

Transcendence through Illumination: Marginalized Identity Re-valued as Art and Literature

Karly Berezowsky

Female identity is not a static construction. Fragments of the self can be re-created, re-remembered, and re-positioned depending on the perspective of the narrator. As Paul John Eakin writes: “One must start from the structure of the relations between individuals in order to understand the ‘psyche’ of the individual person” (43). Despite history’s positioning of women as objects to be gathered, colonized, and ruled (Friedman 79), women’s autobiographies provide an important platform for the female voice. Through autobiography, the self can be represented as living with “others in an interdependent existence that asserts its rhythms everywhere in the community” (ibid). Scholars need to have a proper understanding of polarized politics and the double consciousness of gender identity, of how women have come to be understood as objects, and of how women writers like Eltit have worked to surpass monolithic representations of the self to generate a self that defies reduction. By providing a story about the identity of what happens to the body, one can convey the experiences surrounding the culture of the time.

Critical Context and Methodology

Eltit, specifically, examines the intersections of power and privilege in her narrative. Through her performances as E. Luminata, she examines issues of female vulnerability by reducing herself to a state of victimhood. E. Luminata serves as a figure of intersectionality because her performances suggest multiple layers of domination as she pushes questions of respectability for herself, her sex, and her body, demonstrating a representation of who she really is within her community. Under the alias E. Luminata, Eltit is able to perform femininity and masculinity because her identity is not only fluid, but in fact, borderline mythic. As such, she is able to play with the differences between the identity of a “woman” and the universal foundational category of “women” in their collective identity.

Female identity is connected to a cultural identity, an economic identity, a gendered identity, a class identity, etc. Since these different forms are effectively analyzed through language (a written record of hypotheses and findings), autobiography has an enormous power to grapple with how identity operates ideologically. In autobiography, there can be multiple interpretations available about the “I” on the page, the “I” who is writing, and the “I” behind the text. Self-representation cannot be confined to one framework because the “I” in the text can stand for a universal identity, one particular identity, or both. Autobiographical storytelling is “self-expressive,” but the stories reveal gaps in their individualism, thus becoming useful platforms for feminists and female activists to discuss issues of agency, subjectivity, and power, or lack thereof, since such narratives provide a space for critiquing the limitations of oppression. In writing a life narrative or an autobiography, the writer takes on the power to name oneself. The writer is also placing the account within a specific location under a specific form of struggle, which can be individualized or nationalized. As such, autobiographies may be performances written to critique “normative identifications” of the self in which the author has the power to create new spaces for silenced and oppressed people’s voices.

As Susan Stanford Friedman suggests, the self in autobiography is “a developing entity, changing by definable stages” (74), which can help to create “women’s sense of collective identity” as “a source of strength and transformation” (75). It is only through “women’s alienation” that she establishes a “new consciousness of self,” not the “self as culturally defined,” but “the self as different from cultural prescription” (75). Friedman writes:

But always we were split in two, straddling silence, not sure where we would begin to find ourselves or one another. From this division, our material dislocation, came the experience of one part of ourselves as strange, foreign and cut off from the other which we encountered as tongue-tied paralysis about our own identity. We were never all together in one place, were always in transit, immigrants into alien territory [...] the manner in which we know ourselves as an historical being-woman (76).

Drawing on the work of Nancy Chodorow, Friedman suggests that women’s identities are developed through a form of collective consciousness that cannot be clearly delineated (73). In this way, the identity of E. Luminata is divided. She finds grounds for appreciation and notoriety through the gaze of the audience members, watching her. She also has a materialistic identity, with her hyper-sexualized movements of masturbation or undressing or provocatively touching herself pushing her identity into that of an icon of desire while she presents herself, through some of her performances, as a body for sale. To use Friedman’s words, “one ever feels [her] twoness” (76).

In his book *How Our Lives Become Stories*, Eakin provides a way of looking at autobiographical narrative as relational, not subject to the pitfalls of gender binaries (26). Writing in response to the common Western understanding of autobiography as an account of the autonomous individual, Eakin suggests that when a writer tells her own story, she is often telling the story of the other. It is unclear, according to Eakin, whether our “bodies and selves are something we ‘have’ or something that we ‘are’” (29). As such, any identity narrative is a “story of embodiment and dis embodiment” and autobiographies can serve to reflect “humanity reduced to its bare essentials” (42). Masculine dis embodiment, as defined by Judith Butler, is the process by which men disassociate with their own bodies and attribute body-consciousness to women. “By defining women as ‘other,’” Butler argues, “men are able though the shortcut of definition to dispose of their bodies, to make themselves other than their bodies” so that “others are their bodies,” while “the masculine ‘I’ is the noncorporeal soul” (36-37). Eakin effectively demonstrates the importance of body image in the construction of a cultural identity. When a figure such as E. Luminata alters her body image, she is able to address identity issues because she uses her body to negotiate identity and meet her own ontological needs.

Meanwhile, Eltit is working through and challenging the traditional form of writing in a single language. Although *E. Luminata* is written in English, she refuses to translate every word and leaves some words in Spanish. In her discussion of the ways in which Latina authors mix languages within an autobiographical text, Lourdes Torres states that such works:

are both revolutionary and subversive at many levels. They challenge traditional notions about the genre of ‘autobiography’ through their form and their content. They subvert both Anglo and Latino patriarchal definitions of culture. They undermine linguistic norms by using a mixture of English, Spanish, and Spanglish. (276)

By mixing English and Spanish while also mixing visual and verbal representations of herself in opposition to the dictatorship, Eltit effectively illuminates the connections between her and her performative self that cannot be broken. Thus, Eltit belongs to a growing list of Latina authors “who reject the dominant culture’s attempt to silence them” and “insist on their right to use the language that best speaks to their experience, without having to translate for those who cannot or will not understand” (Torres 283).

As Eltit is able to find her own truth, she “illuminates” her power struggle for a voice, but her narrative also suggests that she cares not only about herself but also about her community. Her performances, her filmed scenes, and her narrative mediations can help Western feminists, or feminists worldwide, to better understand and critique the cultural hegemony of sexism, and to help challenge oppression through collective action. Such actions may not involve artistic performances, erotic performances, or cutting-edge performances like those by Eltit as E. Luminata, but a productive dialogue amongst feminists can stem from the ways, she addresses issues of state violence and displays of militarized and domestic power.

Eltit showcases the fact that the social, political, and economic conditions of women in Chile are unjust. Although her activism in the 1970s and 1980s came well before that of more modern feminist scholars like Obioma Nnaemeka and Mrinalini Sinha (2004), there is a direct line of influence between these women and their theories about gender and power. Nnaemeka, for example, discusses issues of agency involved in the power to name oneself and Sinha questions how there can ever be a successful feminist movement when the state continues to perpetuate violence against certain groups of people, and certain types of women, through policies that make gender oppression possible.

However, both Nnaemeka and Sinha, among others, incorrectly assume that feminist scholars cannot have an open and honest conversation about our lives as women or as feminists because of this context of violence. Rather, knowers like Eltit, situated within a specific historic, cultural, socioeconomic, intellectual, or anthropologic context, can produce valuable knowledge about a particular space of the subject. Since all knowledge is socially situated and women have epistemic authority to write their own stories, a focus on gendered perspectives from marginalized spaces is useful, even if political solidarity is impossible.

In her narrative, both her alias E. Luminata and the audience members about whom she writes encapsulate what it means to have a fluid identity within their location. For Eltit, there is a location from which a person can see everything, from which one can theorize legitimately about one’s own experience, one’s own body, and one’s own knowledge from a marginalized perspective. As such, Eltit’s narrative effectively showcases a shared consciousness amongst oppressed groups within Chile, and her work attempts to actively disrupt systems of power under the Pinochet regime. From a local literary standpoint and that of her global readership, Eltit’s knowledge is privileged over the dominant discourse of national patriarchy.

In life narratives, language serves as a relational bridge. In the case of Chilean writer Diamela Eltit, both language and art serve as this bridge between cultures. One of the most striking elements of Eltit’s narrative, in fact, is the way she employs language to negotiate an understanding between the reader and her represented self, constructing a bridge between Latin Americans in opposition to military governments. Though some critics have accused her of being uncanny, Eltit’s use of the Spanish word “Luminata” reflects her response to those who challenged her for being too much of an unnatural, fetish performance icon rather than a “real” icon with whom the people could relate.

In 1983, Eltit effectively illuminates herself in an attempt to better articulate the terrible role of the oppression to which she has fallen victim under Pinochet's regime. Her self-positioning in this light is not subtle; it is an act of radical womanhood within a public space. Eltit explores the separation of a woman, an icon, and an artist from Pinochet, which is discussed as something inexpressible, "beyond language" and, more importantly, beyond personal or national identity. Writing at a similar moment, in 1988 Donna Haraway proposed that, "feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object. It allows us," she adds, "to become answerable for what we learn and how we see" (415).

As Sidonie Smith asserts, meanwhile, "the autobiographical subject finds him/herself on multiple stages simultaneously." However, "these multiple calls never align perfectly. Rather they create [...] unstable boundaries" between identities (110). Smith suggests that women, as a consequence, are positioned to render "body, identity, gender" as "non-identical" (112) and to render "tell-stories" that describe "eccentric cultural positions" (114). Each tell-story attempts to push the boundary of the "I" because each is essentially "autobiographical performativity" (ibid) in which "the process of identification and disidentification is ongoing" (111). Eltit, similarly, proposes that her work should be valued for its "exploration of proposals for change or innovation" within literature and art (7).

In her preface, Eltit argues that in writing *E. Luminata* she was attempting to create a "breach in novelistic form," to effectively make an "assault on the genre as a monolithic, linear mode of storytelling" by incorporating "simulacra and verbalized emotion" in her performances and her meditations about her own performances (7). In her words, "literature is truly multiple" and "what matters is to construct certain aesthetic spaces that convey meanings" at the "edge of insinuation" about "aesthetic and social unrest" (7-8). Eltit reasons that her novel, as a consequence, "is a generator of conflict" because of its "disjunction" and ambiguous nature. Her narrative and performances, therefore, can be considered something more than entertainment.

Eltit states that her performances are a reaction to the "disconformity" she considers herself to be living with on the margins of society. She says "I was not born with a silver spoon in my mouth [...] I am continually made to tow the line of women who work, and I carry that discipline within me, but also the legitimate and legal rebelliousness of the socially subordinated woman" (8-9). Eltit explains: "I feel committed to each of the symbolic and civic struggles to improve the situation of women," but "I have neither the power nor the capacity to change national habits, nor would I like to convert myself into a fiery preacher who must correct public or private actions." Rather, for Eltit, "making literature is a revolutionary activity" (11).

Jeanne Perreault, mirroring this view, argues that this need for identity assertion stems from the desire for "self defense" and "social transformation" (192). Perreault explains that "identity is valued as mobile and transformational, communal as well as private" (193). Moreover, identity is fundamentally relational: "As women write themselves, categories of difference (inner, outer, body, world, language) do not disappear, but take shape as 'I' and in relation to 'I'" (ibid). By contrast to this self-definition, as Simone de Beauvoir argued, "humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being" (41). Eltit's performances and her narratives challenge the positioning of woman as either the "second sex" or as an "autonomous being" because *E. Luminata*'s essence is revolutionary, not just relative to male perception. She straddles what Perreault calls the categories of difference and transcends any reduction to a singular identity.

In Chile under the Pinochet's regime, Eltit would go out into the public square, defying the curfew, and perform for the public under the lights of a single neon sign. She would also play erotic scenes she had filmed for herself. While these scenes were playing, Eltit would watch herself and take the performance further by adding another scene, which she performed live for the crowd. Defying the social and political subjugation of women, she ignores the political surveillance of the military government, standing naked in the public square under an illuminated sign announcing "bodies for sale" (17). As she stands under this sign, people gather around her and begin "rubbing themselves against the concrete [...] always moaning" (19). As people begin to masturbate and moan at her, the pleasure that emanates from their bodies reveals symbolically the "limits of Santiago" because those who are watching are exuding their own "emptiness" (19). Eltit, as E. Luminata, "offers herself to the gaze," deconstructing her female identity as a naked body available "at any price" (30). Yet, it is through this performance that she is transformed into "the redeemed one" in the wake of the "collectivized baptismal ceremony" (30). She leaves hope that the onlookers can also find a form of redemption, and if that is out of their reach, perhaps, she hopes, they will be able to find some form of pleasure, sexual or not, as an escape from what she refers to as "obscenity" (30).

Eltit does not consider this performance to be limited to a specific stance against prostitution or sexual objectification; rather, it is a collective baptism and cleansing process (19). Eltit explains that an onlooker will cleanse himself of his personal "miseries and imperfections" as he ejaculates to her:

he will raise his eyes to the illuminated sign, he will unburden himself of clothes, he will spread his legs stretched out on his back on the concrete, and out of desires he will have consummated himself in another [...] his skin may shine with light from the illuminated sign and only that way may he truly know some kind of life. (22)

Of her audience, Eltit writes, it is "not just young people [that] spread their desire in the square, various ages are always present," as are the "different intensities with which they expose their shamelessness" within the public square (55). Friedman suggests, "In taking the power of words, of representation, into their own hands, women project onto history an identity that is not purely individualistic. Nor is it purely collective. Instead, this new identity merges the shared and the unique" (76). This ritual makes Eltit's identity as a writer and as the performer E. Luminata both shared and unique.

In another baptism performance, Eltit "smashes her head against the tree again and again until the blood overflows the skin, it bathes her face in that blood, she cleans her face with her hands, looks at her hands, licks them," and as she exhibits herself in front of the crowd under the sign, she "probes" her wound with her fingernails until "she lets out a howl and her piercing voice expands and extends into the darkness" (24-25). In her text, Eltit notes how her spectators' "eyes mist[ed] over" and fell upon her then (25). As she hurts herself, the illuminated sign "goes on hurling down names and aliases, crossing over them" so that "nobody will be razed" (27). This act of drawing attention to names, to identities, brings the onlooker's attention to the idea of birthrights.

As the names are obscured or erased, the film attempts to reveal people, "as mere disposable flesh" (27). Eltit suggests that within Chile, there are entire generations of people who are literally in a "daze from being so lost in different residues" to such an extent that only her "experimentation in the square" can showcase this "lapse of life," just as her crusty scab draws attention to her own isolation and abjection (27). As she describes it, through this performance she "assumed another identity" beyond her own image, her own body, her wound. She does not explicitly say that she has taken on a collective identity, but

through her performances, she is able to generate such a close connection to her fellow townspeople that their identities become almost linked.

Eltit proposes that “the illuminated sign gave them life” and that her film and live performances forced “their eyes open” and as they become more enamored by her and her erotic sexuality. Through their wantonness, they, too, will allow themselves to serve their own “depravities” under the electric light, despite the government regulation that no one should be allowed outside after dark except the military (32). It is no coincidence that people come out to the public square in defiance of Pinochet’s regime: these onlookers are “lost souls” and “dark souls” (35). Under the guise of darkness, her audience can be made up of anyone. They can be “sallow figures” or they can be “sterilized.” Their identities are more obscure than hers. They may be beggars or prostitutes, children or adults, lovers or adulterers, but they have anonymity (36). Together, Eltit and the members of her audience are enabled to defy the limits of her own objectification as a sexualized being.

Although Eltit does not consider her work to be speaking for more than herself, arguably it is actively engaged in creating communities and national identities that have been marginalized and silenced by Pinochet during the 1970s and 1980s. Eltit describes her actions as E. Luminata in her filmed scenes when she writes, she “changes positions so rapidly that the dizzying view allows only the observation of fragments” so that her body or her body parts may at times be clear or distorted (40). She explains that E. Luminata’s live performances of her body are distinct from her representations in film: “those others appear opaque and reduced; she in contrast is constructed” since she is “framed by the illuminated sign that embellishes her” (40). She explains:

Imagine a square space, constructed, enclosed by trees: with benches, lights, lighting cables, the concrete surface paved in squares and in patches the ground covered with grass. Imagine this space contained within the city. Imagine this city space at nightfall with its parts shrouded in dusk, though still clear. Imagine this space desolate. Imagine this desolate space just when the electric light comes on: the beams cast over its surface. Imagine the entire square space illuminated by different beams filtering through the trees [...] Imagine the light on the woman’s head [...] Imagine her completely curved body illuminated by a powerful light [...] Imagine everything in tatters under that light. Imagine her own rags exposed to a powerful light. Imagine the imprinting under a light [...] Imagine the illumination of every electric light. (120-121)

When meditating about her portrayal of the figure E. Luminata, Eltit writes that “her soul is material” in the role since her soul is “being established on a bench in the square” (90).

For Eltit, the public square is linked to her and her audience’s collective right to be present there even though it is after the curfew. It is their right, she is announcing, to stake claim to that space. Indeed, she argues that the square is “the only true landscape” for her performances as well as a valuable place to present her filmed scenes because it draws attention to the “falsification of the same square” and the sense of safety and anonymity that it conveys even though no one individual is safe and all are subject to being caught by Pinochet’s men (90).

Eltit, though, might be too focused in her writing to encapsulate the figure of E. Luminata insofar as she limits her role as an artistic performer to “the lighted space” beneath the sign in front of her audience’s gaze. E. Luminata draws her onlooker’s attention to herself as a figure to be “imprinted” upon, such that any one description is too limiting. She neglects to argue that the figure of E. Luminata is more like a mirror image: any individual onlooker can see their own reflection in her and hear their own

grievances within her moans. As Eltit puts her naked body up for sale as a spectacle, she is offering herself up as another identity, just as she does later with her rasping, bestial animal performance.

Eltit's performances, presumably, seek to reconstitute identity and air grievances within the city of Santiago, and this is why the names in her film are distorted so they are not completely visible in her filmed scenes. With their identities deconstructed, everyone becomes malleable and interchangeable, with both individual and collective identities that are no longer merely imprisoned by militarized forces. Rather, they have become self-constructed and anonymous, and they allude to something radically revolutionary, erotic, and public/private happening within the public square. No longer merely conquered women or men and no longer limited to their birth names or their social class, the audience and E. Luminata have been elevated within Chile, the very place that sought to marginalize their bodies and minds.

In watching E. Luminata's performances or her films in the public square, every individual becomes "illuminated entirely, turned on" (134). Similarly, for Haraway, there is "violence implicit in our visualizing practices," which always invokes the political "question of the power to see" (416). Five years prior, in 1983, Eltit addressed many of Haraway's concerns. Since "the knowing self is partial" and "never finished," she holds, it makes sense that a union of selves might obtain a better understanding of women's subjectivity than a single self (417). Essentially, what she is promoting is a sense of community: "situated knowledges are about communities, not about isolated individuals" (419). Given the phenomenological fact of the "split and contradictory self" (417), a greater sense of community and an understanding of more complete points of view might encourage scholars to become more accountable for their beliefs.

In another performance, E. Luminata grants herself a new provocative identity as she intentionally burns herself. Putting her hand over an open flame, "she looks at her hand, the blisters that are rising [...] she has burned her hand in the incipient pyre and her blackened flesh shrivels the skin. She exposes her arm confirming the difference in color" (42). During the same performance, "her open mouth is no longer capable of producing sound, let alone words" because "she has disorganized language." Just as she has burned her body to forge a new appearance, she becomes a "grotesque spectacle" (43). Eltit explains that the purpose of this performance was to push the audience to feel enraged, surprised, and compassionate for her in her "state of deterioration" to also draw attention to the camaraderie that this performance creates (43).

Eltit holds that the audience becomes "very close" as they gather together to watch E. Luminata's spectacle. This act is "more than a means of protection." Rather, the coming together of the audience is important because its individual members are brought together by "constituting themselves as others" in contrast to E. Luminata and her display of physical suffering (43). Eltit explains that the fire scene performance is "based on the power of seduction" and that her focus in it is on the "dramatization of the one seduced" as she goes from a position of resistance standing beneath the illuminated sign to a position of "total surrender" to the fire, to destruction, to "this new identity" that is not "indifferent" or "modest," but rather an identity of pure "passion" and "terror." (45).

As she performs as E. Luminata, Eltit's identity becomes fluid. She can at times appear to be "conquering" and at other times transform herself into a "conquered," surrendering being (45). Moreover, Haraway suggests that there is an "embodied nature of all vision," and therefore a link to be made between feminist objectivity and situated knowledge (414). Rejecting any claim for one superior vantage point over another, she proposes the joining of partial views in order to create a "collective subject position" that can allow us to see a "vision of living within limits and contradictions" (417).

Later in her performance, E. Luminata performs indistinguishable animals, some wild and free and others as oppressively kept and frigid (62). She “moans” and “groans” as if she were the suffering animal, “moos really just the way a cow does, moos and drags herself along as in a birth sequence,” after which the “cow withdraws to her marginalizations” (62). Then, as if she were transformed into a horse, “rearing herself up she radiates sterile kicks” and “tears up grass.” Whichever animal she portrays next is unclear as “she moos and neighs” and the hearing of the audience “gets jammed by the mixing” of sounds (63). Eltit writes that her “warbling” serves to confuse and disorient listeners until they cannot tell which animal “possesses her” (63). E. Luminata continues to “trot” and “gallop” and as she takes on another animal state, changing her sound, pitch, and behavior once again.

The public square “transforms into a pen, lamp poles into posts, benches into rails,” and E. Luminata runs wildly until she strikes against barbed wire, which cuts her and sends her reeling back (63). After this instance, E. Luminata is forced to “come back to life”—i.e., back to her previous artistic activist identity as an illuminated spectacle, “a living advertisement” (70). No longer merely an animal, she is still a being up for sale, a body, like a farmer’s cow or sheep. Her voice may be emanating from her gullet, but as her body is “entirely open” and subject to the gaze of the audience, she is nothing more than a “product in illuminated flesh” (70). Eltit does not discuss the significance of the ending of her performance, but E. Luminata’s final silence evokes a message about social class and the lack of mobility: she has no name; she has no distinguishable voice to be valued; she is marginalized like an animal.

Inevitably, E. Luminata has become limited: she is forced to yield to the barbed wire and, by extension, to her own enclosure within the political dictatorship of Pinochet. She is branded from her previous performance by the fire and tethered to her space, gazed upon by the audience as they create another barrier and as she once again others herself. Banding together to watch, the audience becomes the colonizer or victimizer and she the base animal, the base emotion, the limited being that can never “butt or charge” the oppressors surrounding her (75). Essentially, all of E. Luminata’s posturing, her bravado as a rebellious and untamed animal, does not amount to anything. Like a domesticated animal, as a Chilean woman under the Pinochet regime she is voiceless. One animal does not have the power to take over a farmer’s ranch, just as one woman does not have the ability to change political policy while subject to a military dictatorship. Like the defiant animal, though, E. Luminata may push the boundaries of the government by staging these performances and allowing others to view her filmed scenes within the public square under the cover of darkness, unable to do such things during the daytime. Eltit alludes to the fact that many members of her audience were interrogated in order to reach her, but this forceful dictatorship is put into the background within her artistic autobiographical narrative.

Eakin defines human identity formation as “the lifelong process of making selves that we engage in daily and that informs all autobiographical writing” (1). Thus, Eakin analyzes how humans psychologically and physiologically form identities, seeking to use his findings to better understand the meanings of autobiographical writings. A discussion of the “self, autobiography, narrative, individual” is needed, he argues, to understand the “individual as opposed to the collective, the autonomous as opposed to the relational, and [...] the narrative as opposed to nonlinear, discontinuous, nonteleological forms” (Eakin 48). Eakin writes that “the selves we display in autobiographies are doubly constructed” and that the “use of the first person [...] not only conveniently bridges the gaps between who we were once and who we are today, but it tends as well to make our sense of self in any present moment seem more unified and organized than it possibly could be” (ix).

Life narratives, he continues, are “products of a particular time and place” and for this reason “the identity-shaping environments in these autobiographies are nested one within the other—self, family, community set in a physical and cultural geography, in an unfolding history” (Eakin 85). For this reason, scholars need a proper understanding of autobiographical memory. Like Lacan, Eakin argues that, from a developmental perspective, self emerges at the moment when language is acquired. “Self and language [...] are mutually implicated in a single, interdependent system of symbolic behavior” (192). The discussion of “memory talk” that follows seeks to sharpen this general proposition about the origins of self, in which early conversations between children and their caregivers lay the foundation for adult life and writing later on (106).

For her part, Eltit alludes to her own limitations as a writer and as an artist when she explains that while “she threw herself into this unfailing pleasure” of her own sexuality and eroticism within the public realm and was able to achieve some semblance of the “ephemeral” through her performances and writings about her performances, she neglected to include any way for others to “re-inscribe” her actions. Neither her writing nor her scenes are “sustaining” because they are limited to the time in which they were performed and to the space in which they were showcased (83). Eltit also describes one of the most successful parts of her performances as her distorted and “aberrant ramblings,” which helped to keep any easily accessible solutions for her audience at bay (83). As such, Eltit’s acts of political and social activism are limited to those specific audiences and they can never be recreated in the same way or have the same effect on a different audience, or even for a contemporary reader.

Indeed, the reader might justly assume that Eltit incorrectly limits her performative portrayal as E. Luminata within her narrative. She explains that, as E. Luminata, “she is alone and that is why the performance is solely for the one who reads it, who takes part in the self-same solitude” (100). However, Eltit neglects to discuss what has brought on this emotional onslaught of solitude and loneliness under the Pinochet regime. Neither Eltit as a performer nor Eltit as a writer is truly alone insofar as the performer has an ever-changing audience within the public square and there are people reading her book, attempting to uncover the meaning behind her story, her performances, and her meditations on the self. As such, an audience or readership is always present, so her very own narrative negates the notion of solitude. Given some of the limitations of life narratives addressed by Eakin, she calls for an abandonment of the “restrictive notions of the self and the subject that make of them little more than metaphysical or narrative puppets, opening the way for a much broader, experientialist approach to the nature and origins of subjectivity” (25) where the “existence of the self and the existence of the body are inseparable” (34). When a protagonist is overtly disabled, her story will reflect the “loss of the image of the face” (32), which is “connected with the loss of the image of the self” (32).

Eltit argues that as E. Luminata, she “becomes malleable,” and her eroticism is therefore relatable to many Chilean people, who “spread their complaints across the landscape” while their quest for answers and justice remains unanswered. The moans of the onlookers, in other words, are not merely erotic. They are also the sound of collective dismay about the social and political order within Chile (84). E. Luminata is represented as erotic because she is “moaning for what she doesn’t have in her insatiable quest for light” (84). Nonetheless, Eltit does not describe her performance as a search for clarity or meaning. Although she morphs herself into a “metaphor of starshine on damp concrete,” she neglects to view this as a collective metaphor for her own identity and the identities of those watching her performances (84). The reader might then assume that Eltit, and her alter ego E. Luminata, like many others are truly searching for salvation within their space under the Pinochet regime, which is why her scenes representing distinct and multiple identities are so important.

Sara Ahmed argues, “To be emotional is to have one’s judgment affected: it is to be reactive rather than active, dependent rather than autonomous. Feminist philosophers have shown us how the subordination of emotions also works to subordinate the feminine and the body” (3). Ahmed continues this line of thought when she suggests that, “emotions are not simply something ‘I’ or ‘we’ have. Rather, it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries are made: the ‘I’ and the ‘we’ are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others” (10). Eltit neglects to mention the nature of the environment in which she presents herself, though the public square is a seemingly safe public space except, presumably, under the Pinochet regime. Likewise, Eltit does not describe her political nonconformity in great detail, yet the nature of the traditional public environment of the square is crucial to both her performances and her narrative meditations about those performances.

Her use of the public square might have been intentional because it is relatable throughout the Western world, where public squares are a common place. As E. Luminata, Eltit transforms the public place into a site of resistance, using her performances, films, and her position under the illuminated sign to actively inform the public about her social and political discontent, just as she informs the reader within her narrative about the constant danger of being captured and interrogated by Pinochet’s militants. As Sara Ahmed suggests, “Emotions are associated with women, who are represented as ‘closer’ to nature, ruled by appetite, and less able to transcend the body through thought, will and judgment” (3).

Ahmed believes that emotions “should not be regarded as psychological states, but as social and cultural practices” (Ahmed 9). E. Luminata manifests Sara Ahmed’s idea that “emotion is not what comes from the individual body, but is what holds or binds the social body together” (ibid) and that “pain creates the very impression of a bodily surface” (15). Ahmed believed that writers do not “simply interweave the personal and the public, the individual and the social, but show the ways in which they take shape through each other, or even how they shape each other” (14). As E. Luminata, Eltit is able to address Ahmed’s view that “emotions are bound up with the securing of social hierarchy: emotions become attributes of bodies as a way of transforming what is ‘lower’ or ‘higher’ into bodily traits” (4). Eltit addresses the newly created role of the viewer, the onlooker, and the reader to enable an understanding of the visual and performative nature of her work, and guides their perceptions to focus on her body as a visibly constructed objectified woman all the while showcasing herself as a master, able to transform her identity, inviting onlookers and readers to begin thinking about the role of visibility for marginalized women within identity politics. Eltit’s activism enables her to become an abstraction and also a visible model for others to experiment with society and privilege as a whole, since she addresses so many different versions of self, victimization and social unrest within her performances.

In her representations of bestiality, she is like a fly drawn to the light of the sign. If she is positioned as an animal or as an insect, she is one of the many, marginalized, silenced people in Chile, and it is to depict their situations that her voice and her actions must be amplified. Mrinalini Sinha theorizes, “nations are ‘real’ in that they become instituted and renewed through countless ordinary, and extraordinary, practices that insinuate a nation into the very structure of society and the collective consciousness of people” (229). However, Sinha argues, there is “no one universal and inevitable form of the nation” because “nations are necessarily constructed around a myth of their own uniqueness” (228). She proposes that women are “conspicuous in nationalist discourses as symbols of national culture and, through the control of women’s sexuality, as the markers of community boundaries” (230). Her idea is that women are “signifiers of markers of a group’s innermost identity” within nationalist projects, but that while women should be revered and protected in this system, this is not always the case because of the

institutionalization of “gender difference” (213). Sinha reasons that, “nations and national identities are continuously being formed and reformed in relation to various categories of difference.

Sinha explains that “All nations are gendered, but there is no one privileged narrative of the gendering of nations,” (259) so that sexual difference is not the only way to limit women, who can be class-bound, racially bound, or intellectually bound to their positions within society. Sinha’s theories, which help to explain how Eltit defies the limits of gender within Chile, seem to extend Monique Wittig’s theory that women exist because they are a construction from a heterosexual matrix (250). Wittig calls for the “destruction of the class of women within which men appropriate women” (250).

Eltit’s situated knowledge can be used to further the arguments made by feminist scholars such as Sinha, Wittig, Hawaway, and Nnaemeka, among other autobiographical scholars like Susan Stanford Friedman and Sidonie Smith, all of whom agree that there is no such thing as a universal category of “woman.” A personal lived experience, or “materialist feminist,” approach can be helpful for understanding specific types of oppression, and an individualistic voice like Eltit’s can be useful because it produces knowledge that may not be completely perfect or all-encompassing but that speaks to a truth about how women have remained invisible or silenced from effectively challenging male domination. Eltit’s narrative is about the transcendence of situatedness and the fluidity of identity, and underscores that all humans deserve to be free of oppression and injustice. Although feminists from the postmodern viewpoint might critique Eltit for her discursively produced reality, i.e., for the fact that her truths can be contested for their viability, yet such critiques constitute a disservice to feminism. Indeed, such critiques help to silence voices like Eltit’s.

Eltit also attempts to provide multiple platforms to account for the fact that an individual cannot thoroughly explain a specific experience through language. Eltit occupies a real and complicated space, not just a mythic or exotic space or a traumatizing space. She serves as a model for the possibility of redefining identity. While there is neither an essential woman nor is there a true global sisterhood, her performance and narrative activism provide people with the opportunity to address the issue of marginalization.

She directly confronts the issue of women as “other” or as unknowable, and makes her identity malleable within her problematic location. Allowing her identity to have a greater value beyond her own body, her performance reveals that no society is free of inequality or of appropriating feminist discourse. Her knowledge is no longer foreclosed. Through her narrative, she extricates what may be of use to others by allowing her voice to have free reign while exemplifying the importance of her positionality within Chile, within the public square, and within the text itself. For these reasons, feminist scholars should recognize and respect her unique form of feminism and her individualized and collective production of knowledge, especially as it contrasts against the Pinochet regime.

E. Luminata should also be valued for her social and sexual mobility. She can represent the masculine nature of the sign and its message (“bodies for sale”), but she can also represent the feminine nature of her body being imprinted on by the beams of light and the eroticism that her first performance depicts. Feminist scholars should re-value Eltit’s narrative because, as E. Luminata, she is able to locate the marginality of gender and identify her status in society as a pseudonymous figure. When she takes on this alternate pseudonym for activism, she effectively erases her name, her familial history, and her class status, becoming a work of art herself. She is reflective of her own narrative, her own words—she creates her own identity through her narrative. Just as her name implies, she effectively illuminates, or casts a light on, her own body, her own vulnerability to outside elements such as temptation, fire, sexism, and prejudice.

Eltit proves that women do not need to continue to let society define them along economic, social, or political lines, based on the demographics of race, sexuality, or gender. She suggests that women can take power over their own visibility in the public sphere, rather than being objects that society defines. In control of her own visibility, E. Luminata enhances it, embraces it, and is therefore able to grapple with notions of identity and identification. Yet, what is most important is how she represents more than a plural or collective identity, but represents an understanding of identity politics within the realms of art and literature, where oppression and marginalization have also existed.

Eltit reframes the systems of discourse and dissemination that had not previously been willing to accommodate voices such as hers. Although she occupies a space specific to Chile within the historical context of the Pinochet dictatorship, the narrative about her performances defies the constraints of this space and time. Her ability to overcome marginalization through art and narrative during the 1980s should be considered relevant to contemporary literary scholars and feminists since the notion of identification and class mobility are still problematic today.

Artists can reconstitute their own identities as Eltit does. Indeed, E. Luminata is not merely about a victimized mentality, and she is not, finally, powerless because she can change her identity as she changes her body's actions and as she decides what voices best articulate her anger. Eltit uses her film, her performances, and the discourse of literature to shape her experience of identity in order to question the power of the government and its attempt to quell her voice of determination. She attains political significance because her identity is both individual and collective. Therefore, her story can be separated from its historical situation and engage feminist scholars today seeking, for example, to discuss how oppressive representations of women still exist in art and technology today.

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Karly Berezowsky
Raritan Valley Community College
berezowskyk@gmail.com
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