic Publicity'. For a discussion of the novel in the context of

structures of aesthetic publicness and formations of identity in contemporary artworks, including works of performance, installation and so-called 'public' art, and in relation to far-right mobilisations in Europe, see Monique Roelofs, 'Identity, Art, and the Aesthetic Effusiveness of Racialised Possibility', in *Public Art: Das Recht auf Erinnerung und die Realität der Städte/The Right to Remember and the Reality of Cities*, ed. by Gürsoy Doğtaş, Jörg Heiser, and María Inés Plaza Lazo (Berlin: Distanz Verlag, 2024), pp. 232–50.

⁴ Eltít's novel was first published as Diamela Eltít, *Lumpérica* (Ornitórrinco, 1983) and subsequently published in English translation as Diamela Eltít, *E. Luminata*, trans. by Ronald Christ (Lumen, 1997).

⁵ See Diamela Eltít, 'Errant, Erratic', in Eltít, *E. Luminata*, pp. 4–12 (p. 11); Diamela Eltít, 'Writing, Plot, and Desire', trans. by Ramsey McGlazer, *Critical Times*, 3.1 (2020), pp. 148–56 (pp. 150, 153); Mary Louise Pratt, 'Overwriting Pinochet: Undoing the Culture of Fear in Chile', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 57.2 (1996), pp. 151–63 (pp. 159, 153); Amanda Holmes, *City Fiction: Language,*

Body, and Spanish American Urban Space (Bucknell University Press, 2007) pp. 129–30; Luvia Estella Morales Rodríguez, “‘La letra no es inocente ni menos neutral’: una conversación con Diamela Eltit”, *Confluencia*, 36.2 (2021), pp. 160–66 (p. 162).

⁶ Eltit, *E. Luminata*, p. 3.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 28, 47.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 14–15.

⁹ I read this as a riff on Immanuel Kant, ‘An Answer’, and Michel Foucault, ‘What is Critique?’. While challenging a propagandistic, dictatorial figuration of enlightenment as ‘flames in the night’, as Pratt notes in her powerful reading, Eltit, to my mind, at the same time intriguingly anticipates what Wendy Chun calls the ‘literalization of “enlightenment” by fibre-optics systems. See Immanuel Kant, ‘An Answer to the Question: “What is Enlightenment?”’, in *Political Writings*, ed. by Hans Reiss, trans. by H. B. Nisbet, 2nd edn (Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 54–60; Michel Foucault, ‘What is Critique?’, in *The Politics of Truth*, ed. by Sylvère Lotringer, trans. by Lysa Hochroth and Catherine Porter (Semiotext(e), 2007), pp. 41–84; Pratt, ‘Overwriting Pinochet’, pp. 151–63 (p. 160); and Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Control and Freedom: Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics* (MIT Press, 2006), p. 299.

¹⁰ Eltit, *E. Luminata*, p. 14.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁵ Eltit explores these convergences further in Diamela Eltit, *The Fourth World*, trans. by Dick Gerdes (University of Nebraska Press, 1995); see especially pp. 112–14. Fascinatingly, they prefigure the linkages we activate when accessing the worldwide web. See Chun, *Control and Freedom*, pp. 3–5. Racial dimensions of these social and aesthetic formations, alluded to occasionally in *E. Luminata*, receive additional attention in *The Fourth World*. For analysis, see Monique Roelofs, ‘Selling Literature/Selling the Race: Diamela Eltit’s Decolonial Feminist Critique of the Neoliberal Marketplace’, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 77.4 (2019), pp. 461–73.

¹⁶ Eltit, *E. Luminata*, p. 26.

¹⁷ Nelly Richard, *Cultural Residues: Chile in Translation*, trans. by Alan West-Durán and Theodore Quester (University of Minnesota Press, 2004) pp. 4–6, 9–12, 16.

¹⁸ Modes of individuation erode within what Deleuze some years later would

comprehend as contemporary mechanisms of control. See Gilles Deleuze, ‘Postscript on the Societies of Control’, *October*, 59 (1992), pp. 3–7.

¹⁹ Eltit, *E. Luminata*, p. 84; see also p. 15.

²⁰ On the supplantation of the Latin American state and civic society by consumerism as a model for belonging and identification under global corporatism, see Néstor García Canclini, *Imagined Globalization*, trans. by George Yúdice (Duke University Press, 2014), pp. 137–50.

²¹ As the national and international debates around the 2023 pro-Pinochet demonstrations during the 50th anniversary of the coup made abundantly clear.

²² Eltit, *E. Luminata*, p. 27.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 105, 112, 173.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 18–19.

²⁶ For more extensive readings of the novel’s literary strategies, see Nelly Richard, ‘Tres funciones de escritura: desconstrucción, simulación, hibridación’, in *Una poética de literatura menor: la narrativa de Diamela Eltit*, ed. by Juan Carlos Lértora (Editorial Cuarto Propio, 1991), pp. 37–51; Julio Ortego, ‘Diamela Eltit y el imaginario de la virtualidad’, in *Una poética de literatura menor*, ed. by Lértora, pp. 53–81.

²⁷ Robert Neustadt discusses continuities between Eltit’s novel and the performance featuring part of it. See Robert Neustadt, ‘Diamela Eltit: Performing Action in Dictatorial Chile’, in *Holy Terrors: Latin American Women Perform*, ed. by Diana Taylor and Roselyn Costantino (Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 117–34 (pp. 124–25).

²⁸ Eltit, *E. Luminata*, chapters 8 and 9.

²⁹ Diamela Eltit, *Maipú*, 1980, performance, Santiago, Chile.

³⁰ Eltit, *E. Luminata*, p. 165.

³¹ Though not specifically focused on *E. Luminata*, Nelly Richard’s compelling discussions of Eltit’s fiction in *Cultural Residues* offer this reading as a component of a far-reaching cultural analysis of the dictatorship and the dictated transition following it. See also Eltit, ‘Errant, Erratic’.

³² Eltit, *E. Luminata*, pp. 161–65.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 157, 163.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 28–29.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 30–32.

³⁶ On this point, among others, Eltit’s reading of contemporary society goes well beyond Deleuze’s analysis of the epistemic

and political dynamics of control. See Deleuze, 'Postscript'.

³⁷ Eltít, *E. Luminata*, pp. 14, 16.

³⁸ Ángel Rama, *The Lettered City*, ed. and trans. by John Charles Chasteen (Duke University Press, 1996); see also Jean Franco, *The Decline and Fall of the Lettered City: Latin America in the Cold War* (Harvard University Press, 2002).

³⁹ Eltít, *E. Luminata*, p. 106.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 16–17.

⁴² See *ibid.*, pp. 21–23, 29–33, 87–90.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 91–92, 95.

⁴⁴ Eltít, *E. Luminata*, p. 105.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 77, 90.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 95–96; see also p. 188. This engagement with Mapuche idioms, images and ceremonies has precedents in her work. On her collaboration in the publication of Mapuche testimonials, see Eltít, 'Writing, Plot, and Desire', p. 153. For a helpful reading, see also Ronald Christ, 'Extravag(r)ant and Un/erring Spirit', in Eltít, *E. Luminata*, pp. 205–34 (pp. 227–28).

⁴⁹ Eltít, *E. Luminata*, p. 44.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 121–34.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 179.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁵⁴ Eltít, *E. Luminata*, p. 198.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

⁵⁸ See also *ibid.*, p. 101.

⁵⁹ Eltít, *E. Luminata*, p. 199.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 199.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

⁶² Richard, *Cultural Residues*, p. 12.

⁶³ The novel, crucially, challenges not only neoliberalism's affective flattening analysed so perspicaciously by Richard, but also its affective intensities. See *ibid.*

⁶⁴ *E. Luminata* 'celebrates herself' (Eltít, *E. Luminata*, p. 17) and is being celebrated in the bodies of each of the people in the square (*ibid.*, p. 19).

⁶⁵ Eltít, *E. Luminata*, p. 119.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 41–42, 44.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 153–61, 164–65.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 42, 162–63. Pratt signals here a critical reclamation of pain and torture in engagement with state violence. See Pratt, 'Overwriting Pinochet', pp. 161–62. However, these figurations also invite less literal readings.

⁷⁰ Eltít, *E. Luminata*, p. 181.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 178, 197.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 90.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, pp. 14, 16, 34–35.

⁷⁴ Bonnie Honig, *Public Things: Democracy in Disrepair* (Fordham University Press, 2017).

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 56, 59.

⁷⁶ I elaborate my reading of aesthetic publicness in *E. Luminata* and Eltít's *The Fourth World* in Monique Roelofs, *Strange Tastes: Aesthetic Sensibility and the Public in Latin American and Latinx Feminisms* (under contract with Duke University Press).

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