Rethinking the Monster: The Condemnation of Rape Culture Through the Female Monstrous Body in Myriam Gurba's Mean and Carmen Maria Machado's "The Husband Stitch"

Mémoire

Pascale Rousseau

Maîtrise en littératures d'expression anglaise - avec mémoire
Maître ès arts (M.A.)

Québec, Canada

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Sous la direction de :

Jean-Philippe Marcoux, directeur de recherche

Résumé

Ce projet analyse le mémoire hybride *Mean* de Myriam Gurba et la nouvelle « The Husband Stitch » de Carmen Maria Machado en se concentrant sur différentes itérations de monstruosité féminine dans des récits portant sur la culture du viol. Je démontre comment les corps féminins codés comme monstrueux deviennent le site d'un contre-discours qui perturbe et élargi les conceptions sociales qui sont faites de la violence sexuelle. Les écrits de Nathalie Wilson et Sara Ahmed informent la théorisation des monstres et de leurs rôles prescrits, tandis que les idées de corporéalité, *embodiment*, et *abjection* illuminent les possibilités représentatives du corps féminin et insistent sur ses capacités comme agent de changements culturels. Le premier chapitre examine la notion de corporéalité à travers différentes descriptions des traitements du corps féminin monstrueux. Les concepts d'*embodiment* et d'*abjection* signalent l'impact de la culture du viol sur le corps, considèrent tous les espaces comme potentiellement dangereux, et illustrent les similarités entre l'acte physique de viol et certaines techniques narratives. Le deuxième chapitre analyse la multiplicité de façons de régulariser le corps féminin monstrueux et de le subjuguer à des fins patriarcales. Par la juxtaposition délibérée de plusieurs moments clés à l'inclusion de *cautionary tales* subversifs, la nouvelle élabore une épistémologie radicalement politisée. Dans ce chapitre, l'*abjection* est perçue comme une technique expérimentale qui dérange la conception que le lecteur se fait de sa propre corporéalité et subjectivité.

Abstract

This thesis analyzes Myriam Gurba's hybrid memoir *Mean* and Carmen Maria Machado's short story "The Husband Stitch" through a focus on different iterations of female monstrosity in narratives about rape culture. I demonstrate how female bodies coded as monstrous become the site of a counter-discourse that disrupts and enlarges the social conceptions of sexual violence. The writings of Nathalie Wilson and Sara Ahmed inform the theorization of monsters and their prescribed roles, while the ideas of corporeality, embodiment, and abjection engage the representative possibilities of the female body and insist on its possibilities as agent of cultural change. The first chapter examines the notion of corporeality through different descriptions of the treatment of the monstrous female body. The concepts of embodiment and abjection signal the impact of rape culture on the body, consider all spaces as potentially dangerous, and illustrate the similarities between the physical act of rape and certain narrative techniques. The second chapter analyzes the multiple ways of regularizing the monstrous female body and of subjugating it for patriarchal purposes. Through the deliberate juxtaposition of several key moments with the inclusion of subversive cautionary tales, the short story elaborates a radically politicized epistemology. In this chapter, abjection is understood as an experimental technique that disturbs the reader's conception of their own corporeality and subjectivity.

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"I'm feeling disobedient / We will disturb the false peace"

-Petrol Girls, "False Peace"

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Introduction

Thesis Topic

In *Willful Monstrosity*, Natalie Wilson states that identifying others as monstrous is a practice that has long been perpetuated through the use of race and gender as physical markers of difference (7). Informed by the work of Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, Wilson defines monsters as "transgressive figure[s] that disrup[t] binary logic, refut[e] being disciplined or destroyed, and exis[t] in an and/or realm" (9). The monster is, for Wilson, a potent agent of cultural transformation and transcendence. Its very liminality is the conduit that might contribute to bridging the gap between internalized fears and the physical and ideological manifestations of those fears. As such, artistic works informed by the discourse of the monstrous other can participate in its perpetuation.

Wilson's claims regarding the monstrous body are aligned with Sara Ahmed's contentions; she argues for the making of connections between "the willful subject, the monster, and the political dissident" (qtd in Wilson 10). Monsters can then be understood as having both agency and potential for the disruption of hegemonic discourse on gender. Expanding upon Ahmed's framework, Wilson proposes that reconceptualizing the body is the key to rethinking otherness (10). This can be accomplished through re-considering monsters not as passive objects on which fears of difference are projected, but, rather, as "willfully monstrous subject[s]" (10). For Wilson, monstrous characters have the potential to challenge the discourses that construct them. In that sense, the valorization of the "dissenting, demonstrating body" can lead to the construction of willfulness as politics of resistance (Ahmed qtd in Wilson 10). By evaluating what the monstrous body reveals about its sociocultural context, monsters can disrupt the hegemonic discourse and provide insight on its hidden internal structures of oppression.

Importantly, Wilson focuses on the representation of monsters whose otherness is characterized through their gender or race, or both. She argues that recent cultural representations of female monsters successfully disrupt the patriarchal discourse that has constructed them in order to maintain its domination. That discourse leads to the normalization of rape culture in the media and in women's everyday experiences. Since

Wilson considers a large corpus of movies and literary works, her argumentation regards oppression, in general, as experienced by female monstrous characters. Occasionally, this gendered oppression intersects with racial oppression. This intersection "bolsters societal notions of us/them and civilized/savage" (Wilson 10) and serves to maintain sexist and racist patriarchy. Wilson states that the historical construction of "females and people of color as property" is one of the "foundational impetuses" that normalizes rape culture (43).

The two texts studied in this thesis, Myriam Gurba's coming-of-age memoir *Mean* and Carmen Maria Machado's short story "The Husband Stitch," portray, in their respective ways, aspects of physical and psychological violence inflicted upon women's bodies. While Gurba focuses on the experience of abuse in the outside world and on stranger rape, Machado primarily stages manifestations of domestic abuse. Both works engage with the gendered aspect of violence, but in Gurba's case, that violence is intrinsically linked to its racial dimension. Gurba's book blends conventions of true crime, memoir, and ghost story. Machado's story can be situated at the intersection of psychological realism, horror, and science fiction. This fusion between reality and fiction speaks to the way sexual violence is portrayed in society; that is, as a taboo subject whose victims must negotiate believability.

In both texts, the characterization of boys and men and the descriptions of their abuse of women's bodies indicate that monstrosity lies in the cultural acceptance of such treatments of women's bodies. Moreover, the texts point to the tendency to view those bodies as less deserving of "moral consideration" (Shildrick, qtd. in Wilson 100) due to the threat that their agency would pose to hegemonic patriarchal discourse. As such, the thesis shows that the women monsters in Gurba's and Machado's texts expose the underlying monstrosity of patriarchy through the abuse of racial and gendered bodies.

In my thesis, I consider the potential for monstrous-coded female characters to disrupt the patriarchal discourse that perpetuates rape culture. Monstrous coding has long served to mark those who differ from the patriarchal authority as others. The creation of such otherness allows patriarchy to justify the discourses and behaviours through which the other—here, the monstrous coded female—is perceived as inferior and controllable. That dynamic also justifies rape culture since patriarchy imposes its ideology upon the female body. Therefore, female monsters who affirm their agency can, as liminal figures that refute being disciplined,

propose a reconceptualization of their body. In so doing, the monstrous female becomes an agent of cultural transformation whose resisting politics disrupt and expose hegemonic constructs.

Thesis Statement and Outline of the Chapters

This thesis argues that the literary creation of feminine monsters in the chosen texts exposes the rape culture, normalized by sexist and racist patriarchy, as the real manifestation of monstrosity. More specifically, I examine the potential of female monster characters to denounce rape culture in three intersecting ways: by appropriating and subverting the myths imposed by sexist patriarchy; by giving a voice to the victims and portraying monstrous female bodies as the site of a disruptive discourse; and, by denouncing the cultural acceptance and trivialization of rape culture.

Working towards the aforementioned ends, the thesis analyzes how Gurba's memoir and Machado's short story delve into what it means to survive as a woman trapped in a world undergirded by rape culture. I argue that what most significantly links these two primary texts is the use of horror conventions to depict the reality of rape culture as monstrous. By associating women characters with monsters, the texts initially contribute to the long-established trope of monstrous women onto which threats to society are projected; the same trope encourages, justifies, and perpetuates harmful patriarchy and rape culture.

Through their narrative agency, the monstrous-coded narrators of the two texts under study challenge, I contend, the patriarchal conceptions of women as monsters and denounce the normalization of sexual violence. I show that their potential for subverting the culturally accepted discourse is grounded in the (re)consideration of their bodies and of the ways in which the perception of those bodies informs their lives. Myriam Gurba's *Mean* and Carmen Maria Machado's "The Husband Stitch" subvert the sexist myths imposed by patriarchy, underline the agency of their narrator's voices of bodies, and denounce the structural and cultural acceptance of rape culture.

In the first chapter, I analyze *Mean* through the intersection of the concepts of corporeality, embodiment, and abjection. The first section focuses on the multi-faceted ways of representing the corporeality of the monstrous female body. As such, I initially consider

how the narrator's body is treated in school by her peers and her teacher. Specifically, I focus my analysis on the molestations that a boy, Macauley, inflicts upon her body under the eye of their teacher to highlight the masculinist complicity that imposes silence upon the victim. To nuance that argument, I discuss how Gurba uses art imagery to reclaim her body. I also compare how boys' and girls' respective senses of corporeality are antagonistic and emerge from the internalization of the discourse of rape culture. My analysis of corporeality is then extended to Gurba's subsequent interactions with authority figures when, years later, she is raped. These interactions testify to the internalization, both by men and women, of the censoring discourse that sustains rape.

From the consideration of monstrous female corporeality in social spaces, I shift to Gurba's evocation of an intimate sense of corporeality that subverts the stereotypes attached to that body. I focus on Gurba's diction, especially on the way that it breaks multiple taboos regulating the discussion of the female body. The section on corporeality concludes with the analysis of Gurba's attentiveness in shaping the imagined corporeality of Sophia's ghost. In so doing, she contests the reductive, dehumanizing media's reporting on Sophia's death and is able to navigate her own trauma, as she describes the uncanny merging of their senses of corporeality.

The second section on *Mean* addresses the concepts of embodiment and abjection as frameworks. The analysis of embodiment examines the painful experience of the lived body to depict the impact of sexual violence on Gurba's understanding of, and temporary dissociation from, her body. Subsequently, I evaluate how the experience of rape leads Gurba to depict all spaces as potentially dangerous, thus underscoring the omnipresence of the threat of sexual violence and altering her perception of the world and its relative safety.

From this initial consideration of embodiment, I then engage Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection. I use abjection to discuss the ways in which sexual violence threatens an individual's subjectivity and integrity. In the case of Gurba's rape, the experience of abjection is translated into a disturbance of her perspective of the world, a suggestion that sexual violence and rapists are never finished, and an impression of having been robbed of parts of herself. My analysis of abjection turns from the content of the text to the reader's experience of Gurba's narrative. In that subsection, I argue that the reader may experience abjection both

by becoming an observer and participant in Sophia's rape and by seeing their interpretative agency compromised.

In the second chapter, my discussion of the female monstrous body in "The Husband Stitch" is three-fold. I begin with a consideration of the treatment of the narrator's body by authoritative male figures. Her early interactions with her father, who gaslights her experience, informs her subsequent relationships with her husband and son. The continuous silencing of female agency is examined in the doctor's complicity with the husband regarding their common objective of controlling and subduing the female body. The textual analysis exposes how the internalization of the beliefs of rape culture leads men to consider the female monstrous body from a conqueror's perspective.

In the second section of the chapter, I investigate the reasons for the narrator's juxtaposition of cautionary tales with her experiences of sexual violence. Since she subverts the intended message of those embedded tales, the narrator proposes examinations of the notions of corporeality and knowledge that do not adhere to patriarchal, hegemonic discourse. My analysis of intertextuality and storytelling, which expands on Mary Angeline Hood's reading of the story, testifies to the veracity of feminist theoretical assertions regarding the instilling of a victim mentality in young girls. As the narrator subverts the tales, her rhetoric becomes political. I study how subversions engender a reconceptualization of patriarchal conceptions of motherhood and advocates for the validity of the wild woman.

The third section of the chapter focuses on the theory of abjection. In Machado's story, abjection is communicated through language and stylistic nuances. As such, I examine Kristeva's notion through the interaction between reader and narrative. I consider the narrator's parenthetical directions to be manipulating devices. With these, the narrator is able to directly interpellate the readers and to instruct them into adopting particular voices that provide them with insight into the story's development. In that way, the directions can disrupt the reader's textual interpretive subjectivity, and can, simultaneously, attract and repulse the reader. The directions increasingly work towards linking the reader's corporeality to the narrator's, which incites the reader to experience a certain type of coercive control. By the end of the story, the reader's experience of abjection traps them into the text's superstructure.

Methodology

The analytical method chosen for this thesis is close reading. More specifically, I focus on the conceptual language used in descriptions of the female monsters to draw links with the theoretical vocabulary that constructs the notions of gender and monstrosity as forms of otherness that need to be controlled. Giving consideration to this descriptive language allows me to discuss how the bodies of female monsters interact with their surroundings and with other characters. This approach to language is aimed at challenging the socially accepted contemporary myths that surround rape culture and that often mischaracterize the abused as virgins or whores.

It is important to state that my approach to Machado's and Gurba's texts is not comparative. Rather, I look at different iterations of the female monster to show the multi-dimensional function of the otherness forced onto them and the many insidious forms in which rape culture manifests itself. My thesis thus reflects the multitudinous forms of violence, whether subtle or overt, that emerge from rape culture: the silencing of women, the imposed control of female bodies, and the sexual violence that ranges from casual remarks to rape. This approach to the texts provides insights into the cultural structures that lead to the trivialisation and normalization of sexual violence in society.

Theoretical Framework

My thesis is informed by the conceptualization of the social construction of otherness as monstrosity. The two literary works I analyze have, as main characters, women coded as monstrous who aim at subverting the discourses imposed upon them. Their subversive narratives advocate for a reconfiguration of the ways in which women's bodies and minds are socially perceived in a world that encourages sexual violence.

The Female Monstrous Body

My theoretical framework is thus first concerned with defining the monstrous female body, since the figure of the monster is interconnected with, and used to justify, rape culture. Wilson explains that "monsterizing the Other was—and continues to be—one of the primary ways to maintain power and shore up existing hierarchies" (6). She describes how colonialism and conquest necessitate this monsterization as it becomes a "'convenient

justification'" (Braham, qtd. in Wilson 7) for the oppressive formations of the "general will" (6). In other words, patriarchal and racist hegemony demands the cultural codification of the Other as a monster in order to uphold itself as its opposite. By negatively qualifying otherness, hegemony becomes positively codified. Wilson specifies that the "emergence of race as a concept" laid the groundwork for the practice of monsterization. She points to the "early catalogs of race" (6) that, in an attempt to justify hegemonic discourses on race, attributed "certain proclivities" (6) to the Muslim, Jewish, and Mongolian to equate them with "imagined monsters" (6-7). Those catalogs exemplify the cultural designations that define "'who is due moral consideration and who is not'" (Shildrick, qtd. in Wilson 7) according to those in power.

Wilson invokes W. Scott Poole, who claims that the early monsterization of otherness occurred through "ideological efforts to marginalize the weak and normalize the powerful, to suppress struggles for class, racial, and sexual liberation, to transform the 'American way of Life' into a weapon of empire" (qtd. in Wilson 7). This monsterization continues to this day, albeit in often subtler ways. Because Poole argues that "monsters register our national traumas" (qtd. in Wilson 7), Wilson considers that his work reads "American history *as* horror" (Wilson 7, emphasis Wilson's). In that culturally informed horror, gender is also perceived as a marker of otherness.

In fact, Wilson contends that gender has also "long served as a basis to identify others as monstrous" (7). She points to cultural descriptions of the "womb as a hungry animal," "the many variations of the vagina dentata," and the repeated association of females with "excessive, dangerous consumption" and "perverse sexuality" (7). Those associations "buttress the 'necessity' of patriarchal rule" (7). That is, constructing the female body and female sexual agency as monstrous allows patriarchy to justify its conquering discourses and, at the same time, reinforces power disparities between the self-defined hegemony and those it identifies as weaker and controllable. Invoking Margrit Shildrick's argument regarding the depictions of women and people of color as "'regressive agents capable of dragging down white civilization by feeding off the precious resources, both economic and bodily, accrued by right-living men'" (qtd. in Wilson 8), Wilson specifies that such patriarchal discourse leads to cultural representations of otherness that perpetuate "white supremacist capitalist

patriarchy" (8). Despite this tendency, many cultural representations of monstrosity can "critique hegemonic power" and "cou[rt] sympathy for those deemed Other" (8).

To frame her argument about the monster as a figure imbued with potential for social change and cultural revolution, Wilson engages with Sara Ahmed's theory of willfulness. Wilson considers that Ahmed's reading of the cautionary Grimms' tale "The Willful Child" refutes its intended moral and instead understands the girl's arm, which reaches beyond the grave, as "a willful part which refuses to 'be a good girl'—a passive girl, a voiceless, dead thing" (6).[1] The arm's willfulness thus becomes a "'disobedient part' threatening the body politic" (6). Ahmed postulates that being identified as willful "is to become a problem" (3) in the eye of hegemonic power. According to Wilson, it then follows that willfulness can "be advantageous to those seeking to resist the general will and its oppressive formations—indeed, sometimes willfulness is an urgent necessity, one required to change conceptions of which lives and bodies matter" (6). It is in that political sense that Ahmed situates willfulness and monstrosity as holding the same promise (Ahmed 161-3).

Willfulness and monstrosity are both grounded in the politics of the body. The codification of otherness as monstrous is founded upon "corporeal specificities" (Wilson 10). Likewise, the history of willfulness is that of "those who are willing to put their bodies in the way, or to bend their bodies in the way of the will" (Ahmed). Bodies become materialized through discourse: the construction of monstrosity relies on "naming certain bodily forms deviant, deformed, and/or freakish" (Wilson 10), while willfulness is a style of politics in which the body can be turned into a "blockage poin[t]" that reclaims its time and space (Ahmed 161-3). Therefore, I align my analysis of narratives of sexual violence with Ahmed's and Wilson's theorization of the potential of the monstrous, willful body to enact resistance.

[1] Here is the tale as it appears in both Wilson's *Willful Monstrosity* (5) and Ahmed's *Willful Subjects* (1): "Once upon a time there was a child who was willful, and would not do as her mother wished. For this reason God had no pleasure in her, and let her become ill, and no doctor could do her any good, and in a short time she lay on her death-bed. When she had been lowered into her grave, and the earth was spread over her, all at once her arm came out again, and stretched upwards, and when they had put it in and spread fresh earth over it, it was all to no purpose, for the arm always came out again. Then the mother herself was obliged to go to the grave, and strike the arm with a rod, and when she had done that, it was drawn in, and then at last the child had rest beneath the ground [Brothers Grimm 125]."

In the texts under study, the female body is coded as monstrous and proposes a discourse that subverts the patriarchal oppression.

Poole's definition of "American history *as* horror" is, I argue, what the two texts under study respond to: sexual oppression and sexual violence, justified through the association of female bodies with monstrosity, can potentially turn any female's life into a horror story. The rape culture that prevails contributes to fostering such environment. The narrators of the two texts analyzed in this thesis are monsters in the eye of the "normative society" (Wilson 183) because of their willfulness to dismantle the "oppressive ideologies strangling [their] world" (183). Wilson even describes the female author as "that devilishly frightful monster" (185), thus highlighting the possibilities of their narrative agency. Their questioning of societal norms and structures, whether subtle or overt, is "gaining positive traction in our new millennium" (183). Such valorization of the feminist potential inherent in horror literature testifies, in my argument, to the genre's subversive abilities and to its engagement with the patriarchal rape culture that informs American constructions of female monstrosity.

A Sociological Understanding of Rape Culture

The cultural construction and acceptance of female monstrosity informs my understanding of rape culture. I theorize rape culture by invoking primarily Emily Buchwald, Pamela R. Fletcher, and Martha Roth who, as editors of *Transforming a Rape Culture*, provide a sociological definition of the feminist term and engage with its cultural ramifications.[2] According to them, a rape culture is "a complex of beliefs that encourages male sexual aggression and supports violence against women. It is a society where violence is seen as sexy and sexuality is violent" (xi). In such an environment, "women perceive a continuum of threatened violence that ranges from sexual remarks to sexual touching to rape itself. A rape culture condones physical and emotional terrorism against women and presents it as the norm" (xi). The forces that go into constructing that "norm" are the same ones that Wilson identifies as contributing to the creation and perpetuation of coding the monstrous:

[2] Buchwald, Fletcher, and Roth use the article "a" before "rape culture" because they are, in their introduction, writing about a theoretical rape culture that could exist in different societies. I keep the article for the theoretical section that pertains to those anthologists, but subsequently use "rape culture" because my thesis concerns the rape culture that exists, specifically, in the United States.

hegemonic, patriarchal discourse is intent on affirming its superiority through colonization and debasement of the female body.

The prevalence of rape culture in women's everyday life creates an atmosphere of fear that can limit their behaviour and that functions as "a powerful means by which the whole female population is held in a subordinate position to the whole male population, even though many men don't rape, and many women are never victims of rape" ("Rape Culture"). Rape culture can then be understood as emerging from a patriarchal discourse that categorizes women both as controllable and as valuable only for the sexual possibilities that their bodies are perceived to be offering. It is a discourse that understands sexuality as being linked to violence and that justifies its claims by normalizing this violent paradigm. The desired result of such discourse if to render the victims of such violence as powerless and voiceless as possible. For my thesis, I invoke this conflation of violence with sexuality in my consideration of how the monstrous-coded female bodies are perceived and treated in social spaces and by authoritative figures.

Buchwald, Fletcher, and Roth emphasize the fact that the cultural acceptance of a rape culture is implanted in our minds from an early age. They note how, as a society, "we claim to deplore the sexual violence that characterizes our culture, yet we rear our sons and daughters in such ignorance of their sexuality that many confuse pleasure with pain and domination" (xiv). This contradictory focus indicates not only a great societal concern with how children are wired to function within a rape culture but also the pervasiveness of such a culture over time. This pervasiveness is largely due to the silence that surrounds rape. As Carol J. Adams points out, "[a]s long as violence is both invisible and unnamed, it is tacitly, although perhaps unintentionally, condoned" (81). In the two texts under study, I highlight instances where young girls' and boys' behaviours are informed by the early implantation of rape culture in their minds. Additionally, I contend that, in those texts, literature acts as a potent agent of subversion of imposed silence by effectively bringing sexual violence and the voice of its victims to the foreground.

Rape Myths and False Beliefs

The silence that perpetuates rape culture is due, in part, to an acceptance of rape myths and false beliefs that conveniently cloud information and, thereby, obscures the reality of sexual violence. In my thesis, I invoke the article "Monsters, Playboys, Virgins, and Whores: Rape Myths in the News Media's Coverage of Sexual Violence," in which Shannon O'Hara outlines the most common myths that shape public opinion and understanding of rape because of their accessibility and rate of recurrence. Echoing Martha R. Burt, she defines "rape myths" as "'prejudicial, stereotyped or false beliefs . . . about rape, rapists, and rape victims'" (qtd. in O'Hara 247). The article highlights how several rape myths—such as the one claiming that bad girls get raped and victims ask for it—consistently shift the blame onto the victim, while the perpetrators of violence are often portrayed as beasts, perverts, monsters, or individuals different from ordinary men (O'Hara 248). I use O'Hara's article to show how Machado and Gurba appropriate several rape myths, only to subvert them in an effort to denounce the real monsters and confront the trivialization of sexual violence.

In "The Language of Rape," Helen Benedict comments on the language used by news media to report instances of rape. Benedict notes that in the English language, the vocabulary is biased to reflect and encourage the culture of rape by portraying women as "sexual objects, fair play for the hunter-man" (125). She affirms that the language through which rape is expressed has barely changed since the 1960s, and that the media's language is also found in "ordinary people's comments" (125). Notably, the vocabulary that describes rape often conflates it with sexual intercourse (126), thereby pointing to the cultural acceptance of sexuality as violent, and of violence as sexy. Benedict claims that since the media both reflects and shapes public opinion, it can "lead the reform of the language of rape" (127).

I use O'Hara's and Benedict's works in my analysis of *Mean*, for I argue that Gurba is intent on resisting the media's language and on proposing a reconfiguration of the ways in which we talk and think about sexual violence. The significance of language is also useful for my analysis of intertextuality in Machado's "The Husband Stitch," as the short story includes and subverts cautionary tales whose language aims at internalizing a victim's mentality.

The Intersection of Rape Culture and Race

Since the concept of rape culture intersects with race in Gurba's memoir, my analysis considers how the stereotypes attached to the Latina body inform the cultural representations of Latina rape victims. I invoke Alicia Arrizón, who demonstrates that the Latina body has been historically othered through the eroticization of its "brownness" in order to maintain racial and gendered relations of power (191). Arrizón states that most contemporary depictions of the Latina sexual body showcase it as a "product of objectifying stereotypical processes and complex subject formations" (191). Significantly, she discusses the enforced sexual repression imposed on Latinas through the effects of machismo and the "'whore-virgin' dichotomy" (193). Alongside Arrizón, my thesis also considers the contributions of Inés Hernández-Avila, Tey Diana Rebolledo, and Catrióna Rueda Esquibel to the historical theorization of the Chicana body as sexually available in society. Together, the theorists and critics of the Latina body inform my analysis of corporeality in Gurba's *Mean*.[3]

Historical Perspectives on the Pervasiveness of Rape Culture

I include Susan Brownmiller in my framework as the myths and false beliefs she identifies construct the contemporary discourse about rape. In the landmark *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (1975), Brownmiller affirms that the rapists who remain undetected by the police "perform a myrmidon function for all men in our society" (209). That is, because their existence is "cloaked in myths that obscure their identity," they can anonymously function as "agents of terror" (209). All men benefit from that terror since it is justified in the culturally accepted sexual violence that defines gender relations in terms of power. In fact, as Brownmiller argues, "[a]ll rape is an exercise in power" because rapists "operate within an institutionalized setting that works to their advantage and in which a victim has little chance to redress her grievance" (256). The two literary works I study denounce the portrayal of rapists in myths and the terror imposed on women by affirming their narrative agency and the validity of their voices.

[3] It should be noted here that although my reading of Gurba's memoir considers race as intersecting with gender, Chicana identity is not a central element of the thesis.

The social context in which rapists operate can also be an emotional one, such as a dependent relationship that "provides a hierarchical, authoritarian structure of its own that weakens a victim's resistance, distorts her perspective and confounds her will" (256). Brownmiller affirms how rape culture, as a long-standing discourse and practice, shapes our relations and informs our understanding of sexuality in terms linked to violence. Her argument regarding rape, power, and institutionalized settings is instrumental for my thesis as I analyze the perception and treatment of monstrous—and therefore controllable—female bodies by different male authority figures and institutions.

Within the institutions and settings that justify and perpetuate the threat of sexual violence,[4] the training of women to become potential victims is fundamental. Brownmiller states that, "[t]o talk about rape, even with nervous laughter, is to acknowledge a woman's special victim status" (309). Likewise, "[t]o simply learn the word 'rape' is to take instruction in the power relationship between males and females" (309). She finds that women become "indoctrinated into a victim mentality" from a very young age, in part influenced by the "vague dread" and "catastrophe" that, in fairy tales, seem to "befall only little girls" (309). Brownmiller's idea that girls are trained to become victims is echoed in Buchwald, Fletcher, and Roth's awareness of the gaps in the rearing of children regarding the nature of sexuality (xiv; Roth 366). My analysis invokes Brownmiller's statements about the conditioning of girls and women as potential victims. Specifically, Gurba traces her early experiences of sexual violence at the hands of complicit boys and men, while Machado frames her adult experiences through the silencing and skepticism of her father.

Brownmiller also engages with the myth that considers rape as a "crime of irrational, impulsive, uncontrollable lust" (391), a myth that is still accepted and disseminated to this day. She refutes that mischaracterization and insists on the "deliberate, hostile, violent" nature of rape as an "act of degradation and possession on the part of a would-be conqueror, designed to intimidate and inspire fear" (391). Although Brownmiller does not use the term *rape culture* in her work, her assessment that "elements in our culture . . . promote and propagandize these attitudes which offer men . . . the ideology and psychologic encouragement to commit their acts of aggression *without awareness*, *for the most part*, *that*

[4] Examples of institutions and settings include schools, hospitals, the media, marriage, etc.

they have committed a punishable crime, let alone a moral wrong" (391, emphasis Brownmiller's) characterizes such a culture. The emphasis on the rapists' unawareness of the nature of their acts still features prominently in today's discourse about rape. I invoke this myth in my analysis of male complicity within patriarchal structures in Gurba's work and in my discussion of the husband's misrecognition of his violent behaviour in Machado's short story.

The enduring misrecognition of the rapists and their acts is underlined in a recent work by Jon Krakauer. In *Missoula: Rape and the Justice System in a College Town* (2015), Krakauer investigates the legal developments of recent rape cases in the United States. While I do not reinvest the prosecutorial aspect in this current thesis, the sociological aspect of Krakauer's work reveals that the current discourse on rape is still steeped in largely accepted myths and misunderstandings. For instance, a woman, who acted as a juror on a rape case, was "was astounded by the ignorance of acquaintance rape," and realized that "[a] very old concept of rape prevails," one that sees rape as either perpetuated by a stranger jumping out of the bushes or as invalidated unless "the woman puts up a fight, to the death if necessary" (305). This example not only aligns with the arguments in Brownmiller and Buchwald, Fletcher, and Roth, but also confirms the continuous existence of a rape culture that has barely evolved over time. For my thesis, I invoke Krakauer's findings in my discussion of the validity of the two narrator's experiences, both of which complexify the accepted idea of rape mentioned earlier.

Krakauer's interview with lawyer Rebecca Roe illustrates the role that the socialization of women into potential victims plays in the establishment and reinforcement of a rape culture. According to Roe's experience with rape survivors, it is "'actually pretty common for women not to scream or call the cops [during and after the sexually violent act(s)] in rape cases I prosecuted. . . .at least partly because women aren't wired to react that way'" (qtd in Krakauer 140). Roe states that, "'[w]e are socialized to be likeable and not to create friction. We are brought up to be nice. Women are supposed to resolve problems without making a scene—to make bad things go away as if they never happened'" (qtd in Krakauer 140). Her assessment correlates with Brownmiller's statement regarding the wiring of women as potential victims of sexual violence (Brownmiller 309). Roe also points to the

cultural acceptance of the fact that gendered relationships are determined through power and violence. I invoke Roe's assertion to nuance Brownmiller's claims regarding the socialization of young girls as potential victims.

Corporeality and Embodiment

For my analysis of the concept of corporeality, I revert to Moira Gatens's definition of the term in *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power and Corporeality* (1996). Gatens is concerned with "representations of the human body, which, contrary to popular opinion and anatomical textbooks, is unrepresentable" (vi). The reason for such vexed representations is that, since human bodies are "diverse, even anatomically speaking, the selection of a particular image of the human body will be a selection from a continuum of differences" (vi). That is, one cannot encounter a universal representation of the human body because the selection of such a body would misrepresent reality. Yet, a certain type of body must at times be selected; Gatens observes that the white, male body is frequently chosen for such representations. This establishes the male body as the norm against which other bodies must compare themselves. For instance, Gatens remarks that the female body is called upon to illustrate the specific capacities of its reproductive system (viii). The woman is thus "treated only insofar as she is not-man" (viii), which constructs an imaginary gender hierarchy. The empowered representation of the male body has resulted in "detrimental effects on notions of women and femininity, since these notions have been closely associated with the body, nature and emotion" (viii). As a result of this gendered differentiation, Gatens argues, "women's status as (fully) 'human' has sometimes been in question" (viii).

For my thesis, I engage with how Gatens defines "corporealit[ies]," not as the "physiological, anatomical, or biological understandings of the human body," but rather as "imaginary bodies" (viii). Imaginary bodies are specific to cultures and originate from "those ready-made images and symbols through which we make sense of social bodies and which determine, in part, their value, their status and what will be deemed their appropriate treatment" (viii). In other words, the social perception of bodies depends on the images, stigmas, and stereotypes culturally attached to them; this perception, in turn, informs the treatment of bodies in social spaces.

To theorize the term "embodiment," I revert to Rina Arya's *Abjection and Representation*. Arya describes the shift from "an understanding of the external representation of the body, which prevailed before the twentieth century, to a preoccupation with embodiment, the condition of both *being* and *having* a body" (85). In that sense, embodiment can be understood as following a preoccupation with corporeality. Arya invokes Bryan Turner, who distinguishes embodiment from the concept of the body. According to him, "'body' suggests a reified object of analysis," one that is presented through the public aspect of the body (qtd. in Arya 85-6). In contrast, "embodiment" captures "the notions of making and doing the work of bodies" (Turner, qtd. in Arya 86) and refers to the private aspect of the body.

The shift from the public to the private body highlights the boundaries that human beings are encouraged to create in order "to think of body-image as consisting only of the external" (Arya 86). Arya turns to Elaine Scarry, who argues that the discourse of pain can "mediat[e]" the relationship between inner and outer conceptions of the body (qtd. in Arya 86). In fact, the experience of the lived body often occurs when its "state of equilibrium," or "balance," is "disrupted with the onset of pain" (Scarry qtd. in Arya 86). Arya notes that the loss of is equilibrium is frequently explored through the use of abject substances (such as bodily fluids), the fragmentation of the body, or the emphasis on the precarious inner-outer boundary (86).

Julia Kristeva and Rina Arya on the Theory of Abjection

To complement the sociocultural understanding of rape culture, my analysis of rape narratives and monstrous-coded female bodies is largely informed by Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection. In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Kristeva understands abjection to be "above all ambiguity" (9). She states that within abjection looms "one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable" (1). It is in that focus on threatening subjectivities, liminality, and potential for subversiveness that I situate the interrelationship between the monster, the abject, and their significative possibilities in rape narratives.

Kristeva explains that abjection is a process of ambivalent nature. It functions "like an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsion [that] places the one haunted by it literally beside himself" (Kristeva 1). In other words, abjection can qualify an experience between a subject and a threatening object. For instance, Kristeva identifies that the sight of a corpse can upset the one who confronts it (3) in a manner that both compels and repels the subject. Because the corpse signifies death, it pushes the viewing subject to "the border of [their] condition as a living being" (3). Understood that way, the corpse is "death infecting life" because it "disturbs identity, system, [and] order" (4). That process draws the subject "towards the place where meaning collapses" (2). The ambiguity that characterizes abjection is a significant component of my analysis of rape narratives because of the ways in which it interacts with the reader's perceptions and engagement with textual accounts of sexual violence.

Kristeva identifies crime, in general, as abject, "because it draws attention to the fragility of the law" (4). She argues that "premeditated crime, cunning murder, hypocritical revenge are even more [abject] because they heighten the display of [the law's] fragility" (4). Crime disrupts the boundaries between what is deemed socially acceptable and legal, and what is not. When the law is broken, the system and order it is meant to uphold collapse, which, in turn, unsettles one's subjectivity. This unsettling emerges from one's realization that safety cannot be guaranteed. In my thesis, the monstrously coded women are forced into that realization through their multiple experiences of sexual violence.

Kristeva briefly mentions rape in the theorization of abjection. She singles out "the shameless rapist" (4) as abject. In my argument, I expand on this conceptualization of "the shameless rapist." In particular, I perceive two different kinds of abjection: in the ambiguous morality of the rapist, and in his threat to the physical and emotional boundaries of his victim. That is, a rapist's thoughts and actions cannot be rationalized as moral because he rejects or ignores laws that prohibit sexual violence. A rapist transgresses the law's boundaries; likewise, he violates the boundaries of his victim's body and mind.

While my thesis acknowledges Kristeva's theory as a starting point for the discursive potential in linking abjection to rape culture, I also revert to Rina Arya's vulgarization and application of abjection in *Abjection and Representation*. Therefore, my framework places

both Kristeva and Arya in conversation. Arya echoes Kristeva when she states that abjection, being both "compelling and terrifying," conjures up "conflicting feelings that simultaneously draw us in while also moving us farther away. Fascination pulls the viewer in, while we remain at arm's length because of the dangers that the abject exerts" (5). Arya analyzes works of art to translate the experience of abjection as one between a subject and a threatening object.

Through that method, Arya focuses on the "sensory power of abjection" (10) when concerned with the boundaries and lived experience of the body. Because of its engagement with the body, Arya's understanding of abjection is foundational to my thesis on sexual violence. I consider the two literary works under study as having the capacity both to translate the abject experience of rape, and to transfer that experience to the reader's confrontation with the texts. Abjection can thus be conceived "as an operational function and as a process that is engendered by aesthetic experience (Arya and Chare 9).

Arya also highlights a relationship between abjection and the figure of the monster. As has been previously established, monsters are "transgressive figure[s] that disrup[t] binary logic" and refut[e] being disciplined or destroyed" (Wilson 9). Arya claims that the monster is "archetypally abject and occupies interstitial states between different categories, thereby transgressing the idea of a discrete boundary" (15). She contends that our fascination with the horror genre "reflects a desire to engage with the abject" because it "gives voice to feelings that are often repressed, and confrontation may engender a sense of release" (29). Therefore, monsters can be understood as evoking a sense of abjection because they "disturb . . . identity, system, [and] order" (Kristeva 4). The link between abjection and the monstrous is explored in my thesis: as the monstrous coded female bodies disrupt the horrific discourse of sexual violence, their experiences of abjection are transferred onto their narratives.

Critical Corpus on the Chosen Literary Works

Because Gurba's coming-of-age memoir and Machado's short story were published very recently, little academic work has been published so far on either work. Literary reviews of Gurba's *Mean* have commented on the significance of the treatment of dead bodies, noting, in Elizabeth Gumport's case, that the memoir's dead are "potentially anywhere, or

everywhere" but that they remain present despite their invisibility (Gumport). More specifically, Gumport notices that, by calling the ghost of Sophia Castro Torres by her first name, Gurba restores part of Sophia's identity, which she was denied in death. Gumport claims that the connection between Gurba and Sophia is the animating spirit, which is pertinent considering that the book concerns Gurba's coming-of-age and survival of rape.

Jonathan Alexander also sees the presence of Sophia's ghost as an appropriate device that "disturbs" the reader, and that connects Sophia and Gurba in a "perverse continuum, a grotesque slippage into each other" (Alexander). This continuum portrays sexual abuse as "part of a larger cycle of sexualized violence" (Alexander) against the female body. Alexander also specifies that through language, Gurba connects her individual experience to that of others, and, as such, engages with the impact of race on the perpetuation of sexual violence (Alexander).

Gurba herself asserts that "[i]t's okay for ghosts to exist through me…. It has to be" (qtd in Anderson). She indicates that her ghostly character helps her "make meaning" (qtd in Anderson) out of the sexual violence that has shaped her life and that of many others. Liz von Klemperer notices that, although the book's protagonist is its author, the narrative is "also dominated by the presence of [Mexican] Sophia Castro Torres," who appears as a ghost that helps Gurba "deal with her own PTSD and sexual assault trauma."

Machado's story has been the subject of critical commentary. For one, Natalie Wilson briefly mentions "The Husband Stitch" in the conclusion to *Willful Monstrosity*. She argues that the narrator's ribbon is repeatedly linked to sexual imagery and to violent vocabulary, but that it is also made into a symbol of femininity (240). Having the victim as narrator aligns, for Wilson, the story's plot with Ahmed's idea of the willful monster. Wilson also discusses the shared fear of motherhood that unites the narrator and another woman she meets for coffee, which indicates that "women are trapped within their ribboned bodies" (240) and that their voices remain unheard. That communal trauma depicts the consequences of the patriarchal discourse that fuels and justifies rape culture and sexual violence.

Mary Angeline Hood's article, "Desire and Knowledge: Feminist Epistemology in Carmen Maria Machado's 'The Husband Stitch,'" explores "the epistemological value of

stories and urban legends" in Machado's work (989). Hood explains how the notion of knowledge is awarded various levels of validity depending on the "knower," thus highlighting the patriarchal power relations at play in the story. Later, she explains that the narrator's subversion of the intended meaning of embedded tales points to "the toxicity of society and the misogyny that persists in the central institutions of marriage and motherhood" (989). I expand on Hood's framework by analyzing stories or anecdote that she has not considered and by building on her ideas.

The literary reviews of Machado's story regard its powerful intertextuality as telling of the normalization of sexual violence. Justine Jordan points out that the narrator's ribbon "becomes a locus for desire, aggression, [and] control" that is linked to women's communal experiences of sexual violence (Jordan). Jordan also notes that through her parenthetical directions, Machado's narrator challenges individual readings and indicates that one story's version may not be fully representative of reality.

The story's engagement with physical and emotional boundaries has also been linked to a political discourse about women's bodies. Jen Corrigan argues that the reader "becomes complicit in the cultural sentiment of disbelief, which comfortably allows us to disregard the words of women, especially when addressing violence against their (our) own bodies" (Corrigan). Significantly, a reviewer of Machado's reading of her own story describes how the room was "seized…with the eerie chill of a gripping ghost story" ("Heterosexual Horror Story").

Contribution of the Thesis

My thesis places both Gurba's and Machado's works in conversation with the growing body of literary criticism that engages with the portrayal of gender in horror literature. It also establishes a direct correlation between contemporary discourse on rape culture and literature by demonstrating how the works appropriate the myths attached to rape to denounce, overtly, sexual aggressors as the real monsters. As such, the thesis contributes to enlarging conceptions of rape in literature by analyzing domestic violence, micro-aggressions, and stranger rape. Moreover, the analysis of the use of horror tropes testifies to the possibility for horror literature to engage with the reality of sexual violence without disassociating the

fictional attributes of monsters from women’s lived experiences of sexual abuse. I also consider that my thesis expands the possibilities for literary applications of the theory of abjection. Through my analysis, I strengthen the link between rape and the abject that Kristeva theorizes, and expand on the sensory powers of abjection that Arya highlights. My thesis also testifies to the potential for abjection to characterize not only a text’s content, but also the reader’s experience.

Chapter 1: "Some of us use rape to tell time": Sexual Aggression as Omnipresence in *Mean*

In Myriam Gurba's hybrid memoir *Mean*, the disruption of patriarchal discourse permeating the narrative—a socially determined masculinist perspective that allows rape culture to thrive—occurs through the narrator's consideration of the monstrous-coded female body. The narrator, Gurba herself, is a mixed-race Chicana whose body is othered by patriarchal, racist society. In *Willful Monstrosity*, Natalie Wilson identifies how race and gender have long "served as a basis to identify others as monstrous" (7). More precisely, she discusses how the association of women with "perverse sexuality" "buttress[es] the 'necessity' of patriarchal rule" (7). Because sexual agency has historically been encouraged in men, women who demonstrate the same behaviour are ostracized and marginalized. Women who aspire to exert control over their bodies and sexualities threaten patriarchal hegemony. This perceived danger leads patriarchy to demonize sexual agency in women, especially for those who are already othered because of their race.

Such vilification allows patriarchal authorities to justify their domineering actions and discourses in the social world they control. The creation of hurtful stereotypes significantly contributes to maintaining the hegemony in power. For instance, Inés Hernández-Avila reveals how the imposition of the stereotypes of "fiery, dumb, promiscuous sexpots" (327) on Chicanas and Latinas has led to a pattern of mistreatment and degradation, one that "contributes to the forming of a rape culture such as the one that exists in the United States" (330). Alicia Arrizón also comments on the othering practices that lead to contradictions in the representation of the cultural specificity of the Latina body. She asserts that the patriarchal gaze equates the "mestizo/mulato blood" with the "'hot' temperament of the body," which leads to an "eroticization of 'brownness'" that objectifies the Latina body (191).[5] Arrizón observes that both the machismo attitude and the whore-virgin dichotomy

[5] In "Brain, Brow, and Booty: Latina Iconicity in U.S. Popular Culture," Isabel Molina Guzmán and Angharad N. Valdivia use the term "tropicalism" (221) to define the enduring trope of hypersexualization that is imposed on the Latina body and on Latina iconicity in the U.S. The authors contend that "the bodies of women of color . . . have been excessively sexualized and exoticized by U.S. and European cultures (221). Popular images of the Latina body—and of Latinas—focus "primarily on the area below the navel," which serves to reinforce the dichotomy between mind (associated to the Eurocentric "higher intellectual functions") and body (associated with the "lower biological functions") (211). Therefore, the fragmentation of the Latina body into parts, such

are embedded in Latino cultures (193). Monsterizing the Other—whether from the perspective of a white patriarchal gaze or that of a machismo gaze—thus maintains power and hegemony.

Gurba and Sophia, the ghost, are coded as monstrous in *Mean*; that is, while they do not present the physical, recognizable appearance of monsters, like vampires or witches, they nevertheless are othered because of their gender and race. As a mixed-race Polish Chicana, Gurba mentions that racist people mistake "Mexican" for "subhuman" (5), and they believe her racial heritage to combine "the two stupidest races ever" (41). She also remembers being called a "wetback" (20), a "Mexifart" (29), a "ho" (35), and asserts that her classmates take her brownness to mean that she is a "thief" (22). These insults are meant to reduce Gurba to an inferior being, thereby affirming the superiority of those who have the definitional power to impose labels upon her. Yet, Gurba disrupts this discourse by characterizing herself as "[a] cunt. A free thinker. A roamer" (12). By doing so, she taps into the fears of the hegemonic, patriarchal authority. She rejects the rules that intend to regiment her existence into submission and instead chooses to question them. Her reclamation of "cunt" as an empowering term is a willful act, one that discredits the stigma and stereotypes usually attached to it.

Self-defining as "mean" thus becomes a subversion of the tropes that have historically been ascribed to bodies that look like hers and to minds that think like hers. Being mean helps her "defend [herself] from . . . those who would chop off [her] breasts;" it "keeps [her] alive" (16-7) in a culture that is intent on monsterizing her. In other words, her willfully mean acts assert the agency that patriarchy denies her by monsterizing her body and codifying it as useable. The image of the chopped off breasts is both a representation of patriarchy's assaults on bodies it deems monstrous and a condemnation of the discourse that leads to monstrous codification. Rebecca Stoner sees a "political act" in Gurba's reclamation of meanness and asserts that her "small acts of meanness highlight the cruelty of pervasive, systemic racism, misogyny, and homophobia" (Stoner).

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as the "breasts, hips, and buttocks," functions as "mixed signifiers of sexual desire and fertility as well as bodily waste and racial contamination" (212).

Liz von Klemperer states that "Gurba offers an alternative narrative [to being mean as a result of insecurities and narcissism] in which meanness, hardness, and bluntness are valid and valuable responses to patriarchy, oppression, and violence" (von Klemperer). Understood this way, meanness is an enaction of Ahmed's definition of willfulness as "a style of politics" that can "*get in the way of what is on the way*" (161, emphasis Ahmed's). Meanness can obstruct the normative discourse and propose reconfiguration. Von Klemperer adds that Gurba's use of the term "mean" is a subversion of the "trope of the 'mean girl,' which has played a significant role in recent popular culture" (von Klemperer).

Parul Sehgal further establishes a relationship between popular culture and *Mean* by calling upon the slasher film convention of the final girl. The final girl is "the last woman alive" who "faces down the killer" and "lives in order to tell the story" (Sehgal). As a "self-professed 'final girl'" (Sehgal), Gurba offers *Mean* as her testimony, her survival narrative, written against the hegemonic patriarchy that supports systematic sexual violence. Gurba aims at writing against a "pattern of storytelling" in which stories of sexual assault and violence are "saturated" with "piety" and "[banish] irreverence from the narrative" ("Why I Use Humor"). She rejects the definition of "violation as a baptismal experience that defines one's person" and that "don't allow for survivors to really be alive" ("Why I Use Humor"). Writing her memoir itself, since it exposes the very foundations of rape culture, can be considered as a "mean" act if we consider it from the perspective of the hegemonic gaze that sustains systemic violence against which the narrative acts.

In *Mean*, Myriam Gurba uses female monstrous-coded bodies to expose the reality of sexual violence; she does so by negotiating the intersection of the concepts of corporeality, embodiment, and abjection. Gurba proposes multi-faceted representations of corporeality through her depictions of the treatment of the female body by authoritative institutions, her frank discussion of the intimate, sexual workings of the body, and her attention to the fleshing out of the ghost of Sophia. Embodiment is mainly represented through depictions of the narrator's multiple molestations and rape, as well as in her characterization of spaces as potentially dangerous. Embodiment informs the concept of abjection, which is explored in three ways. In many vignettes, Gurba examines how sexual assault leads to the disruption of the boundaries of Sophia's body. Those chapters are intertwined with Gurba's account of

how that rapist similarly invades her body against her will and destabilizes her subjectivity. The analysis of abjection concludes with a discussion of the reader, whose experience of the memoir is uncomfortably guided by Gurba's imposition of rapist perspectives. In her delicate intermingling of those three concepts, Gurba's narrativizing of the monstrous-coded female body, the site where rape occurs and is dealt with, leads to a willful disruption of patriarchal discourse and the creation of new ways of approaching and understanding sexual violence.

1. "You can't see her in them, but you can": Corporeality of the Monstrous-Coded Body

The concept of corporeality is most prominently staged in the first half of *Mean*'s narrative, which precedes Gurba's account of her rape. As mentioned in the introduction, corporeality, for Moira Gatens, can be understood as originating from "those ready-made images and symbols through which we make sense of social bodies and which determine, in part, their value, their status and what will be deemed their appropriate treatment (viii). Therefore, corporeality refers to the ways in which the body is socially perceived. Gatens mentions that, historically, depictions of the "human body [have] turn[ed] out to be depictions of white male bodies—with the bodies of others called upon to illustrate specific capacities: the female reproductive system, for example" (viii). She claims that these representations have had "detrimental effects on notions of women and femininity" (viii). Gurba rejects those conventional ways of representing and discussing the human body. She chooses to propose her own monstrous-coded body as the site where a new discourse can emerge.

In my thesis, the section on the multifaceted aspects of corporeality aims at defamiliarizing what has been accepted as familiar. The widely accepted and internalized mediatic and cultural discourses that inform our society's understanding of rape are often focused on the corporeal. For instance, sexual violence is regularly blamed on a victim's sexualized body or choice of clothes; news headlines focus on a victim's physical characteristics but, contrarily, also discuss a rapist's loss of opportunities or harmed reputation; and rape is both minimized to the forced penetration of a victim's body and reflected linguistically in the misogynist bias of the English language. Through their focus on a reductive definition of the corporeal, such discourses present a misconception of sexual violence that has become normalized. The section that follows demystifies the notion of

corporeality that is defined in rape culture. Its goal is to transform the familiar into a more complex, unfamiliar understanding of the monstrous female's corporeality. In so doing, the harmful discourses become invalidated in order to propose a more accurate understanding of the notion of corporeality in situations of sexual violence.

1.1 The Female Monstrous Body as Prey and Masculinist Complicity Within the System

Gurba's childhood and adolescence vignettes are memories often related to the ways in which her physical, material body was understood and treated by authoritative figures and institutions, which are all intent on perpetuating the monstrous coding they impose upon her body. A salient example is her description of the molestations she endures at the hands of a classmate named Macaulay. Gurba explains that she knew him from second grade, a "simpler time and place" when recess was spent "compet[ing] against one another in timed tournaments of sexual assault" (23). That "playground sport," called "Kissy Boys versus Kissy Girls," had for a winner "only the toughest kiss rapist" (23). Gurba specifies that her "well-developed calves, ambition, and machismo" made her a great player (23).

Here, the vocabulary used connotes the association of power with sexuality. Evocative of the definitions of rape culture offered by feminist critics such as Susan Brownmiller and Emilie Buchwald,[6] sexuality in Gurba's work is understood in terms that denote violence, however subtle and casual. In that playground game, whose title is misleading, gender seems to have no impact on the source of that violence: everyone who decides to play does so knowing that "an 'oppositely sexed' team member" might "connect lips with any part of them" (23). However, Macauley's behaviour following a particularly "sweaty session" (23) contradicts that apparent neutrality. He calls Gurba's name and proceeds to "ban[g] into [her] lips," "making her "teeth dug into [her] own wet flesh" (23). That "unsanctioned kiss" (23) indicates that Macaulay considers Gurba's body as available because of her participation in the game. It also foreshadows his seventh-grade molestations of Gurba in Mr. Hand's history class.

In that class, Gurba's and Macauley's behaviour is compared to expose the gendered perspectives on sexuality that emerge from growing up in rape culture. She states that they

[6] For definitions of rape culture, refer to pp. 9-13 in the introduction of this thesis.

sit together at the “left front corner” (24) under the watchful eye of Mr. Hand. As the teacher explains the syllabus, Gurba is fascinated with the texture of her classmate’s sweater and feels “lewd impulses towards it”: she “want[s] to touch the fleece” and to “squeeze it the way [she] sometimes long[s] to squeeze big boobs” (24). Her overt allusion to the female body acknowledges the fact that such thoughts are commonplace, especially at an age where adolescents become increasingly aware of their condition as sexual(ized) beings.

Yet, her decision to “[sit] on [her] hands” (24) instead of acting upon her impulses is contrasted with Macauley’s acts against her body to emphasize the repercussions of growing up in rape culture. Macauley has internalized “physical and emotional terrorism against women” (Buchwald et al. xi) as a normalized behaviour and understands his actions as justified. His behaviour attests to a type of ignorance that confuses pleasure with “pain and domination” (Buchwald et al. xiv); it is a confusion that empowers men both by keeping them sexually inviolate and by portraying women—and their bodies—as sexually useable (Dworkin 17).

Gurba describes the multiple instances when Macauley invades her body in class. On the first occasion, she feels “a sensation intrud[ing]” “near [her] bicycle shorts’ hem” (24), looks at Macauley “with caution” (25), and freezes, instinctually knowing that “what was happening under the table shouldn't have been happening” (25). Her rhetorical choices are important to unpack. Although the words “sensation” and “what” are vague and indicate her lack of proper vocabulary to recognize sexual violence— a lack that reflects the societal taboo and misinformation regarding the conversation about rape—her use of “intruded,” “caution,” and “shouldn’t” (24, 25) points to her body and mind’s “[i]nstinctual” (25) response to a threat. Additionally, she “sens[es]” that “if [she] yelped, [she]’d look like the bad guy” and so “swallow[s] [her] chance at rescue” (25). As explained in the introduction, Gurba’s body has already been coded as monstrous because of her race and gender, so any attempt to blame the boy who assaults her would not be taken seriously. This passage exemplifies the repercussions of what Brownmiller calls the indoctrination of girls and women into a “victim mentality” (309).

Gurba’s initial understanding of her body as that of a “prey” (25) is further examined in the subsequent molestations she suffers as well as in her realization that her possible

rescuer, Mr. Hand, is complicit in her abuse. Her decision to include those moments in her memoir breaks what Elizabeth Gumport calls the "past silences," or the "tape people tried to erase" (Gumport). Gurba breaks the silence by narrativizing her experience; she demonstrates how her time with Mr. Hand "mostly taught [her] how to be quietly molested" by those she calls "bad moles" (25). A bad mole "creeps up" behind its prey and "lets his whiskers slip where they don't belong" (25). Her explication of the prey/predator animal imagery implies that her time in history class was spent fixating on her public molestation in order to rationalize it. The sexual violence enacted upon her body thus got in the way of her education.

The relationship between education and molestation is disturbingly validated by Mr. Hand's inability to intervene in Gurba's situation. Nan Stein states at school, from kindergarten through grade twelve, "[g]irls learn that they are on their own, that the adults and others around them will not believe or help them when they report sexual harassment or assault" (61). She contends that the harassers "find that their conduct is treated with impunity, sometimes even glorified" (61). Stein's allegations are echoed in Gurba's narrative and diction. As the students take a test, Gurba feels Macauley's hand "land" and "blushe[s] as his fingers snuck into [her] crotch" (30). Looking at Mr. Hand, she observes:

> His eyes left the page he was grading. He saw. From where he was sitting, his desk parallel to the chalkboard, his face facing us, he had a view.
>
> Mr. Hand's eyes were watching the performance between my legs. It was symphonic. Macauley played for no audience, but he had an audience of one.
>
> I looked into Mr. Hand's unprepared eyes. He looked me in mine. Mr. Hand's face, neck, and scalp went from light pinkish to cherry tomato.
>
> I'm not sure what my expression told Mr. Hand, but I think it communicated something like, 'I know that seeing a boy do this to me is embarrassing for both of us, but I'm pretty sure you can make it stop. (31)

Here, Gurba focuses on diction related to the body to translate her experience. By doing so, she familiarizes the reader with the patriarchal perception imposed on her female monstrous body. She mentions Mr. Hand's "desk" to assert his authoritative position and relates that position to "his face facing us" in order to point to the student-teacher power hierarchy. Her clear delineation of the physical setup of the class mirrors her acute attention to the silent interaction of the three physical bodies: Mr. Hand's, Macauley's, and her own. Her mention

of Mr. Hand's[7] red "face, neck, and scalp" points to the fact that her teacher's body cannot help reacting to what he is witnessing. This sort of reaction, however, does not acknowledge the situation and forces Gurba into silence. Such paralleled silence accentuates the repercussions that the beliefs of rape culture have on the sexist perception of female bodies in society (here, specifically in school and in interactions between authority figures, boys, and girls); that is, the socialization of girls to develop a victim mentality and the configuration of sexuality as linked to violence inform the social behaviour that Gurba describes. These beliefs minimize the importance of female bodies. At the same time, they enforce the sexualization of these bodies and encourage violent behaviour towards them.[8]

In the above passage, Gurba also examines the various perceptions of the act: the repetition of the word "eyes," and the use of "view," "performance," "audience," and "expression" (31), portray sexual assault both as occurring in plain sight and as being willfully ignored. Therefore, her ironic use of "performance" points to her unwillingness to participate in her molestation and her discomfort at being seen in such position. The three times Mr. Hand's eyes are mentioned can be associated with Gurba's initial description of her teacher as someone who is viewed as powerful, for he "was blue-eyed, and likely had a penis, everyone had taken [him] seriously" (24). Here, the blue eyes infer that he is white; the "penis" points to his masculinity; and the seriousness implies his authority. Gurba had also mentioned his "cr[ying]" of instructions, his "toss[ing]" of syllabi (24), and his "track[ing], hunt[ing], and captur[ing]" of cutout paper letters to form the word *welcome* (25), which indicate his internalization of violence as a defining aspect of masculinity. This description of Mr. Hand as a serious, aggressive, predator-like person is contrasted with his subsequent blushing and embarrassment at seeing Gurba's pleading eyes. The authority he seems to have has not prepared him for confronting a molestation.

In fact, after looking at the "performance," the teacher "snapped his eyes back at the worksheet he'd been grading. He hunched closer to it. He buried his blushing face in it. He

[7] In fact, Mr. Hand's name itself suggests touching, which links him with Macauley's own hands inappropriately invading Gurba's body. This relation strengthens Gurba's denunciation of male complicity with each other and with the sexist system in which they thrive as predators.

[8] In the narrative, the silence characterizes Gurba's reactions as unacceptable and worthless, while Macauley's behaviour is tolerated. These differences also concur with Krakauer's research, which demonstrates the cultural disbelief of women who claim to have been sexually assaulted.

used the worksheet as a veil. He became as modest as some harem girls are expected to be. As speechless, too" (31). By contrasting her teacher's corporeality to her own, Gurba reveals that "[a]ll rape is an exercise in power" (Brownmiller 256). Although her teacher is visibly uncomfortable, his inaction testifies to the "institutionalized setting that works to [his] advantage and in which a victim has little chance to redress her grievance" (Brownmiller 256). Mr. Hand does not rape Gurba, but his witnessing of the act and his inaction are a complicit acknowledgment of the tacit pact of silence between men regarding their ability to abuse women with impunity.[9] He relies on his masculinist power to align himself with Macauley. It is that power which sustains—and is sustained by—the cultural beliefs regarding rape culture.

1.2 Corporeal Redemption Through Art

In the following vignette, Gurba evokes corporeality by translating her molestation into art imagery. She discusses how the "standard American molestation" usually "implicates a grown-up and not a peer, especially not a peer molesting you in broad daylight while your history teacher looks on and pretends he doesn't see" (32). Since her story differs from that template, she calls it "avant-garde molestation" (32), thus implying that Macaulay's actions somehow push the boundaries of what is accepted as the norm. Her comparison can be read as a social critique of both what constitute this norm—the restrictive, cultural belief of what constitutes sexual assault—and the reasons for the acceptance of the status quo. The female body is considered as the space where a performance takes place, or as material that can be moulded. As such, the male body is the one performing the female body because that body is perceived as monstrous and thus in need of regimentation.

While at first glance such an observation seems bleak, Gurba's imagery related to visual arts allows her to regain control over her own body. She invokes the work of artist

[9] In a blog entry, Gurba, now a teacher herself, discusses how her school district "offered . . . training on the prevention of sexual abuse." She remembers being molested in class while male teachers "watched and did nothing," as is evident in her depiction of Mr. Hand's class. Gurba then describes being "horrified" by the trajectory of the training: "A good part of it was spent discussing how teachers might avoid false accusations…HOW TEACHERS MIGHT AVOID FALSE ACCUSATIONS. With that priority, the workshop's intent became clear. Protecting predators and promoting the myth that girls lie, that a girl's word is suspect, that girls don't deserve testimonial justice, that girls are a bunch of petty shit talkers, that girls aren't as trustworthy as boys, THAT GIRLS DON'T MATTER, matter most" ("On Katie Hill and American Girls").

Ana Mendieta,[10] who, as a Cuban and feminist woman, would be subjected to the same monstrous codifications that the hegemonic power imposes upon Gurba. Mendieta's work consists of her wandering through different places and "nestling her naked body into meadows, beaches, and hillsides" (32). The silhouettes that her nestling created were then photographed and became "evidence of her interaction with the earth" (32). Mendieta's artistic approach is concerned with the "interaction" of a monstrous-coded body with different places it can inhabit. The traces that she leaves and the photographs of them become odes to the female physical form. Gurba contends that, "[y]ou can't see her in [those photographs], but you can. You can't see Macauley on me, but you can read him. He treated me like an artist working with dirt" (32). That comparison between Gurba's body and "dirt" exemplifies how the social space in which she exists allows others—boys and men who adopt and enact sexual violence, and therefore perpetuate rape culture—to treat her body as malleable and serving their own patriarchal, selfish needs. In other words, being a racially-othered, female being marks her as a sexual prey.

At the same time, Gurba asserts that the "invisible imprints" of "Macauley's touch" "on [her] thighs" allow her to redefine her "little molester as a sculptor," which "redeem[s] [her] molestation" (32). According to her, "[a]rt is one way to work out touch gone wrong" (32). Her rationale for her reclaiming her body is that since Marcel Duchamp could elevate a urinal to the status of art, then she could do the same thing with herself (32). She states that "like a urinal," she functions as a vessel and holds "sadness, language, memories, and glee" (32). She therefore refuses to have her existence reduced to her sexually traumatic

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[10] In her memoir, Gurba writes that Mendieta's husband, "minimalist sculptor Carl Andre, pushed her out of their window" (32). Her assertiveness contrasts with the mystery that still shrouds the circumstances of her death in 1985. Sean O'Hagan's article for *The Guardian* details the various perspectives on the supposed murder. He explains how the American justice system is biased towards the protection of sexual aggressors, which led to Andre being acquitted. Moreover, O'Hagan highlights that Mendieta's work was unknown "outside the rarefied world of feminist art criticism" and that the "art establishment" is "male-dominated." He refers to the 1992 opening of the SoHo Guggenheim Museum art gallery, where feminist protesters denounced the inclusion of Carl Andre's work over that of Mendieta (Ana Mendieta: Death of an Artist Foretold in Blood"). Another article on Mendieta's work and death is significant. In it, Nina Renata Aron states that Mendieta is "a symbol of the looming threat of violence all women face" and that, as many argue, the response to her death "reflects the historical neglect of the work of women artists and artists of color and, more disturbingly, the erasure of violence against women in the culture at large" ("The Puzzling Death of Controversial Artist Ana Mendieta Has Long Overshadowed her Brilliant Work").
Gurba's invocation of Mendieta can thus be understood as her effort to denounce the silencing that has been imposed upon the artist and her body.

experiences. Gurba claims her corporeality for herself and, like the visual artists she invokes, uses the traces left upon her body as proof of its value and validity.

1.3 Antagonistic Male and Female Corporealities

Gurba stages the vignettes involving Macauley's acts of molestation against the larger context of the sexualization of girls' bodies in school, a context that contributes to rape culture in relatively subtle ways through the reinforcement of the links between power and sexuality. To do so, she uses a casual tone to allude to that context, which both minimizes the gravity and impacts of particular types of behaviour and points to their widespread presence and internalization. In so doing, she is testifying to the veracity of Benedict's assertions regarding the "sexist bias in the English language" (125). For instance, she briefly mentions the "accusations carved into the bathroom stall paint" that involve "the word *hoe*" and its variations (26); she later specifies that her "ho status eclipsed the rest of [her]" (35). She describes a classmate who, after calling Anne Frank a "big-time lesbo," "physically punctuat[es] his assertion with a hip thrust inches from [her] face" (29). She also explains that her "skirt-wearing style attracted admirers" (35), and that Joey, a classmate, stares at girls in a way that makes them aware that "in his eyes, [they] skinny-dipped" (39). In PE class, she mentions how mandatory stretching became an opportunity for "perverts" to "loo[k] around to see what other people looked like in this pose so they would have something to masturbate to" (39). The casual tone used in these examples does not simply testify to the cultural normalization of such behaviours: it also attests to Gurba's awareness of the system—the patriarchal system whose beliefs have seeped into the school system—and to its impact on young people.

The sense of corporeality here is not only related to the way female bodies are perceived in the social space that is school. In fact, Gurba points to a device used by girls to defend themselves against the attacks upon their bodies that boys, vindicated by the internalization of their superiority, enact on them. After a "bunch of Little Leaguers"[11] decide to moon Gurba and her friends in gym class, the girls humorously "[discuss] their exposure," and bond over the evaluation of what they have seen (40). By doing so, they invalidate the

[11] A term, often repeated in the memoir, that establishes a link between these classmates and the park that hosts "Little League games by daylight" where Sophia dies.

boys' sexist attitude without resorting to insults or aggressive behaviour. [12] From the girls' perspective, their own behaviour discredits the socially constructed superiority that allows boys to act in that unwelcomed way without being punished.

Yet, the girls' awareness of their own corporeality must be understood as existing in opposition to the males' perception of female bodies. In other words, even though girls know how their bodies are seen and attempt to gain control over them by rejecting such patriarchal gaze, boys still thrive in a rape culture that affirms the superiority of their own sense of corporeality. In that social system, the boys' agency and power are promoted over the girls': this leads them to believe that their perception can override the knowledge that girls claim for and about themselves and their bodies. Buchwald states that "[i]deas are powerful shapers of behaviour" (215). According to her, the misogyny that is fed to boys "with their breakfast cereal" is repeated "until it becomes part of a stored memory" and "is thought of as a received truth" (215). Misogyny considers the monstrous female body as marked by its inferiority and, therefore, as conquerable. Ingraining the idea of superiority thus leads to a destructive message regarding the imbalance of power between genders (Buchwald 216).

1.4 Authority Figures and the Silencing Imposed by Rape Culture

Gurba's experiences in the school system frame her subsequent interactions with authority figures. Immediately after being assaulted in the street while on the way to her mother's class at the elementary school, Gurba is led to the principal's office. As she enters, the secretaries observe her with "the same looks on their faces the principal had upon first seeing [her]. It was one I'd never seen before but recognized immediately. It was the oh-god-she's-been-raped look. It was rotten to receive that look. I didn't ever want to be looked at that way again" (121). Here, Gurba becomes aware of the way her body is seen and reduced following the assault it has survived. Her repetition of the word "look," as a verb and a noun, echoes the previous passage in which Mr. Hand saw her being molested and ignored it. In both cases, her body becomes a site of judgement. The looks she receives testify both to the widespread lack of understanding about sexual assault and to the inability of others to empathize with a survivor. Her choice of the word "rotten" suggests that her body is perceived as defiled,

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[12] Gurba explains how the "manliest boy, Tim, turned to look at [them]" and "kissed the air" (40). That defiant attitude is one of many subtle ways in which boys assert their so-called superiority over girls.

which threatens the redemption she had achieved in her own mind after Macauley's molestation.

Following that silent interaction with the principal and secretaries, Gurba goes through a destabilizing experience when the school nurse confronts her. The nurse shows no sign of empathy and verbally attacks Gurba as if she were responsible for her traumatic experience: "'What happened?' she asked. She squinted at me through her glasses. She folded her arms and crossed her legs. She was closing herself off. The principal was gone" (122). The nurse's attitude, communicated through her body language, is characteristic of a wider tendency, even in women, to disbelieve women claiming to have been raped. Krakauer explains the "humiliating experience" (16) most victims go through when submitting to medical procedures following sexual assault. For many, these procedures are essentially a second rape: the victim's "most private recesses" are, again, "intensely scrutinized by strangers" (16).

Although Gurba does not mention undergoing the procedure for collecting evidence of assault, her interaction with the nurse has a similar negative effect. The nurse's question triggers "a fresh round of hysterics" for Gurba who, "wail[ing] through [her] tears," answers: "'Iwaswalkinghereandamangrabbedmeandhewouldn'tletmegoandhebentmeoverand—'" (122). This answer is interrupted when the nurse yells "'STOP CRYING!'" and shocks Gurba silent (122). Without asking further questions or waiting for Gurba to continue, the nurse says, "'You're going to have to get over this . . . These kinds of things happen. You're going to have to get over this. Do you hear me?'" (122). Such a verbal attack and a silencing numb Gurba, who feels "[s]ensation le[aving] [her]" while the nurse's expression remains firm (122). The nurse's reaction suggest that women have also internalized the censoring discourses that sustain rape culture. Her behaviour imposes domination over Gurba's corporeality by minimizing her rape, silencing her, and denying her humanity.

1.5 Reconfiguring the Intimacy of the Female Monstrous Body

In *Mean*, the sense of corporeality is not only enacted in social settings where bodies exist and interact. Gurba also evokes a more private idea of corporeality, one that concerns the bond between the monstrous-coded female narrator and the intimate workings of her own

body. By doing so, she commends the female body and breaks the stigmas associated with it. For instance, early in the narrative, Gurba introduces a frank examination of her bodily odours. She first identifies a correlation between race and smells: "I have heard some people say that different races have different smells. If you're interracial, do you have a blended fragrance?" (21). Here, she alludes to one of the many stereotypes that reinforce the imaginary us/them dichotomy. As a mixed-race Chicana, her identity does not squarely fit within either an *us* or *them* dialectic or within any particular category; rather, in a manner that evokes Gloria Anzaldúa's borderlands identity, Gurba can navigate multiple categories.[13] Her association of smell with race, then, evokes the significance of her body as a multicultural site—an ontology that the patriarchal authority uses to monsterize her. By wondering whether she has a "blended fragrance," she questions the ways in which her racial identity emanates from her physical body.

Gurba then reclaims the stereotype of racialized fragrances by converting it into an empowering discourse. She affirms that "[her] crotch has a blended fragrance," and that she "love[s] the way it smells, especially when it hasn't been washed in a few days. It smells like life, the ocean, baked goods, and shawarma" (21). Uncleanness and bodily secretions are often associated with abjection (Arya 4, 61, 97, 115) and have been historically taboo topics. Tey Diana Rebolledo affirms that "a clear taboo for women is to speak or write publicly about the realistic, everyday functions of the female body" (159). Here however, Gurba explicitly objects to any categorization of her genitals as linked to the abject and the unspeakable; instead, she reclaims her body by associating its functions with an empowering sense of corporeality.

Martha Roth argues that the discovery of one's genitals is strongly associated with shame for girls, while boys "are praised for learning to aim a urine stream" (366). In a similar vein, Catrióna Rueda Esquibel comments that in Chicano/a literature, girls are "discouraged

[13] In the preface to the first edition of *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Anzaldúa explains that the "borderland" identity she postulates is based on her exploration of the Texas-U.S. Southwest/Mexican border, and extended to the psychological, sexual, and spiritual borderlands that emerge when "two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle, and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy" (19). Those borderlands are places of contradictions and prominently feature "[h]atred, anger and exploitation" (19). Anzaldúa proposes her borderlands identity as a way of existing that valorizes contradictions and challenges the cultural tyranny of the "[d]ominant paradigms, predefined concepts that exist as unquestionable" (38).

. . . from recognizing or exploring their sexuality" (94). Often, girls are forced to "come . . . face to face with . . . their prescribed roles' in Chicana/o (hetero)sexual economies" (Saldívar, qtd. in Esquibel 94). Therefore, by declaring that she loves the smell of her unwashed "crotch," Gurba rejects the conventional discourse surrounding female genitalia and offers a renewed mode of thinking about her body and its functions.

In fact, her claim that her "crotch" "smells like life and the ocean" conjures up, once again, Gloria Anzaldúa. In particular, Gurba evokes Anzaldúa's argument about the need to destabilize the male-dominated culture that disempowers the fertile potentiality of "powerful female deities" and drives them "underground by giving them monstrous attributes" (Anzaldúa 49). Such monsterization reinforces the association between female sexuality and forms of alterity. The male-dominated culture splits the female self into its "upper (light) and underworld (dark) aspects" (49), which leads to the construction of the "virgen/puta (whore) dichotomy" (Anzaldúa 53; Caputi 356). Patriarchal authority uses this dichotomy to "mete out institutionalized oppression" (Anzaldúa 53), thus indoctrinating Chicanas to assume a docile, submissive mentality. By revering the intimacy of her body, Gurba rejects this monsterizing split and places herself in a continuum of writers engaged with a more holistic representation of female bodies.

Gurba expands on that progressive representation by comparing periods to food. By doing so, she inscribes herself in a legacy of Chicana/Latina women writers, such as Denise Chávez, who use such devices to counteract the societal taboos that regulate the discussion of the monstrous-coded female body (Rebolledo 163). While reading "*El Diario de Ana Frank*," she observes that "Anne Frank was talking kind of dirty. She was sharing what her body was like . . . describing her period and confiding the texture of it, the marinaraishness of it, the minestroneishness of it. She nicknamed it her sweet secret" (30). Those comparisons explicitly reject the social taboo regarding menstruation, as well as the multiple euphemisms for periods that perpetuate ignorance.[14] The link she establishes between her genitals and food echoes her previous assertion that her "crotch" smells like "baked goods" and "shawarma" (21), which contributes to the reconsideration of the culturally accepted ways of

[14] For example, Jane Caputi highlights ads for sanitary napkins as a case in which "flowers" become substitutes for the "menstrual period" (258).

discussing (or avoiding talking about) the intimate workings of the female body. The connections she creates, then, can be understood as normalizing devices for the reader, who might have internalized the discourses that monsterize the female body. Therefore, Gurba's metaphors become somewhat didactic: they exhort the reader to consider new perspectives on the female body through positively connotated images that discard cultural taboos.

1.6 Sophia's Imagined Corporeality

1.6.1 The Subversive Writing of Sophia into Existence

In positing positive corporeality, Gurba inscribes her narrative with a complex, personal understanding of her intertwined experiences of being raped and of living in a rape culture. Such experiences are further sustained by Gurba's narrative efforts to flesh out Sophia's ghost. Put differently, Gurba gives shape to the imagined corporeality of what would otherwise remain the vague memory of a dead Mexican girl in order to work through her own trauma. She aims at creating an impression of Sophia that refuses to be minimized by the monsterizing that patriarchy enforces onto female bodies, a process that becomes exponentially degrading if that body is racially marked.

The first method for such shaping consists of criticizing the dehumanizing and reductive portrayal of Sophia in life and death in the news. It is important, here, to invoke Liz von Klemperer who discusses the significance of the book's title: she writes: "[Gurba's] mission is not only to tell her story but also to give meaning to a story that was sorely misrepresented and underreported by the media" (von Klemperer). Following her initial depiction of Sophia's rape-murder, Gurba implicitly compares it to that of the newscaster reporting on the tragedy. Focusing on the murder description "as 'the bludgeoning death of a transient in Oakley Park,'" Gurba insists on the "cruel[ty]" of the phrasing, claiming that "[it] reduces [Sophia] to transience, as if she personified it, and it ignores her name. Her name matters" (3). In this quote, the contrast between "transience" and the importance of "her name" is significant: not naming the victim amounts to translating her attack into one more figure for statistics. Likewise, reducing her to transience underscores the newscaster's belief in Sophia's insignificance, which, in turn, negates her humanity.

By insisting on naming Sophia, Gurba writes her into existence: she "turn[s] [Sophia's] name over and over in [her] head. [Her] brain rubs it smooth from *S* to *a*. Sophia" (3). Gurba's use of kinetic vocabulary correlates with her attempt to create a sense of corporeality for Sophia. "Writing" Sophia into existence is also present in the way she titles the first chapter of her memoir in her honour. She specifies that "[i]n Greek, *sophia* means *wisdom*" (3). Titling her opening chapter "Wisdom" becomes Gurba's deliberate act of infusing Sophia's ghost with the corporeality and significance that the newscast denies her. Since the memoir as genre often focuses on the author's encounters with significant people, Gurba's approach and rehabilitation of Sophia's humanity have discursive potential. Sophia is depicted not only as deserving of attention, but also as contributing to Gurba's understanding and navigation of her own life.

Elsewhere in the narrative, Gurba dedicates more vignettes to the life and death of Sophia, thereby continuously challenging reporters' depiction of the rape-murder. By doing so, Gurba refuses to let Sophia be reduced to another nameless dead rape victim, and instead insists on celebrating her life. In the chapter "Strawberry Picker" (112-3), she writes "the short, mean life of Sophia Torres" (112). Her use of "mean" echoes the memoir's title and Gurba's subversive self-definition. As such, "mean" is part of Gurba's attempt to dissociate Sophia from the culture that exploits her because of her appearance. She rejects the "outsider status" and monsterizing coding that is imposed on migrants with words such as "mojados" and "alambristas" (Rebolledo 232)[15] and instead characterizes Sophia as having agency. Gurba expands on the other ways in which she relates to Sophia:

> Sometimes I feel like I know her better than I know most living people. We share this thing. A man, a Mexican. All three of us, the trinity of us, are Mexican. She and I share a fear of him. We share what it's like to have him touching us and watching us. Breathing on our faces. We both understood that he wanted us dead. She wound up dead. I mostly didn't. (112)

In this passage, Gurba alludes to the way in which the sense of corporeality she shares with Sophia was perceived by their aggressor. By focusing on the actions done to their bodies—touching them, watching them, breathing on their faces, killing them (or intending to)—Gurba uses her own rape as a scaffolding for understanding and empathizing with Sophia.

[15] "Mojados" translates to "wetbacks," and "alambristas" to "wire crossers/cutters" (Rebolledo 232).

As a result, their interlinked senses of corporeality become the sites of their visceral experiences. Jonathan Alexander highlights how in Gurba's memoir "an embodied life is always full of the impress, imprint, and pressure of other bodies. Some of those bodies we invite; some thrust themselves upon us" ("Other People's Children"). When understood through the "trinity" (Gurba, Sophia, and the rapist—all of them Mexicans) the author identifies, the "impress, imprint, and pressure" lead to both rapes being treated with the same narrative importance, for they inform one another.

In that same vignette, Gurba focuses on Sophia's battered body to give an extensive account of the violence she suffered. The news articles about her attack exploit that violence for shock value[16]—preferring to detail the "pool of blood on the ground and splattered blood" (132) found at the crime scene and to present headlines that focus on the gruesomeness of the "battered body" (132), rather than to dwell on the fact that a rapist is at large. Therefore, Gurba exposes the mediatic tendency to glorify the violence enacted upon female bodies rather than to condemn the predators and the patriarchal system responsible for such sexist violence.

Conversely, Gurba uses food metaphors to describe Sophia's injuries. This device, which parallels her earlier association of the female genitalia with comfort food, allows for a graphic, but necessary, take on the destruction of Sophia's corporeality. After specifying that Sophia "came to the United States from Mexico" and "picked strawberries for white people," a fact that points to the economic imbalance leading those in power to use and literally abuse the bodies of those who have no choice but to migrate, Gurba reiterates how the victim "got raped, beaten to death, and left in a park" (112). She then supposes that

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[16] This is a common technique identified by both Brownmiller and Krakauer. Brownmiller observes that "rape sells newspapers" and that a "*selected* rape," one that is "dressed up to fit the male fantasy," is usually featured (337). Of course, Brownmiller assesses these facts in the 1970s. She also stresses that she is talking about tabloid journalism and that the handling of rape by papers such as *The Washington Post* is usually informative and unsensational (337). Nevertheless, Brownmiller's observation that glamourous words such as "attractive," "good looking," and "blond/brunette" (339-41) is still relevant today. Similarly, Shannon O'Hara points out that the news media's coverage of sexual violence tends to categorize the female victims as "virgins" or "promiscuous women" (248). Meanwhile, when rape is sensationalised by the press, the perpetrator is "transformed into an 'other'" with vocabulary such as "monster," "evil," and "freak" (251). Those words perpetuate the myth that rapists are not ordinary men. Victims are portrayed in sexual terms—which revictimizes them—while guilty men appear to be so drastically different from regular men that the role of the patriarchal, rape culture is often ignored. For his part, Krakauer points out that news coverage regularly focuses on the opinions of those who minimize an occurrence of rape in order to redeem offenders (114-5).

"[p]arts of Sophia must've looked like strawberry compote once he was done with her. Sauce in the moonlight" (112). Gurba's tone is grim: "[s]auce in the moonlight" is not an expression that would usually denote sexual violence. The comparison of a corpse to strawberry compote and sauce suggest that rape and murder should be considered through a different language than the one used by news media. The allusion to food, here, is not meant to comfort or familiarize the reader with the monstrous female body, but rather to disrupt the detached vocabulary that is conventionally accepted when discussing sexual violence in the media. Renewed through language, Sophia's corporeality becomes a catalyst for the emergence of a new discourse, in which stereotypes and monstrous coding are invalidated.

In the following vignette, entitled "Exquisite Corpse," Gurba creates a "found poem" out of "court documents," believing it to be a "suitable tribute" to Sophia (114). As she explains, the police "collected bits and pieces," and she herself only knows "bits and pieces" about Sophia too (114). She concludes, "[r]ape cuts everything into bits and pieces" (114). The repetition of "bits and pieces" emphasizes the physical impact of the rape-murder unto Sophia's body, which speaks to her fragmentation. Using these techniques, the found poem is visually evocative of Sophia's corporeality and does not merely focus on its state after her death. With her artistic choices, Gurba is also exposing and contesting what Barbara Creed terms the cultural obsession with "the bleeding body of woman" (52). Instead, through the poem, Gurba considers Sophia's body as a testament to the complexity of her life. The bits and pieces that Gurba cuts are placed to create an approximative body shape formed by a mixture of biographical information, forensic work done on Sophia's body, news articles about her death, and the new discourse Gurba proposes.

Read from top to bottom, or head to toe, the poem ends with its most significant part: the self-standing letters and words that form the legs and feet. Once joined, they spell out "STAWBERRY FIELDS FOREVER STRAWBERRY SHORTCAKE" (115). Gurba does not specify whether she is making a reference to the 1967 Beatles' song "Strawberry Fields Forever," but the considerable number of cultural references throughout her story point to this as a plausible interpretation. The lyrics' emphasis on introspection, living "with eyes closed," and "misunderstanding," reflect Gurba's own introspection about living a life indelibly altered by a rape culture that "misunderstands" women's bodies.

The found poem's end, "STRAWBERRY SHORTCAKE," echoes the "compote" and "sauce" (112) previously used to describe Sophia's damaged body. However, the metaphor here has more hopeful tones. Since a strawberry shortcake is made of layers, it can be read as a metaphor for Sophia's life. In the visual poem, the mention of the shortcake targets the celebration of Sophia's life rather than her death or battered body. The creation of a shortcake alludes to Sophia's life: she had a "layered," or multi-faceted existence; she was not just a statistic or a body to abuse. As such, Gurba's food metaphor contributes to contesting the media's reduction of Sophia to a transient bludgeoned to death.[17]

1.6.2 Homages and Tributes as Devices for the Redemption of Sophia's Death

The second approach to the consideration of Sophia's corporeality is apparent in Gurba's homage to the victim. Her tributes are attempts to redefine Sophia's untimely death, emphasizing her humanity to contest what the media considered an insignificant life. In the aforementioned passage where she explains the significance of Sophia's name, Gurba "light[s] a votive candle, watch[es] the flame bounce, and whisper[s] her name aloud," stating that "[i]t sounds like breath" (3). While the votive candle, by itself, does not necessarily contribute to fleshing out Sophia, the words "whisper" and "breath" both allude to life. Therefore, the vocabulary Gurba selects associates the memory of Sophia with the life force rather than with the death and violence of mediatized accounts. It is a subtle way of anchoring her memory into a reality that ignores or reduces her to silence. Whispering Sophia's name means that Gurba is physically aware of, and intent on, producing a sound that fights the transience used to describe the victim in the news. "Sophia" is repeated aloud, which generates a sense of corporeality that the votive candle re-evokes. More precisely, the sound and the flame become physical markers of existence. Through her efforts to transcend the media's incomplete portrayal of the victim, Gurba allows Sophia to live through her mind.

Gurba mentions other ways through which she attempts to pay tribute to Sophia and, in the process, negotiate her own painful experiences of rape. One of those ways is to bring a "yellow rose bouquet" to the place "'[w]here they found her body'" (171). In popular

[17] Since strawberry picking is often associated to Mexican workers, Gurba's emphasis on the fruit can be understood as pointing to the dependent relationship between the so-called transients and the more privileged. Gurba hints at the contradiction that characterizes transient workers as both a nuisance and an ignored, necessary workforce.

culture, yellow roses are a symbol of friendship, remembrance, and caring, and are renowned for the happy hue of their colour (Roeser). In Gurba's narrative, the flowers have the potential to counteract the painful experiences that unite both women. However, Gurba soon finds her offering to be "insignificant" and "[d]umb" (171), making her feel "cheap" (172). Here, she realizes that the physicality of mourning flowers cannot compare to, or stand in for, Sophia's stolen corporeality. At that moment, Gurba sees "[t]he ghost [she] brought flowers for appea[r] on the flat pitcher's mound. In the long dark skirt the news said she was wearing the night she died, she began running towards home" (172). The flowers offered as tribute become physical reminders of the place where Sophia's attempts to escape were brutally stopped by her rapist. The roses testify to the absence of safe places.

After that grim realization, Gurba sits in a Taco Bell (173) and orders a "chalupa," which, in her mind, "assum[es] the status of holy object" and of "[r]elic" (174). Echoing the "Aztec altar" (1) previously mentioned in her narrative,[18] she thinks about how "[a] woman was sacrificed so that [she] might sit here, autopsying [her] chalupa" (174). As she observes her food, she notices "body parts floating inside the gooey rice: two strands of hair" (174). Aware of her luck in surviving her sexual assault, Gurba eats her lunch, "hair and all" (174). In this passage, her decision to consume her compromised food evokes Sophia's lost corporeality through Gurba's own loss: she pays tribute to Sophia by glorifying the chalupa into an object worthy of worship, and by associating that moment of sanctity to the battered body of the victim. By eating the chalupa, she makes Sophia a part of herself. In that sense, Gurba's tribute can be understood as counteracting the rapist's violence: whereas his sexual predation forced a part of himself into Sophia and destroyed her life (he *consumed* her through sexual violence), Gurba willingly eats the chalupa to honour Sophia and to acknowledge her own fortune in surviving the attack of the same man. Thus, by making Sophia part of herself, she allows her to survive in a way.

1.6.3 The Merging of Corporealities

The last device Gurba uses to flesh out Sophia affects her narrative structure, and, in turn, the reading experience. Her survivor guilt leads to an uncanny merging of herself with

[18] Gurba first mentions the Aztec altar on the first page of her memoir (1); I refer back to it on page 57 of this chapter.

Sophia's ghost. The merging of the two women allows Sophia to transcend death, for Gurba lets her share her sense of corporeality. This is understandable given that Sophia, despite being characterized as a ghost, does not provoke the dread or horror that is conventionally associated with monsters. Indeed, in *Mean*, the dead are "often invisible but always potentially present" and "can be brought suddenly into view by a current of thought" (Gumport).

The constant (re-)emergence of Gurba's guilty conscience, "a current of thought" about surviving rape, is also made evident in the interruptions of the narrative. Early in her memoir, Gurba includes the first of many short interruptions of the narrative when she discloses that "Sophia is always with [her]. She haunts [her]. Guilt is a ghost" (3). This passage occurs right after honouring Sophia's name. The ghost that haunts Gurba is necessary for her if she is to negotiate her experience of rape. In fact, "[g]uilt is a ghost" is repeated word for word (55, 116) or approximately (174) at other points in the book, which serves as a reminder of the impact of Sophia's story on Gurba's. It is therefore possible to assert that Sophia's haunting is not a product of her unfinished business, but of Gurba's survivor guilt.

Gurba explains how the constant presence of Sophia's ghost generates a sense of corporeality. She mentions that, sometimes, while driving her car, she realizes that she has been listening to ranchera music that she does not really like (3). She then remembers: "Sophia…" (3), and writes that, "[s]ome ghosts listen to the radio through the bodies of the living. They use us to conduct pain, pleasure, music, and meaning. They burden us with feelings that are both ours and theirs" (3). Gurba's body refuses to be reduced to that of a monster, as sexist patriarchy has instructed her to throughout her life. Instead, here she portrays it as the emotional space where she can "label, articulate, allow, and make conscious her experience in dealing with the dissonance in her life between myth and reality" (Rebolledo 123). She is thus asserting her and Sophia's humanity despite the discourse that aim to minimize their significance. Alexander writes that, "Gurba's body becomes the live wire, twitching unexpectedly as shocks of recognition connect her experiences to others" ("Other People's Children").

This interconnection is evident in her use of the words "pain" and "burden," which are contrasted with the positively-connotated "pleasure," "music," and "meaning;" together,

they speak to the complexity inherent in corporeality. They reflect the variety of Sophia's feelings, each of which corrects the news' description of her as a merely "depressed," "withdrawn," and senseless wanderer (113). Like Gurba, Sophia's ghost has to navigate different emotional states whose effects reverberate on the body. Because of the emphasis put on the racially marked monstrous body throughout the memoir, the "pain" and "burden" are associated with Gurba's and Sophia's common experiences in a society that stereotypes them for being both Mexicans and females.

Gurba ends her memoir on a similar note. The fact that the story both begins and ends with sustained attention to Sophia demonstrates the impact of the dead on the living. The last chapter of the story, titled "Radio" (175), is again concerned with the haunting. But, in that passage, the word "haunting" is not used, which points to a certain sense of resolution for Gurba. As she explains,

> She still doesn't leave me alone. She's still here. And it's still mostly through the radio that she makes her presence known. I'll linger on a station I can't stand and wonder, 'Why am I listening to this?' Then I'll realize: *she's listening to this*.
>
> She enjoys music through me. She enjoys food through me. She enjoys sunsets through me. She enjoys the smell of certain flowers through me. It's OK for ghosts to exist through me. It has to be. (175)

With this passage, Gurba's narrative comes full circle. Whereas she initially characterized Sophia's haunting as a "burden" that can provoke "pain" (3), the end of her narrative focuses on the various pleasurable ways that Sophia, through Gurba's body, can enjoy corporeality again. The merging with Sophia allows Gurba to come to terms with her guilt; narrativizing the merge points to the cathartic nature of writing a memoir that is concerned with the multiple experiences of living in a rape culture.

2. "The Chaos of Penetration": Embodiment and Abjection as Devices for Familiarizing the Unfamiliar

In an article for *TIME*, Myriam Gurba writes that she disagrees with the "[a]rguments against rape culture [that] state that we normalize sexual violence far too much" ("Why I Use Humor"). Gurba opposes the definition of rape culture as "exist[ing] in a realm that is all too familiar." Instead, she contends that "[rape]'s something with which we haven't become

intimate enough" ("Why I Use Humor"). Invoking Mikhail Bakhtin, who identified laughter as an "armament," she asserts that her use of "dark humor" and irony is "a lens that helps us to face the world in all its perplexing glory" ("Why I Use Humor"). In this section, I consider how the notions of embodiment and abjection also function as devices—or "armament[s]"—that contribute to turning the unfamiliarity of sexual violence into an intimate reality.

2.1 The Inescapability of Embodiment

In Gurba's narrative, female corporeality, which is coded as monstrous, is interwoven with the narrator's exploration of embodiment. Embodiment, or "the condition of both *being* and *having* a body (Arya 85), moves away from the external aspect of the body and into the experience of the "'lived body'" (Turner, qtd in Arya 86). As Elaine Scarry explains, experiencing pain, for instance, may lead to an increased awareness of the body's innards and, as a result, of the embodied condition (in Arya 86). In the case of the monstrous-coded female body, whose external aspects are constantly regulated and threatened by patriarchal authority, embodiment can be experienced at an uncanny frequency. Indeed, since Gurba's body is also othered because of her race, the experience of embodiment is decidedly linked to her gender and her ethnicity. A society that monsterizes those who are considered "subhuman" (Gurba 5) can force a questioning of one's body. The violence those in power enact—which leads to the painful experience of the lived body—is justified by the imagined threat that "others" pose to patriarchal rule. In *Mean*, the concept of embodiment can be explored through an analysis of the vignettes in which Gurba describes her sexual assault and the ways in which her body and mind reacted to such violence.

In these vignettes, Gurba's language connotes how the pain and horror she experiences lead both to an acute awareness of her embodied state and to feelings of dissociation from her body. For instance, the chapter "I Wandered Lonely as a Dissociated Could" (118-23)—whose title ironically refers to a Wordsworth poem—is, like most of her narrative, fragmented in many short sections. It is also placed after four short vignettes that focus on Sophia's assault, and in which graphic details (such as the aforementioned comparison of her corpse to strawberry compote) emphasize the violence and pain that she experienced. Shifting back to her own rape, Gurba describes walking in the street, feeling

hands suddenly grip her waist, and immediately thinking it must be her friend Elizabitch. Gurba again reverts to a food metaphor to depict her instinctual response:

> My thoughts happen in lasagnas, in layers of meats, noodles, and cheeses, and the thought under the Elizabitch one was very different. It contradicted the one that believed a girl was touching me. This layer of awareness knew that the person touching me was not girl.
>
> It was man. (118)

This straightforward realization occurs as she becomes aware of the impending physical threat to her body. Moreover, the initial thought testifies to the socialization of women as victims and to the impulse to rationalize rape as a traumatic event that only happens to others. As she turns around to look at her aggressor, still clinging to the faint hope that it might be her friend, she is shocked by the man's appearance: "The man standing behind me looked so average it horrified me" (118). They even appear to have the same age (119). Her thought echoes the rape myth that "acts of sexual violence [are] the irrational, unrelated acts of deranged strangers" (Buchwald 216) and that rapists are beasts, perverts, monsters, or individuals different from ordinary men (O'Hara 248).

Gurba specifies that "[h]is grin horrified [her] the most," focusing on how his smile overwhelms her to the point where the rest of his face vanishes (118). As she describes, "[a] smile held [her] captive" (118). Her choice of the words "horrified" and "captive" suggests her state of embodiment: she is acutely aware of having and inhabiting a body that can suffer extreme pain. As she becomes preyed upon because of her appearance as a racialized woman, her predator's smile contrasts with the actions he is imposing upon her body and calls to mind Kristeva's exemplification of abjection as "a hatred that smiles" (4).[19] That uncanniness profoundly disturbs Gurba and freezes her in place. Such a physical response is common in rape victims. As Krakauer explains, the traumatic experience of being raped causes victims

[19] In her theorization of abjection, Kristeva contends that it is "immoral" and "sinister" (4). Therefore, the "hatred that smiles" that she identifies evokes the disparity between the positive connotations of a smile and the violence that the criminal—here, the rapist—enacts. The smile and the experience of embodiment that is forced upon Gurba's body are thus uncannily (dis)connected.

to behave in "a wide variety of ways that may seem inexplicable,"[20] including being unable to scream or to run away (70).

While held captive by her rapist's smile, Gurba feels herself dissociating with her body. In that passage, the evocation of William Wordsworth's poem "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" becomes significant:

> I broke up with my body.
>
> Birds watched my assault.
>
> I joined them.
>
> I observed.
>
> I saw myself in the clutches of a stranger waiting to do something to me.
>
> I was a bird, though I was also myself. The smile looked into my eyes. I couldn't make sense of it. (118)

The poetic structure conveys the emotional and physical fragmentation that she experiences: the "I" seeing and the "I" feeling are detached, which is suggested by the use of the past tense to describe the immediacy of the experience. Gurba's experience is not poetic; it is not "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" that "takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility" (Wordsworth 251). Unfortunately, rape is immediate, and it remains so in the survivor's mind. There is no "tranquility" in sexual violence, nor any emotion "qualified by various pleasures" (Wordsworth 252). Her rational mind "wants to believe that a smile is a smile is a smile is a smile" (119). Her repetition stresses the safety and familiarity that are usually associated with a smile. In her situation, such a smile loses those affective characteristics and becomes sinister and full of danger.

Following her rapist's flight, Gurba keeps on walking towards her mother's work, while still suffering from the aftermath of realized embodiment that her rapist forced her to endure. Her painful, forced experience of sexual violence has led her to disconnect from her body. As she describes it, "[her] feet crossed the street. Loaves hung in place of [her] arms. These limbs felt less [hers] than the rest of [her], which also felt less [hers]. [She] was losing

[20] Krakauer is here invoking a conference given by David Lisak.

[her]self in degrees" (120). In this passage, Gurba speaks of the consequences of the attack on her integrity. She perceives her body as fragmented into irreconcilable parts and senses the disintegration of both her self-understanding and the relation between her mind and body. In that moment, she exists in an automated manner: the feet crossing the street and the loaves she feels hanging are described as disconnected movements and feelings. Her vocabulary instead expresses numbness, suggesting the pain she has experienced has disturbed her body's state of equilibrium.

Months later, the consequences of her experience of embodiment still disrupt Gurba's relationship with her body. She tries to focus solely on "homework and exercise" (142) as a protective mechanism, but that effort cannot impede the insidious effect of the rape on her body and mind. She describes her sleep as disturbed by "[an] unfamiliar discomfort" (143). Thinking she might have to urinate, she goes to the bathroom but only wrings "a single tear from [her] urethra" (143). The image is powerful: despite her protective mechanism, her sex is portrayed as crying. Gurba expands on her body's responses: as she climbs back into bed, "[the] sensation of his pressing remained" (143). Gurba describes how she feels the threat of his body pushing down on hers even though she is alone in bed. The rape that illuminated her embodied condition as a monstrous coded female has reverberating effects upon her life and well-being. This suggests that once embodiment has been elicited through traumatic pain, it can remain active in her unconscious. Rape is therefore not simply a single act of sexual violence, as often suggested by patriarchal culture, but rather a traumatic experience that affects a survivor in unpredictable ways.

Gurba further explains her attempt to avoid crying from her sex: "His face tried to cuddle between my legs. His chin tapped my bladder, digging. I peed to get rid of him, but he drank these repellent/resplendent showers. His ghost, his memory, was thirsty" (143). The imprint her rapist has left upon her mind and body is reminiscent of Macauley's. Here, however, there is no art metaphor to recuperate her violated body since the rapist is described as able to absorb Gurba's attempts at exorcising him from her mind. By calling him a ghost and a memory, Gurba draws a link between his haunting and Sophia's, which highlights the difference between welcomed and unwanted ghosts.

2.2 Embodiment as a Framework for Potential Violence

Throughout her narrative, Gurba depicts all spaces as potentially dangerous. Viewed in this way, spaces become more than the sites where different bodies can exist in ways informed by sexist discourse, as I have argued in the previous section on corporeality. Spaces are perceived as inherently encompassing all the physical threats to the female monstrous-coded body. As such, any space may become a site where the experience of embodiment is forced upon someone. The awareness of that pervasive danger leads her to live in a state of vigilance that takes over her (un)consciousness and, potentially, her reader's. A female reader might be subjected to an experience akin to Gurba's, while a male reader might witness the disruption of his perception and awareness of the world. Given that, Gurba's experiences of embodiment can familiarize individual readers with a different manner of understanding the world, one in which violence and pain are potentially lurking anywhere, anytime.

Articulating her awareness, Gurba writes, "[s]omewhere on this planet, a man is touching a woman to death. Somewhere on this planet, a man is about to touch a woman to death" (33). Her use of the present tense, along with the "biting and brutal" (von Klemperer) tone, is significant since it depicts sexual violence as immutable in the lives of all women. Her belief in the inevitability of sexual violence is emphasized by "somewhere." The adverb does not denote ambiguity, but rather the extent to which sexual violence transforms all spaces into potentially dangerous environments.

Gurba later re-echoes that conceptualization of dangerous spaces: "You never know what spaces might turn into graves" (54). Similarly, Gurba ends her memoir with: "Somewhere out there . . . a woman is getting touched to death" (175). Ending her memoir by alluding to an unknown, unnamed victim mirrors the fact that, even though her personal record of sexual violence has come to an end, the culture that allows it persists. When placed in the context of rape culture, this circularity evokes the idea of a vicious circle: like the other victims, Gurba is trapped in a world that identifies her as a target because of her monstrous-coded body. In that world, safety is a relative notion, one that affects her existence and her perception of her environment.

To underscore its pervasive presence, Gurba compares the omnipresence of rape in the culture to God's omniscience. In the tellingly titled vignette "Omnipresence," she writes:

> God is like rape.
>
> Rape is everywhere too.
>
> Rape is in the air.
>
> Rape is in the sky.
>
> Rape is in the Bible.
>
> Rape happens at the neighbor's.
>
> Rape happens at home.
>
> Rape happens in the dugout.
>
> Rape happens in the infield.
>
> Rape happens in history.
>
> Rape happens at bakeries.
>
> I've watched children rape donuts with their fingers.
>
> Rape gave birth to Western civilization and maybe your mom. (110)

In this passage, the anaphoric repetition of "Rape is/happens" points to a reconfiguration of Gurba's approach to, and relation with, her environment. By associating rape with a multiplicity of places, both public and private, Gurba states that she cannot be safe anywhere. She also implies that familiar, safe places may not be as they appear: each can potentially become the site where one is forced to experience one's lived body. Her language thus unsettles the common assumption that rape only happens to others (Brownmiller 184, 351), and in isolated, dark places. This rhetorical posture offers a new perspective for understanding sexual violence as a scaffolding structure: rape—and the disruption of the body's balance that it imposes—imbues her mindset and frames of reference in the same way that, for some people, an omniscient God provides the dominant discourse that regulates their life.

The parallel that Gurba thus draws between God's authority and the masculinist culture of rape is significant. Since both are patriarchal in nature, they can be understood as fostering a mentality that favors males over females and that considers violence and sexuality as inter-related. In fact, religion has played a crucial in the construction and perpetuation of the acceptance of sexual violence. Erlinda Gonzales-Berry writes that "Catholicism has sought to repress and control the body, particularly the native female body" (qtd. in Rebolledo 181). As Gurba reminds us, "[r]ape is in the Bible." In her association of rape culture with God's authority, she infers that masculinist conceptualizations of the world forced the experience of embodiment on those codified through otherness and monstrosity.

Elsewhere in her narrative, Gurba mentions her neighbour Mr. Osmond, a Sunday school teacher, a known "chomo"—"child-molesting homosexual"—who had "finagled the jizz out of the kids he taught baseball to and probably the kids he represented pro bono in the juvenile court system" (47). Gurba notes that his church ignored the molestations, did not banish him, but instead got him therapy (47). She also remarks that the neighborhood was shocked by the revelation that Osmond's "whole-grain breakfast-cereal type of family" was a lie. Building on the links among lies, secrecy, and religion, Gurba states: "I have a deep respect for big-time liars. They create religions. . . . Liars make us believe that Nietzsche was wrong. God can't be killed. Only hidden" (79). Gurba's assertion that God cannot be killed but only hidden can also apply to rape culture: both are iterations of patriarchal power that seek to minimize denunciations of their respective cultures by blaming and doubting victims, denying potential perversity, and constructing sexuality as inherently violent. It is through such construction of rape culture that embodiment becomes a constant, potential threat to the monstrous female.

Gurba develops on the idea of a dominant discourse by stating that "[e]verything is reborn" for a survivor of rape (111). According to her, "[e]verything takes on a new hue, the color of rape," which propels victims to "look at the world through rape-tinted glasses" (111). The renewal is not regenerative but destructive: instead of bearing new life or hope, it turns rose-tinted glasses into rape-tinted ones. Rape scaffolds the perception ef every place that one used to exist in—a street, a park, a school, etc.—and becomes omnipresent in the survivor's mind. Gurba suggests that this omnipresence contributes to hiding reality.

Wondering why she had not noticed her rapist before, she answers: “Because he was everywhere” (120). From that perspective, her rapist becomes a metonym for all rapists and even for rape culture itself. Gurba cannot “escape him or the ubiquity, even the mundanity, of sexual threat” (Sehgal). Because such culture has been accepted and justified historically, it has become difficult to recognize its subtler, more insidious symptoms, and to disentangle its ramifications.

In sum, the notion of embodiment is intrinsically linked to corporeality in *Mean*. Gurba acknowledges the significance of the monstrous-coded boded as it is perceived by others. Also, she complexifies the public body by uncovering the visceral experiences it can survive. The attention to the lived body and to the ruptures of its inner/outer boundaries allows Gurba to contribute significantly to the contemporary discourse regarding rape culture. Her consideration of corporeality and embodiment is political in that it rejects culturally accepted ways of discussing rape victims. Gurba’s voice is that of a survivor, an embodied voice intent on exposing the cultural beliefs that poison her life and that of many other women.

2.3 Abjection’s Disruption of Boundaries

Julia Kristeva understands abjection in terms of ambiguity (9). That is, abjection rejects any clear, absolute definition because its experience depends on the reality of each subject. It is a “composite of judgement and affect, of condemnation and yearning, of signs and drives” (Kristeva 10). The range of social taboos, regulations, and accepted behaviours that characterize a society inform a subject’s individual experience of abjection. That ambiguity threatens subjectivities and, like the monster, transgresses established boundaries (Kristeva 1; Wilson 9).

Building on Kristeva’s theorization, Rina Arya explains that abjection must be understood as a process that is experienced (4). In other words, the concept of abjection cannot be applied solely to a material object. Rather, it should be applied to “an experience between a subject and a source of abjection” (4). For example, bodily fluids such as semen and menstrual blood, once ejected from the body, still “remain a part of the body-image” (Schilder, qtd. In Arya 4). They exist at the same time as separated from the body and yet

still part of it, which confounds the inner/outer boundaries of the body. This ambiguity can cause a visceral reaction because it threatens the subject's sense of self. As such, the subject's integrity can also be unsettled by abjection.

Arya discusses the possibilities of evoking abjection through art and literature by emphasizing its ability to fascinate the viewer in a manner that is both compelling and terrifying (5). In *Mean*, the horror that is inherent to living in a rape culture affects the narrative and the reader by eliciting the process of abjection. Gurba considers the reality of rape culture as a system that consistently attacks the boundaries of the female body; in her and Sophia's cases, their race is perceived by patriarchy as a sign that their bodies are disposable. The subjectivity and integrity of their monstrous-coded bodies are in a constant state of precarity because of the coding forced onto them. Their experience of abjection is informed by the stereotypes that consider their existence as inferior to those who maintain the oppressive hegemony.

2.3.1 Gurba's Abject Experience of Rape

The transgression of boundaries and threat to an individual's subjectivity and integrity that characterizes abjection is experienced in three ways in *Mean*: in Gurba's depiction of her rape, in her illustration of Sophia's rape, and in the reader's experience of the text. In the case of Gurba's rape, the abjection that arises from a stranger's penetration of what he understands as a monstrous female body upsets her perspective on the world. In the chapter "A Wrinkle in Time After Time," Gurba illustrates such an effect: "Some of us use rape to tell time" (99). The title refers to Madeleine L'Engle's young adult novel *A Wrinkle in Time* (1962), in which the main characters travel through space and time. The novel is concerned with the dichotomies of good/evil and light/darkness. Gurba's addition of "After Time" hints at the destabilizing reality of rape culture. Her refiguration of the title indicates that the "[t]ime[s]" represent her multiple sexual assaults. She is thus trapped in a circle of sexual violence that disturbs the chronology of her life and her ontology. The sexual assault becomes a measure of her life: she now understands herself through a before/after binary in which memories are somehow presciently related to sexual violence (a structure that is mirrored in her narrative choices). Krakauer explains that rapists do not just steal their victim's innocence; they also "poiso[n] her understanding of who she [is]" and "transfor[m] her into a kind of ghost,

trapped forever in the act of being violated" (347). The perspective forced upon her by her experiences of rape can be understood as a process of abjection. It has infiltrated and traumatized her subjectivity, making her unable to recover her "before" sense of self.

Such an abjecting process is central to Gurba's depiction of the aftermath of the rapist's intrusion of her body. Walking towards her mother's workplace, she feels "like he was in everything" and "wasn't finished" (120). Although the rapist had fled, his actions have continued to affect his victim's subjectivity. Gurba's description suggests that both her mind and body have been raped and that the consequences of that two-pronged aggression will never end. In fact, she states that "[t]hings like that are never finished" and that "[m]en like that are never finished" (120). Her similarly worded statements echo both the image of the vicious circle, as well as the omniscience of the rapist discussed earlier. Gurba alludes to the pervasiveness of the cultural beliefs that rapists have internalized and that have trapped victims into seeing the world through rape-tinted glasses.

Gurba also describes the abjection she experiences as having been robbed of parts of herself. As she unsuccessfully searches the neighbourhood for signs of her rapist, she observes that "[t]he smile had retreated into the small town ether, taking stolen sights, smells, and tastes with it" (123). This focus on sensory elements interprets abjection through corporeality. The sights, smells, and tastes that Gurba refers to are defining and intimate details of herself. The mention of smell is particularly important, as Gurba had previously defined the "blended fragrance" of her crotch (21) in empowering terms. The rapist's actions thus not only breach the physical boundaries of Gurba's body, but also compromise its integrity through theft. He brutally takes what should be hers to give and leaves behind a void that unsettles Gurba's relation with her body.

Brownmiller describes rape as "both a blow to the body and a blow to the mind" (377), the intent of which is "not merely to 'take,' but to humiliate and degrade" (378). Through his theft and "temporary access to the victim's intimate parts" (Brownmiller 377), Gurba's rapist forces her to experience abjection by debasing her body. Since her body is already coded as monstrous—because she is a racially-marked female—by the patriarchal authority, the rapist believes this coding gives him license to debase. In this regard, the

machismo that often permeates the oppressive relationship between Chicanas and "their own men" (Rebolledo 97) is a significant element that can allow a rapist to justify his actions.

2.3.2 The Translation of Sophia's Abject Experience into Food Metaphors

The correlation between abjection and the body is likewise discussed through the consequences of Sophia's rape. In the first chapter of the book where Gurba describes Sophia's rape, abjection is translated into food metaphors to convey the horror of having the boundaries of one's body forcibly breached. The sexual violence is set up, in part, through the association of a traditional Mexican street food item with a sense of looming threat. Following his initial attack on the Mexican girl, the rapist, a creeping "man wearing white clothes" (1) and swinging a pipe, "reaches down his sweatpants" and "fondles his penis" (2). The next lines shift in both subject matter and tone to describe how earlier that day, at sunset, "a vendor in a straw cowboy hat had pushed his cart along the sidewalk yards away," shouting "¡Elote! ¡Elote! ¡Elote con mantequilla! ¡Elote con mayonesa!" (2).[21] With the precision that the rapist "had heard these calls for corn. He bought none" (2), the apparently innocent allusion to street food takes a sinister turn. The rapist understood Spanish, which suggests that he shares cultural filiation with his victim. The ominous tone of "He bought none" implies that his violence not only took place within earshot of other people, but also that his intentions were set so deeply that they could not be interrupted by the reminder of his proximity to others. That is, the rapist was resolute on enacting sexual violence regardless of potential witnesses, which suggest his understanding of himself as a predator in a society that culturally justifies such predation. Indeed, the sentence stands alone in the text, functioning as a single concise paragraph whose horror is likely to affect the reader since its finality can be understood as mirroring that of his victim's fate.

The threat crystalized as "corn" becomes a disturbingly evocative phallic symbol. Immediately after the rapist "bought none" [of the elotes] (2), the narrator adds that "[l]ovingly, he strokes his corn. It quivers. He lets go of it and resumes his chase" (2). The vendor's shouts had previously hinted at sexual connotations in the image of a "corn on the cob with mayonnaise" (2): when "corn" becomes synonymous with the rapist's genitals, the

[21] Corn on the cob! Corn on the cob! Corn on the cob with butter! Corn on the cob with mayonnaise! (translation mine)

phallic metaphor is spelled out and the "corn" becomes the menacing weapon of a predator chasing his prey. Contrasting the dehumanizing act of rape, the seemingly misused word "lovingly" contributes to the sense of the impending threat. Gurba, in fact, uses the word sarcastically to signal the rapist's selfish, violent behaviour. Her diction echoes Jon Krakauer's statement that, "[a] rapist, by definition, is only interested in gratifying his own desires. A rapist doesn't care what a woman wants. If he did, he wouldn't rape" (93). Gurba's dark humor and irony, especially in the passages that depict sexual violence, is aligned with those of many female writers because they "[reflect] the ambivalences and uncertainties that women feel as they look for ways to survive" (Rebolledo 158). Rebolledo affirms that "[h]umor acknowledges that the socially constructed self and its norms are arbitrary and allows us to question that self and those norms" (158). Therefore, Gurba's narrative choices are intent on revealing that "rape seems like the sickest practical joke ever invented" ("Why I Use Humor When Talking About My Sexual Assault").

The narrative reverts to the corn imagery when Gurba describes Sophia's doomed attempts at escaping, discussed earlier. As she flees, her purse tips and potential weapons—a nail file and a toothbrush—spill out on the ground. The rapist reaches and pins her against the dirt, "[w]recking her" (2) into helplessness:

> He pushes her legs apart. He pulls out his corn and kneels. Blood pours from her cheek, nose, and head as he feeds himself into her. He thrusts to the rhythm of her death rattle. Her agony sustains his erection, holding it.
>
> He freezes. He moans and shivers. His slack corn slides out of her. Cum oozes from between her legs. It gleams like unspeakable poetry. (2)

The disturbing sexualization of corn again evokes the sense of abjection that permeates rape. As such, the corn imagery is used to establish a parallel between the act of eating and that of being subjected to sexual violence. Grounded as it is in the concept of abjection, such a parallel offers a vivid and unsettling conception of rape, one that cannot be fully understood through statistics and reports. Eating and being raped both involve the intake of a foreign item into one's body. In the case of eating, the intake is usually voluntary and done for pleasure, satisfaction, or sustenance; in the case of being raped, the intake is forced upon one's body and is used as an expression of power. In both cases, the intake becomes, albeit in different ways, part of the person on the receiving end.

Paul Schilder comments that bodily fluids, such as semen, can lead one to experience abjection because what originates from one's body remains part of "the body-image even when separated in space from the body" (qtd. in Arya 4). Although Schilder's statement relates to one's relation with one's own body, I contend that it can also apply to the transfer of one's bodily fluid to another person: in Sophia's experience of sexual violence, her rapist's semen, as part of his "body-image," becomes a stain on her body. Because she is forced into accepting his fluid, parts of him transgress her bodily boundaries and unsettle her own "body-image."

The concluding sentence to the passage, "[i]t gleams like unspeakable poetry" (2), takes on significant meaning when juxtaposed with Gurba's later statement, when discussing Ana Mendieta, that "[a]rt is one way to work out touch gone wrong" (32), and with her refiguration of Wordsworth's poem. Whereas Gurba has redefined her classmate molester as a sculptor in order to reclaim her body, she associates Sophia's rapist with a poet whose "cum"—or "poetry"—is so abject that it cannot be spoken. His "poetry," having forcibly disrupted the boundaries of Sophia's body, testifies to the abjection Sophia experienced before dying. Gurba, a survivor, was able to translate her own experience as a "[d]issociated [c]loud" (118); Sophia's body, in contrast, is a site soiled by the rapist's "unspeakable poetry" (2).

2.3.3 The Reader's Abject Experience of the Text

Throughout the narrative, the reader becomes subject to experiencing abjection. This process occurs mainly through two discursive and narrative means: by becoming an observer of, and participant in, Sophia's rape, and by having their narrative agency over the text constantly undermined. I contend that in both cases, Gurba's narrative can be considered as a willful, mean act that seeks to obstruct conventional perceptions of sexual violence. In the first case, the then unnamed narrator (Gurba) uses rhetorical devices to induce the reader into adopting a perverse perspective. In that sense, she is echoing Creed's stance regarding how the "modern horror film often 'plays' with its audience" (52) in order to point to the fragility of their perspectives. The first lines of her memoir ask the reader to become, or to embody, a specific place and time:

> Let's become a spot upon which fateful moonlight shines.

> Let's become that night.
>
> Let's become that park.
>
> Let's absorb and drip. We're damp grains of earth. We're grass purged of color. We're baseball bleachers. We're November's darkness. We're the baseball diamond's sediment. We host Little League games by daylight. By dark, we become an Aztec altar.
>
> We open our eyes. We allow them to adjust to the place and things described. (1)

The first sentence is misleading: the combination of the terms "fateful," "moonlight," and "shines" has positive, even romantic connotations, while the indeterminate "a spot" could be referring to any setting (1). "Let's" (1) and "[w]e're" suggest that the reader is accompanied in their experience, which produces a false sense of security that is quickly undermined. Josh Cook qualifies the use of "[l]et's" as an "invocation" that "grows more ominous" as the scene unravels (Cook).

In fact, the precision of the next line initiates the descent into insecurity. The vague "spot" becomes "that night" and "that park," a spatio-temporality that is associated with "darkness" and "purged of color" (1); from the evocation of this setting emerges a sense of looming threat. The comparison between the innocent "Little League games" hosted "by daylight" and the "Aztec altar" (1) that the place becomes at night is particularly suggestive in its insinuation of gruesome sacrifice.[22] Figuratively speaking, the reading experience becomes "the place" where Sophia will be raped and beaten to death. Through that technique, the reader's integrity is brought to the text and is compromised by the narrator's devices. That is, by becoming indirectly involved in Sophia's rape, the reader is asked to question their role in the system that perpetuates rape culture. This role might shift depending on the reader, but the questioning is likely to illuminate the extent to which rape culture is often internalized as an inevitable fact in the minds of males and females alike. For the reader, being forced in that experience creates a subtle parallel with the ways in which Sophia and Gurba have been perceived and treated due to their monstrous-coded bodies.

[22] The image of the Aztec altar recurs later in the narrative, where it is used to emphasize the fact that Sophia's death, as a sort of sacrifice, has led to the arrest of her rapist.

Such a rhetorical mechanism is increasingly effective in disturbing the reader's illusion of safety as the narrator leads them to intrude upon Sophia's body. In a self-standing sentence, the narrator states that "[a] dark-haired girl walks alone" (1). Considering how the narrator's vocabulary and tone have already elicited a tense atmosphere, the sentence alone conjures up the feeling of an impending threat. The fact that Sophia is not named strengthens the threat by enlarging its possibilities: the girl walking alone could be any girl.

At that point, the reader can still feel detached from that threat, as is usual when reading a story, a posture that is, however, undermined in the very next paragraph: "Her foot falls onto the grass. We see up her skirt. She's not wearing underwear, so we can see that special place of her. It's the hole Persephone fell into. Some swine fell down it too" (1). The language—a girl walking alone, at night, without underwear—taps into the patriarchal definition of women as sexually useable bodies. It is the same definitional apparatus that associates female sexuality with monstrosity. Here, the reader is forced into both visualizing the victim and adopting an intrusive perspective, one that is usually associated with sexual predators themselves. The reference to Persephone, who was abducted and used for barter by two men, amplifies the imminence of the threat.[23]

Along with the voyeurism, the forced visualization and intrusive perspective shatter the distance and bond of trust between the reader and the text, turning the reader into a predator against their will. This disturbs the reader's subjectivity and elicits discomfort and unease that are characteristic of abjection (Kristeva 10). The reader can revolt against the text's breaching of boundaries, but might still be fascinated—that is, simultaneously summoned and repulsed—by it. This type of ambivalent response depends again on the reader, as women are likely to have a different reaction to men given their own experiences in a patriarchal rape culture. Still, the imposition of a predator perspective hints at the ways

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[23] Gurba has written about the ancient Greek tale of Persephone. In a blog entry, she states: "Seldom do I find elements of mainstream culture that acknowledge the lifelong impact of rape. When I do, I relish them. One artifact that validates this impact is taught as part of the high school English curriculum. It is the rape of Persephone." She describes the tale in terms of control and violence, and concludes: "Divine law, however, makes a return to normal impossible. After tasting the fruit of the Underworld, Persephone is required to be a part-time resident of hell. Supernatural rules mandate that she cyclically spend time with her rapist. Life for rape victims continues in the same infernal vein" ("From Persephone to Tara Reade, Rape Victims Are Relegated to Everyday Hells"). Clarissa Pinkola Estés offers a longer version of the tale, one that concurs with Gurba's emphasis on control and violence (365-7).

in which women can also be subjected, as was argued before, to the internalization of certain aspects of rape culture.

This possible perspective is then compromised as the narrator details the gruesome actions of the rapist against Sophia's body. After a disturbingly graphic description of the rapist's attack (2), the narrator states that, "[w]recking her makes him feel like she belongs to him. We may feel that because we are privy to the wreckage she belongs to us too, but she does not" (2). The unrelentingly bleak tone differs from the narrator's initial efforts to position the reader as a participant in the rape. The repetition of the association between "wrecking" a woman and possessing her corresponds to feminists' identification of the significance of power in rape culture.[24] The narrator's denunciation of interwoven notions of sexuality and power thus ends the process of abjection that the text had so far sought to impose upon the reader.

The denunciation also extends to the larger culture. Foreshadowing her refusal to let the media reduce Sophia to a transient bludgeoned to death (3), Gurba asserts that she objects to "going . . . down in local history as the girl who was weirdly raped by the Mexican guy who murdered the lady in the park" (145). Gurba provokes the process of abjection to familiarize the reader with the workings of sexual violence. Her assertions have the potential to force an unfamiliar experience and to impose a certain perspective upon the reader, only to rip it away, and confound their subjectivity. This rhetorical approach can be read as a political act: Gurba opens the door that leads to an intimate experience of sexual violence before reminding the reader that this perspective does not allow them to claim a complete understanding of the reality of rape. In that context, abjection is valuable as it can "enac[t] a positive force for cultural intervention and social change" (Wark 35).

Gurba also often directly addresses the reader to question their morality, which can challenge the reader's self-understanding. It is a subtle manifestation of the process of abjection, as Gurba's direct interrogation of the reader might unsettle the reader's sense of

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[24] Buchwald, Fletchar, and Roth assert that a rape culture is "a society where violence is seen as sexy and sexuality is violent" (xi). Brownmiller considers that all men benefit from that terror that rapists promote since that terror is justified in the culturally accepted sexual violence that defines gender relations in terms of power (209).

subjectivity. For instance, following her explanation of the reasons for her acting "mean," "[b]eing rude" or "[b]eing a bitch" (17)—all terms that threaten patriarchal rule and that have been used to monsterize women deemed unruly—Gurba interrupts her linear narrative to confront the reader:

> When was the last time you were mean for fun? When was the last time you were mean in the name of politics? Have you ever been mean for Jesus? When was the last time you tried to kill someone rather than let him into your club? When was the last time you wanted to kill someone but chose to be a bitch instead of a murderer?
>
> Have you been called a bitch? (18)

In that passage, she questions the level at which the reader either participates in, or works towards dismantling, rape culture. This appeal to morality occurs early in the text, but is not restrained to its vignettes. Since Gurba's questioning tackles the reader's values, it has the potential to unearth deep-rooted cultural beliefs that perpetuate the existence of rape culture. The many instances in which Gurba describes acts of sexual violence become opportunities for the reader to relate her life to their own, and to unveil their possible complicity in the system. This process can lead to the experience of abjection: it may confront a reader with parts of their unconscious that threaten subjectivity. That is, the realization of one's participation in the system of rape culture, however minor or unconscious that complicity may be, can alter a person's self-understanding drastically.

Conclusion

Myriam Gurba's *Mean* is a defining text in the contemporary discourse surrounding rape culture. Gurba's exploration of the potential for monstrous-coded female bodies to have discursive significance negotiates the interrelationships among the concepts of corporeality, embodiment, and abjection. In so doing, Gurba creates a political narrative that is intent on exposing and dismantling the cultural beliefs that justify sexual violence. Her innovative approach to the subject matter creates "new angles from which to report on this most ancient of stories, to zap you into feeling" (Sehgal). The body she literalizes becomes the site for a "new language, her own language, to evoke the horror and obscene intimacy of sexual violence" (Sehgal). As such, she reclaims her monstrosity and rejects the dehumanizing discourse that has been historically imposed upon her body. As an iteration of a final girl,

Gurba does not simply survive to tell a victimizing story; rather, she practises the art of being mean (17) and untangles the ramifications of the omnipresence of sexual violence in America. As she points out, surviving rape is “a nerve-racking proposition. It’s like being at the edge of your seat at a horror movie, but the horror movie is your life, and you’re the girl who knows just how evil the ordinary guy is” (111).

Chapter 2: The Version of the Story That You Need to Know: Coercive Control in “The Husband Stitch”

Carmen Maria Machado’s debut collection *Her Body and Other Parties* includes eight stories, each concerned with the female body and the violence visited upon it. The first story, titled “The Husband Stitch,” defies genre conventions in its blending of horror, psychological realism, and cautionary tales. As Natalie Wilson contends, “The Husband Stitch” is Machado’s subversive adaptation of the children’s story “The Green Ribbon” (238-41). In the original version of the tale, a girl named Jenny is described as “like all the other girls” except for the mysterious green ribbon tied around her neck (Wilson 238). She marries Alfred, who relentlessly demands to know what the ribbon means. On Jenny’s death bed, she allows him to untie the ribbon. After he does so, Jenny’s head falls to the floor (238). Wilson specifies that although many versions of “The Green Ribbon” exist, all end with the revelation that the woman’s head is not attached to her body, and that she must therefore be a monster (238).

Wilson understands the original story’s ribbon to be a symbol of virginity (238). The male suitors’ insistence to remove it “equates [with] sexual coercion,” while its untying suggests both “metaphorical rape” and “murder” (238). The woman’s refusal to either explain or remove her ribbon is an act of willfulness, one that is seen by the patriarchal hegemony as monstrous because it signifies her agency (240). In Machado’s refiguration of “The Green Ribbon,” that willfulness is expanded upon and juxtaposed with both the narrator’s questioning of cautionary tales and explorations of female desire.

“The Husband Stitch” is narrated by the woman—in contrast to the tale’s previous iterations—and follows the same basic plot line as “The Green Ribbon”: the girl meets a boy at a party, they fall in love, marry, and have a child. The husband frequently asks to touch the ribbon, becoming increasingly aggressive at each refusal. At the story’s end, the woman abdicates and lets him untie the ribbon, causing her head to fall off the bed. Significantly, Machado’s narrator is not the only character featuring a mysterious ribbon: all women seem to have one, although it varies in colour and placement.

In "The Husband Stitch," as in other versions of the tale, the ribbon engenders the codification of the female body as monstrous by those who would control it. That is, the ribbon physically marks the female body as that of an Other. Such otherness has historically been used to strengthen the dichotomies—male/female, civilized/savage, and empirical knowledge/legends and stories, to name a few—that patriarchy uses to justify its dominion. Since the ribbon remains a mystery for iterations of patriarchal authority, it can threaten established dichotomies that undergird structures and institutions whose definition of power opposes otherness. For patriarchy, the ribbon becomes synonymous with monstrosity. Defining women and their bodies as monstrous engenders a quest for control over them, because that control allows those in power to maintain their authority and dominion over the world.

While the ribbon generates fear in men, it also paradoxically allures them because of its sexual connotations. Wilson identifies the ribbon as a symbol of "being female" (240): for patriarchy, this equates with the need to be sexually conquered. Sexual agency in women threatens the sexual supremacy that men have erected for themselves. It is that same supremacy that perpetuates rape culture. Constructing women as monsters can remove their agency, thereby ensuring their status as sexually useable. The men seeking to control the narrator's ribbon want, by extension, to subdue her and her body. Viewed as such, the ribbon poses a significant threat to patriarchal hegemony; in fact, the narrator's agency in telling her story is a measured confrontation with a society that continuously works towards enabling and maintaining the beliefs of rape culture. In other words, the ribbon functions in two unruly ways: as a symbol of willfulness, the ribbon disturbs patriarchal rule by denying the access to the female body and the answers men demand; as a symbol of "being female" (Wilson 240), the ribbon makes sexual violence and coercion explicit and identifies unrelenting males as the real monsters. Therefore, the monstrous female body has the potential to challenge the discourse that has "maintain[ed] the normality and fixedness of certain selves" (10). Machado writes this body as politically disruptive in order to generate new, potent approaches towards the multitudinous forms of violence that it experiences.

Machado's concern with the female monstrous body is announced in her choice of epigraphs for her collection.[25] The first, excerpted from a poem by Jacqui Germain, considers the body as a "haunted house" that the speaker is "lost in"; in that haunted house, "[t]here are no doors but there are knives and a hundred windows." The second epigraph, quoted from Elisabeth Hewer, reads: "god should have made girls lethal/when he made monsters of men." Both epigraphs introduce conventions of horror into their vocabulary, which sets the tone for the social commentary in Machado's stories. In addition, the two poets are concerned with both the representation of different female bodies and the interaction of such bodies in a social space that encourages violence against them. In their portrayal of the body, the epigraphs encapsulate Sara Ahmed's connection of "the willful subject, the monster, and the political dissident" (qtd. in Wilson 10). Through that connection, Ahmed argues for an understanding of otherness that is "grounded in the politics of the corporeal" (qtd. in Wilson 10). This grounding permeates the narrative—and narration—of "The Husband Stitch," making the female monstrous body of Machado's narrator a subversive one.

Machado has spoken about her intentions to revisit conceptions of the female body in a world where sexual violence has become normalized. In an interview on David Naimon's podcast *Between the Covers*, Machado explains that women writers often turn to the uncanny to prevent their stories about sexual assault from being readily dismissed. She recognizes the power of revisiting the familiar in strange, new ways: the uncanny, which she describes as "moments where reality is being punctured a little bit," allows her to escape the limitations of "another rape story by a woman" (00:06:30-00:11:29). Machado conceives of being a woman as inherently uncanny because of the gaslighting to which they are constantly being subjected. By gaslighting, Machado means the manipulation of another person into doubting their perceptions, experiences, or understanding of events (American Psychological Association). Gaslighting affects women's very physical presence: it makes their humanity liminal, their body forfeit, their mind doubted as a matter of course, and their existence peripheral (00:16:20-00:17:00). Through her stories "rooted in the physical" and driven by

[25] These epigraphs are quoted as they appear in *Her Body and Other Parties*. Since no official version of the two poems appears online, I could not reference their line numbers. In Machado's collection, both epigraphs appear before the table of contents; therefore, I could not include any page number.

"urges and desires" (00:54:00-00:59:54), Machado explores the "cultural gaslighting" that society is trapped in (00:22:30-00:26:00).[26]

In its confrontation with rape culture and domestic violence—what Myriam Gurba acutely calls "coercive control" ("Coercive Control")—"The Husband Stitch" tackles, I will demonstrate, the sexual violence visited upon the monstrous female body. Having access to the voice of the female monster enlarges the possibilities for understanding and engaging with sexual violence. Working toward those objectives, my analysis of the story focuses on three significant methods of discussing the female monstrous body. It considers the treatment of the narrator's body by the (often authoritative) male figures with whom she interacts. Her experiences with her father, husband, doctor, and son all illuminate how the various types of violence that aim at controlling her affect her physical presence. The goal is to expose how each of the narrator's interactions with male characters are, despite my separate analyses of them, constructed by the beliefs of rape culture. Since each relationship is considered discreetly and chronologically, the section concerning the husband includes the narrator's death. As such, it also functions as a record of the narrator's life: its early inclusion allows me to complexify its reiteration through the integration of other male figures.

Following my analysis of the female monstrous body, I consider how the narrator juxtaposes the descriptions of those experiences with her subversion of cautionary tales. The inclusion of embedded stories foments tensions in tone and atmosphere that lead to insurgent examinations of the notions of corporeality[27] and of knowledge. Expanding on the record of the narrator's existence, I argue that the analysis of the cautionary tales can be connected to specific moments in her life. My analysis then shifts to the narrator's interaction with her reader. Throughout the story, the narrator often concludes episodes with parenthetical directions aimed at the reader. These directions, which open the narrative, are grounded in the notion of trust and of its fragile nature. They also effectively link the disturbance of the

[26] "[C]ultural gaslighting is a term I understand as referring to the creation of a dominant cultural narrative that excludes the identities threatening it by casting doubt upon their existence and validity. In this case, women are excluded by the dominant patriarchal discourse. In the podcast, Machado mentions Joanna Russ' *How to Suppress Women's Writing* as a seminal text that discusses such gaslighting.

[27] A term I understand as what Moira Gatens defines as "those ready-made images and symbols through which we make sense of social bodies and which determine, in part, their value, their status and what will be deemed their appropriate treatment (viii). In other words, corporeality refers to the ways in which the body is socially perceived.

reader's own sense of corporeality and subjectivity to the narrator's experiences. Consequently, the parenthetical directions are analyzed through the lens of Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, as this theory examines the disruption of the sense of self.

Together, those three approaches towards the female monstrous body expose the cultural structures and beliefs that perpetuate rape culture. The goal in using those three approaches is to study how the text questions society's limited perception of gendered violence, to challenge the reader's involvement in the sexist superstructure, and to comment on the intertextuality that, in the form of cautionary stories, informs and regulates women's lives. Machado punctures the discourse of sexual violence and openly displays its horror; along the way, she produces a subversive commentary on the female monstrous body, one that is powerfully political in its reconfiguration of common tropes.

1. "I want to know": Controlling the Female Monstrous Body

1.1 The Father's Gaslighting

The narrator of "The Husband Stitch" chronicles her interactions with authoritative male figures in order to unveil their various methods of regulating her mind and body according to their patriarchal mindset. She recalls an episode in which, as a young girl, she goes to the grocery store with her mother and sees "toes, pale and bloody stumps" (8) mixed in with the potatoes. She even "poke[s]" one "with the tip of [her] index finger" and feels it "yiel[d] beneath [her] touch the way a blister did" (8). The narrator is convinced of the veracity of her experience: "They had been there. I had seen them with my own eyes" (8). Yet, her mother disbelieves her story and asks the narrator to stay sitting in her "child-sized" chair until her father returns from work (8). When he does, he listens to "each detail" (8) of her story before proceeding to convince her that she must have imagined the toes. As he stacks up his "piece[s] of evidence," she "feel[s] [her] doubt unfurl" "beneath the sunbeam of [her] father's logic" (8).

Mary Angeline Hood interprets the narrator's stories as "the way she understands and learns about the world" (998). In the interaction between the narrator and her father for instance, the notion of authoritative knowledge is directly related to "the vast power disparity between men and women" (998). The narrator's description of her chair as "child-sized"

(Machado 8) adds the dimension of parental authority to that disparity, and points to the father's minimization of her story's validity. Even though the narrator has *seen* and *felt* the toes—which, as Hood specifies, are "two subsets of [the] empirical knowledge" (999) that are "particularly appreciated by positivistic notions of science and progress" (989)—her father disregards her experience and credibility. The "science" and "progress" that Hood highlights point to the sort of lived knowledge that patriarchy privileges, as opposed to knowledge gained from stories and legends for instance. It is also a form of authoritative knowledge whose access is denied to women.[28] Hood invokes Rae Langton to describe the father's lack of "'intersubjective authority,'"[29] which denies the narrator the possibility of "being a 'knower'" (qtd. in Hood 998). Her status as a witness is discredited while her father, an outsider to the events narrated, is to be believed (999) by virtue of his role as patriarch.

The narrator concludes her anecdote about pota(toes) with a reflection on the nature of knowledge: "As a grown woman, I would have said to my father that there are true things in this world observed only by a single set of eyes. As a girl, I consented to his account of the story, and laughed when he scooped me from the chair to kiss me and send me on my way" (9). Here, she again refers to her chair to assert the power disparity between her and her father. The contrast established between "girl" and "grown woman" reinforces that imbalance. It also points to the narrator's understanding that one's credibility is determined by those who control the hegemonic discourse. Each party has a "chair," with the narrator's being a space symbolizing her silenced narrativity, her negated voice.

In that sense, the story about pota(toes) sheds light on a particular attitude that is rampant in rape culture. As Jon Krakauer underlines throughout his research on rape and the American justice system, those in positions of authority consistently minimize the credibility

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[28] The most obvious example of a such hierarchy of knowledge is in the social construction of STEM sciences as harder, more contributive fields than those of the arts and humanities. Needless to say, boys and men have long been encouraged to pursue STEM studies. Today the situation seems to be slowly evolving, but girls and women who work in STEM still face countless setbacks and forms of violence.

[29] Rae Langton defines the term "intersubjective authority" as "credibility" (274). This definition suggests that credibility is defined not by the person speaking, but by the person's audience. In the anecdote about pota(toes), the father's lack of intersubjective authority means that he is unable to ascribe credibility to his daughter. In so doing, he is denying her the possibility of being a subject of knowledge. Langton emphasizes that the distribution of credibility is related to the distribution of social power (274). In the story, there is a clear imbalance of power between the narrator and her father. Therefore, the distribution of credibility is distorted. This injustice serves to "exclude women from the class of those who fully function as knowers" (Langton 274).

of those who survive sexual violence (48, 53-4, 59, 69, 72-3, 91).[30] The narrator's father acts in the same way; their interaction uncannily resembles a trial in which the victim stands alone and witnesses their word—and world—being discredited.

1.2 The Husband as Conqueror

The narrator also ponders the nature of knowledge through the portrayal of her husband's relentless desire to either touch, untie, or obtain answers about her ribbon. Those instances of inquiry increase in violence and intensity as their relationship reaches different turning points. As a matter of fact, the narrator juxtaposes her husband's questioning with critical moments in the trajectory of their life, all of which coincide with sexual encounters. By systematically associating his repeated requests with sexuality, the narrator aligns her husband's behaviour with the aforementioned notions of sexual violence and control of the female monstrous body. Hood similarly comments on the husband's attitude towards the ribbon: she identifies his "ability and desire to know" as that of a "conqueror" who "seeks to map out every line of the land's topography that he wishes to subdue and subjugate" (999-1000). Her choice of vocabulary is akin to that of Persephone Braham, who describes "the monsterization of women as 'a prerequisite to conquest and colonization'" (qtd. in Wilson 7). Since the ribbon symbolizes being female, any attack upon it, like the supposed desire to know and understand, can be understood as misogynistic and dominating.

The correlation between sexuality, control, and the ribbon is first established on the night where the narrator meets "the boy," who seems "sweet" and "flustered" (4). After they get acquainted, she "choose[s] her moment" and kisses him (4). She describes him kissing her back, "gently at first, but then harder" as he "even pushes [her] mouth open a little with his tongue, which surprises [her] and, [she] think[s], perhaps him as well" (4). Although the narrator "moan[s]" and seems to enjoy this kiss, her diction ("harder," "push[ing]") already

[30] This includes any person that takes part in the arduous, prosecutorial process of denouncing sexual violence, but also concerns the vast majority of people who hear the story and refuse to believe it for what it is. It should be noted here that the page numbers included refer to some of the most insidious comments that undermine a victim's credibility. Examples of such comments include "chicks exaggerate on rape" [anonymously written online] (48), "sometimes girls cheat on their boyfriends, and regret it, and then claim they were raped" [told to a victim by a police officer] (54), "[w]e have a lot of cases where girls come in and report stuff they are not sure about, and then it becomes rape. And it's not fair. It's not fair to you" [told to a rapist by a detective] (59), and telling a court that an accused is "too kind and compassionate to be a rapist" [affirmed by a female prosecutor] (91). The second chapter of Krakauer's book, "Before the Law Sits a Gatekeeper," thoroughly expands on the various methods used to undermine a victim's credibility (pp. 49-124).

hints at the violence that will later characterize their relationship. Her will to "choose [her] moment" (4) is contrasted with the boy's own eagerness, which takes over the scene and nullifies the control she previously seemed to have.

When the boy pulls away, his eyes "settl[e] on [her] throat" and he asks: "What's that?" (4). The narrator casually answers: "Oh, this? . . . It's just my ribbon," and runs her fingers over it until they "rest on the tight bow that sits in the front" (4). As he "reaches out his hand," she "seize[s] it and press[es] it away," telling him that he should not, and cannot, touch it (4). The next paragraph details the fantasy that she has "[t]hat night," as she pictures his tongue "pushing open" her mouth and masturbates (4). The boy's first question about the ribbon is thus framed by two moments charged with sexual, somewhat violent imagery ("seize," "press," "pushing open"). Significantly, the boy's actions neglect the notion of consent (he "reaches out" his hand toward her throat without asking for permission). His conqueror's attitude forces the narrator to physically impede him from invading her body, which situates that monstrous female body as a site where both conquest and rebellion are possible. However, the narrator's defiance arises from the boy's intrusion; in that sense, her defiance is limited to emerging from his quest for knowledge rather than from her own initiative.

On the night they first have sex, the narrator translates the boy's hunger for knowledge and control into increasingly aggressive terms. In the dark, they drive to "a lake with a marshy edge that is hard to get close to" (5). After he "breaks [her]," "pushing, pushing" before "finish[ing] with [her] blood slicking him down," she masturbates before his eyes (5). As she does so, he says that he needs more but "does not rise to do anything" (5). Here again, the vocabulary used to describe the penetration of the female monstrous body evokes a selfish conquest that is saturated with violence. The verbs "break" and "push," along with the mention of "blood," emphasize the boy's active role as he performs intercourse upon her passive body. Although the narrator is "fascinated and aroused by the rhythm, the concrete sense of his need, the clarity of his release" (5), his desire overtakes hers. When he is finished, the narrator hears "something that sounds like a banjo being plucked" (5). Wilson interprets this reference as an allusion to "the infamous banjo scene from *Deliverance* and the equally infamous scene in which Bobby (Ned Beatty) is raped" (240). As such, the

vocabulary and sonic intertext embedded in the account of the narrator and the boy's first sexual encounter foreshadow the later violence and coercion that will characterize their relationship.

The concealed allusion to rape is supported by the boy's repeated demands to touch the ribbon right after they have had intercourse. As both teenagers look out the car window, the narrator contemplates that anything, from a "hook-handed man" to a "ghostly hitchhiker forever repeating the same journey," could be out there in the darkness (5). These references to well-known urban legends instill a certain sense of danger.[31] In the story's context of sexual violence, this danger can only be read as associated with sexuality. Accordingly, the boy's requests can be interpreted as a form of sexual violence. As his eyes return to the girl, he asks: "Tell me about your ribbon" and "May I touch it?" (6). Despite the narrator's repeated refusal to answer, he persists: "I want to touch it" (6). As he says so, she notices his fingers twitch and decides to "close [her] legs and sit up straighter" (6). In this passage, the narrator's body language precautionarily responds to the boy's, as if the cautionary tales she has heard all her life had groomed her to adopt a vigilant attitude; she is alerted by his insistence and by the movement in his fingers, which hint at his desire for control. The boy's shift from "may" to "I want" suggests both his indifference to her consent and an affirmation of his own selfish desire. Since he has already *acquired* a certain knowledge of her body through intercourse, he considers that he is entitled to being completely privy to that body and the ribbon that, for him, remains an infuriating mystery. The mystery surrounding the

[31]The narrator of "The Husband Stitch" mentions a "hook-handed man," a "ghostly hitchhiker forever repeating the same journey," and an "old woman summoned from the repose of her mirror by the chants of children" (5). The narrator claims that "[e]veryone knows these stories—that is, everyone tells them, even is they don't know them—but no one ever believes them" (5-6). The urban legends she describes are commonly known as "The Man with the Hook," "The Vanishing Hitchhiker," and "Bloody Mary" (Ellis, "'The Hook' Reconsidered" 61, 62; Ellis, *Lucifer Ascending* 112, 124). The hook-handed man's weapon has a phallic dimension, while his ways of killing are often described with sexual imagery. The ghostly hitchhiker could be a reference to the legend of a "prophetic angel predicting an imminent disaster (Ellis, "'The Hook' Reconsidered" 71). The legend of Bloody Mary has various versions: she is said to be a ghost or witch who appears in a mirror when someone chants her name repeatedly (de Vos 155). Some versions believe Mary to have committed suicide after losing or killing her child (Ellis, *Lucifer Ascending* 112). These three urban legends do not explicitly discuss sexuality; however, they are each concerned with danger and are often used to caution young girls against the so-called dangers of active sexuality. Their placement in "The Husband Stitch" associates those stories with the narrator first sexual encounter and, therefore, with the subtle violence to which the boy subjects her body and her ribbon. In that sense, the danger inherent in these urban legends is transferred to the narrator: she risks becoming an urban legend herself.

ribbon is, in his eyes, an obstacle to his will to possess her. From the narrator's point of view, however, her response to his desire to touch it is a demonstration of her willfulness.

Yet, her defiance is somewhat tarnished by her conclusion to that episode: "That night, I wash myself. The silky suds between my legs are the color and scent of rust, but I am newer than I have ever been" (6). The juxtaposition of "rust" with "newer" is significant. The colour and scent of rust evoke that of blood, thereby accentuating the physical impacts of intercourse upon her body. While "rust" usually conjures up images of progressive oxidation, decay, and eventual collapse, in this passage it alludes to the increasing significance of active sexuality in her life. In her eyes then, the dried blood marks her departure from adolescence and entry into womanhood: sexual intercourse has made her into a "new" person.

Still, the conclusion has an ominous tone for the reader, who witnesses the narrator's repetition of vocabulary. The narrator's "[t]hat night" as a formulaic opener can be compared with her use of the same phrase after she first kissed the boy (4). In that first episode, the narrator fantasizes about her suitor's tongue pushing open her own. This moment follows the boy's initial, almost indifferent question about the ribbon. After they have sex, "[t]hat night" leads to a different outcome: the narrator washes herself from the smears of blood that mark her body as proof of the boy's penetration of her body and does not seem concerned about his persisting questions regarding the ribbon. Comparing those two moments, the reader notices an alarming escalation, present in both the intensity and quantity of violent language and in the boy's relentless requisition of control over the ribbon.

The boy's persistent desire to conquer the narrator's ribbon becomes increasingly brutal in the following milestone moments of their life together. After agreeing to his marriage proposal, she sits on his lap on a park bench and fans her skirt so that passersby cannot see that he is "knuckle-deep and trying not to pant" (9). He tells her: "I feel like I know so many parts of you . . . [a]nd now, I will know all of them" (9). Although there is no specific mention of the ribbon in that passage, it is inscribed in the "parts" of the narrator that the boy wants to "know." Since the boy conflates knowledge with sexuality and control, the girl's ribbon is the last part of her that he does not yet know. By marrying her, he expects the secrecy to be revealed to him, which would consummate his knowledge of, or domination over, her body.

On their wedding day, before the ceremony, he obtains further control over her by confusing the idea of love to that of intercourse. Seeing the narrator in her dress, he "insists" on initiating sex, pushes her against the wall, and "puts his hand against the tile near [her] throat," so that his "thumb brushes [her] ribbon" (11). As he moves inside her, he repeats "I love you, I love you, I love you" (11). For him, the imminence of the legal union translates into his assumed right to access the ribbon. This idea is reinforced by the narrator's behaviour: on that occasion, she rescinds the rule she had previously established—that he cannot finish inside her (7)—and even tells him to use "[her] body as he sees fit" (11). By revoking her rule, by allowing him to engage in such behaviour, and by manifesting her desire, the narrator unintentionally opens the door for his increasingly oppressive and violent desire to know what the ribbon is. In essence, repeating "I love you" allows him to touch the ribbon.

Candace Walsh notes that this passage follows the narrator's telling of two stories about brides ("Self-Salvation, Structure, and Sex Part II"). In one, "wearing a white dress is conflated with being poisoned, just as getting married eventually kills the narrator," while in the other, the bride gets trapped in an old trunk and dies (Walsh). By letting her future husband brush her ribbon while she is wearing her wedding dress, the narrator foreshadows herself as one of many brides who "never fare well in stories" because stories have the ability to "sense happiness and snuff it out like candles" (Machado 11). Walsh asserts that, by averting stories that prey on joy, the narrator "misplac[es] blame that could be channeled toward interrogating the patriarchy inherent in these stories' predilection for the downfall of female characters" ("Self-Salvation, Structure, and Sex Part II").

After their wedding, the husband "becomes increasingly irate when met with resistance to his desire" (Hood 1000). When the narrator tells him that she is pregnant, he runs his hand around her throat, grabs her wrists, and "presses the silky length with his thumb" (12). Despite her repeated pleading for him to stop, he only does so after her voice "crack[s] in the middle" (12-3). He then releases her and "rolls on his back as if nothing has happened" (13). His dismissive attitude echoes that of her father who, years before, had brushed off her story about pota(toes) after coercing her into accepting his version of the event. By imposing his authoritative perspective on his daughter, her father had silenced her

and made her doubt her knowledge, which are both forms of violence imposed upon the monster. In the husband's case, the violence that leads to the silencing is less subtle. His actions upon the ribbon, justified by his patriarchal mindset, force her into the position of a prey. In rolling on his back "as if nothing . . . happened" (13), the husband attempts to invalidate the narrator's experience, a behaviour that silences the narrator and allows for further violations of her body.

Indeed, five years after giving birth to their son, the narrator is again forced to resist her husband's attempt to "loop his fingers through the ribbon" (20). On that occasion, he invokes the sacred bond of marriage to justify his actions: "'A wife,' he says, 'should have no secrets from her husband . . . A wife should have no secrets . . . I want to know . . . Why do you want to hide it from me?'" (20-1). This passage demonstrates his need for controlling the female monstrous body. The ribbon, as a symbol of monstrosity and of alluring sexuality, is, for him, a threat that he cannot dismantle. It is the final barrier to his totalitarian authority. His wife's refusal to give in confuses his understanding of the world by jeopardizing his position, or self-assumed role, of patriarchal ruler. In that sense, the monstrous female body wearing the ribbon becomes synonymous with rebellion.

The narrator's rebellion, enacted through refusing her husband access to the ribbon, is extended to her narrative agency. The narrator is able to control the rendering of her story, which allows her to focus on the repeated instances of casual coercion in order to highlight a pattern of sexual violence. She is not reduced to a statistic or to seeing her experience twisted by an authoritative patriarchal voice. Her voice is that of a victim of rape culture; it testifies to the complex, interconnected aspects of rape culture that are often silenced by patriarchal structures.

The pattern of sexual violence she identifies culminates in the narrator's eventual giving in to her husband's insistence. After their son leaves for college, the narrator is "happy," but feels that "something inside of [her] is shifting into a strange new place" (29). That vague impression takes on new meaning at the very end of the story, but its placement in the narrative is significant, for it directly precedes the last of the couple's intimate moments. In her description of their coupling, the narrator insists that she knows she "made the right choice" (30) in deciding to marry him. Yet, after they fall asleep together, she wakes

up to him “kissing the back of [her] neck” and “probing the ribbon with his tongue” (30). She feels her body rebel “wildly,” while her husband “looks confused and hurt” (30). Wilson contends that, in this scene, the husband does not recognize himself as a rapist (241), which concurs with many largely established beliefs regarding rape culture.[32]

The narrator seemingly agrees that “[h]e is not a bad man . . . He is not a bad man at all. To describe him as evil or wicked or corrupted would be to do a deep disservice to him” (30). As “[r]esolve runs out of [her]”, she “realize[s]” suddenly that his not being a bad man “is the root of [her] hurt” (30). That is, “he is not ‘bad’ in the sense that he is *like* all the other men in her life—her father, her teacher,[33] the doctor” (Wilson 241, emphasis mine). However, as Wilson pinpoints, the narrator ends “her revelation with an ambiguous ‘And yet—’” which “indicates that he is, in fact, bad” (241). This “revelation” points to the narrator’s reassessment of her husband’s actions: he acts in the same way as she has learned to expect men to act when confronted with feminine assertiveness. From her father’s gaslighting and her teacher’s abuse (9) when she was young, to the doctor’s deliberate ignorance of her needs as she gives birth (15-7), the men she has known have all exerted a certain amount of control over her body because of the monstrous coding they impose upon it.

The narrator then describes the untying of the ribbon and its unavoidable conclusion. The number of details that she includes testifies to the intimate relationship that she has with her bow and, by extension, with her monstrously-coded female body. She contrasts this intimacy to her husband’s face, which “flashes gaily, and then greedily” as he “runs his hand up to [her] bare breast and to [her] bow” (30). Disturbingly, she specifies that she does not “have to touch him to know that he grows at the thought” and that he “groans” as he unties the silky length (30). Both her tone and vocabulary reveal that her husband associates the untying of the ribbon with sexual arousal; in other words, he does not recognize his final

[32] Myths and erroneous beliefs regarding rape include, but are not limited to, (1) that rapists are not ordinary men, (2) that promiscuous women invite the rape and can be blamed for it, (3) that acquaintance rape is not very common, and (4) that *real rape* involves extreme violence by a stranger (O’Hara 248-250).
[33] The narrator had previously told her husband about a teacher who “hid [her] in a closet until the others were gone and made [her] hold him there” (9). Afterwards, she went home and “scrubbed [her] hands with a steel wool pad until they bled” (9)

invasion of her body as an instance of sexual violence, and is, instead, driven by the selfish prospect of possessing her completely.

While sexual greed forges his perception of her body as available for his own needs, the narrator's keen awareness of her ribbon suggests her pain. She describes how the bow "undoes, slowly, the long-bound ends crimped with habit" (30) to emphasize the imminent loss of her sense of self despite the many years of firm resolve. After her husband's final pull, she bleakly observes: "The ribbon falls away. It floats down and curls on the bed, or so I imagine, because I cannot look down to follow its descent" (30-1). Her intricate description of the ribbon's fall attests to its significance and to her anguish at losing it. By focusing on the ribbon's movements, she transfers her sexual and narrative agency unto it, and disentangles it from the husband's pulling. In so doing, the ribbon maintains its significance and resists being characterized only through the husband's insistence and violence.

A similar, final resistance is also at play in the concluding paragraph of "The Husband Stitch." After professing her love to her husband, the narrator depicts losing her head because it is no longer held by her ribbon: "My weight shifts, and with it, gravity seizes me. My husband's face falls away, and then I see the ceiling, and the wall behind me. As my lopped head tips backward off my neck and rolls off the bed, I feel as lonely as I have ever been" (31). Wilson comments on the story's ending, specifying that it follows the other versions of the tale, and that the husband finally has what he wants: "Her body. Without a head. Without the mouth that can say no" (241). Her observation accentuates the husband's conqueror's attitude but neglects the willfulness inherent in the narrator's action.

By allowing her husband to untie the ribbon, she does not simply acquiesce to his relentless demands; rather, she chooses to deny him access to her mind and body, thus preventing his dominion over her. She knows she will die once the ribbon falls. Therefore, she chooses death over a life that is continuously threatened by sexual violence. After its death, the monstrous body that justified the husband's control becomes a corpse that can no longer be regulated and harmed. Her death, then, is not solely a consequence of his abuse,

but also a liberating rebellion against it. It is not a capitulation, but rather an "unwillingness to live in a world which seeks to hold her captive in its oppressive norms" (Wilson 188).[34]

Regarding the very last words of the story,"I feel as lonely as I have ever been" (Machado 31), Hood notes that "[a]lthough the protagonist is well aware of the pain and violence that befalls women in stories and legends, she is unable to prevent her own death (1001). My analysis diverges from that conclusion: while I acknowledge that stories and legends frame the narrator's attempts at survival, I read her death as a last resort in the face of rape culture. In other words, her death should not be understood merely as fatalistic and inevitable, but more as a manifestation of agency since she is revoking her husband's control over her body. According to Hood, the narrator's fatality suggests that "[t]he problem is bigger than men . . . and lies in society's complicity in disregarding a woman's needs and its promotion of the idea of a sacrificial wife and mother that can only end in her own destruction" (Hood 1001). Hood's allusion to rape culture as a systemic propagator of gendered violence places the narrator in the midst of a trap. It is from the confines of this trap, I argue, that the narrator decides to abandon her ribbon, and her life, in a final bid for freedom.

1.3 The Doctor's Complicity with the Husband

The narrator's relationship with her husband is the most evident illustration of how a culture's acceptance of sexual violence can be transposed inside the home. However, her interactions with her doctor, as well as her husband's complicity with him, depict the role that institutions, such as hospitals, can play in shunning women's attempts at willfulness in order to uphold patriarchal control over female bodies.

The birthing episode depicts both the narrator's overt awareness of her corporeality as well as her complete lack of control over the handling of her body. She first renders the pain of contractions in gut-wrenching prose: "I go into labor in the middle of the night, every

[34] This quote is from Wilson's analysis of Vanessa in *Penny Dreadful*. Wilson sees her death not as the capitulation that is common among "many Gothic heroines, femmes fatales, and 'fridged' females who die within their narrative moorings," but rather as "allied to resistant female figures such as Joan of Arc, Medusa, and Lilith" (188). It is within the context of Wilson's association of willful death with resistant figures that I also situate the death of Machado's narrator. While having death as the only option for escape is certainly problematic, the association of death with resistance portrays the female characters and figures not as helpless victims but rather as aware of their misogynistic society and as intent on dismantling the system.

inch of my insides twisting into an obscene knot before release. I scream like I have not screamed since the night by the lake, but for contrary reasons. Now, the pleasure of the knowledge that my child is coming is dismantled by the unyielding agony" (15). Her allusion to the first time she and her husband had sexual intercourse creates continuity between the two episodes, affirming a continuum of pain associated with feminine existence in masculinist spaces. As such, the violent vocabulary in both scenes emphasizes the narrator's acute knowledge of her own body and of the many ways in which it can endure suffering.

Despite the narrator's familiarity with her body, the doctor and her husband brush off her questions regarding its handling. For example, when she asks the doctor "What's happening?" he does not answer the question; when her husband asks the same question, the doctor tells him that he might need to deliver the baby surgically (15). The doctor then ignores her plea of "No, please . . . I don't want that [a caesarian], please" (15), alluding "to the benefits of keeping her vagina tight and more pleasurable for her husband" (Hood 1001). He states that the surgery "might be best for everyone" (15). In that instant, the narrator is "almost certain" that she sees him winking at her husband but rationalizes that "pain makes the mind see things differently than they are" (15). Although pain might be altering her perception, her phrasing recalls the gaslighting of the anecdote about pota(toes). The gaslighting, along with the constant violence perpetrated upon female bodies, points to the validity of the narrator's observation of the complicity among men.

After she gives birth to a boy—indicated by the fact that the baby has "[n]o ribbon"(16)—her body is again violated by the doctor who, disregarding her implorations to the contrary, imposes the husband stitch upon her. This outdated medical procedure, one that is "of no value for the baby or the mother, but done in order to further a husband's pleasure" (Hood 1001), involves inserting an extra stitch "where they cut" (16) to tighten the vagina after the woman has given birth, thus restoring the organ to its virginal state (17). In the story, the narrator is drugged, but remains somewhat conscious of her surroundings. She notices her husband joking around with the doctor and discussing the procedure (16-7). Significantly, "[n]either man turns his head toward [her]" as she begs them not to continue (17). Although she willfully demonstrates her desire, it is of no consequence (Hood 1001). When the narrator wakes up, the doctor informs her that she is "all sewn up . . . Nice and tight, everyone's

happy" (17). In this passage, the female monstrous body is forced into experiencing helplessness and uncertainty as the doctor and husband deny her agency.

About the procedure, Jen Corrigan points out that, "the internet both says [the husband stitch] does and doesn't exist" ("Speculative Feminism"). This ambiguity indicates not only a disregard for a woman's right to know, understand, and approve of what is being done to her body, but also the standardized misogyny that, through a convenient clouding of information, can construct medical pacts between authoritative men.[35] Indeed, the doctor's and the husband's attitudes towards the narrator's body reflect the "widely and diversely apparent" "antipathy towards the mother" (Caputi 30) that exists in rape culture. Jane Caputi argues that contemporary culture is filled with "the ritual retelling of an essential patriarchal myth—male vanquishment of the female . . . administering a necessary fix to a society hooked on and by male control" (23). The purpose of this myth is "to instill dread and loathing for the female" (Caputi 23), and specifically for the mother,[36] who in fairytales is often "killed off" and "blamed for the most modern of male discontents" (Caputi 30).

One expression of this hatred is frequently associated with the act of birth: the god-surrogate doctor performs the often unnecessary slicing of the genitals (episiotomy) in an act of "gynophobically rooted ritual" that "recalls the treatment of Tiamat at the hands of Marduk" (Caputi 30).[37] The birthing scene in "The Husband Stitch" exemplifies the extent of control that patriarchal male figures exert over the monstrous female body. The doctor's emphasis on what "may be best for everyone" (15) is a blatant lie: the two procedures performed on the narrator's body only sexually benefit her husband who gets to relive the original moment of sexual conquest; for the narrator, the procedures necessitate a full year to recover completely. Because of her status as a mother, she becomes the subject of men's

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[35] Jane Caputi points out that "[f]eminist theorists have long argued that there are profound interconnections between personal forms of patriarchal violence (such as rape and sexual murder) and institutional . . . violence" (270).

[36] Discussing the birthing practice, Jane Caputi explains that the primary meaning of the word "deliver" refers to setting "free *from* restraint, imminent danger, annoyance, trouble, or evil generally" (OED qtd. in Caputi 30, emphasis original). She uses that definition to describe the "system that views all mothers as Terrible, as evil monsters from whom the child must be saved" (30).

[37] According to Ira Spar, this Mesopotamian myth is about the ocean waters goddess Tiamat who, after losing her husband Apsu, is urged by the other gods to do battle against Marduk, the tallest and mightiest of gods. Marduk, given control of the four winds, creates storms that upset and confound Tiamat. In battle, Marduk vanquishes Tiamat and proceeds to split her carcass in half for the purpose of creation.

antipathy and is treated as a monster whose body must be regulated in order to remain in its place, in the "chair" her father had prepared her for. The doctor, complicit with the husband, seeks to convert the female body back to what he perceives as its intended role: that of a sexually useable, and therefore controllable, object. The doctor's imposition of two unnecessary surgeries is an act of violence that mirrors the husband's silencing of his wife's desires. By making her more sexually alluring to them, and by associating female sexual agency to monstrosity,[38] they justify their need for control.

1.4 The Son's Assimilation of Violence

Through her selection of specific, prominent moments in her life, the narrator reveals the many forms of violence inflicted upon her by domineering men. The similarities in terms of behaviour and rhetoric among her father, doctor, and husband suggest that these three men uphold patriarchal attitudes and beliefs towards women, which leads them to consider the female body as monstrous. This culturally constructed monstrosity justifies, in turn, their quest for controlling and subduing the female body; the men's quest for control results in a wide array of sexual violence, ranging from gaslighting to violations of the body (most often illustrated through the ribbon). The narrator's characterization of these men implies that their patriarchal mindset is innate and, therefore, unavoidable. Interestingly, the description of her son's changing behaviour—from considering the ribbon as a part of his mother to duplicating his father's insistent questioning about it—indicates that violence against the monstrous female body can be observed and assimilated.

Initially, the son is unconcerned by the ribbon. The narrator describes how he "touches [her] ribbon, but never in a way that makes [her] afraid. He thinks of it as a part of [her], and he treats it no differently than he would an ear or a finger" (18). The language used in this quotation is similar in form to that often used to describe the husband's touch, but it has positive connotations in the son's case. The narrator uses "part of me" (18) to echo her husband's marriage proposal, where his hope to know "all [parts of her]" (9) was directly linked to control of her body. In contrast to that selfish, possessive attitude, the son does not understand the ribbon as a threatening marker of difference or as a mystery that must be elucidated. In fact, the narrator specifies that touching her ribbon gives her son "delight in a

[38] This is mentioned in the introduction's engagement with Natalie Wilson's work.

way that houses no wanting, and this pleases [her]" (18). The son thus appreciates the narrator's ribbon that signifies being female (Wilson 240) without needing to possess it, and, by association, her, in any way. His mother is not monstrous, but simply another being with whom he coexists and builds a loving relationship.

Approximately five years later, the son's behavior changes after he witnesses a violent exchange between his parents. He hears his father repeatedly admonishing his mother about her "secret" and asserting that, as a wife, she should have none (20-1). He also observes his father "get[ting] down very close to [his mother]" (21) in a threatening manner.[39] What the young boy sees leads to a drastic alteration of the mother-son relationship. The very next day, he "touches [her] throat and asks about [her] ribbon," trying to pull at it (21). His imitation of his father's behaviour "pains" the narrator who has to insist that the ribbon is "forbidden to him" (21). By prohibiting a specific part of her body, she establishes physical barriers that distances her son from her. Paradoxically, she has to resort to mild physical threats to do so; she shakes a can full of pennies as he reaches towards the ribbon (21). The discordant crashing noise makes him "withdra[w] and wee[p]" as she bleakly observes that, "[s]omething is lost between [them], and [she] never find[s] it again" (21).[40] Here, the narrator attacks her son through sensory threats for her own self-preservation: she becomes a sort of monster in his young eyes, scaring him into abandoning his curiosity, and disrupting his conception of motherhood.

A similar episode occurs on Halloween when the son, dressed as a "tiny professor" gnawing on a pipe in an "unsettlingly adult" way, asks, "Mama . . . what are you?" (25). The narrator, not in costume, tells him she is his mother (25). At this answer, the son screams and begins to sob (25). As the husband comforts him, the narrator realizes the horrific nature of her answer: it echoes the "story of the little boy who only discovered on Halloween that his

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[39] It should also be noted that the father had interrupted an intimate moment by touching the ribbon. It is unclear whether the son has also witnessed this part; if he did, his early understanding of sexual relations is probably steeped in ideas of power that determine what a wife supposedly owes her husband.

[40] That loss foreshadows the later feeling, once the son has left the familial home, that, "something inside of [her] is shifting into a strange new place" (29). Those similar reactions do not simply point to the loving relationship between the narrator and her son; rather, they imply that he is the only boy/man whose absence--including the distance that separates them after she crashes the can of pennies to his ears--affects her well-being. This attachment can be understood as emerging from the loss of an intrinsic part of her: her son emerged from her monstrous-coded female body, was fed by that body, and once appreciated it as was without harbouring controlling impulses towards it.

mother was not his mother, except on the day when everyone wore a mask" (25). Evidently, monster imagery is easily conjured up in the context of Halloween; for the son, monstrosity does not wear the mask of a strange creature, but rather looks like his mother. His initial perception of his mother's entire body as a facade for something sinister and unknown threatens the unity of what he knows to be his family. Together, the two episodes evoke the pervasive iconography of the monstrous maternal figure and stress the "formation of masculine identity" that emerges from the male infant's separation from the mother and his construction of boundaries (Caputi 203).

Through the depiction of her relationship with her son, the narrator suggests the impact that stories can have on one's identity. As the son grows up, the narrator first tells him "the very oldest" fairy tales but pares away the "pain and death and forced marriage" (26) that they involve. By so doing, she modifies their intended didacticism, neglects their good and evil dichotomy, and provides her son with unrealistic lessons. Quickly, however, the son questions the plausibility of those tales. The narrator agrees with him and tells him new stories that are "closer to true:" stories about children lured away who go missing, an omen of death that takes the form of a black dog or of frogs who corner passersby in the marshland and extort their money (26-7). The narrator thus moves from useless tales to more realistic, cautionary ones that align with her son's understanding of the world. The new stories confirm that growing means understanding, and, in turn, that understanding means authoritative knowledge and power in a patriarchal world.

Notably, these stories do not focus on girls and women—as do the urban legends strategically positioned in the narrative, rather, they have a general, wider-ranging aim. The narrator's decision to tell such stories demonstrates her awareness that her son will not experience life as she has, with her being coded as a monster. Still, she maintains her intention to educate him into becoming a sensible, cautious human being despite her belief that her husband "would forbid these stories" (27). She is thereby pointing to her and her husband's antagonistic experiences of a patriarchal world and of the dangers it poses to women.

The son's questioning of the fairy tales is transferred, once more, onto the ribbon when he turns twelve years old. At that age, having experienced diverse aspects of the world, he asks his mother "point-blank" about her ribbon (27). She explains that everyone is

different and that "sometimes you should not ask questions;" then, she distracts him with "stories that have no ribbons" (27). Her explanations characterize the ribbon as an integral part of her, which is the way he understood it as an infant before witnessing his father's abuse. Moreover, she insists on the fact that one's ignorance or misunderstanding of someone else—or of an aspect of someone else—does not justify any form of violence. In doing so, she prevents her son from acting like his father.

She then comments that he "stops smelling like a child—milky-sweetness replaced with something sharp and burning, like a hair sizzling on the stove" (27). The undertones of this observation hint at his inevitable development, despite her efforts, into a man just like all the other ones she knows. The loss of his "milky-sweetness" is linked to his dissociation from the mother who provided his milk, while the terms "sharp," "burning," and "sizzling" connote a potentially dangerous transformation into predatory masculinity. Yet, the narrator's fears seem unfounded: when her son is fourteen, he "waits for the neighbor boy, who walks with a brace" (27) before heading to school together. She sees that as a sign of the "subtlest compassion," and as proof that he has "[n]o instinct for cruelty, like some" (28). In this passage, the narrator's implicit comparison between the son and the men she knows is telling: it reveals how an early, acceptance-oriented education can groom a male into rejecting patriarchal ideology. The narrator's hopes are nuanced, however, for she opens her story by declaring that "as a man," her son's voice is "like [her] husband (3).

Through the symbol of the ribbon, the female monstrous body works towards constructing a discourse of respect, rather than one that defines masculinity in terms of "entitlement, predation, and violence" (Kimmel 141). Still, despite the narrator's hopeful conclusion regarding her son, who wants to marry his girlfriend, her initial statements still suggest that he could, as a man, emulate his father's violent behaviour.

2. "I don't need to tell you the moral of this story": Subversion of Cautionary Tales

In "The Husband Stitch," the narrator plays with the tropes of storytelling by questioning the performative purposes of urban legends, cautionary tales, and old wives' tales. The linearity of her own story is interrupted by her purposeful embedding of various tales that traditionally

aim at "instill[ing] submission and chastity in women" (Hood 990). Most of those stories are concerned with the female body; sometimes, the body is not the primary focus of a tale but is rather used to comment on the cultural lens that informs it. In other words, the stories that do not directly address the body itself still engage implicitly with strictures placed upon it through their allusion to the control, misogyny, and gaslighting that construct the monstrous perception of the body.[41] The urban legends examine, among other topics, sexuality and desire, motherhood, marriage, and knowledge. Their placement in Machado's narrative, which coincides with significant moments in the narrator's life, points to the stories' "didactic and instructive quality" (Hood 996-7). Through her subversive retelling of the stories, the narrator foments the challenging of the harmful values that cautionary tales prescribe. With her decisive political intentions in including those stories among her own, she proposes a feminist re-evaluation of the knowledge that they transmit.

2.1 Storytelling and Intertextuality

In her article "Desire and Knowledge: Feminist Epistemology in Carmen Maria Machado's 'The Husband Stitch,'" Hood claims that "the subject of storytelling is central to feminist discourse and allows for the reimagining of both the past, present, and future" (991). She understands Machado as following in the footsteps of as Gloria Anzaldua, Cherie Moraga, and Sandra Cisneros (Hood 991). As is the case for her precursors, Machado's "'queer as f***'" stories "reject all attempts at categorization" (Machado qtd. in Hood 990; Hood 990). This queerness is most evident in "the types of knowledge that are prioritized by the protagonists in her stories and that are used to navigate a world full of violence and misogyny" (990). The inclusion of cautionary tales in Machado's narrative therefore comments on their "performative nature" by offering "alternative ways of knowing" (992). That is, by subverting the tales' expected outcomes, the narrator stresses the misogyny and thirst for power and control that both inform them and serve the interests of patriarchal discourse. Through her discussion of the biased didactic quality of the stories, the narrator also points to "the lies that [they] reinforce" (995). Her rhetoric is thus political: it denounces the subtle instances of violence perpetrated on the female body in order to maintain it in a

[41] For instance, the second story that I consider in my analysis concerns the three mistakes that, according to patriarchal authority, a woman can make. There, the monstrous body is not discussed explicitly, but its physicality is understood as justifying the behaviour of those intent on subduing the monster.

subdued position. In this section, I will expand on Hood who understands the reworking of the legends and stories as a counter-discourse and a collection of experimental knowledge (989) that should not be disregarded.

Many of the embedded stories in “The Husband Stitch” implicitly discuss what Clarissa Pinkola Estés calls “the wildish nature of women” (263). She argues that the long-established patriarchal taming of that nature has led to “the normalization of violence” and of “the abnormal” (Estés 263-4). For Estés, “the abnormal” consists of “violence against the psyche’s knowing nature” (264); the ‘normalization of the abnormal,” then, applies to “all battering of the physical, emotional, creative, spiritual, and instinctive natures” (263-4). Inscribing herself in a tradition of feminist critics, Estés sees that normalization as the cause of the “learned helplessness” that leads women to stay with abusive mates and “groups that exploit and harass them” despite “clear evidence that it is to one’s own detriment to do so” (263-4).

Estés claims that women “adapt to violence” by “normalizing the abnormal,” which leads to a loss of the “power to flee” (263-4). The terms she uses to define the wild woman archetype are similar to those that, as Wilson asserts (7, 8, 43), culturally construct the monster as an Other, one that must learn submission. Because they do not adhere to ingrained norms of patriarchal society, the wild woman and the monster threaten the hegemony’s authority. Their refusal to comply with what is expected of them is affirmed earlier on in Machado’s short story when the narrator proclaims that “[t]his isn’t how things are done, but this is how [she is] going to do them” (3). The narrator, a storyteller herself, draws conclusions from cautionary tales that “differ greatly from their intended lessons” (Hood 1002).

The first story the narrator mentions concerns sexual desire; it is situated between her initial noticing of the boy and their first kiss.[42] She summarizes the story as that of “a girl who requested something so vile from her paramour that he told her family and they had her hauled off to a sanatorium” (4). The premise suggests not only that the exploration of sexual

[42] It should be noted here that, as specified in the first part of this chapter, the narrator is the one who knows she “want[s] him before he does” and who initiates the kiss.

desire is discouraged in women, but also that it is a sign of insanity. It constructs the girl's parents and the boy as authoritarian figures who allow themselves to regulate the girl's mind and, by extension, her body. The narrator's use of "her family" suggests that the girl's mother has been indoctrinated into accepting passively the patriarchal authority. The overt message of this tale promotes chastity and obedience in girls. Conversely, the word "vile" (4) designates as monstrous any opposition of the expected subdued behaviour.

The narrator subsequently describes her own reaction to that tale, which indicates her intention to diverge from the story's didacticism: "I don't know what deviant pleasure she asked for, though I desperately wish I did. What magical thing could you want so badly they take you away from the known world for wanting it?" (4). Hood also singles out this story for its epistemological value. According to her, the narrator "plays with expectations" by focusing on the woman's desire rather than on her so-called deviance (Hood 997). This reinterpretation of female desire "as something positive, beautiful, and magical" disregards the "social norms and gender roles" (Hood 997) she grew up with. While the narrator's comments explicitly point to what Jen Corrigan terms a "celebration of sexuality" ("Speculative Feminism"),[43] her initial agency is tinged with a hint of patriarchal control, symbolized by threat of the "sanatorium," that foreshadows the rest of the narrative. Indeed, the embedded story is followed by the narrator and the boy's first kiss, which leads him to ask about her ribbon and reach for it. What seems like an expression of freedom quickly turns into an act that oversteps boundaries.

Another story is included between the boy's marriage proposal and the narrator's selection of her wedding gown. The story, one that has been told before, concerns a girl who is "dared by her peers to venture to a local graveyard after dark" to stand on someone's grave (9). In it, the narrator points to the three mistakes—scoffing, being proud, and being right—a woman can make; the placement of this didactic tale thus anticipates, in a sinister way, the couple's future life together and at the pervasive misogyny that defines a woman's life. In

[43] Corrigan contends that in Machado's collection, sex is written in a way that "does not gross [her] out" ("Speculative Feminism"). According to her, the body becomes an "expression of spirit" since its responses to sex celebrate sexuality. Corrigan notes that this celebration is apparent is scenes of "beautiful eroticism" and "consensual sex." Therefore, the term "celebration of sexuality" cannot apply to the way the narrator's husband later coerces her. However, it can function here since the narrator believes, at this point, that she can deviate from the path of chastity and obedience that the embedded story promotes.

the story, the girl's peers tell her that "standing on someone's grave at night would cause the inhabitant to reach up and pull her under" (9). At the proposition that the dead would possess the ability to assault her, the girl scoffs (9). Machado's narrator then asserts: "Scoffing is the first mistake a woman can make" (9). The girl claims that she will show her peers that life is "too short to be afraid of nothing" (9), which is followed by the narrator saying that "[p]ride is the second mistake" (10).

The girl's peers give her a knife that she should stick into a grave's earth as proof of her presence in the graveyard. She goes there and chooses a particular spot. At that point, the narrator specifies how some storytellers affirm that the girl picks the spot "at random" (10). Yet, the narrator believes that the girl's choice was "tinged by self-doubt," and that she selected a very "old grave" in order to minimize the potential threat of its occupant (10). The girl plunges the blade and stands to run but cannot escape because something clutches at her clothes. When her peers come the next morning, they find her dead with the knife pinning her skirt down (10). According to the narrator, the girl in the story "was not wrong [which is the third mistake], but it didn't matter anymore" (10). [44] She adds that "everyone believed that she had wished to die, even though she had died proving that she wanted to live" (10). In the end, the girl's peers override her story, just as the narrator's father gaslighted her into disbelieving her own story about pota(toes). In this embedded urban legend, the narrator includes her own experiences—for instance, her father's gaslighting—as a scaffolding device. Her life thus informs her choice of tales, just as their intertextuality informs the reader.

2.2 The "Wild Woman" and Patriarchal Conceptions of Motherhood

The narrator also uses tales to discuss the double standards that subtly contribute to constructing and maintaining rape culture. For instance, these double standards are invoked through the aforementioned three mistakes that a woman can make. The mistakes—scoffing in defiance, being proud, and being right—would be considered desirable qualities in men because they bolster and maintain their social status in patriarchal discourse. When women

[44] The story concludes with the narrator claiming that "[a]s it turns out, being right was the third, and worst, mistake" (10).

behave in those ways, they are considered a threat and become monstrous from the perspective of patriarchy.

The mistakes evoke Estés' description of the wild woman (1-2): she characterizes the wild woman as an "endangered species" (1) that is harassed for being "devouring and devious" and "overly aggressive" (2). Yet the wild woman is also perceived as "of less value than those who are [her] detractors" (Estés 2). The aggressiveness and deviousness Estés points to would be apparent, for patriarchy, in a woman's deliberate scoffing, pride, and rightfulness. It is therefore fitting that the cautionary tale warns women against adopting the three mistakes while, at the same time, denouncing the sexist structure upholding them through its tone and its placement in the narrator's story.

The narrator includes another relevant story between the announcement of her pregnancy and description of the bodily changes that she experiences. It should be noted here, again, that the husband enacts physically violent and painful attempts to touch the ribbon after learning of the pregnancy. The premise of the embedded tale is "about a pioneer husband and wife killed by wolves" (13). Yet, as Candace Walsh notes, the story is revealed to be truly about "the daughter being adopted by wolves" and "raised feral" ("Self-Salvation, Structure, and Sex Part II"). The daughter, eventually characterized as a "young woman, on the cusp of marriage age," runs around with the wolf pack, menacing a hunter and "ripping open a chicken in an explosion of feathers" (13). It is also said that, years later, she was seen "suckling two wolf cubs" who "bloodied her breasts" (13). The narrator believes that the wolf woman "did not mind" it, but instead "felt a kind of sanctuary, peace she would have found nowhere else" since the cubs were "hers and only hers" (13). The narrator concludes: "She must have been better among them than she would have been otherwise. Of that, I am certain" (13). The narrator's certainty arises from her own experience, both as a girl and as a woman. Even though she does not yet have a child, she remembers the patriarchal gaslighting and violence that informed her childhood. Therefore, she conceives of an idyllic childhood free from patriarchal authority figures.

Walsh understands the narrator's tale as a "nod to the impending maternal surrender of her body," one that prefaces the doctor's infliction of the episiotomy and "titular 'husband stitch'" upon her helpless self ("Self-Salvation, Structure, and Sex Part II"). While Walsh's

assertion is substantiated by the vocabulary used (“ripping open,” “bloodied” breasts), it does not consider the freedom that is implied in that surrender. The narrator’s statement that she “love[s]” (13) this tale indicates her craving for the possibility of escaping the usual confines of marriage and motherhood imposed by society. She does not reject motherhood itself but fears its experience in a world that constantly forces various types of violence on women’s bodies.

While in the wolf tale controlling men are not explicitly identified as the cause of violence against women, their absence—aside from the dead father, and the hunter, who is threatened by the wolf girl and her pack—is telling. It advocates for divergence from what Estés defines as the “acquiescence to marrying the monster” that is taught to young girls (48). Estés claims that such acquiescence consists of “mak[ing] pretty all manner of grotesqueries whether they are lovely or not” (48).[45] In other words, young girls are trained to accept violence as a fact of life. This learned acquiescence trains young girls to “override their intuitions” and “submit to the predator” (48). In the story, the young girl of marriageable age does not need a husband or, for that matter, the patriarchal society in which she was born. Her life with the wolves allows her to experience motherhood as a “sanctuary” (13), as well as a version of freedom and peace that “she would have found nowhere else” (13). The narrator concludes this tale with the aforementioned “Of that, I am certain” (13), which refers to her own empirical experiences as a woman and future mother in a patriarchal society that aims at controlling the female body and its narrativization.

3. “If you are reading this story out loud…”: Abjection as Experimental Device

As has been established through the examination of the narrator’s relationships with different men as well as through the analysis of the cautionary tales that shape young girls’ understanding of the world, the female monstrous body is continuously threatened in a society that justifies and propagates rape culture. The narrator details the multiple ways in which the actions of those who wish to control and subdue her body for their own means

[45] Estés exemplifies that claims through the Bluebeard tale. According to her, the training of young girls to normalize the abnormal is what leads the youngest sister to say, “Hmmm, his beard isn’t really *that* blue,” and to ignore the dangerous situation she is in (Estés 48-9).

disrupt her sense of corporeality. Whether overt or subtle, the relentless violence that threatens the female body can be translated into an experience of abjection.

3.1 Abjection and Coercive Control

In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva delineates the contours of abjection as an experience that "disturbs identity, system, [and] order" (4). Abjection emerges from that which threatens one's subjectivity and integrity through its disrespect of "borders, positions, rules" (4). As such, the "shameless rapist" (4) forces an experience of abjection upon his victim: he draws the victim "toward the place where meaning collapses" (2) and "uses the body for barter instead of inflaming it" (4).[46] In other words, a rapist feels no moral impetus that would make him question his actions because he lives in and affirms a patriarchal culture. Rather, he considers his victim as useable, and allows himself to break the laws that prohibit sexual violence and coercion. Being seen and used in such a way profoundly impacts a survivor's sense of self and relationship with their body.

Kristeva further characterizes abjection as a "massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness" that might have been "familiar . . . in an opaque and forgotten life" (2). When experienced, however, uncanniness takes on larger, potent proportions. That is, an uncanniness that is observed can threaten a subject's sense of self to a certain degree; an uncanniness that is experienced carries more danger to the self. For instance, a woman's vague knowledge that sexual violence happens can modify her perception of her environment without drastically altering her subjectivity. If that same woman witnesses sexual violence,[47] her subjectivity is likely to be disturbed.

Abjection, then, is "immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady" (Kristeva 4): in a context informed by rape culture, immorality points to an aggressor's disregard of laws and norms

[46] Kristeva explains abjection as "a passion that uses the body for barter instead of inflaming it" (4). She does not define exactly what she means, but her example is rhetorically linked to seeing abjection as "immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady" (4). As such, I understand "uses the body for barter instead of inflaming it" to mean that a person who forces the experience of abjection upon another completely disregards the other's subjectivity. This is why I establish a link between the content of that quotation and the rapist: "barter" refers to the commodification of the victim's body for the rapist's selfish needs, while "inflaming" refers to the sexual excitement or pleasure that is denied to the victim through an assault's violence.

[47] By "witnesses" I include varied forms of witnessing, such as first- and second-hand experiences of sexual violence or confrontations with theoretical or fictional material regarding rape culture (for example, *Mean*, "The Husband Stitch," or Susan Brownmiller's *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*).

that prohibit sexual violence; “sinister” is understood to produce evil; “scheming” and “shady” are analogous to *devious* and characterize a rapist’s (in this chapter, the husband’s) deceptive attitude. Kristeva claims that abjection makes one lose their “bearings” (Kristeva 8), which means that the experience of abjection that emerges from sexual violence destabilizes a subject’s sense of self and confuses what one believes one understands about the world. One can notice the correlation between Kristeva’s vocabulary and the one Machado uses to describe the cultural gaslighting to which girls and women are constantly confronted.

Kristeva’s definition of abjection can be applied to the process by which, in Machado’s story, the husband gradually leads his wife into revealing the secret of her ribbon. Although the husband’s actions could certainly be defined as domestic violence, this term does not, as Evan Stark argues, “capture the true scope of harm perpetrated by batterers” (qtd. in Gurba, “Coercive Control”). Indeed, *domestic violence* “focuses on discrete acts of violence” (Stark, qtd. in Gurba, “Coercive Control”), and thus “obscures the totality of the crime” by ignoring the environment engineered by the batterer (Gurba, “Coercive Control”). Gurba contends that since batterers create “hostage-like situations” and “take [a woman’s] freedom,” the term *coercive control* adequately defines their crime as a liberty crime (“Coercive Control”). It is a crime that “results in the subjugation of women in private life” and is “facilitated by male privilege” (Gurba, “Coercive Control”). Coercive control, then, severely disrupts the boundaries of a woman’s mind and body. Although Machado’s story depicts the abject experience of coercive control in the narrator’s marriage, it is the forced interactions between the text and the reader that instigate a sense of abjection. Such interactions reflect the contemporary explorations of abjection that are explored in many art forms.

3.2 Abjection, Literature, and the Experience of Machado’s Reader

In *Abjection and Representation*, Rina Arya applies Kristeva’s concept of abjection to a vast array of contemporary works of art. She invokes the work of Nicholas Chare, who contends that the abject is often “too rapidly and simply equated with piss, shit, vomit, viscera and corpses” (qtd. in Arya viii). The conflation of the theoretical concept of abjection to material objects that “conjure up a sense of it or its effects” reduces and distorts its potential (Arya

viii-ix). By using abjection as a qualifier for objects that elicit disgust—such as the bodily fluids mentioned by Chare—one forgets that abjection is a process. That is, "shit" and "piss" by themselves are not abject; they can lead a subject to experience abjection if their interaction with them destabilizes that subject's sense of self.

Abjection should not be used as shorthand for anything that pertains to the "sensational and gory" (Arya ix). For instance, the term *abjection* cannot characterize the overt violence of slasher films, or the gory images that this violence generates, because such characterization focuses on the objects rather than on the process. Arya observes that in the art world, the concept of abjection remains central due both to its "persisting interest in the body and trauma" (ix), and to its place "at the heart of social and cultural regulations" (x). When abjection is translated into artwork, it creates an experience for the viewer (or, in our case, the reader) that varies on a spectrum "from uneasiness to repulsion" because of the transgressions of the moral sensibilities that usually maintain the boundaries between public and private acts (Arya 1). To illustrate her contention, Arya uses the example of Kiki Smith's *Pee Body*, a life-sized wax body of a woman with an elusive face, whose urine is symbolized by "a multitude of yellow trails of beads . . . forming a pool" (1). According to her, the artwork elicits a "cycle of repulsion and attraction, fear and intrigue" (2). That experience of simultaneous and contradictory feelings is, according to Kristeva and her scholars, a characteristic of abjection (Kristeva 1, Arya 5).

While Arya acknowledges that "the visceral and somatic aspects of the phenomenology of abjection lend themselves more readily to visual expression" (156), she agrees with Kristeva's contention that literature is "the most explicit realization of the signifying subject's condition" (qtd. in Arya 156-7). That is, the reader, the signifying subject, can find themselves confronted with the "sensory power of abjection" (10) while experiencing a text. Just as in the visual arts, the interaction between a subject and a disturbing object can activate "the gag reflex literally and/or metaphorically" because it causes abjection, whether "visceral, social and moral" (5).

In literature, abjection is communicated through a language that differs from its everyday use (15). Texts can unveil the horrors of the abject "in their content and themes as well as in their stylistic nuances" (15). Kristeva contends that the writer who is fascinated by

the abject will pervert the language as they imagine the logic of abjection and attempt to render it (16). This attention to the potential of language leads to an approach to writing that is "powerful and engaging" and "unstinting in its horror" at the same time (Arya 15). That is, the language that translates the process of abjection can be overwhelming, both in its vocabulary and in its connotative potential. The horror that emerges from such language respects no borders; a text that deals with abjection can thus be difficult and even unbearable to read (Arya 15). This is precisely what is at play in Machado's "The Husband Stitch," specifically in the parenthetical directions that can unsettle the reader's interpretative agency over the text and assault their sense of corporeality.

Throughout "The Husband Stitch," the narrator includes parenthetical directions that are aimed at guiding the reader's experience. This readerly manipulation echoes the narrator's own experience as a monstrous woman in a world intent on controlling her and her body. Because the parenthetical directions are disruptive in nature, they can elicit an experience of abjection from the reader by potentially disturbing their own sense of corporeality. The abject first manifests itself through the unnamed narrator's direct acknowledgement and simultaneous discipline of her reader. To this end, the story opens with a long parenthesis in which the narrator establishes how the voices of the characters should be heard. [48] She addresses the reader through the familiar "you" (3), thus challenging the usual method of reading a story in one's head. Irene Kacandes considers such direct address as "the irresistible invitation of the second person pronoun:" to engage the reader in that manner brings immediate awareness to the way in which the text interacts with the reader's experience of it (139). The "you" cannot be conceived without the "I," which transforms the reader into a "necessary interlocutor" (Kacandes 140). The narrator's suggestion that her story could be read "out loud" "if" (3) the reader chooses to do so draws a parallel with oral traditions of storytelling. Such a parallel can be understood as anchoring her voice, and by extension her subject matter, into the perennial conversation about gender and sexual violence that has often been diminished through its conversion into mere cautionary tales.

[48] This long parenthesis functions as a prologue giving guidelines.

Despite the narrator's proposal, the reader is likely to maintain the conventional way of engaging a story because of the usual reading posture that detaches a reader from a text. The performance characteristic of reading a story out loud is thus transferred onto the reader's mind and is enforced by the narrator pleading to "use the following voices" (3). According to the narrator, her voice "as a child" is "high-pitched, forgettable" and is, "as a woman, the same;" the voice of "the boy who will grow into a man, and be [her] spouse" is "robust with serendipity;" her father's voice is "kind, booming; like your father, or the man you wish was your father;" her son's voice is, as a small child, "gentle, sounding with the faintest of lisps" and as a man, "like [her] husband;" finally, the voices of "all other women" are "interchangeable with [her] own" (3).The description of the voices is thus meant to establish differences in the reader's perception of the characters' gender.

The narrator's detailed description of the male individuals portrays them as separate beings who develop from children to adults, while the women are depicted not only as "interchangeable" (3) with one another, but also as incapable of experiencing maturation. Boyhood and manhood are differentiated, while girlhood and womanhood are "the same" (3). Implied in these gender differences are the socio-cultural notions of authority and power. The narrator purposely characterizes women as "interchangeable" to point to their lack of discursive agency in the world she depicts. Her directions equate girls with women in order to ascertain the endurance of male authority and dominance. They also provide insight into the development of the story by linking her son's voice to her husband's. That relation between son and father further differentiates the voices of men from those of women and hints at the eventual separation of the son from his mother.

It is in that apparent guiding stance that abjection takes place; the parenthetical directions do not simply guide the reader by illuminating gender issues and power imbalances, but they also lessen the reader's interpretive subjectivity over the text. This disruption of the reader's usual interpretive agency impacts the reading experience by displacing and reformulating its performance. That is, the reader does not perform the text according to their preconceptions and predispositions. Rather, the text performs the reader by sketching, from the very outset, an authoritative voice that disciplines the reading experience with the specific goal of unsettling whoever reads the narrative. The story, as a

performative concept, thus becomes an unmanageable entity that simultaneously attracts and repulses the reader.

While the initial parenthetical directions point to the coexistence of attraction and repulsion towards the text, subsequent directions confirm the role of abjection as a performative tool that becomes increasingly persuasive. Such moments of directions are organized throughout the text and function as pauses; they close significant moments of the narrator's life and offer (often disturbing) insight into the scenes that have just unfolded. The impact of these directions lies in their ability to evoke the notions of trust and corporeality.

Abjection further disrupts the boundaries between text and reader in two interrelated ways. First, by breaking the implied bond of trust through their commanding intimations, the directions force the reader to read the story and to obey its instructions or, at least, to imagine what such obedience would feel like. Second, by evoking the reader's own corporeality through their focus on the body and physical harm/scare techniques, the directions reinforce the reader's identification with the narrator and incite them to experience coercive control. In other words, the motif of broken trust that underlines much of the narrative directly involves the reader by imposing a literary experience of coercive control.

The first instance of parenthetical directions, aside from the initial ones concerning which voices to adopt, is included after the narrator and the boy leave her parents' house to have sexual intercourse in a clearing. In that scene, the narrator reiterates the two aforementioned rules that she has established: he cannot finish inside of her or touch her ribbon (7). By noting the ribbon, she draws attention to its frailty and to the eventual threat that it will come to signify for the boy who has yet to mention it. The ribbon, along with the scene's lexical field focusing on the sexual experience, indicates the narrator's constant awareness of her corporeality. That awareness is transferred onto the reader at the end of the episode:

> (If you read this story out loud, the sounds of the clearing can be best reproduced by taking a long breath and holding it for a long moment. Then release the air all at once, permitting your chest to collapse like a block tower knocked to the ground. Do this again, and again, shortening the time between the held breath and the release.) (7)

Here, the narrator induces the reader into simulating sexual breathing. This allows the narrator to lead the reader into identifying with her through a shared corporeal experience. In that sense, the reader becomes familiar with the experience of the monstrous female body.

At the same time, the vocabulary in the parenthetical directions functions in the same way as the mention of the ribbon: they both hint at a future threat. In the directions, the sexual breathing is described in terms of destruction. The mentions of "collapse" and "knocked to the ground" emphasize the structural fragility of the "block tower" (7). The precarious structure of that tower can be understood as a metaphor for both the structure of the boy and the girl's relationship and the structure of the text. In fact, the "block tower" also reflects the precariousness of feminine identity and voice. As was argued before, the story later reveals that the narrator's marriage is doomed to "collapse" because of her husband's insistence on touching her ribbon. Meanwhile, the narrative of the story itself gradually leads the reader into losing their interpretive agency and subjectivity over the text. In both cases, the disturbance of one's sense of corporeality leads to an experience of abjection.

One of the most potent instances of parenthetical directions concludes the birthing scene in which the narrator's husband and doctor ignore her desire and revoke her control over her own body. After describing her happiness at holding, touching, and nursing her newborn son, the narrator directs: "(If you are reading this story out loud, give a paring knife to the listeners and ask them to cut the tender flap of skin between your index and your thumb. Afterward, thank them.)" (16). In this parenthetical guideline, the reader's corporeality, which had previously been evoked, comes under attack.[49] The reflection of the narrator's own experience allows for a more intimate understanding of the world in which she survives. Although the imagined cutting of one's skin does not literally compare to enduring and recovering from a real, forced episiotomy, the narrator's device can disturb the reader's experience of the text. Not every reader will react to the directions in the same manner: for example, a person who has experienced forced violence might feel a stronger sense of abjection than one who has not experienced such violence. Still, the diction in the direction is meant to mimic the intrusive behaviours of the husband and doctor. As such, it disregards

[49] The narrator had evoked the reader's corporeality in her intimation to imitate sexual breathing (7) and, later, to "exhaust" themselves by simulating the sounds of lovemaking (12).

the reader's feelings and desires just like the two men do. By exploiting the shattering of trust, the narrator guides the reader experience abjection. Readers find themselves confronted with a narrative that gradually involves them against their will and that traps them into its superstructure. This entrapment disturbs not only the boundary of the fourth wall—that is, the conceptual space that separates the audience from a performance[50]—but also the corporeal boundaries of the reader.

Furthermore, in the example above, the reader, like the narrator, is asked to "thank" their abuser. Walsh observes that since the directions "have moved from which voices to use, to a simulacrum of sexual breathing, to a slicing of flesh plus gratitude," one can "only feign gratitude after such an injury" (Walsh). Yet, despite the repulsion that readers might experience in response to these directions, the narrative still draws them towards the text. The cycle of fear and intrigue that characterizes abjection is at play in the story; it generates a reading that both activates a metaphorical gag reflex and fascinates the one experiencing the narrative.

While the parenthetical directions analyzed thus far have converged towards disturbing the reader who is forced to experience them as a victim, one particular direction subverts this process. Before introducing the parenthetical commentary, the narrator describes how she felt attracted to the woman who poses naked for her art class. She states that, "[n]o small amount of guilt comes along with [her] wandering eyes," and decides not to tell her husband (22-3). Despite her silence, "he can sense some untapped desire," and brings her to tell him about it, which releases "an extra flood of shame" (23). The narrator's depiction of her inner desires contrasts with those of her husband, who has always expressed his in a controlling manner. The shame she feels at describing "the details of [the woman's] ribbon" (23) is considerable: while her husband uses her desires to fuel his own fantasy and to initiate intercourse, the narrator feels "as if [she] [has] betrayed [the woman] somehow" (23). Since women share the mystery of the ribbon, the narrator's disclosure is a betrayal, one whose depth is intensified by the way in which the woman's ribbon becomes accessory

[50] While the "fourth wall" is a concept usually applied in drama or film, I use it here because the text is *performing* the reader through its parenthetical directions.

to the husband's fantasy. The narrator has thus involved the posing woman, against her will, in the coercive control that defines her marriage.

She closes the episode with the following parenthesis: "(If you are reading this story out loud, force a listener to reveal a devastating secret, then open the nearest window to the street and scream it as loudly as you are able.)" (23). Here, the reader is placed in the position of the aggressor rather than of the victim. In the story's context, this position mirrors the narrator's own. The narrator's shame at her betrayal of the woman is transferred to the reader. As such, one can argue that a similar "flood of shame" will be released by the reader. Shame can be a visual emotion: Darwin notes that blushing often accompanies one whose sense of morality is being examined (333). He specifies that people tend to blush in shame or guilt when accused of a crime (Darwin 333), which correlates with the narrator's reaction at the sight of the naked woman and telling her husband about it. Therefore, the narrator's incitement to feel shame uses the reader's body as barter in order to make them complicit in the sexist structure that regulates both the narrative and the social beliefs that the narrative criticizes.

The husband's untying of the ribbon and the narrator's head falling off frame the last directions the narrator offers. Significantly, they are not placed in parentheses: "If you are reading this story out loud, you may be wondering if that place my ribbon protected was wet with blood and openings, or smooth and neutered like the nexus between the legs of a doll. I'm afraid I can't tell you, because I don't know. For these questions and others, and their lack of resolution, I am sorry" (31). The absence of parentheses suggests finality: it anchors the reader's reaction as an inextricable part of the text. The parentheses had previously been used as supplementary commentary on the text; at the story's end, the directions cannot be considered as separate content. In this case, they do not order the reader to take action, but rather acknowledge that story and reader have now blended together. By gradually stimulating the reader to live an experience akin to hers, the narrator has suggested a particular reading of her story, one that denounces rape culture as the cause of her misery. A woman reader might become more familiar with that reality or realize that her story and that of the narrator are interrelated. A man reading "The Husband Stitch" could feel attacked by the story's sexual and gender politics, especially if he is oblivious to his social privilege and

to the beliefs that construct him as superior to the so-called monstrous feminine. Both men and women can realize their internalization of those patriarchal beliefs.

The lack of resolution to the ending may be understood as an offshoot of the narrator's last willful act. The abjection that it elicits in the reader is not related to the body, despite the narrator's vivid description of her neck as both "wet with blood and openings" and "smooth and neutered like the nexus between the legs of a doll" (31). Rather, readers experience abjection from the story's structure that does not conform to their expectation. The ribbon functions like Chekhov's gun: its untying is expected, especially given the emphasis placed upon it throughout the narrative. [51] In "The Husband Stitch," the untying does not provide answers. In this context, the lack of resolution disconnects the reader from the text and, in the process, unveils the similarity between the reader's and husband's frustration and desire for knowledge.

As Corrigan notes, the reader may doubt the narrator's words and thus might "becom[e] complicit in the cultural sentiment of disbelief, which comfortably allows us to disregard the words of women, especially when addressing violence against their (our) own bodies" ("Speculative Feminism"). With that ultimate condemnation, the narrator forces the reader—whether a man or a woman—to realize the patriarchal role that they may easily adopt. Likewise, any reader is subject to be antagonistic to women like the narrator because of the deep-seated internalization of the patriarchal role and aims. The narrator's manipulation of the reader, which had so far concentrated on their corporeality and ability to trust, culminates in that destabilizing conclusion.[52]

Conclusion

Carmen Maria Machado's "The Husband Stitch" is a disturbing tale that demolishes the borders between text and reader. C. G. Holden, who attended Machado's live reading of her story, describes how the room was seized "with the eerie chill of a gripping ghost story"

[51] The term "Chekhov's gun" refers to a technique of literary foreshadowing and plot-construction. It is illustrated by a quote from playwright Anton Chekhov, who wrote that "[o]ne must not put a loaded rifle on the stage if no one is thinking of firing it" (Mar and Oatley 176).

[52] Notably, the narrator's manipulation of the reader is akin to Myriam Gurba's *mean* intentions in writing her memoir. Both texts familiarize the reader into what is not familiar enough—the insidiousness and pervasiveness of sexual violence.

("Heterosexual Horror Story"). She comments that, although Machado was not prepared to act out the parenthetical directions, she did not have to. The suggestive power of the directions is enough: its interpellation of the reader evokes their abject experiences through the narrator's own.

The story's narrator, an unnamed woman whose body is characterized as monstrous because of the green ribbon tied around her neck, weaves together and reformulates cautionary tales, urban legends, and horror stories. Those stories are themselves interlaced with the narrator's life, which is haunted by many forms of sexual violence, gaslighting, and domineering control over her body. In that sense, Candace Walsh observes that the narrator's "unique experiences run into the river of female stories" ("Self-Salvation, Structure, and Sex Part II"). Indeed, the narrator believes that, "stories have this way of running together like raindrops in a pond. Each is borne from the clouds separate, but once they have come together, there is no way to tell them apart" (Machado 16). What all those stories have in common is a feeling of entrapment.

On the *Between the Covers* podcast, Machado criticizes the way society traps, through continuous cultural gaslighting, generations of women into reiterating the same feminist discourse as a way of preventing any substantial advancement (00:22:30-00:26:00). By tangling up the reader in her story and making them complicit, she reflects that bleak reality, and provides a persuasive argument against patriarchal ideology and the rape culture it engenders. The monstrous feminine body becomes the subject of empathy, effectively rejecting the discourse and dominion that the patriarchal rule imposes upon it. Having access to that voice allows for a reconsideration of what is (mis)understood as rape culture.

Conclusion

This thesis was concerned with literary representations of monstrously coded female bodies as subversive agents of the rape culture upheld by patriarchy. By considering sexual violence from the perspective of the oppressed, I argued that monstrous female characters destabilize the domineering discourse that has been imposed upon their body and, at the same time, expose the insidious practices and beliefs through which sexist and racist patriarchy becomes normalized. More precisely, through close readings of *Mean* and "The Husband Stitch," I showed how the female monsters' denunciation of the system transpires in three intersecting ways: through the appropriation and subversion of myths that aim to subdue the monsters; through the monsters' narrative agency that allows them to construct a disruptive discourse; and, through an engagement with the roots of the cultural acceptance and normalization of rape culture.

To attain these objectives, I aligned my claims with those of Natalie Wilson, who considers the figure of monster through Sara Ahmed's framework. Ahmed theorizes that willfulness—"a diagnosis of the failure to comply with those whose authority is given"—can compromise "the capacity of a subject to survive, let alone flourish" (1). In a world where the patriarchal rule persists as the dominant discourse that regulates society, being identified as willful "is to become a problem" (Ahmed 3) because willfulness threatens the established phallocentric power. As such, willfulness is a potent and promising means for those who seek to "resist the general will and its oppressive formations" (Wilson 6). In fact, for some, willfulness "might be necessary for an existence to be possible" (Ahmed 160). Ahmed suggests that willfulness, as a "style of politics," holds the same promise as monstrosity (161-2).

From the interlinked promises of willfulness and monstrosity, Wilson theorizes the monster as a liminal figure imbued with potential for social change. As I explained in my analysis, Wilson argues that willful monstrosity can challenge the oppressive, dichotomous discourse that patriarchy has historically used to justify its self-proclaimed superiority and authority. She considers monsters whose willfulness disrupts the practice of using gender and race as a basis for the upholding of the hegemonic power. Through her engagement with

recent cultural representations of female monsters, Wilson contends that the valorization of such otherness contributes to the creation of "a powerfully political metaphor for our time" (181).

Both Ahmed's and Wilson's claims advocate that the body, as a visible marker of gender- and racial-based difference, can become the site of a resisting discourse of willfulness. Ahmed states that "a history of willfulness is a history of those who are willing to put their bodies in the way, or to bend their bodies in the way of the will" (161), while Wilson bases part of her analysis on the fact that the "mere female bod[y] [is] enough to construe monstrosity" (182). My thesis therefore considered the monstrous female body as a subversive cultural agent whose willfulness is intent on exposing and demolishing the accepted beliefs and myths that perpetuate rape culture. In that sense, my analysis valorizes females coded as monstrous, which in turn contributes to the embracing of the subversive discourse that their bodies encompass.

In the first chapter on Myriam Gurba's memoir, I argued that race impacts the portrayal of sexual violence by drawing on the stereotypes of hypersexualization attached to the Latina body. The Mexican identity shared by the narrator, the ghost, and the rapist who abuses them both is a significant element of Gurba's coming-of-age narrative. Gurba's *Mean* is organized in short vignettes, which range in length from "a single blunt sentence" to "lengthier explorations" (Stoner). The story is told by a first-person narrator—Gurba herself—whose grim humour, I averred, matches the topic matter to reveal the casually horrific nature of living in a rape culture. Gurba's tale is largely concerned with the various ways in which the notion of the female, monstrous-coded body exists in different spaces. Focusing on that particular body, I showed how the narrator revisits childhood memories and poignantly relates them to her experiences as a teenager and adult. Her unique narrative structure has a significant impact on the story: as a memoir, it begins and ends with references to the ghost of Sophia Torres, a Mexican girl who was raped and murdered by the same rapist who had previously assaulted Gurba.

My analysis of Gurba's *Mean* engaged with the significance of the female monstrous body through the consideration of three interrelated concepts: corporeality, embodiment, and abjection. The section on corporeality aimed at defamiliarizing the reader from the

essentializing and reductive notions that prevail regarding sexual violence and the female body. Corporeality was discussed through Gurba's depictions of the treatment of the female monstrous body in social spaces, her discussion of her intimate body, and her consideration of Sophia's own corporeality. The second section focused on embodiment and abjection as means of familiarizing the reader with what is not familiar enough: the lived experience of rape. I invoked the notion of embodiment to analyze Gurba's painful experience of rape and her subsequent realization that all spaces may become sites of similar horror. Embodiment frames the exploration of the theory of abjection, which I reverted to in my analysis of the bodily disruptions of Sophia's boundaries, the similar invasion of Gurba's body, and the unsettling reading experience.

In the second chapter on Carmen Maria Machado's short story, my argument concerned a nameless narrator who is socially othered because of the mysterious ribbon tied around her neck. By analyzing specific passages, I studied the various processes through which she comes to self-define as a "storyteller" and to guide the reader through the various instances of sexual violence and patriarchal control that shape her life. Because her story is episodic in form, the chosen approach allowed me to focus on how the narrator interrupts her narrative with inclusions of cautionary tales that she has previously heard. I also analyzed the many episodes that are concluded with parenthetical directions in an effort to demonstrate how the narrator involves and disrupts the reader's experience of the text.

The analysis of Machado's "The Husband Stitch" considered the control of the narrator's monstrous body by different male figures throughout the story. To this end, my analysis examined how her husband, son, father, and doctor perceive her as different and threatening, as well as the textual moments that reveal their repeated attempts at controlling her through various types of violence. In that first section, the depiction of the narrator's relationship with her husband spans the entirety of her life. Therefore, the subsequent sections, as I demonstrated, nuance and complexify that narrative of her life.

In the second section, I analyzed how the narrator's integration and subversion of cautionary tales lead to examinations of corporeality and knowledge that disrupt the patriarchal hegemonic discourse. The last section discussed the reading experience through the lens of abjection, as defined by Kristeva and Arya. I argued that the narrator's

parenthetical directions link her disturbing experiences to the reader's confrontation with the text.

Since the format of the thesis limits the scope of my analysis, I chose to restrict my topic to the experiences of the narrators against those who uphold patriarchy. For *Mean*, however, the narrator's merging with Sophia could not be ignored, which led to a more comprehensive consideration of the narrator's life. If conciseness were not an issue for the project, I would have liked to delve deeper into the intertextuality that Gurba inscribes in her narrative. As a person interested in arts and literature—she even studies art in college—, Gurba frequently mentions authors and artists to frame, either positively or negatively, her experiences. Although I selected the most prominent examples of those intertextual mentions, the remaining ones could certainly reinforce an expanded analysis. A closer attention to art, for instance, could have been linked to the episode in Machado's story where the narrator takes up art classes for women in order to occupy her time while her son is at school.

I initially planned to study another element, common to both narratives: the cultural trauma of sexual violence that women share. Such trauma is mentioned in my analysis of Gurba and Sophia's shared corporeality, but only hinted at in the chapter on Machado's story. I would have liked to cover how, in Gurba's text, female bonding serves as a deflector of boys' and men's controlling, patronizing, and intrusive behaviour that they allow themselves to perform against the female monster. For "The Husband Stitch," I would have focused on the narrator's bonding with the woman poser that she meets at her art classes, and on the episode in which she joins a school committee of mothers to sew costumes for a children's play. In the latter episode, the narrator's subtle mention of how one woman's ribbon, tied around her finger, tangles in her thread and makes her swear and cry, has discursive potential. I believe that an analysis of the diction in that passage would have reinforced the symbol of the ribbon and, at the same time, would have shown the women's awareness of their condition.

It should be noted here that, at the time of gathering sources and writing my chapter on "The Husband Stitch," I was unaware of the very recent publication (February 2021) of Samantha Wallace's article "In Defence of Not-knowing: Uncertainty and Contemporary

Narratives of Sexual Violence." Since Machado's story is recent, the critical corpus that engages with it is continuously growing. In her article, Wallace uses Machado's story to question the claims of ambiguity that are often imposed upon the testimonies of survivors of sexual violence. She argues for the need to "re-examine the role of ambiguity," and to make a case for "'not-knowing'" as, itself, a legitimate "form of expression" (1-2). Wallace argues that, because we have accepted a "standard of certainty" regarding narratives of sexual and gender-based violence, we have ossified the "language for theorising sexual encounter, sexual subjectivity and sexual violence," thus constricting the possibilities for articulating and representing such experiences (4-5). Further critical perspectives of "The Husband Stitch" would benefit from the valorization of "not-knowing" and from the discussion on language. Because of their nuances regarding ambiguity and credibility, Wallace's arguments complement Hood's approach as well as the sociological critics who analyze the language we use when we talk about rape.

By rethinking the monstrous female body, my thesis contributes to the larger societal discourse regarding rape culture that, in recent years, has occupied much of mediatic space and spurred many controversies. Sexual violence has long been denounced by feminists; however, as Ahmed argues, the women who question societal norms and structures—the "killjoy[s]" (160)—are seen and portrayed as monsters by normativizing patriarchy. Yet, the figure of the feminist "killjoy" is, according to Wilson, gaining popularity in the new millennium (183). Movements such as #MeToo, for instance, are driven by unapologetic feminists who discard the consumerist "feel good feminism," and instead assert the validity of their "political activism" (Wilson 183).

More specifically, my thesis contributes to this feminist political activism by identifying the monstrous female body as the site where a willful, subversive discourse emerges. I engage with the notions of corporeality, embodiment, and abjection in my analysis of the female monster in order to disrupt the silences that, through monsterization and various forms of oppression, have categorized women's experiences of sexual violence as dishonest, exaggerated, false, or harmful to the phallocentric authority. A key aspect of my argumentation concerns the discursive methods through which the narrators of *Mean* and "The Husband Stitch" lead their reader to (re)consider their own internalization of, or

participation in, the patriarchal discourse that justifies and perpetuates rape culture in the United States. In this respect, the works under study are powerful in their ability to, as Mathias Clasen argues about horror narratives, "offer insight into the mechanics of social interactions and psychological processes" (60).

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