

**Her Body and Other Ghosts:  
Embodied Horror in the Works of  
Shirley Jackson and Carmen Maria Machado**

Jill E. Anderson

“The sight of one’s own heart is degrading; people are not meant to look inward. That’s why they’ve been given bodies—to hide their souls.”

— Shirley Jackson, *The Sundial*

“Places are never just places in a piece of writing. If they are, the author has failed. Setting is not inert. It is activated by point of view.”

— Carmen Maria Machado, *In the Dream House*

In the foreword to *Dark Tales*, a 2017 collection of Shirley Jackson’s short stories, Ottessa Moshfegh recounts a strange encounter with a woman she mistakes for her mother at the Port Authority Bus Terminal in New York. Moshfegh labels the incident as “a peculiar malfunction in the brain,” which occurs when “something deeply familiar appears in a strange context” (Jackson 2017, vii). This “malfunction” can become “a new dimension of possibility” in which “paranoia is no longer a state of mind” (Jackson 2017, vii), but rather a real, felt, lived conspiracy against a person’s sense of stability. Moshfegh labels these “occasions of failed recognition as Shirley Jackson moments” (viii), in which situations that at first seem benign and familiar morph into a tricky and half-occluded paranoid terror, uncanny horror in its truest sense. In these situations, paranoia and fear are mapped onto the real world rather than existing as imaginings trapped inside a person’s mind. Those spaces once deemed comfortable and recognizable become awash with danger, forgetfulness, doubt, and failed understanding.

Jackson intertwines her domestic situations with the ludicrous horrors of everyday life, playing up the ways that ordinary household objects and domestic practices can harm or imprison women, causing them to viscerally dread even the most mundane of tasks. These existential insecurities compel Jackson’s women into constant, insidious acts of

adaptation,<sup>1</sup> and their development of defence mechanisms can look like instability, dis-ease, insanity, malfeasance, and even criminality to an outside world. Whether it is Miss Strangeworth who, in “The Possibility of Evil,” nonchalantly composes letters to send to her neighbours for the sole purpose of stirring up discord and fear; or Mrs. Smith who, in “The Honeymoon of Mrs. Smith,” placidly refuses to acknowledge her new husband might be a wife-murdering serial killer; or the townsfolk of Jackson’s most famous short story, “The Lottery,” who casually and unconscionably stone a neighbour to death—horror visits the most intimate spaces in Jackson’s world. Her characters often miscalculate their interactions with the world since their perceptions are so distorted by the uncanny horror around them. The emotional and psychological malleability of the horror genre allows its authors to plumb the depths of the mind-body connection to uncover the insidious ways women are forced to cope with a discriminatory and dangerous world. Horror can remind readers of the ways society and domesticity are structured to oppress women and to force terrified responses to the resulting pressures. Navigating the world in the mind/body of a woman is always already horrifying.

Horror’s malleability also speaks to Carmen Maria Machado, who, in a 2017 interview with the *Paris Review*, explains:

When you enter into horror, you’re entering into your own mind, your own anxiety, your own fear, your own darkest spaces. [...] horror is an intimate, eerie, terrifying thing, and when it’s done well it can unmake you, the viewer, the reader. That tells us a lot about who we are, what we are, and what we, individually and culturally, are afraid of. (Kane 2017)

Machado’s description echoes the manner in which Eleanor navigates the world of Jackson’s 1959 novel *The Haunting of Hill House*. In fact, Machado labels *Hill House* as both “the perfect novel” and her favourite book to reread, as she draws on similar themes to create characters forced to adapt to the horrific yet mundane vagaries of life as a woman. It is through this very ordinariness, the insidiousness of the ways the body is forced to adapt, that horror fully engulfs Jackson and Machado’s women. These moments of horror—those slippages in perception and recognition, the ways characters adapt to their existential insecurity—illustrate that horror is not just an

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<sup>1</sup> My use of the term “adaptation” does not refer to the ways one artistic medium is revised into another. Rather, I use the term to describe a more biological function, an adjustment to one’s environment and to the conditions of the world around them or how they perceive those conditions.

external, monstrous, othering force but also a deeply embodied and felt experience for women in their various social and domestic subjugations.

Austin Lillywhite's concept of the "raw feel" is helpful here, as it describes "situated experience—not as a naïve refusal of a more real reality, nor as something falsely subjective, but rather as a mode of world-directed objectivity" (2022, 120). Lillywhite highlights a "phenomenology of feminine queer body experience, where knowledge of the world is directly in the body rather than in consciousness, and that the body produces unique types of spatiality in the ways that it is lived," emphasizing "the ways in which one's body copes with lingering gendered violations, and how this new understanding revises the psychological definition of raw feel as *qualia*" (120). It is the raw feel of paranoia, the way she is forced to adapt to her surroundings, that propels Miss Morgan in Jackson's "The Nightmare." Given the mundane task of delivering a package across town for her boss, she begins to feel like a hunted animal as she becomes the subject of a radio contest. Her physical description is broadcast for all to hear (blue gloves, red topcoat, carrying a large package), and even as she removes her gloves, alters her route, and changes the package she carries, she is still pursued by the sound truck touting her description. Forced to flee, she is finally caught in a parade going through Times Square peopled by children and men dressed like her, chanting, "Find Miss X, get all the checks" (Jackson 2018, 52). Readers are given no other explanation for what is happening here, why Miss Morgan is the subject of a radio contest or why it is frightening her so much, but she is finally whisked away by a mystery man who installs her in a hotel after saying, "We'll have to do it all again tomorrow in Chicago, this town stinks" (54). Miss Morgan is not this scheme's only victim. Instead, as the title implies, this mob-like, nefarious pursuit of young women attempting to go about a mundane task is a daily occurrence. Their bodies are always open to physical violence, and their minds always ready to react in fear and paranoia.

My readings of Jackson and Machado's work make note of the ways in which their characters adapt to the "raw feel," the horror inherent in their lives by seeking proof of and evidence for their past traumas. Writing horror brings it into existence, into the light, enlivening fears through the written word, so that the characters come to recognize the ways they have been groomed for disappointment and their macabre reality. This, in turn, forces them to find ways to cope with how these matters live inside their very bones. In what Robert Lloyd deems the "spectralization of identity," the act of writing, according to Lloyd, is an attempt at exorcism as the "loci of identity work in different ways to turn Jackson herself into a spectral presence, albeit one who haunts herself, or herself, rather than an old room in the attic of the family home" (2020, 810). This spectralization is a

way for writers like Jackson to draw the embodied raw feeling from the realm of the occluded where it is hidden within the cells into the light to bear witness and provide evidence of those macabre realities. This spectral uncertainty and the embodied horror of being housewives, mothers, and merely *women* imbues Jackson and Machado's protagonists with a sort of second sight—one able to pierce the veil of normative expectations to see what the world is truly made of. Unable to act upon and change a fate, they are at least able to take note of it and either adjust their expectations accordingly or continue to mentally spin out in ways that manifest themselves physically.

The characteristic ambiguity of Jackson's work, her way of leaving the door open to the possibility of the supernatural (are they *truly* seeing what they are seeing? Is it a ghost or a figment of their imagination? Is it something that can psychologically or physically harm them?), enables many of her characters' adaptations to the physical environment to be expressed in outwardly strange and often isolating actions. For Machado, though, adaptation is absorbed into seeking proof of past horror and violence because of the historical erasure of so many queer narratives. Making trauma legible, writing it into the record and preserving it for others to share, becomes the primary mechanism of Machado's tales of horror and domestic violence. The difference between Jackson and Machado is the difference between ambiguity and defined survivalhood. For Jackson, embodying horror is just another way to navigate the vagaries of the world and the structural harms visited upon women in the mid-century; for Machado, it is how we learn to survive the violence of the past. Their texts, then, serve as evidence for and animation of these embodied horrors, which grant survivors a version of agency that, while not fully liberating, at least makes their experiences and feelings legible.

Horror, as a genre, excels at exposing dominant ideologies that are so insidious they are rendered unseen or deeply normalized as they govern our lived experiences. Body horror invites us to explore the ways characters adapt to and adopt those ideologies, thus rendering them part of a system that makes them either the monstrous other or a victim of it. Philip Brophy argues that contemporary horror films see the body as "a true place of physicality: a fountain of fascination, a bounty of bodily contact. If there is any mysticism left in the genre, it is that our own insides constitute a fifth dimension; an unknowable world, an incomprehensible darkness" (para. 15). Plumbing the depths of this unknowable world means also taking in account how body horror materializes around that which is seemingly unimaginable, exposing the certain unpleasant truths normally invisibilized by the status quo, and surfaces in unspeakable bodily functions and everyday realities of inhabiting the body of a woman. It also invites and forces us to confront

that which is not only deeply and extraordinarily traumatic but that which is lived-in, ever present, and normalized. The body is made alien by the environments around it, but then re-doubles as an alien being when reflected back to and felt by the subject of the story.

Put another way, body horror when “paired with the element of the supernatural or the uncanny [...] is a statement, a place to experiment with and openly discuss what has for so long been hidden and viewed as taboo: the topic of women’s bodies in all states, from puberty to sexuality to childbirth” (Rapoport 2020, 620). While body horror has, to this point, been critiqued primarily as a subgenre in film, taking on examinations of the extreme and grotesque, the disfigured, diseased, and mutilated, I claim body horror, or more specifically *embodied* horror, as a means of describing the psychosomatic reactions to the less immediately intense but still extraordinary ways women navigate the world. While much of body horror’s goal is the spectacle of the transformed or mutilated body, embodied horror works from the inside out. That is, the audience witnesses the psychological transformations in characters before they even begin to manifest physically. Often characters seem stuck in a liminal space between the physical manifestation of horror and their own psychological activity. This constant flux, between outside and inside, often erodes their sense of security in the world, forcing them to undergo adaptations that can be deemed as monstrous. This not only leaves them susceptible to external forces, the violences of the everyday world, but also makes them accessories to their environments.

But the physical threat to women’s bodies has long been a feature of Gothic horror, since the Gothic “as a form of experience, as a recognizable aesthetic, [is] one that relies on the susceptibility to being under attack or scared that is instinctive to us” (Reyes 2014, 2). The haunted castle or house features prominently in works of Gothic fiction as a physical container for the disempowered, trapped body. Though body horror builds on “anxieties surrounding transformation, mutation, and contagion” of the body and on a disgust that “is premised on the estrangement of the body via an exaggeration or transformation of its ordinary qualities or capacities,” embodied horror is the nexus of those anxieties and exaggerations (Rapoport, 54, 56). What is crucial, though, is that body horror highlights victimhood and disempowerment at the same time it inscribes a terrifying agency to the haunted body. Bodies are taken over by external entities such as viruses, demons, experiments, and assaults. Barbara Creed’s examination of horror film through the Bakhtinian carnival reveals that the body in horror

mainly puts into play those oppositions that take place between the inside and outside of the body. This interplay between inside and

outside implicates the entire body in the processes of destruction. Whereas carnival celebrated a temporary liberation from prevailing values and norms of behaviour, the cinema of horror celebrates the complete destruction of all values and accepted practices through the symbolic destruction of the body, the symbolic counterpart of the social body. [...] The existence of the abject points always to the subject's precarious hold on what it means to be human. For the abject can never be fully excluded; it beckons from the boundaries, seeking to upset the already unstable nature of subjectivity, waiting to claim victory over the "human." (1995, 149–50)

Or, as Jack Halberstam argues, "[s]lowly but surely the outside becomes the inside and the hide no longer conceals or contains, it offers itself up as text, as body, as monster" as postmodern horror is all about the "immediate visibility" of the that which is monstrous (1995, 7, 1).

Embodied horror, I argue, is about validating objective experience and agential force by making those anxieties evidentiary and legible through the act of writing them into existence and articulating the physical manifestations of a horrified mind. It is a way of making the woman's body both victim *and* monster inhabiting Gothic stories

as technologies that produce the monster as a remarkably mobile, permeable, and infinitely interpretable body. The monster's body, indeed, is a machine that, in its Gothic mode, produces meaning and can represent any horrible trait that the reader feeds into the narrative. The monster functions as monster, in other words, when it is able to condense as many fear-producing traits as possible into one body. (Halberstam 1995, 21)

Embodied horror, then, articulates the ways women's bodies are both open to abuse and monstrous in the ways that abuse can and does transform them, in their despair and in their physical forms. The narrator of "The Husband Stitch," Machado's modernized version of folklore's "Girl with the Green Ribbon," is just such a monstrous creature. Her husband is intrigued by the green ribbon around her neck, and despite their happy years together, he persists in wanting to touch it—"A wife,' he said, 'should have no secrets from her husband.' [...] 'The ribbon is not a secret; it's just *mine*'" (Machado 2017, 20). His final insistence that he take command over her ribbon does, indeed, cause her head to fall off so she is, in the end, not just a headless woman but also the victim of her husband's inability to believe her and maintain her physical and emotional boundaries. Her power is gone because those boundaries have been crossed irrevocably.

Jackson also creates characters who find it difficult to maintain power within their own boundaries. She utilizes Freud's concept of the uncanny (or *unheimlich*—meaning “unhomely”), which has domestic connotations but is also related to that which is secreted or hidden away, helpless, haunted, repressed, inexplicable. The uncanny references those moments in life that bring forth familiar visions or memories in ways our conscious minds cannot or will not fully recognize, thus cloaking them in an eerie or frightening sheen of half-truths not meant to come to light. Jackson's version of the uncanny forces her characters to scan their surroundings and map their perceptions onto the landscape within their own minds to get oriented (or close to some version of orientation), often resulting in deeply subjective paranoid terror reflected in a seemingly dependable and safe external environment. Elsewhere, I have called these moments the mundane and ludicrous horrors of everyday life, and these mundane horrors dotted throughout Jackson's fiction come particularly to affect the women in her writing. That is, the women can appear stable and balanced to others as they go about their daily, monotonous tasks while internally experiencing existential turmoil. Their paranoia does not necessarily reveal something uncanny *within* their perceptions. Rather, it is just one way of processing the world, making it, at least for a moment, navigable and discernible. One need only look as far as Jackson's well-known domestic sketch, “Here I Am, Washing Dishes Again,” in which she outlines all the ways her kitchen utensils are actively conspiring against her, ruining dinners and keeping her from other (paid) labour. The kitchen itself acts as a large magnet: “I feel the magnetic pull myself, the urge to flatten myself against the wall, and, until I am taken down for some practical purpose, lie there quiet, stilled, at rest” (Jackson 2015, 321). Jackson's uncanny, always within the context of seemingly mundane domestic situations, is steeped in the existential angst of being a (White) middle-class woman in the mid-century. What is important here is not that *some* of the threats to Jackson's women are, indeed, real but that these women filter all their perceptions through the lens of everything being a threat, a nuisance, or simply eerie and unreal. The gaps in their narratives appear between the way they embody their experiences and the way things actually are.

These narrative gaps can also serve another purpose—a method of inscribing missing evidence into stories of generational trauma. The survivor of the trauma, faced with having to fill in the gaps, has to reconcile with and attempt to name the ways that trauma surfaces in their life. Recalling the cup of stars from an early scene in *Hill House*, a shattered cup of milk haunts Lucy, the main character of Machado's “A Hundred Miles and a Mile” from the 2021 collection *When Things Get Dark: Stories Inspired by Shirley Jackson*. The cup of stars in *Hill House* appears while Eleanor is making her way toward

Hill House. She stops at a cafe and witnesses a young girl refusing to drink milk from the cafe's glass because she wants the cup of stars from which she drinks at home. Her mother's attempts to convince the girl to drink go stubbornly unanswered. This cup of milk represents the frightening and exhilarating potentiality of events past, as Lucy's haunted cup contains the constellation of Cassiopeia, the Queen and Goddess who is said to be trapped in the constellation as punishment for vanity. As the memory surfaces for Lucy, she not only hopes to "outgrow" it but also is forced to recall the ambiguity of the shattered cup with a very real, visceral psychosomatic response: "her pulse picks up, a fat bluebottle fly bumping around a lampshade, urgent and lost [, ...] a string being pulled away from a guitar's neck [, ...] she feels like she's drifting away, like she'd simply disappear if not for the inconvenience of her limbs and organs" (Machado 2021, 63). This "knowing-not-knowing" seeps into Lucy's lived experiences, and the embodied horror of this recollection traps her like Cassiopeia or like *Hill House's* Eleanor, who telepathically warns the little girl

Don't do it [, ...] insist on your cup of stars; once they have trapped you into being like everyone else you will never see your cup of stars again; don't do it; and the little girl glanced at her, and smiled a little subtle, dimpling, wholly comprehending smile, and shook her head stubbornly at the glass. Brave girl, Eleanor thought; wise, brave girl. (Jackson 2006, 15)

The moment in Machado's story that we are certain that Lucy *is* the little girl from this scene in *Hill House*—grown up and still traumatized by the memory of the day of the silent message she received from Eleanor—is the moment we also realize that Eleanor's own disturbances have had reverberating and transcendent psychosomatic resonances. Unable to directly recall the memory or put an exact name to her fears, Lucy's emotional insecurity takes the form of this slippery recollection that comes to colour all her experiences, including the break-up of her almost-marriage with Peter and her subsequent relationship with Merideth, who is present for one of Lucy's psychosomatic episodes in which she visits the same café where Eleanor "spoke" to her. As she integrates these memories, they become more like "a mood than a fear; a sense of oncoming doom, like the seconds before death by drowning" (Machado 2021, 64). Here is her proof of past suffering, made manifest in both her body and her personal narrative.

Though the reader is privy to Lucy's memory slippages and her racing-heart reactions, nothing particularly sinister surfaces until Lucy lures a little girl from her mother at a department store. Like Eleanor before her, Lucy feels a certain urgent kinship with the child, wanting to warn her of



*something*. She manages, it would appear, to communicate this something to the kidnapped child, but in the process exhausts and further isolates her, and she fears she ultimately failed. Like for Lucy, the “sense of terror” that permeates *Hill House*, argues Sophie Gilbert, “comes instead from Eleanor’s cloying, troubled mind—her feelings of isolation, her permanent state of unease, her sense of being awkwardly at odds with herself and everyone around her” (2018), and her inability to express herself in a way that makes her understood by others. *Hill House* itself reads as a prolonged panic attack that has no release or resolution until Eleanor drives her car into a tree, so that the “malignancy Eleanor senses in the house might actually come from her. That her darkest, most self-negating thoughts might actually be true,” according to Gilbert (2018). In much the same way, Lucy cannot describe any particular reason for her feelings of unease and terror. Save the memory of her brief encounter with Eleanor, Lucy cannot articulate her anxieties but only *feels* them as a victim of some uncanny journey. It is hard to tell if Lucy is a kindred spirit for Eleanor or if there is some kind of psychic transference occurring here. Regardless, Lucy is transformed by this interaction and must learn how to adapt to her new awareness. Though the exact words Lucy speaks to the child are not known, we do know that Lucy “whispered the thing she needed to hear,” and the trauma of that encounter seems to have been passed along as the little girl remembers Lucy as a monster: “a hulking, sorrowful creature—red-mouthed and sleek as an otter” (Machado 2021, 68). Thus, the urgency of the message—the fear of complacency and entrapment—gets transferred from one generation to the next, producing a form of intergenerational trauma. Eleanor has managed, in her own helplessness and terror, her own possession, to plant seeds of self-doubt into someone else, transforming a young girl into a hulking mess of a woman. Her paranoia is so great it cannot be contained within her own mind anymore; she has to make it manifest in the world. Machado’s borrowing of this element of Jackson’s story is significant too. Eleanor’s suffering is made legible all over again, as Machado calls it back into existence, and legitimizes her position as the monstrous abused.

Seeking physical “proof” of uncanny, everyday horrors to quell the self-doubt of the monstrous can be just as disorienting as experiencing them mentally and physically. For Eleanor, the protagonist of *Hill House*, recollections of her loneliness and the way her life with her mother “had been built up devotedly around small guilts and reproaches, constant weariness, unending despair” (Jackson 2006, 3) cause anxieties to well up and manifest in the form of the ghosts that walk in Hill House. The house is decidedly “not sane,” but Eleanor, despite the hope she has for her journey, integrates her self-doubt into the way she moves throughout the novel and in Hill House itself. She feels herself “like a small creature

swallowed whole by a monster [...] and the monster feels my tiny little movements inside” (29) and she is both monster and victim. Her anxieties become mapped onto Hill House itself, enabling forces that rattle the doors and become ghostly beings that the others can see but by which she is also terrified and lured. Her interior life is literally written on the walls. Referencing the metaphysics of *Hill House*, Jody Castricano notes that the question of the novel “is not only how to think of the possibility of forms of non-human consciousness or ‘supernormal phenomena,’ but also how to think cogently about the relationship between telepathy, clairvoyance, haunting and the unconscious without resorting to psychopathology” (2021, 138). The novel depends on multiple modes of consciousness, Castricano argues, and those modes rely on synchronicity (the Jungian concept of psyche and matter) to express Eleanor’s experiences. Thus, Eleanor’s perceived telepathy finds physical manifestations in the hauntings at Hill House: “what cannot be accounted for takes the form of telepathy and clairvoyance, of the mysterious coincidence between psyche and matter” (Castricano 2021, 149). That Eleanor exists in this liminal space, between physical matter and what is crashing around not just in her head but also in house, is expounded by the doubling of her identities—that split between the Eleanor of her past domestic life and the Eleanor off on an adventure at Hill House.

But this split is also a coping mechanism of sorts. Recovering from the trauma of her past while simultaneously trying to carve out her own new life, Eleanor experiences changes in her being unimaginable anywhere else. Hill House enables these changes, gives her the power (albeit, a terrifying power) to witness and embody her own emotional and psychological turmoil made manifest in the hauntings. She cannot fathom her luck at being selected to come to Hill House, and after safely arriving, she takes an astonished inventory of her various body parts as well as how her body takes up space as she situates herself at Hill House:

Eleanor found herself unexpectedly admiring her own feet. Theodora dreamed over the fire beyond the tips of her toes, and Eleanor thought with deep satisfaction that her feet were handsome in their red sandals; what a complete and separate thing I am, she thought, going from my red toes to the top of my head, individually an I, possessed of attributes belonging only to me. I have red shoes, she thought—that goes with being Eleanor; I dislike lobster and sleep on my left side and crack my knuckles when I am nervous and save buttons. I am holding a brandy glass which is mine because I am here and I am using it and I have a place in this room. I have red shoes

and tomorrow I will wake up and I will still be here. “I have red shoes,” she said very softly. (Jackson 2006, 60)

It is a way to not just check on her own existence but also to note how they show up in the space of the mansion and relate to the others around her. She connects her physical attributes with her personality and habits, inventorying each proudly as a way of defining her self. But Eleanor’s astonished *there-ness* at being in Hill House, the only time she feels truly enlivened, comes with external warnings. “I’ve never been wanted *anywhere*,” Eleanor argues, but she soon begins to feel “walled up alive,” seeing herself flying “in and out of the windows” (154). Dr. Montague’s recollections about Hill House’s history of familial trauma and abuse are cautionary tales of relying too fully on sensory experience: “We have grown to trust blindly in our sense of balance and reason, and I can see where the mind might fight wildly to preserve its own familiar stable patterns against all evidence that it was leaning sideways” (78). Using such words as “balance” and “leaning,” the doctor invokes the physicality of Eleanor’s mental disturbances as she finds herself often stumbling and crashing into things. The conscious mind is impervious to the uncanny, the doctor argues, but “the menace of the supernatural is that it attacks where modern minds are weakest, where we have abandoned our protective armour of superstition and have no substitute defense” (102). Even the doctor’s use of the phrase “protective armour” references the physical body, causing a conflation—intended or not—between what the mind perceives and the body experiences. The difference between imagination and rationality, then, is fear, since it “is the relinquishment of logic, the *willing* relinquishing of reasonable patterns. We yield to it or we fight it, but we cannot meet it halfway” (117). This, seemingly, is Eleanor’s downfall. She is able neither to fully yield to nor to fight her fear of the house and its ghostly messages, which leaves her mind and body susceptible to the embodiment of her own traumatic past.

Every physical sensation is met by Eleanor’s increasingly intense self-doubt, but the ghostly hand-holding scene provides another perspective to her bodily manifestations. As Eleanor lies in bed with Theo seemingly gripping her hand and listening to Hill House’s ghostly screams, she observes: “I am scared, but more than that I am a person, I am human, I am a walking reasoning humorous human being and I will take a lot from this lunatic filthy house but I will not go along with hurting a child, no, I will not” (Jackson 2006, 120). Her functioning human-ness, her mind and her body, is enough to seemingly will away her terror at the moment, but it does not alleviate the ambiguity of “whose hand was I holding?” That is, Eleanor’s constant liminal status, both within her own psyche and within the house itself, provides evidence of her traumatic past. She appears to inhabit a

waking dream throughout, a sort of conscious sleep paralysis, one in which she is only partially aware and in control of what is occurring around her. Her dreams and her trauma are layered over her waking hours, causing her to feel the ghostly hand. Even as she is packed up in her car unwillingly and forced to leave Hill House, she manifests a voice which tells her: “Go away, Eleanor [...] go away, Eleanor, we don’t want you any more, not in *our* Hill House, go away, Eleanor, you can’t stay *here*; but I can [...] but I can; *They* don’t make the rules around here. They can’t turn me out or shut me out or laugh at me or hide from me; I won’t go, and Hill House belongs to me” (181). There is no possibility for her outside of becoming part of the house. Hill House stands, in the beginning and end, as evidence for and amplification of Eleanor and her vulnerabilities. This is her final attempt to create the evidence of her own existence and to build a world of her own making, allowing herself to adapt in her own way.

But adaptations can sometimes take the form of monstrous transformations, however subtle or psychosomatic, resembling disease. Riffing on the quasi-feminist cliché “real women have curves,” Machado’s story “Real Women have Bodies” is a tale in which women begin to fade away, slowly turning transparent and wraith-like, for completely unknown reasons. The subtleties of these transformations are what drives the story. Here, the horror is connected to nothing that can be grasped in the physical world. The story, which appears in Machado’s debut collection, *Her Body and Other Parties*, follows a woman as she and the world grapple with the mystery of the fading women. The cause of the fading is entirely unknown: “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 are able to find” (Machado 2017, 128). When the story’s narrator, who works in a fashion boutique called Glam, discovers her girlfriend Petra’s mother has been sewing these fading women into the dresses that are sold in Glam, she is shocked and horrified. It seems that these women have been flocking to Petra’s mother in order to live on in their own way, but the narrator “cannot tell if they are holding on for dear life or if they are trapped” (137). Their ghostly presence within the garments is enough to spark terror and fear in the narrator, but it is further heightened by the seemingly meaninglessness of their existence. The fading women infiltrate electrical grids and computer servers to commit forms of incognito terrorism, imbuing themselves with agency and power. When Petra herself admits she is beginning to fade, the narrator feels like her “feet are trapdoors that have sprung open, and [her] insides are hurtling out of [her] body” (140). The story ends with the narrator’s attempt to free the women trapped in Glam’s dresses, who refuse to leave. This is not just an indictment of the fashion industry and its manipulation and abuse of women’s bodies. Since all the women who fade are anonymous (save Petra), we are left to only

consider their presence in this environment and their attempts at adapting to their new conditions. No backstories and no causes for the fading means we have *only* their bodies as evidence of their existence, and those bodies are fading away.

Indeed, the story parallels a plotline in Machado's *The Low, Low Woods* (2019–20), her DC comic series, in the ways the characters are left to wonder how they are to embody their conditions in an unchanging world. In the comic, the coal mine in the town of Shudder-to-Think has a raging underground fire (like the real Centralia, PA, where an underground fire has been blazing since 1962). Though the men of the town experience the symptoms of mining-related illnesses, the women begin to experience "environmental dementia." As the fire rages beneath ground: "all that heat with nowhere to go. The earth splitting like the thickened skin on the back of your heel. Smoke filled the air like the edges of a dream" (Machado 2020). The town's women then forget their names, begin to wander around aimlessly, and finally disappear underground. Some of the women's bodies begin to reflect the rift in the earth itself, as vortex-like sinkholes open in their abdomens while they sleep. These supernatural elements—ghostly, fading women and women sucked into the earth while their bodies become black holes—serve as a reminder of how horror can erupt without explanation and reason. In their efforts to merely live their lives, they fall victim to an environment already victimized and violated by the abusive practices of capitalism and ecological pillaging. These women's bodies become the sites of violence and unease, the ultimate result of their violations of the status quo.

For some of Jackson's heroines, the embodied results of abuse and violence are just as inexplicable and uncomfortable. Recalling the Gothic imprisonment of the narrator of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," Jackson's short story "The Good Wife" features Mrs. Benjamin, a woman locked away in her bedroom by her husband who will not let her out until she admits to an affair with a man named Ferguson. Mr. Benjamin himself has invented the affair, crafting letters from Ferguson to send to his wife, as a way to coerce and gaslight her into isolation. Within her bedroom prison, Mrs. Benjamin is "always the same" and "not influential at all" within the household, though inhabiting the house, even in the short time before she was imprisoned, "she existed as a presence made up half of recollection and half of intention" (Jackson 2017, 153). Though Mr. Benjamin's description makes her sound like a ghost, her acquiescence to her imprisonment proves she is not only not a ghost but also a willing participant in her imprisonment. Falling into a "sullen indifference," Mrs. Benjamin seems impervious to promises of a return to her "normal life" (Jackson 2017, 155). In this way, she has come to inhabit and embody the horror of her

situation, absorbing it and physically fighting off any possibility of escape. Mrs. Benjamin's transformation from "normal" but seemingly bland wife to willing captive highlights the same sorts of embodied violence Machado writes of in her memoir. Participation becomes the mode for survival here, and though the story focuses on Mr. Benjamin's insidious deceptions, the reader is left to wonder why Mr. Benjamin chooses to abuse his wife in this manner and why she has come to accept it and reject any gestures towards freedom. Something has occurred in the gaps of the narrative, the untold parts of this horror story, to enable such a transformation in a seemingly "normal" young woman.

A similar paranoia and anxiety creeps in Margaret in Jackson's story "Pillar of Salt." The title clearly mirrors the Biblical story of Lot's wife who disobeys God by gazing back at the wicked city of Sodom. Margaret's wicked city is New York, much different from the slow, clean, quiet, rural New Hampshire town she's come from for two weeks' vacation with her husband, Brad. When we are first introduced to her, she appears as an ordered but anxious housewife and mother in need of time away, but the noises and crowds of the city begin to affect her mental orientation, much like Miss Morgan in "Nightmare." As she attempts to navigate a crowded sidewalk, she observes that everyone is rushing past and

seemed hurled on in a frantic action that made every hour forty-five minutes long, every day nine hours, every year fourteen days. [...] It's as though everything were travelling so fast that the solid stuff couldn't stand it and were going to pieces under the strain, cornices blowing off and window caving in. She knew she was afraid to say it truly, afraid to face the knowledge that it was a voluntary neck-breaking speed, a deliberate whirling fast and fast to end in destruction. (Jackson 2005, 243)

As the world around seemingly blows apart from the very speed at which New Yorkers live, the "solid stuff" that is Margaret's own body begins to crumble under her anxiety and disappointment. She sees everything as deplorably artificial, sometimes dangerous, and always a bit shabby and broken. True, that there is some real physical danger in the story: at one point Margaret and her husband are in an apartment building that has caught on fire, and there might just be a serial killer loose in the city leaving body parts scattered throughout. But Margaret's panic ("No sense worrying," is her constant, automated refrain) is not shared by the others around her. Everyone else, including Brad, seems nonchalant about the crushing speed and danger of the city. She seems to be the only one out of sync here, and the apathy from those around her further stokes her paranoia, causing her

to imagine walls crumbling, elevators moving too fast, all the windows broken, buildings shaking around her, and to dash into traffic for no apparent reason. The perceived danger of the city and its crowds of people propel Margaret's body into an automatic physiological reaction—the flight response of fight/flight/freeze. She sees evidence for her fear all around her but is still attached enough to social propriety to worry about being perceived as foolish. Those who might witness her body shivering apart, like the buildings and the streets, would see a woman on the cusp of becoming some monstrous but still vulnerable other.

Machado's aptly named 2019 memoir, *In the Dream House*, is, in all its incarnations and mutations, the site of world building, mythmaking, and personal struggle, much like Jackson's Hill House functions for Eleanor. Within the walls of the Dream House are the echoes of the violences committed against both Eleanor and Machado's narrator, and the houses become Gothicized containers of domestic abuse and past traumas. "Dream House" can also refer to the iconic Barbie Dreamhouse, the pink-washed site of Barbie's uncomplicated domestic routines and familial bliss, a playset marketed at young girls to perform controlled femininity and learn of their ideal futures. It is also a Dream House, too, because the narrator is in a kind of Eleanor-esque sleep paralysis throughout, aware of the abuses perpetuated against her but still going through the motions of being in a relationship. Machado's Dream House holds the "abused woman," a figure present throughout human history but, according to Machado, only acknowledged by academia in the last fifty years as a result of Second Wave Feminism's focus on the lived experiences of women. "What is the topography of these holes?" Machado questions the gaps in the archive, "How do we do right by the wronged people of the past without the physical evidence of their suffering? How do we direct our recordkeeping toward justice?" (2019, 5). The memoir, then, is both "act of resurrection" and a way for her to speak into the silence around violence against women. In this way, Machado argues, the Dream House functions as

a convent of promise (herb garden, wine, writing across the table from each other), a den of debauchery (fucking with the windows open, waking up with mouth on mouth, the insistent murmur of fantasy), a haunted house (*none of this can really be happening*), a prison (*need to get out need to get out*), and, finally, a dungeon of memory. (2019, 72).

The sudden shift from a convent to a prison marks the quickness with which one's surroundings and, with it, one's emotional and psychological can upend. The explicit words of Machado's description juxtaposed with those

italicized and parenthetical phrases emphasize the tension between the physical space of the house and the way her body and mind are imprisoned. Elsewhere, Machado constructs the Dream House as a memory palace, combining recollections of past loves with the spatial elements she associates with them—"The bedroom: don't go in there" (2017, 17). The description also calls to mind Eleanor's half-agential experiences at Hill House, with the spaces she forbids herself, and just as Machado's memoir itself is proof of her experience, evidence of her past, and a way of reckoning with the guilt and shame around traumas, so is Hill House for Eleanor.

Likening her experience living in the Dream House to a haunted mansion rife with metaphors, Machado realizes she is a ghost in the home she and her partner share since "you don't need to die to leave a mark of psychic pain" (2019, 127). But because the memoir's chapters are divided into generic and thematic categories—prologue, musical, inventory, tragedy of the commons, the apocalypse, a surprise ending—*how* Machado's story is told—the language and the proof of how it inhabits her body—is just as essential as the story itself. A feature of domestic abuse, Machado points out, is the ways the victim/survivor makes excuses for the abuser, coming to see her as an ally in her physical and psychological isolation, and the shared domicile as a site of "dislocation." The "world building" involved in the Dream House is an act meant to confuse, overwhelm, and isolate Machado, and because "setting is not inert" (72) in writing, Machado's composition enlivens the spaces of her isolation, meaning she is composing her own proof of embodied horrors. Recollections of the past traumas of her abusive intimate relationship—like those experienced by Eleanor in *Hill House* with her mother—come in the form of ghost stories, demonic possessions, and the cosmic horrors pulled down into individualized, daily traumas. In fact, Machado invites the readers to experience these traumas themselves in the section of the memoir that touts itself as a "choose your own adventure" story. Like readers of *Hill House* who are set inside Eleanor's mind and taken along with her panic attack/fever dream of a reaction to being in Hill House, readers of *Dream House* are given options to various situations in Machado's life. Rather than an adventure, though, the options reveal not just the various imagined reactions Machado could have had to her partner's outbursts but also the repetition in the patterns of the abuse, forcing the reader to flip the pages back and forth and cycle through the trauma of the situations themselves, embodying the fevered and frustrated frenzy of Machado's situation. The scenarios only end with reiterations of self-doubt and recrimination for not reacting correctly in the moment, with Machado telling the reader that any attempt to escape the story or assert one's own agency is a fiction. But it is all a trick on her readers in the end. First, she gives her readers the agency to extricate themselves from the story, but then she scolds



them, “You shouldn’t be on this page. 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 2019, 167). Plopping her readers right back into reality immediately after this assertion, Machado confesses to fantasizing about dying because she had “forgotten leaving is an option” (177) further differentiating her stuck and imprisoned self from the reader who could simply close the book on Machado’s story.

As Machado further recalls her partner’s rage-filled outbursts, she begins to view them as a form of demonic possession, googling “memory loss, sudden onsets of rage and violence” as she is gaslit into thinking she is misremembering these incidents—her own “peculiar malfunction of the brain” (2019, 133), embodied by the past and written into the evidentiary record. But what words are sufficient to describe the characteristics of the person making you feel that you are forced to live inside a horror story? What is true inside a haunted house, a Gothic hellscape of entrapment and terror? Finding “evil” too strong a word to describe her partner, Machado settles for imagining herself powerless in the midst of a cosmic horror story. She finds the words “sick” and “disordered” are also insufficient labels for the partner since what these labels absolve her of responsibility for her actions. For Machado, trauma acts “like an ancient virus” and gets stored in her body—“[M]y nervous system remembers. The lenses of my eyes. My cerebral cortex, with its memory and language and consciousness. They will last forever, or at least as long I as do” (225). Seeking solid proof of the domestic abuse she has endured (much of it, as she points out in an earlier chapter, absolutely legal), Machado points out that “the court of the body” (225) while not meting out any justice that could be recognized as punitive, has given her a way of recognizing further dangers. Ephemera is evidence, a way of proving the fleeting moments of abuse now so deeply settled inside her body.

But emotion is evidence too. Machado argues that though the “the sharpness of the sadness has faded does not mean that it was not, once, terrible. It means only that time and space, creatures of infinite girth and tenderness, have stepped between the two of you, and they are keeping you safe as they were once unable to” (2019, 235). By personifying time and space, creatures that can protect and interact, Machado has palpable ways of imagining her body’s response to terrible sadness. Later, Machado realizes this trauma has helped her to develop a sixth sense of danger, her “brilliant body’s brilliant warning,” manifesting in “physical revulsion that comes on the heels of nothing at all, something akin to the sour liquid rush of saliva that precedes vomiting” (238). Though these visceral responses serve as proof of Machado’s survival, they also function as a way to recognize her body in transformation and flux. She adapts, however coercively or

reluctantly, both mentally and bodily. Her mind processes the trauma, and her body learns from it.

Jackson and Machado write women whose bodies create anxieties about our psychosomatic vulnerabilities while simultaneously experiencing supernatural components or mutilated (as in, changed) bodily functions and appearances. The horror these women feel is *real*, but just slippery enough, just beyond their recognition, so as to make self-doubt the most dreadful emotion of all. In the end, these self-possessed women become the possessed, subject to the infernal forces of everyday life. Their minds adapt to the horror around them to then seek physical evidence for their fear. They are not passive spectators in the horror uncovered each day; instead, they are active explorers, travellers unable to extricate themselves. In their respective houses, both Eleanor and Machado experience the dreadful self-doubt of being an abused and traumatized woman, both the object and subject of their respective horror stories. The evidence of their pain surfaces in the monstrous ways they must cope with the forces meant to oppress them. For Eleanor, it not only takes the form of her own paranoia but manifests alongside the physical crookedness of Hill House as she is knocked off-balance and holds ghostly hands in her attempts to right her mind. Machado populates the Dream House with the memories of her past abuses, choosing the inextricable link between mind and body to articulate just how she is forced to integrate her trauma in her daily living. Both writers use embodied horror to spell out the nefarious and varied ways women's minds/bodies are forced to participate in and be the subject of daily, oppressive iniquities of living as a woman.

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**Jill E. Anderson** is the author of *Homemaking for the Apocalypse: Domesticating Horror in Atomic Age Literature & Media*, the co-editor of *Shirley Jackson and Domesticity: Beyond the Haunted House* and the forthcoming open-access journal *Shirley Jackson Studies*. She is an associate professor of English and women's studies at an HBCU in the South.

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