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Fragments from a Fractured Self:
Abusive Queer Relationships in
Carmen María Machado's *In the
Dream House* (2019)

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Resumo [na lingua en que se vai redacta-lo TFG; entre 1000 e 2000 caracteres]:

By forgetting that queer people are just polyhedric human beings, we can easily fall prey to essentialisms and reinforce two contraposed tendencies: seeing and representing queerness as “pure evil” or “pure goodness”. Envisioning queer individuals and their relationships as unflawed contributes to an essentialist idealisation that leads to the silencing of certain issues within the community such as abuse in queer relationships. In this work we will address this matter through the analysis of Carmen María Machado's memoir *In the Dream House* (2019), deploying a theoretical framework which, like Machado's work, is multiple and hybrid in its references, as it brings together queer theory, socio-cultural studies on abusive queer relationships and criticism on trauma and life writing. In doing this, we aim to shed light on the role of literature — and in particular texts focusing on often silenced problems such as abuse in queer relationships — in giving visibility and raising awareness. The dissertation will be divided into three distinct chapters, each focusing on different aspects related to the topic under scrutiny, and all having both a theoretical and an analytical component. The first chapter will handle queer essentialism and its role in perpetuating abuse in queer relationships; the second chapter will tackle the visible effects of trauma in writing with a focus on queer life writing; and, lastly, the third chapter will deal with the importance of inscribing abusive queer relationships into the collective archive, showing how Machado accomplishes such task by mobilising well-known images and tropes from folktales and popular culture.



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Claudia Costas González

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Claudia CG', with a stylized flourish at the end.

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Introduction

This work centres on the study and analysis of Carmen María Machado's *In the Dream House* (2020), a memoir that blends fiction and reality in order to tell a very personal tale: Machado's own experience of abuse in a sapphic relationship. Fragmentary in nature, this narrative is divided into very small chapters, offering in each and every one of them a glimpse into such an experience, and showing how writing provided Machado with a form of self-healing and a means of putting together the pieces of her shattered self.

In the second chapter of this memoir, titled "*Dream House* as Prologue", Machado introduces the notion of "violence of the archive" or "archival silence" (2020, p. 2) so as to explain how there are some stories that go missing and are forgotten as they are destroyed or never shared. She then goes on to point out that the term "archive" comes from an ancient Greek word meaning "the house of the ruler". Thus, as Machado explains, those who rule over the archive decide what gets left out of it and, therefore, confined to oblivion. Queer stories have historically been excluded from the "archive", but in the last years efforts have been made to reinscribe them into such archives. Still, as Machado explains in her memoir, the queer reality that the "archive" contains includes many essentialisms, silencing marginal stories such as those relating to abuse in queer relationships: "The queer community has long used the rhetoric of gender roles as a way of absolving queer women from responsibility for domestic abuse [...] Women could abuse other women. Women *have* abused other women. And queers needed to take this issue seriously, because no one else would" (2020, p. 230). Machado then navigates the waters of a very underrepresented topic in literature and in media more generally. She decides to speak up about such issue by telling her own story, thus helping to break this "archival silence", and contributing to creating an alternative one in which voices like hers and stories like hers are finally kept safely.

The main aim of this dissertation is to provide a close analysis of Carmen María Machado's *In the Dream House* (2020), showing how the life-altering experience of abuse faced by the author and its ensuing traumas are portrayed in the narrative not only thematically, but also formally, as this memoir displays a set of formal features that reflect Machado's struggle to write about this deeply hurtful event. The study seeks, therefore, to unravel how the experience of abuse impacted on the way in which Machado crafted her narrative, one that reveals many characteristics germane to trauma literature such as fragmentation, ellipsis and a sense of embattled self. In the process, the dissertation also sheds light on the importance of literature — and, particularly, the memoir genre — to give visibility to minorized and often silenced voices. In so doing, we will get to understand the imperative necessity of sharing stories of this nature both on an individual level, as an act of processing and healing, and on a social level, as a way to raise awareness and upend essentialisms.

In order to carry out the analysis described above, this dissertation combines different theoretical frameworks, from queer and gender studies to trauma theory or criticism engaging with autobiographical writing. The work is divided into three chapters and the three of them displays the same structure: the first part of each chapter is devoted to laying bare the specific theoretical framework that informs the subsequent analysis. Thus, Chapter 1, "Queer Studies and Strategic Essentialism Revisited", begins by approaching the history and meaning of the term "queer", drawing on the field known as Queer Studies and bringing in the work of key scholars such as Judith Butler (1993) and Teresa de Lauretis (1991). This initial overview is followed by a discussion focusing on the problems linked to the overly positive essentialisation of queer identities, which has contributed to silencing certain realities and experiences within the queer community — most notably here, abuse in queer relationships. Drawing on works such as Lori B.

Girshick's *Woman-to-Woman Sexual Violence: Does she Call it Rape?* (2002), Jude Irwin's *Addressing Violence, Abuse and Oppression* (2008), and Harden et al.'s "The Dark Side of the Rainbow: Queer women's experiences of intimate partner violence" (2022), we explain the nuances and apparatus behind the reality of abuse in sapphic relationships, underlining the importance of the idea of the "lesbian utopia" — the idealised conception of intimate relationships between women as egalitarian paradises exempt from any kind of problematic power dynamic — as a fundamental part in the mechanisms at work. After this first theoretical section, we introduce Machado's memoir and, drawing on the previously established frame, we analyse the dynamics of the "women-to-women" relationship that the author portrays in her memoir. In doing so, we intend to showcase, through the case study of *In the Dream House*, the illusory nature of the "queer paradise" or the "lesbian utopia", its dangers for the queer community, and the importance of the representation of fully fledged queer stories, and not simplyedulcorated ones.

Chapter 2 is titled "Life Writing, Queerness, and Trauma" and is divided into two main parts. In the first part of the chapter, we start by defining both "life writing" and the concept of "memoir", making use of various works that allow us to problematise these concepts and the relation of these genres to the experience of marginal voices — amongst others, we could mention Marlene Kadar's *Essays on Life Writing: From Genre to Critical Practice* (1992), Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's *Reading Autobiography: a Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (2010), G. Thomas Couser's *Memoir: An Introduction* (2012), Christiane Lahusen "3.23 Memoirs" in Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf's *Handbook of Autobiography / Autofiction* (2019), Leigh Gilmore's "#MeToo and the Memoir Boom: The Year in the US" (2019), and even Machado's own definition of the term "memoir". Then, we read *In the Dream House* as a form of "life writing" for a "queer

archive”, one that purports to break the archival silence that surrounds the issue of abuse in queer relationships. Subsequently, we examine Machado’s text in relation to the importance acquired by life writing within the queer community, as demonstrated by studies such as Julie Avril Minich’s “Writing Queer Lives: Autobiography and Memoir” (2015). On the other hand, the second part of the chapter tackles the notion of “trauma”, drawing on seminal works within trauma theory (Caruth, 1996; Balaev, 2008) and exploring the intersections of trauma, queerness and abuse in memoir writing. This leads us to explore the formal techniques that Machado deploys to retell her traumatic experience of abuse, focusing inter alia on the use of fragmentation, the alternation between the use of the first person singular and the second person singular, and the importance of physical spaces, specifically the “Dream House”. By doing this, we aim to demonstrate how this memoir acts within the boundaries of its self-ascribed genre, while simultaneously adopting a specific set of characteristics that relate to the fact that it is a queer story and, at the same time, a recollection of a traumatic experience.

Finally, Chapter 3, “Re-inscribing Abuse in Queer Relationships into the Collective Imaginary”, begins by problematising the notion of “intertextuality”, drawing mainly on Graham Allen’s *Intertextuality* (2011). This is followed by an analysis of Machado’s resourceful use of intertextuality in *In the Dream House*. We will focus on two main types of references: those related to popular culture media, and those related to folk and fairy tales. The analysis begins by addressing what popular culture is through John Storey’s *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction* (2009), and we go on to point out the different instances of popular culture allusions that Machado uses to illustrate her own story — this includes engaging with Til Tuesday’s 1985 debut single “Voices Carry”; Til Tuesday’s singer’s, Aimee Mann, solo single “Daisy”; or the 1940 film *Gaslight*. In the next section, we move from popular culture to fairy tales and,

accordingly, the section begins with a brief overview on the power and “magical spell” behind fairy tales, as discussed in works such as Cristina Bacchilega’s *Postmodern Fairy Tales: Gender and Narrative Strategies* (1997), and Jack Zipes’s *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk & Fairy Tales* (1979). This grounds our subsequent analysis of Machado’s use of fairy-tale motifs in her memoir. As we will argue, Machado uses fairy-tale motifs for two main purposes: one, as a resource to illustrate her experience, and two, as a way to re-inscribe this same experience into the collective imaginary, creating a new space for the representation of abuse in queer relationships in “archives” from which it has been historically excluded from.

Chapter 1. Queer Studies and Strategic Essentialism Revisited

1.1. Queer Studies and the “Lesbian Utopia”

The term “queer” is very complex to define. Although as an umbrella term it can be used “as a substitute for gay and lesbian, and to include others whose sexuality and/or gender places them outside of society’s idea of ‘normal’: bisexuals and transgendered people” (Dilley, 1999: pp. 457-458). Its meaning bears a much more nuanced and abstract nature that often seems to be reduced to a simpler, but not so exact, explanation. In its origins, the word meant “strange, odd, peculiar, eccentric” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, n.d.), but during the beginning of the twentieth century its derogatory use towards non-heteronormative people became increasingly popular. During the 60s and 70s, the term was reappropriated and resignified within the LGBTQ community, just as other derogatory terms, such as the n-word, have in other contexts. The resignification of the term came from the margins, from those who were signalled as “queer”, and therefore its meaning cannot be assimilated to that of a traditional category whose definition and connotations have remained static and unchanged throughout time and space. Queerness is answering “yes, and?” to an attempt of an offense. As David M. Halperin (as cited in Giffney, 2009) puts it:

[...] ‘queer’ does not name some natural kind or refer to some determinate object; it acquires its meaning from its oppositional relation to the norm. Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. (p. 3)

Accordingly, Queer Studies fall under the area of Gender and Sexuality Studies and explore the plasticity of the concept “queer”, its place in society, and its relation to other fields of study. The beginnings of academic research and theoretical postulates regarding

this subject area are undoubtedly recent. Its foundations can be traced back to the 1990s as a response to the rise of gay identity politics that relied on strategic and gender essentialism. Teresa de Lauretis coined the term “Queer Theory” in a conference held at the University of California – Santa Cruz, which was later published in an issue of the journal *differences* in 1991 under the title “Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities” (Chandler & Munday, 2020, p. 827). Other important voices, such as Judith Butler, who aimed to destabilize binary oppositions of gender and sexuality, also joined the conversation in the 90s and are now considered to be fundamental theorists within the field.

Queer Theory looks for a contraposition to mainstream narratives, but also for a construction of a new narrative outside of the mainstream. It is constantly reevaluating and questioning itself, never reaching a fully defined form. In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler (1993) explains:

If the term “queer” is to be a site of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings, it will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes. (p. 228)

At its core, Queer Theory purports, therefore, to be an open and everchanging political and identitarian exploration, but this “abstractness” often becomes difficult to maintain. The political category of “queer”, which has tried to be disruptive against “normality”, has at times fallen and keeps falling into homogenising tendencies, as other political categories, such as “Black” have (see Hall 1996). Hence, a single understanding of the “queer experience” and the “queer subject” as essentially positive leads to the invisibility of narratives and experiences that become marginal in an already marginalised social

group. In this sense, the work that we will be dealing with, Carmen María Machado's *In the Dream House* (2021), is an important narrative to feed Queer Studies with, as it tackles the topic of abuse in an intimate relationship between women, which is an issue that is not spoken about enough and is even silenced within the queer community.

Both feminism and Queer Studies have forsaken women in relationships with other women because of the lack of representation of voices that speak out about abuse, and also by taking at times an essentialist stance that portrays this type of relationships as what Lori B. Girshick calls "the lesbian utopia" (Girshick, 2002). In *Woman-to-Woman Sexual Violence: Does she Call it Rape?* (2002), she states the following: "[t]he mythology of women's nonviolence and lesbian egalitarianism has proven to be a formidable block to admitting and dealing with same-sex sexual violence and domestic violence perpetrated by women" (p. 61). Different currents of feminism and heteronormative conceptions of domestic violence have confabulated to create an illusory image of intimate or romantic relationships between women. This has been so both because of the lack of recognition of these relationships as legitimate and because of an opposite vision that has construed such relationships not only as legitimate, but also as perfectly idealistic. In *Addressing Violence, Abuse and Oppression* (2008), Jude Irwin makes a chronological analysis that explains these complexities and how they produce "the invisibility of intimate partner violence between lesbians" (p. 80). The initial theorization of early feminists about domestic violence considered this issue only within heterosexual relationships, which has shaped our general understanding of domestic violence and consequently overshadowed and silenced domestic violence in dissident models of relationships. This invisibility was further worsened because of the view of lesbian relationships as "utopian" by different branches of feminism, such as cultural and radical feminists (Irwin, 2008).

Both in Girshick's *Woman-to-Woman Sexual Violence* (2002) and Harden et al.'s "The Dark Side of the Rainbow: Queer women's experiences of intimate partner violence" (2022), the authors point out several common denominators as to why domestic violence in sapphic relationships is hidden and how preconceived ideas regarding both women and lesbian relationships have aided this censoring: a) the essentialist notion of women as non-violent, nurturing, and caring creatures conceals the possibility of psychological or physical abuse in their relationships, which leaves a potential victim defenceless against it (Girshick, 2002, pp. 54-56); b) the lack of recognition of same-sex relationships as legitimate in comparison to heterosexual ones and theorizations of intimate domestic violence centred on heterosexual couples make it harder for the identification of abuse within same-sex relationships (Girshick, 2002, pp. 10-12); c) the lack of studies and literature around intimate relationships between women and specially around problematic power dynamics and abuse within them leaves these women without a framework to identify intimate partner violence, as the one given by society does not fit their experiences (Harden et al., 2022, pp. 307-308); d) the sense of loyalty towards other bisexual or lesbian women makes the act of denouncing abuse more difficult both for the victim and for other people of the collective because of the feeling of betrayal this action bears (Girshick, 2002, p. 57); e) the fear that admitting this reality of violence will hurt the image of bisexual and lesbian women as a whole and will perpetuate heterosexism (Girshick, 2002, pp. 56-57). On that account, lesbian and bisexual women have to adhere to two different parameters: one related to gender and the other to sexuality. The combination these two axes produces a unified vision of their experiences that eradicates any room for divergence and obstructs the visibility of narratives that challenge mainstream visions. This creates an impossibly perfect and perfectly unflawed theoretical image of same-sex relationships that does not actually or necessarily match reality.

Because abuse thrives on secrecy (Girshick, 2002, p. 8), in order to counteract the invisibility of violence within same-sex relationships, Irwin highlights the crucial role of “naming the violence” as part of the solution: “Naming violence is a political act and has been a critical feature of feminist activism. However, limited language and understanding and the lack of talk about intimate partner violence between lesbians has contributed to the difficulty in speaking out” (2008, p. 86). She also addresses the importance of generating a literature that deals with domestic violence in lesbian relationships and establishes three different areas under which this type of literature can fall: “establishing the extent of intimate partner violence between lesbians; explaining or theorizing intimate partner violence between lesbians and exploring lesbians’ experiences of intimate partner violence” (p. 85). Machado’s work is an exercise of “naming the violence” that contributes to the literature around abuse in queer relationships and, although it mainly focuses on exploring a specific experience of intimate partner violence in a sapphic relationship, *In the Dream House* also invests in theorizing or introducing the public to theory about the subject.

1.2. Narrating Intimate Partner Violence in a Queer Relationship: Carmen María Machado’s *In the Dream House* (2021)

In her memoir, Machado recalls her own case of abuse in a relationship with another woman that she names “the woman in the Dream House”. Through a series of glimpses into different events of their relationship, she reflects upon this issue using the lens of her personal experience and trying to put together the pieces of how and why it happened.

1.2.1. Power Dynamics: An Unbalanced Relationship

In “The Dark Side of the Rainbow” (2022), Harden et al. enumerate common themes in experiences of intimate partner violence between women. They mention the relevance of power dynamics for the shaping of any kind of relationships and how they take a part in

explaining abuse. In order to have a wider picture of how abuse works – one that is not reduced to a heteronormative conception – we have to analyse relationships with an intersectional approach in mind, and take into account the roles that gender presentation, race, income, class background, and other defining elements have.

In her memoir, Machado explores the unhealthy power dynamics that she had to deal with in her abusive relationship with “the woman in the Dream House”. It starts as something small, almost imperceptible, but it is acknowledged from the get-go that there is some sort of unbalance. While the narrative voice feels small in comparison and just lucky to be there, her partner plays into that feeling and takes up a position of power that gives her the upper hand in the relationship. She describes her partner as “young and upper class and petite and blonde” (p. 89), notes that “[d]espite the fact that you were the same age, you felt like she was older than you: wiser, more experienced, worldlier” (p. 24), and confesses that “[p]art of the problem was, as a weird fat girl, you felt lucky. She did what you’d wished a million others had done — looked past arbitrary markers of social currency” (p. 26). As the narrative advances, the reality that they have a different class background, amount of experience, and adscription to normativity is made apparent and weighs in more and more, creating a problematic power imbalance. In order to illustrate this experience, Machado resorts to the use of different narrative forms – from pieces of news to fairytales – in her tireless search for the right words to help her explain what happened. She explores the silences that surround her experience from diverse angles, connecting memory, fantasy, and theory, in an attempt to give voice to an experience for which there is still no language available.

In the chapters titled “*Dream House as Warning*” and “*Dream House as Murder Mystery*”, Machado illustrates in what sense “the woman in the Dream House” was both the perfect victim and the impossible perpetrator. In “*Dream House as Warning*”, she tells

the story of a woman who went missing at the time, and that casually looked like her then girlfriend. She explains how the disappearance of this woman was made very present, and you could not go out on the street without thinking of her because there were massive signs everywhere. In contrast to this enormous effort to find this “upper-class, petite, blonde” (p. 89) woman, she presents the situation of another girl who went missing but, unlike her, “she did not come from a wealthy family” (p. 89), and those who looked for her struggled for people to care. By proposing a connection between the girl that went missing who everyone cared about and “the woman in the Dream House”, by placing them together under the same “category” of people, she illustrates how society actually cares for people like her girlfriend at the time. In “*Dream House as Murder Mystery*”, Machado narrates a fictional “murder mystery” story in which a detective goes through a list of suspects present in the crime scene. She describes how the detective keeps ignoring a blonde woman as a possible suspect and how she gets away with her crime without even being considered as a possible murderer. Through the proposition of these chapters’ images, the author tries to convey how class background and adscription to normativity played a part in the problematic dynamics of their relationship. “The woman in the Dream House” is in a position of presumption of innocence under society’s eyes, which makes her believe that she can behave as she wants without any consequences, and, in fact, she can because “[m]ost types of domestic abuse are completely legal” (p. 129), and intimate partner violence between women is often not even taken into account as domestic abuse.

Another aspect that shaped the power imbalance in Machado’s case was experience. In “*Dream House as Road Trip to Savannah*”, the author recalls an instance in which she and her partner were walking down the street and a man tried to attack her. Her girlfriend intervened quickly and stopped the attack from happening but kept saying sorry for not doing it sooner. The narrative voice asks, “Sooner than immediately?”, and

then, her girlfriend at the time replies, “I know this is new to you, but I’ve dated a lot of women. This is just par for the course. This is the risk you’re taking” (p. 29). The phrase “I know this is new to you, but I’ve dated a lot of women” reverberates through the story, conditioning the narrator’s behaviour and her view of intimate relationships between women. In “*Dream House as Noir*” she states that “the woman in the Dream House” is her first female lover, and then makes the following observation:

[...] when she walks into your office and tells you that *this is what it’s like to date a woman*, you believe her [...]. You have spent your whole life listening to your father talk about women’s *emotions*, their *sensitivity* [...]. All these years of telling him he’s full of bullshit, that he needs to decolonize his mind and lose the gender essentialism, and here you are learning that lesbian relationships are, somehow, different — more intense and beautiful but also more painful and volatile, because women are all of these things too. (p. 48)

The lack of a theoretical framework about intimate partner violence between women results in cases like the one Machado shares: it results in the victim not being able to identify the abuse because she does not have the language to name it (Harden et al., 2022). The more “knowledgeable” and “experienced” part of the couple is then able to manipulate the perception of the other individual as to how relationships between women look or work. Therefore, being unexperienced can also play a role in the shaping of power dynamics and, in the case of *In the Dream House*, it certainly does. To comprehend abuse in any type of intimate relationship, one needs to understand that gender is not the only parameter that plays a part in it (which it also does); there are also other aspects that define how power relations work. Indeed, as Girshick (2002) puts it: “Understanding that power

relations run through all aspects of who we are as individuals and not just targeting some dimensions is important in challenging the misuse of power” (p. 17).

1.2.2. Only Human: “Queer folks fail each other too”

As already mentioned, the mythology surrounding female queer relationships that depicts them as paradises of egalitarianism blocks the conversation about different and not so ideal realities (Girshick, 2002). In “*Dream House as Fantasy*” Machado addresses the theme of fantasy as the defining cliché of female queerness and how acknowledging this unrealistic idea is a difficult and painful but necessary process: “Maybe this will change someday. Maybe, when queerness is so normal and accepted that finding it will feel less like entering paradise and more like the claiming of your own body: imperfect, but yours” (p. 125).

The mirage of queer paradise does not help the community but hinders the path towards normalisation. Normalising queerness means humanising queerness and, as humans, we are naturally flawed. In “*Dream House as Queer Villainy*”, Machado explains her interest in queer villains and their symbolic importance for queer discourse. Even though queer villainy is generally done with offensive undertones as a way to associate “evil and depravity” (p. 50), Machado finds this image attractive. Queer villains are interesting, complex, exaggerated, and they occupy space. They expand representation and they are put in context, which gives “space to queers to be — as characters, as real people — human beings” (p. 50). Machado highlights the importance of representing queer people as flawed with the aim of humanising them and deconstructing the dangerous notion of queer paradise. As she goes on to state, “[w]e deserve to have our wrongdoing represented as much as our heroism, because when we refuse wrongdoing as a possibility for a group of people, we refuse their humanity” (p. 50). Consequently, Machado rejects the idea of queerness as essentially good or pure and she aims for an

understanding of it as a state of being subject to “moral complexities of every kind” (p. 51).

For Machado, her experiences seemed exceptional. She could not conceive abuse in a relationship with a woman because she was not educated with examples of it. Women are pictured as nonviolent and sapphic relationships are presented as a utopia, a way out of male domination (Girshick, 2002). As her relationship goes on and thinking in retrospect, Machado learns that these things are simply not true. As she states in “*Dream House as Equivocation*”, “Queer folks fail each other too” (p. 230). In order to challenge the heteronormative conception of abuse we have to understand power dynamics through intersectionality and how abuse is not just an issue of men towards women. Abuse can happen in female queer relationships too “because the world is full of hurt people who hurt people. Even if the dominant culture considers you an anomaly, that doesn’t mean you can’t be common, common as fucking dirt” (p. 266).

Chapter 2. Life Writing, Queerness, and Trauma

2.1. Defining Life Writing and Memoir

The term “life writing” encompasses a series of writing practices which, taking up different forms, focus on portraying the life or a particular part of the life of an individual, including both real and fictionalized narratives. There are different ways of understanding life writing, some more restrictive than others, but we will concentrate on its conceptualisation as a mutable set of practices that contribute to the emancipation of the subject (Kadar, 1992), and that, “in engaging the past, reflect on identity in the present” (Smith, 2010, p. 1). Life writing includes, therefore, personal forms of writing, such as biography, autobiography, memoir, diaries, or even letters.

Amongst the previously mentioned practices, often subsumed under the category of “life writing”, the line that separates (auto)biographical narratives and memoirs is particularly fine, as writers, publishers, critics, and scholars have deployed the term “memoir” in different ways (Couser, 2012, p. 18). While both (auto)biographies and memoirs present themselves as nonfictional records of human experience, the term “autobiography” designates a particular practice of life writing that appeared during the Enlightenment and became a staple in the West. The term comes from Greek, and it translates directly to “self-life writing”, referring to retrospective narratives written by someone about the story of their own life, and how they became who they are (Smith, 2010). On the other hand, “memoir” also alludes to a self-referential practice, but it differs in the fact that a memoir is based — as its name indicates — on memory rather than research, which denotes a more subjective nature. In addition, while the autobiography puts its eye on the chronological storytelling of the development of the life of an individual, the memoir emphasises a particular moment or experience within a wider

social context, making it the focal point of the narrative (Smith, 2010, pp. 3-4; Lahusen, 2019, p. 626).

The nature of memoirs as a more personal genre, rather than the factual and chronologically structured character of autobiographies, led to the consideration of (auto)biographies as the most “serious” genre until recently. Now, the tables have been turned, and, as a consequence of the increasing popularity of memoirs, this genre has come to be regarded as the most prestigious counterpart of self-life writing (Couser, 2012, pp. 18-19). The so-called memoir boom, which can be traced back to the Civil Rights and identity movements of the 1960s (Gilmore, 2001, p. 886), and the impact of the #MeToo movement, opened a whole new space for the expression of those narratives that did not fit in with the canonical conceptualisation of the autobiography. In this sense, the memoir has positioned itself as an utterly necessary genre for sharing the stories of marginalised and silenced groups, as both the subject and the readers are able to find a sense of community in an individual experience to which they can relate to collectively. As Christiane Lahusen puts it in “Memoirs” (2019):

This form of self-reflection is not a monologue delivered into an empty space, but is instead the social self-exploration process of a particular time – memoirs can therefore be understood as a social communication event. They thus inhabit the space on the border between the individual and social groups: They are at the same time acts of individual and collective self-historicization. (p. 634)

This new-found prevalence of memoirs, and the shift in who writes them and what is written about, has come along a surge in life writing about trauma, and, more concretely, about sexual violence (Gilmore, 2019, p. 163). This has tapped into the experiences of many people and helped shift “shame from the abused to abusers, and demanded accountability” (Gilmore, 2019, p. 165). *In the Dream House*, a self-designated memoir,

forms part of this memoir boom, taking up a much-needed space to talk about abuse in queer relationships. In “*Dream House* as Prologue”, Machado shares what she understands by memoir:

The memoir is, at its core, an act of resurrection. Memoirists recreate the past, reconstruct dialogue. They summon meaning from events that have long been dormant. They braid the clays of memory and essay and fact and perception together, smash them into a ball, roll them flat. They manipulate time; resuscitate the dead. They put themselves, and others, into necessary context. (p. 4)

In the following chapter, “*Dream House* as Not a Metaphor”, she establishes the veracity of her story: “I daresay you have heard of the Dream House? It is, as you know, a real place” (p. 7). Although her text is indeed full of metaphors, and although stating that the *Dream House* is “not a metaphor” can seem rather contradictory, Machado does so in order to establish a point of departure from a place of truth. She is setting her intentions straight on, explaining that she is telling a real story, although she is braiding “the clays of memory and essay and fact and perception together”, or manipulating time, or resuscitating the dead. She filters her experiences through the self, but she is not telling less of a truth; she is just telling her own truth, and the truth of other people like her. In this sense, she positions herself as a memoirist and her story as a memoir, equating the relevance of what she is telling to that which could be told in a biography, as, “the knowledge of the memoirist, although less factually accurate, is more complete” (Delany, as cited in Minich, 2015, p. 65).

One could even say that Machado’s memoir parallels, differences aside, those eighteenth-century “scandalous memoirs” which dealt with “accounts of a range of ‘fallen’ women” that “sought to understand their life stories in the context of a suppressive culture” (Lahusen, 2019, p. 627), and which are considered to be the origin of modern

memoirs. Her tale as a queer woman, a subject from the margins, takes confessional tints, conversing directly with its audience in a very intimate tone that takes the reader into a journey through the depths of the author's experience: the ups and downs; the past, present, and possible future; the mind and the body, and the overwhelming reality of it all.

2.1.1. Life Writing for the Queer Archive

Partaking in an act of "self-historization", *In the Dream House* breaks the silences surrounding abuse in queer relationships through a vividly personal account, making a necessary addition to the canon of queer literature. In the chapter titled "*Dream House* as Prologue" mentioned earlier in this work, the author alludes to the notion of "violence of the archive" or "archival silence". She explains the etymology of the word "archive", which comes from ancient Greek and means "house of the ruler"; and how what is left out of the archive is a deliberate political act dictated by the "ruler", the archivist, the one in power. She asks, "[w]hat gets left behind?", and the answer is, "[g]aps where people never see themselves or find information about themselves. Holes that make it impossible to give oneself a context. Crevices people fall into. Impenetrable silence" (p. 3). We can find these gaps all throughout a history that has constantly rejected the entrance of women's voices into the "archive". In "*Dream House* as Unreliable Narrator", Machado explains how, as a kid, she was seen, by some members of her family, as being "melodramatic" or a "drama queen", and how these labels have accompanied her during her whole life. She frustratedly asks, "[w]hy do we teach girls that their perspectives are inherently untrustworthy?", and follows up proposing, "[t]his is what I keep returning to: how people decide who is or is not an unreliable narrator. And after that decision has been made, what do we do with people who attempt to construct their own vision of justice?" (p. 166). For the sake of her own vision of justice, Machado finds in the memoir genre a

way to fill in the gaps and holes, the crevices and silence; and above all a way for her voice as a woman, and, more precisely, as a queer woman, to be heard.

In the Dream House aims, in a way, to reconstruct the archive by building a “house” out of words, out of stories; a house in which the reality of abuse in queer relationships is not kept hidden in the basement. This notion of the memoir as a medium for breaking “archival silence” positions the genre as a crucial artefact for the queer community. More generally, life writing serves an important purpose for marginalised communities for, in being excluded from the “archive”, they are forced to use their own voices to build an archive of their own, one that includes their experiences. As Julie Avril Minich contends in “Writing Queer Lives: Autobiography and Memoir” (2015), “an examination of queer autobiography and memoir has much to offer broader conversations about the significance of queer lives and queer history” (p. 62). Minich further suggests that “the telling of such stories helps us understand sexuality in its full complexity”, and it is “crucial to [building] knowledge about human sexuality in its many and diverse manifestations” (p. 61).

2.1.2. *In the Dream House: A Queerly Written Story*

The experiences of queer life do not conform to the norm, and *queer writing* does not either; so, we must ask ourselves “what constitutes *queer writing*” (Minich, 2015, p. 60). A queer life is not only one lived by a queer person, but one lived *queerly*; hence a queer story is not only one in which its subjects are queer, but also one that is written *queerly*. This leads us to talk about what Jack Halberstam calls *queer time*, which alludes to “alternative temporalities” that are not subject to the traditional paradigms of life experience (Halberstam, as cited in Minich, 2015). Machado’s memoir is not only a queer memoir, but also a memoir written *queerly*, with its own path and rhythm, one structurally crafted as an image of Machado’s experiences. In “Writing Queer Lives: Autobiography

and Memoir” (2015), Minich comments on the memoirs of Gloria Anzaldúa and David Wojnarowicz¹, highlighting their form, which does not conform to “heteronormative constructions of time”; instead, as Minich goes on to argue, these authors have “produce[d] texts that are similarly punctuated and interrupted in unexpected ways” (p. 69). Similarly, Machado’s *In the Dream House* does not conform to the traditional chronological linear form of storytelling; instead, it becomes *queer* in terms of form and temporality: it jumps timelines and locations, it intersects reality with fiction and theory, it does not define a clear ending, and, most characteristically, it makes use of two distinct narrative voices: the first-person “I” and the universal “you”. *Queer writing* creates its own particular forms and under its own particular rules, inviting “us to think about why queer lives matter, about what we might learn from their unusual embodiments and their nonnormative unfoldings in time and space, and about the literary modes, genres, and formal strategies that represent them” (Minich, 2015, p. 62).

2.2. Queerness and Trauma

Life writing and, in the case concerning us here, memoirs serve as a vessel for the process and expression of collective or individual trauma. Trauma positions the subject within a wider frame, allowing the individual to connect with others who have suffered, still suffer, or will suffer from similar experiences. Writing about trauma – and even more so about collective trauma – moves that “personal experience onto the historical stage” (Gilmore, 2001, p. 885). To define what trauma means, we can begin by tracing the origins of the word, which go back to Greek, meaning “wound”. Trauma can serve to describe a physical wound, but in the case concerning us here, we will use it to refer to an emotional wound, a wound in the psyche. According to Michelle Balaev’s definition in “Trends in

¹ The memoirs mentioned refer to Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), and David Wojnarowicz’s *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* (1991)

Literary Trauma Theory” (2008), trauma “refers to a person’s emotional response to an overwhelming event that disrupts previous ideas of an individual’s sense of self and the standards by which one evaluates society” (p. 150). Hence, works within the field of Trauma Literature focus on that profound emotional response that disrupts the sense of self, putting in conversation the subject, its readership, and history in itself as a direct consequence.

2.2.1. The Effects of Trauma: Memory and Expression

Trauma and memory are undoubtedly intertwined. Trauma becomes a “wound” in the mind, making it difficult for the individual to articulate their experience (Gilmore, 2001, p. 885). There are different psychological theories or models regarding the effects of trauma on the mind and its relation to literature. Cathy Caruth’s approach, based on the abreactive model, has become central to the study of Trauma Literature but, as more recent approaches suggest (see Balaev, 2008), it also presents some problems and limitations. For Caruth, the experience of trauma disrupts the mind in a way that makes the event blurry and can even erase it from the victim’s memory. She further suggests that, even if the memories of the event return – as they often do – the victim will often feel unable to verbalise them. In this sense, Caruth adds, literature and storytelling can become a form of self-relief, allowing the traumatised individual to voice the traumatic experience through imaginative renderings. For Caruth then, the traumatic experience is “unregistered” or “unclaimed” and impossible to verbalize in a straightforward manner (Pederson, 2014), but Richard McNally’s research in *Remembering Trauma* (2003) challenges these ideas, suggesting that “traumatic memories are both memorable and speakable” (Pederson, 2014, p. 338). These propositions are not to say that trauma does not have profound effects on the mind, but to say that a unique approach to it produces a homogenising understanding of its effects both on memory and on its expression, and that

there is more to it than the mere impossibility to recall or to speak about the traumatic event (Balaev, 2008, p. 149). In Machado's memoir, in the chapter "*Dream House as Exercise in Style*", she explains how, for the duration of her stay in the *Dream House*, she experienced an outburst of creativity:

It would make sense if, during the time in the Dream House, your work suffered. Why not? You were miserable; you spent what probably added up to weeks or months of your life crying and snotting and howling in agony. But instead, your creativity explodes. (p. 171)

As she expresses here, it would have been "normal" for her writing to be affected by the traumatic experience that she was living through, but instead she experienced an overflow of inspiration, and the mere fact that *In the Dream House* exists testifies to this. She indeed recalls her experience. She is able to talk about it, and, most importantly, she wants to talk about it. In "Speak, Trauma: Toward a Revised Understanding of Literary Trauma Theory" (2014), Joshua Pederson, leaning on the work of McNally, goes on to suggest that "[t]raumatic memories, then, are not elusive or absent; they are potentially more detailed and more powerful than normal ones. This fact should leave literary critics open to the possibility that authors may record trauma with excessive detail and vibrant intensity" (p. 339). Trauma, of course, leaves its traces on the individual, on their memory, and on the way they express themselves; but these traces do not necessarily mean a lack of detail or absence of speech. In "Trends in Literary Trauma Theory" (2008), Balaev states that "the "unspeakability" of trauma claimed by so many literary critics today can be understood less as an epistemological conundrum or neurobiological fact, but more as an outcome of cultural values and ideologies" (p. 157). This would mean that the taboo nature and lack of framework for many traumatic experiences is what makes the victim unable to share their experience, and not something exclusively linked to the

“unspeakability” of trauma as argued in psychoanalytical approaches such as Caruth’s. This would explain why abuse in queer relationships, a taboo and understudied topic, lacks representation; and why there are not that many works that explore the subject as Machado does in her memoir.

2.2.2. The Formal Traces of Trauma in Machado’s Memoir

2.2.2.1. Breaking Down: The Use of Fragmentation

The approach presented by the abreactive model — which has been previously explained —, falls short for the analysis of Machado’s work, as there is a need for a more nuanced reading that does not focus so much on the “unspeakability” of the experience, but in how it is spoken about. The reading presented here centres around the structure of the text and how the traumatic experiences that are being dealt with affect and condition its form. In “*Dream House as Exercise in Style*”, which engages with the outburst of creative Machado experienced while suffering abuse, the author explains that, at that point, she began to “experiment with fragmentation”, and that she felt she could “jump from one idea to the next, searching for a kind of aggregate meaning” (p. 171). These effects on her writing are, of course, manifestations of what she was going through at the time and, at the same time and in relation to what Balaev explains (2008), this investment in fragmentation can also be seen as the author’s conscious attempt at rendering the effects of trauma formally. Machado then goes on to say, “I broke the stories down because I was breaking down and didn’t know what else to do” (p. 172). As Balaev explains in “Trends in Literary Trauma Theory” (2008):

Authors employ a nonlinear plot or disruptive temporal sequences to emphasize mental confusion, chaos, or contemplation as a response to the experience. [...] These strategies help the author structure the narrative into a form that attempts to embody the psychological “action” of traumatic memory or dissociation. (p. 159)

Machado makes use of the resource of fragmentation as a way to transcribe her emotions into textual form. *In the Dream House* is composed by generally really short chapters that, on many occasions, seem completely unrelated, and which the reader has to piece together in order to create a coherent whole. Nonetheless, if we look at the work as a whole, if we take a few steps back and look at the entirety of it, if we leave behind the pretensions of trying to pick it apart, we will only then be able to see the image of a woman breaking her stories down because she was breaking down and she did not know what else to do.

As anticipated earlier, Machado goes as far as to split the narrative voice into two differentiated voices: an “I”, and a “you”. The use of the second person “you” to tell her own story can be attributed to the disruptive effects of trauma; the use of the second person allows Machado the possibility of dissociating herself from those deeply hurtful events as if she was talking, in retrospect, about a different self. In “*Dream House as Exercise in Point of View*”, she addresses these two different selves that plague her story:

You were not always just a You. I was whole — a symbiotic relationship between my best and worst parts — and then, in one sense of the definition, I was cleaved [...].

I left, and then lived [...].

But you. You took a job as a standardized-test grader. You drove seven hours to Indiana every other week for a year. You churned out mostly garbage for the second half of your MFA. You cried in front of many people. You missed readings, parties, the supermoon. You tried to tell your story to people who didn't know how to listen. You made a fool of yourself, in more ways than one.

I thought you died, but writing this, I'm not sure you did. (p. 12)

She establishes this distinction pretty early in her work, and we go on to see it played out throughout the narrative. There is a prevalence of the use of the second person point of view in her story, always utilised in the fragments that refer to her relationship with “the woman in the Dream House”. In doing so, Machado distances herself from that experience, but, at the same time, she interpellates the reader, and makes them put themselves in her place through the use of “you”, creating a sort of “everyperson” figure. By splitting into two differentiated beings, she makes it seem as if she is addressing both herself and the reader, creating in her memoir an inclusive experience and, at the same time, breaking with narrative conventions that state that memoirs should be written in the first person. Although we are not dealing with fiction, Balaev explains the phenomenon in “Trends in Literary Trauma Theory” (2008):

The traumatized protagonist in fiction brings into awareness the specificity of individual trauma that is often connected to larger social factors and cultural values or ideologies. We can see that the trauma novel provides a picture of the individual that suffers, but paints it in such a way as to suggest that this protagonist is an “everyperson” figure. (p. 155)

2.2.2.2. *Dream House* as Locus Horribilis

In the Dream House is a memoir that incisively highlights the important role played by place in a traumatic experience. A quick look at the title already reveals the relevance that the house as a place has, and, moreover, each chapter alludes to that notion over and over again, as the titles all follow the same pattern: *Dream House* as X. For our interpretation we will use Balaev’s meaning for place, “[t]he term *place* refers to a physical environment inhabited, viewed, or imagined by a person who attaches and derives meaning from it” (2008, p. 159). Machado attaches her experience to the place that she calls the “Dream House”, and constantly alludes to the central role that the house has in domestic abuse. In

addition, she channels the expression of her case through it, positioning the house almost as a character in her story, making place “not only a location of experience, but, significantly, a facet of perception that organizes memories, feelings, and meaning at the level of the physical environment” (Balaev, 2008, p. 160). In her case, Machado positions the house as a *locus horribilis*, a “hellish place”, nearly an accomplice of the abuse she was subjected to. In “*Dream House as World Building*”, the author states, “[p]laces are never just places in a piece of writing. If they are, the author has failed. Setting is not inert. It is activated by point of view” (p. 81). In this same chapter, she explains how “a common feature of domestic abuse is ‘dislocation’” (p. 81); meaning that victims of abuse are usually in a situation of isolation from the rest of the world, which makes them vulnerable, dependent on their abuser, and unable to see the situation from the outside. She then goes on to say:

The Dream House was never just the Dream House. It was, in turn, a convent of promise (herb garden, wine, writing across the table from each other), a den of debauchery (fucking with the windows open, waking up with mouth on mouth, the low, insistent murmur of fantasy), a haunted house (none of this can really be happening), a prison (*need to get out need to get out*), and, finally, a dungeon of memory. In dreams it sits behind a green door, for reasons you have never understood. The door was not green. (p. 82)

For her, the Dream House features as a character in her recollection of the traumatic experience of abuse. It acts as an agent of dislocation, separating her from the rest of the world. In “*Dream House as American Gothic*”, Machado highlights the crucial role of the house in domestic abuse through the gothic notion of “woman plus habitation”:

The house is not essential for domestic abuse, but hell, it helps: a private space where private dramas are enacted behind, as the cliché goes, closed doors; but also

windows sealed against the sound, drawn curtains, silent phones. A house is never apolitical. It is conceived, constructed, occupied, and policed by people with power, needs, and fears. Windex is political. So is the incense you burn to hide the smell of sex, or a fight. (p. 86)

Machado's case acts as a concrete example of a collective reality. The house plays a role in allowing and hiding abuse, just like abuse is an issue often silenced in society. She uses place as a way to convey her traumatic experience, and, at the same time, that place conveys a wider historical and political frame, as it is inherently bound to context. As Balaev (2008) explains:

Novels represent this disruption between self and others by carefully describing the place of trauma because the physical environment offers the opportunity to examine both the personal and cultural histories embedded in landscapes that define the character's identity, and thus influences the meaning of the traumatic experience. (p. 160)

In "*Dream House as Idiom*" Machado explains different idioms that feature the word "house" in them. She centres, in particular, on the expression "safe as houses", and adds:

I always thought the expression "safe as houses" meant that houses were safe places. [...] There's the house, waiting for you; a barrier from nature, from scrutiny, from other people. [...] "Safe as houses" is something closer to "the house always wins." Instead of a shared structure providing shelter, it means that the person in charge is secure; everyone else should be afraid. (p. 88)

The house acts as a one-way mirror. Those situated outside are unable to see what happens inside, but those inside are still contaminated by the ways of the outside world. You go on shouting from the inside and no one out there is able to hear you or see you. Power

dynamics are played out and abuse happens within this four-wall space, but no one is able to point it out because it happens behind doors, secured in a private place; and so the abuser wins, and so does the house.

To even further underline the importance that Machado gives to the house in the narration of her traumatic experience of abuse, we have to note that there are several other chapters, aside from the ones mentioned above, that make direct allusions to the significance of it, such as “*Dream House as Idiom*”, “*Dream House as a Lesson in Subjunctive*”, “*Dream House as Set Design*” or “*Dream House as Memory Palace*”. In “*Dream House as Memory Palace*”, Machado describes the house from outside in as if all the people that she had different romantic, sexual, or generally intimate experiences with were lined up in different rooms. Outside she positions her childhood crushes and first love, and she goes on, little by little, making her way into the house and its different rooms, going through the bonds that she had in different moments of her life, until she faces the most personal and private of the rooms, and warns, “[t]he bedroom: don’t go in there” (p. 16). Machado utilises an agent of her traumatic experience to focalise her narrative. She describes it, she shows us its ways, she deconstructs it and builds it up again, she even makes it breathe, and she finally warns us, also warning herself, “don’t go in there”.

Chapter 3. Re-inscribing Abuse in Queer Relationships into the Collective Imaginary

3.1. Tracing Connections: The Notion of “Intertextuality”

When reading a work of literature, we cannot ignore its connections — purposeful or not — to other pieces outside or within the field of literature itself. The notion of “intertextuality” is hence central to the understanding of both literature and other cultural or artistic elements. This literary concept can be approached from different perspectives, but a productive starting point is to conceptualise “intertextuality” as the relationship that “exists between a text and all the other texts to which it refers and relates, moving out from independent text into a network of textual relations” (Allen, 2011, p. 1).

The origins of intertextuality can be traced back to twentieth-century linguistics and, in particular, to Ferdinand de Saussure’s studies on the relational nature of meaning, and Mikhail Bakhtin’s works, which were more concerned with the existence of language within specific social situations. Later, Julia Kristeva attempted to combine the ideas of both theorists on language and literature, and this resulted in the first articulation of intertextual theory in “Word, Dialogue and Novel” (1966). For Kristeva, the concept aimed to disregard the idea of texts as closed systems, proposing an approach to their study which accounted for the relational processes that happened within them (Martínez Alfaro, 1996, p. 268). As María Jesús Martínez Alfaro explains in “Intertextuality: Origins and Development of the Concept” (1996):

There are always other words in a word, other texts in a text. The concept of intertextuality requires, therefore, that we understand texts not as self-contained systems but as differential and historical, as traces and tracings of otherness, since

they are shaped by the repetition and transformation of other textual structures. (p. 268)

The shaping of the concept of “intertextuality” took place then at the end of the 1960s, a period of transition from structuralism to poststructuralism. The term began to be used amongst poststructuralist theorists and critics as they tried to “disrupt notions of stable meaning and objective interpretation” (Allen, 2011, p. 2). One of the highest exponents of poststructuralism was Roland Barthes, who challenged conventional ideas surrounding the “role of the author in the production of meaning and the very nature of literary meaning itself” (Allen, 2011, p. 3). On the other hand, structuralists such as Gérard Genette and Michael Riffaterre approached the concept of “intertextuality” from a different and more restrictive angle. Structuralists deployed intertextual theory to stabilise meaning, and to say “definite, stable and incontrovertible things about literary texts” (Allen, 2011, p. 4). As broad as this concept is, the main idea of texts as necessarily related to other literary or non-literary productions remains present along all approaches of intertextuality. In the words of Martínez Alfaro (1996), the consequences of the proliferation of these theories have entailed the “progressive dissolution of the text as a coherent and self-contained unit of meaning, which has led, in turn, to a shift of emphasis from the individual text to the way in which texts relate to one another” (p. 268).

Now that we have established “intertextuality” as a concept that centres around the idea of meaning being materialised as a result of connections, we define our approach to the study of intertextuality in Machado’s *In the Dream House* as focused on explicit references to other texts or media, while always envisioning the text through “the figure of the web, the weave, the garment (text) woven from the threads of the ‘already written’ and the ‘already read’” (Allen, 2011, p. 6).

3.1.1. Intertextuality in *In the Dream House*

The fragmentary nature of Machado's text, previously addressed in Chapter 2, enables, and favours the existence of a web of intertextual relations that Machado purposefully threaded within her narrative. Fragmentation allows her to introduce a wide repertoire of references that aid her on telling her story, as well as helping the reader to further deepen their understanding of Machado's experience. These allusions to different types of media bound her memoir together and provide a new dimension of meaning to the text. At the same, the connections made serve to inscribe the reality of abuse within queer relationships into the collective imaginary. In what follows, we will classify the diverse and broad array of references or allusions presented in *In the Dream House* into two major groups of interest for this analysis: on one side, references to popular culture media, and, on the other, allusions to folk and fairy tales.

3.1.1.1. From Music to Film: References to Popular Culture

Popular culture, like other terms within the field of cultural and literary studies, is subject to different understandings and definitions. So as to thoroughly comprehend what popular culture entails, we have to know first what both "culture", on the one hand, and "popular", on the other, refer to. Firstly, there are several ways to define culture. Raymond Williams (as cited in Storey, 2009) proposes three broad definitions for the term: culture as a) "general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development" (p. 1); b) "particular way of life, whether of a people, a period or a group" (p. 2); c) "the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity" (p. 2). On the other hand, Williams (as cited in Storey, 2009) also establishes four meanings for "popular": popular as a) "well liked by many people" (p. 5); b) "inferior kinds of work" (p. 5); c) "work deliberately setting out to win favour with the people" (p. 5); d) "culture actually made by the people for themselves" (p. 5). These number of definitions of both "culture" and "popular" are

combined with each other establishing a diverse set of conceptions of popular culture. In John Storey's *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction* (2009, pp. 5-13), he explores six different approaches to the notion of popular culture. Storey (2009) notes that the most obvious way of defining popular culture is "to say that popular culture is simply culture that is widely favoured or well liked by many people" (p. 5). He goes on to point out that, although this quantitative approach is correct to a degree, there is not an agreed threshold at which something qualifies as popular. In addition, this definition also falls short in the sense that there are other nuances that play a part into the understanding of this concept. Nevertheless, even when taking into consideration these limitations, we should not gloss over the quantitative dimension for the definition of popular culture. Without forgetting this initial elemental explanation, we will go on further in our analysis, making use of the fifth definition proposed by Storey (2009), one that draws on the work of Antonio Gramsci. Following this interpretation, we understand popular culture as a "site of struggle between the 'resistance' of subordinate groups and the forces of 'incorporation' operating in the interests of dominant groups" (p. 10), meaning that popular culture:

is not the imposed culture of the mass culture theorists, nor is it an emerging from below, spontaneously oppositional culture of 'the people' – it is a terrain of exchange and negotiation between the two: a terrain, as already stated, marked by resistance and incorporation. (p. 10)

In this sense, Machado's memoir acts as a fighting ring for these forces of "resistance" and "incorporation". On the one hand, she makes apparent the lack of narratives dealing with the reality of abuse in queer relationships within the field of popular culture, underlining the "resistance" that exists towards giving a voice to these stories; and, on the

other, she incorporates her own story into this dimension by filtering her experiences through popular culture media, moments, or tropes.

In “*Dream House* as Pop Single”, Machado explains the story behind the ’Til Tuesday’s 1985 début single “Voices Carry” — making this a case of deliberate intertextuality —, which tells the story of an abusive relationship, and which was a top-ten hit in the United States. She describes its music video in which we see the female lead singer of the band, Aimee Mann, in different situations with her abusive boyfriend as she, little by little, loses parts of herself to accommodate to what he wants her to be, until we reach the very end, where she is able to confront and break away from him. Machado then goes on to explain that, after the video came out, the producer of the song revealed that the demo had originally used female pronouns, but the record company was not happy about it as “this was a very powerful, commercial song and they would prefer as many of its components as possible to swim in the acceptable mainstream” (p. 169). After this, Machado describes how, twenty-seven years after “Voices Carry” first came out, Mann, years into her solo career, releases an album with a song called “Labrador” (2012). This song’s music video is a remake of “Voices Carry”, but this time the piece is addressed to a so-called “Daisy” redeeming in this way the straightwashing that her story had previously suffered in the hands of the record company, and finally telling her real story, a story of abuse in a relationship between women. The existence of these two songs serves to represent the struggle between “resistance” and “incorporation” in popular culture that we have previously addressed. While the story behind “Voices Carry” encapsulates an act of resistance within the music industry towards the representation of stories of abuse in queer relationships, “Labrador” serves to counteract its effect, searching for the incorporation of these stories into popular culture discourse. Machado finds in these songs a source of comfort and a place of representation that runs parallel to her own story. The

two-song narrative and everything that surrounds it represents the struggles for finding the words and the right frame for speaking about such an underrepresented topic as abuse in queer relationships is. She is able to see herself in them and, because of it, she feels less alone in her experience. She decides to include them in her story, as they are a part of it:

Both songs, despite the darkness of their subject, are catchy and endlessly singable.

And I do. Endlessly sing them, that is. Every time I reread this chapter while writing this book, “Voices Carry” was in my head — and my voice — for days afterward. (p. 169)

Another relevant popular culture allusion that we find in *In the Dream House* has to do with the history behind the use of “gaslight” as a verb. Nowadays, actual gas lights are no longer in use, but still, the word “gaslight” has found a new purpose, meaning “[t]o manipulate (a person) by psychological means into questioning his or her own sanity” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, n.d.). Machado explains the origin of this meaning in the chapter titled “*Dream House* as 9 Thornton Square”:

Before it was a verb, *gaslight* was a noun. A lamp. Then there was a play called *Angel Street* in 1938, and then a film, *Gaslight*, in 1940, and then a second film in 1944, directed by George Cukor and featuring an iconic, disheveled, unraveling performance from Ingrid Bergman. (p. 107)

The theatre piece and the two films that Machado mentions here tell the story of a man who is trying to make her wife go insane by misplacing objects with the purpose of sending her to an asylum so he can acquire some missing jewels from her late aunt who he had murdered years before. In the film *Gaslight* (1940), as side effect of the process of

trying to locate the jewels in the attic, the man provokes the flickering of the gas lamps in the house, which contributes to the woman thinking she is going mad. The term, therefore, comes from this story in which a man is trying to make her wife go insane because he intends to get something out of it. Machado points out that, even though he is trying to make her go insane with a purpose — retrieving the jewels —, he still finds amusement in his schemes and machinations. She finishes this chapter by emphasizing that, “abusers do not need to be, and rarely are, cackling maniacs. They just need to want something, and not care how they get it” (p. 108). Machado thus resorts, once again, to popular culture to illustrate, in a language shared by most of us, the hidden workings of abuse.

Even though “*Dream House as 9 Thornton Square*” provides the first reference to the term “gaslight”, Machado addresses its origins in other four chapters: “*Dream House as Cycle*”, “*Dream House as Wrong Lesson*”, “*Dream House as I Love Lucy*”, and “*Dream House as Ambiguity*”. In “*Dream House as Ambiguity*”, she points out that, even though the husband in *Gaslight* (1940) had committed actual crimes — such as murdering her wife’s aunt and attempted theft of property —, the core of the horror in the film were not those crimes, but the emotional and psychological abuse that could not be judged or condemned by law. Machado goes on to say:

Narratives about abuse in queer relationships — whether acutely violent or not — are tricky in this same way. Trying to find accounts, especially those that don’t culminate in extreme violence, is unbelievably difficult. Our culture does not have an investment in helping queer folks understand what their experiences mean. (p. 161)

In saying this, she puts the focus on the importance of representation for the understanding of the silenced reality of abuse in queer relationships, and she does so by alluding to a

story in which this insidious and low-key side of abuse — even though in the case of a heterosexual relationship — is shown. Machado knits a web of allusions involving the term “gaslight” and its history as a means to support and illustrate her story, as this notion and its background forms a part of her, as well as she forms a part of it. By telling her own story, she adds a new piece to the puzzle of people who have been “gaslit”, people who have suffered from abuse; but in the process of doing so, she is able to find a community of shared experiences and a source of understanding, even on pieces of media, even on something as seemingly simple as a film or a song.

3.1.1.2. Folk and Fairy Tales: Finding Reality in Fantasy

We tend to confuse the folktale with the fairytale, without considering the history behind them – one that, nonetheless, also overlaps. The folktale, originally an oral narrative form that we can trace as far back as to the Megalithic period, was cultivated both by non-literate and literate people. It was once part of communal property, and it acted as a medium for the representation of the frustrations of the “folk”, embodying their needs and desires. These tales served to create a sense of community, bridging people’s understandings of social issues through means of narratives familiar to their experiences, as well as shading light on the feasibility of their utopian aspirations. Each distinct era and specific community tended to alter the original folktales, so they were in tune with their particular reality. Nowadays, as a result of the process of industrialization and the establishing of the capitalist model, the essence of the folktale has been lost to favour the fairytale (Zipes, 1979, pp. 1-10).

All throughout the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, both the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie appropriated the folktale, and, with the aid of the expansion of publishing, the original folktale became what we know as the fairytale, a genre which utilises the figures and plots of the folktale, but which reflects the values and

conflicts of the transition from feudalism to early capitalism (Zipes, 1979, pp. 9-10). As Jack Zipes puts it in *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales* (1979), “folk tales were subjected to a ‘civilizing’ process of reutilization that belied the original social function of the tales” (p. 13). Nevertheless, even though the fairytale represents the instrumentalization of the folktale for bourgeois and conservative interests, the folktale also operated within the frame of the established hierarchies and social norms, despite its more subversive core (Bacchilega, 2010, pp. 5-10). Even so, the fascination that both the fairytale and the folktale have stirred up through time resides in an internal conflict between subversion and the norm. As Cristina Bacchilega words it in *Postmodern Fairytales: Gender and Narrative Strategies* (2010):

As folk and fairy tale, the tale of magic produces wonder precisely through its seductively concealed exploitation of the conflict between its *normative* function, which capitalizes on the comforts of consensus, and its *subversive* wonder, which magnifies the powers of transformation. (p. 7)

The seductive element of both folktales and fairytales lays in the magical representation of desire. They are, as Bacchilega (2010) calls them, “ideologically variable desire machines” (p. 7). They are both constructed in a way in which they conceal their ulterior ideological motives and struggling interests with a layer of desirable fantasy and magic. In its multiple retellings, folktales and fairytales enact, in its different shapes and forms, the “controlling metaphor of the magic mirror”, which “conflates mimesis (reflection), refraction (varying desires), and framing (artifice)” (Bacchilega, 2010, p. 10). Regarding these retellings, our point of interests lays in the “postmodern transformations of the fairytale” (Bacchilega, 2010, p. 22), which recuperate the magical concealment of ideology and desire while providing new readings and interpretations, and working, at the

same time, in a way that does “not exploit the fairy tale’s magic simply to make the spell work, but rather to unmake some of its workings” (Bacchilega, 2010, p. 23).

In the Dream House is a work brimming with many allusions and some retellings of both folktales and fairytales, which Machado utilises as a medium to navigate and transmit her own story. The most prominent example of the presence of these types of allusions can be found in the footnotes which, all throughout the narrative, reference Stith Thompson’s *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, a six-volume catalogue that, as its name suggests, compiles folk-literature motifs. There are thirty-three instances of footnotes of this nature in the text, and they serve in a way, to classify Machado’s own experiences according to a series of motifs that repeat in much folk-literature. In this manner, Machado compares, or at least puts at par, what she lived with characteristic images, dynamics, and occurrences of folktales. In doing this, she creates a sense of continuity that binds the accounts of her real-life experiences with fictional story motifs (Jesussek, 2023, p. 335). As a whole, her story is not a retelling of any folk or fairy tale, but through these references it seems to work to break, or at least unmask, the perfect layer of magical concealment that surrounds a tale as old as love, which works to silence the darker, and not so magical, reality of abuse.

Outside of these instances of paratextual references to folk-literature, Machado also makes direct allusions within the main text to folk and fairy tales. In “*Dream House as Folktale Taxonomy*”, she mentions the stories of “The Little Mermaid”, “The Wild Swans”, and “The Goose Girl” — all of which are first recorded to have been compiled in fairytale collections during the beginning of the nineteenth century. In dealing with them, Machado centres her attention in the suffering that the women protagonist of those stories have to endure. In whatever they do, these women are condemned to suffer in a more or less great degree. Machado then says:

Sometimes your tongue is removed, sometimes you still it of your own accord. Sometimes you live, sometimes you die. Sometimes you have a name, sometimes you are named for what — not who — you are. The story always looks a little different, depending on who is telling it.

There is a Quichua riddle: *El que me nombra, me rompe*. Whatever names me, breaks me. The solution, of course, is “silence.” But the truth is, anyone who knows your name can break you in two. (p. 39)

Machado recalls these stories, often regarded as children’s fairytales, in which the defining characteristic of womanhood equals suffering. The female protagonists of these tales willingly sacrifice their lives for what is ultimately love. They are broken down and mistreated, but they resist and comply for the promise of their names in their lover’s mouths. They are silent for the sweet promise of love, and still they are broken in two. Machado puts a mirror to these tales of tragic romantic suffering and exposes them for what they are: tales of grotesque unnecessary suffering.

“*Dream House as Bluebeard*” is another instance of an allusion to a fairytale within the main text. The tale that Machado references was first published in 1697 by the French author Charles Perrault under the title of “La Barbe-Bleue” in his collection of stories *Histoires ou contes du temps passé* (Bacchilega, 2010, p. 104). Perrault writes how a rich man with a strange blue beard marries a young woman who then goes to live with him. Everything seems fairly normal, but gives her a set of keys, telling her to go wherever she wants in the house, but warning her not to enter one specific room. When he leaves, the young woman, unable to contain her curiosity, goes into the room and discovers the corpses of his past wives. When he comes back, he sees the key to that room covered in blood, and tells her that, as a punishment for not obeying him, he is going to kill her. She is able to persuade him to let her pray before dying, gaining in this way time to warn her

sisters and wait for his brothers to come and help her. Her siblings arrive on time, and they kill Bluebeard, hence she inherits his wealth, and lives like this happily ever after. There are two main messages that we can find in Johnson's translation of Perrault's story into English: firstly, a warning against female curiosity, and secondly, a reproach to men for losing their authority to the female vice of talk (Bacchilega, 2010, p. 105). Even though in Perrault's original version the first message was not directed specifically to women, we can still sense a moral which "uphold[s] absolute patriarchy as a 'paradise', lost when women's curiosity opened the door to the bloody chamber" (Bacchilega, 2010, p. 105). Bruno Bettelheim goes further into the matter, as he explains:

"Bluebeard" is a tale about sexual temptation. [...] However one interprets "Bluebeard", it is a cautionary tale which warns: Women, don't give in to your sexual curiosity; men, don't permit yourself to be carried away by your anger at being sexually betrayed. There is nothing subtle about it; most of all, no development toward higher humanity is being projected (as cited in Bacchilega, 2010, p. 106)

Nevertheless, through time, this story has been subject to multiple retellings and reinterpretations in the form of books, films, and even opera pieces or songs, which tackle the original plot with different intentions, criticising, in many cases, the heteronormative and patriarchal ideals of the tale (Jesussek, 2023, pp. 327-328). Machado recalls Bluebeard's story in "*Dream House* as Bluebeard", finding parallels between it and her own experiences, which she showcases later in more detail in her own retelling of the fairytale, "*Dream House* as the Queen and the Squid" (Jesussek, 2023, p. 334).

In "*Dream House* as Bluebeard", Machado centres her attention on Bluebeard's primary rule, and what would have happened if his wife had followed it:

Bluebeard's greatest lie was that there was only one rule: the newest wife could do anything she wanted — anything — as long as she didn't do that (single, arbitrary) thing; didn't stick that tiny, inconsequential key into that tiny, inconsequential lock.

But we all know that was just the beginning, a test. She failed (and lived to tell the tale, as I have), but even if she'd passed, even if she'd listened, there would have been some other request, a little larger, a little stranger, and if she'd kept going — kept allowing herself to be trained, like a corset. (p. 66)

Machado hence highlights the fact that one seemingly inconsequential rule was not so inconsequential after all. It hid something darker that would have come up in different and progressively worse ways, finally revealing the hidden meaning behind that one seemingly inconsequential rule: having control and power over her. Machado compares her own life story with “Bluebeard”, as hers is also a tale of psychological violence and manipulation (Jesussek, 2023, p. 334). As Carolin Jesussek (2023) explains, “[m]uch like the Dream House, Bluebeard's castle is not the place of safety it is made out to be but rather a site haunted by violence” (p. 331). At the end of this chapter, Machado seems to be addressing both Bluebeard's wife and her own past self as if they were the same person, bonded by experience; as if she was also the victim of Bluebeard's violence, the protagonist of that story:

This is how you are toughened, the newest wife reasoned. This is where the tenacity of love is practiced; its tensile strength, its durability. You are being tested and you are passing the test; sweet girl, sweet self, look how good you are; look how loyal, look how loved. (p. 67)

In “*Dream House as the Queen and the Squid*”, Machado gives us her take on the Bluebeard’s story, which she previously approaches as a haunting tale of abuse. She combines Bluebeard’s plot with her own experiences, linking fiction with reality, the fairytale with her own life. She describes the story of a squid who was called upon the queen because she was feeling lonely. They were both delighted with finding each other, and so they quickly formed a marvellous friendship, travelling in each other’s company. After some time, the queen no longer enjoyed the company of the squid, neglecting and hurting it with cruelty. One night while in her palace, the squid wandered around, and ended up finding a mysterious door. It decided to go in, and he found, to its horror, a zoo in horrible conditions with all of the queen’s past lovers in it. Later, the squid saw the queen with a beautiful bear, and, after all of this, heartbroken, it decided to leave. When she found out, the queen was enraged, and she sent the squid letters showing love and asking for forgiveness, even going as far as to asking it to marry her. The squid just replied that her words were pretty, but he could not forget about the zoo. Then the story goes on saying, “Here is a story I learned from a bear: There was a queen, and she was lonely again” (p. 235). Reminiscent of Bluebeard’s chamber, where he hides the bodies of his decapitated wives, the queen has a zoo of discarded animal lovers (Jesussek, 2023, p. 334).

As a means to intertwine her own story with Bluebeard’s and fairy tales more generally, Machado draws inspiration from certain key moments of her abusive relationship, which she decides to depict in this fictional story of “The Queen and the Squid”. In referencing chapters of her own memoir, Machado is creating a metatextual story, tracing connections not only with other texts, but also within the confinements of her own work. Firstly, she explains how the squid and the queen “travelled to the edges of the kingdom” (p. 232), mirroring Machado’s road trips with her then girlfriend

described in “*Dream House as Road Trip to Savannah*” or “*Dream House as Road Trip to Everywhere*”. Then, she describes the evolution of their relationship as “a companionship defined by its tenderness [...]. But after a while, the queen grew bored with her companion” (p. 232), in the same way that her relationship with “the woman in the Dream House” was sweet and caring at the start, but quickly turned bitter and hurtful. She goes on to explain how, after leaving her, the queen sent letters to the squid, trying to persuade it to come back to her, asking for forgiveness for her mistakes, and even asking it to marry her; in the same fashion as “the woman in the Dream House” did when Machado tried to leave her, leaving messages in her inbox such as “I’ve made a mistake” (p. 225) or “I love you, I miss you” (p. 242), or sending her emails asking her to meet her, like in “*Dream House as a Hotel Room in Iowa City*”. At the end, the squid is freed from its tortuous relationship — and so is Machado —, but the story does not end, it keeps on repeating itself; the queen is free to choose a new victim, and so is “the woman in the Dream House”. Machado underlines the cyclical nature of domestic abuse — when the abuser is done with one person, they are able to pass on to their next victim — as well as the fact that hers is not an isolated case: we can find it in folk and fairy tales, in films, in music, and, specially, all throughout real life.

Conclusions

Regarding queer people as essentially evil has been a hurtful burden to bear for the queer community but viewing them as essentially good and flawless can prove to be just as hurtful. When we envision any type of community as a homogenous mass, the result tends to be the oversimplification of said community's hopes and struggles. The reductive nature of this type of approach to any kind of identity — for example, gender or sexuality identities — is, in a way, dehumanizing. This essentialist understanding of minorities and, in the case concerning us, of queer or sapphic experiences, results in unrealistic depictions in media, creating an image of a homogenous mass of stereotyped flat queer characters. Because queer people are not only queer, but also people, Machado's work provides a polyhedral insight into queer experience. The raw vulnerability of *In the Dream House* is a necessary addition to the canon of queer literature, providing a point of reference for a very underrepresented topic: abuse in queer relationships.

In the first chapter of this work, "Queer Studies and Strategic Essentialism Revisited", we explored the intersection between queerness and abuse, its workings in sapphic relationships, and the ways in which Machado grapples with this topic — and hurtful life-experience — in her memoir. Drawing on gender and queer studies, we provided a close analysis of those chapters in Machado's memoir where the author depicts the unbalanced power dynamics that shaped her abusive relationship, while also examining those chapters which directly reflect on the workings of abuse in intimate relationships between women. As a result of this analysis, we can conclude that the heteronormative conception of abuse in combination with gender essentialism creates a sort of smoke screen that hinders the recognition of abuse in queer relationships, which can be challenged by approaching the topic through an intersectional lens. The

exploration that Machado makes of her own case contributes to the recognition of this reality, adding to the literature on the topic and helping to raise awareness.

In the second chapter, “Life Writing, Queerness, and Trauma”, we dealt with Machado’s work as one pertaining to the genre of life-writing — and, in particular, the memoir genre. As explained in this chapter, Machado found in the memoir fitting genre for carrying out an act of defiance against the silence that surrounds such minorized issues as abuse in queer relationships, for this genre allowed her to speak with her own voice in her own personal manner. *In the Dream House* is, no doubt, a clear example of life-writing, but it also shows affinities with other forms of trauma writing, considering the topic it revolves around. For this reason and drawing on trauma theory, this chapter also focused on examining Machado’s memoir in relation to trauma. Inter alia, the chapter centred on demonstrating how the emotional and traumatic burden encapsulated in this story of queer abuse influenced the formal decisions taken by the author. *In the Dream House* contains then a series of features that are commonly found in narratives engaging with trauma, such as the widespread use of fragmentation, the variation between the use of the first and the second person singular by the narrator, and the underlined relevance of physical spaces, centring around the figure of the “Dream House” in this case. The experience of intimate partner violence in a sapphic relationship informs, therefore, the way in which Machado’s story is written, with the fragmentation of the narrative reflecting Machado’s fragmentary self and even the difficulty of voicing the “unspeakable”.

The third chapter, titled “Re-inscribing Abuse into the Collective Imaginary”, deals with the concept of “intertextuality” and how Machado weaves a web of intertextual references into the fabrics of *In the Dream House*. The chapter concentrates on exploring two main sets of intertextual references: those pertaining to popular culture media, and

those linked to folk and fairy tales. In addressing the general concept of popular culture and concrete allusions to different types of media within the field of popular culture, we position Machado's story as one aware of the current cultural discourse, as well as of the lack of representation of the reality of abuse in queer relationships within it. On the other side, when acknowledging and analysing the concept of folk and fairy tales and the subsequent references to them, we are able to decrypt the underlying commentary on the historical absence of a conversation surrounding this topic, resulting in the unavoidable silence surrounding it. We found in these references a way for Machado to illustrate her story and, at the same time, a means for creating a network of allusions working together to inscribe the reality of abuse in relationships between women all throughout our culture, from tradition to modernity and into the collective imaginary.

All in all, this dissertation intended to examine, both thematically and formally, Machado's engagement with abuse in queer relationships in her memoir *In the Dream House*. This study could be expanded by examining other works from Machado's oeuvre such as, for example, her short story collection *Her Body and Other Parties* (2017) which, albeit not focused on abuse in queer relationships, does tackle the topic. Most importantly perhaps, the topic of this dissertation could be built upon by engaging with recent works which, like Machado's *In the Dream House*, voice this silenced topic and attempt to reinscribe it into the archive. This is the case, for example, of Bernardine Evaristo's memoir *Manifesto: On Never Giving Up* (2021), and her novel *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019), in which Evaristo also tackles abuse within queer relationships at times drawing on her own experience, as one can easily detect when putting her memoir and her acclaimed novel in dialogue with each other. This means that this dissertation does not simply contribute to shedding light on Machado's memoir, but it also paves the path for

future studies centred on contemporary works engaging with the question of abuse in queer relationships.

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