

Any Pain? Every Pain: From Anthropocentric to Symbiocenic Politics of Female Aging in Charlotte Colbert's *She Will*.

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ABSTRACT: Charlotte Colbert's film *She Will* (2021) draws on experiences of women in the film industry who have to face both ageist, sexist, and ableist prejudices in the era of the Anthropocene. Nonetheless, in the context of the Symbiocene, which exalts values like interconnection and mutual support with nature and all living beings, patriarchal constructs about old age, femininity and ability have been left behind in favor of more inclusive approaches as a result of ecocritical practices. Colbert's film draws on the legacy of classic films that focus on the figure of the aging actress who is banished from the screen on account of age and gender discrimination, but also contemporary films which subvert ageism and sexism. This article argues that Colbert's film presents a narrative arch in terms of cultural discourses of age, gender, and disability which displays decline, progress, and transformation. Initially, an entanglement between disability and aging is established, drawing on Margaret Gullette's claim (2004) that aging has conventionally been associated with decline. Conversely, the process of female aging gradually turns into a narrative of progress and ability through a counter-story, to use Hilde Lindeman Nelson's term (1995), which displays instances of active or positive aging. Finally, drawing on Pamela Gravagne's premises (2013), female aging arises as a narrative of becoming and transformation whereby female aging is approached as a collective and non-linear, rather than as an individual and a detached, experience.

Keywords: aging, gender, trauma, Anthropocene, Symbiocene.

Introduction

The era of the Anthropocene is characterized by the human impact on the environment, thus causing effects like climate change, biodiversity loss, and global food insecurity. In the second half of the nineteenth-century, geologists like Antonio Stoppani already referred to an Anthropozoic era as a new geological period in order to acknowledge the increasing power and effect of humanity on the planet. As a precursor of the Anthropocene, Joseph LeConte used the term psychozoic to underline

the impact that the human mind has had on the globe. Nonetheless, it is Eugene Stoermer who has been acknowledged as the scientist who first coined the term Anthropocene in the 1980s, even if meteorologist and atmospheric scientist Paul Crutzen contributed to popularizing it upon arguing that the influence of human behavior on the atmosphere has been so significant that it has constituted a new geological epoch.

Consequently, Johannes Umbgrove sought to bridge the gap between geological evolution, cosmic rhythms, and human consciousness. Drawing on the notion of noosphere coined by Édouard Le Roy and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, as an evolutionary geological layer which reflected human rational activities, Vladimir Vernadsky put forward three stages of the earthly development, comprising the geosphere as the phase of inanimate matter, the biosphere as the stage of biological life, and the noosphere as the period when humankind begins to create resources through the transmutation of elements. From a spiritual perspective, Teilhard de Chardin proposed that the evolution of the universe consists of a purposeful continuous process moving from matter to mind and ultimately toward spirit.

In contrast with the Anthropocene, the Symbiocene comprises a period of reintegration between humans and the rest of nature based on the need for a symbiotic coexistence in order to preserve life. Coined by Glenn Albrecht in 1953 on the basis of the notion of symbiosis, the era of the Symbiocene lies its roots in “the interconnectedness of life and all living things” and relies on “living together for mutual benefit” (2016, 13). Years before Albrecht coined the term, Murray Bookchin already referred to an ecological understanding of the world, thus arguing that “the issues which ecology [...] cannot be ignored without bringing into question the survival of the planet itself” (1971, 59). Moreover, in the Symbiocene, ecological thinking is applied to

politics and society, and the types of relationships that prevail enhance mutual interdependence and mutual benefit for all living beings.

Accordingly, in the era of the Symbiocene, political systems should function as ecosystems and be based on symbiotic relationships that enable them to operate. As Albrecht argues, it is desirable that the fatalistic implications derived from the Anthropocene are left behind in favor of the premises that characterize the Symbiocene.

This transition between eras is reflected in artistic manifestations, since, as Albrecht also claims, popular literature and film may become “sensitive barometers of a society’s deep anxieties — also of interests” (2016, 12-3), which both reflect and contribute to giving evidence of the need to shift from the Anthropocene to the Symbiocene.

Although Crutzen proposed the Industrial Revolution as the start of the Anthropocene, in 2019, the Anthropocene Working Group considered its starting date in the middle of the twentieth century as a result of factors like the rise of human population. Nonetheless, more recently, Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin claim that the Anthropocene began much earlier, with the arrival of Europeans in America, as it had an unprecedented effect on the planet, through land clearance, farming, and exchange of species, thus causing a global transformation. This period coincides with the massive hunting of witches that prevailed at the time, since the vast majority of witch burnings took place during the early modern period, following the publication of the witch-hunting book *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486) in Germany. Accordingly, a connection may be established between the rise of the anthropocentric control over the land and the peak hysteria about witches. In contrast, with the eventual advent of the

Symbiocene, and its reconnection with nature and balance with all living creatures, the witch as a female figure deeply connected with the land and with ancestral knowledge about nature is reevaluated, shifting from ostracism to revalorization, and from an anthropocentric to a symbiocenic approach.

As a case in point that underlines this transition, Charlotte Colbert's film *She Will*, released in 2021, establishes a contrast between two clearly differentiated spaces as respectively representative of the parameters of anthropocentric and symbiocenic configurations. On the one hand, Colbert's film focuses on Veronica Ghent (Alice Krige) as a veteran actress who gained fame and acclaim as a movie star in her youth, but she also faced manipulation and exploitation in the film industry. Veronica was abused as a child by an influential cinema director, Eric Hathbourne (Malcolm McDowell), who took advantage of his role as an older mentor on account of making her a star. On the other hand, as an older actress, Veronica travels to a healing retreat in

Scotland with her young nurse Desi Hatoum (Kota Eberhardt) in order to heal both physically and psychologically from a recent double mastectomy. As Veronica becomes more acquainted with the place and its people, she learns that the site on which they are staying is where women who were accused of witchcraft were burned and their ashes turned into the pit and mud that now fills the land. Through strange visions that haunt her dreams, Veronica begins to discover a sense of belonging with the place that enables her to gain insight into her own self and her repressed past trauma.

Accordingly, Colbert's film brings to the fore the juxtaposition of scenes that portray two differentiated locations, as Eric Hathbourne is making arrangements for his new film in a large metropolitan setting, whereas Veronica and her caregiver Desi are located in a rural and detached area in the midst of Scotland. The place that Eric

inhabits becomes an embodiment of capitalism and patriarchy, in which men occupy positions of power and authority, its architectural structures exude rationalism and cartesianism, and the mass media exert a tight control over the public opinion. Conversely, Veronica and Desi are in touch with nature, they feel at the mercy of the weather and they follow the rhythms of the land in a place where humans feel in communion with other living entities and consider themselves another agent along the chain of being. As the film displays juxtaposed scenes taking place in these two clearly-differentiated locations, the world that Eric inhabits and epitomizes is representative of the Anthropocene, as man exerts his authority and leaves his impact, and it is a system regulated by competition and hierarchy, whereas the place that Veronica and Desi occupy becomes an embodiment of the Symbiocene, since both women embrace the landscape and feel in communion, since emotional bonds are reinforced between them on the basis of solidarity, while a strong sense of community with nature is established through the ancestral figures of the witches in communion with the landscape. In relation to her debut film, Charlotte Colbert aimed to underline the interconnectedness that brings together all forms of life and that arises from the trauma caused by anthropocentric precepts, thus suggesting a necessary shift moving from the Anthropocene to the Symbiocene.

As Colbert states in an interview with Candy Bedworth, “the story has themes I’ve always been interested in [...] how trauma blurs our experience of reality and time, how nature holds so much solace” and “how the infinitely small, like a cell, contains the same patterns as the universe” (2022, n.p.). Trauma is revealed to be multi-layered, as it operates at a personal level, since Veronica must cope with her childhood trauma of patriarchal abuse and the awareness of being banished from the screen in her old age owing to ageist prejudice, but it also expands to tap into the ancestral trauma of generations of women. As Bedworth (2022) notes, Colbert’s film draws on the

contemporary context of the Me-Too movement, but it also expands its claim to the history of persecuted women like witches in the Anthropocene, and how the bonds of sisterhood, along with the solace that the landscape and nature offer, have the power to restore and heal.

Colbert's film was released during the time of the Witches of Scotland campaign, which sought to attain official exoneration from those women convicted in the witch trials held in Scotland from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. As a result of this plea, First Minister of Scotland Nicola Sturgeon formally apologized on behalf of the Scottish Parliament and promised a national memorial for the infamous accusations of witchcraft in the past. Drawing on the ideas of historians and mythographers like Marina Warner, fairy tales may be regarded as women's stories told in code (1995, 229), thus reinterpreting the figure of the witch as a woman of wisdom and empowerment in the community. As Herbert Covey (1991) argues, the witch has often been portrayed as an old single woman who is ostracized and considered an outcast as a result of social prejudice and fear of her mysterious powers, thus leading male authorities to condemn her to banishment and oblivion. In Colbert's film, as an ostracized woman who has suffered the traumatic effects of the Anthropocene, after being abused as a child actress and now being banished from the screen as an older actress owing to ageist prejudice, Veronica Ghent establishes emotional ties with the witches that were condemned in former times for their rebellious and unorthodox behavior by means of their communion with the land.

The transition from the Anthropocene to the Symbiocene takes places in Colbert's film as its female protagonist, Veronica Ghent, moves through different stages, which may be identified as complying with three typologies of narratives which have been discussed in aging studies, thus comprising an initial narrative of decline, a subsequent

counter-story, and a concluding narrative of becoming. Drawing on the premise that we are “aged by culture” (2004, 12), Margaret Gullette claims that, in the Western society, aging has often been associated with a narrative of decline which “worsens the experience of aging past youth” (2011, 5). As an older actress, Veronica Ghent revisits classic portrayals of the twilight of the aging actress, which bring to the fore the ageist prejudice prevailing in the film industry which banish women actors from the screen in their older years.

In contrast with this initial narrative of decline, in Colbert's film, Veronica Ghent gradually embraces a counter-narrative, which Hilde Lindemann Nelson defines as “a story that contributes to the moral self-definition of its teller by undermining a dominant story, undoing it and retelling it in such a way as to invite new interpretations” (1995, 23). Moreover, as Nelson further claims, identities are constructed either by drawing stories from our cultural background that we apply to ourselves or by resorting to images with which others have categorized us (1999, 76). Upon arriving at the retreat in Scotland where Veronica becomes acquainted with the legacy of the witches who were burned centuries before, Veronica feels a special connection binds them together, but she also embraces her awareness of being old as a way to counteract age prejudice. As Veronica begins to have strange dreams and suffer from somnambulism, she seems to acquire unusual gifts and supernatural skills, which resemble the precepts of positive aging and of aging successfully, albeit in an unrealistic and even fantastic way. Accordingly, as Veronica gains insight into her aging process, she accepts the effects of aging and her old age, thus resorting to alternative femininities imposed on her by patriarchal precepts as a way to retaliate and defend herself from them.

Finally, Veronica's experience during her stay in Scottish lands allows her to reconcile herself with her femininity in old age. As she gains insight into her aging process, she starts envisioning old age as a narrative of transformation. According to Pamela Gravagne, narratives of becoming seek "emancipation from normative assumptions about aging" (2013, 183), insofar as they allow individuals to embrace old age with its effects rather than resorting to unrealistic goals promoted through positive aging. After her cathartic experience, Veronica moves back home with renewed energy, as she has faced trauma and accepted her identity as an older woman, thus being able to canalize her creativity through art and bonds with other women. In Colbert's film, as an older woman, Veronica approaches her old age as a life stage to be embraced and as an opportunity to establish close bonds with female friends, like her nurse Desi.

This article will approach Colbert's film *She Will* as a narrative in which its female protagonist, Veronica Ghent, shifts her attitudes toward old age along her metaphorical journey from the Anthropocene to the Symbiocene. Accordingly, Veronica first projects aging as a narrative of decline, as she must cope with trauma, patriarchal assumptions, disability, and ageist prejudice. Subsequently, as a result of gaining awareness of the interconnection with the landscape and the legacy of previously ostracized women, Veronica displays a counter-narrative, first embracing positive aging and then coming to terms with alternative femininities in old age. Finally, after her cathartic experience, Veronica is able to approach aging as a narrative of transformation after accepting old age as a life stage in which to reinvent herself and establish bonds with other women. Following this tripartite structure, this article will analyze Colbert's film as a narrative of decline, a counter-narrative, and a narrative of transformation in relation to aging. The aim of this article is to establish connections between the transition with regard to these narratives of women's aging and the evolution from the era of the Anthropocene to the Symbiocene with its increasing emphasis on the transforming interrelationship

between humankind and nature from a gender perspective. Accordingly, it will be argued that the Anthropocene often involves subjection and repression as a result of patriarchal dictates in contrast with the Symbiocene, which rather implies interconnection, regeneration and empowerment.

Narratives of Decline in the Anthropocene: Sexism, Ageism, Disability

According to Albrecht, the Anthropocene refers to the observed human influence and increasing dominance on climatic, biophysical and evolutionary processes that take place at a planetary scale (2016, 12). It could be added that this human urge to exert dominion is an intrinsically defining trait of patriarchy and capitalism, as configurations in which men subject others to their own profit and benefit. As Albrecht notes, certain concepts which may be initially praised have been corrupted once they have been incorporated into the Anthropocene and have become normalized (2016, 13). As cases in point, values like resilience and toughness have been appropriated by patriarchy, thus turning into perverse resilience whereby the male exerts oppression and exploitation. Democracy has been corrupted by the sole rule of the powerful, thus turning into an oligarchy or plutocracy, where dominance lies in the hands of a few males who use autocratic power. Likewise, capitalism has often given way to corruption, thus destroying the integrity of a social system.

The mechanisms that operate in the Anthropocene, such as perverse resilience, oligarchy and corrupted capitalism—all of them deeply rooted in patriarchal ideals—become pervasive in the film industry in which the female protagonist of Colbert's film was raised as a child actor. Given the fact that cinema is show business, its directors and producers, who were invariably male, aimed to make profit in films in which young women were meant to be looked at, but were prevented to hold the gaze. In addition to sexist prejudice, ageist bias came along when these women actors reached maturity and were banished from the screen on account of their age. In this respect, Susan

Sontag refers to the double standard of aging whereby men remain eligible well into old age, whereas women are discarded at a much younger age, particularly in the film industry. In Colbert's film, as an acclaimed actress, in her old age, Veronica Ghent finds herself rejected by the same system which turned her into a star as a young woman. Detached from the object of the gaze, not only is she rendered invisible as an aging woman, but she is also pathologized and disabled, which is metaphorically remarked after having gone through a double mastectomy. In her old age, Veronica is literally and figuratively deprived of her femininity as a woman, the same kind of femininity for which she was praised in her youth. In this respect, in Colbert's film, Veronica initially approaches aging as a narrative of decline. According to Sarah Falcus and Stefanie El Madawi, "the decline narrative understands aging as a process of loss and diminution, as movement along the life course is characterized by increasing restriction and decreasing capability" (2019, 1). As an older woman, Veronica faces prejudice at different levels as a disabled aging woman. In due course, Robert Butler (1969) and Alex Comfort (1976) defined ageism as the systematic social discrimination against people on account of their age, in analogy with racism and sexism, and how they operate in relation to skin color and gender.

The opening scene in Colbert's film, which intercuts surgical flashes of mastectomy with the ritual application of putting on full make-up through a series of close-up shots, introduces us to Veronica Ghent, a fading screen cinema actress, played by Alice Krige. In this scene, she declares, "it's become a ritual, putting the layers on," and she states that "every mask has a function" and "this mask is about preservation." Veronica is making a point of the fact that she has fallen apart and that she has felt compelled to put herself together many times. As a symbolic victim of the Anthropocene, she suffered abuse as a child on behalf of a cinema director, she has been banished from the screen in her old age, and these occasions on which her womanhood has been

thwarted and even called into question are evoked when Veronica undergoes a mastectomy. According to Sontag, “to be a woman is to be an actress,” insofar as “a woman’s value lies in the way she represents herself” (1997, 22). As Sontag explains, “a woman’s face is the canvas upon which she paints a revised, corrected portrait of herself,” and “a woman’s face is prized so far as it remains unchanged,” since “it is supposed to be a mask—immutable, unmarked” (1997, 23). In the initial scene of the film, Veronica’s body and face are metaphorically fragmented by means of fast juxtaposed close-up shots as if the camera was imitating the effects of a sharpening scalpel. Sontag thus claims that “women are split, as men are not, into a body and a face—each judged by somewhat different standards,” since “what is important for a face is that it be beautiful” and “what is important for a body is two (often contradictory) things: first, that it be desirable and, second, that it be beautiful” (1997, 22). Sontag’s words seem to echo along the first scene in Colbert’s film, as juxtaposed shots of Veronica’s face and body reinforce this division.

Veronica Ghent’s literal and metaphorical mask evokes her haunting image as a film star, but also her internal commitment as a woman which obliges her to put on a mask to both construct and preserve her femininity. When Veronica and Desi arrive at the Scottish retreat, Veronica wears a long coat, dark sunglasses and a turban that covers her head, which strikes as a rather inappropriate outfit to be wearing in a rural area, thus categorizing as a foreigner in the place. Besides, as a cinema star, Veronica is trying to preserve her anonymity, but her outfit has the opposite effect, as she rather attracts the gaze. Moreover, through a series of full shots, Veronica’s exotic clothes are deeply evocative of the character of Norma Desmond (Gloria Swanson) in Billy Wilder’s classic film *Sunset Boulevard*, thus establishing an intertextual link with another aging actress who was banished from the screen as a result of the patriarchal and ageist discourses prevailing in the Anthropocene. As Simone de Beauvoir claims, “one is not

born, but rather becomes a woman" (1974, 301), and as Marilyn Pearsall adds, "as hard as it is to become a woman, it is even harder to become an old woman in patriarchal society" (1997, 1). In Colbert's film, when Veronica and Desi arrive at the retreat, Veronica catches a glimpse of a tabloid cover in which a photograph of herself as a young actress is juxtaposed to a photograph of herself as an aging woman, urging readers to notice the difference between how Veronica used to look and how she looks presently. Moreover, one may point out that, as hard as it is to become an old woman in patriarchal society, it is even harder to become a disabled old woman. The juxtaposed images of Veronica's face and body in the first scene are echoed throughout the film through contrasted close-up shots of Veronica's face and of parts of her body, particularly of her absence of breasts as a result of a double mastectomy, which underlines her old age and disability as agents that threaten to undermine her femininity according to established patriarchal dictates in the Anthropocene. After undergoing a double mastectomy, not only does she suffer physical pain, but also psychological strain as she feels that she might have been deprived of her femininity, which urges her to wear prosthetics even if Desi notes that it might be too soon.

The character of Veronica Ghent in Colbert's film exemplifies a triple categorization as female, aged, and disabled. Rosemarie Garland Thomson (1997) has written about the paradox that a female body with a disability presents culturally, since, "both the female and the disabled body are cast within cultural discourse as deviant and inferior; both are excluded from full participation [...] both are defined in opposition to a valued norm" (1997, 19). In particular, though, Thomson notes the distinction between the exclusion that accompanies femininity and the exclusion that accompanies disability, stating that: "feminizing practices normalize the female body, while disabilities abnormalize it" and "feminization prompts the gaze, while disability prompts the stare" (1997, 28). In addition, Sally Chivers adds old age to Thomson's description, claiming

that “while aging bodies are not necessarily disabled, older people frequently face being treated as though they were physically less capable than they once were” (2006, 211), thus assuming an intrinsic link between disability and later life. Accordingly, Shivers claims that the aging disabled female body “is triply marked as inferior” (2006, 223) as a result of the impossible standards imposed on all non-normative bodies, that is, on all bodies.

Throughout Colbert's film, there are scenes in which, as an aging woman, Veronica literally encounters herself as a child, particularly as she comes to terms with her childhood trauma and recollects being abused as a young actress. As the boundaries between life stages blur, Veronica's trauma as a child is echoed in her old age. Shortly after arriving at the Scottish retreat, Veronica starts having nightmares that bring back memories of her trauma as a child, she sees her image as a child reflected in the window glass, and when she is disoriented and loses her way in the forest, she encounters herself as a child, lying down on the ground. In her old age, Veronica feels as vulnerable as she felt when she was abused in her childhood. Accordingly, when Desi asks Veronica if she is feeling “any pain,” Veronica responds that she is feeling “every pain.” Her childhood trauma after being abused echoes her discomfort as an aging woman who feels deprived of her femininity. Her exploitation as a child actress by the film industry in the past gives way to her ostracism as an aging actress who is no longer required. Her physical abuse as a young teenager when her career was beginning matches her double mastectomy as an older actress. In the era of the Anthropocene, Veronica has been triply abused and exploited in terms of gender, age, and disability. Conversely, far from being banished from the business, her abuser, Eric Hathbourne, takes advantage of his fame and acclaim in his old age, and remains active to the point of making arrangements for a remake of the film that featured Veronica in her youth and made him a name in the film industry. Apparently, the advent of old age

has no negative effect on Eric's career, but rather, as a cinema director, he is highly acclaimed to the extent of being bestowed a knighthood. Likewise, Eric Hathbourne displays his power and authority, as he lives in luxury and gives interviews to the media. In this respect, given his power and authority in his old age, Eric Hathbourne arises as representative of the values of the Anthropocene, particularly in terms of negative resilience, autocracy, and corruptive capitalism. In a scene in Colbert's film, Eric is giving an interview and, when the journalist remarks that Veronica was only thirteen when he discovered her, Eric defends himself stating that "I made her into something." Eric's statement becomes ambiguous insofar as, even if he intends to say that he made Veronica a star, his words reinforce the process of commodification that she was made to undergo both as a woman and as an actress, whose effects would last until her old age.

As a legacy of films whose metafictional quality draw attention to the plight of aging actresses, Colbert's film also shares a series of features that characterize the figure of the aging actress. First, as Lucy Fischer notes, "all aging women experience this sense of 'doubling,' of a youthful image superimposed on their visage in age, which becomes particularly clear for the movie actress" (1997, 171). In Colbert's film, as an aging woman, Veronica recollects herself as a young actress whose fame, but also traumatic experience, still resonate in her old age. Besides, though, the presence of Veronica's young nurse Desi underlines the age gap between patient and caregiver, as Desi's youthful beauty is initially an unwelcome reminder of Veronica's faded glory. Second, according to Peter Shelley, the aging actress in these films is either presented as "a mentally unstable antagonist or as the woman in peril protagonist" although "the most interesting of these films have characters that possess both these qualities" (2009, 8). As a former diva Veronica displays some histrionics and steely coldness in the course of her initial relationship with Desi, hence suggesting the categorization of Veronica as the

unstable antagonist and Desi as the woman in peril protagonist. Nonetheless, as the story progresses, Veronica's figurative mask, as she tries to remain poised during her convalescence, gradually slips to unveil her psychological vulnerability and physical disability in order to come to terms with her past trauma. Third, as Luce Irigaray claims, rooted in the traditional conflation of femininity and artifice, womanliness turns into a masquerade understood as submission to the dominant economy of desire (1985). Drawing on Irigaray's notion of womanliness as masquerade, Kathleen Woodward claims that aging women may resort to youthfulness as masquerade, which reveals "not the fear of losing one's femininity, as we might expect, but rather the denial of a desire for masculinity" (1989, 130). In a scene in the film, Veronica gazes at Desi's short dyed hair and declares that androgyny looks beautiful in youth, but repulsive in old age. Veronica in Colbert's film also exhibits some androgynous traits, as she holds on to her former image in youth to retain her femininity, but in so doing—in exalting her feminine traits through make-up and clothes—she also seems to conceal a latent wished-for masculinity, which goes hand in hand with her process of awakening and progressive empowerment.

As Deborah Jermyn puts forward, cinematic narratives depicting aging women become ambivalent, insofar as they may present "delimiting representations of female aging that embody the disgust 'old women' evoke in our culture," and yet, at the same time, these films may also "enact a resistance to the very industry from which they emanate" (2014, 5). American classic films like Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), Joseph Mankiewicz's *All About Eve* (1950) and Robert Aldrich's *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane* (1962) portray aging actresses in the twilight of their careers who are ostracized on account of their age by patriarchal dictates pervading the film industry. In Colbert's film, explicit scenes with close-up shots of Veronica's aging face and of her double mastectomy reinforce the portrayal of female aging as associated with decay and

decline. Nonetheless, through its portrayal of aging as decline, Colbert's film more closely evokes British films like José Quintero's *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone* (1961) and Jack Clayton's *The Lonely Passion of Judith Heanre* (1987), which portray older women releasing themselves from patriarchal conventions about female sexuality although they are also ultimately chastised. Even if Colbert's film follows the cue of these films, in contrast, its unadorned images of old age and disability are meant to cast a critical gaze on the industry which contributes to ostracizing non-normative female bodies.

Embracing the Symbiocene: Counter-Stories, Positive Aging, and Alternative Femininities

In contrast with the precepts prevailing in the Anthropocene, the era of the Symbiocene is grounded in the interconnection of all living things, comprising humans and nature. From a symbiocenic perspective, there is a symbiotic interrelationship between the functioning of the ecosystems and of human life so that humans should never be considered as occupying a privileged position in creation, but rather, as remaining at the same level as other creatures. In Colbert's film, when Veronica becomes further acquainted with the landscape in the retreat where she has taken accommodation, she states explicitly that "this place feels familiar, as if I recognized it, as if I had been here before." Soon after her arrival, in a series of wide shots that show the subject against the environment, Veronica has experiences that reinforce her bond with the landscape, while the land gradually reclaims its right over the places that humans occupy, as is displayed in a series of scenes. In a full and high-angle shot, when Veronica is taking a bath, some pit falls into the bathtub from the facet, tainting the water with black. The floor of the cabin that Veronica and Desi inhabit is often suffused with mud from the land outside. Some dust known as witch's feathers falls down as if it

were rain, but it is truly made up of ashes arising from the ground, which are alleged to be the remains of witch burning in the past. Moreover, Veronica wakes up every morning noticing that her body is covered with mud as a result of spending the night in the forest and of taking part in some mysterious atavistic rituals. This sense of communion with the landscape enables Veronica to gain insight into her trauma and establish links with other beings that have also been victims of exploitation and subjection in the Anthropocene.

Accordingly, from a narrative of decline, Veronica gradually resorts to a counter-story whereby the dominant narrative of the Anthropocene is eroded and undermined, hence disclosing that other narratives are feasible. Thus, instead of approaching old age as a narrative of decay and decline, Veronica adjusts herself to a counter-narrative of aging that grants her the opportunity to reinvent her femininity in old age. As Nelson argues, counter-stories prove that identities may be reconstructed by resorting to narratives from our cultural background that individuals apply to themselves, or rather, by embracing the identities that others impose on us (1999, 76). Veronica discovers that the site on which they are staying is where women were burned as witches in the past, and their ashes turned into the mud that now fills the land and the feathers that fall down onto the ground. At night, through full and low-angle shots, Veronica experiences vivid dreams and lapses of somnambulism that bring her to the forest where she is greeted by women gathering around a pyre. In this respect, in Colbert's film, after Veronica gains insight into the latent power that the land possesses and transmits, she first resorts to the dynamics of positive aging, which involve unrealistic and fantastic interpretations of the process of growing old, which bring to mind supernatural powers. In this respect, Colbert's film partially evokes American fantasy films like Lee Toland Krieger's *The Age of Adaline* (2015) and even anticipates Coralie Fargeat's *The Substance* (2024) which transcend the limits of aging, portraying older

women whose extremely youthful appearance contrasts sharply with their chronological age, thus engaging in ambivalent discourses that both comply with, and subvert, patriarchal dictates of female aging. Subsequently, though, Veronica rather opts for embracing alternative femininities that allow her to envision aging as a progress narrative, thus resorting to a more realistic and feasible way to counteract the effects of aging.

In Colbert's film, Veronica's counter-narratives evoking positive aging correspond with ancestral stories about female aging that she embraces and applies to herself in order to counteract dominant narratives of female aging that have traditionally associated old age with decay. In particular, Veronica embodies the figures of the female grotesque, the crone and the witch, as aging female figures which defy assumptions of female aging as a life stage of disempowerment and decline. Moreover, these aging female figures are inextricably linked with the landscape and the forces of nature, and they display a kind of femininity that, in contrast with a patriarchal perception of femininity which values dependence and fragility, the femininity embodied by the figures of the female grotesque, the crone and the witch is associated with power and authority, as values traditionally associated with manhood. In Colbert's film, a series of scenes display instances of positive aging, as Veronica arises as an embodiment of ancestral female figures endowed with supernatural powers that enable them to exert their female dominion over threatening males.

Drawing on Mary Russo's notion of the female grotesque (1995), Anne Morey refers to discomfiting performances of female aging in film as embodiments of the figure of the elegiac female grotesque (2011, 107). Etymologically rooted in earthly caves which emulate the cavernous female body, the female grotesque is associated with the abject—as it is abjected from bodily canons—and with the uncanny—as it remains

repressed and estranged in spite of its familiarity. As Candy Bedworth claims, in Colbert's film, Veronica bears "the very physical scars of surgery and the invisible scars of childhood abuse" (2022, n.p.). In this respect, through close-up shots, Veronica gains insight into her body as an incarnation of the abject, which, in Julia Kristeva's words, involves "what disturbs identity, system, order," "what does not respect borders, positions, rules," and what includes "the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (1982, 4). Moreover, the notion of the female grotesque also elicits the Freudian notion of the uncanny, which is defined as "that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar" (2003, 124). In Colbert's film, as Veronica dares to face traumatic memories from the past, she encounters familiar passages which had been repressed and became a personal source of dread, but need to be retrieved to procure healing and relief. In this respect, as Deborah Chambers claims, while "the grotesquely gendered body draws attention to normative gender roles, at the same time it disrupts and disfigures them" (2012, 167). Insofar as Veronica establishes ancestral connections with the land, she arises as an embodiment of the female grotesque that calls into question patriarchal notions of femininity that deprive older women of their womanhood. The figure of the female grotesque that Veronica metaphorically incarnates also underscores the relevance that nature acquires in Colbert's film, insofar as the turmoil of Veronica's inner landscape is reflected in the surrounding scenery, as indicative of her trauma, but also as a source of healing and empowerment.

As Veronica feels increasingly attracted towards the land and its latent power, she comes in touch with the figure of the crone or the great mother from an ancient matriarchal perspective. As Barbara Walker explains, the crone arises as the fearful Old Woman and all-powerful Mother "who embodied the fearful potential for rejection, abandonment and death," and "men found it most intimidating" (1988, 12), since, as

Walker further notes, “women’s most feared power over men is the power to say no [...] to refuse to service them sexually [...] to refuse to love them” (1988, 11). In Colbert’s film, as Veronica is endowed with preternatural powers, she is enabled to visit Eric Hathbourne to haunt him, cause him to remember his crime, and accuse him of abusing her when she was only a teenager. When she finally confronts him and urges him to confess his crime, not only does he refuse to do so, but he blames her, telling her that she knew what she was doing. Eric’s reinstatement of his patriarchal abuse unleashes Veronica’s rage and ends up with Eric’s death, through a low-angle shot, which emphasizes the reversal of positions of power, as he falls off his pedestal at the hotel, both literally and metaphorically, which is interpreted as suicide by the media. Likewise, when Owen (Jack Greenlees) invites Desi, Veronica’s nurse, to have a drink at the pub, he attempts to rape her in the forest. Nonetheless, the ancestral mud under their feet seems endowed with life of its own, thus turning into quicksand that buries Owen and saves Desi from being raped. These two scenes evoke the ancestral figure of the crone which arises to take revenge on dominant males who are willing to submit women to their patriarchal will, in spite of the fact that these women refuse to succumb to their power and subject their bodies to quench their desire.

In close connection with men’s fear and rejection of the crone lies their dread and anxiety with regard to the ancestral figure of the witch. As brewers, herbalists and connoisseurs of the local flora, witches were in close contact with nature in order to assist and nourish the community, although their power over the land became a source of dread for men, who ostracized and condemned them for their powerful gifts out of fear and envy. In Colbert’s film, Veronica’s communion with the landscape and the soil, comprising the ashes from women who were once burned as witches, allows her to establish bonds with other ostracized ancestral women, feel empowered to confront male abusers, and reinforce the power of their sisterhood as mutual victims of

patriarchy across time. When Veronica is first informed about the fact that the place is known for the site where a coven of witches was burned, rather than describing it as creepy, as Desi does, Veronica rather designates the event as tragic. Likewise, at night, Veronica leaves her cabin to walk to the forest and take part in rituals in the company of other witches, as she herself realizes in the morning when she finds out that her hands and feet are covered in mud. Moreover, when Veronica and Desi join the rest of the group who are participating in the retreat, one of the young men calls into question the existence of patriarchy, and hence, the need for feminism, which triggers Veronica's rage and causes her to set his hand on fire, in an act of retaliation against the burning that witches suffered under the patriarchal regime. Likewise, when Veronica encounters her abuser, Eric calls her Nica, as he used to call her when she was a child, thus establishing a phonetic association between Veronica and the cult of Wicca, which refers to a pagan cult of esoterism that centers on the power of the land. Veronica thus displays an unprecedented power as an older woman arising from her connection with the landscape, which metaphorically evokes the tenets of positive aging.

Nonetheless, Veronica's association with ancestral figures like the female grotesque, the crone and the witch—who have been deeply demeaned from a patriarchal mindset, particularly in their association with women's old age—also reveal unrealistic approaches to female aging, which ultimately finalize after Veronica's initial rage as a result of trauma comes to an end. Accordingly, Veronica gradually leaves behind unrealistic instances of positive aging in order to embrace alternative femininities as an older woman, even if they imply no longer being the object of the male gaze. In this respect, drawing on Nelson's notion of counter-narratives, Veronica takes advantage of the identities that others impose on her in her later years as a way to counteract

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patriarchal conceptualizations of femininity. In a moving scene, a medium shot shows Veronica's naked body from her waist to her head, as she looks at herself in the mirror,

and gazes at the scars resulting from her double mastectomy. Veronica no longer feels the need to conceal her scars, and they no longer hurt as the wounds have healed and she is no longer in pain. An analogy is established between the cathartic experience that she has undergone—once she has come to terms with her childhood trauma and exposed her abuser—and her recovery from her surgical intervention. Displaying Veronica's absence of breasts reveals that womanhood is not intrinsically related to the body, and particularly, patriarchal dictates of what femininity should entail. As Colbert herself admits, "it is a statement even having an older woman on screen" (Bedworth 2022, n.p.). Consequently, showing a naked older and disabled female body arises as a counter-narrative, which assumes a rebellious and alternative femininity that Veronica finally learns to embrace. However, at this juncture in the film, having confronted her childhood trauma and having vindicated herself as an older woman, Veronica displays some ambivalence. On the one hand, Veronica's change shows in her appearance, as she unties her long hair, wears a red dress, and put on some red lipstick, as a way to celebrate her femininity in her old age and with her disability. On the other hand, though, Veronica tells Desi to leave, while she lies down in her bed and lets her body be covered in witches' feathers as if awaiting her own death. This poetic scene ultimately indicates Veronica's process of reconciling herself with her womanhood in old age before coming back home.

Overcoming the Anthropocene, Embracing the Symbiocene: Narratives of Becoming

Colbert's film displays how anthropocentric assumptions have contributed to imposing themselves at the expense of other humans and nature. By means of patriarchal dictates, a few males, who configure a powerful elite, have appropriated the

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foundations of resilience, democracy and capitalism and use them to their own benefit.

Conversely, symbiocenic approaches rather embrace the ethics of cooperation, support

and interrelationships among all living creatures and nature. From this perspective, in terms of gender and aging, narratives of decline that associate aging with decay are left behind in favor of progress narratives. According to Falcus and El Madawi, progress narratives challenge aging narratives that envision old age as a stage of decline, but also ageist master narratives that associate patriarchal constructs of femininity with youth (2019, 1). Moreover, Gravagne refers to narratives of becoming, which seek “emancipation from normative assumptions about aging” (2013, 183), thus calling into question ageism and patriarchal constructs of womanhood with the purpose of envisioning old age as a stage of transformation. In Colbert’s film, after rejecting aging as a narrative of decline, but also unrealistic instances of positive aging, while embracing alternative femininities, Veronica approaches her process of growing old as a narrative of becoming which subverts stereotypes about female aging. In this respect, Colbert’s film follows the cue of previous films like Roger Michell’s *The Mother* (2003), and Sebastian Lelio’s *Gloria Bell* (2018), in which older women are enabled to release their inhibitions and live a life of their own choice with the advent of aging.

Upon arriving at the retreat, Veronica refuses to take part in the cultural activities with the rest of the group. Nonetheless, she finally agrees to attend the art class, while following the instructor’s recommendations to use the charcoal that comes from the land. As the instructor indicates, “do not draw the landscape, but let the landscape draw you,” thus encouraging the attendees to change their perspective and submit themselves to the creativity of the land rather than subjecting the land to their own creativity. According to Gene Cohen admits, rather than considering old age as a period of reevaluation of the past, it should be praised for its potential for new endeavors (2005, 31). In this respect, Veronica canalizes her creativity as an actress on the canvas,

holding the charcoal and giving free vent to her artistry and ultimately producing a painting in a frenzy of inspiration.

Likewise, it is at a later stage in life that Veronica establishes lasting bonds with other women, especially with her nurse Desi. Even though when they first meet, Veronica is suspicious of Desi's proficiency as a nurse, Veronica gradually grows attached to her, even to the extent of giving her her mother's necklace as a sign of friendship. As Carol Gilligan asserts, notions of interdependence not only alter the way individuals perceive others, but also the way they regard themselves (1997, 210). In this respect, even if Veronica asks Desi to leave her on her own at the retreat, Desi finally feels the need to come back to collect Veronica and return back home together, thus suggesting an emotional bond that goes beyond the professional relationship between nurse and patient. Veronica's friendship with Desi not only reveals the importance of sorority, but also enables her to approach old age in more positive terms.

Accordingly, Veronica's process of growing old ultimately resembles a narrative of becoming whereby she accepts her vulnerability as an older woman, she finds new ways to canalize her skills, and she also establishes mutually-enriching bonds with other women. Veronica thus leaves behind anthropocentric constructs of womanhood, which disrupt her femininity in old age, or rather, ostracize her as a woman as a result of ageist prejudice. Likewise, after displaying instances of unrealistic positive aging by means of resorting to preternatural powers as a result of witchcraft, but also embracing alternative femininities that defy patriarchal assumptions of femininity, Veronica finally envisions old age as a narrative of transformation which shifts her initial perception of aging as decay, which she had imbibed from the film industry in which she had been raised as a woman. Veronica thus resorts to her creativity and her emotional bonds with other women to face her process of growing old with renewed energy and hope.

Conclusions

Veronica Ghent's physical and metaphorical journey in Colbert's film follows a tripartite narrative arch in terms of discourses of age, gender and disability, which displays corresponding narratives of decline, progress, and transformation. Having undergone a double mastectomy and being haunted by the repressed, but latent, trauma of childhood abuse, Veronica initially undergoes a narrative of decline, as she feels triply marked as aged, unfeminine, and disabled. In a series of scenes, Veronica scrutinizes her face in the mirror, and close-up shots bring to the fore her aging face and disabled body. According to Gullette, aging has conventionally been associated with decay and inability, and even in some cases, according to Chivers, with disability. In particular, for women actors, the advent of old age often implied being disqualified and erased from the screen. Nonetheless, when Veronica comes into contact with ancestral forces from the land and establishes links with generations of witches who were also subjugated to anthropocentric and patriarchal dictates, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, she gathers courage to face her past trauma, challenge her abuser, and reconcile herself with her identity as an aging and disabled woman. By means of female archetypes of the horror genre, such as the female grotesque, the crone and the witch, Veronica leaves behind a past of subjection to embrace female empowerment in her old age. Veronica thus exchanges her initial narrative of decline for a counter-story, to use Nelson's term, and she embraces active or positive aging as an older woman. Finally, when her journey comes to an end, Veronica becomes aware of the importance of establishing bonds with other women and creating networks across genealogies, as her sisterly bond with her caregiver Desi is reinforced, but also with past generations of women, like witches, who have also been symbolically disabled by patriarchy. Drawing on Gravagne's precepts, at the end of Colbert's film,

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Veronica undergoes a narrative of becoming by means of which female aging is perceived as a collective and non-linear experience. Following the transition described

in Colbert's film, patriarchy lies at the core of the Anthropocene, whereas female regeneration and empowerment arise in communion with the landscape as indicative of the Symbiocene.

As its title indicates, Colbert's film *She Will* thus arises as an ecofeminist plea and a story of vindication at the end of the Anthropocene and the beginning of the Symbiocene, which goes back to ancestral cults of witchcraft, but also addresses contemporary plights against sexual abuse in the times of the MeToo movement. Rooted in classic films which portrayed the fading film star, who was banished from the screen far too soon, Colbert's film brings to the fore an optimistic prospect, since Veronica undergoes a cathartic experience which enables her to embrace her identity as an older woman. From this perspective, categorizations like the female grotesque, the crone or the witch acquire positive connotations, as they turn into subversive markers that reinforce the combative spirit of the disabled older female in order to defeat the trauma of abuse on behalf of patriarchs whose power has been perpetuating through time. As a woman actor, Veronica uses her artistic and performative skills to her own advantage, as the discourses of age, gender and disability are revealed to be cultural constructs. Embracing her unfeminine, aged, and disabled body according to patriarchal standards, she arises as a woman who has made peace with her past and faces her old age with renewed strength. As Colbert herself admits, "the film format allows me to link in with dreams, the unconscious, how we process things, and the way we try to make sense of the world" (Bedworth 2022, n.p.). Her debut film *She Will* pays homage to women facing ageist, sexist and ableist prejudice from ancestral to contemporary times, thus revealing that it is through

interconnection and artistry that they may manage to find the strength to release themselves from the yoke of patriarchal oppression in the times of the Anthropocene.

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