Atypical True Crime, Laughing at Offenders, and the Publishing Industry: An Interview with Myriam Gurba

Myriam K. Gurba (b. 1977) is a Chicanx writer, editor, artist, educator, and activist born in Santa Maria, California. She is a graduate of the University of California at Berkeley and author of the literary true crime memoir *Mean* (2017), for which she was a Lamba Literary Awards finalist. She is also the author of the short story collections *Painting Their Portraits in Winter* (2015) and *Dahlia Season* (2007), which won the Publishing Triangle's Edmund White Award for Debut Fiction. Her next book, titled *Creep: Accusations and Confessions*, will be published by Avid Reader Press, an imprint of Simon & Schuster in 2023. Gurba is co-founder, with Latinx authors David Bowles and Roberto Lovato, of the grassroots campaign *#DignidadLiteraria* (Literary Dignity), which seeks both greater inclusion of Chicanx and Latinx authors, editors, and executives, and to combat the exclusion and erasure of Latinx and Chicanx literature within the publishing industry in the USA. The author-activist collective was formed following Gurba's viral review of the novel *American Dirt* (2018) by Jeanine Cummins.[1] Her visual artwork has been exhibited at the Museum of Latin American Art (MOLAA) and The Center, Long Beach, California. She has also written for *The Guardian* and *Time* and is the Editor-in-Chief of *Tasteful Rude* (published by The Brick House Cooperative).[2]

Gurba's early work involved the publication of chapbooks through radical, alternative, often queer presses, including RADAR Productions, Future Tense Books, and Manic D Press. Her chapbooks include *Wish You Were Me* (Future Tense Books, 2011), *Sweatsuits of the Damned* (RADAR Productions, 2013), which won the Eli Coppola Memorial Chapbook Prize, and *River Candy* (eohippus labs, 2015). Working as a traveling writer in the early 2010s, Gurba toured the USA with Sister Spit, a collective of radical, queer performance poets.[3] Sister Spit began in the 1990s as a women-only open mic night and, inspired by the punk movement, became a roadshow of touring poets and writers. Having been invited to tour with the collective in 2011 and 2015, Gurba took part in the revival era of Sister Spit, working and performing alongside authors such as Michelle Tea and Ali Liebegott.

Touring as a writer was instrumental to the formation of Gurba's authorial voice, which fuses a compact poetic style with a gothic, grotesque, and surreal humor informed by the strategies of standup comedy. As she writes in *Time* on employing humor to write about sexual violence, humor enables her to resist what she refers to as a "pattern of storytelling [that] has come into vogue" and which has formed a "canon" with its own "script" for survivors of sexual violence (Gurba, "Why I Use Humor").This body of writing about surviving sexual violence, she argues, employs language in a manner that conveys the idea that "experiencing sexual violence is the worst moment in a survivor's life, period" ("Why I Use Humor").Writers in this canon, she asserts, "raid the vocabulary of religion in order to confer solemnity," and readers are asked to "'witness' a victim's pain as

they 'testify'" ("Why I Use Humor").This way of writing about sexual violence, she believes, has a deadening effect on both the prose and the perception of survivors.

There is nothing "deadening" about Gurba's prose. Formally, her work follows modernist and formalist directives in which the "purpose" of literature is to produce defamiliarizing and estranging effects. Her writing destabilizes dominant narratives, overly familiar images, and clichéd tropes to create novel visions of our world. In its use of humor to innovate within the canon of rape literature, her work evokes Mikhail Bakhtin who wrote that "laughter demolishes fear and piety" (*Dialogic Imagination*, 23). In *Mean*, Gurba portrays a school peer who rapes her as a "bad mole" in a representation that rejects the predatory animal imagery most typically associated with sexual violence: "Molesters are bad moles that touch other moles,"—a depiction that renders the offender a snivelling, sniffling creature (25). To mock perpetrators of violence in this way through defamiliarization provides opportunities for readers to encounter novel perspectives on sexual violence. For Bakhtin, this is what humor does; it brings us closer to such topics, thereby "clearing the ground for an absolutely free investigation" (*Dialogic Imagination*, 23). In her work, funny, often grotesque humor brings readers into embodied encounters with sexual violence.

The following interview took place online over the video conferencing platform *Jitsi* on 30 June 2022. In this conversation, Gurba discusses the publishing industry and the anti-Mexican racial rhetoric that emerged following her viral critique of *American Dirt*, critical theory, writing about violence with humor, and her atypical true crime memoir, *Mean*.

HS: I want to start with foundations: could you tell me about your beginnings as a writer?

MG: It's difficult to pinpoint the beginning because I'm not sure whether or not the beginning should be tied to intent to publication or desire. I suppose that I could say that I was first struck by the notion of becoming a writer, when I was a teenager in high school. I tried my hand at it and then when I was in university, I submitted pieces to various publications; all of them were rejected. Then after graduating I worked at the University of California at Berkeley, and then I had a position as an editorial assistant at *On Our Backs* magazine, which was a lesbian, pornographic magazine made by lesbians for lesbians. And so that was my first formal entry into the publishing world and my first bylines were in lesbian pornography.

HS: What a journey! It strikes me as interestingly parallel to Hanif Kureishi's beginnings. But what do you think? Are you familiar with his work?

MG: I don't think I am.

HS: He's a British writer. He wrote a book called *The Buddha of Suburbia* in 1990, and it was adapted into a BBC television series in 1993. But when he started out, he wrote erotic literature and then he moved into writing literary fiction.

MG: Yes, one of my jobs as an editorial assistant at *On Our Backs* was to go through the slush pile of erotica submissions. And unsolicited erotica submissions are the worst kind of unsolicited submissions. I was at the bottom of the food chain, so they gave me this horrible pile of manuscripts to go through and it was really a feat to have to endure.

HS: I want to talk more about publishing, but before we do, could you say something about your work with Sister Spit?

MG: I toured with Sister Spit on two occasions. The first time that I went would have probably been around 2011, and then I went for a second time in 2015. During both instances I was invited by the curators of the series, and the first time that I went, I was reading from a chapbook and then the second time that I went I was reading from my second fiction collection. So, I did both of those tours, and as a result of those tours I strongly

recommend to writers that they tour and that they never tour alone. I recommend that they attempt to amass a cabaret that they can tour with and by cabaret, I mean different types of artists who are willing to travel and perform one after another. As a result of those tours, I also tend to remind writers that it's very important that they be performers and that they develop their stage skills and develop a stage persona because the most brilliant prose can be rendered flat through a weak performance.

HS: How then was Sister Spit formative for you as a writer? I know that the Radar Productions website describes the group as having "a historic vibe of feminism, queerness, humor, and provocation"—that description makes me think of your writing. I am interested in what you were saying about cabaret as well.

MG: So, how did Sister Spit impact on my development as a writer?

HS: Yes.

MG: So, I went to UC Berkeley, which is in the Bay Area, and it's located in the East Bay on the other side of the Bay of San Francisco, one of the queerest cities in the world. I would look to San Francisco for inspiration, and I would look to what was happening culturally in San Francisco and I would follow what was happening there. I'm unsure of how I encountered Sister Spit. I don't have a specific memory of Michelle Tea or Sini Anderson [the founders of Sister Spit], but I came across Michelle Tea's work. I devoured the work very quickly and was struck by it because she was narrating a queer, working class life. She was doing so in an incredibly gritty way that meditated on popular culture, and she was writing into existence documents of lives that I had been trained to believe did not deserve a literary spotlight, and suddenly she was showing me that our lives do deserve to serve as muses for literary artifacts. That made me very interested in her as a writer, but also as an activist and organizer because I quickly learned that she lived in San Francisco and that she was producing literary events, but that literary programming had an aggressive feminist bent and an aggressive dyke bent. It was so aggressive to the degree that there were gestures made toward lesbian separatism, which at the time I found interesting and appealing. I began to follow Michelle's career and also to attend some of her literary programming, and in the process of doing so I learned simply through observation what I had the power to do in terms of literary organizing; and then years later I began to engage in my own programming and organizing.

HS: I can see those impulses in your work, as you archive lives that have not historically been in literature.

You have published with many alternative presses and publishing platforms, including Radar Productions, and you are Editor-in-Chief of *Tasteful Rude* with The Brick House Cooperative. Can you say more about why you choose to publish through alternative presses?

MG: It is not so much that it is a choice as it is that alternative presses have been among my very limited options. As I mentioned earlier, I entered the publishing industry through pornography, which some might say is entering the publishing industry through its sewers. I have never—well for a very long time—I have been an outsider of the publishing industry in the United States, or I have existed on the outskirts of the outskirts. And because of the subjects that I focus my literary attention on, the big presses have not been interested in my work and have rejected my work.

When I did begin to publish some fiction online during the early 2000s it was primarily in queer online publications and alternative literature on- line zines that were accepting my work. There was an editor from a small press—Future Tense—who spotted my writing in one of those alternative literature journals, that is no longer running, but he emailed me and complimented my work and asked if I had more fiction and if so, would I want to publish a collection with him because he was, at the time, in charge of an imprint that was being published through Manic D Press. That was how I came to be published by Manic D; it was an invitation through this independent publisher who had an imprint. Then after Radar Productions published *Sweatsuits of the Damned* and I won that chapbook contest [the Eli Coppola Memorial Chapbook Prize of 2013], Manic D offered to publish another collection because Jennifer Joseph, who is the Publisher-in-Chief at Manic D, enjoyed some of the pieces from *Sweatsuits of the Damned*.

Mean, my third book, was also not a book that came into being as a result of my knocking on doors. Again, a publisher—in this case Emily Gould—who had an imprint [Emily Books] at Coffee House Press, contacted me and complimented me on my work and asked if I had a manuscript. So, there have been a series of very fortunate invitations from publishers who run small imprints that have enabled my work to travel and to have a life. Historically, when I've knocked at the door of big publishers and more prestigious publishers and publications, I've been given an emphatic no! Oh, but now, I'm signed to one of the big ones, and it's very weird. It's super weird. I'm just like, "oh, you like me now? Why do you like me now?" It is incredibly strange to have been treated like a vampire who needs to be warded off with garlic. And now they're like, "well, come inside, sit down, what can I get you to drink?" Uh, where is this kindness coming from? So yeah, it's strange.

HS: After the review of *American Dirt* went viral, did you experience any backlash in the publishing industry? And what are your hopes for the publishing industry post-*American Dirt* and after your co-founding of *#DignidadLiteraria*?

MG: Yes and no. When the criticism of *American Dirt* went viral, a lot of conservative literary critics were extremely critical of me and relied on many racist tropes to launch their critiques of me and that essay on *American Dirt*. That wing of the publishing industry, because they are part of the publishing industry, they were hostile. When Flatiron Books [the publishers of Jeannine Cummins' *American Dirt*] released a statement, they issued a press release that relied on some of those racist tropes that imply that I was a member of an "angry brown mob" that's set upon murdering, or at the very least, attacking white authors.[4] There was a characterization of me as a "savage" of sorts.

At the same time, I received invitations to write from prestigious publications who had never knocked on my door before. I got an invitation from *The New York Times* to write an editorial on *American Dirt*, and I thought to myself, I already did! Why would I want to write another? You guys won't let me cuss. I don't want to. There were requests of that nature; they wanted me to continue doing this anti-*American Dirt* song and dance for clicks and it got stale very quickly. The offers were so narrow in terms of what people wanted me to discuss and how they wanted me to discuss it and the anger that they wanted me to perform.

I'll give another example: I was asked by an editor of *The New Yorker* to contribute to the food section of the magazine. I wrote an essay about vacationing in the Midwestern part of the United States, in Iowa, with a person who was my wife at the time, and I described the racist reception that I received from my ex-wife's family. I attempted to win them over by cooking Mexican food for them. Of course, it failed because you can't win bigots over through cuisine. It just doesn't work that way, even though at the time I naively tried. The editor was surprised by the piece, and one of the elements of the piece that surprised her was that I so badly wanted for my in-laws to embrace me. I suppose she wanted something that had me poised as a fighter, but this was me showing my vulnerability and it shocked her that I was soft. That's bothersome to me that because of my ancestry, there's this expectation that I'm supposed to be a constant spitfire and that being liked wouldn't matter to me. But why wouldn't being liked matter to me, especially by my partner's family? I think she wanted me to perform a certain kind of Mexican female persona and was disappointed that that didn't emerge in that narrative, and it didn't get published. She ghosted me, so that's an example of the kinds of offers that I got in the aftermath, and then when I didn't perform appropriately, it disappeared or the offers were retracted.

HS: Yes, you've refused to perform for this anger economy, which the publishing industry is intent on generating.

MG: Exactly, and it's exhausting to be angry all the time. I am often very angry, but I need a break, and I do cry. I would joke that people have this idea of me as this woman swinging from vines with a machete in my mouth; that's not who I am. That might be a persona that I occasionally adopt on the page, and when I'm angry I will argue and fight, but I'm not a full-time warrior.

HS: Yes, and the publishing industry doesn't like this other side of you.

MG: Exactly, the fully human me is not welcome.

HS: Thinking about your work both as a writer and editor: to me, all aspects of your work seem grounded in theory. Starting with *Tasteful Rude*, which is the online magazine where you act as Editor-in-Chief, your mission statement is informed by Edward Said and his call for criticism to "think of itself as life enhancing and constitutively opposed to every form of tyranny, domination, abuse and its social goals and non-coercive knowledge producing the interests of human freedom" (*The World* 29). What led you to include this quotation as part of the mission statement for the publication?

MG: When Maria Bustillos invited me to join The Brick House Cooperative and told me that I could be the Editor-in-Chief of a publication and that the publication could have any focus that I wanted, I immediately knew that I wanted cultural criticism to be the driving force of the publication. I enjoy criticism and I've always enjoyed criticism. The experience of publishing the *American Dirt* essay and my involvement in the social movement that emerged coincidentally with the publication of that essay allowed me to see the impact of cultural criticism in real time. It solidified for me the significance of criticism to my approach to publishing, my approach to arts and literature, but also my approach to life. I think we ought to have a critical approach to life. I wanted readers to know exactly what they were getting themselves into, and I adopted that bit of his thinking as our guiding light for the magazine and to serve as like my guiding light, so that I would not forget that this is what we do here. Everything we publish ought to be steered by this idea. I read quite a bit of theory. I spend quite a bit of my time reading theory. I have not been reading as much philosophy lately, but I do spend quite a bit of time reading philosophy as well.

HS: Can I ask, are there three or four foundational theoretical texts for you?

MG: Over the last several years, my consciousness has shifted, and I have come to embrace the global abolitionist movement. In terms of that political and intellectual shift that has happened, the theorists and the thinkers who have had a hand in that change include the historian of social movements Robin D. G. Kelley, the political theorist and activist Cedric J. Robinson, the prison scholar and abolitionist Ruth Wilson Gilmore, and the organizer, educator, and curator Mariame Kaba. Those are some of the thinkers whose work has altered my thinking and as a result altered my activism as well.

HS: I also wanted to know more about Said's idea of "non-coercive knowledge" (*The World* 29). What does non-coercive knowledge mean to you, and why is it important?

MG: It's much easier for most of us to identify how overt violence structures the social order, whereas coercion works invisibly and insidiously, and it works in every aspect of our lives to maintain the social order. I think, also, that quite often the state is involved in coercive knowledge production. I'll give an example of coercive knowledge production: a publicist working on behalf of the local Police Department releases a statement regarding an incident of harm, and a local reporter who has a crime beat receives the press release and uncritically paraphrases the information that she was given by the police, which is propaganda. The reporter understands that, if she were to be critical of this propagandistic artifact that she has received, the police would cease to communicate with her. That's coercive.

HS: Yes, they would see her as hostile.

MG: Exactly. What would reporting look like if we were to hold po- lice accountable? It means that we need to look at the coercive techniques that are used to maintain the US police state. For example, we published a piece around the time of the [Covid19] uprisings about a woman who was operating a restaurant in the neighborhood where I live, who was in defiance of mask mandates. She was being treated very generously by the police. The reporter who worked on this piece wanted to explore why she was receiving this treatment, but rather than appealing to the police for their answer, she spoke to people in the community who had had police interactions and worked with those individuals so that they would know that they were safe speaking to her. That is an example of non-coercive knowledge production. What are some of your theoretical touchstones? I'm curious.

HS: I've been guided in the last year or so by Charles W. Mills and ideas of the racial contract and epistemologies of ignorance. I'm very interested in structures of ignorance, which are similar, I suppose, to ideas of coercive knowledge—or what the state wants its citizens to know and what they do not, and how knowledge is produced. What do we structurally not know and then have to seek out—and takes a lot of effort to seek out?

I also wanted to ask you about your thoughts on "cancel culture." In *Letter to a Bigot: Dead but Not Forgotten* (2020), at the end of your open letter to George Hobbs, a former mayor of your hometown Santa Maria, you anticipate reactions from your imagined readers to your writing. You imagine the reader accusing you of making a call for cancelling Hobbs, and as you anticipate that, you write, "you cannot cancel the dead. What I'm doing is shaping public memory" (*Letter to a Bigot* 21). This is a statement about power and how knowledge is made, and it pushes back succinctly against certain framings of cancel culture. What are your thoughts about cancel culture?

MG: I think that it's incredibly silly. I try to ignore a lot of the spectacle surrounding the manufactured controversy of cancel culture. It's a media manufactured controversy that in some regards exists in order to shield mainstream media, because if media can then allege cancellation, the media doesn't have to scrutinize how it's complicit in maintaining a social order. I see the scandal of cancel culture as the following: it involves a group of dominant actors who hold elite positions who are unaccustomed to being publicly critiqued, not necessarily held accountable, simply critiqued in public, and to be critiqued in public is so shocking to them that it is framed as an attack and an existential threat. In the same way that a man who is attached to his patriarchal ego feels that any sort of wrong look from a woman has fractured that ego. Now he must punch that woman in the face to heal that fracture. That's how I perceive the cohort of individuals who claim "cancel culture."

HS: You have talked about your relationship with theory even in your everyday life already. In your work, particularly, you are often described as "exploding" or "bending" genre; that's an aspect that people stress in your work and in *Mean* especially—its genre-bending nature. Thinking about genre categories, then, do you consider *Mean* to be autotheoretical, maybe even autofictional?

MG: I think that autotheory fits *Mean* as a descriptor. I don't think that autofiction fits *Mean* as a descriptor because there's nothing fictional there. I think that the reason why sometimes someone might want to describe it as autofiction is due to the surreal qualities to some of the sections as well as the presence of the ghost. But what I tell people is that the ghost is not a metaphor. That ghost is not a metaphor. I belong to a culture where we talk to ghosts. Ghosts are part of our day-to-day lives. The dead are with me in this room right now. You can't see them, but they're here. I think that a misunderstanding of my cultural context might be why some folks want to lean toward fiction, especially because of the presence of the supernatural in my work, but to me, there's really not a distinction between the supernatural and the natural—they're the same.

HS: How involved were you in the process of categorizing *Mean*? On the back of my copy, the first line of the blurb calls the book, "true crime, memoir and ghost story." Were you involved in that process of categorizing the text?

MG: No, I don't think that I was. I don't recall having been asked, but I may have been and I'm forgetting it. *Mean* was a really difficult book to bring to publication, because for part of the time that I was working on and so there are parts of that ordeal that I don't remember very well because I would repress memories in order to be able to endure the day-to-day violence and threats that I was being subjected to. So, I don't have a distinct memory of being invited to collaborate on the categorization. I also think that there's a mechanism by which the US Library of Congress categorizes works and I'm not sure how that mechanism functions. I do appreciate the categorization as "true crime" because this is such an atypical work of true crime and as a result of that the book complicates the genre. One of the ways that it complicates the genre is that it is not a piece of propaganda; so much true crime fetishizes the role of law enforcement in upholding justice. Law enforcement only plays a marginal role in *Mean,* and they come to nobody's salvation. They are cold, distant figures interested in securing a prosecution for the sake of re-election, because we elect our prosecutors in the United States. When you campaign, you have to campaign based upon your prosecutions, and so I and the other women who survived

what Tommy Martinez had done were part and parcel of that re-election push. I don't glorify the police at all in that work, and that's what makes it stand apart from a lot of other true crime works.

HS: Do you read true crime? Would you call yourself a true crime fan?

MG: Not at all, no. I used to consume a lot of true crime, and I reflected on why I had such a craving for this material, both on screen and on the page. I would read true crime paperbacks, and I would also consume true crime programming on TV. I think that my taste for it developed as a result of the incredibly violent trauma that I've experienced and the absence of validation in my life. Often when I share with folks what I've experienced, there is horror, and my audience, even if it's an audience of one, they will become distraught. In some cases, I have had to comfort people who I have told my story to. That's really ugly. That's a very ugly situation to put a survivor in, to tell the survivor that what they survived is too much. Well, was it too much? It wasn't too much for me. I'm still here. How is you being exposed to a narrative about it too much? I think what happened is that I subconsciously realized that if I cannot get that validation in my day-to-day life from another human being, through my social interactions, then I can get it through an interaction with this genre called true crime where at the very least I can see what happened to me reflected, and as the audience, we're not looking away. As the audience of true crime, we're looking at it. Because, like I said, people want to look away, people want me to be quiet, people want me to change the subject. People even want me to comfort them. But true crime offered validation to me. It let me sit with it. But then I was able to find a trauma-informed therapist whose work primarily focuses on healing sexual assault and domestic violence survivors. Once I began working with her, my taste for true crime vanished.

HS: I find that fascinating, and I think those sentiments could resonate with many true crime readers.

MG: True crime is for women because women are the primary consumers and the primary targets of gender-based violence. People by and large do not want to hear us describe what I call a lifetime worth of misogynist crime committed against us. If we can't receive that validation in our social circles, well, we can turn on the TV and watch a true crime programme where we see ourselves. We don't see resolution, but at the very least we see ourselves.

HS: Yes, true crime is proof; it is a very imperfect archive of gender-based violence happening in the world.

MG: Yes, exactly.

HS: That idea of having to comfort your audience too, it's a big theme in your work, and recalls what Sara Ahmed refers to as the "cultural politics of emotions." I'm thinking of the crying white girls you portray in *Mean* and the power of their tears. After having taunted you with racial slurs in the playground, they cry in the classroom in front of your teacher, and the upshot is that you were forced to comfort the girls, to absolve their bad feelings. And then, there's what you just mentioned about people who find a story about what happened to you to be "too much." Do you think that other people's uncomfortableness is a strategy that they have unconsciously learned to silence people?

MG: I do think that people weaponize their discomfort. People will weaponize sadness. People will weaponize discomfort. People could weaponize any human emotion or any mood state. I think that discomfort is one of those mood states. I think, for example, about misogynist responses to menstruation: "Oh, it's disgusting!" "Oh, that needs to be hidden!" "Oh, I can't eat my lunch now that I know that this person over here is bleeding." It is coercive. Discomfort is being used as a weapon in those cases, and I think people learn very early how to how to deploy a mood state as a shield.

HS: Yes, so those emotions are acting in broader service to the order or structure of society. As you show in *Mean*, the tears of those white girls are serving racial hierarchies in the United States.

MG: And they were nine! They already knew how to do this. They were nine years old! They were so annoying.

HS: Another question I want to ask concerns the serial sexual rapist as a figure in narrative. Your writing, for me, disrupts the typically fantastical "bad apple" figure of the psychopathic rapist. So, the serial killer or the psychopath is usually depicted as not reflecting the society they live in in any way. But your work draws explicit connections, especially in *Letter to a Bigot*, between serially murderous individuals and the serially murderous culture of the USA. I've seen you deploy that term "psychopath" and "serial killer," which are loaded terms, in interestingly unconventional ways. Is that something you consciously set out to do in writing *Mean*?

MG: Yes, totally. So, I came of age during the 1980s and during that time the propagandistic indoctrination that children received primarily at school was of a figure who was out to destroy us: the stranger. The stranger was depicted as a shadow, you couldn't actually see the stranger. So, there's automatically a patina of xenophobia. And also, the shadow is what color? A shadow is dark, and the shadow is out there, and the shadow is unfamiliar. And the shadow is here to do only one thing: to harm us. That "us," we are inside the house, and the danger is always outside of the house. Inside of the house we are "safe." When, in actuality, stranger assault is the rarest form of assault. The person likeliest to kill you is not just somebody you know, but probably somebody who has told you at least once that they love you. I like to joke that we don't need to lecture girls about potentially being raped while they walk home. We need to lecture them about being raped on their wedding night because that's who is likeliest to commit serial sexual assault: your intimate partner.

When I did experience a stranger assault [it was] perpetrated by a man whose violence escalated, who then did violently take somebody's life and then did it again but was interrupted in the process of trying to take this woman. Because I have this connection to this series of harms, I can say that I was assaulted by somebody who we can term a "budding serial killer"' in true crime speak, and that makes me a unique sort of victim. However, that's not the only man who has raped me, that's not the only man who has sexually assaulted me. Every other man who has sexually assaulted me has been a man I've known, and the most horrifying experiences that I've had to endure were the experiences I've had with the people that I've known. And I tell people about what I've been through, about the violence that has been perpetrated by people that I know as well as the sexual assault by a budding serial killer and I tell people, "You know which is worse? Getting raped by a serial killer was nothing compared to getting raped by someone you know". That is kind of at the crux of my next collection. I went through the thing that everybody says is the most horrifying thing. And guess what, it wasn't!

I'm interested in tricking people into thinking that they are entering traditional storytelling, and a traditional story, and that it is going to be told using the traditional tropes that true crime writers rely on. Then, slowly, I lead the reader into a sociological story without them realizing that I'm engaged in sociological stories. I wrap it up in something else because you have to trick them. You have to trick the reader into accepting this kind of narrative because the reader is trained to reject sociological storytelling because it's unpopular and it's typically done in this very heavy-handed kind of way as opposed to this chatty sort of way.

HS: I find overt sociological writing often to be very "tell" rather than "show."

MG: The way that I approach the page is like this: there was a group of girls—and I described them in *Mean*—that I hung out with when I was in high school, and I thought they were the smartest, funniest, bitchest girls in the world. When I got to school my goal was to impress these girls and to get them to laugh. Everything that I write is still for those girls. If I know that I can't keep that core friend group riveted through this prose, then the prose is not good. That is still how I approach storytelling. Maybe the ideas are more sophisticated, but the style is still meant to be accessible enough for a seventeen-year-old girl to be like, "oh my god, I gotta go tell my friend!"

HS: One of the other things you appear to be doing, when you're unsettling that serial killer figure, the traditional rape narrative, and the received wisdom about rape, is innovating at the level of language and imagery. In *Mean*, you depict an ensemble of rapists, and you describe them in a manner that is unlike many other narratives about serial sexual violence. This is particularly stark in your use of animal imagery. Typically, predatory figures such as rapists are portrayed as powerful and intimidating animals such as wolves. However, in your memoir you

describe one rapist as a mole which is not a particularly frightening animal. The act of bringing a mole to the page, and to women's writing about the serial killer, is striking. When you were creating the mole image and portraying what you describe in *Mean* as your "avant-garde molestation" to describe peer- on-peer sexual violence, how did you come to choose these words and images (32)? And in representing your experience of peer-on-peer rape at school, did you explicitly not want to use the term "rape"?

MG: I wanted to push myself to write unlike specific authors who have come to be associated with what I call the "rape canon." I had read Maggie Nelson's work and I had read Alice Sebold's work. I want to be the anti-Maggie, the anti-Alice. What would these women not do? And I was like... oh, well now that I realize that's the voice that I want to inhabit, this is really easy now being the anti-Alice or the anti-Maggie because I can't imagine a mole burrowing through their rape narratives. The other element that I wanted to bring to prose about trauma was surreal humor. Because surreal humor is what has enabled me to survive and endure what has happened. We are taught that humor is antithetical to telling this type of story, because of its content, because of the substance. But I think that because of the content we should bring more humor, not just no humor, but more humor than prose about less serious topics. So, I was like how can I maximize the humor in a way that is really going to confound the reader? I pushed myself to be as strange and surreal as possible, to play with these animals and these ideas that some might argue have no place in a rape memoir and especially not the self-deprecating humor in a rape memoir.

Part of the reason that I was wedded to bringing humor to the piece even, and I know that some of the humor does punch down, but some of the reason that I was so dedicated to doing that... Well, there are two reasons. It's twofold. One, I am annoyed by the insistence that those of us who write about trauma, especially our lived experiences of it, have to bring gravitas to it because if those of us who have survived trauma, and especially the trauma of rape are going to reassert our autonomy then part of that autonomy is here too, in our voice. So, don't tell me how to talk. Don't tell me how to write, as a survivor. If I want to bring humor into my prose, I'll do it. Don't tell me that that this doesn't help me to heal. Don't tell me that's disrespectful. It is my experience. I'm going to write however I want to.

Secondly, I think that the humor provides assistance to the reader in being able to consume stories that would otherwise be very difficult to grapple with. Then the other thing that we can do with that humor is make fun of the rapist. They're the figure that deserves to be the biggest punchline. It was a very conscious decision to bring humor and to bring a sort of strange and surreal language to that prose, because for me, very often the experience of trauma is surreal. I feel like I'm in a Salvador Dali painting and I'm like, "Is this real? Is this really happening again? Why are the clocks melting?" You know what I mean?

HS: When I was reading *Mean*, I felt that the humor was appropriate. I felt the grotesqueness was appropriate, the coarseness too. You include images of briny bubbly vaginas giving your prose a grotesque proximity to the body. It felt right for many reasons—this act of not looking away, which you mentioned earlier. In addition, humor is, I think, a kind of power.

MG: It's aggression too, I think most humor involves an act of aggression because a person who is using humor demands attention.

HS: I know elsewhere you've talked about humor as self-defence. So, there's humor as self-defence too. In terms of the humor in *Mean*, before we end, I wanted to know whether you have been influenced by standup comedy. The devices and effects that standup as a form produces seem to run through *Mean*. Would you say that is accurate?

MG: Yeah, very much so. *Mean* is influenced by Wittgenstein, because of his comment that a great work of philosophy could be constructed through jokes (Malcolm, *Ludwig Wittgenstein* 28-29).[5] I was like, "Oh, I'm going to try that through *Mean* and I could fail, but I'm going to fail spectacularly!" That Wittgensteinian commitment to humor was at the back of my mind as I was writing. What else? I was married to a woman for sixteen years and during the last five or six years of our relationship she had decided that she wanted to become a comedian. She was involved in the Southern California standup circuit. I would go to shows to watch her, and I was exposed

to a lot of standups. I became interested in standup as a result of her interest. As a result of that interest, I read memoirs and biographies of standups. One of the memoirs that I read was actor and comic Steve Martin's. Steve Martin also brings his philosophical education to humor, and he uses logic to build jokes in the same way that Lewis Carroll would make these surreal statements using logical inversions. I took what I learned from figures like Steve Martin who were applying logic lessons to joke construction and then I used those to structure sentences and paragraphs in *Mean*. Quite a bit of the logical play is quite deliberate, and it's rooted in the teachings of standup comics who have philosophical training.

HS: The humor has very productive effects too. The logic-based humor in *Mean* seems to produce opportunities for readers to see their own complicity in, say, rape culture. You see yourself being made fun of and it's a much more comfortable location through which you might think, "Oh, I do that!" without instead eliciting a more negative defensiveness. I think that's one of the things that humor can do. On that note, I want to thank you for your time and your generous answers.

MG: Thank you, it was my pleasure.

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[1] For an analysis of *American Dirt*, see Marini.
[2] See Gurba, "Beyond American Dirt" and "Why I Use Humor."
[3] For further information about Sister Spit, see https://www.radarproductions.org/tour.html.

[4] Flatiron Books cancelled the publicity tour of *American Dirt* in the USA. In a statement, the publishers mobilized racial imagery, citing "concerns about safety" and asserting, "'we believe there exists real peril to their safety" (Miller).

[5] American philosopher Norman Malcolm, a friend and former student of the philosopher, asserts that "Wittgenstein once said that a serious and good philosophical book could be written that would consist entirely of jokes (without being facetious)" (Malcolm 28-29).