

## ‘Queer Villainy’: Carmen Maria Machado’s *In the Dream House* as Testimony to Lesbian Abuse and Love

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### ABSTRACT

Domestic violence and abuse (DVA) are popularly believed to be the exclusive preserve of the heterosexual population. This assumption underpins the fact that policy and interventions aimed at reducing DVA often focus on remediating men’s behaviour so that they become less violent towards women. Such views exclude the fact that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBTQ) people also experience DVA. This lack of knowledge is partly due to the lack of legitimacy afforded to non-heterosexual relationships. This extends to literary-cultural representations, and there is a particular dearth of texts representing lesbian partnerships. Carmen Maria Machado’s memoir, *In the Dream House* (2019), fills a gap in literary representations of lesbian relationships, as well as in representations of DVA between same-sex partners. In this article, we read the work as literary scholars, but we do not interpret it as a hermetically sealed work of art with no reference to the world. Instead, we argue that it makes an important contribution, in literary form, to the emerging scholarship on DVA amongst LGBTQ people. We explore how its literary strategies create rich connections with popular culture and give it a place in the queer archive.

**Keywords:** Carmen Maria Machado, *In the Dream House*, lesbian interpersonal abuse, lesbian writing, DVA

### INTRODUCTION

While DVA amongst cisgendered heterosexual people has long been studied, their occurrence amongst LGBTQ people has only been recognised comparatively recently. Hester, Donovan and Fahmy trace the emergence of this body of scholarship, noting that DVA amongst lesbians first became visible in the 1980s, before DVA amongst gay, bisexual and/or transgender people. At the same time, there was a counter-move among feminists to deny and/or suppress the knowledge that lesbians were engaged in DVA since this would counter the long-held belief that lesbian intimate partner relationships are egalitarian and utopian, as well as the idea that women are naturally less violent than men. Catherine Donovan and Rebecca Barnes’s article, ‘Help-seeking among lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender victims/survivors of domestic violence and abuse’, lists a number of factors that militate against LGBTQ people seeking help when they have experienced DVA.<sup>1</sup> One notable factor is the heteronormative ‘story’. Donovan and Barnes write that ‘[the] emphasis on female victims/survivors and male perpetrators in government strategies to address DVA confirms the binaried public story that DVA is a heterosexual problem’ (2020: 557). As they assert, this unfortunately ‘invisibilises women as perpetrators and men as victims, and fuels myths that DVA between women will not be as harmful or risky as that from a man towards a woman’ (2020: 561). This notion feeds into patriarchal media images of men as violent aggressors and women as passive victims, reinforcing heteronormative concepts of gender and sexuality as binary. All these mistaken ideas clearly need to be exploded: research on DVA among LGBTQ people, while it challenges some cherished feminist ideas about lesbian existence, also challenges the binary of the strong man/weak woman. Luca Rollè, Giulia Giardina, Angela Caldarera, Eva Gerino, and Piera Brustia (among other authors) confirm that the prevalence of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) among LGBTQ people is similar to that among heterosexual people:

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<sup>1</sup> In keeping with Donovan and Barnes’s usage, this article uses ‘DVA’ to refer to acts of intimate partner violence (IPV), whether this is physical, emotional, financial or social (and we recognise the intersections of these different types of abuse).

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61.1% of bisexual women, 43.8% of lesbian women, 37.3% of bisexual men, and 26.0% of homosexual men experienced IPV during their life, while 35.0% of heterosexual women and 29.0% of heterosexual men experienced IPV.

When episodes of severe violence were considered, prevalence was similar or higher for LGB adults (bisexual women: 49.3%; lesbian women: 29.4%; homosexual men: 16.4%) compared to heterosexual adults (heterosexual women: 23.6%; heterosexual men: 13.9%). (2018: 2)

As these figures attest, DVA in the United States is, regrettably, common among LGBTQ people.

As lesbians who have both experienced psychological and emotional abuse over long periods from our same-sex partners, we have a personal interest in bringing DVA among LGBTQ people to light. *In the Dream House* has helped both of us to understand that we are not alone in having been abused by women we once loved.

In the discussion that follows, we argue that *In the Dream House* occupies a unique position in the emerging scholarship on DVA among LGBTQ people precisely because it is a *literary* account of real, historical experiences. Its portrayal of a love gone dangerously wrong draws on the affordances of literary representation such as irony, metaphor and focalisation in order to build up a work of art that holds great significance for the study of gender and love.

## **DREAM HOUSE AS NOT (A) METAPHOR**

Carmen Maria Machado's *In the Dream House: A Memoir* was published in 2019. It tells the story, set in the United States, of a lesbian couple. The partners rent a house in Bloomington, Indiana, which they call 'the Dream House' in recognition of the fact that their relationship appears initially to fulfil all their dreams. One partner is studying creative writing in Bloomington, while the other lives in Iowa and visits on occasions. The memoir narrates the gradual decay of the relationship into DVA, with the narrator's girlfriend becoming increasingly irrational and abusive. Finally, the relationship ends and the narrator is left to rebuild her life, which she achieves through a new relationship. The memoir represents a kind of catharsis for the narrator and helps her to develop a language for the growth of an abusive relationship. It also serves as a counter-example for people who might think that lesbian relationships are utopian.

Our first introduction to *In the Dream House* is the cover image of the memoir. The reader is immediately drawn to the image of a deserted and possibly haunted house. In the doorway of the house one can see the outline of a person. Moonlight illuminates the house and textures its concrete status. The house has windows, curtains, a chimney, an outside balcony or terrace and roof, and stairs that lead to its entrance. But the spectral image on the bottom floor and the hole in the top floor, through which we see the brooding face of a young woman, refer to historical and mystical aspects of the house which we do not know. The bottom floor, which lies beneath the woman's face, and its deserted status contrast with the second floor and invite the viewer to a story that has a concrete architecture.

The solid reality of the house's visual representation parallels the fact that *In the Dream House* is not fiction, but memoir, which is an account of a person's experiences in their own words. Machado re-emphasises the fact that the events she recalls really happened to her in a chapter entitled 'Dream House as Not a Metaphor':

If I cared to, I could give you [the house's] address, and you could drive there in your own car and sit in front of that Dream House and try to imagine the things that have happened inside. (2019: 9)

In keeping with Machado's insistence on the concrete nature of the Dream House, memoir differs from fiction in that it 'presents itself, and is therefore read, as a nonfictional record or re-presentation of actual humans' experience' (Couser, 2012: 15). This is complex in *In the Dream House*, where Machado employs numerous literary strategies, including non-chronological narration, the subversion of readers' expectations through irony, the inclusion of footnotes providing references, and intertextual comparisons to a variety of other literary genres. The text explicitly foregrounds its own contrivance, which could lead the reader to assume that it is based on fictional events; yet, as Machado assures us, it depicts real experiences. To this extent, it makes a significant contribution to the corpus of research on DVA among LGBTQ people.

## **DREAM HOUSE AS METAPHOR**

*In the Dream House* recounts DVA between Machado and her female partner at the time. To understand the text, it is necessary to disentangle the metaphor of the Dream House.

The prologue to the memoir and all the entries that constitute the full account of emotional abuse between two lesbians reinstate the importance of the architecture of the memoir and its constituent parts. The entry ‘*Dream House as Prologue*’ provides concrete reference to Machado’s fascination with the concept of the house and haunted houses, as well as her knowledge and interest in the conceptual architecture of the historical and contemporary queer archive.

In this entry, Machado refers to the creative scholarly work of US scholar, José Esteban Muñoz, in the disciplinary areas of cultural studies, queer studies and queer archives. Drawing from Muñoz’s theorisation of queer evidence and the archive, Machado writes:

The late queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz pointed out that ‘queerness has an especially vexed relationship to evidence. When the historian of queer experience attempts to document a queer past, there is often a gatekeeper, representing a straight present.’ What gets left behind? Gaps where people never see themselves or find information about themselves. Holes that make it impossible to give oneself a context. Crevices people fall into. Impenetrable silence. (2019: 4-5)

The retelling of queer life by a queer author in *In the Dream House* is vexed by the fact that most life stories are heteronormative. In this context, Muñoz’s theorising about ephemera as evidence (2008) can become a productive lens through which to analyse queer experiences of violence. According to Muñoz:

Ephemera, and especially the ephemeral work of structures of feeling, is firmly anchored within the social. Ephemera includes traces of lived experience and performances of lived experience, maintaining experiential politics and urgencies long after these structures of feeling have been lived. (2008:10-11)

Machado’s memoir relies on the personal, emotional, ephemeral evidence of interaction between herself and her lesbian partner. As Donovan and Barnes have demonstrated, the ‘public story’ tends to erase abuse between women. In addition, there is a belief that emotional abuse is ‘not severe’ because it does not leave marks on the body; a broken bone or a bruise is taken more seriously than sustained gaslighting, even though the bone may knit and the bruise heal before a person who has been gaslighted learns to trust again. Finally, trauma is, by its nature, mostly silent because it is experienced at a level beyond words (Caruth, 1996). Thus, even when Machado is deeply shocked by her partner’s psychological cruelty, she lives it through intense physical sensations rather than naming the emotions that arise within her and does not use the word ‘abuse’ at all until very late in the text.

The image of the ‘Dream House’ calls to mind a couple, deeply in love, moving into their first home and decorating it to their taste. In this light, there is a powerful irony in Machado’s choice of *In the Dream House* as the title of her memoir: it is a location in which more nightmares have been experienced than dreams that have come true. Still, by using the phrase ‘Dream House’, Machado links her experiences to the fantasy of living in a shared home, reminding the reader that her abuse began as a romantic ideal.

The many entries that comprise *In the Dream House* testify to the productive capacity of trauma, which US Queer Studies scholar Ann Cvetkovich also emphasises:

As a name for experiences of socially situated political violence, trauma forges overt connections between politics and emotion. Sexual acts, butch-femme discourse, queer transnational publics, incest, AIDS and AIDS activism, grassroots archives – these are some of the sites of lesbian public culture where I have not only found the traces of trauma but ways of thinking about trauma that do not pathologize it, that seize control over it from the medical experts, and that forge creative responses to it that far outstrip even the most utopian of therapeutic and political solutions. (2003: 2-3)

Cvetkovich highlights here that the lens of trauma studies may underscore features of lesbian life that have been erased from legitimate/d historical evidence. We argue that this is precisely what *In the Dream House* accomplishes. By surfacing DVA between lesbian partners, it overturns the trope of male abuser versus female victim, as well as the binary opposition of masculinity as aggressive and femininity as passive.

## LITERARY TECHNIQUES

*In the Dream House* is an unconventional, self-consciously literary memoir. One of its most prominent techniques is intertextuality. Each of its episodic entries is titled ‘*Dream House as ...*’ and these titles compare the Dream House to a wide range of literary and cultural phenomena. These include literary genres such as ‘Picaresque’ (2019: 10-11), ‘Time Travel’ (2019: 18), ‘Lesbian Cult Classic’ (2019: 20), ‘Confession’ (2019: 22), and ‘Romance Novel’ (2019: 28). There are also references to parts of literary texts and literary strategies, such as ‘Exercise in Point of View’ (2019: 14), ‘Inciting Incident’ (2019: 15), ‘Folktale Taxonomy’ (2019: 36-27) and ‘Star-Crossed Lovers’ (2019: 39).

Some of the titles allude to cultural themes, such as 'Man vs. Nature' (2019: 52), 'Lesson Learned' (2019: 70-71) and 'Creature Feature' (2019: 75). Others allude to clichés, such as 'Murder Mystery' (2019: 182), 'The Apocalypse' (2019: 186), 'The Pool of Tears' (2019: 190), 'Sodom' (2019: 195), 'Sex and Death' (2019: 216-217), 'Nightmare on Elm Street' (2019: 221) and finally 'Cliché' (2019: 233). These entries link *In the Dream House* to extreme, life-threatening exaggerated experiences, reminding the reader that abuse between people is commonplace. Also, however, these point to the extremity of the affective experiences of being abused by an intimate partner. As Machado writes in '*Dream House as Cliché*':

Your brain can't engage a cliché, not properly—it skitters right over the phrase or sentence or idea without a second thought. To describe an abusive situation is almost certainly to deploy cliché: 'If I can't have you, no one can.' 'Who will believe you?' 'It was good, then it was bad, then it was good again.' 'If I stayed, I would have died.' (2019: 233)

Clichés are statements that have been used so many times they have lost the power to communicate. Thus, any abusive relationship is difficult to narrate precisely because cultural texts such as the infamous popular film *9½ Weeks* (1986) and the *Fifty Shades* book and film trilogy (2011-2021) have fascinated audiences with their imaginative exaggeration of DVA. The comparison with cliché implies not only that the extreme cruelty of the DVA depicted in *In the Dream House* is unbelievable, but also that it is real.

The entries in *In the Dream House* are brief: one is a single sentence. Cumulatively, they relate Machado's experiences of DVA to the literary archive. Thus the memoir is not only a record of a specific individual's experience, but is linked to many different kinds of literary texts, including those that provide the foundation of a culture ('Folktale Taxonomy' (2019: 36-37); those in other languages ('Déjà Vu' (2019: 29, 98, and 181); 'L'appel du Vide' (2019, 177); and 'L'esprit de L'escalier' (2019: 236-237)); texts in science fiction, fantasy, thriller, and many other genres. In this way Machado creates a network of literary community around her experiences with the woman in the Dream House as part of coming to terms with an accumulation of subtle acts of interpersonal abuse, which have isolated her and made her feel paralysed by her own silence.

The title '*Dream House as Déjà Vu*' appears three times: early in the narrative, when Machado and her partner have just fallen in love; later on, when their relationship has deteriorated into DVA, and finally, when it is nearly over. Each entry consists of a paragraph, and they contain many of the same declarations of love, including 'she loves you', 'she wants to keep you safe' and 'you're sexy' (2019: 29, 98 and 181). There are subtle differences between the entries, though. In the second, the phrase 'she says' prefaces Machado's partner's declarations, thus distancing Machado and the reader from the ostensibly loving content of these utterances. By the time the reader reaches the third entry, we understand that Machado's partner is not only deliberately cruel, but also duplicitous: her saying something does not make it true. The shifts between these three entries signal the sinister collapse of the relationship into a cycle of psychological abuse. In this way Machado exploits the slight, unnerving differences between a loving relationship and one that is infused with subtle cruelty.

Machado uses footnotes to relate motifs in her memoir to Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* (1960) and Aarne-Thompson-Uther's *Classification of Folk Tales* (MFTD, 2023). The references to these texts connect the experiences in the text with a set of foundational cultural texts. The entry '*Dream House as Folktale Taxonomy*' ends with a riddle:

There is a Quichua riddle: El que me nombra, me rompe. Whatever names me, breaks me. The solution, of course, is 'silence.' But the truth is, anyone who knows your name can break you in two. (Machado, 2019: 37)

Nominalism is a common feature of folktales, as Machado's footnote explains: 'Guessing name of supernatural creature gives power over him' (2019: 37). It also appears in fantasy, most notably in Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Books of Earthsea*, where 'the Rule of Names' dictates: 'Magic consists in this, the true naming of a thing' (2018: 36). As a result of the vacillation between knowing and not-knowing that Caruth identifies as uniting trauma and literature, Machado cannot name DVA while she is experiencing it. An example occurs early in the relationship, when she and her partner are both marking standardised tests for Pearson.<sup>2</sup> Machado hears another woman sobbing in the toilet cubicle in the bathroom, and expresses compassion; she and the woman talk for two hours. At the end of their conversation, Machado joins her partner and is met with a stream of verbal abuse:

'You are the most inconsiderate fucking person I've ever met and how fucking dare you just walk out of the building with no explanation like that.'

<sup>2</sup> Pearson is an educational company based in the United States of America (Pearson, 2023).

[...]

She unbuckles her seat belt, and leans very close to your ear. ‘You’re not allowed to write about this,’ she says. ‘Don’t you ever write about this. Do you fucking understand me?’ (2019: 44)

Machado’s silence at this incident is an index of her confusion at a response that is so far from loving as to appear impossible. The irony of the lie in her relating, in writing, that she promised not to write about the incident echoes the disjuncture between the role of an intimate partner and the woman’s abusive behaviour.

The entry ‘*Traumhaus* as Lipogram’ is the only one not to be titled ‘*Dream House* as ...’. A lipogram is an orthographic puzzle: a literary work omitting one letter of the alphabet. The most common lipograms omit the letter e—the most commonly used letter in English—challenging the author to find words that do not use the letter, but still convey meaning (Nordquist, 2019). ‘*Traumhaus* as Lipogram’ omits most ‘e’ letters, which explains why the phrase ‘Dream House’ is translated into German. Nevertheless, using ‘Traumhaus’ to refer to the Dream House relates the content to Freudian psychoanalysis, with its emphasis on the uncanny (*der unheimlich*) and the intimate relationship between ‘house’ and ‘unhomely’, which resonates deeply with Machado’s experiences. The entry contains only one ‘e’ (in ‘Loss of the function’, 2019: 149). The missing letter becomes a metaphor for trauma victims’ inability to articulate their experiences, especially Machado’s initial inability to categorise her relationship as abusive. By failing to name what is missing in her interaction with her partner, such as love, care, and compassion, Machado broadens the difficulty of articulating DVA. She describes this feeling vividly:

This is what I did not know until now: this constraint taints. It is poison. All day and night, until I ran, I was drinking poison. (2019: 149)

*In the Dream House* does not use the term ‘abuse’ until late in the narrative. This means the reader has to journey together with Machado towards realising that the relationship is dangerously abusive. As the authors of this article know, an abusive lesbian relationship can indeed feel like drinking poison. The drinker imbibes the venom willingly, but it damages, limits and destroys her emotional and social life. Once the relationship is recognised as damaging and abusive, the words ‘violence’, ‘abuse’ and even ‘evil’ can be used, and a journey towards healing has begun.

A third feature of Machado’s literary technique in *In the Dream House* is its unusual point of view. Teresa de Lauretis’ ‘Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation’ explores the innovative devices used by lesbian authors, especially Monique Wittig’s untranslatable first person pronoun *J/e* and grammatically impudent third-person plural *elles* (1988: 166).<sup>3</sup> Wittig’s use of *J/e*, in her own words, testifies to ‘the lived, rending experience which is *m/y* writing, of this cutting in two which throughout literature is the exercise of a language which does not constitute *m/e* as a subject’ (cited in De Lauretis, 1988: 167). Like Wittig, Machado finds unusual strategies to articulate her experiences. The entry ‘*Dream House* as an Exercise in Point of View’ describes the split in her identity as a result of the emotional abuse that she endured. She names her two sub-personas ‘I’ — ‘that assured, confident woman, the girl detective, the adventurer’ — and ‘you’, ‘who was always anxious and vibrating like a too-small breed of dog’. The entry ends with the ominous sentence: ‘I thought you died, but writing this, I’m not sure you did’ (2019: 14). This recognises that Machado still possesses the qualities that made her vulnerable to the woman in the Dream House. Writing years after the abuse, when presumably she feels more whole, she is still unable to use ‘I’ for her own narrative because it is too painful to identify with the experiences. In addition, language (as De Lauretis (1988) and others have shown) is male-centred, and does not allow for the insertion of a lesbian subject into its vocabulary. Accordingly, Machado uses ‘you’ as a shorthand for ‘the I that accepted the emotional abuse’ to narrate her experiences. This also interpellates (Althusser, 2014: 190) readers, drawing them into the events that are presented. Machado complements this technique by writing consistently in the present tense, which brings her experiences into immediacy.

At times, Machado displaces emotion onto other phenomena, as when she visits her girlfriend’s parents and has her first experience of cruelty at the hands of a woman who claims to love her. At the end of the entry, she writes: ‘When the storm breaks, the thunder is as loud as a gun’ (2019: 58) and the reader understands that the threat of the gun is present in the relationship, not in the weather. By writing in the second person, in the present tense, and through exceptional detail, Machado shows the reader the powerful sensory and emotional effects of abusive acts.

<sup>3</sup> The third person singular pronoun for a male, or masculine, noun is *il* and for a female, or feminine noun, is *elle*. The third person plural, though, is *ils*, or ‘hes’. Wittig’s third-person plural can be translated as ‘shes’.

## DVA IN *IN THE DREAM HOUSE*

*In the Dream House* details numerous kinds of DVA, ranging from physical injury to irrational rage via unexplained, seemingly baseless aggression. Most of these actions are difficult to categorise as DVA because they do not leave physical marks on the victim. In addition, a canny person can also make her partner feel that she has misremembered instances of abuse by denying them, re-narrating incidents in such a way that she appears innocent of cruelty or aggression, or lying about what has happened. This behaviour is particularly pernicious, because the other partner may start to wonder whether her memory or mind is playing tricks on her when she is confronted with outright denial from the abuser. It is known as gaslighting: 'a form of emotional abuse that makes you question your beliefs and perception of reality. Over time, this type of manipulation can wear down your self-esteem and self-confidence, leaving you dependent on the person gaslighting you' (York Morris and Raypole, 2021). Women who have experienced gaslighting often describe it as a surreal and bewildering experience that makes them question their sanity and sense of reality (Sweet, 2019). Like most DVA, gaslighting is popularly believed to be perpetrated by men against women, especially if the women are emotionally, physically, or financially dependent on them. This description of gaslighting and its situatedness in heterosexual relationships reinforces the false belief that women, rather than men, are dependent. It also perpetuates the myth that this particular type of DVA does not occur amongst LGBTQ people.

George Cukor's 1944 American film *Gaslight* (although not the first text to feature gaslighting) gave its name to the behaviour of falsifying reality and making another person believe that they are losing their sanity for the purposes of controlling them. Machado refers at length to the film as a way of providing a correlative for her experiences. First she provides the context:

Before it was a verb, gaslight was a noun. A lamp. Then there was a play called *Angel Street* in 1938, and then a film, *Gaslight*, in 1940, and then a second film in 1944, directed by George Cukor and featuring an iconic, disheveled, unraveling performance from Ingrid Bergman.

A woman's sanity is undercut by her conniving husband, who misplaces objects — a brooch, a painting, a letter — in an attempt to make her believe she is mad so that he ultimately can send her to an asylum. Eventually his plan is revealed: he had murdered her aunt when the woman was a child and orchestrated their whirlwind romance years later in order to return to the house to locate some missing jewels. Nightly, Gregory — played by a silky, charismatic Charles Boyer — ventures into their attic, unbeknownst to her, to search for them. The eponymous gaslights are one of the many reasons the heroine believes herself to be truly going mad — they dim as if the gas has been turned on elsewhere in the house, even when, it would seem, no one has done so. (Machado, 2019: 93)

Cukor's film *Gaslight* (1944) shows how Ingrid Bergman, as Paula, is lured into a web of deceit in an intimate relationship with Gregory, played by Charles Boyer. As Machado mentions, the eponymous lights are one of the reasons the heroine believes herself to be going mad, and are a central motif in the film, whose monochrome palette adds to its mystery as a psychological thriller. Similarly, Machado recalls incidents where her partner confused her by denying her reality or contradicting her values. One of these events is narrated in the entry entitled '*Dream House* as Famous Last Words'. It is a one-liner that signals the first of many terrifying experiences, epitomising the disconnect that occurs in abusive relationships. Machado's partner states, "We can fuck," [...] "but we can't fall in love" (2019: 21). In this confusing statement, Machado's partner forcibly attempts to dictate the emotional boundaries of their relationship. This is similar to an early scene in *Gaslight* where Paula starts to fall in love with Gregory, but wants to think about it before she decides whether to marry him. Although Paula successfully gets away to Thornton Square, London (where her aunt was murdered), her freedom is interrupted on her arrival when Gregory is waiting for her outside the carriage. Gregory does not give Paula any time to think, and disrespects her boundaries by overwhelming her with feigned proclamations of his love and unwavering commitment to her.

Despite popular perceptions that gaslighting is exclusively inflicted by men on women, it is enabled and fuelled by gendered stereotypes and power inequalities. Paige L. Sweet explains:

[g]aslighting should be understood as rooted in social inequalities, including gender, and executed in power-laden intimate relationships. The theory developed here argues that gaslighting is consequential when perpetrators mobilize gender-based stereotypes and structural and institutional inequalities against victims to manipulate their realities. (2019: 1)

Sweet's case study is significant for how it identifies the mobilisation of gendered stereotypes in patriarchal institutions to reinforce 'the association of femininity with irrationality' (2019: 1). The idea that women are crazy

regardless of their age, race, sexual orientation, religion, ability, and social location remains prevalent globally, despite the progress made by feminism. In fact, the rise of right-wing politics that we have witnessed since the turn of the century has a heteronormative, and in many cases misogynist foundation. Furthermore, micro-aggressions against women in families, the workplace and almost every other social domain are equally pervasive, with the result that women are regularly called crazy in both the private and public spheres. These micro-aggressions form part of the historical trivialisation of women's concerns, and they are often adopted and reproduced by women against other women. Related to this, Sweet writes:

When abusers successfully make victims feel 'crazy,' victims become especially vulnerable to institutional abuse and less likely to rely on institutional supports. As such, I argue that we need to parse 'gaslighting' as specific type of psychological abuse in order to understand the social dynamics that make gaslighting effective, as well as the consequences it engenders. (2019: 4)

The misogynistic idea that women lose their minds when they fall in love, and that they often fail to make wise choices when choosing a partner, emerges in Machado's memoir when describing her initial attraction to her girlfriend. She describes the perceived inequality and power dynamic between them in an entry entitled '*Dream House as Confession*':

Despite the fact that you were the same age, you felt like she was older than you: wiser, more experienced, worldlier. She'd worked in publishing, she'd lived abroad, she spoke fluent French. She'd lived in New York and been to launch parties for literary magazines. And, it turned out, she had a weakness for curvy-to-fat brunettes in glasses. God herself couldn't have planned it better. (2019: 22)

Machado feels at a class remove from her girlfriend, who is white, well-educated, and has considerable professional experience, while she is 'Latina, more or less white-presenting' (Powell's Books, 2019) and feels like an amateur writer. At the same time, the iconoclastic closing line of the entry foregrounds Machado's idealisation of the woman she perceives as her perfect partner. The title evokes Michel Foucault's philosophical insights in *The History of Sexuality*, which foregrounds the importance of understanding sexuality through the practice of confession.

In addressing society's enduring struggle to understand themselves and their sexuality, French philosopher Michel Foucault sheds light on how the practice of confessing in the Catholic tradition constituted part of restoring men's/women's sanctity and their relationship with God. Foucault carefully analyses the historical valorisation and intensification of discourses about sex and its relationship to power:

There was a steady proliferation of discourses concerned with sex [...] But more important was the multiplication of discourses concerning sex in the field of exercise of power itself: an institutional incitement to speak about it, and to do so more and more; a determination on the part of agencies of power to hear it spoken about, and to cause it to speak through explicit articulation and endlessly accumulated detail. (1990: 18)

Patriarchal and cisnormative power structures continue to manifest in all relationships, regardless of gender and sexual orientation. These power structures and their intersectional axes of discrimination are even more prevalent in intimate partner relationships that have historically been marginalised and discriminated against. Therefore, the seemingly perfect lesbian coupling in an allegedly queer-friendly North America — 'God herself couldn't have planned it better' (Machado, 2019: 22) — is tainted by power and class differences that are often used to the advantage of the abuser in what was originally imagined as a realisation of the myth of lesbian partnerships as utopian and egalitarian.

People whose sexualities and/or genders do not fit into hegemonic categories are often subject to trauma through social exclusion and marginalisation. The experience of having been traumatised by a society that labels one as anything from deviant to sinful, followed by the trauma of DVA, is not additive but exponential. Thus Machado's wish that her partner should 'stop making us look bad' (2019: 126) testifies to the collective and individual trauma that has been inflicted on lesbians for centuries by social forces that vilify, reject and abandon them. In response, many lesbians long and strive for lifestyles that fit into suburban norms, where the houses they share with their partners, such as the 'Dream House', hold unremarkable lives of exemplary civilian normalcy.

Machado's wish for lesbians (and, by extension, all LGBTQ people) not to look bad reaches into Anglo-American literary and cultural traditions. It has roots in a statement by canonical heterosexual male author, Norman Mailer, that 'The sniffs I get from the ink of women are always (...) too dykily psychotic' (Machado, 2019: 126). By invoking Mailer, Machado conjures the entire history of patriarchal representations of women as psychotic (insane), dating back to ancient Egyptian notions of hysteria as a disease exclusively of women, caused by spontaneous movement of the uterus (Sigerist, 1951). In turn, these play into Western cultural assumptions that women are more 'emotional' than men, alluding to the gendered binary opposition of rationality and emotion. Mailer's

misogynistic accusation that the 'ink of women' (their literary production) smells too 'dykily psychotic', therefore, resonates across the whole of patriarchal culture, tarring all women with the brush of lesbian insanity. Machado succinctly explains: 'one woman writing is mad and a woman-who-loves-women writing is mad squared' (2019: 126). From a patriarchal perspective such as Mailer's, Machado's memoir is condemned by its author's gender and sexual identity before she has even finished writing it. Not only is the protagonist susceptible to exclusion and marginalisation because of her sexual orientation, but she is doubly marginalised for having written about it.

At the other end of the political spectrum from Mailer, there is a considerable body of texts written by second-wave feminist authors which portray lesbian relationships as utopian and perfect: for example, Sarah Scott's *A Description of Millenium Hall* (1762; rpt. 1995) and Sally Miller Gearhart's *The Wanderground: Stories of the Hill Women* (1985). These representations are premised on an understanding that women's romantic relationships with men are characterised by male abuse, so (since women are 'inherently' more peaceful and more nurturing than men) women's romantic relationships must be nurturing and mutually supportive. Paradoxically, this idealisation does not help to establish a realistic understanding of lesbian experience.

Machado's emotional abuse at the hands of her intimate partner leaves scars that remind us of USA literary theorist Cathy Caruth's 'speaking wound':

[T]rauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or a truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language. (1996: 4)

Caruth associates the literary representation of trauma with a wound in the psyche that speaks and articulates its pain, even as it cannot cease re-experiencing it. Machado's memoir of emotional abuse from her intimate partner — the nameless 'woman in the Dream House' (Machado, 2019: 66), her namelessness broadening her identity into Everywoman — is a wound that speaks: its having been published and printed gives it a voice.

The first signal of Machado's emotional abuse appears in one of the shorter entries in *In the Dream House*, entitled '*Dream House* as Time Travel'. Here Machado wonders if she would have listened to an older version of herself if that self had appeared through a 'milky portal' that 'opened up in your bedroom' (2019: 18) and warned her about the woman in the Dream House. These thoughts evoke a sense of chronological and psychological unravelling. The Machado who is writing is in a time after the intimate partner abuse, and imagines travelling back in time to warn her younger self of the dangers of the relationship. She signals the psychological splitting that the abuse has caused when she writes:

I was whole—a symbiotic relationship between my best and worst parts—and then, in one sense of the definition, I was cleaved: a neat lop that took first person—that assured, confident woman, the girl detective, the adventurer—away from second, who was always anxious and vibrating like a too-small breed of dog. (2019: 14)

The psychological splitting of Machado into an 'I' who is confident and adventurous and a 'you' who is timid and anxious is a typical response to trauma, which, Caruth attests, is a 'breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world' (1996: 4).

A second characteristic of trauma, for Caruth, is that, like literature, it exists at the troubled interface between knowing and not knowing (1996: 4). The self who has lived through a traumatic experience may suppress or deny knowledge of their memories; at the same time, they seem unable to avoid repeating or re-experiencing them. This, too, is true of Machado, who writes in '*Dream House* as Spy Thriller' of a litany of everyday actions that are 'heightened with what you know and they — all those ordinary citizens — do not know' (2019: 91). Machado wishes to be one of the 'ordinary citizens' instead of being abused; there is a part of her (the 'I' that was not involved in the abusive relationship) that does not want to know either. In this way, traumatic abuse ruptures, not only the self, but its relationship to its context and community.

The trauma that Machado suffers in her relationship with the woman in the Dream House is primarily caused by disjunctures between her partner's behaviour and her words. When the two take a drive from Connecticut to Bloomington (a distance of nearly 1,400 km or 870 miles), Machado is in the driver's seat when something changes in their interaction:

'Why won't you let me drive?' she asks. Her voice is controlled, measured, like a dog whose tail has gone rigid; nothing is happening, but something is wrong. Dread gathers between your shoulder blades. (2019: 87)



The threat of the woman's anger, which is certain to be more out of control than the car, persuades Machado to surrender the driver's seat to her partner. The woman is a reckless driver, as Machado has learned previously. The drive through the night is fictionally glossed as 'Thompson, Motif-Index of Folk-Literature, type C752.1, Taboo: doing thing after sunset (nightfall)', as though Machado is at fault for having broken an ancient taboo. It is a metonymy of the relationship, filled with vertiginous, terrifying swerves and near-accidents: Machado's fear is palpable. But:

In the morning, the woman who made you ill with fear brews a pot of coffee and jokes with you and kisses you and sweetly scratches your scalp like nothing has happened. (2019: 90)

The implicit denial that anything out of the ordinary has happened is tantamount to the woman's denying the reality of Machado's feelings or the fact that she has caused them. As these kinds of incidents recur, Machado slowly realises that she cannot rely on her partner to be either emotionally consistent or rational.

In another early incident, Machado is introduced to her girlfriend's parents. The girlfriend's mother is making lunch and Machado is reading. For no reason, Machado's girlfriend grips her arm so hard that she hurts her and even causes a bruise. Time stands still as Machado struggles to come to terms with this almost invisible abuse:

Her grip goes hard, begins to hurt. You don't understand; you don't understand so profoundly your brain skitters, skips, backs up. You make a tiny gasp, the tiniest gasp you can. It is the first time she is touching you in a way that is not filled with love, and you don't know what to do. This is not normal, this is not normal, this is not normal. Your brain is scrambling for an explanation, and it hurts more and more, and everything is static. Your thoughts are accompanied by a cramp of alarm, and you are so focused on it that you miss her response. (2019: 57)

As feminist author, Margaret Atwood, shows in *Cat's Eye* (1988), the emotional abuse that occurs between girls and women is subtle, almost imperceptible. *Cat's Eye* details how Cordelia, under the guise of being Elaine's friend, slowly begins to ruin her self-esteem with a combination of pointed criticisms and surveillance while professing her loyalty to the friendship. Although *Cat's Eye* does not describe an intimate relationship between women, there are definite similarities between the two situations of emotional abuse. In response to Cordelia's cruelty, Elaine begins to peel the skin off her feet because 'The pain gave me something definite to think about, something immediate. It was something to hold on to' (1988: 128). In a similar way, Machado accepts the injury that her partner is inflicting on her in the name of love, and in this way becomes complicit in her own abuse.

*In the Dream House* is full of incidents like this, where Machado's expectations of gentleness and rationality are met with irrational interpersonal aggression. These accumulate into a primal, intimate trauma, which lingers for years, as she notes in a section of the book entitled 'Dream House as Choose your own Adventure'. The title alludes to a genre of popular culture and online gaming that became popular in the late twentieth century. These texts, largely aimed at children and young adults, are written in the second person and invite the reader to make choices at key points in the narrative. The choices the reader makes determine the plot development. The 'Choose your own Adventure' section of *In the Dream House* (Machado, 2019: 162-176) does not make sense in the same way as children's and young adult books that allow readers to create their own narratives. Instead, it cycles around at least twice, reaching false endings where the reader is told 'You shouldn't be here' (2019: 165, 167, 170). It is as confusing as DVA incited by Machado's partner raging at her for having moved her arm at night so that it touched her face. Every choice Machado makes in this situation deepens her partner's fury and abusive behaviour.

*In the Dream House* is metatextually structured by Machado's naming riddle (2019: 37). Caruth's 'speaking wound' is its own healing: as Machado writes of what happened in the Dream House, the memoir becomes an act of naming her experiences as DVA. Machado's partner denies her the use of these words by denying that she has been aggressive or violent, effectively gaslighting her. In a late entry, Machado discusses the difficulty of finding words for her experience:

*Evil* is a powerful word. You use it once, and it tastes bad: metallic, false. But what other word can you use for a person who makes you feel so powerless? [...]

*Sick* seems more appropriate, but it too tastes bad. It feels too close to *disordered* [...]. (2019: 157, original emphasis)

Machado's naming riddle is important for trauma sufferers, who often find that using the correct name for their experiences is liberating.

In 'Dream House as Plot Twist', Machado narrates meeting 'Val', the ex-girlfriend of the woman in the Dream House, and how she comes to fall in love with Val and eventually marries her. The entry is only a page long, but

contains three mentions of 'talking' as Machado and Val discuss their traumatic relationships with the woman in the Dream House. The entry ends with a significant paragraph:

Eventually, you and Val will come to love each other outside this context. You will move in together, get engaged, get married. But in the beginning, this is what holds you together: the knowledge that the two of you are not alone. (2019: 218)

DVA alienates people from all support systems, making them feel completely alone and psychologically weak. Creating a community through sharing stories of abuse is an important method of healing. Similarly, telling the story — to Val and to the reader of the memoir — is a curative process for Machado. The healing power of storytelling is well-known:

Through storytelling we can come to know who we are in new and unforeseen ways. We can also reveal to others what is deepest in our hearts, in the process, building bridges. The very act of sharing a story with another human being contradicts the extreme isolation that characterizes so many of our lives. As such, storytelling carries within it the seeds of community. (Stone, 2004: 3)

In different contexts, Bagele Chilisa and Gabo Ntseane (2010: 621, 624) in Botswana; Gabriele Rosenthal (2003) in Germany; and Carl Lindahl (2012) in Louisiana, USA have all affirmed the curative power of storytelling among people who have survived trauma.

In order to come to terms with her experiences in the Dream House, Machado deliberately sought out existing narratives of DVA in lesbian relationships. The entry '*Dream House as Fantasy*' contains several footnotes referring to lesbian abuse as documented by Lisa Shapiro and Amy Edgington (2019: 109). Many of the texts she mentions here appear in *Off Our Backs*, a long-running USA-based 'women's newsjournal' (JSTOR, 2023). In that publication, Amy Edgington writes about a ground-breaking conference about lesbian battering (1988: 8). Both Shapiro and Edgington struggle palpably to reach an understanding of DVA in lesbian relationships that encompasses psycho-emotional violence, and fall back, unsatisfactorily, on 'battering' as a description of DVA.

In a later chapter, Machado resumes the quest for narratives of DVA in lesbian relationships: 'I have spent years struggling to find examples of my own experience in history's queer women. [...] Did any of them wonder if what had happened to them had any name at all?' (2019: 227) When Machado wrote *In the Dream House*, there was an emerging body of scholarship on DVA amongst LGBTQ people. She does not seem to have been aware of this research, possibly because of the 'silo' effect where scholars in one discipline, such as creative writing, are not aware of the work of scholars in another, such as social sciences. The answer to Machado's question is that *In the Dream House* itself stands, metatextually, as a key text in naming DVA among LGBTQ people. Authors who have written about DVA among lesbians, together with Machado, form a significant sub-archive in Cvetkovich's 'archive of feeling'. They contribute to helping readers see that LGBTQ existence encompasses all kinds of love, including its self-destructive forms.

## CONCLUSION

Machado's *In the Dream House*, as we have shown, records experiences of profound interpersonal trauma within an intimate lesbian relationship. By suffusing the narrative with intertextual references to many kinds of cultural phenomena, it creates important connections with public discourse, highlighting the need for DVA among LGBTQ people to be recognised. The second-person narration draws the reader into the narrative, taking us with her as she slowly realises that the person she loves is abusing her emotionally; and the highly textured descriptions of emotional states situate the memoir precisely in a particular context. The text gives visibility to an aspect of public life that is doubly invisibilised: as Donovan, Barnes, Ovesen and others have shown, popular discourse deliberately underemphasises DVA in LGBTQ relationships. The entry entitled '*Dream House as Equivocation*' ends with the prognosis:

Women could abuse other women. Women *have* abused other women. And queers needed to take this issue seriously, because no one else would. (2019: 200, original emphasis)

Likewise, Machado's '*Afterword*', like many of the footnotes in the text, invokes the emerging body of literature dealing with DVA between lesbian partners. *In the Dream House* takes the issue of lesbian intimate partner abuse very seriously, and the counter-narrative that it provides to mainstream accounts of heterosexual love and abuse make it an important addition to the lesbian archive.

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