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NOTHING BUT WORKERS: READING CLASS STRUGGLE IN DIAMELA ELTIT'S *MANO DE OBRA*

*In this essay I study the supermarket in Diamela Eltit's *Mano de obra* as a site of class struggle. Despite readings that see in the novel a representation of post-work society, several scholars have noted that *Mano de obra* can be productively read as a novel that explores the centrality of labour in present-day capitalism. In this article I suggest that Eltit's novel offers, at the level of form, a powerful reflection on labour exploitation as mediated by the sale and purchase of labour-power. I emphasise two processes that the novel registers in relation to the neoliberal working-day: the changes in the inward notation of time brought about by the expansion of the service industry, and the compenetration between the disciplinary practices of the workplace and the affective structures of the household. I conclude the essay by showing how the punctuation of the novel, in particular the overabundance in the use of parentheses, gives formal expression to the fundamental reality hidden behind the sale and purchase of labour-power: the dispossession of the worker from her own living body.*

Keywords: class struggle; labour; labour-power; neoliberalism; working class; capital

First published in Spanish in 2002, in the early years of what came to be a substantial turn to the left in Latin America, Diamela Eltit's *Mano de obra*, a short novel that revolves around the lives of a group of supermarket workers who struggle to stay afloat amidst a relentless process of labour alienation, closely adheres to Fredric Jameson's well-established formulation of the postmodern as "an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place" (1991, ix). *Mano de obra*'s attempt at historicity takes the form of a supermarket – the quintessential site of neoliberal commodity circulation. The postmodern wager of *Mano de obra* is played out in the formal contrast between the eternal present that shapes the experience of time inside the supermarket and the historical genealogy of labour traced by the names of working-class newspapers and dates that, stretching all the way back to the early twentieth

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century, are used as chapter titles and subtitles throughout the novel. Indeed, the formal tension between the two opens the plot of *Mano de obra* to the possibility of thinking historically about present-day realities of work.

As a neoliberal space, the supermarket has been described as “the realm of measurability of time par excellence” (Draper 2010, 94), a “historically configured space that presents globalization as a lived experience” (Hoyos 2015, 96), a “meeting place” for the “celebration of the physical qualities of things” (Fornazzari 2013, 60), and “a setting of control; panoptic temple of the power of consumption and of the supervision of the workers” (Olea 2002; my translation). Under these circumstances, the supermarket in *Mano de obra* can be readily identified as a hostile environment for labour organisation. In many interpretations of Eltit’s novel, therefore, the supermarket is taken to be a space that exists outside the political history evoked by the names and dates of its (sub)titles.¹

While the disjunction between the atemporality of the supermarket and the radical past activated by the titles of the novel has been the primary focus of many analyses devoted to *Mano de obra*, most critics have neglected to consider the ways in which the novel formalises, out of a dialectical necessity, its exact opposite, the historical persistence (an unbroken link) between past and present labour. The pre-eminence given to the setting of the novel often occludes the fact that *Mano de obra* is, in many ways, much more than just a novel about a supermarket; that, as its title suggests, *Mano de obra* is, above all, a novel about work and workers. It is a novel about labour. Therefore, the novel can be said to reflect not only upon the specific character of labour exploitation under neoliberalism (as a novel about a supermarket would do), but to reflect also on labour exploitation under capitalism *in general*, i.e. on labour mediated by the sale and purchase of labour-power. This approach, I argue in the following pages, opens a path to better understand the conditions that weld the long history of class struggle traced by the novel’s (sub)titles to the novel’s plot. In particular, I emphasise the way in which the punctuation of the novel, its characteristic use of parenthetical intermissions, formally expresses the contradiction that opposes worker to capital as both worker *and* bearer of the commodity labour-power, a contradiction that, under capitalism, grounds the continued dispossession of the worker from her own living body.

The neoliberal supermarket as a site of class struggle

The title of the first part of the novel, “El despertar de los trabajadores” [The awakening of the workers], is a reference to one of the first Chilean working-class newspapers, an instrument for the organisation of the saltpetre miners of the northern province of Iquique that circulated between 1912 and 1927. The publication was conceived as a vehicle to allow the Chilean proletariat to reflect upon itself.² The immediate contrast between the space evoked by the title of the newspaper – the saltpetre mines of the Atacama Desert – and the setting of the novel delineates a genealogy of the Chilean working class that, stretching all the way back to the early twentieth century, moves from industry to supermarket. As Patrick Dove indicates, generally speaking, the supermarket “marks the end of the factory as a paradigm for capitalist

production, and its replacement by the service industry and its increasing disregard for specialization” (2006, 87). The distance between these two moments mirrors the gap between the movement towards class consciousness implied in the title of the newspaper, and the alienating nature of the interior monologue that, in a series of brief episodes, registers the mental downfall of a supermarket worker under the pressures of the neoliberal working day. On a different level, this symbolic gap evokes the formal displacement of the realist and naturalist aesthetic associated with the names of Baldomero Lillo, José Santos González Vera, and Manuel Rojas, key figures in a proletarian and anarchist literature that ran a parallel course to the working-class newspapers that are used as headings throughout the novel.

The second part of the novel, “Puro Chile” [Pure Chile], owes its title to a newspaper founded in 1970, the year Salvador Allende was elected president. *Puro Chile* ran until 1973; it was shut down in the early days of the military dictatorship. As in the first part of the novel, the opposition between the neoliberal supermarket and the experience of class antagonism and social upheaval that followed Allende’s election presents a stark contrast between what most scholarship refers to as two different moments or stages of labour organisation and capital accumulation, in short, two different moments of class struggle. The second part of the novel tells the story of a household, a group of workers that has decided to live together in order to navigate the hardships of their precarious condition as supermarket employees. As the novel progresses, solidarity inside the house is overthrown by the disciplinary violence of the workplace, leading to the moral degradation of the household members. Inside the house, as the interaction between the title and the plot of the second part of the novel seems to suggest, the neoliberal ethos is boiled down to its bare essence, its “pure” form. The symbolic density of the newspaper title collapses into the mundane space of the proletarian house. The horizon of the national liberation struggle, manifested in the formulation of the Chilean road to socialism, is shattered; what is left are fragmented stories, individual narratives incapable of overcoming their separateness, of structuring a larger political community – the dissolution of the household towards the end of the novel is, in this sense, a natural conclusion to the story.

Yet all distance is also a form of proximity, and if the centrifugal forces at play tend to move the plot of *Mano de obra* away from the political imaginary evoked by its (sub)titles, it is also the case that the framework of the novel wrests a sense of historicity out of the maelstrom of the novel’s plot. A place and date marked in parentheses immediately follow the newspaper titles used as chapter headings. As spatiotemporal referents, “(Iquique, 1911)” and “(Santiago, 1970)” displace the space of the supermarket outside its alleged atemporality; they produce a temporal dissonance that challenges the narration’s frantic rhythm by opposing to it the historical temporality of the evolution of the Chilean working class. The episodic nature of the novel loses ground before the proletarian epic, fragmentariness is surmounted by the all-encompassing wave of history. For a moment, a syncopation in neoliberal time suspends the drive that forces the characters’ lives towards an eternal present. This time lag opens a space for the lives of the supermarket workers of *Mano de obra* to unfold alongside the Chilean history of the twentieth century. Their simultaneous occurrence produces a spatial allegory wherein the

totality of the history of the Chilean working class is projected upon the narrative space of the supermarket,³ indelibly stamping “la obsesiva reglamentación de los estantes” (34) [the obsessive arrangement of the shelves⁴].

In its own way, *Mano de obra* produces what Susana Draper (2009), analysing the development of a new sense of temporality in the post-dictatorship era, studies under the notion of spatial juxtaposition, an operation that sutures disjointed spaces and temporalities while reconfiguring public space. In the case of *Mano de obra*, the spatial juxtaposition produced by the framework of the novel serves the purpose of alienating the hyperpresent of the supermarket.⁵ The referents used as chapter titles challenge the sanitised nature of *el súper*; they disrupt its spatiotemporal indetermination⁶ and call into question its artificial spatiality.⁷ In doing so, the subtitles help re-situate the plot of the novel within a radically historicised series. As Héctor Hoyos has already established, *Mano de obra* invites its readers “to situate the modern supermarket within the annals of Chilean labor – itself a notable chapter in the history of international labor relations” (2015, 99). Because the headings used throughout the first part of the novel do not follow a chronological order, *Mano de obra*’s structure is endowed with a sense of permutability. The lives of the supermarket workers become an anagram of the lives of the Chilean saltpetre miners. Each vignette, each episode, a link in the chain that “rivets the worker to capital more firmly than the wedges of Hephaestus held Prometheus to the rock” (Marx 1990, 799). From this standpoint, the headings of the novel suggest, rather than a distant past, the historical persistence, the common experience of the formal subsumption of labour under capital.

The historical bond becomes relevant when taking into consideration that which is left outside the series of dates that frame the novel. As Hoyos points out, in the textual apparatus of *Mano de obra* “[t]he omissions could not go unnoticed: the 1907 massacre of Santa María de Iquique, where thousands of saltpetre miners died, and the 1973 coup against Allende, followed by the Pinochet years” (2015, 105). The deliberate erasure of these junctures from the historical script of the novel produces a calendar marked by luminous episodes of working-class mobilisation rather than by its momentary defeats. The historiography that emerges from the (sub)titles seems to fulfil the demand contained in the novel’s epigraph: “Algunas veces, por un instante, la historia debería sentir compasión y alertarnos” [Sometimes, for an instant, history should feel compassion and alert us]. History, indeed, alerts the workers of *el súper*, although the deliberate omissions of the Iquique massacre and the coup d’état make it hard to argue that the alarm it sounds is a premonitory one. On the contrary, what history seems to apprise the characters of is their role in an unfolding drama: the continued confrontation between labour and capital. Much like Benjamin’s Angel, where *we* see the appearance of a chain of events, history sees a single catastrophe. What *alerts* the workers of *el súper* is the historical experience of the saltpetre miners and the Unidad Popular, whose combative voices reverberate throughout the novel: “Hay que poner fin a este capítulo” (60) [We must put an end to this chapter]; “Caminemos. Demos vuelta a la página” (140) [Let’s move on. Let’s turn the page]. While bringing each section of the novel to an end, these lines endow the plot of *Mano de obra* with a sense of futurity. Through this operation, Ericka Beckman notes,

“Eltit engages a reading of the untimely (...) by looking back to the distant past as a possible site of utopia” (2012, 150). Invoking past episodes of labour organisation, *Mano de obra* urges us to, as it were, “awaken the dead and to piece together what has been smashed”; it opens a new horizon for the emancipation of the working class, effectively transforming the space of the supermarket from a hostile environment for labour organisation into an active site of class struggle.⁸

How then to situate the supermarket as a site of class struggle? The supermarket is a by-product of the neoliberal experiment set in motion by the military dictatorship that ruled Chile between 1973 and 1989. This experiment not only redirected the national economy towards an export-oriented model based on productive specialisation (Osorio 2004, 101–127), it effectively reversed – by way of torture, persecution, and several other forms of violence – the economic and political victories of the working class that glimmer through the chapter headings of *Mano de obra*. The 1979 Labour Code played a significant role in disciplining the Chilean labour force into a new productive order. This piece of legislation helped jumpstart “a system that gave employers the utmost flexibility in organizing their workplaces as they saw fit” (Bank Muñoz 2018, 90). The supermarket, a paradigmatic site of (unproductive) consumption and a neoliberal work environment, is also symptomatic of the rise of the retail industry – a space governed by a very distinct brand of labour discipline, working habits, and distribution of manual and intellectual labour.

More significantly, the supermarket is not just the primary gateway for neoliberal consumption; it is the primary gateway for the neoliberal consumption of *wage-goods*, which makes it a rather meaningful space in the dispute between the neoliberal drive towards labour “flexibilisation” and the limits this drive imposes on the access to the means of subsistence needed for the daily reproduction of labour-power. This struggle can be better understood following the contradiction that opposes worker to capital as both seller and buyer of commodities: the supermarket workers who, at first (both in the novel and in everyday life), are nothing but sellers of labour-power in search of a living wage, are coercively transformed, once the labour day is over, into buyers in desperate need to reproduce their working capacities. The means of subsistence needed to fulfil this reproductive process appear to the workers of *Mano de obra* as commodities that circulate through their own work environment. It is no coincidence that, as the novel progresses, the deterioration of their working conditions prevents the characters of *Mano de obra* from fulfilling their role as buyers. Early in the second part of the novel we learn that Gloria – a member of the household forced into domestic (and sexual) servitude after losing her job as a product demonstrator – “Caminaba cuerdas para encontrar las últimas ofertas del día” (69) [Walked entire blocks in order to find the last sales of the day]. For the characters of *Mano de obra* supermarket prices have become restrictive, coercing them to look for discounted foodstuffs elsewhere. This almost trivial passage vividly captures the end of the Fordist/embedded capitalist model that, ever so fleetingly in the peripheries of the capitalist world system, “reinvented the household as a private space for the domestic consumption of mass-produced objects of daily use” (Fraser 2016, 109). It is this “structural uselessness” of the workers of the periphery as consumers that, on the other end, allows the deployment of the predatory labour practices to which they are ruthlessly subjected.

As *Mano de obra* continually illustrates, the limits imposed by neoliberalism on working-class access to consumption are effectively enforced within the space of the supermarket. From this perspective, the supermarket is immediately transformed into an active arena of class struggle, a site where we can “witness the emergence of all the hidden forces that usually lie concealed behind the façade of economic life” (Lukács 1971, 65). Barred as consumers from the neoliberal supermarket, the characters of *Mano de obra* re-enter the stage as *nothing but workers*, castaways forcibly caught up in the whirlwind of the wage relation.

Towards an inward notation of neoliberal time

The multifaceted violence experienced by the characters of *Mano de obra* hinges upon their absolute dependence on an access to wages. Day in and day out they are confronted with Joan Robinson’s prescience: “the misery of being exploited by capitalists is nothing compared to the misery of not being exploited at all” (1963, 45). The spectre of a “wageless life” (Denning 2010) haunts the supermarket workers of *Mano de obra* every step of the way: “Aunque nos habían quitado horas de trabajo, a pesar de que nos habían bajado considerablemente los sueldos, más allá de un cúmulo de atropellos que teníamos que soportar, *necesitábamos el salario para sobrevivir*” (91; my italics) [Even after they restricted our working hours, in spite of having our pay cheques cut, beyond the series of violations we had to endure, *we needed the wage in order to survive*]. The wage relation reveals itself as an institutionalised form of violence: “El súper había entrado en una batalla definitivamente monetaria en contra de nosotros” (131) [*El súper* had declared an absolutely monetary battle against us]. The threat of losing one’s job compels the workers of *Mano de obra* to submit to the violent discipline of the workplace without complaint. The masses of unemployed that circle *el súper* – a snapshot of those “populations often unable to hold regular employment as wage labourers and whose presence serves (among other things) to depress the wages of those who can find employment” (Benjamin 2018, 43) – tighten capital’s grip on the worker: “Ya las filas a las puertas del súper se habían convertido en una situación abiertamente definitiva (...) allí estaban, alineados, buscando trabajo por horas sin anteponer ni las más elementales condiciones” (111) [The lines at the doors of *el súper* had become an overtly definitive situation (...) there they stood, in line, looking for hourly jobs without even worrying about the most basic conditions]. Time is recast as an unstoppable force that besieges the supermarket: “El tiempo ahora aprieta el súper como si lo estrujara en su puño” (38) [Time now squeezes *el súper* as if it were compressing it in its fist]. The consequences of this dynamic, needless to say, are far-reaching and worthy of some consideration.

Analysing the personal and collective experience of time between 1300 and 1650 (a period marked by the rise of industrial capitalism), E.P. Thompson considered: “If the transition to mature industrial society entailed a severe restructuring of working habits – new disciplines, new incentives, and new human nature upon which these incentives could bite effectively – how far is this related to changes in the inward notation of time?” (1967, 57). The historical moment inaugurated circa

1973 – with the ominous Chilean experiment as its bedrock – brought about a similarly widespread restructuring of working habits. The radical expansion of the service industry and the emergence of new work environments not only launched a violent refashioning of disciplinary practices, it also entailed a large-scale reconfiguration of the experience of time itself. In many ways, *Mano de obra* traces the emergence of what, reformulating E.P. Thompson's interrogation, we might call an inward notation of neoliberal time.

At some point during the first part of the novel, bemoaning his personal situation, a nameless character reflects: “Las horas son un peso (muerto) en mi muñeca y no me importa confesar que el tiempo juega de manera perversa conmigo porque no termina de inscribirse en ninguna parte de mi ser” (27) [The hours are a (dead) weight on my wrist and I don't mind confessing that time toys with me in a perverse manner because it never fully inscribes itself anywhere in my being]. Inside the supermarket time expresses itself both as a material element – a weight capable of afflicting the worker's corporeality – and as an immaterial force, some fleeting power that continually resists being embodied. This duality not only allows capital to take hold of the worker's body, to manipulate it promptly, in a “timely manner”, it also prevents the worker from experiencing the passing of time. Because time is never fully apprehended, work becomes an out-of-time experience, a permanent affliction that gradually consumes the worker's body.

Throughout the novel, time, and in particular labour time, is constantly referred to as a progressive illness: “Estoy poseído, lo afirmo, desde la cabeza hasta los pies por un síntoma enteramente laboral, una enfermedad horaria que todavía no está tipificada en los anales médicos. (...) Soy víctima de un mal que, si bien no es estrictamente orgánico, compromete a cada uno de mis órganos” (40) [I am possessed, I affirm, from head to toe by an entirely work-related symptom, an hourly disease not yet typified in the annals of medicine. (...) I am the victim of a disorder that, although not strictly organic, impairs every single one of my organs]. The overuse of an infectious language participates in a long-standing tradition of critique that posits capitalism's evils as a form of disease. As Dierdra Reber recalls: “Since its inception, capitalism has been culturally naturalized as a system whose benefits may be quantified in a calculus of the social good. Its proponents argue that capitalism brings about a prosperity that is tantamount to robust health; its detractors, making the opposite claim from within the same symbolic terrain, assess its faults in terms of social malaise or ill-being: disease, desperation, dehumanization” (2012, 77). *Mano de obra* expands and revises this tradition. The immaterial weight that the disgruntled characters of *Mano de obra* are bound to carry from aisle to aisle reaches a tipping point towards the end of the first part of the novel, when the workers of *el súper* are forced to endure a 24-hour shift. Undercut by the threat of unemployment, the workers of *Mano de obra* fall prey to capital's werewolf-like hunger for surplus labour. The limits of the working day are expanded until they coincide with the limits of the natural day: “Estoy en riesgo. Lo sé. Pero cumpliré el trato de las 24 horas. 24 horas. 24. 24 horas sin salario adicional” (56) [I am at risk. I know it. But I will keep my side of the 24-hour deal. 24 hours. 24. 24 hours with no extra pay]. As Marx had already noted,

“in its blind and measureless drive, its insatiable appetite for surplus labour, capital oversteps not only the moral but even the merely physical limits of the working day” (1990, 375). In *Mano de obra*, capital’s insatiable appetite prevents the workers of *el súper* from fulfilling even their most basic physiological needs.

While these processes are grounded in the logic that drives the accumulation of capital altogether, i.e. the self-valorisation of value, and must therefore be understood as a general tendency of the capitalist mode of production, there is a case to be made for the qualitative difference in the inward notation of time that originates in the transformation of the spheres of production and circulation associated with the process of neoliberalisation. As Adrián Sotelo Valencia points out, “labour flexibilisation and precarisation [are] the most far-reaching transformations of the structural and institutional order of the past two decades. Placed in service of the need of production, productivity and market dynamics, these trends have had a negative impact on wages, contractual categories and the functions performed by workers” (2016, 79). The corollary to these changes is an ever-growing population dependent on an access to wages. The service industry is a particularly relevant case given its subtle yet symptomatic blend of manual and intellectual labour. In *Mano de obra*, as manual labour is intensified, chipping away at the “unproductive” moments of the working day, intellectual activity and the capacity to reflect on productive labour as such gradually disappears from the characters’ consciousness.⁹ The mechanical repetition of tasks is accelerated *beyond human capacity*: “Ordenando los productos con una radicalidad mecánica, empaquetando a una velocidad admirable y sobrehumana, siempre atentos al más mínimo movimiento” (92) [Ordering the products with a mechanical radicality, packaging at an admirable and superhuman speed, always attentive to the slightest movement] (92). This “mechanical radicality” is in line with capital’s aspiration to eliminate *waste* from the working day.

Reflecting on the minimisation of waste, Ricardo Antunes suggests that “[m]etaphorically speaking, if the worker breathes and while she is breathing there are moments in which she is not producing, she could be urged to produce while breathing and breathe while producing and never breathe without producing. If the worker could produce without breathing, capital would allow this, but to breathe and not produce, no” (2013, 198). The impulse of capital to minimise waste becomes the same impulse that robs the worker of her individuality, of the experience of being herself, an experience that *must occur in time* in order to be perceived. On the other hand, the avowed beauty of neoliberal production lies in its incessant movement. In the novel, we follow the de-humanisation of the workers, their gradual transformation into mere movement as their position within the structure of the supermarket consistently deteriorates. Sonia, a member of the proletarian household, eventually loses her job as a cashier and is forced to work as a butcher; the characters witness “El espectáculo de las pirámides de pollos que Sonia, día a día, trozaba de manera cada vez más mecánica, más precisa y más bella. Unos cortes perfectos. Maníacos” (101) [The spectacle of the chicken pyramids that Sonia diced, day in and day out, always in a more mechanical, more precise, and more beautiful way. With perfect cuts. Manic cuts]. The “joyous spectacle” sparked by the intensification of labour, the continued prolongation of the working day, and the assertion of the wage relation as a form of violence are

all consistent with what Ruy Mauro Marini described as “a mode of production exclusively founded on a greater exploitation of the worker, as opposed to the development of her productive capacity” (1973, 40; my translation). The supermarket of *Mano de obra* is, therefore, not only a neoliberal work environment, it is a neoliberal work environment that unequivocally reproduces the particular tendencies and contradictions of *dependent capitalism*.¹⁰

Finally, the exacting discipline of the workplace overflows the supermarket and spreads across all spheres of social life: capital appropriates for itself the time destined for the reproduction of the worker. Commenting on Toyotism’s obsession with productivity, Antunes illuminates some basic consequences of this process:

(...) the worker becomes her own despot (...) She is encouraged to self-incriminate and self-punish if her production does not reach the so-called “total quality” (this mystifying deceit of capital). She works in a team or production-cell and, if she does not turn up to work she will be covered by the other members of the team. (...) It is a real moment of estrangement or, if you prefer, of labour-alienation but taken to the extreme, internalized into the “soul of the worker”, leading her to think only of productivity, of competitiveness, of how to improve the performance of the company, her “other family”. (2013, 199–200)

A double shift takes place: on the one hand, the workplace is endowed with the qualities and values of the household, the company becomes a “second family”, affect is expropriated from the worker and is redeployed as a tool for the reproduction of capital. On the other, the disciplinary practices that preside over the labour process, stamped with the maxims of competitiveness and high performance, begin to reorganise life outside the workplace. For one of the characters in the novel: “El súper es como mi segunda casa. Lo rondo así, de esta manera, como si se tratara de mi casa. Me refugio en la certeza absoluta que ocasionan los lugares familiares” (92) [*El súper is like my second home. I roam it like this, in this way, as if it were my own home. I take refuge in the absolute certainty produced by familiar places*]. The familiarity produced by the supermarket is, however, a highly impersonal, artificial one; as a familiar space the supermarket is closer to a stage than a refuge. The supermarket’s alleged certainty is only attained by way of replication, by the never-ending stream of commodities that, like a *deus ex machina*, reappear in front of the worker’s eyes before they have even started to vanish. The neoliberal myth of the “other family” masks the alienating features of exploitation under the nourishing aura of the house, the traditional shelter.

At the other end of the spectrum, the affective structure of the household is gradually (but irrepressibly) subdued by the disciplinary logic that radiates from the workplace. “The family”, write Marx and Engels, “which to begin is the only social relation, becomes later, when increased needs create new social relations and the increased population new needs, a subordinate one” (1998, 48). The household of *Mano de obra*, also a social relation, can be read as a product of the increased needs and new social relations brought about by the neoliberal restructuring of working habits linked to the exponential growth of the service industry. Confronted by the economic threat of unemployment, a character admits in

reference to the unwritten rule by which the entire household lives and dies: “Nosotros no permitíamos cesantes. Ni enfermos” (73) [We didn’t allow anyone who was currently unemployed. Or sick]. If inside the supermarket the productive unit is enshrined as a second family, within the house the familiar nucleus is torn apart by the unsparing discipline that structures life inside the supermarket. As Ana Forcinito indicates, “the group of workers breaks apart inside the house: on the one hand the group shares the experience of oppression, but it does not signify it, it rather sets in motion the control and surveillance mechanisms even within the domestic space, as a continuation of a logic that circulates without borders” (2010, 98; my translation). The workplace-household binary is broken into a continuum, the frontier demarcating where the one ends and the other begins is irreversibly blurred: “En ese momento nosotros ya éramos implacables. No podíamos hacer otra cosa” (109) [By then we had become implacable. We couldn’t help it]. Amidst a relentless competition for economic survival, the rhythm of the workplace subsumes all social relations under the encompassing symphony of capital, forcing the workers that haven’t yet fallen prey to the incessant rotation of *el súper* to become despots of themselves. The house begins to mimic the temporality of the workplace, domestic relations reproduce the supermarket’s control mechanisms, and family relations are reconfigured to function under the parameters of a productive unit.

Throughout the novel, the group’s implacability can be read as a reverberation of the disciplinary practices that, fuelled by capital’s thirst for surplus value, spiral out from the space of the supermarket. The displacement of these practices into the domestic sphere signals the degree to which capital has taken possession of the worker’s free time, i.e. the degree to which leisure time has effectively been reduced to the necessary interval for the reproduction of labour-power.¹¹ Metamorphosed into an extension of the work environment, the house becomes pervaded by a latent violence. Dianna Niebylski notes that “the insults into which the communal or solidarist attempts of the second part of the novel decay are the product of individual frustration, but they point to a collective defeat” (2017, 442; my translation). The vitriolic language, “the reduced vocabulary structured around the curses with which [the characters of *Mano de obra* relate] to others” (Tompkins 2006, 130), serves as a marker of the interpenetration between the spheres of production and reproduction.¹² The result is a self-disciplining labour force: “Intento mantenerme en lo que me he convertido: *demasiado proclive a la paz y adicto a la corrección*” (31; my italics) [I try to remain as what I have become: *too prone to peace and addicted to correction*]: docile yet obstinate bodies, instilled with a “natural” predisposition to optimise the use of time and intensify all work-related activities. Contrary to the interpretations of the novel that see in it a representation of a “post-work” society, *Mano de obra* could be said to actively engage in an exploration of the meanings of work and its persistent significance in the face of the socio-economic changes that followed the structural crisis of the 1970s. And yet, as many scholars have noted, *Mano de obra* not only explores, i.e. thematises, the persistent significance of labour in the face of neoliberal capitalism, but rather expresses this very significance at the level of form, be it through its particular use of language (Franco 2007; Forcinito 2010; Hoyos 2015), its rhetorical and

grammatical strategies (Hozven 2008; Niebylski 2017), or its paratextual apparatus (Colomina-Garrigos 2011). However, it is my claim that the punctuation of the novel remains an unexplored avenue to approach the ways in which *Mano de obra* accounts for the persistent significance of labour in present-day capitalism.

Punctuating labour

We have circled back to the problem of how to read *Mano de obra* as a novel about labour under capitalism *in general*. In this final section I argue that one of the most salient formal features of the text, its profuse use of parentheses, although largely ignored by critics who have written about the novel,¹³ can be productively read as an attempt to give formal expression to the contradiction that opposes worker to capital as both worker *and* bearer of the commodity labour-power. In other words, the punctuation of the novel effectively formalises the contradiction that originates in the material embodiment of labour-power, in the living corporeality of the worker, a contradiction that holds true not only for the workers of the neoliberal supermarket, but for all labour mediated by the sale and purchase of labour-power.

The overabundance in the use of parentheses helps shape the novel's experimental design. The narration, forced to jump through these parenthetical intermissions, acquires a rather specific texture, a distinct narrative rhythm. Although significantly more prevalent throughout the first half of the novel, the continued use of parentheses is one of the few features that help establish a formal connection between its two parts, otherwise formally (if not thematically) quite distant from each other.¹⁴ Throughout the novel, the parentheses are recurrently used as a vehicle for repetition: "En realidad estoy ya demasiado agotado (decirlo, decirlo y repetirlo para profundizar al paroxismo el eco del cansancio). Mi deseo (mi último deseo) es derrumbarme en medio de un estrépito más que irreverente y así arrastrar conmigo a una hilera interminable de estantes para que las mercaderías sean, finalmente, las que me lapiden" (42–43) [To tell the truth, I'm already too exhausted (to say it, to say it and repeat it in order to intensify the echo of this tiredness into paroxysm). My wish (my last wish) is to collapse in the middle of a more-than-irreverent clamour and drag with me an endless row of shelves so the commodities are, finally, the ones that lapidate me]. Within the parenthetical interlude, the narrative voice is (oftentimes) duplicated. Something indefinite emerges from these syntactical intermittences, an echo that, while displacing the site of enunciation, remains inextricably linked to the narrative voice and is, therefore, prevented from fully becoming an/other. This formal displacement serves to estrange the worker from herself: "Con mi cuerpo pegado a mí mismo (como una segunda piel) me desplazo por el interior del súper" (15) [With my body stuck to myself (like a second skin) I move inside *el súper*]. The worker's own body is experienced as something foreign, a "second skin" that is, *at once*, an integral part of her/self *and* something external to her. At the level of form, the parentheses expose this duality; they effectively mobilise a multiplicity that lies behind what is initially perceived as unitary.

For a brief moment, the parenthetical repetition shatters the discursive coherence of the narrative voice: “Ah, si no estuviese atado a la desagradable metafísica de esta voz mía incesante y terminal cascada que me retumba en mis propios oídos (mi voz casi inaudible que me habla de manera monótona de mí mismo. De mí)” (45) [Oh, if I weren’t chained to the unpleasant metaphysics of this incessant and terminal worn-out voice of mine that resounds in my own ears (my almost inaudible voice that speaks monotonously to me about myself. About me)]. The displacement of the site of enunciation effects a distortion of the narrative voice. The narrator (“this incessant voice of mine”) is confronted by an indefinite other, an ephemeral utterance that, anxiously oscillating between the first and the third person, breaks through the parenthetical looking glass, giving rise to a commentary (a commentator) that, while originating in the worker’s own living corporeality, is able to speak to and about her from a different perspective (an “almost inaudible voice that speaks (...) about myself. About me”).

The parenthetical displacement of the narrative voice follows the physical and mental deterioration of the characters. Driven to exhaustion, a character reflects: “Mi persona ya no está radicada en mí mismo” (14) [My person is no longer rooted in myself]. The same character then goes on to describe “Un dolor que está determinado y, sin embargo, *carece de una localización precisa*” (19; my italics) [A pain that, in spite of being determined, *lacks a precise location*]. As simultaneous processes, the parenthetical displacement of the narrative voice and the progressive deterioration of the characters’ bodies are mediated by the same social relation, the relation of wage-labour to capital. Analysing the connection between capital and biopower, Jaime Osorio notes that “it is not possible to materially separate labour-power from the very existence of its proprietor. There is no ontological difference between one and the other (...) There is no possible detachment between her living body and her working capacity, and between her existence as a living being and this capacity” (2016, 188; my translation). Free to sell her labour-power to the highest bidder, the worker becomes immanently exposed to the whims and fancies of the valorisation of capital. This rudimentary antinomy is the absolute point of departure to approach the category that gives the novel its title, that of *mano de obra* [workforce].

In Marx’s own words, one of the essential conditions “which allows the owner of money to find labour-power in the market as a commodity is this, that the possessor of labour-power, instead of being able to sell commodities in which his labour has been objectified, must rather be compelled to offer for sale as a commodity *that very labour-power which exists only in his living body*” (1990, 272; my italics). Labour-power can only exist inside the living body of the worker; it is, as a commodity, at the same time an integral part of her corporeality *and* something different from it, a “second skin” that the worker is compelled to offer in exchange for a living wage. This elementary paradox exists for the supermarket workers of *Mano de obra* as it existed for the Chilean saltpetre miners and for the industrial workers of the copper industry; it remains a general condition for the sale and purchase of labour-power. As many before her, the supermarket worker of *Mano de obra* has also brought her own hide to market.

At the level of form, the parentheses of *Mano de obra* expose the compenetration between labour-power and the living corporeality of the worker *without indulging in the bourgeois fantasy of their ontological differentiation*. This formal process of disentanglement produces a (material) space for the worker's subjection to capital *as bearer of the commodity labour-power* to be abstractly demarcated from the worker's subjection to capital *as a living body*, two simultaneous progressions that can never occur in isolation from each other: "Labour-power is the living, labouring capacity of the person, and as such, it cannot be detached from the bearer" (Endnotes 2013). The parenthetical breaks that punctuate the plot of *Mano de obra* bring forth the contradiction at the heart of this fluid totality: "No estoy enfermo (en realidad) sino que me encuentro en un viaje de salida de mí mismo" (45) [I am not sick (in reality), I'm in the middle of an exit journey from myself]. What *in reality* dispossesses the individual worker from her own body is not an organic disorder, a corporeal disease, but the social relation of wage-labour to capital. In everyday life, however, this relation is systematically concealed behind the "façade of economic life", leaving behind nothing but an indefinite shadow: "Estoy enfermo, cansado, como si en alguna parte de mí mismo tuviera que cargar con la silueta ahorcada de un indeleble despojo" (46) [I am sick, tired as if somewhere inside myself I had to carry around the hanged silhouette of an indelible plunder]. Beyond the parenthetical interludes, the fundamental reality hidden behind the sale and purchase of labour-power, the dispossession of the worker from her own living body, becomes lost amidst the unforgiving pressures of the neoliberal working day. It is in this sense that the parentheses in *Mano de obra* can be said to be consistently revolutionary: they actively expose what is socially (structurally) repressed; they call into question the essential condition needed for the reproduction of capital itself.

The decoupling performed by the parentheses in *Mano de obra* in many ways mirrors the operation that the novel performs as a whole. While the first part of the novel presents us with a worker stripped of all individual features (an abstracted worker lacking a name, fixed gender, or race), the second part of the novel recasts this same character under the full weight of its historical determinateness, i.e. as bound by specific gender and racial norms that curb her experience qua worker. The parenthetical structure of *Mano de obra* helps explain why "complex power dynamics occupy the later portion of the book, playing out along lines of ethnicity and gender roles" (Hoyos 2015, 100). The structure of the novel enacts a tension between simultaneity and linear succession; each part becomes co-determined by the other. The second part of the novel can therefore be read as a parenthetical repetition of the first part and vice versa. As a whole, the parenthetical structure of *Mano de obra* sutures the distance between the narrative voices that set apart its two main sections: both narrative voices become refracting echoes produced by the continued flow of their sum total.

The parentheses of *Mano de obra* not only bring together the lived experience of past and present labour; at the level of form they create the conditions of possibility for thinking historically about the contemporary vicissitudes of class struggle. Like a magnifying glass, the parentheses of *Mano de obra* reveal, under the untainted surface of the neoliberal supermarket, the indelible plunder that stamps the relation of wage-labour to capital. It is this persistent condition (and the

struggle to overcome it) that, in the end, welds together the long history of class struggle traced by the novel's titles to the novel's plot.

Notes

1. Franco argues that "the title of this novel is an ironic reference to a past in which manual labour identified the working class (...) Eltit's novel, situated in the post-work society of contemporary Chile, reduces this rich and dynamic history to a series of quotes and titles of old working-class newspapers" (2007, 145; my translation). Dove likewise suggests that "[t]he inclusion of specific dates and places names, instead of conferring depth and richness, only intensifies the prevailing sense of interruption and oblivion" (2006, 87). For Colomina-Garrigos "the text that follows each title contrasts significantly because of the absence of a politicised and resisting discourse inside the novel's universe" (2011, 8; my translation). Rodríguez considers that "the working-class struggles, documented by the series of newspapers of the socialist press that resound in each chapter's titles, have been left behind, at an astronomical distance from a world where labour as the maximum value of modernity no longer creates collective identities nor serves to integrate or include" (2019, 122; my translation).
2. In the edition of 10 February 1912, the social and political leader Luis Emilio Recabarren introduced *El despertar de los trabajadores* as a newspaper committed to serving the interests of the Chilean proletariat: "READ IT FOR YOURSELF! TO THE WORKERS! THE LAUNCH OF THEIR OWN NEWSPAPER. A novel newspaper that comes to serve the interests of the workers, the proletarians, and, in general, to spread a doctrine that conducts everyone through the path of social fraternity among peoples has just seen the light of day" (Cruzat and Deves 2016, 351; my translation).
3. Other critics have noted the metaphorical character of the novel. Olea describes *Mano de obra* as an "exemplary metaphor of the phagocytizing of the public subject and social discourse in contemporary Chilean society" (2002; my translation). Noemi, likewise, argues that *el súper* is an "evident metaphor of a society that is, in essence, a market" (2003, 144; my translation). Dove considers that "several tropological figures in the text appear to establish a clear referential key for reading the novel as an allegory of post-dictatorship Chile" (2006, 87). Pastén casts *Mano de obra*'s supermarket as a metaphor of the country's condition as a "*nación-mercado*" during the years of the Transition: "To dramatize this situation, Eltit writes a text where the supermarket becomes an incontrovertible metaphor of Chile" (2014, 35–36).
4. All quotes from Eltit 2002 [2011]. All translations are mine.
5. Draper's characterisation of the shopping mall can be easily extended to the supermarket of *Mano de obra*: "the shopping mall became a kind of non place in which the temporality of the day and the season was suspended in a paradise of the eternal present, a present spent eternally consuming, where people could shop without having to think about the weather, the violence of the streets, beggars, etc." (2009, 37).
6. "Transforming the movement from a given space-time to a different one into something instantaneous (like every information and capital flux), indetermination grants the supermarket a superelectricity or absolute velocity" (Noemi 2003, 143; my translation).
7. "There are fundamental asymmetries to the supermarket: between what you see and what you do not, between the experience of workers and that of customers, between the naturalness of the shopping experience and the artificiality of the light-controlled, purposefully scented spaces where it takes place" (Hoyos 2015, 98).

8. This interpretation contrasts with other readings of *Mano de obra*'s engagement with the utopian. Franco, for example, assumes the decadence portrayed in the novel cancels out any possibility of a utopian future: "The novel – satyric, fun, and tragic, a masterpiece of black humour – introduces us into a world in which fear and distrust have ruled out solidarity, and where blood, brute sex, sickness, and the death we share with animals *cancel any utopian vision of a humanized society*" (2007, 146; my italics and translation).
9. "The more closely we scrutinise this situation (...) the more obvious it becomes that we are witnessing in all behaviour of this sort the structural analogue to the behaviour of the worker *vis-à-vis* the machine he serves and observes, and whose functions he controls while he contemplates it" (Lukács 1971, 98).
10. "It is also important to point out that, in the three mechanisms under consideration, the essential characteristic lies in the fact that the worker is denied the conditions necessary to compensate for the deterioration of his labour-power: in the first two cases [the intensification of work and the lengthening of the working day], because he is forced to expend labour-power in excess of what he would be required to expend under normal circumstances, thus provoking his premature exhaustion; in the last case [the expropriation of part of the labour necessary for the worker to reproduce his labour-power], because he is denied even the possibility of consuming what is strictly indispensable for him to conserve his labour-power in its normal state. In capitalist terms, these mechanisms (which, moreover, can, and usually do, occur in forms of combination) signify that labour is remunerated below its value, and thus amount to a superexploitation of labour" (Marini 1973, 41–42; my translation).
11. "From this perspective, the brief parenthesis in which the worker reappropriates for herself her own existence ceases to exist, and becomes a replacement time stipulated by capital" (Osorio 2016, 189; my translation).
12. Hoyos considers that "the hyperbolic use of coarse, popular language in the second part, rich in *chilenismos* (...) is the counterpart to the parodic, hyper-intellectualized moments of philosophical reflection in the first part, which hints at archaisms" (2015, 102).
13. Forcinito, in reference to the use of parentheses in *Mano de obra*, argues that "[t]he narrator accounts, at the same time, for a double position in the surveillance device (as subject and object) and his own transformation (sickness, decomposition, flight). This displacement is narrated, in several instances, through what is said between parentheses, where the narrator undoes the narrative of the invincible and impeccable advertising 'company'" (2010, 103–104; my translation).
14. Niebylski, referring to the affective differences between the two parts of the novel, indicates that "[t]he first-person voice of the first part of the novel does not allow us to react affectively. It is impossible *not* to react viscerally to the second one" (2017, 447; my translation).

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