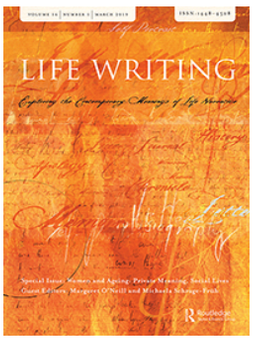

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Contemplation as Resistance to Ageism, and its Historical Context: Mexican Writers Carmen Boullosa, Guadalupe Nettel, and María Rivera

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ABSTRACT

Carmen Boullosa's (1954) daring "Mis cadáveres" (My Cadavers, 2003) shares achievements with Guadalupe Nettel's (1972) "El cuerpo en que nací" (The Body in Which I Was Born) (2011) and María Rivera's (1971) "Variaciones para una autobiografía" (Variations for an Autobiography) (2011). The three autobiographical essays by Mexican women writers describe such sexuality-related moments as losing one's virginity (Nettel), masturbating (Boullosa), and giving birth by caesarean section (Boullosa and Rivera). The pioneering nature of these texts becomes visible through contextual details regarding earlier Mexican women artists Nellie Campobello (1900), Frida Kahlo (1907), Griselda Álvarez (1913), Elena Garro (1916), Clementina Díaz y de Ovando (1916), and Guadalupe Amor (1918). The archives on the Centro Mexicano de Escritores (Mexican Center for Writers, 1951–2006) help to illuminate the nature of ageist pressures exerted on Díaz y de Ovando, as well as on Ángeles Mastretta (1949), Ana Cecilia Treviño (1932), and Amparo Dávila (1928). Writing by more recent generations of writers represented by Boullosa, Nettel, and Rivera suggests that ageism can be overcome in part by exiting the narrative arc of autopathology in favour of meditation, which points to a solution of emptying out the self, contemplating the present moment, and valuing community over individuality.

KEYWORDS

Mexican women writers; autobiography; ageism; meditation

Marc Augé's maxim, "Age is to aging intellectuals what beauty is to women" applies best—and perhaps only—to men intellectuals (2016, 14). If women intellectuals can be assumed to exist at all under Augé's rule of thumb, his comment anticipates the fact that looks *do* matter. Women intellectuals find themselves caught in the conundrums of ageism that affect careers in the entertainment industry, namely that "women's youth is a prized commodity that loses value with age" (McGlynn, O'Neill, and Schrage-Früh 2017, 3). The devalued intellectual woman can be hard to notice because, in one way or another, she begins to disappear as she ages (2017, 3). By contrast and in the spirit of Augé's adage, "men are allowed to age in the media and the celebrity culture" (Fairclough-Isaacs 2015, 363). Ageism has intensified to such an extent that Kristy Fairclough-Isaacs proposes

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that no middle ground exists between two age categories; subjects are perceived as "either young or old" (2015, 365).

The invisibility that comes with women's ageing controls even posthumous appreciation of their work. If "greatness" for a woman artist requires performance of youth, then the effect of this association of talent and youth is to conjoin the terms *Shame and the Aging Woman*, as Brooks Bouson's recent monograph argues. Bouson cites research that finds older women articulate an alienated interpretation of their own ageing bodies, especially viewing their aged faces as "deviant or pathological" masks or disguises, and therefore a betrayal of their inner younger selves (2016, 10). The sea change involved in interpreting wrinkles as positive—as indicators of a good mood, for instance (2016, 17)—is measured in the unfamiliar vocabulary related to an anti-ageist stance, i.e. the unexpectedness of the term *ageful*, which gerontologist Molly Andrew celebrates (Bouson 2016, 31). The scholar responsible for the disciplinary label *Age Studies*, Margaret Morganroth Gullette, wrestles with the paradox that links the older person to other minorities: a plight of both "invisibility and hypervisibility" (2017, xxi). This tricky status as either too-visible or invisible reflects the association of ageing with narratives of decline and death, which frames ageing women as symbols of dreaded deterioration to the degree that they become "deaths' heads" (2017, 14).

What was it like to be a "death's head" in a time when nearly no one identified the problem as such? One habit among celebrities from the last century was to lie about their age, as explored in the first part of this article on Mexican women writers. As the internet made it impossible to pull off creative age mathematics, however, a new crop of writers began to praise a contemplative absence from the demands of narrative itself. That release in meditation concerns the second part of my article, which suggests mindfulness as one secret for living "agefully," in Ashton Applewhite's neologism (qtd. in Gullette 2017, 82).

An overview of Mexican women artists and writers who faced ageing by way of reticence and misdirection highlights tactics evinced by Nellie Campobello (b. 1900), Griselda Álvarez (b. 1913), Elena Garro (b. 1916), Guadalupe Amor (b. 1918), and Frida Kahlo (b. 1907). To start with the least celebrated artist, the poet and sometime governor of Colima, Griselda Álvarez, published a memoir, *Cuesta arriba* (*Uphill*) (1992), that leaves out more dates than one would think possible in a detailed review of a political career. Álvarez omits the years of her birth, her marriage, her child's birth, her tenure in lower-level administrative positions, and the exact years of her governorship, though she never hesitates to drop the names of contemporaries who end up dating her; these peers span Mexican presidents from López Mateos (1958–1964) to de la Madrid (1982–1988) (1992, 71, 164). The difficulty of playing down age in the context of professional achievement appears in the contradiction, articulated by age scholar Stephen Fineman, between the "age signposts" embedded in educational and work history and the fact that to eliminate age completely on a CV "would effectively erase the person" (2011, 62). Álvarez cannot divorce the timeline from her narrative of public accomplishment, and thus the open secret of her age places her in a kind of glass closet.

The same futilely closeted attitude toward age appears in publicity regarding Mexican intellectual Clementina Díaz y de Ovando (b. 1916), who apparently tried to solve the problem in print by leaving almost no personal writings among her many academic books and by revising her birth year. The obituaries agree that Clementina Díaz y

Ovando was born in 1916, though her file in the Centro Mexicano de Escritores has her born in 1920, a mistake repeated elsewhere (Domínguez Cuevas 1999, 116). Thus, Díaz y de Ovando was about 37 years of age, four years older than she claimed to be, when she received a writing grant for the year 1953–1954 (Domínguez Cuevas 1999, 116; "Díaz y de Ovando").

In very old age, Díaz y de Ovando continued to dye her hair. Her final preference for a deep black shade causes the observer to stare. Take one of the photographs typical of those used in obituaries for the 95-year-old: Díaz y de Ovando, some four years prior to her death, sits in a wheelchair, dressed formally in a blouse and skirt suit, with resolutely artificial dark hair ("Fallece" 2012; see also Palapa Quijas 2012). The obituaries upon her death in 2012 fail to specify whether she married, had children, or left behind a partner. The dyed hair suggests Díaz y de Ovando's fear of irrelevance under ageism, which surely contradicted the celebration of her pioneering achievements, such as her status as the first woman to join the Mexican Academy of History (in 1974) and as the first woman to receive the National University Prize (in 1988) ("La Dra" 2011). Like Álvarez, Díaz y de Ovando suffers the paradox that to remain visible for her work as she ages is also to risk admitting her age and thus disappearing.

Maturity connotes sexual knowledge, and here again it seems that performance *does* matter in assessments of intellectual careers. Both Díaz y de Ovando and Álvarez largely elide personal details in writing and thus implicitly convey uneasiness with sexuality. Even when referring not to herself but to two long-deceased uncles and an STD that truncated their careers, Álvarez ventures only euphemism. Narrating from what must be more than fifty years of distance, Álvarez recalls that in Paris the uncles caught "la llamada peste blanca" (the so-called white plague) (1992, 18). Díaz y de Ovando never seems to broach the topic.

A third example of this exercise in aged willful innocence surfaces in Elena Garro's more literarily skilful memoire, published, like that of Álvarez, in 1992. The gossipy *Memorias de España 1937* (*Memories of Spain 1937*) emphasises at every turn Garro's ingenuousness during her visit to the Spanish Civil War and reveals almost nothing about her sex life, despite the fact that the trip doubled as a honeymoon with Octavio Paz (b. 1914). Garro's reliance on naïveté as a framing device irritates critic Christopher Domínguez Michael (b. 1962), who fails to recognise the motives for Garro's tactics, and he judges her impatiently: "Elena […] se hace la tonta como recurso narrativo (recurso que hará escuela entre las escritoras mexicanas)" (Elena […] plays the fool as a narrative technique [a technique that will create a following among the other Mexican women writers]) (2014, 86). Certainly, if age benefits (men) intellectuals, Garro opts to incarnate only beauty, along with ignorance.

Perhaps to bolster the impression of innocence, Garro had declared her birth year to be 1920, rather than 1916. Domínguez Michael quotes Paz's opinion regarding Garro's lie: she used the younger age to support her tale of the kidnapped bride (2014, 68). In his role as Paz's biographer, Domínguez Michael digs up the paperwork and debunks Garro's story of a wedding ambush (2014, 78–79). Only the birth certificates are missing from the marriage file, perhaps because Garro was seven months shy of the legal age of 21.

Women who circulated in the arts knew that maturity put them at risk of vanishing from even reflected light. Sara Potter neatly summarises twentieth-century customs of

romantic ageism by way of the example of Surrealist men artists' sexual relationships, in which "female lovers or wives were generally much younger than their male partners"; the steadily widening age difference cast women as "part of an ever-rotating roster, as they were frequently traded in for newer, younger models" (Potter 2013, 75). The "trading down" of partners lasted well beyond the heyday of Surrealism. Take Max Aub's (b. 1903) diary entry on August 1, 1967, when he marvels at Octavio Paz's second act in life, facilitated by a second marriage: "Octavio Paz, rejuvenecido. ¿Tendrá uno siempre la edad de su mujer?" (Octavio Paz, rejuvenated. Is one always the same age as one's woman?) (Domínguez Michael 2014, 291). Though Domínguez Michael himself cites this passage, he seems largely oblivious to what these connotations might mean for Garro.

Of course, Garro subtracts far fewer years from her age than would-be contemporary Nellie Campobello. In her biography of the Mexican writer and dancer, Clara Guadalupe García implies the collusion necessary to pull off Campobello's false thirtieth birthday party: "[E]lla apagó treinta velitas sin que nadie sospechara que en realidad tenía cuarenta" ([S]he blew out thirty little candles without having anyone suspect that actually she was forty) (García 2000, 105). Complicity with Nellie's lie had party guests accept her autobiographically informed art on the Mexican Revolution, despite the fact that without the extra decade on her age, it would have been much more difficult for her to remember the details of that conflict. Like Garro's *Memorias de España 1937*, Campobello resorts to naiveté for the Revolutionary tales of *Cartucho* (Cartridge) (1931), and that innocence is emphasised in Elena Poniatowska's (b. 1932) late twentieth-century introduction to the fragmented narrative (Gano 2015).

Campobello's younger half-sister Gloria modified her age too. Dates given for Gloria's birth year range from 1913 to 1919; however, according to dance scholar Margarita Tortajada Quiroz, the real date is 1911 (2001, 70). Nellie's lie thus seems to have claimed Gloria's age for herself, which must have forced Gloria's revision of her age and dictated both women's self-imposed setbacks in artistic maturity—a regression that complements naïve narrative voices but frustrates feminist art. In its ultimate consequences, lying downward about age leads to feminism devoid of experienced feminists, though rich in eternal ingenues.

As predicted by the pattern of self-censorship regarding sexual experience, the artificially youthful Nellie and Gloria studiously denied personal sexual history. Like Garro's eventual habit of taking publicly known lovers, including Adolfo Bioy Casares (b. 1914), but never publishing straightforward autobiography on the practice, the Campobello sisters enjoyed heterosexual relationships outside of marriage without publicising these adventures. Tortajada Quiroz neatly summarises the contradiction in the sisters' exercised sexual freedom: "[P]or un lado ejercieron su sexualidad alejadas de las formas tradicionales y por otro se mantuvieron atadas a éstas y las reivindicaron públicamente (con su exigencia de ser llamadas señoritas, por ejemplo)" ([O]n the one hand they exercised their sexuality far from the traditional forms and on the other hand they remained attached to those and publicly claimed them [with their demand to be addressed as young ladies, for example]) (2001, 539). Scholarship has revealed that before Nellie became a famous dancer in Mexico City, she gave birth to a son in 1919, in Chihuahua, who until his death at age two was raised by Nellie's mother. Few people knew about this child, in part because "Nellie nunca reconoció haber sido madre" (Nellie never acknowledged having been a mother) (Tortajada Quiroz 2001, 270).

In an eerie parallel to Nellie Campobello's troubled maternity, Guadalupe (Pita) Amor had a child whom she did not raise and who accidentally drowned when he was about a year-and-a-half old. Amor's pregnancy at age 38 caused her lover to withdraw his financial support. Soon after the caesarean section, according to Poniatowska, Amor entrusted the child to a sister (2000, 48). Martha Zamora reviews that sad story in the context of a failed interview with Amor. Though Zamora fails to coax the poet to talk about Frida Kahlo, the true subject of Zamora's research, the latter expresses gratitude that Amor refrained from her worst tantrums (Zamora 2015, 98). Michael Schuessler's laudatory biography of Amor acknowledges that in her later years, Amor's abusive habits and eccentric look earned her the nickname, "la abuelita de Batman" (Batman's granny) (1995, 14). In anecdotes told by Poniatowska, Zamora, and Schuessler, the aged Amor needed no provocation on the sidewalks of Mexico City to shout racial insults at men and whack young women with her cane.

Before her shameless ending, Amor broke taboos in more artistically interesting ways. Though confessing sexual knowledge proved nearly impossible for some contemporaries, Amor publicly acknowledged her sexuality. Poniatowska's biographical essay on her aunt, who never married, claims that Amor's daring stunts included humiliating her mother with a shouted confession during mass: "I had an abortion!" (¡Tuve un aborto!) (2000, 41). Perhaps Amor's most groundbreaking gesture is a repetitive and brief story about a woman protagonist who spends time alone, masturbating. The text is titled "La solitaria" (The solitary woman) and appears in *Galería de títeres* (Puppet Gallery) (1959). This writing marks the first published mention of female masturbation by a Mexican woman writer that I can name. However, no sexual discovery appears in Amor's autobiographically inspired novel *Yo soy mi casa* (I Am My House 1957).

Even the daring Frida Kahlo, who painted her experiences with abortion and miscarriage for all to see, manipulated her age. Eva Zetterman's research manages to intertwine these two topics by citing a clinical history, written in 1946, that at once repeats Kahlo's invented birth year of 1910, rather than the actual date of 1907, and marks Kahlo's three interrupted pregnancies, in 1929, 1932, and 1934 (2006, 231). Zetterman attributes published repetition of a "miscarriage myth" on Kahlo as the basis for converting it into the "established truth" (2006, 233). Convention also has biographers tend to excuse Kahlo's false birth year as a patriotic urge, and few invest much thought in Diego Rivera's traded-down partners. For instance, a children's biography introduces these points without much critique: "Diego casi duplicaba la edad de Frida: él tenía 42 y ella solo 22" (Diego almost doubled Frida's age: he was 42 and she just 22) (Morán 2012, 19). That statistic uses the correct math for Kahlo, and the biographer explains, "Frida, que nació en 1907, siempre se quitaba tres años. No por vanidad, sino para que su nacimiento coincidiera con la Revolución Mexicana (1910), con la que siempre se identificó" (Frida, who was born in 1907, always erased three years from her age. Not out of vanity, but so that her birth would coincide with the Mexican Revolution) (Morán 2012, 31).

In order to assess the ageist pressures that influence these distortions, I turn to another group of women writers whose struggles appear in the archive on the Centro Mexicano de Escritores (Mexican Center for Writers), the CME, which operated from 1951 to 2006. Relevant authors who applied for a year-long writing grant from this Mexico City institution include Ángeles Mastretta (b. 1949), Ana Cecilia Treviño (b. 1932), and Amparo Dávila (b. 1928). To start with that first figure, I note that an image search on Google

reveals Mastretta's surgically rejuvenated face; she joins the ranks of the would-be ageless, along with Chilean novelist Isabel Allende (b. 1942). I turn to the CME archive for more data on the pressures that might have led Mastretta to, on the one hand, chase an ageless self-performance, and, on the other hand, write daringly, such as including an early lesson from a gypsy on female masturbation in the bestselling novel *Arráncame la vida* (*Tear this Heart Out* 1985).

The file on Mastretta preserves evaluations from the CME application process. The most cutting of these three early opinions is issued by Salvador Elizondo (b. 1932), who sighs, "Los lugares comunes en estos libros de mujeres que se sienten adolescentes. Siempre la misma cosa" (Clichés in these books by women who feel like adolescents. Always the same thing) (Mastretta, "Archivo" 64-3). Elizondo's negative judgment on Mastretta as a perpetual adolescent proves one thing, at least: her age performance and age-appropriate behaviour mattered. All three evaluators' notes are prefaced with Mastretta's age of 24, which in Juan Rulfo's (b. 1917) evaluation appears written by hand (64-1). The fact that Rulfo would imitate the typed headings on the notecards for his entirely hand-written letter of evaluation suggests that the judges took seriously the matter of age.

Nearly ten years before Mastretta's winning application, the social columnist Ana Cecilia Treviño won a CME grant for 1964–1965. The evaluation notecard in her file begins with the typewritten "GIRONELLA, CECILIA TREVIÑO DE / Edad: 32 años" (Age: 32 years). Below that heading, three brief handwritten opinions appear by the director Margaret Shedd (b. 1900), and the writing tutors Juan Rulfo, and Juan José Arreola (b. 1918) (Treviño 17). Shedd's English-language comments read in full: "Seems to be a very interesting project, and an attractive girl" (Treviño 17). The idea that a well-known thirty-two-year-old social columnist for *Excélsior* could seem a "girl" and that her competitiveness as a candidate had to do with this girlishness indicates the problem of ageing into maturity as a woman writer. At the time, Treviño may have been older than 32. A Facebook post from 2015 by the Instituto de Investigaciones Bibliográficas (Institute of Bibliographic Research) at the National Library, lists Treviño's birth year as 1929, against the Center's record of 1932—the year also repeated in Domínguez Cuevas's history of the CME (1999, 402). The possible three-year fudging of Treviño's birthdate should strike my reader as plausible. After all, if "Bambi," as Treviño was known pseudonymously, competed successfully as "an attractive girl," what better career boost than youth?

If Treviño did lie for the Center's paperwork, she stands in good company. Even Juan Rulfo, a man writer, subtracted a year from his age on the grant application. Biographer Fernando Barrientos del Monte attributes Rulfo's creative mathematics to age rules issued by the CME requiring authors to be under age 35. Record of early rules has vanished, and thus no proof for this suspicion exists. Barrientos del Monte himself acknowledges that Rulfo also represented himself as one year younger on his marriage certificate and on the birth certificate for his second child (Barrientos del Monte 2007, 41). Setting aside Rulfo's hazy motives for deception, it remains clear that ageism intertwines with sexism to pressure women more than men. As Gullette observes, "Gender always has an age too, although theorists rarely notice this" (2004, 160).

The imbrication of sexism and ageism emerges in the evaluations for the grant cycle 1966–1967 with judges' handwritten opinions on a single notecard headed in typescript: "DAVILA, AMPARO. Edad: 38 años / Divorciada" (Age: 38 years / Divorced) (Dávila 28). I did not find another instance of civil status appearing on the notecards. The salience

of Dávila's marital status hints at the reasons earlier women artists, like the Campobello sisters, Garro, and Amor, took pains to omit or rewrite their own sexual histories. In Poniatowska's memorialising journalism of Dávila's truncated marriage to Pedro Coronel, she explains vaguely, "Creo que tuvieron dos hijas, porque después perdí a Amparo de vista" (I think they had two daughters, because later I lost sight of Amparo) ("Poniatowksa 2016 El renacimiento"). Dávila disappeared from her own career, a plight that had Emmanuel Carballo (b. 1929) lament at a national homage for her in 1998 that only a few university teachers and literary critics appreciated Dávila's out-of-print stories (Hernández García 2002, 8).

Today's grant competitions in Mexico, such as the national *Jóvenes Creadores* (Young Creators) and *Tierra Adentro* (Land Within) programmes, tend to use applicants' ages to differentiate between one category of competition and another, often with the age of 34 or 35 as a dividing line, so some values have not changed. However, in another sense, the internet has eliminated a central conceit here: when writers today hit maturity, they cannot lie convincingly about it.

Although I have pitched one angle here as the importance of writers' sexual forthrightness, before arriving at the last grouping of writers I want to temper my own enthusiasm by citing Gullette's observation that "sexuality is the main narrative we are currently being trained to read for" (2004, 16). Narratives of sexuality are complicit with a prejudicial system. To the extent that ageism today discriminates against women after menopause —making them both hypervisible and invisible—it does seem that Carmen Boullosa (b. 1954), Guadalupe Nettel (b. 1972) and María Rivera (b. 1971) take the lesson inherent in figures such as Amor, Campobello, and Garro. Rather than risk dismissive labels like "crazy" so easily applied to the earlier artists, these more recent generations stake careful claim to *restored* mental health. That is, each of the more contemporary texts assures the reader that the author has *already* overcome a mental health problem. Alongside this framing appropriation of sanity, the three autobiographical essays by Boullosa, Nettel, and Rivera likely fail to engage fully what Thomas Couser calls *autopathography* (1997, 5). Emphasis in the Mexican essays falls not on pathology, with its comic tropes and obsession with autonomy, but on a process or pathway—a mode attuned not to narrative, but to the contemplative.

Boullosa's daring autobiographical essay "Mis cadáveres" (My Cadavers, 2003) was first published online in a feminist journal and is available there as a PDF, from which I borrow the page numbers used below. The piece was later republished in her book of essays, *Cuando me volví mortal* (When I Became Mortal) (2010). While Boullosa's essay has not garnered much attention, various and mixed reviews on the Mexican home front greeted Nettel's essay "El cuerpo en que nací" (The Body in Which I Was Born) and the later book version of the same title, published in 2011 (2011a). A well-received English-language translation of the book appeared in 2015. Nettel's essay is available online in the 2009 *Letras Libres* magazine edition, along with María Rivera's contribution, "Variaciones para una autobiografía" (Variations for an Autobiography). Both Nettel's and Rivera's essays were republished in *Trazos en el espejo* (Penstrokes in the Mirror) (Nettel 2011b, Rivera 2011), the anthology that reorganised the original magazine project to include only autobiographies of Mexican writers under the age of 40. I take the page numbers below from that anthology.

By contrast to the persistent attention given to Nettel's work, Rivera's "Variaciones para una autobiografía" attracted an enthusiastic reception that soon lapsed into silence. Rafael Lemus (b. 1977), as well as Ricardo Muñoz Munguía (1970), approved of Rivera's intimate essay, although the former rejected Nettel's piece as "una narrativa de lo más tradicional: relatos lineales con un yo sólido y estable al centro" (a narrative in the most traditional style: linear stories with a sold and stable "I" at the centre) (Lemus 2011). For Nettel's book-length version, which some critics view as more of a novel, *Letras Libres* published two reviews: Geney Beltrán Félix (b.1976) issued an ambivalent opinion along the lines of Lemus's quibble (2012), and Christopher Domínguez Michael (b. 1962) admired Nettel's prose and praised a scene of masturbation with the railing of a stairway (absent from the essay), but he failed to acknowledge the pioneering nature of that description for a Mexican woman writer (Domínguez Michael 2012, n.p.).

If Boullosa admits her age as nearly fifty years old, a detail inserted at the end of "Mis cadáveres," Rivera and Nettel reveal their ages mostly by reminiscing about the tumultuous events of the 1990s. Nettel's explicitly anti-(sexually) romantic acquaintanceship with Subcomandante (Deputy Commander) Marcos, the leader of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (ELZN), occurred when she was a university student returned from France, and she never changes tone when jumping from the personal to the political, as in a previous unromantic comment that at age 16 she lost her virginity "de una manera poco memorable" (in a forgettable way) (2011b, 162). Just as Nettel matter-of-factly narrates her rejection of that boyfriend who subsequently attempts suicide, she reveals in unpretentious detail that Marcos eventually ejected Nettel from the rebellion, because she accepted a governmental subsidy in the form of a *Jóvenes Creadores* writing grant. Perhaps to anchor the lack of grandiosity, Nettel views this history as dreamlike: "Nunca volví a pisar el territorio zapatista. Me sigo preguntando si su existencia es realmente geográfica o si es algo que se lleva por dentro, como un sueño recurrente o una existencia paralela" (I never set foot in Zapatista territory again. I still ask myself if its existence is really geographic or if it's something that one carries inside, like a recurring dream or a parallel existence) (2011b, 173). The scorecard for ageism seems uncertain: Nettel dates herself only to suggest the unreality of history.

Rivera's essay pulls the same move. She looks back on her life as it intertwines with historic events and notes, "Los días, los años se superponen y mirados tan de cerca dan la impresión de no ser nada, de nunca haber pasado" (The days, the years overlap and examined closely they give the impression of not being anything, of never having happened) (2011, 12). The dissolving nature of linear time justifies disinterest in narrative arcs, articulated insistently in Rivera's fragmented poetic notion that her essay must "hacer menos una trama y más un cuadro impresionista" (make less of a plot and more of an impressionist painting) (2011, 12). To wit, "Variaciones para una autobiobrafía" starts over in eight of the nine sections. Eight times the essay launches a variation of the phrase, "Tendría que empezar así:" (I would have to begin like this:) and varies the second part of the sentence. The last, ninth, section changes the anaphora and states: "Tendría que acabar así: últimamente la noción de estilo me causa repugnancia, no dejo de pensar en él como una domesticación del alma" (I would have to end like this: lately the notion of style disgusts me, I can't stop thinking about it except as a taming of the soul) (2011, 28). This dismissal of *style* suggests humility as an individual that might benefit the goal of a collective endeavour.

The theme of shunning individual ego for meditation arrives explicitly in Nettel's brief admission of a depression years in the making that finally caught up with her in Paris. The problem is no sooner mentioned than solved; she recovers by way of a birthday gift, a Tibetan book about the art of dying, which leads her to explore Buddhism, to visit India and a French retreat centre, and finally to write a short story. Nettel achieves a newly emptied state as a fiction writer; that is, she compares the enterprise of crafting the short story with the mind-emptying task of automatic writing: "Me aferré a él [el cuento] como quien busca en la escritura automática las claves de su existencia. Lo titulé 'Bonsái'" (I clung to it [the short story] like someone who searches for the keys to her existence in automatic writing. I titled it "Bonsái") (2011, 176). Again, Nettel seems to write not so much an autopathography—*that* would be the suicidal ex-boyfriend's story—but an example of self-revelation that resists the plotting that makes self-revelation so difficult for women. To slip out of the ageist trap without leaving behind her experience —to include both *the* age and *her* age—Nettel meditates on her own ordinariness.

That meditation on common human qualities *includes* the sensation of being an outsider and may contradict to some degree the scholarly work on Nettel's writing that engages disability studies.[1] Finding oneself as part of the world by way of the not-plotted body concerns an interview conducted on the publication of *El cuerpo en que nací*. There, Nettel proposes her autobiographical goal of self-revelation as just another being:

> Quería sobre todo resaltar la idea del trilobite: de la cucaracha que va encontrando el camino hacia su reconciliación con ella misma. ¿Y quiénes son las cucarachas? Las que vienen de atrás, las sobrevivientes de miles de cosas. Me puse en la perspectiva de "no soy la única cucaracha, no soy la única *outsider*". Ha existido toda una corriente oculta del trilobite, desde los tiempos remotos hasta nuestros días y yo me reconozco como heredera de ella. (Espinosa de los Monteros 2011, 34)

> I especially wanted to highlight the idea of the trilobite: of the cockroach that is finding the path to reconciliation with itself. And who are the cockroaches? The ones that come from behind, the survivors of thousands of things. I put myself in the perspective of "I'm not the only cockroach, I'm not the only outsider". There has been a whole hidden current of the trilobite, from ancient times to our days and I recognize myself as its heir.

Even as Nettel places herself in a kind of impersonal and deep time, this eternal present and ordinariness give way in the book-length *El cuerpo en que nací* to a final paragraph that subscribes to a narrative of decline:

> Mi propio cuerpo […] me aparece ahora como un vehículo en descomposición, un tren en el que he ido montada a lo largo de todo este tiempo, sometido a un viaje muy veloz pero también a una inevitable decadencia. (My own body […] seems to me now a vehicle in decay, a train I have been riding this whole time, subject to a very fast trip, but also to an inevitable decline 2011, 195–196)

Nettel's switch from a contemplative essay to an ageist book finalised with the decline trope inspires me to wonder whether meditative reflection, like allegory and the fable, is best realised in a genre with a short word count.

For her part, Rivera never revises her essay into a book and thereby preserves the integrity of the meditative approach. To critic Lemus's delight, the fragmented "Varations" do place into doubt a narrative "I" that would justify an autobiographical plot arc. Rivera

hints at momentarily emptied-out self-identity as a means of combating overly determined narrative designs, particularly when she describes a trio of delirious experiences. Under the category of "la misma placidez somnífera" (the same sleepy pleasure), Rivera remembers outdoors drunkenness in Paris on Ranelagh street, nighttime drunkenness on a lawn in Ohio, and sedation after a caesarean section; though narrated in the above order, the latter experience is chronologically situated between the two drunken episodes abroad (2011, 15). As a poet, Rivera seems to enjoy these non-narrative states of sedation or drunkenness ("que es lo mismo" [which are the same]) (2011, 15). For reasons of word count, I skip the lyricism of Rivera's unusual review of her Caesarean section and highlight only the meditative moment of Rivera's first gaze upon her daughter: "Decir todo esto es no decir nada. Las palabras se me angostan, el lenguaje no me alcanza para expresar el silencioso sueño de mi hija, la mirada de sus ojos azorados cuando me ve como a una extraña cosa" (To say all this is to not say anything. The words narrow on me, language falls short of expressing my daughter's quiet dream, the look in her alarmed eyes when she views me like a strange thing) (2011, 16).

Against the development of an arc of would-be autopathology that chooses between the miraculous normalcy or the sick strangeness of motherhood, Rivera alludes only vaguely to the mental health problems that afflicted her before the birth, during a lengthy troubled period, from around 2000 to 2005. That reckless problem period appears largely in the past tense, as in the following passage:

> Cuando tras años de vivir al límite, me encontré agotada y enferma. Cuando la herida que me acicateaba, una herida que se convirtió en una vía de conocimiento, se volvió un costurón invisible y mi lamento, una cantaleta. Cuando encontré que no tenía caso seguir caminando en esa dirección, que esos días como rayos encendidos habían dado ya toda la luz posible. (2011, 17)

> When after years of living on the edge, I found myself exhausted and sick. When the wound that spurred me on, a wound that turned into a path of knowledge, became an invisible scar and my wail, a whining refrain. When I found that there was no point in continuing to walk in that direction, that those days like burning bolts had given all the light possible.

Rivera's return to health does not arrive in linear history, just as Nettel's illuminations seem to turn away from politics. Rather than a Buddhist treatise, however, Rivera finds relief in the cyclical domestic bliss of having a child and a partner. The constantly restarting "Variations" on an autobiography thus hint that writing well reflects a present-moment meandering; note the similarity between trance-like moments of drunkenness and sedation, and Rivera's notion of poetic writing, "un camino hacia 'quién sabe dónde', que es como yo llamo a la poesía" (a path to "who knows where," which is what I call poetry) (2011, 10).

Finally, Boullosa reaches this same destination-irrelevant path by arranging her autobiographical essay around the theme of dead bodies. Of special interest here is a childhood pathway to relief from rational thought processes, accessed by staring at a desiccated bat. As a child, Boullosa practiced imaginative trances by staring at the bat, amusingly classified as the largest specimen among a childhood collection of preserved insects:

> Pasé muchos ratos observando atentamente al murciélago. Lo encontraba muy atractivo, y lo usaba como una base. Lo veía, pero me viajaba mirándolo. Era mi base para imaginar. Abría

> la caja, acercaba mi carita a la de él, fijaba en él los ojos, y ¡adiós mundo!: me iba. A mi manera yo estaba enamorada de él. (2003, 35)
>
> I spent many hours intently observing the bat. I found it very attractive and used it as a base. I saw it, but I traveled watching it. It was my base for imagining. I would open the box, bring my face near his little face, fix my eyes on him, and Goodbye world! I would check out. In my way I was in love with him.

The imaginative base of the preserved bat, like Nettel's glossed interest in Buddhism and Rivera's escape into sedation, eludes the problems of narrative and therefore does not include much of the contemplative experience itself. Just as Nettel never recounts the details of "Bonsái," (which the curious reader can find in the oeuvre anyway), and just as Rivera does not present her poetry in her description of the delights of taking a path to the unknown, Boullosa chooses not to recount any particular fantasies inspired by the bat. The process and not the plot matters.

In "Mis cadáveres" Boullosa takes the unusual step for Mexican women writers of confessing sexual discovery. For instance, a first memory of genital pleasure took place under a faucet when a grandmother washed "Carmelita's" "colita" (little tail). The grandmother, nicknamed *Mami*, does not comprehend Boullosa's enthralled request for more (2003, 30). The described *trance* in the passage links the notion of meditative escape with sexual pleasures of the body, shared with the grandmother who both participates in and fails to register the event. Another memory in this vein places a four-year-old Boullosa seated alone at a table, pressing her crotch against her foot in a darkened room and experiencing genital pleasure tinged with a sense of isolation. Boullosa claims an epiphany: "De golpe, he comprendido que yo acabo en mi piel, que irremediablemente yo termino en ese límite" (Suddenly, I have understood that I end at my skin, that inevitably I terminate at that edge) (2003, 28). Just as Rivera experiences her C-section alone in a room of people and Nettel feels herself isolated in childhood due to an eyepatch that attentive doctors instruct her to wear, Boullosa tests the limits of her separation as an individual within the context of care. "Mis cadáveres" thus shares the theme of commonness and community that Rivera's and Nettel's meditations suggest; Boullosa's expression of belonging is also meditative and attained through bodily experience.

I hope to take the lesson from these three essays. Rather than attempt to pull these meditations by Boullosa, Nettel, and Rivera into my diagnostic narrative arc, I want to close by locating these groundbreaking autobiographies on a collective family tree. A previous generation left sex and infants out of the story: Guadalupe Amor, Nellie Campobello, and Elena Garro, among others, never emphasise the birth of their one child. These women and their peers also tended to erase their true ages, to bury lovers, and otherwise to silence their affairs. Boullosa, Nettel, and Rivera allow the audience to see flashes of another way. I applaud this switch in answering questions about one's age from "Um" to "Om," particularly in view of the ineffectiveness of lying. Abandoning the narrative structures that encourage ageist discrimination marks the first step in a more mindful approach to assessing our own and other women's ageful lives. This task of assessment requires balance between recovering the historical context and letting go of that same past, in an embrace of beginner's mind that is not so much a tool of ingenuousness as a process of seeing anew.

Note

1. Maricruz Castro Ricalde (2017) summarises nicely some of that disability-themed criticism in her article on the short story "Pitosis".

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