Why Myriam Gurba Doesn't Believe That Confessional Art-Making is Inherently Cathartic

The author of Creep: Accusations and Confessions shares the familial roots of her irreverence, the surprising response to her viral critique of the book, American Dirt, and the work she did in the aftermath of an abusive relationship to make herself whole.

Alicia Menendez: Myriam Gurba's first book, Mean, was a true crime memoir and ghost story, detailing Myriam's own coming of age as a queer Chicana and surviving sexual violence among other traumas. The assumption Myriam found was that the confessional art she was making must be inherently cathartic. To Myriam, it was anything but. Her newest book, Creep, Accusations and Confessions, is a sort of response to that assumption. An informal sociology of creeps and how we challenge them.

Myriam and I talk about life after leaving an abusive relationship, the complicated blowback to her viral critique of the book American Dirt, and the tension between wanting to be well-liked and being, well, a little mean.

Myriam, thank you so much for doing this.

Myriam Gurba: My pleasure. Thank you so much for inviting me.

Menendez: One of the ways your first book, Mean, is often described was like a queer, Chicana coming of age story. You and I are about the same age. There were not a lot of Latina stories, there were not a lot of Chicana stories, there were not a lot of queer stories, period.

Then you start layering those identities on top of each other, and it really didn't feel like they exist. So I wonder if you recognize the first time that you saw yourself reflected back to you in literature?

Gurba: I have never seen my entire self reflected back in literature. I've seen fragments of myself. I wrote about one of these moments in Creep, in the essay that I have that is critical of Joan Didion. So when I was a senior in high school, we took the AP literature exam. And the booklet contains excerpts from various works, and then the students analyze them. And I remember coming across an excerpt by Joan Didion that pulled from Los Angeles notebook. And in that same test booklet was an excerpt from Sandra Cisneros's The House On Mango Street. And I was flabbergasted. Because here I had a piece of prose that articulated the interiority of a Chicana having a birthday. And then several pages later, I have a description of California weather that I'm very intimate with. And so it's in moments like that that I find fragments of myself, but seldom do I find those fragments fused.

Which is why, in part, I wrote Mean. Was to take all those pieces and put them together. Because I know that there are so many readers like myself who are interested in seeing their lives, and not just their lives, but their communities reflected on the page. And so that was part of my motivation in writing Mean.

Menendez: You write Mean, and one of the outgrowths of it is this assumption on the part of readers and voyeurs that somehow doing art that is self-revealing and self-excavating must in some way be healing or cathartic.
Which is very strange to me, because I would not make that assumption at all. It seems like a very obviously faulty assumption if you have ever tried to excavate your personal pain. And in that way, Creep sort of becomes the retort-

Gurba: Yes.

Menendez: To that faulty assumption. Tell me how.

Gurba: So when I wrote Mean and was doing press for it, a question that I was frequently asked, and it was almost thrown out in a rhetorical tone was, "Wasn't the experience of writing this book cathartic?"

And to me that seemed to imply that whomever was asking the question has this belief that the artist, in particular the female artist or writer, is sort of like this vessel. And if you tap us with a spigot, you can empty us of pain. The pain then flows onto the page, and then it becomes somebody else's to consume.
And that's not at all what art making is. And that also continues to stereotype women as these vessels that hold, but that don't necessarily create. Or these vessels for transference, or exchange.

And so I was very bothered by that line of questioning. And what I want for my readers to know is that the conditions under which I wrote my memoir, Mean, were really brutal conditions. I survived three years of domestic violence while I was working on the book, and also experienced a retraumatization while I was working on the book because I had to do research into certain events that had occurred in the nineties. And so the excavation of that material was traumatic for me.

So ultimately, unless you know the conditions under which a work of art was created, don't assume that they were liberatory conditions.

Menendez: One of the things that I was struck by as I was reading Creep is, you approach a lot of heavy, sensitive topics without the sentimentality that I think a lot of readers come to expect women to write about their pain with. And I, too, share that deep sense of irreverence, especially when it is meant to upend expectation.
I struggle myself, though, with when that irreverence and that humor is really me existing in my survival mechanism, and is more of a shield. And when it is actually a device that serves me.

And I wondered if you struggled at all with that tension. And how, as someone who it would seem to me your aim is to be visceral, and raw, and to cut right to the nerve, how you know when you were doing that, and when the humor or the irreverence ... If you ever caught yourself doing it as a means of self-protection?

Gurba: I think it's usually a means of self-protection. We were talking earlier about my family and the legacy of storytelling. In my family, I was also socialized to cope

with difficulty through humor. And so I cultivated that skill, and I think that that's actually a very queer skill. To deploy camp, right? Susan Sontag wrote iconic essay about that phenomenon, about that sort of queer dabbling or queer commitment to camp. And so I think that it's very present in my work.
I also think that it's very Mexican, to take violence and to take deaths, and to turn those phenomenon into intellectual play things. I think that I'm working within a tradition when I do that, but it is not an Anglo tradition or a US tradition. And so for that reason, in a US context, it seems irreverent. But I think in other cultural contexts it would seem more normalized.

Menendez: You mentioned Joan Didion. There's a very thoughtful critique of your own grandfather in Creep. I wonder, do you have any sacred cows? Is there's anything or anyone you would not write about?

Gurba: No. Because I don't believe in revering people. I think that we have to rigorously critique those that we admire, and we have to rigorously critique ourselves.

Menendez: How do you build room into that critique for this sort of conversation about calling people out versus calling people in? Have you ever had that type of critique where it led ultimately to growth, to evolution, to change on the part of the person who you felt needed to be called out?

Gurba: You mentioned the essay that I wrote about my grandfather, which is titled Mitote. And I have described it as an anti-tribute. So it is both tribute and scold. And I open it by saying that one of the things that I do is I give my idols flowers before I knock them off their pedestals.

So I think that it's possible to do both. I think that you can love aggressively. And in the case of my grandfather, I feel like I engaged in a call in with him through that essay, although he's deceased. And I engage in a lot of ancestral veneration as part of my personal spiritual practice.

And my grandfather is a person whose complexity is interesting to me. Because on the one hand, he is responsible for my interest in Mexican literature. And he's responsible for so much of who I have become as an artist. But he was also a misogynist who believed that I could not achieve any success, or express any talent as a writer because of the gender that I was born into.

And so in a sense, the essay Mitote is a spiritual call in for my grandfather. What I did when I was working on that essay was, I prayed a lot at my altar with him. And made sort of these petitions and appeals to him.

Where I essentially said, "Look, grandfather, you were an incredibly destructive force for the women in your family, and the girls in your family. And you now as a person who dwells in the spirit world, have an opportunity to intervene on our behalf and to make right what you got wrong when you were incarnate. So will you walk with me and journey with me as I draft this essay where I hold you accountable? I invite you to do that." And I believe that he did.

Menendez: Let's talk about the critique that you are probably best known for, and I promise not to linger here very long because I think a lot of our listeners will be familiar with your critique of Jeanine Cummings's American Dirt.

For those of you who were not, what you missed is that it was a book about Mexican migrants who was written by someone who had neither the experience of being Mexican, nor the experience of being a migrant. And in the opinion of many, including Myriam, It wasn't well done and to some extent lean into pain and trauma and relied on that instead.

My question for you, Myriam, is I think that is one of those experiences that we all kind of got to be voyeurs of. We watched that unfold, and I think oftentimes the experience of going through it is different than what it looks like on the outside. And so I'm curious, having had that light shine very bright on you in a very strange way, what you think is most misunderstood about that period of time?

Gurba: That media moment was really strange. And I feel like I was cast as this paradoxical villain by certain entities in media. I was simultaneously this pied piper who led these gullible Latinas to oppose a liberal industry that was attempting to represent them through American Dirt. That those who sort of embraced the message of the essay could not think for themselves, and were incredibly gullible. And then there was this other story that developed that ascribed this incredible amount of power to me. Where I had single-handedly destroyed publishing for white people. And white people, in particular white men, could no longer publish because I'm like this literary tola with a machete who has come into the publishing world and cut off people's hands.

There was just this bizarre paradox of powerlessness and utter sort of authoritarian despotism that was ascribed to me. And the reality is that I was a public high school teacher with about a thousand dollars in my bank account, and three independent books for which I had not made more than $5,000.

So that was the truth of the matter. And I would just laugh because I would think, if I had the power to bring the publishing industry to its knees the way that I was described, I would not be using it in the way that people are describing me as using it. If I had that power, don't you think I would've used that power in order to build myself up? It was really strange.

It reminded me of what some people jokingly refer to as Schrodinger's Mexican Immigrant. So we're simultaneously stealing all the jobs, but we're too lazy to work. You know what I mean? It was just this bizarre paradox where it's like, who are we? Because we're certainly not the paradoxes that the media presents us as.

Menendez: It's so wild.

I do, I find you interesting. Because, forgive me, I'm going to paraphrase you here. I believe it's in Mean that you write, "I want to be a likable narrator, but I'm also a little mean."

Which, as someone who has written an entire book about likability and the expectation that women and girls not only should be likable, but should care about likability, I am always drawn to women who I perceive as not giving a damn. Because I don't know what that experience is, and so it is to me, super interesting. Do you care about being liked?

Gurba: I do care about being liked. I think most people do. But I don't care so much that I'm going to become an unprincipled person. So if adhering to my principles and my moral compass is going to result in dislike, then I'm happy to be disliked. I don't have any problem with that, under those circumstances.

And the reason that I wrote that line had more to do with the way that survivors and victims of gender-based violence are represented. Those of us who are presented or represented as these sort of angelic figures are given much more compassion than those of us who are complex. And who are human, essentially.

Menendez: Right. This idea that we see in multiple forms of a perfect victim.

Gurba: Exactly.

Menendez: And only a perfect victim being worthy of empathy. You said recently, and I wanted to tease this out, "There are conditions under which I'm living that are very good, that I did not think were achievable."

Gurba: Yeah.

Menendez: What is that, and what did that require?

Gurba: I'm a survivor of domestic violence. I don't like the term domestic violence, because it implies that the violence is contained within the space called home. But domestic violence travels everywhere with you when you are in its clutches.
But when I was trapped, and I refer to that period of my life as a form of captivity, I didn't know that I would be able to escape it. And I came to fear for my life, and because I was so terrified and so frightened that my life was going to be taken, I would sometimes wonder if freedom was possible.

And I became so accustomed to living under essentially what was a patriarchal, authoritarian regime in my household that the idea of living freely, it seemed impossible.

Menendez: I think it's interesting that there was the assumption that writing Mean would have allowed you to heal in some way. And I am curious if not the writing, if not the art as an act of healing, than how it is that you have, I don't know how you would describe it. Heal, come into alignment, reckon with what has happened with you.

Gurba: The work that I have done in order to, I suppose you could say make myself whole again, I'll reach for that cliche, I think it's a good one, is off the page. It's largely off the page. And a lot of it has been spiritual.

As I mentioned earlier, I have a practice of ancestor veneration that I engage in, and I do believe that my ancestors have assisted quite a bit in piecing me back together.

A lot of my recovery has also happened through physical activity. Through hiking, through walking, through being in my body. And I think that those sort of corporeal healing modalities are crucial to those of us who are healing from gender-based violence.

And one of the other techniques that has been incredibly helpful for me has been a culinary therapy. Because when I'm cooking or baking, all I have time for, and all I have energy for, and all I have sort of the mental capacity for, is the recipe.

And one of the foods that was incredibly healing for me to make was tortillas. Making a lot of tortillas, mountains of tortillas. So yes, tortilla therapy was crucial to my recovery.

Menendez: Myriam, thank you so much.

Gurba: Thank you. This was fun, thank you.

Menendez: Thanks for listening. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our producer. Kojin Tashiro is our lead producer. Tren Lightburn mixed this episode.

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