



Ashley Espinoza

A las Mujeres:

Hybrid Identities in Latina Memoir

My copy of *The House on Mango Street* is the 25th anniversary edition and has an introduction by Sandra Cisneros. The introduction starts with a photo of herself and she begins with the woman in the photo, as if she is a character in a book rather than herself. She doesn't use the word I, so when the story begins we see the character Esperanza and we view the story through Cisneros' own point of view. Cisneros says that a lot of the book was drawn from her own life, that the narrator is a blend of herself and a blend of Esperanza.

Cisneros writes that the woman in the photo "wants to write stories that ignore borders between genres, between written and spoken, between highbrow literature and children's nursery rhymes, between New York and the imaginary village of Machado, between the U.S. and Mexico." Though the book is fiction Cisneros has taken real life people and circumstances and turned them into fiction in what we might now call autofiction.

The world she created on Mango Street feels real to many Latino/a/x people. She created a fictional street that represents her feeling Latina in her own community, while also expressing what it was like for some immigrants moving to America. Many of her characters may feel "other." There is something to be said about feeling other. To live in between spaces and worlds. To one minute feel Latina and the next to forget it all together and feel very American. In reading, there is something to be said about reading works that are considered "other." To read in between spaces and worlds. To feel the way an author trusts her reader to read in between the lines.

As I explored more Latina authors, I could sense their between-two-worlds feeling. Their art lives in multiple spaces. They exist as both American and Latinx. Their memoirs are sometimes shelved in the essays, plays, or poetry sections. The works I admire most are more than one thing. I am more than one thing. The authors I love are more than one thing. I exist in two places. I am American and Latina. I exist in even more spaces beyond that. My mother, a Puerto Rican, and my father, a Mexican whose family has lived in New Mexico since the 1600's, and my step father, a Mexican whose parents were born and raised in Mexico. My personal heritage and culture mixes all of these identities, Mexican-American, Puerto Rican, Mexican and American. I feel it all. I carry it all. I am it all.

I hardly ever get to choose to be both Puerto Rico and Mexican on demographic forms I fill out. It is always a one or the other. I choose what best suits my mood for the day. Sometimes I gravitate towards checking the Puerto Rican box, and sometimes I choose the Mexican. I never consistently choose the same box because I am never just one of those, I am always both. Many authors of many races write in hybrid forms, but for me I wanted to take a look at authors who have multiple cultures and how they deal with writing in hybrid and segmented forms. I want to explore how Carmen Maria Machado, Myriam Gurba, and Virginia Grise use hybridity to reflect on their identities and the ways in which they write memoir. Gloria Anzaldua started this conversation in *Borderlands*, but my aim is to examine the contemporary Latina memoir and how they use hybridity. As a writer we must uphold who we are as a person, and an artist. As an American Latinx writer we must uphold our American culture as well as our Latinx culture. I want to explore how these books uphold both while using segmentation and hybridity to do so.

In the Dream House

Home to a Latinx person means everything, so I can't help but connect *In the Dream House* and *The House on Mango Street*. Where you live defines you for life. Where you grew up and how never escapes you. In *In*

The Dream House, the house is haunted and the reader is forced to live in it. In *The House on Mango Street* the reader wants to get Esperanza out of Mango Street, not because of the house but because of the danger it presents for a girl her age. The reader wants Esperanza to have a house of her own, to be alone and to be happy. At the end of *In the Dream House* all I want is for Machado to be able to leave the house, to no longer suffer the abuse of her girlfriend. In *The House on Mango Street* I want more for the protagonist. I want her to get out of the house and the neighborhood and to live.

The House on Mango Street and *In the Dream House* operate in a vignette segmented structure. As readers we see how each section is crafted to tell the story that the title of each section suggests. However, they operate better once built upon each other. Each vignette is needed to tell the next vignette and once there is a collection of them all, it's an entire book. As a result, both *In the Dream House* and *The House On Mango Street* still hold some of the functions of a novel. They both have a beginning, middle and end. There is a specific climax to each book, and a resolution to both. The female identity that Cisneros constructs for Esperanza will be echoed later by Machado: for example, Cisneros mixes life as a kid and life as a growing young woman. Esperanza and her friends Lucy and Rachel are given high heels and the walk around in them and men give them compliments, and one even tells them the shoes are dangerous for as young as they are (Cisneros 39). At first before leaving the house with them on they admire their legs that look long in the heels. By the end of walking around in the heels they say they are tired of being beautiful. In that scene they are just barely beginning to see how men really behave. Are we old enough to be considered women? Or are we still a young girl? Often times we have to be both.

Machado constructs a hybrid identity for herself and her protagonist from the beginning, creating a structure that holds two competing ideas simultaneously that will influence the vignette structure to come. At the start of *In the Dream House* we read that the author doesn't like prologues and never reads them (Machado 3). The next section is the author's prologue. Here the reader gets to experience two offsetting things. In the prologue we get the writer's research on topics that ultimately lead her to write *In*

the Dream House. She writes about her learning about the etymology of archive that is translated to mean “the house of the ruler.” From there she loved the idea of the word “house” meaning authority. In this prologue we understand Machado’s memoir is not only her story, but also deeply researched. The prologue sets us up for what is to come, a function that Machado uses well in the traditional sense, but when she says she hates prologues and never reads them, she is giving the reader an out, but should the reader choose to skip the prologue, they will be contributing to the erasing of the archive, the silencing of story, that the prologue is intending to establish. She is suggesting that we could skip it if we wish, it will not change the context of her memoir, but rather enhance it. In the prologue the reader learns about the etymology of archive and how archival silence is erasure of certain people’s history. Some archives are destroyed or never written, and therefore are missing from history. Because identities have been erased throughout history a lot of voices have been underrepresented; women have been erased as well as Black, Asian, Indigenous, Latinx, and Queer voices. Those underrepresented voices are now finding a voice, however at the cost of feeling this hybrid identity. I would argue that because those voices have been repressed that now writers are pushing back against the typically Western form and trying new ways of expanding what we are used to reading.

In the same prologue Machado brings up the act of writing a memoir. She writes

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

In her definition of what a memoir is she has permission to take what she deems important in her mind and turn it into what meaning she wants. The events are still true, no matter how they are presented. Her interpretation allows the writers who come after her the chance to write in various forms. Machado takes

her own definition and gives herself creative license to write in a nontraditional form. She is also breaking the pattern of storytelling common to Western culture, the same formulaic form of books, movies, and television. Machado breaks those typical story patterns. Machado ends her prologue by writing “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.”

“Dream House as Erotica” is the first time Machado mentions the color of her skin through the perspective of the woman in the dream house. The woman in the dream house discusses the differences in their bodies, hers is pale while Machado’s is olive. Her nipples are pink and Machado’s are brown. The woman even says, “Everything is darker on you” (Machado 42). Even though Machado doesn’t specifically discuss her ethnicity and the otherness she feels dating a white woman who has to mention her “darker” skin is clear. Later Machado calls herself racially ambiguous, a term I doubt she named herself or calls herself. She’s so stuck in the dream house with a white woman she concedes to the term “racially ambiguous” and the identity—or lack of one—that terminology brings.

In one of the first sections, titled “Dream House as an Exercise in Point of View,” the point of view switches to second person, continuing the destabilizing of readerly expectations (Machado 14). We are no longer reading about the “I” character, instead we read from the “you.” The next section does the same thing with its title, “Dream House as Inciting Incident” (Machado 15). There are very few sections where Machado writes in the first person, and those sections tend to be when she writes about herself in the past, before the dream house, such as “Dream House as Bildungsroman” (Machado 30) Those are also the only sections that are longer than one page. She has a structure to her book, and her own set of rules that she abides by. For instance, she names each chapter with the words “Dream House” in the title to signal we’re stuck in the dream house with her. Most sections are short with a lot of white space, a vignette. Each title is a motif or a writing trope that names what is about to happen in that section.

When readers experience this book in the second person we are experiencing Carmen Maria Machado as she experiences her ex-girlfriend, or the woman in the dream house. When readers are experiencing the “I” character we are experiencing Carmen Maria Machado as her own person outside of the dream house. However, in the section titled Dream “House as Exercise in Point of View” Machado writes from the “you” perspective on the first paragraph and switches to “I” in the second paragraph. In the second paragraph from the “I” point of view Machado tells us exactly what she did with her life after the dream house. She moved, lived, wrote a book, got married, and bought a house where she makes Manhattans, sauces, and keeps her succulents alive. She gives the reader her happy life right in the beginning and then in the third paragraph she switches to the “you” again and takes us to her past, the time she lived in the Dream House. She writes that *you* are a test grader, *you* drove seven hours to Indiana, didn’t write well in *your* MFA, and cried a lot. She ends that section with “I thought you died, but in writing this I am not sure you did” (Machado 14). In that sentence readers know that we are looking at her past. She has resurrected her old self and we will learn what her life was like in the Dream House.

Furthermore, *In the Dream House* explores abuse against women, particularly the invisibility of abuse against women of color. With that concept in mind, Machado explores lesbian abuse by bringing in court cases and historical events involving two women. She explores the idea that lesbian abuse has never been taken seriously, because lesbian relationships aren’t taken seriously. As a woman, a queer, and a “racially ambiguous” person, she is often someone who is not represented in the manner in which she may see herself. Not only is she living in a hybrid identity, so were the queer woman who came before her. Hybrid text allows her to do this.

In “Dream House as Set Design,” the opening of this section reads like a script. We get in words what we are supposed to be seeing, not in a scene like most memoirs, but rather as if we are reading a play. In this section we get a description of the house, we learn that it is a home filled with old cardboard boxes, and mismatched furniture, and it looks like someone is either moving out or moving in. It doesn’t appear

to be a pleasant place to stay; the front door is never opened and wild animals are in the front yard as if no one lives there. Machado writes, “the curtain rises on two women sitting across from each other: CARMEN, a racially ambiguous fat woman in her midtwenties with terrible posture...” (Machado 74). Machado uses this structure as a twofold tactic. One is to show us the scene. Writers always set the scene but this gives it a new and interesting look at the scene, which creates distance in the narrative. It also gives to the effect that the author Carmen, and the woman sitting in the house Carmen are two different women. Carmen the writer is looking back at her life and viewing Carmen the woman in the dream house as someone who needs to be observed from afar.

Your Healing is Killing Me

In the introduction written by Deborah R. Vargas she calls Virginia Grise’s *Your Healing is Killing Me* a “movement manifesto.” She says it is “literally a call of us to move. People of color are masters of movement, having cultivated knowledges and grammars to survive forced displacements from their lands, homes and kin” (Grise 9).

Virginia Grise’s *Your Healing is Killing Me* first started out as a performance manifesto and has often been performed as a play. A year after its first performance, *Your Healing is Killing Me* was developed into a book. Grise guides her manifesto with Chairman Mao’s 4 minute physical fitness plan. There are 8 exercises to be performed by the reader. Reaching, punching, present the bow, kick the door, side stretch, to touch, to the heavens, and jumping jacks. The start of Grise’s work states “This is not a play” but later it is stated that it was originally developed as a one woman play, though it can be played by three women. When reading the reader has a choice, to either stand up and do the exercises or move past those pages. Moving is the one of the points of Grise’s work, though it isn’t required. Each section starts with a new exercise and sketches of how each exercise is performed. The sketches are of Grise herself. I find this work to be genius. Grise is taking something from her culture and integrating it into her work. Also by

providing sketches of those exercise with herself she is integrating her own self into her work. I can see myself in Grise's sketches (sketched by Zeke Pena). She is short and round with short black hair.

Grise immediately lets the reader know the contradiction of her work: it is not play, but yet it was developed as a play. It is not a play, but also it is a play. Grise is Chinese, but also she's Mexican. She's a playwright but also she's a memoirist. She writes in between both audiences, and she writes in both genres. Her work is genre defying. This play/manifesto is also written in a hybrid and segmented style. In her introduction she urges the reader to do the exercise in between the text. She states it is vital to the experience of her work. She didn't write a book or a play: she wrote an experience.

The main focus of *Your Healing is Killing Me* is how Grise cannot find a cure for her terrible eczema and how the world is pushing against her for being an artist. Not being able to find a cure and only being offered creams speaks to the title of her book, *Your Healing is Killing Me*. She is being killed, or essentially harmed by the "cures" that are offered to her, but no one is solving the main problem. The situation alone is a form of hybridity. Grise has a problem, eczema, however the society she lives in; capitalism will not help her solve this problem but instead makes it worse. It's metaphorical, but also it's real. Capitalism is killing her, but so is the cream. Both are one and the same.

Though Grise also has very sort segmented sections like both *In the Dream House* and *The House on Mango Street*, it is the white space I am most interested in. Grise has several short sections that are mostly white space. One example is the section titled "Four Things Cis Men Will Never Have to Do." She then lists the four things.

1. Menstruate.
2. Get Pregnant.
3. Give birth.
4. Have an abortion.

She ends that section with the sentence “Yeah, sometimes it sucks being a woman.” This section gives the reader a short list and plenty of white space in order to interpret what Grise is trying to say as an artist and as a woman. Each word gives the reader the opportunity to think of our own experiences. I, for one, can think of having to bear the burden of periods since age nine and getting pregnant by a man who left me, contemplating abortion, and giving birth alone. The white space in this section allows me to take my life experiences and place them in the text, without further interpretation by the author. Perhaps if the reader has never experienced those things the white space may not give the same effect as I had.

Grise writes a single paragraph at the top of the page that ends with “At age five I had already learned fear, had already learned to be scared, scared of men, scared of the men on the street in my neighborhood.” The remainder of the page is white space. The reader can guess what Grise means. The tension is high and when the reader reaches the next page Grise writes,

“At age five, I...

I...

I...”

Grise cannot finish the sentence. She cannot write what happened to her at age five. The white space allows the reader to know that something horrible happened to her with a man on her street. The following section is titled “Ten Characteristics of PTSD.” We jump to the conclusion that Grise has PTSD from the traumatic experience she had at age five.

Though the sections are short and the book is very short at less than 100 pages I still view this as a memoir of sorts. As readers we are still getting a narrative about Grise and her life. We get her back story and the story of her parents and how she was raised. We finished the journey with her and she gives us one last action before we can finish. The last pages read, “Breathe. Breathe with me.” Those words, in the second person imperative, brings the readers into the text to actually breathe and take in what they just read in a different way than Machado’s second person. The following page only has “1...2...” and the

book ends. The 3 never comes. That is for us, the reader, to do is count to 3. We breathe, inhale and exhale. Then we count 1, and 2, and the third breath is left to us to live our lives. On the count of 3 the reader has to put down the book and decide how to interpret what they read and how to take those interpretations into their own lives.

Healing comes from the part of the American culture that tells us to practice self-care. Grise constructs her text to argue that instead of self-care we need to find the root of the problem's cause. Self-care and putting a metaphorical band aid on the trauma we endure as humans won't heal us; in fact, it will kill us faster. Not finding the cause of our pain and suffering and fixing it at the source leads to more suffering and faster death.

Myriam Gurba

Gurba's life is a hybrid mixture of three cultures, though primarily two cultures, Mexican and America, so naturally mixing the two would come out into her work: "...our family became the first thusly interracial family to pioneer this upper-middle-class neighborhood in the name of those like ourselves. Mexican Polacks." She then brings up how she smells of kielbasa and corn tortillas, a mixture of her parent's two heritages. People who grow up with a culture from Mexico or elsewhere and are American have lots of stories of being two things. She describes her mother's cooking as fusion. Her mother made her pork chops and hamburgers but always stuck radishes and avocados where they didn't belong. Gurba's mother was living her life in two places, just as Gurba does. For Gurba, this hybrid/plural identity means eating radishes where most people think radishes don't belong.

From this foundation, she takes the concept of fusion and applies it to her work. Gurba tells her readers that she learned one language as a girl, English and Spanish. To her they are one and the same. I think many people who speak both languages would agree. It is not uncommon for people who speak Spanish and English to form a hybrid of those two languages, sometimes often called Spanglish. She

places Spanish words where someone else might think they don't belong and she even incorporates jokes told in both languages. "People were people, and people talked, and talking was for everyone. Today, I understand that words are for everyjuan, but not that everyjuan is for every word" (Gurba 5). Juan is being used for the word "one," a common joke in America whether the person is Mexican or not.

And yet this hybridity/fusion is complicated. Gurba tries a "Mexican casserole" (Gurba 9) when staying at a friend's house as a girl. In this scene she realizes there was nothing Mexican about it. Her friend's mom did fusion wrong. Not everything Mexican can be turned into an American dish.

Gurba uses the concept of mean, or bad, or pain as a hybrid concept. We first get a sense of where the title comes from when as a girl she is discussing evil with her father (16). He tells her to think how boring life would be without the bad. She then comes to the conclusion that "Being mean makes us feel alive. It's fun and exciting. Sometimes, it keeps us alive" (Gurba 16). She then discusses how being mean is used to save our lives as women and that gives us the chance to be a bitch sometimes. It's easy to see the influence of Cisneros here.

Myriam Gurba uses both short segmented chapters and poetry to explore her trauma. In the opening poem, Gurba is haunted by the woman Sophia, who was raped and killed in the poem. In order to separate herself and her readers from the trauma of recounting the rape and Gurba writes the horrors into a poem, rather than giving the account into a prose scene. In writing the rape as a poem she is giving herself the creative liberty to recount an event that she wasn't present for. Gurba does not know the victim, Sophia, but rather feels connected to her because later Gurba was raped by the same man.

In the poem Gurba writes about a man pushing a cart down the street selling *elotes*. The man calls out, as a street vendor would, and the perpetrator hears the street vendor selling *elote*, or street corn. Gurba then takes the liberty to refer to the perpetrator's penis as a corn on the cob. She uses the *elote* to set the scene in the poem and give visualization of how the murder takes place at a ballpark, a place where no one would expect a rape or murder to happen.

Later in the book Gurba describes her own rape by the same man that murdered Sophia:

God is like rape

Rape is everywhere too.

Rape is in the air

Rape is in the sky

Rape is in the Bible.

Rape happens at the neighbor's

Rape happens at home.

Rape happens in the dugout.

Rape happens in the infield.

Rape happens in history.

Rape happens at bakeries.

I've watched children rape doughnuts with their fingers.

Rape gave birth to Western civilization and maybe your mom. (Gurba 110)

What Gurba is achieving here is the fusion of identities: we take on the identities of the things that have happened to us and it follows us, not just through ourselves but our work as well. Gurba enduring rape is the topic of this book, just like her poem suggests, rape is everywhere.

Additionally, Myriam Gurba uses white space in *Mean* to track time. In the Chapter "Fall Semester 1995" Gurba lists the classes she took that semester,

ANTHRO 3AC

ART 8

EDUC 98

ENGLISH 45C

She starts new chapters throughout the rest of her book in the same format, listing the various classes she took throughout her time in college. She uses the semester classes as time markers in her life. She uses the effect of the white space underneath her classes so the reader can see the time moving forward. In each chapter she is a little bit older, and is still enduring the trauma of her rape.

The chapters of Gurba's book are segmented and tell about Gurba's life apart from the rape, but the poems she intertwines deal with rape itself. "Everything takes on a new hue, the color of rape. You look at the world through rape-tinted glasses" (Gurba 111). Gurba uses this hybrid form to examine rape culture, the history of America and scrutinizing what isn't taught in schools. Her book, *Mean*, is about her life, but also it's about the social injustices women face daily. Women are forced to live hybrid lives even if we don't want to. We have to be strong and resilient, but soft and tender. We have to simultaneously be a bitch and also not be a bitch. We have to deal with our trauma, but also set that trauma aside. We have to be one ethnicity and culture in one setting and another in a different setting.

Conclusions

Sandra Cisneros dedicates her book to "A las Mujeres" "To the Women," which emphasizes that each of these books, *In the Dream House*, *Your Healing is Killing Me*, and *Mean* could be dedicated *A las Mujeres*, To the Women. As a woman straddling Latina and American culture I can relate to the hybrid form written by authors with hybridity thoughts and feelings. Yet each book can be enjoyed by anyone who isn't exactly the same as the author. Women still fight the patriarchy every day. We fight it in our skin color, our ethnicity, our gender, our sex, our burden to bear children, and do domestic tasks, and work, and fulfill our duties as artists that often don't get the recognition we deserve.

Machado, Griese, and Gurba's hybrid memoirs explicitly state that those authors belong and so do their stories. Each book is genre bending, each author is more than one thing. They are each fiction, essays,

nonfiction, and plays. I am more than one thing. I am American, Latina, student, author, reader, researcher.

I am hybrid, but I am also whole.

Works Cited

Cisneros, Sandra. *The House on Mango Street*. Vintage Books, 2019.

Grise, Virginia. *Your Healing is Killing Me*. Plays Inverse Press, 2017.

Gurba, Myriam. *Mean*. Coffee House Press, 2017.

Machado, Carmen Maria. *In the Dream House*. Graywolf Press, 2019