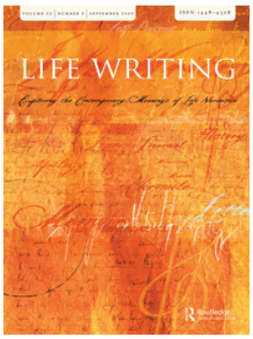

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Coercive Control in Queer Relationships: Reframing Gender and Violence in Carmen Maria Machado's *In the Dream House*

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ABSTRACT

Global debates around the criminalisation of coercive control have relatively neglected queer and gender diverse communities. This is due, at least in part, to the continuing erasure of LGBTIQA+ identities in legal discourses on Domestic and Family Violence, and to desires from within queer communities to tell positive stories about thriving relationships and communities. This article seeks to understand how coercive control in queer relationships might be understood outside of heteronormative frames, and to interrogate the concept of coercive control through a queer critical understanding of gender and power. To do this, the article offers a contextual reading of Carmen Maria Machado's *In the Dream House* (2019), a memoir about an experience of abuse within a queer relationship. Writing through vignettes that encircle an impermeable centre of abuse, Machado relives a relationship punctuated by unbearable silences, impossible and changing demands, and the foreboding threat of physical violence. This article reads *In the Dream House* as an entry point to contemporary debates about the ways that coercion and controlling behaviours in queer relationships might depart from heterosexual scripts of abuse, and connects Machado's vignettes to critical concerns around the limits of contemporary legal reforms in relation to domestic and family violence.

KEYWORDS

Coercive control; queer memoir; domestic and family violence; Carmen Maria Machado

Introduction

The concept of coercive control has gained significant legal, political, and cultural traction internationally as a key touchstone for reformed understandings of Domestic and Family Violence (DFV). Originally coined by Evan Stark in 2007, the term 'coercive control' builds on a much longer history of feminist legal scholarship concerned with manipulation, social isolation, and domestic entrapment (see Barlow and Walklate 2022), but as Amin (2024) has argued, the 'symbiotic' convergence between popular storytelling and legal reforms connected to coercive control is relatively recent. From thrillers like *Alice, Darling* (2022, USA) and *The Lost Flowers of Alice Hart* (2023,

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Australia) to the more comical series *Bad Sisters* (2022, Ireland) and globally successful comedy drama *Baby Reindeer* (2024, UK), the contemporary surge in storytelling around coercive control contributes to vital sense-making around the phenomenon, while plausibly contributing to the raising of community expectations for direction intervention from states and governments. Similarly, Kathryn Heyman's *Storm and Grace* (2017, Australia), Amani Haydar's *The Mother Wound* by (2021, Australia), Jenny Erpenbeck's *Kairos* (2021, Germany), Rosie Price's *The Orange Room* (2024, UK), and Roisin O'Donnell's *Nesting* (2025, Ireland) join a host of literary works that explore the impact of abuse within intimate relationships, and that destablise readers' efforts to find clear points of identification within complex interpersonal conflicts (see Browne 2024). These authors seek to replace what Melanie Randall (2004, 145) describes as the 'universalizing, homogenizing, and static tendencies' of stories about battered women with more complex storylines and character motivations, including victim-survivors willing to take revenge (see Philips 2021).

However, the international groundswell in stories about coercive control has not often challenged the 'public story' about domestic violence, which 'locates the phenomenon inside heterosexual relationships within a gendered victim/perpetrator dynamic' (Donovan and Hester 2010, 9). Popular culture has diversified representations of harmful heterosexual relationships, while regularly leaving heteronormativity itself unchecked. In keeping with Amin's argument about the symbiosis between law and culture, the heteronormativity of popular texts about coercive control coincides with heteronormative assumptions embedded in many policy statements and policing practices around coercive control itself (see Jennings-Fitz-Gerald et al. 2024; Reeves, McGowan, and Scott 2023). In saying this, we recognise that coercive control (and DFV more broadly) is overwhelmingly a pattern of male violence against women, and that feminist analyses of patriarchal ideologies and gender-based inequalities justifiably form key touchstones for understandings of gender-based violence. However, it is still possible – and indeed, necessary – to disarticulate gender as a complex relational process involving a multiplicity of masculinities and femininities from the heterosexual couple as the (still) privileged model for understanding how gender shapes violence. Given that many of the most compelling criticisms of coercive control legislation have focused on unexpected potential harms to victim-survivors (e.g. Cross 2022), the inclusion of LGBTQA+ communities within public debate is also important for understanding how gender-based harms might be understood outside of a heteronormative frame.

This article explores the affordances and challenges of queer storytelling around coercive control in relation to consideration of the wider social and discursive context of Domestic and Family Violence. We seek both to understand how harms in queer relationships might benefit from the insights provided in the extant feminist discourse on coercive control, while also interrogating this discourse through a queer critical analysis of power and relationality. To explore queer approaches to coercive control, this article provides a contextual reading of Carmen Maria Machado's *In the Dream House* (2020), a memoir that recounts the narrator's relationship with a person she calls 'the Woman,' 'the Blond Woman,' or 'the Woman in the Dream House.' Written in vignettes that encircle an impermeable centre of abuse, Machado describes a relationship punctuated by impossible and changing demands, unbearable silences, gaslighting, and the threat of physical violence. Working with and against inherited fictional genres around

domestic violence, *In the Dream House* works through what Isobel Lavers calls the intersection of 'queerness, abuse, and testimony' (Lavers 2024, 132), and therefore provides a germane opportunity for examining gender and sexual diversity alongside the frame of coercive control.

In reading *In the Dream House* as a text about controlling behaviours within a queer intimate relationship, this article builds on important scholarship on the stylistic features of queer memoir as archival practice (e.g. Cvetkovich 2003; Dever, Vickery, and Newman 2009; Lavers 2024), and locates the memoir within the burgeoning discourse on coercive control within LGBTIQA+ communities (e.g. Jennings-Fitz-Gerald et al. 2024; Stark and Hester 2019). In doing so, this article shows storytelling around harmful intimate practices needs to be diversified not only through the inclusion of more LGBTIQA+ characters, but also needs to be better attuned to queer histories, communities, and relationships outside of the scripts of heterosexual abuse. This approach updates formative scholarship on the ways that gender stereotypes have shaped understandings of victims and perpetrators in representations of violence (e.g. Finley 2016), and on the more recent experiences of LGBTQA+ communities navigating both experiences of coercive control and policing responses to coercive control (e.g. Reeves, McGowan, and Scott 2023).

Before we proceed, a caution about truth in storytelling. In reading *In the Dream House* alongside discourses on coercive control, we do not want to suggest that Machado offers a more (or less) truthful story about intimate relationships than those considered in contemporary scholarship from social policy and criminology. The burden placed on victim-survivors to produce culturally coded markers of truth and reliability can contribute to a wider epistemic injustice that holds personal stories about abuse in suspicion by default.[1] For writers and others invested in self-representation, it becomes a challenge to reflect openly on traumatic experiences without inviting forms of judgement 'too similar to forms in which trauma was experienced' (Gilmore 2023, 3). To circumvent the normative demand to confirm *who* is telling the truth, memoir can provoke a different question: *how* is truth-making to happen? Machado's *In the Dream House* (2019) provides a commentary on the ways that fact-based testimony can be made to betray the testifier, and the ways that stories about abuse can be misheard – when heard at all. With these issues in mind, we draw attention to the inherent challenges in representing forms of violence in and through dominant understandings of gender and sexuality – challenges that continue to be shared across literature and the law, and that cannot be resolved through fixed notions of reliable testimony or the ideal victim.

Queer memoir, auto-theory, and the politics of respectability

Contemporary Anglophone queer literature is broadly marked by preoccupations with the storytelling forms made available through autobiography, memoir, and personal testimony, a pattern possibly explained through what Valerie Rohy (2010, 343) labels the 'legacy of the closet.' The documentation of individual queer lives produces an implicit – and sometimes, explicit – claim to political visibility and historical existence for queer communities (Orr 2021, 1; Cvetkovich 2003, 242). Archives of queer experience can provide evidence of the diversity of queer lives, and continues to be urgent work:

consider, for example, the vitriolic public debates around Maia Kobabe's graphic novel *Gender Queer: A Memoir* (2020), which became one of the most challenged books across US libraries in 2023 (Enis 2023). But not all queer memoirs aspire to be read as reliable non-fiction. The expectation that memoir must be believable is regularly challenged by experimental and polyvocal works that unsettle assumptions around the coherence of gender and sexuality, including those now commonly labelled 'auto-theory' (or sometimes 'autotheory'). Spearheaded by Paul Preciado's *Testo Junkie* (2017), Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* (2015), and Julietta Singh's *No Archive Will Restore You* (2018), auto-theory blends personal storytelling and theoretical inquiry, allowing for both the assertion of experiential knowledge and the critical analysis of such knowledge. Considering the feminist uptakes of auto-theory, Lauren Fournier (2021, 2) uses the term to describe works 'that exceed existing genre categories and disciplinary bounds, that flourish in the liminal spaces between categories, that reveal the entanglement of research and creation[.]'

Carman Maria Machado is a key contemporary North American author extending queer memoir into the domain of auto-theory. Machado's earlier book of short stories, National Book Award finalist *Her Body and Other Parties* (2017), anticipated a central question posed across *In the Dream House*: how does one articulate new experiences of violence using stories and legends inherited from the past? For example, the short story that opens the collection, 'The Husband Stitch,' presents a variation on the French folktale Bluebeard that foregrounds themes of domestic control, the erosion of consent, and subtle violations of bodily autonomy by predatory men. Mary Angeline Hood (2020, 989–990) reads Machado's use of myths and folk tales as foregrounding 'the epistemological value of storytelling in female experience and day-to-day survival,' and as challenging the preconception that 'only one type of knowledge – that which is provable by fact – is valid.'

Like *Her Body and Other Parties, In the Dream House* works closely with myths and folktales. The titular Dream House is not a queer space of safety. Rather, the house promises an ideal or myth of an intimate relationship, and explores those crises through which the myth starts to unravel. Within the first few pages of the memoir, Machado tells the reader that the dream house is 'real' and that if 'I cared to, I could give you the address, and you could drive there in your own car and sit in front of the Dream House and try to imagine the things that have happened inside' (7). The mode of address also reminds us that the Dream House is a familiar place: the section called '*Dream House* as Not a Metaphor' opens with the question, 'I daresay you have heard of the Dream House?' (7). The house is also multi-sited: it could be the narrator's own house in Iowa, or a barn in upstate New York, or the Woman's house in Bloomington, Indiana. Across these distances, the Dream House becomes a mobile microcosm of fantasy and failure; Machado describes the house as a 'convent of promise' (82), not only of domesticity but also of debauchery. On a broad reading, the Dream House could be any and every space of intimacy, but the early textual indicators of anxiety, fear, and violence point to a specific mode of storytelling around the mobile space of the house: the domestic noir.

Domestic noir is a storytelling genre typically set in a middle-class household that proves to be dangerous for a woman, with a narrator that is required to navigate escalating forms of violence (see Browne 2024; Philips 2021). The genre has historically explored the dangers posed to women by men within heterosexual relationships;

indeed, Machado refers at length to the 1944 film *Gaslight* (dir. George Cukor), which tells the story of a husband who attempts to trick his wife into believing she is delusional. The choice of heterosexual antecedents to assist in sense-making around violence in a queer relationship raises a question around the role (if any) of masculinities and femininities within the abusive practices themselves: most pertinently, is the Woman in the Dream House playing the part of the abusive man?

In the Dream House poses questions around gender and violence that are answered in part through the (loosely chronological) sequence of events in the relationship with the Woman, and in part through a plethora of scholarly histories, half-remembered television episodes, pop music videos, dappled childhood vignettes, bible stories, folktales and fairy tales, literary science-fiction, and other intertextual homages and clichés.[2] As Elias (2004) has shown, textual fragmentation can perform work in its own right without working toward completeness or a whole to be restored. In Machado, fragmentation makes visible the partial nature of personal memory, the tendency of memory to make unexpected connections between heterogenous times and places, and the specific impacts of trauma on the recollection of troubling events. 'I broke the stories down,' writes Machado (2020, 172), 'because I was breaking down and I didn't know what else to do.' The fragmentary and stylistically eclectic form of *In the Dream House* forecloses any final verdict relating to the causes of, or remedies for, intimate partner violence. Rather, by placing the personal memory of unhappy events alongside popular fictions, Machado poses a problem of communication: how can stories about villains be told *and believed* without reference to, or dependence on, those received templates for domestic abuse that populate the collective memory?

While textual fragmentation can be read as a meta-commentary on the limits of the narrative conventions that frequently attend stories about bad relationships, it can also perform positive work in affirming the value of queer archives. While there exist many stories about violence inflicted on queer bodies (e.g. Feinberg 1993), there are few that represent abuse between queer women in intimate relationships.[3] *In the Dream House* is explicitly concerned with the task of giving shape and structure to a memory that does not follow received cultural scripts around family violence. Ann Cvetkovich (2003, 7) suggests that trauma 'demands an unusual archive, whose materials, in pointing to trauma's ephemerality, are themselves frequently ephemeral.' *In the Dream House* prompts critical reflection around the frames through which queer archives become legible, and this legibility is most strained in relation to scenes of coercion and violence. In the opening section, 'Dream House as Prologue,' Machado writes about archival silences around queer domestic abuse:

> I enter into the archive that domestic abuse between partners who share a gender identity is both possible and not uncommon, and that it can look something like this. I speak into the silence. I toss the stone of my story into a vast crevice; measure the emptiness of the sound. (4)

In the Dream House does not invite a reading of its recollections as straightforwardly reliable: rather, Machado lays bare the challenges in navigating its intimate archive.[4] For example, the narrator uncovers on a digital memory card a set of photographs: close ups of the vulva of the Woman in the Dream House, 'flushed maroon with blood' and taken 'either just before fucking or just afterwards' (264). After deliberating

about the potential uses of these images, the narrator decides to delete them and feels a 'twinge of loss' (264). Evicted from the archive, these photographs achieve presence through absence, exposing the interplay between visibility and invisibility, seen and unseen.

Building an archive of violence between partners that share a gender identity is a risky political move. In the US context, same sex relationships continue to be stigmatised in the law, in State institutions, and in political fora. In response, the politics of respectability – or, following Duggan (2002), homonormativity – places a high premium on positive representations of LGBTIQA+ relationships. Homonormativity produces two distinct results: first, a hierarchy of persons from within the LGBTIQA+ umbrella, such that some groups are centred in struggles for rights and others are marginalised (see Santos 2013; Stryker 2008); and second, even for those groups centred in these struggles (e.g. middle-class, cisgendered white men), unpleasant or unsuccessful queer intimacies are strategically silenced. This centreing and silencing produces a dominant story about who should benefit from queer struggles and what kinds of relationships they should be having. There do exist alternative ways of imagining queer communities and futures beyond normative, 'respectable' models, and the work of Muñoz (2009) has been exceptionally fruitful in generating diverse conversations around queer utopias outside of homonormative discourses. However, the refusal of homonormativity in relation to diverse forms of queer existence has not necessarily entailed examination of the problems connected to conflict, harm, and violence. '[W]ithin this vision of queer utopia,' writes Isobel Lavers, 'there is little place for narratives of undoing, of violence perpetrated within queer communities against each other' (2024, 135). Byrne and Lake (2023, 1) also note that abuse between women in intimate relationships has been historically denied, including by feminists, due to the desire to posit lesbian relationships as 'egalitarian and utopian' and to show that women are 'naturally less violent than men.' To the extent that Domestic and Family Violence has been understood primarily in relation to cisgendered men as offenders and cisgendered women as victims, the category of violence has been strongly identified with cisgendered men as a group, or with a singular form of hegemonic masculinity most closely associated with cisgendered men. When violence enacted by women is acknowledged, an intersectional analysis reveals stratifications in the ways this violence is commonly understood and represented: cisgendered, white, middle-class women are most often regarded as victims responding to an oppressive gender order, and women of colour, Indigenous women, and working-class women are more likely to be regarded as potential criminals (Larance et al. 2022, 468). The public discourse on abuse between women in queer relationships is therefore shaped by these dual considerations: on the one hand, socially coded assumptions about the monstrous perpetrator and the ideal victim that reproduce existing hierarchies around race, class, and gender identity; and on the other hand, the strategic challenges for queer political movements in naming forms of violence that do not project a utopian model of queer existence.

We can now begin to understand why stories about violence between women, and especially between women in queer relationships, are less often published, rarely made into feature films or television series, and are never taken as paradigmatic cases for considerations of domestic and family violence.[5] The silence around queer domestic abuse is described by Kulbaga and Spencer (2024, 105) as a form of 'epistemic violence,' and they

position *In the Dream House* as a text that highlights the 'epistemic forms of violence that leave survivors struggling to make sense of their experience' (106). This epistemic violence also has a historical aspect: survivors may look for antecedents in popular culture that acknowledge and work through their experiences and find inexplicable gaps and omissions. Saidiya Hartman's concept of the violence of the archive is explicitly evoked by Machado (2020, 2) at the start of *In the Dream House*: 'sometimes stories are destroyed, and sometimes they are never uttered in the first place; either way something very large is irrevocably missing from our collective histories.' For Lavers (2024, 151), this archival silence prompts a central and possible intractable question: 'Can the archive become a place not only for queer remembrance, but also for a reckoning?'

Telling stories about coercive control

First published in 2019, *In the Dream House* arrived during a ripple of legislative initiatives in a number of Western countries to criminalise patterned practices of coercive and controlling behaviours. The term 'coercive control' was first popularised by Evan Stark, who used a strong metaphor of men trapping women as hostages in their own homes, leading him to characterise coercive control as a liberty crime rather than a crime of assault (Stark 2009). The perpetrator might undermine the liberty of the victim survivor by 'appropriating their resources; undermining their social support; subverting their rights to privacy, self-respect, and autonomy; and depriving them of substantive equality' (Stark 2009, 13). Commenting on proposed (and now enacted) legal reforms in some states in Australia, Jane Wangmann notes that the offence.

> may include physical violence, sexual violence, property damage, financial abuse, surveillance, isolation, denigration and many other individualised acts and behaviours. These all interact and build on each other to create the structure or architecture designed to control a particular victim within the context of pervasive gendered structural inequality which legitimates and enables the abuse. (2022, 59)

As this description indicates, coercive control does not necessarily exclude physical harm, but coercive control has entered the popular lexicon through its capacity to name non-physical violence as producing serious harms comparable to or in tandem with physical violence (see Bettinson, Munro, and Burton 2024, 2).

The concept of coercive control has enjoyed wide international uptake in policy and legal contexts, including criminal legislation relating to controlling and coercive behaviours in England and Wales (2015), Ireland (2018), Australia (2022), and France (2023), among others. European Union member states have also made rolling efforts to criminalise 'coercion and threats' in keeping with Article 33 of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (2011). While only the State of Hawaii has currently criminalised coercive control as a distinct offence (Wilder 2024), the concept of coercive control has also been incorporated into many civil statutes across the United States, often in the context of future anticipated reforms to criminal codes (see Cross 2022). In each national context, public understandings of coercive control tend to be strongly informed by media representations of harm and violence within intimate partner relationships, and

these representations themselves frequently travel across political and geographical borders (see Amin 2024). Our focus is therefore on coercive control as a conceptually broad and geographically dispersed heuristic for understanding non-physical violence linked to controlling behaviours, while acknowledging that the legal applications of the concept may involve pronounced jurisdictional differences.

Coercive control is not, in Stark's original and popular formulation, simply a name for controlling behaviours in a vacuum: as indicated above, the emphasis is placed on structural gender inequality as a key precondition for men trapping women in their own homes. This framing can create difficulties for applications in relation to LGBTIQA+ communities. There has been a persistent erasure of LGBTQIA+ identities in heteronormative framings of intimate partner violence, including the exclusion of sexual diversity from formative texts on coercive control (see Donovan and Barnes 2021). LGBTQIA+ people can sometimes struggle to name and report experiences of violence that are shaped by gender and sexual identities, without conforming to a script that identifies violence with masculinity and victimhood with femininity (see Reeves, McGowan, and Scott 2023, 2). This struggle has been compounded by historical stereotypes associating queer identities with criminality, such that it becomes difficult to articulate experiences of violence within queer communities outside of the stigma attached to these communities *tout court* (see Mogul, Ritchie, and Whitlock 2011). At the same time, emerging studies of male violence and online misogyny point to the convergence of anti-feminist ideologies with anti-LGBTQIA+ ideologies (Hill 2025, 21–22), such that when LGBTQIA+ communities are included in discussions around male cultures of violence, the inclusion is often in relation to homophobia and transphobia, rather than violence within gender and sexually diverse relationships. In this context, we consider here the ways that *In the Dream House* contributes to existing conversations around the need to diversify models of coercive control to include LGBTQIA+ experiences, and reflect on the strengths and limitations of legal frameworks for understanding the kinds of harm documented in Machado's memoir.

Across the first part of *In the Dream House*, Machado tracks a series of early incidents with the Woman that are identifiable as coercive control. After unexpectedly needing to comfort a new friend in a bathroom and arriving later to pick up the Woman, the narrator reports the following:

> [Your] girlfriend has called and texted you half a dozen times. *Where are you, where are you, where are you*, she asks, and just as you lift the phone to your ear to call her back, the front door of the building opens and a herd of scorers begins to pour out, including her. … Your girlfriend is glowering. Your new friend is running next to her, looking a little anxious and breathless, and gets to you first. 'She was just worried about you,' your new friend says, with such preemptive anxiety that you are taken aback. The three of you get in your car, and your girlfriend is radiating fury. (Machado 2020, 46)

This scene points to a well-documented feature of controlling behaviour: a sudden and unexpected outburst of rage that force the protagonist to consider whether their conduct is pleasing to the Woman. But the more subtle harm here is the isolation of networks of potential social support:

> You drive silently to the friend's house. When you get there, she seems almost reluctant to get out of the car, and once she's out she lingers, like there's something she wants to say. But

> then she goes inside. As you pull away from the curb, your girlfriend slams her hand on the dashboard as hard as she possibly can. (46)

The theme of isolation, or 'deprivation of social connectedness,' has been prevalent in existing literature on coercive control (Stark 2009, 15), and this harm is compounded for those within queer communities. Duke and Davidson (2009, 805) note that 'LGB individuals are often aware of almost everyone in their particular community, with couples tending to share the same friends. Because of the shared friendships of same-sex couples, relationship breakups threaten the circle of friends, and people may feel forced to choose sides.' In Machado's memoir, seemingly non-violent incidents where the narrator is discouraged from communicating with new friends – or indeed, old friends – can have a heightened effect in a context where the spaces available for queer safety are already cramped.

Talking about coercive control in queer contexts means raising awareness around the double-edged blade of belonging to tight-knit kinship networks during moments when kinship itself stops being a site of safety. Consider the following:

> The next day, after you say good-bye to your friends, you sit in the car in the parking lot as she talks at you – your friends hate me, they're jealous. An hour later you are still there, your head bent tearily against the window. The new bride walks by and notices you in your car. You see her slow down, her face crimped with puzzlement and concern. You shake your head ever so slightly, and she looks uncertain but mercifully she keeps walking so you can endure your punishment in peace. (Machado 2020, 62)

Like the previously cited incident, this scene links the direct harm of verbal abuse from the Woman to the indirect harm of further isolating the narrator from friends and community. *In the Dream House* thickens our understanding of abusive practices as existing not only within queer relationships, but as a problem that affects queer *communities* in distinct ways, given the typically close-knit character of such communities. Small communities can create barriers to disclosing experiences of abuse, and these barriers can be further compounded by the collective disengagement of some queer communities from legal processes, based on past and present failings of police to support community needs (see Reeves, McGowan, and Scott 2023). In this respect, the challenges for queer communities overlap and intersect with those facing ethnic minorities and diasporic communities, within which practices of violence and financial exploitation may exacerbate existing structures of isolation for migrants (see Mayeda, Cho, and Vijaykumar 2019; Singh and Sidhu 2020).

The wider challenges for understanding controlling behaviours within queer communities are also shaped by gendered assumptions around the relationship between offenders and victims. The gender identity of the Woman, or rather her connection to gender, is marked by Machado (2020, 24) in explicit and implicit ways. We are told she is rail-thin and androgynous. She has stereotypically masculine traits: she is recklessly ambitious, unable to communicate emotions, and has a passion for fast driving. As noted earlier, her controlling behaviours are juxtaposed with cultural references, such as *Gaslight*, featuring abusive cisgendered men. The narrator even articulates a fear that she might be pregnant after too much sex with the Woman. In an early incident, the Woman courageously 'protects' the narrator from abuse in the street. Later, the parents of the Woman are presented as a heterosexual couple in which the father may

be abusing the mother, and which invites the reader to consider whether the Woman may be inheriting patrilineal traits.

The significance of these plausibly gendered connections is not self-evident. Queer literary criticism has carved vital paths around the reductive work of mapping character traits onto a stereotypical grid of masculinity and femininity. Memoirs can have a performative capacity to rewrite motifs and even clichés in ways that unsettle gender binaries: on the one hand, Machado's use of conspicuously gendered folk tales and popular culture texts *could* invite us to conceive of a world-historical narrative of patriarchal abuse; on the other hand, Machado could be asking us to reconsider how narrow understandings of 'masculinity' and 'femininity' have contributed to the discursive erasure of violence within queer communities, except in those cases of homophobic texts that cast queer violence as a perverse effect of queerness itself. But to reimagine violence in queer storytelling outside of stereotypes around masculinity and femininity necessarily involves re-examining the connection between gender, violence, and villainy itself.

The incorporation of violence into narrative is frequently connected to the presence, or at least possibility, of a villain. Villains are frequently conceived as monstruous figures possessing unusual or exceptional psychological traits that motivate aberrant conduct: this is what Diane Shoos (2017, 75) characterises as the 'psychotic villain' in her study of domestic violence in Hollywood. Machado acknowledges that 'queer villains' can be hard to write, given the risk of inviting homophobic stereotypes, but villainous characters also add complexity to queer world-making, as long as they are allowed to live in worlds populated by other queer characters (50). But the Woman in the Dream House is not a plotting and planning villain, nor is she the 'psychotic villain' of Hollywood cinema. One example from *In the Dream House* shows how Machado navigates the complexity of villainy and motivation.

Going to a Halloween party, the Woman in the Dream House dresses up as a Dalek from *Doctor Who*. She has never watched the programme. But this does not stop her from grumpily trundles around in a cut-up cardboard box. The couple travels home after the party:

> When you get to the house, she is kicking the door. The knobs of her Dalek costume are falling off into the grass. You approach her. 'I have the keys,' you say, wearily. She jumps, and then begins to scream. 'Why would you scare me like that? What the fuck is wrong with you?' She is still yelling as you go inside. 'Why did you want to make such a fancy dinner?' she says. 'You fucked everything up, this whole night you fucked up. We just have this weekend together and you have fucked everything up.' She is still yelling as you begin the laborious process of washing your face, your skin emerging in patches through the makeup. 'What the fuck are you supposed to be, anyway?' (Machado 2020, 96)

This scene brings together themes found across *In the Dream House*: abrupt outbursts of abuse; intimidation in a domestic space; and the sense of fear pervading social outings. But the closing to the scene adds further complexity:

> She is still yelling as you stand in the shower, the temporary hair dye swirling creamily down the drain. She is still yelling as you put on your pajamas. In bed, she says, 'I want to fuck,' and you say, 'Maybe tomorrow,' and turn into your pillow. Maybe next Halloween will be better. (Machado 2020, 96)

This effort from the Woman to restore intimacy may have a gaslighting effect, as well as contributing to the absurdist bookending of an anecdote that begins with the comedy of the Dalek and ends with an abrupt invitation to sex. But like the scenes discussed above, this vignette contains no speculations as to the motives or intentions of the Woman. Later, the narrator tells us 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' (108). This is a surprisingly spartan or 'thin' approach to characterisation, not in the pejorative sense of lacking the 'thickness' required for meaningful context (see Geertz 1994), but in the sense of withholding the psychological clues that might ordinarily be offered to situate a villain within a moral frame. The story of the Woman contains no lessons about the trauma of damaged childhoods, the pitfalls of hubris, or ideological failings in relation to identity, gender, or sexuality. The singular biography of the Woman is not relevant to the naming of her abuse as a pattern of practice. She simply becomes any person who *does this*.

Categorical distinctions should not be made between male villains in heterosexual relationships and female abusers in queer relationships, as if each belonged to a different universe. In Machado's memoir, the Woman exercises power over the narrator and this power draws on earlier sexist messaging the narrator has received about her body, her emotions, and her desires. The question is not necessarily whether this is 'men's violence' or 'women's violence'; rather, the challenge is to describe violence that exists within a queer relationship *in the wider context of a patriarchal and homophobic society*. The difficulty is that dominant frames for understanding violence prioritise the identification of a perpetrator, and tend to distinguish victim and perpetrator through highly gendered lens (Duke and Davidson 2009, 801–802). In this context, we may need to reconsider received ideas about and caricatures of villains and perpetrators. The influential formulation of coercive control by Evan Stark casts perpetrators as highly motivated: one does not take a domestic hostage without knowing that one is doing so. As Walby and Towers (2018) note, Stark's model centres the motivations of the perpetrator over other circumstantial elements that may impact the character or severity of domestic abuse, such as the resources available to victim survivors. But even the figure of the 'motivated perpetrator' itself can be misleading. Australian journalist Jess Hill (2025) has recently argued for re-engagement with complex approaches to DFV developed in psychopathology, for the reason that prevention work 'has to find a way into the minds and bodies of those who are most likely to act violently – sexually, physically, emotionally – and persuade them not to do so' (112). Hill notes that while the feminist critique of patriarchal ideologies and attitudes remains foundational to addressing the social contexts for DFV, the construction of psychologically reductive or caricatured villains can alienate key segments of the community (including current and future perpetrators) from difficult conversations about prevention and healing. In her reading of *In the Dream House*, Isobel Lavers notes that Machado deliberately subverts the binary between villain and victim:

> [Machado] defies the traditional narrative arc of misery memoirs, which often center narratives of struggle followed by neoliberal exaltation, and simplistic definitions of good and evil, protagonist and villain. Through this structural creativity, Machado challenges

> how narratives are presented, and better establishes the complexity and emotional depths of her experiences. (Lavers 2024, 143)

Defying the dichotomy between victim and villain, *In the Dream House* indirectly challenges ideas about motivated perpetrators embedded in Stark's metaphor of coercive control as a hostage situation. The Woman in the Dream House is highly reactive, unpredictable, and fickle in her motivations and purposes; indeed, this is one reason why the narrator finds it difficult to condemn the Woman's behaviour in unequivocal legal or moral terms.

The often equivocal characterisation of the Woman leads to the wider question of the benefits and shortcomings of reframing lived experiences of intimate partner abuse within a legal lexicon and in relation to legal reforms. Queer theory in Anglophone scholarly contexts has long engaged with questions of power and ethics in intimate relationships, but its engagements with legal reform discourses have been uneven. As Raj (2020) has noted, queer theorists in the US context have been split in relation to pro – LGBTQIA+ legal reforms, with some ongoing concern that 'the demand for gay and lesbian legal recognition rests on the discursive conditions that have historically been responsible for policing sexual minorities in the first place'. Raj further argues that the 'emotional structures' linked to narratives of legal progress (e.g. marriage equality) can obfuscate more complex forms of discrimination or exclusion (see Thomas, McCann, and Fela 2020). Similarly, Alexander Sasha Kondakov (2023, 1421) frames the relationship between family violence law reform and queer communities in terms of an underlying paradox: 'on the one hand, law – criminal law especially – has historically been utilised as a tool of oppression of queer people; on the other hand, legal recognition of LGBT+ experiences, identities, and filiations is actively sought and positively regarded by LGBT+ communities across cultures.' Feminist and queer scholars have long critiqued the carceral logics underpinning legal reforms around Domestic and Family Violence, and pointed to the ways that marginalised women – including queer women – are more likely to be convicted, or to receive longer custodial sentences, in relation to criminal codes ostensibly designed to prevent violence (Whalley and Hackett 2017). While efforts to criminalise coercive control have often been welcome by many DFV advocates, critics have voiced concerns that coercive control legislation can disproportionately affect marginalised offenders already more likely to have been in contact with the criminal justice system; perpetuates a carceral policy orientation without addressing the failures of incarceration as a rehabilitative technology; introduces a false dichotomy between violence that coerces and violence that does not; and over-emphasises the motivations of the perpetrator over the circumstances of the victim (Walby and Towers 2018; Walklate & Fitz-Gibbon, 2021).

We are not advocating a carceral reading of Machado that would push toward criminalising the conduct of the Woman in the Dream House. However, we do use *In the Dream House* to consider the ways that violence within queer relationships can become legible, and to reflect on further implications for public discussions around coercive control within the frame of Domestic and Family Violence. Being mindful of the challenges for LGBTQIA+ narratives about domestic abuse, the significance of *In the Dream House* is that it tells a story that does not coalesce around a fixed model and that frustrates the judicial drive toward definitions. One does not need testimony in a

legalistic discourse to say that the Woman is unambiguously abusive and her actions are manifestly harmful. We do need to tell stories about problematic queer relationships more often and in more places and to more people. But if there is a tension central to Machado's project, it is that an appetite exists to hear authentic stories about domestic abuse in queer relationships, but that these stories can most reliably be heard as 'true' when rendered through the 'public story' of domestic abuse in heterosexual relationships.

Conclusion: you

In the Dream House adopts a second person address for many of its vignettes. In a section entitled 'Dream House as Myth,' Machado writes.

> When you try to talk about the Dream House afterward, some people listen. Others politely nod while slowly closing the door behind their eyes; you might as well be a proselytizing Jehovah's Witness or an encyclopedia peddler. Kind to you in person, what they say to others makes its way back to you: *We don't know for certain that it's as bad as she says.* (2020, p. 255)

The second person address implicates the reader in the world of the Dream House, while enacting a split between Machado's past self and the authorial voice of the memoir. In this way, the 'you' also has a distancing effect: it addresses a version of Machado that has not yet found a way out of the Dream House. In a chapter called 'Dream House as an Exercise in Point of View,' Machado comments on this former self by drawing a contrast between the future trajectory of the 'I' who moves away, writes a book, marries and buys a house, and the past 'you' who is described in terms of personal failures: writing 'mostly garbage', withdrawing from social opportunities, and consumed with shame (2020, p. 12). In excavating the trauma of the Dream House, the memoir reanimates this earlier version of Machado. But this does not mean that intimate partner violence is relegated to the past in the manner of much storytelling in Hollywood films (see Shoos 2017); rather, *In the Dream House* adopts the second person address to interpolate a future reader – or, to paraphrase Jacques Derrida (1996, 36), the book enacts its archival work as a promise to the future. 'If you need this book,' writes Machado, 'it is for you.' (np)

Through its construction of an 'I' and 'you' that move between past, present, and future, Machado's text pushes against the temporal conventions that would position the narrator of a domestic violence memoir as simply or unquestionably heroic. Unlike domestic noir, a genre in which perpetrators of domestic abuse are most often punished, *In the Dream House* refuses the closure of the revenge plot. Or, alternatively, the retribution for the narrator is simply the writing of the book itself. In a chilling scene, the Woman hisses at the narrator 'You're not allowed to write about this […] Don't you ever write about this. Do you fucking understand me?' (Machado 2020, 47). The narrator controls the public record of the relationship. Moreover, Machado as a character in her own book comes to find a form of narrative closure through the romantic stories that had previously entrapped her. When she first meets her, the Woman is involved in a relationship with another women called Val. At the end of the memoir, Machado does arrive at her happy ending through a relationship with Val: in the Acknowledgements, Machado describes Val as 'my plot twist, my fate, my fairytale ending'. The fairy tale motif, with all

its heteronormative baggage and its normalisation of gender-based hierarchies, unexpectedly delivers on a promise of romance and domesticity – a promise that, as Vider (2021) has shown in detailed historical perspective, has been denied to queers for so long. This is not to undermine the radical deconstructive nature of the text or the fundamental challenge it poses to narratives of romance. It is simply to point out that there are moments at which Machado comes to have her cake and eat it too.

In the Dream House engages in urgent sense-making work around queer domesticity, violence in queer relationships, and questions of power that extend beyond or challenge heteronormative frames of reference. As a contribution to an archive of queer domestic abuse, Machado stages an important cultural moment for queer storytellers to engage with, reflect on, and challenge the ways that coercive control has transformed our understanding of gender and violence. And although legal reforms have worked toward better understandings of the forms of violence that affect LGBTIQA+ communities, the epiphany reached by Machado (2020, 129) remains substantively true: 'Most types of domestic abuse are completely legal.'

Notes

1. Victim survivors are often subject to what Tuerkheimer (2017) describes as 'credibility discounting' in relation to the testimonies of across each stage of a legal process. See also Stewart (2019).
2. Many of the chapters bear the names of popular clichés, such as 'Dream House as Famous Last Words', 'Dream House as I Love Lucy', and 'Dream House as American Gothic'.
3. Notable exceptions include Melissa Febos' book of personal essays *Abandon Me: Memoirs* (2017), and the Booker Prize winning novel *Girl, Woman, Other* (2019) by Bernardine Evaristo.
4. On intimate archives, see Dever, Vickery, and Newman (2009, 10).
5. A significant exception is the Booker Prize winning *Girl, Woman, Other* by Evaristo (2019), a book about twelve black marginalised British women that includes, among its different stories, a rare depiction of an abusive relationship between women (see Strauss 2023).

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