The Dream House of American Culture
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Archives of the Self, Visions of the Future

Abstract: This article argues that American literature and culture help students draw more expansive geographies of their selves and more articulate narratives of their experiences. Using Carmen Maria Machado's memoir *In the Dream House* as an example, it shows how students are empowered to make meaningful connections between the personal and the political, and how they are encouraged to reflect on their "home" identities, especially with regard to race, class, sexuality, and gender. This text—graphic, raw, and challenging to read—fosters courageous conversations that illustrate what American studies can offer, namely an archive of struggle, a context of representation, and a space of community for our students.

Keywords: Carmen Maria Machado*, In the Dream House*, memoir, archive, community, identity

In her critically acclaimed memoir *In the Dream House* (2019), Carmen Maria Machado compares the process of collecting her memories to the act of constructing an archive. Drawing on Jacques Derrida's discussion of power in *Archive Fever*, Machado uses the house as a metaphor for the archive. As Derrida points out, the word "archive" is derived from the Greek *arkheion*, the embodiment of *arkhē*, "initially a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates," referring to those who have the power to make and to speak the law.[1] To build an archive, then, is to grapple with the power of the law; in other words, to question what is placed in (or left out of) the archive. As Machado stresses, this is a political act, which entails illuminating the "[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."[2] As teachers, we empower our students to break this silence, and, to this end, we offer them contexts—literary, cultural, and social—where they can see and find information about themselves, helping them weave their stories into individual and collective archives.

American studies can (and should) offer these contexts, as the history of the United States is a collective archive of struggle for social and racial justice. While some of these struggles might seem geographically remote to our students, they express a remarkable diversity of voices. To make this diversity relatable and meaningful to the Nordic context is, to a large extent, our vocation as teachers and scholars of American studies. In our classes, we foster a cross-cultural perspective that helps our students articulate their stories and draw more expansive geographies of their selves. In what follows, I show how a contemporary American text such as Machado's memoir *In the Dream House* offers the language to express—and the space to imagine—a self across genders, races, and cultures.

The memoir as a genre reveals the ties between the personal and the political and carves a space where readers can see their own struggles. Machado notes that "[t]he memoir is, at its core, an act of resurrection. Memoirists re-create the past, reconstruct dialogue. . . . [T]hey braid the clays of memory and essay and fact and perception together . . . [and] put themselves, and others, into necessary context."[3] In her own memoir, Machado reconstructs the traumatic experience of an abusive relationship with another woman and creates a context for timely and courageous conversations about gender and difference, queerness and desire, and identity and justice.

Machado's text is challenging for undergraduate students: her prose is raw, her imagery is graphic, and her story is horrific. Yet the central conceit, namely the analogy between the memoir as a house of memories and the Dream House as the symbolic (and material) space of the author's past relationship, facilitates the connection between her own experience and the reader's. The form is highly experimental, with chapters of varying length simulating a labyrinthine space with a Gothic feel, which reflects the blurry boundaries between entrapment and desire. The claustrophobic effect of entrapment is counterbalanced by the impressive array of intertextual—popular, literary, and mythic—references and folk motifs, which helps the narrative radiate toward broader themes and cultural contexts. Thus, formal experimentation and cultural scope allow Machado to "braid the clays" of personal story and collective narrative, opening up a space of community for (and with) her readership.[4]

I recently had the chance to teach this text in a transatlantic Women's Literature course at Nord University in Norway. The syllabus featured some canonical British and postcolonial texts, such as Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), yet mainly

focused on American texts, from Harriet Jacobs' slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) to realist and naturalist novels such as Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) and Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905). Using feminist, gender, and queer theory as our primary critical lenses, the students and I debated the meaning of women's literature and expanded the grounds of women's identities. To frame such a broad discussion and a purposefully diverse range of texts—with Machado's memoir as the final text of the semester—we used Adrienne Rich's definition of writing as a revision of personal and collective narratives. As Rich argues in her seminal essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision" (1972), "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering the old text from a new critical direction . . . is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves."[5] The course encouraged students to see themselves in new contexts by exploring representations of women rewriting their identities, reconstructing their narratives, and recreating the archives of their stories in the form of literal and symbolic spaces of community and love.

The students represented a varied disciplinary, social, and cultural demographic. The majority were in the second year of completing their bachelor's degrees in English while others were exchange students in teacher education from overseas. Some students had grown up in regional communities in Northern Norway, whereas others had emigrated from other parts of the world; some of them had fled war, poverty, and oppression, while others had grown up in more stable and secure surroundings. Far from homogenous, the student demographic brought a wide range of perspectives to the class and enriched our discussions, particularly with regard to American culture. I could see that some of the students regarded the United States from a bemused distance, while others confronted it with a critical eye and earnest interest, or merely from a neutral stance. When we started reading *In the Dream House*, we were close to the end of the semester, a time that usually marks the ebb of a course in terms of student engagement and class participation. Contrary to my expectations, the text became a platform for animated discussions on gender, race, sexuality, and identity.

Machado's struggle to find her voice is set in the context of the contemporary United States, yet it raises questions that reverberate across cultural, temporal, and spatial boundaries. In this sense, the memoir creates a transcultural space of individual and collective growth, which resonates strongly with students. Reflecting on her own identity as a queer writer, for example, Machado notes that she is defined by an "eternal liminality," whereby "[y]ou are two things, maybe even more; and you are neither."[6] While this sense of liminality is clearly set at the intersection of her own sexual and racial identities—and, by extension, the liminal position of a contemporary US-Latinx queer individual—it is also contextualized in a larger narrative of domestic abuse. The narrative zooms out to a long history of legal cases as well as documentaries and popular films, such as the 1940s film *Gaslight*, before returning to Machado's own experience as a naïve teenager with her first crush on another girl. This archive of desire and abuse—both individual and collective—is, again, the context that each young individual needs to build in order to make sense of their growing pains.

In a painfully humorous way, Machado notes how her younger self wanted to rise out of her seat, grab her friend's hand, and yell "[t]o hell with Hemingway!" yet had no context or language to understand this impulse as an early bud of sexual desire.[7] Machado's intuitive association of Hemingway with normative masculin-

ity aside—a topic that I leave for Hemingway critics to debate—the scene nicely illustrates the young girl's amorphous and inarticulate desire. Her older self can acknowledge that "it was the early 2000s and [she] was just a baby in the suburbs without a reliable internet connection. [She] didn't know any queers. [She] didn't understand [herself]. [She] didn't know what it meant to want to kiss another woman."[8] The struggle for self-awareness and self-acceptance, especially at the intersection of liminal identities, gave rise to interesting perspectives in class discussions and allowed for self-reflection on the students' sexual orientations, socioeconomic backgrounds, and sense of cultural belonging. Machado's memoir became a mirror of the self and a platform of conversation; in other words, a context where students could *see* themselves and draw connections to their own experiences.

These experiences might differ from the ones that Machado is describing, yet they might also be readily relatable. For instance, Machado describes the difficulty of coming to terms with her physical appearance and the wish to look different so that she could be loved. She notes how the difficulty of seeing herself as worthy of love is rooted in an experience of sexual assault early in her college studies as well as the difficulty of setting boundaries, especially in romantic relationships. These issues are socially relevant and affectively charged; they affect a great many of our students in often traumatic ways that go deeper than they might be able to acknowledge. What is more, the students might lack the language to do them justice even when they try. As Machado reflects, "[p]utting language to something for which you have no language is no easy feat."[9] The language of American studies, just like Walt Whitman's verse, is large and can contain multitudes; built around the values of equity, diversity, and tolerance, it becomes the fabric with which students can stitch together their experiences and weave narratives of their lives.

This language can take various forms but always includes a process of archival reconstruction, a rewriting or "re-vision" of the self in Rich's terms. Machado shows us how this revision also entails an understanding of the other. Part of her memoir was written during a residency in a barn on the property of American poet and playwright Edna St. Vincent Millay. At that point, Machado's memoir was more of a fragmented assemblage of memories, of notes and scenes, the result of her own "mental excavation."[10] It was not until she came across an enormous pile of broken bottles of gin and morphine that she caught a glimpse into the poet's private life, the "measure of her pain," the "proportion of her problems," which, in turn, revealed a different view of Millay than the well-known persona of the brilliant, if arrogant, poet.[11] The "stab of sympathy" triggered by this unusual archive worked therapeutically for Machado as she was trying to make sense of her own painful, fragmented memories. What bound these memories together was a sense of sympathy for her self, triggered by the understanding of the other—a connection to a larger community in a context of healing and growth.

This context is beautifully rendered through natural imagery. There is a moment of mindfulness and redemption when Machado sits on the grass after a harrowing road trip and enjoys the peace of the early morning while thinking of Allen Ginsberg's apostrophe to Whitman in "A Supermarket to California." The ending scene in her memoir finds her in rural Oregon, where she stays in a cabin by a dry lake. The imagery she evokes reveals the traces of time, pain, and memory on nature and the human body, from a series of bloody stains on the floor (her nose bleeding as a result of the dry air) to the crusty pieces of an alien landscape that Machado compares to the universe of *Star Trek*. The imagery culminates in the apocalyptic imagery of "a nearly full moon illuminating fast-moving clouds, and the distant, golden pulse of fire over

the mountain, glowing like a second sunrise."[12] The crucible of fire gives way to the light of a peaceful silvery moon on the "dark and deep" crevices of dried soil that she can now see with clarity and understanding. The traumatic past she has evoked is palpably there—just like the damp soil under the cracked surfaces, the "memory of the lake"—but is molded into love for and reconciliation with the different parts of herself.[13] This reconciliation is evident in the narrative voice as well. Throughout the text, Machado's voice has been split into the older, more mature self who is looking back on the past and addresses her younger, scared, insecure self in the second person. By the end, the second person has not so much assimilated into the "I" Machado confidently uses but has become a silvery shadow that follows her along and, in a sense, illuminates her way.

As humanities teachers in an American studies context, we like to think that we illuminate our students' lives. This is indeed a tall order, one that can be rewritten as the humbler task of helping our students see their shadows and ghosts, tying the fragments of their memories into meaningful contexts. To teach a text such as Machado's memoir to our students in the Nordic context—which might be both geographically and culturally removed from the high desert landscapes of the West, the Midwestern setting of Iowa City, the fashionable milieu of New York, or the lower middle class setting of Pennsylvania—is challenging but rewarding. The rewards are, in fact, greater than the challenges, largely thanks to Machado's honest rendering of her desire to dream and to *be*. Machado's Dream House evokes the dream house of American culture, the "constant, roving hunger" of desire that urges us to reconcile our fragmented, incomplete, yet beautiful lives.[14] It invites us to create contexts that matter, lives that count, and archives that include not only who we are but also who we aspire to be. If American identities are born out of historically specific forms of displacement and exile, desire and strife, they also poignantly translate to other cultural, social, and historical contexts, helping our students dive into the crevices, find their voices, and grow articulate and strong.

Notes

1. Derrida, *Archive Fever,* 2.
2. Machado, *In the Dream House*, 3.
3. Machado, *In the Dream House*, 4.
4. Machado, *In the Dream House*, 4.
5. Rich, "When We Dead Awaken," 18.
6. Machado, *In the Dream House*, 157.
7. Machado, *In the Dream House*, 162.
8. Machado, *In the Dream House*, 162.
9. Machado, *In the Dream House*, 156.
10. Machado, *In the Dream House*, 183.
11. Machado, *In the Dream House*, 183.
12. Machado, *In the Dream House*, 277.
13. Machado, *In the Dream House*, 278.
14. Machado, *In the Dream House*, 11.

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