

THE BODY BEAUTIFUL AND THE ABJECT:

A LOOK INTO THE MANIFOLD

MIRROR OF AGE

by

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## ABSTRACT

This project studies four novels by Rosa Montero, *Te trataré como a una reina* (1983), *Bella y oscura* (1993), *La hija del caníbal* (1997), and *Instrucciones para salvar el mundo* (2008), as well as four novels by Agnès Desarthe, *Cinq photos de ma femme*, (1998), *Les bonnes intentions* (2000), *Mangez-moi* (2006), and *Dans la nuit brune* (2010).

This dissertation examines the representations of aging in these novels through the lens of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia and Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject. I consider the effects of cultural constructs of age and aging on: how the elderly characters are depicted; how the characters describe their own aging and that of others; the interpretation of reflections in literal and figurative mirrors; the obsession with youth in Western cultures; and the sexual identity of female characters. I will take an in-depth look at how identity, self-perception, and sexuality are linked to the aging body.

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my seven-year-old self, who decided to be a doctor; and to my parents, who never gave up on me.

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## INTRODUCTION

This project will explore the ways in which aging is represented in select novels of Rosa Montero and Agnès Desarthe. The novels studied were published between the years 1983 and 2010. With the death of the dictator Francisco Franco in 1975 there began in Spain a societal upheaval. The Catholic, extremely conservative societal views of women were steadily being challenged and changing rapidly. By 1983 much progress had been made in adapting to the new cultural norms without the strict censorship of the Franco regime. I chose this time frame because I wanted to analyze Montero's works that I felt were not inhibited in any way by the defunct dictatorship. This set the time boundary for the earliest novel that I chose from Montero. I then read both Montero's and Desarthe's works up to the present, and used those novels that were most relevant to this study. Despite the cultural differences and geography that separate them,<sup>1</sup> I chose these two specific authors because of the striking parallels and similarities in the way that they represent aging in their writing. Though the theme of aging is ubiquitous in the field of gerontology, much opportunity exists to further this field of study in the realm of literature. This dissertation will examine how the characters of these two authors represent the effects of the aging process on the construction of their identities.

In this dissertation I shall take an in-depth look at aging: how identity, self-perception, and sexual identity are inextricably linked to the aging body. To my knowledge, the concepts associated with aging and these aforementioned aspects of aging have not been considered in the novels of Agnès Desarthe. My purpose in this project is to present a new perspective on these

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<sup>1</sup> The populations of both France and Spain are concerned about the growing number of elderly people. In 2014, 52% of the people polled in Spain and 45% of the people polled in France thought that the growing aged population is a "major problem." In Spain, 17.1% of the population was 65 or older in 2010, whereas in France it was 16.8%. However, in 2050 Spain will have 34.5% of the population 65 or older, and in France it will be 25.5%. The anxieties associated with the care of the elderly population brings to the forefront the contemplation of aging. <http://www.pewglobal.org/2014/01/30/attitudes-about-aging-a-global-perspective/>

well-known writers, and in so doing present ideas about aging that are new to the field of literary research, such as the inclusion of the concept of the abject in the social constructs of aging, and how cultural heteroglossia affects these social constructs. It will also be my intention to raise questions that I feel are pertinent not only to the examination of these novels, but also to the study of the representations of aging in literature.

I have chosen these specific novels from these particular authors because they show striking parallels in how their characters react to and deal with the aging process. Montero and Desarthe both depict female characters that have great difficulty incorporating their aging bodies into their identities, as well as male characters that are aware of the effects of aging on their constructions of self. They also share the view that aging connotes loss of youth, of vitality, and of importance in society. Their depictions of the decrepit aging body also mirror each other in many ways.

The novels I will analyze written by Rosa Montero are: *Te trataré como a una reina* (1983), *Bella y oscura* (1993), *La hija del caníbal* (1997), and *Instrucciones para salvar el mundo* (2008). The novels written by Agnès Desarthe are: *Cinq photos de ma femme* (1998), *Les bonnes intentions* (2000), *Mangez-moi* (2006), and *Dans la nuit brune* (2010).

In Chapter One I shall analyze how the representation of the aged characters reflects culturally constructed concepts of the elderly, as well as discuss the inclusion of the abject in these constructions. In Chapter Two the focus will be mirrors, both literal and figurative, and what effects they have on the identity formation of characters. In Chapter Three I shall consider the male gaze, the female gaze, and how age affects the sexual identity of female characters, as well as how they interact with the societal construct of sexuality of the older woman. In Chapter

Four I shall compare the two authors' representations of aging, and I shall discuss the final conclusions of the concepts they present in their novels.

Two critical theories will form the bases of my arguments in this dissertation, and other theories that I utilize in this study will relate to one or both of them. The first is the theory of heteroglossia from Mikhail Bakhtin. This theory states that the way in which a person speaks, the words he chooses, reflects his personal view on the world. His words express his values and his position on the topic of which he speaks. The second is that of abjection by Julia Kristeva. Kristeva posits that that which disturbs personal or cultural identity is cast off, and one separates oneself from these concepts as not part of oneself. In combining Bakhtin's and Kristeva's theories I shall show that the dominant cultural languages propagated by Western cultures push the concept of aging into the realm of the abject. I elaborate on what these theories are and their impact on this project later in this dissertation.

The questions that I address in this dissertation are these: How do the characters in these novels reflect on their embodiment? How do they construct their identities in relation to their age? What influences do the negative cultural languages that construct the concepts of age have on these characters? Are they able to overcome these languages and construct their own identities on their own terms, or do they fall victim to these negative languages and adopt them as the definition of both their subjects and objects?

In order to investigate the concepts of age and the aging body, first I shall set the parameters of the concepts of identity and embodiment in this study. It will then be possible to apply these concepts to age and the aging body and to discuss the difficulty in defining age.

The ideas about what the body is, what it represents, and what part of our identities it encompasses have been debated for centuries. For Anthony Synnott, the body is not our physical

being but our very self. As a result, he writes, “We are all embodied. Obvious though this may be, what it means in practice is not always so obvious. Controversies rage about the ownership of the body, the boundaries, its meaning, its value, the criteria of life and death, and how it should be lived, and loved” (1). One thing, however, is certain: as soon as we see another body, we assign a race, a gender, and an age to that body. There is no escaping this ‘summing up’ of the body before us. Even in instances where one cannot easily discern race, gender, or age (or all three), our minds seek to place the body of this person in specific categories so that we may position the person in a social context. In this way the identity is always already constructed in the eyes of society and culture. What these assignments of race, gender or age mean or represent differ from culture to culture and in different societies.

This raises the question of what part of our identities the body represents. This is not an easy question to answer, for identity is a complex and mutable idea of ourselves. We consider more than our bodies in order to construct our identities; we also consider our minds, with all the individual complications that that implies. As Susan Whitbourne explains, “Identity process theory proposes that the adult’s sense of identity is composed of feelings about physical, psychological, and social functioning” (83). It is, however, much more difficult to assess the psychological and social functioning of people, because it takes time and at least a small degree of intimacy to know their minds. Social functioning, one could argue, is just as difficult to discern because people are different day to day. How one interacts with others may give one impression one day and an entirely different one the next, depending on numerous factors such as his mood, the circumstances in which he<sup>2</sup> finds himself, the people around him, and many other possibilities that would influence his behavior. Or, if you consider social functioning to

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this dissertation I use the pronoun ‘he’ with the intention that this includes both males and females, as the pronoun ‘she,’ on the other hand, would exclude all males.

mean what role that person serves in society, then this is also highly mutable, as this may also change from one day to the next.

The body, on the other hand, offers a ready and relatively stable material for assessment. Many people use their bodies to make statements to the rest of the world as to who they are. Innumerable ways exist in which these statements can be made; the possibilities can range from clothes, body piercings, tattoos, haircuts, and a vast collection of other potential identity markers. “Of all the ways people think of themselves,” April Fallon writes, “none is so essentially immediate and central as the image of their own bodies. The body is experienced as a reflection of the self” (80). Therefore, the image we choose to project to the world is an integral part of our definition of ourselves. Though we cannot control the perception of those ‘adornments,’ we can, nevertheless, use our bodies as a tool to project to the world what we want to be visible to others, as Fallon explains: “Body image is the way people perceive themselves and, equally important, the way they think others see them” (80). What we wish to project to others does not have to take a permanent form. Body image can change from day to day; just by changing the mode of dress or the styling of hair one can present a different image to others.

This intentional projection of an image of the self through the body carries with it an implicit invitation for surveillance. We are all constantly aware, whether or not it carries meaning for us, that we are being observed and therefore assessed anytime we are in public. “Thus, some might argue that all bodies,” Shari Dworkin contends, “including men, pregnant women, adolescents, children and older women and men, are subject to surveillance and objectification” (8). The others that make up that public sphere are the source of an infinite set of thoughts that manifest themselves in that surveillance, for, as Bryan Turner states, “The body is always socially formed and located” (59).

Consequently, it is only through an awareness of the social and cultural sphere that we are able to project the desired image of ourselves. Those with tattoos, to use one example, are aware that people exist who love tattoos, but also people who hate tattoos, people who will make their assessments based on *which* tattoos have been chosen as permanent artwork on the skin, those that will instantly think that the tattooed person is a delinquent, a criminal, or an idiot; the point is that the person who has chosen to get one or more tattoos has consciously chosen this expression of himself through his body knowing that in his society his body ink will provoke a particular type of surveillance, whether it be positive or negative.

There is, however, another side to consider. Even though he has chosen his tattoos, and is aware that he will evoke a multitude of psychological reactions in others, he cannot control what those reactions may be. That is to say, what his body represents to others is not entirely his choice. In other words, as Chris Shilling explains, "...the body is a receptor, rather than a generator, of social meanings. In this respect, *social constructionism* has been used as an umbrella term to denote those views which suggest that the body is somehow shaped, constrained and even invented by society" (70, emphasis original). Even though he wishes to convey a certain message with his body art, how others interpret that message remains beyond his control.

Therefore, according to the social constructionist perspective, his tattoos are only meaningful as a marker of identity because of the society in which he lives. He may say that how society views his tattoos does not affect him, but nonetheless he was aware when he got them that he was choosing a particular aspect of his identity. Both the positive and negative reactions from his society have constructed their own meanings of his tattoos. As Synnott writes, "The body is...capable of carrying a wide range of ever-changing meanings" (3), as is demonstrated

by both the positive and negative perceptions of his decorated body. “[The body] is the prime constituent of personal and social identity; yet also the deepest prejudices and discriminations, for and against, accrue to the body” (3). His tattoos broadcast his personal identity to the culture that surrounds him, yet also place him in preconceived categories constructed by those who view him, be it positively or negatively. So how his body accrues meaning depends upon not only his expression of his personal identity, but also the meanings that society places on his body. That is to say, he may choose particular identity markers that carry a specific meaning for him, while those markers simultaneously carry different meanings to others.

Contained in these meanings there exists a multiplicity of possible interpretations that manifest themselves as different languages: positive reactions to his tattoos are one language, negative reactions another, his own perceptions of his tattoos yet another; the possible languages are numerous and varied. This differentiation between languages includes two distinct areas that must be explored.

The first is we are both subject and object as we inhabit our bodies. We are our bodies, and we are also a consciousness that inhabits that body and lives through that body. These are two distinct languages that speak to the idea of subject and object. Nick Crossley explains this duality:

‘Reflexive embodiment’ refers to the capacity and tendency to perceive, emote about, reflect and act upon one’s own body; to practices of body modification and maintenance, and to ‘body image.’ Reflexivity entails that the object and subject of a perception, thought, feeling, desire or action are the same. When I look in the mirror, for example, I am both the subject who sees somebody in the mirror and the object who is seen. (1)

In this way our perception of ourselves as we look in the mirror is split: one part evaluates how our bodies are representing us (object), the other is a separate consciousness that knows that we are more than just our bodies (subject). These are two languages that meet in the embodiment of

the consciousness that evaluates the reflection. It is possible that these languages are harmonious; when we feel that the outward representation of our selves is congruous with our inner identity (meaning we feel that our outward representation accurately depicts our inner selves), then there is no discord between the two. There is also the possibility, however, of enormous discord. When the outer does not in our minds justly reflect the inner, these two voices (or languages) are incongruous; this can cause great distress in the 'I' that is the subject. Indeed Mikhail Bakhtin describes this process as a kind of internal battle culminating in a crisis "...as soon as it became clear that these were not only various different languages but even internally variegated languages, that the ideological systems and approaches to the world that were indissolubly connected with these languages contradicted each other...and the necessity of actively choosing one's orientation among them began" (296).<sup>3</sup>

And so a person must choose between adopting the orientation of subject or that of object. The object's language speaks to him of discord, an uncomfortable and often irreconcilable voice that tells him that his body is fat or old or ugly, or any among the innumerable possible reasons that he is uncomfortable with how his body represents him. If the subject chooses this language he may experience great unhappiness, for the dominant language is based on negative feelings of the self. When the subject gives too much emphasis to the surface or construction of the body, then the identity becomes dependent upon the object for the dominant definition.

The second area to be explored is how one internalizes this language. In this choice of a negative dominant language, he may be internalizing what his *culture's* language speaks about

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<sup>3</sup> Though Bakhtin refers here to social and political transition, the ideas he presents are relevant to this study in the context of social and cultural languages that influence the construction of the identity of individuals that live in that society and the hegemonic cultural constructs of that society.

his body. That is to say, he may be choosing not a language of his own about his body, but rather a language that is created in his cultural surroundings. As Bakhtin explains, “Actual social life and historical becoming create within an abstractly unitary national language a multitude of bounded verbal-ideological and social belief systems; within these various systems (identical in the abstract) are elements of language filled with various semantic and axiological content and each with its own different sound” (288). If his culture has constructed languages that speak of his body in negative ways and he has allowed himself to be interpellated, then he has adopted this as his own (internal) language.

This language of society’s constructs of ‘acceptable’ or ‘attractive’ bodies can have profound effects on the inhabitants of that culture. One cannot argue against the fact that the perceptions of bodies change with the times. It is an interesting study to look back and see that what is culturally desirable in the body depends upon the societal parameters in place at that time. In one example, during the Great Depression it was considered a privilege to be able to have food; therefore, the cultural preference dictated that the (literal) weight of the body be a representation of that person’s status in society. A factor in modern society that has dictated the language of the ‘ideal’ body is Hollywood. In the 1950’s, for example, the women that were considered the most attractive were voluptuous, weighty bodies. This was the ‘ideal’ that was set culturally, and women aspired to achieve it. In the 1970’s a model (appropriately) named Twiggy was introduced in the modeling world, and the obsession with thinness began. “The body is not a ‘given,’” Synnott writes, “but a social category with different meaning imposed and developed by every age, and by different sectors of the population” (1). These few examples demonstrate not only the mutability of the culturally constructed language of attractiveness, but also the impact on society that these languages have. Though there are (and were) many bodies that did

not reflect the 'ideal,' it is (and was) the language of the culture that dominated the consciousness that inhabited the 'less than ideal' bodies.

Particularly in today's society, it is perfectly acceptable to alter one's body to fit the language that has interpellated its subjects. Cultural languages, however, have diverged into a multiplicity of possibilities of what represents the 'ideal'. To some, thin is still the ideal. To others, large breasts and ample buttocks are the language (and body) they choose to represent them. To others still, the perfectly toned and muscular body speaks their language of choice. All this affirms the heteroglossia present in culturally constructed languages. One has only to actively choose one's language.

This does not change the fact, however, that bodies exist that, without surgical intervention or a willful rejection of the natural shape of the body, will never be able to speak the language that the subject wishes the object to speak. But is not our 'natural' identity one to be valued? Are there not irreversible repercussions to the permanent alteration of the body? Susan Bordo has this to say: "...bodies are lit with meaning, with memory... We bob our 'family noses,' lift our aging faces, suction extra fat, remove minor 'flaws'... In the process, we substitute individualized beauty—the distinctive faces of the generation of beautiful actresses of my own age, for example—for generic, very often racialized, reproducible codes of youth" (*Male Body* 222-23). As we surgically change our bodies we lose the history that they carried on their surfaces, and elect to conform to more conventional or culturally accepted norms for beauty. This is not a judgment of altering one's body to fit the language that the subject desires. If discord exists between the physical representation of the self and the inner identity, the subject may experience profoundly negative effects. If the subject is willing and able to bring the desired language to the object, then so be it. Each body's experience is unique and "...an understanding

of image can only really come from an appreciation of embodied identity, that is, the ways in which bodies live, feel, and experience the world” (Gill 104). If the subject and object are in harmony and speak the same language, the experience of the world will be a much more positive one.

But what if the culturally constructed language of a particular body projects predominantly and overwhelmingly negative images? How do the multitude of cultural languages that speak negativity about his body affect the subject? This describes the context of aging in Western society and cultures. An omnipresent ‘narrative of decline’ permeates the Western cultural languages constructed around aging, with very few exceptions; the amount of “...images of aging as decline, death, ruin, and the abject” (Kaplan 188) abound. In her book *Facing the Mirror: Older Women and Beauty Shop Culture* (1997), Frida Furman, as a professor at a university, asked her undergraduate class to compose a list of concepts that they associated with people who have reached old(er) age. These are a few of the characteristics that her students wrote: “frail, dependent, angry, unattractive, sickly, depressive, non-sexual, lonely, inactive, useless, crabby, whiny, ineffective, senile, fumbling, deaf, alone, incapable, decaying, burdensome, pitiful” (94). Each of these words that the students chose perpetuates a socially constructed language about aging; in fact, they are each a language of aging unto themselves. As Bakhtin explains, “...all languages of heteroglossia, whatever the principle underlying them and making each unique, are specific points of view on the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words, specific world views, each characterized by its own objects, meanings and values” (291-92). The older body, therefore, is the recipient of each of these crushingly negative languages, and is shaped by them, constrained by them, and even invented by them. This in no way negates the actual biological fact that the body does indeed begin to break down with age;

the older we get, the more difficulty arises in keeping the body 'up and running' smoothly. However, having these languages that speak of utter disintegration and ruin will inevitably negatively affect the identity of the aging person, particularly if he adopts this type of language as his internal one rather than all the other possibilities: "Thus at any given moment of its historical existence, language is heteroglot from top to bottom... These 'languages' of heteroglossia intersect each other in a variety of ways, forming new socially typifying 'languages.'" (Bakhtin 291). Thus, the "socially typifying languages" of growing old are an onslaught of negativity. Yet the subject may (attempt to) reject these languages; that is his inherent choice. Inevitably, however, the subject must contend with not only the cultural language constructions of his aging body, but also how those languages are at war with how he views himself. A consequence of this conflict, as Bakhtin describes it, is that "Each of these 'languages' of heteroglossia requires a methodology very different from the others; each is grounded in a completely different principle for marking differences and for establishing units..." (291). Consequently, "...languages do not *exclude* each other, but rather intersect with each other in many different ways" (291, emphasis original). In this intersection of languages the older subject is forced to contend with unfamiliar or detrimental views of himself as an object. Even if he has a positive view of his internal *and* external self, he is still always already viewed in a specific social language. As Susan Whitbourne and Karyn Skultety explain, two different manners exist that the subject can employ when dealing with these conflicting languages. In identity assimilation, when the individual detects age-related characteristics, such as wrinkles, his identity remains constant. In identity accommodation, the realization that aging has affected the body can cause the individual to question his sense of self. This can cause an upheaval in what he considered to be his identity. The most desirable outcome of the realization of the effects

of aging is that he continually incorporates these developing characteristics into his definition of self. This is called identity balance, and results in higher self-esteem (85). The subject is aware of his own sense of self and how he feels about his bodily representation, as well as the societal concepts that will accompany the ever-growing wrinkles on his face. Which language he chooses to incorporate into his definition of self will clearly affect the formation of his changing identity as he ages.

The choice of a positive language of aging has become increasingly difficult; the culturally dominant languages of aging in Western cultures have taken a turn for the worse. Today, the concept of old age expresses a ‘narrative of decline,’ and philosophy has done little to abate the negative concepts of aging. Joseph Esposito explains in his book *The Obsolete Self: Philosophical Dimensions of Aging* (1987): “Although in ancient times to live a long life was almost to qualify as a philosopher, philosophy has not focused much on the subject of aging...Aging is thought to be a disintegration of human life, a slow devolution of the human form...Yet it is perfectly appropriate for philosophy to question this...” (1, emphasis original). Perhaps it is our generalized fear of dying that has prevented more study into the positive aspects of aging. Death is, after all, the inevitable and universal result of the aging process. We will *all* eventually die, and this idea engenders discomfort in the subject that inhabits the body. Kathleen Woodward writes, “Scholars have no intellectual guideposts which would enable them to enter easily and effortlessly into an exchange. Hence an awkward silence. But I am also convinced that this silence all too often speaks of a suspicion that the subject of aging is, simply, morbid” (*Discontents* 21).

The proposition that the subject of aging is morbid could not be more clearly illustrated by Simone de Beauvoir in her exhaustive study *The Coming of Age* (1972). In this enormous

book Beauvoir looks at the (immense) history of representations of aging and the attitudes surrounding it. She presents a less than positive view: “Change is the law of life. And it is a particular kind of change that distinguishes aging—an irreversible, unfavorable change; a decline” (11). Clearly Beauvoir was interpellated into the language of decline, decay, ruin, and disintegration. She was, however, acutely aware of the interplay between identity construction in the aging subject and the culture in which he is embedded: “But although old age, considered as a biological fate, is a reality that goes beyond history, it is nevertheless true that this fate is experienced in a way that varies according to the social context...” (10). In Western cultures as the subject’s body begins to show more and more signs of age, his life is taken to mean less and less.<sup>4</sup> The elderly, as was highlighted so clearly in the list of words that Furman’s students associated with the aged, are no longer considered useful to society. With these associations the meaning of the life lived by the aged person loses all significance. When the culture does not value the aged, it does not value the life lived before old age. In other words, the experiences and wisdom that an individual has (hopefully) gathered are utterly discounted when the aged person loses significance due to his age.

Beauvoir also discusses the difficulty in placing old(er) age in a social context:

“[Aging] is a biological phenomenon...It brings with it psychological consequences—certain forms of behavior are rightly looked upon as being characteristic of old age. And like all human situations it has an existential dimension—it changes the individual’s relationship with time and therefore his relationship with the world and with his own history.” (9) No one can deny that the passage of time affects the appearance and functioning of the body, that it is a biological process,

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<sup>4</sup> José Enrique Rodríguez Ibáñez, a Professor of Sociology at the Universidad Complutense de Madrid, writes that “Sin embargo, el problema de la vejez no es estrictamente biológico, sino que posee asimismo unas raíces sociales y culturales” (77).

as Beauvoir points out. What deserves more attention and consideration are the psychological consequences to which she refers. The effects of aging on the psyche can cause extensive existential questioning. Am I the young person that I feel like on the inside? Or am I the old person that my aged body represents to the world? Throughout my research into this facet of aging there was one constant: no one wants to consider themselves old. That is to say, 'old age' is always an age older than themselves; this was true even for people in their eighties. To a ten-year-old, thirty is old. To a twenty-year-old, forty is old. To a forty-year-old, sixty is old. To a sixty-year-old, eighty is old. To an eighty-year-old, one hundred is old. The constant in this context is that as the subject reaches each socially constructed milestone of age, he feels differently about that age when he reaches it than he did when he was younger. This constant shifting of perspective changes his relationship with his own history. As his relationship with his history changes, so does his relationship with his future self. His future self will inevitably be older, and will *look* older.

Looking older and the appearance of the body present the greatest difficulty in dealing with aging in Western cultures. 'Attractiveness' (or perceived attractiveness through the cultural lens) is a crucial component in the subject's evaluation of his aging body. Even though he may still *feel* attractive, having incorporated the wrinkles on his face into his body identity, culture screams at him in multiple contexts that he is *not* attractive, that he should take advantage of everything available to him to erase those wrinkles and to *appear* as young as possible. This dominant cultural language makes it ever more difficult, as the body continues to age, to incorporate the aging body into the subject's identity without causing discord and distress when he evaluates his object. Whitbourne explains that "For both sexes, social attitudes toward death and dying create an environment in which it becomes difficult to acknowledge the changes

associated with the aging process that bring the individual closer to death” (88). She goes on to explain that the media’s portrayal of older adults suffering from mental incompetence exacerbates the fear of losing dignity and independence in older age. This leads to difficulties in maintaining self-acceptance and a positive body image (88). The cultural constructs of what is deemed attractive in regards to the body carry great significance in how the older person is perceived. Linda Jackson writes, “Western cultures value physical attractiveness, and this value unequivocally influences how members of the culture think about and behave toward people who vary in attractiveness” (19). The appeal of the body has taken on such significance that it is *the* determining factor in how aging people are perceived.

In Western cultures, attractiveness is a commodity. One has only to watch television for a few hours to see a multitude of commercials for products ranging from benign anti-wrinkle creams all the way up to major plastic surgery. It has reached such a level that the aging body has become *abject*. Dworkin explains this alienation from one’s own body: “Drawing on Marxist perspectives, individuals become alienated from their own bodies through fitness regimes [or anti-wrinkle creams or plastic surgery] designed to restructure the body as capital. The body then becomes a fetish or sign, often a moral signifier for viewers to see and judge, rather than an integral part of the actual identity of the self” (9). It is a dangerous prospect to desire so vehemently to restructure the body in an attempt to continually stay ‘one step ahead’ of the aging process. The alienation of which Dworkin speaks easily metamorphoses into abjection, a total and overwhelming sense of otherness that inhabits the object that represents the subject.<sup>5</sup> There

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<sup>5</sup> Barbara Ann Day writes, “In his study of aging in modern France, Peter Strauss was surprised to find so much prejudice against the elderly in a traditional European culture. Anticipating respect for the aged, he instead discovered cultural prejudices that described older people in such denigrating terms as ugly, selfish, impotent, and best kept out of sight” (690). [Stearns, Peter. *Old Age in European Society: The Case of France*. London: Croom Helms, 1977. Print.]

is such pressure to retain ‘attractiveness’ that when signs of aging inevitably mark the body, the subject feels such estrangement from his body that it becomes abject to him.

Again, culturally constructed languages are at the root of this. Attractiveness being a commodity has direct and derogatory effects on the inhabitants (consumers) in that culture. They are the weapons of their own demise. As we more and more voraciously consume all the products meant to keep us *looking* young, we perpetuate the intense necessity to continue the process of looking young. As Crossley contends, “We are aware that we are on display and this makes us more conscious of ourselves and mindful of how we appear. This has been further fuelled, moreover, by the emergence and popularity of new technologies, including mirrors, cameras and videos, which present individuals with an image of their body, facilitating and encouraging bodily preoccupation...” (52-53). Not only does the proliferation of cameras on cell phones allow subjects to see and evaluate their own bodies, more detrimentally it allows a recording and sharing of *others’* bodies so that they may be evaluated by millions of people on the internet. It is alarmingly easy to take a picture of an eighty-year-old woman in a bikini or an eighty-year-old man in a speedo on the beach, and then instantaneously post it on the internet so that an enormous number of people can express their disgust at these bodies, and their anger that these subjects have the audacity to display them in such a manner. When the language of one becomes the language of millions the sheer number of participants in the language validates it (in their own minds). This phenomenon not only perpetuates negative languages surrounding aging, but it also further cements this language as ‘the undeniable truth.’<sup>6</sup> As Woodward laments “...we are culturally illiterate about aging” (Introduction xv). With all this readily available

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<sup>6</sup> Ibáñez writes, “En efecto, la ancianidad es una etapa no deseada de senescencia cuyas terribles características son, entre otras, las arrugas, la enfermedad, la debilidad, la fragilidad corporal y, sobre todo, la vecindad de la muerte” (77).

disparagement of the aging body, the aging bodies themselves become more and more abject, to the observers and to the possessors of these bodies. The irony lies in that those observers that surveil these bodies with such horror will, if they are very lucky, experience the same situation. Those of us who manage to survive all grow old, with all the bodily decline that that entails, or we die. No one seems to want either one. And yet these observers are failing to realize that *they too* are growing older. When will they feel old? When will they start to realize that their bodies are marking time? The concept of (older) age and the meanings of aging are extremely difficult to define and place in a specific societal context, as Amelia DeFalco explains: “But in spite of all such efforts to segment aging into discrete periods and categories, we are all growing older every moment, and this constant movement of time will eventually undermine any attempt to fix age identity” (xiii). These very observers, therefore, will find it very difficult to assess themselves as aged when the time to do so arrives, if it does arrive.

No one (except the dead) escapes the aging process. In the following pages I shall study the effects that the concepts that surround aging have on the characters in Rosa Montero’s and Agnès Desarthe’s novels, because “Aging is a subject in which we all have interests of our own. The difference of age is the one difference which we will ultimately all have in common, if we live long enough. The subject of aging is one that belongs to all of us” (Woodward, *Discontents* 23).

## CHAPTER ONE REPRESENTATIONS OF AGING AND THE ABJECT

In this chapter I examine the representations of the ‘old’ characters in the novels *La hija del caníbal*, *Te trataré como a una reina*, and *Bella y oscura* by Montero and *Les bonnes intentions* by Desarthe. I consider in detail the depictions of these aged characters, and discuss how they mirror societal constructs of old age. I also relate the illustrations of these characters to Julia Kristeva’s concept of the abject in *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982).

In the simplest terms, Kristeva’s concept of the abject deals with the “me that is not me” (5). “The abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to *I*” (1, emphasis original). She defines the abject as any experience that disturbs identity, cultural constructs, or social order. When something confronts the subject that he cannot assimilate, the subject experiences trauma and relegates that something to the area of the abject. In the context of this study, that which disturbs identity is the aged body. The characters examined in this dissertation view the aging body as outside the parameters of how they construct their subjects. The disintegration of the body through aging represents the ‘not me’: “I experience abjection only if an Other has settled in place and instead of what will be ‘me’” (Kristeva 10). Whether dealing with the effects of aging themselves or viewing it in an other, the characters experience trauma when the aging body confronts their subjects.

This feeling of trauma in the aging person will be explored through Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of heteroglossia, in that it offers an explanation of how societal languages and constructs transform the concept of ‘old age’ into something abject. Bakhtin describes the relation between the image and the construction of the languages associated with that image:

The way in which the word conceives its object is complicated by a dialogic interaction within the object between various aspects of its socio-verbal intelligibility. And an artistic representation, an ‘image’ of the object, may be

penetrated by this dialogic play of verbal intentions that meet and are interwoven in it; such an image need not stifle these forces, but on the contrary may activate and organize them. (277)

Hence the culture that views the aged body (the image) as ‘not me’ generates hegemonic languages that construct the conceptualization of the words ‘old’ and ‘aged,’ which causes these images to contain inherently the idea of abjectness.

In my research of theories that focus on how the subject experiences the aging of his object, the idea of the abjectness and foreignness of old age appears with great regularity.

Esposito sums up this idea quite well:

Artists and writers have often attempted to convey what it is like to find oneself among the aged. Until now their message has been nearly unanimous: aging is symbolically a catastrophic event, no matter how gradually it occurs. It appears almost suddenly in a glimpse in a mirror, in the transformation of a lifelong friend’s face, in the reactions of the young to one’s very presence. From an etiologic point of view, its emergence is like that of cancer—a small, silent, secretive violation of bodily integrity that eventually consumes the entire organism, dragging down and crushing the spirit. (3-4)

Esposito highlights the alien experience of the body as it ages and ‘betrays’ the subject. The disintegration of the body negatively affects his identity in the mirror, while also disturbing others that prefer not to view or acknowledge him. The concurrence of these leads to a condemnatory self-image, which in turn results in the “crushing of the spirit” to which Esposito refers. Due to the reactions of others to his aged body, the subject begins to feel obsolete, discarded, and invisible. Mary Russo states that “The rhetoric of the old as the culturally residual, the decrepit, the distorted, and, finally, the alien in the new world to come, permeates discussions of public policy, medicine, education, electoral politics, feminism and art...” (27). The ‘alien’ is the abjectness contained within the cultural languages that overtake and consume the concepts of old age. Kristeva has this to say: “The abject lies, beyond the themes...in the way

it speaks; it is verbal communication, it is the Word that discloses the abject” (23). In the context of this study the actual word that communicates the abject is *old*.

The character of Félix in Montero’s *La hija del caníbal*<sup>7</sup> experiences himself as ‘old’ in many ways that reflect cultural constructions of the aged.<sup>8</sup> Despite his eighty years, he continues to be relatively active and maintains a sharp mind. Lucía Romero, the narrator of the novel, describes Félix in rather positive terms for his fashion sense, for his multitude of interesting stories from his life, and for his intellect and wittiness. Félix, nevertheless, describes himself as “este pobre viejo” (35). His idea of old age aligns directly with the cultural languages that speak of old age as loss: “...que fui aprendiendo de verdad lo que es la pérdida. Cómo no aprenderlo, si vivir es perder, precisamente. Desde entonces, desde mis doce años, lo he perdido todo. La vista, el oído, la agilidad, la memoria” (120). The sense that old age signifies a loss of everything valuable reflects precisely Kristeva’s ideas of the abject: “The abject is the violence of mourning for an ‘object’ that has always already been lost. The abject shatters the wall of repression and its judgments” (15). In Félix’s mind his youth was always already lost due to his loss of innocence as a result of his actions in the war. Now he mourns the disintegration of his bodily integrity and the devaluation of his life experience. Félix feels that his body deteriorates more every day. This affects his self-perceived value to his friends Lucía<sup>9</sup> and Adrián,<sup>10</sup> as “...the ailing body comes to

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<sup>7</sup> Félix is a friend and neighbor of the narrator, Lucía Romero. At the very beginning of the novel, Lucía’s husband, Ramón, disappears at the airport just before they are to leave on vacation. Throughout the novel Félix aids Lucía in her search for and eventual rescue of Ramón.

<sup>8</sup> “La preocupación desde un plano personal por el paso del tiempo y la muerte era ya muy evidente en *Crónica del desamor* (1979) y *La función delta* (1981). En *Te trataré*, sin embargo, esta obsesión se conceptualiza a través de un conjunto preciso de imágenes” (Escudero, “La visión” 127). These themes weave in and out of Montero’s works with a surprising consistency. In her most recent work, *El peso del corazón* (2015), the android, Bruna Husky, must struggle daily with the fact that her creators have given her a life span of only ten years. Although the novel ends when she still has more than three years left to live, the entire work somehow evolves into a slow countdown towards her eventual demise.

<sup>9</sup> Lucía is the main protagonist and narrator of the novel. She writes unsuccessful books for children, and has a marriage that stifles and bores her. The search for her missing husband is the basis of the plot for the novel.

<sup>10</sup> Adrián is a young man who lives in the same building as Lucía and Félix.

be seen as the instrument through which the older person loses social significance” (Furman 97). In a positive view of old age he would appreciate that he has value for his perception and intelligence, regardless of the state of his body. Félix, however, does not see this. He believes that aging has taken away the importance of all his memories and of those whose lives he touched. In fact, all that he has accomplished loses significance: “De niño cree que la vida es una acumulación de cosas, que con los años vas conquistando y ganando y coleccionando y atesorando, cuando en realidad vivir es irte despojando inexplorablemente” (120). The importance of Félix’s accumulation of life experiences decreases, in his mind, in equal proportion to the increase in deterioration of his body.

To make matters worse, Félix is hospitalized with pneumonia. His already aching and ailing body suffers a dramatic and rapid decline. Lucía, the narrator of the novel and Félix’s friend, provides images of him that illustrate the disintegration of the sickly body: “...estaba boca arriba, quieto y tieso, una menudencia anciana y arrugada del color de las pasas de Corinto, con tubos por la nariz y por los brazos. Tenía los ojos cerrados y parecía muerto. [sic] Lucía apretó la mano engarabada por la artritis y acarició el dorso maltratado” (154), and “...ahora, envuelto en el camisón hospitalario, se le veía huesudo, pingajoso de piel y diminuto, viejo como una gárgola, más pálido que las sábanas, extremadamente delicado y frágil” (294). This collapse of the body as it nears death is one aspect of old age that makes it a form of the abject. We do not want to face the idea that we, too, will disintegrate. Using Kristeva’s concepts, in order to construct the separation between subject and object, the consciousness rejects that which evokes the abject. We must dispel our consciousness of death in order to separate ourselves from our aging bodies (3).

Lucía shares Félix’s views of the aging body. Only forty-one, she manifests in her language of old age the culturally structured abjectness of old age. At the very beginning of the novel she describes a very old lady: “Estaba encajada en su silla como una ostra en su concha y era una pizca de persona, una mínima momia de boca desdentada y ojos encapotados por el velo lluvioso de la edad” (12). Lucía’s description of this lady illustrates the belittling of the significance of the old.<sup>11</sup> She is a “pizca” of a person, a pinch, a smidgeon, and a *mummy*, as if she has already died and occupies an empty shell. Even her presence in the world has been reduced to a minuteness that others shuffle from place to place: “Ancianas sarmentosas y matusalénicas atrapadas por la edad en el encierro de sus sillas y trasladadas de acá para allá como un paquete: en los ascensores las colocan de cara a la pared y ellas contemplan estoicamente el lienzo de metal durante todo el viaje” (11). Lucía echoes society’s view that the old are simply a burden; they have no thoughts, no significance, and no reason for existence. They stare at the walls presumably waiting for the end to come. The thought of this dependence on others and loss of autonomy frightens Lucía. Elissa Melamed explains that “...for many of us, both male and female, aging may be more difficult to confront than mortality. The fear of a prolonged period of deterioration, dependency, or unattractiveness can seem worse than death itself” (43). Lucía does fear death, but her fear of loss of autonomy oppresses her as well.

In addition to her anxieties regarding dependence on others, Lucía expresses several other negative languages that speak of old age. She shares Félix’s angst regarding the deterioration of the functioning of the object, as well as the manifestations of this decline on the surface of it. Among her positive descriptions of Félix’s other attributes she includes images of him as “viejo viejísimo y cubierto de arrugas por todas partes” (35). His appearance clearly disturbs Lucía,

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<sup>11</sup> Ibáñez writes, “No obstante, creo que es posible...detector en las sociedades contemporáneas un sesgo profundo de segregación cultural de la vejez que afecta a toda ella por igual, incluidos los ancianos ricos” (78).

who fears the inevitability of resembling Félix in the future. She adds to this mental rejection of his body the culturally constructed idea that loneliness is an inevitable component of old age: “Él también debía de sentirse acorralado por la soledad, como tantos otros ancianos y jubilados” (81). Even though Félix enjoys a friendship with Lucía, she assumes that he suffers, like all old people, from the marginalization that solitude implies.

Lucía also repeatedly expresses her fear of death, which exposes the root of culture’s rejection of old age. She suffers from a “...miedo personal que cada uno arrastra, del pozo que te vas cavando alrededor a medida que creces, ese miedo exudado gota a gota, tan tuyo como tu piel, el pánico de saberte viva y condenada a muerte... Dormir es ensayar la muerte, por eso atemoriza” (84). The knowledge that we are all dying, minute by minute, terrifies her. With the first breath of life the process of dying begins, and Lucía allows this fact to haunt her. Her panic and fear exemplify why the abject inhabits the concept of old age. Javier Escudero remarks that “...esta preocupación con una realidad metafísica, con la idea del no-ser—de una muerte que se hace presente como decadencia, corrupción, o excremento...” (“La presencia” 22), which clearly references the abject, is a common element in Montero’s novels. In our day-to-day lives we must shun and reject these thoughts of death, as Beauvoir explains: “Society looks upon aging as a kind of shameful secret that is unseemly to mention” (1), even to ourselves. Lucía, however, fixates on death. This obsession results in her belief that “De hecho, no hay criatura viviente que no tenga miedo: se diría que la sustancia misma de la vida es el temor” (122). This fear permeates Lucía’s thoughts of aging: “Un terror ontológico y elemental: tenía miedo de envejecer y de morir” (141). This view of aging as the representation of death itself causes the concept of aging to suffer from the language that constructs it as *inherently* abject: it cannot be us, it must be a representation of an *other*. Lucía exhibits this in the ‘othering’ of the old woman

that she describes as a mummy. Even though she acknowledges that "...si se mira bien, todos los humanos nos estamos muriendo, todos estamos recorriendo un frenético pataleo el corto trayecto que separa la negrura previa al nacimiento de la negrura posterior a la muerte... pero en definitiva todo es cuestión de tiempo y de esperar un poco" (337); when the corporal form of an aged body confronts this consciousness she cannot assimilate this image. This reflects the societal compulsion to reject aging. We attempt to avoid the awareness that it affects us all, but we cannot ignore the results.

Lucía expresses yet another cultural language of aging when she questions the idea that her viability as an individual person will diminish as she ages: "Ya lo dicen las encuestas: a partir de determinada edad desapareces... 'De los 45 en adelante', dicen las groseras tablas estadísticas, como si a partir de ese mojón se extendiera el espacio exterior, la Tierra del Nunca Jamás, el despreciable Universo de los Invisibles. Pues bien, justamente ahí se encontraba Lucía: pisando el confín del acabóse" (143). Lucía highlights here the importance that society places on categorizing people by age. When one reaches the age of forty-five then there is no differentiation between someone who is eighty-five: "De los 45 en adelante" (143). Because of this Lucía fears that being forty-one (as she labels forty-five as the 'point of no return') she is on the cusp of the time when society will no longer value her. She cynically remarks that her end nears; not her death, just her disappearance in the eyes of society. Her tone implies that she thinks this is ridiculous, as "la Tierra del Nunca Jamás" (143) with capital letters demonstrates, but at the same time she supports this cultural construct by believing it to be true, "pisando el confín de acabóse" (143).

She manifests this belief that age detracts rather than adds value in her use of language elsewhere as well: "Con los años, los humanos nos solemos ir achicando por dentro. De las mil

posibilidades de ser que tenemos todos, a menudo acabamos imponiendo sólo una: y las demás se petrifican, se marchitan. Los escritores-profetas del sentimiento ñoño le llaman a eso madurar, aclararse las ideas y asumir la edad, pero a mí me parece que es como pudrirse” (157-58). She utterly disparages the idea that to mature and to know oneself better are valid concepts of aging with the use of the word *ñoño*, as if this idea were childish and ridiculous to her. Also, the use of the word *pudrirse*, to rot, to decompose, presents an astonishingly negative view of aging. Lucía has internalized the language that rejects the positive aspects of aging and mirrors it back to us. Woodward explains, “By experiencing aging, I am referring primarily to the internalization of our culture’s denial and distaste for aging, which is understood in terms of decline, not in terms of growth and change” (Introduction xii). The word *pudrirse* does, however, elucidate why aging represents the abject. No one wants to admit that the body ages every minute of every day, and so one thrusts it outside of the subject that inhabits the body: “...prefería creerse y hacernos creer que su decadencia tenía una causa externa y accidental, que no era producto de esa ignominia personal que es la vejez que nos crece dentro” (188). We cannot face it, so we place it outside ourselves: it is abject.

Lucía also reinforces Félix’s perception that ‘old’ signifies the loss of everything, including her identity: “Al envejecer te ibas desintegrando, y los objetos, baratos sucedáneos del sujeto que fuiste, iban suplantando tu existencia cada vez más rota y fragmentada” (274). This disintegration happens not only to Lucía, but to everyone. As Ellen Mayock asserts, “Furthermore, the rapid transition to the use of ‘tú’...generalizes the experience for all middle-aged women, who experience that preterit sense of that which they were...and the corporal fragmentation...visible in their real and metaphorical mirrors” (62). In this use of ‘tú’ Lucía addresses the reader directly, simultaneously making the experience of the fragmentation of the

subject both specific and general. That is to say, ‘tú’ speaks to the ‘I’ reading specifically, as well as every other reader addressed by this ‘tú.’ Everyone who reads this line inhabits the same subject. Everyone, with no exceptions she implies, suffers the same fate as he ages. Lucía thinks this fragmentation robs her of her identity; the person in the mirror does not look like the person she pictures herself to be, who is *younger*. In addition to one’s identity, Lucía also believes that “Crecer es perder y es traicionarse: pierdes a los seres queridos, pierdes la juventud, pierdes tu propia vida y a menudo acabas perdiendo también tus ideales, y ahí es donde empieza la traición a uno mismo” (426). To both Lucía and Félix, then, age equates to loss of everything, including oneself. Ashlee Balena comments on Lucía’s perspective: “For Lucía Romero, her existence has resulted in a series of one loss after another, and upon turning forty years of age she finds herself in an abyss of confusion. Because of her body’s physical changes, she no longer recognizes herself, nor does she recognize the man she married, and she now focuses on trying not to fall to pieces as she approaches her final demise, death” (38). At this point, however, Lucía finds *no* redeeming qualities in growing older. She in fact demonstrates that she is ‘falling apart.’ She is a convincing mouthpiece for the negative cultural constructs of aging.

In contrast to Lucía and Félix, doña Bárbara in Montero’s *Bella y oscura* exhibits a duality of awareness that defies the cultural norms of aging. She is an aged grandmother, but her actual age is unknown: “Un día le pregunté cuántos años tenía; y ella me contestó que los tenía todos: ‘Cuando yo nací, comenzó el mundo’” (27). At the beginning of the novel she controls her family, including her large, angry son. No one questions her authority. The description of doña Bárbara by her young granddaughter, Baba, reflects doña Bárbara’s strength and wisdom: “Doña Bárbara era tan sabia, tan fuerte, tan grande: no era de extrañar que lo hubiera visto todo” (27). Baba’s description of her physical characteristics also present a woman that exudes physical

presence and intelligence: “Era una mujer muy alta y muy robusta; los huesos de su rostro, fuertes y prominentes...los ojos, dorados y pequeños, intensísimos. Hubiera tenido cara de rapaz de no ser por su gran mandíbula asimétrica” (27). This woman exhibits no weakness; her body and will are strong. The description of how she dresses and comports herself also merits attention: “Siempre iba vestida de manera imponente, incluso cuando permanecía acostada...Crujían sus trajes al menor movimiento, pesados ropones de tafetán y seda, de terciopelo y brocados, en color verde oscuro, azul fondo de mar, rojo sangre reseca; el cabello, muy blanco, lo llevaba apretado en un moño perfecto” (27). She takes great pride in her appearance, resembling a queen on her throne. She brings attention to herself with every movement she makes. She wears bold and beautiful colors. Despite her age, doña Bárbara epitomizes style and strength, and this directly reflects her refusal to conform to the cultural imagination of age. She may claim to be as old as the world, but she certainly refuses to act as if she were. She is such a force of will that the people in her neighborhood do not subject her to the usual marginalization and invisibility of old age: “Sé que mi abuela vestía de un modo raro; pero entonces me parecía una reina, y en los ojos de los demás creía miedo y a lo mejor envidia, nunca compasión, curiosidad o desprecio” (38). Their envy and fear contrast sharply with the usual pity and weakness associated with the old. She also defies the construct that old age signifies nothing more than waiting for death. Despite her age, she appreciates her life and knows the value of it: “Entre el mar de tinieblas del tiempo que fue y el interminable mar del tiempo que vendrá, tú estás viviendo ahora, justo ahora, una chispa de luz y de casualidad entre la nada. Un privilegio...Con todas esas personas que ni siquiera saben que están vivos. Cuando yo podría hacer tan buen uso de todos esos años que otros malgastan” (39). She has no intention whatsoever of disappearing, or of wasting the time she has left lamenting that her youth is gone.

She not only sustains a positive attitude, she also maintains a sharp mind. She has a multitude of stray cats that she allows to enter and exit freely from her rooms, and as her granddaughter, Baba, describes, “Doña Bárbara tenía muy buena memoria y siempre llamaba a cada gato por el nombre adecuado” (40). She names her cats using gravestones in the cemetery,<sup>12</sup> so each name contains three parts, and she always refers to them with all three names. She truly has an excellent memory. Doña Bárbara defies the cultural languages that construct the concept of old age.

She keeps her mortality in mind, however, and knows that people prefer not to do this: “Celebramos con mucho empeño el día de nuestro nacimiento, pero la otra fecha más importante de nuestras vidas, que es la de nuestra muerte, la ignoramos por completo...atrasamos ese día crítico completamente ciegos e ignorantes...sin saber que ese mismo día, veinte años después, o cinco, o uno, daríamos cualquier cosa sólo por alcanzar la madrugada” (75). Her wisdom permeates her interactions with her granddaughter; she shares all her knowledge of the world every chance she gets. It seems as though she will live forever. There are moments, nevertheless, when she shows her age, and her granddaughter must face the truth: “Estaba de mal humor, áspera e irritable, pero en esta ocasión, cosa extraordinaria, no me sentí amedrentada. Fue la primera vez que la vi vieja, en vez de simplemente descomunal y sobrehumana” (75-76). This provides her granddaughter’s first glimpse of her grandmother’s mortality and imminent demise.

Doña Bárbara also demonstrates acute awareness of the difference between her own body and that of her granddaughter’s: “Fíjate qué mano. Fíjate que piel. Suave como la seda de mi blusa. Firme y fresca. Es un placer tocarte la mano. Y contemplarte. Toda tú tan nuevecita. Tan llena de vida que la derramas por todas partes. Mientras que nosotros los viejos estamos tan

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<sup>12</sup> Mary Harges writes that doña Bárbara “fights death” with her trips to the cemetery. Being around the dead makes her feel vibrantly alive by comparison (“Language” 172).

comidos por la muerte que manchamos de oscuridad a quien se nos acerca” (76). This acknowledgement makes her unique. Though she does not *act* her age, she regularly makes comments disparaging her age and her aged body, while maintaining an active and fulfilling life. She shows an awareness of how age affects her body, but she does not allow this to negate her vitality. Unlike Lucía and Félix in *La hija del caníbal*, doña Bárbara focuses on life, not death. Yet her mortality never leaves her mind: “Esas son otras fechas cruciales que también se nos pasan inadvertidas. Es extraño que vivas estúpidamente esas ocasiones tan importantes sin apreciar su transcendencia. La última vez que olí al último de mis bebés. La última vez que corrí por la calle sin ninguna razón...La última vez que me besó un hombre” (76). She feels her life coming to a close, she does not deny this, but she appreciates every moment that she has left: “La abuela nunca se podía marchar de los sitios que le gustaban. Mientras los demás paseábamos, investigábamos y descubríamos, ella siempre se quedaba pegada a la primera piedra, ávida y absorta...cada vez que abandonaba un paisaje que la emocionaba, se sentía un poco más cerca de su muerte” (95). She neither denies nor shuns her mortality; she uses this knowledge as an impetus to savor every day. People in Western society, on the other hand, reject thoughts of mortality, and in so doing lose sight of the importance of every day granted to the living.

Her granddaughter learns in a terrible way the difference that one day can make: “Hasta que llegó, en efecto, al día fatal; porque si hay algo seguro en este inseguro mundo es que el tiempo siempre se cumple y que el final siempre nos atrapa” (88). Escudero comments on Baba’s realization: “El ser humano, imposibilitado de refugiarse de por vida en el claustro materno, está destinado desde el momento en el que es arrojado al mundo a enfrentarse, en absoluta soledad, a la decadencia y la muerte...” (“Bella” 89). Though doña Bárbara is her grandmother, she certainly represents a maternal figure. And once she wastes away and dies, Baba is truly alone.

The family's house burns to the ground, with all of doña Bárbara's photos, her treasured clothes that were such an integral part of her identity, and everything that she held dear. At this point she rapidly disintegrates both physically and emotionally: "La abuela se echó llorar y esa debilidad tan inhabitual en ella me hizo intuir la dimensión de la catástrofe" (114). Doña Bárbara's physical collapse reflects what cultural languages speak of old age: "...doña Bárbara ya no parecía doña Bárbara...sobre todo carecía de algo interior: del hierro caliente que antes le asomaba a los ojos, y de la altura, porque ahora era mucho más baja..." (123). Doña Bárbara has lost the ability to physically intimidate others, as well as the light of intelligence and fire that burned in her eyes. "De hecho, la abuela ya no volvió a salir y se levantaba cada día menos de la cama. Estaba enferma, o eso decía ella, aunque yo no podía acabar de creérmelo, aun viéndola así de alicaída y de bajita" (123). By staying in bed and becoming ill doña Bárbara has become the equivalent of a person in a nursing home, confined to her bed with no desire to interact with the world.

At this point she is the culmination of 'old' in the imagination of society. With the loss of all that made her who she was, she loses all sense of her identity. Esposito explains that "...aging presents a multi-faceted series of challenges—biologically to our sense of organic familiarity, psychologically to our sense of personal integrity, and sociologically to our sense of social worth and justice" (5). Doña Bárbara faces all these challenges; she has lost her bodily integrity, her psychological strength, and her place as head of the family. Her son, Segundo, dominates her, and even has the courage to yell at her. She now represents what is *expected* of her age. She disintegrates to the point that her granddaughter finds it difficult to recognize her as the same woman, which symbolizes how identity can fracture in old age. Her condition continues to deteriorate: "Doña Bárbara empeoraba. Las manos le temblaban y la cabeza se le había llenado

de unas ideas tan oscuras como sus ojos” (134). Nothing can stop her decline; she disintegrates before her granddaughter’s eyes: “Después de aquel día doña Bárbara empeoró bastante. Apenas si hablaba; se pasaba las horas contemplando el rectángulo del cielo y dormitando” (135). Doña Bárbara has become the woman that Lucía in *La hija del caníbal* imagined staring at the walls waiting for death. Her body changes as well, inhabiting that area of the abject: “...no se trataba de que hubiera perdido algunos kilos, sino que había menguado incluso en aquellas zonas del cuerpo que son imposibles menguar, como las manos, que antes eran unas manazas dominadoras y unos puños terribles, y ahora tan sólo eran un montón de huesillos, arañitas traslúcidas paseando torpe y lentamente por el embozo” (144). She transforms into someone almost unrecognizable. Doña Bárbara exemplifies “...la imposibilidad de concebir alguna forma de salvación que redima al individuo de la putrefacción a la que está condenado” (Escudero, “La presencia” 25). Unfortunately, her condition gets worse still: “Tenía la carne llagada y los miembros como muertos, y dentro de todo ese destrozo ardía su inteligencia entera. Ella...sufría ahora la humillación de un organismo sin control, sucio y descompuesto. Estaba presa en el interior de su cuerpo, pasajera a la fuerza de su viaje biológico, y pasaban los días y ella seguía a la espera, sitiada por el fin de las cosas y los dolores” (144-45). This description of her body as *sucio* and *descompuesto*<sup>13</sup> symbolizes exactly the ideas of old age that we fear the most and that make aging so abject: a body that we are no longer able to control, a stranger to ourselves in its decomposition. A mind, a consciousness, imprisoned in a body that utterly betrays us.

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<sup>13</sup> Though Escudero writes the following comment in reference to the novel *Te trataré como a una reina*, it has striking relevance to not only doña Bárbara’s situation, but also to every other character discussed in this chapter: “Las referencias excrementales son un presagio, un anuncio constante del destino de los seres humanos, de la putrefacción del cuerpo. A través de estas imágenes se recuerda a cada paso que los seres están irremediabilmente destinados a morir, a convertirse en un desperdicio hediondo. La muerte, percibida como algo trágico y espantoso, representa...la victoria final de lo excremental” (“La visión” 116).

Kristeva describes this utter disintegration as a consuming of the body: "...I am not the one that devours, I am being devoured by him; a third party therefore (he, a third person) is devouring me" (39). This third person, this one who devours, is age. So in the end, doña Bárbara manifests all the cultural fears of old age. Her body practically rots in her bed as her mind burns, trapped in this ruin of a body; she no longer has autonomy and depends on everyone; and she has lost all her significance in the world around her. She dies in her bed only a shell of a person remaining. Everything about her situation exemplifies the abjectness of old age.<sup>14</sup>

This abjectness is also established in two characters in Montero's *Te trataré como a una reina*. The first, the mother of Antonio and Antonia<sup>15</sup> is described as "...esa anciana que ahora apestaba a muerte y a orines y a la que él era incapaz de soportar" (69). The reference to the smell associated with old people recurs in societal descriptions of them. This 'smell of death' carries weight in the description that Antonio gives, for it highlights that a great part of our fear of the old body actually reflects our fear of death.<sup>16</sup> Woodward explains this association: "We cannot detach the body in decline from the meanings we attach to old age. The inevitable and literal associations of advanced old age with increasing frailty and untimely death itself presents a limit beyond which we cannot go. The body in advanced old age not only represents death; it is close to death and will in due time be inhabited by death" (*Discontents* 19). Antonio's disgust with his mother's aged body so overwhelms him that he is unable to visit her. Kristeva helps to explain his rejection of her: "...what is *abject*, on the contrary, the jettisoned object, is

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<sup>14</sup> Escudero writes that "La lectura de *Bella y oscura*...confirma la consolidación en la narrativa de Rosa Montero de una nueva temática que supera ya los planteamientos exclusivamente feministas para dar entrada a una angustiosa reflexión sobre la trágica condición humana" ("La visión" 126).

<sup>15</sup> Antonio and Antonia are siblings. Their parents named Antonia after her father, Antonio, because they feared that her brother would die from illness as a child, and they wanted his name to carry on.

<sup>16</sup> In reference to this passage, Escudero writes that "El mal olor, la suciedad, los deshechos corporales, no son sólo representación de la materia inerte, sino que se constituyen en una metáfora de la destrucción, en imagen de la propia muerte" ("La visión" 116).

radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses” (1). He has so fundamentally rejected her that he no longer accepts her as his mother. He cannot cope with the condition of her body, knowing and remembering what she was like in her youth, and compares that to her state now: “...en la penumbra, con una esquina de sol sobre la cara, el pelo negro, larga de esqueleto, delicada, allí estaba bellísima; ...tan hermosa que daban ganas de morirse. Pero eso era al principio, cuando él era verdaderamente muy pequeño; después madre empezó a deshacerse muy deprisa, y todo se le marchitó, menos los dientes” (70). The changes in her aged body inspire horror in him, and he cannot overcome this. This *thing* that smells of death and urine no longer represents his mother.<sup>17</sup> Escudero comments on the images of the abjectness of old age in Montero’s novels: “Las abundantes imágenes excrementales que aparecen en estas novelas—residuos corporales, desperdicios, malos olores—asociadas a la vejez y a la muerte, al deterioro y a la descomposición, refuerzan en un plano simbólico la visión pesimista que preside la obra de Montero, la percepción de una realidad corporal y de un cosmos en continua degradación” (“La presencia” 24). This utterly pessimistic view of aging present in Montero’s novels directly reflects how Western society conceptualizes the aging process. There are, however, alternatives to this point of view, which I shall discuss later.

The images that Escudero describes are also present in Antonia’s depiction of her mother. Antonia’s description demonstrates all the areas where our fear of old age manifests itself: “Porque madre estaba un poco loca. O a lo mejor era que vivía ya en ese mundo de los viejos y los ciegos. A veces...a su madre le lloraban los ojos miopes por sí solos, y derramaba gruesos lagrimones...sin que la vieja se apercibiera de su propio llanto. A veces hablaba de su marido como si aún viviese...” (107) She no longer has control or awareness of her body, she has lost her

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<sup>17</sup> Escudero also writes that “Las imágenes excrementales aparecen asociadas a lo largo de la novela, y de forma muy significativa, a la vejez y a la muerte” (“La visión” 115).

mental capacities, talks to her dead husband, and is utterly alone in a world in which she no longer has any function or place. The sadness expressed in this passage truly disturbs the mind, but the message is crystal clear: old is ugly, disgusting, lonely and abject.

The second character in *Te trataré como a una reina*, Benigno,<sup>18</sup> also reflects this cultural language of old age. Though he is only sixty-three years old, the descriptions of him by others and of himself are entirely and utterly negative. He works for Antonio, and his job provides the singular meaning to his life. He describes himself thus: “Es que desde que don Antonio falta mi vida no es ni asomo de lo que era. Tengo 63 años, soy soltero y solo. Desde hace mucho tiempo, tanto que ya he perdido la memoria de lo que hubo antes, mi vida se ha centrado en mi relación con don Antonio y en la redacción de mi ópera magna, una novela épica” (202). No one believes that Benigno will ever write his ‘master work;’ he perpetuates this fantasy in an attempt to give meaning to a life that he clearly believes has lost all other significance: “No me queda nada, joven ¿sabe usted?” (203). This illustrates again that old age signifies loss of everything of importance, which Kristeva’s clarifies: “The abjection of self would be the culminating form of that experience of the subject to which it is revealed that all its objects are based merely on the inaugural *loss* that laid the foundations of its own being” (5, emphasis original). Thus Benigno has based his identity on his usefulness in society, his job, and when that ends his subject will have lost its foundation; with this comes the abjection of his subject.<sup>19</sup> After he retires, he believes that he will have nothing left to live for: “Pronto me jubilaré y la vida de un jubilado es

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<sup>18</sup> Benigno works for Antonio as his assistant.

<sup>19</sup> “Este tipo de segregación cultural está en relación con la obsesión productivista propia de la ‘modernización’ capitalista: si, como sucede en la cultura del capitalismo, a los viejos se les considera más como ‘jubilados’ (no trabajadores) que como personas, entonces no es raro que la sociedad ‘adulta’ segregue hacia ellos una actitud estigmatizadora y dirigista...A tal punto llega la cuestión, que los interesados no temen sólo el retiro por lo que tiene de quebranto económico, sino que también a veces les acarrea problemas de salud y equilibrio emocional” (Ibáñez 78).

un desierto...Alguien para acompañar mis tardes y mis miedos, sólo eso quería, sólo eso. Las tardes sobre todo, son tan tristes” (203). Benigno expresses the emptiness of his life, and the emptiness of his inner being.

The loneliness that Benigno expresses echoes how Lucía in *La hija del caníbal* assumed all old people must feel: “Corren tiempos duros, joven, y yo me siento solo, solo y viejo” (204). Judith Butler deals with the abject in a social setting that helps us to understand why Benigno’s situation represents the abject: “The abject designates here precisely those ‘unlivable’ and ‘uninhabitable’ zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the ‘unlivable’ is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject” (*Bodies* 3). As society considers the old useless and no longer valuable, marginalized to the point of nonexistence, Benigno represents the ‘not that,’ excluded from being part of the social fabric. He has lost the status of the subject; in his retirement he will no longer exist as a valuable human being, which negates his subjectivity. Loneliness, solitude and loss of value societally are the culturally constructed languages that make retirement due to age inhabit the abject. As Beauvoir explains, “Leisure does not open up new possibilities for the retired man; just when he is at last set free from compulsion and restraint, the means of making use of his liberty are taken from him. He is condemned to stagnate in boredom and loneliness, a mere throw-out” (6). Benigno agrees with Beauvoir’s assessment: “Nada. Eso no es nada. Es el vacío, joven, es como si uno no viviera” (203).

Benigno inspires pity in the reader because of this utter loneliness, but arouses revulsion in Antonio: “Es un olor a alcantarilla. A muerto...Está Usted podrido. Es verdaderamente inaguantable” (145).<sup>20</sup> Montero uses this word again to describe an aging person: *podrido*, rotten,

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<sup>20</sup> Escudero comments on this passage, writing that “Estas y otras citas enmarcan de forma precisa el contexto en el que deben situarse las alusiones excrementales...” (“La visión” 115).

decomposed. This language has a clear effect on Benigno's self-perception, as Bakhtin explains: "For any individual consciousness living in it, language is not an abstract system of normative forms but rather a concrete heteroglot conception of the world" (293). Antonio's saying this directly to Benigno causes him to accept the 'truth' of this language. He even apologizes to Antonio for smelling this way and offending him. This discourse also contributes to Benigno believing that his entire life is decomposing and rotting, as "...aging can be a trauma for all of us, existentially" (Kaplan 172).

Antonio's treatment of Benigno demonstrates his own existential dilemma with aging and his fear of death. Benigno's very presence repulses him: "...el viejo estaba cerca, muy cerca. Contagioso, contaminante. Una marea de papeles y el abismo" (145). Antonio feels contaminated by death (*abismo*) just by being near him. Benigno signifies, therefore, death incarnate. Furman elucidates this association that Antonio makes: "Undoubtedly contributing to this devaluation of the old is the association people make between old age and death. We constitute, after all, a society that aggressively avoids grappling with death at an existential level. As a consequence, older people elicit anxiety about younger people's own mortality" (93). Benigno's proximity repulses Antonio because he must confront his own impermanence: "Excrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.)," Kristeva explains, "stand for the danger to identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death" (71). The old are threatening because they are a corporal manifestation of death.

Montero constructs a metaphor of the decay and disease that old age signifies in the descriptions of the bar in the novel, *El Desiré*. In fact, the depiction of the bar contains all of the elements that Kristeva claims represent the abject: "Así iba todo en el *Desiré*. Lo que se rompía

ya no se recomponía. El club se deshacía en el olvido, se pudría como un cadáver gigantesco. Las bombillas rotas, la moqueta alternando peladuras y costras de añejas vomitonas, el retrete femenino atrancado con mierdas milenarias. Y esas palmeras de la decoración, anémicas de color, con el cartón despellejado y despuntado” (28). In this description everything is broken, never to be repaired, just like the aging body that disintegrates and cannot ever be whole again. The bar disappears into oblivion, the forgotten space that the old inhabit in society. The carpet is crusted with vomit stains, the women’s bathroom is clogged with literal excrement. The account of the palm trees on the wall as decoration losing their color, peeling off the walls, and retaining none of their once vibrant colors coincides perfectly with the socially constructed language of the aged body: it loses its vibrancy, the years peel youth from the body, and only a sad representation of what was once beautiful remains. Bella, a singer in *El Desiré*, sums it up succinctly: “Qué asco de lugar, se dijo Bella. Una bombilla pelada en el techo, los azulejos amarillentos y pringosos, olor a meadas rancias. Qué asco de club, qué asco de vida, qué asco de trabajo” (26). Disgust and revulsion, these are the associations society constructs around the concept of old age. Escudero’s remarks support my analysis of how Montero represents aging in her novels. He writes, “La vejez aparece siempre presentada como una etapa trágica y solitaria, donde la vida carece de sentido y donde el ser humano, carcomido por la enfermedad o la decadencia física, aguarda temeroso el cumplimiento de su condena” (“La presencia” 23-24). Throughout her novels Montero expresses the fears of aging and death, but in later discussions I shall show that she also offers evidence that one need not focus on the negative aspects of aging.

Desarthe also deals with the dread of aging and dying<sup>21</sup> and the subsequent disgust and revulsion that this fear engenders. In her novel *Les bonnes intentions* three characters epitomize

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<sup>21</sup> Day writes that “The experience of death and loss, like the presence of our aging population, is often screened off from the affluent life style of the successful middle classes. Not only is death a question that we have not dealt

the loathing and repulsion present in the cultural languages of old age. The novel centers itself around Sonia, a young mother of two small boys who has bought an apartment in Paris with her husband. She must deal with her neighbors in the apartment building, which presents many difficulties. Three of the neighbors are very old, and the depictions of them inspire horror, disgust and repulsion in the reader.

We first meet Niniche, the servant of the two caretakers of the apartment building. Her body is decrepit; she walks with a cane and has trouble moving about. Nevertheless, her responsibilities include all the cleaning and shopping for the caretakers, an abominable pair of human beings. Sonia gives a description that highlights the abjectness of Niniche's body: "C'est Niniche qui a tout pris. Un grand coup dans la tête. Maintenant, elle se teint même les cils. Je pense que ça doit piquer les yeux. Avec ses petits poils blancs hérissant ses paupières, elle s'apparente de plus en plus aux créatures abyssales mi-poisson, mi-lézard, nées aveugles, gluant dans les mares glacées de grottes insoupçonnables" (102). She has become so alien that she no longer represents a human being to Sonia. Butler's description of the Other explains how Sonia sees Niniche: "The 'abject' designates that which has been expelled from the body, discharged as excrement, literally rendered 'Other.' This appears as an expulsion of alien elements, but the alien is effectively established through this expulsion" (*Trouble* 169). Sonia's repulsion causes her to expel Niniche *from Niniche's own body*. Half-fish, half-lizard, Niniche no longer occupies her own body; some alien creature has replaced her. Niniche also cannot speak well due to her age. To Sonia this provides further evidence in favor of rendering her the Other, as she can no longer communicate like a functioning human would: "L'ascension est pénible. Niniche me touche le bras sans cesse, pour attirer mon attention, pour me confier des histoires que je ne

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with as a culture, but aging and death are rarely a concern until we are faced with an immediate experience of physical limitation or tragedy" (688).

comprends pas, parce qu'elle a trop de mal à articuler" (126). Sonia goes on to describe Niniche physically: "Je regarde ses joues molles, son petit front défoncé dont la couleur et la texture étrange m'évoquent les blocs de halva suant dans la Cellophane" (126-27). Sonia's perception of Niniche's skin, its texture and color, further dehumanizes Niniche. She now resembles food, an even further departure from human than the animal she was previously. Niniche simply wants to be sociable, but Sonia's repugnance for the state of Niniche's body is so strong that she revokes Niniche's connection to the human race.

Even more than Niniche, however, Monsieur and Madame Dupotier bring to life all of our nightmares about old age. Sonia describes Madame Dupotier thus: "Lorsque je la voyais sortir de chez elle, j'étais stupéfiée par sa blancheur, ce côté poussiéreux, comme si l'immeuble entier lui était tombé dessus et qu'elle s'en était miraculeusement sortie indemne, avec, pour seule séquelle, cette pellicule plâtreuse qui s'incrétait dans chaque pore de sa peau" (20). Sonia denies so vehemently that this represents her possible future that she makes Madame Dupotier an inanimate object. The exclusion of the possibility that her own body could ever be in such a condition, and thus her dehumanizing of Madame Dupotier, defines the abject.

Sonia continues her debasement of Madame Dupotier: "Là encore, j'aurais aimé lui prendre les mains. Mais les siennes étaient encore plus repoussantes que celles de son épouse, à cause de ses ongles qu'il avait cessé de couper et qui s'incarnaient, noircis, dans la chair grise... Parce qu'elles me semblaient fournir un indice fiable du retour, avec le temps, de l'humain vers l'animal" (21). Once again, Madame Dupotier embodies a space less than human. A body in this condition could not be a human being. Sonia's refusal to acknowledge Madame Dupotier as a human being deflects her anxieties that she will one day resemble her, and that she has no control over this: "But whether we are well or ill, at the gut (biological) level, aging

means confronting our mortality,” Melamed explains, “not as an abstraction, but with its full complement of messiness and vulnerability. The signs of age remind us all that we are not in control of what concerns us most: our life” (44). Aging and death are beyond our control, as well as how others perceive the signs of aging that mark our bodies. Soon after this description Madame Dupotier dies, leaving her husband alone in the world. His dog dies, then his sixty-three-year-old son dies. He is the last of his family to survive.

The representation of M. Dupotier portrays most clearly the abjectness that consumes culture’s languages of old age. He lives in a rancid apartment that is overcome with “une lente décomposition” (30), just like his body. Roaches and filth are everywhere. The further description of his apartment so horrifies that Sonia’s nausea affects even the reader. It bears citing at length due to the abundance of revolting images:

J’ai fait le flou pour annuler le grouillement des blattes et trouver la force de lever le bras vers les manettes de commande de la chaudière. Le commutateur orné d’une flamme était si poisseux que j’en ai eu un haut-le-cœur...juste à côté...se trouvait une pile de vaisselle sale...L’ensemble était plutôt verdâtre, les morceaux de nourriture s’étaient incrustés dans l’éponge...un voile gris fondait le tout dans une pérennité statuesque... Je suis donc restée dans la cuisine et j’ai fait ce que je n’aurais pas dû. Ouvrant mes narines, que j’avais maintenues hermétiquement fermées jusque-là, j’ai inspiré, les yeux plongés dans un tas de vert-de-gris. Il n’est pas exagéré de parler de suffocation. J’ai pensé que c’était peut-être ça cette odeur, qui les avait tués les uns après les autres. (46-47)

The accumulation of details in this passage produces an overwhelming sense of despair. There are several images that conjure the image of death and decay. The swarming of cockroaches brings to mind the infestation of maggots in a rotting corpse. The stickiness and grime that make Sonia retch resemble the fluids released from the body as it decomposes into a pile of sludge. The green mold on the plates of food, the veil of grey, and the sense that nothing has moved during a great length of time associates the scene with the stillness of death. When Sonia finally dares to breathe the smell of the apartment suffocates her, threatens to take the very breath of life

from her. This smell, she speculates, must have been what killed Madame Dupotier and the dog. This epic depiction correlates to the repugnance that old bodies inspire in the young, a metaphor for the asphyxiating fear of the decomposing aging body that cultural languages construct. Kristeva's explanation of a component of the abject elucidates Sonia's reaction: "We are no longer within the sphere of the unconscious but at the limit of primal repression that, nevertheless, has discovered an intrinsically corporeal and already signifying brand, symptom, and sign: repugnance, disgust, abjection" (11). Sonia's fears, while she interacts with the filth of his living conditions, take on an actual physical manifestation. This apartment represents the very real decay of M. Dupotier's body, the entity that Sonia vehemently rejects.

Sonia feels repugnance and fear, but also pity, as M. Dupotier is literally starving to death. His daughter-in-law has given the caretakers a monthly allowance, only a pittance, in order to feed him. The caretakers, however, spend it on themselves. He knocks on Sonia's door every single day begging for food. Because she feels such revulsion, at first she only gives him a bit of chocolate and some crackers through the door. She does not allow him in the apartment for fear that he will think he is welcome there and stay. His begging her for food highly annoys Sonia; she does not wish to concern herself with this old man's plight: "C'est la cinquième fois aujourd'hui que M. Dupotier vient sonner à ma porte. J'ouvre en réprimant une franche envie de meurtre. Pourquoi s'accroche-t-il ? Il ne lui reste rien. Sa seule occupation consiste à guetter mes heures d'entrée et de sortie, à calquer les gargouillis de son estomac sur mon emploi du temps. M. Dupotier a faim. Du matin au soir" (51). The pathetic elements are striking. He so annoys Sonia that she wishes to murder him; however, what she actually wants to do is banish his image and existence from her mind. She wants to annihilate the necessity to face her fears that M. Dupotier embodies. There is nothing left in the world to him other than listening to her comings

and goings in order to know when to beg for food. The debasement and misery that he suffers make the reader want to never grow old. She does not, at first, wish to help him; this is due, as Beauvoir explains, to the fact that Sonia no longer views him as a human being: “In any case, either by their virtue or their degradation they stand outside humanity” (4). He suffers such humiliation that she cannot feel compassion for him.

At length, however, her lack of sympathy begins to weigh on her. Sonia realizes more each day that he needs food more substantial than the little morsels that she gives him. She knows that he suffers from starvation, and the guilt of this knowledge finally forces her to feed him better: “C’est de potage qu’il a besoin, de blanc de poulet, de compote et de laitages frais. Mais si je commence à me laisser aller sur cette pente, je glisserai jusqu’en bas. C’est inévitable. Je l’assiérai à ma table, je l’adopterai” (52). Beauvoir elucidates the reason that Sonia fears ‘adopting’ M. Dupotier, of actually taking responsibility for him, this old man who desperately needs her help:

When we look at the image of our own future provided by the old we do not believe it: an absurd inner voice whispers that *that* will never happen to us—when *that* happens it will no longer be ourselves that it happens to. Until the moment it is upon us old age is something that only affects other people. So it is understandable that society should manage to prevent us from seeing our own kind, our fellow-men, when we look at the old. (5)

She does not wish to help him because he does not represent an actual person to her. If he were, would she be able to shut the door in his face as she does? Like Niniche and Madame Dupotier, Sonia has stripped M. Dupotier of his very humanity in order not to have to face the reality of his condition. If she does not have to look at him, then she does not have to face the threat of old age that he so terrifyingly embodies.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Day writes, “That French culture has alienated the elderly and dying from the social mainstream has not been contested in recent scholarship” (689).

She does finally allow him into her apartment, and she feeds him a substantial meal. His gratitude is heartbreaking. She, on the other hand, shows once again her disgust: “Je m’assieds face à lui et fais la conversation sans prendre garde aux horribles bruits de succion, de déglutition, au bouillon qui dégouline sur le menton et tache le pyjama” (65-66). Sonia’s actions demonstrate the cultural languages that motivate us to turn away from the image of the old. This inability to control one’s own body, the disgust that it engenders in others, these are the fears of old age that the young harbor; the loss of dignity beyond one’s control to remedy.

M. Dupotier has also lost all dignity in losing his autonomy. The caretakers begin locking him in his apartment so that he cannot beg for food. As Sonia returns home one day she hears him scratching at his door begging for help. Not only is he a prisoner in his own decrepit body, he is also a prisoner in his own apartment. The image of him sequestered in his apartment represents the repression that creates the abject. She calls the police in order to file a report and to get them to release him. The police show no sympathy; they are irritated that they must deal with this situation, much like the very presence of the aged annoys society. The caretakers have placed a sign on his door forbidding anyone to feed him: “IL EST INTERDIT AUX PERSONNES DE L’IMMEUBLE DE NOURRIR M. DUPOTIER...J’ai pensé aux panonceaux fixés aux enclos des zoos. IL EST INDERDIT DE NOURRIR LES ANIMAUX” (67). Once again, the aged are compared to animals, this time caged in a zoo, inherently dependent on caretakers for their very survival. M. Dupotier should elicit a feeling of despair in Sonia, but not for herself as he does. He should engender this feeling in her because he deserves to live a better life, to be respected as a human being. Beauvoir laments the fact that society treats the old in this manner: “The fact that for the last fifteen years of his life a man should be no more than a reject piece of scrap, reveals the failure of our civilization: if we were to look upon the old as human

beings, with a human life behind them, and not as so many walking corpses, this obvious truth would move us profoundly” (6). This demonstrates exactly how Sonia sees him, as a walking corpse, just as she saw Madame Dupotier. He only provokes revulsion, disgust, and a sense that he is utterly alien to her. He has lost all dignity, all autonomy, all his loved ones, even his ability to procure food. He has none of the characteristics that sustain a meaningful human life. M. Dupotier embodies the nightmare that is old age in Western culture.

In conclusion, this chapter demonstrates that both Montero and Desarthe manifest the negative cultural languages that construct the concept of age in the depictions of their characters. They both show how the fear of death disturbs the social order by inspiring fear and revulsion of the aged body; and also how the aged body confronts individuals in society, disturbing their identities by engendering the rejection of what signifies the ‘not me.’ In *La hija del caníbal*, in the character of Lucía, Montero highlights the detrimental effects that fear of aging and death can cause, as well as the categorical rejection of the aging body as abject. In Félix she represents the feelings of loss and decrepitude that can accompany old age. In *Te trataré como a una reina* Benigno signifies the loss of subjectivity that the old suffer due to the marginalization forced upon them. Both Montero and Desarthe use their characters to show the embodiment of the abjectness of old age in the repulsive and disintegrating bodies of Doña Bárbara in *Bella y oscura*, and Niniche, Madame and M. Dupotier in *Les bonnes intentions*. They show us the worst that *old* can be, as “The aging body as imagined and experienced and the aging body as represented structure each other in endless and reciprocal reverberation” (Woodward, *Discontents* 5). Their narratives reinforce culture’s negative views of old age, which allows the reader to contemplate the influence of these views.

However, the difference between doña Bárbara at the beginning of *Bella y oscura* and her state before her death serves the function of juxtaposing positive and negative narratives of old age. This highlights the choice that people have in the construction of the subject, and the possibility of rejecting the negative constructs that attempt to define them. All subjects and objects are constructed through the narration of the self, “Thus narrative is identity is embodiment is narrative. Our existence as bodies makes it possible for us to tell stories about ourselves and consequently make ourselves in the telling” (Amago 1041-42). The point is this: as aging subjects, which all of us are, we have the power in narrating our selves. If we choose a narrative that constructs us using negative cultural languages of aging, then we have let others speak our story for us, and we embody the reflection cast on us by their mirrors. We always have the option, however, to choose a different language.

Doña Bárbara exemplifies this choice at the beginning of *Bella y oscura*. Though we do not have the power to control the inevitable break down of the body, we do control how we view ourselves until the moment that death takes us. Like doña Bárbara and unlike Lucía, we can use the consciousness of our mortality as an inspiration to savor every moment, rather than rejecting the inevitability of death, losing sight of the importance of every day by doing so. By the end of *La hija del caníbal*, Félix has journeyed to this revelation. Amago writes, “...even while his existence as a body is a constant process of loss and decay, narrative gives form to our brief existence as material subjects...” (1036). The choice of this narrative constructs our self-perception. Lucía’s comment “Aquí estoy, inventando verdades y recordando mentiras para no disolverme en la nada absoluta” (412) shows the importance of narrative in maintaining the existence of the self, but it has another meaning. Words can also construct the “nada absoluta.” The absorption and internalization of negative cultural languages as we age creates the negative

space that consumes our identities and reduces us to a single concept: old. As Betty Friedan writes, “The image of age as inevitable decline and deterioration...was also a mystique of sorts, but one emanating not an aura of desirability, but a miasma of dread...how this dread of age fitted or distorted reality, making age so terrifying that we have to deny its very existence... I wondered if that dread, and the denial it breeds, was actually helping to *create* the ‘problem’ of age” (42, emphasis original). And so culture produces these languages of abjectness and dread, and narratives reflect back to us the images created by them, which creates a vicious circle of impressions of age trapped in the mirror as the aged body. The more we look into that mirror and see ourselves through this language, the more we internalize it and speak it as our own. Melamed elucidates this idea: “Ageism is not only an attitude of the young—in fact there is probably no other form of discrimination so meekly accepted by its victims. Surveys such as the Harris poll indicate that the negative attitudes toward old people held by the public are also widely endorsed by old people...” (30). The significance of this cannot be ignored. They have internalized these concepts, and this affects perception of not only themselves but of all other old people. When those that are aged refuse to rebel against these constructs, what hope do the rest of us have of changing them?

Kristeva asks a pertinent question in this regard: “The connection between the *unconscious and language*—what is the share of language learning or language activity in the constitution of object relations and its transformations?” (33). When these negative languages so permeate the discourse on aging, when they are able to enter the collective unconscious, then every person will suffer from the consequences. One can already see the results of this: a narcissistic culture obsessed with youth and maintaining a youthful appearance. When fear of old age becomes inextricably interwoven with the fear of death, for the two should *not* be

synonymous, the effect is no one wants to age *or* die. One is inevitable, the other is a gift. Those whose bodies show the marks of time have the power to change their narratives, and in the process may change society's discourse of old age. The more aging people who defy the perceived nothingness of old age (or the association with death incarnate) and speak their own stories, the better we will be able to conceptualize aging in a positive light. The fear of death should not consume our thoughts, because dying is no way to live.

## CHAPTER TWO MIRRORS AND THE OBSESSION WITH YOUTH

In this chapter I investigate the effects of the mirror, both literal and figurative, on the formation of identity of the characters in Montero's *Te trataré como a una reina*, *La hija del caníbal*, and *Instrucciones para salvar el mundo*; and Desarthe's *Mangez-moi*. I also consider how the obsession with youth in Western cultures affects the identity of older characters.

The mirror, whether friend or foe, is the surface upon which we judge ourselves. We scrutinize and dissect our bodies and faces. The perception of the reflection in the mirror, however, is not a singularity. It contains a multitude of objects within it, each reflecting a different voice, a different language imposed on that reflection, because "...the way we think about concepts or entities in themselves, or about the relationships between them, is highly influenced by how we speak of them" (Reischer 307). In other words, speech influences our conceptions of the reflection in the mirror. As Bakhtin explains, "The living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance; it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue" (276). This means that as we gaze at our reflections, we incorporate a multitude of cultural voices into what we see.<sup>23</sup> We perceive more than merely our surface representation. We add to this what our culture *tells* us to see, as well as our thoughts of others' evaluations when they look at us. A multiplicity of reflections fill that mirror. As Bordo explains, "What's still missing from this picture, though—and what was ultimately supplied in

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<sup>23</sup> "La vejez, que es un estado natural de la persona, queda identificada con el 'retiro' o 'jubilación' —que es una invención social—. Paralelamente, lo 'juvenil' preside más y más la cultura establecida. El *ethos* industrial u 'occidental' adquiere unos rasgos—éxito, competitividad, aceleración, agresividad—claramente identificados con la juventud; y de esta manera las personas de edad son percibidas como anacronismos incluso en las escenas cotidianas en las que puedan intervenir" (Ibáñez 78, emphasis original).

the twentieth century—is the recognition that when we look at bodies (including our own in the mirror), we don't just see biological nature at work, but values and ideals, differences and similarities that *culture* has 'written,' so to speak, on those bodies" (*Male Body* 26). We compare ourselves to others of our gender of the same age, to others of our gender who are younger and older, and also to what we consider to be the 'ideal,'<sup>24</sup> the list of possibilities is nearly endless: "Comparison and contrast: familiar dynamics for many women in twentieth-century American society, central elements in the construction and maintenance of femininity" Furman writes. "These dynamics do not cease in youth. They prevail in women's experience well into old age" (52).<sup>25</sup> A wealth of theories exist that discuss women's susceptibility to these types of comparisons, and the effects that culturally constructed languages have on the female subjects that inhabit that culture. How these constructions affect men does not attract nearly the same attention. Men, however, are not immune to the language that surrounds them and identifies them, that describes them in languages that speak of their bodies in terms of age and attractiveness. As Bakhtin describes the effects that social heteroglossia has on subjects, I do not hear gender:

As a living, socio-ideological concrete thing, as heteroglot opinion, language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else's... Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language...but rather it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions... Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated—overpopulated—with the intentions of others. (293-94)

So when a subject looks into the mirror and sees his reflection, the words he uses to describe himself are populated with the intentions of the culture that surrounds him. This is an

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<sup>24</sup> Bordo comments that "We are creatures swaddled in culture from the moment we are designated one sex or the other, one race or another" (*Unbearable* 36). Our specific culture defines for us the 'ideal' of beauty.

<sup>25</sup> Though this references American society, the broader relevance is evident in the novels analyzed in this chapter.

unavoidable fact; no subject lives in a vacuum outside of language. He must use the national language of his specific culture in order to construct his identity, while simultaneously comprehending that that language is not entirely his own. His culture uses that same language to construct his identity. Complications arise when the language of the subject conflicts with others' languages that speak of him.

The subject's chosen language may clash with those that his culture utilizes to define him, but also the languages he uses to construct his own identity may cause difficulty. That is to say, when an older person looks into the mirror and sees a reflection that has wrinkles, carries extra pounds, is balding, or a multitude of possible images that are unpleasant to him, the languages of what he considers his 'inner' identity directly conflict with the languages of his outer representation. Butler asks pertinent questions in an attempt to elucidate this conflict of inner identity and outer representation: "Rather, the question is: From what strategic position in public discourse and for what reasons has the trope of interiority and the disjunctive binary of inner/outer taken hold? In what language is 'inner space' figured? What kind of figuration is it, and through what figure of the body is it signified? How does a body figure on its surface the very invisibility of its hidden depths?" (*Trouble* 171). This disjunctive binary is the root of the conflict when the subject looks in the mirror and feels that the reflection does not represent who he feels himself to be.

To make matters even more complicated, as Melamed posits, "We are taught early: How we look is who we are" (71). If how we look is who we are, but how we look is not what we *feel* we are, then who are we? This existential questioning can easily lead to a splintering of the identity. The subject's body reflects innumerable cultural identities constructing the object, yet the subject that inhabits that body feels alienation from the image he sees. He is always already

aware, however, that his body visually represents the subject. He must, at some point, attempt to reconcile the two. Kristeva elaborates: “The ‘unconscious’ contents remain here *excluded* but in strange fashion: not radically enough to allow for a secure differentiation between subject and object and yet clearly enough for a defensive *position* to be established—one that implies a refusal but also a sublimating elaboration. As if the fundamental opposition were between Inside and Outside” (7). In other words, the subject defends his ‘inner’ identity that is in opposition to the reflection in the mirror, maintains a refusal to accept the signs of age marking his body, yet at the same time he must acknowledge that these bodily changes are always already affecting the identity of the object. Inevitably the subject *is forced*, by his own reflection, to merge the Other that is his aging body into what constitutes the subject, as Kristeva explains:

And, as in *jouissance* where the object of desire, known as object *a* [in Lacan’s terminology], bursts with the shattered mirror where the ego gives up its image in order to contemplate itself in the Other, there is nothing either objective or objectal to the object. It is simply a frontier, a repulsive gift that the Other, having become *alter ego*, drops so that ‘I’ does not disappear in it but finds, in that sublime alienation, a forfeited existence. (9)

The Other is the aging body; the forfeited existence is *youth*.

Kathleen Woodward expands on these concepts in her essay “The Mirror Stage of Old Age: Marcel Proust’s *The Past Recaptured*” contained in her collection of essays *Aging and Its Discontents: Freud and Other Fictions* (1991). In this work Woodward argues that the inverse of the mirror stage of infancy, as described by Jacques Lacan in his work *Écrits* (1977), is the mirror stage of old age. For Lacan, we recall, the mirror is the point in the psychological development of the child in which he is forced to identify with the image of himself, which makes him aware that he has a spatial identity. The next development in this process is the point in which the child realizes that there is a discrepancy between the reflected image and the experience of his actual body. As he adopts the mirror image as his identity, the child begins to

feel alienation due to the doubts that arise in his consciousness because of the discrepancy between the mirror image and the actual body. In order to alleviate the distress that this realization causes, the child begins to adopt an identity that is rooted in the context of social relations, such as the mother and father. At around two years of age the child will acquire language, and the *I* now becomes situated in the symbolic order of language. The child's identity is now rooted not in the relation to others but rather in the system of language and culture.

(Lacan 1-7)

This brings us to the examination of Woodward's theory that the mirror stage of old age is the inverse of the mirror stage of infancy. She states: "Although knowledge of old age certainly can come to us from our infirmities (our own bodies can speak to us of old age), I want to insist again that old age is in great part constructed by any given society as a social category, as is, for example, adolescence. The mirror our culture holds up to the elderly contains the feared image of death" (109). In this case, aged people are not only confronted with their images in the actual mirror, from which they feel utterly alienated, but also the mirror of society which considers them ugly. Woodward explains, "Given the western obsession with the body of youth, we can understand the 'horror' of the mirror image of the 'decrepit' body as having been produced as the inverse of the pleasures of the mirror image of the body of Narcissus. In part this may help explain the psychological phenomenon that as we age, we increasingly separate what we take to be our real selves from our bodies" (62). The alienation from the body is rooted in the reflection that the subject sees in the mirror. Woodward continues, "We say that our real selves—that is, our youthful selves—are hidden inside our bodies. Our *bodies* are old, *we* are not. Old age is thus understood as a state in which the body is in opposition to the self. We are alienated from our bodies" (62, emphasis original). This alienation is caused by a split between

an inner sense of identity and the outer bodily disintegration that horrifies the subject. What causes the subject such distress when he sees his reflection, I argue, is the construction of the image of *old* in negative cultural languages.

In every novel analyzed in this chapter the characters identify themselves via a bodily description. This speaks to the importance of the body as a source of self-definition. This account of their physicality demonstrates that they have all absorbed and reflect back the idea that “How we look is who we are” (Melamed 71). It is, of course, of prime importance that they all give their ages as an identity marker, and they all give negative descriptions of their physical appearances due to their ages.

Beginning with Montero’s *Te trataré como a una reina*, one perceives the importance of the appearance of the body in self-perception with the following description that introduces Antonia: “Se contempló en el espejo biselado: el pelo corto y castaño, con el brillo apagado por la permanente; los ojos redondos, la nariz chica, la boca pequeña y perdida en la profusión de los mofletes. Hoy tenía la cara lavada y sin afeites...El cutis, por lo menos seguía siendo bueno, claro, delicado, uniforme. Su piel era el rasgo físico que más le complacía de sí misma” (20).

This passage imparts, in just a few lines, a wealth of information about how Antonia views herself. Her age, forty-four, places her in a pre-constructed social category of ‘middle-aged.’ This simple statement carries with it all the constructions of society that surround this concept.<sup>26</sup> Her hair is dull because she dyes it; this admission implies that, because of her age, she wants to cover the grey in her hair. She considers her face fat, which is society’s voice speaking of the

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<sup>26</sup> “For one effect of this critique of the pervasive dualisms and metaphors that animate representations of the body is to call into question the assumption that we ever know or encounter the body—not only the bodies of others but our own bodies—directly or simply. Rather, it seems, the body that we experience and conceptualize is always *mediated* by constructs, associations, images of a cultural nature” (Bordo, *Unbearable* 35, emphasis original).

‘ideal’ that she does not reflect back to herself, and therefore has a negative self-image due to her failure to conform to this ideal. The description of her skin as “bueno, claro, delicado, uniforme” (20) articulates that her skin *looks young*. This is her favorite physical characteristic of herself: that her face does not show its age. This implies that her actual age carries less importance than the fact that she does not *look* her age: “A woman who is high in body surveillance” McKinley writes, “believes that how she looks is more important than how she feels” (57). The word ‘surveillance’ carries particular significance, for it implies a sort of guilt or flaw in the one being observed. This supports the idea that the aging face carries with it the inherent understanding that the age-related characteristics on the face are flaws. Antonia has the choice to not surveil her body in this way, just as she has the option not to internalize the cultural languages that make her view herself negatively. However, she chooses to assimilate these derogatory languages. In fact, every negative concept used in this description reflects what *culture* tells Antonia about her *self*. She sees the characteristics of her face and hair as undesirable because society continually underscores these features as detractors in relation to attractiveness.

Shortly after this first description of Antonia’s physical appearance, she puts on make-up and inspects herself in the mirror: “Más por pasar el tiempo que por otra cosa decidió pintarse un poco; se empolvó la nariz y ambas mejillas, oscureció en azul profundo el pliegue de sus párpados y resaltó sus labios con un carmín discreto” (20). What would the “otra cosa” (20) be? It would be, of course, to make herself feel more attractive. It seems as though Antonia lies to herself, as if she does not want to admit that she puts on make-up to feel prettier. Antonia continues her self-assessment: “Analizó los resultados y quedó satisfecha sólo a medias: tenía la cara demasiado redonda y los rasgos demasiado pequeños. Lo más feo, la nariz, que era como un pellizco. Se inclinó hacia delante y se acercó al espejo poco a poco, hasta chocar con él, hasta

apretar sus labios contra su propia imagen. El cristal estaba frío y quedó manchado de carmín” (20). She now looks at the results, and they do not please her. Her face appears too round, her features too small. Her nose she describes as outright ugly because of its diminutive size. Where do these judgments originate? Are these thoughts her own, or do they reflect what she thinks others see when they look at her? Nita McKinley addresses this question: “The second facet of OBC [objectified body consciousness] is the *internalization of body standards*. A woman who internalizes these standards experiences them as coming from her own desires, which makes the standards difficult to challenge and conceals the external pressures to conform, such as the discrimination against women who do not ‘measure up’” (57, emphasis original). Antonia has these thoughts and judgments about her appearance because she compares herself to all those that society holds up as standards of beauty. So driven is she to inspect her image, she actually touches the mirror with her lips. Melamed describes such actions: “Women approach mirrors like lovers. They prepare to ‘be seen’ by themselves, subconsciously choosing certain angles, certain expressions” (70). Her rejection of her features due to the unattractive qualities that she believes they represent, while at the same time feeling compelled to inspect them further at such close range, demonstrates the importance of her ‘flaws’ in the formation of the identity of her object.

After this examination, she turns to the mirror once again and undertakes a second, even more ambiguous appraisal: “Antonia se desató el cinto de la bata y se aflojó las ropas. Por el escote asomaron los pechos, abundantes, salpicados de pecas, estremecidos en el encierro del sostén. Ahí estaba Antonia, la bata entreabierta, mirándose en el espejo el húmedo canal sobre el esternón...” (21-22). With the exception of the freckles, Antonia does not employ negative language in regard to the reflection of her ample bosom. Yet still, she considers herself in the mirror in order to judge her image based on what she thinks she *should* see. Are large breasts a

standard for beauty? In Western cultures, yes,<sup>27</sup> so this area of her body receives positive attention. She then continues to undress: “Los pechos se le desparramaron blandamente buscando su acomodo sobre las costillas, y los pezones, normalmente tan secretos, empezaron a hormiguar como locos en cuanto que se encontraron libres. Cuánto calor y cuánto cuerpo, piel protagonista en el bochorno, una apoteosis de epidermis. Con mano derrotada se quitó las bragas, unas bragas de notables dimensiones...” (21). She now stands completely naked before the mirror, and the words used to describe her are significant. The fact that her breasts rest on her ribcage, even though this is a perfectly natural place for them to rest, references the fear that her breasts will sag with age. The words ‘so much body’ imply that she negatively views her size. The words *bochorno* and *apoteosis* can have two senses, one positive and one negative. *Bochorno* can either mean ‘sweltering’ or ‘shame, disgrace.’ *Apoteosis* can either mean ‘grand finale’ or ‘adoration.’ It is very hot in her apartment, so it would be reasonable to think that, taking both in a positive light, ‘she adores her naked flesh in the sweltering kitchen’. The other possibility indicates ‘a grand finale in the shame of her corpulence’. However, the negative in these two choices immediately draws consideration because of what follows this description, as almost a passing remark: the size of her panties. They are of notable dimensions; a clear reference to the size of her body. In other words, she is fat. This laconic but nonetheless telling remark about the size of her panties reveals Antonia’s negative self-image, and that she employs the language of a culture that considers her fat.

Later she and her friend Bella converse about their appearances. Bella remarks to Antonia that “Pues tú tampoco estás nada mal” (38), to which Antonia replies “Yo...Yo estoy feísima”

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<sup>27</sup> <http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/worldwide-plastic-surgery-statistics-available-for-the-first-time-100248404.html>. In 2013 breast augmentation was top of the list of procedures performed by the cosmetic surgeons who participated in the study in Spain. It was the second most performed surgery worldwide.

(38). Not only is Antonia unwilling to accept the compliment given to her by Bella, but she also describes herself as *extremely* ugly. She clearly feels she does not in any way reflect the cultural standards of feminine beauty.<sup>28</sup> Bella, in turn, gives her some advice: “Lo que tienes que hacer es ceñirte la cintura, así, para que resalten las caderas... Y desabróchate el cuello, mujer, que se te vean ese par de tetas tan hermosas...” (38). Bella wants her to show off her breasts and hips, reinforcing the cultural standard that large breasts are attractive. Her breasts, of course, represent the one feature other than her skin that she finds acceptable.

Bella expresses an extremely negative self-image as well. In this same conversation she describes herself as “¿Guapa? Mira, mira qué caderas... Mira qué tripón... Estoy gorda como un cerdo” (38).<sup>29</sup> She can see the beauty in Antonia’s body but not her own. Only forty-six, her image in the mirror horrifies her: “Ahora, sí, ahora sí que estoy horrorosa, se dijo Bella, mirándose en el espejo de azogue podrido y amarillento” (154). She sees herself as *rotten*, as *yellowed*, which specifically alludes to her age. When she looks in the mirror her reflection speaks to her with the language of her culture that tells her she has passed her prime, that her body is disintegrating, that she no longer represents any possible conceptualization of her as attractive.

After Bella realizes her attraction to Poco, a bouncer at the bar where she works, she takes a hard look at herself and detests all that she sees:

Últimamente Bella se pintaba mucho más, y se arreglaba con esmero.  
Últimamente necesitaba estar guapa, para gustar al Poco. Pero cada día se veía

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<sup>28</sup> Bordo claims that we are “...vulnerable, to one degree or another, to the requirements of the cultural constructs of femininity” (*Unbearable* 36).

<sup>29</sup> Bella’s remarks about herself fall in line with what Bordo writes of the “...completely and densely institutionalized *system* of values and practices within which girls and women—and, increasingly men and boys as well—come to believe that they are nothing (and are frequently treated as nothing) unless they are trim, tight, lineless, bulgeless, and sagless” (*Unbearable* 32, emphasis original).

más fea. Hacía muchos años que Bella no se preocupaba tanto de su físico. Había ido envejeciendo aburridamente, sin darse apenas cuenta. Pero ahora se miraba de otro modo, y se había encontrado con todos los estragos del tiempo, de repente. Las bolsas de los ojos, y los párpados caídos, y papada. Dos profundas arrugas en las comisuras de los labios, allí donde, de joven, tenía unos hoyuelos muy graciosos. Y los muslos blandos, y las tetas por la cintura. Un cuerpo casi cincuentón, irremediable. Bella se miraba en el espejo y le costaba trabajo reconocerse en esa vieja. (154-55)

Several significant components in this passage merit critical attention. Her new approach to the mirror suggests that she has begun to look at herself through her culture's view of her ("se miraba de otro modo"). Before this appraisal she had not paid much attention to her aging body, ("no se preocupaba tanto de su física"). Now when she looks at her face she thinks how *others* would see it; her image reflects an amalgamation of the features that her culture tells her are unattractive. Bella's admission of enhanced use of make-up ("Últimamente Bella se pintaba mucho más") in an attempt to look more attractive demonstrates her unease with her own reflection.<sup>30</sup> Carolyn Heilbrun's comments hit the mark: "First comes despair at the aging body, and particularly the aging face, a despair whose alleviation can be sought...by impersonating youth with the aid of drugs, surgery, or makeup..." (355-56). But at this very moment of self-appraisal, Bella suddenly becomes cognizant of the 'ravages' of time upon her face: bags under her eyes, droopy eyelids, jowls, deep wrinkles around her mouth, and sagging breasts. She has, in one passage, utilized almost every negative language of the aging face supplied to her by cultural constructs. Ann Kaplan speaks to this circumstance:

As a woman's appearance begins to lose its youthfulness, there may be a crisis of identity: I am either good, beautiful, whole, and to be loved; or bad, ugly, fragmented, and unlovable, according to the degree to which my appearance fits into prevailing cultural discourses about 'ideal' female beauty. Who am I if I am no longer a desirable object to be gazed at? Who am I if I do not like gazing at

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<sup>30</sup> "Through the exacting and normalizing disciplines of diet, makeup, and dress—central organizing principles of time and space in the day of many women—we are rendered less socially oriented and more centripetally focused on self-modification through these disciplines, we continue to memorize on our bodies the feel and conviction of lack, of insufficiency, of never being good enough" (Bordo, *Unbearable* 166).

myself anymore because of unwelcome wrinkles and lines, sagging eyelids, and bags under my eyes? (174)

Bella notices the exact characteristics to which Kaplan refers. It is most interesting that Bella begins this self-analysis *because* she has developed an attraction for Poco, “Últimamente necesitaba estar guapa, para gustar al Poco” (154). To use Kaplan’s words, she now describes herself as “bad, ugly, fragmented, and unlovable” (174). How could Poco love a woman with such a face? Bella is so distraught by what she sees in her reflection that she has *trouble recognizing herself*. Kristeva concludes that what causes abjection is that which “disturbs identity, system, order” (4). As she beholds her image in the mirror, she rejects this image as *not me*; she cannot assimilate her ‘ravaged’ face into her identity. She has, in the end, chosen a (negative) language to define herself, as Bakhtin explains: “Consciousness finds itself inevitably facing the necessity of *having to choose a language*. With each literary-verbal performance, consciousness must actively orient itself amidst heteroglossia, it must move in and occupy a position for itself within it, it chooses, in other words, a ‘language.’” (295, emphasis original). This heteroglossia, the cultural voices on one side containing descriptions of the horror of the different negative characteristics of her face, and her own voice that says she does not recognize herself in her own image, causes the fragmentation of her identity.

How could her identity not split when she sees herself in this manner, through the lens of the language that speaks of all the unattractive qualities of aging that are marking her face? She does not *want* to feel horror when she looks in the mirror or she would not attempt to feel prettier by wearing make-up. But why, on the other hand, does make-up make her feel prettier? It makes her feel like she *looks younger*, which makes her feel more attractive, as Furman attests: “The message is clear: to be young is to be active; to be young is to be healthy and sexy” (91). The part of Bella that was not overly concerned with aging confronts the Bella that incorporates and

internalizes the negative cultural voices that tell her the signs of aging on her face should produce horror and shame in her. Every day, she states, she feels uglier. Every day her identity assimilates to a greater degree what culture tells her to see in her face.

As it turns out, Poco demonstrates that Bella's fears about her attractiveness are not unfounded. The slightly older Poco ends up confessing his love for Vanessa, an eighteen-year-old young woman. The descriptions of Vanessa contrast sharply with the descriptions of Bella: "Vanessa era una de esas mujeres de cuerpo omnipresente que parece que siempre se están dejando acariciar por el aire. Culigorda y patirrencia. Ahora, que era disparatadamente joven, tenía en las carnes ese lustre de la adolescencia" (51). Her beauty invites even the air to caress her. She is 'glossy' in her newness, lustrous in her youth. The difference in the descriptions of Vanessa and Bella expresses the obsession with youth that rules Western cultures, as Jeannette King observes: "...there is, moreover, a 'knowledge' of ageing which comes through discursive representations, adding to the physical experience of ageing the stigma deriving from the contemporary ideology of youth culture" (175). Therefore, Bella has such a negative self-perception because she compares herself to Vanessa, with whom every man surrounding Bella is obsessed. Poco lusts after her, and Antonio (Antonia's brother, who is forty-nine) ends up proposing to her, "Vanessa caramela de piel suave" (192). Her youth is her most attractive quality, and she recognizes it: "Vanessa lo sabía y se movía por el local como un general en territorio conquistado. Estaba resplandeciente, morena de piscinas, con un traje amarillo de punto que marcaba bien la contundencia de sus caderas, la espalda al aire, sandalias doradas a la moda y una tostada cara de niña..." (132). She embodies the ideal of beauty, and she carries herself as though she owns the world. Germaine Greer explains this behavior: "Youth in women is prized by men and, therefore, by women themselves; a younger woman is prompted by a thousand

cultural goads into thinking of herself as a newer and therefore better model. There is in our throwaway culture no suspicion that an individual might improve with age and accumulate desirable characteristics” (237). Vanessa views herself as better than her older counterparts, but when Bella assesses her own attractiveness in comparison to Vanessa, Bella supports this valuing of youth.<sup>31</sup>

Bella despises Vanessa, mostly because of her youth, but Bella herself sees Vanessa as young and beautiful while viewing herself with horror. This coincides with Greer’s argument that “The creation and imposition of these stereotypes of older women involve the cooperation of women themselves” (237). If Bella and Antonia felt better about themselves it would detract from Vanessa’s power. They would carry themselves differently because they would be confident in themselves, as well as the objects that represent them, their bodies. The fixation on the concept that youth equals beauty manifests itself elsewhere as well with the description of a girl in a cafe: “La mujer tenía el tic de sobarse el pelo. Hundía su linda mano en la opulenta masa y la echaba para atrás...El cabello caía en cascadas, se ondulaba, flotaba y se aposentaba como si fuera seda. Era un gesto lleno de gracia que la chica debía haber ensayado un millón de veces desde la pubertad” (98). This passage reads like poetry, expounding the virtues of an attractive young girl with luxurious, long hair. She knows that she is beautiful because she *believes* herself to be, due to her culture’s consistent reinforcement of this language.<sup>32</sup> Even though Western cultures are obsessed with youth, this does not mandate that older women or men accept, absorb, and speak the languages that validate the beauty of youth and the ugliness of age. By describing

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<sup>31</sup> Viviana Giménez writes that “Montero recurriré...a diversas formas de cultura popular que describen a la mujer y al amor desde la perspectiva masculina. Las mujeres de esta novela, sin embargo, no alcanzan a comprender que son producto de ficción de esos hombres que les han creado una imagen a su antojo” (454).

<sup>32</sup> “Standards of beauty describe in precise terms the relationship that an individual will have to her own body. They prescribe her motility, spontaneity, posture, gait, the uses to which she can put her body. *They define precisely the dimensions of her physical freedom*” (Bordo, *Unbearable* 113, emphasis original).

themselves in such negative languages both Bella and Antonia absorb the reflection offered to them by the mirror of society and make it their own.

Not only do Bella and Antonia uphold this obsession with youth when they look in the mirror, Antonia, moreover, idolizes youth. While on the train to go visit her mother, she sees a (very) young German boy on the train who “Olía a sudor fresco y joven y de Nivea” (108). Even his sweat smells good to her. He smells of youth. This contrasts sharply with the smells associated with Benigno and Antonia’s mother discussed in chapter one. The description of him abounds with images of his beautiful, youthful body: “...los ojos de Antonia cayeron de nuevo sobre las tibias carnes alemanas. El chico balanceaba un pie en el aire y el muslo se le movía todo, duro y elástico...Sería tan fácil extender la mano, rozar el calor de esas piernas, tocar su piel dorada como el pan” (108). She does not single out a *middle-aged* man about whom to fantasize; the object of her desire is a hard, flexible, *young* man. Her desiring this young man mirrors Poco and Antonio both yearning for Vanessa. The striking differences in the illustrations of the aged body in chapter one and these descriptions of the youthful body support the cultural maxim that youth is beautiful and old is ugly. Their inherent agreement with this shows in their chosen objects of desire.

Antonia makes this even clearer in her choice of a lover. She has an affair with a man one year less than half her age, Damián. A virgin at forty-four, her first lover is twenty-one. His youth enralls her, just as Vanessa’s captivates Antonio and Poco: “Qué guapo era Damián con su uniforme: brincaba en la explanada vestido de aceituna. Antonia no se cansaba nunca de mirarle” (163). She never tires of looking at him, nor is she capable of looking at him without mentally undressing him: “El caso era que no podía mirar a Damián sin desnudarlo mentalmente...” (164). With the addition now of Antonia, all the older characters in *Te trataré*

*como a una reina* exhibit a fixation on the body beautiful of youth. Antonio and Poco with Vanessa, Bella in comparing herself with Vanessa, Benigno in his loss of vitality, and Antonia with Damián, all make clear their support of the cultural beliefs that youth represents what is desirable, and the old embody all that is unattractive.

In Montero's *La hija del caníbal*, the narrator, Lucía Romero, demonstrates her agreement with these exact tenets. The first description of her focuses on her physicality, including her scars: "Menos mal que en esos casos cabe recurrir a las señas de identidad, siempre tan útiles: Lucía Romero, alta, morena, ojos grises, delgada, cuarenta y un años, cicatriz en el abdomen de apendicitis, cicatriz en la rodilla derecha en forma de media luna de una caída de bicicleta, un lunar redondo y muy coqueto en la comisura de los labios" (13). She describes herself as if someone else were inspecting her body. That person would notice the scars, the flaws, so she includes them. But even this description turns out not to be true. She is extremely short, and her eyes are not grey, but rather black. Even in this portrayal of herself she has changed details in order to make herself more attractive in the mirror of cultural standards of beauty. Fallon explains that these standards are "culturally bound and consensually validated," (80), and that they play an important role in how body image develops. Fallon continues, "One's body image includes his/her perception of the cultural standards, his/her perception of the extent to which he/she matches the standard, and the perception of the relative importance that members of the cultural group and the individual place on that match." (80) She believes that culture prefers tall women with unusual eye colors. One is able to see this cultural definition of beauty in the use of models in Western fashion magazines who originate from all over the world that do indeed embody this idea.<sup>33</sup> So she makes herself adapt to these standards, even if she has

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<sup>33</sup> Bordo writes that "...these homogenized images *normalize*—that is, they function as models against which the self continually measures, judges, 'disciplines,' and 'corrects' itself" (*Unbearable* 25).

to lie to conform.<sup>34</sup> Samuel Amago deals with this exact passage from the novel, but his interpretation differs from mine. Whereas I argue that Lucía includes the scars and flaws as a representation of an other reviewing her body, Amago writes that Lucía describes these scars to “hint at the hidden stories that have informed the construction of her sense of self” (1032). He argues that these marks on her body are not simply visual, but rather remind her of the violence that her body has suffered (1032). The loss of her teeth and uterus in a car accident becomes an integral part of her identity. Amago also comments on Lucía’s propensity for lying about her physical characteristics. My interpretation of this habit of Lucía, discussed above, focuses on her desire to conform to cultural standards of beauty. He relates these fabrications to Lucía’s quest to figure out exactly who she is today. He states that her remark that her cells constantly renew themselves makes her ponder what exactly constitutes her identity (1033). This closely relates to my assertion that her aging body, in other words her cellular degeneration, causes her to question her identity.<sup>35</sup> In Amago’s analysis the regeneration of cells marks the key component of Lucía’s existential crisis, whereas I argue that the degeneration of her cells is what causes Lucía’s crisis of identity.

Lucía’s concern with her aging body also reflects her anxiety about conforming to what she believes others find attractive. The consciousness of cultural standards of beauty forces her to deal with the fact that her body changes with time: “Nada hay hoy en mí que sea igual a la Lucía de hace veinte años. Nada, salvo el empeño de crearme la misma” (63). This implies that

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<sup>34</sup> “The body—what we eat, how we dress, the daily rituals through which we attend to the body—is a medium of culture” (Bordo, *Unbearable* 165).

<sup>35</sup> Montero writes that “...a medio camino de la redacción de *La hija del caníbal*...descubrí que la obra trataba fundamentalmente de la identidad. Cuando empecé el libro creí que los asuntos principales eran la traición y la pérdida, y el aprendizaje de la madurez...Y sí, es cierto, todo eso está ahí; pero además el libro entero es una reflexión sobre la identidad, qué somos, cómo nos percibimos, cómo conseguimos la continuidad del ser...” (“Vivir” 351).

while internally she feels the same and thinks of herself in the same way, her reflection tells her a different story. This exemplifies the difficulty that the mirror presents in maintaining a cohesive identity. Outside of the mirror she is still the Lucía of twenty years ago, but her reflection is twenty years older. She explicitly expresses this fragmentation: “Pero en realidad yo no soy la que fui ni la que seré; como mucho, no soy más que este instante de consciencia en la negrura, y ni siquiera estoy segura de ser eso, porque a menudo me veo a mí misma desdoblada” (64). Amago also comments on this fragmentation of Lucía’s identity. He writes that Lucía’s narration of her self “functions as a way to signal the impossibility of maintaining a perfectly stable self over time...” (1035). Warren Johnson also writes about Lucía’s difficulties in dealing with her aging, but relates it to the injury of bodies throughout the novel: “The fragmenting of the unity of the body, suggested by the recurrent presence of detached fingers, ears, and even an eye... comes to serve as a metaphor not only for the disintegration of the subject but of intersubjective relations” (457).

Johnson uses a different view to explain Lucía’s fractured identity, but his analysis also supports my contention that it is the state of her body that causes such a disruption in her sense of self. He writes that “In the course of the novel, the alienation Lucía comes to feel about her body in its advancing age contributes to the crisis of her uncertain identity...” (464). In Johnson’s article, he focuses on the theme of cannibalism and the actual dismemberment that occurs to shed light on Lucía’s quest to free herself from what I consider to be cultural languages of aging. He characterizes these languages in a different way, with the same result. He claims that Lucía’s writing “...provides a vista beyond the fragmentation of the social fabric portrayed through the metaphor of cannibalism. It offers a perspective that, in subtle ways, suggests how a woman’s conception of the individual can transcend the divisions that characterize the male-

dominated anthropophagic social structures of the novel” (457). Relating this to negative cultural constructs that speak negatively of age, one could argue that the “male-dominated anthropophagic social structures” (457) eat away at Lucía’s positive self-assessment as she looks in the mirror. Johnson goes on to write that “The central metaphor of anthropophagism in Montero’s novel likewise point to the imperative of at least the attempt on the part of the woman protagonist to escape the cannibalistic system that is insistently coded as masculine” (458). This supports my argument that Lucía must eventually come to terms with her aging body in the mirror in order to escape the hegemonic cultural voices that reflect back to her an image of unattractiveness due to her age. If those cultural voices value youth, as we have seen in Antonio and Poco, then Lucía’s identity loses parts of itself in the “cannibalistic system” (458) that requires that she look young in order to be attractive. Rather than permit this to fracture her identity when she can no longer maintain her youthful appearance, she must learn not to allow the system to cannibalize parts of her, but rather incorporate the image in the mirror into an ever-developing sense of self. Marisa Postlewate supports this assertion. She writes, “In *La hija* the intention is also to present ideologies that will facilitate the process toward self-realization of the narrator, a process that includes gaining the self-confidence to break away from those norms that limit both her happiness as a woman and success as a writer” (132).

Continuing with Lucía’s statement that “...yo no soy la que fui ni la que seré...” (64), she does acknowledge the fluidity of identity as one ages. As Amago writes, “Bodies and identities are mutable, precarious, ever-changing things that tend to evade our attempts to portray and understand them definitively” (1035). Each day that passes the signs of age accumulate; when these signs reach the point of changing the reflection in the mirror, the subject must assimilate these changes into his identity. If he does not, the identity fragments into the (younger) image

that he feels justly represents him, and the reflection that he feels does not. Johnson remarks that “The separation of the inside and outside, posited only to be blurred, does not mark the individual as distinct, but rather situates the subject within a hierarchical structure that defines that subject’s relative position with respect to others” (461). In this context, Lucía compares herself to her younger self as well as those in society that are younger than she. As she ages she loses position in the structure that values youth. This results in her refusal to incorporate her aging body into her self-conception. Lucía has become disconnected from her object when she looks in the mirror: “Hay un antes y un después en mi memoria: antes era yo y después me convertí en una desconocida” (138). Just like Bella in *Te trataré como a una reina*, when she looks in the mirror she sees a stranger. Amago reinforces this assertion. He writes, “Those ‘vertiginous cells of the flesh’ that rapidly and continuously die represent the uncertain material to which her [Lucía] identity clings: body creates self” (1036). Therefore, as the signs of aging mount, so does the distress in Lucía’s consciousness. Her identity is inexorably woven with her identity as her younger-looking self: “Más que perder el pelo es como me hubiera perdido a mí misma. Me he perdido en mitad de mi vida, como otras personas se pierden en un bosque” (138). It cannot be ignored that this happens to Lucía at forty-one. As Postlewaite observes “...Lucía typifies the middle-aged population...who grew up under the dictatorship and are now in search of their identity within the ideals of democracy” (134). The *bosque* where she has lost her self is middle-age. Kristeva explains this crisis: “And the pit where what speaks is a strange rent between an ego and an other—between *nothing* and *all*” (Kristeva 141). Lucía’s insistence on identifying with her younger image supports her narcissistic ego, while her rejection of her reflection indicates the crisis she experiences in contemplating the nothingness, the total loss of identity, that she is afraid will occur if her appearance continues to deteriorate.

Lucía details her bodily characteristics that threaten her attractiveness, and therefore her identity: "...yo me teñía las canas de la cabeza, y me daba cremas reafirmantes en el pecho, y tenía celulitis en las nalgas, y...me quitaba los malditos dientes para lavarlos. ¿Alguna miseria más? Pues sí, manchitas en el dorso de las manos, el interior de los brazos pendulante, arrugas insufribles en el morro, las mejillas alicaídas y apagadas" (99). Lucía, just like Bella in *Te trataré como a una reina*, perceives her body as an amalgamation of flaws and unattractive qualities due to her age. Kristeva explains why this affects Lucía: "I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish *myself*" (3, emphasis original). Using the mirror to scrutinize all of her 'flaws,' in the same instant the reflection in the mirror establishes her as Lucía, but also causes her to despise what she sees. Cultures' languages that speak of the unattractiveness of the aging body highlight all these qualities: grey hair, cellulite, age spots on her hands, flaccid skin on her arms, wrinkles, and tired skin. She sees in her reflection all the negative associations with aging, and instantly compares this image to that of her younger self. Furman explains this occurrence: "When [a woman] looks at herself in the mirror and feels old, she is seeing herself... from the perspective of a younger person...As woman she is observed by the internalized male gaze. As older woman she is observed by the internalized gaze of youth" (109). Lucía sees herself through her own, younger eyes, while at the same time evaluating herself by means of a patriarchal culture that has gained control of her own eyes and tells her old is ugly. This results in a double reinforcement of her perceived unattractiveness. This seriously affects her self-confidence. Postlewaite comments that Lucía suffers from "...a lack of self-esteem—a feeling the narrator must overcome as she works toward self-realization" (137). Though Lucía will find her confidence later, she has not done so at this point. Therefore, in order to maintain her appearance (of youth) as long as possible, Lucía

uses a barrage of products. She lists them all in a litany, twice, in order to highlight the efforts that she makes in the upkeep of her failing body: “Todos estos frascos, frasquitos, botellones, tubos, estuches, cajas, pomos, tarros, ampollas, envases y botes se acumulaban de manera indecente en mi cuarto de baño del hotel de Ámsterdam, como un recordatorio de mi naturaleza decadente... Todos esos frascos...eran la representación de mi vida” (27). Her fixation on maintaining her appearance consumes her life. Her identity as the Lucía she wants her body to represent is at stake. The image of the dead rabbit pinned to the wall signifies the constant inspection of her body (by herself and others); she is on display for everyone to judge her ‘decaying nature’: “Como un cuadro con una jarra de barro en primer plano y un conejo cadáver, tieso como un madero, colgando de la pared por las orejas” (274). She has thrust the truth of her aging body so far away from her that the avoidance of it *has become her*: “Abjection, with a meaning broadened to take in subjective diachrony, *is a precondition of narcissism*,” Kristeva explains. “It is coexistent with it and causes it to be permanently brittle. The more or less beautiful image in which I behold or recognize myself rests upon an abjection that sunders it as soon as repression, the constant watchman, is relaxed” (13, emphasis original). She represses the image of her aging body to the point that *not* using all these products to stave off the effects of age would leave her in the arena of the abject. She must fight aging; she must use these products to ensure her youthful appearance for as long as possible. Her narcissistic self must uphold its image of her to avoid the abject, the signs of age, in her own face.

Amago deals with this very passage, and comments on the importance of Lucía listing all the products she uses “to combat the constant physical deterioration of her body” (1030). According to Amago, Lucía’s preoccupation with the aging process relates to “the novel’s self-conscious preoccupation with the narrative act” (1030). Lucía uses her body to construct a

complex narrative of self. Amago and I agree that Lucía uses her material body to develop her sense of self, to found her personal identity. It is a process of self-discovery for Lucía as she grapples with the difficulties of aging. Amago argues that even though Lucía frees herself from the influences of her husband and father, her bodily changes threaten her self-realization more than the oppressive patriarchal system (1032). This correlates precisely with my arguments that Lucía's perception of her aging body forms the very foundation of her sense of self. Amago writes that "...Lucía Romero identifies herself *first* in terms of physical characteristics" (1032, emphasis mine), and we both posit that the signs of aging are the primary identity markers for Lucía. He and I both argue that "The decadent nature of the body causes Lucía more than a little distress. The vials, lotions, pomades and unguents that she uses to prevent her physical disintegration mirrors Lucía's fragmented experience of reality" (1038). However, Amago focuses on her dealings with Ramón's kidnapping causing her to confront the "fraudulent life" (1038) that she has been living that disrupts her reality, whereas I argue that her perception of her aging face and body causes the fragmentation to which Amago refers.

Lucía's despising her own body because of the signs of age leads to her idolizing youth, echoing Antonia in *Te trataré como a una reina*. As Thomas Cash explains, those that are beautiful hold a special place in society,<sup>36</sup> and Lucía is well aware of this:

"Claro que los hombres y mujeres guapos suelen parecer criaturas especiales con una frecuencia sorprendente... Tendemos a atribuir a la belleza virtudes ajenas a lo meramente físico... Y así, del guapo no solemos decir que es guapo, sino justamente todo lo demás: qué inteligente, qué elegante, qué estilo, qué serenidad, qué simpatía, qué bondad" (101). Society (overly) values

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<sup>36</sup> Cash, Thomas F. "The Psychology of Physical Appearance: Aesthetics, Attributes, and Images." *Body Images: Development, Deviance, and Change*. Thomas F. Cash and Thomas Pruzinsky, eds. New York: The Guilford Press, 1990.

beauty, giving those that are beautiful positive attributes based solely on their appearance. And youth is beauty, so the youthful are the ones that are thought to embody these positive attributes, whether they actually possess them or not. This exemplifies yet another reason why Lucía guards her youthful looks so jealously. She harbors uncertainty about her identity in the middle of her life, and she gives herself positive attributes based on her ability to remain what she considers to be (what her culture *tells* her to consider to be) attractive and beautiful. She sees this beauty in Adrián, and it draws her to him like a moth to flame: “Estaba hermoso hasta el dolor, atractivo como un abismo. Cómo deseé acariciar su cara. Pasar un dedo por la rosca suave y caliente de sus orejas. Por su cuello. Por sus labios reseco” (251). She not only appreciates this quality in Adrián, she is jealous of it, as her own youth, in her eyes, slips away more every day: “Tú tienes la vida, Adrián, y eso me llena de irritación y de envidia” (139). She both wants him and wants to *be* him. She cannot appreciate that others find her attractive, including her very young lover. There exists a divide in her mind that cannot be reconciled: “Analogously, we can understand our culture’s representations of aging in terms of splitting,” Woodward explains. “Youth, represented by the youthful body, is good; old age, represented by the aging body, is bad...” (*Discontents* 7). So instead of appreciating her own beauty, in the natural form that it takes, she splits Adrián’s youth as good, something she must be able to perceive in the mirror, and her own age as bad, something to be rejected.

In Montero’s *Instrucciones para salvar el mundo*, Daniel, one of the narrators, also vehemently rejects his age. When Daniel looks in the mirror, his appearance causes him to question his identity, much like we have just seen with Lucía in *La hija del caníbal*. When he looks in the figurative mirror of youth, he sees a positive representation of himself that contrasts harshly with his self-perception in his present life. His refrain throughout the book is “¿Adónde

se había ido la alegría del mundo?” (18). At forty-five he is a doctor who has lost all passion for his work, and lives with his estranged long-time girlfriend. Within the first pages of meeting Daniel he presents an overwhelmingly negative self-perception. When talking about his girlfriend, Marina, he describes her as “...humillándose con esa perpetua mirada despectiva que era como el espejo de su derrota” (24). She serves as the mirror in which he sees the utter collapse of his life. The mirror of his youth also reflects back to him the ruin that is his life now. His youth represents a time of happiness, joy, dreams and aspirations. The description Daniel gives of aging demonstrates the contrast between then and now: “Tenía cuarenta y cinco años, ya casi era un viejo...Por las noches, cuando se acostaba y apagaba la luz, le caían encima todas las calamidades que le aguardaban, el progresivo deterioro de la edad, la enfermedad, la muerte, ese futuro negro que se cernía sobre él arropado por las tinieblas de su cuarto...” (192). At forty-five he describes himself as “casi viejo.” Daniel’s thinking mimics Lucía’s in *La Hija del caníbal*. His body deteriorates before his eyes. The future holds more disintegration, sickness, and eventually, death. Daniel has no hope, and the shadows of his pessimism crush him as he lies in the dark.

Daniel values the memories of his youth more than he does the (possible) long life ahead of him. The juxtapositions of Daniel’s youth and his present are striking: “¿Qué había sido de la luminosa ligereza de los veinte años, cuando la vida era como un gran regalo de Navidad que sólo necesitaba ser abierto? ¿Cómo había conseguido acabar encerrado en una existencia tan pequeña y mezquina?” (18). This ‘luminous lightness’ of his twenties echoes the description of Vanessa in *Te trataré como a una reina*. Instead of his youthful appearance, as in the case with Vanessa, his life was luminous. His future was an unopened gift on Christmas morning, full of expectation and promise. This image represents a direct contrast with his life now: “...luego

todas esas luces se apagaron, como las de un árbol de Navidad en la basura de enero” (39). His life has metamorphosed from a Christmas gift into a Christmas tree abandoned in the trash. The light that signifies his youth to him has also turned into a world of black and white.

These types of comparison abound: “¿Adónde se había ido la alegría del mundo? Tal vez Daniel no hubiera sido un tipo muy batallador y tampoco muy apasionado, pero de joven se recordaba con ilusiones, como todos” (38-39). Presently, Daniel retains no illusions; he has no desire to even function in society. With age, Daniel has lost all possibility to be loved, as well as the exhilarating emotions associated with youth: “Asimismo recordaba de manera brumosa, como quien sueña, el temblor de sus manos y de su estómago mientras bailaba con su primera novia en una discoteca; la borrachera erótica de tenerla apretada contra él, el romanticismo lacrimoso de la música lenta y de creerse amado” (39). This memory possesses particular poignancy because it demonstrates that Daniel was, indeed, a man who enjoyed his life. Unquestionably, his present life bears no resemblance to this image. Only his youth, it would seem, was worth living: “Los amplios horizontes de su adolescencia se habían ido reduciendo hasta convertirse en una pequeña jaula: un mal trabajo, una mala relación sentimental, una mala vida” (41). The very essence of his life signifies *not young*. The death of Daniel’s parents was an event that made him face his own mortality, and caused him to evaluate the emptiness of his life: “Pero desde la desaparición de sus padres se sentía desnudo, porque, sin ellos, ya no había nadie que le necesitara, nadie que le recordara, nadie que le echara de menos” (150). Now that he can no longer identify himself as their son, he has no identity left to him but that of the meaninglessness of his existence: “Esa pequeña vida de su padre, rutinaria, árida y pasiva, le había producido auténtico horror en su adolescencia, pero ahora se descubría siendo un calco de él” (41). Daniel loses his identity in the realization that his father’s life has consumed his own.

Daniel's aging body also causes a crisis of identity. One day while shopping he glimpses himself in the mirror: "También esa pérdida la descubrió de golpe cuando, al mirarse por casualidad en un espejo del probador de unos grandes almacenes, vio con horror que tenía un redondel tan despeluchado en la coronilla que se la transparentaba el mundo cuero del cráneo" (39). Upon seeing his seemingly enormous bald spot, he immediately feels horror that this reflection represents him. Melamed explains this reaction: "Catching oneself unawares in a street mirror can throw [a person] into confusion: they do not 'know' the person whose unfamiliar shape or way of moving they have just inadvertently glimpsed" (70). This image of his body further robs him of his identity when once again it represents his father rather than himself:

Aún peor; era como si su progenitor hubiera regresado de ultratumba y le estuviera poseyendo, porque esa repentina y vergonzante calva tonsurada era la de él, lo mismo que las tímidas lorzadas que habían empezado a cabalgar sobre su cinturón, o esos hombros desganados que ahora se le caían hacia delante. El viejo se estaba encarnando en él y Daniel estaba dando a luz a su padre... (41)

He embodies those physical characteristics that defined his father's old age. He recognizes his father's body, but not his own. Kristeva comments on this alienation: "Essentially different from 'uncanniness,' more violent, too, abjection is elaborated through a failure to recognize its kin; nothing is familiar..." (5). Daniel's body has become his father's. This object is not *his* body, it is a reincarnation of the body that Daniel considered abject.

There is one exception to the horror that encompasses Daniel's life: he immerses himself in a computer game called *Second Life*. In this game he manifests all that he does not have in reality. Having no control over his body that is no longer his own, he uses the avatar in *Second Life* to recreate himself: "Por eso le había gustado tanto *Second Life*: había sido como abrir una ventana en el muro ciego de una celda. En *Second Life* era nuevamente joven: para representarse a sí mismo se había hecho un avatar alto y musculoso, de abundante melena y puntiaguda barba

pelirroja” (41). The feeling of being ‘newly young’ provides Daniel a new self, one that better matches how he wants to feel on the inside, as well as how he wishes he looked on the outside. Because this is the only identity that he feels is truly his own, he plays the game so often that it becomes an obsession. His only moments of happiness come while playing Second Life. In Daniel’s case, Second Life is a misnomer; it is his only life.

Daniel has immersed himself in this computer game because his actual life and body are alien and foreign to him. They elicit horror in him because he cannot assimilate the transformations that have occurred due to age. Kristeva explains this inability to comprehend changes in one’s identity: “If it be true that the object simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject, one can understand that it is experienced at the peak of its strength when that subject, weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very *being*, that it *is* none other than object” (5, emphasis original). Daniel finds himself in the state that Kristeva describes. He has lost ownership of his body, as well as his youth, attractiveness, emotions, ambition, and his passion. The very essence of Daniel is *loss*: “Un día advirtió que se había quedado sin emociones... Un día se había mirado por puro azar en el espejo de su intimidad y se había dado cuenta de que, allí donde antes hubo nervios y deseos punzantes y esperanzas, ahora sólo había una especie de sopor” (39). When Daniel looks into the mirror of his soul, nothingness reflects back to him. His body is not his own, his life is not his own. Aging has taken away everything that constituted his identity. Escudero writes about Montero’s propensity to develop her characters in the way reflected in Antonia, Bella, Lucía, and Daniel: “Todos ellos son solteros, con edades en torno a los cuarenta años, que se aterrorizan al mirarse al espejo y comprobar los devastadores efectos del

paso del tiempo. Su deterioro físico está descrito usando un realismo feísta...ante las miserias del cuerpo” (“La presencia” 23).

Similar to Daniel, Myriam in Desarthe’s *Mangez-moi* experiences a crisis of identity in every aspect of her life and her self.<sup>37</sup> Now forty-three, she opens a restaurant in Paris, and the novel tells the story of her grappling with her issues while trying to run her restaurant. Myriam’s identity is in flux; after losing everything she still has little idea of how to define herself. She constantly questions who she is, as a person and as a woman.

Myriam lives in her restaurant, a fact that she hides from all those that she has met since opening it. This shames her, as she does not have a ‘proper’ place to live: “Qui croirait qu’on se brosse les dents ici, qu’on se lave les cheveux, qu’on se lève la nuit pour pisser, qu’on vérifie dans le miroir la tête qu’on a, au cas où le cauchemar qu’on vient de faire l’aurait totalement transformée” (62). This first look in the mirror merits attention for several reasons. Myriam usually speaks in first person, yet this description of herself looking in the mirror changes to third person. This sudden shift signifies Myriam’s alienation from herself, from her own identity. Having no definition of herself causes her separation from her reflection. The person in the mirror is ‘she’ or, even more noteworthy, by using the pronoun *on*, ‘one,’ she distances herself even further from that image. In this moment of alienation, she still simultaneously verifies that she *is* still herself. Nancy Miller explains this need for confirmation: “How does any woman know what she looks like? How does she learn to recognize what she looks like—from the outside? The look of the look in the mirror” (9). The mirror validates that her reflection has not changed, even if what that reflection represents has. The reader does not know at this time in the

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<sup>37</sup> She had an affair with Octave, a school friend of her sixteen-year-old son. The affair came to light, and thus she lost her husband, her son, and the rest of her family. She wandered for six years before deciding to settle once more.

novel, but the dream that wakes her refers to her affair with Octave. She looks in the mirror to make certain that the nightmare has not completely transformed her reflection; however, her affair with Octave has changed her in every other way. She confirms that at least her face, the object that represents her to the outside world, does not reflect this change in her self. She is still Myriam, and her reflection proves this to her. Melamed explains Myriam's need to do this: "Many women continue to verify their existence throughout their lives by looking in mirrors" (70). Regardless of what she has done, she still exists as Myriam. The proof lies in the mirror.

The second time that Myriam looks into a mirror, she again expresses a negative self-perception: "Elle regarde son visage dans le miroir du couloir. La pénombre du contre-jour lui donne un teint bleuté. Elle songe à la banquise et se dit : oui, c'est bien ça, je suis prise dans les glaces" (203). The narrative changes again from first person to third person, this time to the pronoun 'she.' She moves closer to 'I,' but she continues to feel disconnected from her reflection. She experiences such detachment from her subject that the reflection representing her object must be described as someone else. Crossley comments on this situation: "...reflexivity generates a lived sense of separation (or perhaps of separation and connection) between self and body...it entails that we turn back upon ourselves, generating a temporal split between subject and object and, as the terms suggest, objectifying ourselves" (2). Myriam experienced such a degree of shame and humiliation after the affair was discovered that she separates herself from her reflection and her *self*. Kristeva offers pointed commentary in this regard:

It amounts to setting up not a beyond but two terms, face to face, each judging the other, in turn, and both reducing in the end to the same abjection. On one side, what is base; on the other, the speech that I hold forth and that has me in its hold. Nature, the body, the inside. Facing the spirit, others, appearances. Truth being on the base side; a barren side, without makeup, without seeming, rotten and dead, full of discomfort and sickness, horror. (143)

Her subject regards her object, face to face, and they are both abject to her, “full of discomfort and sickness” (143). Her reflection in the mirror reproduces the horror she feels about her own being. She tries desperately to reconstruct an identity of herself that does not contain this revulsion, but she has not reached it yet. So when she contemplates herself in the mirror she remembers the person she wants to erase. Her identity, in essence, has split into *three*: her subject, her object, and the subject she attempts to construct *outside* these two.

Being ‘frozen in the mirror’ expresses how she feels when she contemplates her reflection. Myriam desperately wants to recover from the trauma that was the result of her affair, yet as she gazes at herself she cannot escape what that reflection represents to her. She is frozen as the Myriam that had an affair with a boy, the Myriam that destroyed her family, the Myriam that can only exist in the languages of shame and humiliation that construct her.

The final time that she contemplates herself in the mirror everything changes. She has reconnected with an old friend and they have become lovers. He is a gentle, wise, kind and reassuring man who does not press her or judge her. He knows her flaws and accepts that she is damaged, but still valuable. After they have made love, Myriam walks down the hallway and catches herself in a mirror: “Je cours le long couloir. Un miroir me renvoie l’image d’une folle dont le maquillage a coulé. Ses cheveux dessinent une auréole autour de son front. Je m’arrête, brutalement. Je fais quelques pas en arrière et j’examine mon reflet. Je ne connais pas cette tête. Sous les traînées de mascara, mes joues sont roses. Pas un cerne. Je suis mignonne” (248). At first she still refers to herself as ‘she.’ The mirror reflects a ‘madwoman;’ her make-up has run, her hair is a mess. Myriam states, however, the image is ‘thrown back to *me*.’ She is on the verge of claiming that reflection as her own. She stops abruptly and considers the image that no longer denotes a stranger, but instead is ‘*my* reflection.’ She has fully owned that this image in the

mirror is, in fact, Myriam. She does not recognize this face; her cheeks are pink and there are no bags under her eyes. Shame and humiliation no longer construct the Myriam in the mirror, rather happiness and acceptance have replaced them. She ends with ‘I am pretty.’ Not only has she claimed ownership of this image, this object that pleases her, but she has also successfully constructed a new identity, a new subject, that she inhabits comfortably. Her three identities have finally merged into one.

Even though Myriam eventually accepts herself and her reflection, she still idolizes youth. Like the other characters examined in this chapter (Lucía, Bella, Antonia, Antonio, Poco, and Daniel), Myriam believes that youth embodies beauty while old exemplifies ugly. She believes that even if one is amazingly attractive, this attractiveness diminishes through the ‘faults’ that appear on the body due to age: “Ces gens n’étaient pas particulièrement laids, certains possédaient même une séduction redoutable, mais leur physique était rendu ordinaire par cette collection de petits défauts que l’on accumule naturellement au cours d’une vie. J’étais comme eux...j’avais un petit ventre rond, du cal sous les pieds et des cernes sous les yeux” (102). The body beautiful in youth becomes the ordinary body with age. The marks of time are considered faults; they detract from what *used to be* beautiful. Myriam sees her body and others’ bodies as ‘less than’ due to these unattractive traits. Her rounded belly, the calluses on her feet, and the bags under her eyes unmistakably reference the cultural ideals to which she compares herself. As we have seen, cultural standards define the parameters of attractiveness, and how one perceives one’s own body depends on these cultural definitions of beauty. Further, Jackson notes, “The closer body self-perceptions come to the cultural ideal, the higher should be the self-ratings of body attractiveness. Thus, body image should depend on cultural ideals and on how an individual perceives his or her own body in relation to these ideals” (18). Youth represents her

culture's ideal: the body beautiful with a flat stomach and a 'flawless' face. When she looks at her own body and others', neither she nor they reflect this ideal. She judges not only her own object, but also all those objects around her as well. Everyone who shows signs of age she holds to this standard.

Myriam goes on to describe how she feels in her age: "J'éclate de rire, comme fit Saraï le jour où l'ange lui annonça, alors qu'elle avait quatre-vingt-dix-neuf ans, qu'elle accoucherait bientôt d'un fils. Moi aussi, je me sens vieille et terminée. Qui pourrait m'aider et comment?" (107). She compares how she feels to how a *ninety-nine-year-old* felt when God told her that she would have a son. In her mind the words 'old' and 'finished' describe her. The fact that she is forty-three defines her entire being. Furman explains this situation: "Because women are also culturally identified with their appearance, the old body in a woman becomes a totalizing representation of the self. To be perceived as 'old' or to see oneself in that light is to identify the whole of oneself with the label" (107-8). She cannot separate her subject from her chronological age. 'Forty-three' becomes the sum of her existence. It is ironic that she asks the question, 'Who could help me and how?' The answer is she can help herself, by not viewing herself through the lens of the negative languages of the culture that surrounds her. She need not believe that when youth evaporates, only an unattractive body remains.

She does, however, believe this. When she compares youth and age this is her cognition: "Paradis de l'enfance, paradis de la jeunesse, paradis corrompus" (111). Age is a corruption of youth. Even she, like *all* the young, was once beautiful: "Tout le monde est joli à dix-huit, vingt ans. Moi aussi, j'étais jolie à dix-huit, vingt ans" (253). The days when she was beautiful are gone, "Au bon vieux temps de quand j'avais vingt ans" (168); only the body of a woman of forty-three endures. Myriam sums up the comparison between youth and age with one sentence:

“On se dit qu’on a pris un coup de vieux et la porte secrète, découpée dans la palissade, claque dans notre dos” (56). With the realization that we are older, the characteristics that we once used to define ourselves are left in the past. Though she still values youth above age, Myriam realizes that her identity, the reflection in the mirror that now pleases her, can only base itself on the present.<sup>38</sup>

In this chapter we have seen that both Montero and Desarthe construct characters that fall victim, in a most detrimental way, to their cultures’ languages that speak of age as a disintegration and a loss of the beautiful young self that they once were. They all adopt these languages as their internal, as well as external, identities. The languages that speak of even the possibility of beauty in age are lost in the din of voices that are obsessed with youth and with the flawless body beautiful. Both Montero and Desarthe demonstrate in their characters the “...difficulty of reconciling the conflicting versions of identity that culture offers its subjects” (DeFalco xiv).

In their struggles, however, there lies a deeper question. Each character in both these authors’ works experiences an existential quest for identity that begins with their reflections in the mirror. As they are forced to confront their aging reflections, they also face the question of who they are outside those images in the mirror.

Antonia in *Te trataré como a una reina*, Lucía in *La hija del caníbal*, and Myriam in *Mangez-moi* all come to the realization that they are more than the image in the mirror. Throughout her life Antonia has let herself be defined by her patriarchal culture. Her father and then her brother controlled her completely. Kathleen Glenn comments on Antonia’s situation: “Antonia has been denied experience and therefore is stunted...She has not been allowed to

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<sup>38</sup> Anne Strasser writes that “[Ce roman] s’inscrivent donc dans le monde du lecteur, en jouant habilement sur la frontière conformisme et désir d’originalité, propre à tout individu” (58).

mature emotionally, to develop an identity” (“Victimized” 198-99). Jordan Tronsgard echoes this idea when he writes “Por lo tanto, de acuerdo con la educación y control de su padre, Antonia reprime su propia identidad como ser sexual para ajustarse al ideal tradicional de la buena hija católica española” (3). Due to this evaluation of herself as a participant in the patriarchal system, when Antonia first gazes in the mirror she sees a reflection of what her culture sees as inadequacies. She has no identity outside this particular Antonia, except for the subservient woman who does nothing other than care for her brother and mother. Antonia has no sense of self outside the patriarchal structure that defines her. Through her affair with Damián, however, she develops a desire to be more than she has ever been before. When she sees herself reflected in his eyes a new world opens up to her. Glenn claims that “Vanessa, because of her physical appearance, has a modicum of power, but middle-aged, dumpy Antonia has none” (198). I disagree with Glenn’s assessment of Antonia. Her affair with Damián affords her a new perspective on the woman in the mirror. She does have power as a woman (despite her middle-age and “dumpy” appearance as Glenn claims), and she realizes that she controls the perception of herself. The fact that Antonia attracts a lover of twenty-one shows her that there are other possibilities and she does not have to believe culture’s assessment of her. In this way the mirror (of Damián’s eyes) serves as a vehicle for Antonia to grow and change as a person. The image in the mirror is what she believes it to be.

Lucía also uses the mirror in her journey of self-discovery. Amago writes that “While the plot centres on Lucía’s search for her missing spouse, the progression of the narrative coincides with a more threatening struggle as she comes to terms with her own human ‘necesidad de permanencia’” (1030). As outlined in this chapter, Lucía has great difficulty assimilating her aging body into her identity. She regurgitates all the negativity that her culture sees in her

reflection. Her journey, however, does not end here. Amago writes that "...the novel documents a more important process of self-discovery as Lucía comes to terms with her ever-changing sense of self" (1031). Her eventual acceptance of her image in the mirror demonstrates that one *can* overcome the negative cultural voices and define one's identity on one's own terms. Separating one's identity from the reflection in the mirror, from the outward representation that the body supplies, only leads to fragmentation and a rejection of an integral part of the self. That body represents not only a corporal substance; it also reflects all the memories and experiences that have accumulated in the mind that inhabits that body. Lucía comes to this realization, as Amago writes, "The fact that she is not *physically* the same person today that she was a few years ago causes her to reflect more than once on what human identity really is, for while our experiences have psychological effects on who we are, physically speaking there is nothing about our bodies at the present moment that connects them to what they were in our childhood" (1033, emphasis original). Lucía develops the ability to appreciate that she is *more than* her reflection, that it does not represent the totality of her self. She chooses to believe that the narrative of her self includes not only the appearance of her body, but also that "While the body deteriorates and disappears, narrative—be it fictional or historical—gives meaning to the ageing process and continuity to the perception of the self" (Amago 1039). Our narratives are the expression of what we have learned, the experiences we have lived, and how we have incorporated all of this into who we are. What Lucía does shows courage, as Nancy Miller confirms: "To resist the narrative of decline requires an active, arduous engagement with the general cultural assumption that we are at our most beautiful or desirable at a youthful moment and the rest is downhill" (7). Youth may be beautiful, but it is oftentimes stupid. Hopefully, with age and experience comes a better understanding of ourselves and the world around us. Only if one internalizes the negative

cultural languages can this be considered a ‘downhill’ journey. Lucía’s final acceptance of her value as a middle-aged woman is a narrative that we need to hear more often.

In *Mangez-moi* Myriam’s journey reflected in the mirror ends in the same way as that of Lucía. Though she cannot relinquish her over-valuing of youth, she does look in the mirror and declare ‘I am pretty.’ This realization inherently contains her acceptance of the reflection that includes her middle-aged qualities. This represents a critical juncture in her journey. As Audrey Borenstein explains, “From the standpoint of analytical psychology, striving toward wholeness is seen as far more than an objective chosen by the conscious mind. It is experienced as an imperious command from the psyche” (151) Myriam’s wholeness in her acceptance of her reflection includes the reacquisition of other parts of her identity that she had excised from her life.

She reunites with her brother, who never understood why she disappeared, and this shows her that she is more than the mistakes that kept her frozen in the mirror. She is a sister loved by her brother. She also reconciles with her son, and meets and accepts his fiancée. Now once again ‘mother’ comprises part of her identity, as well as ‘mother-in-law.’ Through her relationship with Ali she understands that she has value for many reasons other than the appearance of her body; friend and lover are added to the components that comprise her. Myriam, Lucía, and Antonia all show the importance of writing one’s own narrative. The reflection in the mirror represents only a surface, the last layer of cells that comprise the body. Identity contains so much more than this conglomeration of cells. These three characters’ realization of this represents a narrative that all aging people can internalize and make their own. As Melamed states, “It is true that we cannot change the eyes of others, but we can change our own” (153).

Bella in *Te trataré como a una reina* and Daniel in *Instrucciones para salvar el mundo* are examples of what happens when this realization never occurs. Bella views her life as a complete failure, much like Daniel. In her younger days she pictured herself being a successful singer, with all the accoutrements that accompany success. Her job singing at El Desiré is the antithesis of success.<sup>39</sup> Her apartment likewise represents failure: “Pero eso era cuando Bella todavía creía que ser artista consistía en otra cosa, cuando solía pasearse por el barrio residencial mirando los chalés y escogiendo mentalmente el palacete al que se mudaría cuando llegara el éxito. Desde entonces, las cortinas habían perdido muchas de sus cuentas de cristal y el terciopelo de las butacas se había llenado de polvo y peladuras” (77). The thoughts of “...la nostalgia de lo no vivido...” (88) haunt her. When she has the courage to fall in love, “Bella se rompió toda por dentro y supo que sí, que estaba enamorada de él, a su edad, a estas alturas de la vida y otra vez así de tonta y entregada” (129-30). Instead of appreciating this development, she denigrates it by thinking that she is too old to be experiencing this feeling. When Poco rebuffs her and expresses his desire for Vanessa, she takes this as a sign that she has nothing left to offer. Bella’s reliance to define her identity on what she considers to be her disintegrating reflection and her singing to customers that barely know she is there shows a dependence on aspects that have nothing to do with her inner self. Christopher Lasch<sup>40</sup> elucidates Bella’s situation: “This irrational terror of old age and death is closely associated with the emergence of the narcissistic personality as the dominant type of personality structure in contemporary society. Because the narcissist has so few inner resources, he looks to others to validate his sense of self. He needs to be admired for his beauty, his charm, celebrity, or power—attributes that usually fade with time” (207). Bella looks for validation from Poco for her beauty and charm, while lamenting that she

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<sup>39</sup> Glenn rightly states that Bella singing in a seedy bar such as El Desiré signifies her marginality. (“Authority” 427)

<sup>40</sup> Though written thirty-five years ago, the intervening decades have not diminished the importance of this work.

wastes away singing in a dilapidated club instead of a more respectable place where she would be appreciated. In short, she exhibits exactly the qualities that Lasch describes. She also demonstrates that her memories, what should comprise a great deal of her identity, have slipped away from her: “En ella había nacido, en ella creció, en ella permaneció los veinte primeros años de su vida. Bella sintió un vértigo: ¿cómo era su casa, cómo era? No se acordaba bien” (230). The distancing of herself from her own history provides further proof that Bella has no internal resources on which to draw to construct her identity: “Miedo, miedo a haber olvidado, miedo a no poder recuperar lo que hubo, dolor casi físico ante la ausencia de lo que uno fue. Como si de repente se supiera huérfana, huérfana del todo, más huérfana aún que cuando sus padres murieron realmente, una orfandad de sí misma, de su pasado y de su historia” (230).<sup>41</sup> Bella has completely lost herself in her aging reflection; everything other than this has been erased.<sup>42</sup>

Daniel’s experience mirrors that of Bella. He has become a ghost in his own life. Daniel has no friends even though he has worked in the hospital for twenty years. His girlfriend has been having an affair for quite some time, and once he discovers this they decide to separate. He makes a futile attempt at regaining some semblance of a life in his pursuit of Fatma, a beautiful young prostitute, but this ends in failure. Daniel also has no inclination whatsoever to regain the passion for being a doctor that he had when he was young. Daniel sums up the assessment of his life thus: “Que era lo mismo que decir que su aparición tampoco importaba, que su presencia no tenía más sentido que una voluta de humo. ¿Estaría llegando al fin de sus días? ¿Esto era todo lo había hecho con su vida? ¿Ya no quedaba más? Qué desperdicio” (210). Daniel also refuses to make the leap that Antonia, Lucía, and Myriam do. Even though he shows awareness that he

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<sup>41</sup> Though I do not agree with her, Susan Dobrian uses this exact quotation to argue that “Unable to reconstruct a connection to a nurturing relationship based on a maternal one, Bella is empty of self” (113).

<sup>42</sup> Escudero correctly adds that “En un nivel metafísico, todos los personajes que habitan este mundo concebido como algo caótico y en destrucción continuada, son víctimas de su propia existencialidad” (“La visión” 125).

possesses the mental power to change his life, “Tendría que desear de verdad vivir, y reunir el coraje para lograrlo” (251), he never does. His existential quest for identity ends with his being consumed by his aging reflection in the mirror.

Montero ends *Instrucciones para salvar el mundo* with this thought: “Y es que la Humanidad se divide entre aquellos que saben amar y aquellos que no saben. Pero ésa es otra historia” (312). She is correct in more ways than one. Loving others no doubt gives a greater meaning to one’s life; but even more importantly, the ability to love oneself, as shown by both Montero and Desarthe, including the reflection in the mirror, provides the essential material in the construction of one’s identity

## CHAPTER THREE THE GAZE AND FEMALE SEXUALITY

In this chapter I shall turn critical attention to *La hija del caníbal* and *Te trataré como a una reina* by Montero; and *Mangez-moi*, *Dans la nuit brune*, and *Cinq photos de ma femme* by Desarthe. The focus here shifts to the concept of the male gaze—what it contains and how it impacts those that it touches; the idea of the invisibility of the older woman—what are the components of the societal constructs that cause this lessening of visibility; the female gaze—what it sees and the representation of it; and how the women characters in these novels interact with the languages that culture speaks of sexuality in the older female.

### The Male Gaze and Invisibility

In her well known article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975), Laura Mulvey deals with the idea of the male gaze. Using writings by Sigmund Freud as her basis, she describes the gaze as “...taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze” (8). Though her article focuses on female depictions in cinema, her ideas apply to many other contexts. Today, the idea of the male gaze posits that all women, from childhood, are aware that they are being watched, observed, and objectified by men. Melamed concludes the following: “Women are looked at but not truly *seen*. Glances bounce off our surface as reflections bounce off mirrors, and we live with this sense of being constantly viewed and evaluated...Nevertheless, our knowledge that we live under observation makes us self-conscious, and colors our behavior... We know we are being looked at” (70-71, emphasis original).

This gaze is triple-sided. In youth, one takes this observation for granted. When a beautiful woman walks into a room, all eyes turn to look at her, both male and female. She comes to expect this, and something is missing when she does not receive it: “In our obsession

with image,” Melamed states, “the eyes of others are ultimate mirrors” (73). When others no longer observe her, she interprets this as a loss of approval of her object. Appreciating her own body becomes more difficult. She has lost the attention of others, and she begins to view her body in a negative manner.

On the other hand, this observation can make a woman overly self-conscious. When she does not feel her best, or does not feel particularly attractive that day, in her mind this scrutiny can transform into a *critical gaze*, where she imagines that those around her, surveilling her, observing her, are focusing on her flaws. McKinley writes, “Girls learn to watch their own bodies from this outside perspective to avoid negative judgment. This construction of women as objects to be watched and evaluated both shapes women’s consciousness and makes them dependent on others for approval.” (56). This can cause high anxiety if she does not feel self-assured. She does not see others observing her as approval, but rather as negative judgment. Though she may be mistaken, her own lack of self-confidence determines, in her own mind, what these others are thinking.

We also find a third component of this observation from others: as she grows older this positive surveillance begins to diminish. She notices as she walks into a room that people are no longer drawn to look at her. What she might have found annoying in the past she now misses greatly. She may not have realized the importance of the fact that people looked at her, but she certainly notices when they do *not*. Frequently this presents the first clue that her age affects her attractiveness. Melamed explains that we do not feel that we are different, but the reality is that “...we are simply put into another category by the eyes of others” (75). “What these eyes tell us,” Melamed continues, “is that they will no longer mirror us. The eyes make no contact; they glance and slide off as if they had seen an inanimate object... The bite on the neck signifying

male approval introduces a time-release poison: it is a bleach; we fade gradually; we become invisible” (75). The aging woman has reached a critical point in her life when this happens. She can either calmly accept the fact that she elicits less attention, or she can allow it to disrupt her very identity. She may find it extremely difficult, however, to let this ‘gaze’ disappear gracefully. This knowledge that they are being observed is often so ingrained in women that they begin to make an effort to recapture this attention. They may also, as I demonstrated in the previous chapter, become hyper-focused on their appearances so as to *keep* rather than recapture this attention. Being the object of male desire is often part and parcel of a woman’s identity.<sup>43</sup> As Furman explains, “In short, we repeatedly see that women’s developing sense of their bodily selves is strongly shaped by the way they are perceived by others... We will see that this tendency is not limited to women’s youthful years but continues to affect the time and attention they devote to their physical appearance throughout their lives” (51).<sup>44</sup> The older a woman gets, the more she must focus on her appearance in order to retain the attention that she commanded in her youth.<sup>45</sup> As established in the previous chapter, Lucía in *La hija del caníbal* and Bella in *Te trataré como a una reina* put a great deal of emphasis on their efforts to keep their bodies as youthful as possible. They fear, like many women fear, the day that *no one* looks at them. Melamed posits, “To be seen as unimportant to men is—with few exceptions—not to be seen at all. It is that simple” (74). The gaze of others comes to signify a woman’s existence in the world. Without it, she disappears.

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<sup>43</sup> Irigaray writes that “Female sexuality has always been conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters” (23).

<sup>44</sup> “Sexism, heterosexism, racism, and ageism, while they do not determine human values and choices, while they do not deprive us of agency, remain strongly normalizing within our culture” (Bordo, *Unbearable* 299).

<sup>45</sup> “...so woman derives her price from her relation to the male sex...” (Irigaray 188).

Montero and Desarthe both provide much evidence of their awareness of the male gaze in the novels examined in this chapter. In *La hija del caníbal* Lucía remarks on several occasions about the omnipresence of this gaze. She knows that each pair of eyes that observe us represents a separate language that speaks to us and of us: "...todos somos subjetivos, no hay más realidad que la que completamos, traducimos, alteramos con nuestra mirada. Tantas realidades como ojos" (73).<sup>46</sup> Each gaze evaluates us differently. The number of opinions constructing our objects equals the number of people who observe us. In other words, it is impossible to please everyone. As the saying goes, one can be the juiciest, most succulent peach in the world, and there will still be people who do not like peaches. Lucía, however, concedes an extraordinary amount of importance to the gaze of the Other: "...porque todos somos lo que los demás nos creen y como nos miran" (145). Lucía comes to this conclusion, but not all women do. We are what *we* think of ourselves.<sup>47</sup> What others think as they observe us exists in a realm completely out of our control. How others perceive us, how they construct our objects, or what language they choose to describe us, does not fall under our influence. To base one's identity on the views of others invites disaster. Melamed adds depth to my contention: "But to base one's identity on these cues [from men] is like trying to find out who you are in a hall of mirrors. This exteriorization of our identity makes us enormously vulnerable. An admiring glance or compliment may cheer us today, but a lack of response may plunge us into depression tomorrow. And even the best mirror is only two-dimensional; it can never give us any solidity" (84).<sup>48</sup> This type of dependence on

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<sup>46</sup> Irigaray writes that "*Socially* [women] are 'objects' for and among men and furthermore they cannot do anything but mimic a 'language' that they have not produced..." (189, emphasis original).

<sup>47</sup> Bordo writes, "Rather, I view our bodies as a site of struggle, where we must *work* to keep our daily practices in the service of resistance to gender domination, not in the service of docility and gender normalization" (*Unbearable* 184, emphasis original).

<sup>48</sup> Bordo writes, "Yet female bodies, pursuing these ideals, may find themselves as distracted, depressed, and physically ill as female bodies in the nineteenth century were made when pursuing a feminine ideal of dependency, domesticity, and delicacy" (*Unbearable* 184).

what languages the culture speaks about one's appearance can lead to catastrophic consequences, not only concerning the effects of self-perception, but also on one's essential identity. How one views oneself carries infinitely more importance than anyone else's evaluation.

This in no way contradicts that others constantly observe and judge us. Lucía's relationship with this ubiquitous male gaze is contradictory. At times she disparages it, and on other occasions she bases her attractiveness and value directly on the opinion of others. At one juncture she remarks that it matters little how attractive the woman is, the man will always be compelled to look and evaluate her: "...el hombre era un prototipo celtibérico de la subespecie Agreste Camionero, uno de esos individuos que llevan la testosterona en la solapa y que devoran indefectiblemente con la mirada a cualquier mujer que se les ponga al lado, así sea la más horrible del planeta mundo" (142). Here she completely devalues his gaze, as she proposes that just by being female one attracts the 'devouring' male gaze. She infers that this gaze holds no significance because it in no way evaluates the woman's attractiveness. She is simply a woman.

Yet she also pities the woman that has lost the possibility of this attention: "Y esa señora gorda, vieja y dilatada, ¿cómo pudo acostumbrarse a volverse invisible, a perder para siempre la mirada del hombre?" (136). Here she equates this woman's identity with the male gaze. Lucía validates the languages that underscore the devaluation of a woman as she ages, frequently to the point of her non-existence. Old and fat, men no longer see her, despite the possibility that she may be a wonderful woman. Who could possibly know the depths of this old, fat woman from a glance? Lucía indicates that none of this matters. If she no longer embodies an object worthy of male desire and no longer attracts positive attention, then she is worthless.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Irigaray writes, "*Commodities, women, are a mirror of value of and for man...They yield to him their natural and social value as a locus of imprints, marks, and mirage of his activity*" (177, emphasis original).

Lucía also uses the male gaze to evaluate her own worth: “Y sí, en efecto, el hombre se encontraba todavía ahí abajo: pero con la vista vuelta hacia otra parte y completamente ajeno a Lucía, a las piernas de Lucía y a sus pechos sin sujetador resaltados por el tricot elástico. ‘Se acabó, te volviste invisible,’ se dijo ella. ‘Ahora sí que la has jodido para siempre’” (142-43). When his gaze slips off her without sexually objectifying her, she has lost everything. Even though she thinks he should be looking at her legs, or at the very least her breasts in the tight sweater she is wearing without a bra, he does not. This, to her, signifies that she has suddenly become invisible, *forever*. Johnson supports my contention. He writes that “Lucía belie[ves]...in the inextricability of identity from its foundations in the *mirada* of the Other. Montero’s protagonist believes in the inevitability...of being devoured by the look and actions of the paternal authority figure” (463, emphasis original). She expects to be looked at and judged, and she places her value as an attractive woman in the glance of an unknown, random male that does not ‘see’ her. She could just as easily look at herself in the mirror and see how attractive she is, but she does not. Her value should be in her own eyes, not his.

One cannot overstate the importance that Lucía places on this attention from men. Balena reaffirms this assertion when she writes that “The loss of youth is an anxiety that enslaves Lucía’s mind...She worries about losing the ability to attract attention from men or simply becoming invisible...” (40). After she takes a twenty-one-year-old lover, she begins to notice the looks she receives from a variety of people: “Tras pasar por los brazos de Adrián...comencé a mirar alrededor y a descubrir que había otros muchachos que me miraban... Este descubrimiento fue un jolgorio, una fiesta, un regalo inesperado de la existencia...porque el coqueteo inocente y el modo en que mi presencia chisporroteaba en los ojos ajenos me hacían sentirme viva y hermosa y apreciable” (279-80). Lucía once lamented her invisibility, but after taking Adrián as

a lover suddenly the whole world notices her. It makes her feel alive, beautiful, and appreciated. Lucía's epiphany features a variety of curious aspects. She states that she has never really attracted that much attention from men. She believes that her diminutive stature detracts from her appeal, and that her face does not stand out as special. All in all she is not totally unattractive. But *now*, now that she rests on a young man's arm, her presence 'gives off sparks,' everyone that she encounters notices her, looks at her, and takes note of her presence. Is it possible that she feels confident in herself, and this self-assurance sparkles in the eyes of those that look at her and attracts their attention? The answer is yes. This 'unexpected gift of existence' was within her reach all along. She never needed to be on a young man's arm, or any man's arm, in order to feel this way about herself. All she needed was to look in the mirror and like what she sees. All she needed was to choose a different language.

The instances of the male gaze in Montero's *Te trataré como a una reina* abound. The forty-nine-year-old Antonio makes a habit of evaluating women from afar. In one case a beautiful woman sits smoking in a cafe. As Melamed says, the girl knows without question that she is being watched: "La chica fumaba del mismo modo que se aventaba los rizos, con artificios naturalidad. Era tan bella que no necesitaba mirar alrededor para saberse observada. Se interpretaba a sí misma sin dignarse a contemplar a los espectadores, consciente de que no podía por menos de ser el centro de atención allí donde estuviese" (102). Her movements have a studied quality, as though her actions were a performance for those who surveil her. Antonio appreciates these movements; he feels they are intended for him as he observes her. He has the practice of sexually objectifying every attractive woman he sees, in a most disturbing way: "La chica...de la caballera de fuego, necesitaba un macho...Un macho para gemir...cómo gemiría ella, con esa boca tan carnosa. Un macho para deshacerse, para acariciarle con el suave plumón

de su pelo, para envolverle en su melena mineral, para atraparle en el laberinto de sus cabellos, para estrangularle con la hermosa y letal maraña de sus rizos” (101). Antonio routinely pictures himself in a sexual liaison with every beautiful woman he sees. He personifies the male gaze, instantly transforming every attractive woman he sees into a sexual object.

Antonio evaluates his sister, Antonia, in a different context. She takes care of her brother in a loving, doting way, yet he treats her terribly: “Pero mira que es burra, Toña, no es que seas más pequeña que yo, es que es burra—gritaba Antonio” (13). Though Antonia is forty-four, her only job entails caring for her brother. She shows herself susceptible to the negative language he uses in reference to her, and looks for positive attention from other sources. She has recently developed the habit of masturbating frequently with her stuffed animal, and one day she discovers Damián, the twenty-one-year-old nephew of the superintendent of her building, watching her through the window. Horrified at first, she stays in her apartment for three days to avoid any chance encounter with the voyeur in the hallway. When she finally ventures out of her apartment, she does indeed come face to face with Damián. However, his reaction differs from what the dismayed Antonia expected: “A Antonia se le paralizó el pulso en un latido y Damián farfulló unos cuantos ruidos inconexos... Antonia, aunque sumida en un aturullado patatús, había advertido que el muchacho se había puesto rojo como un cangrejo, y que en su mirada no había rastro de malicia, sino un susto, un sobresalto, un desvalimiento que le dejó enternecida” (91). Antonia anticipates a malicious acknowledgement from Damián that he has observed her in her most vulnerable state. What she discovers instead is a ‘powerlessness’ in his expression, as though *she* were in control of the situation. Jordan Tronsgard remarks on this shift of power: “Para Antonia, la reacción tímida del chico es reveladora. Los ojos de Damián ya no le dan miedo; ella empieza a abrazar el poder sexual que ejerce sobre el joven” (4). The submission in

his gaze bolsters her confidence to such a degree that she begins masturbating, with the curtains and window open, at the same time of day in order to encourage Damián's voyeuristic propensities. Her fantasies have now evolved to *being watched*: "...humedeciendo el lomo de peluche de Lulú con fantasías nuevas, con la ensoñación de que unos ojos de varón espiaban su estremecida desnudez. Eran unos ojos un poco estrábicos, idénticos a los del muchacho que estaba unos metros más arriba, en la azotea, meneando su inexperiencia y mojando de soledad las abrasadas baldosas del terrado" (92). Antonia, rather than being the object of the male gaze (even though he would be watching her), has converted herself into the *subject* of that gaze, from watched to watcher. That is to say, she seeks out this gaze, knowing that she has the power to entrance this 'powerless' young man with her naked body. She uses his observation to her own ends. Rather than being objectified, she objectifies his gaze. Rather than viewing herself as an object of Damián's gaze, in her explicit invitation of his observation she becomes the initiator in the situation. Tronsgard's comments on this scene support my analysis. He writes that "Aunque Antonia sigue siendo el objeto de la mirada voyerística, ya no es un objeto avergonzado: se ha convertido en una exhibicionista dispuesta. Además, ella se apropia del acto mismo de ser mirada como una fuente de su propio placer" (4). By doing this she has taken the power away from Damián's surveillance and given it to herself by *using* his desire to watch her as a tool in a scenario that she controls. In Tronsgard's analysis, the gaze of Damián "...da lugar a una jerarquía del poder que se establece entre el que mira y la que es mirada y juzgada" (2). Though he implies that the power lies with Damián as he watches, even though Tronsgard admits that she derives pleasure from it, I argue that Antonia subverts the hierarchy of power by seizing control of the situation.

The male gaze plays a critical role in Desarthe's *Mangez-moi* as well. At the beginning of the novel Myriam's description of herself demonstrates that she no longer believes herself capable of attracting the male gaze: "...je suis, à l'extrême limite, un chien en peluche, mais moche, celui dont personne ne veut et qui se couvre de poussière sur l'étagère d'une épicerie de village qui avait pensé un temps faire dans le jouet pour attirer la clientèle" (49). Being in a window automatically puts her on display; but she gathers dust, meaning no one pays attention to her, and no one wants her. She has lost the attraction of the gaze that she once had.

She did indeed attract attention at one point. Her son Hugo's friends remark on her appearance: "D'autres me trouvaient jolie et demandaient à Hugo comment ça se faisait que j'étais si jeune" (198-99). This attention does not interest her much until she wishes to elicit it from Octave, the sixteen-year-old boy with whom she has an affair. He arrives unexpectedly at the house one day, and she laments her appearance: "Elle pense à la robe vraiment moche qu'elle porte aujourd'hui, au fait qu'elle ne s'est pas parfumée et que ses doigts, sentent l'ail. Elle voudrait recommencer la journée, se faire belle. Elle ne pense pas amour, elle pense dignité, voilà, c'est tout. Etre présentable. Ce n'est pas comme quand ils étaient petits" (203). Once again she changes from first person to third person. She stands outside of herself to evaluate her object as she thinks others would see her. Furman writes, "The picture that emerges is one in which the feminine self is developed through a vigilant and sensitive response to ever-present external assessment: from parents, boyfriends, husbands, friends" (52). She has objectified herself, and what she sees does not please her. Her dress seems ugly, her hands smell of garlic, and she lacks perfume. She wants to restart the day and 'make herself pretty.' At this point she is already attracted to Octave. She tries to convince herself that being presentable concerns her ("Elle ne pense pas amour, elle pense dignité..." (203), but truthfully she wants Octave to look at her and

see her beauty. She covets his gaze. She wants her object to please to him. This male gaze plays a critical part in her self-perception, as she feels that she does not measure up to what she thinks would attract him.

In *Dans la nuit brune* by Desarthe, Jérôme, the fifty-six-year-old narrator, constantly surveils the women around him and evaluates their appearances and their physical traits. He evaluates them with a single glance and quickly expresses his approval or disapproval. At the beginning of the novel Jérôme's daughter's eighteen-year-old boyfriend has died. His ex-wife, Paula, comes to be with them during this trauma. The moment Jérôme sees her he thinks how old she looks: "Comme elle est vieille, pense-t-il" (27). Upon further inspection, however, he reassesses her appearance: "Il l'examine et, du coup, la voit. Pas si vieille finalement. Pas vieille du tout, même, se dit-il en regardant sa poitrine toujours très haute, comme si ses seins souriaient. Elle porte un jean qui pourrait appartenir à Marina et ses cheveux sont courts et longs à la fois, brillants, bien plaqués autour de sa tête comme un bonnet d'enfant" (27). It is interesting that at this point he remarks that he actually *sees* her, as if before when he thought she looked old he did not. He inspects the look of her breasts, still very high, and dressed in jeans that he compares to ones that his eighteen-year-old daughter might wear. Both these descriptions are references to how *young* Paula looks, rather than how *old* she looks: "Thus female attractiveness, and femaleness itself," Melamed writes, "becomes associated with youth for reasons of dominance as well as reproduction. Woman comes to 'mean,' in essence, young woman" (29). He also refers to the look of her hair as a 'child's bonnet.' This carries particular significance in relation to the idea of dominance. Paula intimidates Jérôme. She is a strong woman, and she left the marriage. By infantilizing her haircut he, in essence, diminishes her strength as a woman. She, however, values his gaze and solicits his opinion of how she looks:

“Tu me trouves comment?” demande-t-elle en baissant les yeux” (27). Not only does she find it necessary to ask, as if his opinion of her were more important than her opinion of herself, but she coquettishly lowers her eyes, a sign of submission to the dominance of his opinion.

As stated previously, every woman that Jérôme sees he evaluates in this way; the younger she looks, the better: “Jérôme pense à la mère de Rosy. Elle tient un salon de coiffure... Elle change si souvent de couleur de cheveux qu’il peine à la reconnaître d’une fois sur l’autre, mais ses fesses ne changent pas, ses seins, sa taille—un corps pimpant, énergique, disponible. Déjà au collège, elle avait cette réputation. A treize ans, tout le monde savait qu’elle avait couché” (149-50). The use of the word *pimpant* is significant because of its synonyms in French: *juvénile*, *jeune*, *juvenile*, *young*. The descriptions of her breasts, her buttocks and the size of her waist, as well as her body in general as energetic and available, clearly demonstrate the reason that he gazes at her. Melamed explains, “Age discrimination, as we have seen, weighs more heavily on women than on men. And sexism is inherently ageist, because the tits-and-ass mentality equates female value with female youthfulness” (29). He even goes so far as to imply that this type of body invites promiscuity, for how could one attract such attention without acting on those gazes? Even though she colors her hair (presumably to hide the grey), her *body* still looks like that of a teenager, so she is worthy of, attracts and holds, his gaze.

When Jérôme encounters a woman, Vilno Smith, that in no way confines herself to his ‘ideal’ construction of a woman, he is completely flummoxed. He does not know how to deal with her, much less evaluate her as a woman: “Il l’observe, comme s’il lui fallait décider à quelle espèce cette grande femme vigoureuse et franche appartient. Je n’ai jamais rencontré quelqu’un comme elle... en cherchant à définir ce qui la distingue si radicalement des autres spécimens” (89). He loses his capability to listen to what she says because he tries desperately to

assess her. She so breaks the mold of ‘woman’ in Jérôme’s imagination that he has trouble determining what *species* she represents. She is tall, without make-up, and does not dress provocatively. This so-called woman threatens him because he cannot classify her in conventional terms and therefore cannot dominate her. He has trouble even facing her because her nonconformity to his standards so confuses him: “...cet air d’indépendance, d’autonomie... Il n’est pas certain d’apprécier. Se tenir face à elle lui demande un effort” (89). Vilno is a refreshing character in the midst of all the female characters in these novels that place such value on the opinion of men and the cultures in which they reside. Vilno cares not a whit what anyone thinks of her, and this threatens the men who wish her to be subservient to and conform to their standards of the appropriate appearance of ‘womanhood.’ She uses her object as a representation of what pleases her subject, and this supplies a glimpse of the self-confidence that this sort of independence from societal constructs can impart. She is beholden to no one but herself. She has no one to impress with her appearance other than herself.

This strangeness to Jérôme does not stop him from objectifying her sexually. After his efforts to subjugate her body in his mind fail, he refers to her “poitrail de guerrière aux côtes apparentes, ses petits seins goguenards” (89). He cannot stop himself from noticing her ‘small, mocking breasts.’ He refers to her breasts in this way because her entire *essence* mocks his expectations of what a woman should be like. She fits into no preconstructed categories in his mind and therefore everything about her mocks his narrow-mindedness.

In Desarthe’s *Cinq photos de ma femme*, we meet Max Opass, an eighty-year-old grandfather (and narrator) who objectifies women to the same extent as Jérôme. His wife, Telma, has recently died, and he takes five different pictures to five artists in order to have them paint her portrait. During his adventures he has several opportunities to evaluate the young women

around him. The first of these is the wife of the first painter he visits. Her face was terribly burned in a fire, but Max sexually objectifies her nonetheless: “Surtout qu’à bien y regarder, cette peau lisse, ce masque impassible percé de deux yeux étincelants sous le turban multicolore, et puis ce corps—de danseuse peut-être—dos très droit, genoux en dehors, poitrine haute et ferme. Un elfe qui n’aurait jamais de poches sous les yeux, jamais de pli au coin des lèvres” (49). In his observation of her body, Max manifests several cultural ‘ideals’ that construct the languages of attractiveness for women. He remarks on her ‘high, firm breasts.’ There are abundant references in both of these novels, as we have seen, to this particular cultural language in reference to the acceptability of female breasts. Her body is thin, that of a dancer, which reflects another social construct of Western cultures. He remarks that because of her burned face she will never have bags under her eyes or wrinkles on her face. Even at eighty years old Max has a standard for female beauty that does not allow for aging.<sup>50</sup> Melamed elucidates this idea: “There is good reason to be apprehensive about aging if you are female—not because of wrinkles and gray hairs, but because of the fall from grace they represent” (18). When a woman shows wrinkles she will fall out of even an *eighty-year-old man’s* graces. Both Max and Jérôme, despite their ages, maintain standards of female beauty that center around youthful appearance, even as they and the women around them age.

Max’s idolization of youthful female bodies continues throughout the novel. When going to visit the second painter, Virginie, Max thinks, “C’était une femme cette fois-ci. Il l’espérait jeune et jolie, pourquoi se prive ? Il se sentait en veine pour un numéro de charme” (54). He would be pleased if she were young and pretty; this implies that if she is *not* young and pretty he

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<sup>50</sup> Bordo writes, “And for women, associated with the body and largely confined to a life centered *on* the body (both the beatification of one’s own body and the reproduction, care and maintenance of the bodies of others), culture’s grip on the body is a constant, intimate fact of everyday life” (Bordo, *Unbearable* 17, emphasis original).

will be disappointed. He also thinks that he will flirt with her a little if she is what he imagines. He clearly believes that his fixation on youth does not manifest itself in the opposite sex. Max also turned this judgmental gaze upon his wife at the age of forty-five: “Sa silhouette n’avait pas changé; toute en jambes, un peu plate, de très belle épaules et une taille souple. Son visage, souvent inerte, figé dans une mystérieuse expectative, avait mis bien longtemps à creuser sa première ride. Une vraie beauté” (55). Max considers her a true beauty, not only for her long legs (another cultural language of female beauty), but also because her face did not develop its first wrinkle for quite a long time. He and Telma both revel in the fact that Telma was often mistaken for her daughter’s sister rather than her mother. Both Max and Telma valued her youthful looks above all else.

Max eventually turns this gaze upon himself, and what he sees in his very aged body does not please him: “...au bassin creusé, aux hanches en dedans, aux vertèbres saillantes, aux chairs détendues...” (92). Perhaps it is this aversion to his own body that makes him so disparage the signs of aging in others. At the very least, Max thinks *all* old people are unattractive, not just the women: “Pourtant...c’est quand même moins beau, les personnes âgées, non?” (92). As the body ages it becomes less aesthetically pleasing to those who uphold the language that *only* youth is beautiful. To Max, it has always been about this obsession with beauty: “Comment l’atteindre, la capturer, l’assujettir?” (93), but, in his mind, in order to maintain beauty one must hold on to youth, an impossible proposition.

The male gaze does not merely sexually objectify women; more is contained in that action. Within the observation of the female object exist all the cultural languages of youthful beauty and the ‘ideal’ female body. The surveillance of the aging female form brings with it judgements of how young she *looks*. This results in what Melamed terms ‘appearance anxiety’

(68), and this concern brings with it an inherent need for reassurance that they are not ‘looking their age.’ “A symptom of our sickness” Melamed writes, “is that we feel complimented when others tell us we do not look our age” (31). Women absorb these cultural constructs, suffer from immense pressure to retain their youthful appearance, and feel ‘less than’ when they do not. This allows the male gaze (as culturally constructed) to dictate their attractiveness. This is not mandatory; women choose to allow this. There exists, however, an alternative. Women can realize that their aging bodies are not failing to maintain the impossible standards that set them up for failure, and understand that it is Western cultures’ inability to let go of its neurotic obsession with youth that fails aging women.

## The Female Gaze

Given that the male gaze elicits such attention in the realm of theory, the female gaze deserves equal consideration. The male gaze, as demonstrated above, signifies a sexual objectification of females. Women are similarly capable of sexually objectifying the male body with their surveillance. When Calvin Klein began placing almost nude male bodies on display on huge billboards in Times Square, he opened the door to giving the male body the same status as sexual object that female bodies had acquired decades earlier (Bordo, *Male Body* 185). Now men, alongside women, were in their underwear for all the world to see. This gave women the opportunity to see and fantasize about the male form in a public forum. As Susan Bordo remarks, “We’re [women] just learning, after all, to be voyeuses” (*Male Body* 178). Not only did these massive billboards equalize the normality of seeing naked bodies of both genders, it started in motion a new language of the ‘ideal’ male body.<sup>51</sup> This, in turn, gave women a new standard to which to compare other objects in their field of vision. As those models in Calvin Klein underwear were both young and exceptionally fit, men became acutely aware (as women experience with the comparison of their bodies to those of ultra-thin lingerie models) of their physical imperfections. (Bordo, *Male Body* 179-180).

Montero focuses in on this comparison in several of her novels. The male characters evaluate women with their observations, but the female characters reciprocate with their own appraisals. These evaluations, identical to the male opinion in many ways, assess the attractiveness of the male characters in relation to the appearance of their bodies, often comparing them or appreciating them in relation to their youthful exterior. When Bella observes

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<sup>51</sup> Bordo contends in her book *The Male Body: A New Look at Men in Public and Private* (1999) that this advertising did not have the intention of giving women “men as sex objects,” (179), but rather that Klein capitalized on the burgeoning market that catered specifically to gay males. However, she argues that a side effect of this advertising was that it did indeed provide images of the ideal male body for women to observe in the public sphere.

Poco in *Te trataré como a una reina*, she does so with a critical eye, “De perfil estaba bien. Tenía una nariz recta, y recia, y muy bonita. Y un cuello de toro” (83). She also fantasizes about him as a younger man: “¿Cómo habría sido de joven? Un conquistador. Tierno y duro al mismo tiempo” (83). Women, too, nurture an obsession with youth. We see this same fixation on youth when Bella contemplates what Poco might have looked like before she met him: “Qué pena, haberle conocido tan mayor. Ahora a Bella le entraban unas nostalgias tontas, una melancolía absurda. Le entristecía, por ejemplo, el no haber conocido al Poco de joven. Y de adolescente. Y de niño. Intentaba imaginárselo con quince años, con la torpeza de la pubertad, tierno y medio hacer” (153). Bella imagining him in this manner mirrors Antonio’s obsession with Vanessa’s youthful body; the only difference lies in the actual corporal condition of Poco and Vanessa in the present.

When Vanessa’s gaze evaluates Poco, she disparages not only his object but his subject as well: “Vanessa se detuvo un instante con el cepillo suspendido en el aire y le miró de soslayo, a través del espejo: ahí estaba, feo y viejo, acurrucado en un rincón, acobardado. Un pobre diablo, un miserable. Pero esa miseria se había acabado para ella. Que se pudriera” (206). She feels an innate superiority to him because of her youth. She goes on to further denigrate his appearance and his ambitions to be with her romantically, due to his age: “El muy borrico, se dijo Vanessa, lo mismo se creía que yo podía enamorarme de él, con esa facha. La piel enferma y escamosa, y ojos de borracho, y pellejudo. Repugnante” (206). Her abhorrence echoes that of Sonia in *Les bonnes intentions*. When caught in the young female gaze, markers of age engender disgust.

Antonia in *Te trataré como a una reina* exemplifies both sides of the gaze, enjoying both being watched and watching. Mulvey explains that “There are circumstances in which looking

itself is a source of pleasure, just as, in the reverse formation, there is pleasure in being looked at” (7-8). Antonia relishes both. Quite the voyeuse, she shows her preference for a young body as well: “Entonces corría cautelosamente a la mirilla para capturar así un instante de su perfil, o la golosa de sus hombros. Verle le veía lo que se dice mal, porque la mirilla era muy turbia” (17). She also experiences pleasure watching her lover, Damián: “A veces salía al descansillo de puntillas y atisbaba desde una esquina, mientras el chico barría la escalera con el escobón de mimbres tiesos. O le contemplaba dormir entre sus brazos... mientras ella le espantaba las pesadillas. O se sentaba en el bidet para ver cómo se duchaba la criatura, o cómo se repeinaba el remolino, o cómo se afeitaba con cuchilla” (163). She derives such pleasure from gazing that every time she sees Damián she mentally disrobes him, and imagines his naked penis: “Pero ahora, una vez conocidas las agonías de la carne, los ojos de Antonia atravesaban el uniforme del muchacho y reconocía las líneas secretas de su espalda o la blandura momentánea de su virilidad” (164). Antonia’s voyeurism knows no bounds; her objectification of a young German boy on the train reaches a sexual crescendo: “Pero las piernas parecían de otro hombre, largas, robustas, tan desnudas como un pecado. Los pantalones cortos eran de verdad muy cortos y dejaban ver la musculosa curva de los muslos, cubierta por una pelusa de oro deliciosa. Antonia recordó los pelos negros que ensombrecían las gruesas muñecas de Damián y la boca se le quedó seca y sintió como unas repentinas ganas de orinar” (109). Antonia’s capacity for sexual arousal simply through observation challenges even that of her brother Antonio. They display equal obsession with watching the opposite sex. She does it so frequently that it connotes one of the seven deadly sins to her: “Porque había decidido que también se podía cometer pecado de gula con los ojos” (164). She has had pre-marital sex with Damián and she has masturbated habitually, yet she confesses that surveilling men gives her the greatest gratification: “De todos

los pecados cometidos, era el mirar el que más placer le producía en Antonia” (164). Antonia rivals, perhaps even surpasses, the male proclivity for sexual objectification.

Lucía in *La hija del caníbal* is another character who delights in surveilling and judging men. The evaluation of her husband Ramón is less than approving: “Le miré mientras cruzaba la sala: alto pero rollizo, demasiado redondeado por en medio, sobrado de nalgas y barriga, con la coronilla algo pelona asomando entre un lecho de cabellos castaños y finos. No era feo: era blando” (10). Lucía makes clear references in her description of Ramón to the male ‘ideal,’ and finds him lacking in every sense. She also relegates men to the same categorization to which she subjected the old, fat woman previously. That is to say, they have lost their ability to attract the sexual gaze due to their aesthetically displeasing attributes: “Ese señor del traje, por ejemplo, ¿habría llorado mucho la pérdida de su caballera? ¿Cuánto tardó en aceptar su cráneo mondo, en dejar de estremecerse, por las mañanas, cuando se contemplaba en el espejo? ¿Sentiría todavía un hipo melancólico cuando se veía en fotos antiguas, con todo el pelo y todo el futuro brotándole con vigor juvenil de la cabeza?” (136). Once again she uses the young ‘ideal’ to judge this balding man, even making explicit reference to his younger days when he had hair. She subjects yet another man to this dissecting gaze when she meets Li-Chao, a man she and Félix visit to find out information about her missing husband. At first she is unsure how old he is, but upon further inspection she uses physical attributes in an attempt to fix his age: “Sus ojos estaban rodeados de una infinidad de arrugas muy menudas. No debí de tener cuarenta años, sino bastantes más. Cincuenta, quizá incluso sesenta” (298). She judges others’ wrinkles as harshly as she judges her own. Yet she has not finished inspecting him, still attempting to place him in a specific category of age: “Por otra parte, esa mano izquierda con la que desempañaba todos los movimientos estaba cubierta de manchas, seca y arrugada, con los nudillos deformados por la

artrosis. Setenta. Li-Chao debía de tener lo menos setenta años. O quizá incluso ochenta. Era la mano de un anciano” (300). No one escapes Lucía’s minute scrutiny. If the body has recorded time on its surface, she will ferret out those details with an unforgiving eye. Her evaluation becomes more pejorative as their physical attributes move further and further away from the youthful ideal personified by Klein’s male models.

Montero allots equal importance to the male and female gaze in *Te trataré como a una reina* and *La hija del caníbal*. She recognizes the existence of the female gaze, and also gives the female characters the power to use their surveillance of the opposite sex to their own ends. The attention she pays to the equality of opportunity to behold from afar proves noteworthy. Men do not corner the market on evaluating others’ bodies, nor do they escape the scrutiny of the female eye. Desarthe, alas, does not exhibit an interest in balancing the male gaze with a female one. Her female characters are objectified relentlessly in her novels, but almost nowhere in the four novels of Desarthe do we find a case of female voyeurism.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> In one instance in *Dans la nuit brune* Desarthe employs the female gaze. When Vilno first enters Jérôme’s office she studies him in an attempt to decipher the effect he has had on her: “Elle a posé le menton dans ses mains, coudes sur le bureau, car, sans cela, elle serait tombée à renverse. C’est physique, se dit-elle, quand elle cherche à s’expliquer ce qui lui est arrivé. La pente des yeux, la couleur de la peau, l’orientation des sourcils, l’implantation du nez, le dessin de lèvres. Parfois, un visage vous bouleverse” (194). This detailed examination of his facial features constitutes the only example of the female gaze that I found in her novels studied in this dissertation.

## Female Sexuality

The generalized conception of sexuality in older women is based on a multitude of negative constructions, as Beauvoir contends, “If old people show the same desires, the same feelings and the same requirements as the young, the world looks upon them with disgust: in them love and jealousy seem revolting or absurd, sexuality repulsive and violence ludicrous. They are required to be a standing example of all the virtues” (3). King states that “In Western culture, however, the term ‘ageing’ implies decline and deterioration and—for women—the loss of sexual identity” (xii). Melamed states that “Older women are depicted as asexual, while older men never are” (52). The list goes on, but the message does not change. Women lose their sexual identity as they grow older.<sup>53</sup>

With one exception, this is absolutely not the case in these eight novels of Montero and Desarthe. The aging female characters not only do not lose their sexual identity, they often reveal aggressive sex drives. These portrayals contrast sharply with their usual conformity to all the negative languages that society speaks to construct the identities of older women.

In *La hija del caníbal*, Lucía’s attitude towards sex shows metaphysical tendencies: “...el sexo es otra cosa. Es salir de ti mismo. Es detener el tiempo. El sexo es un acto sobrehumano: la única ocasión en la que vencemos a la muerte. Fundidos con el otro y con el Todo, somos por un instante eternos e infinitos, polvo de estrellas y pata de cangrejo, magma incandescente y grano de azúcar. El cielo, si es que existe, sólo puede ser eso” (280). Sex obviously holds great meaning and significance to her. Though she and her husband, Ramón, have greatly reduced their sexual encounters with each other, she remains a sexual being. When Ramón mysteriously

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<sup>53</sup> For additional commentary on aging women and their sexual identity, see works by the following authors: Mary Russo, Frida Furman, Kathleen Woodward, Carolyn Heilbrun, Susan Whitbourne, Nancy Miller, Joseph Esposito, and Ann Kaplan.

disappears at the airport at the beginning of the novel, Lucía recruits the help of two of her neighbors that live in her apartment building. One of these is Adrián, a man of twenty-one. Her torrid affair with the young Adrián not only provokes a good deal of self-analysis, it also serves to define both her sexual identity and appetite.

The first time that Lucía sees Adrián in a sexual manner she describes the situation thus: “Miré a Adrián: se le veía rabioso. Estaba muy guapo... Yo no sé si he dejado claro antes, pero Adrián es guapo. Muy atractivo. Miré sus ojos verdes oscuro... y sentí un vacío en el estómago, un pellizco de náusea, un ligero mareo. Sentí ese desfallecimiento singular que uno a veces percibe cuando se asoma a depende qué ojos... el aire me salió tembloroso de la garganta” (96). Her corporal reaction demonstrates her sexual attraction to Adrián, but she does not admit it at this point. When she initially addresses the possibility of this attraction, she echoes the cultural languages that would disapprove of such a relationship: “Como mucho, veía el despropósito, la inquietud de que me resultara atractivo ese mocoso. Yo no soy una estrecha. Tuve, siendo joven, mis más y mis menos amatorios. Pero Adrián era veinte años más pequeño...” (99). At the beginning of the comment, Lucía acknowledges that there are many that would see this relationship as inappropriate, and she includes herself in this group. The language she uses to describe Adrián, basically a snot-nosed kid, disparages even the idea of being attracted to this young man. She attempts to convince herself that she is not attracted to Adrián out of fear of what society would think: “Another obstacle is the pressure of public opinion... [The old person] is afraid of scandal or ridicule,” Beauvoir writes. “He becomes the slave of what other people might say. He inwardly accepts the watchwords of propriety and continence imposed by the community. He is ashamed of his own desires, and he denies having them...” (320). This describes Lucía’s situation perfectly. She has to deny her sexual response to Adrián in order to

retain her dignity. She even admits that she does not know how to deal with this situation: “Quiero decir que creo que no estaba preparada psicológicamente para coquetear con un muchacho como Adrián” (99). She is not yet willing to silence the voices in her mind that speak of the inappropriateness of a relationship between a woman of forty-one and a man of twenty-one.

She cannot, however, ignore her sexual attraction to him. When she touches him, even casually, her hair stands on end. Old enough that she could be his mother, yet she is *not* his mother: “...donde las madres ven carne infantil...yo sólo veía carne masculina, turbadora e intensa carne de hombre, el enigma del otro que te completa” (100). As she gradually acknowledges her feelings for Adrián, the cultural voices with all their negative criticism fade away.

Even though it takes quite a while after her admission of attraction, they do eventually have sex. After they have been lovers for a while, there is no doubt that Lucía maintains equal footing sexually with Adrián: “Y así, aunque Adrián era veinte años menor que ella, créeme que en la pasión Lucía no era ni un minuto más vieja que ese muchacho, porque en el alucinamiento del amor todos somos estúpidos y perpetuamente jóvenes” (379). Curiously, after their initial sexual encounter, Lucía completely discards the idea that women over forty are not sexual beings: “No es verdad que las mujeres nos pudramos al cumplir los cuarenta. No es verdad que nos desvanecemos en el pozo de la invisibilidad. Al contrario: la mujer madura, incluso muy madura, posee un atractivo propio, un momento de gloria...” (277). Lucía is full of contradictions. She laments several times, as discussed earlier in this chapter, that older women become invisible when they lose the male gaze. Yet here, because she has taken a much younger lover, she seeks to defend the sexual attractiveness of the older woman. She goes on to justify

her sexual relationship with Adrián, despite cultural disapproval: “Pese a las prohibiciones sociales y los prejuicios, a lo largo de la Historia infinidad de mujeres mayores han mantenido relaciones con hombres más jóvenes...No hay más que acercarse un poco a la vida de las mujeres célebres y empiezan a salir historias de este tipo” (278). After this remark she gives an extensive list of famous women who had affairs with much younger men.<sup>54</sup> At last, Lucía has not only silenced those negative cultural languages created to control her sexuality, she has also chosen a language that accepts and glorifies older women’s sexuality.

Even more remarkable, Lucía, after all the negative self-perception, finds freedom from her fears of aging. In the eyes of Adrián she now sees her own beauty. She now understands and rejects the destructive languages we adopt to describe ourselves: “Aprendí que él no notaba que yo tuviera celulitis ni que mis dientes fueran de resina; que le gustaban las arrugas de la comisura de mis ojos y que le importaba un carajo que mis antebrazos estuvieran un poco pendulones” (279). Lucía’s imagery of fileting and dismembering the body captures the essence of the damage that these negative languages can inflict: “Aprendí que la mirada implacable con la que nos fileteamos y descuartizamos y despreciamos las mujeres es una mirada nuestra, una mirada interna, una exigencia loca con la que nosotras mismas nos esclavizamos...” (279). Women have the choice to dissect themselves with every look in the mirror, or not. Lucía has turned her back on the languages that speak of her unattractiveness because of her age. She has learned to love the reflection in the mirror. Even though she needed the eyes of her lover to be the mirror that convinced her, she has accepted that reflection as her truth.

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<sup>54</sup> “Con sesenta años, George Sand enamoraba a hombres de treinta; Agatha Christie se casó, a los cuarenta, con un chico de veinticinco; Simone de Beauvoir vivió pasiones con muchachos jóvenes; Eleanor Roosevelt, la primera dama americana, amó y fue amada durante toda su vida por un hombre doce años menor que ella. La lista es interminable: Madame Curie, George Eliot, Edith Pilaf, Alma Mahler...Lo que públicamente se entiende por *normal* no es lo más habitual, sino lo normativo, lo convencionalmente obligatorio” (278). Lucía clearly states the effect that culture has on the perception of these relationships.

In *Te trataré como a una reina*, Antonia also finds liberation in the arms of a twenty-one-year-old man. She is a virgin at forty-four, having been heavily influenced her entire life by her father, her brother, and her religion. She comes to question these influences, wondering if she has made the wrong choice: “Había ocasiones en las que incluso llegaba a preguntarse si no estaría comportándose como una tonta, si no se habría equivocado en ser como era, o sea, tan decente” (19). As discussed earlier, Antonia has taken to habitual masturbation. Her sexuality has unquestionably awakened, even if it took forty-four years. She lusts after her neighbor, she lusts after a young German boy on the train, and she lusts after Damián. Her sexuality is rampant. Tronsgard argues that Antonia’s new-found liberation represents the end of Franco’s dictatorship in Spain: “Además de cambios políticos...la transición también da lugar a una liberalización creciente de actitudes sociales en cuanto a los roles tradicionales del género y la libertad sexual” (2). Though Antonia has not challenged her subservient role to her brother, she has clearly seized the opportunity to liberate herself sexually. She demonstrates just how liberated she feels when after she and Damián become lovers, she constantly undresses him in her mind: “...no hacía más que posar sus ojos en él, y zas, el chico se le quedaba en puros cueros...” (164). Antonia has no shame or reluctance to be in a relationship with Damián. She actually goes to see Damián when he is with his military company to bring him lunch. Her overly exuberant behavior so mortifies Damián that he identifies her not as his girlfriend but rather as his mother. When he tells his lieutenant this, he responds, “Pues, tienes una madre de buen ver todavía, soldado, de buen ver” (168). It is humorous that while Damián tries to separate himself from a relationship with Antonia, his lieutenant shows sexual interest in her. Antonia has metamorphosed into a new woman since her relationship with Damián began. She shows more

confidence, her self-perception has improved, and she finds true happiness in the arms of Damián, “Había aprendido tantas cosas Antonia, en estos meses” (196).

Sadly, the relationship lasts only three months. When Damián attempts to break up with her in the park, Antonia shows just how empowered she has become: “Los hombres parecían pensar con la bragueta, y, en un arranque de intuición, Antonia depositó su mano gordezuela en la entrepierna del muchacho, sobre la cremallera y lo prohibido” (198). Rather than passively allow him to break up with her, Antonia decides to molest him in public. Compared to the subservient, pre-relationship Antonia, the new Antonia demonstrates a degree of gumption and lack of fear that catches the reader off guard. She has sexual power, and she knows it and uses it. They have passionate sex in the park, for anyone passing by to see. This is a monumental moment, as having sex in public shows just how uninhibited sexually that Antonia has become. Tronsgard argues this same idea: “Aunque es de noche, el lugar público del encuentro implica una ruptura del miedo y la vergüenza de ser vista” (5). As it turns out, they are seen. A policeman watches them have sex, and masturbates while watching. Tronsgard comments that in this moment of supposed liberation for Antonia, she is converted once again into an object of male desire (5). Though Tronsgard has a valid point, the fact that Antonia has summoned the courage to have sex in public carries more importance than her objectification. Considering the fact that she solicited Damián’s voyeuristic attention, it is entirely possible that she would find being watched by a third party while having public sex arousing. Tronsgard also interestingly contends that the reader becomes a voyeur during this scene (5). He argues that the voyeuristic gaze shifts from Antonia to inspector García, as the reader watches him masturbate rather than watching Antonia and Damián have sex. In this way García replaces Antonia as the object of the gaze (5). In Tronsgard’s analysis, this shift of attention presents an opportunity to pass judgment

on the actions of García, who represents the past repression that Franco's dictatorship imposed on the citizens of Spain (6). This is an interesting view of this scene, and one that takes one step further my argument that Antonia's actions subvert the patriarchal system in the present that demands that she remain subservient to the rules set forth by this system to govern her behavior. Tronsgard's argument also adds meaning to the fact that García, after publicly masturbating, arrests them for indecency. Even though he has also committed a crime, he still holds power over those that he considers to be criminal, much like the repression of Franco's dictatorship still holds power over the people of Spain even after his death. García does, nevertheless, arrest them, and this has dire consequences for her relationship with Damián.

This moment brings about the turning point in their relationship, as Antonia's brother must bail her out of jail. His reaction to her behavior proves less than positive: "es que tengo una hermana un poco puta y algo loca..." (225). Antonio feels so enraged because Antonia was caught having sex in public, as Russo explains: "...the risk of anachronism is scandal. Not acting one's age, for instance, is not only inappropriate but dangerous, exposing the female subject especially, to ridicule, contempt, pity, and scorn" (21). Antonio also accuses Damián of having a sickness for wanting to sleep with Antonia: "¿No entiendes que eso es como una enfermedad? ¿Que haces tú con una mujer tan mayor?" (226-27). Antonio's hypocrisy is astounding. Forty-nine, he proposes to a girl of eighteen. Yet the words he uses to describe Antonia's relationship are "Repugnante, vergonzoso, morboso, aberrante, escándalo, indigno, asqueroso" (225).<sup>55</sup> Antonio's relationship with Vanessa, in his own mind, in no way resembles the exact situation in reverse with Antonia and Damián. He cannot tolerate the idea that Antonia has become sexually

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<sup>55</sup> "Men are not the enemy, but they often have a higher stake in maintaining institutions within which they have historically occupied positions of dominance over women. That is why they have often *felt* like 'the enemy' to women struggling to change those institutions" (Bordo, *Unbearable* 29, emphasis original).

liberated after he has controlled her for the entirety of her life. As Melamed explains, this can be particularly upsetting: “Older women are particularly dangerous [in a patriarchal and repressive culture]. Often widowed or single, they are no longer under control of father or husband. Alone and sexually savvy, they are ‘free-floating radicals,’ potential threats to the system. No wonder their sexuality is put down as either disgusting, ridiculous, or nonexistent” (99). Antonia’s independence, her ‘audacity’ to think that she can behave this way, threatens Antonio to his very core: “Lo hago sobre todo por el bien de mi hermana. Está haciendo el ridículo, se está poniendo en ridículo y es mi hermana, ¿entiendes? Yo quiero la mejor para ella. Antonia es como una niña y yo tengo que cuidar de ella, ¿comprendes? No puedo permitir que la gente se ría de ella, y yo sé que se ríen” (227). His referring to Antonia as a little girl further belittles her existence as a forty-four-year-old sexual being. Her sexuality threatens everything that upheld Antonio as superior to her. Tronsgard remarks on the discrepancy in how Antonio views himself and how he judges Antonia: “Antonio no solo demanda que Antonia cocina para él y haga todas las tareas domésticas como una ‘buena mujer,’ sino que también le prohíbe que mantenga su propia vida amorosa. La aplicación de una ley para él y otra para ella destaca el carácter de niña sometida de la que Antonia todavía padece aunque tiene 44 años” (3). Tronsgard and I agree that Antonio’s maintaining his authority requires that Antonia remain classified as a little girl. However, Antonio’s reaction, no matter how negatively and derogatorily he views the situation, does not change the fact that Antonia has found her sexual liberation.

The ending to Antonia’s story disappoints immensely, however. She has the courage to leave everything behind, including her suffocating and controlling brother, to get on the next train and escape: “Deprisa, muy deprisa, camino de un destino insospechado, hacia la novedad, hacia la vida. Lo había hecho. Había sido capaz, lo había logrado. Antonia aspiró profundamente

y el aire era limpio y la llenaba todo” (245). This passage gives the impression that she has been liberated not only sexually, but has also taken this freedom and seized it as the basis for the rest of her life. Unfortunately, Montero does not allow Antonia to escape. The random train Antonia has chosen leads straight back to her mother’s neighborhood. Tronsgard’s analysis coincides with mine. He writes that “No obstante, la nueva sexualidad de la mujer representada en esta novela carece de idealismo ingenuo; demuestra, en cambio, un juego ambiguo de la emancipación...” (2). She has experienced sexual liberation, yet finds herself headed straight back to the system that oppressed her. Glenn also agrees that Antonia “finds herself not en route to a new beginning but on the same old train that over the years has borne her back to her mother’s house” (200-201). Mary Harges, however, contends the opposite: “When Antonia courageously decides to leave Madrid, her exciting train ride is a conscious choice to free herself of her illusions and dependencies rather than, as Glenn suggests, ‘the same old train ride...back to her mother’s house’...This act initiates her revolution against patriarchal control and her desire to become the subject of her own discourse” (49). What Harges posits rings true in the beginning; it appears as though Antonia has truly broken the chains that bound her to her previous life full of repression and subservience. However, this analysis does not hold true at the end of Antonia’s story. Antonia’s entire attitude changes when she realizes which train she has randomly chosen. The reader’s final impression of Antonia is not positive: “La tarde se había puesto gris y sucia y la locomotora silbó con lamento de buque entre la lluvia” (245). This description contrasts sharply with that of her initial boarding of the train. This final image in no way supports Harges’s contention that Antonia will maintain her “revolution against patriarchal control” (49). Escudero also disagrees with Harges’s final conclusion. He does agree that Antonia has been “educada para convertirse en una mujer sumisa y servicial bajo los más

estrictos códigos católicos y machistas,” and that she also “trata de definir su nueva identidad personal y sexual, rebelándose en contra de esa educación represiva...” (“Miseria” 150).

However, Escudero contends that Antonia does not succeed in her attempt to escape, and also sees Antonia’s failure as symbolic of all women still trapped by Franco’s legacy of repression: “Su [Antonia] intento por liberarse de esas ataduras, por vivir auténticamente su sexualidad, condenado finalmente al fracaso, está alentado por las nuevas circunstancias en las que se desenvuelve la vida de la mujer española en la transición” (150). If Harges were right, if Montero had allowed Antonia to revel in her newfound independence, to grasp her liberation from her brother, from her own negative self-perceptions and from her sexual repression, this would have been glorious. Alas, Montero chose to have her lose all of this in the last moments. Expanding on Escudero’s thoughts, Antonia could have been a symbol of the courage to find liberation, an inspiration to all women of Spain to free themselves from Franco’s legacy, but she is not. Rather she gets on a train that leads her back to her past.<sup>56</sup>

In contrast to Antonia’s repression, in *Mangez-moi* by Desarthe one could say that Myriam’s sexuality is almost out of control. She has no problem whatsoever acknowledging herself as a sexual being at the age of forty-three. She had an affair with a sixteen-year-old, Octave, but because of the destruction this caused in her life she has been celibate for six years: “Cela fait six ans qu’un homme ne m’a pas tenue dans ses bras. Et encore, la dernière fois, était-

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<sup>56</sup> In his article, “La vision excremental de Rosa Montero,” Escudero discusses the previous train rides that Antonia took to see her mother. When Antonia suddenly ‘forgets how to breathe,’ Escudero argues that she “...es ahora consciente de la imposibilidad de rebelarse en contra de esa mecánica que la conduce inexorablemente, a Malgorta, representación de la vejez y la muerte” (122). Escudero also writes that these previous train rides to her mother’s house signify “...la manifestación de un cosmos opresivo y maligno que la condena a vivir en una prisión excremental” (122). He also comments on when Antonia considers getting off the train at a random stop rather than traveling all the way to her mother’s house, but remains on the train instead: “Sus ansias de libertad, sus deseos eróticos, sucumben así...ante la fuerza de las tradiciones, ante el mundo de la castidad” (122). Escudero’s comments are also highly applicable to this scene of Antonia’s final train ride.

ce vraiment un homme ? Six années vides” (179). We see that Myriam has missed this sexual contact enormously when she is attracted to the eighteen-year-old, Ben, whom she hires to work in her restaurant. When he hugs her, platonically, Myriam’s sexuality rages to the point that she can barely contain it: “Il se lève alors et s’avance vers moi. À mon tour je me lève. Il me prend dans ses bras et me serre contre son grand corps que me dépasse de partout...Son corps demeure muet, tandis que le mien hurle. Entre mes jambes, une affiche se déroule. MANGEZ-MOI s’y écrit en lettres tremblantes et gigantesques. Je le repousse et je m’excuse” (174). Just through this hug Myriam’s sexual need screams to be satiated, but she knows that Ben does not intend this hug to be sexual, so she walks away. The man who owns a flower shop next to her restaurant, Vincent, someone who is much closer in age to Myriam, *does* have sexual interest in her. She resists for quite some time before giving in to her needs, albeit somewhat reluctantly. Her description of this encounter is almost clinical; she has no actual interest in Vincent, she just goes through the motions. She wanted to be touched, and he fails in that regard: “...comme [Vincent] tarde et que ça me déconcentre je n’ai d’autre recours que d’imaginer davantage... je soude à son torse les bras de mon dernier amant. Les doigts imprécis d’Octave s’aventurent sur mes épaules. Un courant électrique me parcourt, des pieds à la tête. Vincent n’a aucune idée de la rage qui me pousse vers lui...Je vais le manger tout cru” (202). As she thinks that she would like to get some sleep so she can go to the market tomorrow (obviously not thoughts one should be having during a sexual encounter), her mind replaces Vincent with Octave. After she does this her desire is ravenous. Myriam replaces Vincent with the image of Octave because of the way he made her feel. This contradicts how she *should* consider him. Octave charmed her relentlessly; his intention was to seduce her so that he could film their encounters, which he later showed to her husband and son. He was manipulative and had every intention of destroying her life; yet she

still fantasizes about his touch on her body. She craves, in reality, the sensation that she had when she was with Octave: “Elle a l’impression d’être beaucoup plus belle, beaucoup plus intelligente” (215). Myriam was vulnerable to Octave’s machinations because she lacked self-confidence. Because she did not receive the attention that she needed from her husband, and because she never felt a strong connection to her son, Myriam found validation of her worth in the attentions of a sixteen-year-old. She continues to fantasize about Octave due to her continued crisis of identity. Through her sexual expression, even with Vincent, she attempts to validate her existence. However misguided it may be, she still harbors no fear in expressing her sexuality, and for that she is commendable.

When Myriam becomes involved with Ali, her former friend, she finally finds comfort both in her subject and object. They have sex by a fire in the woods, and Myriam realizes her value as a human being. Through sex with Ali, she comes to terms with her past, and reassembles her essence into a positive form: “Je crie. J’appelle un à un les atomes de ma peau pour qu’ils se réunissent...” (246). Myriam’s sexual expression throughout the novel mirrors her fractured identity. When she reaches the point that her identity becomes unified, her sexual identity brings her peace at last.

The next two characters that I shall examine from Desarthe demonstrate a healthy self-perception and sexuality. The first is Vilno Smith in *Dans la nuit brune*. Desarthe portrays Vilno as a woman in charge of herself. She does what she likes whenever she likes, and answers to no one in the process. Vilno expresses her sexuality freely and has no inhibitions. She expresses contentment with her age: “Je préfère maintenant. Je préfère toujours maintenant. On est mieux maintenant, non? ... mieux que quand on était jeune, qu’on mettait des jeans trop serrés, mieux que quand on s’est marié” (92); and she fears nothing: “Jérôme ne comprend rien à ce qu’elle dit.

Cette femme le fatigue. Elle est trop grande, trop vive, trop sincère. Elle parle sans arrêt, elle n'a aucune pudeur. Assise en tailleur sur le sol souillé, elle joue à faire voler des plumes de la taille d'un ongle" (97). Vilno is playful in every aspect of her life. Her sexual appetite will not be denied, and she demands a lot of Jérôme: "De la paille dans les cheveux, Vilno Smith est couronnée d'or. Son grand corps bleu repose sous la lune. Elle se fiche du froid. Elle se fiche de tout... Jérôme touche ses genoux, dépose des grains de blé sur ses cuisses. Dans le grenier de la porcherie, ils font l'amour le jour, la nuit, tout le temps" (177). Vilno constantly pushes Jérôme out of his comfort zone; she convinces him to have sex in strange places and not to be self-conscious. She walks around naked without a care. Vilno has found the secret to aging happily: "Mais l'enfance reste en nous. Le temps est une boule. L'enfance est au centre ; on ne fait que tourner autour. On ne la perd pas. J'ai cinquante ans. C'est vieux. Mais, dans ma tête, j'ai trois ans et huit ans et quatorze ans" (199). The positivity that Vilno exudes, both sexually and in her everyday life, jettisons from her existence the idea that a woman of fifty has lost her sexual identity or her joie de vivre. Vilno has lost nothing, except her inhibitions and fear.

In Desarthe's *Cinq photos de ma femme*, the character of Nina inspires even more appreciation than does Vilno. Nina is seventy-seven years old, and she regularly propositions eighty-year-old Max: "Ça fait plusieurs fois qu'elle me fait des propositions. Je crois qu'elle a, comme dirait, des vues sur moi" (34). She tricks Max into coming over to her apartment so that she can flirt with him: "Nina le regardait de côté, tentatrice à la bouille fripée, au sourire incertain. Elle est comme moi, se dit-il. Une gentille petite égoïste, qui s'en est bien sortie" (115). Before he died, Nina and her husband had a healthy sexual relationship and they were intimate friends as well. Her view of him when he was sixty-five echoes the difficulty in categorizing age: "Si la personne était âgée, on se félicite qu'elle ait tenu jusque-là. Charles était

encore jeune. Il avait soixante-cinq ans et—peut-être était-ce les yeux de l’amour—je ne le trouvais pas plus fripé qu’à quarante” (148). Nina still thought her husband young at sixty-five, and also still found him as attractive as he was at forty. She is a testament to the importance of the subject’s perspective when considering the object, as King explains: “...the desire to consider oneself middle-aged rather than old may enhance morale and contribute to longer and better life...the more older women try to ‘pass’ as young, and distance themselves from images of ageing, the more they reinforce the fear of old and its marginalization” (143). Nina accepts her age, and she does not listen to the cultural voices that tell her she is too old to behave this way. She feels pride that she has reached seventy-seven, and still sees herself as attractive as well: “Soixante-seize, depuis un mois, répondit-elle fièrement. Je n’ai jamais eu peur de vieillir, figurez-moi. Et, si vous voulez tout savoir, je ne me trouve pas trop mal” (139). Beauvoir states that “A woman of seventy is no longer regarded by anyone as a sexual object” (347). Nina evidently disagrees with Beauvoir, as she considers herself a sexual object. Nina proves that the language chosen to set the parameters of the subject carries equal weight as the choice of language to describe the object. If only all women could throw off the chains of societal languages replete with negativity as Nina does, maybe the fear of aging would be replaced with a joie de vivre that both she and Vilno embody.

In this chapter we have seen that both the male and female gazes play an important role in the development of the characters discussed. Their observation of others reveals a wealth of information concerning who they are and how they view the world. The gaze constitutes an essential component of their identities; they would be completely different characters without it.

In the case of Antonio in *Te trataré como a una reina*, the reader sees him as a lecherous example of the worst that the male gaze can represent. These qualities play an indispensable role

in the reader's construal of his character. Concerning Max in *Cinq photos de ma femme* and Jérôme in *Dans la nuit brune*, their observation and judgment of women highlights not only the desired conformity to cultural standards of beauty, but also the neurotic obsession with youth that colors their views of women. Antonia in *Te trataré como a una reina* uses her gaze much in the same manner as Antonio, but in her case it represents an opportunity to escape from her sexual repression. I find that her devouring gaze empowers her, for it shows that even though society controls her in many other ways, her thoughts are her own.

Lucía in *La hija del caníbal* has an interesting relationship with the gaze. She uses her own observation to dissect and denigrate others, both male and female, yet demonstrates the importance of the surveillance of others in her self-perception. Even in the end when she accepts herself as an attractive, sexual, middle-aged woman who gives herself permission to have an affair with a twenty-one-year-old, she still depends on the male gaze to satisfy her narcissistic ego. During her affair with Adrián she notices that everyone around her notices her, and this makes her feel beautiful. This continues to give the observation from others a central role in her assessment of her beauty. Rather than look in the mirror and see it for herself, she judges her level of attractiveness through the eyes of others.

In my discussion of the male gaze, I focused on three components: the idea that youth attracts more attention; the self-consciousness that observation can cause in women; and the way the diminishing or disappearance of surveillance from others can negatively affect older women. The underlying cause of all of these effects is narcissism. When women need to have their beauty validated through the eyes of others, when they crave attention solely for the surface of their beings, this undermines their power as women, just as we have seen in the case of Lucía. If a woman must base whether she feels satisfaction or dismay about her body on the attention of

others, she clearly lacks the self-esteem necessary to value her own opinion. The gaze of others only has power if the subject that inhabits the body being objectified willingly gives that power away. If the disappearance of objectification disrupts the identity of an individual, then she based her self-concept on superficial characteristics from the beginning. Or, if she feels invisible due to the absence of attention from others, then her perceived invisibility is of her own making. If one uses intellect and behavior as the foundations for constructing the subject, then the significance of the object representing her diminishes greatly. If she has confidence in her view of the world and herself, then she can never disappear. Even in a visually centered culture, the only eyes that should matter are one's own. In allowing others to consider the effects of age on the body as detractors to her level of attractiveness, the woman dismisses the importance of the experiences that led to those 'flaws.' These 'imperfections' can only be called as such if the life that led to them was not worth living. Melamed writes that "...the eyes of others are our ultimate mirrors" (73); this holds true only if one believes it. If one finds satisfaction in one's own body along with that which constitutes the subject, then this acceptance of oneself is the ultimate mirror.

This idea has relevance in the consideration of female sexuality discussed in this chapter as well. Though the characters of both Montero and Desarte rely heavily on the views of others and cultural constructs of beauty to judge themselves, they express their sexuality with aplomb.

Though Lucía in *La hija del caníbal* must first obtain permission from herself, she finds happiness and sexual satisfaction in the arms of her (very) young lover. She learns that what society thinks of her actions only has as much influence on her as she allows. Even more significant, at the end of the novel she is happy being alone, a testament to the importance of being true to oneself. Johnson writes that "She comes to recognize not only the possibility of enduring solitude, but its imperative for the female self to come into being, not as severed from

the world, but as joined with it in the intimacy of the written word” (465). Lucía realizes that in order to find her true identity she must find a definition of only herself, not in relation to the men in her life. She does not need a lover in order to be content with herself, nor does she need one to help define her.

Antonia in *Te trataré como a una reina* also finds happiness, if only momentarily, with her young lover. She throws off the shackles of the patriarchal system that controls her life and her sexuality, and finds that she has the power to decide for herself who she will be. Though the loss of her lover devastates her,<sup>57</sup> her eyes are open to the possibilities of her future. Whether she will return to her former subservient self remains a question at the end of the novel, but at the very least she took responsibility for herself in the decision to manifest her desires.

Myriam’s sexuality in *Mangez-moi*, as implied by the double entendre of the title of the novel, erupts in volcanic proportions. Though she has difficulty containing herself in situations in which her desire is misguided or inappropriate, her unwillingness to repress this part of her being (after six difficult years) marks the beginning of her process of accepting herself once again. Sexual expression is an integral part of Myriam’s identity, and through the reawakening and acceptance of her desires she reconstructs her shattered subject.

Vilno in *Dans la nuit brune* and Nina in *Cinq photos de ma femme* epitomize the freedom that comes from expressing oneself without regard to the judgement of others. Vilno harbors no fear or reluctance in recognizing and fulfilling her sexual needs. Her penchant for walking around naked and having sex with Jérôme at all times of the day demonstrate that confidence in one’s body and self-assurance need not be reliant on the opinion of others. Vilno answers to no one other than herself. Nina exemplifies that challenging what society dictates as ‘appropriate’

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<sup>57</sup> Susan Dobrian contends that “Like Bella, Antonia exemplifies the way a woman’s self-definition is bound up with her relational ties to others” (113-14).

behavior for the aged lies in behaving however one wishes. She finds it humorous that Max thinks that they are too old to enjoy themselves; the fact that he believes this shows that he has internalized those cultural voices that tell him this. Nina relentlessly pursuing him demonstrates her refusal to lose her sexual identity. She also still finds herself attractive at the age of seventy-seven, which clearly demonstrates that the mirror is what one makes of it.

## CHAPTER FOUR A COMPARISON

Rosa Montero was born in Madrid, Spain on January 3, 1951. She had tuberculosis as a child and was forced to stay home until the age of nine. During this time she began reading voraciously and writing. She began her university studies in psychology, but quickly changed her focus to journalism. She began working for the newspaper *El País* in 1976. She published her first novel in 1979, *Crónica del desamor*, and her first book for children in 1992, *El nido de los sueños*.

Agnès Desarthe was born in Paris, France on May 3, 1966. Her father was both a pediatrician and a writer. She began her career as a translator, but published her first book for children in 1992, *Je ne t'aime pas, Paulus*, and her first novel for adults in 1993, *Quelques minutes de bonheur absolu*. She has since published ten novels.

Though they were born fifteen years apart and in different countries, the representations of aging in their novels are strikingly parallel. They treat in remarkably similar ways the themes they have in common: the aging body in female and male characters; elderly characters facing the end of their existence; the psychological and physical trauma of aging; the existential questioning that comes with age; the mid-life crisis; and the elusiveness of the sense of self that aging causes. They also share common messages concerning several of these topics.

The novels *La hija del caníbal* by Montero and *Cinq photos de ma femme* by Desarthe both contain octogenarian characters as protagonists, and they have much in common. Both Max in *Cinq photos de ma femme* and Félix in *La hija del caníbal* consistently complain about their aging bodies while simultaneously maintaining active lives. Félix aids immensely in Lucía's search for her missing husband, which leads to strange new encounters and even travel to another country. Max's quest to find an artist to paint a portrait of his deceased wife leads to many

adventures and to meeting many new people. Though they share the same aches and pains associated with being elderly, Max and Félix do not allow this to diminish their activity, physical or mental. Both these characters also have in common their need to narrate their lives. Félix's stories of his life fill a great many pages of the book, while Max writes letters to his children throughout the novel not only to communicate his day to day life, but also to relate stories about himself, his wife, and their childhood. The first impression of Max comes from a letter he writes as the first pages of the book in which he confesses that flying frightens him terribly. Just before the final page of the novel, Max writes the last letter to his son to tell him that he plans to visit him in La Paz, and then travel on to Tokyo to visit his daughter. Max has overcome his fear of flying in order to see his children one last time. This long journey holds great significance, for it encompasses the final message that Desarte imparts to the reader. After this final letter, the last page of the novel contains the image of Max on a plane. Max states: "...on n'est pas plus avancé à mon âge qu'au tien. Ce que j'ai appris, en quatre-vingts ans, tient dans le creux d'une main de bébé. *Seule compte la vie*. En dehors, il n'y a rien, aucun mystère à chercher, pas le moindre éclaircissement" (186, emphasis mine). Max understands the worth of appreciating that he has had the good fortune to experience another day. The search for enlightenment or the answer to the mysteries of life are secondary to the importance of living each day as if there were no tomorrow. Félix at the end of *La hija del caníbal* conveys the same message. In spite of his age, he runs off with Lucía's mother. Lucía pictures them having a wonderful time acting like adolescents again, enjoying their love affair while dancing and socializing. The message could not be clearer. Age deters new experiences and enjoying life only if one allows it.

Montero uses Benigno in *Te trataré como a una reina* to prove this exact point from a different perspective. Benigno is only sixty-three, significantly younger than both Max and Félix,

yet he acts as though his life has ended. He markedly counterpoints Félix in that Benigno has lost his will to live. When he retires he believes that he will disappear into nothingness and solitude, whereas Félix starts a new affair at almost twenty years his senior. In love with Antonia for quite some time, Benigno has never had the courage to reveal his passion for her. He also expresses the desire to write an epic historical book, but no one believes that he will actually accomplish it. This fact holds significance, for while Max and Félix write or tell stories to document their lives to others, Benigno does not. Not only do both Montero and Desarthe convey that life is meant to be enjoyed at any age, they also both highlight the fact that by sharing our narratives with others we transcend the limits of our corporeality. As Félix expresses at the end of the novel, he will live on in Lucía now that she possesses his stories in her memory, and Max's children will always have his letters as an enduring remembrance of his thoughts, emotions, and life.

Doña Bárbara in *Bella y oscura* considers the possibility of living in others' memories extremely important as well. The representation of doña Bárbara in this novel corresponds to the characters in *Les bonnes intentions* by Desarthe. The protagonists of both these novels, doña Bárbara and M. Dupotier respectively, have reached a very advanced age. Both works also have younger characters that interact with the aged and comment on the effects of aging. In the beginning of *Bella y oscura*, doña Bárbara epitomizes the antithesis of what society associates with the elderly. She takes great pride in her appearance, maintains her autonomy, and keeps control of her family. She communicates to her granddaughter on numerous occasions her desire that Baba think of her and remember her after she dies. She knows that she will continue to live in Baba's memories. Doña Bárbara relishes every day of her life, drinking in every experience as if it were her last. However, after their house burns down she loses her health and her zest for life. At this point she and M. Dupotier become parallel characters. They both lose all autonomy,

depending on others in every aspect of their lives. They both inhabit decrepit, decaying bodies. M. Dupotier, however, has no one left to remember him. His wife dies, then his son of sixty-three years has a heart attack and dies as well. At the end of their lives doña Bárbara and M. Dupotier are pathetic, abject characters that embody all the fears of old age. With M. Dupotier and doña Bárbara both Desarthe and Montero demonstrate the suffering that aging can cause. While she slowly dies doña Bárbara's mind still burns in a body that rots. M. Dupotier decomposes along with everything in his disgusting apartment, but his mind still yearns for companionship. Through these characters both authors narrate the fears that stalk us. They bring to life on the page the worst nightmares of what death can look like. Montero and Desarthe disturbingly depict the physical and psychological trauma that one may experience at the end of life. Though both authors could have the intention of working through their own fears,<sup>58</sup> these characters offer another possibility. Rather than viewing the old as disgusting and vile, the reader may sympathize with doña Bárbara and M Dupotier, seeing their humanity. They once had functional bodies, and they lived meaningful lives before arriving at this state of being. Doña Bárbara and M. Dupotier clearly show these decrepit bodies are still human beings with feelings and memories. This allows the reader the opportunity to examine his attitude toward the elderly, and inspires him to look more carefully at those old people around him, rather than turning away in revulsion and fear.

Desarthe in *Mangez-moi* and Montero in *Te trataré como a una reina* and *La hija del caníbal* both illustrate this fear of aging. All three novels contain female characters ranging from forty-one to forty-four who experience a mid-life crisis. Myriam in *Mangez-moi*, Antonia and

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<sup>58</sup> "La literatura...es un reflejo del mundo interior de cada persona, o sea cada escritor o escritora cuenta el mundo como lo ve" (Talbot 93). Montero also writes that "Toda novela es lo que el escritor es: refleja sus gustos, sus obsesiones, sus miedos, sus fantasías, sus lecturas, sus amistades, sus triunfos y sus derrotas" ("Vivir" 349-50).

Bella in *Te trataré*, and Lucía in *La hija* all look in the mirror and have difficulty assimilating what they see. Their mid-life crises stem from this fact as well as other factors. Myriam has lost her family, and Lucía has momentarily lost her husband to a kidnapping. Antonia has begun questioning her subservience to the rules of the patriarchal culture that has oppressed her throughout her life. Bella must contend with the knowledge that success and love have eluded her. All these characters face the crisis of identity that these events cause, which coincide with their evaluations of themselves in the mirror.<sup>59</sup> With the exception of Bella, the other protagonists eventually accept the signs of age on their bodies, and understand that the surface of the body does not represent the totality of their selves. Myriam, Antonia, and Lucía come to the realization that they have the option to overrule the hegemonic voices that speak of cultural norms of attractiveness. They can see the beauty in themselves, and this signifies the message that Desarthe and Montero relate through these characters. By the end of the novels all but Bella have accepted their aging bodies and are able to overcome the negative self-perceptions that plagued them due to aging, or their perceived lack of conformity to culturally constructed languages of ideal beauty. Desarthe and Montero also illustrate that identity is fluid, changing with the reflection in the mirror as well as the accumulation of experiences throughout life.

Bella indeed proves to be the exception in all these female characters. Bella illustrates the dangers caused by cultural voices that denigrate the aging body as unattractive while singing the praises of the body beautiful of youth. The other female protagonists and Bella move in opposite directions in the novels. That is to say, Myriam, Antonia, and Lucía begin by despising their reflections, but overcome this struggle to arrive at self-acceptance. Bella, on the other hand,

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<sup>59</sup> "At those times in the lives of female characters when they are most concerned with their self-identities, or when crises in their lives throw them back on their sole selves, they turn with remarkable frequency to the contemplation of their images in the glass" (La Belle, *Mutiny* 53).

initially does not exhibit much concern about aging, but ends by loathing her reflection. The other characters find self-acceptance through their relationships with men, but Bella develops self-hatred because of her relationship with Poco. She begins to see herself as old and unattractive in comparison to Vanessa, who represents youth and beauty. In all these female characters both authors illustrate the importance of understanding that the cultural voices that construct negative perceptions of age do not have to dictate or influence self-perception. One sees in the mirror what one chooses to see. Myriam, Antonia, and Lucía developing positive self-images despite their cultural surroundings serves as a lesson to us all.

Lucía, Antonia, Bella, and Myriam challenge cultural norms in another manner as well: they all have sexual encounters with men half their age. Relationships between older men and much younger women do not disturb the social fabric, while these relationships in reverse certainly do. Even though these female characters must overcome their perceived failure to embody the cultural requirements for attractiveness, their sexual lives lie outside the parameters of social acceptability; and yet they continue on without concern. Lucía must first convince herself to ignore the cultural voices that denigrate such a relationship, but once she starts her affair with Adrián she exhibits no desire to hide it. She also presents a defense of this type of relationship. In order to prove the legitimacy of her situation she provides a long list of famous women who had relationships with much younger men. Antonia also has a lover less than half her age, and does not hesitate to show her affection in public. The decision to have sex for the first time presents the difficulty for Antonia, not the fact that her lover is so much younger than she. Myriam first has an affair with a sixteen-year-old, and only shows remorse when he turns out to be a sociopath who only wanted to hurt her son and husband. Even after Octave does this to her and her family, she still fantasizes about him while having sex with another man. She in no

way appears regretful that he was merely sixteen. After Myriam resurfaces from the trauma that Octave caused, her desires reawaken and she wastes little time in taking another lover. Bella in *Te trataré* also has sex with a much younger man. Though he demonstrates a certain level of skill, Bella longs for the touch of an older man. This demonstrates yet another distinction from the other female characters. Nina in *Cinq photos de ma femme*, though she does not have an affair with a younger man, nevertheless also flaunts her nonconformity to cultural stipulations of sexuality in the older woman. She relentlessly pursues her octogenarian neighbor, and finds it humorous that it makes him uncomfortable to confront such openly expressed desire. At seventy-seven Nina still considers herself a sexual being, which testifies to the fact that the individual, regardless of age, has the ability to decide what defines appropriate behavior. The subversion of the cultural norms in regards to sexual relationships occurs with every female character in both these authors' novels, with the single exception of Sonia in *Les bonnes intentions*, who is also the only married female character in any of these works. Both Desarthe and Montero use their female characters to express that sexuality need not be controlled by a patriarchal culture that finds sexually expressive women threatening. As with any cultural voice that tries to dictate behavior or self-perception, it only has power over the individual if he or she listens to it.

Myriam, Lucía, Antonia and Bella also illustrate the importance of independence. At the end of *Mangez-moi* and *La hija del caníbal*, both Myriam and Lucía decide to be alone rather than with a man. They learn that happiness can only be rooted in the self, not in relationships with others. Myriam has rebuilt her identity from the fractured chaos that she was, and finds peace in the knowledge of herself. In the case of Lucía, she has broken the bonds of dependence on her father and her husband to define her as a person. At the beginning of the novel she is the daughter of the cannibal and the wife of Ramón, but in the end she finds a Lucía of her own

making, without the need of men to put her in a context. Antonia and Bella in *Te trataré* do not come to this realization. With the loss of her lover Antonia returns to the patriarchal system symbolized by her mother's town, and Bella ends up in prison for throwing Antonio off a balcony. In the end, both are confined in a system from which they cannot escape.<sup>60</sup> *Te trataré* is the oldest novel in this study, so as Montero ages and writes later novels her female characters become much more empowered and independent, even if they have to struggle and metamorphose in order to achieve these qualities, echoing the journey to self-realization that Myriam makes in *Mangez-moi*.

The last novels chronologically by both authors also have many commonalities. Both Desarthe in *Dans la nuit brune* and Montero in *Instrucciones para salvar el mundo* focus mainly on male protagonists. Jérôme in *Dans la nuit brune* and Daniel in *Instrucciones* are in their mid-forties, and both experience a mid-life crisis. Both characters at the beginning of the novels have distanced themselves from seeking out new experiences. They live as though they were observers rather than participants in their own lives. Daniel attempts an affair with a striking twenty-year-old African prostitute and also seeks out a dominatrix to try to reawaken his libido, but nevertheless he maintains a posture of nonparticipation throughout the novel. Jérôme, on the other hand, finds new inspiration to partake in the joys of life when he meets Vilno Smith, a robust, intelligent, sexually liberated woman. Vilno challenges everything that makes Jérôme comfortable with standing outside his own life. He thoroughly enjoys having sex again, something that had been lacking from his life since his wife divorced him. He also learns to accept Vilno for the independent and nonconformist woman that she revels in being, learning

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<sup>60</sup> Escudero adds that "Al final de la novela, los personajes quedan abocados a la decadencia sexual y a la vejez (Antonia y Antonio), a la cárcel (Bella), al hospital (Vanessa), a la soledad (Benigno), al suicidio (Poco), a un destino incierto (Damián), o a la indiferencia (Menéndez o García). Ninguno es capaz de escapar del mundo excremental, ninguno puede encontrar un consuelo existencial..." (La visión 125).

along the way that the self-imposed parameters he had put on his own life had done nothing but confine him, much in the same way that Daniel creates his own prison of unhappiness and solitude. Where Daniel never escapes, Jérôme discovers that the rest of his life can be as full as he makes it. The juxtaposition of these characters illustrates the importance of taking control of one's own life. Both Jérôme and Daniel slip into the middle point in their lives as passive observers of the vitality that surrounds them. Only Jérôme decides that life has more to offer, and he makes the conscious effort to make his life worth living.

In addition to the various similarities in the works of these authors, one of the most interesting aspects of the comparison of these novels lies in the contemplation of the context of the novels. That is to say, Montero constructs environments populated by drug dealers, pimps, prostitutes, and violence in Madrid, while Desarthe's characters live in rather mundane circumstances. This was a key element in the choice of these particular works by these two authors because despite the marked difference in the configurations of the outer surroundings of these novels, both Montero and Desarthe construct female characters that progress in the same manner. They begin from a stance of passivity, conformity, and resignation to the cultural expectations of beauty and aging, yet they end in a position of rebellion against and emancipation from these expectations. This highlights the conflict between the social embeddedness of the concepts that seek to define aging versus the freedom of self-definition. Bordo writes that women must investigate "...the mechanisms by which the subject at times becomes enmeshed in collusion with forces that sustain her own oppression" (*Unbearable* 167). Bordo also discusses at length "the depiction of women as passive, without agency, a depiction that overlooks both a woman's collusion with patriarchal culture and the frequent efforts at resistance" (*Unbearable* 23). Montero's and Desarthe's characters perfectly represent the duality

of the existence of women that Bordo describes. Both authors' constructions of their female protagonists include both passivity and resistance, collusion and rebellion.

The key development in the representation of these conflicting elements is that the characters become *conscious* of their complicity in their own oppression. This in itself marks a major achievement, for only through consciousness of the influence that cultural constructs exert on women can they decide on their own terms how to define themselves. Bordo highlights makeup, high heels, and plastic surgery as examples of particular choices that women make in their constructions of their femininity (*Unbearable* 23). The crucial idea represented by the decision to wear makeup or high heels or have plastic surgery manifests itself in *why* the woman makes the choices she does. Irigaray adds to the discussion of femininity when she writes “But in fact that ‘femininity’ is a role, an image, a value, imposed upon women by male systems of representation. In this masquerade of femininity, the woman loses herself, and loses herself by playing on her femininity” (84). Both Montero and Desarthe show through their female characters, despite the vast differences in their circumstances, that each individual has the capacity to develop this consciousness needed to truly understand Irigaray’s statement. In the character of Bella in *Te trataré*, Montero also demonstrates the extremely detrimental effects that occur when a woman does not come to the realization that she must base her self-identity *solely* upon what pleases her and how she views herself, rather than what she thinks will give her value in a patriarchal culture that seeks to commodify her. Bella exemplifies the oppression inherent in “...the completely and densely institutionalized *system* of values and practices within which girls and women—and increasingly men and boys as well—come to believe that they are nothing...unless they are trim, tight, lineless, bulgeless, and sagless” (Bordo, *Unbearable* 32, emphasis original). In contrast to Bella, Lucía in *La hija del caníbal*, Myriam in *Mangez-moi*,

and Vilno in *Dans la nuit brune* do indeed develop the consciousness that they have the choice to defy the “institutionalized system of values and practices” (Bordo, *Unbearable* 23) that attempt to undermine their value in their own eyes. Antonia in *Te trataré* reaches the same conclusion, but only to a certain extent. After realizing that neither her weight nor her age carry any importance to her young lover, she becomes much more comfortable in her own skin. She finally sees the beauty in herself. After losing her lover, however, Antonia appears to revert back to her reliance on the oppressive patriarchal culture to define her. Therefore, Antonia ends in the same circumstances as Bella, representing the idea that “...we continue to memorize on our bodies the feel and conviction of lack, of insufficiency, of never being good enough” (Bordo, *Unbearable* 166); whereas Lucía, Myriam, and Vilno demonstrate the capacity to resist and rebel, and to find their self-worth only in the perception of themselves. Developing consciousness of the detrimental effects of negative cultural constructs renders those constructs nearly powerless, and also begets the empowerment of the individual to choose her own language in defining herself.

Despite the difference in their ages and their countries of origin, Desarthe and Montero illustrate their characters in a strikingly similar fashion. They present both a positive view of octogenarians and a negative view. In the positive they show that one may choose to enjoy life until the very moment of death, and in the negative they illustrate that those for whom this option has evaporated because of their failing bodies still deserve consideration and respect as human beings. They both present strong women who learn to accept their aging reflections in the mirror to construct their identities on their own terms. They also both illustrate characters that fail in this endeavor, presenting a comparison that strikes a resounding chord in the reader. Desarthe and Montero show how to successfully navigate a mid-life crisis, as well as how to crumble into oblivion. The parallels in these novels demonstrate the commonality in the struggles to adapt to

an aging body, and the difficulty in maintaining a positive self-image throughout the aging process. We see our aging selves in these novels, and both authors give us the choice of which characters mirror ourselves back to us.

## CONCLUSION

In this study of the novels *Te trataré como a una reina*, *La hija del caníbal*, *Instrucciones para salvar el mundo*, and *Bella y oscura* by Rosa Montero and *Mangez-moi*, *Dans la nuit brune*, *Cinq potos de ma femme*, and *Les bonnes intentions* by Agnès Desarthe, I have demonstrated the influence of culturally constructed languages of age and aging on the identities of the characters analyzed, on their conceptions of the aging process, as well as on their images of the aged body. The development of this dissertation found its base in the concept that "...the quality of attractiveness that we find in the bodies around us is not insulated from cultural and cognitive processes; attractiveness is that which is found ideologically appealing within an overarching set of values" (Reischer 300). Culture affects cognition of the self and others. When that culture's hegemonic language espouses the value and beauty of youth while at the same time defining aging as decline, deterioration, and ugliness, these languages affect the self-perception and therefore the identity of aging people in that society.

Within the context of this project, my purpose has been to demonstrate that the negative cultural languages that speak of the changes in the body as it ages and 'old age,' as well as Western cultures' obsession with youth, have direct effects on how these characters deal with the concept of age and how they experience aging.

In Chapter One I examined the depictions of the elderly characters of Niniche, Madame and M. Dupotier in *Les bonnes intentions* and doña Bárbara in the latter part of *Bella y oscura* and found them to embody the abjectness of old age that renders old bodies 'the Other.' Culture views this disintegration of the body as frightening, so their bodies engender repulsion. Younger people in society are unwilling to assimilate the sight of old age, because "Age is removed from us by an extent of time so great that it merges with eternity: such a remote future seems unreal"

(Beauvoir 4). This rejection of the aged human body as representational of oneself in the future places that decrepit body in the realm of the abject, and dehumanizes those that reflect this corporeal state.

I also demonstrated that both Félix in *La hija del caníbal* and Benigno in *Te trataré como a una reina* represent the idea that "...our society's dread of old age, its dreary or blanked out image of the aging, seem[s] to deny their very existence..." (Friedan 70). Félix himself denies his importance in society, and Benigno professes his imminent disappearance from 'the land of the living' when he retires from his job. Félix also focuses on his ailing body, which he considers the cause of his loss of significance in the world around him, because "...bodies are not only constitutive of subjectivity, but also mediate the relationship between persons and the world" (Reischer 307). Because his body has begun to deteriorate with age, he believes his memories, experiences, and wisdom no longer hold significance. Lucía in *La hija del caníbal* dreads this loss of identity that Félix and Benigno have both experienced, and the fear of death and aging overwhelms her. All three of these characters have internalized and mirror back to us society's negative portrayal of old age.

Doña Bárbara in the beginning of *Bella y oscura* presents a positive view of old age, with a strong will, a sharp mind, and a desire to stay active. She represents the possibility of changing the discourse of old age. By neither denying her age nor ignoring her mortality, doña Bárbara demonstrates that it is possible to live to a ripe old age without the loss of identity, without losing social significance, and without being overwhelmed by the fear of death. She shows that if we have the strength of mind to reject the negative cultural languages of age, we have the power to write our own narratives.

In Chapter Two I examined how mirrors, both literal and that of society, affect the identity and self-perception of the characters in both these authors' novels. Antonia and Bella in *Te trataré como a una reina*, Lucía in *La hija del caníbal*, Myriam in *Mangez-moi*, and Daniel in *Las instrucciones para salvar el mundo* all have great difficulty assimilating their aging reflections into their identities. Bella's greatest concern reflects her failure to represent the cultural ideal of beauty. Bella, Lucía, Myriam, and Daniel all look in the mirror and see the signs of age destroying their appearance. They demonstrate that "The body becomes...the site at which [people], consciously or not, accept the meanings that circulate in popular culture about ideal beauty..." (Balsamo 78). They not only despise their reflections because they no longer represent the body beautiful, but they also idolize youth, which makes it all the more difficult to accept their aging bodies. When they look in the mirror they want to see the reflection of their younger selves; when they do not it causes a fragmentation of their identities. They also reject their images in the mirror because of the loss of power societally that they associate with aging, as Jenijoy La Belle explains, "While the mirror has provided women with an essential means for the subject/object interchange, it has also been a trap for the self-imposition of social limitations" (*Mutiny* 56). They believe that they have lost potency and vitality in their lives because cultural languages that construct the meanings of the aging body tell them this. They have given all their control of self-perception to the culture that surrounds them by evaluating their reflections through others' eyes. This grants enormous power to the mirror and the perception of others; they evaluate themselves as nothing more than a visual image (La Belle, *Mutiny* 34). The difficulty that these characters confronted in overcoming this simplification of themselves into no more than an image in the mirror began an existential quest to define themselves. Antonia, Lucía, and Myriam discovered that "The way forward is not clearly prescribed and she must

therefore take her own, existential step. She must choose for herself, and in doing so, choose herself” (Crossley 19). All three of them realized that they are more than their visual representations. They have the power to choose what they see in the mirror as well. Only they can decide what languages they wish to employ to evaluate their own reflections, because mirrors “...are essentially neutral in value until they are used in particular ways within cultural contexts that they did not themselves create. It is, after all, the woman who does the looking and creating, not the glass” (La Belle, *Herself* 173). Lucía and Myriam in particular realize that they control the mirror, not the cultural voices that try to dictate to them what to see.

Bella in *Te trataré como a una reina* and Daniel in *Instrucciones para salvar el mundo* never come to this realization. They both accept their aging reflections as their internal and external definitions. They reach the point that “The reflection goes beyond sign or metaphor and becomes the self itself; the reflection becomes the predicate of existence” (La Belle, *Herself* 91). They cannot escape the mirror in order to find a deeper meaning in their lives. They become nothing more than light bouncing off glass.

In Chapter Three I examined the male gaze, the female gaze, and the sexuality of female characters. Antonio and Antonia in *Te trataré como a una reina* use the observation of others for sexual gratification. In Antonio this fact makes him an unsympathetic character; his visual objectification of women represents only a part of his manipulation and mistreatment of them. Antonia, on the other hand, uses the gaze to mentally relieve her sexual repression. In this way she defies the patriarchal culture that oppresses her. Max in *Cinq photos de ma femme* and Jérôme in *Dans la nuit brune* expose in their surveillance their desire that the female body conform to the hegemonic language of the ideal female form, as well as their fixation on the beauty of youth. Lucía in *La hija del caníbal* judges harshly those she dissects with her

observation, while at the same time relying on the gaze of others to gauge her level of attractiveness. Even though Lucía in the end is able to accept herself and display self-confidence, she never quite understands that “In order to like themselves [women] must reject trivialization by others of who and what they are” (Greer 4).

The characters analyzed in the section on female sexuality all reject the assumption that older women lose their sexual identity. Antonia in *Te trataré como a una reina* and Lucía in *La hija del caníbal* both take lovers who are twenty-one years old, which demonstrates their defiance of social norms. In the case of Antonia, her decision to take a lover, particularly one so young, represents a disruption of her utter submission to external forces that control her behavior. Myriam in *Mangez-moi* oftentimes expresses her desires in inappropriate situations; nevertheless, she uses sex as a tool to repair the fragmentation of her identity that plagued her. Vilno in *Dans la nuit brune* is carefree in her expression of her sexuality; she represents those women “...who no longer need to please men and are content to exist without them” (King 142). She definitely prefers to have an intimate partner, but even in a relationship she maintains her independence in thought and action. Nina in *Cinq photos de ma femme* represents the pinnacle of self-confidence. She does not fear being a sexual being at the age of seventy-seven, and continues to nurture a healthy self-perception despite cultural languages that attempt to dictate the parameters of appropriate behavior for someone her age. Nina proves that “The body is thus a prime site for the contestation of social and individual power; it is the locus of both oppression and empowerment, simultaneously” (Reischer 314). Nina chooses to make her own decisions about how she behaves, and in so doing demonstrates that the individual always has the power to resist social pressures to conform and to disregard the opinions of others.

In conclusion, this dissertation has focused on the impact of negative cultural languages that construct the concept of aging. The analysis of the characters in these novels by Rosa Montero and Agnès Desarthe has shown the detrimental effects of the internalization of cultural constructs of the body beautiful, of youth, and of the aging body. Both Montero and Desarthe reinforce the ‘narrative of decline’ so prevalent in Western cultures. In their depictions of this negative view of aging, they reflect back to us images of our own fears: “And indeed *upon* reflection,” Warren Motte writes, “reading can be conceived as a kind of mirror-gazing” (785, emphasis original). These texts provide the environment in which we may see ourselves and our aging bodies, echoing endlessly in the cavern of deterioration: “Of course the actively literary linguistic consciousness comes upon an even more varied and profound heteroglossia within literary language itself,” Bakhtin writes, “as well as outside it” (296). Literature has always had the power to reflect and reinforce hegemonic societal views, as well as the influence to subvert and challenge them.

Even though reading “...encourag[es] us to imagine identity between ourselves and textual constructs,” (Motte 786), we may also choose to see in these negative images what we do *not* desire to be. We may consciously decide these accounts do not tell our story: “Indeed, even the knowledge of one’s own self is dependent upon the silent narratives of consciousness,” La Belle writes, “those stories that we tell ourselves to become ourselves” (*Herself* 12). One must never forget that the only alternative to aging is death. Only we control the narratives of ourselves, only we have the choice to make that story positive or negative.

Montero and Desarthe show us that if one chooses to internalize the language that speaks of aging as decline, deterioration, and loss, then he has chosen dying over living. If instead he uses the consciousness of the eventual break down of the body and the certainty of his death to

savor every moment afforded to him, then he has chosen living over dying. The difference lies in which way he chooses to tell his own story. Every time he looks in the mirror, after all, he is forced to choose his own language.

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