‘Mujer’ y Chile: en Transición/‘Woman’ and Chile: in Transition*

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“Transitions to civilian rule in Latin America today,” according to Verónica Schild, “involve a reconfiguration of state-civil society relations along the lines of the neoliberal modernizing project, with powerful cultural effects” (94). One such effect is el tema mujer, as the Chilean critic Raquel Olea calls the indiscriminate or all-encompassing topic of ‘woman’ in cultural productions, which she says is a result of recent historical, social, political and economic conditions (i.e. transitions to civilian rule, neoliberalism) that contribute to an ever-increasing problematization of female identity, often causing official reactionary discourses to it. The historical moment of the late twentieth century points to a time of redefinition of identity and roles in most aspects of Chilean society (not just female identity) as Chile went from being socialist democratic, to ruled by military dictatorship, and back to democracy again. It is within the larger spectrum of these societal changes that the redefinition, and consequently the representation, of female identity becomes so critical.1 Representation is so important because, as Nelly Richard asserts, “el modo en que cada sujeto se vive y se piensa está medido por el sistema de representación del lenguaje que articula los procesos de subjetividad a través de formas culturales y de relaciones sociales” (“Feminismo...” 734).

For Richard, it is necessary to contextualize these tensions in the coup d’etat in Chile in 1973 which breaks the symbolic order, the social intelligibility, in order to build new signs with meanings that were specific to its purposes. For example, during Pinochet’s military regime and dictatorship in Chile (1973-1990), “los signos ‘mujer’ y ‘familia’ fueron objeto de un doble y contradictorio tratamiento” (“Género, valores” 200). Although the dictatorship exalted the union ‘mujer-patria’ [with its analogues mater-pater, y madre-padre] as the base, guarantee, and continuer of the order, it used the emblem of the Mother in particular “como guardiana natural de los valores sagrados de la Nación” (200). By imposing this specific social ‘performance,’ the dictatorship was able to ensure order at one level, but this same regime maintained a parallel punitive system based on violence towards the people for whom the repressive character of the rhetoric and the force of the dictatorship were not enough: There was a double play of signification occurring with the violence committed by the State against the mothers, fathers, wives, husbands, and children that the State considered to be dangerous for the “Orden” (200).

When they began to publicly discuss the return to civilian government in Chile, the first impulse was to think that the Pinochet years would just automatically disappear in the same way that the pre-Pinochet order of social intelligibility had been disappeared or erased by Pinochet – something like “borrón y cuenta nueva.” However, what remained were residual effects, such as the trauma of having lived those 17 years of the repressive regime, as well as the original wound of nostalgia for what had been lost, or what had been disappeared by the Pinochet regime. Even though it was necessary to reconstruct the cultural imaginary in order to accompany the return to democracy, the pieces left with which to do so were fragmentary, violent or violated, unexpressed or

1 Verónica Schild summarizes this phenomenon: “Certainly the attention to the discursive constitution of women’s problems, and more generally the efforts to integrate different categories of women ‘excluded’ from the national community, have not materialized out of thin air, and must be linked to the struggles of the women’s movement. But more concretely, I argue that there is a convergence between, on the one hand, the concerted actions of the networks of women activists and professionals that make up a large segment of the women’s movement and, on the other, the renewed efforts of the Chilean neoliberal state to redefine the nature of the ‘national community’ and the appropriate behaviors of its constituent members” (94).

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inexpressible. Within this pathologized framework, Richard emphasizes that the metaphor was, and still is the best way to express that which was lost, or that which disappeared ("Cultural Periphery" 71).

During the Pinochet years (1973-1990), the dictatorship was the obvious enemy that united feminists and others against it and its unequivocal usage of ‘woman’ and ‘family’ as signs of Chilean values, tradition, and stability (Schild 100). When the first government of the transition back to democracy, la Concertación, came into existence in 1989, it had to decide what to do with the machinery of signs that Pinochet had put into production and circulation. Due to uncertainty about the transition to democracy, according to Richard, “el gobierno de la Transición democrática necesitó hiperbolizar el discurso de la Familia para fundar nuevos vínculos de estabilidad comunitaria que se encargarán de naturalizar el reencuentro del país consigo mismo” (“Género, valores” 200-201). In other words, it was necessary to utilize certain signs such as ‘woman’ or ‘family’ to represent certain ‘tradiciones chilenas’ or ‘valores chilenos’ in order not to fall back into the chaos or the instability that could occur by pushing aside the repressive machinery of the dictatorship, or by welcoming the new waves of neoliberal economics and globalization that were arriving in Chile. Therefore, the united family became important as the metaphor of the country reintegrating itself, and though it may seem paradoxical, the government of the transition decided to reify the same signs that the military government did: ‘woman’ and ‘family’ as guardians and guarantors of Order.

Both governments promoted a representational politics that naturalized and essentialized the signs ‘woman’ and ‘family’ (“Género, valores” 203). However, the Transition promoted these representations in the way it knew best: by incorporating them into the economy, and by making a cultural product of them, in a sense “maximizing femininity” (Olea 74). For these reasons, the “tema mujer” in the movies, art, literature, academic programs, and cultural events and programs became a sure seller. However, according to Raquel Olea, the effects of these phenomena “no siempre deseados, responden antes a los intereses neo-liberales y sus necesidades políticas hacia la mujer que a interrogantes abiertas desde la teoría y las prácticas feministas” (original emphasis, 74).

Though the Transition did this as a way of maintaining societal continuity in the face of so much change, this rhetorical policy in the name of “concertación” (harmony, agreement, union) ironically silenced those who had fought against the Pinochet regime and its unequivocal meanings for these signs, by in effect saying that non-traditional women’s interests were expendable and excludable for the good of the nation (another former rhetorical strategy borrowed from the Pinochet regime in reference to the disappeared). This double message fragmented Chilean feminism as some women entered into the new government, accepting and promoting the signs of ‘woman’ and ‘family’ according to the official discourse, while others maintained a contestatory and marginalized position regarding the new government and its symbolism as they tried to promote the multiplicity of possibilities for women within what they now understood as a whole cultural system of subjugation, not just a repressive military regime (Richard “Género” 201-202; Schild 100). Two novels that were published in this timeframe of transition from dictatorship to democracy, El cuarto mundo (1988), by Diamela Eltit, and Nosotras que nos queremos tanto (1991), by Marcela Serrano, perform this process of bifurcation regarding the symbolic representations of the signs ‘woman’ and ‘family’ and...
their cultural effects. These novels, then, also permit us to see their inscription within larger cultural debates about identity, neoliberalism, democracy, and literature.

In her article on “Gender, Dress, and Market,” Francine Masiello highlights the conjunctures that have existed since the mid-1800s in Latin America between modernization, the gendered body, the politics of social relations, and the regulation of these bodies and relations through cultural consumption. Masiello tells us that novels and other cultural products have been used to teach ‘national subjects,’ particularly women, the correct behaviors, tastes and desires in the face of modernization. But Masiello also sees a space for undermining hegemonic discourses through gender representation: “the spectacle of representation often prompts alternative forms of identity and alliance; it requires us to rethink the way in which the body has been used to create ‘national subjects’” (231). She ends by saying that it is necessary to “reinsert the gendered body in our discussions of aseptic neoliberal exchange, to show the gendered body as an originating point of discourse, community, and action” (231). Masiello has praised Richard and Eltit for their destabilization of gender which has the effect of removing it from binarisms, creating ambiguity, uncertainty, and subverting the neoliberal project of “un limitado surtido de fáciles opciones” (“Tráfico de identidades” 764), something akin to Olea’s el tema mujer.

Indeed, in *El cuarto mundo*, Eltit takes advantage of the gaps in the double play of significations of ‘woman’ and ‘family’ in order to expose and deconstruct/decenter in an allegorical fashion a whole range of subjugating relationships. In this way she denaturalizes the notions of woman and family in order to expose their ideological charges. *El cuarto mundo* was published in November 1988, still during the Pinochet regime. However, 1988 is also the year of the plebiscite, whose public discussions had begun some years before, to see if Pinochet would continue in power, or if Chileans wanted to have, for the first time since 1970, democratic elections for the leadership of the country. Indeed, the result of the plebiscite, held in October, 1988, just one month before the publication of *El cuarto mundo*, supported returning to democracy. Therefore, whether it is coincidence or not, *El cuarto mundo* was written and published within the climate of both dictatorship and democracy.

The textuality of Eltit’s novel anticipates and undermines the discourse of the transition from dictatorship to democracy, and reveals the fear of the chaos, instability and uncertainty that could accompany such a transition. It also shows an impulse to deconstruct totalizing notions of ‘woman’ and ‘family’ that are accepted as ‘natural.’ The story, written with abstract allegorical figures, is about a totally dysfunctional family that lives in a “sudaca” city. Almost all the action takes place within the confines of the family home. There are no specific temporal markers, although the reader is told that the city has prostituted itself to “la nación más poderosa del mundo” (101, 127). The allegorical aspect of this novel is important because such defamiliarized characters and places force the questioning of the official discourses since it makes the language itself stand out that much more.

The text achieves the collapse of a totalizing discourse – that of a coherent, univocal and unified novel – since it is divided in two distinct sections with very different narrative voices. And even though there are two sections, the text also avoids the binarism of domination/subordination which would cause one of the versions to be

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2 All quotes are from the original Spanish version of *El cuarto mundo*, unless otherwise indicated.

* With special thanks to Debra Castillo, Edmundo Paz-Soldán, and Luis Cárcamo for their helpful comments and suggestions. © Donetta M. Hines.
privileged over the other because neither of the sections is more credible nor more elucidating for the reader. However, the title of the first section, “Será irrevocable la derrota,” establishes a conflictive situation in which there is a fight, a struggle for power where there will be a victor and a vanquished. It sets us up to wait for the “irrevocable” and “irreversible” defeat, and to wonder who will be defeating whom. But there is more than one struggle; Eltit adroitly plays with text, representation, and language in order to create multiple defeats that challenge, overthrow, and destabilize multiple structures of power, like, for example, the family, or the traditional relationship between writer (provider of pure knowledge) and reader (desiring of the truth). In choosing the word “derrota,” the text tells us that it is not about a simple transgression, violation, or infraction, but rather something more final and more devastating. In the end it is a defeat of hierarchies, a total deconstruction.

Eltit’s text exposes multiple defeats from the very beginning when the father rapes the mother who is in a disadvantaged condition because she is suffering from a fever (11). This scene, and another like it in which a twin sister is conceived, are narrated by the male twin (el mellizo) who is conceived during the first rape, yet who narrates from before his conception. His is the only narrative voice in the first part of the novel. Despite the narration of the mother’s initial defeat, a few pages later the narrator tells us that the mother knows very well how to act in order to perpetuate in the father “su ilusión del poder” (16). Therefore, we see that the mother, according to what the son tells us, knows how to use her site of enunciation in order to achieve what she wants. Furthermore, she is aware of the hierarchical ‘ordering’ of her world, in this case the family, and works from inside the system, from her subordinated position, in order to defeat or undermine it.

Another defeat in the first part of the narration concerns the socialization of the twin (mellizo). Although the parents officially give him (“se me otorgó”) the same name as his father (as one would give or grant a prize or make a legal act), the mother “solapadamente, me miró y dijo que yo era igual a María Chipia, que yo era ella. Su mano afilada recorrió mi cara y dijo: ‘Tú eres María Chipia” (23). This “underhanded” or “sneaky” action on the part of the mother turns out to be stronger than the official act and ends up undermining it: “Volvió a la legalidad de mi nombre insistentemente, para borrar su faz oscilante y plenamente humana. Yo no podia. Cada vez que ella, acunándome, me llamaba, yo volvía la cabeza escrutando la figura de mi padre” (24). The twin (mellizo) is unable to identify with “the name of the father,” that is, with the perpetuation of the authoritarian and patriarchal official discourse.

Still, there are many more examples when family members overcome patriarchal authority. In the second part of the novel, for example, the narrative voice belongs most of the time to the twin sister, but one also notices a multiplicity of voices since this section of the novel also incorporates dialogue among members of the family. Even though the second section does not retell the same events as the brother has told us in the first part (since, I think, this would divide the text in just two voices and versions, a binarism that it seems to want to break), it permits the reader to hear other voices and perspectives than that of the male twin, and in this way it serves as a sort of contestatory discourse. Furthermore, in the second part the text rapidly begins to enter into a state of chaos, where it is difficult to ascertain what is happening, to whom, and why, and this transmits a sense of uncertainty. Perhaps the title of this section, “Tengo la mano
terriblemente agarrotada,” refers to the hand of the female twin, who, in the act of writing is “agarrotada,” or oppressed, and cannot express herself openly in writing and in words, emblematizing the situation of censorship under political repression when one cannot write directly what one wants for fear of reprisals.

Despite the restrictions, in the second part of the novel we are explicitly told of the incestuous relationship between the twins, a transgression of the incest taboo. Here we also learn that the twin brother is a transvestite, a defeat of traditional gender roles. At the beginning of this section, we also learn that the incestuous sexual relationship between the twins has engendered a pregnancy. The “extraña fecundación” is described in terms of something residual, something painful and void of pleasure, in a denaturalization of the sexual and reproductive act: “cuando el resto seminal escurrió fuera del borde y sentí como látigo el desecho” (83). Furthermore, it is described as a “catástrofe” (83), but also as a “compromiso híbrido” (83).

If having a baby is the ideal realization, in the most traditional sense, of a woman in a family, Eltit’s novel deconstructs this notion in multiple ways. First, the pregnancy is described as a pathological state for the woman, something that she feels will part her violently in two, that will devour her (20-21). Maternity is ambivalent as the mother gives her children milk as well as hostility (22). Furthermore, it is a clear transgression and yet inevitable curse that the baby has been conceived/engendered in an incestuous relationship and that it will be born as “una obra sudaca molesta y terrible” (88). It is also important to note that the baby, also referred to as “la obra,” has been “herido,” hurt or injured since its conception (83). The baby is not awaited lovingly by the family, rather, its conception and subsequent birth are what unleash the eventual dissolution of the family.

The twin sister says that she and her brother want to repeat (or keep repeating) the sexual act (the sexual/textual act that conceived ‘la obra’), and in this way understand it and erase it (83). Even though repetition can be a form of deconstructive liberation since each repetition changes what is being repeated, in this case, and to borrow the word used in the first section, the act is irrevocable because it has already conceived the sudaca baby (¿obra?). Throughout the second part of the novel, the twins repeat their sexual activities, always under the watchful eyes of their parents. Their younger sister, María de Alava, repeatedly obliges the twin sister to describe the act and the experience in writing, and the twin does so even though she recognizes “la inutilidad de mi lengua,” or what Dick Gerdes has translated as the “futilidad de mi articulación” (87; 73). The uselessness or futility call attention to the slippage between the act itself and the ways of understanding it (seeing it, reading about it), and to the impossibility of language to faithfully represent ‘reality.’ The problem is that language does not represent reality, but rather, as Foucault says, it constructs reality for us, enclosing us in it, like in the family or in the house in the novel, yet it is the only means we have to express ourselves. This passage also underlines the enormous differences among the multiple perspectives of the experience, its observation, its retelling, and the memory, which is also a retelling. For these reasons the allegorical nature of the novel communicates something to us at the same time as it confuses us. Since we are all prisoners of the same kinds of structures, we struggle to recognize ourselves and to undo ourselves from the ties that bind and blind.

Similarly, in the second part, the references to ‘la raza sudaca,’ ‘la catástrofe sudaca,’ and ‘el estigma sudaca’ become more and more frequent. These are linked to
increasingly more references to the “destrozamiento” of the family, and to their physical and moral decadence. For example, all of the family members seem to suffer from some kind of physical ailment or affliction with some kind of moral overtone. While in the first part of the novel the “sudacas” are strangers described as packs of eroticized youths, with nude torsos and big muscles, who attack María Chipia (el mellizo) and give him his first scar, on the first page of the second part of the novel, suddenly the family and the unborn baby are also referred to as sudacas. María Chipia is heard repeating to himself “soy un digno sudaca, soy un digno sudaca’ mientras las sílabas se trizan contra los muros de contención de la casa” because, as we all know, those two words ‘digno sudaca’ are not meant to go together (87). The pregnant narrator also says of her unborn baby: “Quiero hacer una obra sudaca terrible y molesta” (88). By the ending of the second section of the novel, it is very clear that to be ‘sudaca’ is a site of enunciation replete with ambivalent emotions, from contempt and repugnance, to pride in forming part of a sudaca fraternity in hopes of defeating “la nación más poderosa del mundo.”

According to the novel, the sudaca fraternity may be able to prevent the insidious curse of “la nación más poderosa del mundo,” which seems to be lying in wait to buy everything that the sudaca city has to offer, despite its contempt for the sudacas. At the end, the narrative voice, which seems to be different from that of either of the twins, says: “El dinero caído del cielo entra directo por los genitales y las voces ancianas se entregan a un adulterio desenfrenado” (127-128). In other words, the embodied city prostitutes itself, breaking its traditional pacts of faithfulness to its citizens in order to hand itself over to seduction by commercial interests. And in a city where everything is sold, nothing remains intact, except the sudaca baby/obra waiting to be born.

In the end, the fruit of the incestuous relationship is what finally dissolves the family and physically decenters it from the house where they live because, before the baby is born, the parents and the other daughter, María de Alava, abandon the house and the incestuous twins. The last lines are: “Lejos, en una casa abandonada a la fraternidad, entre un 7 y un 8 de abril, diamela eltit, asistida por su hermano mellizo, da a luz una niña. La niña sudaca irá a la venta” (128). There is a repetition of a story within a story (despite the differences, for example, at the end only a daughter is born) because these dates are the same dates in which the twins, at the beginning, were conceived. However, this time the “niña sudaca” will be put up for sale. Therefore, instead of the birth as part of a closed cycle, the family as a symbol of totality, we can imagine a spiral, perhaps even spiralling out of control in a city which is already a “fiction”. If the family is now free of its traditional symbolic order represented by the house, it is only in order to then be subjected to the commercial interests that the narrator says are prostituting the city. Although the twins identify with the sudaca race and side with its marginalized position with regard to the market, by the end of the novel there are no alternatives left to the market logic imposed on the city by “la nación más poderosa del mundo.” Therefore, when the “niña sudaca” is born, it is announced that she, too, “irá a la venta” (128).

It is possible that the baby is the novel itself, perhaps the fruit of “textual intercourse”, something that has been discursively and incestuously engendered in a system of symbolic representations. But, amongst whom? – diamela eltit (all lower-case, the copy, not the original?) and a metaphorical brother? …Or could the baby be ‘memory,’ at the end too charged with significations/meanings to have a clear ‘value,’ and therefore forced to go up for sale? Or does she emblematize the sudaca product(ion),

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marginalized, yet now considered a commodity on the market, just like everything else? Since the text is abstractly allegorical, we cannot definitively respond to these questions. Nevertheless, it is a strong commentary that unites the aesthetics of deconstruction with the ethics of the multiplicity of significations for woman, family, and by extension, for a country in the midst of transformation. Furthermore, it defeats the idea that it is possible to reunite the allegorical family, the country, when it is totally broken, devastated, and sold-out to the interests of the market. It is a decidedly negative vision.

In contrast with Eltit’s novel, Nosotras que nos queremos tanto, by the Chilean Marcela Serrano, promotes the Transition government’s traditional discourse on ‘woman’ and ‘family’. From the very title in which there is a harmonic group emphasis, “nosotras,” one intuits that the ideology of this text supports the naturalization and the essentialization of ‘woman’: that even though we all have different experiences, we are all, in essence, the same. Indeed, Nosotras is based in the realist narration of the events in the lives of four women– Ana, Isabel, María, y Sara – in Chile, in the second half of the twentieth century, precisely in the years before and during the military regime of Pinochet, and ending with the transition to democracy. Ana is the main narrator, and through her the other characters tell each other (and the reader) stories about their pasts, presents, and futures, of their desires and disillusionments, their loves and their losses, their professions and their families.

What most interests this narrator/character Ana is literature and “este raro fenómeno de mi género” (15). Therefore, from a narrative point of view especially interested in gender, Ana says:

Yo no soy protagonista de estas páginas, si es que existe claramente alguna. Aquí sólo hay mujeres, cualquiera de ellas. Somos tan parecidas todas, es tanto lo que nos hermana. Podríamos decir que cuento una, dos o tres historias, pero que da lo mismo. En el fondo, tenemos todas – más o menos – la misma historia que contar (16).

Serrano’s text, then, is centered on a sisterhood of women – “somos tan parecidas” – which implies that there exists a strong essence of what it is to be ‘woman.’ In other words, this narrator and her fellow characters, despite any superficial differences among them, are all united in a fundamental sameness known as ‘woman.’ The novel, then, seems to have internalized what Richard calls “el menú conformista y pacificante” of dominant patriarchal culture by reducing all women to a singular, non-protagonist sign (“Feminismo” 744).

The four women worked together in Santiago in the same Institute, where they met in 1979 when the Institute was initiated as a mediator between the government and civil society. This feminine work space inserted between two masculine spheres, “como si el Instituto hubiese sido el cobijo en estos años malos”, lasted for 10 years, until the return of democracy in Chile (17). At that time Ana is left on her own in the Institute while Isabel, Sara and María leave it to incorporate into the new democratic government. Though Ana, about 10 years older than her friends, believes that her friends can benefit greatly in the new government, she worries that they may become disenchanted in the public sphere: “si descubren que no es ese su camino, quisiera tener la casa abierta para recibirlas” (18). Since the structure of the novel is circular, meaning that it begins and ends in the same chronological moment after having traversed the lives of its characters,
the reader never knows if Isabel, Sara and María are successful in the public sphere. We only know that Ana worries that they may not be.

Of the four, Sara comes closest to being feminist in that she questions her identity in comparison with what she sees other women feel they have to do. For example, she often complains about women thinking that they need to be in a relationship with a man. She even decides to try a one-night-stand with a woman, but finds it to be “una alternativa menos en la vida” (282). Sara finally does fall in love again, with a man, Cristián, with whom she works on the ‘Comité para el NO’ in the plebiscite to be held to see if the people of Chile want Pinochet to continue as leader. During the post-plebiscite celebration initiating the return of Chile to democracy, Cristián and Sara are celebrating side by side in the street, when his ex-wife suddenly reappears, and she and Cristián have a silent reconciliation in a Hollywood style embrace, leaving Sara alone as a witness to the scene. Cristián’s abandoning of Sara in order to return to his wife precisely at the moment that the military government has admitted its loss in the plebiscite does not seem coincidental. On the contrary, it can be interpreted as a return to ‘traditional family values’, in which a single mother is cast to the side, and estranged couples that reunite are celebrated. In this sense it is the perfect metaphor for the same discourse that the Transition government uses to encourage reconciliation and reunification of the national ‘family.’

This return to ‘traditional values’ is especially strong in the portrayal of María. She is described in sensual terms: walking with her pelvis tilted forward as if it were her ‘proa’, her guide in her life (24). María’s rebelliousness is carried out vis-à-vis her sexuality – by promiscuity, assertiveness, and a definite intention not to fulfill her parents’ plans for her, and those of her socio-economic class, namely, marriage and family. María is able to fulfill her intention, living ‘independently’ and changing lovers whenever it suits her. Though she has a successful career, what matters most to her is a satisfying sexual relationship with a man. That is, until her sister Soledad, a left-over guerrillera against the Pinochet regime is killed by the government, and it is up to María to take charge of her niece, whose name, ironically, is Esperanza – ‘hope’. María, at this time single, contacts her former lover, Ignacio, and asks him to return to her, in this way trying to form a sort of family with the adopted niece as a daughter. This is a not-so-subtle way of saying that the ‘hope’ for María’s future lies in finally carrying out the plan she was destined for by her socio-economic position, that way of life she tried so hard to avoid, and which finally brought her to a crisis until ‘Esperanza’ shows up in her life. The book ends with María waiting passively for Ignacio to return.

Even though her workmates at the Institute are serious and successful professionals, and all but María have biological children, Isabel’s husband Hernán considers them “una mala influencia” on his wife (290). Ana, the narrator, says that “literally, this is true” (my emphasis, 290). We can interpret Ana’s comment several ways: first, that she hopes that this literary narrative will incite other women to question their roles, much as the three have encouraged Isabel to do; or second, that Ana recognizes, agreeing with Hernán, that this kind of questioning is ultimately negative. If we analyze only the literal, as Ana suggests, the second interpretation is the most appropriate because far from promoting feminism, this novel propagates traditional stereotypes of ideal women as mothers and wives, and of ‘feminists’ or ‘liberated women’ as troublemakers – either masculine or over-sexed. For all the questioning

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Isabel has done, for example, she settles back into a complacent relationship with her husband who may have improved a bit, but he continues to relegate her as the primary caretaker of the children and the house. Likewise, María says that she has realized, paradoxically, after reading a book by a North American feminist (Marilyn French’s *The Women’s Room*), that professional success is nothing if one does not have a loving relationship; as she says “el amor importa más que cualquier otra cosa en la tierra” (356). This is a way, then, of delegitimizing Sara, the only character who could be considered somewhat ‘feminist’, though in a stereotypical way, and her choice of dedicating herself to her profession and her daughter (though the dedication seems less of her own desire than from resignation after losing Cristián). More importantly, these character representations disarticulate feminism, and in the end, reduce all women to an undifferentiated sign of ‘woman’ who should achieve realization and stability through traditional notions of family.

According to Raquel Olea, a novel with the ‘tema mujer’ that is oriented toward the market, such as *Nosotras*, is successful precisely because it promotes a type of middle class woman who is not ‘dangerous’ to the dominant culture. By promoting this model for mass consumption, Olea says that it converts this type of woman into the mass desire. She becomes a model for all women because from her humble or difficult origins, she has been able to obtain her university degree, become a professional, have children, and contribute to society. Or, in the case of one of the characters, María, despite her promiscuous past, she has been reformed by true love, has abandoned her egocentrism, and has adopted her niece, the daughter of a left-over anti-Pinochet guerrillera – an obvious ‘extra’ in the Transition. And now, as a reformed woman, María is ready to integrate into the new democracy. This type of reading tells all women to forget their superficial differences, and to reembrace their traditional roles as they reintegrate into the new democracy.

After Ana, the narrator, has introduced herself and her three friends at the beginning of *Nosotras*, she asks: “¿tendremos que ser necesariamente tan distintas nosotras cuatro?” (24). The response that we see throughout the novel and in the title itself is a rotund NO that also goes along with the official ideology of harmony and reconciliation that serves to disarm differential discourses, like feminism. And the coincidental(¿?) setting of the novel in the transition to democracy implies that marginal discourses like feminism are fragmentary, will hinder or impede the Transition, resulting in chaos and instability again. In this way, the stability of the signs ‘woman’ and ‘family’ literally means stability for the country. As Olea paraphrases from the Argentine critic Néstor García-Canclini, “el consumo y su efecto generator de identidades fundadas en el uso de bienes específicos -- materiales o simbólicos – debe ser pensado en las actuales formas de articular ciudadanías” (74). In this context, the citizenship represented in *Nosotras* is homogeneous, and the fact that the novel is a bestseller means that the articulation of citizenship in it is determined by the mass consumption of a homogenizing discourse.

Indeed, Nelly Richard has written about how the official discourse of democracy, that ‘all are equal,’ actually presupposes an erasure of differences, and results in the “indiferentes diferencias” that exclude the real differential discourses that might enrich society, not fragment it (“Feminismo” 744). In another essay, in language that clearly revokes the ideology expressed in Serrano’s novel, Richard warns about “la directriz
conscientizadora del ‘nosotras’” that represses “el libre y cambiante juego de los ‘yo’” (“Género y valores” 216). According to Richard’s line of thinking, then, while Serrano succumbs to this “directriz conscientizadora del ‘nosotras’” from the title on through to the end of the novel, Eltit’s text makes every effort to avoid it in every sense and on every level, not just in its gender representation. In her article about the political and aesthetic projects of Eltit, Mary Beth Tierney-Tello writes that Eltit utilizes “aesthetic elements like linguistic rupture, fragmentary, nonmimetic narrative form, and composite, allegorical protagonists to unveil and unravel the multiple oppressions of a patriarchal, classist, racist, and politically repressive social structure” (80). Therefore, Eltit’s text deconstructs aesthetically what it proposes to deconstruct politically. In contrast, in the fictitious, but realist transition to democracy in Nosotras, there are no differences – there are no homosexuals, ‘sudacas’, transvestites, incestuous relationships, prostitutes – just a group of women who, in the end, are all the same. While Eltit’s novel El cuarto mundo questions the family as a site of multiple webs of oppression and as the base of society, Serrano’s novel Nosotras que nos queremos tanto reifies the family as the foundation of society, and in the final analysis, as the ultimate achievement for women.

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Bibliography


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