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**Entering the Haunted Body: Exploring Female Bodily Experiences in the Art of Ana Mendieta, Carmen Maria Machado and Francesca Woodman.**

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## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	4
Historical Context.....	5
Literature Review.....	6
The Gothic Sublime.....	7
The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality.....	8
Theoretical Framework: Chapter 1.....	9
Theoretical Framework: Chapter 2.....	11
Methodology.....	14
Chapter 1:“Leaving the Body Behind: A Sublime Experience”.....	16
The Husband Stitch.....	17
Female Stories of Power(lessness).....	20
The Stitch.....	24
The Ribbon(s).....	26
Ana Mendieta: Anima, Silueta de Cohetes.....	29
Formal Elements of <i>Anima, Silueta de Cohetes</i> and the Gothic sublime.....	31
Mendieta’s or Silueta’s Story.....	32
Chapter 2: “The Horrors of the Erotic Body”.....	34
Difficult at Parties.....	36
The voices and Patterns Underneath.....	37
The Implications of the Naked and Pornographic Body.....	40
The Camera’s Eye and Reclaiming Control.....	42
Woodman’s Woman in the Wallpaper.....	45
Ana Mendieta: The Imprint of the Female Body and Sexual Violence.....	48
Woodman’s Female Body Imprint.....	51
Conclusion.....	54
Appendix.....	58

## Introduction

The female body and what it means to have a female body in modern patriarchal western societies—in the case of this project, the United States of America of the 20th and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries—have been a site of heated debate among scholars. Judith Butler, for example, argues for the social constructedness of the categories of gender and sex (*Gender Trouble*) and the formation of matter, meaning the materiality of the body, on “a set of violations” (*Bodies that Matter* 5). Therefore, I need to clarify from the beginning of my project that I use the term “female body” not in an essentialist manner, which assigns “femaleness” exclusively to the bodies under discussion while excluding others. Instead, I employ it in a sociocultural manner, acknowledging that the traditional characterization of a body as female influences both the perception of that body by the individuals to whom it belongs and its societal reception. Femininity, as a category, can be regarded as overdetermined and controversial, often appropriated to represent beauty and “the ideal”. Charles Baudelaire, for instance, in his poem “To a Passer-By”, commented upon the body of a female passer-by: “agile and graceful, her leg was like a statue’s” (Baudelaire, line 5). The emphasis in his description is on the perfection of the female body and perhaps also on his inability to ever obtain it.

By contrast, the female body has also been appropriated as a site of horror, reflecting male anxieties about “uncontrolled” female sexualities. A prominent theoretical concept that addresses this horror is Barbara Creed's notion of the “monstrous feminine”. One of its manifestations is the concept of the “vagina dentata”, which symbolizes a threat to the male counterpart through castration, thereby representing the radical Other (Chare 27). I place my research on the horrific female body, but on the horror that arises from the female is directed at the subject of its origin, the woman, and leads to her own dissolution without necessarily affecting its male counterpart. One of my primary cultural objects of discussion is Carmen

Maria Machado's short story collection, *Her Body and Other Parties*. The collection recounts the stories of women whose bodies are subjected to various forms of distress: they are broken down, fade out, dissected, sexually assaulted, or disassociated from the world around them. The horror and haunting quality of occupying a female body are characteristics that I also observe in Ana Mendieta's and Francesca Woodman's visual art, albeit from an altogether different era. Their artwork dates from the 1970s and 1980s in America.

## Historical Context

Ana Mendieta and Francesca Woodman are both visual artists who were active in the 1970s and 1980s, mostly in the United States of America. Ana Mendieta and her sister Raquel fled their mother country, Cuba, at the age of 13 to move to Iowa, USA, because of the political affiliations of their family during the revolution led by Fidel Castro. They arrived in Iowa in 1961 under a rescue program of the Catholic Church in America called Pedro Pan (James 570). This uprooting from the motherland stigmatized Mendieta and her art. She often explored the theme of entering back into the womb of the motherland through a symbolic integration of her physical or artificial Silueta into the soil (Best 94). She also educated herself and incorporated into her art rituals from the traditional Afro-Cuban religion La Santería in her attempt to reinforce her bond with the tradition of her country (Lippard 13). In addition, her body, as a racial and gendered body, is always part of her art; an art also interested in critiquing rape culture through performance pieces such as *Sweating Blood* and *Rape Scene*, which helped her gain popularity in a male-dominated art world and aligned her work with second-wave feminism (Dango 156).

Francesca Woodman, on the other hand, was more influenced by the movement of Surrealism in art, and she often experimented with the qualities of space and her body in it (Baker 58). Both artists died at an early age: Mendieta at 36 and Woodman at 22. In

Mendieta's case, her body was found on the pavement of her New York apartment building, in what could be considered the tragic and last performance of her *Siluetas* series. The main suspect in her death was her husband, minimalist sculptor Carl Andre, who was, however, acquitted in 1988 (Lippard 8). This verdict has been contested by friends of Mendieta and fellow artists, culminating in a protest in 1992 against the silencing of gendered violence outside the Guggenheim Museum in New York with the slogan, "Where is Ana Mendieta?" (O'Hagan). Other similar protests occurred during the 1990s, and notable instances took place in 2014 outside the DIA Art Foundation in New York and in 2016 outside the Tate Modern Gallery in London. (James pp.570-71). As for Woodman's suicide, especially in the more psychoanalytic approaches to her work, critics have tended to emphasize the theme of suicide in her photographs. However, this tendency has faced criticism for its oversimplifying and monolithic approach towards her art (Baker 53).

Carmen Maria Machado is a contemporary American writer of Cuban descent who identifies as queer. Her work could be positioned in the MeToo era of the feminist movement since her debut short story collection, *Her Body and Other Parties*, was first published in 2017. The year when the hashtag #MeToo was widely employed in social media platforms denouncing cases of silenced sexual assault (Fileborn 2). As the title of the collection evokes, the stories have to do with female bodies and all the parties that feel they are entitled to such bodies (Grady).

## Literature Review

In what follows, I am offering an overview of the main theoretical points of reference in my thesis. First, I am explaining how I employ the concept of the Gothic sublime as explained in Mishra Vijay's 1994 book *The Gothic Sublime*. Next, I delve into the examination of the female nude as approached by Lynda Nead in her 1992 book *The Female*

*Nude: Art, Obscenity, and Sexuality*. I utilize Vijay's notion of the Gothic sublime because, in his chapter "Theorizing the Gothic Sublime", he provides a comprehensive contextualization of the term, discussing its connection to the broader history of the sublime as well as its various sub-divisions, at least up until the time of his writing. In relation to Nead's work, her analysis of feminist body art from the 1970s and 1990s aligns with the timeframes of the artworks created by Mendieta and Woodman, which are the focus of my analysis.

The *Female Nude* is still influential in recent research regarding representations of the female naked body (Charre 2). Hence, it does not seem outdated to incorporate in my research as well.

## **The Gothic Sublime**

Firstly, even though I am not going to engage in a theoretical discussion of the sublime in its entirety, as that would require a separate project due to its historical context and intricate sub-divisions, it would be beneficial to mention the theories that will serve as the foundation of my exploration of the concept, as outlined in Vijay's chapter, "Theorizing the Gothic Sublime". The term "sublime" has a long history of significations beginning from Longinus's treatise *On the Sublime* and extending to Kant's influential analysis of the sublime in *Critique of Judgement*. It encompasses various appropriations of the term, including the Romantic sublime, the technological sublime, and the female sublime. These different conceptualizations have contributed to a diverse understanding of the sublime throughout its development. One of the passages where Vijay explains the specificity of the Gothic sublime is the one where he compares the Gothic to the Romantic sublime:

The Gothic narrative is to be located at that indeterminate moment of the nearabyss where the subject says, I am my own abyss, and is faced with a horrifying image of its own lack of totality. Where the Romantic version of this narrative reestablishes a totality as the ego



under the security of reason embraces the magnificence of storm or holocaust, the Gothic subject has none of the capacities of the supremely confident, overpowering (though often insecure) Romantic ego ( 38)

This “lack of totality” that the Gothic subject experiences that does not allow for a return to reason, and for that matter, to the reason of patriarchy, is also observed in the short story “The Husband Stitch” by Machado and the video performance *Anima, Silueta de Cohetes*, by Mendieta. According to Vijay in his chapter “The Gothic Sublime and Literary History” contact with the Gothic sublime leads to “an experience of death rather than Oneness of being” (231). However, as I argue in the first chapter of my thesis, this “lack of totality” is already imposed on the female characters’ bodies by patriarchal societies.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the release of the Gothic sublime’s excessive power depends on the sociopolitical context in which it takes place. Art historian Lynda Nead, whose work I am analyzing next, has also theorized about the female body and its connection to the notion of the sublime. The idolized, perfected female nude was usually employed by male artists to control the female obscene; the uncontrollable force of female bodies that would be closer to the sublime (pp. 6–7). The return to reason is thus symbolized by the creation of the female nude. The Gothic sublime of the female body in Machado and Mendieta is not, however, part of the obscene dimension of female bodies as viewed by men but rather a personal experience that violates the totality of reason.

## **The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality**

In her 1992 book, Lynda Nead, as she herself mentions, does not offer a historical overview of the tradition of the female nude in western art but rather an analysis of the power

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<sup>1</sup>Note that in the case of Mendieta and Woodman, I will refer to the female figures portrayed in their artworks, which often represent themselves, as characters at various points. This approach is taken because the narrative or storytelling aspect of their photography holds greater significance than a strictly self-referential allusion.

dynamics behind characterizing a work of art depicting a naked female body as a “nude”, and therefore part of art, or “obscene”, and therefore part of the pornographic. An interesting category for the author is that of the “erotic” because it is rather unstable and transgressive. Meaning that depending on who is “drawing the lines” to use Nead’s words, the erotic can either veer towards the obscene and pornographic or the nude and artistic. In my second chapter, I employ the terms “erotic, naked, sexual, and pornographic” to refer to different conceptualizations of the female body. I attempt to apply Nead’s theory in Machado’s, Mendieta’s, and Woodman’s art. The aim is to observe how the artists respond to already-determined notions about their characters’ naked bodies and the horror that arises from such notions, hence the title of the chapter, *The Horrors of the Erotic Body*. An aesthetic critique of the female naked body, which, of course, as Nead emphasizes, is never purely aesthetic, is useful in delving deeper into the symbolic dimension of the naked female body in the artists’ work. Paying attention to the symbolic dimension of their art minimizes the spectacular aspect of female naked bodies, especially because in the case of Machado and Mendieta, the female body also refers to a sexually assaulted body.

## **Theoretical Framework: Chapter 1**

The story that has received the most criticism from literary scholars in Machado’s collection, *Her Body and Other Parties*, is “The Husband Stitch”, due to its combination of supernatural and folkloric elements, as well as its sociopolitical critique of women’s bodies. Austin Lillywhite, Mary Angeline Hood, and Samantha Wallace are all interested in the epistemological aspect of the story, which they present as a situated type of knowledge arising from the female body. Lillywhite argues for the feminine knowledge of “raw feel” that depends on a “skin-deep phenomenology”, as she names it (127). Hood explores the concept of feminist epistemology, in which women’s stories, conveyed through gossip and

storytelling, serve as a form of solidarity among women and have the potential to instigate social change. Wallace, in contrast, argues for the importance of “not knowing, hesitating, and being uncertain” on the part of the wife in the story(538). This uncertainty is juxtaposed with the husband's insistence on knowing every detail about his wife, thereby exerting complete control over her. Wallace understands this insistence as a type of not only epistemological but also ontological violence directed towards the wife.

While I value Hood's and Lillywhite's emphasis on a feminine type of knowledge that resists patriarchal reason, my analysis aligns more closely with Wallace's emphasis on the importance of “not-knowing”. Rather than viewing it as a resistance to patriarchal reason, I perceive “not-knowing” as a state imposed on the female body, which ultimately leads to its disintegration. In my analysis, the disintegration of the female body represents the Gothic sublime moment within the story. Nevertheless, it is important to note that this sublime moment emerges from an emotionally exploitative relationship between the wife and her husband. I have chosen the aesthetic category of the sublime in my argumentation because I consider it an open-ended concept that allows for diverse interpretations and reader appropriations when approaching female bodily experiences.

Moreover, the Gothic sublime moment is not released into a void but in a very specific sociopolitical context, which inevitably influences its interpretation. That context is the emotionally problematic relationship between the main female character, the wife, and her husband. In order to better understand this relationship, I employ Anna Jónasdóttir's theory of “love power”, according to which: “men tend to exploit women's capacities for love and transform these into individual and collective modes of power over which women lose control”(49). I am not interested in a sociological analysis of the relationship between men and women as Jónasdóttir is, but I utilize her theory because it facilitates the illustration of the power imbalance between the wife and her husband, mainly in the emotional

dimension of the relationship. The concept of “love power” and its exploitation can be somewhat elusive since every relationship is unique and complex. However, I consider it still useful in naming an experience that might otherwise be perceived as “normal”. For Mendieta, the sociopolitical context of the video performance is established by drawing upon her personal and political background, which heavily influences both her life and artistic expressions.

Lastly, the sublime, according to Kant, for example, is an aesthetic category that can lead to moral judgments, with a return to reason (qtd in Vijay 35). Additionally, other theorists have also employed the sublime as an aesthetic category that brings value to the experiences of the sublime subject. James Lee explains that the sublime poetics, which he observes in Sappho’s poetry, can become a practice of ethics since the subjects can regain power over themselves (183). This idea stands in complete opposition to my argument, which asserts that the sublime, even when self-inflicted as in the case of Mendieta, reveals the powerlessness and vulnerability of the female body within patriarchal societies. It is even suggested throughout my analysis that the disintegration of the female body, whether symbolic or physical, is already determined by the power of patriarchal reason. As a result, it could be argued that the malleability of the concept of the sublime, serving at times diametrically opposite ideological positions, diminishes the concept’s argumentative power. However, I would like to point out that perhaps the “porosity” of the sublime allows for experiences, such as female bodily experiences, to be captured without being confined to a fixed meaning, thus maintaining an open-ended quality.

## **Theoretical Framework: Chapter 2**

My second chapter, *The Horrors of the Erotic Body*, is structured around Nead’s theory of female naked bodies as presented before in this introduction. In addition, because

the female bodies under discussion, in the case of Machado and Mendieta, refer to sexually assaulted bodies too, I utilize some of Sara Stockton's notions regarding rape narratives in literature of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. More specifically, in the introduction to her book, she analyzes the idea that femininity is at times problematically connected to "rapability" in metaphors of different types of oppression. For example, the exploitation of the Earth's resources has been alluded to as "the rape of the Earth". She also observes that in many rape narratives, the female victim is represented as the passive object of the male aggressor's perversity. According to the author, this representation of the female victim, even if denouncing a social injustice, fixates the victim into a narrative of helplessness under the abnormal passions of her aggressor without necessarily critiquing the systemic reasons behind the commitment of such a crime. Her work is particularly relevant for Mendieta's representations of rape, which, as I argue, portray both positions of propagation of stereotypes and, to some extent, their negation.

Another scholar whose work I briefly mention in my chapter is Audre Lorde, specifically her essay about "The Uses of the Erotic". For Lorde, the erotic is an exclusively "feminine" trait that empowers the female subject in contrast to its opposite, the pornographic. In my analysis of Machado's story, I show, however, how pornography can potentially be empowering for the main female character. I utilize Lorde's notion of the erotic mostly to demonstrate again the malleability of the term, as with the sublime, and to connect Lorde's erotic to Nead's point that there is not necessarily an inherent value in the aesthetic categories of the pornographic, the nude or the erotic, but that their value depends on the user of these categories.

Finally, Machado's short story, "Difficult at Parties", has not yet received scholarly criticism. The work of Ana Mendieta and Woodman, however, has been commented upon by art critics and scholars. Jane Simon is one of the scholars who, like Laura Larson in

“Francesca Woodman Reconsidered” (Baker), emphasizes the need for a closer examination of Woodman’s photographic techniques, such as seriality and distortion. These photographic techniques have been ignored by critics such as Solomon Godeau, who privilege feminist interpretations of her work (qtd. in Baker 59). While my analysis of her work, conducted through a comparative approach with the works of Mendieta and Machado, corresponds with a feminist interpretation, I do not view it as an illogical imposition on her art. In other words, I have specifically selected these images because they question ideas about the female naked body, as Mendieta’s and Machado’s art does as well, and not because this is the sole interpretation of her work.

Hariet Riches focuses more on Woodman’s ability to reveal and hide herself and her identity, which is a theme apparent in my analysis of Woodman’s revealing of her own or her model’s naked body. Regarding Woodman’s photograph featuring the female body imprint, Elizabeth Bronfen, like Riches, highlights Woodman’s deliberate interplay between presences and absences. Bronfen argues that the artist’s main conceptual aesthetic revolves around the theme of “fragility”. As for her “wallpaper” photograph, the scholar notes both its transitional character and its relation to the short story *The Yellow Wallpaper* which forms part of my analysis too. While she pays more attention on the question of selfhood construction through a psychoanalytic prism, I will be focusing more on the aesthetic and sociopolitical connections between the two works.

For Mendieta, Angelique Szymanek has conducted a comprehensive study of her art, depicting rape and gendered violence through the use of animal blood. Her main argument is that Mendieta manages to engage the viewer of her art in complicity regarding this type of violence and to offer her own social critique. More than the social critique of her work, I am interested in matters of symbolic representation regarding violence against women. The

symbolic representation moves from the mere affective value of such art to the realm of thinking more actively about the ideology behind gendered violence.

## Methodology

My research revolves around a comparative analysis of two short stories by Carmen Maria Machado, “The Husband Stitch” and “Difficult at Parties”, from her 2017 collection *Her Body and Other Parties*, and selected artworks by visual artists Ana Mendieta and Francesca Woodman. In addition, in my first chapter, I employ Washington Irving’s 1824 short story, “The Adventures of the German Student”, which is an earlier version of “The Husband Stitch”, as a point of reference for the Gothic sublime. This inclusion aims at discovering the differences between the appropriations of the Gothic sublime by a male author, Irving, and then by Machado. In my second chapter, I similarly utilize Charlotte Perkins Gillman’s 1892 short story *The Yellow Wallpaper*. This time to trace how Machado, Woodman, and Mendieta reinvent or reply to the feminist theme of patriarchal oppression as symbolized by the sub-pattern of the wallpaper. The connection among my primary artists became apparent to me almost with the intensity of the sublime moment that goes beyond categorizable experiences (Zepke 10). Meaning that when I first encountered their artworks, I sensed an incommunicable horror emanating from the experience of having a female body, which compelled me to further explore and try to comprehend it.

This is one of the reasons why I was drawn to employing the concept of the Gothic sublime in my first chapter. The common thread among the artists is, as I interpret it, a feeling of unsettledness within one’s body that can even reach the point of horror. A horror that is the result of patriarchal ideological oppression or an actual physical threat in the sense of the violation of the female and sexual body. Scholars like Hood and Lillywhite seem to value a type of feminist empowerment through the valorization of female bodily experiences

and their connection to a specific type of feminine knowledge. Irigaray proposes a “re-writing” of the body that will result in more authentic and empowering female bodily experiences (Nead 30). Whether it's about suggesting new ways to empower women or just protesting against gendered violence with the representation of such violence, there is an implication that there is an understanding and conscious expression of female bodily experiences by the female characters. In my analysis, I will attempt to demonstrate that the vulnerability and the realization of the lack of “thinking” around female bodies invigorate existing discourses about female bodily experiences and call for unique interpretations. The depiction of haunting and haunted female bodies in the works of these artists illustrates how the characters grapple with their perceived powerlessness, ultimately seeking a deeper understanding of it and of their own bodies . This understanding potentially allows them, even though it is not directly implied in their artwork, to discover more organic approaches to “re-think” their bodies that extend beyond mere notions of female power and resistance.

In Chapter 1, “Leaving the Body Behind: A Sublime Experience”, I explore the haunting experience of having a female body in patriarchal societies. I do so through the prism of the Gothic sublime, which I adjust to the works of Carmen Maria Machado, “The Husband Stitch”, and Ana Mendieta’s “Anima, Silueta de Cohetes”.<sup>2</sup> I also argue for the importance of the social context of the Gothic sublime, which I establish through the theory of “love power” in Machado’s story and through the personal and sociopolitical context of Mendieta’s video performance.

In Chapter 2: “The Horrors of the Erotic Body”, I move to more concrete aspects regarding the horror arising from female bodily experiences by examining the issue of sexual

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<sup>2</sup>Note that for the sake of text flow, I will be using footnotes to guide the reader to the artworks I am referencing in my main text. Each footnote will refer to a specific figure number in the appendix, which can be found at the end of the thesis. Figure 1 in the Appendix on page 56 corresponds to *Anima, Silueta de Cohetes*. The figure is a snapshot of the actual video performance. For this reason, I am also providing here the video link of recorded screening of the performance: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z8m1gmbxEGE>



assault and the position of the sexual female body in patriarchal societies. The cultural objects under discussion are Machado's short story "Difficult at Parties", Mendieta's performance piece *Body Tracks*<sup>3</sup> and Woodman's photographs: *From Space*<sup>2</sup>, *Providence, R.I., 1975–78*, and *Francesca Woodman, untitled, 1976, Providence, Rhode Island*.<sup>4</sup> The aesthetic value of the naked female body assumes a fundamental role in my analysis of how female characters comprehend and articulate their own bodies and experiences. Furthermore, it explores the significance of these expressions within the societies in which they are situated.

## **Chapter 1: "Leaving the Body Behind: A Sublime Experience"**

One of the main traits of the Gothic sublime, according to Vijay, as already mentioned in the introduction to my thesis, is its contestation of the primacy of reason and the revelation of the "lack of totality" on the part of the subject (38). This "lack of totality" and questioning of reason in patriarchal societies are the notions that I am utilizing in my analysis of the Gothic sublime in the short story "The Husband Stitch" by Carmen Maria Machado and the performance video *Anima, Silueta de Cohetes* by Ana Mendieta. In addition, I argue that this questioning of reason that would normally take place inside haunted castles and revolve around illegitimate relations, instead unfolds inside the bodies of the female characters. As a result, "the excess or abscess that produces an atmosphere of toxic breathlessness" (Vijay 19) is absorbed in a sense by the female body, which leads to its literal and figural dissolution in the work of Machado and Mendieta.

However, I also argue that the context leading to the Gothic sublime moment is as important as the moment itself in both framing the unfathomable, the sublime, and in highlighting the sociopolitical implications it carries. In this case the sociopolitical context

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<sup>3</sup> Figure 2 in the Appendix on page 57.

<sup>4</sup> Figure 4 and 5 respectively in the Appendix on page 58 and 59.

pertains to the oppression of women under patriarchal societies. My aim is to demonstrate how the Gothic sublime unveils a form of injustice inflicted upon marginalized identities, particularly women and women of color. The unrepresentable character of the sublime, which was traditionally connected to the transcending of the physical senses, in the art of Machado and Mendieta could be attributed to the irrepresentability or to the incomprehension of the impositions of patriarchal reason onto female bodies. This injustice could potentially be a hermeneutical one, as Miranda Fricker explains in her work about the understanding and transmission of the experiences of disadvantaged people (*Epistemic Injustice*). Nevertheless, an analysis of the sublimity of the moment, contributes to questioning the dominance of reason in patriarchal societies over other qualities, such as emotional understanding and connection.

### **The Husband Stitch**

“The Husband Stitch”, which is the first story in the collection *Her Body and Other Parties* by Carmen Maria Machado, introduces the reader into a horrifying universe of psychological abuse, harassment, death, insanity, and body image issues. Bleak, but nonetheless, common issues regarding women’s bodies, accessed through the genres of horror and the supernatural. This story is a retelling of “The Green Ribbon” (1984) by Alan Swartz which Machado mentions as her main source of inspiration (Owens). Washington Irving has also written a short story called “The Adventures of the German Student” (1824) with the similar theme of a woman with a loosely connected head to her body. In both the stories of the male authors, the women represent the object of horror for the innocent men who truly love them. However, in “The Husband Stitch”, the horror that the main character endures in her everyday life, mostly through her relationships with the men of her life, dominates most of the narration.

Before delving into Machado's use of the Gothic sublime in her short story, it might be useful to briefly mention how Irving approaches the sublime through his story's gothic aesthetics. "The Adventures of the German Student" not only serves as an earlier version of the same story but also proves valuable as a reference point for the analysis of the Gothic sublime as explored by Vijay, as well as for my own interpretation and utilization of it in "The Husband Stitch". In the final chapter of his book, *The Gothic Sublime*, Vijay analyzes six Gothic works of literature, among them *The Monk* by Matthew Gregory Lewis and *The Italian* by Ann Radcliffe, to sum up his discussion of the Gothic Sublime in literary history and to show its close affiliation to postmodernity and its aesthetics of unrepresentability (pp.256-57). He argues that the "Gothic sublimity" of a text is revealed through its thematic explorations of the forces of "attraction and repulsion" (227) or of the collapse of the "'I' in the 'Abyss'" (253). The transgressive desires of the Gothic texts and the "illicit communion with the sublime" (226) could also be observed in Irving's story "The Adventures of the German Student", when he mentions the outstanding beauty of the female character and her simultaneous ghostliness and resemblance to a corpse. The student describes the female character as having an appearance that transcends the ordinary, stating: "The female had the appearance of being above the common order" (23). This suggests a departure from the realm of the limited and framed "beautiful", and a movement towards the sublime, the unrepresentable, that which exists "above the common order".

In addition, when he confesses his unrestrained passion for her, he afterwards declares that "everything [now] was under the sway of the 'Goddess of Reason'" (25), giving the impression to the reader that reason can still be retained, which of course is disproved by the ending of the story. An ending that presents the female character dead on the student's bed after a night of love confessing with him. The final scene presents her head falling off by unleashing the velvet black collar that was holding it in place. This is a moment of self-

destruction that aligns with the theory of the Gothic sublime, with the German student exclaiming: “The fiend! The fiend has gained possession over me!” and “I am lost forever” (26). To use Vijay’s words, the story’s ending is the moment of “the self’s own dissolution in and confrontation with death” and “[t]he sublime becomes the radically Other to which we are compulsively drawn, without ever reaching it or conceptualizing it” (229). The “radically Other” here could be either the dead body of the woman or the “illicit communion” with a corpse. The German student ends up dying in a mental asylum after being led to destruction and madness by the female character. Employing Irving’s story as a backdrop for my analysis of *The Husband Stitch* by Machado will contribute to showing how the Gothic sublime can be appropriated in postmodernity, to which I would consider Machado’s text belonging, revealing a new set of contestations and challenges to the primacy of patriarchal reason.

While Washington Irving’s story presented the female character as corpse-like and passive, in Carmen Maria Machado’s story, the female character is portrayed with more agency, or at least with the ability to have her own thoughts regardless of her male counterpart. The ending of “The Husband Stitch” is quite similar to that of “The Adventures of the German Student” since the main female character also dies with her head falling from her body. Nevertheless, in “The Husband Stitch”, the sublime moment is clearly instigated by the husband, who unties his wife’s ribbon, leading to her death. Her beheading could be considered traumatizing for her husband, but the reader only gets her impression of his reaction: “My husband frowns, and then his face begins to open with some other expression—sorrow or maybe preemptive loss” (Machado 31). The reader cannot be sure, of course, if the husband experiences terror as well, which would be a logical conclusion, but the emphasis is on his inability to fathom what his eyes are witnessing. The sublime moment of the beheading violates his positivistic scheme of knowledge (Hood 993), similarly to the

German student in Irving's story. However, while the student is lost forever, as he exclaims, the reader never learns about the husband's future.

Unlike the husband's momentary incomprehensibility in front of the sublime moment of the beheading, which was a by-product of his actions, the female character seems to have formed her subjectivity on the basis of this incomprehensibility and sublimity. Besides her husband's insistence on taking off her ribbon, her father, another critical male figure, also rejects or fails to comprehend her experience because of their discrepancy in their systems of knowledge (Hood 999). While Hood's argumentation has important consequences for the epistemological and ontological approach to experience, especially in the case of female bodily experiences, which are often contested in patriarchal societies, my focus is going to be more on the green ribbon because of its symbolic aspect and the obscurity of its meaning and essence. As already mentioned, the beheading is a moment that exceeds human logic and consciousness, and trying to explain what the green ribbon symbolizes is not only impossible, as there are no clues in the text, but also a violating act resembling that of the husband. Nonetheless, the subliminal moment takes place in a specific social context of female power(lessness), and for this reason, before analyzing the beheading of the female character and its relation to the sublime, I will analyze the female character's relation to other women in the story and to her husband and male child.

### **Female Stories of Power(lessness)**

This section of the analysis of "The Husband Stitch" is dedicated to the contextualization of the sublime moment that takes place at the end of the story with the death of the female character. The main theme that is to be explored is that of power(lessness), both for the female protagonist and for the other women whose stories she recounts to the reader. In order to better ground my analysis, I am employing Anna Jónasdóttir's theoretical concept of "love power", which is an appropriation of the Marxist terminology "labor power" (45). Even

though she makes explicit in her work that her theory does not follow a clear Marxist framework, she utilizes the term “power” to develop her own theoretical concept. Her objective is to emphasize the imbalance of power relations in the field of “sexual love” between men and women, focusing, thus, mostly on heterosexual relationships. According to the scholar, even in societies where men and women are, superficially at least, equals, women’s “care” in romantic relationships is exploited by men who do not offer women the equivalent emotional support.

This harmfulness, even in “equal” relationships, can also be observed in the female character’s confession: “He is not a bad man, and that I realize is the root of my hurt”, who continues to say, “To describe him as evil, wicked, or corrupted would do a deep disservice to him. And yet— (Machado 30). The hesitation, “And yet—”, of the female character denotes that, even among seemingly “good” men, the exploitation of women’s “loving care” can still persist. This reflection of the female character happens after her husband tries, contrary to her wish, to untie her ribbon. I suggest that this instance dramatizes Jónasdóttir’s power imbalance between the sexes, where the male character is receiving both the “ecstasy and care” part of “sexual love”, while the female character partakes only in the “ecstasy” part. In my understanding of Jónasdóttir’s theory, the “care” part of sexual love refers to the emotional support between the partners that, as I argue, the female character does not receive. This emotional inadequacy causes the sublime moment at the end of the story, which leads to a questioning not only of the primacy of reason in patriarchal societies but also of the sublimity that is already imposed on the female body as a form of violation. Her body is already dissected from the moment she is born as a “female” and thus with a ribbon. This is also verified by the lack of ribbon on her son’s neck when he is born: “No ribbon. A boy” (Machado 16).

The female protagonist of the story, the woman with the green ribbon, who is telling the reader the story of her own life, is also interrupting or rather supplementing the narration with the stories of other women, almost all of whom were led to their deaths. Other women's stories do not necessarily involve matters of power exploitation in "sexual love", but they are important to analyze to understand the position of women and their bodies in patriarchal societies. The fact that she or an unknown narrator inserts instructions on how to better perform this story, "The Husband Stitch", also reveals the haunting quality of her narrative; it has become part of the nexus of female stories of annihilation. For example, in the beginning of the story, the narrator instructs: "If you read this story out loud, please use the following voices: ME: as a child, high-pitched and forgettable; as a woman, the same. All other women are interchangeable with my own" (Machado 3). She even mentions: "Each story is borne from the clouds separately, but once they have come together, there is no way to tell them apart" (Machado 16).

I would argue that her emphasis on the interconnectedness of the stories not only fosters a solidarity among women regarding their bodily experiences in patriarchal societies, but also establishes the setting of the Gothic sublime. In Irving's story the Gothic sublime was contextualized in a setting of "lightnings gleaming, lofty narrow streets" and "evils spirits" trying to seduce the German student (21). In "The Husband Stitch", the horror aesthetic is also apparent in the story of the "hook-handed murderer" (Machado 28) for example, but, as I have argued before, the real horror comes from the realization of the emotional disconnection between men and women in the stories and women's subsequent isolation in heterosexual relationships. The excessiveness of the Gothic sublime is enhanced in Machado's story by the additional stories of women acquiring, thus, a sociopolitical character and amplifying the "explosive" moment of its release with the beheading of the main character.

In all the stories she recounts, the female characters try to assert their own voices, embrace their independence, and show signs of power, for which it seems like they are punished with their deaths. Some of the themes of their stories do emerge in her own story, or she expresses her sympathy and understanding for these women. For instance, in the story with the woman who was nursing the wolf cubs, she exclaims: “They certainly bloodied her breasts, but she did not mind because they were hers and only hers. I believe that when their muzzles and teeth pressed against her, she felt a kind of sanctuary and peace she would have found nowhere else. ... Of that, I am certain”(Machado 13). She usually ends the stories with an evaluation of their moral, and in this case, her certainty over the security the woman would have felt among the cubs reflects her own anxiety about losing something that belongs only to her and to no one else: her ribbon and her connection to her baby. Even if the ribbon is something imposed on her body for being born a “female”, it still is something that belongs only to her. She even uses the phrase “hissing to my little” right after the story of the wild wolf woman ends. It could be even implied that the only “sanctuary and peace” that a woman can have in patriarchal societies is in exile, where her body and the decisions over it, even if hurtful, belong only to her.

Her story like those of the other women is one of power and powerlessness. Even though in the beginning she seems to have command over her desire and that of her boyfriend and future husband: “I have always wanted to choose my moment, and this is the moment I choose” (Machado 4) when referring to her first sexual encounter with the boy. However, she simultaneously subjects herself in the objectifying paradigm of patriarchal culture: “I have breasts that heave out of my dresses in a way that seems innocent and perverse at the same time” (3). Also, whenever she describes in detail the intimate scenes with her husband, a seemingly deviant practice in the context of a society that punishes women for their “vile pleasures”(4), the expressions she uses disclose some sort of violence and non-agency



(Wallace 541). To be more specific, some of her descriptions are: “offer myself up to him” (Machado 7), “use my body as he sees fit”(11), “the concrete sense of *his need*” (5 my emphasis), and “I’ve given you everything you have asked for”(21). Even though she does briefly mention her own pleasure at some point, it is only through her belief that she acts in a “deviant” way that she receives pleasure: “I do not know if I am the first woman walking up the aisle of St. George’s with semen leaking down her leg, but I’d like to imagine I am” (Machado 11). In this sense, she attempts to assert herself over her husband by initiating, participating, and to some extent controlling the moments of “ecstasy”, but the lack of “care” and emotional connection in the relationship will eventually lead to her death.

Her romantic relationship is one that she wants to control to gain power over the powerlessness that has been assigned to her for being a woman, but that could not be characterized as love. The ultimate exploitation of the female character’s loving capacities is the husband’s insistence on “knowing” everything about her, including the secret behind her ribbon, even though she has been emphasizing from the beginning of their relationship that there is no secret behind the ribbon and that it is something that belongs only to her. Before marrying her, he even admits to her that “I feel like I *know* so many parts of you. And now I will *know all of them*” (Machado 9). A rather ominous assertion that reveals his imposing and conquering attitude towards his wife and her selfhood (Hood 1000). His insistence on knowing and his lack of emotional engagement with his wife will be threatened, however, when her head will fall from her body after his final persistence on *knowing* the secret behind his wife’s green ribbon.

### **The Stitch**

Even though the story is called “The Husband Stitch”, the presence of any type of stitch is not given any prominence throughout the story, except for the passage where the female character is delivering her baby. In this birthing scene, the husband asks the male doctor who

is performing an episiotomy on the woman, “How much to get that extra stitch?” and then the conversation continues: “—The rumor is something like— like a vir—”(Machado 17). When the wife wakes up, the doctor informs her: ““you’re all sewn up; don’t you worry’ he said. ‘Nice and tight, *everyone’s happy*’” (Machado 17 my emphasis). Here, like in the next chapter with *The Yellow Wallpaper*, the reader witnesses a clear instance of legal male violence over the female body, disguised as medical intervention and influenced by patriarchal medical perceptions of female bodies. Whereas the performance of an episiotomy to ease childbirth is a medical tactic that might contribute to securing the health of both the mother and the baby, the doctor’s and husband’s emphasis on the need for a “stitch” after the surgery revolves around matters of sexual pleasure and not of health safety. This might indicate that a stitch in this case was not necessary or that it was performed for the wrong reasons and without the consultation of the woman whose body was being operated on (Hood 1001).

I would also like to position another aspect of the stitch, which is rather figurative and coincides with the inability of emotional connection between the couple in the story. To be more specific, if the woman’s head is attached to her body with a ribbon, then a stitch, or “the husband stitch”, could be a way to “heal” the traumatic experience of being a woman in a world where your bodily integrity is constantly compromised. The husband, though, does not seem to want to be engaged in the emotional world of his wife. He is obsessed with her sexual body, even when she delivers their baby. My goal is to illustrate how the social context surrounding the subliminal moment of beheading, as discussed in this section, gives the Gothic sublime a clear political message regarding the absence of emotional connection between men and women in an environment where the bodily integrity of women is often compromised. Unlike the woman in Irving’s “The Adventures of the German Student”, whose significance in the story was to represent “the radical Other to which [the student] is

compulsively drawn” (Vijay 229), the woman in “The Husband Stitch” is retelling her own and other women’s stories that are formed on a set of violations and power inequities in matters of love and sexual love. Lastly, the sublime moment of realization that she is a living corpse is instigated by her husband, who does not respect his wife’s desire to not touch or untie her ribbon. In this context, the dissolution of the self is not anymore a reaction towards the primacy of reason but a perverse and to some extent immoral action on the part of the husband.

### **The Ribbon(s)**

After having established the emotional disconnection between the husband and the wife in the story and its wider social significance in patriarchal societies, in this section I analyze more closely the Gothic sublime moment of the beheading of the female character, connecting it to a sublime already imposed on the female body. More specifically, the ribbon, the object that leads to the sublime moment at the end of the story, is mentioned from the beginning of the story when her boyfriend, and later husband, notices it after their first sexual encounter. The conversation between them is the following: “ ‘What is that?’ He asks. ‘Oh this? It’s just my ribbon.’... He reaches out his hand, and I seize it and press it away. ‘You shouldn’t touch it.’ I say. ‘You can’t touch it’” (Machado 4). Throughout the narration, the husband makes many failed attempts at untying the ribbon, varying in their degree of coercion towards his wife. In the end, his wife consents to untying her ribbon, and thus, to dying. As a result, the green ribbon functions as a rhythmic undercurrent in the unfolding of the plot, making the reader aware, after completion of the story, of the mysterious and unspeakable reality it beholds. A reality or essence which is nonetheless never revealed. In addition, the woman informs her husband from the beginning of their relationship that this is something that belongs to her only, and although she has surrendered her body to him, her ribbon is something that must remain hers.

There are also other women in the story who wear ribbons: a red one on their ankles and a yellow one on their fingers. The different colored ribbons unite them in their womanhood, but none of the other two present in the story could prove to be as lethal as the protagonist's, which is attached to her neck. We, the readers and the husband, learn nothing about the ribbon. This is not because we are not worthy of knowing or because we would not understand, but because it is something that we have to accept as inherently resisting our colonizing behavior. In other words, the ribbon resists the positivistic scheme of knowledge where everything has to have a rational explanation, and, in this sense, it questions not only Reason's totality (Vijay 252), but also Reason's irrationality in dictating, for example, the management of women's bodies. So, the dissolution of the self through contact with the Gothic sublime is already imposed on the wife's body and just awaits its release by the husband. As I have proposed only through an emotional connection, a "stitch", it might have been possible to prevent its lethal quality, but this is not suggested in the development of the plot. The woman's son, while not yet affected by patriarchy, presents an attitude that respects her subjectivity and could possibly be healing for her in the long term: "My son touches my ribbon, but never in a way that makes me afraid. He thinks of it as a part of me, and he never treats it differently than he would an ear or a finger. It gives him delight in a way that leaves no wanting, and this pleases me" (Machado 18).

In the context of the Gothic sublime, then, it seems important to ask what the symbolic value of such a ribbon and its incommunicability are. Even if the sexual encounters between the couple are consensual, to a certain extent, or presented as consensual by a narrator that wants to reclaim control over her body, the scene where the husband touches the ribbon against the will of his wife is one of explicit violation: "He uses his strength, grabbing my wrists with one hand as he touches the ribbon with the other. He presses the silky length with his thumb. ... 'Please,' I say. 'Please don't'" (Machado 12). As Jónasdóttir notes in

“sexual love”, there is a “compelling erotic need to access the other’s body and mind” (55), and this obsession is apparent in the husband’s sexual behavior that is violating towards his wife because he has to *know* and access everything relating to her body. One could claim that the ribbon is so important for her because it is the one determining whether she lives or dies. The fact, however, that she does not wish to communicate this information to anyone and that between her and the other women there is an underlying solidarity in the matters of the ribbon signifies that this is her actual power over her own free will and subjectivity.

She even asks her husband: “ ‘Do you want to untie the ribbon after all these years? Is that what you want of me?’ ‘Yes, he says. ‘Yes’” (Machado 30). She does not resist her condemnation to death, because what is left for her if the person with whom she is supposed to have a special connection cannot accept that she has her own agency irrespective of him? With the fall of the woman’s head, her husband, and potentially the reader too, is “locked into a dual process of attraction and repulsion, a double bind, so to speak, that constitutes ‘an excess’, ‘a superabundance’ (Überschwenglich) which opens an abyss (Abgrund)” (De Quincey qtd. in Vijay 227). The abyss that is opened is the inability to connect with another person despite mutual differences. “We are all different, and sometimes you should not ask questions” (Machado 27), says the woman to her son when he interrogates her about her ribbon, and in this case the differences depend on sexual and societal power imbalances between men and women.

Lastly, the female character ends the story with the following confession to the reader: “For these questions and others and their lack of resolution, I am sorry” (Machado 31) which reaffirms the incomprehensibility imposed on her body. The only thing that she is certain of is that “[she] feels as lonely as [she] has ever been” (Machado 31), reasserting the lack of “loving care” in her relationship with her husband. Even if Jónasdóttir’s term “care” referred to “sexual love”, I believe that it is applicable in the relationship of the female character with

her husband, as it is only ever described in its sexual dimension. The ribbon could, in a sense, symbolize all the injustice the women in the stories have suffered and so much more. Close to the end of the story, the female character wonders “if perhaps men have ribbons that do not look like ribbons. Maybe they’re all marked in some way, even if it’s impossible to see” (Machado 21). And maybe they are, but this is not a story that she can tell. To sum up, if in the Gothic sublime “a profane demonization of space (sacred or otherwise) takes place as the castles, for instance, undergo remarkable degrees of sexual and social contamination” (Vijay 24), in “The Husband Stitch” this demonization is imposed on the female body, indeed, as a form of sexual and social contamination within patriarchal societies. Finally, the untying of the ribbon distinguishes between the people who momentarily experience the sublime moment, the husband, and those who have to incorporate its excessiveness and irrationality into their bodies, the wife, with the resulting inescapable destruction of the body.

### **Ana Mendieta: Anima, Silueta de Cohetes**

The female characters in “The Husband Stitch” do not belong to a racial minority or, it is not mentioned if they do. The colonization depicted is that of their bodies by an irrational patriarchal society. Mendieta adds another layer to the exploration of the Gothic sublime as a Cuban immigrant to the US. Ana Mendieta is renowned in the art world for her *Silueta* series, which depict her physical body or the outline of her body using natural materials such as wood. These works are presented in various positions, mostly in natural environments in Mexico or Iowa where she studied as an art student. There are two possibilities for interpreting her performance, depending on whether the viewer is aware of its historical context. However, in both cases, the title reveals that this is the work of Ana Mendieta, a Cuban American female performance artist.

Firstly, I will comment on the formal elements of the photograph and their relation to the concept of the sublime. Mendieta herself emphasized the irrelevance of her materials to

her artwork (Mendieta qtd. in Best 92), aligning her work, at least partially, with the philosophy of conceptual art. In the philosophy of conceptual art, the idea behind the artwork takes precedence over the object of art and its aesthetic qualities. One of the main tactics of conceptual art was the use of so-called “ready-mades”, with the most famous example being Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917), depicting a urinal. Lippard observes the influence of Duchamp in Mendieta's work (11). Her work has also been defined as land art for the ephemerality of her *Siluetas* and praised for its eco-feminist characteristics (Best 106). Susan Best observes that Mendieta's *Siluetas* are frequently described as “visceral” and ‘haunting’, revealing the interplay between the “expressive and non-expressive” elements of her work and its affective dimension (pp.92-93). Even if not aesthetically pleasing her art might produce a negative pleasure which is closer to the effects of the Gothic sublime. I aim to move beyond the realm of the affective to the sublime, because the “opaqueness in the affective dimension” of Mendieta's work, as Best names it (5), I argue, is the result of an incomprehensibility and excessiveness closely connected to the sublime.

The sublime in art is similar to the sublime in philosophy and literature, as it is connected to ideas of grandeur as well. According to Burke, “whatever is in any sort terrible or is conversant about terrible objects or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime” (Sublime). An example of the sublime in art can be seen in John Martin's painting *The Great Day of His Wrath* (1851-3), which depicts the image of a world catastrophe and represents the sublime as envisioned in British art of the 19th century (Riding and Llewellyn). In contemporary and avant-garde art, the sublime involves the transcendental and that which escapes reason (Bell). For example, Barnett Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (1950-51), a large red painted canvas with five vertical lines cutting through it, represents the sublime as the viewer is “being engulfed by the vast redness” of the painting (MoMA).

However, the sublime in Mendieta's firework performance *Anima, Silueta de Cohetes* which consists in “a series of small explosions that form the silhouette and burn out slowly” (Mendieta) evokes not only terror, as Burke argued for the sublime in art, but also a horror that arises from the female and racial body. The political implications of a gendered and racial sublime highlight “the political role of the sublime in creating a new future” (Zepke 3). I argue that this new future is created not just through resistance and condemnation of social injustice, which could be considered the goal of protest art, but through implicating the viewer in the dissolution of the subject and the irrationality of the primacy of patriarchal Reason. This is why I apply the Gothic sublime in Mendieta's video performance too since it accounts both for the aesthetics and effects or affects that the Gothic “text” produces. Just like in “The Husband Stitch”, it is crucial to acknowledge the sociopolitical significance of the Gothic sublime.

### **Formal Elements of *Anima, Silueta de Cohetes* and the Gothic sublime**

The first part of the artwork's title, *Anima*, meaning Soul, introduces the viewer to the idea of the transcendental, the overflowing, and the potential for the transcendence of the self through contact with the sublime. However, the materiality is still apparent in the wooden effigy chosen by the artist to represent her own body, emphasized by setting it on fire. The feeling of indeterminacy and the unknown regarding the body's dissolution is similar to that in “The Husband Stitch”. The reason for constructing and burning the *silueta* is never mentioned or alluded to in Mendieta's video performance, similar to the undisclosed reason for the existence of the green ribbon in Machado's story. The self-inflicted experience of dissolution, recognizing the lack of totality in the self, attaches a nuanced and political dimension to Mendieta's artwork. It does not imply a suicidal tendency, but rather highlights the experience of having a female body constituted “through a set of violations” (*Bodies that Matter* 5) that are experienced as a form of self-dissolution.



According to Zepke, “the sublime exiles you from yourself”(1), and in Mendieta's case, this exile aligns with the exile the subject experiences in the Gothic sublime, where the return to Reason is impossible. In “The Husband Stitch”, the internalization of the irrationality of patriarchal reason leads to the destruction of the female character, instigated by her husband's persistence in untying her ribbon. In *Silueta de Cohetes* this internalization of the excessiveness of the sublime is visualized through the use of fire and explosive fireworks, indicating an entrance into the abyss. Lastly, the aesthetic experience of the sublime is intensified by the video’s potential perpetual replay, which can evoke a sense of discomfort. The trope of the phoenix is negated here, as the rebirth from the ashes is impossible, with the video ending while the spark from the fire is still visible. This inescapability from the force of the fire reinforces the idea that the entrapment of the female *Silueta* is recurrent and aligns with the concept of the “ ‘endless dying’ ” of the Gothic sublime (Vijay 231). It represents a type of “dying” that destabilizes the subject and leaves the sublime unsettled for future generations to explore (25).

### **Mendieta’s or Silueta’s Story**

To contextualize the sublime, I previously employed Jójansdóttir’s theory of “love power” to explain the relationship between the female character and her husband, which provides the necessary context for understanding the final sublime moment of the woman’s beheading. In *Anima, Silueta de Cohetes*, I focus on Mendieta’s relationship to her mother country, Cuba, as it served as the inspiration for most of her *Silueta* series performances. In addition to the Gothic sublime theme in *Anima, Silueta de Cohetes*, there is also a racial and post-colonial element that adds another layer of political significance to the artwork. The power dynamics between Cuba and the US are complex and challenging to reflect or insinuate in a single video performance. Mendieta's perception of her alliance to her home country changed after she revisited Cuba as an adult (James 574) which further complicates

her feelings of liminality, existing between Cuba and the US. However, the focus here is on the otherness of the human subject, given the US's red scare attitudes towards Cuba, and the racial undertones implied by the setting in Oaxaca, Mexico. Considering the colonial and racial context of the *Silueta*, its dissolution in this section could be interpreted as violence and violation of the colonial female body. The "lack of totality" in the *Silueta* is instigated through the colonial subject, and the viewer represents or performs complicity in witnessing the destruction. Another post-colonial interpretation of Mendieta's *Anima, Silueta de Cohetes* views the artwork as a tribute to the African lives lost in America since the onset of the colonies in 1776, considering that it was created in 1976 (Hyacinthe 65).

Esteban Muñoz argues that the approach of Mendieta's art through her "brownness" reflects the postcolonial and feminist interpretations of her work and, like Best, he focuses part of his research on the affective dimension of her work (Vitalism's *After Burn*). While I agree that her work, in *Silueta de Cohetes* too, transmits the affect of "brownness", to use Muñoz's term, the concept of the Gothic sublime allows for the exploration of the excessiveness imposed on female racialized bodies. The ethical dimension of encountering the sublime can also be addressed in her work since the viewer is implicated in witnessing her dissolution. Mendieta may be active in retaining or unleashing the energy of the sublime, but the root of the *Silueta*'s sublimity depends on exterior forces. These exterior forces are not identifiable in her video performance, as they were for instance in "The Husband Stitch" with the main female character confessing that the root of her hurt was the seeming benevolence of her husband. Additionally, the unrepresentable forces leading to the self-dissolving Gothic sublime moment in *Silueta de Cohetes* imply perhaps an open-ended complicity in the dissolution. As a result, Mendieta's dissolving "brownness", apart from eliciting feelings associated with such "brownness", can also signify the irrationality of this dissolution within the context of the Gothic sublime. Lastly, in both "The Husband Stitch" and *Anima, Silueta*

*de Cohetes*, the female characters have internalized the immense power of the sublime, which precedes their existence as gendered and racial subjects. This internalization leads to an ontological tension portrayed in their disintegrating bodies which ultimately reveals the destructive power of patriarchal Reason.

In this chapter I examined the inevitable destruction faced by the female characters in the works of Machado and Mendieta, in response to the research question: “what is the impact of the excessiveness of the Gothic sublime on female bodies in patriarchal societies?”. Both in Machado’s short story and Mendieta’s performance piece, the female characters struggle to articulate the immense destructive power of patriarchal Reason over their bodies. That is why, the concept of the Gothic sublime facilitated the analysis of the ineffability of the haunting experience of inhabiting a female body in a patriarchal society. This experience eventually manifests in their art as a predetermined path towards destruction and dissolution.

## **Chapter 2: “The Horrors of the Erotic Body”**

In this chapter, I delve deeper into the analysis of the erotic female body, building upon the previous chapter’s reference to sexual bodies, particularly in “The Husband Stitch”. The conception of the erotic body by the female characters is, to an extent, influenced by the objectification logic of patriarchal society. Lynda Nead considers the erotic as “the aestheticized sexual representation” (103), and as “the borderline of respectability and non-respectability, between pure and impure desire” (104). In Machado’s “Difficult at Parties”, the erotic body is replaced by the pornographic body, presented to the reader through the protagonist’s consumption of pornographic movies as she attempts to regain access to her own sexual body. However, this body has been deeply affected by sexual abuse. As a result, the concept of the erotic as a liminal and unstable category between the pornographic and the aesthetic takes on a heightened significance for a woman whose naked body has endured the

physical violence of patriarchal Reason, not just its ideological influence. “The Husband Stitch” explores the incommunicability of the violated female body, equated with an internalized sublimity, ultimately leading to the destruction of the character. In “Difficult at Parties”, the female character’s body, physically violated and partially “dissolved”, serves as a means for her to explore the formation of her naked and sexual bodies from an outsider’s perspective. Nead critiques the absence of power dynamics in discussions of the erotic and the pornographic, and my analysis demonstrates how these power dynamics are laid bare in the works of Machado, Mendieta, and Woodman. Mendieta, in *Body Tracks*, represents the violence towards the erotic or sexual female body, translating it into aesthetic violence in her art. Woodman’s work is the most evocative of the three artists, but she still addresses the violability of the female body and its aesthetic conception by patriarchal Reason.

Drawing from Sharon Stockton’s book *The Economics of Fantasy: Rape in Twentieth Century Literature*, I explore Alice Jardine’s and Roland Barthes’ metaphor of the feminine as one “without breaks” to illustrate the concept of the “rapability” assigned to traditionally feminine bodies or entities (24). In analyzing the works of Machado, Mendieta, and Woodman, I examine how the artists employ and deconstruct this metaphor, by exploring the “rapability” of the female and erotic bodies. A thematic undertone that emerges across the works of all three artists is their relation to Charlotte Perkins Gillman's 1892 short story *The Yellow Wallpaper*. The yellow wallpaper’s symbolic significance in Gillman's story has been recognized for its critique of patriarchal violence against the female body and mind (Dock et al. 52). Additionally, the narrator reveals that the greatest impact on her mental health comes from the sub-pattern of the strangled women’s heads she observes within the wallpaper. This trope of the wallpaper’s sub-pattern is present in Machado's “Difficult at Parties”, while the symbolic significance of marked walls and wallpapers is apparent in Mendieta's performance art piece *Body Tracks* and in Woodman's photographs. The artists’ preoccupation with fitting

into, shrinking within, or emerging from the “walls” of patriarchy supports my argument throughout this project regarding the simultaneous power and powerlessness of female characters in patriarchal societies.

### **Difficult at Parties**

“Difficult at Parties” recounts the challenges the female protagonist faces in reintegrating into normal life activities after experiencing a traumatic event, strongly implied to be rape. Visual representation of the erotic body takes on particular significance in the story as the narrator, who has been assaulted, both fears and utilizes it as a means to establish her subjectivity. While she is deeply affected by the trauma, as evidenced by her statement that “[her] body radiates pain, is dense with it” (Machado 219), she attempts to rationalize her experience and find a way out of the void in her mind, expressed as: “afterward there is no kind of quiet like the one that is in my head” (219).

The exploration of the erotic and the pornographic in the story becomes complex, as it is the pornographic that leads to the contemplation and judgment of the protagonist’s life, rather than the aesthetic nude or the liminal erotic. In patriarchal societies, pornography and women’s bodily experiences do not often receive the necessary attention. However, I argue that by delving into their complicated nature, the female characters can attain a level of self-understanding that may help them escape the irrationality imposed on their bodies by patriarchal Reason, which constructs their identities in the social imaginary. In my analysis, I approach the story comparatively, drawing parallels to Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper*. By doing so, I aim to demonstrate how the sub-pattern of patriarchy has evolved from 19th-century America to 21st-century America, hinting at the emergence of new discourses surrounding the sexual female body, as proposed by Machado in her story. The scenes I focus on in “Difficult at Parties” are the protagonist’s relationship with the pornographic movies she watches to reconnect with her subjectivity, the anonymous man

attempting to film her at a house party, and her act of filming the moment of intimacy with her boyfriend.

### **The voices and Patterns Underneath**

In *The Yellow Wallpaper* the narrator becomes increasingly fixated on the pattern of the wallpaper in the room where she is enclosed to rehabilitate from her “temporary nervous depression” (Gilman 6). One possible interpretation for her suffering, however, could be what was later on recognized as postpartum depression and its subsequent maltreatment (Oakley 36). The narrator’s boyfriend, in “Difficult at Parties”, Paul, is not as rigid in his suggestions regarding the main character’s rehabilitation, this time from sexual assault, as was the physician husband in Gillman’s story. Nonetheless, he still fails to grasp the nuances of his girlfriend’s mental difficulties in processing the traumatic event of the rape and his solutions, changing house or going to a friendly party, are always met with displeasure on the part of the narrator. This displeasure is also apparent and vocalized, at least in the beginning of the story, in *The Yellow Wallpaper* with the narrator confessing to an imaginary reader: “Personally, I disagree with their ideas” (Gillman 6) referring to her husband’s and other physicians’ ideas regarding her case. In the end, every time she tries to express her dissatisfaction, she is being silenced by her husband who, in a patronizing fashion, calls her his “blessed little goose” (Gillman 12).

Unlike her predecessor, the woman in “Difficult at Parties” manages to go against her boyfriend’s wishes. Her response for example for changing an apartment is “I shouldn’t do anything, I say. I don’t want to move” (Machado 221) and when her boyfriend contradicts her by characterizing her response a “bad idea”, she then thinks to herself “a bad idea for whom?” (221), pointing to his solipsistic attitude. In other words, she opposes in a more assured voice to the well-intended suggestions of her boyfriend and when he insists again about changing an apartment, she exclaims: “Please stop. He reaches for me, but I knock his

hand away. I need you to be simple and good. Can't you be simple and good? He looks straight through me, as if I already know the answer" (Machado 235). Even though, the boyfriend tries to show signs of care which seem to be genuine enough, his actions towards the female character are often perceived as a mere fulfillment of his assumed "duty" as her boyfriend, taking on a traditional "breadwinner" role. The "loving care" directed from the male towards the female partner, which Jónasdóttir observed as lacking in "sexual love", continues to persist in this final story of Machado's collection. In "Difficult at Parties", however, the matter, the female body even if sexually blocked for the narrator is not led to its annihilation, implying a possibility for comprehension of the body's experiences. This comprehension involves only the female narrator and not her boyfriend. Like the woman in "The Husband Stitch", she is presented too by the end of the story "as lonely as [she] has ever been" (Machado 31), but at least with a possibility for self-understanding.

Now that I have established the similarities and the differences between the women and their partners in both stories, I am going to close read a recurrent theme in "Difficult at Parties" which has to do with the voices that the main female character hears while watching pornographic material on her DVD player, whether with her boyfriend or alone. In a similar manner to the narrator in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, where the female protagonist observes in the intricate pattern of the wallpaper the strangled heads of women with their bulbous eyes protruding, not apparent to anyone else in the story but her, the female character in "Difficult at Parties" hears, as she confesses to the reader and her boyfriend, the thoughts of the porn actors in the adult films she watches. Her boyfriend's immediate reaction is: "What is *wrong* with you?" (Machado 234) which approximates the physician husband's reaction to the confessions of his wife in *The Yellow Wallpaper*. Jhon, the physician husband, in Gillman's story "scoffs openly at any talk of things not to be felt and seen and put down in figures" (Gillman 5), which shows their similarity.

The exact words of the narrator regarding the voices she hears being: “Underneath, something else is moving. A stream running beneath the ice. A voiceover. Or, I guess, a voice under” (Machado 224). This confession is very much in line with the ominous sub-pattern of the yellow wallpaper that the main female character observes in Gillman’s story. Whether these voices are the thoughts of the actors, as the female character proposes, or her own projection to them is not clear. It would not be improbable that they are their own thoughts as that does not go against the fabulist universe that Machado has created in this collection, but in any case, the result is the same; the thoughts are not always completed, they are interrupted, repetitive and at times incoherent, expressing a difficulty in articulating personal needs. For example, in one of the pornographic movies which is about a married couple the female comments: “I cannot hear him. Only her voice tinged with desperation. *How do I say, how do I say, How do I-I cannot hear her anymore. I hit mute. How do I say, How do I say How do I-*” (Machado 233). The last phrase still lingering on even though the DVD player has been shut off and haunting the narrator’s imagination and personal thoughts about her own sexual body.

The pornographic material in this story stimulates the mind of the narrator beyond the realm of mere action and arousal and contributes to re-evaluating the way people or herself connect with one another in intimate relations. It could be claimed that the “titillating” aspect of pornography is blocked for the female character due to her traumatic experience of assault, but more than that, I would suggest that the rejection of the possibility of “contemplating” pornography is also traumatizing for people like women who are usually to be found on the giving end of pleasure. Close to Jónasdóttir’s observation that women are often present in “sexual love” to provide men with the experience “ecstasy” and “care” (pp. 55-56), the female character, without having experienced the “care” part of love appears confined in the “ecstasy” part, which due to her trauma, she cannot fulfil for her boyfriend.



## The Implications of the Naked and Pornographic Body

The inclusion of the sexual and naked body in the “Difficult at Parties” story adds another dimension to the feminist exploration of the manacles of patriarchy in a diametrically different context than that of *The Yellow Wallpaper*. The narrator of Machado’s story is a 21<sup>st</sup> century woman, presumably working before the traumatic event of the assault and “freer” to question her boyfriend’s logic, even though she conforms to his wishes. In addition, the events that affect the mental stability of the respective narrators are also of a different nature, in *The Yellow Wallpaper* the event is childbirth and its consequences on the protagonist’s mental health. In “Difficult at Parties” the event, which is not narrated, is rape and the narration revolves around the main character’s strategies to rehabilitate. Interestingly, or unfortunately, enough, the strategies refer only to the re-connection to her sexual body in order to regain “normality”. The voices she has been hearing, if not rejected by her boyfriend, they are still incomprehensible to her. As I mentioned before, this focus on the sexual self within a romantic relationship might be the result of a power imbalance between the couple where the woman’s “love power” is exploited by her male partner (Jónasdóttir 51).

Nevertheless, the insistence on the thoughts and the “voices underneath” of the porn actors in the movies she watches should not be considered as her entrapment in patriarchal ideology. Her insistence on the power they have over her mind, leading to the introspection of her sexual self, could potentially be considered as an involuntarily feminist act not in “re-writing” the body (Nead 30), but in “re-thinking” about it. Whereas a “re-writing” of the body is an act of self-assurance, that might not always question the already internalized paradigms of patriarchy, the “re-thinking” of the naked body in a context of powerlessness brings to the surface the problematic aspects of sexual relations. This “re-thinking”, however, is not a positive experience for the narrator, her words being: “I can still hear them thinking, echoing around my head, slipping into the crevices of memory. I cannot keep them away. The

dam will not hold” (Machado 240). The imminent dissolution of her mental dam might imply the danger of a mental breakdown, like the woman in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, if the voices are not taken seriously.

The choice of healing through pornographic material brings to the forefront the problematic category of the sexual female body in patriarchal societies. In other words, the concept of the naked and the pornographic showcase, in this story, how the sexual bodies of the porn actors, are not entirely their own. The seeming total exposure of the naked pornographic body and the simultaneous impossible access to it by the narrator complicate the notion of the pornographic as a straightforward category. In this sense, Nead’s emphasis on the context and the identity of the person who is looking at the naked body in determining its pornographic quality could be applied here (86). What is clearly identified and marketed as pornography in the story, and therefore meant to be arousing, becomes the source of existential dread for the female character, who ponders whether she was ever conscious of her thoughts about or during her intimate relations.

The harm done to the narrator is not the gender stereotyping of some of the porn she watches, but the continuing inability to understand where the inner voices of the actors come from, and whether she ever listened to her voice thinking about her sexual self. “Do they know what they are thinking? I wonder clicking through the videos, letting them load like a slingshot being pulled back. Do they hear it? Do they know? Did I know?” (Machado 236) is her main preoccupation close to the end of the story. According to Audre Lorde “the erotic is a source of *power and information*” (54 my emphasis) unlike its opposite the pornographic.<sup>5</sup> However, as it is shown in the short story the erotic is, of course, blocked for the narrator as

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<sup>5</sup> Lorde of course goes against the pornographic that propagates gender stereotypes and sexual violence against women. However, I use her definition not to imply that she was mistaken, but rather to show how it can be redefined in the feminism of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

she has not recovered from her trauma, but the condemnation of the pornographic as only connected to immediate gratification is also rejected. In fact, by approaching the pornographic through the prism of “contemplation, discrimination and transcendent value” (89) which as Nead observes is closer to the realm of art, the female character seems to have a possibility for understanding her sexual subjectivity.

### **The Camera’s Eye and Reclaiming Control**

As I mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, Machado manages to reinvent the traditional rape narrative of the passive female victim and the active male aggressor (Stockston 183). She achieves this not only by focusing on the subjectivity of the female character after her assault, but also by pointing out the inadequacy of thinking about sexual bodies both when powerful and powerless. It is not the physical rape that is narrated in the story, but a supposedly innocent act that happens, ironically, in a context of “Good people” and “mostly women” (Machado 226), revealing the evident presence of rape culture in everyday social experiences. This “innocent” act is the involuntary filming of the female character by an anonymous man in the party. Once again, a man is trying to “extract” part of her agency without her consent, and she has to fight back and strive for control over her body. In the end, she manages to seize and destroy the camera: “I thump the camera down to its shadows” (Machado 231) reclaiming this way the control over her own body. In addition, the female character decides after this event to also start filming herself during her sleep and this results, coincidentally, in her filming her first sexual contact with her boyfriend after her assault. In *The Yellow Wallpaper* the woman is subsumed, tragically, by the pattern she sees in the wall and is led to her own madness, whereas for the woman in *Difficult at Parties* there is still hope for recovery. Even if she is “imprisoned” in a patriarchal context that demands the immediate recovery of her body in order to please others. She might, after all, be able to start understanding her own experiences: “I look down at my hands. They are dry and not

shaking. I look back at the screen and I begin to listen” (Machado 241) being the last sentence of the story.

The first time that she plays back the video of her sleeping, and she watches her frantic and violent sleep patterns, she momentarily disidentifies from her digital self. A self that is traumatized, since she refers to herself for quite some time of the narration in the third person. She concludes the viewing by stating in a matter-of-fact manner: “When I am done, I rewind it to the beginning and replace it in the camera” (Machado 236) which goes to show that she cannot yet process her changed body and she prioritizes the rehabilitation of her “sexual self” in order to please her boyfriend. When they decide to watch together a pornographic movie, at some point she starts crying and immediately her boyfriend assures her that: “I don’t want any of them. I want only you” to which her reaction is “I stiffen” (Machado 240). Her body reacts and reveals her displeasure and discomfort, when her mind cannot process what is happening to her. She cannot grasp why she is not anymore, as her boyfriend puts it: “a well that never emptied” (Machado 238) referring to her desire for him. The dichotomy between the pornographic, which is primarily aimed at titillating the senses, and the erotic, which emphasizes aesthetic pleasure, is effectively shattered within the narrative by the female character's profound disconnection from her own sexual body. This disconnection unveils how pornography, unexpectedly, can serve as a catalyst for self-discovery and a deeper understanding of one's agency in intimate relations.

In addition, Paul, the boyfriend considers the problem of his girlfriend crying while watching an adult movie to be jealousy, when she has indicated to him that it might be the voices she involuntarily hears. So, because he does not seem to understand her and because like the husband in “The Husband Stitch”, he too is “a good man”, the narrator decides that “because he is hurting, and [she] wants it to stop” (Machado 240) to start kissing him. Another evidence of the power imbalance and the exploitation of women’s “love power” in

romantic relationships (Jónasdóttir). Unlike the woman in “The Husband Stitch”, however, she does not realize that this is “the root of [her] hurt” (Machado 30). When afterwards she is watching the videotaped intimate scene between them, she describes it as: “Her body-my body, mine- is still stripped with the yellowish stains of fading bruises. It is a body overflowing out of itself; it unwinds from too many layers” (Machado 241). It is the first time she mentions the impact of the abuse on her body, and it seems that she needed to objectify herself in the camera lens in order to be able to “listen” to her own thoughts. This is how the pornographic, even when it refers to oneself, becomes “a source of power and information” to use Lorde’s words again (54). Lastly, in both “The Husband Stitch” and “Difficult at Parties”, the female characters confront ideologies that impose the expectation of utilizing their bodies solely for the purpose of providing pleasure to their male partners. A type of pleasure which supposedly will satisfy them as well. In “The Husband Stitch” the woman’s body literally disintegrates and falls apart in front of her husband’s eyes, whereas in “Difficult at Parties” the body remains blocked for the narrator; an obstacle which she tries to overcome by insisting on the rehabilitation of its sexual aspect.

To end this section, as Ellen Rooney points out about rape narratives in the 20<sup>st</sup> century, the female character by being distanced from the spectacular aspect of the assault is “defined by more than the sole abilities “to consent or refuse to consent”, to be necessarily and “always either already raped or already rapable” (qtd. in Stockton 92). This distancing in “Difficult at Parties” contributes to disclosing the problematic connection of the character to her sexual body even before the assault. The pornographic in this narrative is obscene not because it offends the cultural standards and aesthetic values of a patriarchal society, but because it reveals the taboo around pornography and sexual bodies. The act of viewing might not be denied to the character, as it would have been in Gillman’s 19<sup>th</sup> century America, but

the act of thinking about it is met with the boyfriend's indignation: "What is wrong with you?" (Machado 234), the voice of patriarchal Reason.

### **Woodman's Woman in the Wallpaper**

Taking as a point of reference the line from *Difficult at Parties* "I cannot shrink tightly enough against the wall" (Machado 227), I analyze Woodman's photograph *From Space*<sup>2</sup>, *Providence, R.I., 1975–78* that can be connected to themes both from *The Yellow Wallpaper* and "Difficult at Parties". To be more specific, in Woodman's photograph a female naked body is positioned against a wall holding the torn pieces of the wallpaper covering the intimate parts of the woman in question and her head. Only the torso, legs and hands of the female model are left visible. I refer once again to Nead's idea of the female nude or naked which is this time more closely adopted by Woodman. As Nead notes about feminist art regarding its appropriation and questioning of traditional art methods in depicting the female nude, what matters more in criticism is to understand: "who draws the lines, where they are drawn and for whom" (33). This is how I am approaching Woodman's photographs and play with the female naked body. Especially because the medium of photography has been, not unproblematically, more widely connected with realistic (re)presentation. Therefore, it could more easily veer towards the domain of the obscene and pornographic. The decisions made by the artist concerning the visibility of the naked body and its placement in the photographic space are significant to my analysis. Building upon Simon's argument on the importance of Woodman's uses and abuses of space in her photographs, particularly her *House* series (32), I examine the placement of the wallpaper and the model's body in space.

First of all, it would not be unthinkable that Woodman was familiar with *The Yellow Wallpaper*, a quite popular text of 19<sup>th</sup> century American fiction.<sup>6</sup> In Woodman's photograph, there is no context of a boyfriend or a husband as was the case with Machado's and Gillman's stories, hence I am focusing solely on the -partly naked- body and its relation to matters of visibility. Many scholars, among them Riches and Bronfen, analyze her work through the lens of hiding and revealing the self. They do so by reflecting on her photographic techniques and the particularities of the medium of photography. In this project, I am interested in matters of visibility through a more sociopolitical point of view. Some of the other photographs in her *Space<sup>2</sup>* series, to which the photograph I am analyzing belongs too, re-imagine the body's relation to space using, for example, a blurring effect. They distort the body's relation to space and hinder the possibility of it being captured by the camera's eye. In the photograph under discussion, nevertheless, there is an insinuation of movement, but the body is still and clearly visible; at least the parts that Woodman lets be visible. The concealment of the genital parts of the female figure is not merely an instance of averting the male gaze. Francesca Woodman, in her photographs, repeatedly exposes her own or other women's naked bodies to the camera lens, not in voyeuristic terms, however. The partially naked body in the *From Space<sup>2</sup>* photograph appears to be, or perhaps attempts to be, integrated into the design of the wallpaper. If the connection is to be made with the yellow wallpaper in Gillman's story, then the ways the wallpaper is employed by Gilman and Woodman need to be further explored. The aim is to discover how Woodman employs the naked female body in her work and what the sub-pattern of the wallpaper means for her photograph.

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<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Bronfen has conducted research on the comparison of visibility in *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Francesca Woodman's photograph that I am analyzing and the film *The Others* (2001). She terms this transmedial comparison "crossmapping", which can be found in her book: *Crossmappings: On Visual Culture* (2018).

To be more specific, in the beginning the woman in *The Yellow Wallpaper* simply describes the wallpaper in negative terms: “One of those sprawling flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin” (Gillman 9). Then she becomes progressively obsessed with it and sees in it “bulbous eyes” (13) and strangled necks which she explains as: “they get through [the women], and then the pattern strangles them off and turns them upside down and makes their eyes white” (30). In the end, she tries to strip down the wallpaper to get the woman out of it: “I pulled, and she shook, I shook, and she pulled, and before morning we had peeled off yards of that paper” (33). This action could be interpreted as the result of an uncured mental illness, but it also shows the power of the wallpaper over the character. In the case of Woodman there is no context to interpret her relation to the wallpaper. When approached comparatively, the wallpaper in Woodman's photograph is under the control of the woman behind it, presumably Woodman herself. The partly naked body seems to be part of the wallpaper completing the pieces that are missing to create a whole, a unity. At the same time, the body is also coming out of the wall, escaping, momentarily, the two-dimensional quality of the photograph and “animating” the inanimate wallpaper.

In the case of Woodman, then, a woman might be hidden behind the wallpaper like the narrator of Gillman's story imagined, but Woodman or her model is the one holding the wallpaper in place and determining its power. If placed in the context of 1970s America, this act might mean that female bodies are still “imprisoned” behind the wallpaper of patriarchy, but that the possibility of ripping them and coming out of them might now be more realistic. Furthermore, the vulnerability of the naked is insinuated by Woodman and the danger of patriarchal constrictions could still be apparent, taking into consideration the wallpaper's symbolism in Gillman's short story. The appearance only of the female figure's torso prevents its categorization either to the female nude or the pornographic because it resists both the aesthetic value of the female nude, through its lack of harmony and therefore beauty,



and the obscenity of the pornographic, as there is not enough “matter” revealed to gratify the viewer and motivate action (Nead 88). Consequently, as with the female character in “Difficult at Parties”, Woodman’s female figure invites the viewer in a rather intellectual relation to her naked and potentially sexual body. As Bronfen mentions Woodman’s photography “challenges us to share her curiosity” (23) by trying to uncover the meaning behind the enigmatic position of the female body between two torn pieces of a wallpaper.

### **Ana Mendieta: The Imprint of the Female Body and Sexual Violence**

In this part of my thesis, I am exploring how Mendieta is approaching the erotic body and the violence towards such a body through the depiction or insinuation of rape in her photographic work. Mendieta influenced by the rape and murder of fellow student Sara Ann Ottens in 1973 at the campus of Iowa university began a series of “performing” violence against women, with her first performance *Rape Scene* just some months after the assault and murder of Ottens (Weinman). In *Rape Scene*, she is presented naked on a table with animal blood all over her lower body. James Wendell Hall was the main suspect convicted for the murder of Ottens. The conviction just for the murder raises the question of whether he would have been put on trial if the case of the rape did not also include the murder of Ottens and the spectacular aspect of her dead body. This is why the title of Mendieta *Rape Scene*<sup>7</sup> becomes significant in bringing to the forefront the violence done to the female sexual body. A sexual body in the sense that the fact that this is a sexualized form of violence should not be undermined. *Rape Scene* was part of the broader anti-rape movement that gained momentum in the mid-1970s and led to a significant rape reform in America (Gershon).

For the society of the time *Rape Scene* might have been a rebellious act due to an important silencing or misinterpreting of sexual assault narratives. It was also considered

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<sup>7</sup> Although this photograph is not one of my primary cultural objects, I will include it in the Appendix because I extensively used it for the comparison with Mendieta's *Body Tracks*. It is labeled as Figure 3 on page 58.

provocative for disclosing the sexual violence against the non-white subject and for making the viewer complicit in the witnessing of the event (Szymanek 905). However, I would have to argue that this photograph is following rather traditional narratives of rape representation whereby the female “object” occupies a passive position and the male subject, absent from the scene but easily inferred, is the active abuser (Stockton 10). Of course, Mendieta is the one controlling the narrative that she subjects her body to, but still she was not the actual victim of abuse, so it is a form of representation. In *Body Tracks*, nevertheless, that I consider more evocative of assault and therefore more engaging in questioning the systemic violence against feminine bodies, Mendieta offers her own take on *The Yellow Wallpaper* story.

In this artwork, Mendieta iconically uses the blood of animals to represent violence. As Susan Sontag notes regarding the (re)presentation of pain in photographs that are supposed to capture reality, the viewer might get desensitized to images of pain if the end goal on the part of the photographer is to provoke feelings of despair and sympathy (82). In addition, being sympathetic towards the representation of pain, might come to be the sole responsibility of the viewer (102). However, in *Body Tracks* the viewer cannot refrain that easily from the ideological implications of what they are witnessing since they cannot immediately objectify the pain depicted. A pain that seems almost sacrificial with Mendeita’s hands leaving on the wall in front of her a bloody V-like sign, suggesting an image of crucifixion. Besides the allusion to violence against the gendered racial subject, the meaning of *Body Tracks* is slightly more obscured than, for example, that of *Rape Scene*.

To be more specific, the fact that Mendieta leaves behind her performance just a trace of her hands, not even a *Siluetta*, problematizes the connection of violence to a singular abused body and raises the question of what these two solitary red traces symbolize. Szymazek considers these traces as a way to “mark space” with the unspoken violence of sexual abuse (920). While I am not in disagreement with this assertion, I am interested also in

matters of why and how this assertion relates with my previous artists. In the case of Mendieta the “wallpaper’s” design depends on herself since she is the one who inscribes the female pain of patriarchal oppression into the wall. Like in “The Husband Stitch”, where the exact cause of female oppression was never revealed, in *Body Tracks*, Mendieta performs a desperate attempt to record a type of pain that implies an impending danger. The attempt to record the violence is characterized as desperate because there is nothing to say, there is no message behind it, but rather an imaginative and inaudible cry and the impression of Mendieta’s red hand imprints. On the contrary, in *Blood Sign*, she painted a clear political message on a wall: “There is a devil inside me” alluding mainly to her racial identity as an otherized immigrant Cuban woman. The naked body might be absent from her performance, but not the sexual one. If I have tried to show throughout my analysis that the female sexual body, is not a private matter and that it is socially constructed by patriarchal Reason, then the understanding that gendered violence is closely connected to sexual violence would not be a preposterous interpretation in *Body Tracks*.

Lastly, the performance of the hand imprints in *Body Tracks* has a close affinity to the sublime as delineated in the previous chapter, but unlike her *Anima, Silueta de Cohetes*, here the subject of the imprint, Mendieta, is visible and identifiable and the political message of her work becomes more evident. The artist retains the authority over the work, that has to do with female bodies, and the viewer could not deny the connection between Mendieta’s body and her artwork. The final imprint on the wall looks almost like a Christ like figure brought to its dissolution. Mendieta appears down to her knees after the ending of the performance and her traces are left intact for society to contemplate upon. In this sense *Body Tracks* pertains more on the symbolic aspect of representation (Walker) that allow the woman, in this case Mendieta, to be both an active and a passive medium for expressing pain. This is achieved by being the one in authority to produce the work but also subjecting the self to violence. It

remains interesting that both Mendieta and Woodman place their bodies against walls and that the woman in *The Yellow Wallpaper* is seeing women imprisoned behind the nightmarish design of the wallpaper. That is because “the house” has been traditionally connected with stereotypical gender roles and women’s labor. The characters of the three artists (or the alter egos for the visual artists), Machado, Mendieta and Woodman, are either subsumed or try to escape from and reveal the violence inherent in the walls of patriarchy that they “crash” against too. Their bodies are sites of violence, this time a violence to be concretely felt such as in the case of sexual assault.

### **Woodman’s Female Body Imprint**

To end this chapter, I am coming back to Woodman because in her photograph *Francesca Woodman, untitled, 1976*, she combines both the question of the naked body as it was raised in the analysis of the short story “Difficult at Parties” and the imprint or trace which I explored in the previous section with Mendieta’s *Body Tracks*. In this photograph, Woodman or one of her female models is presented naked in a chair covering her genitalia with her hands in what seems like a defensive pose. On the floor there is the imprint of a female body, and both the imprint, and the naked woman are placed again in the familiar context of her photographic world, the abandoned factory that she used for many her photographs. First, I will address the naked female figure and then the imprint of a naked female body. The imprint of her body on the floor has been characterized by Riches as the negative of the photograph made forcefully visible to the viewer and in this way bringing to the forefront the presence of an absence (113). This paradoxical appearance raises questions of who has authority over the image, who controls or is controlled by the gaze and is there a place of authenticity in (photographic) representation? However, in the photograph analyzed by Riches the upper part of the woman’s body and her head is cropped, and this proves important for her argumentation of an obscured selfhood (111). In the one I am using, which

still retains the imprint and the figure of the female sited woman, the face of the woman is clearly visible, and the position of her body cannot be unaccounted for.

First, regarding the naked female figure sitting in a chair with her hands covering her genitals and looking in an apprehensive way, it seems impossible not to address again the concept of nakedness. In Nead's words: "if the tradition of the female nude emphasizes the exterior of the body and the completion of its surfaces, then women's body art reveals the interior, the terrifying secret that is hidden within this idealized exterior" (66). That terrifying secret, in the case of Woodman, might be "that women's bodies are never entirely their own or without limits" (Rapport 627) or that access to the naked female body is not as easy and straightforward as it might seem to be in the beginning. The woman who looks like Woodman points both to the interchangeability of the female "nude" and to the vulnerability of the subject against the probing gaze of the viewer. Moreover, a certain kind of violence can be detected in trying to penetrate the obstacle of her hands covering her genitalia and in imagining the rest of her naked body. Like the woman in the "Difficult at Parties" story who was interested in the thoughts of porn actors and her personal thoughts regarding her own sexual body, Woodman is inviting the viewer to "think" about their relation to the naked body depicted. Woodman's nude moves away from the pornographic in the sense that it seems hard to claim that it offers "instant gratification" (Nead 89) to the viewer. Positioned in a derelict place and in a defensive pose, it emphasizes not only the violence of the male gaze but also the violence of gazing in general.

As for the imprint on the ground, while I agree with Szymazenk's point on the significance of the female imprint being authorized by the woman herself as in the case both of Woodman and Mendieta (1990), I think that its forming on the ground of the depicted room is of importance too. To be more specific, Woodman often experiments with space and the positioning of her body or her models in it. So, the imprint and the physical female body are

positioned in two different dimensions which if interpreted in a context of causal relations, since there is no other object/subject visible, makes the viewer wonder whether the woman in the chair was previously in that laying position or the imprint belongs to a different woman and to where she might have escaped. Unlike the designs of strangled women in *The Yellow Wallpaper* that could be interpreted as part of the narrator's imagination, due to her untreated mental illness, here the bodily imprint of a naked female body is made evident to the viewer, leaving an uncontroversial trace behind it. In the context of this chapter's theme: "The Horrors of the Erotic Body", even though there is no indication of abuse or violence against the woman's body, the gothic aesthetic of the photograph, the abandoned room, the trace of "unseen" presences and the vulnerability of the naked woman express the haunting or rather horrific aspect of the erotic.

In this chapter, I analyzed the complex relation of the female characters to erotic, sexual, naked or pornographic female bodies in response to the research question "why having a female body in patriarchal societies can be a source of horror for the female characters and how the recipients of such horror react?". The female naked body has been the object of medical, aesthetic, and legal regulations of patriarchal Reason. From the obligatory confinement of Gillman's character to the room of the yellow wallpaper, to the assaulted body of the woman in "Difficult at Parties", to the symbolic representation of violence towards the female sexual body in Mendieta's *Body Tracks* and finally to the transgressive "erotic" body, a body of power and powerlessness, in Woodman's photographs. All the artists offer new and unique ways to think and contemplate upon already overdetermined categories such as that of the female naked body and its various manifestations through their characters' personal experiences.

## Conclusion

Adrienne Riche in her essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Experience”, coined the term “lesbian continuum” to describe “a range-through each woman’s life and throughout history- of woman-identified experience” not limited only to the sexual attraction to other women (648). She is critical enough to deny the simplification of her term as a mere opposition to patriarchy and a celebration of lesbian utopia. Her aim is to emphasize the strong bond among women “in the sharing of a rich inner life” (649). This type of bond could be observed among the women in “The Husband Stitch” who feel a certain type of solidarity when they see each other’s ribbons, a symbol attributed to them for being born “culturally” as women. In my comparative analysis of Machado, Mendieta, and Woodman, I aimed to present a continuum of “woman-identified experience”, specifically focusing on the lived experience of occupying a female body in patriarchal societies. The inclusion of diverse mediums, such as visual art and short stories, played a crucial role in my analysis as it highlighted the transgressive aspect of genre and narrative construction within the exploration of female bodily experiences. Furthermore, the variation in time periods represented by their artworks revealed the transhistorical nature of these experiences, while still acknowledging their individual uniqueness.

The experience that unites all the artists is a collective sense of uneasiness stemming from inhabiting female bodies within patriarchal societies. In Machado’s “The Husband Stitch” by Machado and Mendieta’s *Anima, Silueta de Cohetes* the uneasiness arises from the excessiveness of significations imposed on the female and racial bodies by patriarchal Reason. The significations are often not fully realized by the characters, the wife in “The Husband Stitch” admitting: “for these and other questions, and their lack of resolution, I am sorry” (Machado 31). Their excessiveness, however, is strongly experienced as a Gothic sublime experience that leads to self-dissolution and destruction. Incorporating the

excessiveness of the sublime into the female body leads to a “schizophrenic” relationship where something so internal to the self, the body, is simultaneously immensely external to the self. It is also important to note the disparity in the experience of the Gothic sublime moment between the different characters and/ or the viewers. In other words, while the husband and the viewer can experience even the negative pleasure of self-destruction, and then assess the possibility of returning to reason, Mendieta’s *Silueta* and the wife, on the contrary, have no escape from the excessive irrationality of patriarchal Reason.

In addition to the indefinable uneasiness they feel, the characters also experience a tangible uneasiness that can be clearly defined as a violation of their sexual and naked bodies, as imagined and regulated by patriarchy. The violation can be an ideological and aesthetic one, as presented in Woodman’s photographs, or a more physical one in the form of sexual assault, represented in Mendieta’s and Machado’s work. “The parties that feel entitled to women’s bodies” (Grady), whether in the field of medicine through misidentification or inadequate understanding of “female” diseases, or in art through attempts to confine and manipulate the portrayal of the female naked body, create an impression for men that they possess a rightful control over women's bodies. This rightful control can reach its peak in the form of sexual assault, which represents the ultimate violation and objectification of women's bodies. However, the artists strive to address the horror they feel towards their bodies, recognizing them as categories that they do not fully comprehend, by attempting to “re-think” and reimagine their bodies. Their process of “re-thinking” does not necessarily give rise to new categorizations of the female body, but rather serves as a critique of the inadequacy and injustice inherent in the rigidly defined and limited female bodies found within various categorizations in patriarchal societies.

A limitation of this project has been the exploration of female bodily experiences that traditionally receive more attention. Meaning that Machado has also written about queer



female bodily experiences in her stories “Mothers”, “Real Women Have Bodies” and “The Resident” from the same collection which I did not analyze. Furthermore, in Mendieta's video performance titled *Anima, Silueta de Cohetes*, the exploration of the racial body was only partially evoked. A more in-depth and comprehensive study of this aspect would not only be interesting but also necessary. As for Woodman's photographs, I focused on individual photographs which might have undermined to a certain level the importance of seriality in her work (Baker 62). However, I engaged her work in a different type of “seriality” by bringing it into dialogue with the work of other artists, some closer to her field, like Mendieta, and others more distant, like Machado. By giving prominence in these stories and artworks does not imply that they present a comprehensive understanding of female bodily experiences in patriarchal societies. By contrast, what they highlight is the significance of paying attention and trying to understand each unique story without categorizing experiences under vague labels.

Another dimension of comparison between the artists that I would have liked to explore, possibly in a more extensive project, would involve analyzing the boundaries of the physical female body as portrayed in the story “Real Women Have Bodies” by Machado and Woodman's photographs from the *Space<sup>2</sup>* series. In this series, Woodman employs her famous blurring effect to simulate movement (“Five Things to Know”) and, perhaps, evade the scrutinizing gaze of the camera. In Machado's story, women's bodies undergo a mysterious transformation, fading out and existing in an immaterial state that resides on the surface of prom dresses. This portrayal of the elusiveness of female bodies presents an intriguing avenue for research between the two artists. Art created by women about their bodies can be seen as politically charged within feminist ideology. This can be attributed to their depiction of female bodily oppression or their resistance against such oppression. However, what I have attempted to demonstrate is that the art of Machado, Mendieta, and Woodman, to

varying degrees, can be regarded as political not necessarily for offering definitive answers about the experience of having a female body in patriarchal societies, but rather for raising more thought-provoking questions surrounding this subject.

## Appendix



Fig.1. Ana Mendieta, “Anima, Silueta de Cohetes (Firework Piece), 1976”. Art Basel, For sizing purposes this photograph is retrieved from the web site Art Basel, 2016, <https://www.artbasel.com/catalog/artwork/46826/Ana-Mendieta-Anima-Silueta-de-Cohetes-Firework-Piece>.

For sizing purposes, this photograph is a snapshot of the video performance retrieved from the web site Art Basel. The rest of the photographs in the Appendix are referenced in the Works Cited page.



Fig.2. Ana Mendieta, *Body Tracks (Rastros Corporales)* 1982. Photograph taken during a performance at Franklin Furnace, New York City, 1982.



Fig.3. Ana Mendieta, *(Untitled) Rape Scene*, photograph, 1973.



Fig.4. Francesca Woodman, from *Space<sup>2</sup>*, Providence, RI, photograph, 1975-78.



Fig. 5. Francesca Woodman, *Untitled, Providence Rhode Island, 1976*

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