DOI: 10.2478/aa-2023-0005

The Ghosts of the Disappeared: On Re-Reading *Waiting for Godot* and *Aura* "Post"-Pandemic

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Abstract:
Given how rapidly the still-ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has receded from the public consciousness since 2021, the time is ripe to revisit how Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot *and Carlos Fuentes's* Aura *inform our present historical moment, particularly since both texts are concerned with the large-scale disappearance, erasure and repression of the mass-dead by statist economic interests in the wake of national traumas – post-Vichy France and post-Famine Ireland in the case of Beckett, and the French Intervention and the Spanish Conquest in the case of Mexico. Yet these two seminal works are not only concerned with how statist interests erase their dead, but how these same dead continue to haunt, influence and impact these same nations despite – or even because of – their erasure. As we are once again recognizing in our own "post"-pandemic moment, just because the dead have been erased, that by no means signifies they are silent.*

Introduction

It is already becoming increasingly difficult to remember that the year 2022 was bookended by the Omicron surge in January and the "triple-demic" surge in December (when the resurgent flu, RSV and COVID-19 all conspired together to overwhelm US hospitals once more). Yet what a contrast there was in national responses to these twin surges within the space of a single calendar year. The Omicron surge brought about another wave of school closures and return to remote-live classrooms in January of that year; yet by December, almost all school mask mandates had lifted nation-wide, all social ending had ended, and the latest rise in COVID deaths were largely greeted

with a shrug. In classrooms everywhere, there wasn't even an attempt to return to remote-live. On the contrary, 2022 holiday travel was the third busiest on record since 2000. In less than a year, the pandemic was already actively receding from public memory, largely treated as though it was either long over, or never was. The 3,000 killed on 9/11 were still being heavily memorialized by US governmental interests over 20 years later; meanwhile, it is not an exaggeration to say that the 1,000,000 (and counting) killed by the much more recent pandemic have already been erased, repressed and disappeared by statist interests that are economically invested in keeping these dead silenced disappeared.

The repression and erasure of such mass-death – and the lingering after-effects of that repression – have been the peculiar province of Samuel Beckett's landmark play *Waiting for Godot* and Carlos Fuentes's Gothic novella *Aura*. Both mid-century literary productions are concerned with the persistence and recurrence of the dead. Specifically, they call attention to those dead who were erased, repressed and/or intentionally forgotten by state interests in the aftermath of catastrophic national traumas: post-Famine Ireland and post-Vichy France in the implicit case of *Godot,* and the French Intervention and Spanish Conquest of Mexico in the explicit case of *Aura* – all of which this paper will review shortly. Yet although the postcolonial conditions that produced these two texts can be contextualized and historicized, their long-standing popularity and global circulation indicates that their appeal lies in how they are able to resonate in a wide variety of other cases of large-scale disappearance, historical amnesia, and mass-atrocity. As such, these two texts have (like the dead they describe) also resurged to relevance in our current pandemic-induced reality. The value of *Waiting for Godot* and *Aura* in this moment, then, is in highlighting both the futility and the prohibitive cost of attempting to erase the dead from our collective memory.

On a side-note, Beckett and Fuentes in particular recommend themselves for more comparatist study than they have previously received: there is for starters the already well-documented intersections between Mexico and Ireland generally, in particular the famed San Patricio battalion of the 1847-48 Mexican-American War that defected from America to Santa Anna's army. More specifically however, Beckett and Fuentes are both mid-century authors who wrote repeatedly upon the dead and the dying: Beckett with *Murphy*, *Mercier and Camier*, *Malone Dies*, *Krapp's Last Tape,* and of course *Waiting for Godot* , and Fuentes with *The Death of Artemio Cruz*, *Terra Nostra* , *Gringo Vieja* , and of course *Aura*; both were heavily influenced by that arch-modernist James Joyce (another author famously preoccupied with the recurrence and return of

the dead, from the revenants of *Dubliners* through the ghostly apparitions of *Ulysses* and the *Wake*); both were celebrated and canonized within their own lifetimes (Beckett won the Nobel, Fuentes the Cervantes); and both of course wrote in the aftermath of major early-20th century upheavals: the 1916 Easter Rising and 1910 Mexican Revolution, respectively. Furthermore, comparing *Waiting for Godot* and *Aura* may also help to foreground Beckett's anti-colonialism more explicitly, which has only in the 21st century received the thorough critical treatment that the topic merits. I will first examine how *Waiting for Godot* resonates with our current "post"-pandemic moment, then how *Aura* does the same, then bring the two into direct conversation with each other.

"These skeletons"

Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* has long resonated in a wide variety of contexts of mass death, atrocity, erasure and disappearance. Emilie Morin has catalogued, for example, "the bilingual Hebrew-Arabic production directed by Ilan Ronen in Haifa in 1984" in Israel, "Susan Sontag's 1993 production in Sarajevo" (Morin, 2014, p. 9) during the Bosnian genocide, a production staged "in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina" (Morin, 2014, p. 251) in 2007 New Orleans, and how the play "was banned in [Soviet-era] Czechoslovakia like other texts expressing views that the government did not support" (Morin, 2014, p. 246). The play's performers and producers have intuitively understood the text's political subtext, even as numerous 20th-century critics have not; as Patrick Bixby notes, Beckett's works have been "routinely portrayed…as progressively relinquishing their tangential concern with social realism for an outright rejection of the external world" (Bixby, 2011, p. 4). Indeed, numerous critics of this era took as axiomatic James Knowlson's claim that, "[Beckett] would draw…on his own inner-world for his subjects; outside reality would be refracted through the filter of his own imagination" (Knowlson, 1996, p. 329), and overall embraced "[t]he undialectical assumption that Beckett aspires to write without encumbrance from history and politics" (McNaughton, 2018, p. 2), reading him as monkishly drawing solely "on his own inner-world for his subjects" (Knowlson, 1996, p. 329). A rising generation of critics in the 1990s and 2000s would later challenge and overturn these ahistorical assumptions; yet even before this significant critical re-evaluation took place, Beckett's most famous play was still persistently performed in "situations of political hardship and oppression" (Morin, 2014, p. 8). More precisely, whenever and wherever a large population is systematically silenced, trivialized, downplayed, ignored, erased and/or disappeared, *Waiting for Godot* has oft re-emerged like a ghost, haunting the peripheries as a sympathetic presence.

According to Andrew Gibson, that is in part because *Waiting for Godot* itself emerged from multiple contexts of large-scale erasure. In his Afterword to 2010's *Beckett and Ireland*, Gibson argues that the specific historical and political factors that inform *Waiting for Godot* itself include Beckett's adopted homeland of France, specifically during the post-Vichy period:

> Beckett wrote the play in late 1948 and early 1949; that is, in a climate of pompous Gaullist triumphalism…France was determined to purge itself brusquely of shame, thereby swiftly achieving historical amnesia. Gaullists were busily rewriting contemporary history, the emphasis falling on the supposed heroic character of the majority under Vichy. The official mythology stated that most Frenchmen and women had not just waited for Godot. They had actively liberated themselves. (Gibson, 2010, p. 188)

It was this revisionist sense of Gaullist triumphalism that celebrated some fictional, mass-populist anti-Vichy rebellion – so discordant with Beckett's own experience with a chronically undermanned French Resistance (per numerous sources, less than 1% of the French population actually participated), whose scant members were always hiding in ditches and wearing ill-fitting boots, subsisting on squalid root vegetables, delivering meaningless encoded messages and perpetually waiting for nothing to happen – that Beckett wishes to disabuse in *Godot*, according to Gibson. In this reading, the Fourth Republic had attempted to erase the memory of France's shame during WWII; Beckett in turn had parodied that erasure in *Godot* by never referencing the war directly, even as its most mundane details constantly allude to it.

Yet Gibson also notes how many of these same elements of Vichy France have doubled as symbols of Irish history; he argues, for example, not only "the importance of carrots and turnips in […] in wartime France, where root vegetables often became the staple diet", but also how "from the Famine to the early twentieth century, the turnip was Ireland's second crop" (Gibson, 2010, p. 190). The turnips serve as a double-signifier for both wartime France and post-Famine Ireland. For that matter, the fact that the rural Irish town of Connemara is thrice name-checked by Lucky in his well-known Act I monologue would likewise indicate that Beckett is suggesting a post-Famine Irish countryside as much as a Vichy French one. From the carrots and turnips in their pockets, to the song Vladimir sings at the start of Act II about a dog getting beaten to death for stealing a crust of bread, to the way he angrily demands of the message-boy sent by Godot, "Does he give you enough to eat?" (Beckett, 42), Famine imagery permeates the play. Terry Eagleton has

likewise argued that the "starved, stagnant landscapes of [Beckett's] work…are also a subliminal memory of famished Ireland, with its threadbare, monotonous colonial culture and its disaffected masses waiting listlessly on a Messianic deliverance that never comes" (Eagleton, 2009). Seán Kennedy in turn also argues that *Godot* not only re-enacts the Famine landscape, but also its attempted erasure from public memory by those imperialists in power: "We must speak here of famine memory as opposed to any historical account of the Famine because what is at stake is not history but rather the myriad ways in which different classes and individuals in Ireland remembered (or chose to forget) the Famine as a function of their political and social ambitions"; Kennedy specifically singles out how "many of those affiliated with the Protestant Ascendancy tended to repress the event, enabling them to maintain a more benevolent view of their role in the lives of the Irish peasantry" (Kennedy, 2016, p. 110). In this reading, Beckett refuses to allow his fellow members of the Protestant Ascendancy to erase or white-wash their role in facilitating the genocide of the Irish Catholic peasantry during the Famine, nor co-opt that catastrophe for their own purposes – just as he simultaneously refuses to allow his fellow French compatriots to get too self-congratulatory during the immediate post-war period. Yet whether we are speaking here of post-Vichy France or post-Famine Ireland, in either case, Beckett is adamant in calling out the wilful erasure and revisionism of recent historical events by statist interests. Indeed, *Waiting for Godot* has resonated with audiences in such diverse locales as Palestine and Israel, Sarajevo, Prague and New Orleans precisely because it also reflects these peoples' own brutal experiences with mass-disappearance, governmental revisionism, and erasure.

Waiting for Godot not only sympathizes with the silenced and disappeared heavily, but also implies that this disappearance is not complete, that in fact the dead still haunt us and disrupt us, not only in spite of but because of all our collective attempts to erase and ignore them. Such in fact is a central theme of the play, wherein the erased dead are never seen but everywhere felt on the stage. As Joseph Roach bluntly argues, "The natural-historical landscape of *Godot* is desolate but not empty. In addition to a tree with five leaves and a handful of the living [...] it is thickly populated by disembodied voices. In other words, it is haunted" (Roach, 2002, p. 85), and we in turn as viewers and readers are in turn haunted as well. Roach cites for example the following significant exchange between Vladimir and Estragon in Act II:

Estragon: All the dead voices.

Vladimir: They make a noise like wings.

Estragon: Like leaves.

Vladimir: Like sand.

Estragon: Like leaves.

Silence.

Vladimir: They all speak at once.

Estragon: Each one to itself.

Silence.

Vladimir: Rather they whisper.

Estragon: They rustle.

Vladimir: They murmur.

Estragon: They rustle.

Silence.

Vladimir: What do they say?

Estragon: They talk about their lives.

Vladimir: To have lived is not enough for them.

Estragon: They have to talk about it.

Vladimir: To be dead is not enough for them.

Estragon: It is not enough.

Silence.

Vladimir: They make a noise like feathers.

Estragon: Like leaves.

Vladimir: Like ashes.

Estragon: Like leaves. (Beckett 40)

Here, the empty stage of *Godot* is not empty but full: "They all speak at once," "They make a noise," they "murmur," "rustle" and "They talk about their lives". As Roach wrote of the city of Connemara's role in *Waiting for Godot*: "Like the 'abode of stones' of which Lucky speaks in his thrice-repeated naming of Connemara [...] rural Ireland is haunted by dead voices" (Roach, 2002). Though these dead are not visible on the stage nor to the audience, their influence is everywhere felt: "Where are all these corpses from?" asks Vladimir of the empty stage, to which Estragon responds cryptically, "These skeletons" (Beckett 54). The sheer fact that these dead have been literally erased from the stage only makes them all the more present, such that Vladimir can at one

point exclaim "A charnel-house! A charnel-house!" (Beckett 55), as though the stage itself were a place piled with human skeletons – and charnel houses (which sprung everywhere across Ireland during the Famine) are always associated with violent deaths specifically. Again, Beckett re-enacts (perhaps even parodies) the tendency of both the British Empire and the complicit Protestant Ascendancy to ignore, erase or downplay the Famine by never showing the dead on stage explicitly, even as he continually calls attention to their continued presence and persistence. In fact, Beckett implicitly indicates that this failure to acknowledge the active presence of the dead may be the *source* of these characters' paralysis and immobility.

Certainly, the themes of disappearance, revisionism and erasure in *Waiting for Godot* feel relevant yet again amidst the current aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the time of this writing, the mask mandates, school-closures, social-distancing protocols, and vaccination campaigns have already receded into a sort of mass-amnesia, as though none of it had ever happened, or even had much consequence. Even among those who most diligently followed public health safety protocols at the virus's height, significant portions of the US population have regressed to pre-pandemic behaviours – unconsciously, almost instinctively. Again, unlike 9/11 (which still receives regular mass-memorializations over two decades later) there have been no large-scale attempts to memorialize, mourn, or "never forget" the literal-million dead Americans that the pandemic left in its wake. Partly this is because, of course, the COVID-19 pandemic was simply never as cinematic nor visual a spectacle as 9/11 (for likely the same reason the Spanish Flu of 1918 evaporated from both public and critical consciousness in contrast to the Great War, despite the pandemic far eclipsing the war in total mortality). Yet, more damningly, it is also obvious that the million that were left dead by COVID could never be exploited to meet the insatiable demands of the military-industrial complex and the larger economy like the victims of 9/11 could be. The Twin Towers could be used to justify the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and provide a boost to a war-time economy; whereas the constant complaint of the pandemic lockdowns was of their *negative* impact on the economy. Hence their prompt erasure.

As Idelbar Avelar writes in *The Untimely Present: Postdictatorial Latin American Fiction and the Task of Mourning*, "[m]arket logic absorbs even the documentation of disappearances and tortures as yet another piece of the past for sale" (Avelar, 1999, p. 22). As he argues it, the past in our modern economies – even our most atrocious past – must either consent to becoming but another product for sale, or be erased entirely from memory to make way for what will. Now,

Avelar here writes primarily about the complicity of the post-dictatorial republics in South America's southern cone – Chile, Argentina and Brazil – in perpetuating the neo-liberalizing projects forcibly imposed by their late-20th-century dictatorships. Nevertheless, his model can also be effectively applied to post-pandemic America, wherein our own neo-liberal economic order has privileged the maximization of economic productivity above all other human considerations – and markedly, this trend was predominant even in the earliest days of the pandemic, when there was a push from the White House to "re-open the economy" by the Easter 2020 shopping season.

Notably, the majority of those most bullish for a quick return to economic "normalcy" did not for the most part deny the coronavirus's rates of infection or lethality *per se* (despite the quick proliferation of conspiracy theories to the contrary), but only argued that a certain percentage of mortality in the general population – the oft-repeated "2 or 3 percent," or what would have added up to six to nine million American deaths suddenly thrown at once upon an already-overburdened healthcare system – was an acceptable trade-off for sustained economic growth (this was also, notably, the exact same pernicious logic deployed by the UK Parliament during the Irish Potato Famine – that a certain percentage of the Irish population could be sacrificed to preserve "free market" principles while the bumper crops were shipped to Great Britain under armed guard). As Texas Lt. Governor Dan Patrick blandly quipped in April of that year, "There are more important things than living" (Stieb, 2020). The obvious rejoinder – that there are not – had apparently not occurred to him; for him and tens of millions more like him, the demands of economic productivity answered all concerns, and covered all sins. A proportion of all human lives had been deemed to be that Dickensian "surplus population", extraneous and expendable, a floating population of the walking dead whose erasure could easily be justified in the all-important interests of maximizing economic production at all costs. Hence, for example, Midwestern meat packing factories that suffered COVID-19 outbreaks early in the pandemic were quickly declared "essential infrastructure", all without any corresponding assurance that the infected low-wage workers therein would be provided with adequate protections or sufficient hazard wages; and when the infections and deaths inevitably occurred at those facilities, the White House notably responded by simply ceasing all reportage of the same altogether.

Nor were these attitudes limited to official government policy, as large swaths of the US population began notoriously flouting mask mandates and social-distancing policy in public areas, and resisting vaccination once the COVID-19 vaccine became available; they, too, had determined

that a certain percentage of the population was expendable in the cause of maintaining economic productivity. Less than two decades earlier, Cameroonian philosopher Achilles Mbembe had proposed the idea of the Necropolis, in order to describe those war-torn border regions in sub-Saharan Africa that had produced "new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead" (40); yet in the early 2020s, it was the supposedly developed and industrialized United States that operated openly like a Necropolis, consigning similarly vast populations to a living death. Amidst the triumphalism of the post-pandemic "return to normalcy," the million dead have been erased, forgotten, trivialized, repressed.

Yet as the continuing global supply chain crisis and record inflation – exacerbated by the millions dead and tens of millions stricken with long COVID – that has occurred in the aftermath of the pandemic has again demonstrated, just because the dead have been erased, that by no means signifies that they are silent. One is not required to believe in the supernatural to see how these vast populations of the dead continue to wreak their havoc upon us, no matter how stridently we try to ignore them or silence them or segregate them away into a discrete and forgotten past. Like Vladimir and Estragon, we have short memories and a lost sense of time (recall how neither Estragon nor Vladimir can remember how much time has passed at the beginning of Act II). We, too, have been paralysed into economic immobility, due to our large-scale inability to properly acknowledge, grieve, mourn or honour the dead among us.

It is here that it might be useful to place Beckett in conversation with his mid-century trans-Atlantic peer, the acclaimed Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes, who in 1962 also produced a widely circulated text on how eliding the memory of the dead only magnifies their influence.

***Aura*/ahora**

As noted earlier, Fuentes, like Beckett, was a major mid-century writer who emerged in the aftermath of a major nationalistic upheaval – Mexico's 1910 Revolution to overthrow the Porfirio Díaz dictatorship (which even occurred contemporaneously with the 1916 Easter Rising in Ireland) – in order to splash cold water on the triumphalism of the post-revolutionary generation. In the emergent national narrative, the 1910 Revolution had been a completed success, the ruling PRI party were the natural heirs of that revolutionary legacy, and there had been a clean break with the past. To paraphrase Gibson, Fuentes came of age "in a climate of pompous [PRI-party]

triumphalism…[Mexico] was determined to purge itself brusquely of shame, thereby swiftly achieving historical amnesia. [The PRI party] were busily rewriting contemporary history, the emphasis falling on the supposed heroic character of the majority under [Porfírio].” Fuentes, however, saw Mexico’s post-revolutionary government as complicit in the same patterns of colonization, exploitation and betrayals to foreign interests as gave rise to the 1910 Revolution in the first place. He had already claimed as much explicitly in his novel *The Death of Artemio Cruz* (released the same year as *Aura*) wherein an ageing Mexican businessman and 1910 revolutionary veteran lies on his deathbed and reflects on the wreck of his life, how he had betrayed not only his wife and family, but also his country and his revolutionary principles, by doing business with the same exploitative US financial interests that the revolution had purportedly been waged to overthrow in the first place. Fuentes presented Artemio Cruz as representative of the larger Mexican business class that had tacitly continued the exploitative practices of the *Porfiriato*, perpetuating these same historical patterns despite all official attempts to narrativize them as dead and buried.

Fuentes allegorizes these repeating historical patterns in his 1962 Gothic novella *Aura*. The story concerns a young scholar in 1961 Mexico City named Felipe Montero, who responds to a newspaper ad that appears custom written for him alone: “It seems to be addressed to you and nobody else” (3).[i] For the princely sum of 4,000 pesos, a centenarian widow named Consuelo Llorente (109 years old in 1961) seeks a French-fluent historian to edit the memoirs of her late husband General Llorente, a Mexican commander for Napoleon III during the French Intervention of 1861-1867. She had met the General in 1867 when she was 15 and he 47; he preceded her in death by some 59 years in 1902 (right in the midst of the Porfírio Díaz dictatorship). Responding to the ad, Felipe visits Consuelo’s apartment at “the most famous address in Latin American literature, Donceles 815” (Gutiérrez Mouat, 2004, p. 298), where he finds that, “Up there, everything is the same as it was”[ii] – literally, in the original Spanish, ‘there nothing changes’ (9). To paraphrase Faulkner, here the past is not dead, it’s not even past.

Felipe is offered the position, but only on the peculiar condition that he must reside in Consuelo’s apartment for the duration of the project. Desperate for cash to help fund his own scholarly projects on the early Spanish *Conquista* of the Americas, Felipe agrees. Yet as he lives and works there in the ensuing days, he begins to fall in love with Consuelo’s live-in niece, the stunningly beautiful Aura. He soon entertains fantasies of gallantly liberating Aura from what he

perceives to be Consuelo's domestic tyranny. However, the longer he lives and works at Consuelo's home, the more Felipe cannot help but note how much Aura copies and mimes all of her aunt's physical movements, often move for move. In one key scene, the protagonist watches as Aura skins a dead goat for dinner in one room, then races over to Consuelo's bedroom to behold her mimicking these same moves in the air; to his dawning horror, he comes to realize that Aura is not the niece of Consuelo, but a supernatural manifestation of her younger self.

Nor is it a coincidence that Aura is skinning a goat in particular; the Spanish word for goat is 'cabra', which is also the root of that premier Spanish insult *cabrón*, or 'big goat', with its heavy connotations of horns, cuckoldry, and therefore betrayal. This implication of treachery is relevant because the General had committed high treason in wilfully collaborating with the French dictatorship against the democratically elected Mexican government. Indeed, the fantastic twist in the novella's climax is revealed to be that, not only is Aura the magical apparition of the old widow's younger self, but that Felipe himself is the unwitting reincarnation of the late General Llorente. The newspaper ad that lured him in really *was* written for no one else but him; the 4,000 pesos was but a ploy to draw Felipe over, so that she could revive in person the long-dormant memories of her dead husband reincarnate. That is, Felipe learns that he is the physical embodiment of the betrayal of Mexico to European imperial interests by a traitorous upper-class – as well as of all the other national betrayals that followed in the war's wake. As has been well-documented by numerous historians, the chaos that followed the French Intervention also helped give rise to the military dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz. Even as the 1910 Revolution has been repeatedly celebrated and mythologized in official government literature, its ideals were, according to Fuentes, repeatedly betrayed by the rising Mexican business class, all while the calamities that gave rise to the Revolution have been segregated out as distinct, completed, separated from, and ultimately irrelevant to their present historical moment. What Fuentes has attempted in *Aura*, then, is to render explicit how, despite their erasure from popular and personal memory, the influence and legacy of the dead – particularly of all these various dead invaders, colonizers, traitors and dictators – still persist, still influence national patterns and policies, and still haunt Mexico's present.

General Llorente is a fitting representation of these betrayals; he spent "his childhood on a hacienda in Oaxaca"[iii] – a son of those same wealthy and landed *hacendados* who sold out the nation to Porfirio Díaz – and "his military studies in France, his friendship with the duc de Morny

and the intimates of Napoleon III, his return to Mexico on the staff of Maximilian…the defeat in 1867, his exile in France" (Fuentes 57),[iv] all of which details how willingly he fought on the side of the European invaders in both the lead-up to and the duration of the French Intervention. In this context, it is not incidental that Felipe's scholarly ambition is to write a "great, inclusive work on the Spanish discoveries and conquest of the New World. A work that sums up all the scattered chronicles, makes them intelligible, and discovers the resemblances among all the undertakings and adventures of Spain's Golden Age, and all the human prototypes and major accomplishment of the Renaissance" (Fuentes 65).[v] The uncritically laudatory language Felipe here uses to describe the era of the *Conquista* – "Golden Age", "major accomplishments", "adventures", even still referring to these already-populated continents as the "New World" – indicates that Felipe was already intellectually complicit (even if only at an unconscious level) with the *Conquista* and all its attendant atrocities upon the native peoples of Mexico. He had been re-enacting these same colonialist patterns of European invasion in his own scholarship, before doing so literally as the unwitting reincarnation of General Llorente. Felipe had called his scholarly work "postponed and almost forgotten" (65),[vi] but the text seems to imply that maybe it *should* have been forgotten – and that his general failure to cease from lionizing the *Conquista* ensures that its effects will continue to retraumatize modern Mexico generally, just as General Llorente re-inhabits him personally.

Mexico overall, Fuentes implies, far from escaping these pre-revolutionary patterns, is still re-enacting them. Recall also how when Felipe first observes Aura's reenactment of Consuelo, he notes that she was "[s]o enslaved that she imitated every gesture of the Señora, as if she were permitted to do only what the Señora did" (Fuentes 73).[vii] Tacitly, that is all the rest of us are permitted to do as well in this demonic ceremony: imitate the gestures of our predecessors, and reinforce their patterns of colonialism and oppression. Moreover, Fuentes seems to indicate that the marriage between Mexico and foreign imperialism is a sterile, impotent, childless one, much like General Llorente's and Consuelo's: "I know why you weep at time, Consuelo. I have not been able to give you children" (131),[viii] the General writes in his memoirs. Yet though sterile, their relationship nevertheless remains a seductive fantasy, and therefore keeps on repeating and perpetuating itself: "you're seeking your other half, that the sterile conception last night engendered your own double" (117)[ix] reads the text, wherein the sex act results not in reproduction of offspring but solely of one's self. The fundamental selfishness of this traitorous union is further

underscored by Consuelo's own sadism: the General himself records in his memoirs how "One day he found her torturing a cat" (85)[x] – which torture is apparently still ongoing, as Felipe early on in the text gains a glimpse of "five, six, seven cats—you can't count them, can't hold yourself up there for more than a second—are all twined together, all writhing in flames and giving off a dense smoke that reeks of burnt fur" (59)[xi] in the gardens. Even the traitorous General remarks sorrowfully of his wife in his memoirs that "the devil was an angel once" (Fuentes 135).[xii] These devilish tendencies in turn explain the blasphemous icons on the altar Felipe first spies in Consuelo's dimly lit room:

> Christ, the Virgin, St. Sebastian, St. Lucia, the Archangel Michael, and the grinning demons in an old print, the only happy figures in that iconography of sorrow and wrath, happy because they're jabbing their pitchforks into the flesh of the damned, pouring cauldrons of boiling water on them, violating the women, getting drunk, enjoying all the liberties forbidden to the saints. (Fuentes 47)[xiii]

That is, Consuelo does not just passively contemplate the tortures of the damned, but delights in participating with the same. Damnation, after all, literally means non-progression, which is all that this sterile, childless, rape-filled union purports for the never-ending Llorente marriage – as well as for all of Mexico, of which Llorente and Consuelo are a metonym. The novella overall becomes a metaphor for how the legacy of the dead continues to possess and determine modern Mexico, no matter how much that atrocious historical memory has been repressed or forgotten.

It is perhaps more than a coincidence that "Aura" in Spanish also sounds phonetically similar to "ahora" ('now', in English), emphasizing the temporal collapse between past and present on parade in this text, as the betrayals of a century ago continue to wield their influence over the present. The text informs Felipe:

> …as if you were afraid that some invisible hand had ripped off the mask you've been wearing…the cardboard features that hid your true face, your real appearance, the appearance you once had but then forgot. You bury your face in the pillow, trying to keep the wind of the past from tearing away your own features, because you don't want to lose them. (Fuentes 137-139)[xiv]

Felipe buries his face in his pillow to prevent "the wind of the past" from tearing away his features, but the wind of the past tears them away all the same, revealing that he is in fact still the sum of the past – that the past is not even past – that the influence and trauma of history is still very much

alive, still with him, still inscribed in him, still *is* him. The entire novella is narrated in the second person, implicating the reader and indicating that we, like Felipe, continue to be imprinted with the trauma of that particular European invasion, whose influence is still as alive as it ever was. "You'll learn to write in my husband's own style" (Fuentes 21),[xv] Consuelo tells Felipe upon their initial interview, with the hidden insinuation being that not only will Felipe replicate the sins of the General, but so will the reader – because we, too, are the General; his influence still exerts itself upon us. "*Your scream is an echo of Aura's*" (Fuentes 95; italics in original),[xvi] the text informs us, "your nightmare, and finally identify your sleep-walking movements with those of Aura and the old lady" (99),[xvii] as not just Felipe but the reader's self becomes absorbed into the sadistic repetitions of Consuelo. In Fuentes's text, the dead are not only not silent, but the very act of pretending that they no longer exist or exert influence only makes them all the more powerful and omnipresent. All attempts to talk over them as though they are not there are futile. At one point in the text, Felipe attempts to wipe his memory clean of the supernatural horrors he has witnessed by taking a bath, "letting yourself relax into forgetfulness" (Fuentes, 117),[xviii] save that forgetfulness was entirely the initial problem – it was his own failure to recognize his own complicities and re-inscriptions of the *Conquista*, and hence his innate complicity with the erasure of indigenous peoples, that rendered him so susceptible to being lured by Consuelo, seduced by Aura, and ultimately drawn back into these sterile patterns in the first place.

Better if he had heeded his own advice to Aura before he realized her apparitional nature: "She's trying to bury you alive. You've got to be reborn, Aura",[xix] Felipe declares to her as he tries to coax her to escape Consuelo alongside him. She in turn rejoins, "You have to die before you can be reborn" (Fuentes 123),[xx] but then, the entire problem is that they haven't done that either! Consuelo refuses to die, and moreover prevents the memory of General Llorente from dying as well via her memoir project. Overall, if there is any sort of lesson or warning to be gleaned from *Aura*, it is to properly bury the dead; refusing to neither let them die nor acknowledge their passing is what allows them to continue to haunt us. "She'll come back, Felipe. We'll bring her back together. Let me recover my strength and I'll bring her back…" (Fuentes 145)[xxi] reads the final line of the novella, as Consuelo clearly states her intention to continue to not let the dead finally die – nor even allow them to be fully reborn – in an endless cycle or sterility and monstrously prolonged longevity.

At their first meeting, Consuelo had told Felipe that "This house is full of memories for us. They won't take me out of here till I'm dead!" (Fuentes 51),[xxii] but not only does she have no intention of permanently dying, but implicitly, her legacy of sadism and treachery will not die, either. Felipe had earlier told himself that "General Llorente's French doesn't have the merits his wife attributed to it. You tell yourself you can make considerable improvements in the style" (Fuentes 55),[xxiii] before he instead succumbs to Llorente's style entirely, assuming his reincarnate identity; that is, he will make no improvements after all – not on his style, not on himself, not on Mexico overall. The General's lack of merits extends far beyond his French, but into his legacy of treachery and oppression as well – and as Fuentes's second-person narration reminds us, that legacy also extends to "you", the reader, who is likewise implicated and determined by these same historical patterns; you too are haunted by these same dead; you too are also possessed by General Llorente and all the other traitors and oppressors that came before him.

That is, General Llorente is a contagion – and the more this contagion is ignored, the more virulently it spreads. Those of us who still try to remember the COVID-19 pandemic will remember how those peoples and regions of the country that most strenuously denied either the existence or the severity of the virus are the ones that spread it the quickest, as well as succumbed to it the most frequently. The anti-public-health conspiracy theories reproduced themselves as virulently as the virus itself did, and contributed to its mortality rates. What is more, these anti-maskers were unwittingly repeating the well-documented rhetoric and behaviours of the anti-maskers during the Spanish Flu a century earlier; like Felipe, they have unknowingly re-enacted these same historical patterns from a plague that had remained long erased and forgotten. And just as with General Llortente, it was specifically a strain of oppression and exploitation that was here being re-produced – for it was, as ever, the weakest, the poorest, the sickest, the most vulnerable and most marginalized who were most endangered by the actions of these COVID deniers. They, too, have practised a species of innate sadism, cruelty and national betrayal, one that is inherently sterile in nature. And as has oft been noted, in this they have been but repeating the historical patterns of America in its treatment of the marginalized dating back to its earliest colonization, from the small pox blankets to the reservations.

Cyclical history

Beckett, too, is concerned with the endless repetitions of history. Indeed, both *Godot* and *Aura* insist upon a conception of a cyclical history that continually returns the dead – that is, repressed history – back to the stage, despite (or even because of) all attempts to ignore, trivialize, appropriate, exploit, downplay and/or plaster over the same. Such a movement is even literalized into the stage-directions of *Godot* itself, according to Ruby Cohn: "Although the moon is fully circular at the close of each act of Waiting for Godot, its arc of rise is not a complete circle. Similarly, Didi and Gogo move in semi-circles on stage, whereas Pozzo and Lucky enter on stage left and leave on stage right in each act, thus implying an offstage circle" (Cohn, 1993, p. 4). Such is also the cyclical history in *Aura*, as the novella ends with Consuelo and Felipe carnally repeating their sterile love affair in what must ultimately result in an endless series of rebirths and reincarnations into the foreseeable future.

This sterility is also oft cited by critics as a core theme in *Waiting for Godot*. Jim Hansen, for example, notes that the very lack of women in Godot is also a sign of the stagnation and sterility of not only the remaining Protestant Ascendancy, but also of the predominantly-Catholic Irish Free State itself (that Beckett was also no fan of), which in its earliest iterations was possessed of a nostalgia for some sort of lost past in need of a Celtic Revival: "Reproduction, in Beckett's oeuvre, becomes the very symbol of stagnation and sterility. One cannot help but to be reminded here of Pozzo's claim in Waiting for Godot, 'They give birth astride a grace'" (Hansen, 2010, p. 144). Hansen goes on to also claim that: "In the aesthetic logic of Beckett's critique, the Irish Free State's desire to isolate the mind and purify the body appears as a feeble attempt to reassert precisely that masculine autonomy that had failed in the first place" (Hansen, 2010, p. 150). This endless rehashing of purportedly ancient patterns is what, for Hansen, explains the paralysed status of the ever-immobile Vladimir and Estragon:

> The desire for a recognizable pattern drives Beckett's characters […] In Beckett, we often find characters who live out established narrative patterns only to discover that their lives are violated by the patterns themselves. […] like Vladimir and Estragon in Waiting for Godot, chooses to go through the motions of following the pre-established pattern. In Beckett's world, the nostalgia for the formal pattern itself signifies an absolute failure to magnify a world that might work in any other way. (Hansen, 2010, p. 148)

Just as General Llorente and Consuelo are metonymic for Mexico, so are Vladimir and Estragon metonymic for Ireland and France, and towards the same end: they are continually re-enacting pre-established patterns that result in only their continued sterility and paralysis.

Yet it may also be possible to read the cyclical mode of both texts as reconstructive, even reconstitutive; as Stephen Buttes has argued, "[c]ritics have long drawn attention to the fact that the appearance of these doubles at Donceles 815 makes visible to the reader what has been 'buried' or made invisible by the new residential and commercial developments that were built 'alrededor de la casa' during the boom years of the 'Mexican Miracle' […] Yet what remains less clear is what precisely should emerge with General Llórente and Aura" (Buttes, 2017, p. 301). For that matter, similar statements have also been said of *Waiting for Godot*: "The scholar Porter Abbott sports the terms of postmodern criticism in order to rescue Beckett for late modernism: 'Beckett's method of recollection by distortion, in its refinement of modernist opposition, is the continual and vigorous reconstruction of tropological emptiness' […] Not, I stress, deconstruction, but *reconstruction*" (Cohn, 1993, p. 7; emphasis added). What is being reconstructed is of course not at all clear; the ghosts remain stubbornly unintelligible. But then, as McCormack has argued, "*Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* exemplify a dictum of Adorno's according to which 'art maintains its integrity only by refusing to go along with communication'" (McCormack, 1986, p. 426). By refusing to communicate clearly, the ghosts thereby refuse to participate with empire on its own discursive terms; in this manner, the dead help to commandeer a space wherein their respective nations can at last fulfil the arrested promises of their respective revolutions, to finally resist the Anglo-centric neo-colonial economic systems that reconstituted themselves upon both Ireland *and* Mexico post-revolution.

"Everything's dead but the tree" (83), says Vladimir at one point, but again, that by no means indicates that the dead are silent. Indeed, their very lack of intelligibility is a form of grievance; as John Paul Riquelme has argued, "Beckett's style for incarnating his postmodern version of the undead, in which the boundary between the real and its opposite, between the living and the dead, between the actual and the imagined, becomes obscured, poses a challenge for conceptions of language that insist on referential, determinate meanings" (Riquelme, 2000, p. 602). Determinate meanings are of course a way of imposing order, defining boundaries – a critique that Beckett had against the conservative Dublin regime as much as he did against the British Empire; what Beckett's version of the undead accomplish, then, is to undermine the capacity of hegemony,

empire, and statist power altogether to define and control. Their very "rustlings" and "murmurings" help them to slip away, unnoticed and undefined, unseen yet still very much present. Though less overt than *Aura*, *Godot* is nonetheless still engaged in the same project of calling attention to an erased and violent history; watching the actors on stage, the audience also becomes aware of the ghosts surrounding, influencing and possessing them – that they are indeed, like Felipe, among those very ghosts and skeletons that Estragon and Vladimir are hearing speak. We are all the dead reincarnate, just as we are all General Llorente.

A Brief Coda on *One Hundred Years of Solitude*

In chapter 15 of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Gabriel García Márquez narrates a fictionalized account of the real-life Banana Massacre of 1928, wherein anywhere between 47 and 2,000 striking banana-plantation workers in Ciénaga, Colombia, were machine-gunned down by the Colombian army at the behest of the United Fruit Company and the US State Department. In García Márquez's re-telling of the atrocity, a full 3,000 striking banana workers are massacred in the fictional town of Macondo, their corpses loaded up onto the trains like banana stalks themselves, then shipped off to be dumped into the sea. One of the sole survivors of the massacre, José Arcadio Segundo, tries to inform the rest of Macondo of what has happened, only to find that not only has the government officially denied that anything of the sort has happened, but that even the townsfolk themselves have been afflicted by a sort of collective amnesia of the event, such that he is treated as only a raving, senile old man every time he recounts the massacre for the rest of his life. Once again – as we have recently witnessed happen post-pandemic here in the United States – a certain proportion of the population has been designated as surplus population that could be sacrificed and erased in order to satisfy the demands of maximizing economic productivity.

Yet as we have also discussed with *Waiting for Godot* and *Aura*, this erasure and wilful forgetting results in a curse: first, Macondo is hit with a rain storm that lasts "four years, eleven months, and two days" (315), which is in turn followed by a withering drought. The deluge not only devastates the town, but begins its permanent decline; as the American fruit companies abandon it, their technology regresses to pre-modern conditions, their homes fall into disrepair, and "Macondo [is] forgotten even by the birds" (404), before being apocalyptically destroyed for good by a storm in the final chapter. Like the landscape of *Waiting for Godot* and the marriage of Consuelo and General Llorente, Macondo has been rendered a sterile wasteland by its wilful

erasure and forgetting of the massacred dead. These are all of course examples of fiction, but as symbols for what happens to a society that erases its dead from memory, they are effective reminders of how there is always a curse to be suffered – a curse we are currently living through now in our own "post"-pandemic moment.

Endnotes:

[i] "Parece dirigido a ti, a nadie más" (2)
[ii] "allí nada cambia"
[iii] "la infancia en una hacienda oaxaqueña"
[iv] "los estudios militares en Francia, la Amistad con el Duque de Morny, con el circulo intimo de Napoleón III, el regreso a México en el estado mauor de Maximiliano…el Cerro de Campanas, el exilio en París" (56)
[v] "gran obra de conjunto sobre los descubtrimientos y conquistas españoles en América. Una obra que resuma todas las crónicas dispersas, las hagas inteligibles, encuentre las correspondencias entre todas las empresas y aventuras del siglo de oro, entre los prototipos humanos y el hecho mayor del Renacimiento" (64).
[vi] "aplazada, casi olvidada" (64)
[vii] "prisionero al grado de imitar todos los movimientos de la señora Consuelo, como si sólo lo que hiciera la vieja le fuse permitido a la joven" (72)
[viii] "Sé por qué lloras a veces, Consuelo. No te he he podido dar hijos" (130)
[ix] "que buscas tu otra mitad, que la concepción estéril de la noche pasada engendró tu propio doble" (116)
[x] "Un día la encontró…martirizando a un gato" (84)
[xi] "cinco, seis, siete gatos—no puedes contarlos: no puedes sostenerte allí más de un Segundo—encadenados unos con otros, se revuelcan envueltos en fuego, desprenden un humo opaco, un olor de pelambre incendiada" (58)
[xii] "también el demonion fue un ángel, antes" (132)
[xiii] Cristo, María, San Sebastián, Santa Lucia, el Arcángel Miguel, los demonios sonrisentes, los únicos sonrientes en esta iconografía del dolor y la cólera: sonrientes porque, en el viejo grabado iluminado por las veladores, ensartan los tridents en la piel de los condenados, les vacían calderones de agua hirviente, violan a las mujeres, se embriagan, gozan de la libertad vedada a los santos. (46)
[xiv] …como si temieras que una mano invisible te hubiese arrancado la mascara que has llevado…esas facciones que son tuyas, que quieres para ti. Permaneces con la cara hundida tu verdadera faz, tu rostro antiguo, el que tuvistes antes y habías olvidado. Escondes la cara en la almohada, tratando de impeder que el aire te arranque las facciones que son tuyas, que quieres para ti. (136-138)
[xv] "Usted aprenderá a redactor en el estilo de mi esposo" (20)
[xvi] "*tu grito es el eco del grito de Aura*" (94)
[xvii] "en tu pesadilla, identificado, al fin, tus movimientos de sonáambulo con los de Aura, con los de la anciana" (98)
[xviii] "dejarte ir, no pensar más" (116)

[xix] "Trata de enterrarte en vida. Tienes que renacer, Aura"
[xx] "Hay que morir antes de renacer" (122)
[xxi] "Volverá, Felipe, la traeremos juntos. Deja que recupere fuerzas y la hare regresar…" (144)
[xxii] "Esta casa está llena de recuerdos para nosotras. Sólo muerta me sacarán de aquí" (50)
[xxiii] "El francés del general Llorente no goza de las excelencias que su mujer le habrá atribuido. Te dices que tú puedes mejorar considerablemente el estilo" (54)

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