



Universiteit
Leiden

The Netherlands

The (Un)Reality of Abuse in Carmen Maria Machado's *In the Dream House* (2019)

Stefanakou, Athena

Citation

Stefanakou, A. (2023). The (Un)Reality of Abuse in Carmen Maria Machado's *In the Dream House* (2019). *Leiden Elective Academic Periodical*, (3), 119-133.
Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3633576>

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Creative Commons CC BY 4.0 license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3633576>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

The (Un)Reality of Abuse in Carmen Maria Machado's *In the Dream House* (2019)

Athena Stefanakou

Carmen Maria Machado's 2019 memoir *In the Dream House* recounts a story of same-sex psychological abuse by the narrator's ex-girlfriend, whom the narrator identifies as the "woman from the Dream House."¹ In this article, I argue that *In the Dream House* achieves a form of "hermeneutic justice" through its deliberate use of fictional and non-fictional elements, transcending the premium usually placed on factual accuracy in the genre of memoir. In doing so, the text conveys a "deeper" truth through the narrator's play with the form and structure of language. To make this argument, I draw on Miranda Fricker's notion of "hermeneutic injustice," which refers to a gap in the way that disadvantaged people understand and interpret negative social experiences because of their social position.² One of the examples that Fricker uses to describe "hermeneutic injustice" is that of women whose experience of sexual harassment in the workplace is not recognized as such due to a "gap in the collective hermeneutical resource."³ Fricker means that the lack of a specific term to name the social experience of sexual harassment prevents the harassed from understanding their experience as harmful. These women, therefore, are "wronged in their capacity as a knower." For Fricker, this wronging results from "a specific sort of epistemic injustice—a hermeneutical injustice."⁴ In

¹ *In the Dream House*, 5. Note that throughout my analysis of the memoir, I will deliberately be using the term "narrator" to refer to what could otherwise be identified as the author. That is because I want to emphasize the storytelling aspect of the memoir.

² *Epistemic Injustice*, 148.

³ *Id.*, 169.

⁴ *Id.*, 149.

this article, I suggest that the narrator of *In the Dream House*, a woman abused within a queer relationship, faces a hermeneutical injustice in her lack of linguistic and hermeneutical tools to frame and understand her experience of abuse. As the narrator says: “putting language to which you have no language is no easy feat.”⁵ Consequently, “when she [the abuser] walks into your office and tells you that this is what it’s like to date a woman, you believe her. . . . you trust her, and you have no context for anything else.”⁶

Previous scholarship, particularly Prudence Bussey-Chamberlain’s work, followed the narrator’s own framing of *In the Dream House*, examining the memoir for its contribution to resisting “the violence of the archive” by documenting a form of previously disregarded abuse.⁷ In the memoir’s opening, the narrator herself discusses the “violence of the archive,” referring to inequities in the recording of personal stories that result, for example, in inattention to stories of queer abuse.⁸ While I do not refute this reading, I intend to open up alternative approaches to the text. Analyzing the memoir through the lens of hermeneutic justice and injustice, I argue, allows for a more open-ended exploration of trauma narratives, breaking down a range of binary distinctions. These include the distinctions between truth and lie, fiction and non-fiction, and, more broadly, between clearly defined identities as abuser and abused. Bussey suggests a possible reading for hermeneutic injustice in her assertion that the formal incoherence of the memoir owes to the absence of similar abuse narratives as points of reference.⁹ However, I go beyond this reading by explaining how the memoir’s formal irregularities ultimately lead, due to their incoherent and unstable character, to a specific type of hermeneutic justice. I present this argument in three parts. First, I show how Machado’s notion of “the Dream House” acts as an imaginary space for hermeneutic justice. Second, I analyze how the interplay of fiction and non-fiction inside the Dream House points

⁵ Machado, *In the Dream House*, 134.

⁶ *Id.*, 45.

⁷ “Every Lover Is a Destroyer,” 1.

⁸ Machado, *In the Dream House*, 4.

⁹ “Every Lover is a Destroyer,” 17.

to new ways of interpreting abuse narratives and narratives that move away from the oppression of the fact. Finally, I close read the use of language in *In the Dream House* to examine how the narrator subverts and reimagines the meanings of overdetermined words such as love, abuse, and fatness.

The notion of the Dream House: hermeneutic justice and abuse narratives

I begin my analysis by considering the ambiguous notion of “the Dream House,” which is first mentioned at the very beginning of the memoir. The Dream House, which frames the memoir’s narrative structure, troubles the boundaries between “reality” and “fiction.” The narrator explains the idea of the Dream House in several ways. On one level, she suggests it is an actual house in the world outside of the memoir: the narrator claims that “I could give you the address and you could drive there.”¹⁰ On another level, the Dream House is a constructed space in the narrator’s memories, imbued with abuse in every possible conceptualization of it by the narrator. The Dream House also serves, however, as a mental space in which the narrator can present “unrealistic” events that do not fit normative understandings of abuse. As the phrase “Dream House” itself suggests, it is also a place that the narrator associates with dreams, nightmares and the unconscious. Finally, the “Dream House” is a trope that structures the memoir itself, with each chapter title comparing the Dream House to a different fictional or non-fictional genre or concept: “Dreamhouse as Sci-Fi Thriller,” “Dreamhouse as Pop Single” or “Dreamhouse as Confession.”

I wish to offer an understanding of the Dream House beyond those provided by the narrator herself: that her construction of the Dream House is also the construction of a new context in which hermeneutic justice can be attempted at. By this, I mean that even if there “is a gap in the collective hermeneutical resources” of society to understand and interpret the narrator’s experiences as a psychologically abused queer woman, she creates a safe space to explain these experiences in the Dream House.¹¹ The dedication of

¹⁰ Machado, *In the Dream House*, 9.

¹¹ Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 169.

In the Dream House states that “if you need this book, it is for you.” I read this as a suggestion that the memoir can function as a tool with which anyone who feels that their abuse narrative does not fit the dominant forms—male abuse of a female within a heterosexual relationship—can reframe their understanding of their own experience and develop a new sense of its meaning.

As an “unreal” place, the Dream House can house sensations, feelings, and impressions that would not be perceptible in real life and present them in a form the reader can access. As such, it encloses all the forms of evidence that, as the narrator states in the chapter “Dream House as Proof,” she has no other way of representing or calling upon as proof of her abuse. For example, it is in the Dream House that the narrator places “the rancid smell of anger. The metal tang of fear in the back of my throat.”¹² With these descriptions, the narrator makes emotions such as anger and fear material and tangible, giving fear a physical presence as “metal.” These emotions then become proof otherwise lacking in cases of purely psychological abuse. An obsession with the materiality of pain makes the narrator wish that “she [her ex-partner] had hit you. Hit you hard enough that you’d have bruised in grotesque and obvious ways, hard enough that you took photos.”¹³ A conscious or unconscious need for visual evidence to verify the truthfulness of an abuse narrative, especially regarding psychological abuse between queer women, is a clear instance of hermeneutical injustice. The narrator lacked the hermeneutical tools to effectively communicate her experience, and the people she confided in could not perceive or evaluate this deficiency.¹⁴ In this sense, the Dream House creates a space in which the “testimonial injustice”¹⁵ that the narrator faces in the chapter “Dream House as Myth” can be resisted: “we don’t know for certain that it [her relationship with her ex-girlfriend] is as bad as she says. The woman from the Dream House seems perfectly

¹² Machado, *In the Dream House*, 225.

¹³ *Id.*, 224.

¹⁴ Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 169.

¹⁵ Testimonial injustice in the case of the narrator occurs because, due to prejudices regarding her identity, she is “receiving less credibility than she otherwise would have—a credibility deficit.” This is analyzed in Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 17.

fine, even nice.”¹⁶ People were reluctant to believe her account due to her identity as a queer woman and their lack of hermeneutical resources regarding women abusing other women in relationships. The Dream House provides then the space for the narrator and the reader to recognize the difficulty in expressing one’s pain to others when there is no physical evidence for it and the uniqueness of the narrator’s experience that cannot be conveyed through preexisting abuse narratives.¹⁷

This materialization of the intangible is also expressed in the haunted or oneiric quality of the house. In the chapter “Dream House as Set Design,” the house is anthropomorphized: “the house inhales, exhales and inhales again.”¹⁸ The only physical witness to the terrors that took place, the Dream House itself, now appears to reflect those terrors in its very being. This understanding can also be seen in the narrator’s claim in “Dream House as American Gothic” that “[a] house is never apolitical . . . Windex is political. So is the incense your burn to hide the smell of sex, or a fight.”¹⁹ In this passage, the narrator shows how easily a person can be deceived by their physical perceptions. Despite these deceptions, the house will always “know,” will always be marked by some type of “psychic pain.”²⁰ While some stories of queer abuse make it into the newspapers, perhaps because they involve murdered women, the narrator wonders how many other stories are forgotten because they are not sensational enough. These stories, the narrator states, are lost in “archival silence.”²¹ As in Gothic fiction, where hauntings can be interpreted as “the return of the repressed,”²² the Dream House is haunted by the silenced and otherwise unheard. In the chapter

¹⁶ Machado, *In the Dream House*, 223.

¹⁷ Meretoja refers to the violence of concepts developed by Friedrich Nietzsche as: “Every concept comes into being by making equivalent that which is non-equivalent,” which she then argues makes one “forget the singularity of each individual and [the] crucial differences within each group,” “Philosophies of Trauma,” 29.

¹⁸ Machado, *In the Dream House*, 74.

¹⁹ *Id.*, 76.

²⁰ *Id.*, 127.

²¹ *Id.*, 138.

²² Wallace, *Female Gothic Histories*, 14.

“Dream House as Equivocation,” the narrator explains that queer communities tend to propagate images of a queer utopia in which abuse is nonexistent.²³ The narrator finds this attitude unhelpful and dehumanizing because it makes queer people forget, as she puts it, that “we’re in the muck like everyone else.”²⁴ This attitude sustains the hermeneutical injustice that queer abused people experience.

The Dream House progressively mutates into different forms, showcasing how the experiences it houses, including traumatic ones, are temporally and socially mediated.²⁵ Describing the transformations of the Dream House, the narrator recounts: “The Dream House was never just the Dream House. It was, in turn, a convent of promise, a den of debauchery, a haunted house, a prison and finally a dungeon of memory.”²⁶ This fluidity of the Dream House points to what Hana Meretoja calls a “non-subsumptive narrative understanding,” according to which concepts are not fixed but are formed based on unique experiences.²⁷ Meretoja argues that narratives “can be a vehicle of stretching one’s imagination towards what feels incomprehensible.”²⁸ Through the instability of its meaning, the Dream House shows to the reader how a house that might initially seem “a convent of promise” can, in time, transform into “a prison.” In the end, however, “the inhabitant gives the room its purpose,”²⁹ making it the reader themselves, by reading and thus “inhabiting” the Dream House, who will ultimately decide if the incidents narrated in the Dream House, fantastical or not, could prove to be useful in extending their hermeneutical framework regarding abuse narratives.

After the narrator has been “wronged in her capacity as a knower,” the ambiguous presentation of the Dream House offers her the necessary context and hermeneutical tools to transmit her experience of psychological abuse to others.³⁰ The narrator achieves

²³ Machado, *In the Dream House*, 199.

²⁴ *Id.*, 109.

²⁵ Meretoja, “Philosophies of Trauma,” 25.

²⁶ Machado, *In the Dream House*, 72.

²⁷ “Philosophies of Trauma,” 34.

²⁸ *Id.*, 33.

²⁹ Machado, *In the Dream House*, 9.

³⁰ Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 149.

this not just by constructing the narrative space of the dreamhouse but also by simultaneously problematizing the stability of notions such as truth and unreality that might affect the credibility of her abuse story. In the next section, I will move one step deeper in my stylistic analysis of the memoir to discuss the variety of genres that the Dream House houses, especially those that are closer to fiction genres like fantasy and fairytale. These genres, provocative to include in a memoir, are unconventional ways of achieving hermeneutic justice and of accessing the reality of someone else's pain.

Genre and the boundaries of truth: fiction and non-fiction as tools for hermeneutic justice

The division of the memoir into different chapters titled in the formula of "Dream House as 'X'" also requires an analysis of each "X." Some of these titles refer to non-fictional discourses (e.g., the "Dreamhouse as Second Chances"), and others to fictional ones, (e.g., "Dreamhouse as Noir"). In each chapter, the narrator borrows the aesthetics of the discourse mentioned in the chapter title to recount her experience. This approach showcases how familiar concepts can be applied to something unfamiliar and incomprehensible, eventually broadening sensibilities regarding abuse narratives. The title "Dream House as Gaslight," for example, reflects a long tradition of cultural discourse on psychological manipulation. Like the 1944 movie *Gaslight*, the "fictional" Dream House could alter our hermeneutical framework. This alteration could prove particularly important for people who, like the narrator, experience a hermeneutical lack in the expression of their pain.³¹ The inclusion of fictional concepts in the memoir points to Machado's view that "in many cases we need more than reality to accurately describe reality."³² In my view, this inclusion of fictional elements in the memoir aligns her work with the theory of post-trauma poetics as proposed by Houston A. Baker Jr. While Baker Jr.'s analysis emphasizes black subjectivity and Zora Neale Hurston's "poetic intuition in reading darkness" through what he

³¹ *Id.*, 157.

³² Mahindra Humanities Centre, "Carmen Maria Machado," 17:36.

terms an “archival dance,”³³ the theory of post-trauma poetics is applicable to Machado’s work. In the same way that, as Baker Jr. suggests, “Hurston’s archive inhabits a different interpretative universe,”³⁴ Machado’s archive also does not conform to the rules of realistic writing where titles and concepts such as “memoir” and “fantasy” are stable signifiers that evoke specific expectations.

Besides the use of chapter titles that belong to fiction, such as “Dream House as Fantasy,” the Dream House also hosts chapters that are entirely fantastical both in title and content matter, as in the chapters “Dream House as Bluebeard” and “Dream House as the Queen and the Squid.” These chapters are adaptations of a fairytale and a fable that, at first glance, have no relation to the story of the Dream House. Fairytales and fables are not traditionally considered part of the “real,” an attitude some people—including the narrator’s aunt—extend to queer people as well: “I don’t believe in gay people.”³⁵ The narrator’s response: “Well, we believe in you,” foreshadows her own use of fairytales, of the unreal, to make real events more comprehensible to the reader.³⁶ As Stephen Benson notes, fairytales are a form of storytelling traditionally associated with “the constitution of selves and identities.”³⁷ Julia Christensen stresses that storytelling is also “a mode of knowledge production and dissemination.”³⁸ These ideas align with my argument that the narrator of *In the Dream House* constructs a new hermeneutic framework through her storytelling, drawing on the frameworks of existing genres to break down the binary distinctions between truth and falsehood, fiction and non-fiction.

The fairytales in *In the Dream House* feature explicit instances of psychological abuse, manipulation, and gaslighting, aiding the narrator in overcoming her difficulty in conveying her traumatic experience to others. In the narrator’s adaptation of the fairytale of the Bluebeard, for example, she clarifies that while the traditional image of Bluebeard is as a wealthy man with supernatural

³³ “Intuiting Archive,” 2.

³⁴ *Id.*, 1.

³⁵ Machado, *In the Dream House*, 71.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Contemporary Fiction*, 9.

³⁸ *Activating the Heart*, xii.

powers, he can also “be simple. And he doesn’t have to be a man.”³⁹ In the narrator’s retelling, the increasing acquiescence of Bluebeard’s new wife to his irrational demands renders her escape impossible. Out of docility and potentially love, she voluntarily becomes a victim of abuse. The fairytale ends with the moral: “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.”⁴⁰ If the narrator, or anyone, for that matter, were to let themselves be submerged in their abuser’s reality, as the moral of Bluebeard suggests, the result would be “a scene where Bluebeard [would] dance around with the corpses of his past wives . . . and the newest wife would [sit] there mutely.”⁴¹ Such a scene would reemphasize the inescapability of manipulation and abuse. In contrast, the narrator’s telling of the fable of the Queen and the Squid gives the reader the impression that the abused squid comes to realize its pain and rejects the queen’s advances for reconciliation: “your words are very pretty. And yet they cannot obscure the simple fact that I have seen your zoo.”⁴² Once again, the fairytale is “a force that stretches beyond inherited ideological limitations” and “expands the repertoire of the tellable.”⁴³ Hermeneutic justice is achieved through the vehicle of the fantastic, which opens up a space for alternative visions of reality.

Another parallel world of fantasy that destabilizes the veracity of the memoir emerges through the narrator’s use of footnotes in some chapters. These footnotes refer to Thompson’s *Motif-Index*, which categorizes recurrent motifs in world folkloric literature.⁴⁴ The motifs cited in the narrator’s footnotes are taboos or types of behavior; they constitute a rhythmic undercurrent to the memoir, reminding the reader of the taboo nature of trauma, particularly in queer abuse narratives. This stylistic technique is an alternative way of utilizing preexisting concepts to recount unique experiences. The distribution of footnotes throughout the memoir does not follow a specific pattern; they appear in chapters of all different genres as a

³⁹ Machado, *In the Dream House*, 59.

⁴⁰ *Id.*, 60.

⁴¹ *Id.*, 59.

⁴² *Id.*, 204.

⁴³ Benson, *Contemporary Fiction*, 13.

⁴⁴ Rosell Castells, “The Dream House was never just the Dream House,” 52.

type of evidence corroborating the main narrative. For example, when the narrator's mother does not support her against her aunt's discriminatory comments: "I don't believe in gay people,"⁴⁵ the footnote at the end of the line reads: "Thompson, Motif-Index of Folk Literature, Type S12.2.2, Mother throws children into fire."⁴⁶ This is not what happened literally in the main storyline, but the footnote does abide by the rules of the folkloric universe, which is a foundational part of the memoir. Ultimately the moral in the main text and the paratext is the same: that mothers can be cruel, even to the point of annihilation of their children or their identity. In this way, the affective impact of the event in the main text is amplified by the footnote.

The inclusion of fictional discourses in the narrative of *In the Dream House* covers the gap of hermeneutical injustice, providing the narrator with a framework to understand and then express her experiences. It also potentially reveals the inadequacies of non-fictional discourses to capture the nuances of some social experiences, possibly even when there is no gap in the collective hermeneutic resources. One might expect that these fictional discourses compromise the narrator's reliability, since the genre of the memoir is traditionally realistic. However, I would emphasize that the question of the narrator's reliability is of no importance. The narrator, to put it in Baker's words, does not "merely make[s] another deposit in history's consignments without troubling its fervid limitations and fissures."⁴⁷

Reshaping the discourse of abuse: the vocabulary of hermeneutic justice

In this final section, I examine how the narrator's use of language to describe in recounting her personal abuse story creates "new vocabularies for dealing with traumatizing processes" that go beyond the inherited biases of the linguistic system.⁴⁸ More specifically, the narrator subverts the convention in abuse narratives to represent the

⁴⁵ Machado, *In the Dream House*, 71.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ "Intuiting Archive," 3.

⁴⁸ Meretoja, "Philosophies of Trauma," 31.

abuser as a strong and physically large man and the abused person as a weak, white, and petite woman. Even though the narrator describes herself as fat, which implies a larger physique, and the woman in the dreamhouse as petite, the narrator's linguistic choices convey her feelings of smallness and weakness, particularly during the manic, spiteful, and borderline violent attacks of her ex-girlfriend. In a moment in the narrative in the chapter "Dreamhouse as House in Florida" where her ex-girlfriend is hurting her arm, the narrator remains motionless, stating to herself: "You make a tiny gasp, the tiniest gasp you can."⁴⁹ This line reflects the narrator's attempt to minimize herself in front of her lover. Another example of the narrator's self-minimization comes in the chapter "Dream House as the Pool of Tears," where the narrator shrinks from being gigantic to dwarfish in an *Alice in Wonderland* fashion and, while tiny, risks drowning in her own tears. These images contribute to the reader's sense of the narrator's helplessness and weakness.

The narrator's word choices also resist dominant gender discourses that structure a reader's cultural assumptions. One of these assumptions is that a frail, blond, white woman must be weak. As dramatized in the chapter "Dream House as Murder Mystery," however, sometimes a blonde, "helpless" woman is a culprit who, being outside of the hermeneutic framework for suspicion, goes unsuspected. In "Dream House as Murder Mystery," the blonde woman "wipes the blood of the blade [of her knife] onto the dinner guest's dress and replaces it in her purse. Everyone continues to argue as she walks out the front door and into the night."⁵⁰ The "Murder Mystery" chapter shows how restricted hermeneutic frameworks can have harmful real-life consequences. The narrator asks herself: "Who is capable of committing unspeakable violence?"⁵¹ Gender norms mean that the reader might not suspect a blonde, white woman with a "dazzling smile," even if the evidence of her guilt is blindingly obvious.⁵²

⁴⁹ Machado, *In the Dream House*, 57.

⁵⁰ *Id.*, 182.

⁵¹ *Id.*, 47.

⁵² *Id.*, 182.

Throughout *In the Dream House*, the narrator offers both society's perspective on her body, which facilitated her abuse, and her later empowerment and acceptance of her body image, which allowed for her escape from that abuse. The narrator mentions that she grew up with the notion that "you should be grateful for anything you get as a fat woman,"⁵³ internalizing the idea that she was "undeserving of worship."⁵⁴ Her memoir, like her overweight body, overflows across different genres. It questions not only the boundaries of reality but also which bodies, and by extension, which texts, matter in society. As the narrative progresses, the narrator redefines the word fat by stripping it of its negative connotation. For example, when the narrator says that "My fat still remembers, but just barely—within a few years it will have turned itself over completely,"⁵⁵ she contrasts this to her memory: "But my nervous system still remembers . . . My memory has something to say about the way trauma has altered my body's DNA, like an ancient virus."⁵⁶ Fat and fatness are fundamental to the narrator's identity but nonetheless inferior to her memory, where abuse will always be hard-wired. The narrator now uses the word fat in a more neutral way than in its previous connotation of unworthiness. Lastly, the "fat raccoon,"⁵⁷ a figure that the narrator recognizes as a trickster, appears in a chapter where her friends or acquaintances dismiss the veracity of her story and remind her to keep fighting through her trauma: "he [the raccoon] doesn't look up, he doesn't speak to you, he just keeps going. But keeping going is a way of speaking."⁵⁸ The encouraging appearance of the fat raccoon contributes to the memoir's reexamination of prevalent ideas about fatness, showcasing how they can be overturned in a positive way. The re-signification of fatness in *In the Dream House* follows Meretoja's argument that literature is a means to create "new vocabularies for dealing with traumatizing processes,"⁵⁹ the traumatizing process here

⁵³ *Id.*, 213.

⁵⁴ Young, "Haunted by humiliation."

⁵⁵ Machado, *In the Dream House*, 225.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Id.*, 223.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ "Philosophies of Trauma," 31.

being caused by the negative connotations of fatness. By re-signifying fatness, the narrator combats what I would term here *hermeneutic violence*; while there is a hermeneutical space for her experience of fatness, it is one dictated by people who do not look like the narrator. By reimagining her relationship with fatness in more positive terms, the narrator does justice to her embodied experience.

The narrator also reframes dominant understandings of the relationship between love and suffering. The idea that one must suffer for true love is recurrent both in the fictional and non-fictional worlds inside the Dream House. For example, a footnote in the chapter “Dreamhouse as Myth” contains a quote from New York Times opinion columnist, Maureen Dowd, who argues that “experiencing the ordinary brutality of love does not make one a victim. It makes one an adult.”⁶⁰ This inclusion of Dowd’s idea in the footnote suggests that love has always been connected with abuse, making the two perhaps, in fact, one. The narrator of *In the Dream House*, however, problematizes this association. For example, she addresses herself: “You laugh and nod and kiss her, as if her love for you has *sharpened* and *pinned* you into a wall.”⁶¹ Here the love expresses itself sensorially as physical abuse, represented by “sharpness” and “pinning.” This line highlights that the association of love and suffering will later lead to the narrator’s abusive relationship. Once again, the narrator is opening a space for hermeneutic justice by suggesting that this abuse, which was psychological, can be represented in such physical terms.

To conclude my analysis of *In the Dream House*, I examined specific uses of language in the narrative that show concretely how, in addition to hermeneutic injustice, the narrator was subjected to hermeneutic violence. The narrator experienced hermeneutic violence in that the existing hermeneutical framework and resources for representing her experiences and identity were rather harmful. As with formal elements of the memoir analyzed in previous sections, the narrator’s re-inventing of language in the Dream House is, I have argued, a means to hermeneutic justice.

⁶⁰ Machado, *In the Dream House*, 223.

⁶¹ *Id.*, 68, emphasis mine.

Conclusion

Machado's memoir suggests that the narrator, a queer abused woman, has faced a type of hermeneutic injustice that prevented her from completely understanding and transmitting her experience to others. The memoir proposes narrative form as a means to overcome this injustice, drawing on a descriptive matrix that oscillates between fiction and non-fiction, imagination and reality. My analysis began with the ambiguous notion of the Dream House, where I showed how the Dream House constitutes the constructed space where hermeneutic justice can take place. I also showed that the difference between unreality and reality in abuse narratives becomes irrelevant inside the Dream House; in the Dream House, the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction collapse. The "unreal" space of the Dream House allows the narrator to incorporate fictional genres and discourses. In doing so, the narrator defies the insufficient collective hermeneutical resources of society and the insistence that abuse stories be works of non-fiction verifiable with material evidence. This insistence is particularly harmful to victims of psychological abuse. In the chapter "Dreamhouse as Myth" where the narrator confides in people her abuse story and then learns about their disbelief, she confesses about herself to the reader that: "You will never feel as desperate and fucked up and horrible as when you hear those things."⁶² Even when the narrator has concepts available to understand and interpret her experiences, she shows how these concepts, like fatness, abuse, and love, can be disadvantageous for her self-definition. Reimagining these concepts, the narrator overcomes a hermeneutic violence. *In the Dream House* ultimately demonstrates how the creation of more inclusive and open-ended hermeneutical frameworks through the formal elements of the memoir does hermeneutic justice to queer abused people and points to new ways of understanding and interpreting abuse narratives.

⁶² *Id.*, 223.

Bibliography

- Baker Jr, Houston A. "Intuiting Archive: Notes on Post-Trauma Poetics." *African American Review* 49, no.1 (Spring 2016): 1-4.
- Benson, Stephen, editor. *Contemporary Fiction and Fairy Tales*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2008.
- Bussey-Chamberlain, Prudence. "'Every Lover Is a Destroyer': Queer Abuse and Experimental Memoir in Melissa Febos' *Abandon Me* and Carmen Maria Machado's *In the Dream House*." *Prose Studies* 42, no.3 (2021): 259-78.
- Christensen, Julia, Christopher Cox, and Lisa Szabo-Jones. "Introduction". In *Activating the Heart: Storytelling, Knowledge Sharing, and Relationship*, edited by Julia Christensen, Christopher Cox, and Lisa Szabo-Jones, xi-vii. *Indigenous Studies Series*, edited by Deanna Reder. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2018.
- Fricker, Miranda. *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Machado, Carmen M. *In the Dream House*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2021.
- Mahinda Humanities Centre. "Mahindra Humanities Centre, Carmen Maria Machado in conversation with Laura van den Berg." Filmed April 2022, YouTube video, 1:01:59.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P0h5BcOBk1Q&t=1063s>.
- Meretoja, Hanna. "The philosophies of Trauma." In *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma*, edited by Colin Davis and Hanna Meretoja, 23-35. Milton: Taylor and Francis, 2020.
- Rosell Castells, Clara Jane. "'The Dream House Was Never Just the Dream House': Unhousing, Domestic Abuse, and Archival Silence in Carmen Maria Machado's *In the Dream House* (2019)." MA thesis, Universidad de Barcelona, 2022.
- Wallace, Diana. *Female Gothic Histories: Gender, History and the Gothic*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013.
- Young, Kristen M. "Haunted by humiliation, Carmen Maria Machado breaks form to address domestic abuse." *The Washington Post*, November 5, 2019.