Can I Believe Her?: Fantastic Abjection in Contemporary Horror Narratives By Women

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Recent years have seen a renaissance in horror media. The revolution in horror has crossed mediums, touching film, television, and literature. The expansion and evolution of horror captures previously untold terrors. Marginalized stories are being told with the classic tenets of the genre, turning the traditional narratives on their heads and offering new perspectives. Horror serves as an ideal vessel for storytellers who wish to convey the unfairness and cruelty they face in a brutal form. The expansion of the genre into the mainstream has opened discussions of the value of "pop" horror versus the value of "artistic" or "elevated" horror. The distinction between the two has become a point of contention among old and new fans of the genre. The new artistic and avant garde approaches to the genre capture a key aspect of horror: "Much horror depends upon destabilising our sense of security, defamiliarising the familiar, and questioning what is seen as an everyday norm–of the body, identity, family relationships, continuity, time, space, boundaries of life and death, alien, Other and self" (Wisker 145). The familiar slasher film has been met with high brow films that question what constitutes horror? Both traditional horror and its new imaginings ask the question: who is horrified?

I examine three contemporary works of horror fiction by women to demonstrate how the recent rise in elevated horror offers nuanced depictions of the current socio-cultural climate faced by women. *Nightbitch* by Rachel Yoder, *Bunny* by Mona Awad, and "The Husband Stitch" from Carmen Maria Machado's short story collection *Her Body and Other Parties* all offer new, horrifying narratives of women. Examining these texts through the literary theories of the fantastic and abjection reflects how horror narratives are constructed in order to reflect a continually mutating vision of modern womanhood.

Theorized by structuralist critic Tzvetan Todorov, the fantastic is a genre that invokes the spaces between certainty. Published in 1970, Todorov's essay "The Fantastic" examines how

subgenres can stack on top of one another, building the fantastic through their seeming incompatibilities. He writes, “The fantastic is based essentially on a hesitation of the reader–a reader who identifies with the chief character–as to the nature of an uncanny event” (Todorov 157). This hesitation rises at the intersection of a recognizable, lived world and the absurd, grotesque supernatural. It is ultimately the reaction of the reader that defines the fantastic.

Though Todorov restricts the fantastic to a genre with rigid bounds, contemporary horror does not fall into this less forgiving structure. It is far more fluid and ambiguous in its depiction of the horrifying. Literary horror in particular moves in and out of his notion of the fantastic, though ultimately it produces the effect of “hesitation” he emphasizes. He states that within literature,

> It is not the acts which are violent, since in fact there are no acts, but the words. The violence is performed not only through language (it can never be otherwise in literature), but also strictly *in* language. The act of cruelty consists in the articulation of certain sentence, not in a succession of effective areas. (134)

Ultimately, language and its careful construction prompt uncertainty in the reader. The violence of contemporary horror is built through language. The careful construction of horror narrative ultimately lends a sense of unease to readers of the fantastic. The “articulation” of the fantastic is parallel to the articulation of the body in horror: it is both carefully constructed and destructed in order to affect its audience.

As a genre, horror serves as an incredible vehicle for the fantastic to enter into narratives. It is founded on a sense of unease, the same feeling that the fantastic instills in its characters and readers. Whisker defines horror by arguing that “Horror lies along a continuum in its use of the real, documentary, and graphic, indicating its daily presence in cruel, disgusting acts of violence

and disempowerment and invasion into normality, threatening the body and stability. At the other end of the continuum lies the weird or supernatural, its sources in the unconscious, the psyche, and the imagination" (145). Horror is an ideal avenue for the fantastic, as it balances the "real, documentary, and graphic," with the "weird or supernatural," and the "imagination." These juxtaposing forces within the narrative drive the insecurity of both narrators and readers as they are forced to reckon with the collision of the known and the imagined. Literary horror opens the door for these elements to coexist within and between various genres.

Though Todorov defines the fantastic as a genre, in this essay I recontextualize and reimagine the fantastic as a phenomenon experienced in contemporary horror. I do so by exploring it alongside the psychoanalytic idea of abjection. French psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva theorized abjection as a deeply embodied discomfort. Essential to horror, and more specifically body horror, Kristeva's theories explore the boundaries of the body. She particularly grounds her unease within the female body. Her opening lines are poetic in their description of abjection: "There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there quite close, but it cannot be assimilated" (1). The feeling of separation within one's body and the sense that an aspect of the self is in "revolt(s)" is the driving force of abjection. The boundary between the "outside" and "inside" is blurred. The inability to distinguish the two results in abjection. Kristeva's theory is grounded in horror, a "dark revolt(s)" that pushes the self away from their own body while simultaneously feeling the discomfort and unease deeply set within the body.

Kristeva's thoughts on the transgression of boundaries as instigating horror do not directly build on Todorov's notions of the fantastic. However, they run parallel. Kristeva

captures the uncomfortable confrontation of abjection: “Apprehensive, desire turns aside; sickened, it rejects. A certainty protects it from the shameful–a certainty of which it is proud holds onto it. But simultaneously, just the same, that impetus, that spasm, that leap is drawn toward an elsewhere as tempting as it is condemned” (Kristeva 1). The dichotomy of Kristeva’s “certainty” and her “elsewhere” instigates the fantastic. The role of desire in the abjection, and specifically desire for that which is “condemned,” creates the tension noted by Todorov as the driving force of the fantastic.

> “The writer, fascinated by the abject, imagines its logic, projects himself into it, introjects it, and as a consequence perverts language–style and content. But on the other hand, as the sense of abjection is both the abject’s judge and accomplice, this is also true of the literature that confronts it” (Kristeva 16).

The writer is pulled to the abject. The perversity of abjection is both deeply interesting and grotesque. The writer perverts their language in order to craft this feeling. Language itself is perverted. The multiplicity of language and its openness to interpretation is utilized by the writer to construct the fantastic. The fantastic in contemporary horror fiction is evoked by the inability to pin down reality or fantasy through dueling language and perspective.

Channeling Todorov’s fantastic through feminist psychoanalyst Julya Kristeva’s theory of abjection, I examine how the physicality of these women’s experienced violence and disembodiment reflects a deep rift between the body and the mind. Kristeva’s notion of the discomfort of abjection and Todorov’s hesitation offer distinct thoughts that both hinge on the tension between crossed boundaries. The transgression of the internal to the exterior and the interweaving of the objective/subjective dichotomy offer commentary on the position of modern women.

Each novel constructs a specific imagining of the feminine relation to the horrifying abject. Their individual constructions of horror–monstrous, gothic, body–represent and reflect on contemporary womanhood. The subject of abjection is pulled between external and internal forces, ultimately breaking the divide between the two. Kristeva writes, “If it be true that the abject simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject, one can understand that it is experienced at the peak of its strength when that subject, weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very being, that it is none other than abject” (5). The women of these novels are “pulverize[d]” psychologically and physically. The external forces that push these women into their designated social roles vary: from pressures as wives and mothers, to the pressures of proper feminine acceptance, to economic struggle, to subduing intense emotions in the name of keeping peace. These women reflect on the social pressures that confine and strangle women, heightening their visibility through elements of horror. This collision of the reality of womanhood and its heightened visibility in the construction of these narratives as horrifying–what they already are, though not recognized as such– evokes the phenomena of the fantastic.

Nightbitch reflects on the social conditions that construct motherhood and the role of the stay at home wife. These pressures, deeply restrictive to the narrator, force her into an increasingly isolated and unacknowledged position of constantly catering to others and neglecting herself. Placed in a suburban pressure-cooker, the mother begins to physically mutate, finding freedom in the shedding of femininity and proper social order. Her transformation is possibly a physical metamorphosis or a descent into madness.

Class and gender dynamics play into *Bunny* as a contemporary gothic horror. The narrator Samantha finds herself isolated among her wealthy, intensely interdependent group of

female peers. Consistently excluded from and condescended by, Samantha feels sharply distinct from her surrounding elite private institution's M.F.A. fiction program. Samantha's position in the university does not diminish her feelings of ineptitude, but instead exacerbates them as she is continually belittled by her more-privileged peers. As she is pushed into the intensely insular group, she begins to collapse into herself, taking on the voices and ideas of those around her.

In the "Husband Stitch," Carmen Maria Machado reflects the lack of respect for women's bodies through a normalized medical procedure that continues to hurt women. She creates a narrator that reads as both incredibly relevant to contemporary women while simultaneously seeped in antiquated imagery and ideals. Her imagined world is reminiscent of retro-America and full of fairytales come to life. Machado's horror comes with deep heartache in its sincerity and proximity to the common experiences of her women readers.

These three narratives, the female protagonists, and the women who write them all comment on the external pressures faced by women, and the unique terror they bring. Each addresses gender and power by using various horror subgenres and by evoking the ephemeral realities of the fantastic. Using horror to represent the absurd, but deeply recognizable, violence experienced by women, these narratives confront the tension between recognizing the widespread violation of women in contemporary society and the consistent criticism and belittlement of women who share their experiences with violence. These texts fall into various horror subgenres, but whether through gory violence or psychological terror, all of them construct an image of womanhood that is both deeply rooted in the body and starkly dissociated from it. Constructing an analysis of these stories by weaving the fantastic and abjection together offers a specific feminist vision of horror that reflects contemporary issues faced by women.

***Nightbitch* by Rachel Yoder**

Nightbitch falls most comfortably into horror-adjacent fiction as a grotesque, satirical examination of women's discontent through body-horror. The protagonist, referred to as "the mother," is a privileged middle-class stay-at-home mother who finds herself increasingly neglected by her husband and isolated with her child. As she navigates her new life confined to the home, she grows increasingly disillusioned. One day she discovers a patch of coarse fur on her neck and shows her husband, only for him to quickly dismiss her. She begins to notice other changes which lead her to believe that she is transforming into a dog. Her detachment from the recognizable reality is deeply intertwined with exaggerated, satirical recreation of the world. Visiting the library one day, she finds a pseudo-academic text by Wanda White, titled *A Field Guide to Magical Women: A Mythical Ethnography*, which fuels her belief in her transformation. It becomes a guiding force as she begins to hunt the illusive writer of the text. Joining a cultish group of suburban moms selling herbs, Nightbitch meets other mothers who operate with intense fervor. The increasingly odd circumstances of her life lead her down a rabbit-hole of brutal self-discovery. Nightbitch finds herself liberated from social pressures and the weight of motherhood's intense responsibilities. This transformation frees her from the confines of her domestic life and inspires her to create art once again. The novel itself is described as a satirical fairytale. Kristeva's idea of the abject is particularly helpful in understanding how the story moves from fairytale into the realm of the fantastic. The visceral nature of the mother's transformation, and the true animality she embodies, extends beyond the allegorical transformations of fairytale.

The title itself crafts ambiguity. Is she becoming a "bitch" in a physical sense–actually transforming into a dog–or is she shedding social norms and becoming the social iteration of the

“bitch”? The sharp name given to her carries deep social significance as a gendered term. There is a vitriolic hate in the use of “bitch” as a primary identifier. She is nameless, other than being a mother and a bitch. She is not her own person, but instead exists in relation to others. However, is she is truly transforming into a dog, than “bitch” becomes an identifier still loaded with cultural weight but descriptive of her as an individual not in relation to others. There is a freedom in this transformation.

The hesitation of the fantastic is born of Nightbitch’s transformation. There is no clear affirmation of her physical change by those around her, leaving the reader to wonder whether she is experiencing a true physical transformation or hallucinating her experiences. Nightbitch offers up the grotesque transformation of the mother as a horrifying avenue to explore the contradictions and uncertainties of contemporary womanhood. The transformation of the mother, whether it occurs in the novel’s reality or is purely within her mind, is the primary avenue for horror. The tradition of the monstrous woman in horror is not new and is founded on a fundamental expectation of womanhood as something placid that becomes horrifying once its boundaries have been breached. Whisker notes, “...male fears of women when other than passive, nun-like, static, even dead, constantly figured her as animal, snake, and monster, the feared Other, the abject” (190). Wisker figures this as the “devouring animal woman,” a historical figure of horror which builds a sense of terror through the unhinged presentation of the woman as consuming grotesquely, inherently unfeminine and deeply disengaged from the bounds of proper femininity (190). Nightbitch does not work to solidify these male fears, but instead questions how male expectations push women to animalistic states. The mother begins to display a primal animality that pulls her from her dull daily routine.

The root of uncertainty within the narrator herself comes from her shifting position in society. She moves from the professional artistic world to isolated within the domestic sphere, experiencing a deep rift in her identity with this change. Whisker notes that horror rises "from people who have themselves been Otherised as monstrous–principally women" (171). The mother serves as many 'types' of women, all who receive a level of scorn or apprehension in society. The mother is treated as the "good woman" for her willingness to prioritize her child over her career. In transitioning from the work world to the domestic sphere, the mother seemingly transitions into the conservative culture's idealized woman. However, in doing so she instigates a rift within herself between her own professional interests and desires. She loves motherhood and feels a deep connection with her son. In a horrific irony, the mother is monstrous because she abandons her "Otherised" role as a working woman.

The opening paragraph of the novel addresses its pointed naming. Awad writes, "When she referred to herself as Nightbitch, she meant it as a good-natured self-deprecating joke–becuase that's the sort of lady she was, a good sport, able to poke fun at herself, definitely not uptight, not wound really tight, not so freakishly tight that she couldn't see the humor in a light-hearted not-meant-as-insult situation–but in the days following this new naming, she found the patch of coarse black hair sprouting from the base of her neck and was, like, *What the fuck*" (3). The character is introduced through her self-degradation as an appeal to a male ideal of the cool girl. She assigns herself the moniker as a means to appear relaxed. However, this ultimately leads to her descent into visceral animality. It is just "days following" to adopt this name that the transformation begins. The mother prompts her own metamorphosis, but it is rooted in misogyny and an appeal to an oppressive male ideal of women. The initial changes she experiences are not liberating, but instead deeply disorienting and confusing. The moniker jump starts the process of

the mother fracturing into multiple personas. She is the mother, Nightbitch, a wife, a mother (somehow both the same and distinct from her name, “the mother”) and a repressed artist.

The mother finds solace in a library book discovered by chance, which she uses to guide her self-discovery and accept her transformation. Trying to understand the changes she is undergoing, the mother peruses the library searching for medical texts to explain her changes. She discovers *A Field Guide to Magical Women*, a book marked “nonfiction” and covered with “all sorts of fantastical creatures” with the “edges of everything a bit blurred” (39 digital). The work of Wanda White illuminates the mother and she finds a deep sense of visibility in the writings of the reclusive academic. The Field Guide establishes an idea of “the unbelievable” as a philosophic construct tied intimately to motherhood. The mother reads, “what is more unbelievable than pushing a small human from a small hole between your legs, or having a masked, robed stranger slice open your belly and pull from it a mewling, bloodied babe? Both are absolutely preposterous propositions, not able to be believed and yet undeniable in the presence of the child, a factual reality” (65). The uncertainty of the mother’s own perception of her role as ‘mother’ is displayed in the text, offering her an overwhelming sense of recognition that leads her to “pause[d], tears in her eyes, which she harshly rubbed away.” Motherhood is displayed by White as a fantastic ordeal, rooted in uncertainty within its extremity. The physicality of motherhood is partially the root of this, displayed through the sharp language describing the female body: “a small hole between your legs” as the vagina, and c-section as a “robed stranger slice[s] open your belly and pull[s] from it a mewling, bloodied babe.” This is a direct, brutally precise and unpoetic description of birth. The reality of motherhood is conveyed in these lines as something brutally physical. Its emotional nature propels this into the realm of

the uncanny, as the significance of life coming from these simple, brutal actions leads to a sense of wonder and disbelief.

After reading White's work, the mother is compelled to reach out to her in order to further understand the theories of the author. She builds a deep connection in her mind which she wishes to further explore. She emails the writer, closing the message stating, "On a personal note, I've recently embarked on a peculiar and unexpectedly fraught era of my life–motherhood, to say it as plainly and simply as I can, though certainly motherhood is in no way plain or simple–and find myself coming up against questions that seem to intersect both philosophically and experientially with your work" (70). The complexities of motherhood are finally acknowledged. The many voices surrounding the mother which display her life as idyllic and simple are finally met with one recognizing her turmoil. Her email captures the contradictions she notices, the contradictions which ultimately form her ambiguous identity and construct the fantastic in the reader. The "plain and simple" world around her is deceptive, and in actuality there is a great deal of paradox and contradiction which those around the mother refuse to acknowledge. She reaches out to White in the hopes that she will acknowledge this and enter into conversation, answering the multitude of questions held by the mother. Finally having a voice which captures and reflects her own thoughts ultimately pushes the mother's transformation forward. Her self-actualization as nightbitch is propelled by this recognition. Though it begins as an isolated process, it becomes communal.

Her perception of the world around her shifts from recognizable to absurd as she becomes convinced that women she knows are similarly turning to dogs. During a trip to her local dog park, one she herself often runs through, Nightbitch sees a "woman" whom she recognizes. Yoder writes that, "She took the retriever's head in her hands and looked into its eyes. Jen? She

whispered, and the dog blinked, playing it cool. They eyed each other for a time, until Nightbitch said, Okay, fine. Go on, and slapped the dog's haunch." Nightbitch begins to take apart normal scenarios, assigning great significance and supernatural power to the animals/women around her. It is unclear whether she has found true power, or has simply slipped into an odd psychosis. The fantastic's layering of genres is a key power in contemporary constructions of the phenomenon. Yoder particularly constructs her narrative through a limited point of view, but builds on and morphs traditional mythology in order to construct a highly satirical modern iteration of the monster tale. The fantastic rises through these particularly modern elements.

To understand genre in *Nightbitch,* we need to know how the novel both evokes and deviates from prior horror genres. The narrative of the mother as "nightbitch" evokes the traditional werewolf narrative in order to simultaneously build upon and subvert the classic monster tale. These contradictions are paired, in part contributing to the fantastic within the text. This is also a feminist strategy, since–as [feminist literary critic?] FIRST NAME Rogers argues– "terms such as myth, structuralism, and narratology….are vital for the potential of madness in literature to signify liberation" (Rogers 70). The mother forms her own mythos, morphing the known werewolf story into something uniquely reflective of contemporary struggles. A story traditionally depicting the monster as an outsider is itself transformed through the mother's position as a privileged, middle-class white woman. She lives a sheltered life. In traditional werewolf narratives, "Werewolves particularly haunt forested areas, rural peasant territory, part of the terror of dark nights before electricity" (Wisker 213). Moving nightbitch's story into a middle class suburban landscape substitutes these early rural landscapes with more structured, cookie-cutter environment. Removing the natural element of the wild creates a solely internal sense of the wild. In this, social norms and pressures internalize and build. The possible

psychosis of the narrator is rooted in the understanding that the physical confines of society cannot be escaped. . Traditional stories mark the transformation to animal through setting, whereas Yoder uses the rigid social confines to further nightbitch's animality.

The final scene captures the inability–or perhaps the unwillingness–of the novel to explain whether Nightbitch's world is reality or fantasy. Nightbitch crafts a stage performance that leaves the world around her baffled. There is no clear understanding of her work, only awe for her art. The fantastic rises in the absurdly grotesque abjection of the show, as Nightbitch proceeds to tear bunnies apart with her teeth. Considering the play, Yoder writes, "Even more terrifying is what the audience would ponder later, each one of them tucked in their beds: but from where had the animals come?" The ambiguity of Nightbitch's supposed power is deeply tied to her body, to animality, and to perception. Is her art an illusion, the embrace of motherhood and womanhood she so desires, or is there true magic guiding the world?

The mother's feelings of frustration towards her husband build throughout the novel, ultimately leading her to violent thoughts as she is continually unable to convince him to consider her perspective or concerns. After he witnesses a dog in the park, and even goes so far as to consider the possibility of it being his wife before dismissing the idea, he condescends and demeans her for not being at home. Though she warned him she would be gone, and left him a note restating this fact, he grows angry with her as he is "forced" to look after his own child and home. The mother grows angry at his blatant disrespect: "She had wanted to bite him by the throat or pummel him with a baseball bat or scream at the top of her lungs, but instead she'd started washing the dishes he had dirtied from breakfast" (97). The mother is constantly forced to mother not only her child, but also her husband who continues to act selfishly and then throw tantrums when his every whim is not met. The mother expresses a desire for violence, though it

is done so rather casually, and is therefore presumed to be superficial. This takes the form of a primal, animalistic drive to “bite him by the throat.” Angry after years of neglect, she is urged to go for the jugular and to kill him. . She imagines “pummell[ing]” him with a “baseball bat.” Instead of acting violently against him, however, she turns to the duties of a caretaker. She washes the dishes he made without complaint or comment after his rambling complaints after he had to perform these tasks, though clearly failing to do so. The responsibility to complete these tasks, as well as apologize for the argument that “led” to the, existing in the first place, falls on her.

The closing scenes of these novels offer scenes of closure without answer or catharsis. The characters and plots remain in a fever-dream state. Beyond the grotesque and violent nature of the texts, there remains a solid lack of confirmation that these events truly occurred. The fantastic is developed through the ambiguous reactions to the mother against her intense belief in her transformation. The closing responses to her performance by critics and audience members emphasizes this uncertainty. . There is no clear cut understanding of her work. Her roles–mother, artist, woman, performer– all highlight her central role as someone seen and perceived. This is the essence of her character. She is deeply inside her mind, and yet simultaneously deeply engaged with the exterior world. Her construction is independent of external validation (as seen in the rejection of her husband’s denial of her dog-transformation) and yet deeply aching for it (joining the groups of mothers whom she otherwise does not share much with, the stage production). She stands as artist and art, with her mind and body melding into something deeply personal yet ultimately displayed for performance.

This ambiguous close is the greatest tool of uncertainty, as noted by Todorov is his insistence that the uncertainty must be maintained to the end. In the tradition of horror, Wisker

explains, “The carnival ends and order returns in traditional saturnalia, but we must remember that carnival is a moment for the working class and other to both riot and rule. Many activities mock the social norms that would maintain subordinate positions” (Wisker 161). The carnival does in fact end, but the nature of the fantastic persists. The lack of solidity in the final scene of the novel is crafted through the reaction of the audience. The terror remains in the lack of clear witness accounts. The brutality of the mother’s art returns but is funneled through the body. The uncertainty in the boundaries and state of the mother’s body–if she has physically transformed, if she has entered psychosis, or if she has reached self-actualization as an artist–all prompt hesitation in her audience as a character and in the novel’s audience of readers.

***Bunny* by Mona Awad**

Mona Awad's 2019 novel *Bunny* follows Samantha, a M.F.A. student at Warren University, an elite pseudo-ivy league institution. She navigates her elitist, insular group of peers through avoidance. Referred to as "the Bunnies," a moniker they pass among themselves, preferring to use the shared nickname over their own names, the group condescendingly mocks Samantha. Samantha and her friend Ava, an artist not attending Warren, resort to using their own nicknames: Cupcake, Duchess, Vignette, and Creepy Doll. Their hyper-feminine, label-heavy aesthetics and underhanded approach to workshopping Samantha's "dark but not like a good dark" writing (Awad 60). *Bunny* is a satirical response to the rising dark academia genre. Mocking the deeply elitist ivy-league aesthetic, Awad uses horror to draw criticisms of elitist institutions. Satirical nods to Donna Tartt's genre-defying novel *The Secret History*, itself a satirization of the deeply insular and elite classics studies, cannot be missed. Awad takes the initial story of class stratification and deeply insular academic community and frames it with feminine horror.

Samantha embodies an artistic archetype, not dissimilar to the protagonists in the other narratives we are examining. Samantha is fully engaged in this role as a student in Warren's M.F.A. program. Nightbitch is distanced from her position as artist, ultimately leading to her dissociative state, while Samantha's immersion in the culture of the program ultimately heightens her own isolation. The relationship between institution and individual is a key one in Bunny. Literary critic Susan Lanser explores the relationship between women writers and established institutions, arguing that "Regardless of any woman writer's ambivalence toward authoritative institutions and ideologies, the act of writing a novel and seeking to publish it…is implicitly a quest for discursive authority: a quest to be heard, respected, and believed, a hope of

influence" (Lanser 7). Samantha is deeply conflicted in regards to her MFA program at Warren. The renowned program is itself intensely competitive and academically high-brow. This leads to the program primarily being populated by wealthy elites, such as the Bunnies. Samantha deeply resents the program's instructors and her peers. At the same time, she seeks their approval. She is pulled between the "ambivalence" of Ava and the authority of her instructors and peers. She chases the "discursive authority" outlined by Lanser. The constant tension from both sides contributes to her fragmentation.

Awad evokes the uncertainty of the fantastic by deconstructing and fragmenting the novel's narrative voice. The novel's primary narration is split into two positions: Samantha's thoughts and actions–a first-person narrative describing her thoughts and experiences–and a second narrative voice, always italicized, representing outer voices, memories, and abstract imaginings. This italicized voice creates ambiguity and uncertainty, as it forces the reader to reposition themself. It represents Samantha's intrusive thoughts, her memories, the voices of outside characters, and ultimately psychic connections. Our inability to establish whether the voice is solely in Samantha's mind, is a product of madness, or represents a supernatural connection between her and the Bunnies and between her and Max lends an air of the fantastic to the novel. In relation to the absurd events of the novel, this voice is difficult to pin down. This makes its clarity at the end of the novel even more chilling.

The fractured narrative voice is established in the opening in the novel. Samantha is introduced through a collective voice. Awad begins the novel, "We call them Bunnies because that is what they call each other. Seriously. Bunny" (digital 3). The opening line multiplies the narrative voice. The novel does not clarify who this "we" refers to. It is clear, however, that the "we" is in opposition to the "Bunnies." Samantha is set apart, though grouped into an unknown

"we," a collective opposed to those around her. As the story continues, this "we" is revealed to be Samantha and Ava, but this knowledge comes after Samantha has developed the image of the bunnies as an insular group which she is not a part of and indeed actively disdains. Samantha explains: "Completely immune to the disdain of their fellow graduate students. Me. Samantha Heather Mackey. Who is not a Bunny. Who will never be a Bunny." The initial characterization of Samantha is constructed almost entirely through negation and her placement within the "we." She does not stand on her own, but instead as opposed to the Bunnies and the presumed superficial comradery and exuberant joy of the Bunnies. Before Samantha is an individual, she is an opposing force.

Though framed through the Bunnies, this opening line, and the scene that follows at Warren University's "Narrative Arts department's annual welcome back *Demitasse*," stage her as an outcast. The emphasis on the pretentious "*Demitasse*" further elaborates on her disdain for those around her. She emphasizes the "free champagne" she and Ava drink throughout the event. There is a clear line drawn between Samantha and Ava and those around them, whereas the elite university and its many excesses are embodied in the Bunnies. Their excessive touchy-feely meetings are met by Samantha's cold demeanor and "comic-book-villain venom." She likens herself to a famously unpretentious piece of writing, one often belittled for its mass appeal and position as a quintessential piece of pop culture. Despite her position within the university and program, Samantha feels a deep rift between herself and her environment. She is constantly pulled between the elite world she has been superficially accepted into and the reality of her financial position, a conflict which fragments her. . The power dynamics within the elite university are key to her identity and the formation– or, rather, disintegration–of her narrative voice. Samantha's role as an outsider in her insular world causes her identity to break down. .

She has no identity outside of her comparisons to the Bunnies and the university. Her connection to Ava is her only true lifeline in a world that feels foreign and hostile.

Bunny is a contemporary work of horror in which gothic settings as well as references to other gothic works contribute to a sense of the fantastic. Two locations important to the story are the attic of Kira's apartment and the basement of Warren–both of these are represented in a distinctly gothic manner. Samantha describes the space she and her cohort meet for workshop as, "The Cave…a black-box theater in the basement of the Narrative Arts Center. No visible doors, no windows, and of course, no clocks. Only dark, damp walls that evoke the womb" (54). She additionally refers to her seminar instructor as Fosco, a character in the classic gothic novel *The Woman in White*. Warren, an ivy-League-type institution, conveys the sense of grandeur common in the classic castles and dungeons of gothic literature. Building on this historic, and to a degree stuffy, physicality, Warren serves as a microcosm of conservative contemporary society though it postures as a liberal beacon of progress.

Bunny thus references the seminal texts in the genre in which it is constructed, satirically and cheekily pointing to how gothic tropes, such as location, can be used in modern works. It equally mocks the stern nature of these texts through its extremity. The layering of genres–gothic, contemporary high-brow horror, satire–are explicitly self-referential. The gothic itself as a tradition utilizes spaces of in-between and transition, as noted by Wisker: "Gothic fictions use spaces that are dangerous, at the edge, such as cellars, dungeons, attics, haunted castles, to show us how we, in our minds, push those elements of our lives we worry about into safe, distant places. The Gothic brings them out again, exposes them, and enables readers to explore contradictions before being returned to security" (148). These spaces push the novel into the space of the fantastic as it is unclear whether Samantha is knowingly making these references

and relying on literary tradition in the construction of this narrative, or whether the horror story she endures is itself an outside gothic work.

Throughout the novel, Samantha's own writing is described as off putting and discursive. She is consistently criticized by her instructors and peers for her "dark" writing. The university is the foundation for revolutionary reforming of writing: genre, form, perspective. Samantha's experimentation is condemned, however. It is unclear if this is because of her attraction towards the discursive world presented to her by Ava, or if her mental state has degraded her writing. As a character, her expression is muddled and distorted. This is subverted at the end of the novel as Samantha is extolled by her instructor for her work. This closure, seemingly in opposition to the lingering wonder of the fantastic, works to reinforce the possible interpretation of the novel's events as a work of Samantha's imagination. The preceding chapters lean toward supernatural interpretation, but the closing assuredness from Samantha ultimately works to undo this. She is well, in spite of the preceding violent events. The reader knows that there is some degree of reality in Samantha's account of the violent night, as the Bunnies appear brutally injured. Samantha's assuredness coincides with the completion of her thesis and in her graduation from her program. The environment that forced her insecurity and continual self-degradation is finally shed, and with it her own confusion and mental fog. The reader experiences this clarity through Samantha, but ultimately the question of the supernatural is unanswered.

The bunnies are liberal elitists, uncaring in the exertion and advantage of their privilege. Samantha's economic status is initially the greatest force in their division. As the story progresses and she takes on o their hyper-feminine, indulgently performative style , she is accepted. When she is invited to the Bunnies' "Slut Salon," their weekly get- together, she is drawn, seemingly by unknown and unavoidable powers, to attend. It is unclear whether these

powers are supernatural or if they are social pressures. Upon her arrival, the night quickly progresses into a haze. Remembering the night as an odd, hazy memory, Samantha recollects the evenings odd emotional intensity: “Their coos of sympathy are still in my ears. Their finger pads still wiping tears from my cheeks. Because I did cry. Why did I cry again? What did I tell them?” (48 digital). The Bunnies echo in her mind after they have separated. Their voices and touch become inescapable to Samantha, who, in spite of her lack of clarity in recollecting the evening, distinctly hears and feels the Bunnies around her. She remembers the evening to a certain point, wherein she shares the story of her and Rob Valencia, a boy she attended high school with and played the wife of in their high school play. To the joy of the Bunnies, Samantha describes the experience as deeply erotic.

As Samantha joins the Bunnies’ cultish slut salon, she begins her descent into their disorienting hive mind. Samantha’s initiation into the Bunnies is a form of self-annihilation. The first-hand account of the novel’s events disappears and Awad shifts to a “we” perspective that is distinct from the ambiguous “We” that opens the story. This “we” is more clearly a melding of minds between Samantha and the Bunnies. It represents her annihilation in the face of extreme social and personal pressures to adhere to the absurdly privileged and parochial world she inhabits. Samantha’s individuality is lost as she dives into the privileged world of the Bunnies. Samantha does not recognize her loss of self. This lack of awareness is constructed through her fluid voice. The novel is clearly skewed, with Samantha as an unreliable narrator, and once again we cannot distinguish between imagination and reality. Samantha’s lack of objectivity engages the fantastic as she descends into a shared voice.

As she moves to the narrative voice of “we,” Samantha’s individuality is almost entirely lost. It is through Ava’s intervention that she escapes the hive mind of the Bunnies. The loss of

self is the destruction of the ego. The conscious self is submerged in the dominant psyche. The Bunnies are confident and coherent in their attempt to override Samantha's mind and pull her into their group.

The novel begins its final spiraling descent into gruesome madness as the Bunnies fracture. Without their tight knot dynamic holding them together, their bodies and appearances crumble, and with them their status and art. In a final meeting in the dungeon-like Cave, Ursula addresses the cohort in a speech highlighting the physical impacts of producing art. She describes "An interesting side effect of the Process," in which the boundaries between writer and writing blur, both physically and ideologically. She notes how, "these sorts of transformations are common during the final thesis semester. When all leave the maternal embrace of the Cave and retreat to our own individual dark spaces–to spin the pain and fear and shame that lives there into so much literary gold" (247). The artistic process is a deeply transformative one. The womb-like imagery of the Cave meets its gothic implications, creating a construct of the maternal body which the women are leaving in their own processes of creation. They leave the "maternal embrace" in order to becomes mothers themselves, birthing their creative works. Ursula offers demented imagery of this birth. Ironically unaware of the Slut Salon and its bunny-boy productions, she captures the brutality of creation and its abject horror. She describes the process in horrifying scenarios: " Genitals get impaled with pins. Hair gets chopped off with hacksaws, sometimes ripped from the root…One poor young man chopped off an ear. That was… unfortunate, but also indicative. Of the deeper Transformation required by the Work. The Work does not come without Cost." The production of art requires pain and intense physical suffering. Samantha's interpretation of Ursula's speech highlights her belief in this aspect of the creative process. The capitalization of "Process," "Transformation," "Work," and "Cost" all highlight

these elements of the process as something formal, deeming proper recognition in Samantha's mind. The phrase "That was… unfortunate," comes directly from Ursula, yet it is not quoted as her opening reflection is. Samantha's mind takes on Ursula's, leading her to claim her advisor's voice and language as her own. As the Bunnies become distinct from one another, Samantha is further pushed into a collective mind.

In this meeting, Ursula also highlights the transgressive impact of art on identity. She notes that the artists themself is changed psychologically. The fundamental identities of the artists are tested in the final stages of writing. She notes that, "Genders become fluid, orientations shift, white people suddenly discover other races in their lineage. And then, of course, some take it too far" (247). This notion frames the understanding of Max. Introduced as an odd man who Samantha continues to run into around town, and then revealed as Ava's boyfriend, Max is a pseudo-doppelganger of Samantha, created from a deer. The doppelganger figure in gothic tradition is one of exact replica. However, Awad reinterprets the tradition, making Max a male reflection of Samantha who shares her thoughts and feelings. Her role in his creation is unbeknownst to her, and Max uses this knowledge to taunt her. In gothic tradition, "...the doppelganger sees to represent the recognition of the tragedy of one's own fragmentation and alienation from the self" (Rigney 10). Max stands as the aspect of Samantha that does not adhere to the university and Bunnies' elitist demands. He does not feel the same isolation as Samantha because he does not underhandedly seek their approval, though he receives attention from the Bunnies regardless. The alienation inherent to the doppelganger is exacerbated by the gender distinction between the two figures, as Max does not have to appeal to patriarchal notions of acceptable womanhood.

In the book's final descent, Samantha realizes that Max is deeply connected to her, serving as her distorted doppelganger. He is parallel to a Bunny boy, but sharply distinct from them as he is mutated from a deer and is seemingly whole. This is because he is a reflection of Samantha herself. He is a male doppelganger born from her and he shares many of her traits, including deep emotional, sexual, and romantic feelings for Ava. Samantha realizes this on the final violent night of the novel. After confronting him, their connection becomes clear in Samantha's muddled mind. She notes, "It was clear my use of the word *intentions* amused him terribly. He let out a great honking laugh. *My INTENTIONS. MY intentions."* His intentions are ultimately her intentions and vice versa. They are wholly separate and wholly the same. Her inner voice, speaking voice, the minds of the Bunnies and of Ava and Max all muddle together. He carries her thoughts and desires unburdened by the desire to be seen and acknowledged by the elite institution and cohort she is so eager to mock.

Bunny simultaneously presents gender as a binary and deconstructs that binary. The masculine and feminine are in stark opposition, and femininity is often used to manipulate men. . The Bunnies are hyper-feminine and use their femininity in a referential, ritualistic way. Their aesthetic is a detailed construction of their idealized world. The bunny men they create do not fit their ideals of masculinity. The men are created for their own entertainment and sexual interests. The men that do not turn out–those with weaker hands or an inability to speak or think coherently, as well as those who are severely physically deformed as a result of botched metamorphosis–are all violently removed. Masculinity is an unreachable ideal constructed by the Bunnies. They have strict notions of male-perfection in their minds which are ultimately unattainable for their creations. This leads to their brutal murders, as the failed creations are

violently killed by the Bunnies. An acceptable representation of masculinity and personhood is only fulfilled by Max, who proves to be a more complexly gendered figure.

The relationships between gender, class, and power constrict Samantha and exacerbate her mental strife. In the closing scene, in which Samantha attends her graduation's closing cocktail hour, paralleling the novel's opening scene, Samantha mocks the university's insistence that her all female-cohort stood as a testament to their progressive nature. She sarcastically comments, "Warren's first all-female cohort. *Such trailblazers we are, yes*?" (302). Samantha's inner voice is mocking. She sarcastically mocks the emphasis on gender as unifying. The Bunnies, who she looks at bruised and scarred from their sadistic actions, were cruel and belittling, even int he moments they were supposedly unified as a cohort. Until the end, in the final explosive night of violence, the Bunnies maintained their feelings of superiority and disdain for Samantha. The class divide of the program alienated her from the Bunnies in spite of their shared existence as women. The use of "*trailblazers*" is equally sarcastic. These women are in an elite university. Their position is one of extreme privilege. The opportunity to participate in Warren's MFA program is not universally accessible. Though Samantha participates in the program, she is in a sea of incredibly wealthy individuals, and the lone target of their cruelties. Their condescension is in no way negated by their gender. Instead, the rhetoric of womanhood, and the sense of comradery between women that was heightened and perverted to manipulate Samantha at the slut salon, heightens their cruelty.

“The Husband Stitch” by Carmen Maria Machado

Her Body and Other Parties by Carmen Maria Machado weaves fairytale, fantasy, horror, and feminist critique into a collection of deeply disturbing and moving stories. The collection begins with “The Husband Stitch,” which sets the tone for the stories to come. Nominated for the Nebula Award for Best Novelette, the story establishes an insightful, deeply evocative voice that carries through every story in the collection in spite of their varying narrators, settings, and themes. The story follows an unnamed woman as she navigates a world reminiscent of 1950s/60s America. As a teenager, she meets a man who she begins dating and having a sexual relationship with. The complex feelings she faces as a woman in a restrictive culture who deeply desires and enjoys sex push the narrative forward. As she enters the world of domesticity and marital bliss, the narrator continually reflects on her husband’s insistent interest in the ribbon around her neck. The ribbon, a reference to the classic folktale of the girl in the green velvet ribbon, is a point of contention in their relationship–seemingly the only one in an otherwise fulfilling relationship. Her husband constantly pushes her boundaries: when their child, a boy, is born, he asks her doctor to perform the “husband stitch.” Colloquially, this refers to a procedure post-birth where tearing from birth is sutured with an extra stitch in order to create a tighter, more pleasurable feeling for the husband during sex. Often this comes with deep discomfort, pain, and other possible health issues for the woman receiving the stitch. This moment marks the beginning of the story’s final descent. Slowly the world turns sour to the narrator, as the son she is raising begins to insist on pushing the same ribbon boundary as his father and as the woman grows increasingly isolated and discontented. The story culminates in a final violation from the husband, where the woman wakes to find him messing with her ribbon.

tired of constantly trying to reinforce the one distinct boundary she has asked for, she gives into his demands, and in doing so loses her head.

Machado‘s use of the fantastic is different from Yoder’s and Awad’s. While *Nightbitch* and *Bunny* tend toward what Todorov describes as the supernatural or uncanny, Machado’s story tends allegory. While *Nightbitch* and *Bunny* evoke existing monster stories, Machado pulls more directly from the story of “he girl in the green ribbon,” a story often passed between children. The story goes as follows : a girl was born with a velvet green ribbon around her neck. She does not ever remove the ribbon, nor does she let anyone else touch it, though they often ask. One day she marries. On her wedding night, as she sleeps, her husband removes the ribbon and watches in horror as his wife’s head falls off her body, lamenting “Why oh why did you have to touch my ribbon?”

Over the years, this folktale–like all classic stories–has morphed. The modern telling of the story, the one I and my others grew up with, has the woman untying the ribbon herself. Her head falls off, the husband is horrified, and she dies. But Machado reverts back to the original story’s violation, albeit through a modern consideration of women’s autonomy and rights to their own bodies. Within the story, Machado writes, “that may not be the version of the story you’re familiar with but I assure you it’s the one you need to know.” She reflects on the meta-fictional use of the girl in the green ribbon. Machado plays with the stories many re-tellings, as her narrator does eventually pull the ribbon herself at the behest of her husband‘s constant nagging. Machado chooses to maintain the violation of the original telling through the use of the husband stitch. She pulls from a variety of materials, and their many iterations, in order to construct a deeply horrifying and painful picture of womanhood. In this way, the story is both relevant as a

representation of contemporary gendered violence and reflective of the historical status of women at varying points in history.

The fantastic emerges in the story through a complex layering of fantasies. The character is aware of folktales and she repeatedly refers to their morals, but she is blind to her own status as a folktale archetype. . She uses, interprets, and rewrites these folktales throughout the story to fit in her idyllic 1950s America. Her knowledge of the stories ultimately does not save her from her fate. At one point she states, “I have heard all the stories about girls like me and I’m afraid to make more of them” (17 digital). Machado questions the nature of folktales. When does rumor become truth, when does lived reality turn to cautionary tale? The recognizable urban legends told by the narrator are mixed with far more vague stories of girls with such debauched desires that their husbands send them away. Their families abandon them in moral outrage.

The opening directions of the story prompt pause in the reader. Machado sets out stage directions, defining the character within her story as though they were to be performed on stage. She establishes the character “ME,” but it is unclear if this is Machado, the character, the reader themself, or a combination of the three. She does something similar with the assigned character named “MY FATHER.” She states that he is “like your father,” to create a sense of the character in the reader’s mind before they are ever introduced to the father of the story. The reader is prompted from the start to layer their own experiences with those of the narrator. Machado’s father is the character’s father, the reader’s father, a generic patriarchal father, all wrapped in a single character. The narrator, reader, and Machado collapse into one figure that is deeply fractured. The violation becomes personal to the reader. The story does not unfold as a script, but instead returns to a theatrical production, as Machado prompts the reader to stop and stage the scene themself. These moments are odd and disconcerting, as she prompts the reader to act out

abstract ideas rather than giving them concrete stage instruction. Machado writes, “(if you read this story out loud, please use the following voices” (14 digital). This alludes both to a theatrical performance of the story as well as a history of oral storytelling. The reader is an integral part of the story being shared and spread. Here, layers of genre, as described Machado’s crafting of a twisted folktale, a moral passed primarily among children, builds on this initial instruction.

The layered nature of the story continues to construct the fantastic. Todorov describes the fantastic as being produced by layered genres. The inability to neatly define the genre, and thus to anticipate its conventions, causes the reader to hesitate. The narrator consistently references stories she has heard. These stories vary from classic fairy tales to urban legends to gossip. The first instance of this referencing is of a sexual nature. Machado writes, “I once heard a story about a girl who requested something so vile from her paramour that he told her family and they had her hauled off to a sanatorium” (15). Deviant sexuality and fear are intimately linked in this moment. The gossip and social stigma surrounding this story permeate the narrator’s own fears. She states, “I don’t know what deviant pleasure she asked for, though I desperately wish I did. What magical thing could you want so badly they take you away from the known world for wanting it?” (15). The narrator openly participates in and enjoys sex with her partner. She is voicing both the “magical” nature of her desires as well as the recognition of the “deviant pleasure” in the 1950s/60s world she lives in. As the story continues, her sexual desires are shown to be more aimed at pleasing her husband, rather than purely fulfilling her own desires: sex becomes a tool in their marriage. She begins to lose her autonomy, even as the ribbon itself serves as a mark of self-ownership. Her husband, and eventually her son, question their lack of access to her ribbon. Machado’s story is about perpetually giving up pieces of oneself until there is nothing left to give. Then, her narrator’s ribbon is removed, and her head falls to the floor.

Machado's genres are closely connected, rather than seeming distinct forms of storytelling. She layers folktales, urban legends, gossip, theater, and horror, all within a near-confessional prose. The collection is often referred to as dark fairytale retellings. This oversimplifies the complex layers Machado builds the narrator's world with. These distinct, overlaid layers are key in the production of fear, abjection, and the fantastic. It is unclear which world the narrator resides in. She seemingly lives in an extension of the story of the girl in the green ribbon.

The story meets its title in the hospital, as the narrator is forced to endure the husband stitch after the pain of childbirth. This is a moment of horror through deep uncertainty in the mind of the narrator, and a deeper certainty in the mind of the reader, as to whether the horrifying violation has occurred. The narrator [?] is unwilling to fully dedicate herself to what she has witnessed post-birth, describing the scene unfolding around her as, "He looks up and I am almost certain he winks at my husband, but pain makes the mind see things differently than they are" (26 digital). The narrator is at the mercy of the men around her. In her vulnerable position, the men turn to one another. The husband's sexual desires are prioritized above the health of the narrator. Beyond this, it is done so mockingly, even playfully. The doctor winks at the husband, entering into an agreement about the narrator's body without consulting her. The hesitation she feels is rooted in her supposedly distorted witnessing of this interaction between the husband and doctor. She tries to deny what she saw, pointing to pain's possible influence on her perception of the scene unfolding around her. She denies herself the certainty of witnessing. Physical pain pushes the bounds of her perceived reality.

The husband stitch offers a clear moment of building body horror. The story alludes to this subgenre through the ribbon and the reader's presumed knowledge of the folktale, but it is

explicitly expressed through the performance of the husband stitch on the nonconsenting narrator. The relationship between the female body and body horror is fraught, often condemning the feminine body as horrific in the male consciousness rather than examining how patriarchal conceptions of the feminine body condemn it. Whisker considers the implications of the body as a source of horror, writing that,

> Some rewrite body horror, recognising and pointing out that it is essentially built on a male fear and loathing, the fear of a vagina dentata, which renders all women's bodies, for some men, the object of disgust and terror, the abject, the rejected Other of waste, taboo, and potential devouring death. Body horror is built on a disgust and fear of the body and its functions, a desire to obliterate or destroy one's own body or other bodies, a desire to be devoured, or an examination of that desire as it appears in traditional tales. (Wisker 178)

Machado builds a feminist horror through the deconstruction of the narrator's body post-birth. The "male fear and loathing" described by Wisker of the "vagina dentata" is somewhat subliminal in the story. It is not an active recognition by the husband or doctor that the woman's body post-birth is a source of this "fear and loathing," but instead presents as complete ambivalence towards the physicality of their actions in performing the husband stitch.

Machado takes the traditional tale of labor and delivery and morphs it into horror through this lack of recognition and acknowledgment. The functions of the female body are ultimately an unrecognized source of horror for the men of the story. The narrator does not initially find horror in her own body, instead feeling a sense of building horror as her body is modified and reformed outside her control and choice. She initially displays a comfort in her body through her open sexuality and involvement with her husband. She experiences the pain of childbirth, but does not feel dissociated from her body until this moment. Even in this she recognizes it but refuses to acknowledge it, and does not confront the horrifying actions of the husband and doctor. She denies the severity of their violation in her mind in order to preserve a sense of security. For the

reader who sees this all happen with the distance of a witness, however, there's an innate sense of violation, cruelty, and horror.

Machado distinguishes between male collective unconscious and female collective unconscious. The women in the story offer comradery and comfort, something greatly lacking in the narrator's marriage as she is consistently forced to restate her boundaries. This is vital in the construction of the mythology of the world. The women speak and recognize one another's struggles, but these are entirely ignored by the men. Considering the creation of stories, "Myths, which are creative expressions, in some respects like symptoms, of group or collective psychology" (Rangell 28). Machado distinguishes different collectives. The myths crafted by women are made in order to warn and protect. There are elements of shame, but the narrator largely removes this shame, replacing it with fear. The story of the depraved girl is a warning. The narrator does not shame her and instead empathizes, and the original intent of the story is dulled by her compassion. Subversive action unites the woman of the story and our narrator. The women in the story share a distinctive collective psychology. They are united in their oppression.

Machado's use of a multi-faceted fairytale prompts horror in multiple dimensions. The fluidity of storytelling, weaponized by and against women, ultimately extends beyond women's control. The narrator herself addresses the fluidity of storytelling, stating, "When you think about it, stories have this way of running together like raindrops in a pond. Each is borne from the clouds separate, but once them have come together, there is no way to tell them apart" (26-7 digital). Machado utilizes "borne" to describe the conceptualization of stories. They are created, paralleling motherhood. This loss of distinction ultimately moves to condemn women, as seen in the narrator's son adopting the thinking of his father. The perceptions of women cannot be controlled. Though the narrator gives birth to her son and he is distinct and innocent, he

eventually melts into the larger culture. He becomes one of the men the narrator fears, becoming obsessed with her ribbon and upset when he is not given access to it. The entitlement he displays reflects a larger culture which demands full access to women. Reinforced by his father, he becomes the man the narrator fears.

It is this reason that the narrator does not push beyond her world's limits. Her husband asks and she gives. Sometimes excitedly, becoming the debauched woman that she feels she is, and other times with hesitation, afraid to share a piece of herself that belongs purely to her. It does not matter how hard she pleads, he demands the one thing that is solely hers. The loss of bodily autonomy in the final loss of her head, and in the earlier procedure of the husband stitch, proves that her body is never really her own. This devastating realization comes with a parallel realization when she says, “he is not a bad man and that I realize suddenly is the root of my heart he’s not a bad man at all to describe him as evil or wicked or corrupted would do a deep disservice to him and yet-” Machado recognizes the complexity of life for women who are constantly forced to give themselves away without return, without privacy, and without understanding from their partners. There are no clear boundaries even in moments or clear violation. Our villain is just a man, a man the narrator still loves, and in this contradiction Machado finds a fantastic kind of horror, as well as betrayal and sadness. The hesitation of the woman transfers to the reader cannot tell her to leave him. Because the reader is the “I” of the story, the reader is left to endure the suffering just as the character has been left to endure the physical and psychological impacts of the husband stitch. It is a common cruelty. And we cannot reject that which is so acceptably common.

> When I wake up, my husband is kissing the back of my neck, probing the ribbon with his tongue. My body rebels wildly, still throbbing with the memories of pleasure but bulking hard against betrayal. I say his name, and he does not respond. I say it again, and he holds me against him and continues. I wedge my

> elbows in his side, and when he loosens from me in surprise, I sit up and face him. He looks confused and hurt, like my son the day I shook the can of pennies. (39)

Thus begins the final violation. Similar to the original telling of the girl in the green ribbon, the narrator begins this violation asleep with her husband probing her boundaries. Machado makes this explicitly sexual. The husband's interest in the ribbon is inherently tied to his desire to fully control his wife's sexuality. Like her relationship with the woman in the painting class, there is no space for solitude in her life, nor in her body. The narrator experiences a deep conflict, embodying both a hesitation and the abject in this moment. She states her "body rebels wildly." There is a lack of control in her own movements as her body betrays her.

The husband's "hurt" at being denied his wife, sexually and intimately with the ribbon, is reminiscent of the scorned child. There is a sense of entitlement in the husband's actions and subsequent response to her reaction that casts him as emotionally immature. he son and father are linked in their disdain towards the woman. For the child, this is due to her supposed betrayal as she shakes the pennies in his face. For the husband, this is her unwillingness to share her ribbon. There is a thread that connects the men and sets them in opposition to her. Their expectations of her require complete submission to their whims, however they are presented, and when she does not meet this lofty expectation, she is met with confusion and pain. The husband acts as the betrayed party despite his consistent violation of his wife's boundaries. The body becomes a space of unsureness. The memory of pleasure exists with the present "betrayal" leading the narrator to feel as though her body is in rebellion. She is at once deeply within her body, feeling her husband violate her boundaries, while simultaneously feeling a deep lack of control and security in her physical form. She is both starkly alienated from her body, yet deeply embodied in her pain in this moment.

The close returns to the story's theatrical introduction, now directly capturing the gruesome horror of the narrative. The narrator states, "If you are reading this story out loud, you may be wondering if that place my ribbon protected was wet with blood and openings, or smooth and neutered like the nexus between the legs of a doll. I'm afraid I can't tell you, because I don't know. For these questions and others, and their lack of resolution, I am sorry" (40 digital). Dolls and other lifeless human forms are often deeply unsettling and elicit the feelings of the uncanny. Here, the doll also stands in as the ideal female form and an already disturbing association is further problematized in its sterile nature. It is "neutered," incapable of the bodily functions of the female form, primarily highlighting birth as the function which prompts horror. The "nexus between the legs of a doll" are highlighted as ideal through their lack of function. Machado constructs a blank female body as the male ideal and a space void of meaning. The "wet with blood and openings" expresses the internal body becoming external, creating a sense of abjection. The grotesque physicality of the internal body is brought to the surface. This is an uncertain movement, of course, because it is not clear which of these images–the doll or the wound–is the true one revealed in the narrator's beheading. She herself is unsure of her own body. The ribbon was her security, and now that it has been removed she is unfamiliar with this aspect of herself and with this area of her body. This is expressed in the moment of her annihilation, however, leaving both her and the reader to wonder the reality of her actions.

Conclusions

The fantastic as a rising phenomenon within contemporary horror literature reflects contemporary social and cultural issues that afflict women. In capturing women's horror as ambiguous and in metamorphosis, these stories offer explorations into how women's voices are constructed outside of fictional narratives. "Both narrative structures and women's writing are determined not by essential properties or isolated aesthetic imperatives but by complex and changing conventions that are themselves produced in and by the relations of power that implicate writer, reader, and text" (Lanser 5). In conversation, these narratives produce an image of the contemporary "relations of power" faced by women. These narratives come at a time when the social position of women is uncertain. They rise not as coincidental "isolated aesthetics," but instead as individual voices within a larger cultural conversation. Examining their positions through varying means–motherhood, class, sexuality, bodily autonomy–these narratives offer critical insights into how women's voices are projected into the cultural unconscious.

The narrative voice, and specifically a first person narration that feels dissociated from the external world and at odds with the internal world, crafts the violence of the text. How the gruesome actions of the novel are conveyed–through this dissociated voice–leads to a detached, somewhat ambivalent attitude. This is not to say that the protagonists are desensitized to violence or uncaring in their witnessing of experiencing of violence. But, there is a rift between the socially acceptable perception of violence and that which is conveyed by the narrators. Dulling horrifying acts produces the fantastic. The violence is familiar, but the experience is not. The "articulation" of the gruesome and grotesque as an extension of nature and of the self develops the hesitation of the reader. They cannot relate to the narrator, nor can they condemn them. Yet, the reader is still placed in the mind of the speaker, experiencing their descent first hand.

These narratives enter “a culture suddenly lush with primal visions of women’s bodies– dripping with blood, coursing with hormones and pulsing with pain and arousal” (Hess). Our current culture is in transition, moving towards a more accepting culture. The “Me too” movement signifies a push towards believing women when they experience violence, both publicly and behind closed doors. This movement, and others, are not perfect. The backlash endured by women who speak up is not negated by visibility, often being heightened by it instead. However, there is an unprecedented awareness that cannot be ignored. We stand as witnesses to the bleeding bodies of women, and it is becoming increasingly difficult for people to look away.

Literary critic Rachel Eve Moulton writes, “As a woman, what you understand to be true and right could easily be contorted until it is a shape you barely recognize, and in this way, the world can legitimately call you crazy.” These narratives both rely on and reject the ridicule of women’s voices. The use of the fantastic emphasizes the unwillingness to believe women. The absurd scenarios these women find themselves in would be easy to deny. And yet the texts do not do this. They indulge the protagonists and allow their stories to unfold in grotesque fashion. The narratives are both implausible and undeniable. These narratives do not allow for the world to diagnose their “crazy.” Characters within the texts deny these women’s narratives, undermining their voices and the power they have as witnesses to and victims of horrors. It would be easy as readers to deny these women, to file these narratives away simply as allegory or fiction. However, the truth that rises out of the unbelievable is poignant, and ultimately undeniable for the reader who witnesses their struggles.

In discussing these books with my cohort, other students, professors, and friends, I have found that these stories are recognized only by women and femme-nonbinary individuals.

Something in these narratives appeals to these groups. There is a recognition of the familiar in these stories, in spite of their absurd means. There is also excitement in the ways that horror shines a light on these narratives with such direct brutality. It is in these conversations that I noticed a trend with those who had read them. In talking about the narratives, we tended to treat the acts of absurd brutality and gore as fact, in spite of the ambiguity within the language. There is a tendency among these groups to believe the women in these narratives. This appears to be a key, albeit anecdotal, representation of Todorov's insistence that the hesitation at the core of the fantastic resides in "a reader who identifies with the chief character."

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