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*Dissident Self-Narratives: Radical and Queer Life Writing*

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**“I just don’t want to be so likeable that anyone wants to rape me”: queering the affects of trauma in Myriam Gurba’s Mean**

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**“I just don’t want to be so likeable that anyone  
wants to rape me”:  
queering the affects of trauma in  
Myriam Gurba’s *Mean***

Gabrielle Adjerad

**Abstract**

In *Mean*, a memoir published in 2017 which chronicles her coming of age as queer and Chicana, Myriam Gurba consciously uses humor to talk about endemic sexual assault and her aggression. She has explained this gesture as a way of challenging a hegemonic “canon” saturating stories of sexual violence with piety, describing rape as a “baptismal experience” to be approached with solemnity (Gurba, 2018). This article contends that the description of trauma the memoir foregrounds can be read in the light of the queer approach developed by Ann Cvetkovich as “a name for experiences of socially situated political violence” (Cvetkovich, 2003). Through the ambiguous relationship with the figures of saints that the book contains, Gurba claims a tradition of queer self-writing which highlights moral ambiguity that resists the forced innocence assigned to the “ideal victim” (Yap, 2017). As she painfully negotiates the stance of the likeable narrator and points up to the centrality of meanness and other “ugly feelings” (Ngai, 2003), she disrupts narratives based on sympathy such as self-help manuals (Cvetkovich, 2005) and irreverently perturbs the empathy assumed by the genre of the feminist confession (Felski, 1989). Refusing an understanding of her feelings as purely pathological and a therapeutical conception of writing, she lingers on the stereotype of “the final girl,” a very fleshly ghost (Gordon, 1997) which haunts her, and radically questions the possibility of catharsis as a teleology of the memoir. Her description of trauma brings to mind the way Cvetkovich displaces insidious violence within the ordinary life of present sensations.

Myriam Gurba is a Mexican American writer and visual artist. She is the author of two books of short stories, *Dahlia Season: Stories and a Novella* (2007) and *Painting their Portraits in Winter: Stories* (2015), collections of

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poetry as well as numerous thought pieces on the internet. Nonetheless, it is her true-crime memoir *Mean*, a self-narrative published in 2017 by Coffee House Press in which she investigates her own sexual assault, surveying the wider impact of violence against women, which has garnered the most attention from critics. Released in the wake of the ‘Me Too’ Movement, the text was praised for its idiosyncratic tone and was variously designated as “scalding” (Seghal), “playful and rebellious” (Hoover) or giving prominence to a “piss-and-vinegar voice” (Kane). Gurba has stated that her choice to use humour to talk about rape was voluntary and her indignant flair also sets apart her unapologetic opinion columns, such as the one which went viral for condemning Jeanine Cummins’ *American Dirt* for its racism (Gurba “Pendeja, You Ain’t Steinbeck”)<sup>1</sup>. Divided into sixty fragments, sometimes as short as one paragraph, the book is a collection of heterogeneous pieces such as newspaper articles, scripts from the trial, poems, transcripts of grades, lists taken from the death row tracking system or narrative vignettes. It endeavours to transcribe Gurba’s own experience, while engaging with the ghost of Sophia Castro Torres, a Mexican woman whom she didn’t know personally but who was murdered by the same assailant, Tommy Jesse Martinez. The text thus describes two rapes, one in a third-person point of view and one in the first person.

A socially and politically committed writer, Gurba expresses her views outside of her fiction, and the reasons for calling *Mean* a queer memoir, with a narrow understanding of the term as designating “same-sex sexual object choice” (Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 8), could simplistically be brought back to biographical and contextual elements. Gurba herself identifies as queer (Pasricha). She has toured with Sister Spit, a lesbian feminist spoken-word collective<sup>2</sup> and hosts an advice podcast called AskBiGrlz. Even if Gurba does not write a “coming-out story” or a “romance novel” (*M*, 155), the book does allude to lesbian love stories as in her previous short story collections. *O, The Oprah Magazine* has called *Mean* one of the “Best LGBTQ Books of All Time”; however, beyond this delusively straightforward understanding of the queerness of *Mean*, some occurrences of the term in reviews seem to unlock a deeper and shifting definition of the notion, stretching it beyond mere thematic content to embrace literary means. Hoover argues, for instance, that Gurba endeavours to “queer genre” by subverting autobiographical linearity. We read elsewhere that “her voice is an alchemy of queer magic feminist wildness, and intersectional explosion” (Soloway). Therefore, what makes this self-narrative about sexual assault queer and dissident? We may remember here Sedgwick’s more capacious definition of queerness:

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That’s one of the things that “queer” can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or *can’t be made*) to signify monolithically. (*Tendencies*, 7)

This impossibility to signify gender or sexuality univocally has relevance to *Mean*’s refusal of normativity. Gurba has notably resisted a labelling of her book under the Zeitgeist category of the Me Too Movement, as she focusses on stranger assault, instead of aggressions within existing relationships, thus interrogating a monolithic grasp of the violence inflicted to women (Racho). Through her evocation of the murder of a Mexican woman, she also opens gaps and dissonances within the apparent unity of gender by evoking other parameters of difference such as ethnicity, nationality and sexuality which cross over and fracture a unitary identity discourse. Formally, she is irreverent regarding the memoir, departing from survivor stories which she considers as a genre in itself, voicing her opposition notably to the lexical field of religion to be found in a hegemonic “canon” saturating stories of sexual violence with piety, describing rape as a “baptismal experience” to be approached with solemnity (Gurba “Why I use Humor”).<sup>3</sup>

This essay contends that the irreverent depiction of trauma and the avoidance of morality that *Mean* foregrounds can be read in the light of the queer approach developed by Ann Cvetkovich as “a name for experiences of socially situated political violence” (3). Although Cvetkovich admits being poised between a “queer” and “lesbian” framework, her approach can be deemed queer for various reasons: she engages with an archive of mostly lesbian public cultures but chooses texts which entertain a critical relation to monolithic understandings of these cultures (exploring class, racial and national specificities). She talks about traumas that she considers to be linked to “lesbian locations” (3) such as incest or AIDS, using this “unabashedly minoritarian perspective” (7) to approach national trauma histories. She departs from a medicalised and healing model of trauma which has been instrumental to pathologising LGBTQ communities in favour of a political and collective paradigm; she eschews the solemnity of a trend of feminist and lesbian discourse on trauma to focus on texts with a radical and amoral edge. Mostly, Cvetkovich’s insistence on delineating new cultures born of affective experiences can shed a different light on the disturbing emotions that *Mean* conjures up and which have been deemed as deviating from the ones fuelled by traditional genres of feminist confession<sup>4</sup> and survivor story.

First, we will see that, as Gurba painfully negotiates the stance of the likeable narrator and points up to the centrality of meanness and other “ugly

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feelings” (Ngai), she disrupts narratives based on sympathy such as self-help manuals and irreverently perturbs the empathy assumed by the genre of the feminist confession by engaging with the reader’s cruelty. Through the ambiguous relationship with the figures of saints that the book contains, Gurba claims a tradition of queer self-writing which highlights moral ambiguity and resists the image of the ideal victim. Then, we will focus on how Gurba refuses an understanding of her feelings as purely pathological. Dissenting from a therapeutical conception of writing, she lingers on the stereotype of the “final girl,” a very fleshly ghost which haunts her, and radically questions the possibility of catharsis as a teleology of the memoir. Her description of trauma can thus be informed by the way Cvetkovich displaces insidious violence within the ordinary life of present sensations

### **Resisting empathy and sympathy**

In *Mean*, Gurba uses the memoir in a way which strikingly departs from the politics of feminist confession as they are delineated by Rita Felski. According to the latter, the genre, inspired by the older practices of consciousness-raising workshops, can be conceived as a first-person narrative foregrounding “the most personal and intimate” (87) yet spontaneously creating an intimate bond with an implied reader—a woman—who identifies with the experience depicted. In that sense, the genre contains an implicit tension between idiosyncrasy and representativity as it “is less concerned with unique individuality or notions of essential humanity than with delineating the specific problems and experiences which bind women together” (94). The assumption of this “ideal listener” (Kaplan, 6) is brutally deflected by Gurba. Suggesting that models of transmission of feeling mediated by art, such as sympathy (“I feel what a character in the work feels,” Ngai, 82) or empathy (“the work’s ‘feeling’ is a duplicate of what I feel,” Ngai, 82), are not necessarily suited to the subject matter, she showcases a flawed system of communication, resting on an unequal balance of power.

### **Confronting the reader’s violence**

Right from the beginning of the story, Gurba mobilises an adversarial stance towards the reader and she demonstrates “affect’s surprising ability to produce distance rather than immediacy” (Ngai, 83). This disconnection is manifest in the epigraph taken from a Mexican song by Jenni Rivera: “Lo mejor que tu puedo desear es que te vaya mal” (The best I can wish for you is that everything goes wrong). The lyrical fragment is equivocal as it can

constitute an address to Gurba's rapist or a paradoxical praise of the epistemological potential of depression. The pronoun "you" also establishes an intense bond with a reader to whom the narrator also wishes that everything goes wrong; glanced at the threshold of the text, Gurba's *hypocrite lecteur* is only reluctantly admitted. Recurring *captatio malevolentiae* tease the addressee who is constantly jeered at for their prejudice.<sup>5</sup> For example, when Gurba evokes her first words in English, she derogatorily alludes to the reader's presumed xenophobia: "so please, dear reader, *si no te molesta demasiado*, pass me the metaphorical French fries as you whisper what you wish had been the first un-American words to pass through your uncorrupted lips" (*M*, 5). Here, by blending words of Spanish within the text, she only pretends to solicit the reader's will ("*si no te molesta demasiado*"), insulting racist and patriotic preconceptions associating the foreign with the impure ("uncorrupted lips").

This brutal pedagogy which puts us in an awkward position is also implied by the incipit of the memoir. *Mean* opens with the voyeuristic and unexpected description of a rape. In that sense, it presents a form of violence which is not often featured in feminist representations of women.<sup>6</sup> As Maggie Nelson ponders in her reckoning on cruelty, female aggressivity has long been a taboo and the most topical scenarios of violence are "the rape and revenge" model (73) and stories of self-mutilation. However, she suggests that women artists have also proved excellent at "exposing the cruelties of others" (75). The opening itself involves us in the scene of violence and makes us share the narrator's sadism:

Let's become a spot upon which fateful moonlight shines.  
Let's become that night.  
Let's become that park...  
We open our eyes. We allow them to adjust to the place and things  
described.  
Seasonal quiet prevails.  
Nothing squeaks or whimpers...  
A dark-haired girl walks alone.  
Her foot falls onto the grass. We see up her skirt. She's not wearing  
underwear, so we can see that special part of her. It's the hole  
Persephone fell into. (*M*, 1)

A collective entity, in which readers can recognise themselves, is truly invited to partake in this metamorphic prologue, as the anaphoric injunction underlines. This implies an apparent effort but the image leaves us no choice: we are plunged in *medias res* in the spectacle of the gruesome aggression. By insisting on silence and on the quiet before the storm, Gurba creates a form of distasteful suspense urging us to consider the rape as an event to anticipate.

Moreover, the mention "we see up her skirt" also creates a more unnerving complicity by progressively incorporating thoughts which pertain to the rapist. After the innocuous transformations which have made us meld with the landscape, she insidiously forces us to espouse the gaze of the attacker, his myths ("the hole Persephone fell into"), the interpretation of her body as an invitation ("that special part of her"), his threatening and joyful comments on the deed to come ("It won't look like that much longer", *M*, 1). The unease grows as we are confronted with a Faulknerian intertext, the shack of corn recalling the specific rape scene in *Sanctuary* ("his slack corn slides out of her. Cum oozes from between her legs. It gleams like unspeakable poetry", *M*, 2).

If she does not spare the ghastliest details, Gurba does reflect on the fact that the victim, Sophia, eludes her. Even though she is vulnerable and attacked, she retains autonomy and power, notably over the reader. The writer insists on challenging this preconception about storytelling: "We may feel that because we are privy to the wreckage she belongs to us too, but she does not" (*M*, 2). Here, the feeling of mastery conveyed by the intimacy of the scene that the narratee might experience is explicitly designated as illusory and the text insists on their lack of understanding of Sophia's plight. By suggesting that the implied reader could have a desire for destruction and appropriation, Gurba debunks theories about the ideal feminine listener (Kaplan, 6). Testing the onlooker's gaze and their intentions in an experiment of thought could be the crux of this bizarre incipit. Its effects are close to what Maggie Nelson attributes to Ana Mendieta's pieces *Untitled (Rape Scene)* (1973) and *People Looking at Blood*, *Moffitt* (1973). In these two works, Mendieta respectively staged herself as a rape victim, inviting fellow students to come to her apartment to witness the scene, and filmed passers-by as they contemplated a massive stain of blood over a doorway. Nelson considers that, in Mendieta's work, cruelty "leaks out to the viewer" (79), who finds themselves questioned: how will they participate in the terrible spectacle they are given to contemplate? According to Nelson, the interest of Mendieta's art stems from the compulsion to reenact scenes whereby terror is inflicted, reflecting the "more aggressive borderline sadistic motivations and effects" of her projects (78-79). Similarly, in Gurba's opening, we seem to see the author lurking and whispering: "Look at this pile of carnage, with no clear story, source, assailant, or victim. Just look at it. Now look at others looking at it. (And I will be looking at you looking.)" (Nelson 80). The similarity between Gurba's intentions and Ana Mendieta's pieces is pointed at by the memoir itself, which frequently refers to the artist's legacy. At some point in the narrative, she unexpectedly recreates the alleged murder of Mendieta by her husband, sculptor Carl Andre

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(“The other day, as I was cleaning my bedroom, I decided, for fun, to act out Mendieta’s murder”, *M*, 32). In spite of the apparent levity of the recreation (“for fun”), the narrator really endangers herself by attempting to mimic her fall (“I took off my clothes, set up my camera, and struggled against an imaginary husband...My shadow froze mid-plummet”, *M*, 32) and capture this image (“My camera clicked”, *M*, 32). As the eye of the camera, we are forced to attend a tangential scene of self-harm, and this shock-treatment could emphasise a sense of passive cruelty on the part of the reader.

### **Hoarding and eluding**

Later in the memoir, Gurba depicts her own assault which obviously resonates with Sophia’s rape. In spite of a spectacular teasing of the story which echoes the braggart tone of the incipit (“Here comes a classic moment”, *M*, 108), the voice quickly retracts and feels the need to pause. In this deferral, the narrator underlines what prevents her to move forward with the narrative, her reticence to share her story:

A possessive part of me wants to hoard this story. I want to chipmunk or squirrel away the memory of this event, place it in a tree trunk with the memories of all the other rapes, attempted rapes, and gropes, memories that will never be released or consumed. When a man asks, ‘What did he do to you?’, he’s asking to eat one of these traumatic acorns. Girls never ask for these seeds. They know what it’s like to be degraded and fucked up by this world, to be made a big-time bottom by life. They don’t need the details of my particular shame to construct empathy. (*M*, 108)

In the tension between speaking out and secrecy, one hears the criticisms and dilemmas formulated by feminists and queer theorists around the act of confession, in the wake of *The History of Sexuality*. Foucault has famously debunked the “repressive hypothesis” (10) which posits a historical censorship of sexual discourse in the Victorian era, underlining, conversely, an institutional and social incitement for disclosure “through explicit articulation and endlessly accumulated detail” (18), a verbal proliferation which would be less liberatory than regulatory and normative. The “man” quoted by Gurba is read as exerting one of these polymorphous techniques of power. By demanding to be informed apparently neutrally, he is immediately construed as gathering aspects of her “particular shame.” The expression which associates “details” and “shame,” as well as the binary opposition between men and women, condense the process through which the apparent benign curiosity for the event and the epistemological concern re-enact a debasement of women and essentialise a hierarchy of gender norms (“degraded,” “fucked



up," "big-time bottom"). The masculine supremacy over how rape is handled is well encapsulated in the coded and archetypal terms referring to trauma ("acorns" and "seeds"). The imagery of devouring food also gestures towards the criticisms which have underlined how sexual abuse has been turned into a mass culture spectacle, and how survivor discourse has been recuperated by the media to be treated as a form of sensationalist entertainment, a pleasure born out of the pain of victims (Alcoff and Gray, 260-290). More so, the passivity of the listener and the clear differentiation between himself and the assailant ("what did he do to you?") makes us think of Sontag's reflections on an inane form of compassion which does not necessarily translate into understanding and even less so into action. According to Sontag, sympathy is not sufficient as it can go along with innocence that prevents us from "locating how our privileges are located on the same map as their suffering, and may...be linked to their suffering" (102). Simultaneously, another model of empathy is brought to the fore by the collective noun "girls," one that would not necessitate artificial reiteration of the open secret. The implicit knowledge shared by women serves as a reminder of what Sedgwick calls the "epistemological privilege of unknowing" (*Epistemology*, 5) which organises the laws around rape and grooms male sexuality in a careful education of silence and ignorance, practised as tools of command.

In another reflexive meditation on the rape, Gurba confesses a deliberate withdrawal of elements:

I told a detective about it, but I didn't tell him everything. Some parts felt too personal for the historical record...By denying certain events a place in the historical record, there's a certain denial of truth. With that denial comes dignity. Belief in one's basic dignity is like makeup. It helps you leave the house. It protects your real face... Sometimes, it's best to protect what the arms, faces, fingers and mouths of strangers have done to you from misinterpretation. (*M*, 154)

Here, the allusion to the face summons Gurba's complex minor position, as a woman who is racially identified as Mexican, and whose sense of exposure and visibility is therefore heightened. It is here counteracted by an invocation of what Edouard Glissant has called a certain "right to opacity" (204-205). The comparison with "makeup" reminds us of what Glissant says of the coloniser's power in its scopic dimension of surveillance updated through the figure of the detective. According to Glissant, the colonised person's strategy of resistance can be concealment, a refusal to be seen in a regime which constructs him as visible and transparent (Britton, 19-24). In order to participate in the exchange on equal terms, Gurba creates an unreadable

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image of herself, covered in artificial cosmetics, enshrined in an armour of protection (reminiscent of the allusions to Joan of Arc which punctuate the book). Conceived as a project of self-defence, the act of dissimulation serves as a vital means to contend with this situation of bodily vulnerability. Yet, the affective attachment to secrecy ("too personal") also brings to mind the "epistemology of the closet" described by Sedgwick, the process through which knowledge and sexuality have been aligned and made to intersect when it comes to heterosexuality whereas same-sex sexuality has been constituted as privateness and forced to repression as an object of cognition. The allusion to the exit and the entrance in the public domain ("it helps you leave the house") also bears similarities with "coming out" which, according to Sedgwick, is never a total and final process, but a prolonged experience, constantly challenged by the closet as a "shaping presence" (*Epistemology*, 68). The refusal of "misinterpretation" constitutes an assertion of the character's irreducible density as a queer Chicana woman, an injunction to respect her differences and a resistance to be assimilated under the pretence of understanding.

### **Female saints and moral ambiguity**

The link between politics and affects which Cvetkovich asserts is of paramount importance to understand the title of the memoir and the way meanness is conceptualised as a resistance to an emancipation based on moral superiority. In a chapter entitled "The Problem of Evil," the narrator endeavors to delineate her unease regarding female mystics and martyrs encountered early in childhood when reading *A Child's Book of Saints*: "Bad things happened to the saintliest ones...Pirates and aristocrats raped them. Barbarians carved their breasts and noses off. It seemed that the nicer you were, especially during the Middle Ages, the meaner the world was" (*M*, 16). The antithesis ("the nicer", "the meaner") stresses the absurd and paradoxical injustice. In this theodicy undertaken at the threshold of life, the narrator comes to the surprising conclusion of virtue's inefficiency in keeping persecution, death and destruction at bay. The religious text's inability to offer a satisfying response to evil's embeddedness within ordinary life also leads her to adopt a substitute document of reference: "I skimmed *The Communist Manifesto*, which I'd wedged into the Gospels. Vague as it was, I still preferred Marx's alms-for-everyone utopia to the snow-white heaven we got snapshots of in class. White is so hard to keep clean" (*M*, 65). This preference for Marxist doxa seems to provide a makeshift assistance which is more suited to the narrator's

intuition of the impossibility of purity ("white is so hard to keep clean"). The replacement of the moral by the political epitomised by the entwined books also evokes the criticisms addressed by Wendy Brown to a trend of feminism which would compensate a lack of power by a moral indictment of authority, suggesting that virtue would be the only weapon of the dispossessed (44).<sup>7</sup> In keeping with Brown's Nietzschean developments, Gurba often uses the religious metaphor to refer to weakened states of dispossession. For instance, her sister's anorexia is depicted as a desire for transcendental elevation. In this mock-heroic move, fasting idealises Ofelia ("Her illness made me understand the meaning of female sovereignty. Ofelia deserved to be bathed in light", *M*, 53), but the text highlights the destructive side-effects of goodness. Ofelia's quite literal physical disappearance constitutes a culmination of her desire to access the realm of "good girliness" (*M*, 52).

In this refusal of fairytale whiteness, Gurba inscribes herself in this tradition set forth by Cvetkovich of queer texts about trauma which lay emphasis on the reversibility of the status of oppressor and victim: she seems wary of her own capacity for evil. The text's complex feat is to not reduce meanness to a form of self-defense:

We act mean to defend ourselves from boredom and from those who would chop off our breasts. We act mean to defend our clubs and institutions. We act mean because we like to laugh. Being mean to boys is fun and a second-wave feminist duty. Being rude to men who deserve it is a holy mission. Sisterhood is powerful, but being a bitch is more exhilarating. Being a bitch is spectacular. (*M*, 17)

The conflation of an aesthetic quest and a strategic one is interesting here. Political and dignified aims ("defend our clubs and institutions," "those who would chop off our breasts," "a second-wave feminist duty") are blended with more gratuitous and entertaining ends ("boredom," "laugh," "fun," "exhilarating," "spectacular") thus engendering a form of undecidability as to how legitimised meanness really is. Gurba resists a one-sided praise of the "ugly feeling" (Ngai) as a matter of life or death. Employing sacred language, Gurba operates a total reversal of moral polarities in which what seems to be at stake is the messiness of lived ethical experience. This is in keeping with Tessman's interrogation of non-ideal morals (*MF*, 76) stemming from praxis in an imperfect world where oppressed people are more subjected to uncomfortable dilemmas and "moral trouble" (5). Normative rules and categorical imperatives are absent from Gurba's monologue on meanness which focuses on a catalogue of situations and actions requiring their own adapted rules.

This blend of art and necessity is also explicitly designated within the book as a sign of belonging to the queer community: "Being mean isn't for everybody. It's best practiced by those who understand it as an art form. These virtuosos live closer to the divine. They're queers. To observe the queer art of being mean, watch *Paris is Burning*" (M, 17). Here, Gurba explicitly refers to the act of shade. Throwing shade as a "[process] of a publicly performed dissimulation that aims either to protect oneself from ridicule or to verbally or psychologically attack others in a haughty or derogatory manner" (Hawley, 1201-1202) must be understood in its context of emergence in New York City's ethnic working-class, gender-bending community of voguing, as a means of resisting a hostile pressure for conformity. It is notably evoked in Jennie Livingston's famous documentary on the ballroom drag scene in Manhattan and in the mostly Latino House of Xtravaganza, which would explain Gurba's reference—although this reference may seem to reduce shade to a film which has been widely criticised as a white appropriation of poor Black and Latino cultural experience (hooks, 145-156). Nevertheless, what is interesting in this film, as stated in Butler's response to hooks, is that it "documents neither an efficacious insurrection nor a painful resubordination but an unstable coexistence of both" (95). Inspired by the queer art of shade, Gurba places her sophisticated jabs at the audience under the sign of this wavering between gratuitous violence and self-preservation, where meanness is not just pure self-defence but a dazzling spectacle. Gurba thus seems to side with Butler in the controversy as the "spectacle" of black experience is precisely what hooks blames the film for: the "focus on pageantry" obscuring "the ritual of the black drag ball" to transform the communal experience into an "entertaining dramatic display" (hooks, 150) oriented towards the outsider (white) gaze. More so, hooks condemns Livingston for portraying the people in the documentary as cut off from the "real" world and living in fantasy. She is particularly shocked by the treatment of Venus Xtravaganza, whom Gurba praises as the real heroine of the documentary: "The audience does not see Venus after the murder. There are no scenes of grief. To put it crassly, her dying is upstaged by spectacle. Death is not entertaining" (155). On the contrary, Butler insists on the conflation of "realness" and "performance" in the film, and the fundamental ambivalence of gender performance as both reiterating norms and rearticulating them.<sup>8</sup>

Gurba does not hesitate to probe her enemy within, examining her internalised racist slurs and her own potential for brutality notably as an American tourist. When she visits the Mexican desert during a Catholic

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pilgrimage, she meets a couple of American expatriate missionaries. Their daughter's bossy behaviour triggers a flashing fantasy of murder:

I am a gringa, and since gringos are really good at exploiting Mexico as a liminal space, a shadow rose in me and eclipsed my morality. Images of violence toward the missionaries' daughter sped through my mind. I could smash her head with a rock, beat her with cacti, stab her with thorns, rip off her dress, destroy the world between her legs, and throw her in a stream glittering with fool's gold. (*M*, 71)

Interestingly, the liminality of the Mexican desert ("liminal space"), which echoes Gurba's own liminality as the child of a Mexican immigrant, are not treated as a source of cultural empowerment, epistemological in-betweenness, creative wealth or immediate radical stance. Gurba deflects the traditional association between hybrid identities and the capacity for transformative change (Král, 14 – 19). Here, the liminal space of the mestiza becomes a site of destruction and darkness where the narrator experiences the revelation that "evil starts in the mind" (*M*, 71). What is replicated in the narrator's grim vision is an imperial history of looting and conquest, reversing the scheme of aggression against an American expatriate. Identifying with the conquistador, her reference to "fool's gold" or pyrite brings to mind Cortes taking control of the Aztec's riches, leaving nothing but this hazardous material as a trace of Mexico's past glory. She thus offers a reversed epiphany where the desert is not conceived as a scene of light but as a temple of darkness, in which the superego is eclipsed to give way to the grim unconscious of a belligerent American archive.

### **The ideal victim**

The narrator's refusal to convey a moral image of herself also coincides with a certain ideological framework around the rape accusation. Indeed, according to Audrey Yap, there are "standard stories" (4) of sexual assaults which tend to be conveyed by the media, closed systems with a certain number of archetypal characters structuring a network of credibility. The main standard story is "stranger assault," (5) which is a rarer form of aggression, although a classic theme of television drama in which, for instance, a young woman is walking home and assaulted with a weapon, often by a mentally ill man. This type of narrative, says Yap, is the one that tends to be believed and prosecuted the most for its logical coherence. *Mean* addresses this category of crime: in both cases, the narrator and Sophia are raped by a stranger. However, Gurba self-consciously anticipates and satirises the empathy that could stem from the account's familiarity. She also stresses its extraordinary nature in a

humorously swaggering tone: "Stranger rape is like the *Mona Lisa*. It's exquisite, timeless, and archetypal. It's classic. I can't help but think of it as the Coca-Cola of sex crimes" (M, 110). By pretending to eulogise the awful act, exaggerating the praise with associations in bad taste to an artistic masterpiece, Gurba insists on the fictional exposure which this type of aggression has benefited from. The postmodern alignment of DaVinci and Coca-Cola conveys the devaluation entailed by the propagation of this story which has become a consumer good deprived of meaning. In her hyperbolic pride, she implicitly accuses the reader of establishing a hierarchy of violence, offering his selective compassion to a form of luxury suffering. By extending a certain profile, she also reflects on the frequent process of "victim blaming" (Yap, 13), holding victims responsible for their aggressions notably regarding their sexual history. Larcombe has showed that sexual assault trials tended to shape "ideal victims" (137), normatively defined as virtuous and sexually restrained. Gurba completely rejects such a depiction by insisting on her desire and promiscuity, notably claiming the "destructive powers" (M, 146) of her genitalia after the rape. She successively calls up a project to have sex with a married man and parallels her vagina with a feminist women's festival, intimating a plurality of partners: "then my pussy became the Michigan Womyn's Festival. Every night was ladies's night" (M, 150). Part of this assertive lust seems to explicitly address the assumptions meant to disparage Sophia during the trial, including a mysterious allegation concerning her tendency to find "*warmth in the arms of a stranger*" (M, 153) to seek "*release from her emotional pain*" (M, 153). The defense attorney's words, italicised in the text, elicit Myriam's quiet contempt, which is epitomised by a bewildered quotation accompanied by a baffled interjection: "Warmth in the arms of a stranger. Wow." (M, 153). The laconic statement spells out the old-fashioned nature of the rationale, the implications of the elliptical hypothesis, and the weariness entailed by such a common and pathetic strategy.

The fact that Sophia is treated as partially guilty of her crime is also implicitly coupled with racial discrimination. Indeed, when the narrator becomes obsessed with the figure of the Black Dahlia, she attributes her Los Angeles fame to her conformity with the status of the ideal victim: "Who could do this to such a pretty white girl? Apparently, somebody. Pretty white girls needed to be careful. Pretty white girls needed to stay home...She became famous for being lifeless, pretty and white" (M, 157). The repetition of "pretty white girls," the alignment of whiteness and innocence in a choosy indignation is reminiscent of Anne Cossins' s interrogation of the dichotomy of bad women and innocent victims by examining how the criminal body of sexual assault is

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also constructed by different intersections of class and race. This results in a tendency to construct “good” women as white, and black and indigenous women as embodiments of promiscuity and unreliability (94). In spite of Sophia’s tale being a “standard story,” other discriminations seem to prevent her from getting the attention which she deserves.

### **Impossible catharsis and the present nature of trauma**

The structural forces of racism that shape the reception of Sophia’s ordeal also lead Gurba to queer a self-narrative that would espouse a cathartic format. Cvetkovich identifies two main issues around the medicalisation of trauma. First of all, she sees a certain kind of therapy as replicating a form of “privatized encounter” (10) between a clinical professional and a customer, obliterating the political nature of affects. According to her, some troublesome emotions have to be connected with world events and national histories (3): because some of the causes of depression are rooted in systemic forms of oppression, emphasising the cure of individual people operates at the detriment of broader and more diffuse structural change. She also considers that medical authority has naturalised trauma instead of historicising it, erasing the differences between the geopolitical contexts in which it emerges (19). Similarly, Gurba seems to offer a narrative which questions the therapeutic value of testimony. Her text lingers on the wounds without hurrying the healing process and injustice persists under the form of unquenchable bad feelings.

### **The therapeutic stalemate**

The ironic stance towards the therapeutical conception of trauma is visible in the satire of psychoanalysts. Instead of likening the doctors to pure vessels of Freudian transference, they are skeptically pictured as pathetically human, sociologically anchored, either disinterested (“So far, she had been my best therapist. She hadn’t fallen asleep on me. Yet”, *M*, 171) or proffering deadly diagnoses influenced by racial prejudice. This is notably the case when Doctor Hamilton declares that Ofelia cannot be anorexic because she is Mexican. The gross and almost caricatural discrimination at stake here beyond the presumably universal discourse of trauma is something that Cvetkovich criticises, engaging with feminist, queer and racial traditions which have shed light on the underlying exclusions structuring psychoanalysis, and its pathologising of difference.<sup>9</sup> This is perceptible in Gurba’s depiction of the doctors’ offices as deceptively neutral spaces structured by implicit

demarcations: "Dr. Hamilton's office smelled like glass, steel, and immunity, how I imagined it smelled inside a syringe" (*M*, 50). Here, the inclusive allusions to impersonal materials ("glass," "steels") and the sterilisation suggested by the syringe are nuanced by the pun on "immunity," which evokes both medical exemption and social privilege. The narrator's aesthetic experience in the bare waiting room of a psychoanalyst is characterised by a lack of sensory markers and the setting is designated as the apex of luxury, the embodiment of a "posh minimalism" (*M*, 52). She sees, smells, and hears but the synesthesia is strangely atonous, evoking nothingness rather than intensity. Myriam thus connects the possibility to be cured to a wealthy status which excludes her: "So this is what mental health smells like...' I thought. It wasn't cheap. It certainly wasn't Mexican" (*M*, 52). Beyond the lack of smell, it is money which she spots. In line with Cvetkovich's injunction to treat trauma as a cultural and social discourse, Gurba insists on not naturalising PTSD and recalls its contingency: "Did you know PTSD is the only mental illness that you can give someone? A person gave it to me...He transmitted this condition. Like the man who gave my gay cousin HIV, or like my grandfather who gave my grandmother the clap" (*M*, 109). Gurba does not undermine the severity of the symptoms but treats this type of mental unrest as also interpersonal and contagious, neglecting to comment on the limits of the comparison as the perpetrator presumably does not suffer from PTSD. By comparing PTSD to a virus, a sexually transmitted infection, the narrator chooses to stress the historical event which has triggered the condition, delineating the temporality of the spread. The relational nature of the disease also serves to interrogate the tendency to abstract rape from the perpetrator's action and to focus the attention on the victim's transformation into an eternal prey, with no agency or capacity for action in the future. The narrator resents being perceived that way because the past event seems to foreclose the possibilities of change, paralysing her in a bygone era with no prospects, trapped in a wound which would have become a fetish, cut off from the complex history of suffering (Ahmed, *CPE*, 173).

When the narrator is raped, she is sent to see the nurse. The aim might be to cure her trauma, but the medical environment itself evokes the frequent associations between the language of healing and the language of justice that Ahmed observes (*CPE*, 200). Indeed, according to Ahmed, it is necessary to take to pieces the association operated by a trend of moral and political philosophy between injustice and bad feelings where the latter should be cured. She believes that justice is not about overcoming injuries and the harmful affections that they entail but using these emotions, even if they might



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seem destructive and creative, as testimonies of history to work towards new attachments to others:

On the counter there were glass jars filled with cotton balls, cotton swabs, and tongue depressors. By the window stood a bed, and beside it, a scale. I'd been weighed on that scale once. I'd been checked for scoliosis in this office and had curled in that bed, wracked with nausea that made me retch and whine. (*M*, 121)

Unfairness presides over this mock-trial run by a woman who looks like a torturer: the "cotton balls, cotton swabs, and tongue depressors" point towards a gagged and silenced witness. The "scale" brings to mind the frequent allusions to eating disorders: inequality is further suggested by the evocation of a twisted spine ("scoliosis"), or a foetal position ("curled in that bed"). The memories that come up are instances of suffering rather than images of care. Moreover, the frightening response of the nurse who interrupts the narrator's "hysterics" to yell at her ("You're going to have to get over this," she said. "These kinds of things happen. You're going to have to get over this. Do you hear me?"; *M*, 122) and the normative injunction to deny what has happened displace the guilt onto the victim who is accused of not dealing with violence properly. Instead of pointing out the injustice of the aggression, the nurse trivialises it in an instance of what Lauren Berlant has called "therapy culture," through which women are invited to compensate political depression and find a "cure for a psychic disorder and social contradictions whose effects are made to seem inevitable and a small price to pay for optimism or its fading memory" (205). The safeguarding of optimism at all costs associated to the connoted term "hysterics" underscore the individualisation of a social problem which is obliterated rather than faced in order to keep up with a patriarchal dictate to save appearances.

Gurba's text thus self-reflexively foregrounds a form of skepticism towards the idea of catharsis. In a world which, in the words of Maggie Nelson, "catharsis-as-cure has been somewhat put to the test by market-driven ventures that profit from egging on particular desires rather than freeing anyone from them" (62), the horizon of liberation promised by verbalisation is constantly postponed. In the final pages of the book, the narrator engages with her trauma by revisiting the scene of the crime, but this does not provide any clear-cut ending: "I'd anticipated squeezing a catharsis out of this pilgrimage, but I should've known my dreams of closure would remain dreams" (*M*, 170). The utopian fantasy of "squeezing out" evokes the excremental metaphor which imbues the book when it comes to the handling of suffering. As the narrator sustains bodily pain after the event and cannot

find a way to urinate ("I squeezed and squeezed and wrung a single tear from my urethra", *M*, 143), as she compares her plight to "shitty feelings" (*M*, 172), which she wishes to wash away, we find ourselves faced with an alternative model of mourning that is not so clearly distinguishable from melancholia. The impossible excretions manifest the blocked processes of "working through" and "acting out"<sup>10</sup> in favor of a scheme of constipated retention. The strategy of removal at stake might be the exact reversal, an ingestion of the affliction rather than its ejection, which is reminiscent of the psychoanalytical model of melancholia: "I tried focusing on the burn. Eating it mentally. If you enter your pain instead of letting it enter you, you can eat it until it's gone; I think that's a tenet of Buddhism" (*M*, 136). This pattern of consummation is striking in the final gestures of the book which show the narrator eating a chalupa: "A woman was sacrificed so that I might sit there, autopsying my chalupa...I was alive and she was dead, so I ate. I ate my lunch, hair and all. We are all cannibals" (*M*, 174). This ultimate blend of absorption and evacuation allowed by the process of eating also connects with Cvetkovich's insistence on advocating somatic models of therapy to deal with the burden of sexual aggression instead of traditional psychoanalytical discursive procedures.

Rather than progressing in a linear fashion towards a final release, and in keeping with this ingestion process, Gurba offers an exploded and incomplete text. Bordering on spaghetti western when Sophia's ripped apart body is evoked, these explosions are sometimes gory and find a literary equivalent in the "bits and pieces" which compose *Mean* ("Police found her in a park. They collected bits and pieces. All I know about her are bits and pieces. Rape cuts everything into bits and pieces," *M*, 114). The impossibility to reconstruct the body of the victim, and to order her narrative teleologically, is captured by a jumbled and illegible calligram of her silhouette (*M* 115) in which words themselves are dismantled and nonsensical. The transformation of the event into mayhem takes on a paradoxically tranquil dimension. We might find it strange that Gurba resorts to Walter Benjamin's essay about the tide of memories assailing him when contemplating his collection of books as she explicitly quotes from "Unpacking My Library: A Talk About Collecting." Benjamin in this text, however, does stress notions of chance and instinct in the acquisition of his most prized possessions, a haphazard path which could characterise Gurba's literary "assemblage" (*M* 153). However, Benjamin's text mostly associates joy and pleasure to the process of reminiscence, something which hardly fits Gurba's own memories of her aggression. Once more, it seems that she "queers" the original essay by introducing a defamiliarising

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angst into the content well-being of the protected bibliophile. The “spirits, or at least little genii” (Benjamin, 492) of ownership which allow the collector to live in his objects are replaced by new gender-bending creatures, which also resemble Füssli’s nightmarish incubus: “I really like the phrase ‘the chaos of memories.’ My spirit latches onto it and wraps its arms around its queer, hairy legs. The phrase expresses what kind of happens to your brain during and after trauma” (*M*, 154).

### **Fleshing out ghosts**

This chaos is best embodied by Sophia’s endless presence. After the initial rape scene that the narrator undertakes to recount, she identifies her as her ghost: “Sophia is always with me. She haunts me” (*M*, 3). Throughout the book, as we come to understand that both women have been attacked by the same man, but one survived to tell the story and the other did not, Sophia’s ghost keeps interrupting the plot in an untimely and nagging manner, embodying guilt in unexpected intrusions. However, as it has been conceptualised by Avery Gordon, haunting can be seen as more than a superstitious, ritualistic or psychotic activity. In many ways, *Mean* takes seriously the contention that haunting “is one way in which abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life” (xvi), manifestations of repressed or unresolved social violence blurring the frontier between the tangible and the impalpable. The ghost, in that understanding of haunting, is endowed with more than an ethereal and flimsy presence: Gordon considers it as the “empirical evidence” (8) that a lost or barely visible regime of oppression is expressing itself. This same desire to flesh out the ghost can be found in Gurba’s story. One of the expressed purposes of the book was to resist the way Sophia was designated in the media as “the transient who was bludgeoned to death in Oakley Park” (Racho). Playing on the multiple meanings of the term “transient” which refers to the mobile quality of the victim, her status as a migrant, the short-lived attention granted to her, and the lack of precision in her designation, Gurba attempts to give her substance and permanence:

This description is cruel. It reduces her to transience, as if she personified it, and it ignores her name. Her name matters. It’s a word that philosophers fall in love with.

It appears many times in the Bible: Sophia. In Greek, *Sophia* means *wisdom*.

I turn her name over and over in my head. My brain rubs it smooth from S to a...

In my grim reverie, I think, ‘She’s the capital of Bulgaria. I love Bulgarian yogurt. So rich, so tart, so *mean*. So grown up.

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My mind keeps rubbing her name. An hourglass fills my  
imagination: Sophia Loren. (*M*, 3)

Fleshing out Sophia operates, at a metaphysical level, through abstractions. With the Greek version of her name, Sophia becomes more than an immanent appearance or an accident. The text pierces through her attributes to reach her ontology. As the etymological embodiment of a concept, she acquires the depth and substance of a Platonic idea ("*Sophia* means *wisdom*"). The literary references and the lingering on the onomastics could further remove her from matter, but the narrator entertains a sensual relationship to her name, the texture of which is explored ("her name matters") and manipulated erotically ("I turn her name over and over in my head. My brain rubs it smooth from S to a"). The expansion of Sophia's character traverses the false duality of body and mind: she is regarded as both visible and invisible, an abstract emanation, the possibility of an idea, and a desirable embodiment whose contours can be anchored in the 'hourglass' of time. When the narrator is possessed by Sophia, the alienation works physically, in a form of undramatic supernatural possession: "Some ghosts listen to the radio through the bodies of the living. They use us to conduct pain, pleasure, music, and meaning. They burden us with feelings that are both ours and theirs" (*M*, 3). This form of affective occupancy echoes the way Gordon describes the mechanisms through which some traumatic past bears on us emotionally instead of being regarded as purely epistemological content (8). The ghost of Sophia, in its vivid persistence throughout the story, demands that something be felt and done about violence to women.

Additionally, the narrator, who is a survivor of sexual assault, and who feels the responsibility to tell the story, compares herself to the "final girl" of horror movies: "Laurie Strode, the character played by Jamie Lee Curtis in *Halloween*, is a good example. Sophia is not. For every final girl, there is a cast of actors who must be sacrificed. It's all very Aztec" (*M*, 111). Gurba highlights the difference between the realism of Sophia's life and the make-believe archetype of fiction. However, the status of the "final girl" seems to shift over to Sophia who, in spite of her death, keeps existing in the present, through the body of the narrator. Implicitly, the book offers a wry comment on the eroticisation of dead girls, and the currency which the trope has gained in the media and in popular culture. Responding to narratives that feed on the portrayal of women as essentially dead,<sup>11</sup> she stages the uncontrollable resurgence of these bodies which cannot be eradicated and seem to invade her house and her body as organic seeds <sup>12</sup> ("I ran from them, but dead and dying girls have a way of taking up vivid residence in the post-traumatic brain" *M*,

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164). Reflecting on the trivialisation of violence within modern entertainment, she underlines the reversal of performance and reality as her experience with the police makes her feel like an illusion (“I felt like I was on an episode of *Law and Order*” *M*, 124). Gurba fights off this objectification of victims and the erasure of their human particularities. Refusing to let Sophia vanish into the shape of a nameless corpse, she focuses her attention on specters who are bent on existing hedonistically in the present, beyond the realm of the macabre (“She enjoys music through me. She enjoys food through me. She enjoys sunsets through me. She enjoys the smell of certain flowers through me” *M*, 175).

### **Sexual violence and the ordinary**

This use of the present to refer to Sophia shows that Gurba’s description of trauma, like Cvetkovich’s, displaces insidious violence within the ordinary life of sensations. Influenced by a strand of Marxism which insists on understanding trauma as a collective modern experience—an affective communal response to capitalism, for instance—, she insists on understanding traumatic experience as an atmosphere which acts on many individuals in a continuous manner, and which cannot be easily relegated to the past. This enlarges the spectrum of traumatic experience which can be encountered within everyday life and not just in cataclysmic events or crises. This conception which eludes the specificity of an occasion, a moment or a place, finds itself expressed in the omnipresence of the threat of rape that Myriam begins to fear. This spatial ubiquity is condensed in the supermarket: “Each aisle brought the possibility of seeing him...The curve of a shaved head was him. A sharp grin was him. A bright white T-shirt was him. Tightly laced Nikes were him. Five o’clock shadow was him. Post-traumatic omnipresence” (*M*, 126). The most mundane occurrences are endowed with a deadly potential. The repetitive pattern correlated to forms as diverse as clothes, natural manifestations or human features heightens the sense of entrapment and obsession. In other instances, Myriam seems to be surrounded by a disfigured landscape, where the corruption of nature translates into a monotonous sense of peril: “After he touched me, it seemed like every fragrant bush might be holding him. He might be hiding inside that bougainvillea. He might be disguised as a butterfly or a hummingbird” (*M*, 120). The pervasiveness is also temporal as Gurba’s memoir invites us to think about how violence against women keeps recurring in an almost legendary cycle of immortality: “Things like that are never finished. Men like that are never

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finished” (*M*, 120). Therefore, beyond the sole figure of the aggressor, and the individual neurosis unhinged by the rape, it is the possibility of violence coming from unexpected sites which is revealed and the systemic nature of this injustice. The defamiliarisation is extreme as that which is most homely and familiar becomes the most terrifying: “The man standing behind me looked so average it horrified me” (*M*, 118); “These sidewalks were so familiar. It amplified my horror that I’d spent much of my childhood walking them” (*M*, 120). The frequent glimpses into the potential wickedness of the most mundane men also seem to anxiously explore what Audrey Yap says about the stereotyping of attackers within standard stories as mentally disturbed and coming from a lower educational background. The typical perpetrator is often seen as alien and frightening because of structures of power which strain moral imagination. Rather than feeding in this narrative of exception, according to her, we should focus on the fact that the majority of aggressions are carried out by people the victim knows (5, 16) and who are not necessarily marginalised. *Mean* also stretches this traditional narrative by exposing and lifting the hypocritical veil which serves to conceal and exonerate some assailants such as Mr. Osmond, the Sunday-school teacher and little league coach of the town when it is brought to light that he has engaged in sexual violence against children: “Everyone in town found the news about the Osmonds titillating because the Osmonds were considered a whole-grain breakfast-cereal type of family – crisp, nourishing, and unostentatious” (*M*, 47). The social excitement reverberates what Yap says about the difficulty to conceive rape as emanating from a framework of intimacy and vicinity, especially when the perpetrator resembles the advertised model of the American nuclear family (“a whole-grain breakfast-cereal type of family”). The vignette that is immediately conjured up and its association with closeness and virtue scars the convenient portrayal of the anomalous monster that would attribute the origins of violence to difference. Gurba’s memoir thus also revisits the self-narrative about rape by emphasising the collective nature of this present trauma which cannot be aptly addressed by a cathartic form bent on healing and resolution.

## Conclusion

Myriam Gurba’s *Mean* could be read as a queer self-narrative because it foregrounds an alternative vision of trauma, in a form resisting the mechanisms of sympathy and empathy, as well as a cathartic teleology. It challenges the univocality of womanhood as it perturbs the ideal encoded

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audience of what Rita Felski has called the “feminist confession,” substituting a pattern of conflict over one of harmony with the addressee. Implicitly, through the double trajectory of the narrator and Sophia, Gurba’s narrative points at social fault lines which exceed gender and which complicate the understanding of the story as typical of a woman’s experience. Tracing parallels in a “wide array of relationality” (Nelson, 247) which cannot be reduced to “exact equivalence,” Gurba’s prose resists the homogenisation of situations. Sophia is seized from a third person perspective which acknowledges itself and which resists the smoothing conflation of all ‘women of colour.’ It is in the cracks and the interstices between separate lives which this post-mortem dialogue does not seal that *Mean* manages to sketch the possibility of another form of community. Moreover, it pluralises issues of sexuality by interrogating the central event of the aggression and by organising the plot around it in a nonlinear and chaotic manner. Doing so, Gurba’s memoir is echoing Cvetkovich’s analyses of a differential amoral approach to trauma, that she notably identifies in queer and lesbian texts, which would not involve a traditional psychoanalytical and medicalised therapeutic path but a resolutely political one, confronting the present and pervasive nature of social ills that cannot be simply cured or solved poetically.

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<sup>1</sup> The piece called “Pendeja, You Ain’t Steinbeck: My Bronca with Fake-Ass Social Justice Literature,” published by *Tropics of Meta*, has triggered much controversy, engendering a debate on the whiteness of American publishing and leading Gurba to launch the hashtag #DignidadLiteraria.

<sup>2</sup> See for instance Tea.

<sup>3</sup> She expands on this topic in an interview with Gustavo Arellano, targeting more precisely two memoirs on sexual assault which were “incredibly popular and widely read”: Alice Sebold’s *Lucky* (1999) and Maggie Nelson’s *The Red Parts* (2007). She considers them “brilliant,” yet decided to write *Mean* as a reaction to ossified storytelling habits which she found encapsulated in these two narratives: the solemn tone, the reverential approach to trauma and the lack of humor. She expands on her desire to respond to the disgusting and horrific aspects of rape, writing about it from a “repulsive and repugnant sensibility” to regain agency and spontaneity in her approach of the events. Gurba thus seems to understand canonicity as defined by popular success.

<sup>4</sup> Rita Felski considers the genre of the “feminist confession” as a subset of autobiography and she applies the category to texts like Audre Lorde’s *The Cancer Journals* (1980), Kate Millett’s *Flying* (1974), and Alice Koller’s *An Unknown Woman* (1982) among others. She calls it feminist for various reasons. First, because she analyses the influence of the women’s movement’s focus on critical self-understanding through consciousness raising groups and their desire to delineate a communal female experience in literature. She identifies the same tension between personal narrative and the “specific problems and experiences which bind women together” (Felski 94),

between singularity and typicality, in the texts that she studies. Therefore, she considers that "feminist confessions" materialise the aims of women's movements by foregrounding the personal as political and constructing group identity. More so, the stories that she chooses often narrate a woman's "conversion to feminism" (Felski, 99). Finally, be it in forms that resemble journals or retrospective syntheses, these texts, according to her, rhetorically foreground the relationship between female author and implied female reader, with a stress laid on communication of feelings rather than on formal experimentation. It is said that "the implied reader of the feminist confession is the sympathetic female confidante" who is "often explicitly encoded in the text" as the person who will "understand and share the author's position" through "a tone of intimacy, shared allusions, and unexplained references with which the reader is assumed to be familiar" (Felski 99).

<sup>5</sup> Although, Gurba addresses the "reader," it is important to distinguish between the narratee and the reader, as the narratee is fictive, contrary to empirical readers (Prince, 100). The reason I have chosen the neutral pronoun "they" is that readers are plural, have pragmatic and diverse reactions to the text which I cannot map here and that Gurba cannot anticipate: they should not be construed as an unproblematic community. However, through many signals, Gurba, who is both the author and the narrator of this autobiographical text, describes a narratee whom she confronts and mocks in a sort of enduring power battle. This narratee acts as a mediation between the reader and the text and many ironic effects are created by the distance between them and the narrator.

<sup>6</sup> Feminist analyses linking the foundations of violence in the modern global system to patriarchy are numerous (Reardon), as the gendered system of meanings and cultural expectations often associate masculinity to hostility (Kurtz and Kurtz). As Hendin notes, the representation of violent women has not often been studied perhaps because of the extent of abuse perpetrated by men on women which is not seriously taken into account and therefore such a focus would be deemed politically ineffective and counterproductive (7-8). Much of the research on domestic violence has been focused on promoting a pattern of cooperation, closer to women's socialisation. However, such a connection between women and peacemaking could be seen as reproducing an archetypal and conservative partition.

<sup>7</sup> Brown mainly targets Hartsock and MacKinnon for their attacks on postmodernism. Through a reference to Nietzsche and his concept of "resentment," she is wary regarding the reappearance of truth as founding feminist epistemology.

<sup>8</sup> Gurba chooses the filter of *Paris is Burning* to evoke shade whereas she is probably aware of the controversy and of hook's criticism of the film, having herself taken a strong stand against cultural appropriation. Therefore, when she says "watch *Paris Is Burning*" (M, 17), is she once more teasing the addressee for their narrow range of representations, referring to a cultural production which has been targeted as a mainstream vehicle of queer culture praised by the general press and very much appreciated by white people? Or is her allusion to the scene where Venus Xtravaganza insults a man a more tender evocation of shared queer references, with an added layer of allusion to the myth around the production when she later refers to Dorian Corey's corpse in the closet? ("Drag queen Dorian Corey also demonstrates the high art of meanness during her interviews. New York learned the extent of it after AIDS killed her. Friends were cleaning out her home and found a mummified hustler among her sequins and feathers. Somebody had wrapped his corpse in imitation leather and stuffed it in a trunk." M, 17)

<sup>9</sup> On this topic, see the chapters "Phantasmatic identification and the assumption of sex" and "Passing, queering: Nella Larsen's Psychoanalytic challenge" in Butler (1993) and Ahmed (2006).

<sup>10</sup> Influenced by Eng and Kazanjian, Cvetkovich also rejects the hierarchy of values between these two types of methods, which she relates to mourning and melancholy: "Like Eng and Kazanjian, I refuse the sharp distinction between mourning and melancholy that leads Dominick LaCapra, for example, to differentiate between "working through," the successful resolution of trauma, and "acting out," the repetition



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of trauma that does not lead to transformation. Not only does the distinction often seem tautological—good responses to trauma are cases of working through; bad ones are instances of acting out—but the verbal link between acting out and ACT UP indicates that activism’s modes of acting out, especially its performative and expressive functions, are a crucial resource for responding to trauma” (164).

<sup>11</sup> Maggie Nelson prefers evoking the inaugural trope of the “woman in the refrigerator”: “the female is already dead: that is how the plot begins. Indeed, there can be no plot without her death—without it, what would there be to find out, explain or avenge? Comic-book aficionados even have a stock-phrase to describe this setup: they call it the ‘woman in the refrigerator syndrome,’ which derives from a Green Lantern comic in which the hero is set into motion by the discovery of his girlfriend’s corpse in his icebox” (165).

<sup>12</sup> Another recently interesting queer novella on that topic is featured in Carmen Maria Machado’s *Her Body and Other Parties* (2017): “Especially Heinous” reimagines episodes of *Law & Order* in an infinite tapestry of reconfigurations which feature the constant grotesque and macabre reappearance of young victims.

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