

The Dream House at the Shoreline: Carmen Maria Machado through the Lens of Audre Lorde

Every woman I know is a victim of harassment or assault. However, rather than disclosing to me directly, my female peers often allude to their trauma in passing. It seldom surprises me to hear they have gone through such experiences, given that “1 in 3 women globally experience violence,” according to a study conducted by the World Health Organization. As supported by this data, it is nearly impossible to exist as a woman or femme-presenting individual in society without being stifled by the patriarchy, which prioritizes the lives of white, cisgender men above everyone else. Thankfully, there are women throughout history who have fought for the authentic expression of marginalized people. Specifically, Audre Lorde was a prominent author during the Black Arts Movement, an artistic initiative celebrating Black culture during the 1960s and 1970s. Lorde is remembered for her activism and poetry inspired by the discrimination she faced as both a Black woman and a lesbian. One of her most famous poems, titled “A Litany for Survival,” examines the idea that minorities were born into a society that prevents them from living as comfortably as their oppressors. Lorde’s poem was first published in 1978; however, its themes reverberate through the works of contemporary queer authors.

Namely, Carmen Maria Machado’s memoir, *In the Dream House*, published in 2019, chronicles her first serious relationship with a woman where she suffered various forms of abuse. Her book challenges heteronormative boundaries by asserting that lesbians can also experience violence in their relationships. Together, the works of Lorde and Machado encourage readers to understand the value of speaking up for yourself, claiming that advocating for your needs affects both you and your community drastically. “A Litany for Survival” emphasizes the necessity of breaking the silence, thus reinforcing Machado’s belief that candidly recounting your trauma allows you to reclaim power over it. Using Lorde’s poem as a lens in which we understand *In the*

*Dream House* enables us to realize the significance of queer representation in the media and glimpses into the nature of victim-blaming.

Before unpacking Machado's memoir, it is crucial to analyze Lorde's poem so that it is easier to think in its terms. First, we must acknowledge how Audre Lorde's identity as a Black lesbian contextualizes the main ideas within her poem; however, the author's use of language broadens her intended audience to anyone who has suffered for the sake of remaining silent. She dedicates her litany to "those of us who live at the shoreline / standing upon the constant edges of decision / crucial and alone" (Lorde, lines 1-3). The author utilizes first-person pronouns to imply that she empathizes with those who find it difficult to prioritize their humanity. Furthermore, she uses the shoreline as a metaphor for the unrelenting anxiety associated with making important decisions. Lorde reflects upon the cycle of uncomfortably cold water, shocking your nervous system and pulling away as soon as your body adjusts to its temperature, only to douse you again quickly. This physical process parallels Lorde's feelings as she contemplates asserting herself. No matter how much effort the speaker of the poem may put into avoiding the subject, the consequences of being a minority continue to wash up on the shores of her consciousness. Despite her poem's focus surrounding the importance of vocalizing your needs, this stanza reveals that Lorde understands from personal experience how speaking up is much easier said than done. Admitting how isolating it can feel to put yourself first is an act of bravery on her part, which allows readers to trust her as she motivates us to make positive choices for ourselves.

Moreover, the author's purpose for writing involves dissecting the effect those in power have on our self-expression. She declares, "for by this weapon / this illusion of some safety to be found / the heavy-footed hope to silence us" (Lorde, lines 19-21). Lorde uses the second stanza

of her poem to examine the mechanisms of silence. Specifically, minorities are taught that being passive grants them their best chances of surviving. It is better not to challenge the “heavy-footed,” otherwise known as those who have a prominent influence over others. The term extends to anyone possessing power, whether occupational, such as a government official, or relational, like an abusive significant other. These people have transformed silence into a weapon used to frighten the oppressed into stagnation. Their cumbersome force submerges us into shrouds of self-doubt where we question the validity of our struggles, as well as our ability to challenge the status quo. However, Lorde believes that identifying the cause behind one’s fear of disrupting the peace is integral to fostering stronger self-efficacy.

Finally, the author concludes her poem with insight into the complex dilemma she and her audience face. Lorde reveals that whether you decide to speak up or remain silent, fear accompanies both choices; therefore, “it is better to speak / remembering / we were never meant to survive” (Lorde, lines 42-44). Taking an existential approach, Lorde motivates us to break the silence. She concludes that, although we were never meant to survive, we are still here for the time being. Thus, the author urges us to consider how we might utilize our short time on Earth to express vulnerability. This method stresses the importance of validating emotions; however challenging it may be to do so, speaking your mind is a choice that affirms we are worthy of taking up space. Lorde does not downplay the anxiety associated with using your voice; instead, she honors the fact that speaking up is a painstaking process—one you should navigate at your own pace. Despite the author’s passing in 1992, her work continuously inspires future generations as they inspect their proximity to oppressive people and systems.

Likewise, Carmen Maria Machado’s *In the Dream House* honors Lorde’s legacy as it courageously addresses the effect that a toxic relationship between lesbians has on those

mistreated, as well as the queer community at large. Machado organizes her work into a series of vignettes, creatively documenting the grueling details of her abuse using various genres, such as that of a pop song or mathematical equation. By applying the terms of Lorde's poem to *In the Dream House*, we begin to comprehend the significance of opening up about your trauma. Notably, Machado confesses her reason for publishing a memoir concerning a sensitive subject in the chapter "*Dream House* as Prologue." Initially, the author discusses the origin of certain words, developing her argument on the importance of acknowledging your resilience in trying situations. Specifically, "the word archive ... comes from the ancient Greek ... *arkheion*, [meaning] 'the house of the ruler'" (Machado 4). Distinguishing the history behind this term, along with highlighting its association to sovereignty, reveals Machado's belief that being honest about what you've suffered through allows you to reclaim power over your experiences, similar to the jurisdiction one possesses as a monarch. The author has thereby declared herself the ruler of the "Dream House," the archive she designated to the violent memories from her past relationship.

Furthermore, this concept of using your voice to establish ownership supports Audre Lorde's inference that the heavy-footed use silence to exploit us. Precisely, if the author remained silent about her experience, her ex-girlfriend would continue possessing authority over her, manipulating Machado into questioning the extent to which she was harassed during their relationship. This behavior is especially harmful as abuse in queer women's relationships is seldom documented or taken seriously in society. Despite this, attempts to stifle Machado failed when she created the archive, making her hardship known and asserting control over how she responds to her trauma. As Machado's archive demonstrates, Lorde is right to argue that silence can either help or hinder you depending on your proximity to discrimination. Thus, the poet's

logic discloses why Machado's decision to chronicle her abuse deems her the figurative ruler of her space.

Interpreting Machado's work through the lens of "A Litany for Survival" also articulates the necessity of queer representation in the media. The passage "*Dream House as Queer Villany*" argues that the surplus of queer-coded antagonists in animated films negatively impacts the LGBT community. Although she is not personally offended by these disingenuous portrayals, Machado wants realistic stories about queer people depicted on-screen. She expresses that "They don't have to be metaphors for wickedness ... They can be *what they are* ... queers—real-life ones—do not deserve representation, protection, and rights because they are morally upright as people" (Machado 47). After examining the media's skewed depictions of the LGBT community, Machado concludes that authentic representation is a human right, not something you must earn based on how well you assimilate into the majority. Her decision to archive her abuse is more apparent here. Despite the negative bias surrounding sapphic relationships, Machado does not sugarcoat her experience because she believes it is more valuable to give other lesbians an opportunity to seek validation through her honesty.

Additionally, Lorde's poem verifies that consequences exist because of the lack of queer representation in television, movies, and literature. According to the poet, those in power have made it more difficult for us to understand and express ourselves more freely by pressuring us into keeping our heads down, thus limiting the amount of accurate representation accessible to minority groups. Consequently, if you scarcely see your humanity reflected in the media you consume, you will find yourself among others who stand at the metaphorical shoreline, "crucial and alone." Therefore, "A Litany for Survival" helps us recognize that Machado wrote her

memoir so young people, especially lesbians, would feel less alone and more inclined to seek help if they were also in abusive relationships.

Moreover, Lorde's poem extends our ability to locate the victim-blaming tactics described in Machado's memoir. For instance, the contemporary queer author allows readers to influence the chapter's plot in the passage "*Dream House* as Choose Your Own Adventure." Providing us with various scenarios, we are encouraged to select the options that will deescalate a distressing interaction between Machado and her ex-girlfriend. However, flipping through each page chronologically, readers discover passages in which Machado writes, "There's no way to get here from the choices given to you. You flipped here because you got sick of the cycle. You wanted to get out. You're smarter than me" (Machado 167). Machado describes readers' failed attempts to resolve the conflict as a vicious cycle, one that reflects the hopelessness she felt in similar, real-life situations with her former partner. The author's unique genre choice also illustrates the process of victim-blaming, in which bystanders assert that a victim's dilemma would have turned out differently had they made other choices. People lacking relevant insight and awareness still claimed to understand Machado's situation better than she did. Yet, she was the only one among her peers who directly experienced the varying complexity of her ex-girlfriend's abusive behavior.

The significance of Lorde's poem as a lens is now increasingly distinct. Particularly, all efforts to avoid a fight ended with Machado sobbing on her bathroom floor, supporting the poet's claim that fear inevitably accompanies any choice we make, whether that be evading an argument or speaking up for ourselves. If we long for the intrinsic motivation to defy the heavy-footed, we must take Lorde's advice and identify the challenges associated with advocating for our needs. Adhering to the logic of "A Litany for Survival," we can conclude that Machado was

justified to speak out against everyone who questioned the graveness of her situation, despite the discomfort it brought her to confront her oppressors. In doing so, Machado sets an example for those in comparable circumstances as to how one might navigate abuse along with the trauma reared by victim-blaming.

We should also consider the larger implications of Machado's memoir as a valuable tool for high school students. This age group is among those most susceptible to the wrath of the heavy-footed, given that society takes teenagers and their experiences less seriously. By examining critical responses to Machado's work, we enhance our understanding of her archive and its significance to the queer community. *In the Dream House* sparked controversy last year as parents petitioned its removal from the reading list of a high school district in Leander, Texas. Carmen Maria Machado responded to the backlash in an essay for *The New York Times*, titled "Banning My Book Won't Protect Your Child." The author advocates for the right of students to read her book, arguing that it is helpful to young readers because "You can't recognize what you've never been taught to see. You can't put language to something for which you've been given no language" (Machado). The author draws attention to the lack of LGBT literature accessible to teenagers, making inferences about the impact this has on young queer people, specifically lesbians. Without resources like Machado's memoir, young lesbians in abusive relationships may not have the insight to recognize toxic behaviors or possess the courage to speak out against their abusers.

Once again, speaking to Lorde's stance on the repercussions of silence, destroying Machado's archive means abandoning queer youth at the shoreline, forcing them to contemplate their resilience as they identify and overcome difficult conditions. Additionally, the author notes that parents' disdain for her memoir is rooted in homophobia, suggesting that many young queer

people cannot turn to their parents for thoroughly accurate relationship advice. Instead of prioritizing their children's needs, the Texas parents mask their prejudice as a protective instinct and shame educators for being privy to the harsh reality of certain queer relationship dynamics. These parents fit Lorde's description of the heavy-footed—people who fight to suppress minority voices. Overall, this hostile response to *In the Dream House* further demonstrates the necessity of queer representation in literature. Although these parents subject Machado to bigotry, she believes remaining silent would not prevent her from experiencing discrimination. Therefore, Machado enacts Lorde's call as she speaks her truth regardless of the judgment she receives from authority figures. This memoir is vital, not only to the personal development of Machado as she unpacks her trauma but to the young people lacking accessible resources on the subject of abuse in sapphic relationships.

Audre Lorde's "A Litany for Survival" transcends time as its inspiring message contextualizes the works of contemporary authors like Carmen Maria Machado. Both authors advocate for breaking the silence; however, we can better understand the extent to which Machado believes in documenting your trauma when we analyze her memoir using the terms defined in Lorde's poem. Furthermore, recent criticism of the graphic content within *In the Dream House* reveals that the fight for queer liberation is seldom over. The heavy-footed Lorde speaks of are working hard to silence the voices of queer women and convince them that their experiences are not palatable enough to deserve respect. Our responsibility as empathetic beings is to commend these authors, for they have dedicated the time to archiving authentic depictions of the queer experience. Although Lorde and Machado prominently focus on their struggles as lesbians, anyone can benefit from the wisdom their works provide as we learn to speak up for ourselves. Regardless of one's sexuality, we have all fallen victim to oppressive people and



systems at some point in our lives. Therefore, we mustn't blame ourselves for the actions of our perpetrators, concentrating instead on the significance of exercising vulnerability in challenging situations. Although we were never meant to survive, reading the works of Lorde and Machado provides us with a better chance.

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