



MA in Construction and Representation of Cultural Identities

“The Dream House was never just the Dream House:” Unhousing, Domestic Abuse, and Archival Silence in Carmen Maria Machado’s *In the Dream House* (2019)

Clara Jane Rosell Castells

Department of Modern Languages and Literatures and of English Studies

Faculty of Philology and Communication

Universitat de Barcelona

Academic Year 2021-2022

Supervisors: Dr. Cristina Alsina
Dr. Rodrigo Andrés



UNIVERSITAT DE
BARCELONA

Acknowledgments

To Dr. Cristina Alsina and Dr. Rodrigo Andrés, for their constant support, guidance, and patience with me throughout these slow but gratifying months. Thank you for selflessly sharing your ideas, thoughts, readings, and wisdom. They will stay with me for years to come.

To all my dear friends, my family, and colleagues who believed in this project and encouraged me endlessly. Thank you for listening to my ideas, and for celebrating these pages.

To Miquel Àngel, for fueling so many ideas that I might have disregarded otherwise. Thank you for your companionship, your undying support, your unrelenting energy and for sitting through too many vents of frustration.

ABSTRACT

In the Dream House by Carmen Maria Machado (2019) is a formally inventive memoir that addresses domestic abuse in lesbian relationships. It is presented as a collection of vignettes, each framed through the lens of a different literary trope as a means of interrogating Machado's own experience (a total of 141 are used). The memoir explores how the process of archival silence has erased accounts like hers from historical records, as a form of cultural violence. Drawing from the concept of what Paula E. Geyh calls "unhousing" and considering the claim that Machado makes that "the Dream House was never just the Dream House," the first part of this work centers on the versatility of the so-called Dream House and how its multiple meanings serve to illustrate to what degree the effects of trauma stemming from an abusive relationship reverberate in the abused subject. The way that the concept of the Dream House works on various levels because of the process of unhousing shows how it is used as a narrative device, in close relation to both the text's form and content. The second part of this work deals with how the memoir aims at widening the archive of representations of domestic violence by offering a new space to accounts of intimate partner abuse within lesbian relationships. Moreover, this second part also examines how Machado builds missing context around her account by identifying mirror experiences in the archives of classic fairy tales and folktales, represented in the memoir by Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*.

KEYWORDS

In the Dream House, Carmen Maria Machado, unhousing, domestic abuse, archival silence, lesbian.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Introduction	1
2. Structure, form, and the Dream House	8
2.1 The Dream House as physical setting	13
2.2 The Dream House as book	25
2.3 The Dream House as experience	35
3. Archival silence, fairy tales, and footnotes	44
3.1 Archival silence and <i>In the Dream House</i> as evidence	45
3.2 Fairy tales and footnotes in <i>In the Dream House</i>	51
4. Conclusions	61
Works Cited	65
Appendix: List of Chapter Titles in <i>In the Dream House</i>	1

1. Introduction

In a review in *World Literature Today* of Carmen Maria Machado's genre-bending debut short story collection *Her Body and Other Parties*, Sean Guynes wrote about Machado that she "writes from many worlds, not so much breaking down the borders between them as finding in their gaps and necessary contradictions a literary form necessary for the contemporary" (70). This review aptly reflects how I personally felt when I encountered her work for the first time in 2018. Her critically acclaimed collection of other-worldly stories captured in inventive ways the multiple horrors of the experience of being a woman in our contemporary reality. The sense that I was reading something close to groundbreaking was confirmed in a way when The New York Times chose the collection in 2018 as one of fifteen books by women "that are shaping the way we read and write fiction in the 21st century," as a part of what they call "The New Vanguard" (Garner et al.).

Machado's 2019 memoir, *In the Dream House*, further incorporates this liminal dimension of the stories in *Her Body and Other Parties* that Guynes refers to. Machado embraces the liminality of her experience with a book that is a cry for visibility in a reality where experiences of domestic abuse in queer relationships have been erased from mainstream representations of intimate partner violence in contemporary cultural narratives. In the memoir, the author positions herself in the silence surrounding violence in lesbian partnerships by depicting an experience that was not being recognized elsewhere. Machado also advocates for the inclusion of psychological and verbal abuse in widespread representations of intimate partner violence, which often center on its more familiar physical dimension.

In the Dream House stands out as an innovative memoir written with a fragmented structure, in which form and content are closely tied together. It presents an account in

second person, in which the present-day authorial voice (the “I”) is examining her experience by addressing her past self (the “you”). The memoir is presented as a series of vignettes, each chapter headlined by the construction “*Dream House as _____*.” The chapter titles include literary tropes and genres such as “romance novel” (30), “unreliable narrator” (166), “doppelgänger” (75), or “surprise ending” (215).¹ This choice of structure came as a surprise in my initial reading. However, Machado seems to be giving readers specific guidelines on how to read each chapter by using the Dream House as a narrative device throughout the text. This device serves the purpose of helping her, and, by extension, us readers, decipher her experience. Writer and critic Megan Milks notes how the Dream House is “constructed of as many narrative chambers as Machado can conceive” (*4Columns*, par. 3) and is used to incorporate many meanings. For example, in “*Dream House as Omen*,” the narrator recounts the first time her partner acted violent towards her (45). In “*Dream House as Spy Thriller*,” “no one knows your secret” (104), and in “*Dream House as Demonic Possession*,” “you lie next to hear and watch her sleep. What is lurking inside?” (155). In “*Dream House as Stoner Comedy*,” “you (...) smoke a lot of weed. You have never been a pot person (...) but you smoke because she does and she’ll be annoyed if you don’t” (59). In “*Dream House as Word Problem*,” the narrator gives a good enough summary of the situation (exceptionally straying from the second person point of view to depict herself in the third) while looking for answers. The chapter is a single paragraph that reads:

Okay, so, there’s this woman, and she lives in Iowa City, and then she moves to Bloomington, Indiana, 408 miles away. And her girlfriend, who loves her very much, agrees to do the whole long-distance thing. She doesn’t even pause, it’s what she would call a no-brainer. (The pun is lost on her in the moment.) She spends the entire second year of her graduate school experience shuttling back and forth to Bloomington. She does it gladly. In one trip, she can listen to 75 percent of an audiobook. If she is driving at sixty-five miles per hour, and the average length of an audiobook is ten hours, how many months will it take her to realize

¹ See appendix for the full list of 141 chapter titles in *In the Dream House*.

she has wasted half of her MFA program driving to her girlfriend's house to be yelled at for five days? How many months will it take her to come to terms with the fact that she functionally did this to herself? (132)

Most chapters are short, one or two pages long. Some, like "*Dream House as Word Problem*," even consist of a mere paragraph or just one sentence. "*Dream House as Epiphany*" reads: "Most types of domestic abuse are completely legal" (129), while "*Dream House as Famous Last Words*" reads "'We can fuck,' she says, 'but we can't fall in love'" (23).

In "*Dream House as Prologue*," the author quotes late queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz on the history of building archives of the experiences of marginalized communities: "When the historian of queer experience attempts to document a queer past, there is often a gatekeeper, representing a straight present" (qtd. in Machado, 3). Machado expresses that the problem lies in this "straight present" which is simply not invested "in helping queer folks understand what their experiences mean" (161). Drawing from Saidiya Hartman's ideas around "the violence of the archive," Machado defines the concept of "archival silence" as the process by which "sometimes stories are destroyed, and sometimes they are never uttered in the first place; either way something very large is irrevocably missing from our collective histories. . . . What is placed in or left out of the archive is a political act, dictated by the archivist and the political context in which she lives" (2). During her research, she comes to learn that the etymology of the word *archive* is rooted in the ancient Greek for "the house of the ruler." She was taken with the connection between archives and the domestic space, noting that the sense of authority is indeed "the most telling element" (2). In her own memoir around the idea of the archive, scholar Julietta Singh additionally stresses how this space of the archive that "articulates (...) commandment," "is the place of authoritative law, from where authority is exercised

and externalized” (24). Drawing from these definitions, Machado organizes her memoir about power dynamics in abuse around the notion of space because it is inherently rooted in the very meaning of what constitutes archival silence.

The author outlines her thesis for the memoir in the prologue of the text. She writes: “I enter into the archive that domestic abuse between partners who share a gender identity is both possible and not uncommon, and that it can look something like this. I speak into the silence. I toss the stone of my story into a vast crevice; measure the emptiness by its small sound” (4). Machado claims that with this book “[she] speak[s] into the silence” (4), but it must be noted that this silence she refers to has been created and enforced, and she uses her stylistic decisions to support this idea. As she states in chapter “Dream House as Naming the Animals,” “putting language to something for which you have no language is no easy feat” (156) but, by writing this memoir, she found a way.

The moment I decided to write about *In the Dream House*, around late 2020, I was unaware of the challenges I would face regarding the process of (re)engaging with this memoir in order to produce a cohesive and pertinent academic piece of work. Long accustomed to engaging with contemporary fiction both as a reader and student, I have never been one to shy away from “killing” the author and enthusiastically sharing my readings of texts in a state of complete unattachment to their respective authors. In this case, I found it difficult to insert myself into a space where I could allow myself to give an individual reading of a text that *is* attached to its author, as memoirs are. I was fortunate enough to meet Carmen Maria Machado in person in November of 2021 in Barcelona, when she visited to participate in a literary festival. I took the opportunity to express these challenges I was facing when thinking and writing about *In the Dream House* for an academic project. I verbalized how I was struggling not to make assumptions around

authorial intentions in her book, as I was much more used to engaging with fiction. She did not hesitate in her answer to me: “Well that’s the only thing you can do.” In a way, she granted me permission to make of the book what I wished, as a reader. I have since concluded that genre does prove interesting here to be examined as a tool that the author manipulates, but that it is not a relevant framework through which to read her work at large. At the beginning of this project, I was torn about whether the book’s status as a memoir was relevant and whether I should have been researching theory around autobiographical writing in order to proceed. With the help of my supervisors, I realized that it would be contradictory to read *In the Dream House* through this lens, taking into account the way the author constantly deconstructs and collages together different literary genres. I was clearly more interested in the liberties Machado takes with form and how it connects to content in her writing. I firmly believe that the fact that the text is framed as a memoir relates even more closely to its content than to genre classification itself.

Despite believing that the choice to frame it as a memoir is relevant to Machado’s intentions to claim her story, precisely, as not a fiction, I have had to distance myself from this first urge to try to understand what genre the text fit into. Throughout this work I reference the text’s genre, when needed, as merely autobiographical writing without any further reminiscence on whether the fact that it is framed as memoir carries any significance regarding reader-response. Reading Machado’s work has pushed me to embrace hybrid forms of contemporary literature and employ critical reading tactics to focus more on the content of these works that strive to demolish genre constraints altogether. For this reason, I would like to specifically mention here other literary works I have read during this time that have greatly informed my reading of *In the Dream House* by providing me with additional ideas around queerness, narrative and memoir, archives, the body, storytelling, domestic spaces, and trauma. I have only directly quoted some of

the following works, but they have all served to conform my reading of *In the Dream House*: Julietta Singh's *The Breaks* (2021) and *No Archive Will Restore You* (2018); Rebecca Solnit's *The Faraway Nearby* (2014); Jenny Shapland's *My Autobiography of Carson McCullers* (2020); Megan Milks' *Margaret and the Mystery of the Missing Body* (2021); Garth Greenwell's *Cleanness* (2020); Melissa Febos' *Body Work: The Radical Power of Personal Narrative* (2022) and *Girlhood* (2021); Alexander Chee's *How to Write an Autobiographical Novel: Essays* (2018); Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* (2015); Kristen Arnett's *With Teeth* (2021); Akwaeke Emezi's *Dear Senthuran: A Black Spirit Memoir* (2021); and Sofia Samatar's *Tender* (2017).

By focusing on the formal aspects of *In the Dream House*, the present work strives to uncover what lies behind these stylistic choices while tracing the effects of trauma in the abused subject. Considering the claim that Machado makes that “the Dream House was never just the Dream House” (829), I analyze the memoir from the standpoint that form and content are closely linked.

The first part of this work focuses on how the Dream House is made a versatile concept that embodies multiple meanings in the text. Its use allows the author to depict the process of what scholar Paula E. Geyh calls “unhousing,” since the account told is not initially recognized as a valid experience in the cultural widespread narratives of what domestic spaces traditionally entail. Textualizing the Dream House as a narrative device constructs it as both a central but also elusive space, as I argue.

The second part of this work examines how Machado builds what she refers to as “necessary context” (4) by searching for her story in a network of pre-established narrative tropes in order to create a new symbolic space where to house her account, in opposition to “the house of the ruler.” Moreover, this second part also addresses how the

author recognizes her experience in Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, a scholarly compilation of literary motifs in fairy tales and other fictions.

In the prologue to *In the Dream House*, Machado quotes Saidiya Hartman, who wondered "how does one tell impossible stories?" (qtd. in Machado, 3). The present work wonders: how does Machado tell hers? I strive to answer this question by unpeeling each layer of narrative craft in order to reach what lies behind the door to the Dream House.

2. Structure, form, and the Dream House

Well into the third part of *In the Dream House*, the author includes a chapter that readers familiar with her work can identify as referring to the writing process behind the stories contained in her previously published collection, *Her Body and Other Parties*. Machado writes about how the abusive relationship she was in at the time affected her writing, but not in the way that she expected. Far from of hindering her work, the experience gave way to the possibility of exploring fragmentation in writing, an element that I would now identify as essential in Machado's trademark style, as she states in the chapter "*Dream House as Exercise in Style*:"

Instead, your creativity explodes. You are brimming with ideas, so many that you sign up for six workshops in your last semester of school. You begin to experiment with fragmentation. Maybe "experiment" is a generous word; you're really just unable to focus enough to string together a proper plot. Every narrative you write is smashed into pieces and shoved into constraint, an Oulipian's wet dream—lists and television episode synopses and one with the scenes shattered and strung backward. You feel like you can jump from one idea to the next, searching for a kind of aggregate meaning. You know that if you break them and reposition them and unravel them and remove their gears you will be able to access their truths in a way you couldn't before. (171)

The author's use of fragmented and experimental structure in her writing has been one of the main characteristics I have focused on and it can be used to trace a continuity in all her published work. In a similar manner to the stories included in *Her Body and Other Parties*, *In the Dream House* also presents readers with fragments in the form of individual vignettes that make up the story told and are essential to its construction as a whole. This choice of the form used at large in structuring the memoir merges with the content that Machado is attempting to communicate, since the "subject [matter] is from a history that is very hidden and [has been] represented [only] in little pieces" (internationales literaturfestival berlin, 21:23). In this way, the use of fragmentation is reinforced as the most suitable way to tell this story.

Drawing from this explanation in “*Dream House as Exercise in Style*,” in the examination that follows, I analyze Machado’s play with formal structure as greatly informed by the trauma that stems from her lived experience. By use of this experimental play with fragmentation, *In the Dream House* fails to fulfill initial reader expectations of a memoir and instead takes the form of an experimental text that mirrors both the scarce representations of queer intimate partner violence in history and also Machado’s fractured self at the time of writing the book and, previously, of living the violent experience that is narrated. Moreover, the text, by use of various narrative devices, manages to generate in the reader similar effects of disorientation and unsettlement as those produced by trauma in the writer.

This use of fragmentation draws attention to how the concept of the “Dream House” is used to organize the text, since each chapter is headed with the construction “*Dream House as _____*.” Despite the clear meanings it might initially bring forth, i.e. the uncomplicated assumption that the Dream House is the house where the events recounted in the text took place, Machado frustrates reader’s assumptions in “*Dream House as World Building*,” where she writes that “the Dream House was never just the Dream House” (82), and in “*Dream House as Barn in Upstate New York*,” where she refers to *In the Dream House* as “a book about a house that was not a house and a dream that was no dream as all” (183). By examining how Machado makes the Dream House so central to the text but weakens its definitional boundaries at the same time, I am drawn to further analyze what exactly the Dream House is, if it is not only “the Dream House” (82).

Readers are also destabilized by the fact that, while reading the text, we realize that there is not one clear physical space that the concept of the “Dream House” refers to. In fact, the events take place in many locations which are inhabited by many different

characters apart from the narrator: her partner, her parents, her partner's parents, friends, roommates, random strangers, or other family members. The fact that the characters shuttle back and forth between locations and are on the road almost as much if not more than they spend time in the original Dream House,² adds to this feeling of confusion. Readers, upon finishing the book, might not retain exactly which space in the text is being referred to as the Dream House on so many occasions. Machado is clearly employing form to communicate a big part of the memoir's content: much of what the experience of undergoing abuse entails means existing in a disorienting state of (narrative) confusion. However, it also seems deliberate on the author's part that the idea of the Dream House is made central to the text by being used as an organizer in all the chapter titles and, nevertheless, it simultaneously seems to elude specific identification. In a way, its symbolic structure as a domestic space is dismantled through its textualization. Machado eschews charging the Dream House with a single, easily identifiable meaning.

The way Machado approaches the concept of the Dream House leads me to ask, what exactly, then, is the Dream House? In this section I aim to understand the importance of these various spaces that the narrator occupies and what can be read behind this ambiguous handling of the Dream House in the text, in which it is rendered both central and elusive. What Paula E. Geyh calls "unhousing" proves interesting to attempt to decipher what might lie behind the apparent vagueness of the Dream House as a concrete domestic space.

Geyh calls "unhousing" the process by which there is "a movement across boundaries (...) [and] an apparent denial of them altogether" (112) when faced with a

² The *original* Dream House as I call it here specifically refers throughout this work solely to the narrator's ex-partner's residence in Bloomington (Indiana) at the time of their relationship. I employ modifiers like *original* or *physical* when needed, in order to differentiate this noun phrase from other meanings the Dream House further acquires in my analysis.

traumatic or hostile definition of the domestic space which does not align with what socially constitutes a domestic space, which has been widely defined as inherently ideal. Sara Ahmed also uses the term “unhousing” to refer to a process of revolutionary “delegitimization” of mainstream ideals which “house” some bodies, situations, and symbolic spaces, and not others (106). In Machado’s memoir, the Dream House is constructed as a space that readers can quickly identify as not ideal, which works as a metaphor at large for the less-than-ideal lesbian partnership the narrator is in. This denial of barriers that Geyh refers to is thus made literal in the book, in which the Dream House escapes specific identification and transcends the physicality of the original Dream House, as I will argue in this section of my work. Machado explores the Dream House’s manifestations as a means to suggest that her experience is unrecognized and invisibilized in the public eye. However, at the same time, the words “Dream House” appear on every page, in every chapter, and this repetition seems to be underlining, above all, its centrality, the weight it carries. Every page makes known that the Dream House is real, albeit unrecognized.

“Unhousing,” in Geyh’s definition, also entails the process by which these definitions of domestic spaces, which include, in this case, lesbian relationships in which one partner is abusive towards the other, are automatically marginalized as they exist outside of public recognition. For this reason, I argue that, in her memoir, Machado makes a point of showing the process of what I would call “involuntary unhousing,” in which she has no choice but to move her account to the margins because widespread representations of domestic abuse refuse to acknowledge the existence of a “house” (both literally and figuratively) in which intimate partner violence occurs within a lesbian relationship. In this sense, “unhousing” abides by the same dynamics as archival silence, which has not accepted these accounts and definitions of the domestic space into “the

house of the ruler.” However, in the second part of my work I will argue how Machado seems to be simultaneously reverting this process of “involuntary unhousing,” through the publication of this account, by building a new house—i.e., a new space in which experiences like hers can be recognized—and thus avoid the involuntary unhousing of future subjects.

Moreover, Geyh argues that this process of moving to the margins around fixed domestic structures in society entails “the deconstructing of a unitary, grounded subjectivity and the passing or flowing into a different subjectivity—that of the (...) transient” (113), as opposed to “the settled” (110). The narrator’s consequential transient subjectivity is also made literal in *In the Dream House*. She is constantly physically in transience, in the sense that she is constantly switching locations and never in one space for very long; and also emotionally in transience, as she transits from confidence to insecurity, from bliss to fear, and from knowledge to confusion, locked in the unstable emotional reality of being in an abusive relationship.

The way that the concept of the Dream House works on various levels as a consequence of the process of unhousing shows how it is used as a narrative device, related to both the text’s form and content, to convey a claim that Machado has repeated on countless occasions and is clearly demonstrated in her work: “You can’t untie content and form” (Machado, *Festival* 42). Furthermore, the oneiric quality that Machado attributes to the physical structure of the house where this story takes place hints that there is much to be uncovered past the title phrase.

In the subsections that follow, I have grouped my reading of the different narrative manifestations of the Dream House into three sections that represent different structural levels that organize both the text and its exploration of the effects of domestic abuse and the trauma this experience generates: Dream House as physical setting (where the

experience takes place); to a lesser extent, Dream House as the book (what readers hold in their hands) and, as a conclusion to this section, Dream House as the experience itself (what is being told).

2.1 The Dream House as physical setting

First and foremost, the Dream House that readers first encounter in the book's title clearly refers to her partner's actual house where a big part of this story takes place and where the narrator begins to discover the hidden side to her partner. The Dream House is located in Bloomington, Indiana and is where the author temporarily shared a domestic space with her ex-partner, which she drove to and back from often, while the author was completing her MFA program in Iowa City, two states away. The Dream House is a private space where the abuser molds and reshapes a previously safe realm of intimacy in order to exert her abuse. As I will argue, in the memoir, this physical space "serves in itself as a means to tell the story and is a character within the story" (Naimon, 07:20). In some instances, this representation is made explicit through literary personification. For example, in "*Dream House as Set Design*," the house takes on a life of its own as it "inhales, exhales, inhales again" (84). Moreover, the Dream House always appears with capitalized initials, indicating that it takes on a very specific meaning in this text. It is a location where very specific events take place; it is the location where the narrator suffered from domestic violence.

The Dream House is repeatedly associated with the author's partner at the time, who is referred to in the book on several occasions as "the woman from/in the Dream House" (8, 75, 80, 84, 89, 95, 114, 241, 245, 249, 250, 254, 255, 275), when being referred to as something other than *she*—she is never given a name, unlike other characters that appear in the memoir. Machado chooses to call the abuser's realm in this story the Dream

House, and the narrator enters it as she enters this relationship, while her subjectivity is shaped by the fact that she shares a domestic space with this person and is dominated by a great power imbalance.

In “*Dream House as Set Design*,” the physical details about the actual house’s appearance, contents, and location are further specified:

A nondescript house in a neighborhood on the outskirts of Bloomington, Indiana (...) A front door faces the steps, but this door will remain closed. The driveway leisurely loops up the left side of the property (...) The shingles are off-white, a red chimney is the only hint of character. Behind the house is a large tree with a wooden swing dangling from a low branch. (83)

However, chapters before, in the first part of the memoir, its realness had already been insisted upon, “*Dream House as Not a Metaphor*”: “I daresay you have heard of the Dream House? It is, as you know, a real place. (...) I bring this up because it is important to remember that the Dream House is real. It is as real as the book you are holding in your hands, though significantly less terrifying” (7). In this excerpt, the author insists upon the factual aspects of the story the reader is about to venture into and the way that she emphasizes the authenticity of the house reads as if to ensure that the reader does not forget later on.

This mention of the Dream House being “significantly less terrifying” (7) that the book in readers’ hands points to the idea that the Dream House was terrifying during the time when this experience that is being retold took place within it. Now that the partnership is over and in the past, the house is empty, devoid of abusers and violence, and no longer poses a threat to any visitors. What has instead assimilated the horror that once was contained in those walls is the book that readers hold, a book that scrutinizes the events that happened within the physical boundaries of the Dream House. The author makes sure to repeat this idea of the house as a “house of horrors” throughout the whole

text, in chapters which serve to highlight the centrality and importance of the physical space in the text while, at the same time, warning the reader and revealing the power dynamics that are reproduced within its boundaries. In “*Dream House as Idiom*,” Machado writes:

I always thought the expression “safe as houses” meant that houses were safe places. It’s a beautiful idea; like running home with a late-summer thunderstorm huffing down your neck. There’s the house, waiting for you; a barrier from nature, from scrutiny, from other people. Standing on the other side of the glass, watching the sky playfully pummel the earth like a sibling. But house idioms and their variants, in fact, often signify the opposite of safety and security. (...) “Safe as houses” is something closer to “the house always wins.” Instead of a shared structure providing shelter, it means that the person in charge is secure; everyone else should be afraid. (88)

Moreover, the author assures readers that “*Dream House*” is *not* a metaphor but then proceeds to use the title phrase in the following chapter headings, in what could in fact be considered 141 different metaphors. The fact that the rest of the text is made up of different *Dream House* metaphors that headline vignettes about, manifestations of, and reflections around the experience of abuse shows how the title phrase works on more levels than just as a material space, and that Machado’s choice to use the same phrase for each chapter title indicates more than mere convenience. Sometimes the *Dream House* morphs into “*Modern Art*” (137), a “*Soap Opera*” (151), or “*High Fantasy*” (76).

However, this conception of the *Dream House* as material location serves as the starting point for the story’s setting and is emphasized in subsequent chapters in which other locations also serve as *Dream House* because “The *Dream House* was never just the *Dream House*” (82). In this way, Machado leads readers to understand that the capitalized *Dream House* in the book should be understood as the abstract space where abuse takes place that can take many forms, and not necessarily a delimited space with closed-off physical boundaries, or, at least, not necessarily as the actual house in Bloomington.

Abuse, in this relationship, is enacted widely outside of the home as well, because “the house is not essential for domestic abuse” (86). In other words, the abuse that germinated in the Dream House is also enacted in other places, other intimate and closed-off spaces that give domestic violence further leeway even while far from the physical house in Bloomington. For example, in a car in the chapter “*Dream House as the River Lethe:*”

She goes eighty, ninety miles per hour, and you have to look away from the climbing needle. The shadowy shapes of deer pass in front of you through curtains of rain. I am going to die, you think. You pray for a cop to pull you over, watching the side mirror for blue and red lights that never appear. You clutch the door when she accelerates, and when the car whips weightlessly over a hill. “Stop that,” she says, and goes even faster. “Sleep,” she commands, but you cannot sleep. (100)

Other instances of violence in the form of speeding, threats of drunk driving, and other examples of reckless driving abound in the memoir, in chapters such as “*Dream House as Chekhov’s Gun*” and “*Dream House as Chekhov’s Trigger*,” where the small, closed space of the car becomes an inescapable site of violence. In another instance, in “*Dream House as Here Comes the Bride*,” “you sit in the car in the parking lot as she talks at you (...) your head bent tearily against the window,” where you “endure your punishment in peace” (62).

Additionally, the girlfriend’s parents’ house (see “*Dream House as House in Florida*”) and Machado’s usual residence in Iowa City (see “*Dream House as House in Iowa*”) are other domestic spaces where violence occurs, far from the Dream House in Bloomington, proving just how this original Dream House is effectually transformed into an abstract space of possibility that the abuser freely conflates with other physical settings in which to render the abused subject powerless. These additional closed-off locations also include a hotel room, in “*Dream House as Hotel Room in Iowa*,” where “you have sex with her because you don’t know what else to do; you only speak the language of giving yourself up” (227).

In these previously listed examples, abuse is enacted in spaces with physical boundaries, where being closed-off proves to be a preferably avoidable condition for the victim, as it allows for the abuser to easily trap and manipulate her. However, in two different scenes that I will now analyze, the text overturns these associations between being in closed spaces and being enclosed or imprisoned on the one hand, and between open spaces and freedom on the other, and renders them ambiguous. In the following examples, it is not as obvious to determine whether the abused subject is ultimately free in an open space or ultimately imprisoned in a closed one.

First, there comes a point in Machado's account, in the chapter "*Dream House as Sanctuary*," when a locked room within the already-closed, hostile space of the Dream House provides necessary shelter in the middle of a fight that is first mentioned in a previous chapter, in "*Dream House as Chekhov's Gun*":

The night she chased me in the Dream House and I locked myself in the bathroom, I remember sitting with my back against the wall, pleading with the universe that she wouldn't have the tools or know-how to take the doorknob out of the door. Her technical incompetence was my luck, and my luck was that I could sit there, watching the door test its hinges on every blow. I could sit there on the floor and cry and say anything I liked, because in that moment *it was my own little space, even though after that it would never be mine again*. For the rest of my time in the Dream House, my body would charge with alarm every time I stepped into that bathroom; *but in that moment, I was the closest thing I could be to safe*. (164, emphasis mine)

In this case, a locked room that will be tinged with paralyzing fear from the described moment on provides a momentary escape and protection from a situation of domestic violence, rather than further reinforcing it or permanently imprisoning the victim in an even more closed-off space. Healthy domestic spaces might generally be viewed as a way to protect ourselves from the unpredictable outside world, but for a victim of domestic abuse, the closedness of the home becomes something far from safety which functions by means of isolation and entrapment, which work to the abuser's

benefit. In this case, a closed space within an already closed space functions to the opposite effect. It provides an instant of safety within an otherwise hostile space. She was alone but safe from violence, albeit enclosed and entrapped. In that moment, “[she] was the closest thing [she] could be to safe” (164). In this situation, an additional lock proves to be a pathway to safety. Machado examines the risk of this moment in contrast to the time when her parents had taken away the freedom of having a lock on her childhood bedroom door. She recalls: “I was lucky in that moment that the deconstruction of my door was a violation of privacy and autonomy but not a risk to my safety. When the door was opened, nothing happened” (93). For this reason, it is interesting to note not only how the Dream House at large functions as a location that enables domestic violence, but also how specific spaces within the Dream House can function to the opposite effect at certain moments in time.

Secondly, in “*Dream House as Shipwreck*,” Machado recalls an instance when her ex-partner deserts her in the middle of New York City. This chapter, as an example of abuse, also toys with the idea that a space can be imprisoning due, paradoxically, to its lack of physical confines. She recounts:

In New York that winter, when you walk too slowly for her taste, she abandons you at a storage container craft fair in Brooklyn. (...) (This is, you will recognize later, a pattern: she loves to walk away from you in places where you know no one, where you have no power, where you can't simply get up and go somewhere. Over the course of your relationship she will walk away from you in New York a total of seven times.) (...) When you look up she is actually gone, and you panic, because you don't know New York, you hate New York, and you have too many bags and no money for a taxi and you don't even know the difference between uptown and downtown. (185)

This example proves that in the dynamics of an abusive relationship, it is not solely closed spaces that portend abuse, but also open spaces, whole cities, infinite, indefinite areas that serve the Dream House's functions and can feel just as claustrophobic. In this

case, the abuser resorts to dislocation in order to render her partner powerless, by situating her in an unstable position far from her usual or comfort space. Dislocation is a frequent method used in domestic violence, where the victim “is made vulnerable by her circumstance, her isolation” and, ultimately, “her only ally is her abuser, which is to say she has no ally at all” (81). Dislocation can refer to literally being in a new physical space that the abused individual does not know (which would be the case in this passage about New York) but it can also involve other processes of cutting the victim’s support circle and her ability to communicate with her loved ones (for example, in the original Dream House in Bloomington, where Machado’s only close contact was her girlfriend). Machado writes that, in these cases, “the setting does its work” and becomes “a situation too complex and overwhelming to master on [the victim’s] own” (81). Therefore, following these examples I have listed, in being located in the Dream House or in any of the Dream House’s projections onto other spaces, which entail enduring abuse in either closed or open spaces, Machado’s past self becomes dislocated, because domestic abuse works both inside and outside of domestic spaces, not only behind closed doors, “as the cliché goes” (86).

However, the text also takes breaks from the past, to move forward to a time after the relationship. The memoir is interspersed with chapters set in various locations where, in the future, the author would conceive and write this memoir, “four houses/three lovers/two states/one wife past the Dream House” (253).³ In them, the Dream House transforms into this abstract space of possibility where to think about, remember, and write about the experiences suffered in the original Dream House but without having to endure any isolating afflictions like dislocation or humiliation. In these present and

³ See “*Dream House as Cottage in Washington*” (105), “*Dream House as Apartment in Philadelphia*” (113), “*Dream House as Barn in Upstate New York*” (183), “*Dream House as Cabin in the Woods*” (262), and “*Dream House as Epilogue*” (276).

familiar settings, confined but peaceful spaces are a reality, and the narrator can finally enjoy a domestic space that is not tinged with violence and fear, because she is “safe and so far away” (253) from the woman who ailed her. In these future spaces she is accompanied by people whose company she enjoys, like her wife (113) or fellow writers (195), in places where she can calmly “sleep with the windows open” (105), not “hold back [her] opinions,” “dr[i]nk wine at dinner” (262), and “nurse a crush on a playwright and a nonfiction writer both” (262) without being reprimanded.⁴ In these safe spaces, she finally, “for the first time in ages, hear[s] [her]self” (262). Earlier in the memoir, the narrator had declared “I love to nest, make areas mine” (92)—something that she was not able to achieve in the original Dream House—and what these examples from the future show is an agency of utmost importance that is restored to the narrator to freely inhabit these new domestic spaces, transforming them into vessels full of companionship and joy.

Furthermore, in thinking about the Dream House as the main physical setting in the book, attention must be brought to the construction of this title phrase, to the careful choice of the word “dream,” and to what additional meanings it brings forth.

Straightaway, the expression “dream house”⁵ conveys a sense of peaceful, sought-after domesticity very much ingrained in the end goal of owning a white-picket-fence home as a feature of the traditional American dream. This idea is a marker of what Sara Ahmed calls “happy heterosexuality” (90). She elaborates:

There is no doubt that the affective repertoire of happiness gives us images of a certain kind of life, a life that has certain things and does certain things. There is

⁴ The chapter that underlines the relevance of this fourth statement is “*Dream House as Appetite*,” in which the narrator admitting attraction to other people is met with severe ungrounded accusations of infidelity by her partner. It consists of an extensive list of people that the partner accuses the narrator of “fucking, or wanting to fuck, or planning to fuck” (90) over the course of their relationship. In addition, later on in the text, when the narrator experiences symptoms of a “mystical” pregnancy that she knows is utterly impossible, she is terrified to voice these concerns, “afraid of what she’ll accuse you of” (187).

⁵ Note here the use of lower-case letters to differentiate the concept of “dream house” from “Dream House.” This spelling indicates that the concept is being used to convey the meaning of “the house of one’s dreams,” in connection to an idealized domesticity which is rendered inaccessible in this specific account.

no doubt that it is hard to separate images of the good life from the historic privileging of heterosexual conduct, as expressed in romantic love and coupledness, as well as in the idealization of domestic privacy. (90)

Machado's memoir draws a link between this idealization of the domestic space and privacy that Ahmed refers to and the common idealization of lesbian relationships. This connection is repeatedly suggested throughout the text, while, at the same time, the narrator slowly realizes that having the house of her dreams, represented in this text through the image of an ideal partnership, might prove to be more complicated than she initially thought.

In the beginning of their relationship, when the narrator, her partner and her partner's girlfriend at the time go house hunting in "*Dream House as Daydream*", the text describes households "owned by beautiful young couples[s]" that are "like a fairy tale" (43). Initially, they were looking for a place for her partner and her partner's girlfriend but, since they ask the narrator to come along, the possibility of finding an ideal space for all three (how many beds will they need? how many rooms?) becomes central to this daydream, as they rejoice in "the perfection and lushness of th[eir] arrangement" (42). The three of them "laugh [and] crowd into rooms," while "the landlords don't verbalize [the questions they might have]" (42) about their non-traditional partnership arrangement.

However, moving forward in the text, even when it is just the narrator and her girlfriend, this permanent living space they had been searching for continues to be accessed in the present through mentions of fantasy, wishful desire, or literal dreams. In "*Dream House as Man vs. Nature*," the narrator verbalizes "a fantasy [she has]" and goes on to describe a lavish party she and her partner host in their household because, in this fantasy, "[they] have a beautiful home" (57).

Additionally, another of Machado's texts can be used as an example of this evolution from what seems to initially be a tangible future to a strictly fantasy-locked dream house. In the short story "Mothers," included in *Her Body and Other Parties*,⁶ a woman who is also in an abusive relationship with another woman dreams of the future they will enjoy with their baby, inexplicably naturally conceived by them both. This future includes a home "in the middle of the Indiana woods" (51) that the narrator describes in precise detail on the next few pages. Once she is living in that house with her baby, the house proves not to be what it initially seemed. Her baby's double, all grown up as if years had passed, suddenly arrives one day at the door with a young boy, a man, and a woman. The story's punch lies in the revelation that the real owners of this beautiful house of her dreams in the Indiana woods are actually this married couple at the door, who have two children who have clearly not been conceived by the narrator: "A man behind them, and a woman. Both staring at me. The woman tells Mara to stay away, the man clutches Baby Tristan across his chest. They ask me who I am, and I answer them. Otto barks" (62). Through means of fantasy, the narrator seems to have daydreamed about usurping a home that was not her real home and bearing children that were not her real children. Of this story's narrator, Machado says: "The scenario she concocts is meant to reflect the pleasure of fantasy and its ultimate pain—that not only is the fantasy lofty and idyllic and unattainable, but the disintegrating real-life situation is pulling further and further away from it" (*Yale Literary Magazine*, par. 13). This dream of the perfect home, like the idyllic nuclear family and relationship at large, is rendered unattainable for her, as a female subject who is in an abusive partnership with another woman.

⁶ This short story was one of Machado's first published attempts at verbalizing the domestic abuse she had experienced through fiction before tackling it in *In the Dream House* in a longer non-fiction piece. For yet another of her pieces of fiction that depicts the experience of abuse in a lesbian relationship, see Machado, Carmen Maria. "Blur." *Tin House*, vol. 18, no. 4, 2017. "Blur" was reprinted in *Lightspeed Magazine*, issue 107, Apr. 2019.

In disallowing happiness for this subject in direct relation to the concept of the dream house, Machado puts queer unhappiness in the spotlight. Ahmed stresses the importance of considering “what it might mean to affirm unhappiness, or at least not to overlook it” (89). With this account, Machado exemplifies how “narrat[ing] unhappiness can be affirmative; it can gesture toward another world” (Ahmed, 107). In this case, a future one in which these stories are told, recognized, and shared widely in order to prevent the same past silence from permeating accounts of domestic violence in queer partnerships.

In addition to juxtaposing contemporary reality with the logic of dreams (Waldman, par. 9), where anything is possible, Machado also juxtaposes the concept of the sought-after house of one’s dreams with the concept of the haunted house. Consequently, all these fantasies of reaching a dream house are re-located closer to the realm of nightmares. This idea is cleverly suggested early in the book, in the aforementioned chapter “*Dream House as Not a Metaphor*,” where the house is first presented to readers as the main setting of the story: “I daresay you have heard of the Dream House? (...) If I cared to, I could give you its 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. I wouldn’t recommend it. But you could. No one would stop you” (7). These eerie suggestions foreshadow from the beginning of the book that something terrible happened in that space and its description suggests that those who might want to venture closer (i.e., us readers) must be warned beforehand. In “*Dream House as Haunted Mansion*,” the narrator wonders whether the Dream House is actually haunted, not necessarily by her girlfriend, even though the narrator “spend[s] so much time trembling between the walls of the Dream House, obsessively attuned to the position of her body relative to yours, not sleeping properly, listening for the sounds of her footsteps (...)

staring dead-eyed in disbelief at things you never thought you'd see in your lifetime" (146). She instead wonders if the Dream House is haunted by herself, as a victim of intimate partner abuse in a space that is now "seeped in tragedy" and carries an "atmosphere to consider" (146). The tragedy that permeates the Dream House is the abuse that was enabled and enacted: "You were the sudden, inadvertent occupant of a place where bad things had happened. And then it occurs to you one day, standing in the living room, that you are this house's ghost (...) After all, you don't need to die to leave a mark of psychic pain" (147). Therefore, the house that was intended to be a dream house full of promise (74) becomes the Dream House. The capitalized noun phrase refers to a very specific location where terrible events took place.

Coming back to Sara Ahmed, who is interested in analyzing "how queer fiction attributes and locates unhappiness and how queer fiction might offer [a] different explanation of queer unhappiness rather than simply investing its hope in alternative images of happy queers" (89), I read Machado's account, in its failed chase after a dream house, as a text that strives to openly give visibility to queer unhappiness, queer pain and to stress the importance of not overlooking it. The importance of this account lies not only in what it is *housing* (a new space through which to bring forth an archive of queer intimate partner violence) but also what it is *unhousing* or striving to delegitimize: "the world that 'houses' some bodies and not others" (Ahmed, 106).

As I've shown in this section, adding queerness, unhappiness, and violence to the notion of the "dream house" complicates the concept (Machado, *The Granta Podcast*, 00:07:14) and, in this specific account, ends up disallowing it altogether. The narrator's dream of utopian partnership and, consequently, of attaining a dream house, thus turns into a nightmare.

2.2 The Dream House as book

Machado writes that “places are never just places in a piece of writing” (81) and *In the Dream House* further allows readers to read into how the title phrase “Dream House” embodies other levels of meaning in this text. Thus, in this brief section, I intend to highlight different examples to support the interpretation that “*In the Dream House: a memoir* by Carmen Maria Machado” as a book (that is intended to be read and engaged with by readers) represents another level on which the title phrase works.

The text’s outer/external structure makes it clear how the book is constructed as an artifice for readers designed to mimic the experience of entering the Dream House as a physical space. In “*Dream House as Not a Metaphor*,” where the Dream House is being defined as “as real as the book you are holding in your hands, though significantly less terrifying” (7), an overlap is already being made explicit between the physical setting of the story and the book itself. The fact that Machado states that the physical book the reader holds in their hands is more terrifying than the house where the abuse took place leads me to read the physical object that contains the text as a sort of mirror analogy of the actual house itself. This play on physicality brings readers closer to the space where the story is set. By extension, the book becomes a space specifically designed and curated by the author to enable readers to enter the Dream House alongside Machado’s past self. As readers open the book, they open the front door to the Dream House.⁷

Upon “entering the Dream House,” readers find that the writer postpones the moment of actually starting the account. Machado chooses to space out the three epigraphs chosen for this memoir onto three different pages after the dedication page, so

⁷ The outer aesthetic design of the book further supports this argument. Both cover designs in the English-language editions by Graywolf Press and Serpent’s Tail use the illustration of a house containing a woman’s body which can be seen from the outside. Many international publishers of the memoir in translation have also based their cover designs on this double imagery.

that the reader needs to flip the page three times as an entryway to the actual narrative. This is a choice that separates itself from how traditional publishing protocols join epigraphs on one same page. After the epigraphs, the memoir begins with the chapter “*Dream House as Overture*” in which Machado expresses her skepticism regarding prologues in books, ironically followed by an extensive and very suitable prologue that presents the memoir’s theoretical context and the author’s intentions. Next, readers are met with yet another standalone epigraph which marks the beginning of part I of the book which is further followed by a chapter called “*Dream House as Picaresque*,” almost as if the author were chuckling at the reader’s entry and accentuating just how much mischievousness she can get away with in the outer building of the text. All in all, the memoir starts off from a distance, which can also be interpreted as if the author were dreading the moment of accounting, retelling, and connecting with readers through a past real-life experience. Once the reader has thumbed through almost ten pages, they finally access Machado’s authorial voice. David Naimon remarks that significant interest should be drawn to this peculiarly structured beginning, which indicates “that the house where the story takes place in is in itself a means to tell the story” (00:07:24). Through this physical act of turning pages to build the text, Machado prompts in the reader a certain hesitancy towards what is literally inaccessible and seems to be insisting that they should indeed be afraid to enter the book (and the house) and encounter what lies behind the door (symbolized on the cover). Other critics also draw attention to this peculiar beginning, like Katy Waldman, who compares it to “waiting for a haunted carnival ride to start, only to be wrong-footed. *When does it begin?* you think. Then you realize, *It’s already begun*” (par. 1). This intentional spacing of pages at the beginning of the memoir can be read as doors unlocking another level on which the title works, bringing the possibility of entering the literal Dream House closer to readers.

Leigh Gilmore's theories about the complex representability of trauma in autobiographical texts prove interesting here to think about Machado's handling of textual form to set the scene of her memoir. Machado is aware of how she can use readers' expectations (in this case, the expectations in memoir) to play with how these expectations initially "compel certain themes to emerge or insights to be arrived at," as Gilmore argues. Borrowing from Gilmore, I read these devices used in the outer construction of the text to postpone the account as pointing at "the unspeakability of trauma itself, its [literal] resistance to representation" (*The Limits of Autobiography* 46). Gilmore further explores how the very complexities of verbalizing trauma lie in the experience of trauma itself ("Trauma," 885). The first pages of *In the Dream House* include numerous epigraphs, an overture disapproving of prologues alongside a crucial prologue, and dozens of metaphors for the Dream House after a chapter titled "*Dream House as Not a Metaphor*," in what seems to be an act of stalling the moment of truth that readers would commonly expect in a memoir. However, the author is honest about her intentions regarding this subversion of potential reader expectations: "the fact of the matter was when I tried to tell this story in a straightforward way, I couldn't and no one would listen to me, so I'm just going to walk you through the ways in which I can (...) conceive of what happened [in the Dream House]" (*Between the Covers*, 00:22:17). In this way, the experience of trauma proves itself to be difficult to articulate and the way that Machado incorporates that in *In the Dream House* becomes an example of what Gilmore refers to as the "imaginative transformations available within language" ("Trauma," 885).

Moreover, as Bella Brodzki notes, "life writing on trauma can elicit an experience of disorder in the reader" (qtd. in Smith & Watson, 283), and *In the Dream House* accomplishes exactly that. Machado is interested in using these formal techniques to

create an effect in the reader by mimicking certain experiences that she lived through (*Between the Covers*, 00:75:20). This effect may therefore echo the effects that abuse left in the author. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson additionally stress how stories about traumatic experiences “emphasize a gap that cannot be closed between the narrative present and the narrated past” (283). Trauma is “not only located in the past event but may be reexperienced in the narrative present of storytelling” (283), both for the author writing and the reader reading, in this case. In “*Dream House as Exercise in Point of View*,” the author addresses her second-person past self and says “I thought you died, but writing this, I’m not sure you did” (12), pointing at how the writing process brought her back to relive the painful past events. Machado has never shied away from publicly expressing how difficult the writing process behind this memoir proved to be. On publication day, she tweeted: “I wish I had something eloquent & smart to say about what it means to crystalize your pain into art, but I don’t. The truth is, I found the experience difficult & terrible. Many times in the past few years, I wished I’d never sold this book” (Carmen Maria Machado).

In this section, I will highlight three key moments in the narration that are perfect examples of how the author achieves this mirror effect for readers, and therefore, further transforms the book into the harrowing *Dream House* itself: the contrast between the overture and prologue, the general use of the second person point of view, and the choose-your-own-adventure chapter.

The first chapter of *In the Dream House*, “*Dream House as Overture*,” reads: I never read prologues. I find them tedious. If what the author has to say is so important, why relegate it to the paratext? What are they trying to hide?” This overture is paradoxically followed by a crucial prologue that shapes the memoir’s meaning and arranges the author’s intentions behind publishing this account. In it, she announces that

she is “enter[ing] into the archive that domestic abuse between partners who share a gender identity is both possible and not uncommon” (4) and denouncing the enforced silence that has limited the sharing of these accounts. She claims, in a straightforward manner, that writing a memoir allows the writer to manipulate time and put their story and others’ into necessary context, context that she was lacking (4). In this prologue, Machado shares the key theses that have accompanied me throughout my reading and ensuing analysis, in my attempt to uncover the expansiveness contained in this text. Nonetheless, the overture is sure to intrigue if not intimidate readers. The contrast between the overture and the weight the prologue carries is so stark that it itself indicates that clear intentions are behind it. Franny Marzuki highlights how readers must accept to enter the space of contradiction that these pages present when entering the memoir (par. 11). In offering this overture and subsequent prologue, Machado is presenting readers with the first blatant contradiction to be encountered in the book: “the reader must accept these contradictions because domestic abuse is often littered with them. The abuser is loving, and then they are not” (Marzuki, par. 12). A chapter which helps to think about this overt paradox eventually ensues, “*Dream House as Unreliable Narrator*,” in which the narrator asks: “Why do we teach girls that their perspectives are inherently untrustworthy?” (166). In the choices made in the memoir’s beginning, Machado seems to be dabbling in her own unreliability, putting readers in the position of those who did not listen or did not believe her before, while challenging us to accept the overture and encouraging us readers to listen differently.

Another feature that Machado uses to mimic the effects of trauma in the reader is the point of view she chooses to use, which shifts from the expected “I” to a daring second-person “you.” Early in the memoir, in order to explain this shift in perspective, the narrator explains:

You were not always just a You. 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. (12)

In this account, the use of the “I” marks the narrator speaking about herself in the future, after the events take place, and the use of the “you” throughout marks the narrator addressing her past self, who suffered at the time. It is not an epistolary “you” as is used in some memoirs but a dissociated and self-reflexive “you” (Millares Young, par. 3). In this way, the author splits her voice in two and the text is thus narrated by a first-person voice addressing a second-person “you,” which corresponds to the first-person voice’s past self. Needless to say, using this point of view in the text conflates the “you” with the reader (Smith & Watson 256), who is thus thrown even deeper into these events, as if they were living them themselves. Everything the reader reads becomes, to a certain degree, directed towards them. The use of the present tense throughout the whole memoir also adds to this effect, which makes the experience of abuse feel ever present. As Gabino Iglesias remarks, “this is Machado's story of suffering and survival, but you are in there, and that makes the house your house, the girlfriend your girlfriend, the pain your pain, and the abuse Machado endured something you must digest and process yourself” (par. 3).

One of the chapters where this feature is used to its full potential is “*Dream House as Inventory*,” where the narrator’s ex-partner “makes you tell her what is wrong with you ... a favorite activity; even better than her telling you what is wrong with you” (126). The chapter is essentially a page-long list of statements like “you’re neurotic and anxious and self-centered,” “you believe you’re good at what you do,” “you’ve had sexual fantasies about the majority of your friends,” “you’re a prude about drugs,” or “you love a good fight” (126-27). In this chapter, the point of view fully disorients readers, in a

narrative sequence that feels ruthless and allows no escape while the narrator's ex-partner speaks to us readers directly, although the voice is actually the narrator's, telling her ex-partner what she wants to hear. In this passage, readers are subjected to the direct effects of this humiliating episode.

Furthermore, another chapter in the book, the effect of which is enhanced by this use of the second person, is "*Dream House as Choose Your Own Adventure*" (189). It is one of the most harrowing parts of the book, that digs deep into the complexities of verbalizing the utter inescapability of the cyclic patterns of abuse. Choose Your Own Adventure books are a popular type of stories generally targeted at children⁸ in which the reader assumes the role of protagonist and is given the option to make choices that will determine the fate of their character. However, Machado uses this story template holding the premise that "it's a form that suggests choice, but (...) in fact there is no choice at all. (...) There's only really one successful path, and then fake paths or paths that would lead you to death or destruction" (*Between the covers*, 01:17:36), much like having to navigate an abuser's reactions to one's actions. In "*Dream House as Choose Your Own Adventure*," the narrator wakes up one morning, after a good night's sleep to a room that "glows with a kind of effervescent contentment" (189), but also to a partner who complains about her tossing and turning all night, keeping her awake. At this point, the narrative offers the reader three choices that mirror the choices that Machado's past self faced on a daily basis: "apologize profusely," "tell her to wake you up next time your elbows touch her in your sleep," or "tell her to calm down," each choice leading them to

⁸ Other contemporary writers have used this genre in fiction for adults, like Kevin Brockmeier's *The Human Soul as a Rube Goldberg Device* (Madras Press, 2012), which Machado draws inspiration from (*Between the Covers*, 01:18:57). Megan Milks' work is also worth mentioning. Milks has explored the potential that the Choose Your Own Adventure format has to offer in their debut novel *Margaret and the Missing Body* (Feminist Press, 2021) and the story "Twins" published in the story collection *Kill Marguerite* (Emergency Press, 2014). Feminist Press published a newly revised and expanded edition of this collection under the title *Slug and Other Stories* in 2021.

a different page. However, if the reader chooses to “tell her to calm down,” they will be chastised: “Are you kidding? You’d never do this. Don’t try to convince any of these people that you’d stand up for yourself for one second. Get out of here” (193). An “END” in capital letters lets the reader know they have lost and propels them forward to page 204, to the next chapter, out of this cyclic section. The chapter reads as if the author was offering her past self an alternative to all those times when she had no choice but to follow what her partner considered to be the “correct” option. The revelation that the only option that allows the narrative to keep moving forward and offering new choices is to “apologize profusely” (189) shows that the chapter is simply an illusion of choice, and that anything but that “correct” option leads to END or to pages that read: “You shouldn’t be on this page. There’s no way to get here from the choices given to you. You flipped here because you got sick of the cycle. You wanted to get out. You’re smarter than me” (194). Reading this section sequentially, as it was not intended to be read, only leads to being cursed at and being reprimanded for your actions, like the narrator’s past self was whenever she did something she should not have done, in the eyes of her abuser. However, even if readers choose “to apologize profusely” (189), to make the “correct” choice in order to move forward, they are eventually sent back to this initial page where the chapter begins, to wake up to a room that “glows with a kind of effervescent contentment” (189) to start the day all over again. If the reader follows the steps the narrator took in the past, they find themselves wallowing in distressing circles, unable to escape the cyclic dynamics of abuse that are recurring and endless. In a moment of compassion for the reader and maybe even her past self, the narrator decides to provide a false option: escaping, leaving the house, jumping in the car and driving far away. However, readers are told that this had never been an option considered in the past. Machado writes that during her time in this relationship, she “ha[d] forgotten that leaving

[was] an option” (204). She compares herself to animals in forest fires, cows and bulls that are burned to carcasses because they do not know how to react to get themselves to safety: “Fire comes, and they just don’t know what to do with themselves” (277).⁹ Choosing the false option is the only way to skip forward to the next chapter, to escape the cyclic choose-your-own-adventure. Still, the narrator reiterates: “That’s not how it happened, but okay. We can pretend. I’ll give it to you, just this once” (203). Readers are thus finally granted exceptional permission to “Turn to page 204.”¹⁰

In the end, to “choose your own adventure” is not an option, because to choose to escape, to choose not to be abused was never one. Even though this chapter can be read as the narrator speaking to her past self, the use of the second person takes full force and immerses the reader in the role of main character, trying to navigate these events and lead themselves to a better fate. This section drops readers in the middle of a room in the Dream House, left to decide which of the three doors to open to move forward. However, readers quickly learn that there might be no option that leads to safety.

While reading the book in a linear manner as is expected, readers (re)visit rooms in the Dream House through the remaining different chapters, in a somewhat claustrophobic, never-ending cycle that undoubtedly mimics “the mania of abuse—its wild emotional shifts, the eponymous cycle” (169). The reader has the option to shut the book at any time, but the short chapters surely push to keep going from one room of the

⁹ This association is repeated throughout the text in other instances when the narrator recalls seeing animals that do not know how to react in adversarial contexts, like her mother’s anxious dog who “could have run. The door was open. But it was as if she didn’t even know what she was looking at” (136); or are blinded by hope for the near future and are not aware of present circumstances, like birds who slam into windows: “they never see the glass coming. They only see the reflection of the sky” (184).

¹⁰ Although the action of turning the page results in the illusion of escape, we never know what might come next. In this case, the following chapter is “*Dream House as L’appel du Vide*,” which begins with “in the pit of it, you fantasize about dying” (204), a statement that might feel as claustrophobic and anxiety-inducing as the whole previous chapter. In this text, the Dream House is erected as a space where every room is potentially darker than the last one, providing us readers with no options of escape.

Dream House to the next, propelling forward with urgency from one event to the next. Or back to a previous one, for that matter.¹¹

The book has more chapters than the house realistically has rooms, and, in a way, I read the chapters' endings as rooms in the dream house being shut just to be opened again through other doors. Readers will notice that Machado intersperses certain theoretical ideas repeatedly throughout the text by means of different chapters used as modes of examining the same idea. For example, "*Dream House as Ambiguity*" (157), "*Dream House as Epiphany*" (129), and "*Dream House as Equivocation*" (229) all address the legal trenches of domestic abuse as a recurring theme in the memoir. "*Dream House as House in Florida*" (63), "*Dream House as Naming the Animals*" (156), and "*Traumhaus as Lipogram*" (173) engage with the feeling of not having the exact words to name your experiences. We readers might read a chapter and realize that we have been there before, and this is precisely one of the explicit instances of the parallel that I am drawing between the structure of the book and the cyclic experience of abuse. The physical Dream House's architectural layout is even revealed to be "a circle" on two occasions (83, 144).¹²

In conclusion, some passages in *In the Dream House* have the ability to evoke feelings of discomfort and distress in readers that might have or have not experienced similar events in their lifetime. In this way, form and content merge as the author's past experience that is being narrated overlaps with the reader's present experience at the time

¹¹ For a more explicit example of this repetition within the cyclic dynamics of abuse, see the series of three chapters titled "*Dream House as Déjà Vu*" (31, 112, 208).

¹² Fragmentation also allows for a discontinued reading of the text. Excluding chapters such as the prologue, epilogue, ending, or the surprise ending, there is no strict linearity to the story's structure. Different themes are repeated in many chapters. Machado has recounted how she actually wrote all the middle chapters out of order, and had her editor put them in a systematical order later on, before publication (internationales literaturfestival berlin, 13:45).

of actually reading the book, which inevitably entails the parallel action of entering the Dream House alongside her.

2.3 The Dream House as experience

After analyzing how the concept of the Dream House both works as a boundless physical setting and as the book itself, the third level that the concept of the Dream House embodies in the text can be understood as the experience of this relationship at large. In this memoir, the Dream House also becomes what is being told. The way that Machado conceives of her memories in the physical Dream House results in chapter headings that reflect about what this relationship ended up being for her at different moments in time, not necessarily linked to the physical Dream House but instead to the sensations that abuse induced: an “accident” (55), “ambition” (56), a “lesson learned” (79), a “warning” (89), a “pool of tears” (219), etc. In other words, the concept of the Dream House is so closely tied to the abusive relationship it hosts that it ultimately becomes this experience of an abusive relationship in and of itself, while it also morphs into different shapes on different levels, as I have shown in the previous two sections (as the text itself and as an indefinite setting). This idea of the Dream House as the experience that is being told can be both read through formal elements and the account’s content, once again embodying this dual purpose or double dimension that so many ideas in the text are explored through.

Firstly, the text highlights the experience of gaslighting that the narrator undergoes, i.e., the process by which she is psychologically manipulated into making her doubt her own reliability, memory, and, ultimately, sanity, which is another common practice in psychological abuse, much like the aforementioned process of dislocation. The process by which someone is gaslighted can be analyzed to further support my reading of the Dream House as the experience of suffering abuse, as a state that the victim’s body

and therefore psyche, exist in. In this way, the house as a physical structure containing the horrors of domestic abuse is conflated with the mind and body of the narrator.

Machado uses an excerpt from the Broadway play *Angel Street* by Patrick Hamilton¹³ as an epigraph, and therefore, foreshadows that the idea contained in the selected passage is an important theme in the memoir (together with memory and silence). The epigraph reads: “Your mind indeed is tired. Your mind so tired that it can no longer work at all. You do not think. You dream. Dream all day long. Dream everything. Dream maliciously and incessantly. Don’t you know that by now?” Part of the meanings of the word “dream” in this text stem from this idea of how memory is affected by gaslighting as a form of domestic abuse: “you do not think. You dream.” You cannot rely on yourself, on your thoughts, on your memories. Nor can you rely on reality because you are simply dreaming.

Critic Parul Sehgal underlines how this fusion of the house and the body, which is what this section aims at arguing, is one of the marks of Machado’s writing: “Merge the house and the woman—watch the woman experience her own body as a haunted house, a place of sudden, inexplicable terrors” (par. 2). In *In the Dream House*, the narrator is both trapped in the house and in her own mind. Machado writes about Paula, the abused wife in *Gaslight*, that “everything she is, is unmade by psychological violence: she is radiant, then hysterical, then utterly haunted. By the end she is a mere husk, floating

¹³ The play’s original title was *Gas Light*, and it was later changed to *Angel Street* before premiering on Broadway in 1941. Perhaps its most eminent screen adaptation is the 1944 film titled *Gaslight*, directed by George Cukor. Machado dedicates several chapters in *In the Dream House* to the film: “*Dream House as 9 Thornton Square*” (107), “*Dream House as Cycle*” (109), and “*Dream House as the Wrong Lesson*” (111). After all, the verb *gaslight* was coined from the denominalization of the noun *gas light*, the object that is used in the film by “a conniving husband (...) in an attempt to make [his wife] 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” (107).

around her opulent London residence like a specter. He doesn't lock her in her room or in the house. He doesn't have to. He turns her mind into a prison" (107-8).

There are several passages in the memoir that serve as clear examples as to how the narrator is gaslighted by her partner, showing how the experience of abuse is mainly located in one's own mind, which thus serves its purpose as the Dream House itself, without requiring an external physical space to effectively work. First, in "Dream House as Lost in Translation," readers witness how the woman in the Dream House takes hold of the narrator's mind and turns it against her (138):

You talk to her. You are clear. You think you are clear. You say what you are thinking and you say it after thinking a lot, and yet when she repeats what you've said back to you nothing makes sense. Did you say that? Really? You can't remember saying that or even thinking it, and yet she is letting you know that it was said, and you definitely meant it that way. (98)

Another similar example comes in "*Dream House as Tragedy of the Commons*:" "Why don't you understand? Don't you understand? You do understand? Then what don't I understand?" (128) In "*Dream House as Demonic Possession*," the narrator begins to doubt her own memory after suffering one of her girlfriend's violent outbursts: "you begin to wonder if you'd exaggerated the events of that trip, whether perhaps you are remembering them wrong" (154). In "*Dream House as Five Lights*" (177), the author illustrates an example of explicit gaslighting as a plot device in an episode of season six of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. In these examples, what is lost along the way is control and the ability to rely on one's memory and self-confidence, showing how emotional manipulation works in situations where there is a strong power imbalance, and thus ultimately transforms the second-person narrator into someone who was constantly "anxious and vibrating like a too-small breed of dog," someone who "cried in front of many people" and "missed readings, parties, the supermoon" (12), because "clarity is an

intoxicating drug, and you spent almost two years without it, believing you were losing your mind, believing you were the monster” (257).

Apart from instances of gaslighting, there are other chapters which exemplify how the Dream House becomes the experience that is being recounted to readers. For example, “*Dream House as Stopgap Measure*” reads:

She gets into your MFA program and will leave the Dream House to come to Iowa City. She talks about moving in with you. You coo with excitement over the phone, but when you hang up you feel like you did when you were a kid and your brother launched a baseball into your nose: warm blood down the back of your throat; milk, and metal. (213)

One of the keys to understanding the relevance of this chapter lies in its title. At the time of the call, the distance that has been keeping them apart and making them depend on long car rides to see each other is being threatened. The fact that the narrator was relying on this distance as a stopgap solution to her suffering or to their relationship further proves that it is not the physical Dream House alone that terrifies the narrator. What the narrator fears is all that this partner brings along. The terror that this phone call generates indicates that the narrator is suffering from actions that do not necessarily take place in the physical Dream House but are instead directly related to the experience of being in a relationship with this partner. The caller might “leave the Dream House,” but the narrator will not; she will still be locked inside, even at a distance of hundreds of miles, because she is locked in the space created by their relationship. The ongoing cycle that is abuse does not allow for any stopgaps. There are no pauses or in-between stages; if there seem to be any, they are revealed to be merely illusions. Another example in which the narrator feels such terror far from the physical Dream House is in “*Dream House as Sci-Fi Thriller*,” when she falls asleep watching a movie with her roommates and wakes up “feel[ing] so content (...) in that space, in the moment after waking” (206).

However, even though that moment might have felt like a “pocket of safety and oblivion” (207), it was just masked as a false illusion, before “you remembered the phone,” full of missed calls and text messages, and “remembered your entire life” (207).

Further examples that support my argument that the experience that is being told also becomes the frightening Dream House are linked to the immediate effects of and reactions to abuse rather than to a specific location, as I argued in subsection 2.1. In “Dream House as Diagnosis,” “you feel sick to your stomach almost constantly” (117), and in “Dream House as the River Lethe,” “nothing is happening, but something is wrong” (99). Clearly, something *was* happening, since the narrator has this feeling often, every time that she senses that her partner’s “voice is controlled, measured, like a dog whose tail has gone rigid” (99). The narrator offers readers a guide on “how to read her [partner’s] coldness:” “She is preoccupied. She is unhappy. She is unhappy with you. You did something and now she’s unhappy, and you need to find out what it is so she will stop being unhappy” (98). Later that same night, after a violent episode, the narrator has to force herself to “sit with this,” to not “forget this is happening” (102), in the present moment. At one point, the narrator recounts a scene by pointing out the mistakes she made during the night, in the opinion of her partner. She agrees to go to a concert at a local bar, even though she does not want to: first mistake. She starts to feel exhausted: second mistake. She relaxes when her partner reacts positively to her letting her know she is tired and needs to go home: third mistake (148). This use of mistakes as a unit of measure marks just how unhealthy the present situation and circumstances are. The narrator’s actions become completely surveyed and policed by her partner. Feeling exhausted and relaxing, especially relaxing, will inevitably end in punishment.

There are other instances in the story where the narrator highlights the hope she has for a nicer future. In them, she avoids admitting her partner’s abusive nature and

instead defines the present moment through positive affirmations. By raising the plausibility of a positive future, the text underlines just how wrong the present situation is. In “*Dream House as House in Iowa*,” after a Halloween party gone wrong, the narrator thinks to herself “this will be a good story, one day. (...) Maybe next Halloween will be better” (97). In “*Dream House as I Love Lucy*,” she tries to convince herself through denial that “this is funny! It’s so funny! It could be funny! One day this will be funny! Won’t it?” (119). Later, after boarding a plane, “you swear to yourself that you’re going to tell someone how bad it is, you’re gonna stop pretending like none of these things are happening, but by the time the ground is coming toward you again you are already polishing your story” (153). Finally, in “*Dream House as a Lesson in the Subjunctive*” (this chapter title already pointing at what *could* be) reads:

Yes, there are spiders in the basement, and yes, the floors are so uneven you can feel them pushing against your right leg up against your torso if you run too quickly from room to room, (...) and yes the couch is so old you can feel the springs in your back, and yes she wants to grow pot in the basement, and yes every room has bad memories, but sure, the two of you could raise children here. (123)

What is implicit in these examples is that the narrator communicates that there is something deeply unsettling about the experience she is living without directly asserting her girlfriend’s abusive behavior. Instead, she attempts to convince herself that good could become of all this suffering. It is also interesting to note how, in this last passage, this act of wishful self-convincing works as a substitute for leaving or even considering the option to leave the Dream House. These passages show how a traumatic experience can be incapacitating, and the narrator has no choice but to visualize a future in the Dream House, because any other alternative is rendered inconceivable.

Furthermore, it is interesting to examine whether this conception of the Dream House as an experience also encompasses the time after she broke up with her abusive

partner and has permanently left the original Dream House or not. This raises an additional question: can it, then, ever completely be escaped? The experience of trauma comprises, by definition, the long-term effects it leaves on the victim. If we consider the Dream House to be defined as the traumatic experience that the narrator lives through, then the Dream House or, at least, a shadow of it, can never actually be fully overcome. The text offers glimpses into this time in the future which exemplify just how the narrator is still very much located in this Dream-House-as-experience despite the breakup from her ex-partner. There are certain actions she cannot help, and even though she is finally free of this relationship, “you [still] cry at meals, you cry in the streets” (223), and “soon you find yourself paddling in your own tears, again” (224). In “*Dream House as Proof*” the narrator affirms that “[her] memory has something to say about the way trauma has altered [her] body’s DNA, like an ancient virus” (258). In “*Dream House as Void*,” “it is hard to describe the space that yawns open in your life after she is gone. (...) You have to practice ignoring [your phone]. You keep reminding yourself that you are accountable to no one” (238). During a trip to Chicago with friends, she cannot stop checking her phone, “touching [her] pocket reflexively, wondering if she’s been trying to call [her]” (223). In response to a dinner proposition from “this random guy,” “you agree, even though you don’t really want to see him. You even agree to pick him up from his hotel—his request—although you don’t want to do that, either.” She realizes that “you’re doing what he’s asking you, the same way you’d respond to the woman in the Dream House” (245). Finally, in “*Dream House as Talisman*,” these reactions shift over to the present-day first-person narrator, who also suffers the effects of trauma. She says, referring to the time after, when she still had a year left of graduate studies in Iowa, “I saw the woman from the Dream House often; on the streets and at bookstores, making the town her own. I had not yet trained my body to resist the nauseated panic those sightings brought me”

(254). Therefore, the Dream House still exists in the present and has not been effectively contained in the second-person past. The concept of the Dream House as the experience being told covers both the past and the present, incorporating also the consequences of psychological abuse in this time after their relationship ended. The text itself concludes that the Dream House is “undead” (163). Conceiving of the Dream House as the experience of abuse at large and the effects it leaves on the victim ultimately makes it impossible to escape because it has no clear physical boundaries.

By analyzing how the Dream House functions simultaneously as a physical location, as the memoir itself, and as the experience of abuse, I have shown how Machado further illustrates the claim that “the Dream House was never just the Dream House” (82) through the memoir’s formal structure and content. By denying the Dream House any limits, the narrator is left in transience, outside of any fixed stable structures, unhoused. This movement to the margins represents how the narrator’s story cannot inhabit the widely recognized fixed narratives of domestic violence. In this way, the Dream House, like her account, eludes recognition at first glance.

Machado writes that the Dream House was, all at once, “a convent of promise (...) a den of debauchery (...) a haunted house (...) a prison (...) a dungeon of memory” (82). It was also, simultaneously, as the chapter headers indicate, a lipogram (173), a death wish (257), a cabin in the woods (262), a cliché (267), a musical (120), or *Mrs. Dalloway* (221), to name a few. It is also, in the past and in the present, the experience of abuse. The textual form that is used to recount the events also becomes the Dream House for readers. Machado specifically alludes to this all-encompassing quality of the Dream House in “*Dream House as Schrödinger’s Cat*” (244). I read this text and ask myself, what *is* the Dream House?, and, in this chapter, the text responds that it might not provide

a specific answer: “there is a box you can open to find the answer, but with the lid closed, the answer is all of these things, all at once” (244).

3. Archival silence, fairy tales, and footnotes

In the previous section of this paper, I have shown how Machado uses the versatility of the concept of the “Dream House” to organize the formal structure of the text and explore the effects and implications of the narrator’s traumatic experience. As I’ve argued, *In the Dream House* subverts initial reader expectations and, instead of providing readers with the expected linear structure that tends to be associated with memoir, takes the form of a fragmented text that enables readers to enter the limitless space that is the Dream House, as domestic space and as experience, alongside the narrator’s past self. After attempting to answer the question “what is the Dream House?,” another question arises: What is, then, *In the Dream House*? What is its meaning taking into account the elusive quality of the Dream House, its inescapability, the multiple narrative levels, and the process of unhousing?

In this brief second part of my analysis, I want to answer this question while drawing attention to a recurring element that is also interestingly tied to the form of the text: references to fairy tales and classic tales.¹⁴ The abundance of these references in the memoir led me to wonder what conclusions I could draw from the text if I read it through the lens of storytelling, fiction(s), and folktales. I argue that, in this memoir, the use (and repetition) of traditional storytelling tropes and references to folktale motifs can be read as a means by which to build context around an account of queer domestic abuse that had previously been suppressed as a result of archival silence. This context thus undoes the

¹⁴ I will be using the terms “folktale,” “classic tale,” and “fairy tale” interchangeably in this section for convenience. The widely discussed nuanced differences that have been established between them in the vast field of folklore studies are not relevant to Machado’s memoir or this present work. For more on the classification and differences between folktales, fairy tales, and myth, see Bettelheim, Bruno. *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, Vintage, 2010; Zipes, Jack. *Fairy Tale as Myth/Myth as Fairy Tale*, University Press of Kentucky, 1994; and Sellers, Susan. *Myth and Fairy Tale in Contemporary Women’s Fiction*, Palgrave, 2001.

process of unhousing that takes place as a result of the effects of the Dream House, by building a new housing structure where her story can be freely told and is listened to.

This memoir, despite being a depiction of the process of involuntary unhousing that the narrator goes through, also works to simultaneously revert this process, by building a new house while identifying parts of her account in an archive from which it was erased. In this way, the memoir itself symbolizes a safe space to tell this story, in which the narrator's "private dramas" (86) are brought to the public realm, in an attempt to serve as context for other people who might be in search of it, as the narrator's past self once was.

3.1 Archival silence and *In the Dream House* as evidence

One of this memoir's main concerns is how one should grapple with past experiences for which one has no language or context, as a consequence of the erasure prompted by processes of archival silence. In the experience of domestic abuse that Machado recounts in this memoir, she denounces how difficult it was to find accounts of experiences like hers, once she had understood that lesbian relationships could be abusive. Something that initially would have seemed impossible, because it challenged the long-established "gendered roles of villain and victim" (158), soon became her reality, since her partner "is the first woman who yokes herself to you with the label *girlfriend*. Who seems proud of that fact. And so when she walks into your office and tells you that *this is what it's like to date a woman*, you believe her. And why wouldn't you? You trust her, and you have no context for anything else" (48). As the narrator plunged deeper into the reality of being a victim of domestic abuse, she was haunted by questions she did not even know how to formulate (17), because, when she was young, she was not aware that "you [could] be hurt by people who look just like you" (266). However, these remained unasked while

the answers presented themselves. After knowing nothing about what healthy or bad relationships looked like (32), she “came of age, then, in the Dream House, wisdom practically smothering [her] in [her] sleep” (37). Part of the explanation to this hollow in the archive of domestic violence corresponding to the experiences of queer folks lies in the unchangeability of certain narratives. In the societal context of the publication of Machado’s memoir, domestic violence has been constructed as a fixed collective narrative, and the specter of this depiction made the author “wish [my abuser] was a man because then at least it could reinforce ideas people had about men” (153), on more than one occasion. As she states in “*Dream House as Murder Mystery*,” when a crime has been committed, “no one pays attention to the blonde woman” (210). For this reason, when she tries “to talk about the Dream House afterward,” people wonder: “We don’t know for certain that it’s as bad as she says. (...) Maybe things were bad, but it’s changed? (...) was it really abusive? (...) *Is that even possible?*” (255, emphasis mine). Coming back to the idea of archival silence and unhousing, in these exchanges, her experience is undermined and, therefore, relegated to the margins. Machado is adamant about suggesting that folks (including us readers) would doubt or would have doubted less if her abuser was a man.¹⁵

¹⁵ I recently shared this book with a colleague who, after reading it, told me she had really enjoyed it but stressed that she did not consider it to actually be a depiction of abuse. I was baffled by her conclusion regarding a book written through such outlined authorial intention around just how much stories of queer intimate partner violence are not recognized as such. My colleague explained her thoughts: “women and girlfriends are just like that sometimes.” The narrator in *In the Dream House* explicitly states that she often wished she could die (204), how she had a pair of shoes thrown at her during a fight (143), how she had to sit through a monologue of insults and *fuck yous* that “last[ed] for the entire drive home” (142), and still readers will doubt if her experience actually entails abuse. My colleague was not hesitant to label it “abuse” if she instead imagined a man in the position of the abuser. This reaction is the consequence of normalizing abuse and essentializing misogyny around the nature of female relationships. Additionally, the fact that a review of *In the Dream House* by Kary Waldman that was published in *The New Yorker* headlined it as a “toxic relationship” also proves interesting to think about how the language we use constructs and deforms our conception of interrelationships around us. Labeling the woman in the Dream House as “toxic” instead of “abusive” entirely misses the memoir’s point and simultaneously points at the need to make these accounts heard and shared more broadly.

At the same time, the narrator shows how complicated it is to detach from the traditionally perceived fantasies that are deeply ingrained in the quintessential models of female companionship. The relationship depicted in the memoir failed to fulfill what she anticipated a lesbian relationship ought to fulfill, according to the popularized dangerous misconception of female relationships as utopias. This idea is widely fueled by the assumption “that women without men are naturally non-violent” (Shapiro, 16). In “*Dream House as Fantasy*,” Machado writes that “to find desire, love, everyday joy without men (...) is a pretty decent working definition of paradise” (124), and that is why she states that this particular fantasy is “the defining cliché of female queerness” (124). In regard to “acknowledging the insufficiency of this idealism” (124) within the lesbian community and thus revealing that this blissful utopia is nothing but an attractive illusion, Shapiro further writes: “it is so hard for us to hear that some lesbians live, not in paradise, but in a hell of fear and violence” (qtd. in Machado, 124). In 1988, Amy Edgington posed a question for the future: “What will it do to our utopian dyke dreams to admit the existence of this violence?” (qtd. in Machado, 124) This preconceived notion that lesbian partnerships are, by definition, painless and uncomplicated considerably reduces the discursive spaces available to formulate experiences, like Machado’s, that diverge from this illusory understanding of relationships in which there are no men involved.

Not only is it difficult to address abuse within the lesbian community, but Machado also expresses the struggles in addressing queer intimate partner violence to folks outside of the queer community, since “the last thing queer women need is bad fucking PR” (153). In *the Dream House* recounts a fear of revealing the queer community’s “dirty laundry” (176), haunted by the specter of the lunatic lesbian stereotype (145), the saintly model minority trope (50), and the moral demands that are imposed upon queer folks. In one of the most impressive essayistic chapters of the

memoir, Machado explores this fear of having to be perfect in the eyes of normativity by advocating for more representations in mainstream media of queer villainy. About queer villains, and the “problem and pleasure and audacity of them” (49), Machado writes:

We give space to queers to be—as characters, as real people—human beings. They don’t have to be metaphors for wickedness and depravity or icons of conformity and docility. They can be *what they are*. We deserve to have our wrongdoing represented as much as our heroism, because when we refuse wrongdoing as a possibility for a group of people, we refuse their humanity. (...) Some of us are unkind and some of us are confused and some of us sleep with the wrong people and some of us make bad decisions and some of us are murderers. And it sounds terrible but it is, in fact, freeing: the idea that *queer* does not equal good or pure or right. It is simply a state of being—one subject to politics, to its own social forces, to larger narratives, to moral complexities of every kind. (50-2, emphasis in original)

In the recent memoir *Body Work: The Radical Power of Personal Narrative*, which parallely fed many of the thoughts I had while reading *In the Dream House*, Melissa Febos makes a very similar point. In the essay “Mind Fuck: Writing Better Sex,” which explores how queer sex is written, textualized, and depicted in contemporary literature, the author underlines the dangers of pushing only positive representations of the experiences of people who are part of marginalized communities. Febos warns:

The idealization and marketing of our marginalized sex experiences as wholesome and perfect is a great argument against the argument for our depravity. But it also erases so much of our humanity. Queerness does not have to be healthy to be human. (...) Ultimately, I think that representing the full range of our humanity is the best argument against its erasure. (62)

Therefore, although it might be terrifying to talk about wrongdoing in one’s own community, *In the Dream House* manifests precisely the need to do so, in order to salvage queerness from these conversations around minority anxiety for what it actually is, “imperfect, but yours” (125).

In the Dream House works as a testimony and evidence to the narrator's experience with her partner. Evidence is a crucial concept in this memoir, since Machado herself found it very difficult to find accounts of queer intimate partner abuse that did not culminate in extreme violence. The memoir does in fact include many references to recorded cases of abuse in lesbian relationships, but these references mainly consist of legal texts and detailed reports of murder trials. About this blatant gap in the archive, Machado writes: "the nature of archival silence is that certain people's narratives and their nuances are swallowed by history; we see only what pokes through because it is sufficiently salacious for the majority to pay attention" (161). Since "the legal system does not provide protection against (...) verbal, emotional, psychological" (161) abuse, i.e., experiences that generally cannot leave a material trace of evidence of the events, the narrator ashamedly¹⁶ confesses:

You'll wish she had hit you. Hit you hard enough that you'd have bruised in grotesque and obvious ways, hard enough that you took photos, hard enough that you went to the cops, hard enough that you could have gotten the restraining order you wanted. Hard enough that the common sense that evaded you for the entirety of your time in the Dream House had been knocked into you. (257)

In this way, the memoir itself becomes the only material evidence that Machado holds from her experience, all that was left of her relationship: the memories, the truth of her story (even though she is the only one with access to it at the time), her experience at large. However, since these "things that happen to us (...) are beyond the purview of even a perfectly executed legal system" (258), Machado turns to Muñoz's concept of ephemera as "the key to queering evidence," i.e., "the ways in which we prove queerness and read queerness" (qtd. in Machado, 258). What Machado is left with are these ephemera, these traces in her memory, these remaining effects of trauma: "the rancid smell of anger. The

¹⁶ She explicitly states that she is aware that this wish she confesses is "demented in the extreme" (257).

metal tang of fear in the back of my throat” (259). If her fear could be numerically measured, “the recorded sound waves of her speech on one axis and a precise measurement of the flood of adrenaline and cortisol in my body on the other” (259) would be ideal evidence for anyone who ever doubted. At certain points in her account, the narrator makes herself hold onto this ephemera: “sit with this, you think. Don’t forget this is happening. Tomorrow, you will probably push this away. But here, remember” (102). Despite probably having pushed some events aside, she strived to “write down the little stories I did remember” (170), as much as she could, which account for a lot in this text. *In the Dream House* serves as proof to all of those who did not believe her, who asked “is that even possible?” (255). These ideas about evidence and its legal and symbolic value culminate in the heart-stopping chapter “*Dream House as Epiphany*,” which is composed of one single sentence: “most types of domestic abuse are completely legal” (129). Many of the abuser’s actions are acts of psychological manipulation and abuse that therefore do not leave material traces that would be necessary in order to report them, in the current legal system that is in place. Since they are not generally reported, they are not addressed nor discussed in conversations around domestic violence, and vice versa: since they do not surface in these conversations, victims are led to believe that their experiences do not necessarily entail abuse and thus will probably never report them as such.

In order to widen the archive of intimate partner violence, accounts that do not follow the more familiar heterosexual patterns and that incorporate psychological abuse need to be highlighted, so that other victims are not left out of these conversations. Through the publication of this memoir, Machado wishes to enter into this archive (4) and create a new context so that other victims have representation to resort to in order to comprehend their experience(s), unlike herself in the past. *In the Dream House* collects

evidence from which to build a new structure where to house her account, and by extension, others that are similar to it. At the same time, to support this building, Machado also searches for context she did not have at the time within which to mirror her story. The publication of this memoir has given her account a concrete form by which to enter the limited but now growing archive of accounts of domestic abuse between same-sex partners,¹⁷ and the use of the formal elements I will analyze in this section put the author and her story “into necessary context” (4).

3.2 Fairy tales and footnotes in *In the Dream House*

In order to put her story into this “necessary context” (4), Machado cleverly turns to the vast archive of popular folktales and fairy tales. In the memoir, these references stand out as a system of footnotes that are interspersed in many of the memoir’s chapters, and together they conform yet another unexpected formal element that the author includes in the text, closely tied to the content they carry. Moreover, Machado, in this way, broadly inserts genre fiction (understood here as works that adhere to a specific literary genre, in this case myth or fantasy) into a book of non-fiction, once again toying with readers’ expectations for a memoir.

In the Dream House includes multiples references to the *Motif-index of Folk-Literature: A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Mediaeval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-Books, and Local Legends* by Stith Thompson. Thompson compiled this six-volume index that was published by Indiana University Press (in Bloomington) between 1955 and 1958, which catalogues thousands

¹⁷ In the memoir’s afterword, Machado specifically acknowledges essays by Conner Habib (“If You Ever Did Write Anything about Me, I’d Want It to Be about Love”), Jane Eaton Hamilton (“Never Say I Didn’t Bring You Flowers”), and Melissa Febos (“Abandon Me”), and the poetry collection *For Your Own Good* by Leah Horlick (Caitlin Press, 2015).

of literary motifs from folktales worldwide. It is considered a standard key tool for folklorists in the analysis and study of folktales, often used alongside the *Aarne–Thompson–Uther Index*. Since Machado references the latter catalogue only twice in *In the Dream House*, I have centered on the references to Thompson’s motif-index to select examples for this subsection.

Thompson’s motif-index compiles thousands of literary motifs, organized into 23 hypernymic categories: *A. Mythological Motifs, B. Animal Motifs, C. Motifs of Taboo, D. Magic, E. The Dead, F. Marvels, G. Ogres, H. Tests, J. The Wise and the Foolish, K. Deceptions, L. Reversals of Fortune, M. Ordaining the Future, N. Chance and Fate, P. Society, Q. Rewards and Punishments, R. Captives and Fugitives, S. Unnatural Cruelty, T. Sex, U. The Nature of Life, V. Religion, W. Traits of Character, X. Humor, Z. Miscellaneous Groups of Motifs*. Those that Machado references the most often are of types C and T, which relate directly to the experience of navigating an abusive relationship. Then, entries are divided into more detailed categories and subsequent subcategories, always following a thematical order while moving from one motif to the next. For example, the entry *E102. Resuscitation by magic liquid* contains the following subentries: *E102.1. Resuscitation by magic milk* and *E102.2. Resuscitation by sprinkling ambrosia*. A lengthier example is entry *C423. Taboo: revealing the marvelous*, which includes the subentries *C423.1. Taboo: disclosing source of magic power, C423.2. Taboo: speaking of extraordinary sight, C423.3. Taboo: revealing experiences in other world, C423.4. Taboo: uttering secrets heard from spirits, C423.5. Taboo: revealing sacred mysteries, and C423.6. Taboo: telling children about lake monster*.

The footnotes that refer to these motif types appear interspersed throughout the text, as if the author were citing direct source material consulted at the time of writing this account. Machado states that, in the writing process, the motif-index did indeed prove

useful to “find what [she] need[ed] to find” in her account (internationales literaturfestival berlin, 18:07). For example, in “*Dream House as Folktale Taxonomy*,” Machado lists examples from Andersen fairy tales in which violence against women is enacted in the form of imposing silence, which recalls the process through which archival silence affected accounts like hers. Here, Machado references motif type S163: “Mutilation: cutting (tearing) out tongue” (38). A few chapters later, when the abuser tells the narrator “you’re not allowed to write about this” and she nods automatically, she thinks “fear makes liars of us all.” Machado then references motif type C420.2, “Taboo: not to speak about a certain happening” (47). When her partner declares that her therapist told her she did not need therapy anymore, a footnote referencing type X905.4 adds more nuance to the scene: “The liar: ‘I have no time to lie today’; lies nevertheless” (175). Earlier in the account, when her abuser breaks up with her other girlfriend at the time, type T92.4 is footnoted: “Girl mistakenly elopes with the wrong lover” (75). This note acts as a warning or foreshadowing for the reader which Machado was able to include at the time of writing. At the time of the lived experience, the narrator had no way of knowing that her chosen partner was “the wrong lover.”

Machado also includes several more lighthearted footnotes such as when her partner “pulls the sheet away from [her] body” one night that the narrator is sleeping on the sofa. Type E279.3 is footnoted: “ghost pulls bedclothing from sleeper” (143). When the narrator experiences pregnancy symptoms, perfectly knowing that she cannot possibly be pregnant, Machado chooses to list (in the footnote) the forty-one conception subtypes that are collected in the motif-index, including type T511.1.5: “conception from eating lemon;” type T522: “conception from falling rain;” type T516: “conception through dream;” and type T532.1.4: “conception by smell of cooked dragon heart” (188). In other worlds, any of these possibilities might have been able to explain her symptoms.

The use of footnotes can be read as a means to build context around her story and find her experience mirrored in a dominant archive. We readers, from the vantage point of the narrator's future, are given a guide to navigate the recounted events and make sense of them as we read them in these explanatory notes. The importance of this physical act of checking footnotes, of straying from the main body of the text to focus on smaller script at the bottom of the page, knowing that it will provide some type of explanation, context, or further support to the main reading, is additionally highlighted by other types of footnotes that Machado includes. Apart from the references to folktale motifs, Machado inserts personal anecdotes from the narrator's past (95), citations from secondary sources (124), and quotes from other literature about domestic abuse (146). By means of these copious footnotes, Machado provides readers with the support and context that her past self would have liked to have had access to at the time of the lived experience. While an excessive use of footnotes might seem potentially distracting to some readers, I believe that the abundance of them in *In the Dream House* is another conscious choice on the author's part in order to stress the impact of the interconnection between form and content in this text.

By identifying parts of her story within this archive of folklore,¹⁸ I argue that the author is therefore demanding that her story be recognized, as she has textualized her experience by equating parts of it to literary motifs in this vast archive. This strategy entails carving her experience into a dominant discourse and thus makes it readable, and, by extension, intelligible and recognizable. Machado aims at widening the archive of

¹⁸ A full analysis of how Machado incorporates other references to the genre and archive of folklore and fairy tales escapes the scope of this work. However, it is interesting to note that references to fairy tales and other mythical fictions are present not only in these references to Thompson's motif-index, but also in chapters that are written following specific conventions. "*Dream House as The Queen and the Squid*" (232) is written in the form of a beast fable, while "*Dream House as the Pool of Tears*" (219) and "*Dream House as Apartment in Chicago*" (223) include passages written following the structure of very well-known sections of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

accounts of queer intimate partner violence by identifying her story in another archive, indicating thus how context was there all along, hidden in plain sight. Some might consider it paradoxical that *In the Dream House* strives to tell a new story by means of widely-recognized narrative tropes,¹⁹ but this is yet another feature of the memoir that serves the dual purpose of linking form and content. Amalgamating pre-existing contexts becomes the vehicle through which to devise a new approach to tell this story.²⁰

Before concluding this section, I will consider the weight that the footnotes that reference category C motifs carry, in relation to the concept of taboo. Taboo is closely tied to the dynamics of the events that are depicted in this memoir, considering that the threatening quality of taboo organizes the power imbalance that occurs within an abusive relationship. In these types of relationships, the abuser tips the power scale in their favor in large part through the creation and imposition of taboo, and subsequent punishments or, at least, the threatening possibility of them. This is the reason why our narrator frequently makes what she calls “mistakes,” though sometimes she is unaware of them (90), because in the experience that is the Dream House, every action must be measured. Navigating a present reality based on taboo implies regularly “tiptoeing around unseen land mines” (79).

Their relationship is constructed upon dynamics around taboo from the start. Her ex-partner claimed that “this is what it’s like to date a woman” (48), but also warned her that “you are not allowed to write about this, ever” (47). From the beginning, the narrator

¹⁹ This strategy is used not only in the system of footnotes that permeate the text but also in the chapter headings that Machado uses. Some chapters are written through the lens of broadly recognized literary genres such as bildungsroman (32), noir (48), high fantasy (76), American gothic (86), or murder mystery (209), among others.

²⁰ However, even those experiences and tropes recollected in dominant archives are the product of selection and exclusion. For more on the pre-conceived “classic” nature of fairy tales, see Zipes, Jack. *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*, Routledge, 2011, where he considers that the stories that society widely recalls as classics “are neither ageless nor universal, but the products of a particular historical and economic conjunction” (Sellers, 13).

is made to understand that there is something inherently taboo about their relationship although she does not yet exactly know what. In some cases, as these example footnotes indicate, the taboo is not necessarily identified from the start. Instead, the narrator learns about it after being punished for breaking it. For example, in the chapter “*Dream House as Diagnosis*,” when the narrator feels “sick to [her] stomach almost constantly,” type C940 is referenced: “sickness or weakness for breaking taboo” (117). In another example, after the narrator’s phone stops working after she floods it with tears, type C967 indicates that “valuable object turns to worthless, for breaking taboo” (219). Moreover, when the narrator realizes “how much [she] sing[s]” after “she tells you to stop singing,” the footnote is clear: “type C481, Taboo: singing” (120). Later in the memoir, when the narrator asks her abuser why she is not worried about the fact that she seems to have no memory of past violent episodes, Machado notes: “type C411.11, Taboo: Asking for reason of an unusual action” (175). This indicates that no matter whether the abuser remembers or not, her actions must not be questioned on any grounds.

It is also interesting to note how footnotes referencing taboo motifs continue to appear in the memoir even after the relationship is over. Considering that she is still locked in the Dream House post-break-up, as I argue in section 2.3, she thus continues to navigate the taboos that permeated this part of her life. The space in which her actions were limited by her relationship with her first girlfriend proves difficult to escape. The day they break up, the narrator injures herself while decorating her dining room to host a party for one of her professors and the footnotes identifies “Type C949.4, Bleeding from breaking taboo” (221). When she realizes that she struggles to imagine having sex with other people and “masturbation is near impossible,” the corresponding footnote reads: “Type C974, Magic power lost by breaking taboo” (238). Finally, when the narrator tries “to talk about the Dream House afterward,” and some people “politely nod while slowly

closing the door behind their eyes” (255), the last and maybe most imperative taboo in the memoir is revealed: “Type C423.3, Taboo: revealing experiences in other world” (255).

This last taboo motif is representative of the tie between the functioning of taboo and the account at large. Taboo is essentially an action or an idea that is prohibited to be enacted or enunciated by social or moral norms. However, the act of labeling something as taboo inherently entails pinpointing it and revealing it, to a certain degree. Thus, the concept of taboo both acts to cover and uncover simultaneously. In other words, the very existence of taboo as a concept makes explicit that there is in fact something that must be hidden or covered from the public eye, according to social norms. As the aforementioned last taboo motif footnote indicates, the narrator’s relationship is taboo within the queer community. It is also taboo in the context of heteronormative social customs, not only as a lesbian relationship but as a case of domestic abuse within a lesbian relationship. The publication of this account is Machado’s defiance of the command “you are not allowed to write about this, ever” (47). “This” becomes something that Machado strives to free from the veil of social shame placed over it to cover it.

To conclude, I have argued how part of the effects from the trauma produced by the experience depicted in the text stem greatly in part because it was not recognized as a real, possible experience, and thus had to be covered and silenced as taboo. As Machado writes, at the time of the lived experience, “[her] brain [was] scrambling for an explanation” (64) but she did not have “language to put to it” (65). She “didn’t know what it meant to be afraid of another woman” (162) because she had no access to other accounts. Machado addresses readers: “Do you see now? Do you understand?” (162).

In *In the Dream House*, Machado searches for ways to insert her story into a context of possibility and recognition by using fairy tale tropes, which refer back to stories

that are widely familiar to many readers. The text thus merges form and content again to express these experiences, fill the silence, and serve as evidence to bring stories like hers into wider conversations about domestic violence. Writing within the framework of folklore, fairy tales, and other popular fiction(s) ultimately becomes a strategy to find and locate her story in a pre-existing context, in an attempt to retrieve her experience from the margins, and thus revert this process of “unhousing.” This action serves as a means to actively resist archival silence through a text which becomes concrete evidence of the events told and can serve as a resource for readers and other victims. In the *Dream House* and in the house of the ruler, power imbalances and archival violence make sure that the victim, and any other “unhoused” subjects, are dislocated, unsettled, and, literally, at a loss for words. *In the Dream House* strives to conceive of an alternative, by assembling a new space in which their experiences can be visibilized.

The daring system of fairy tale footnotes serves as clever building blocks in order to create a context around her account and search for mirror-representations of her experience in a wider archive. Through this, the memoir reveals that there are in fact no new stories, and those which have been designated as “impossible” may become possible if told in different ways. By extension, there are no new subjects, only new ways, as Machado proposes, to grapple with past failures and recognize that they deserve a space. However, she adds, “queers need to take this issue seriously, because no one else [will]” (231). Machado takes it upon herself to find and offer this new way of telling by creating a new symbolic house through the publication of this memoir, where accounts like hers are rescued from the margins, barriers between the public and the private are dissolved, and the traumatic experiences that a domestic space can entail are accepted and shared widely. Finally, after years of feeling adrift, unhoused and silenced in the margins, she can finally feel grounded and at home.

Other queer contemporary authors have written and are writing extensively on the exclusion of certain subjects from fixed narratives or literary genres that have been exclusively produced for and by subjects established as normatively legitimate. For example, Milks, in their 2021 coming-of-age novel *Margaret and the Mystery of the Missing Body*, comments on the exclusion and displacement of queer subjectivities from certain narratives: “I seek to haunt narratives of the young girl—at least, the ones I grew up with—with the queer and genderqueer and trans girls and maybe-not-girls they leave out: so many missing bodies. . . . Hovering between presence and absence, barely visible, inchoate, not knowing where they fit or if they fit anywhere at all” (255). Milks is commenting on and within a very different context, but their core idea is revealed to be the same as Machado’s: records, archives, fixed narratives, and history at large are full of “missing” bodies and subjectivities, who are left to crowd the margins. Through the publication of *In the Dream House*, Machado, to a large extent, condemns the erasure of queer individuals from the conversations around intimate partner violence. There are “so many missing bodies” that have been barred from the outset and not taken into account in the conversations about domestic violence and psychological abuse: the bodies of “queer abusers, and the queer abused” (Machado, 3) that seem to be hovering between recognition and invisibility, “not knowing where they fit” (Milks, 255).

It must be noted that, in her attempt at actively building a new space to enlarge the reduced archive of queer intimate partner violence, Machado never attempts to speak to the experiences of all queer people, because their experiences are by no means interchangeable. She additionally explicitly states how these conversations within the queer community still remain inadequate: by “devaluing the narratives of non-white victims, insufficiently addressing nonmonosexuality, [and] rarely taking noncisgendered people into account” (159). She also notes that “if there are failures within these pages,

they are mine and mine alone” (280), stressing that she does not wish to speak for queer people at large, but only for her individual experience as “a more or less cis-gendered queer woman” (279).

However, by offering this personal account that is *In the Dream House*, Machado does seem to be stressing a claim that Milks concludes with: “And finally I see: my body wasn’t missing; it’s been here all along” (Milks 257). Therefore, these subjectivities have not been “missing,” precisely, but have been excluded and removed from predominant narratives. By extension, other “unhoused” bodies have been too. Machado concludes: “Even if the dominant culture considers you an anomaly, that doesn’t mean you can’t be common, common as fucking dirt” (266).

The experience of abuse had cut out the narrator’s tongue in the original *Dream House*, but one of the last footnotes, in “*Dream House as Epilogue*,” signals “Type D2161.3.6.1, Magic restoration of cut-out tongue” (276), once the narrator starts to share her account: “I need to tell you a story” (243). The agency that the narrator was deprived of in her abusive relationship is finally re-attained and her account finishes with the sentence: “My tale goes only to here; it ends, and the wind carries it to you” (278). This choice of words alludes to the tradition of oral storytelling in order to make stories circulate. Thus, Machado releases her tale to the public, after building missing necessary context around it and searching for her experience in a pre-existing dominant archive in order to add her story to the smaller archive of representations of queer intimate partner abuse accounts. By adding to this archive, the author builds context not only for her personal experience but also for those who have come before and who will come after. In its ambition as a “very rough, working attempt at a canon” to be “useful as a resource” (280) for future additions to this archive, the memoir that is *In the Dream House* thus acts as a means to achieve both “individual and collective self-historicization” (Lahusen, 634).

4. Conclusions

In *In the Dream House*, the process of what Geyh calls “unhousing” is made evident, and also its undoing. The memoir serves, in this way, as an example by which to reclaim stories of domesticity that do not align with idealized traditional definitions of the socially sanctioned space that is a home. In this case, Machado advocates for more visibility of cases of domestic violence in cultural representations of lesbian relationships, in a future-driven approach to memoir that wishes to serve as reference and context for other victims who might need it. I have shown how Machado illustrates the claim that “the Dream House was never just the Dream House” (82) and that *In the Dream House* is “a book about a house that was not a house and a dream that was no dream at all” (183), both through the memoir’s formal structure and its content. In my reading, the Dream House is revealed to be, on one hand, a haunting, shifting, and unfixed space where abuse is enacted, a terrifying book which is able to generate in the reader effects that abuse generated in the narrator, and the experience at large of the trauma caused by being locked in an abusive relationship. Additionally, the memoir that depicts the Dream House is simultaneously revealed to be a space of possibility that wishes to revert the process of unhousing and recollect the account from the margins it had been relegated to.

In the first part of this work, I have analyzed how charging the concept of the Dream House with more than just a meaning of physical location allows the author to explore what it means for the Dream House to embody more than just a strict physical space. By becoming every location, the book itself, and the experience of this abusive relationship at large, the Dream House transcends physicality. Drawing from Geyh’s definition of “unhousing,” I have argued how Machado has had no choice but to see her account relegated to the margins of the widely recognized narratives of domestic violence because they refuse to acknowledge the existence of a “house” (both literally and

figuratively) in which mainly psychological intimate partner violence occurs within a lesbian relationship: the Dream House. The narrator's account and, by extension, subjectivity is unhoused, as the author breaks down the boundaries of the original, physical Dream House and has the phrase comprise multiple meanings in the text.

In the second part of this work, I have shown how the narrator—and, by extension in this case, the author—(re)gains agency to tell this story. This act makes possible the construction of a new symbolic “house,” as opposed to “the house of the ruler” that governs the dominant archives, to be inhabited by many subjects that have been barred from the outset. This new space is built through searching for context around her account and identifying mirror-representations of her experience in the wider archives of fairy tale tropes collected in Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*.

By publishing *In the Dream House* and telling her story, Machado challenges the processes by which archival silence affects certain subjects in widespread cultural narratives, in this specific case, in the conversations around intimate partner violence. Machado undoes the process of unhousing by which her account was ignored, silenced, and relegated to the margins and offers a new space to stories of intimate partner abuse within lesbian relationships. To make conversations around domestic abuse more habitable, more subjectivities must be included in these conversations so that queer folks can make sense of what their experiences mean.

There are a couple of ideas that I have used in this work that could likely constitute a starting point for further studies, as a more thorough analysis has escaped the scope of the present paper.

Firstly, the use Machado makes of Thompson's motif-index and references to fairy tales and other fictions carries more weight in *In the Dream House* than I have been

able to show in this work. I believe further studies of Machado's work (including works other than *In the Dream House*) could prove fruitful if situated within the framework of contemporary fairy tale, folklore, and literary studies and centering on the impact that modern retellings of classic tales have in contemporary women's writing, alongside the works of, for example, Emma Donoghue, Kelly Link, Helen Oyeyemi, and, of course, Angela Carter. In the chapter "*Dream House as Bluebeard*" and several of her short stories, most notably in "The Husband Stitch" (*Her Body and Other Parties*), Machado hints at the fact that certain versions of popular tales have been privileged over others. In the opening to "The Husband Stitch" the narrator warns readers that what they tell "may not be the version of the story you're familiar with. But I assure you, it's the one you need to know" (24). Feminist retellings of mythical tales can be very productive in showing how fairy tale as a genre can act as a gateway to many specific experiences that might not have been at the forefront in mainstream cultural representations, as Machado demonstrates in *In the Dream House*. I have consulted works by Jack Zipes, Marina Warner, Susan Sellers, Vanessa Joosen, Cristina Bacchilega, and Ana Llorba, mesmerized by this vast array of fields of study that show how effective what Bacchilega calls a "politics of wonder" (*Fairy Tales Transformed?*, 6, 27) can be to analyze contemporary literary works. These scholars analyze the act of retelling in ways that have helped me think about one of the main ideas I have explored throughout this paper, the discussion around which accounts are shared and which accounts are relegated to the margins. For example, Sellers stresses the need to "retain the capacity to question the tales we are told and tell" (139), and Bacchilega argues that "postmodern fairy tales multiply narrative and gender possibilities (...) because their permutations have depended and will continue to depend on human desires (...) which are shaped by varying histories, ideologies, and material conditions" (*Postmodern Fairy Tales*, 146).

I want to highlight another idea that could establish another premise from which to deliver further studies of Machado's work. I believe that focusing on the way Machado connects themes of memory and trauma to the concepts around how archives and records are compiled could set up a very effective reading of the whole of her writing. For example, a closer look at the significance of orality in relation to memory could be taken in *In the Dream House* and the story "The Husband Stitch" (*Her Body and Other Parties*). The novella "Especially Heinous: 272 Views of Law & Order SVU" (*Her Body and Other Parties*) and the graphic series *The Low, Low Woods* could also be read together to access how the author examines gender violence in connection to records, lists, and other types of archives. Memory is a crucial theme in Machado's body of work that serves as a place of power and resistance, not only in this memoir, but in her fiction as well. However, as I have touched on in this paper, the fact that Machado decided to frame *In the Dream House* as a memoir instead of fiction does carry importance in my specific reading of it.

To conclude, with *In the Dream House*, Machado offers her own attempt at "tell[ing] impossible stories" (Hartman qtd. in Machado, 3) by breaking down boundaries (within the Dream House, between narrative levels, and between physical and textual space(s)), by invoking fictional devices, and by building necessary context when and where she found none. With this account of queer intimate partner abuse, she urges others to do the same, under the roof of this new house for anyone who might need it, so that other traumatic stories of domesticity can be retrieved from the margins and become ~~un~~housed.

Works Cited

Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness*, Duke University Press, 2010.

Bacchilega, Cristina. *Fairy Tales Transformed? Twenty-First-Century Adaptations and the Politics of Wonder*, Wayne State University Press, 2013.

--. *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997.

Carmen Maria Machado [@carmenmmachado]. "It's pub day for IN THE DREAM HOUSE. I wish I had something eloquent & smart to say about what it means to crystalize your pain into art, but I don't. The truth is, I found the experience difficult & terrible. Many times in the past few years, I wished I'd never sold this book." *Twitter*, 5 Nov. 2019.

Febos, Melissa. *Body Work: The Radical Power of Personal Narrative*, Catapult, 2022.

Garner, Dwight, et al. "The New Vanguard." *The New York Times*, 5 Mar. 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/03/05/books/vanguard-books-by-women-in-21st-century.html. Accessed 24 May 2021.

Geyh, Paula E. "Burning down the House? Domestic Space and Feminine Subjectivity in Marilynne Robinson's 'Housekeeping.'" *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 34, no. 1, Spring 1993, pp. 103-122. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/1208504. Accessed 20 Apr. 2022.

Gilmore, Leigh. *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony*, Cornell University Press, 2001.

--. "Trauma." *Encyclopedia of Life Writing: Autobiographical and Biographical Forms*, ed. Margaretta Jolly, Fitzroy Dearborn, 2001, pp. 885-87.

Guynes, Sean. Review of *Her Body and Other Parties*, by Carmen Maria Machado. *World Literature Today*, vol. 91, no. 6, Nov./Dec. 2017, pp. 69-70. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.7588/worllitetoda.91.6.0069a. Accessed 24 Feb. 2021.

Iglesias, Gabino. "In *The Dream House* Invents A New Form Of Memoir To Convey A Haunting Nightmare." *NPR*, 5 Nov. 2019, www.npr.org/2019/11/05/776316011/in-the-dream-house-invents-a-new-form-of-memoir-to-convey-a-haunting-nightmare. Accessed 24 May 2021.

Lahusen, Christiane. "Memoirs." *Handbook of Autobiography / Autofiction*, edited by Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf, De Gruyter, 2019, pp. 626-635.

Machado, Carmen Maria. *Carmen Maria Machado: In The Dream House*. Interview conducted by Rebecca Rukeyser. YouTube, uploaded by internationales literaturfestival berlin, 19 Jan. 2021, youtu.be/pXrWNPmK-gY.

--. *Cos, Erotisme, Terror i Realisme Màgic. El Talent Transgressor de Carmen Maria Machado*. Interview conducted by Desirée de Fez. Festival 42, 5 Nov. 2021, Fabra i Coats, Barcelona.

--. *Her Body and Other Parties*, Graywolf Press, 2017.

--. *In the Dream House*, Serpent's Tail, 2020.

--. Interview conducted by David Naimon. *Between the Covers: Conversations with Writers in Fiction, Nonfiction & Poetry*, Tin House, Feb. 2020, open.spotify.com/episode/1EEBix3whdLRWP4GicaJZQ. Accessed Nov. 2020.

--. Interview conducted by Josie Mitchell. *The Granta Podcast*, 14 Oct. 2020, granta.com/podcast-carmen-maria-machado/. Accessed 22 May 2021.

--. "Scrabbling A Hole Under Reality's Fence: An Interview with Carmen Maria Machado." Interview conducted by Tom Cusano. *Yale Literary Magazine*, yalelitmag.com/scrabbling-a-hole-under-realitys-fence-an-interview-with-carmen-maria-machado/. Accessed 18 May 2021.

Marzuki, Franny. "Dream House as Review on Carmen Maria Machado's *In the Dream House*." *Fools Magazine*, 13 Nov. 2019, foolsmag.com/posts/2019/11/12/-dream-house-as-review-on-carmen-maria-machados-in-the-dream-house. Accessed 24 May 2021.

Milks, Megan. "In the Dream House." *4Columns*, 1 Nov. 2019, 4columns.org/milks-m/in-the-dream-house. Accessed 24 May 2021.

--. *Margaret and the Mystery of the Missing Body*, Feminist Press, 2021.

Millares Young, Kristen. "Haunted by humiliation, Carmen Maria Machado breaks form to address domestic abuse." *The Washington Post*, 5 Nov. 2019, [washingtonpost.com/carmen-maria-machados-in-the-dream-house-puts-the-reader-in-the-shoes-of-a-domestic-abuse-victim/2019/11/04/05d91ae8-ff38-11e9-9518-1e76abc088b6_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/carmen-maria-machados-in-the-dream-house-puts-the-reader-in-the-shoes-of-a-domestic-abuse-victim/2019/11/04/05d91ae8-ff38-11e9-9518-1e76abc088b6_story.html). Accessed 24 April 2022.

Sehgal, Parul. “‘In the Dream House’ Recounts an Abusive Relationship Using Dozens of Genres.” *The New York Times*, 29 Oct. 2019, [nytimes.com/2019/10/29/books/in-dream-house-memoir-carmen-maria-machado.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/29/books/in-dream-house-memoir-carmen-maria-machado.html). Accessed 24 May 2021.

Sellers, Susan. *Myth and Fairy Tale in Contemporary Women's Fiction*, Palgrave, 2001.

Shapiro, Lisa. “Lesbian Battering: Romance to Ruin.” *Off Our Backs*, vol. 21, no. 10, Nov. 1991, pp.16-17. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/20833823. Accessed 29 Dec. 2021.

Singh, Julietta. *No Archive Will Restore You*, 3Ecologies Books/Immediations, 2018.

Smith, Sidonie, and Julia Watson. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. 2nd ed., University of Minnesota Press, 2010.

Waldman, Katy. “Carmen Maria Machado's Many Haunted Stories of a Toxic Relationship.” *The New Yorker*, 31 Oct. 2019, [newyorker.com/books/page-turner/carmen-maria-machados-many-haunted-stories-of-a-toxic-relationship](https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/carmen-maria-machados-many-haunted-stories-of-a-toxic-relationship). Accessed 24 May 2021.

Appendix: List of Chapter Titles in *In the Dream House*

- Dream House as Overture* (1)
- Dream House as Prologue* (2)
- Dream House as Not a Metaphor* (7)
- Dream House as Picaresque* (8)
- Dream House as Perpetual Motion Machine* (11)
- Dream House as Exercise in Point of View* (12)
- Dream House as Inciting Incident* (13)
- Dream House as Memory Palace* (14)
- Dream House as Time Travel* (17)
- Dream House as a Stranger Comes to Town* (19)
- Dream House as Lesbian Cult Classic* (21)
- Dream House as Famous Last Words* (23)
- Dream House as Confession* (24)
- Dream House as Dreamboat* (25)
- Dream House as Luck of the draw* (26)
- Dream House as Road Trip to Savannah* (27)
- Dream House as Romance Novel* (30)
- Dream House as Déjà Vu* (31)
- Dream House as Bildungsroman* (32)
- Dream House as Folktale Taxonomy* (38)
- Dream House as Menagerie* (40)
- Dream House as Star-Crossed Lovers* (41)
- Dream House as Daydream* (42)
- Dream House as Erotica* (44)
- Dream House as Omen* (45)
- Dream House as Noir* (48)
- Dream House as Queer Villainy* (49)
- Dream House as Road Trip to Everywhere* (53)
- Dream House as Accident* (55)

Dream House as Ambition (56)
Dream House as Man vs. Nature (57)
Dream House as Stoner Comedy (59)
Dream House as Meet the Parents (61)
Dream House as Here Comes the Bride (62)
Dream House as House in Florida (63)
Dream House as Bluebeard (66)
Dream House as Heat Death of the Universe (71)
Dream House as Destination (73)
Dream House as Utopia (74)
Dream House as Doppelgänger (75)
Dream House as High Fantasy (76)
Dream House as Entomology (77)
Dream House as Lesbian Pulp Novel (78)
Dream House as Lesson Learned (79)
Dream House as World Building (81)
Dream House as Set Design (83)
Dream House as Creature Feature (85)
Dream House as American Gothic (86)
Dream House as Idiom (88)
Dream House as Warning (89)
Dream House as Appetite (90)
Dream House as Inner Sanctum (92)
Dream House as House in Iowa (94)
Dream House as Lost in Translation (98)
Dream House as the River Lethe (99)
Dream House as Spy Thriller (104)
Dream House as Cottage in Washington (105)
Dream House as 9 Thornton Square (107)
Dream House as Cycle (109)

Dream House as the Wrong Lesson (111)
Dream House as Déjà Vu (112)
Dream House as Apartment in Philadelphia (113)
Dream House as Pathetic Fallacy (114)
Dream House as the First Thanksgiving (115)
Dream House as Diagnosis (117)
Dream House as I Love Lucy (118)
Dream House as Musical (120)
Dream House as Cautionary Tale (121)
Dream House as Rapture (122)
Dream House as a Lesson in the Subjunctive (123)
Dream House as Fantasy (124)
Dream House as Inventory (126)
Dream House as Tragedy of the Commons (128)
Dream House as Epiphany (129)
Dream House as Legacy (130)
Dream House as Word Problem (132)
Dream House as Man vs. Self (135)
Dream House as Modern Art (137)
Dream House as Second Chances (139)
Dream House as Chekhov's Gun (141)
Dream House as Sniffs from the Ink of Women (145)
Dream House as Haunted Mansion (146)
Dream House as Chekhov's Trigger (148)
Dream House as Soap Opera (151)
Dream House as Comedy of Errors (152)
Dream House as Demonic Possession (154)
Dream House as Naming the Animals (156)
Dream House as Ambiguity (157)
Dream House as Undead (163)

Dream House as Sanctuary (164)
Dream House as Double Cross (165)
Dream House as Unreliable Narrator (166)
Dream House as Pop Single (167)
Dream House as Half Credit (170)
Dream House as Exercise in Style (171)
Traumhaus as Lipogram (173)
Dream House as Hypochondria (174)
Dream House as Dirty Laundry (176)
Dream House as Five Lights (177)
Dream House as Cosmic Horror (181)
Dream House as Barn in Upstate New York (183)
Dream House as Shipwreck (185)
Dream House as Mystical Pregnancy (187)
Dream House as Choose Your Own Adventure® (189)
Dream House as L'appel du Vide (204)
Dream House as Libretto (205)
Dream House as Sci-Fi Thriller (206)
Dream House as Déjà Vu (208)
Dream House as Murder Mystery (209)
Dream House as Stopgap Measure (213)
Dream House as the Apocalypse (214)
Dream House as Surprise Ending (215)
Dream House as Natural Disaster (217)
Dream House as the Pool of Tears (219)
Dream House as Mrs. Dalloway (221)
Dream House as Apartment in Chicago (223)
Dream House as Sodom (226)
Dream House as Hotel Room in Iowa City (227)
Dream House as Equivocation (229)

Dream House as The Queen and the Squid (232)
Dream House as Thanks, Obama (236)
Dream House as Void (238)
Dream House as Unexpected Kindness (239)
Dream House as Memory (241)
Dream House as Denouement (243)
Dream House as Schrödinger's Cat (244)
Dream House as Newton's Apple (245)
Dream House as Sex and Death (247)
Dream House as Plot Twist (249)
Dream House as Nightmare on Elm Street (253)
Dream House as Talisman (254)
Dream House as Myth (255)
Dream House as Death Wish (257)
Dream House as Proof (258)
Dream House as Public Relations (260)
Dream House as Cabin in the Woods (262)
Dream House as Prisoner's Dilemma (264)
Dream House as Parallel Universe (265)
Dream House as Self-Help Best Seller (266)
Dream House as Cliché (267)
Dream House as Anechoic Chamber (269)
Dream House as Generation Starship (270)
Dream House as L'esprit de L'escalier (272)
Dream House as Vaccine (274)
Dream House as Ending (275)
Dream House as Epilogue (276)