

BOOK REVIEW

Memory Death: Myriam Gurba's Mosaic of Truth and Trauma

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Mean by Myriam Gurba. Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2017.
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We are invited into the mind of Myriam Gurba as she shares, at her discretion, her coming to queerness and her embodied trauma as a sexual assault survivor. *Mean* is published by Coffee House Press, a nonprofit publisher dedicated to expanding the definition of “literature.” Following her 2015 short story anthology *Painting their Portraits in Winter: Stories*, Gurba yet again carves out her own genre-bending niche, setting a place at the Chicana literary table alongside Sandra Cisneros. As an extension of *Painting their Portraits*, Gurba creates wrinkles within the folds of contemporary literature. We are witnesses to her glee, anger, and meanness as she does so. Gurba writes about her experiences battling racism from her peers and teachers in public and private schools as she exhibits feminist tendencies at an early age. We join her quest for sainthood through her preferred medium of self-expression: art. Throughout *Mean*, we become one of Gurba’s watchful ghosts from the dedication (“For the restless. But not the young.”) to the ga(s)ping finale. *Mean* comes to us at a time when violence against women, LGBT, Latinas/os/xs and people of color is on the rise and necessitates critical attention from all arenas of knowledge production.

Writing in metaphors, comparing perceptions of social constructs (such as time), and summoning Guadalupe, are just a few examples of how Gurba

crafts her identity as an artist and Chicana. Gurba notes the Chicana bind throughout her work: she wishes to emulate La Virgen through her female body, but La Virgen cannot protect her from becoming a subject of male violence. Achieving sainthood, according to Gurba, comes by becoming a “dead and wet feminist” (87). In the chapter “Exquisite Corpse,” a human body made up of text fills the page to show that “rape cuts everything into bits and pieces” (114). Gurba is recreating the body of Sophia, the Mexican girl who is raped and killed by the same man who sexually assaulted Gurba. Sophia is put back together using text from court documents, although her own truth is left unspoken. Gurba uses the literary technique of a found poem or the deletion and addition of phrases from documents. Court documents that notated Sophia’s death become her living body. Gurba produces more than just a story about sexual violence; she shows the power of solidarity and memory between women of color—an attempt to honor Sophia’s life.

To Gurba, being a young girl is an invitation for violence. In the chapter “Señorita,” a boy’s wandering fingers and a teacher as a witness strip Gurba’s faith in calling out for help as she is molested in the classroom. We resonate with Gurba when she states: “I’m mean, but I’ve never been so mean that I’ve ever raped anybody” (109). Gurba inhabits her self-named, transnational identity as we move with her from nursery school to the University of California-Berkeley. As a Molak girl (Mexican Polack), growing up in Santa Maria, California, Gurba breathes truth into her identity by speaking to her heritage. The lives and deaths of her abuelita and great-great-grandfather Magdaleno Escobar culminate into her interests in art and history. She slips into multiple roles as a student, daughter, and friend while perforating the child-like notion that people exist in similar circumstances. But Gurba makes this Chicana memoir special by sidelining performativity in each role she takes. Her narrative voice is consistently jarring, facetious, and mean. In the chapter

“Judas and Icarus,” Gurba demonstrates a developing feminist consciousness when she dares a group of boys to jump from the top of a fence to give their “sex an insurmountable initiation” (15) into her third grade girls club.

Fast forward to her time at UC Berkeley: Gurba solidifies her feminist consciousness as she develops queer growing pains. While white professors and TAs crumple her GPA, she is devastated to discover that white girls are her type. Gurba’s story is relentlessly honest and fills the uncomfortable silences and noises queer and women of color experience in predominantly white spaces. *Mean* shows that we need to call out racists, rapists, and social injustices. By doing so, we affirm our belonging in places that were not constructed for us. We understand when Gurba writes, “White is so hard to keep clean” (65)—the academy, industry, and media will keep pushing Latina/o/x, women, and queer of color folks out into the periphery of significance, so we must push back.

