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Silence and Fecundity in Carmen Maria Machado's *Her Body and Other Parties*

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Abstract: In the final chapter of *Writing and Difference* titled “Ellipsis”, Jacques Derrida describes lack as the element that is constitutive of meaning – what is missing from the book is “invisible and undeterminable”, yet it “redoubles and consecrates” it, so that “all meaning is altered by this lack” (1978: 296). Following Derrida’s cue that writing “is of an *elliptical* essence” (ibid: 296), I focus on lacks and silences in Carmen Maria Machado’s short-story collection *Her Body and Other Parties* (2017) and their contribution to meaning. Machado’s tales uncover new meanings in well-known stories and depict experiences that are usually silenced, thereby highlighting the othering potential of story-telling and stressing the interdependencies between worlds and stories. In this essay, I refer to Emmanuel Levinas’s work on ethics, Maurice Blanchot’s writings on the relation between literature and ethics, and Jacques Derrida’s account of haunting to argue that the stories not only demonstrate that any text is made through what is missing, absent or different, but that they also establish an ethical relation with the reader based on shared vulnerability and uncertainty.

Keywords: ethics, alterity, corporeality, haunting, Carmen Maria Machado

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Płodność ciszy w zbiorze opowiadań *Jej ciało i inne strony* Carmen Marii Machado

Streszczenie: W ostatnim rozdziale *Pisma i różnicy* zatytułowanym „Elipsa” Jacques Derrida opisuje brak jako element, który konstytuuje znaczenie: niewidoczny i nieokreślony, brak jest tym, co zmienia cały sens książki, podwajając go i sankcjonując (1978: 296). Podążając za sugestią Derridy o eliptycznym charakterze pisma (ibid: 296) w artykule omawiam rolę milczenia i braku w zbiorze opowiadań Carmen Marii Machado *Jej ciało i inne strony* (2017). Opowiadania Machado odkrywają nowe znaczenia w dobrze znanych opowieściach i opisują doświadczenia, które zwykle są przemilczane lub wykluczane, aby uwidocznic płynność znaczenia i podkreślić wpływ opowieści na rzeczystwo. W artykule przywołuję filozofię etyki Emmanuela Levinasa, opis relacji między etyką a literaturą autorstwa Maurice’a Blanchota oraz Derridiańską logikę widma, by zaproponować odczytanie opowiadań Machado jako utworów, które zarówno podkreślają znaczenie tego, co nieobecne i inne w tworzeniu tekstu, jak też ustanawiają etyczną relację z czytającymi, której podstawą są wspólna niepewność i podatność na zranienie.

Słowa kluczowe: etyka, inność, cielesność, nawiedzanie, Carmen Maria Machado

“On the horizon of a story is found what was in the beginning: this naive or native sense of touch [...].”
Luce Irigaray

“[The book] is an infinite source of new realities.”
Maurice Blanchot

In the final chapter of *Writing and Difference* titled “Ellipsis”, Jacques Derrida describes lack as the element that is constitutive of meaning – what is missing from the book is “invisible and undeterminable”, yet it “redoubles and consecrates” it, so that “all meaning is altered by this lack” (1978: 296). Ellipsis and ellipse reflect the circular movement of language and meaning, in which the return to the book uncannily reveals that “[r]epeated, the same line is no longer exactly the same” (ibid: 296) and which foregrounds the ineluctable alterity harboured in writing, as well as its lack of definite origin. Maurice Blanchot argues that alterity makes of literature “language turning into ambiguity” (1999: 396) and that it defamiliarizes and others both the writer and the reader: the former because the book is what could not have been anticipated, and therefore it is “[the writer] become other”, and the latter because the work “is an infinite source of new realities”, which makes “existence [...] something it was not before” (ibid.: 372). Literature, as Blanchot suggests, “begins at the moment when [it] becomes a question” (ibid.: 359)¹, that is, when its power to engender

¹ Blanchot formulates the proposal in the following way: “Let us suppose that literature begins at the moment when literature becomes a question” (1999: 359).

new realities questions and disrupts the writers' and readers' right to own and know their realities. Accordingly, Blanchot argues that it is through literature that the self is exposed "to an excessive demand that calls into question the dominance of the subject" (Haase and Large 2001: 71) and that it is literature that allows one to experience one's powerlessness as it bids one to assume ethical responsibility for the other intuited through the text.

The network of relations between literature, alterity, loss, and ethics provides an adequate framework for a discussion of Carmen Maria Machado's debut short story collection *Her Body and Other Parties* (2017)² as a book which highlights the othering potential of story-telling and stresses the interdependencies between worlds and stories, especially those of suffering bodies. In this article I turn to Maurice Blanchot's work on the relation between literature and ethics, inspired by Emmanuel Levinas's account of the encounter with the Other, to read *Her Body and Other Parties* through the tropes of vulnerability and alterity. Many of the stories in the collection depict and reclaim experiences that are usually excluded or silenced, and many others recall other stories to uncover in them a different meaning. Accordingly, I refer to Jacques Derrida's concept of haunting to discuss the sense of otherness, belatedness, and loss that such references to other stories and experiences create. Alongside questions related to ethics and difference, the collection underscores the importance of the female body, which I interpret as an attempt to re-inscribe the corporeal into the space of ethics and to demonstrate that story-telling begins with and between bodies, originating from what Luce Irigaray calls "this naïve and native sense of touch" which hovers on the horizon of any and all stories (2001: 119).

The focus on the telling and re-telling of stories in *Her Body and Other Parties* performs the metafictional function of uncovering the degree to which narratives permeate ordinary lives and determine identities, and also demonstrates the impossibility of fixing the meaning of any story. In Machado's narrative universe, stories repeatedly turn into other stories and proliferate to uncover otherness in the known, so that the readers, just like the writer-protagonist of the last tale, are "reminded, for the umpteenth time, of Viktor Shklovsky's idea of defamiliarization; of zooming in so close to something, and observing it so slowly, that it begins to warp, and change, and acquire new meaning" (2017: 198). *Her Body and Other Parties* juxtaposes the omnipresence of stories against omissions, silences, or narrative incompleteness, and the characters' and readers' lack of knowledge. As a result, the stories not only demonstrate that it is through what is missing, absent, or different that any text is made, but also work to establish a relationship with the reader based on a shared sense of vulnerability and uncertainty. As signalled by the title of the book, the silences and narrative omissions concern primarily (stories of) the female body, presented here as both a source of joy and ravishment and as an object of exchange to which many parties may and do lay claim.

The importance of stories and storytelling, and the corporeal dimension of both, is made manifest in the story opening the collection, which also sets the framework for the

² Machado's debut book won a number of awards, including the Shirley Jackson Award (2017), the Bard Fiction Prize (2018), the National Book Critics Circle John Leonard Prize (2018), and the Lambda Literary Award for Lesbian Fiction (2018), and was a finalist for the National Book Award. In 2018, the *New York Times* placed *Her Body and Other Parties* in "The New Vanguard", as one of "15 remarkable books by women that are shaping the way we read and write fiction in the 21st century" – books that "suggest and embody unexplored possibilities in form, feeling and knowledge" (Garner [&] Szalai [&] Sehgal 2018).

stories that follow. “The Husband Stitch”³ recounts the life of a young woman with a green ribbon around her neck and establishes its meaning through references to many other “texts”, in particular to the medical procedure performed on women’s bodies after giving birth and to “The Girl with the Green Ribbon”, a French story of unknown origin popularised in the USA in the 19th century by Washington Irving and included in the widely read collection of horror stories for children *In a Dark, Dark Room and Other Scary Stories* (1984). In a mode reminiscent of Angela Carter’s work, Machado mixes the corporeal with the textual and reaches back to the narratives that underlie contemporary systems of values and social hierarchies but that are often unacknowledged, forgotten, or silenced⁴. Accordingly, *Her Body and Other Parties* references and rewrites fairy tales, SF, horror stories, folklore, TV police procedurals, pornography, apocalyptic narratives, urban legends, diaries, and ghost stories⁵, thereby effectively destabilizing meaning and undermining the boundaries between various genres and media, and between fact and fiction.

Stories are particularly important for the narrator of “The Husband Stitch”, who casts major events of her life against stories about similar events. Accordingly, when she starts her sexual life, she thinks of “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” (Machado 2017: 4); when she chooses her wedding gown, she is “reminded of the story of the young woman who wished to go to a dance with her lover, but could not afford a dress” (ibid.: 10); and when her son is born, she recalls a whole series of stories about birth-giving:

There is a story about a woman who goes into labor when the attending physician is tired. There is a story about a woman who herself was born too early. There is a story about a woman whose body clung to her child so hard they cut her to retrieve him. There is a story about a woman who heard a story about a woman who birthed wolf cubs in secret (ibid.: 16).

Stories proliferate, so that that it seems impossible to separate life from tales about life, and they also multiply, thereby demonstrating that, as the narrator of “The Husband Stitch” realizes, “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 they have come together, there is no way to tell them apart” (ibid.: 16). This is what happens in “Especially Heinous” which comprises summaries of episodes of the US TV show *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* that are doubly defamiliarized and conjoined through the surreal synopses of the adventures of Benson and Stabler, and through the appearance of their doppelgangers, Abler and Henson, who lead parallel, happier lives in a much more peaceful city. The situation is further complicated by the ghosts of murdered women, “the girls-with-bells-for-eyes” (ibid.: 84), who appear in Benson’s house and slowly take over all the space there, finally driving her out. In this story, ghosts are “part of a symptomatology of trauma, as they

³ “The Husband Stitch” was nominated for the Nebula Award for Best Novelette (2015).

⁴ Most critics reviewing the collection have commented on Machado’s use of fairy tales. For example, Justine Jordan described *Her Body and Other Parties* in her *Guardian* review as “a tense, seductive fairytale about rumour and silence, sex and power, autonomy and being ignored” (2018), and Lucy Scholes called the stories “twisted fairy tales from and for the contemporary world” (2017), thereby signalling perhaps the need for a new kind of stories for women.

⁵ Because of the indiscriminate use of literary traditions, Gary K. Wolfe called Machado, “in the best sense, a literary magpie” (2018).

become both the objects of and metaphors for a wounded historical experience” (Blanco [&] Peeren 2013: 12) of violence against women, generalized through the speechless girls who ask Benson to find their bodies and justice, and particularized in the figure of Stabler’s wife and the gradually revealed story of her rape.

The recurring appearance of ghosts and ghost stories in *Her Body and Other Parties* recalls the function of the ghost as “a conceptual metaphor capable of bringing to light and opening up [...] hidden, disavowed, and neglected aspects of the social and cultural realm, past and present” (Blanco [&] Peeren 2013: 21). Textual ghosts draw attention to repressed inequalities and silenced injustices, thereby making it possible to grasp the nature of the social world and to discover how it can be changed (Gordon 2004: 27)⁶. In Jacques Derrida’s concept of hauntology, ghosts are not only figures demanding justice, but they are also its very condition since no justice “seems possible or thinkable without the principle of some *responsibility* [...] before the ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead” (Derrida 1994: xix; emphasis in original)⁷. The ghosts in *Her Body and Other Parties* call for justice, asking the characters and readers to take responsibility for their communal and individual actions. “Especially Heinous” targets actual violence in real cities and the gratuitous abuse of women’s bodies on screen, offering readers the image of the city as a genderless, ageless creature, filled with undiscovered female corpses, which “demands sacrifices” but which “can eat only what we give it” (Machado 2017: 123), thereby implicating all of us in the violence perpetrated on women. The ghost that appears in “Eight Bites” is made of body parts discarded after a bariatric surgery which was to make the woman “the happiest woman alive” (ibid.: 155), but which left her haunted by “a body with nothing it needs: no stomach or bones or mouth” (ibid.: 151), a thing that “has no eyes, but still, it looks at me. *She* looks at me” (ibid.: 165). The story seems to leave it unspecified who should be made accountable for the appearance of the ghost – as the narrator states, “Who knows where we got it from, though – the bodies that needed the surgery” (ibid.: 151), but it does point to the ritualistic character of the procedure and the guilt the woman feels for being “a poor caretaker” of her own body (ibid.: 168). Similarly, “Real Women Have Bodies”, while ironically refusing to identify those responsible for the disappearance of women, presents a long list of culprits and possible causes of the vanishing act:

No one knows what causes it. It’s not passed in the air. It’s not sexually transmitted. It’s not a virus or a bacteria, or if it is, it’s nothing scientists have been able to find. At first everyone blamed the fashion industry, then the millennials, and, finally, the water. But the water’s been tested, the millennials aren’t the only ones going incorporeal, and it doesn’t do the fashion industry any good to have women fading away. You can’t put clothes on air. Not that they haven’t tried. (ibid.: 128)

The stories told and re-told in *Her Body and Other Parties* always embody some kind of threat or danger for women, and they almost invariably have an unhappy ending. The

⁶ Interestingly, Julian Wolfreys writes about texts as ghosts of sorts, claiming that “[t]exts are neither dead nor alive, yet they hover at the very limits between living and dying” (2013: 72).

⁷ Derrida writes that the experience of haunting entails a call to responsibility and “hospitality without reserve” (1994: 65). For a description of Derrida’s hauntology, see my “Applied Hauntologies: Spectral Crossings and Interdisciplinary Deconstructions” (2017), co-written with Edyta Lorek-Jezińska.

girl with no money in “The Husband Stitch” bought her dress from a second-hand shop and “died from exposure to embalming fluid” because “an unscrupulous undertaker’s assistant had stolen the dress from the corpse of a bride” (ibid.: 10–11). Similarly, “the most real” story about mothers that the narrator knows, about a young American girl visiting Paris with her mother, who falls ill with some strange illness and for whom she needs to fetch a medicine, finishes with the mother’s inexplicable disappearance when the daughter returns to the hotel after her unsuccessful rescue mission (ibid.: 19). The narrator herself, never given a name in the story, dies in the same way as her literary predecessor, her head tipping backward off her neck and rolling off the bed when her husband unties her green ribbon. At the same time, the stories radically disrupt the boundary between life and fiction and suggest that the fictional may hold precedence over the real. In “Difficult at Parties” the protagonist is a victim of physical abuse, whose body “radiates pain, is dense with it” (ibid.: 219); Stabler’s wife replaces the trauma of rape with the fiction of having been abducted by aliens; and the abusive lesbian relationship in “Mothers” disconcertingly hints at the degree to which violence may underlie love. Most tellingly perhaps, the writer in “The Resident”, suffering from a nervous breakdown, fears that she will be seen by the readers as either “too fragile, too sick, too mad to eat and sleep and work among other artists”, or as “a cliché – a weak, trembling thing with a silly root of adolescent trauma, straight out of a gothic novel” (ibid.: 218). Thus, the protagonists of the stories are afraid of becoming victims of other stories and of not being able to resist falling into the narrative lines and tropes traditionally reserved for women, such as that of the madwoman in the attic or the sacrificial wife and mother. Ultimately, they fear lack of control and the inability to author their stories, inscribing on their bodies the protest against the politics of memory and inheritance that privileges stories of female selflessness⁸. This overwhelming sense of powerlessness is illustrated by the ending of “The Husband Stitch”, whose narrator, with her ribbon nearly untied, apologizes to the reader for not being able to finish her story:

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. (ibid.: 31)

The ribbon, as the woman explains, “is not a secret; it’s just mine” (ibid.: 20), and although her husband kills her by taking it away from her, she continues to think that he “is not a bad man” (ibid.: 30).

Her Body and Other Parties presents an image of an anonymous world made of stories that cannot be controlled and whose authors cannot be identified. Moreover, though no one seems to believe they are real, the events from the stories do happen, proving that they are dangerous, especially for women:

⁸ In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida argues that there are always many ghosts and that acknowledging the presence of some of them and refusing to face others is a hegemonic and historically conditioned act; as he writes, “being-with specters would also be, not only but also, a *politics* of memory, of inheritance, and of generations” (1994: xix; emphasis in original).

Anything could move out there in the darkness, I think. A hook-handed man. A ghostly hitchhiker forever repeating the same journey. An old woman summoned from the repose of her mirror by the chants of children. Everyone knows these stories—that is, everyone tells them, even if they don't know them [...]. (ibid.: 5)⁹

The world of Machado's stories is an impersonal world where the decision about which version of a story to tell or which ending to present is arbitrary, and where the protagonists are interchangeable and dispensable. This lack of significance of individual beings is manifest in "The Husband Stitch", whose female narrator asks readers to read her story out loud, providing directions on how to impersonate the characters:

If you read this story out loud, please use the following voices:

ME: as a child, high-pitched, forgettable; as a woman, the same.

THE BOY WHO WILL GROW INTO A MAN, AND BE MY SPOUSE: robust with serendipity.

MY FATHER: kind, booming; like your father, or the man you wish was your father.

MY SON: as a small child, gentle, sounding with the faintest of lisps; as a man, like my husband.

ALL OTHER WOMEN: interchangeable with my own. (ibid.: 3)

The anonymity and replaceability experienced by the characters echo Emmanuel Levinas's concept of the *il y a*, the "there is", which he describes as the primordial ontological state before the encounter with otherness, where there is "no determined being, [and] anything can count for anything else" (1988a: 59)¹⁰. In Levinas's thought, the *il y a* refers to an experience of nothingness which he describes as "a murmur of silence" in which there is "nothing, but there is being" (ibid.: 64) that refuses to take on the burden of existence. Borrowing from Levinas, Blanchot describes literature as "the language of no one" (1999: 384) or the space where the writer and reader encounter the *il y a*, that is, "the very possibility of signifying, the empty power of bestowing meaning – a strange impersonal light" (ibid.: 385). Literature confronts readers with the nothingness of the "there is" but it also asks them to give meaning to this anonymous space in an act of reading. Blanchot describes this act as an acceptance of a gift, "a delighted reception of the generosity of the work, a reception that raises the book to the work that it is, through the same rupture that raises the work to being and turns the reception into a rapture, the rapture in which the work is articulated" (ibid.: 434)¹¹.

In Machado's *Her Body and Other Parties*, the potential emptiness of stories is countered by the address to readers to bestow meaning on them and to impersonate their characters – to

⁹ Jen Corrigan comments on this passage and the concealed, but widely spread tendency to ignore stories by women: "The reader becomes complicit in the cultural sentiment of disbelief, which comfortably allows us to disregard the words of women, especially when addressing violence against their (our) own bodies" (2018).

¹⁰ The concept of *il y a* shows the influence of Levinas on Blanchot's work; both of them developed the idea, but in different directions, as visible in their approach to literature: while Levinas described it as "the very event of obscuring, a descent of the night, an invasion of shadow" (1988b: 3), as a language of information which objectifies and makes it impossible to face the other, Blanchot's work stressed how literature disrupts the *il y a* and makes the encounter with otherness possible, in effect extending Levinas's notion of ethics to encompass literary encounters. For a discussion of the influence of Levinas on Blanchot's work, see Haase and Large's book on Maurice Blanchot, especially pages 67–84.

¹¹ Haase and Large note that for Blanchot "the relation between reader and writer serves as a paradigm for the relations amongst human beings" (2001: 111).

speak for them and to embody them. Recounting their tales, the female narrators leave gaps in the narratives, inviting readers to re-construct and re-trace the events that they only hint at. Significantly, these stories are disturbingly corporeal and speak of bodies that are vulnerable and “constantly under attack” (Scholes 2018). In “The Husband Stitch”, the female narrator explicitly asks the reader to share her pain: having described giving birth to her only son, she tells the reader to read the story aloud, “give a paring knife to the listeners and ask them to cut the tender flap of skin between your index finger and thumb. Afterward, thank them” (Machado 2017: 16). This reaching out to the reader and their body stresses the corporeal dimension of an encounter with the Other and with the book, and indicates that the “disposition of ourselves outside ourselves seems to follow from bodily life, from its vulnerability and its exposure” (Butler 2004: 25)¹². The bodies of the characters, just like the body of the book, are given to the reader as a text that is not yet written and whose meaning remains to be made in an elliptical movement between the reader and the work, “made and unmade by colliding with other realities” (Blanchot 1999: 364)¹³.

Levinas describes ethics as first philosophy and defines being as initially being for the Other and with others, where the subject is not autonomous or independent, but always already responsible for the Other (1985: 77, 95). This relation with the Other is an escape from the “there is” but it is also a loss of sovereignty by the ego that is limited by the ethical duty imposed in the face-to-face encounter with the vulnerable Other (ibid.: 52). In *Ethics and Infinity*, Levinas warns that the relation with the face cannot be dominated by perception since to identify a body part – a nose or eyes – may turn the face into an object and re-absorb the Other into the same (ibid.: 85)¹⁴. *Her Body and Other Parties* stresses the vulnerability of the Other but it also highlights her corporeality, depicting bodies entangled in other bodies in sexual encounters that are voluntary or involuntary, queer or straight. Accordingly, the body is presented as a source of pleasure, whose exposure to other bodies produces meanings and senses through “regenerating fecundation of the flesh” (Irigaray 2001: 237)¹⁵. In Machado’s book, the Other is presented as embodied and touch functions as a means to establish a relationship and to set a limit “to the reabsorption of the other into the same” (ibid.: 246). Between the “there is” of anonymous language and the rapture in which the work is read, there appear bodies – of the characters, readers, and the book – that create meaning through the fecundity of touching and being touched. Without these bodies and touch, sense disappears and so does the human world, as is demonstrated in “Inventory”, an apocalyptic tale whose lonely narrator lingers on by continuing to “make lists. Every teacher beginning with preschool. Every job I’ve ever had. Every home I’ve ever lived in. Every person I’ve ever loved. Every person who has probably loved me” (Machado 2017: 43).

¹² Butler’s work builds on Levinas’s ethics but stresses the corporeal dimension of the encounter with the Other.

¹³ Blanchot writes about the writer that “he exists only in his work, but the work exists only when it has become this public, alien reality, made and unmade by colliding with other realities” (1999: 364).

¹⁴ Levinas writes that “You turn yourself toward the Other as toward an object when you see a nose, eyes, a forehead, a chin, and you can describe them. The best way of encountering the Other is not even to notice the color of his eye!” (ibid.: 85).

¹⁵ In “The Fecundity of the Caress”, Luce Irigaray critiques Levinas’s initial exclusion of corporeality and femininity from the ethical encounter. For a discussion of feminist responses to Levinas’s work, see Tina Chanter’s “Introduction” to *Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Levinas* (2001).

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