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AGEISM, THE ENVIRONMENT, AND THE SPECTER: THE BROAD PREDICAMENT IN CARLOS FUENTES'S *AURA* AND CARMEN BOULLOSA'S *ANTES*

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Do specters grow older? Is there such a thing as a "young specter"? Was communism a bright young thing when it haunted Europe in Marx's text, and did it stay that way, fresh for the reunion in Derrida's *Specters of Marx*? One possible answer can be extrapolated from Owen Davies's social history of mostly British ghosts, which asserts that a ghost's life-span, so to speak, lasts "no more than 2,000 years" (38).[1] An old ghost is not necessarily an elderly specter, of course, and that distinction matters in the context of ageist practice that discriminates against the elderly. What is so offensive about "showing one's age" anyway? Chronological age did not always supply such a definitive classification, according to Patricia Cohen, who argues that more than a century ago adults' ages were not intimately bound up with identity: "Most Americans seemed either not to know or care very much about their precise age" (28). Also working from an English-language research base, Sally Chivers uses film to explain age prejudice. In the movies, old age denotes disability: "Looking old means *being* old, which, in this discourse, means being ill" (italics in original, Chivers 8). Ergo, to reveal one's advancing age means to admit poor health. It seems wise not to get caught up in the wacky bias that old age is an illness, but simply ignoring ageist stereotypes does not make them go away. The analysis below examines a literary reaction to the problem of ageism: female characters in the Mexican gothic short novels *Aura* (1962) by Carlos Fuentes and *Antes* (1989) by Carmen Boullosa employ ghostly doubles. Women readers might take particular interest in the specter's ability to defy the normative process of physical change and manifest itself as younger or older, given that age discrimination works against women sooner in life and more persistently than it affects men.[2]

[1]Davies explains, "To a large extent, then, people's perception of historic ghosts depended on their sense and knowledge of history" (41).

[2]Due to the higher life expectancy and higher poverty rate for women, Woodward argues that, "aging can be said to be a women's issue" (60). One analysis of the "double jeopardy" effect for women film actors finds that in the late twentieth century, the term "older" tended to be used to describe male actors over the age of 40 and female actors over the age of 30; women are nominated for and win Oscars at a significantly younger age than men; and youth is the most powerful criterion for women who win the Best Actress award, while "middle age" is the best

Fuentes's and Boullosa's narratives suggest that the exact age of the suffering protagonist does not matter; rather, the prejudice is triggered by finding oneself in a new life stage, whether the transition to elderly status, or the movement into official adolescence. Although the gothic double as a solution to ageism remains strictly fanciful, the fictional plots signal a link between individual alienation and communal destruction. By reading between the lines of these novels, the reader may come to suspect that the texts warn that an ageist society is unsustainable.

Plot Summaries and Historical Framework

As predicted by the present-*and*-absent, one-category-*and*-the-other-nature of specters, the two Mexican novels in question both support and betray their titles: neither the aura of youth (*Aura*) nor the hope of a fresh and easy "before" (*Antes*) proves easy for the protagonists to conjure in a sustained manner.[3] Fuentes's Aura turns out to be the magical double of Consuelo, an elderly woman, who uses the young-looking specter as a kind of social prosthetic to compensate for her isolated status.[4] Consuelo materializes Aura, whose innocence seduces Felipe, an economically struggling history teacher. Felipe, in 1961, follows paternalistic double standards and considers himself an appropriate suitor for a "girl" apparently about a decade younger than he, whom Felipe believes to be a hostage to her "aunt." In a parallel to Consuelo's symbolic death-in-life that keeps her isolated in the midst of Mexico City, in Boullosa's *Antes* the narrative voice serves as the double and seems to wander an urban space alone; she is all that remains of the persecuted protagonist who "dies" at the end of the novel. As Carlos Rincón notes, *Antes* delivers such a disordered narrative that the text constitutes an anti-novel of formation (16). Under the spell of gothic dread, the girl protagonist, whether in Mexico City or studying abroad in Canada, is "fatally" stalked by enigmatic, persecutory "pasos" or footsteps that belong to an unstoppable preverbal, or "desverbal" force. These "pasos" may supply a metaphor for maturing genetic codes. The ambiguity of the protagonist's alleged "death"—which coincides with her first period—suggests the high degree of subjectivity in play when we determine which alterations in DNA represent a decline and which constitute a tolerable process of aging.

True to the uncertain nature of the binary-straddling specter, Fuentes's and Boullosa's female protagonists seem both smartly self-aware and painfully unable to effect more than a narrow resistance to what one might teasingly call the "broad predicament," or the wide-ranging and almost inescapable trouble that affects female characters in an ageist context. Some readers will take offense at the label of women as "broads," but the pun points out the ridiculousness of the quandary. Fuentes's and Boullosa's characters suffer a sort of loss of status or gothic persecution from the outward expression of their own aging DNA—or more specifically, from nameless others' reaction to their aging bodies. The "broad predicament" has grown so wide these days that it even encompasses men, who risk unemployment if they seem "older" and thus illness-prone and more expensive as workers. This increasing pressure on men to maintain a youthful look encourages the trend in Mexican and U.S. salons for "touching up" the gray in men's hair.

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predictor for male Best Actor winners (616).

[3]See Chorba and Seymour for analyses that compare Boullosa's and Fuentes's approaches on topics of indigenous history and mestizo identity. For a summary of gothic elements in *Antes*, see Burke (40-41) and Reid. For gothic elements in *Aura*, see Rodríguez and Pérez.

[4]The unflattering description of Consuelo inspires one critic to select the passages to illustrate the Hispanic approach to ageism (Lichtblau 109-10).

Significantly for the history of ageism, both *Aura* and *Antes* concentrate the plot in the early 1960s, precisely the decade of intensified talk about age discrimination. In the U.S., legislation was first enacted in 1967 that made it illegal to discriminate against anyone over 40 because of age (Cohen 239). One year later, in the midst of the global turbulence and perceived generational conflict that in Mexico saw the government-ordered sniper killings of unarmed university students on the Tlatelolco plaza, the term "ageism" was coined by psychiatrist Robert Butler, who complained that prejudice against the elderly, "allows the younger generations to see older people as different than themselves" (cited in Cohen 239). Certainly, the younger generations in the 1960s may well have tended to view older people—a.k.a. the "establishment"—as an alien force. The result of this ageist bias, as we can see today, is not freedom. A society in which young people fail to see their future selves in the elderly, and the elderly cannot find themselves reflected in the young, does not seem viable in the long run. Such a divided citizenry easily loses sight of the big picture of the lifespan, and consequently complex development tasks such as the implementation of responsible environmental policy suffer. Although it may seem an unexpected leap of logic to move from ageism to the environment, the topic surprises only because of the narrow and fragmented views that thinking about generations in conflict inspires in the first place. The narratives of *Aura* and *Antes* straddle time periods and generations by way of the double, and this wavering capitulation to and critique of youth values permits the juxtaposition of two environments: a "before" and an "after."

Guest Appearance by La Llorona: The Environment and the "Old" Specter

If Patricia Cohen's gathering of research on the relatively recent rise of age in the U.S. as a fundamental status marker can apply to Mexico, at least one colonial woman specter—the usual suspect, La Llorona—seems to exploit ironically the fears surrounding old age. During her non-spectral lifetime, La Llorona may not have bothered much about her age, but her age-optional visage is put to spooky effect for contemporary audiences in the Mexican horror film *Kilómetro 31* (2006), which thrilled moviegoers by transforming the vengeful ghost from a seductive younger woman to a repulsively decayed cadaver and back again.[5] A summary for those readers unfamiliar with the story is easy to provide: La Llorona haunts Mexico and threatens to steal children as replacements for her own.[6] The specter's simultaneously contemporary and historic, modern and gothic, liberated and constrained manifestations flout linear time and, oddly enough, also serve to measure it. The twenty-first-century retelling of the legend in the box office hit *Kilómetro 31* plays on an environmental point that Boullosa's and Fuentes's novels also make. This correlation supports the continued relevance of the twentieth-century novels—a point that perhaps needs defending in an ageist society that habitually prefers the new over the old. *Kilómetro 31* shocks the audience by providing a momentary flashback in the drainage system of Mexico City that transforms the underground setting to its colonial manifestation as a sunlit outdoor river. Between the bucolic scenery and the enormous cement tubes, the preferable environment seems clear, but La Llorona does not show much interest in restoring her physical world; she mainly wants to exact the same, apparently never completed, revenge. In less dramatic ways than the horror film, *Antes* and *Aura* also privilege the audience

[5]In his review of the film *Kilómetro 31*, St. George notes that so many versions of the legend circulate in Mexico because, according to Derrida, the plurality of constant returns gives strength to the specter. For this reason, St. George reminds the reader, Derrida writes *Specters of Marx* in the plural (238).

[6]This mad maternal specter committed suicide (centuries ago) in despair over a jilting by a Spaniard, and before her death she drowned her child or children.

with glimpses of a bygone Mexico City that neither protagonist means to reinstate.

While *Aura* pits an ever-denser, mid-twentieth-century urban landscape against an elderly woman who refuses to sell out and leave her home on Donceles Street in the Historic Center, Boullosa's *Antes* fears the disappearance of the same 1960s' Mexico City. The protagonist of *Antes* grows up in the mid-century capital, and it would seem that for her the city of the fifties and sixties is preferable to the development of the "urban stain" that will come. True to the disaffected split between the spectral narrative voice and present circumstance, the narrator of *Antes* cannot report with certainty on the current state of the capital: "[N]o sé si [la Ciudad de México] aún existe o si ha cambiado de apariencia, si ha dejado su rostro de ciudad limpia, joven, de virgen bíblica..." (ellipsis in original 102). The reader suspects that Mexico City has probably changed or disappeared, since in *Antes* a fresh-faced youth doesn't stand a chance of graceful aging. And why is that? *Antes* blames the persecution of the "virginal" environment on twentieth-century scientists. The narrator remembers that chemists like her father unwittingly brought about destructive modifications: "Pero antes de ver su efecto devastador, [los químicos] copiaban patentes e inventaban otras que llenaran de una nueva nación nuestro hasta entonces aire claro..." (ellipsis in original, 81). A catalogue of environmental devastation precedes and follows this confession of familial responsibility. The environment, like the protagonist, is doomed and the novel means for the reader to shiver helplessly at the horror, in the same style as the environmental flashback in *Kilómetro 31*.

By contrast, although *Aura* notes the gloominess in Consuelo's home caused by the overshadowing new construction around her residence, nature appears in the novel not as a setting but a tool that facilitates Consuelo's power to command the specter. That is, ancient knowledge of the animal and plant kingdoms allows Consuelo to influence one problem that modernity causes for her, namely solitude, and she does not attempt to alter the larger scale of urban policy. Consuelo's somewhat paradoxical "urban seclusion" likely prompts her narrowed interest in summoning a romantic partner. This resigned and solitary approach fits the irrational quality of the gothic.[7] Irrationality is a key factor for the gothic mood since it promotes the eeriness of the double.[8] The double of the female specter shows, without offering a workable alternative, the degradation of the environment, and as Consuelo's disinterest in environmental collective activism anticipates, novels such as *Aura* and *Antes*, and even a horror film like *Kilómetro 31*, unsettle the audience by demonstrating that the irrational specter does not bother to accumulate wisdom. To add to this unnerving stability of narrow motive, the specter never really faces a penalty for her haunting acts. Thus, the spectral ability to straddle time periods allows the ghost to remain impervious to her age in more than one sense.

Given the doubled and suspended chronology of the specter, it seems almost an expected technical approach that the openings of *Antes* and *Aura* feature a false beginning. Not only does each novel begin in medias res, but also the idea that all is foretold implies an already known, eerily wisdom-resistant, conclusion. The only missing element from this static plotline is an audience. Ergo, similar to the famous second-person invocation that begins *Aura* ("Lees ese anuncio"), Boullosa's *Antes* kicks off with the introductory question, "¿En qué estábamos antes

[7]As Ruth Bienstock Anolik states, "The gothic mode emerges as a response and a counter to the impulse of the Enlightenment to repress drunken, unreason, the unknown, the Other" (2).

[8]Rita Felski contemplates the importance of the double in gothic fiction as a kind of psychological fragmentation: "The recurrence of doubles, mirrors, and split selves make it clear that the Gothic is not about formation of the self (Bildung), but a physic scattering of the self, a return to a condition of de-individuation and formlessness" (153). The examples studied in the present article suggest the double can be used to straddle identity as young (attractive-integrated) and old (repulsive-isolated). In my analysis, this sort of doubling in response to ageism creates not formlessness but intensified individualism.

de llegar?" (11).[9] La Llorona needs humans around in order to have a victim, but Fuentes's Consuelo and Boullosa's protagonist must conjure an audience. These protagonists are not out to kill, but to survive in a prejudiced society that devalues and isolates females as they grow older. Perhaps because she cannot manage a seductive physical contact with her target public the way that Consuelo's narrative magic manages with Felipe, Boullosa's narrator is stuck with the frustrating work of *almost* conjuring the desired listeners: "Sobre todo porque no estás aquí… ¿Y si insisto? Vamos, si insisto puede ser que aparezcas" (11). Just as the reader of *Aura* can come to feel that the second person address converts the audience into Felipe's stand-in, the "you" summoned in *Antes* threatens readers with the imposed identity of someone else, possibly someone not modern and not young, as happens with Felipe when he discovers that he too is a double and that his real identity pertains to Consuelo's reincarnated husband, General Llorente, a nineteenth-century military leader, dead since 1901. The next sections of the analysis leave behind La Llorona, who wails more than she talks, and focus instead on two methods of understanding the more articulated predicaments of the protagonists of *Aura* and *Antes*.

The Specter of Youth in *Aura*: Strange Loops

Felipe eventually comes to embrace Consuelo's age and Aura's dependent role as a double. Note that a simple release from ageism does not force Felipe's insight, but rather his desire for Aura, whom he meets after following up on a want ad in the paper that reads, "Se solicita historiador joven" (11). The specification of a "young" historian means that the question of age arises from the sixth sentence of the novel, although for some readers, Felipe as a 27-year-old will seem youthful only in comparison to the 109-year-old Consuelo. A review of the historical facts help to update this preoccupation about age in the novel: *Aura* did not stop the custom of ageism in the labor market. Even in twenty-first-century Mexico, despite legislative efforts to curb the practice, some want ads—including text sponsored by U.S. employers operating abroad—continue to specify age, and even sex and weight (Dickerson and Mandell). Mexico has made repeated efforts to protect citizens euphemistically labeled "of the third age," and newer legislation includes the 2002, "Law of the Rights of Older Adult Persons," which aims to defend Mexicans age 60 and older ("Ley"). This anti-ageist effort promulgated under the Fox administration appeared about a year before a scandal erupted over *Aura*. The Secretary of Labor, Carlos Abascal, made national headlines and rekindled sales of the book when he objected to the reading assignment of *Aura* for his daughter in Catholic school; the teacher ultimately lost her job over the conflict.[10] Although the Secretary of Labor bridled at the unorthodox religious imagery in *Aura*, it is not hard to believe that age discrimination fueled his rejection of sexuality in the novel.

Oddly, if the dominant stereotype of older people imagines them as "frail, fumbling, fussy, forgetful, and asexual," then the popular imaginary seems at once to expect the lack of sexual activity among the elderly *and* deride this imposed asexuality (Schulz 2). Abascal, as per the stereotype, perhaps assumes that elderly citizens should not have sex—a prejudice that implies that all sex among old people is queer. Fuentes raises the stakes on the queer quotient by imagining a sexually active elderly woman who uses an adolescent double as a sex surrogate. Fuentes may not have been able to script this sexuality in another way. Margaret Gullette argues

[9]Boullosa immediately strips the comforting "nosotros" of the first sentence in *Antes* that tempers Fuentes's disorienting "you," and launches the creepy potential of the lonely "tú" with a second question: "¿No te lo dijeron?" (11).

[10]Fuentes in an interview from 2008 celebrates the improved sales as a result of the attention, which shot up to 20,000 copies per week ("*Aura*, libro de Carlos Fuentes").

that the tendency to view aging as a story of decline accompanies a second narrative popular in the media: sex appeal as *the* dominant plot concern. Or in Gullette's words, "sexuality is the main narrative we are currently being trained to read for" (16). Thus, a double whammy of irrelevance encumbers an elderly character. In *Aura*, Consuelo is automatically barred from participating in the main storyline of modern import, sexuality, and she is expected to follow the secondary storyline of advancing decrepitude. Fuentes allows Consuelo to manipulate Aura as a way to "dub" herself back into an important (and commercially viable) narrative. A reader without Abascal's moral panic is free to note that Consuelo seeks to restore her marriage and not to overturn society. The second seduction of Felipe would seem to supply the ultimate heterosexual marriage plot, a conservative dream come true, if only it weren't so queer because Consuelo is so old.

Certainly, Consuelo seems conscious of her elderly disadvantage. She complains to Felipe that she has been abandoned by society and that the only way that "they" will force her to move from her house is by her death (29). Felipe initially sides with the modern "they" and feels disgust ("asco") when he navigates the rat-infested darkness of the old woman's home (39). In short order, however, Felipe's self-acceptance as an elderly-and-young, nineteenth-and twentieth-century specter prompts the reversal of gerontophobia and motivates his kisses on the old woman's toothless mouth, the detail of which surfaces in a fluid narrative that links Consuelo's elderly body and Felipe's "return to himself" in the same sentence—as if breaking the flow with a period or two might cause the reader to startle at the implausibility (62). The narrative never pauses either for analysis of how Fuentes neatly fits modern alienation into the familiar pattern of the gothic double, perhaps because the premise remains consternating. Felipe becomes most authentically himself when he identifies as a historical figure. This mood is both gothic and modern.

Felipe cannot take interest in Consuelo for herself rather than for her money or her "niece," and at first his motives for accepting the old woman's offer of employment and wanting to make off with Aura seem two-faced. Oddly, Felipe learns that as a modern figuring out one's most authentic emotion—here, attraction for Consuelo and Aura—does not necessarily make one more modern.[11] The circular plot of *Aura* hints that only those who initially resist the "pollution" of old age will end up in a truly gothic stance of repeating someone else's life. That is, the ageist who at the outset values only youth will likely be doomed to repeat that disdained history, because *age catches up with an ageist*. Felipe would have done well to cultivate his sense of respect for the "endings" in human existence, rather than fear that Consuelo's presence taints Aura's "beginning." When read through the lens of ageism, *Aura* suggests that the only way for Felipe not to discover himself as a nineteenth-century double is to respect Consuelo from the beginning, but since he views nearly every object in her house as odd or repulsive, this tolerance seems impossible. The male character's downfall has its roots in an excessive sense of generational fragmentation. Even as a professional historian, Felipe does not manage to pay more respectful attention to older people and their strange ways; if only he could muster the open-mindedness, he would increase his odds of opening a different kind of future, one that does not repeat the past with its reckless environmental practices and bad marriages.

Similar to Felipe's backwards travel in a foretold life that catches him up in Consuelo's doubled "age," the tangled hierarchy between Consuelo and Aura comes to represent not social rebellion, but a static relationship of mutual snares. The elderly woman's social existence depends on the specter Aura, just as the young woman needs Consuelo in order to be conjured.

[11]Robyn Warhol observes that moderns tend to distinguish between real and false feelings. Warhol writes, "[O]ne of the legacies of modernism has been the belief that individual subjects are repositories of 'real' feelings, and that sincere and authentic emotional experience can be distinguished from false sentimentalism and affectation" (11).

This tangled hierarchy between the old and young versions of the same person suggests that as an individual actor, Consuelo will not overcome the "broad predicament," that is, the ominous ageism that operates against modern women. Her failure to propose a solution for the collective difficulty stems from her very method: the closed system of this unstable hierarchy, or to put it another way, the self-canceling gesture of conjuration. The individual response to discrimination ends up trapping Consuelo in the very problem that her gothic double addresses.

In the double movement that Derrida teases out, a conjuration calls forth that which it would lay to rest (50, 58-59). The conjuring of Aura brings back an all-valuable youth in a gesture that makes it impossible for Consuelo to overcome precisely that value of youth. The old woman plays along with ageism at first—and then forever—and thus perpetuates the stubbornness of the wisdom-resistant specter and the closed nature of the strange loop. Consuelo, because of the contradictory nature of the conjuring trick, will not work beyond what she must always determinedly call back to her side. The conjuration means that the plot of *Aura* provides only an illusion of movement that cannot unfold beyond what has already transpired, and thus the plot "development" is only a lengthening shadow, which extends to our times and the ongoing problem of ageism. Additionally, the strange loop eliminates consideration of the environment, in part because it cancels the future need for the next generation. That is, a tangled hierarchy between a character and her double accepts an ageist premise that motherhood would turn the attention toward the child and not the adult. By removing future children from the plot, Boullosa, Fuentes, and the retellers of the Llorona legend allow these female characters to star in their stories. Audience interest and sympathy never shifts too far away from the specter.

The Specter of the "Old" in *Antes*: Experiencing Self, Remembering Self

The ultimately conservative gesture in *Aura* hints at the false conflicts that arise when generations are pitted against one another. A broader outlook might bring into consideration the suspicious political practices that benefit from generational competition and the resultant alienated citizenry. Boullosa uses *Antes* to show the flexibility of these categories by casting "old" as a wholly relative term. The young protagonist becomes irrelevant (or "dead") not when she hits "elderlyness," but when she experiences her first period. Logically, the spectral voice perceives herself to be estranged and contaminating. For instance, near the beginning of her tale, Boullosa's narrator relates that the children at the park resent her polluting presence: "[S]ienten asco de mí, asco, asco, les ensucié su 'día de campo' […], les ensucié, les volví un lodazal el muelle de su desayuno" (12). The implicit setting of this "day in the country" is Chapultepec Park, which houses the pond where the protagonist's father used to take her and her sisters to feed the ducks before school. It perhaps goes without saying that the environment of Chapultepec Park struggles in the face of the intense demands that Mexico City residents place on this would-be natural preserve. The use of "asco" to describe the children's reaction to the narrator—the same word that Fuentes's employs to describe Felipe's feelings toward Consuelo's house—hints to the environmentally aware reader of the link between the negative sentiment that the "aged" female inspires and the environmental degradation that Mexico City connotes. Ageist values support an impossible preference for a "hip" or "young" environment, which can lead to unsustainable rates of consumption; by contrast, incorporating positively a range of ages in social functioning would seem to make for a more sustainable society. *Antes* hints that the lessening of ageist prejudice might permit a renewed focus on other threats to communal well-being.

But surely the ever-familiar aspect of unsustainable environmental practice troubles the idea that somehow things should be different. In the same way that the gothic double and late twentieth-century alienation align so closely, environmental damage and disrespect for the "other" pop up so frequently in history that the reader might speculate that something about these

mindsets is predisposed, rather than a period aesthetic. In fact, the contemporary social sciences seem to agree with the gothic double as an almost biological aspect of human thought. The Nobel-prize winning psychologist and investigator of cognitive illusions, Daniel Kahneman, cogently summarizes recent research on the "two selves" theory, which span the remembering self and the experiencing self. As Kahneman explains the first category, "The remembering self is sometimes wrong, but it is the one that keeps score and governs what we learn from living, and it is the one that makes decisions" (381). The tyrannical nature of the remembering self explains why, according to Kahneman, "most people are remarkably indifferent to the pains of their experiencing self" (387). Environmental challenges mesh neatly with this thought on the two selves. Clean water and air matter to immediate experience, but a functional environment may not satisfy the remembering self's superseding goals. As the gothic double shows, the remembering self is all that matters, and thus sound environmental policy may not actively concern even those spectral beings who live in two time periods. The experiencing self does not haunt; only the remembering self returns as the specter because language and memory fulfill requirements for haunting.

In the case of Boullosa's protagonist, near the end of *Antes* the narrator relates a fantasy of possessing an emotionally savvy heart that would be good for more than pumping blood; ideally, it would change rhythms to conform to that of others, "un corazón que bailara" (155). The goal of the narrator's remembering self is thus to create (in the past) an empathetic experiencing self for the protagonist. Throughout *Antes*, however, the lively social network of school and family that surrounds the child protagonist subtly contradicts the narrative voice. These background networks hint that the protagonist feels more emotionally connected than the remembering self (the narrative voice) allows. The narrator dwells mostly on the frightening and frustrating social relationships of childhood. Strangely, although the experiencing self has no voice, the act of attending school for the child seems to belong mostly to the experiencing self, because the narrator cannot remember the lessons. What's more, according to the narrative voice, the protagonist of *Antes* received perfect grades as long as she completed the lessons mindlessly—certainly a suggestion that the experiencing self takes over the school day and creates lacunae for the remembering self. The latter observes the busy work of formal lessons from a contemptuous distance and later supplies the "real" information, as illustrated in the case of the memory of the incomprehensible national anthem which the protagonist used to sing with incorrect words (18). The experiencing self handled the challenge and survived, if not thrived with the communal act of singing; the remembering self insists on individualistic confusion, mistakes, and torments.

In evidence of the possibility that formal schooling favored an experiencing self for the protagonist, the narrative voice of *Antes* remembers with scornful confusion: "Distraída aprendía. ¿Aprendía qué? ¡Quién sabe! No me acuerdo de una sola palabra. No sé ni qué temas. Estaba absolutamente fuera de mí, quién sabe dónde, ganaba los dieces en las materias a fuerza de no estar en ningún sitio" (31). This mode of earning straight As sounds rather pleasant, and the reader may wonder why the remembering self objects to "learning outside of herself." As Kahneman warns, the remembering self can make the experiencing self quite unhappy by choosing to misrepresent the information gleaned by personal experience. Boullosa's narrator may choose to devalue the protagonist's actual experience by favoring selective memories or rewriting them entirely, a possibility supported in the voice's insistence on her alienation from the very moment of birth. The narrator of *Antes* insists that her mother, named Esther, was not *really* her mom, an idea that absurdly surfaces in the description of Esther's labor in 1954 when she gave birth to the protagonist, who remembers everything about her instantaneous alienation as an infant (13-14). This impossible birth memory encourages the interpretation of the closing "death" in *Antes* as merely poetic. Like Fuentes's Consuelo, the narrative voice of *Antes* cannot exist without the childhood that gave "death" to her, and yet because the narrator exists as a

product of that social demise, she has nowhere to go but to the past, which strikes this remembering self as unpleasant and yet "all there is." The remembering self's discriminatory process of memory-making produces "miswanting," a term that the social scientists prefer to the term "irrational" since it sounds less mentally unbalanced (Kahneman 406). Because the experiencing self does not have a way to communicate verbally to the remembering self what it would rather not relive, Boullosa's narrator can commit merciless acts of "miswanting" for the experiencing self, such as misrepresenting the school day as nearly unalleviated torture.

Against the empathically bleeding heart that the narrative voice desires ("un corazón que bailiara") the novel indicates that the experiencing self values a second organ: a biological heart that simply beats. *Antes* reviews the image of a dissected frog torso in science class and the model of the "running heart" that the father and sisters assemble, and the narrative concludes with an image of a heart, beating in the ground, that precedes the onset of menstruation and the protagonist's "death." This last heart leads to the remembered self's described present-state condition as a deformation of emotion: "A mí misma me he impuesto la obscena tarea de deformarme, de quitarme la facultad de abrazar, de arrancarme las formas que ocultan un cuerpo" (98). Because it is impossible, even for Boullosa's specter, to have a narrated remembered self without an experiencing self previous to the recalled narrative, the battle between the dancing heart and the beating heart probably sets up a false struggle. At the end of *Antes*, the protagonist drops the beating, biological heart that she has picked up from the ground, perhaps in a symbolic abandonment of the joys of a more balanced relationship between the experiencing and remembering selves. The protagonist then levitates, cannot handle the "fall" from innocence or the disgrace of sexual maturation, and "dies." This otherwise impossible levitation can be read as the triumph of the remembering self over the experiencing self. The puzzling ending of the protagonist that marks the beginning of the narrative voice also suggests that the very nature of narrative, as a verbal construct, slants the story—including thought on the environment and age—inexorably from the perspective of the remembering self. A novel, in other words, does not need a beating heart as much as it needs a transmitting neuron, and that favoritism probably encourages alienation—not particularly modern at all—from the immediate experience, whether of the environment or of our bodies as they change, possibly without putting up as much fuss as ageist views would have it.

In terms of the predicament of identifying authentic feeling under conditions of the gothic double, Kahneman and colleagues might say that determining the true emotion depends on whether the remembering self decides to tell an accurate story about the experiencing self. In *Antes*, the experience of levitation reminds the reader that regardless of appearances to the contrary, the remembering self always narrates in the past tense, and sometimes conjures what it "miswantingly" scripts. Probably no experiencing self relishes martyrdom in the way that Boullosa's narrative voice covets the rituals of Catholic sainthood that accept a female as holy once she is dead. Admittedly, a possible contradiction emerges with this interpretation of *Antes*. The stupor of the daily "sweet dream" that the protagonist lives in the classroom, according to the narrator, ends up "winning," and the narrator confesses: "Ahora me ha ganado por completo y sé que nunca podría despertar" (17). In order to explain how the remembering self might have slipped into the same dream of experience that kept the protagonist from completely processing the lessons, this passage can be read to imply that the remembering narrator accepts an "inauthentic" dream state, characterized by the inability to decipher authentic desire from mis-wanting, and cannot jar herself out of this intellectual habit. School, in this interpretation, works to alienate children—or more accurately, to define the remembering selves that follow from childhood. Ultimately, Boullosa's narrator and Fuentes's Consuelo ignore the experiencing self and aim to transform themselves entirely into a remembering self, an impossible effort that finds fault with the present moment and longs for the past, not to improve the collective situation but to relive—impossibly and perhaps stupidly—a miswanting memory.

Conclusion

The present study of *Aura* and *Antes* points out the link between the gothic double and the modern alienated character made foreign to herself in part through ageism. Age discrimination works to expel the female characters from their communities, and instead of fighting back directly, these characters conjure their more socially applauded younger selves, along with an audience intended to do the applauding. The female protagonists in each novel, divided in themselves, do not neatly support binaries of oppressors and oppressed. Thus, the present analysis also relates age discrimination to self-defeating intergenerational strife that fosters unsustainable environmental habits. The lack of concern for the environment in these texts may have something to do with the ease with which moderns split themselves in two and ignore the present moment—a skill perhaps refined in school. Yet there is no exit to these cyclical doublings. There can be no spectral narrator in Boullosa's tale without the girl protagonist from "before," and in Fuentes's novel there can be no Aura without Consuelo. These mutually supportive tangles end up measuring change, but do not directly bring change about because each element in the duality holds the other in static suspension.

In a final thought, it proves helpful to contemplate Kathleen Woodward's musings about the "time-honored association" of aging and wisdom, an association that she believes demands of old people an unnecessary resignation and passivity. Woodward laments the expectation that old people remain placidly sweet as a "sugar-coated screen for ageism" (59). Provocatively, she closes her resentful analysis of the emotional expectations meant to tame the elderly with a question: "What word would we use to describe the anger associated with the experience of ageism?" (78). In other words, if "feminism" describes the anger over sexism, what term would express the equivalent of anger over ageism? The static specters of *Aura*, *Antes*, and even *Kilómetro 31* seem to propose that the expression of ageism drives a counterproductive response of more ageism. Under a discriminatory context, the old manifest themselves as young, in revenge or nostalgic miswanting, and few alternatives appear. This ageism that breeds more ageism reinforces the utility of keeping a sense of humor as regards the broad predicament. Ageism feeds on fear and anger, generational conflict, and suspicion and unfamiliarity; these emotions, when called upon to combat ageism, prove likely agents of the continuation of the problem. Anger over anger does not cause the end of anger, for example. The pattern of the strange loop warns that once an individual falls into the ageist trap and decides to defend the relevance of old people by becoming as angry as the youths who imagine the elderly as different, that person has internalized the conflict and now anchors the opposing, mutually creative categories. Although Boullosa, Fuentes, and the horror film do not constitute straightforward treatises on social justice, they do hint at a lesson: in laughter, as in thought, be anything but narrow. Reader, go for the broad.

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