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Second-Generation *Bruja*: Transforming Ancestral Shadows into Spiritual Activism

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Second-Generation *Bruja*:
Transforming Ancestral Shadows into Spiritual Activism

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Communication
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For my abuelita.

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this dissertation is to develop and illustrate a spiritually centered narrative method for transforming disorder into agency and action. I use my own position as a second-generation Hispanic female immigrant to show how training in a spiritual practice that mirrors my ancestral traditions helped me productively move through a sense of displacement, illness, and lack of purpose. My research includes travel to Havana, Cuba, and immersion in a five-week shamanic counseling training program in Tampa, Florida, during which I learned how to narrate my experiences as I engaged in *shamanic journeying*. As I reflect on these experiences, I explore three questions: How can second-generation immigrants 1) overcome family histories of displacement to create a sense of home? 2) engage in self-care practices that promote healing and nourishing relationships? and 3) create healthy identities and a sense of purpose within their communities? Through the process of writing my own story, I move from individual pathology toward communal creativity and tap into the burgeoning activist movement of *bruja feminism*.

INTRODUCTION:

ORIGIN STORY

“She exists in me now, just as I will and already do within my grandchildren. No one ever truly dies. The desires of our hearts make a path. We create legacy with our thoughts and dreams.”
(Harjo, 2012)

Ancestor

The last time I saw my great grandmother, she squeezed my hand as she stared into my face. I was 20 and shy. I forced myself to maintain eye contact through the silence between us. If I couldn't speak my truth, I would at least give her my attention on what I expected would be our final meeting.

She was Elvira Llauro, our family's tiny matriarch. At 96, she had shrunken to 4'9", but she still commanded every space she occupied. I imagined her a luminous royal, her past full of mythic conquests and risky adventures about which I'd never summoned the courage to ask. I wasn't sure she wanted to relive certain parts of her past.

I called my great grandmother *abuelita*¹, because I had never met her daughter. She called me *niña*². I ran my thumb along the tiny bones of her hand. Her skin was so soft. Her eyes were somehow bright, though they were clouded with cataracts.

¹ Grandmother

² Child

And then she said something, but I can't remember the words. Right now, I see her sitting in her little atrium full of plants, her mouth moving, the light making a golden frame, as if she were merely a portrait of herself.

I can't hear a thing. Something tells me the exact words aren't important, anyway.

I know what she is saying.

She is saying goodbye.

--

Elvira was a spirit medium in Santiago de Cuba, where my father was born. She was the person her family turned to for counsel; she conducted séances for her community, connecting people with the loved ones they hadn't properly parted with and providing services in times of spiritual need.

When my father was a kid in Santiago, a neighbor who was said to practice Santería³ looked into his eyes, speaking what he couldn't have known was a spell:

“Que bonitos ojos tienes.”

What pretty eyes you have.

The next morning, he couldn't open his eyes. Over the following weeks, his parents and grandparents took him to every doctor they knew, but none could get his eyes to open. Suspecting black magic was at play, Elvira called on the support of other spirit mediums, known to my father, colloquially, as “the circle of *brujas*⁴.”

³ An Afro-American religion originating in the Caribbean among descendants of West Africa, centered on saint worship and syncretized with Roman Catholicism. Chapter Two provides a review of Santería and other Spiritist traditions in the West, including *Cuban Espiritismo*.

⁴ “Bruja” is the Spanish word for witch. It is pronounced “broo-hah.”

They placed my father in the middle of their circle and chanted prayers to lift the spell of the evil eye, until finally, his eyes opened. He remembers seeing a hazy ring of women towering around him, dressed all in white, his grandmother in the center.

The last séance Elvira ever conducted took place in Brighton Beach, New York. She was trying to contact her daughter Elsie, my father's mother, who died of ovarian cancer at 41. My father was 16, and he sat quietly, sadly, waiting for Elvira to make a connection. He told me she spoke invocations in the voices of her spirit guardians, and as they inhabited her body, she demanded whisky and cigars, neither of which she ever consumed when she was just Elvira.

My father watched as the guardians of Elvira's spirit lost control, allowing a malevolent shadow to attack. He watched her small body tossed by the shadow. He saw her crumple to the floor, as the shadow severed the connection to his mother.

Elvira gave up her practice, and with her death, the ways of the old country were lost.

--

Where do I begin?

It's a question I'm always asking myself, what I wish I'd asked my abuelita before I left her that day in the late spring of 2006. I thought as I pulled away from her home that there was nothing stopping me from doubling back and asking her about her early life and the family's past in pre-revolutionary Cuba. I was finally an adult, after all, and I knew this was my last chance.

I kept driving, propelled by a stronger desire to leave Miami. I was on my way to Gainesville, where I was wrapping up my third year at the University of Florida, which had provided a retreat from the stressors of home. My parents had recently divorced, and as the oldest daughter, I felt an obligation to take on the troubles of my family members. While I was at home, I was forever worrying about their emotional well being and our financial future.

My brothers and I were the only ones in our extended family to pursue higher education. The rest were struggling to support their families in low-paying temporary jobs with no health insurance, and it was difficult for anyone to stay in one place, as the cost of living was always on the rise. Meanwhile, I was the person most turned to for help.

I listened as my parents leveled complaints against each other, helped my brothers and cousins write personal statements for school and job applications, coordinated holiday events, and acted as translator so my family wouldn't get swindled at insurance agencies or car dealerships.

I hadn't yet learned that this sense of responsibility over family members' problems wasn't universal, and that many young people in the U.S. were expected to achieve total independence, to leave home and never return to live with their parents⁵.

Though many Americans experience similar stressors, studies (Browdy de Hernandez, 1996; Cervantes & Castro, 1985; Cervantes, Fisher, Padilla, & Napper, 2016; Cobb, 1976; Cohen & Wills, 1985; Coles, 1967; Griffin & Villavicencio, 1985; Smart & Smart, 1995; Wodarski, 1992) have suggested that Hispanic immigrants to the U.S. deal with a great amount of "acculturative stress," or difficulties related to adapting to a new culture. We are less likely to access mental health resources for social, economic, and cultural reasons (Cabassa, Zayas, & Hensen, 2006), during a time when we need support the most. In addition to the traumatic experiences associated with exile and immigration, the loss of social support in the form of close interpersonal relationships is one of the biggest factors contributing to stress.

When I was a kid, we had been one big unit, getting together on the weekends for barbeques and dance parties, the young ones dancing, the elders lining the walls of the rooms,

⁵ This expectation is changing, as the percentage of young people living at home with their parents is now as high as it was in 1940 (Fry, 2015).

keeping our oral tradition alive with near-mythical stories of the past. By the time I was an adult, my family had fragmented. As we each struggled to provide for ourselves, we became increasingly busy and isolated. The American emphasis on independence, individualism, and emancipation from family was in direct contradiction to our tradition of collectiveness and strong intergenerational ties (Lum, 1986; Smart & Smart, 1995; Wodarski, 1992; Zuniga, 1988).

We began to lose the thread that kept us together. I felt this conflict most acutely as I left home to pursue my higher education. I couldn't help but feel that as I was bettering myself, I was simultaneously turning away from my family.

At 20, I had gotten as far from home as I could manage alone. Though it was a mere 300 miles away, a different world was showing itself to me. I fantasized about leaving the state, about driving west. But I knew it was impractical, that I couldn't afford it, that my family expected me to go back home, put my degree to work, and settle down into family life.

However far I got, I was always carrying them with me. I kept a photo of my abuelita Elvira on my dashboard.

One morning on my way to work, just a few weeks after my last conversation with her, I noticed her photo had grown brittle overnight. Later that day, my father called me to tell me she'd passed. Over the following weeks, I let the image of my grandmother peel away bit by bit. I felt an immeasurable emptiness. I thought I could have salvaged something of our story. I feared that with my abuelita's death, our family history would remain in shadows.

I returned to Miami. I hung two of Elvira's paintings in my apartment as memorials to her. They are images of rural Cuba, little thatch-roofed huts by the water, and in the corners she wrote her nickname: *Birin*.

I ran my finger along the slightly raised letters and imagined the hand that once wrote it. If I waited long enough, I thought the paintings might open up and reveal their wisdom to me, that I might travel back in time and see the world of my ancestors for myself.

--

The word “ancestor” comes from the Latin *antecedere*, the root *ante* meaning “before,” and *cedere* meaning “to go.” The word “descendant” comes from the Latin *descendere*, the root *de* meaning “down,” and *scendere* meaning “to climb” (“Ancestor,” n.d.).

It’s hard to think about time without imagining place. The relationship between time and space is embedded in our very language: our ancestors “went” before; we “climb down” from them. We tame the abstraction of time by placing it *somewhere*.

To me, the past is in the island of Cuba. To visit would be a form of going back in time.

--

Where do I begin?

I did try to ask Elvira once.

When I was about 16 years old, I told her about the shadow I saw standing over my bed some mornings, about how I couldn’t move or scream at those times. I told her that the shadow had thrown me out of my body and that I had floated to the ceiling and thought I was dying. I told her that when I looked down, I saw it had the tail of a snake.

I asked her what I should do. I thought maybe there was some training I could go through, something she had done when she was young and making her first contact with the spirits. I had a fantastical image of her dressed in robes, walking to a ritual site in the Sierra Maestra mountains to become initiated into mediumship, two decades before it would become the breeding ground for the revolutionaries led by Fidel Castro. It was a romantic picture.

There was no mysticism to her answer. She told me that I was sensitive, that few people were, but that I had to learn to harden myself against the things I saw. She told me to pray until they went away, that with time I wouldn't see them anymore. She touched my hands while she said it, as if she were taking the shadow from me. For a while, I stopped imagining the mythical stories about the home country. I stopped seeing the shadow. But it didn't stay away forever.

Shortly after Elvira's death, the shadow returned to me. I saw it in the corners of my room, and no amount of praying would make it leave. It stayed with me as I moved back to Miami, as I began a job at the newspaper, as the recession hit. It stayed with me as I summoned the courage to leave my job and move to Tampa, my version of "driving west."

It stayed with me through an abusive relationship, through a master's program and the beginning of a Ph.D. program. It stayed with me apartment after apartment, relationship after relationship, job after job. It stayed with me as I got sad, as I got sick, as I sought help, as I got better.

It's still with me now. It's why I'm here, writing this.

Ancestral Shadows and the Narrative Inheritance of the "Second Generation"

When I began to think about this project during the early years of my Ph.D. program, I was reading about narrative inheritance, the stories passed on to children by members of their family. Goodall (2005) writes:

What we inherit narratively from our forebears provides us with a framework for understanding our identity through theirs. It helps us see our life grammar and working logic as an extension of, or a rebellion against, the way we story how they lived and thought about things, and it allows us to explain to others where we come from and how we were raised in the continuing context of what it all means. (p. 497)

Stories like the ones about my great grandmother as a practicing medium are among the only bits of inheritance I have, as my family had to leave almost everything material when they left.

We don't own much in the new country; these stories, along with my abuelita's paintings, are the most valuable things I've been handed down. The stories are full of holes and they beg more questions than they answer. The problem, as Goodall (2005) says, is that sometimes the lack of answers makes us inherit a sense of incompleteness.

The oldest generation of Cuban immigrants, many of whom consider themselves "reluctant immigrants" (Cotanda, 2006), are notorious for keeping the details of their exile quiet. They will gather over *cafecito* or a game of dominos and talk politics in general, but rarely have I heard them speak openly about their own escape from Cuba. Maybe the memories are too difficult to recount casually, memories of a time when they were ripped away from home and family. After all, most of them have never been reunited with those they left behind. Or maybe silence continues to be the greatest manifestation of their fear (Arroyo Naranjo, 1997), since they learned early on, when Castro took power, that talking freely was dangerous.

My abuelita was in her 50s when she left Cuba. I try to imagine what that would be like. To have generations and generations of roots in one place, to grow a family and make a name for yourself, to know every person in your neighborhood, to reach the brink of old age -- and then to be torn away from the only place you've ever called home, from your parents, from your brothers and sisters. Forever.

It's no wonder my grandparents and parents rarely offered details of their exile unprompted. Sometimes, the older generations of a family are traumatized into silence (McNay, 2009). The most cited example of this "absent memory" (Fine, 1988, p. 46) is the experience of Holocaust survivors. Second-generation survivors of the Holocaust inherit a sense of the trauma

that preceded them, though the complete narrative is often absent. The term “postmemory” was coined by Marianne Hirsch in the 1990s to describe this relationship that children of survivors of cultural or collective trauma have to their parents’ memories; postmemory most closely characterizes the experience of these second-generation children, which are shaped by events they can never fully understand nor recreate (McNay, 2009, p. 1179).

What has happened and continues to happen in Latin America is nowhere near as acutely horrific as the Holocaust, yet there is a chronic state of poverty and conflict that has resisted memorialization for so long, because there is no clear enemy and no bounded timeframe that might be provided by the declaration of an official war. Moreover, many of the victims of conflict have dispersed throughout the globe as exiles. The struggle to assimilate to their new countries is so pressing that fear still plays a large role in memory work, leading to silences and alternate modes of memory expression (Riaño-Alcalá, 2008).

In my families’ home countries, there has yet to be a widely accepted narrative of what’s happened. The regime in Cuba particularly defies memorialization for the exiles who now predominantly live in South Florida and who remain separated from their extended families and ancestry. The sense of displacement is ongoing, as U.S. policy continues to change the terms of the embargo and travel limitations. The stories between those who stayed and those who left the island have diverged, and the more time that passes, the more different the two become. But what remains and grows stronger is a desire for connection, to go back somehow, to repair what’s been broken. This desire can and has been passed onto subsequent generations.

Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok (1994), a pair of unconventional psychoanalysts, extend the concept of absent memory with their phrase “transgenerational haunting,” the idea that “an unspeakable trauma does not die out with the person who first experienced it. Rather, it

takes on a life of its own, emerging from the spaces where secrets are concealed” (Cho, 2008, p. 6). What emerges in these spaces is sometimes frightening; Ann Ancelyne Schutzenberger (1998), a transgenerational psychoanalyst and author of *The Ancestor Syndrome: Transgenerational Psychotherapy and Hidden Links in the Family Tree*, documents cases in which her patients experienced traumatic memories against their will, memories that she later found not to be their own, but to belong to earlier generations of their family.

The second-generation Hispanic immigrant experience is replete with such intrusions and, as I’ve experienced, sometimes they come in the form of chronic anxiety, nightmares, or hallucinations. These ailments are sometimes shared by siblings, and in fact, my brothers have also reported a shadow in their bedrooms and have been plagued by panic attacks. I have come to call these phenomena *ancestral shadows*, as I reach to my family’s collective past to explain my personal bouts of darkness.

While the concepts of ancestral memory and postmemory emerged in an attempt to describe the mystery of what seems like the transmission of trauma between generations within a family, memory scholars (Abraham & Torok, 1994; Cho, 2008; Cho & Kim, 2005; Fachinger, 2001; Hirsch 1996, 2012; Hoffman, 1990) do not assert that children inherit direct experience⁶, but rather that in the absence of direct communication about the past, other kinds of legacy-making take over. They take on the silence of their parents about their previous lives as if it were their responsibility to give expression to what couldn’t have been expressed before; as a result, they produce alternate modes of expression, like stories full of mythic imagery and magical characters -- or any other mediated images, objects, or affects -- and these are passed down in lieu of complete family narratives (Hirsch 2012).

⁶ Though interestingly, current research in epigenetics continues to amass evidence that memories may actually be passed directly from one generation to the next through genetic information (Klosin et. al, 2017).

When I was born, my great grandmother gave my parents a golden pin with a dangling bead of onyx, a traditional protection against the evil eye. It is an object that speaks truth in the absence of facts. In it is contained many stories, a cultural one about curses and evil practitioners and a more personal one about something terrifying that happened when my father was young. Embedded in that pin is all the fear and hope experienced by the silent generations that came before me, all they wish to teach me and protect me against.

Though my father lived the experience of the evil eye, he was a young boy, and he had to rely on his parents' and grandparents' versions of what happened. The truth is that they didn't know what happened to him. We still don't know, and we will never know. We do know that his family was desperate to get his eyes to open. They tried everything at their disposal and reached for the wisdom of their oral traditions to create a story that got closest to the truth.

What may seem like a fantastical story to us in the global north⁷ is an objective fact to them, inherently the most rational thing they can do; as the anthropologist Richard Shweder (1986) writes, this kind of rationality is just as valid as what we usually consider objective truth:

It is conceivable that the sense of objectivity invested in religious beliefs is not fundamentally different from the sense of objectivity invested in scientific beliefs, and that to describe other peoples' beliefs as religious or supernatural and our own as scientific is merely to disguise a prejudice in favor of our own conception of natural law over theirs. (p. 170)

⁷ I use the "global north-global south" distinction in place of the "east-west" distinction, because the former is more accurate in terms of socioeconomic and political disparity. The global north encompasses all the members of the G8, while the global south corresponds with the Third World and indigenous societies.

Above all, my family's stories function to create a kind of rational inheritance in the absence of a complete family narrative. They help contextualize the experiences of the past into something useful that can be passed on, creating a sense of continuity and offering moral lessons.

There is wisdom in the very DNA of these stories, which, like all mythologies, employ archetypes, or representative symbols, that may be adapted to specific scenarios. The function of these mythologies is to put into words and get as close as possible to what is beyond words, with the aim of illustrating societal values and guiding individual lives. The dialectic between individuality and dependence is always at play in these myths, as the protagonists undergo challenges that help them evolve; this is the basic structure of the hero's journey (Campbell, 1991).

My family's story of the evil eye event loosely follows this structure: Something happens to propel the characters to go on a quest. There are challenges along the way. Through trials, there is a change in paradigm and the clarity that comes with discovering a new way of knowing. There is a closing ritual, an act that leads to the opening of the eyes, to a new day, to the good.

I now see that my own quest to come to terms with my shadow is an iteration of this archetypal journey. As I confront personal trouble, I journey to my ancestral roots for understanding. I write through the chaos, and what emerges is my interpretation of the ancient search for home, health, and purpose. I hope to add my own story to our frayed thread of family histories, a little bead containing a whole universe.

Sacred Stories of the Second-Generation Hispanic Immigrant

How do I center a belief in spirits and *brujas* and magic in a Ph.D. dissertation?

For inspiration and guidance, I have turned to the little that's been written by second-generation immigrants. The second-generation immigrant experience is unique in that there is a

simultaneous consciousness of different realities. Even those who have assimilated successfully to American life hold the secrets of the past in some way. Sometimes, this double awareness is disturbing and difficult to reconcile. “Postgeneration” artists and writers such as second-generation Holocaust survivor Eva Hoffman (1990) have moved away from scholarly theorizing to tap into a more personal representation of postmemory. They seek to *reanimate* the past, rather than appropriate it, creating something uniquely their own (Hirsch, 2012).

Stories built from transgenerational memories may defy a specific cause-effect kind of narrative and include loosely associated elements such as dream narratives, fiction, and poetry, which serve to fill the narrative gaps. Parts of these narratives are presented in what Mikhail Bakhtin calls a “double-voiced discourse” (Fachinger, 2001). That is, most second-generation narratives possess a hybrid voice as a result of the fragmentation of memory and the absence of a complete family narrative. They combine history and imagined events and employ elements of both fiction and nonfiction. These hybridized narratives allow for different realities to exist simultaneously.

Shweder (1986) writes that the “divergent rationality” of different cultures, what appears from the outside to be merely superstition or supernatural belief, is actually a rational enterprise (p. 164). Not every rational process must be a universal one, and though we can’t remove the subject from experience in these kinds of narratives, the narratives are themselves practical, and therefore, rational. “The idea of divergent rationality,” he writes, “helps us see that there may be more than one conceptual reference point from which to construct an objective ethic” (p. 190). It is the aim of most second-generation narratives to construct a new objectivity from the “in-betweenness” of the American immigrant experience.

The most well-known of the small group of second-generation memoirists are Mexican-American, and they use their own hybrid languages to describe their experiences; Richard Rodriguez was among the first to address the “double-voicedness” and in-betweenness of the second-generation immigrant in his autobiography, *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez* (1983). He focuses on the language more than on the events of immigration, since his experience as a second-generation immigrant revolves around learning English and becoming an academic. This status keeps him somewhere in between the worlds of his family and the academy, and he is never fully part of either.

Rodriguez is stricken by a perpetual nostalgia for a world he has never known, the one of his parents, the world of the Spanish language and intimacy and the private self. As I read his memoir, I related to the sense of being in between worlds and recognized the paradox of pursuing the immigrant ideal of becoming educated; while it opened opportunities, it shut me off from my roots, from my spiritual tradition and my sense of belonging to a family unit. To become successful in school and begin a career, I had to move away from my first language and the mythology of my family stories.

Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands* (1999) is about existing between worlds. Her memoir, consisting of essays and poems, is written in a hybrid voice, its very form challenging the concept of “border,” extending it beyond the physical, to psychic, social, and cultural terrains. As a result, she arrives closer to explaining her experience as a second-generation immigrant Chicana. Particularly poignant to me was Anzaldúa’s reference to a specific kind of sensitivity (*la facultad*), the *ability to tap into an emotional depth*:

La facultad is the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface. It is an instant “sensing,” a quick perception

arrived at without conscious reasoning. It is an acute awareness mediated by the part of the psyche that does not speak, that communicates in images and symbols, which are the faces of feelings, that is, behind which feelings reside/hide. The one possessing this sensitivity is excruciatingly alive to the world. Those who are pushed out of the tribe for being different are likely to become more sensitized [...] Those who do not feel psychologically or physically safe in the world are more apt to develop this sense. (p. 60)

Like Rodriguez, Anzaldúa suggests that second-generation immigrants do not fully belong anywhere, but precisely because of their unique position, they possess an important and useful perception of the world. I particularly related to her story, because she also writes about what it is to be a woman in this position, to feel the burden of taking on others' problems; she reframes this burden as a sensitivity, a quiet power that may be wielded to heal rifts in personal identity and to work toward creating art.

Most recently, *A House of My Own* (2015) by Sandra Cisneros reveals the constant striving towards home that is the centerpiece of much second-generation literature, and which factors prominently in my own stories. Of her work, she says, "So often you have to run away from home and visit other homes first before you can clearly see your own" (González, 2015). Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* (1984) was a seminal work for me when I was a kid, as it opened me up to the genre of magic realism, the blending of fact and fantasy that most accurately depicts the feeling of always searching for home.

Though not a second-generation immigrant like Cisneros, Gabriel García Márquez was my biggest influence as a young reader, as he was born close to my mother's hometown in Colombia. His brand of magic realism gave me the tools I needed to express my strange positionality, and I'm sure I'm not the only second-generation immigrant writer to have

benefited from his precedent. García Márquez's autobiography, *Living to Tell the Tale* (2004), is one of the most high-profile examples of the blurring of genres that is so common in the social sciences since the interpretive turn, as writers seek to accommodate "situation[s] at once fluid, plural, uncentered, and ineradicably untidy" (Geertz, 1980, p. 166). Similarly, Ruth Behar, a Cuban American ethnographer, blurs genres in *The Vulnerable Observer* (1997), as she writes academic studies, poetry, memoir, and fiction, honing in on the in-betweenness of the Cuban-American experience.

Works of blurred genres such as these -- ones that combines art and science, truth and fiction, and memory and imagination -- live up to the task of representing the experience of living between paradigms, as many second-generation immigrants do. Memoir is the perfect home for second-generation immigrant writers, as they have a special relationship with memory; they "remember" things that they have never experienced, challenging the notion of events as a "mere sequence" (Carr, 1986) existing outside of the self. This is the nature of all memory work, as "remembering" refers to content that is no longer part of the present; it is not a representation, then, but it is *representative* of the past, implying "a present act of recollection that is temporally distinct from the time which is recollected" (Kerby, 1991, p. 24).

For me, the act of remembering is an act of *returning to the imaginary worlds of the stories that have been passed down to me by my family* and by the second-generation writers who came before me. I add to these stories, run lines between them, and aim to create something bigger than myself. In this way, I lay the groundwork for my own legacy, a moral from my life that may extend into the future. I might one day pass this on, a kind of narrative heirloom to the next generations.

In Latin American tradition, memory and legacy is preserved predominantly through oral

history; archetypal characters and myths are manifestations of everything that has come before, while also reflecting and constituting the present. Crites (2001) says that myths and legends are communal, moving forms that “inform people’s sense of the story of which their own lives are a part” (p. 31). He calls these “sacred stories” because the sense of self and the world is created through them with each retelling. These sacred stories are imaginative entry points to memory, and they are pivotal to creating a sense of self.

The most influential sacred story to me is Clarissa Pinkola Estés’s *Women Who Run With Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype* (1996). Pinkola Estés is a Jungian analyst and second-generation immigrant. In her work of fiction, she calls on the archetypal power of the intuitive female. She uses fairy tales and folklore to tap into both the primitive powers of the female and her devotion to community. Pinkola Estés defines wildness not as “uncontrolled behavior but a kind of savage creativity, the instinctual ability to know what tool to use and when to use it” (Johnson, 1993). As I read her words, I was reminded of my abuelita, who in times of crisis called on her primordial powers and on the support of her community.

This is the absence that I felt the most when I began this project, the source of power that I perceived had closed with Elvira’s death. I yearned to tap into her knowledge and to belong to my own community of spiritual practitioners. I wanted to turn all that was shadowy inside and hovering over me into a path leading to home, well-being, and meaning.

I wanted to create my own sacred story.

Parts of the Dissertation

Where do I begin?

Now I see that was a moot question all along.

The more productive questions are:

1. How do I overcome a history of displacement to create a sense of home?
2. How do I engage in self-care practices that promote healing and nourishing relationships?
3. How do I create a healthy identity and a sense of purpose within my community?

These are the questions propelling this dissertation, which sprung from a need to make meaning of the childhood shadow and to reconnect to the homeland of my exiled family. The aim of my work is to develop and illustrate a spiritually centered narrative method to move through the uncertainty and fear represented by the shadow toward self-care practices, spiritual identification, and community activism. My research includes a 10-day trip to Havana, Cuba, and immersion in a five-week shamanic counseling training program in Tampa, Florida, during which I learned how to narrate my experiences as I engaged in *shamanic journeying*. As I reflect on these experiences, I explore the questions above, showing that this process of communication with the self and others creates opportunities to reframe negative experience and construct powerful identities. I end with a reflection of how these questions and my method may benefit other second-generation immigrants.

My story begins in late 2015, as I embark on a quest to come to terms with the shadow, which I had self-diagnosed as “sleep paralysis.” The first chapter presents a literature review of different constructions of sleep paralysis and the shadow as I seek help from a shamanic practitioner in Tampa, in hopes of accessing something akin to the spiritual tradition that I wished had been passed down to me by my great grandmother. As I seek the practitioner’s help, I explore different aspects of the shadow, offering spiritual and psychological treatments of similar experiences. In doing so, *I move the shadow from a concept of pathology to one of creativity*, positioning it as an initiation into a productive exploration of the psyche and the self. I

end with a brief overview of shamanism and the ways shamanic practitioners work with the shadow in personal and social contexts, drawing comparisons between its method and the processes of narrative therapy.

The second chapter extends this treatment of shamanism to the spiritist traditions of Cuba, which center on altered states of consciousness as a means of engaging with the spiritual world. I detail the shamanic “journey” as a method for narrating experience and accessing/creating mythologies while exploring and constructing identity. I review the process of gathering and organizing data from my training in shamanic journeying, which involved narrating my experiences, keeping an ethnographer’s notebook, transcribing recorded sessions, and discussing my interpretations with the shamanic practitioner. The data from my shamanic journeys and my reflections on the training sessions guided the content and structure of my narrative chapters, following methods of autoethnography and narrative inquiry.

Chapters three to five are the narrative parts of the dissertation; they offer a story of my experience over the last two years since meeting with my shamanic practitioner, during which I sought to reconnect with my ancestry by traveling to Cuba, trained in shamanic journeying, and tapped into local spiritual communities. The story is structured around the journey sessions themselves, which invoked memories and reflections associated with each level of training. Each chapter addresses one of my research questions. I end with a reflection on the changes I experienced, from anxiety and isolation to initiation into a new spirituality, and I consider how other second-generation Hispanic female immigrants might develop their own therapeutic interventions through writing.

--

And then she said something, but I can't remember the words. Right now, I see her sitting in her little atrium full of plants, her mouth moving, the light making a golden frame, as if she were merely a portrait of herself.

I know what she is saying.

She is saying goodbye.

Her words are not just words.

They are an invocation. An incantation. The old language.

She is passing it to me.

She is saying, *Mi niña, let's see where you go, what you make of it all.*

CHAPTER ONE:
THE SHADOW AS SPIRITUAL INITIATION

“Something reemerges from the past that we thought had been dead ... but that has lain dormant in the turrets and caverns of the soul, till it returns in the form of specters and shadows.”
(Hoffman, 2004)

“There are things known and there are things unknown, and in between are the doors of perception.” (Huxley, 1954)

Shamanic Practitioner

I sat in the waiting room of an old house in Seminole Heights, Tampa, a 1920s bungalow that had been converted into studio spaces for a consortium of alternative health practitioners. There was an M.D. specializing in integrative medicine, a cognitive behavioural therapist, a hypnotist, a massage therapist, and Anna, who I was there to see.

She called herself a shamanic practitioner.

I was there because I wanted to know what was wrong with me. I had been feeling sick for the better part of a year, rattled by a procession of ailments -- migraines, digestive troubles, menstrual irregularities, fatigue, anxiety, insomnia. They formed a fog over me. I felt stagnant. I found no joy in my days or my work. My progress on my Ph.D. was sputtering. I thought often about quitting and moving away.

I'd gone to the student health clinic, the women's clinic, and the counseling center on campus, but that hadn't helped me. They weren't interested in hearing my story. They ticked off my symptoms on a checklist, ruling out physical disease on one end or mental disorder on the

other, as though the two had nothing to do with each other. They dismissed my symptoms as the result of stress and “generalized anxiety,”⁸ and they suggested I try birth control and antidepressants.

As I waited for Anna, I read the literature strewn around the room about the relationship between the mind, body, and *spirit*. I felt a spark of hope. I thought maybe I could finally find what I needed.

Anna emerged in the hallway and introduced herself with a friendly hug, as if we’d met before. She led me into her private practice space, a small, warm room with yellow pine floors and a nook of bay windows on one side. There was little in the way of furnishings, save for two yellow parlor chairs by the windows, and a dresser full of strange and beautiful objects.

Anna signalled to the chair on the right. She dropped into the other, letting her shoulders fall, wrapping herself in a yoga blanket, legs tucking under. It was March, and cold for Tampa. I sat on the edge of my seat, taking in the objects on the dresser across the room. A mortar and pestle. A pearly half of a clam shell. Bundles of dried herbs. Small bits of geodes. A large rattle with feathers woven into its frame. The sun was low in the sky, and the sconces on the walls mimicked the hue of the dying light, casting the objects in a golden shimmer.

“Are you ready?” Anna asked. Her hair also glowed in the light, a warm red that brushed the milky skin of her cheeks. Her eyes crinkled at the corners as her mouth stretched into a generous smile. She appeared barely a decade older than me, but much more sure of herself than

⁸ Women are less likely than men to be treated aggressively during initial visits to health-care professionals. To receive adequate care, the onus of responsibility usually falls on the female patient to prove that she is sick enough to warrant more extensive diagnostic evaluations. This is illustrated by medical phenomena such as “Yentl Syndrome,” the different course of action that heart attacks follow for women compared to men; researchers are beginning to look at how such discrepancies in diagnosis and treatment extend beyond the physical, to psychological ailments (Fassler, 2015).

I felt. I didn't know what was coming, let alone if I was ready for it, but I knew I needed a change. I nodded slightly and mirrored Anna's posture, feigning relaxation despite my nerves.

I was there for one of Anna's introductory services, a "divination journey." What I'd understood from the materials she'd emailed me in preparation for our session was that she would travel to "the middle world" to meet my spirit guides and bring back messages from their meeting. I had read every word twice, only half-believing.

"So, what brings you here?" Anna asked.

And then, it tumbled out of me, though I hadn't planned on mentioning it, the thing I had kept from all the other practitioners:

"There's -- this shadow," I said. "It used to visit me as a kid while I was paralyzed in bed. It's back, now. It sometimes comes to me as a snake. I've read it could be sleep paralysis, which causes hallucinations. But..."

Anna nodded, signalling for me to go on.

"But maybe it's not a hallucination, you know? That's just the best word I have. What if the thing I see is *really* there?" I said. "Like a ghost or something. But that doesn't feel right, either. Whatever it is, I feel like it's keeping me from moving forward."

I surprised myself. I hadn't planned on allowing myself to speak of the shadow. I had been pushing it to the margins, had convinced myself that it had nothing to do with what was going on. Until I sat next to Anna. Something inside of me recognized the opportunity and spoke.

But I didn't tell Anna all of it. I didn't tell her that my brothers have seen the same shadow and that I sometimes wondered if I was possessed by a family demon. I didn't tell her

that sometimes, I felt like I was losing my mind. I didn't tell her that I wasn't sure about this whole shamanism thing. Was this all just a stab in the dark?

I only said, "I'm not sure what I believe."

Anna nodded deeply, knowingly.

I'd been hopeful during my research into Anna's practice, because it seemed to integrate a belief in spirits with what resembled western practices in therapy. Reading through her site, I learned that she'd trained under Sandra Ingerman, a renowned psychotherapist and teacher of shamanism. When I clicked on her contact page, I took it as a sign that Anna's practice was just a block from my home.

I told Anna that I grew up believing in spirits. My brothers and I relished the stories about the séances my great grandmother performed, imagining her little body possessed by foreign entities who spoke in different dialects. My mother's family was equally taken with the spirits; my aunts kept altars in the corners of their houses, with objects much like the ones Anna had around the room. They made offerings to their favorite saints, praying for the homes and families they'd left behind in their native countries.

I told her I was interested in visiting Cuba for the first time, since travel restrictions had recently been lifted. I thought maybe I could somehow reconnect to my ancestry there.

When I was done speaking, instead of responding directly, Anna explained the process of the divination journey. She and I would lie on our backs on mats. She would blindfold herself and put on headphones, which would play a drum track. While she "journeyed" the fifteen minutes to meet my guides, I would wait. When she was done, we would not speak. She would tell me everything she remembered as quickly as possible, because it's easy to forget, like

coming out of a dream. We would record her words, and I could take down notes and questions to ask later.

“Are you comfortable with this procedure?” Anna asked.

I nodded.

“Do you have any questions?” she asked.

“Just one,” I said. “What’s the middle world, anyway?”

“The middle world is this world,” she said, motioning to the room with a sweep of her hand. “It’s our ‘ordinary’ reality, but there’s another part of the middle world, the nonordinary reality of Spirit.”

I don’t know how, but I knew Anna meant *Spirit*, with a big “S.” She told me that the middle world is the space where spirit mediums, like my great grandmother, operate.

I must have looked concerned, because then she said, “Don’t worry. All you have to do is be still and breathe.”

Anna ushered me onto the mat and took her place next to me.

Lying there, I could hear the steady pulse of the drums in her ears. I imagined the ground rising up around me, as if I were on an elevator making its way underground.

Sleep Paralysis and the Spiritual Connection

In my childhood room, the shadow always stood in the corner. I learned to keep it there by putting up a wall around myself with my mind, because I couldn’t move my body. Each time, I was completely paralyzed, only able to breathe -- and just barely, at that.

After the first dozen episodes, I stopped trying to scream for help. If I attempted escape, I reasoned, my guard would fall and the shadow would jump on my chest and try to steal my soul. It had almost succeeded once, had pulled me out of my body with long claws and launched me

toward the ceiling, where I floated, looking down as the shadow tried to fit itself into the space I left behind. I could see it had the black tail of a snake, and the tail was wrapping itself around my legs.

The best I could do was acknowledge the presence of the shadow and wait for the paralysis to break. This went on during my adolescence -- the shadow waiting in the corner for its moment, me just barely keeping it at bay -- until it suddenly stopped sometime during high school.

For a short time, I forgot about the shadow.

When I went away for college, the shadow returned. It materialized in the corner of my dorm room and made its way toward my paralyzed body as I watched in terror. While I struggled to move, all the memories of the shadow from my childhood came pouring back in. I couldn't believe that I had forgotten this terrible thing.

I began studying the shadow in college, and it became the major philosophical preoccupation of my adult life. I was amazed by the hundreds of accounts of the shadow on discussion boards, and as I read literature for classes -- perhaps because I was looking for it -- I kept stumbling across passages that mirrored my experience. In *Moby Dick* (Melville, 1851), Ishmael wakes to find he can't move, but he is sure he is awake, and as he describes the setting in vivid detail, he perceives a malevolent force in the room. In *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* (1952), Hemingway (1952) describes an entity who approaches the protagonist while he is paralyzed in bed. The entity moves closer and closer and puts all its weight on the protagonist's chest. But it wasn't until I read Fitzgerald's *The Beautiful and the Damned* (1922) that I came across a passage so close to my own experience, I could have written it myself:

She was in a state half-way between sleeping and waking, with neither condition predominant ... and she was harassed by a desire to rid herself of a weight pressing down upon her breast. She felt that if she could cry the weight would be lifted, and forcing the lids of her eyes together she tried to raise a lump in her throat to no avail ...

[...]

She became rigid. Some one had come to the door and was standing regarding her, very quiet except for a slight swaying motion. She could see the outline of his figure distinct against some indistinguishable light. There was no sound anywhere, only a great persuasive silence [...] only this figure, swaying, swaying in the doorway, an indiscernible and subtly menacing terror.

These accounts, both fictional and anecdotal, intrigued me, because they suggested that this was somehow a shared experience. How could so many people -- even fictional characters -- experience the same thing? Research on sleep pathologies, particularly *sleep paralysis* (Adler, 2011; Cheyne, 2000; Denis et. al., 2015; Hufford, 1989, 2005; Hurd, 2010; Jones, 1910; Parker and Blackmore, 2002; Sharpless, 2016; Sharpless & Barber, 2011), has come the closest to describing what happens to me. According to the little literature that's out there, thousands of accounts of sleep paralysis (SP) cite similar sensations: a dark figure in the corner of the room or on the chest, a pressure in the torso, trouble breathing, and intense fear.

SP is characterized by the temporary loss of voluntary movement upon waking or falling asleep. Distinct from the dream state, SP occurs during a fully conscious state and is marked by hallucinations at the onset (hypnogogic) or offset (hypnopompic) of sleep. The majority of episodes of SP are considered “discrete” events; that is, they occur in isolation, appearing at random to otherwise healthy people (Kaplan, 2006; Sharpless & Barber, 2011).

SP is a fairly common experience, albeit rarely documented. In fact, recent studies (Cheyne, 2000; Sharpless, 2016; Sharpless & Barber, 2011) suggest that a majority of people experience SP at least once during their lifetime, and prevalence increases drastically for students and psychiatric patients, with non-white females experiencing SP slightly more often than other demographic groups. Since it is not well-documented, it's not always easy to diagnose, and because of the stigma surrounding the perception of mental illness, the prevalence of SP is most likely underreported. While "recurrent isolated sleep paralysis" is a formal diagnosis in the International Classification of Sleep Disorders, it is not coded in either the *International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems* or the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* (Sharpless, 2011).

Some practitioners, like Michael Breus, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist and fellow of the American Academy of Sleep Medicine, focus on personal accounts instead of investigating causes and prevalence. Breus observes that most of his SP patients report feeling like they "woke up dead." He says, "You know that your mind is awake and your body is not -- so you're trapped, essentially" (Kee, 2015). Parker and Blackmore (2002) performed a content analysis of episodes of sleep paralysis and found that the subjective experience of sleep paralysis is distinct from a dream state, with the subjects expressing a stronger identification to their bodies and bodily sensations during SP compared to dreaming.

This attention to the body is driven by the paralysis one experiences in the SP state. Paralysis is actually the result of something the brain does normally during sleep. When a person enters REM, their muscles are paralyzed during a state called atonia, which prevents the sleeping body from acting out its dreams. During an episode of SP, the body remains paralyzed while the brain awakens; as consciousness returns, the waking person is unable to speak or move

voluntarily, and sometimes the paralysis is accompanied by vivid hallucinations. Paralysis only lasts a few seconds to a few minutes. Though brief, it can trigger anxiety and panic attacks.

There have been many theories about the cause of SP, ranging from the spiritual to the neurological to the cultural. It seems we have been trying to understand sleep paralysis for centuries. “Pressing spirits” are referenced in Jewish mythology and in ancient Greek writings. The oldest known accounts of SP date back to Persian medical texts in the 10th century. In 1664, the first clinical case of SP was recorded in the Netherlands, when a woman was diagnosed with, simply, “Night-Mare” (Adler, 2011).

At the time, this supernatural classification was the most accepted explanation for SP; the word “mare” comes from the Old Norse meaning “mara,” a supernatural being who lay on people at night to suffocate them. “Mare” is also the old English term for witch, which was used colloquially as shorthand for the mythical “crusher who comes in the night” (Hufford, 2005). Over time, the “Night-Mare” evolved to the “Old Hag,” as most of the visions of the mara were female. Until the 19th century, demonic possession by some iteration of the Old Hag was believed to be the main cause of SP. Eventually, the term “sleep palsy” supplanted the Old Hag, which evolved into “sleep paralysis” (Adler, 2011).

In the early 1970s, David J. Hufford, who was at the time a faculty member of the Folklore Department at Memorial University of Newfoundland, set out to research the Old Hag,

a common trope in the mythology of Newfoundland. Hufford had experienced SP himself, and

when he realized others had similar sensory experiences, he thought it must have to do with

more than mere “cultural loading,” or the cultural symbols that help one explain personal experience, because he had never been exposed to images of the Old Hag, himself. And there he

was, seeing what was apparently a common vision!

He thought there must be something more universal to the experience, and in his book, *The Terror that Comes in the Night*, he argues that SP is a spiritual experience (Adler, 2011), a conscious manifestation of the unconscious self that we somehow share. To Hufford, the collective nature of the experience is what makes it “spiritual”; the common perception of a spiritual presence absent cultural referents must indicate something more than culture is at play.

In contrast, cultural anthropology at the time largely ascribed to the source hypothesis, wherein potent cultural models provide content for spiritual experiences. But Hufford (2005) writes, “It is not that SP in different cultures is loaded with culturally provided detail, it is rather that cultural traditions of supernatural assault with paralysis, found all over the world, are loaded with knowledge of characteristics inherent in the phenomenology of SP” (p. 20). In other words, culture does not merely provide the detail for SP episodes; though it helps make meaning, the phenomenological experience of SP precedes the cultural symbols used to describe it. The people of Newfoundland use the Old Hag to explain their experiences, because it is the most accessible cultural explanation available, but they’re experiencing something that’s simultaneously personal and shared, a phenomenon that has persisted in the human experience over centuries, across the world.

The interpretations we choose to explain mysteries such as sleep paralysis are, therefore, important and illuminating to our personal experience. They can provide insight into the connections between individuals and the collective, challenging the notion that mental illness can

be isolated to one's brain pathology. They open up a realm of questioning about the relationship between our unique physiology and personal experiences and the experiences of others, dead or alive. If indeed we so commonly tap into an experience that is in some way shared over vast swaths of time and space, we challenge the notion that out-of-the-ordinary experience can be diagnosed as individual illness. The shadow could be considered more than a hallucination; it could become an entryway into the human spirit.

It could be a calling.

What if we were to listen, instead of diagnosing and treating individuals who claim to experience nonordinary phenomena with blanket protocols? What if we let strange experiences breathe and take shape through communication? To understand the challenge of fully moving toward this kind of practice, we must grasp, if only in brief, the philosophical origins of the psychoanalytic model that emerged from the Enlightenment ideal of reason, which removed collective experiences from the discussion of mental health in favor of an isolating individuality which still persists today. This model continues to single out the shadow as the repressed and negative version of the self, leaving little room for communal engagement with experiences that challenge our notions of reality.

Social Constructions of the Shadow

Before the Industrial Revolution and the rise of capitalism, sleep was largely considered a communal activity, and the line between sleeping and wakefulness was not as rigid as it is today. People awoke naturally in the middle of the night and spent more time contemplating their dreams. The mass privatization that arose with capitalism extended to the body and even sleep itself, and as we became an industrial society, we considered sleep a private activity, inferior to the waking state. As the communal nature of sleep dwindled, cultural explanations for sleep

phenomena and the acceptance of aberrant experiences during sleep became less common (Ellis, 2017).

To those, like Hufford, who first experienced SP without the benefit of a communal explanatory framework, SP experiences can make them feel isolated, and so they are less likely to report them for fear of being diagnosed with mental illness (Hufford, 1989, loc. 343). The biomedical model of medicine and the cognitive behavioral model of psychiatry consider the symptoms of sleep paralysis to be indicative of a wide range of disorders (Hufford, 1989, loc. 399). Even though the field of psychology has expanded to include analysis of dreams and nightmares, they tend to be pathologized. Sigmund Freud influenced an age of plumbing the unconscious for sexual conflict when he claimed that dreams were the manifestation of “repressed” desire (Hufford, 1989, loc. 876), a legacy that psychoanalysis has never fully shaken. This has affected early interpretations of sleep paralysis, as they have at times been erroneously tied to memories of trauma and sexual abuse (Powell & Nielsen, 1998).

Modern psychology largely dismisses the “soul” or any reference to spiritual causes of aberrant experiences like hallucinations. The language of psychology is geared toward categorizing illness, making diagnoses, and prescribing treatment; it is a tradition that began with the Enlightenment and the shift to human reason. David Hume (1738) saw supernatural belief as inherently not rational. Immanuel Kant (1764) wrote that the human mind was at the center of all experience, and he categorized the kinds of mental illnesses in his “Essay on the Maladies of the Head,” in which he emphasized individual pathology.

According to Hillman (1960), a Kantian named Johann Friedrich Herbart, considered the father of western psychological movements, removed any reference to soul from the treatment of human personality. A contemporary of Herbart’s, psychiatrist Jean-Etienne-Dominique Esquirol,

pathologized the hallucination, teaching his students that the perception of spirits or communication with the other world should be treated as mental illness. Jeremy Bentham went further, placing pathology at the center of psychology. By the 1800s, there were a proliferation of syndromes. As disorders found names, more disorders began to appear (Hillman, 1960). A new language emerged along with the birth of psychiatry, which may have created and propagated certain kinds of mental illness.

Decades later, the anti-psychiatry movement in the U.S. would challenge the assumption that mental illness stems from individual biological deficiencies, instead arguing that illness is discursively constituted and situated in a relational web of politics. In 1961, Michel Foucault, Erving Goffman, and Thomas Szasz all released fundamental works that heralded a critical view of madness, analyzing it as an intellectual construction expressing a relationship of power (Huertas, 2013). In 1967, R.D. Laing wrote *The Politics of Experience* (1967), which challenged psychiatric diagnosis and drug treatments. He famously writes:

If the human race survives, future men will, I suspect, look back on our enlightened epoch as a veritable age of Darkness. They will presumably be able to savor the irony of the situation with more amusement than we can extract from it. The laugh's on us. They will see that what we call "schizophrenia" was one of the forms in which, often through quite ordinary people, the light began to break through the cracks in our all-too-closed minds. (p. 107)

The idea that mental illness could actually be a sane response to a broken system was quickly taken up by the anti-psychiatry movement as they sought reform of mental health policies and institutions. Their work fought the stigma of mental illness and unveiled the abuse that regularly occurred in psychiatric hospitals, which led to widespread deinstitutionalization of

such facilities. However, the anti-psychiatrists failed to institute a viable alternative, and while psychiatry evolved toward diagnosis and drug treatment, the impetus of mental health care fell on a “community” that didn’t exist (Scull, 2015). Today, the pharmaceutical industry is one of the largest industries in the U.S., and the DSM is now in its sixth edition. While an increasing number of citizens are routinely diagnosed and medicated, prisons have replaced asylums as the primary housing for people with the greatest mental health problems (Powers, 2017). Few people seem to be getting the help they need.

Theoretically, the anti-psychiatry movement was not against psychiatry itself, but as psychologist Kenneth Gergen puts it, against the “posture of authoritative truth” (Freedman & Combs, 1996, p. 21). For all the shortcomings of the anti-psychiatry movement, one of the lasting criticisms of the institution of psychiatry is that it fails to account for local and cultural understandings of symptoms. Rather than trying to come to these understandings through conversation with their patients, therapists enact institutional order from the moment they meet, to defining the problem, to arriving at a diagnosis (Bartesaghi, 2009); the patient has little control over the discourse used.

Psychological anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann researches how local culture and institutional expectations influence perceptions of mental health and illness, particularly when it comes to spiritual experiences. She conducted experiments on members of evangelical churches and a Thai Buddhist community in northern Thailand and found that if a spiritual experience was labeled within the framework of a local religion, the participants were more likely to report physical sensations that they took to be signs of the experience (Parker, 2014). Specifically, Luhrmann and Cassaniti (2014) asked members of both groups about sleep paralysis, and they

found that within the Thai community, where such experiences were more expected, sleep paralysis was more often reported and elaborated upon. They write:

When people attend to their mind with more care and more interest in the supernatural, the partial perceptions and fleeting thoughts, the often unnoticed shifts in awareness that get ignored in most daily life, are allowed to flower into meaning. (Parker, 2014)

In cultures where such experiences are expected and deemed natural, individuals are more likely to talk about them and come to healthy relationships with them. This doesn't mean that treatment isn't necessary -- Luhrmann says that some bodies, whether because of trauma or inheritance, are more likely to experience disturbing events thought spiritual, like out-of-body-experiences and sleep paralysis, than others (Parker, 2014) -- but culture shapes *how* we talk about and treat such phenomenon. The "real" world is not objective at all; it does not possess its own representations, "as it looks to itself" (Rorty, 1982, p. 193), but it is shaped by our subjectivities (Shweder, 1986).

This finding has serious implications for how we think about (and even what we call) hallucinations. Luhrmann (2011) defines hallucination as "a perception, while in a conscious state, in the absence of an external material stimulus. It should have the quality of real perception: It should be vivid, substantial, and located in external objective space" (p. 72). It's only in the global north that we automatically pathologize this kind of experience; in many societies, it is very common for hallucinations to be accepted and even sought after. Neurologist Oliver Sacks writes that hallucinations are more common than we tend to think; he says that in response to our "physiologically based visions," we create stories about what we've seen, and our stories align with our beliefs, which are always changing (Kakutani, 2012). The importance of these stories is not to decide whether what we experience is objectively real, but whether our

experiences can be understood to be reasonable rather than disordered (Hufford, 2005; Shweder, 1986).

Rabkin (1970) argues that we only have two choices when it comes to hallucination. First, we can label the person who experiences the hallucination mentally ill, which “permanently stigmatizes and degrades the patient. The danger is, of course, that such a cure carries the seeds of reinfection” (p. 122). Or, we can suggest that the person who sees something in a different way is actually perceiving a secret about our culture, “that it is an elaborate stage set that we have agreed to treat as if it were not,” (1970, p. 122). The latter approach makes room for alternate realities and frames the experience of hallucination in terms of ability and productivity.

Luhrmann (2011) addresses this ability when she concludes that we have the power to “override” our sense perceptions, and further, that we can train our minds to experience the supernatural more often. Indigenous practitioners across the world have learned to train their attention in such ways (Espírito Santo, 2012, 2015; NiaNia, Bush, & Epston, 2016). This treatment of hallucination counters the usual diagnosis of illness and lends agency to the person who experiences the hallucination.

Depth psychology, which sprung from Freud’s “discovery” of the unconscious, has made hallucination and other aberrant experiences socially functional, at least in the analyst’s room. Though Freud conceived of the unconscious as the negative counterpart to consciousness, the receptacle of the individual’s repressed material (Diamond 1996, p. 93), Carl Jung (1938) extended the theory of the unconscious beyond the individual to the collective, calling it the *shadow*. Jung agreed with Freud that the shadow represented an inferior state, the hidden and repressed aspects of the individual that are denied expression in life. However, he maintained

that there was a positive side to the shadow that if confronted could lead to insight and creativity. He writes, “In spite of its function as a reservoir for human darkness -- or perhaps because of this -- the shadow is the seat of creativity”; and “the dark side of [the human] being, [the] sinister shadow ... represents the true spirit of life as against the arid scholar” (Jung, 1983, p. 262).

To illustrate, Jung noted that the snake was a common shadow vision cited by his patients. In 1932, he gave a seminar in Zurich, Switzerland, called “The Psychology of Kundalini Yoga,” during which he recalled his conversation with one patient in particular, a 28-year-old woman who told him that she had a black serpent in her belly that was causing her illness. “One day she came and said that the serpent in her belly had moved; it had turned around,” Jung says. “Then the serpent moved slowly upward, coming finally out of her mouth, and she saw that the head was golden” (Jung, 1996, p. 83). Jung explains that the snake is a collective symbol, particularly significant in India and Kundalini yoga, as it represents the primal energy that moves up the body as the practitioner makes progress toward enlightenment. In his private journal, he writes: “The serpent is not only a separating, but a unifying principle” (Jung, 2009, p. 247, Footnote 172).

Counter to the western narrative of the serpent as scary or evil, Jung provides another spiritual framework through which to interpret his patient’s experience; the Kundalini serpent is represented as a female energy that lies coiled at the base of the root chakra, or energy center in the body. Ritual practices such as yoga are employed to enable the serpent’s ascent to the crown chakra, at which point, the primal instincts in the individual meet with the divine (Jung, 2009, p. xxiv). Jung interprets his patient’s experience as a confrontation with the shadow and the subsequent transformation of the shadow from a personal problem into a collective power. He says that in practice, this transformation means that the patient is becoming conscious of her

instinctual nature as she taps into the collective power of the inner woman⁹ (Jung, 2009, p. 21). This is just one illustration of how the shadow can transcend individual pathology, as it represents trouble and transformation.

Rollo May's concept of the "daimonic" extends Jung's idea of the collective shadow. He worried that the Jungian conception of the shadow would be interpreted to strip the patient of agency; he therefore conceived of the "daimon" as more than simply the lack of goodness or consciousness. His daimon is as much a creative force on the path of individuation as it is destructive (Diamond, 1996). Clinical psychologist Stephen Diamond (1996) cites May, who explains why externalizing the shadow or the daimon helps patients: "My slightly anthropomorphic terminology comes out of my work as a therapist and is not out of place there. Though the patient and I are entirely aware of the symbolic nature of this [...] it is often helpful for the patient to see himself struggling against an 'adversary'" (p. 101).

As Jung, May, and Diamond's work suggests, stories are central to the way we interpret the shadow. To Luhrmann (2000), learning to be a psychotherapist is much like learning to be a storyteller. She says that analysts should listen for stories (p. 56). Such a patient-centered view of psychiatry (Huertas, 2013) and a narrative approach to therapy (Sarbin, 1986) has arisen in response to the dominant form of psychotherapy in the U.S. For instance, White and Epston (1990) teach their patients a "narrative therapy" that helps them externalize their problems through story so that they understand "the problem is the problem." Grappling with the unconscious in the form of the shadow or demon reframes or re-stories the individual experience of trouble and may make room for interpretation and growth.

⁹ Though the Kundalini serpent is represented as female in Hindu mythology in the form of the goddess Sakti, it is interpreted as a latent power in both females and males, just as all genders can also connect to the energies represented by Siva, the male counterpart to Sakti.

Toward a Spiritually Sensitive Narrative Therapy

Growing up, I was socialized by my family's beliefs in the spirits to think of emotional disturbance as ghostly visitation. Instead of talking about our anxieties, we would gather around a table and take turns telling our "true" ghost stories. We created narratives for our troubles -- we called them ghosts (Monteagut, 2015) -- and as we told our seemingly fantastical stories, we were able to share negative experiences that would have otherwise been difficult to talk about.

As Diamond (1996) writes:

No matter how "possessed," or "pushed," or "driven" we may be by the "shadow" or the "daimonic" at any given moment, there is always potentially some degree of freedom -- miniscule as it might seem -- to consciously choose one's personal response or one's attitude toward these awesome powers. (p. 105)

Guignon (1998) uses Heidegger's concept of life as embodying a narrative structure to argue that there is an inherent "narrativity" to life because of our future orientation (p. 568). Thus, how we conceive of our stories and the directions they take are important, because they have the power to create a new "phantasy," as Laing (1969) would put it, a new reality that turns our disfunction into function. Freeman (2010) calls this process "poiesis," the "imaginative labor seeking to give form and meaning to experience" (p. 143-144).

Diamond (1996) stresses the creativity involved in storying experience during the process of therapy:

When we choose instead to constructively integrate the daimonic into our conscious personality, we participate in the metamorphic process of creativity. For evil -- or creativity, as we shall later see -- seldom, if ever, consists of some single, isolated act, in the absence of any prior relevant psychological context. Both evil and creativity are

byproducts of a profound psychological process. Psychotherapy -- especially depth psychology -- is very much concerned with this cryptic process. Or, at least, it should be. (p. 105)

Diamond argues, depth psychology should see the purpose of “pathology” and use the shadow as an invitation for personal growth.

Jungian psychologist James Hillman (1960) also proposed that if the concept of the collective unconscious is to reach its full potential, it must move beyond the preoccupation of the unconscious itself toward a “creative psychology.” He believed that any suffering that the human undergoes is not the suffering of a psychopathology but the suffering from *a lack of purpose* (p. 35). In *The Myth of Analysis* (1960), he wrote that psychoanalysis had not escaped the Enlightenment ideal of human reason devoid of soul, as analysts were still focused on reflection and, not surprisingly, the *analysis* of psychopathology; this is, arguably, still true today. Analysis must look beyond itself, said Hillman, and something else must be allowed to happen -- a kind of love must be allowed to enter in so that “psychological creativity” might emerge (Hillman, 1960, p. 113).

Our concern, then, is not with the unconscious, but with *consciousness*, and how we use our consciousness to make meaning. The unconscious will continue to present itself and we can analyze it and reflect on it, but in itself this is an isolating act, a pathologizing act that suggests we are each alone in what we experience. When we realize that there are many sub universes of meaning (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), we open up to what Hillman (1960) calls the “imaginal consciousness” (p. 86); we become like children fearlessly imagining a world during play.

Hillman (1960) counters Freud’s “talking cure,” which conceptualized memory as a repository of past events. He acknowledges that recall includes a process of imagination, and

what we call the unconscious state is constituted by imagination, since we cannot really know what lies in the unconscious. At the heart of this creative endeavor is relationship and communication. We must be able to communicate on a larger level to each other that “this is play” (Bateson, 1972). Kenneth and Mary Gergen (1997) write that words gain meaning through the way we use them in relationship, and thus, language functions as social action:

Transformation may begin with play, poetry, experimentation, or any other form of action that falls outside the reiterative patterns of daily life. It may also begin with new arrangements of communication, new modes of dialogue, which invite exploration of the forgotten, the suppressed, or the other. In multiple ways we open routes toward the generation of new orders of meaning. And, as our constructed worlds are transformed, so are we invited into new domains of action. (p. 32-33)

Bateson (1972) conceives of a psychotherapy that blurs the line between the literal and the metaphoric, between reality and fantasy (p. 314), a therapy that makes use of “play” as an evolving system of interaction between patient and therapist (p. 327).

Psychiatrist R.D. Laing wrote that at the core of psychotherapy should be the internal voyage of self-discovery, not the appalling interventions of his day, including sedation and electric shock therapies. Psychotherapy should not constrain the patient in such ways, but rather work toward capturing the wholeness of experience. “From voyages into inner time and space, Laing says, “men can be reborn, no longer alienated, but capable of a new kind of ego-functioning in which the ego is ‘the servant of the divine, no longer its betrayer’” (Ritvo, 1969).

The move toward an imaginal consciousness and new ways of making meaning of difficult or strange experiences could prove particularly useful to second-generation immigrants in the U.S. like me, who hail from spiritual traditions but are estranged from their native

practices of health and spirituality by our assimilation. This orientation towards play instead of pathology can help us explore ourselves in the context of a spiritual community, navigating our “in-betweenness” together and moving toward productive action.

Instead of straining to narrow ourselves into existing categories, we may open up to the possibilities of creating new modes of interpretation and expression. Diamond (2012) writes of a “spiritually sensitive psychotherapy”:

Providing some way to help such patients make sense of their frightening and bewildering subjective experiences and integrate them meaningfully into a deeper psychological and spiritual understanding of themselves and the world is what real psychotherapy should, at its best, strive toward.

If we are to achieve this, we must set aside the tradition of analyzing chaotic sensory perceptions for root causes. We must stop searching after the “Truth” with a big “T.” Instead, we must engage in practices that make space for alternative meaning to be formed. If we, as a collective, want to come together to address our problems, we must make time to engage with the things we don’t understand, and even allow things that we don’t believe to exist side-by-side with our own beliefs. Therapy must also take such a collaborative approach.

Indigenous practices of healing provide models for spiritually sensitive narrative therapies. In *Collaborative and Indigenous Mental Health Therapy* (NiaNia, Bush, & Epston, 2016), three mental health practitioners, Wiremu NiaNia, Allister Bush, and David Epston, one of the originators of narrative therapy, work together to develop a comprehensive approach to advancing the health of Māori patients. Their approach combines two vastly different worldviews -- that of the clinical psychiatrist and that of the indigenous health practitioner. The book presents stories of healing practices employed by both practitioners in their conversations

with Māori patients; these sessions centered the experiences and worldview of patients' spirit cultures, as well as the language they used to describe their experience. Allister writes that the institution of psychiatry doesn't have a way to describe things like hallucinations without dismissing or misinterpreting the experience as disordered. He writes, "If we are serious about expanding our understanding of the overlapping zones between psychiatry and culture, then it is exactly these exceptional experiences to which we should be attending" (NiaNia, Bush & Epston, 2017, p. 13).

Spending time hearing each other's stories and the way others make meaning out of aberrant experiences may help us learn different languages for explaining what happens to the individual. We open up to collective, or even "ancestral," explanations as we hear others' interpretations of similar experiences. This reminds us that we are not alone and frees us to come to a helpful understanding of our own experiences.

The Shamanic Initiation

If we are to move away from alienating those who experience divergent phenomenon, if we seek to be more inclusive of different cultural explanations for troubling experience, and if we are to move from pathologizing and diagnosing toward compassionate understanding, we need to make room for creativity and storytelling. And more than anything, we need more storytellers, practitioners with the imagination and sensitivity to transform trouble into opportunity.

In many indigenous cultures, systems are in place to share troubling experiences. Spirits and visions are a normal part of society, and the spiritual healer of a group usually assumes the role that we in the global north would call a mental health practitioner. Interestingly, in the late 1800s, when psychology was growing into a rational enterprise that dismissed the soul, spiritism

was taking hold in Europe and the U.S., and spiritual mediums and séances were becoming mainstream. In the Caribbean, particularly in Cuba, spiritism mixed with Afro-Cuban religions, and spiritual mediums and *brujos* provided guidance in the face of political turmoil and poverty¹⁰ (Espírito Santo, 2012, 2015).

In ancient indigenous societies, as in some existing societies, social practice arises primarily from spiritual belief. In shamanistic societies, the shaman is a versatile specialist, acting on behalf of their communities as physicians, magicians, storytellers, and even weather forecasters (Kaplan, 2006). The etymology of the term “shaman” is uncertain, but it is most commonly associated with the Tungus reindeer herders of ancient Siberia. The Tungus word “šaman” translates into “one who is excited, moved, or raised,” or “inner heat,” while the Sanskrit word “saman” means “song” (Krippner, 2000, p. 93). In most shamanic societies, shamans enter an ecstatic state through trance to engage with spirits for their communities.

The shaman’s work is to employ a creative narrative solution to a problem, to turn a vulnerability into a power. The shaman uses her biological ability to enter altered states of consciousness and her communication skills to translate her experiences, providing information of her travels to the “spirit world” with her community. The spirit world is divided into “upper,” “lower,” and “middle” worlds (Kaplan, 2006, p. 1). This process of traveling to the other worlds is called the “shamanic journey,” during which the shaman leaves her body and enters a spiritual reality, where she talks to spirits, including humans who have died, deities, or power animals (Green, 2001).

Similar to the externalization that occurs in the process of narrative therapy, shamans undergo a process of depersonalization, usually through the out-of-body experience they achieve

¹⁰ The methods of spiritism and Afro-Cuban religions are discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

during trance. They become detached from their physical experience and as they travel, they can watch their experience as one watching a dream, as an outside observer (Kaplan, 2006, p. 4).

This distance from the experience allows the shaman to story their observations for their clients who are waiting for them to “return” and provide guidance (p. 10). The shaman ultimately provides the client with a restorying of unusual experience.

Such storytelling skills are learned. Shamanic societies routinely cultivate dramatic and unusual sensory perceptions as normal experience (Luhrmann, 2011, p. 79) through spiritual training. “Inner sense cultivation -- and mental imagery cultivation, in particular -- is at the heart of shamanism,” writes Luhrmann (p. 81).

Green (2001) writes that the shaman is usually called to her role through a process of initiation, which typically takes the form of a traumatic psychological or near-death experience (NDE). This initiation shows the shaman how to travel between worlds, to get to the brink of insanity or death, and then to return; the shaman is labeled such by members of her society after she is able to transform her difficult experience into her power. There are many parallels between NDEs and the shamanic journey. Sandra Ingerman, a prominent shamanic practitioner, therapist, and writer, was called to shamanism after an NDE, and Michael Harner, a leading authority on shamanism and founder of the Center for Shamanic Studies, writes:

The shaman’s journey starts with an experience of going through a tunnel of some kind, usually with a light at the end, and this is very similar to descriptions of the so-called near-death experiences. But the shaman goes all the way through the tunnel and explores the world that people feel themselves passing into at the time of death. (Green, 2001, p. 209)

The shaman is involuntarily initiated into a shamanic journey when she gets close to death, and if and when she survives, she is equipped with the knowledge of traveling between worlds. Green (2001) cites Kenneth Ring, who writes:

By taking the shamanistic perspective, we can appreciate that the plane of experience NDEers enter into during their near-death crisis is the same one that shamans learn to access freely during the course of their training. Therefore, strictly speaking, this realm is not one that awaits us only after death. It exists now and is in principle available in life to anyone who has learned the “access code.” (p. 210)

Green (2001) observes that although there is a strong link between shamans and NDEs, people who have never experienced an NDE may spontaneously experience out of body experiences, lucid dreams, or full-blown journeys. In *The Woman in the Shaman's Body* (2005), Barbara Tedlock, an anthropologist who immersed herself in a shamanic tribe in South America, writes that in ancient Mesoamerican tribes, shamans sometimes engaged in ritual bleeding, purposefully cutting themselves to incite visions. Often, female shamans were considered more connected to the source of Spirit, because they periodically lost “bad blood” through menstruation. She writes:

Within the dark fluids of menstrual and birthing blood resides the vital essence of the most feminine form of spiritual energy. Concentrated and deeply mysterious, this force touches every woman and links her to a formidable shamanic tradition. Understanding that energy -- and the rich web of myths and symbols that surround it -- will help us to more clearly see women in their transcendent roles. (Tedlock, 2005, p. 173)

The link between blood and shamanic initiation is still strong today, and those on feminine shamanic paths often receive their calling around reproductive events involving the loss of blood.

Though we in the global north don't have the indigenous knowledge or practices of journeying, we are not precluded from experiencing such things, and we often do, though it goes unreported or is interpreted as illness or a temporary "break from reality." What we lack in our society is a "technology"¹¹ (Krippner, 2009), or methodology, for how to deal with such experiences, which indigenous cultures derive from thousands of years of practice and wisdom. This methodology allows practitioners to tap into their innate abilities to deal with crises and thrive in the midst of uncertainty, to turn negative experience into something productive.

In *The Natural Medicine Guide to Schizophrenia*, Stephanie Marohn (2003) writes about Malidoma Patrice Somé, a shaman of the Dagara people of Africa who observed mental institutions in America and concluded that we are systematically ignoring the birth of our healers. In the Dagara tradition, individuals who begin to experience the symptoms of what we would call schizophrenia would be taken under the wing of an established shaman and trained in healing practices. To illustrate, Somé took in an 18-year-old American man named Alex, who had experienced a psychotic break and was plagued by hallucinations and depression. In Africa, Somé conducted a ritual on Alex, whose case improved and who went on to study psychology and lead a productive life.

Somé says that retreating into another culture should not be the best hope Americans have to overcome their mental health crises; a local ritual must be devised, without appropriation

¹¹ Chapter Two reviews the technology of spirit mediumship and the shamanic journey as a ritual method for narrating experience and constructing a self.

of other cultures, to move beyond pathology toward creation and healing. To him, people are receiving a spiritual call in response to the materialism of our age. He writes:

If these are approached as things that are blocking the human imagination, the person's life purpose, and even the person's view of life as something that can improve, then it makes sense to begin thinking in terms of how to turn that blockage into a roadway that can lead to something more creative and more fulfilling. (Marohn, 2003)

Shamanic practitioners like Ingerman and Harner (Green, 2001) have answered the call to develop practices specifically designed for members of the global north. These are inspired by various indigenous practices, but they are designed for those who didn't grow up with spiritual traditions, or who, like me, no longer have access to their native traditions.

Shamanic practices are among many alternative therapies that have proliferated since the 1960s and 1970s. A variety of creative models of psychotherapy have emerged in the last few decades (Assagioli, 1965; Rowan, 2005; Wilber, 2006), inspired by transpersonal (sometimes called "spiritual") psychology, partly influenced by Jung. These traditions have inspired many potential rituals between the therapist and the patient that could prove fruitful in creating meaning out of disturbing physiological or sensory experiences.

Through her shamanic method of therapy, Anna helped me make meaning of my shadow. She showed me that the shadow doesn't have to be a terror. That instead, what we usually interpret as illness can be a doorway to an exploration of the self and the making of a transformative story.

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I heard the drums stop. I opened my eyes. Anna stirred and moved quietly to her seat. I followed and took my seat next to her. I pressed the record button on my phone and immediately, Anna began to recite her observations.

“I saw rainbow serpent right away. That’s very specific,” she said, adding that many indigenous creation myths feature the rainbow serpent, which is linked to the water element, female fertility, and menstruation.

“And this is interesting...” Anna paused to meet my eyes. “Your guides said that your spiritual path is the shamanic one. It’s tied to your recurring visions. Some, like the shadow, are trying to wake you up to the truth, others want to use you, or scare you, or just fuck with you. The middle world is full of tricksters. You’re highly vulnerable to attack when you’re this sensitive, unless you learn how to journey for yourself.”

Anna’s steady speech anchored me, keeping me from drifting with my thoughts. I took notes, trying my best to listen without immediately responding. I could feel a nervous excitement rising inside of me, as Anna offered a new language to describe my experience.

She told me that I may have undergone “soul loss,” which would explain my anxiety and illnesses. The soul loss could have occurred in response to a traumatic event in my life, or could even be the result of something that happened before my birth.

I remembered reading about how shamans in the Hmong culture called the souls of babies into their bodies shortly after birth, and that if they were separated from their homelands, their souls could remain lost or become possessed by a bad spirit (Fadiman, 1997). I made a note of this in the margin of my notebook.

“Not to worry. The mantra for your life is *abracadabra*,” Anna said. “‘I create as I speak.’ Part of your gift to the world is helping people make the connections to each other and to

all that is. There is Spirit in everything. Your observations will help you see the truth. Your own truth will illuminate others.”

She encouraged me to travel to Cuba.

“It’s about reconnecting to the land that gave birth to your lineage, to your people,” Anna said. “Reconnecting to the spirits and the energy of the land, the place where your blood comes from. I felt the rhythm, the pulsing of it. It’s primal. It is in your blood.”

Blood calling blood back.

The words have been ringing in my ears ever since.

CHAPTER TWO:

THE SHAMANIC JOURNEY AS A NARRATIVE METHOD OF COMMUNICATION

“The doors to the world of the wild Self are few but precious. If you have a deep scar, that is a door, if you have an old, old story, that is a door. If you love the sky and the water so much you almost cannot bear it, that is a door. If you yearn for a deeper life, a full life, a sane life, that is a door.” (Pinkola Estés, 1996)

The Blood Call

I felt dizzy at the end of the divination session.

Anna led me to the front door of the bungalow and hugged me. I felt like saying more, but I couldn't find the words. As soon as I stepped onto the porch, there was a sharp cramp in my lower belly. I felt as if I had gotten my period, though it wasn't due for weeks. I waved to Anna and ran as fast as I could through the back alley toward my house.

A couple minutes later I was on my back stoop, sweaty and rattled by competing thoughts. I fumbled for my keys. I was annoyed at myself for always locking doors, as I only ever succeeded in locking myself out. I finally got the door open and barreled into my bedroom.

I found myself in the middle of a swarm of flies.

They buzzed around my ears and crawled slowly on the door frames, on my lamp shade, up the window panes that lined two perpendicular walls of my room -- little black dots against the red-orange brightness of the setting sun.

My thoughts slowed. I had the strange feeling that all the windows in the room had turned to mirrors, that maybe there were just a few flies in the room, only they seemed multiplied

between the facing panes of glass. I walked slowly through the optical illusion toward the skinny mirror mounted on my armoire. I turned to it to look at myself, and I became momentarily paralyzed, struck by how green my eyes looked. I moved my face closer to the mirror. I had the sense that I could walk through the mirror and into another world if I wanted to.

Is this really happening? I thought. Flies buzzed around my ears. I swatted at them, batting one with my open palm.

Yes, very real.

I shook my head and dismissed my kneejerk mysticism. I reasoned with myself, trying to calm my racing heart: *It's been wet lately. It's an old house. They must've been breeding under the floorboards.*

I held the back door open and whistled to the flies, conscious of the absurdity of the gesture. Surprisingly, the flies flew toward the fresh air, dozens of them buzzing by me on their way to freedom.

I threw myself onto my bed to regroup. On the bedspread was my deck of tarot cards, the day's draw face-up on the top: the Queen of Pentacles reversed. She sat on a throne, holding a golden orb to her womb. I opened my tarot book and read that the Queen of Pentacles is a mother earth archetype, a keeper of home and hearth, a symbol of security. Reversed, she represents only her potential self, hindered by a disconnect between her life's work and her ancestry.

Anna's words returned to me. *Blood calling blood back.*

I felt another cramp and remembered that my period had come early. I got in the shower and let the water quiet my mind. I resolved to let go of the events of the day and get a good night's sleep.

Later that night, the shadow showed itself. As it approached me, it clarified into the form of a snake, as it had done before, but this time its scales were multicolored and bright. It reached my bedside and coiled next to my paralyzed body.

I felt oddly calm. The face of the snake looked like a woman's. Its eyes were bright green, and when it opened its mouth to speak, the voice was female.

"I am Shakti," it said. "It's time you remembered."

Her eyes moved closer, piercing through me as time and space collapsed. I couldn't move or speak. In this vacuum, a scene from my past began to play like an old movie reel, crackling before my eyes. Shakti ruthlessly narrated while I watched, paralyzed:

This is four years ago. It's your first apartment in Tampa. Remember? You shouldn't have forgotten. That's you there on the bed. He is on top of you. He is calling you a stupid bitch. He is telling you to shut up.

I started to feel the old panic setting in. I tried to break the paralysis, but the reel kept playing:

Remember the smell of his alcohol breath? He is holding both your hands with one of his, and the other is in your mouth. You are biting his hand. You are screaming for help. Your roommates aren't going to help you, remember? They'll tell you you made it up, remember? You are biting. You are struggling under his weight.

I couldn't feel my body anymore. There was no use in fighting.

You can't breathe. You are turning purple. He tells you to shut the fuck up. You can't make a noise. He raises his hand. He smashes it down on your temple.

Everything is dark.

Remember.

The crackling scene stopped. Shakti disappeared, and I fell into a dreamless sleep.

When I awoke the next morning, there was a terrible pain in my lower abdomen, the worst pain I'd ever felt. I was sweating profusely. I dropped to the floor, convulsing. I vomited until there was nothing left to purge. And then the pain was gone.

Desperate, I went to the nurse practitioner at the clinic on campus, who told me that an ovarian cyst had probably ruptured. She said it wasn't dangerous and that it is common for women in their thirties. I would experience discomfort as my body absorbed the errant fluids.

I knew it was more than that, that my body and mind were connected in ways the health practitioners who saw me knew nothing about. It felt like something had been exorcised from me.

At home, I reread my notes from my session with Anna and stopped at the part about the rainbow serpent. I was awestruck by the synchronicity in the events of the previous 24 hours. I could explain all of it away as mere coincidence or the power of suggestion, and yet it all felt deeply connected and important.

Despite my pain, I was more clear than I'd been in years, like a door I'd been throwing myself against was finally opening.

Four years earlier, I had escaped from an abusive relationship. While he was gone one night, I moved my life into a new apartment. I was alone for the first time. I hadn't tried to keep any of it secret, and my friends knew the rough details of what occurred. But I realized I had not allowed myself to relive the memory of that last act of abuse. I had focused stubbornly on moving on, enrolling in a Ph.D. program to prove to myself and my family that I was okay.

Had the negative emotion from the violence of my relationship remained unresolved, forming a shadow over me, making me sick?

When the shadow presented itself as the colorful snake Shakti, everything I had been holding inside burst. Despite the pain of the rupture, I felt a brightness emanating from my belly, a willpower and sense of control I hadn't realized I'd been missing.

I thought of the dark figure that haunted my childhood. I wondered what else I was not remembering. I wondered about the things that I could never remember because they happened before my birth, the repressed memories of my parents and grandparents that were somehow passed onto me. I thought about the grandmother I never met, Elsie, for whom I was named. She had developed ovarian cancer in her 30s. Had a shadow grown and grown inside of her until it was too late?

What wounds were still thriving under the surface? What old violence?

Anna said I needed to learn “to journey” to find answers for myself. I would start in the “ordinary” world, with a ten-day trip to Havana. My trip opened my eyes to the hard and beautiful realities of my homeland and to the privilege of my position as a second-generation immigrant. It further encouraged my interest in engaging in spiritual training, as I saw how Cubans had integrated ritual practices into their everyday lives.

I met one woman in particular, Fidela, who shared her daily rituals with me, such as tending to her home altar and consulting with her spiritual leader. She suggested that these private practices were discouraged by the government,¹² but that they helped her mark time, remain productive, and make sense of her troubles. I saw in her practices an echo of the spiritual legacy that had been silently passed down to me, as I too kept a home altar and sought spiritual consultation.

¹² I discuss the issue of religion/spirituality as resistance in the final chapter.

When I returned to Tampa, I resolved to learn shamanic journeying, as it had become, in my mind, the closest resource I had to understanding and connecting to my ancestral spirit knowledge. The notes from my trip and the recordings of my journeys led to a rich writing exploration that consumed the next two years of my life.

In this chapter, I review the narrative method that I developed during my training sessions and over the subsequent months as I wrote the stories presented in the following chapters.

Cuban *Espiritismo* and the Communication Training of the Spirit Medium

In Cuba, I learned the word *espiritismo*¹³ and got closer to understanding the spiritual tradition under which my abuelita must have trained and operated. Spirituality was a daily preoccupation to Cubans, who tended to their home altars and showed me the beads they wore to honor their saints. They whispered about meetings with *espiritistas*,¹⁴ cautious about what I would think. They were conscious of how strange their customs might seem to Europeans and U.S. citizens who were raised under Judeo-Christian traditions.

In fact, *espiritismo* in Cuba is closely related to the spiritism movement of 19th-century Europe founded by Alan Kardec, which was on the rise at the same time there was a surge in Victorian science and invention. Religious historian Mircea Eliade noted that this new kind of spirituality satisfied the collective longing of the time for a universalist and “mythical” religion (Espírito Santo, 2015). Kardec’s spiritism is characterized by a belief in the afterlife, in reincarnation, and in spirit guides. There is a distinct material and spiritual world, and the spirit

¹³ Spanish word for Spiritism

¹⁴ Spirit mediums, which I use here as an all-inclusive term referring to practitioners of different traditions, including curanderos (indigenous shamans), brujos (witches/sorcerers of the Regla de Palo Monte), babalaos (priests of the Regla de Ochá/Santería), etc.

medium accesses the spirit world through her guides. During the late 19th century, both science and religion were undergoing dramatic changes, and spiritists were influenced by the structure of scientific experimentation, purporting to offer a scientific method of proving the existence of spirits (Espírito Santo, 2015).

At the core of spiritism is the belief that “the soul survives death and can be made manifest through some sort of communicational enterprise with the living,” such as the séance (Espírito Santo, 2015, p. 46). Of course, these are ancient concepts that were already practiced in different forms throughout the global south, but this marked the first time that such ideas were taken up in mainstream white industrialized culture. By the late 19th century, séances were all the rage in Europe and the U.S, and some spirit mediums even took their show on the road, entertaining the middle and upper classes alike in drawing rooms around the world (Aykroyd, 2009).

These ideas also appealed to liberal, urban populations of Latin America, especially Brazil and the Caribbean countries, which were officially Catholic. Catholicism already centered on a belief in saints, and spiritism created a bridge between mainstream Catholicism and indigenous and African-based religions, forming a syncretic spirituality that stressed the importance of the dead, ancestors, and spirit guides. The Latin American iteration of spiritism was more political than its counterpart in the global north; in many ways, it was a reaction to colonial hegemony, as the Catholic Church consistently colluded with corrupt governments to keep its people oppressed (Espírito Santo, 2015).

For example, during Cuba’s first war of independence (1868-1878), espiritismo arose as the lower classes asserted their right to experience the spiritual on a personal level without the institutionalization imposed by Catholicism. Around that time, Kardec’s works, particularly *The*

Spirits' Book (1857) and *The Mediums' Book* (1861), arrived in Cuba in the 1860s via the importation of European spiritist texts (Espírito Santo, 2015, p. 36). These works were groundbreaking to Cubans, as they “offered a moral philosophy of racial and sexual equality based on empiricist principles compatible with Victorian science” (p. 37).

In Cuba, spiritism took on an entirely unique form as it melded with existing ritual systems of Afro-Cuban religions, providing a cosmology and a lineage of ancestors to stand in the place of the African lineages that had been destroyed through slavery. The Afro-Cuban traditions of the Regla de Palo Monte, the Regla de Ochá, and Santería, among others, lent espiritismo its language for describing *muertos*¹⁵ and *orishas*,¹⁶ as well as its rituals of dancing and chanting for the ancestors.

Anthropologist Diana Espírito Santo (2015) writes that the syncretization between espiritismo and Afro-Cuban religions is so strong that the *misa espiritual*, or spiritual mass used to invoke the dead and possess the living through song and prayer, “is never celebrated in Cuba if not as an integral part of an Afro-Cuban rite” (p. 37). Espiritismo continued to bring the lower and middle classes of Cuba together in the post-Soviet world, providing an ecstatic outlet as Cubans had to “invent” and “resolve”¹⁷ during scarce times (Espírito Santo, 2015, p. 15).

Underlying spiritism is a rebellious *esprit de corps* that emphasizes intersectionality and political and religious equality.

There is an interesting interplay between individuality and society within espiritismo. Central to the practice of espiritismo is the training of the individual espiritista’s body and mind

¹⁵ The dead

¹⁶ Saints or spirits

¹⁷ *Inventar* and *resolver* are still common verbs used in everyday Cuban parlance to suggest resourcefulness in the face of dwindling or non-existing government support. It’s a point of pride among Cubans, to be efficient and make due with the resources at hand, to “invent” and “resolve” problems themselves.

over time. Espírito Santo (2015) writes that to become an espiritista, one must also become her spirits in service to society. This requires talent and training, and because of each medium's unique position, mediumship is really "a self-reconstructive technology" (p. 7). The espiritista invests time and energy into creating a particular self that is unique to each practitioner; though she connects to a spiritual collective in service of her society, her lived experience is central to her development as a spirit medium (p. 6).

Through communication, the espiritista transforms her "spirits (and selves) into perspectives that can render intelligible and manageable the rugged nooks and crannies of everyday existence" (Espírito Santo, 2015, p. 7-8). Her work, then, is not merely ritualistic or even social, but one that constructs selfhood (p. 38). In this way, Espírito Santo (2015) argues that espiritistas are "interactionists" (Mead, 1934; Goffman, 1959) and that the self is constructed primarily through a process of communication (p. 13).

Through my research in espiritismo spurred by my visit to Cuba, I learned about the "Espiritismo de Cordon," a branch of espiritismo practiced in the "Oriente," or eastern Cuba, where my abuelita grew up. In Cordon, which literally means cord or string, trance and ritual is more central than in other traditions of espiritismo. It is believed that each practitioner possesses a chain of spirits, and to access those spirits, rituals are carried out with a circle of practitioners who hold hands, dance, and chant together. This is consistent with the rituals my father told me he witnessed as a child.

In Cordon, the dead are the focus of all ritual, and mediums employ a "communicational ritual technology" developed over years of practice to link the dead to the undead. Biographies of the dead are crafted over time, with the help of the voices of spirit guides. Even when the spirit mediums are white, the spirit guides in Cordon are predominantly black. Many Cordon

practitioners believe that black spirits have become “disincarnated” through the slave trade, and their wisdom is tapped and given voice through the medium’s body (Espíritu Santo, 2015, p. 59). It seems that my abuelita had a similar belief; my father says that the spirit guides she accessed were a married black couple with thick Caribbean accents.

Cordon practitioners usually undergo a strong initiation. Some have reported seeing shadows before initiation, and after initiation and training in ritual technologies, the shadows clarify into specific entities. The development of these entities is the task of the Cordon initiate. There is a “transhistoricity” involved in this process, as the medium animates and inhabits “a shared past whose stories remain unfinished and untold, even peripheral, and which is continuous in and with the present” (Espíritu Santo, 2015, p. 8). It is the task of the medium to complete these stories. The ritual is considered a technology because it is a template for “producing persons and extended histories” (p. 8); thus, espiritismo produces mythology and sacred stories even as it taps into historical forms of representation.

As I researched this ritual, I realized that my ancestors and other displaced people had long been practicing a method to overcome the gaps in narrative inheritance resulting from exile and oppression. This method is observed by espiritistas with a high level of discipline and attention. I imagine that my abuelita underwent an initiation period and similar kinds of training, though I can’t be sure about the level of formality of her instruction in mediumship. I don’t know if she had a formal teacher or how often she met with her community of spiritual practitioners; for the most part, her practice was domestic and independently executed.

The little that she said about religion when I knew her led me to believe that she was not one to be carried away by cultish behavior or religious ecstasy. She was a highly organized, detailed, and practical person. I can imagine that she would have approached her work as a

medium in a systematic and orderly way, focusing on the tried and true stages of ritual, trance, and spirit communication. After my trip to Cuba, I contacted Anna, energized to engage in training that would mirror the rituals of my abuelita's *espiritismo*.

Shamanic Journey as Method

When I returned from Cuba, I scheduled a consultation with Anna, during which I signed on for a five-week Harner Shamanic Counseling (HSC) program to learn how to journey myself. Though the exact methods are different, the *misa espiritual*¹⁸ of espiritismo and the shamanic journey both provide a set of instructions for how to enter altered states of consciousness (ASCs) and communicate with spirits. While they both focus on beings on the spiritual plane for the benefit of those living, the espiritista and the shamanic practitioner develop highly individual relationships with their spirit guides and with the beings with whom they make contact, and they construct their unique identities as mediums of communication between worlds. The container of their ritual method allows for the freedom to imagine and become the spiritual practitioner they want to be and to express that identity through stories of the other world, which take the form of oral communication with spirits.

The HSC program Anna uses is modeled after Michael Harner's principles of "core shamanism" and influenced by the teachings of Sandra Ingerman, one of Anna's own teachers. Harner is an anthropologist who studied indigenous shamanism in the Peruvian Amazon in the early 1960s and was recognized as a shaman by the indigenous practitioners with whom he worked. He developed a model of shamanic journeying for the global north and wrote *The Way*

¹⁸ Spiritual mass, or séance

of the Shaman (1980), started the Foundation for Shamanic Studies¹⁹, and pioneered the modern shamanic renaissance.

Sandra Ingerman is one of the most highly visible shamanic practitioners in the U.S., and she has taught shamanism and shamanic journeying for more than 30 years. She is also a licensed therapist and has received recognition for her dedication to developing practices in integrative medicine and cross-cultural healing methods. She is the author of *Soul Retrieval: Mending the Fragmented Self* (2006). Anna is highly influenced by Ingerman's teaching style and has modeled her lessons after Ingerman's, blending concepts of core shamanism with the structure of therapy sessions.

I attended five weekly two-hour sessions with Anna from November to December 2015. Our sessions were partly recorded and began with a half hour "teaching," or lecture, on the history, cosmology, and principles of core shamanism and the basics of journeying through the three different worlds.²⁰ During these lessons, I learned how to set my intentions, develop questions, find my "entry point" into the different worlds, and properly journey to the worlds to communicate with beings. Anna told me that to begin, I would only journey to the lower and upper worlds, as the middle world was more "tricky." She said that the Foundation for Shamanic Studies has a hard line about new practitioners traveling to the middle world, because it is full of darker energies that might be difficult to handle without proper training.

As she told me this, I imagined that my abuelita operated in the middle world and recalled my father's story of her body thrashing around as she fought a spirit that seemed to have bad intentions. She was so shaken by the event that she stopped practicing altogether.

¹⁹ <http://www.shamanism.org/>

²⁰ As reviewed in Chapter One, there are three different worlds in shamanic cosmology: the middle, lower, and upper worlds. To traverse these worlds, one must enter and sustain an altered state of consciousness (ASC) through "journeying."

A large part of the lessons covered cosmology, or the “physical” orientation of the worlds. Though there is a lot of variation among practitioners, there is general agreement that there are three distinct worlds, and each world has a signature look and feel that most practitioners experience. To reach the lower world, the practitioner must somehow travel “down,” while accessing the upper world requires journeying “up.” Anna stressed that this has nothing to do with the “heaven” or “hell” of Christianity. The lower world is not a hellish place, and it is actually earthlike, though it tends to be occupied by “elemental” forces and animal spirits. In contrast, the upper world is more ethereal and tends to be occupied by angelic figures and teachers. The spirits are not bound to any one world, and they can move freely throughout all the spiritual realms.

There are only three rules while I journey, Anna told me: First, I must express gratitude to every being with whom I communicate. Second, I must not eat or drink anything. Third, I must not take anything from the environment.

Anna said, “If you have a powerful imagination, it will go easier. It helps to let go of ego.” I took this to mean the self I have created and strengthened by narrowing down my practices and beliefs over the years, and the self image I communicate to the world over and over again, particularly through my public performances and social media profiles. It would be no easy task to ignore that self.

My first assignment was to look for a way into the lower world. There are infinite ways in, but often the entry point to the lower world is somewhere in the ground, in the form of a tunnel or a hole. Anna told me that the entire first journey might be spent looking for this place. Once I found it, I would state my intention before entering (“I am journeying to the lower world to...”). Anna stressed the importance of always having a purpose. She counseled me to

constantly pay attention to my surroundings, and I must train myself to hold onto my questions no matter how bizarre the landscape might become. The lower world could look a lot like our own, but the laws of physics don't apply, and it could shift dramatically with little notice.

Anna helped me develop intentions and questions to ask the beings, should I successfully make contact with them during my journey. The questions should be more than just yes-no, but they should be as specific and straightforward as possible, to increase the chances of receiving an answer. Often, we would spend some time reviewing and rewriting my questions before the journeys. At those times, I also had the opportunity to ask Anna questions about the lessons or share things that were troubling me. Our pre-journey conversations often helped me clear my mind and clarify my intentions for the journeys.

The second half hour of each session was dedicated to the journeys themselves. This entailed lying on my back on a mat with a blindfold and a noise-cancelling headset playing traditional shamanic drum music to induce shamanic trance. Trance is an altered state of consciousness (ASC), "a qualitative alteration in the overall pattern of mental functioning, such that the experiencer feels his consciousness is radically different from the way it functions ordinarily" (Gingras, Pohler, & Fitch, 2014). In the Harner method, rapid drumming, usually at 220 beats per minute, is used to attain trance.

Anna sat next to me and recorded the journeys. She also took notes of my words and her observations of my body on a steno pad. I was given a task -- a place to go, a person to meet -- and I was to narrate everything that I saw, heard, tasted, touched, or felt, while she took notes. During the journeys, I could barely hear my own voice, and after a while, I was not completely conscious of what I was saying, as I fell into an altered state. Narrating in this state proved very challenging, and the recording of my first session reflects this, as there are many long pauses. As

Anna warned, my thoughts (what Anna said belonged to the “ego self”) would sometimes intrude and attempt to edit my experiences. She counseled me in subsequent sessions to try to speak through these intrusive thoughts, to acknowledge them and let them go, returning always to the task at hand.

As a result, I learned how to narrate my surroundings without judgment or control. It was akin to stream of consciousness writing; I learned to accept the chaos of my own mind, resolving to observe my sensory experiences without trying to get to the root cause or the logical outcome of what was happening. I also learned how to safely distance myself from my experience. When memories of my past or projections of the future appeared to tempt or upset me, I didn’t blindly follow them, quickly learning that I would only find myself whipped around in the storms of chaos.

No matter what happened during a journey, Anna would not interfere unless I said, “I need help.” During each journey, I was to remain in the world I was visiting until I heard the “call back,” which was an obvious change in the drums, at which point I would hurry back the way I entered. Besides the task, which was never more complicated than finding a being to ask my question, my actions were solely up to me; I could move around and do whatever I wanted, as long as I didn’t break the rules. Anna encouraged me to explore.

After each journey, we sat together and listened to the recordings of the journeys and silently took notes. For the last half hour of each session, we compared notes, filled in details, and shared impressions. Anna listened as I made connections. She insisted on not interpreting my experiences for me, but she pointed out instances of common experiences or “classic” shamanic events and gave me tips on how to perfect my narration so we had more material with which to work. The recorded sessions did not include much dialogue, as we took turns speaking; Anna

explained this was to safeguard against her imposing her own interpretations of the events.

However, we did engage in informal dialogue at the beginning and end of each session, which were not recorded. At the end of each session, Anna instructed me to look over my notes, listen to the recording again, and journal about my experience over the course of the week.

Upon completion of the program, I transcribed all the recordings, and over the following weeks, I reviewed my notes. I started to notice that this method provides a container for a story about the traditional *hero's journey*, as it includes movement from an ordinary world into a nonordinary landscape; a *mission*, as I am communicating with spirits and receiving information; a *challenge*, as I encounter difficulties finding or communicating with the spirits; a *change*, as my perception about myself and reality adjusts to meet new challenges; and a *return*, as I make my way back to ordinary reality.

Throughout my training, I wrote. I stopped seeing my writing as a product that would eventually be viewed publicly. Instead, I treated writing as a process, a form of journeying that provided a systematic way to catalogue my observations. Writing became a kind of altered state of consciousness in its own right, simultaneously a structured method of exploration, a spiritual ritual, and a therapeutic intervention. My initial reflections about the journey sessions and the memories that were elicited from them were fragmented and sometimes incoherent, but I allowed them to breathe and they became the seeds for the narrative that follows in this dissertation.

Over the course of my journeys, three simple questions organically emerged. As I wrote, I realized each question is more profound and complicated than it seems at first glance:

1. Where is home?
2. How do I heal myself?
3. What is my purpose?

These questions became the focus of the next three chapters, which I wrote through a process of writing as inquiry (Richardson, 2005); I worked through these questions as I catalogued my experiences in Cuba and the shamanic counseling program. As I wrote, the questions stimulated memories from my childhood and reflections about my narrative inheritance and the way I have come to make meaning of my world. This method has helped me make connections between the experiences of my shamanic training and seemingly unrelated moments in my past and present life. The interpretive work I have done in the process is akin to the interpretations a shamanic practitioner or an *espiritista* would develop and communicate to her clients. They have helped me fill in the gaps of my experience into a useful story that transforms trouble into opportunity.

In composing the narrative chapters, I used the cosmology of shamanism as an organizing principle, dividing my stories into “The Lower World,” “The Upper World,” and “The Middle World.” Each part weaves together scenes from my trip to Havana, adapted from my notes and photographs; excerpts of transcripts and journals from the shamanic journeys; and associated memories and reflections that serve to address each question. Over the course of two years, I have written and rewritten these reflections and scenes, working them into the narrative of my experience of shamanic training in the form of a *layered account* (Ronai, 1995).

The effect is a multi-voiced discourse, akin to the writing of the second-generation immigrants I reviewed in the introduction. On the one hand, there are fragments of scenes presented in a dreamlike sequence that resembles an altered state of consciousness, in which the reader moves from scene to scene without a clear idea of what comes next. The collage of excerpts from transcripts and journal entries serve to bring the reader into my “head,” to experience as closely as possible what I experienced. On the other hand, there is a guiding question in each chapter that strings the fragments together and creates a purpose and the sense

of a journey. My reflections zoom in and out from the scenes themselves and allow room for evaluation and understanding.

With this layered, nonlinear structure, I sought to simulate the feeling of journeying, during which unexpected and seemingly unrelated stimuli come together. The methodology requires the one who journeys (in this case, my reader) to engage with and understand the journey through the lens of their own lives, as they think through the questions that organize each section, in the spirit of evocative autoethnography (Bochner & Ellis, 2016).

Over time, I have refined each question in an attempt to make them relatable to other second-generation Hispanic immigrants:

- 1) How can we overcome family histories of displacement to create a sense of home?
- 2) How can we engage in self-care practices that promote healing and nourishing relationships?
- 3) How can we create healthy identities and a sense of purpose within our communities?

This narrative approach has allowed me to order disparate memories and thoughts in the form of myth-like stories that address each question. The form invites readers to think *with* my stories (Bochner, 2002, p. 81; Frank, 1995); they may also construct meaning as they read, rather than remaining passive receivers of the text. This is especially compatible with the traditions of oral storytelling that have inspired me and that form the heart of spirit communication, which dissolves the boundaries between “researchers and subjects, between theories and stories, and between authors and readers” (Bochner, 2002, p. 77).

There are no firm answers to any of the questions I pose, as the journey is about understanding the self and challenging the taken-for-granted assumptions about the world. The movement through the worlds is the key, during which more questions emerge. In this way,

journeying and narrative provide pathways to transformation and healing; the resulting stories themselves are “moving forms, at once musical and narrative, which inform [my] sense of the story of which [my life is] a part, of the moving course of [my] own action and experience” (Crites, 2001, p. 31). Crites (2001) calls this kind of story the “sacred story,” and in writing mine through the process of producing this dissertation, I have created a sense of myself and the world in which I operate.

To journey consciously is to accept, observe, and take note of experience from a safe distance, while keeping faith in the process of the journey itself. It is to know that your path won't lead to *the* truth, but that through continued observation and reflection, it will lead to *a* truth. It is to know that truth is always made in the present and is, therefore, always changing; meaning is not discovered, but *created*. Again and again and again.

Autoethnography, Narrative Inquiry, and Communication Scholarship

A narrative approach to research focuses on the stories that people tell to make sense of their lives, which includes the researcher's role in the meaning making process. Scholars operating under the methodology of *narrative inquiry* concern themselves with the way relationships develop communicatively, in partnership (Bochner, 2002). Since our own experiences as researchers influence our interpretations and those we study, we must remain reflexive about who we are and what we do. In this way, narrative inquiry shifts the researcher from the position of detached observer to one who sees all attempts to represent reality as mediated inscriptions of meaning (Bochner, 2002).

Narrative inquiry can be practiced through different writing methods; it encompasses a wide variety of forms, including autoethnography. Autoethnography includes but is not limited to “first-person accounts, personal narratives, self-narratives, native ethnographies, impressionist

tales, and feminist ethnographies” (Bochner, 2002; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Ellis, Kiesinger, & Tillman-Healy, 1997). Some autoethnography takes the form of layered accounts, a writing form developed by Ronai (1995) that conveys the many voices, both personal and academic, working within the consciousness of the narrator (Bochner, 2002). The texts produced under this methodology “preserve or restore the continuity and coherence of life’s unity in the face of unexpected blows of fate that call one’s meanings and values into question” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 744). This is the purpose that my layered stories serve for me.

Whatever the form, autoethnography accesses personal experience to understand larger cultural phenomena. As the writer reflects on her experience, the reader is invited to make connections to cultural frameworks (Ellis, 2004). Autoethnography is therefore inclusive. Through my account, I can invite uncertain identities (Boylorn & Orbe, 2013) and blur the lines between the known and the unknown to create art that represents my experience. In this way, I may “create and inhabit a different world of inquiry, one better suited to integrating the [professional] and the personal selves” (Bochner, 1997, p. 424) that are always simultaneously present, especially in the second-generation immigrant experience. Ultimately, this dissertation is a work of autoethnography, as my personal experience connects to larger cultural practices.

Like the espiritistas and shamanic practitioners who create whole worlds as they recall and communicate their experiences to address their clients’ inquires, I accept and allow myself to narrate what would normally be perceived too strange for words. My work simultaneously relies on memory and makes use of imagination. By reflecting on my own journeys, I recall past experiences, dreams, visions, thoughts, imagined scenes, etc., and create connections between them, along the way building a “mythical” tale that moves me from trouble to transformation. As memoirist Patricia Hampl (2001) writes about the intersection of narration and reflection:

We find, in our details and broken, obscured images, the language of symbol. Here memory impulsively reaches out and embraces imagination. It isn't a lie, but an act of necessity, as the innate urge to locate truth always is. (p. 31).

The resulting stories employ symbols and archetypes in place of "facts" and "analysis," in order to find synergies between fragments of experience and to arrive at a larger sociological and communicational meaning for this work.

Especially among second-generation people, it's unclear where our stories end and others' begin. Freeman (2010) cites Eva Hoffman, a second-generation Holocaust survivor, whose words provide an example of how second-order memory may become part of one's identity:

Indeed, it was not until I started writing about it in my first book ... that I began discerning, amidst other threads, the Holocaust strand of my history. I had carried this part of my psychic past within me all my life; but it was only now, as I began pondering it from a longer distance and through the clarifying process of writing, that what had been an inchoate, obscure knowledge appeared to me as a powerful theme and influence in my life. Until then, it had not occurred to me that I was in effect a receptacle of a historical legacy, or that its burden had a significance and weight that needed to be acknowledged. Now, personal memory appeared to me clearly linked to a larger history, and the heavy dimensions of this inheritance started becoming fully apparent. (p. 148)

Hoffman here illustrates how a process of writing as inquiry can illuminate a life, helping the writer heal the rift between the past and the present and make connections between her life and a greater story, between lived experience and the narrative unconscious (Freeman, 2010).

Freeman (2002) writes that the narrative unconscious is anything that has been lived but that remains unthought of and untold, like “those culturally-rooted aspects of one’s history that have not yet become part of one’s story” (193). He (2010) makes a distinction between first- and second-order memory; first-order memory is that which is lived through first-hand, while second-order memory refers to what we’ve learned through others. Our memories consist of both, and though Freeman thinks the distinction is important, he accepts that they are both equally constitutive of our “past” and our stories about ourselves. In this way, he presents a more nuanced perspective on memory, breaking the usual dichotomy of true/false memory based on a determinate past, in which a true memory recalls events that were experienced, while a false memory involves things that didn’t happen (Hacking 1998, 246). My work makes use of both first- and second-order memory, as I reflect on the stories that have been passed down to me. This memory work has allowed me to finally put into words the experiences and thoughts that have been difficult to communicate, things that might have otherwise been considered unfactual or devoid of research²¹.

Some of us are called to be storytellers, to seek out the strands of the collective past and the fragments of our memory that beg for a place in a larger tale, and to create with all the disparate pieces a sense of unity through a narrative that reaches for the good. As MacIntyre (1981) writes, “the unity of a human life is the unity of a narrative quest” (p. 219). The goal of the quest, the wisdom of the story, is not immediately clear; rather,

²¹ Recently, a new method has been developed specifically to investigate the experience of transgenerational trauma. Called exo-autoethnography, the method presents individual experience as directed by others’ (usually family members’) previous experiences, in an effort to better understand how the researcher is impacted by the history of past generations (Denejkina, 2017).

It is in the course of the quest and only through encountering and coping with the various particular harms, dangers, temptations and distractions which provide any quest with its episodes and incidents that the goal of the quest is finally to be understood. (p. 219)

I didn't know where I was going when I started writing, only that the terrain was uncharted and dark in some places. Through the method of the shamanic journey and the process of narrative inquiry, my purpose has become more clear and my sense of identity has strengthened. My spiritual training and the stories that have resulted from this work has empowered me to reconnect to my ancestry, tap into spiritual self-care movements, and develop myself as a spiritual practitioner in my community. Ultimately, this has proven to be a therapeutic process for me, one that has helped me face traumatic memories and work through my issues narratively, in a way that transforms what might have been considered pathology into sensitivity, creativity, and power.

Ethical Considerations

Each part of the dissertation process involved ethical quandaries. During the research process, I was aware that though I gained access, I could never completely become a member of the worlds I was visiting. In Cuba, I remained an outsider, though my family has roots there; unlike some of the inhabitants on the island with whom I interacted, I was free to leave, and my home was elsewhere. As a U.S. citizen, I enjoy rights that are not shared by Cubans, and at certain points during my trip, the difference between me and native Cubans became painfully obvious. For me, the trip was an enriching experience, part of a larger personal quest that it is my privilege to take. For them, this was their everyday lives, which would continue after I'd gone.

I was also cognizant of my position as a non-indigenous practitioner of shamanism. As I researched shamanic traditions, I became aware of the fine line between cultural appreciation and

appropriation. Despite my ancestry in *espiritismo*, I was not under the illusion that I was training to become a “shaman,” as I reserve the label for indigenous practitioners, those who grew up in cultures organized around shared spiritual beliefs that are enacted by shamanic ritual. I knew I would always remain apart from those cultures and histories. I learned that the practices that I was adopting were developed by anthropologists of the global north who conducted ethnographies of indigenous tribes, then returned home and disseminated what they’d learned through concepts palatable to developed nations, as did Harner (1980).

There is much criticism about the “neo-shamanism” practiced by those following Harner’s methods. Some anthropologists and native practitioners point out that the practices are “consumed” outside of their sacred cultural contexts, rendering rituals more simplistic and static than they were designed to be (Shaw, 2000, p. 206). With the rise of eco- and spiritual tourism, there has been a greater appropriation of indigenous ritual and an increase in the perception of indigenous people as a resource, which sometimes even transgresses beyond appropriation into cultural domination (Cuthbert & Grossman, 1996, p. 21-22, 34).

Despite this awareness of my outsider status, I believe that this kind of research can be conducted in an ethical way, and I sought to remain reflexive about my position during my trip to Cuba, my training in shamanic practice, and the writing of this dissertation. Throughout the narrative, I reflect on my position in an attempt to avoid simplifying indigenous practices or generalizing about my personal experience. I do believe that the spiritual practices I take up can be practiced by anyone, though we must pay our dues and remain respectful of indigenous religions, ever aware that there are practices and beliefs to which we will never gain access. This is part of the training -- learning what is appropriate and when and how to use shamanic techniques properly.

In the spirit of autoethnography, I have focused on my unique position as a second-generation Hispanic immigrant and a U.S. citizen in my writing. While I show the limitations of my access, I also pay homage to the traditions from which I have derived my own practices, reaching toward an amalgamation of rituals and cultures that reflect my mixed heritage, interests, and beliefs. This is akin to the syncretic kind of spiritism practiced in Cuba, which combines traditions from native populations and European immigrants, as well as those from African tribes that took hold on the island following slavery. I aim to remain aware and respectful of the origin of these traditions even as I create a practice that works for me, a new iteration of ancient rituals that I ground in my local culture and personal experience.

I am grateful to the people who have been a crucial part of this process, and I have the utmost respect for their privacy and the accuracy of the “characters” I have written in the pages that follow. I have obtained each person’s permission to include them in this writing, and I have used only first names. In instances when I use dialogue, I have recreated others’ words through detailed notes and/or transcripts of recordings. In addition, I have shared the excerpts about shamanism and the training sessions with Anna for accuracy. Ultimately, this is my story, and my inclusion of others as characters is not meant to suggest that they think exactly as I do or interpreted our interactions in the same way. The chapters that follow present the stories that I have written over the last two years. I cannot predict what will come of them, or how others will relate to them or integrate them into their own lives. The stories are mine. That I have somehow broken through the shadow that has haunted me, through the paralysis that has kept me from screaming out and animating myself for so many years -- that I have somehow in this mess of words heard my voice and found it to ring true -- is, in itself, my greatest accomplishment.

As a friend I met in Cuba once said to me, “It’s not much, but it is mine.”

CHAPTER THREE:
THE LOWER WORLD (WHERE IS HOME?)

“One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious.” (Jung, 1967)

“Down, down, down. Would the fall never come to an end?” (Carroll, 1865)

Finding an Entryway

Dark Energy

To master the shamanic journey, I would have to overcome my fear of the dark.

Anna warned me about the perils of journeying before I was fully trained, but I didn’t want to become panicked when I tried blindfolding myself during our first session. I spent the day before our meeting alone in my room, working up the nerve to practice.

Beams of dusk broke through my wall of windows. A few were cracked, letting in the leafy smell of Florida fall and the constant ping of my metal spoon chimes. My neighbor’s shirts hung drying on the line outside like fallen angels. They reflected the setting sun so naturally, so beautifully, I almost wished I hadn’t noticed. It made me sad, somehow.

My room seemed the safest space in the house; it was minimalistic, just a bed and small altar in the corner, which held a tall candle of the Virgin Mary, my go-to deck of tarot cards, and wooden mala beads. A floorboard clicked under my weight as I walked to the bed, where I’d cued a drum track on my phone. I connected it to a noise-cancelling headset and held it in one hand as I reached for the blindfold.

I fell to the bed with my knees still hanging off the sides. I pulled the headset over my ears. The blindfold hovered above my face. As I brought it closer, I jerked back up to sitting.

I forgot to check under the bed!

I dropped to the floor and looked under the bed. *Of course there's nothing there.*

Back on the bed, I shut out the sights and sounds of my room. I pressed play.

The drums engulfed me.

Ba-dum. Ba-dum. Ba-dum. Ba-dum.

My heart felt like it was speeding up to match the pace of the beat. My chest tightened.

Ba-dum. Ba-dum. Ba-dum. Ba-dum.

My veins tingled as though full of static, if static were an animate thing and not a sound.

Ba-dum. Ba-dum. Ba-dum. Ba-dum.

Through the static, I felt a pull from the corner of the room.

Ba-dum. Ba-dum. Ba-dum. Ba-dum.

There was something there. There was definitely something in the corner.

Ba-dum. Ba-dum. Ba-dum. Ba-dum.

The room was full of static. My breath turned shallow. My nails cut my palms. I tried to concentrate on anything but the corner. I was saying something, but I couldn't make out my own words.

Ba-dum. Ba-dum. Ba-dum. Ba-dum.

The floors gave way beneath me. I felt the thing fly from the corner.

Ba-dum. Ba-dum. Ba-dum. Ba-dum.

I bolted up, ripped the headset off, and threw the blindfold across the room.

--

We tend to think of darkness as a temporary state of emptiness -- the pause when we blink, the absence of light while we sleep, the void before creation. But the darkness is pregnant with activity.

Most of the things that exist in our world are cloaked in perpetual darkness. Take the oceans: they cover more than 70% of the surface of our planet. Everything below 3,000 feet is completely dark. The average depth of the ocean is around 12,000 feet, and the deepest known part of the ocean, the Challenger Deep in the Mariana Trench, is more than 36,000 feet below sea level. If you were to invert Mount Everest into the Challenger Deep, its peak would still be a far cry from the ocean floor (“Deepest Part of the Ocean”, 2017).

The deep ocean is not devoid of life for lack of light. On the contrary, the dark world under our feet is teeming with living beings. Each year, scientists discover thousands of new species, and they estimate that we only know a tenth of the marine life on earth (Spencer, 2015).

We know even less about the worlds beyond our planet. The universe is almost completely dark; only 5% of it is luminous, or capable of emitting or absorbing light. This includes every galaxy -- all the stars, planets, and the cosmic dust in between. The rest is dark matter, cut off completely from light. Scientists know it's there, that it's *something* and not *nothing*, because it interacts with gravitational forces. What's more, the universe is observed to be expanding, possibly infinitely, by a force scientists call “dark energy” (“Dark Energy, Dark Matter”, 2017).

Maybe it's the knowledge that there is so much darkness around us that propels us toward the light. We push the dark to the fringes of our consciousness in favor of what we see and know. But we can only control so much of our surroundings, and the darkness is always closing in. After all, we relinquish our own minds to the obliterating power of sleep for a third of our lives.

What dark energy lives inside of *us*? What worlds wait below the surface of our waking consciousness? Where do we go when we are in different states of consciousness like sleep or trance, when delta and theta waves rule the brain, just outside the illuminating reach of our awareness?

I am afraid of the dark, not because it is nothing, but because from a young age I knew it was something, and that the “something” had a lot to do with a part of me I was not ready to face. The dark corners of my room coiled into a menacing force, and for years, I trained myself to look away.

I didn't yet know that the darkness was an entryway.

--

It was November 16, 2015, and I was back in Anna's studio in Tampa, settling into the seat I'd taken eight months past. Anna was beginning her first lesson.

“In every shamanic system, there is ordinary and nonordinary reality,” she said. “Ordinary reality is this, you and me right here, what we call our ‘real world.’ Nonordinary reality is all that's unseen, though some people are sensitive and can perceive the forms in nonordinary reality from time to time.”

The shadow flashed in my mind.

Anna was describing the three worlds to which a shamanic practitioner may journey. As if seeing my thought, she said, “The middle world is rich with possibility, but you should wait until you have firm footing, so you're prepared to deal with darker energies, should they approach you. And they will. They are attracted to sensitive people. To them, you are a luminous being.”

Every journey begins in the middle world, Anna said, but I would only be there briefly, to find my entry point to the other worlds. My first journey would be to the lower world, a place of primal elemental energies. She said my task was to meet a power animal there. The entry point is unique to each person, and it could be anything -- a tunnel, a hole in the wall, a trap door.

“The laws of physics don’t apply,” Anna said.

Always the attentive student, I took down every word in my notebook:

The laws of physics don't apply.

During the journey, I was to narrate my experience out loud so Anna could record me. I didn’t know how I was going to speak and be present in my experience at the same time. I usually thought about my words carefully before I uttered them.

“Remember, there are three rules: don’t eat or drink anything while you’re down there, don’t take anything, and when you hear the call-back, the break in the drums, express gratitude and immediately make your way back to your entry point. Do you understand?” Anna asked.

I wasn’t sure I did, but I nodded my head and repeated her words, reading from my notes.

I took my place on the mat on the floor, pulled the headphones over my ears, and put on the blindfold Anna had given me, a kind I’d never seen, with circular foam pads that created space so I could keep my eyes open. Anna started the drum track.

As before, my heart rate immediately increased. This time, I kept the panic at bay with deep breaths, and as Anna instructed, I stated my intention aloud three times:

“I am journeying to the lower world to meet an animal. I am journeying to the lower world to meet an animal. I am journeying...”

By the third utterance I felt as though I'd dropped deep into myself. I could no longer hear my voice, and I wasn't sure if Anna could still hear me. I willed myself to keep falling, though the world had gone completely dark.

--

One of the first books I ever read was a children's illustrated Bible, written in Spanish with a side-by-side English translation. It starts with a description of the world before God created heaven and earth:

Only God existed and His Spirit moved upon the face of the waters. God wanted to fill the void and the darkness to disappear. Where nothing existed, there appeared beings with life and without life. God made everything for love and by His Almighty will. For this reason, everything that exists, is a testimony of the glory of God. (Vargas, 1984, p. 3)

Before I even began my formal schooling, I equated darkness with godlessness. I didn't bother to ask why the water preceded God's creation or how it could possibly exist without Him. I didn't ask about the space that God must have occupied while observing the waters of our planet.

I did always wonder, though, about what lived in that all-encompassing darkness, along with God. Even then, I believed He could not possibly have been the only one.

Childhood Landscapes

Transcript of Harner Shamanic Counseling Session, Lower World Journey I

November 16, 2015 (15 minutes)

I am journeying to the lower world to meet an animal.

I am journeying to the lower world to meet an animal.

I am journeying to the lower world to meet an animal.

I am.

[Pause].

There's a lake. There's a hill going down to a lake. There's a fence, almost at the banks of this lake. It looks like a place I used to live when I was a child. Following the fence. I'm walking along the fence. It's taking me away from the lake. Following the fence. There are trees to the right. There are these trees -- it's a park I used to go to. The trees are skinny, really flaky, kind of gray. Gray bark. I'm walking to one of the trees. It's a tree I used to climb a lot.

[Pause].

I don't -- all of a sudden somewhere else. It's the same lake. It's a tree, another tree I used to climb. A bigger tree right by the lake. I fell from its branches once. There's a space where the roots are. Yeah. I'm walking along the outer edge of the tree, the one, the side that's away from the water. That's where the hole is. There's an entryway and then -- going into it.

It's getting big. Feels like a slide. It feels like it's enclosing, like I'm sliding down something.

It's really dark. It's going faster. It's going faster. Can't really see anything or perceive where I am. There's -- it seems like it's getting lighter. So, I feel like I've changed directions. Kinda feel like my head is below my feet. It's really hot. Feels really hot. Definitely hotter. It's getting hotter. Still don't see anything, but I'm sliding, sliding, feels like I'm sliding upside down.

I hear, I hear a bird.

Whistling. Whirring by. There's a bird. Definitely a bird! It's getting louder. I think I see -- it's getting lighter too, and hotter. I'm sliding a little, more slowly now. Evening out. The bird is still there. I hear it again. It's, like, just above my head or, like in front of me, but by my head 'cause -- I'm coming out. It seems like I'm coming out head first. Okay.

[Pause].

Where am I?

I think I hear a wave. I think I'm on a beach. I don't see anything, but I hear so many things. I hear ocean waves, the birds.

I've journeyed here to meet an animal. Is it -- are you the animal? The little bird.

[Pause].

Okay, the bird is there. There's something else. Coming from the water. Something crawling on the sand, coming towards me. Is it a crab?

[Pause].

I don't see anything, still. Trying. I hear a lot of movement to my left. Still, I'm still on my back, actually. Move. Gotta move.

[Pause].

Okay, I'm sitting up. The water's to my back. There are trees in front of me. Looks like an island. Turn.

[Pause].

It's like a, it's like a parrot. Yeah, there's a parrot coming towards me, limping on the sand. It's um, blue. You can kind of see it but then it goes away. The little birds are still -- they're still fluttering around, but I don't know if they're talking to me or not.

[Pause].

I wanna stand up.

[Pause].

I'm walking to the edge of the water. I feel, there's something still, now it's to my right. I turned around, so. There's still something there.

[Pause].

Now -- putting my feet in the water. That helps. It was really hot, so. The water is very cold.

[Pause].

A fish! Something with a fin.

[Pause].

And a, a rattle?

[Pause].

I have -- I think I hear the call-back. Thank you. I'm gonna go back now.

Turning around. Walking back to where I think I came out of. Yes. There's a little hole. I can feel it. I can't see it very well but -- there's a little hole. Going back in there. And going very quick. I feel like my feet are being pulled. Up, up, going up very quickly. It's getting cold. It's getting colder. I'm coming to the tree. I'm back. I'm back at the tree.

The lake again, and the fence.

--

As I moved through grade school, I became equally fascinated with the strange creatures of the waters and the unexplored planetary bodies of outer space, and I studied them whenever I could. When I was eleven, I told my parents I wanted to be a marine biologist, to explore the depths of the ocean and discover beings that had never seen the light. They enrolled me in a summer program at MAST Academy, which stands for Marine and Science Technology.

One day, I was on a field trip to Elliott Key in Key Biscayne. I waded knee-deep into the salt marshes. I became completely immersed in my experience. All my attention was on the blue-green water as I collected the hermit crabs that congregated around the mangroves. I traced the lines of their shells with my fingers. I concentrated so I wouldn't lose my flimsy shoes to the suction of the sand. I sucked air through my nose, savoring the salt.

Our guide lifted a horseshoe crab from the sand. It seemed extraterrestrial, with its stingray armor concealing its cockroach-like legs that flailed in the air when picked up. The guide said it was a native specimen. I felt like I was a million miles away from our new suburban house in Miami, where our backyard was a strip of pavement and the homes were sandwiched together, ignorant of the Everglades which closed in all around. I pictured my brothers playing video games in their rooms while I learned to be an explorer of the swamp.

We took our findings into a lab, where we measured our hermit crabs and drew them in our notebooks. I wrote down everything I could about them: *Pagarus longicarpus*, the long-clawed hermit crab, from the family *Paguridae*, of the order *Decapoda*, of the class *Malacostraca*, of the subphylum *Crustracea*, of the phylum *Arthropoda*, of the kingdom *Animalia*.

Later, in high school, I was surprised by how poorly I performed on science tests. The book learning was nothing like the hands-on experiences I'd had earlier, and it didn't come easily. My teachers, mostly male, told me that I wasn't made for the rigor of scientific research and that maybe I was better suited for the humanities. I rebelled against them in a way that only hurt myself, purposefully failing my exams and sleeping in my classes.

This was before I learned that girls are commonly lured away from studying STEM subjects because of teachers' biases (Lavy & Sand, 2015). I thought that something in me was

naturally deficient, and I began to believe the myth that science and art are mutually exclusive pursuits.

As I fell from the graces of “Science,” I turned more fully toward writing, but I continued to keep notes about my environment.

--

November 16, 2015

Today was my first journey to the lower world.

I don't know how I interpret what happened, so I'll just write what comes to mind instead. I can see the landscape of the place I visited clearly. This is strange, because I couldn't see anything while I was there. Anna says that some people are clairaudient. They hear instead of see. The sounds paint a picture somehow, the way sonar waves bounce off objects to create an image.

I was surprised to see two of my childhood landscapes so automatically, as though they were embedded inside of my mind. The tree by the lake and the mangrove beach. Maybe I'm like a god creating the world in my own image.

I didn't hear myself talking after a while. I was surprised when I heard my voice in the recording. I said more than I thought. I used the present tense. It was like I was hypnotized, completely in the experience. I felt like I was actually falling, but I was not scared.

I was like Alice, floating down to another world.

--

As a kid I was attracted to stories about leaving home for adventures. I was Alice. I was Dorothy. I was always running away.

My parents disparagingly called me *callejera*, wanderer of the streets. They looked for me for hours, and I hid from them, wishing I could live outside. When we moved to a little brown townhouse by a lake, I took on the role of explorer, surveying the land, drawing maps, writing observation entries, and collecting specimen samples in a beige-colored tin lunchbox. I liked to sit under a particular tree, a large oak by the lake. Under the safety of its branches, I took time to explore my inner world. I wrote scary stories about the shadow that visited me at night while my body was paralyzed.

I wrote down all the details in a report-like fashion -- the light in the room, the staticky feeling of the air, the way the shadow vibrated my body from its corner like a spider tugging at its cocooned prey. When I was done writing, I dug a hole at the base of the tree. I folded the story as small as it would get, and I buried it inside the hole and sat on top of it.

Then, I went about my day.

Going Through Customs

Interrogation

The hole at the base of the tree by the lake is almost a mythical place now, because it is imbued with an essence of me. It's the transition space between home and adventure. My dreams and fears are buried there, and up until I journeyed, they were shrouded in darkness. I think that I defensively concealed the spot to keep it safe from the harshness of reality. In the process, I hid it from myself, forgetting it completely.

Through journeying, that darkness has turned into an entryway. Though I couldn't see, though I was scared to go in blind, I made my way through the hole at the base of the tree. On the other side, a whole world opened to me. I remembered my child self. I unlearned my fear of

the unknown. From then on, every dark corner became a portal to a world of my own creation, and I marveled at the wonders of my own mind.

In the beginning of the third chapter of *Through the Looking Glass*, called “Looking-Glass Insects,” Alice has just passed through a mirror into another world. The first thing she does is survey the land: “‘It’s something very like learning geography,’ thought Alice, as she stood on tiptoe in hopes of being able to see a little further” (Carroll, 2010, p. 154).

She proceeds to meet a string of animals, a goat and a beetle and a horse and a voice in her head that’s really a gentle-voiced gnat, all trying to make sense of her. The land and the customs are alien and sometimes aggressive in their questioning, but through her interaction with them, Alice learns about herself and about her role back home. Paradoxically, the more her curiosity about the wonderland around her grows, the more she searches for traces of the familiar: marmalade jam and afternoon tea.

Every good journey is imbued with the power of home, whether we are leaving home or returning, having been altered by our adventures. We tend to envision the one who journeys as an untethered wanderer, a rolling stone, but the explorer is intimately attached to the idea of home. The very act of running away from home solidifies it as an important place; it is at once the point of departure and the destination. As soon as Alice and Dorothy succeeded in getting away from home, they were immediately looking to get back.

Even the most exotic destinations we can conjure are inevitably projections of what we know. For me, the lower world was full of the familiar, made of bits of memory and imagination alike: the lake by my childhood home, the mangrove swamps, Lewis Carroll’s Wonderland, even the Garden of Eden. Together, they form an imaginary geography to which I continually return, both as an escape from, and a looking forward to, home.

These imaginary places are so full of power, we must be wary of our own hunger for them, or we risk being expelled forever, like Adam and Eve from the Garden, after they ingest the forbidden fruit and its knowledge of good and evil. Or sometimes, we might be unable to leave, like Alice when she eats the cake labeled “eat me” and grows too tall to fit through the doorway.

When I traveled to Havana in May 2015, Anna hadn’t yet taught me the rules of journeying -- that I shouldn’t take anything, that I should always express my gratitude. I’m afraid I might have journeyed there before I was ready, that I took too much, that I didn’t give enough thanks.

I now see that Havana is a personal place of power for me. It is a paradoxical place, the Eden from which my ancestors were expelled, and at the same time, a Wonderland that threatens to keep me forever in its grasp. It is the point of departure and the destination. Now that I have tasted its fruits, I believe I will always look forward to my return, though I also know I will never be able to take root there.

--

Traveling to a vastly different world than your own can be intimidating right from the get-go. Before I boarded a plane to Havana, I had to navigate the delicate visa process, which had recently been amended to allow travel by U.S. citizens. I was one of the first Cuban Americans to go “back.”

Nobody really knew what to do, not even the travel agents.

Officially, travel to Cuba for tourist purposes was still prohibited, but there were 12 new categories of authorized travel. On my visa application, I checked off the most accurate one, the

one for public performances, including exhibitions, since I would be assisting my cousin on her art exhibit for the Havana Biennial.

I got the visa and boarded the plane a few weeks later. One moment the plane was landing in a lush landscape, the passengers clapping and cheering; the next, I was walking into a fluorescent-lit terminal, where I was detained by an armed official in a holding area while the rest of the passengers proceeded to customs.

I felt the official's unforgiving eyes on my skin. He had a razor-sharp stare, the eyes of a killer. I thought that maybe he'd been a soldier, or maybe in this militarized government, all officials were soldiers.

"You speak Spanish!" he said to me. "How is this? You look American."

I told him that I was born in Miami to a Colombian mother and a Cuban father. The official turned and waved to another, a woman who sized me up as she made her way over. They flanked me and together, they unleashed a barrage of questions. As one interrogated, the other surveilled me for inconsistencies.

I was getting nervous, because I'd read speculative articles that the Cuban government would consider the children of exiled Cubans to be Cuban citizens, even if they'd been born in the U.S. I knew this wouldn't hold up. Cuba and the U.S. were in the midst of negotiating the loosening of the embargo, opening travel and maybe even trade. But I was worried as I was being questioned that the officials would find a way to keep me detained. Maybe they didn't like the new changes.

"I'm here for a cultural event," I said for the third time, holding up my visa. "The Havana Biennial." I told them I was going to help my cousin with an art exhibit about the Cuban-American experience.

“So you’re going to see family?” the female official asked.

“No. She’s also American. I am staying in a *casa particular*²² close to the Hotel Presidente,” I said.

“Are you going to the beaches?” she asked.

Careful here, I thought. “I’m not here as a tourist. Just here to work the art event.”

“Are you a journalist?” she asked.

“Not really. I’m a doctoral student at the University of South Florida in Tampa,” I said.

“A doctor? Of what medicine?” she asked.

“No. Not a regular doctor. A doctor of philosophy. I am a writer,” I said.

“So you’re like a journalist,” she said it with a sense of finality.

“I suppose so.” I didn’t want to push it.

“Are you affiliated with any political organizations?” she asked.

“No,” I said. I thought about how to simplify things so they would think me harmless: “I am only here to write about the Biennial for my schoolwork.”

They let me go, reluctantly. I proceeded to customs. I picked one of the many lines and waited my turn. The male official whispered something to the guard who inspected bags at my line. They both stared at me.

When my turn came, my mind reached for bizarre scenarios. Maybe one of them slipped drugs in there while I was being questioned, to have reason to imprison me. Maybe I’d packed a seemingly innocuous item that was banned.

The guard waved me along. I almost couldn’t believe it. I gathered my items with care, and though I wanted to run to a taxi outside, I forced myself to walk slowly, to stop and

²² Spanish for “private house,” similar to bed and breakfast

exchange my dollars for Cuban Convertible Pesos, or CUCs, at a 1:1 ratio minus a 10% tax, my penalty for being an American in Cuba. I was suddenly not afraid any more, consumed by calculations. I silently scolded myself for failing to convert my dollars to euros, which aren't taxed, before leaving the States.

I'd read in my guidebook that visitors may only use CUCs, different than the peso, the national currency carried by the locals, which is worth much less. The dual currency system is a way for the government to segregate visitors from locals, since tourist establishments only accept CUCs. I knew I could get my hands on pesos on the streets, and if I could avoid getting swindled, I meant to find an unofficial *paladar*, a home-based restaurant off the beaten tourist path where I could have a wholesome meal at local prices.

When I stepped outside the terminal, I was blinded by the brightness of the sky, overwhelmed by the hundreds of brown faces that gathered, waiting to be reunited with their families.

Familia Extranjero

"Me llamo Ismael," said the man who drove me from the José Martí International Airport to the Avenida de los Presidentes in Vedado, Havana. He seemed young, in his early thirties, like me. But his face was lined and his eyes were fixed ahead, like he'd already seen all he wanted to see.

We were in what my guidebook called an *almendron*, a 1950s car converted into a taxi. It sounded to me like the Spanish word for almonds. This almond was bright red and had a little American flag glued to the dash on the passenger side, where I sat, my stringy, dirty blonde hair whipping in the wind.

Ismael said he would take me the scenic route so I could see the Malecón, the famous esplanade and seawall. It whirled on our periphery like a crumbling white snake, dividing pavement from blue gulf. We passed a mural with the words: *Patria o Muerte!*

Fatherland or Death.

He pointed to a spot along the seawall. “There. That’s where my brother launched the boat he made.” I asked him if his brother made it, but he didn’t answer. He let me off on a corner of the Avenida near the Hotel Presidente.

I made my way down the street, away from the seawall. The air was heavy. My pack was hot on my back, but I felt healthy under the sun, far from the airport and the scrutinizing gaze of the customs official.

I proceeded down the Avenida, shielding my eyes with one hand, flipping through my journal with the other. My AirBnb reservation slid out, and I unfolded it to reveal the image of the colonial house that would be my home the next week and a half, a seafoam green beauty. I held up the image as I walked. The building seemed in great condition compared to some of the crumbling structures I passed.

A school courtyard appeared on my right. Children in yellow pants wrote on each other’s white shirts with permanent markers and laughed. The last day of school, maybe. There was a park in the median of the Avenida. A group of high schoolers gathered around a bench and listened to music on a radio. A splash of seafoam emerged. I stopped and held the image up for comparison. It was a match. Just beyond was the Hungarian embassy, where a guard kept watch. He exuded none of the negativity of the airport official. A guardian for foreigners.

I let myself in through the cast iron gate and rang the bell. I waited. I heard birds chirping, neighbors calling. I suddenly felt much farther than a mere 200 miles from my birthplace across the Florida Straits.

Somewhere along the Avenida, I must have crossed a portal into a faraway spacetime, where people were forever at leisure and seawalls glittered in the sun.

--

The etymology of the word “Malecón” is uncertain. Before I traveled to Cuba, it sounded like a negative word to me, since the root *mal* means bad or evil. I’d grown up in Miami hearing stories about *balseiros*, fugitives on rafts, and I pictured hundreds of people spilling over the wall, risking their lives to leave. My parents told me we were very lucky to be us and not them.

I didn’t yet know that each night, thousands of Cubans, mostly the young and the hopeful, convert the esplanade into their own special universe. That after sundown, the seawall transforms from a mere landmark to a faithful muse for musicians, artists, dreamers, lovers.

The darkness holds everyone equally in its balmy embrace.

--

The caretaker of the AirBnb on the Avenida welcomed me in and ushered me through the colonial house. The second floor landing opened to a formal dining room. The ceilings were more than twenty feet tall. The tiles on the walls and floors were immaculate, with intricate designs of colonial style, multicolored flower-like shapes connecting in perfect symmetry. The wooden furniture was polished and showed no sign of wear.

I saw a sliver of kitchen, its wash basin overwhelmed with fruit waiting to be sliced: tiny bananas and mango and mamey and others I couldn’t identify. An archway led to a sitting room

and beyond that, French doors opened onto a large balcony. The caretaker beckoned me to follow her down a sunny corridor of doorways. My door was last, a suite with its own bathroom.

“Cuál es tu fruta favorita?” *What is your favorite fruit?* she asked.

She’d been a bit gruff when she answered the door, but her mood brightened when I spoke and she realized she wouldn’t have to muster her best English for me.

*You look like a gringa*²³! she’d said.

“I haven’t had mamey in a while,” I said, dropping my pack, remembering the meaty salmon-colored fruit I’d eaten as a child in Miami. It wasn’t as sweet as most fruits. I’d felt nurtured by it, like drinking mother’s milk.

“A la orden,” she said. She told me her name. *Fidela*.

She looked like my mother’s mother, squat and dark and soft, despite her rough exterior. She had the air of a matriarch, though the real owners of the place were the privileged Cubans who lived in Spain and came and went as they pleased.

--

On my third day in Havana, I bought a can of condensed milk at an outdoor market with Fidela’s pesos, so she could make shakes while I waited for dinner. She had taken to fattening me up the previous two days, in my private little paladar. Breakfast consisted of coffee, bread and butter, and platters of every kind of fruit imaginable -- papaya, guava, pineapple, orange, and guanabana, one of the strange fruits I’d spotted before. Though I wasn’t accustomed to so much sweetness, I could feel myself becoming more vibrant than I’d ever felt, as I ate the natural food and walked the Havana streets.

²³ Term for a white female who doesn’t speak Spanish

I unlocked the door with the key Fidela lent me. She was in the kitchen when I entered, and she called over her shoulder: “You can drop that on the counter and go relax on the balcony.”

I felt like a princess as I leaned over the limestone railing and looked down at the darkening street, out to the seawall. Time stretched there. Two days felt like a week. There was no internet and very little to do unless I wanted to pay a premium for a ride in an old cadillac around a sanitized version of Havana, replete with cabaret shows and fancy rum drinks. From my vantage point, I watched the double-decker tourist busses filled with blonde heads on their way to or from all-inclusive beach resorts.

From up there, the scene felt like an old dream, an absent memory recalled to life.

As we ate, Fidela told me about her real home in Guanabacoa, a little town on the outskirts of Havana. She just bought a house there after a lifetime of working and saving.

“I’m one of the lucky ones,” she said. “Because I get to work here, for you.”

Her face dropped to her plate. Her fork worked into a bed of rice. I practiced Spanish responses in my head, but none of them seemed right. I realized with embarrassment that this was still a whitewashed version of Fidela’s Cuba, that I knew nothing about how Cubans really lived.

“Hey!” she said, relieving me. “Would you like to come home with me? We could make a trip before you leave.”

I smiled and nodded feverishly, trying to keep the food in my mouth, my heart pounding in my neck.

--

Fidela is the female version of Fidel, a popular name in Cuba. It means “keeper of the faith.” It means knowing that everything will be okay, even when there’s no work and little food, even when you’re separated from your family by walls of laws, even when you feel stuck, with no way out. Cubans love to play with words, and among the many dualities inherent in daily Cuban life (the dual currency, the symbiotic existence of communism and capitalism, etc.) is the double-speak one must learn in the event that the government is listening.

For instance, the word “fe” means faith in Spanish. But when someone asks you, “Do you have faith?” they are really asking if you have “FE,” or *familia extranjero*, relatives in exile in other countries. Cubans with FE can afford a little more than those who don’t, as they receive money from their relatives abroad (Sánchez, 2013).

Fidel was my father’s middle name. When he became an adult, he had it reduced to an F. And when he was older, he had it removed altogether, as though it never existed. If you ask him about it, he’ll say that he didn’t want to share a name with Castro, who he saw as the enemy of freedom. I always felt that it was a kind of disavowal of his roots. That he’d lost faith after his family’s exile and his mother’s untimely death.

Listening for the Call Back

The Fall

When I was six, I weathered Hurricane Andrew with my family in the converted garage of our home in Miami. As my brothers slept through it, my parents pushed the largest pieces of furniture against the rattling door, the only thing that separated us from the 175-mile-per-hour winds outside.

Everything was dark. Everything shook. I saw the fear on my parents' faces. I heard my heart in my ears.

The eye of the hurricane passed over us. All was still. We walked through the house. Shattered glass crunched beneath our feet, and through the broken windows, we could see that even the Cuban royal palms had been uprooted.

Later, we planted young Florida royals in the holes left behind.

In the early days of Miami's development, most of the royal palms planted in the city were Cuban imports. They were almost indistinguishable from the Florida natives, except for the more curvaceous column, but they were considered different species.

Now, the Cuban royal and the Florida royal are considered one and the same.

Even when you tear your roots out, something of the past remains.

--

May 21, 2015

The last week, so much, I can't write it

Lone woman in white walking, crumbling street, pipes exposed

Clotheslines between windows, multicolored linens hanging like prayer flags

Invited in for coffee by strangers 3x

Singer at the club pointed at me and yelled, "You're not Cuban!"

I slipped my journal into my bag, trying not to feel a failure. It was two days before my departure back to Tampa, and I'd written nothing but broken little notes. At the seafoam house, Fidela and I prepared for our trip to Guanabacoa. She instructed me to wear jean shorts and

*chancletas*²⁴ and to carry only the pesos of the natives. “No CUCs,” she said. She pronounced it *cooks*.

“And don’t talk to anyone,” she said. “Or they’ll know you’re American.”

We took a crowded bus from the house to a square in Old Havana. We piled into a shared car. We were the only women in the car, and I tried not to say more than a polite hello to anyone, though the men were chatty. The taxi dropped us at the outskirts of Old Havana, at Central Station. I saw signs for José Martí’s birthplace and pictured the park in Tampa’s Ybor City dedicated to him, still owned by the Cuban government. Martí called Ybor City his “faithful little town.” It was his second home after his exile from Cuba; I think he considered it his primary home, in the end.

We boarded another bus. Fidela helped me pay and we took our seats for the twenty-minute ride to Guanabacoa. I looked out the window and froze as we passed security stations occupied by military police with rifles in hand. They didn’t stop us.

We arrived in Guanabacoa, and I noticed it was hilly in comparison to the city, but everything was haphazardly paved and dusty. We got off the bus at a high point, from which I saw the whole town, and I imagined that we could be anywhere in Latin America. It’s what I’d always pictured my mother’s hometown in Colombia to be -- squat housing set close together, few trees, and people yelling to each other from their stoops.

Fidela invited me into a small rectangular living space with sparsely decorated walls and simple tile floors.

“It’s not much,” she said. “But it is mine.”

²⁴ Flip-flop sandals

“It’s lovely,” I said, noticing the central decoration was a three-foot statue to San Lazaro, the saint of dogs and the sick. He wore purple robes, and his exposed skin was covered in lacerations. Two dogs stood at his feet. As Fidela passed him, she dropped a few cents into a bowl she’d placed in front of him. She said she periodically donated the money to a clinic for people with skin problems.

“Do you know the saints?” she asked.

I told her I did, that I grew up Catholic and that my family had altars upon which they placed offerings to the Virgin Mary and the archangels. Her eyes lit up as I said it, and she motioned for me to follow her to the back. Tucked off the kitchen was a little room, empty except for a tiny table covered in a white sheet. On the table were various small objects -- glasses filled with water, a mortar and pestle, incense holders, a pamphlet with cracked, yellowed pages, and a deck of tarot cards.

“I’m happy I can show you this,” Fidela said. “I don’t bring it up to most people.”

I thought about my own altar at home. It wasn’t a secret, but only a couple of my closest friends knew about it. I liked to keep it to myself.

Fidela’s kitchen was the cheeriest room in the house, with orange walls and an assortment of gadgets and spices. She made the same meal of ground beef, rice, and beans she’d made me before, but it tasted more savory, and I realized she kept the best ingredients for herself. While we ate, she told me about the daughter who left to Texas on a rare work visa, to play the violin in concerts. She didn’t know when she would see her again.

Her face got very still.

“Child, why did you come here? Don’t you see that we are all on hold? There’s nothing for you here. Go. Go home and don’t come back.”

The “fall” is at the center of so many of our stories. Satan was an angel who fell from heaven; civilization began when Adam and Eve metaphorically fell from the graces of Eden. Alice fell down the rabbit hole. Dorothy fell from the sky into the world of Oz. In literature, falling is often a transitional state, a tool we use to signal change.

Some researchers believe that the fall is more than just a story, that it serves an evolutionary purpose: the common dream of falling is actually an ancestral memory that we relive in our sleep to prepare for the potential danger of falling to our deaths, as our ancestors used to sleep in trees (Coolidge & Wynn, 2006). This is sometimes referred to as the “Lucy dream,” because recent evidence suggests that Lucy, the name we’ve given to one of the most complete hominin fossils in existence, died by falling from the branches of a tall tree (Hoffman, 2016).

Maybe falling comes more naturally to us than we think. Maybe our whole existence is a falling state, a transition from one place we’ve forgotten to another we can’t anticipate.

When I fell down the hole at the base of my tree, it felt like I’d been falling all along, like I’d been waiting all my life to finally get to the bottom, to touch my feet to the ground.

Souvenir/Heirloom

It was November 23, 2015, and I was to journey to the lower world a second time, for half an hour this time. I would look for my power animal and ask my question.

Where is home?

I’d been turning the question over in my mind since I returned from Cuba. I told Anna that it all still seemed so unclear to me -- what I was supposed to do, where I was supposed to be. I felt turbulent inside, like something had been stirred up and refused to settle.

“People think things get easier when they find their spiritual path, but things usually get much harder,” Anna said.

“I’m ready,” I told Anna.

I let the drums take me, and the room dropped away. I still couldn’t see, but I knew I was back at the shore of the lake from my childhood.

“I hear water [...] There must be a storm or something,” I said.

I imagined the tadpoles that must be whirling under the surface, the ones I used to scoop out when I was seven. I’d pinch their tails and watch them wriggle wildly between my nails as I walked to the street. I’d drop them one by one on the scorching cement and crouch over them like a mad scientist, wondering if they could feel.

I am no longer that child, and I cannot linger here. I thought it but decided not to say it. It was more difficult to fall away completely than it had been the first time, and I was conscious of Anna in the room with me.

I followed the shore to my favorite oak, my entry point. I had forgotten about its existence until it appeared on my first journey the week before -- had not given it a moment’s thought in twenty-three years, until all of a sudden, there it was.

This time, the earth around the base of my tree was muddy, and the entrance to the tunnel was obscured. I dug to find my way. No matter how fast I dug, the water kept filling the hole. I held my breath and forced myself through face-first. I fell more quickly than before. I fell out onto the beach.

“I’m gonna make my way towards the water like I did last time,” I said.

I walked to the shore. I put my feet in the water. I couldn’t see, but it felt warmer.

“It’s all just sounds,” I said.

Just then, I felt the water at my feet roiling. I looked down to see a rope of light. It was the first thing I'd been able to see during the journeys. The rope of light made a figure eight around my ankles. It twisted around my leg, around my torso. It bound me in place.

It was a snake, and I was its captive. Its head appeared in front of me. A cobra. It showed me its fangs. Its eyes were piercing lights.

"Snake. Can I ask you my question now?" I asked. "Where is my home?"

The snake did not answer but only squeezed tighter. It was hard to breathe.

"I feel bound. She's wrapping herself around me, and feels like, like I can't move."

The snake released me suddenly, unwinding quickly. It disappeared into the mangrove forest. I followed. My feet fell into the mud. I had to exaggerate my steps to move forward amidst the roots.

The earth began to shake.

"Earthquake?" I said. "Yeah, I feel the beat in my feet. They're very connected but the earth is moving. The mangroves are keeping me still. I'm holding on. The snake is nowhere to be found."

I walked back to the beach. When I got to the shore again, I heard a deep humming.

"A buzzing?" I said. "It's surrounding me, like a swarm." *Insects?*

The swarm drove me back to where I first saw the snake. At my feet, I saw a rainbow light. I crouched down and picked something up.

"Shiny snake skin," I said.

I heard the drums calling me.

"Thank you," I said, and I made my way back to my entry point.

--

When I stepped back onto U.S. soil after ten days in Havana, I felt strange, like I wasn't really in my body. It was like I'd been gone much longer and been much farther than a couple hundred miles away.

The previous night was still playing in my eyes, the throngs of Cubans along the seawall. I reached into my pocket and turned over the ragged piece of shiny colonial tile I had taken from a street in the neighborhood of Vedado. Here was the sole souvenir of a trip I couldn't yet put into words. I held tight to it, hoping it might help me remember later.

What is it about the physical that helps us keep hold of the past? I always wished for heirlooms, for something that would help me know the grandmother I never got to meet and the land that would never fully be my home. Little souvenirs of my family's history.

Meanwhile, so many Cubans chose to leave all possessions behind for a shot at freedom. On the seawall, they told me of their wishes to have more, to be more.

Under the cloak of our mutual darkness, we filled the night with wishes.

We shared our sad stories.

We shared our light.

We made the darkness conscious.

CHAPTER FOUR:
THE UPPER WORLD (HOW DO I HEAL?)

“And God said to the serpent that he would be cursed among all the animals and that forever it would creep on its belly. And God banished Adam and Eve from Paradise and told them they would suffer for their sin: ‘Woman shall bring forth children in sorrow and shall be ruled by her husband, and man shall have to earn their bread with the sweat of his face.’” (Vargas, 1983)

Learning my Body

Exile

My mother tells me that shortly after I was born, my grandmother Elsie came to visit me from the afterlife. She watched as the chair next to my crib began to rock on its own, and she just knew it was Elsie, although she had never met her.

My father tells me I am just like her, studious and serious about the world. When Elsie graduated, she left her home in the heart of Santiago de Cuba to teach the children of sugarcane farmers in the countryside just outside the little municipality of La Maya.

Elsie’s father was the portmaster of Santiago, and her parents expected her to “marry well” into the upper-middle class. Instead, she married my grandfather, the youngest son of a rancher. In her was a streak of the revolutionary spirit that had permeated the surrounding Sierra Maestra mountains, where Castro’s forces lay in hiding.

In December 1958, the rebel air force led by Castro fired down onto Batista’s soldiers in their headquarters in La Maya, forcing Elsie to flee with my grandfather and her son, my father, who was a one-year-old at the time. They rode a horse out of La Maya and crawled into a

drainpipe at the outskirts of town and waited for the battle to end. Castro's forces went on to sweep the nation, and by the beginning of the following year, he was in full power.

Elsie went about her life, single-handedly teaching all 40 students who came to her from around the countryside, who she separated into different grade levels by age. In the morning, she began with the kindergarteners and made her way around the room, ending with the fifth-graders in the afternoon. She sometimes took my father with her and sat him with the youngest groups. He says he remembers she was just as hard on him as she was on everyone else, and nobody dared say a word out of line.

I like to imagine that Elsie was more romantic than the austere picture my father paints. He says she had been hopeful of the revolutionaries' ability to change things for the better, and I wonder if she didn't root them on.

But as the years passed, it became clear to Elsie that things would only become worse for her and her family. She decided to send my father on one of the first Freedom Flights to Miami, and eventually, she also went into exile, leaving behind the little school in the countryside for an unknown life in the U.S.

Not long after settling in New York, she was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. She died in 1974, at the age of 41.

I think my parents tell me they have seen Elsie hovering around me because they want to somehow tie her torn thread to mine, to make something of the time that was cut short. Her mother, my great grandmother Elvira, tried to call her back during a séance immediately following her death, so Elsie could say goodbye to her family one last time. But she had failed.

Now here I am, conducting a kind of mediumship of my own, trying to use my body and my words to heal the wounds of separation. I am the closest thing I have to my grandmother, and I wonder what I may have inherited from her.

What of her knowledge, what of her troubles, rests in my body?

--

As a kid, my body was my instrument. I didn't give it much thought except to decide how I could use it each day: I used my feet to roller skate down the street, I used my arms to climb my tree, and I used my hands to write in my notebook. I often came home with bloody knees, and my mother cleaned my wounds with alcohol so that I would think twice about my actions.

You are not a boy, she'd say. Stop acting like one.

When I was a month away from fourteen, I got my first period. I was in geometry class. I was sitting in front, taking notes, when I felt something hot and sticky in my seat. I ran to the bathroom and locked myself in a stall. I pulled down my underwear and noticed a brown sludgy substance on the white cotton. I immediately pulled my pants up in fear. I had no idea what it was. I thought maybe I was sick.

Back in class, we were learning triangles. The chalkboard was filled with neat lines. Our teacher said that there are never any surprises with triangles. The angles always add up to 180.

That night, I showed my mother.

She said I would finally understand the suffering of women.

I was exiled from my childhood. Things that were once certain became questions. The body I had ignored was screaming its existence.

I writhed in pain for three days. My mom helped me scoot my bottom close to the wall so I could put my legs above my head. She brought me Tylenol. I clutched my heating pad. She stayed with me.

Aside from the pain and the knowledge that things had irrevocably changed, I felt important, like I had been initiated into a secret club from which my father and brothers were permanently barred.

--

At the start of my adolescence, the shadow visited almost every night.

When I'm scared, my instinct is to escape. But I was held in place. The shadow climbed onto me and pressed down on my chest, and what terrified me the most was the paralysis.

I tried and I tried to move. I tried so hard that I came apart from my body and floated up to the ceiling and bounced there like a forgotten balloon.

I looked down and saw the tail of a snake wrapping itself around my legs.

My shock transformed into a childish awe as I realized that all the stuff I'd read in the Bible was actually true -- *we do have souls, and there are demons!*

--

November 23, 2015

When I got back to my entry point after my last journey to the lower world, I realized I was still holding the snake skin. I didn't want to tell Anna, because I thought she might be upset at me since I'm not supposed to take anything.

But I really tried to put it down. Maybe I'm meant to have it.

What is it, this snake? I've been seeing it since I was a child. Recently, the snake called herself Shakti.

Is this an obsession?

Anna gives me her observation journal to take home every week. She paraphrases my words and makes notes about my body. Last time, she wrote my words in one column:

“I feel bound. She’s wrapping around me. I can’t move. My ankles are tight together.”

And in the column next to this, she wrote:

“Very flushed.”

--

Psychologists use the word “depersonalization” to explain the feeling some people get when they have experienced trauma, the feeling of being “unreal,” or disconnected from one’s body (Lofthouse, 2014). This displacement from the body makes one numb to life. It’s hard to experience joy or pain if you can’t *feel* it.

In 2011, after I escaped from the apartment I’d shared with my boyfriend in Tampa and moved on my own, I was numb most of the time, with short periods of intense anxiety. I didn’t get help, but instead poured myself into graduate school. I ignored my body and lost the connection to the earth I had loved so much as a child.

--

November 29, 2015

Tomorrow is my first journey to the upper world. It’s supposed to be a heavenly place full of teachers and guides. I wish I didn’t feel so sick. I still have my period. It was early again. I know because of the moon. I got it last new moon, and then again on the full moon a few days ago. Maybe I’m just resetting, but I feel like something is wrong. The last ultrasound showed my uterine lining was thicker than normal. I went for another ultrasound a couple days ago to check it out. I might have to go on hormones. I hate the pill.

Why isn’t there another way?

How do I work towards healing? Do I need medicine? The doctors seem to want to diagnose and dismiss me. Do I need god? My childhood religion is so vicious, always creating demons to exorcise.

The snake is the key, somehow.

Spirit Guide

Journeying to the upper world was more difficult than my lower world journeys had been. This time, the snake met me at the base of the tree and showed me the way, slithering up the bark. She was telling me I had to climb. I followed her up, past the branches, until I was somehow sitting on a canopy of leaves.

The snake became rainbow colored, and she stretched into the sky. I floated next to her like a balloon without control, into the atmosphere. As I rose, the air became thicker, and I felt like I was trapped in gauze. The pressure of the air dropped, and it was difficult to breathe. I pulled my way through the gauze, but it was hard to get a firm footing. The more I struggled, the more I sunk into the strange material. Finally, I stopped struggling, and when I did, I floated up and was able to grab hold of a ledge above me.

I pulled myself up through the floor of the upper world.

I was there to meet a teacher.

As was the case in the lower world, I couldn't see, but my eyelids were consumed by a bright light. I heard the same kinds of birds I'd heard on the beach, but this time there were more of them, and their chirps echoed. In the distance, I could hear a waterfall, and I could feel a light mist in the air.

"It's like I'm in an atrium," I said. "Or a giant glass cage."

I said my intention to nobody, as I didn't think there was anybody around:

“I came here to meet a teacher.”

I walked to the edge of the space and put my hand up to confirm the walls were made of glass. As I moved my hand along the glass, I came to a raised part, a seal of sorts, maybe. It felt like a stem with two ropes twining around it.

I heard footsteps approaching.

My right hand got very warm.

“Someone’s holding my hand!” I said.

--

December 1, 2015

It was a female hand, and she was about to tell me something, but the drums called me back.

How do I heal? This is the question I want to ask on the next journey.

I think the answer is in my art somehow, a melding of science and spirit, a kind of witchcraft, or mediumship -- the manipulation of the material into the metaphysical and the metaphysical into the material.

What is it that Anna said, so many months ago? “Abracadabra.”

--

As I completed my confirmation into the Catholic Church, my teachers insinuated that it was primarily Eve’s weakness that led to humanity’s exile from paradise, since she allowed herself to be seduced by the snake; as punishment, God cast her out to suffer the mortal cycle of menstruation, childbirth, and death.

As an adult, I challenged the notion that fault for sin could be ascribed to one gender, or that the female condition was a curse. As I studied the mythology of biblical stories, I started to see how some had been designed to keep me in a submissive position.

Recently, in my renewed interest in the stories of Genesis, I found reference to a woman before Eve named Lilith, who in Jewish literature is cited to have refused to do her duty as Adam's first wife and cavorted with the snake to seduce Eve (Hammer, 2017).

Lilith's role in the expulsion has occupied the minds of artists and writers for centuries, and most of the images are dark; the poet and painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti even describes Lilith as taking the reptilian shape herself (Gaines 2017). A plaque discovered in Syria in the 1930s that is believed to be a pregnancy amulet against Lilith reads: "O you who fly in (the) darkened room(s), / Be off with you this instant, this instant, Lilith. / Thief, breaker of bones" (Gaines 2017).

The only actual mention of Lilith in the Bible is found in Isaiah 34, which suggests that she is a flying demon. The Revised Standard Version of the Bible calls her "the night hag," and other translations depict her as a terror that comes in the night to curse pregnant women and children (Hammer, 2017).

This terrifying Lilith sounds eerily similar to the "old hag" of sleep paralysis, of my childhood. How have these images made their way into my personal experience? Could the story of Lilith help me to interpret my interactions with my shadow?

Some translators have linked "Lilith" to *lylh*, the Hebrew word for "night" (Gaines, 2017).

Spirit of the night.

Everything hinges on interpretation. If we strip away our preconceived notions of what is bad, we make room for more positive interpretations. In recent times, artists and writers of feminist movements have done just that, reimagining Lilith as a strong female force who represents the bond between women, as she re-enters Eden to save Eve from a life of subservience to Adam (Hammer, 2017).

She shows Eve that there is another way.

What if my shadow had been a good force all along?

--

December 6, 2015

I see now that the female body is at the center of my story, in all her forms. I didn't know this until I started to write. I was caught up with shadow and abstractions. Now, when I close my eyes, I see the earth I've always loved, the Great Mother, verdant and beckoning. She is the source of all creation, and her water is blood, and her blood is my power.

Maybe that's what Shakti is. Earth. All women. Me.

--

I know it wasn't her, but I like to think the hand that reached out to me in the upper world was my great grandmother's. When it touched me, I remembered the way her hand felt on our last meeting and how much I'd wanted to say. I wanted to speak to the person whose hand reached for mine, but the only sense I had at my disposal was touch.

Maybe touch is enough. Maybe that's what the snake has been trying to tell me as it wraps itself around my body. That my body against the earth is enough.

On our first meeting, Anna told me that the rainbow snake was a god in Aboriginal Australian creation myths, and she represented female fertility and creativity. There are beautiful

and healthy interpretations such as these all around me. I am attracted to them, the way I imagine Eve was attracted to the forbidden fruit -- not in rebellion, but with an intense curiosity.

When Eve and Adam ate the fruit of the tree of Good and Evil, they realized their human condition and were cast out to live in their mortal bodies. They would fall from grace and experience pain and suffering.

But they would also experience joy and love. Maybe in this way, expulsion is not a curse. Maybe we are cast out from our past when it's time we made something new of ourselves.

Changing my Mind

New Connection

On the day before my second upper world journey, I held the fragment of colonial tile I had scavenged from Havana, trying to find the words for my story.

Is this little tile my madeleine? I thought. Proust (1982) experienced a transcendent moment when he ate a morsel of his cookie soaked in tea, but felt nothing when he tried to replicate the experience. He writes that there must be more to the process of recollection than a simple potion we drink to remember:

I put down the cup and examine my own mind. It alone can discover the truth. But how: What an abyss of uncertainty, whenever the mind feels overtaken by itself; when it, the seeker, is at the same time the dark region through which it must go seeking and where all its equipment will avail it nothing. Seek? More than that: create. It is face to face with something which does not yet exist, to which it alone can give reality and substance, which it alone can bring into the light of day. (1982, p. 49)

Every time we try to remember, we are actually creating something new in the present. As I looked at the tile from Havana, I was trying to get it to transport me back there. I was trying to

get that feeling of déjà vu, like time pressed flat, a closed accordion I could simply unlatch and stretch out.

But there is no going back, not really.

All I can do is remember, and in the process, maybe I can create something good in the present.

--

May 15, 2015

I'm meeting a fourth cousin here for the first time.

It is late afternoon. I meet my cousin Agnes at the Hotel Presidente, a block from the Malecón. An artist based out of Taos, New Mexico, she is a second-generation Cuban exile like me. She is worried. She's behind on setting up her digital art installation, and Marcel, the programmer from Berlin who designed the majority of the piece, has not checked in. She asks me to look in on him at the Hotel Colina, a 20-minute walk away.

I've been meaning to explore the neighborhood on foot anyway, I tell her, trying to sound reassuring. I pull out the map in my guidebook and plot my course, secretly happy to be alone once more. A group of old men playing dominoes on the street wave as I pass. One of them asks if I am American, and I nod without stopping. He looks stricken.

Things are different here. Slower.

People don't have 9 to 5s. There are pedestrians everywhere, but they move like toys with low batteries; some amble, some stand completely still. Most watch me with curiosity as I power-walk by.

I find the Hotel Colina easily, and I notice it is in considerably worse shape than any structure along the Avenida de los Presidentes. A decaying orange, it seems it will crumble at the touch. *It would never pass a building inspection in the States*, I think. I walk into the lobby.

The front desk staff rings Marcel. No answer. I ask for his room number, and they give it to me without question. I make my way up the stairs to the fourth floor. I find the room, knock on the door. The window is half open, but it is dark inside.

No answer.

I pull a blank sheet from my journal and begin to scribble a note: “Marcel--”
What language? I choose English and write vague instructions about how to get in touch with Agnes, and I slip the note under the door.

On the way back to the Airbnb, I pass a man with thick eyebrows and sharp eyes that follow mine. My heart stops. A bomb detonates in my ears.

It's the official from the airport! I force myself to keep walking, to not look back. I turn on the very next street and press myself against a building.

I wait. I catch my breath. I peek around the corner.

I don't recognize any of the faces coming my way.

Halfway down the next street, I see a fragment of colonial tile, a shattered orange flower on a pearly white background. I pick it up and put it in my pocket.

--

May 16, 2015

Can I ever be safe in a world controlled by men?

Will I ever love someone passionately and also feel safe?

It is getting late. There is still no sign of Marcel, so I return to his hotel room; this time, I skip the front desk and slowly walk the flights of stairs. I knock. Twice. No answer. I think about leaving another note (*maybe he doesn't speak English?*) but decide against it. I start down the hallway. I am about halfway to the staircase when I hear a click.

I turn to see Marcel's door cracked open, nothing but darkness on the other side.

I walk with my head down, slow and lethargic, suddenly not excited to talk to anyone. When I arrive at the door, I look up and meet a pair of green eyes behind dark-rimmed glasses peeking through the sliver of opening. The eyes widen slightly and the door opens to reveal a twenty-something-year-old man. He is tall and wiry. His skin is drenched in sweat, his light brown hair disheveled. "Hello," he says softly.

"Hi," I say. "Are you Marcel? I came to check on Marcel."

"Yes," he says. "I'm Marcel." He has a faint German accent.

"Oh! Well, I thought you were older! Sorry, I mean, are you alright? You seem -- my cousin Agnes sent me. She's worried."

I am self-conscious. I look down at my feet.

Marcel seems unconcerned, casual despite his distressed appearance. "I'm getting better," he says, "I ate something bad on the trip. I made a friend in the lobby. He gave me this medicine." He reaches into his pocket and produces a tiny vial filled with a clear liquid. "I don't know what it is, but it's working," he says.

"Well, that's good," I say, already turning to leave. "I guess I'll go now. Give Agnes a call at the Hotel Presidente, when you can."

"Wait," he says.

I stop and turn back. Marcel looks so still, standing there in the door frame. I get the strange feeling that the frame is actually a mirror, that I am somehow looking into an alternate universe.

Those green eyes.

Yes! They look just the way mine looked after my first meeting with Anna, when I stared at myself in the mirror and had the feeling of being outside of myself, peering into another world.

There is no movement anywhere, no air circulation. My feet feel heavy. I can't get myself to move them. I feel like I've fallen to the deepest point of the earth, like I'm on the ocean floor. I wonder if my batteries are finally drained. Maybe the fruit shakes Fidela made me are potions, and I'm becoming a piece of still life in a painting of everyday Cuba.

"Have you seen the third floor?" Marcel asks.

His words break the spell as he walks past me, signaling for me to follow. We walk down the stairs. The air smells fresher as we descend. At the landing, my feet crunch on loose pebbles. I look up.

I almost lose my breath.

The exterior walls are completely blown out, as if they'd been bombed. I can see the balconies of the apartment building across the street, the lines and lines of drying laundry.

"Crazy, right?" he says, stepping over rubble. He makes his way down the hall toward the ledge.

I watch as he becomes the absence of space against the western sky.

"Stay," I whisper, reaching slowly for my camera.

I capture his silhouette just before it is reclaimed by the light.

--

May 19, 2015

I wonder if I was born with a soul at all.

Maybe I didn't lose it.

Maybe I never had it.

Agnes's installation takes days to set up. It is part of a joint exhibition called "Entre, Dentro, Fuera," ("Between, Inside, Outside") in the open-air Cuban Pavilion, taking place on the fringes of the 12th Havana Biennial. The pavilion is usually used as a traffic artery along La Rampa, a busy street of theaters and nightclubs known as Havana's "other downtown." Today, it is closed to pedestrians as artists make final arrangements.

I walk to the installation on the sidelines of the pavilion, housed inside a makeshift room of concrete walls. Agnes's assistants have painted the interior black and mounted projectors to cast Marcel's digital design onto the front wall of the temporary gallery space. The room is completely dark. I can make out Marcel sitting in the middle of the floor, tinkering with the code on his laptop. Rock-like images shine on the wall. My eyes aren't adjusted. I hug a side wall and move past Marcel, to the place where Agnes has arranged a ring of rocks on the floor, facing the projection.

"Move one," Marcel says. "I need to test this."

I look back and see only a dark outline. I crouch and touch a rock, sliding it across the floor. The projection on the wall shifts. The rock images morph together into larger shapes. I hear a kind of crunching, one of the clips of terrestrial sounds triggered by Marcel's algorithm when a rock is moved.

"Pretty cool," I say.

Called “Origination Point,” the installation is a mixture of technology and art; it is an interactive exploration of our subatomic origins, designed as a contemplation of our connections to our environments and to each other. I heard Agnes talking to the media about what it means to her as a Cuban-American, being somewhere in-between two countries and two cultures.

When one moves, the other feels. We come from the same place. No walls can divide us.

I reach for the notepad in my bag to write the thought, but stop myself. So far, I’ve only managed to post two hurried blog entries about the event, using an expensive internet card at the Hotel Presidente.

It’s too dark to write now. And anyway, I don’t know what I really think yet.

I take a seat in the middle of the room while Marcel continues to troubleshoot. I fight the immediate urge to get up and to do something.

For the first time in a long time, I let myself just be. Still and silent. In the dark. Sight slowly returns. Marcel’s outline gains color and sways slightly as he clicks away.

“Do you want to have a coffee when I’m done?” he asks.

We walk outside and take a table in the pavilion and stir our drinks.

“They’ve been saying around here that the soul travels slower, so mine is probably still in the Atlantic Ocean,” Marcel says. He wears a linen shirt he bought at a local market, because he only brought heavy clothes from home.

“Yeah, I feel a little weird, too,” I say. I don’t tell him that I think my soul is missing. I adjust my skirt under the table and rest the side of my face on its aluminum surface like a child. My sweaty cheek slides around.

“Do you think if you keep traveling, your soul will ever catch up?” I ask.

“That’s why home is better. I like walking around my neighborhood in Berlin. When I go to the store, people know my name,” Marcel says. He pushes up sweaty strands of hair with his palm and laughs, a galloping giggle. “But I like how hot it is here.”

I close my eyes and think of home. No place in particular comes to mind.

It’s more a feeling than a place. Orange light entering through the windows. The smell of leaves dying. Chimes tinkling in the wind.

Opening

May 22, 2015

It didn’t work.

It is the day of the exhibition opening, but the Cuban Pavilion has lost power, and Agnes’s installation remains dark.

She meant to show us how we are connected, but we are blind as we enter the unfamiliar space, each alone in our own bodies.

--

May 23, 2015

The malecon

Sweet rum

It is my last night. I force myself to stay awake until my early morning flight. I hang out at the Malecón with Marcel and a posse of locals and international tourists we’ve cobbled together over the course of our stay. Hundreds of Cubans line the seawall, drinking and playing music.

I look out onto the dark water, that expanse that has come to symbolize for me both separation and communion.

I think about what led me here. A strangeness in my belly. An old darkness.

I sense I have changed these last ten days, but not in the way I thought I would. I was absorbed with my own life when I arrived. I walked all over this city in hopes of shedding my trouble, searching for evidence of my family's past in this land that is my home and not my home. I didn't know what I was looking for, really. I called it *Spirit*, but I wasn't sure what that meant. In the process, I met unexpected beauty and made connections with strangers more immediately intimate than any of my interactions with strangers back home.

I think of the old woman who met me on a street in Central Havana and invited me in for a *cafecito*. I waited in a spacious foyer, staring at a twenty-foot image of her late husband hanging from the rafters. When she entered with the drinks, she said, "He is still the master of this house, even now that he's gone."

In Old Havana, I was enlisted to act as translator by a European architect who was interested in a building inhabited by a multi-generational family of women. They told me that they lived in temporary tenement homes for decades before moving into their apartment. It's not theirs but they pay next to nothing to live there. They heard life in the States is much harder, that people work their whole lives to own a house.

"I would never go there," said the woman who was roughly my age, as she held her daughter close. "We are taken care of here."

Others wanted to know everything about the States. A young black man named Fermin was my guide a couple afternoons, but he didn't follow me into restaurants and hotels, because locals are not allowed to frequent the tourist establishments -- especially not black locals.

We hung out by the seawall, and he showed me the tattoo he got for his friends who died trying to leave, a poem he wrote himself. When I touched the bracelet on his wrist, he explained

the red and white beads were for the *orisha*²⁵ named Chango, the king of Yoruba, which is the ancestral religion that evolved into Santería in the Caribbean.

Fermin asked me about black Cubans in Florida, and I was surprised at myself for not knowing any. I told him the Cubans I know are all white, mostly doctors and lawyers.

After that, I was too embarrassed to talk. I made an excuse and returned to my Airbnb. When I got to the balcony and looked down, Fermin was on the sidewalk, staring up at the door to the seafoam dreamhouse.

I feel full of all of them now. So full I can't make words.

Marcel hands me a bottle of sweet milk mixed with rum and I take a syrupy sip, smacking my lips. He is crouched on the wall. I hoist myself to sit next to him. A transgender female walks by in an elaborate floral dress. Next to us, a man rigs his fishing line with a float made from a condom, yet another iteration of Cuban resourcefulness.

“So Berlin, hmm?” I say.

“Yep,” he answers, a cigar hanging out the side of his mouth. “You should come.”

“Maybe,” I say. And then: “What year were you born?”

“1989.”

“Isn't that the year the wall fell?” I ask.

“Yep. I was a pretty cool baby,” he says.

I laugh, and the ring of it hangs in the air. The world slows to a halt again. The revelers blur into the background. Marcel's green eyes shine under the street lamps, his linen shirt paused in mid-billow. In this vacuum, I feel sad all at once. I feel the full effects of the heartbreak I have

²⁵ Saint or spirit, of the Yoruba tradition

been ignoring for years, the resentment toward love and lovers and anything messy and beautiful in myself. Then I feel it all fall away.

How contradictory it is, that to be free and happy I must let go of control and allow myself to feel my pain fully. I must fall completely into emotion. Every fall is terrifying -- the fall into sleep, the fall into love -- and every fall creates opportunity.

I know my sadness is a luxury, a mark of a life of constant movement and possibility. I can fall because I have achieved height.

Here, parents, children, brothers and sisters -- they untether themselves from this shore to try to make the perilous climb to something better. They disappear into the dark waters, and their kin must let them go into uncertainty. Those remaining can only go as far as the seawall, joining the ranks of thousands forever looking out to the light from the shadows. Stuck in a holding pattern. A permanent sadness.

Still, I can't ignore my impression that despite the confinement to the island, despite the meager rations and the crumbling walls, the Cuban people make their happiness every day. Just look at them, creating music and art and love. They transform darkness into light, using all the resources at their disposal, wasting nothing. Their Spirit is not broken.

Are we this happy in our new homes across the water? Are the members of my family happy, somewhere in-between the homes they left and the homes they have yet to make?

The scene unpauses and the sound returns, the singing and laughing and water lapping against the wall. Marcel turns away, and I imagine that one day my heart may fully open again, that I might fall in love with someone like him.

Passionate, messy, beautiful love. It is still a possibility for me.

I take another sip of the milky rum. I sit on the Malécon and look out onto the gulf between my worlds. I feel the drumming of my heart, the blood running through my veins. A voice rings in the night air.

It is my own voice, calling me back.

It's time to come home.

Healing Rifts

The Caduceus

Transcript Excerpt of Harner Shamanic Counseling Session, Upper World Journey II

December 7, 2015 (30 minutes)

I'm journeying to the upper world to meet a teacher and ask what I need to do to heal.

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[...]

My whole right arm is hot. [long pause] I'm not sure I understand. I see a light. It's swirling around in front of me. I see- is it? Two eyes. [pause]

I see a lot of kind of light pinpricks. [murmuring] I feel...thirsty all of a sudden. Really thirsty. Parched. And the sound of the water is gone. The-I definitely feel like there's something in front of me or someone in front of me. Now both hands are hot. My left hand too. They're holding my hands. Feels like my hands are going into something, like water. They're submerged, maybe, in warm water? [long pause]

I-I hear the water coming back. The waterfall is back. I feel someone massaging my hands. It's like, it's like I'm getting a manicure or something [laughing] It is-it's kind of nice here, like I want to stay. I feel relaxed. [pause] Like the words maybe don't matter. [pause] I also

feel a weight on my chest. A little bit of a weight, but it's not bad, it's kind of comforting weight, like I'm being squeezed on all sides, actually. Not just my legs, but my chest, like everything is constricted. Like a, like I'm being wrapped in a blanket, maybe. It's warm. [pause]

Is there anything else you can show me here? The noise of the water is closer and feels like it's picking up speed, like it's running over some obstructions like rocks. It sounds like a creek. I feel-my feet feel cold. My feet are in it. It's like the cold water is running over my feet. Feels like my feet are being pulled. I feel a-kind of a spasm in my lower belly, and a light. It feels like there's a light in my belly. Yeah. There's a light coming towards me, and stopping in my belly, it feels [long pause] like someone is flashing, maybe like flashing a light there. I smell smoke. There's this light now, continually coming in, into my belly button and up. I smelled smoke for a second, not anymore.

Ok, the light's gone. It's just dark now. Oh! I felt my right ear pop. I wonder if I'm under water? Feels like I'm being dunked. Guess I lost my hearing for a second there. [pause]

It's dark again. The light is gone. [pause] It's like I'm always about to see something, but it goes away.

--

December 7, 2015

Anna says I received a healing today. It's unlikely I know the beings I met, but they felt maternal and connected to me. Like ancestors. Why are we so disconnected from those who came before? Why do we tear things down to build new things with no Spirit? Why do we make so much waste, when there is so much waiting to be reclaimed?

I'm trying to reclaim. I don't have much to go on, so I conceive of my ancestors in terms of my own existence: "She was my grandmother, who gave birth to my father, who met my

mother, who birthed me.” But our ancestors are so much more than us. They are whole lives, whole worlds, and through them, we have inborn sustenance. Today, I saw the seal I felt on the wall on my first journey to the upper world. It was a rope of light at first, but then it clarified into two snakes on a staff.

The caduceus²⁶.

--

In her home in Guanabacoa, Fidela showed me a pamphlet on her altar. Its pages had yellowed, and it was dusty from lack of use. The cover was almost completely faded, and it was fragile to the touch, like the discarded scales of a snake.

I could make out the word *orisha*, which I knew referred to spirits in the tradition of Yoruba and Santería. I turned to a page in the middle of the book and read the words in Spanish out loud, as if they were an incantation:

When women experience changes in their life paths, their cycles will often shift dramatically. Women who menstruate with the full moon are called red moon women, and they are the world’s caretakers -- mediums, midwives, matriarchs. When you are on the red moon, instead of making children, you’ll transform even the darkest energies into art, giving birth to creations that can be used for teaching and healing.

When I was done reading, Fidela was staring at me knowingly, and I allowed myself to imagine that she was my grandmother, someone with whom I could share anything without fear of judgment.

²⁶ The caduceus is a staff entwined with two snakes, carried by Hermes of Greek mythology, who was said to travel between worlds and communicate with the dead. The symbol has been confused with the Rod of Asclepius, which features only one snake around a staff and is the official symbol for professional health organizations. The caduceus is now more commonly recognized as a symbol of medicine after the U.S. Army Medical Corps began to use it in the early 1900s. (“Caduceus,” n.d.)

The matriarch is an important symbol in the African Atlantic diaspora, largely depicted by an iteration of “Mami Wata,” a seductive and potentially dangerous water spirit who is often represented as a snake charmer. In Cuba, Mami Wata takes the form of Yemayá, one of the most powerful orishas. While she can appear terrible, when called upon she provides women with the spiritual power to overcome psycho-spiritual and physical ailments, to become healers, and to resist male domination (Drewal, 2008, p. 62).

In the absence of my grandmothers, I turn to female archetypes for strength. I was born separated from the wisdom of my homeland, but when I cry out for guidance, the female Spirit reaches through the ether in all her forms to touch me with her strength.

The Shadow

To move towards healing, I know I have to put the scene into words, and I have to let it live here, as imperfect as it is, whatever the consequences:

I am twenty-five.

It is two in the morning. I am trying to sleep. I hear my boyfriend talking to our roommate about me at the dining table down the hall. He is drunk. I can picture him red-faced and slack-jawed, grasping a half empty handle of Bacardi Silver.

“Don’t get me wrong. I love her. But I don’t know if I want to be with her forever. She’s crazy,” I hear him say.

Our roommate laughs. I hear them slam their shot glasses, picture the alcohol spilling onto the table, seeping into the wood’s stain.

I feel a rage stir deep in my belly.

I get up and turn on the light. I stand next to the door and listen, my heart pounding harder and harder with every word. *She is strange. A hippie. Not stable.*

I throw the door open and stomp down the hall. My boyfriend looks up slowly. He is stupefied. I am furious.

“What the fuck?” I yell.

“What?” he says. “Go back to sleep.”

“I was trying to do that. You think I can’t hear what you’re saying about me? How dare you?” I scream.

My boyfriend throws the table away and rushes me. He grabs me by my upper arm and pulls me back down the hall. “Get back in the room,” he yells.

I try to make myself heavy, but he is much stronger. He drags me. I yell back at our roommate: “Help me!”

He doesn’t move. I see him staring blankly as I’m pulled through the door frame. He looks like a painting of still life, and I wonder if he’s even real as the door slams shut in front of me.

My boyfriend throws me on the bed. Before I can sit up, he is on top of me. He brings his face close to mine, and the smell of the alcohol in his breath nauseates me. He grabs both my hands and holds them down with his left hand. He moves his right hand to my mouth.

I bite his hand and scream to our roommate for help. I convulse, trying to get his weight off me. He doubles down, his hand back on my face. I try to bite again, but his hand is stronger. It presses down on my nose and mouth so hard, I feel like my jaw is going to break.

I can’t breathe anymore. I try to scream, but no sound comes out.

He is screaming, “Shut the fuck up! Shut the fuck up!”

I watch his hand go up. I watch it come down.

Everything is dark.

--

Many shamans see shadows before they are initiated. Usually, the shadow will reveal itself to a potential shaman at childhood, visiting as a dark form, causing night terrors and other disturbances. This is a reflection of the child's deepest fears. If faced with love, it will reveal itself for what it truly is, a projection of the self. In adulthood, a shaman initiate will be visited by spirits, who will challenge her with mental and physical ailments. Known as shamanic illness, if an initiate overcomes this phase, the spirits will respect her as a shaman, someone who has learned to walk between worlds (Harrell, 2011).

I wonder if my great grandmother experienced such an initiation in Cuba to become a spirit medium. My dad told me she was part of a circle of healers, that she went through some sort of training. Had she felt lost too? Had she been sick? Had she faced her shadow? Had she retrieved her soul? These are things I'll never know. I know she saw horrible things -- the premature death of her child Elsie and demons that tossed her body in the dark. I imagine that she felt the loss in her body, like she was disconnected from reality.

In shamanism and spirit mediumship, "depersonalization" is reframed as an ability (Kaplan, 2006), as the practitioner learns to leave her body to communicate with "Spirit" for the purpose of healing. I like to think that this is what my abuelita did -- turned the bad into good, transforming her grief over the loss of her daughter into action.

Elsie was expelled from her life. I somehow felt, maybe because of how my parents spoke about her in relation to me, that my fate was tied to hers. I felt outside of myself, like I was

steering my body from somewhere above myself, instead of actually breathing and feeling. I now see that I reached out to Anna because I was waiting for something bad to happen.

I hadn't prepared for the possibility that everything would be okay.

--

December 9, 2015

The results of the ultrasound came back. Everything was normal. The bleeding has stopped and I feel better. The doctors say it happens at this age, that it's just my system "resetting." But resetting to what?

What do I do now?

CHAPTER FIVE

THE MIDDLE WORLD (WHAT IS MY PURPOSE?)

“I hope you will go out and let stories, that is life, happen to you, and that you will work with these stories from your life -- not someone else’s life -- water them with your blood and tears and your laughter till they bloom, till you yourself burst into bloom. That is the work. The only work.” (Pinkola Estés, 1996)

“The central essence of the witch is and has always been political resistance.” (Lodi, 2015)

Cultivating Nonordinary Reality

Hurricanes

When I began training with Anna, she told me that things often become more difficult along the spiritual path, because opening spiritually involves becoming vulnerable and facing the hard realities of life. The training in shamanic journeying is not about escaping to another world, but about honing attention. I learned to attend to the changes both in and outside of myself and to care for myself during periods of chaos.

By the time I finished my sessions with Anna at the end of 2015, I learned to see everything as “nonordinary reality,” since the world I perceive is a reflection, to some degree, of my own state of mind. I learned that disruption provides me with an opportunity to see anew, and I wanted to remain awake to the shadows of the world, to keep from averting my eyes.

Anna suggested that I shift my attention to my community. I began to turn a question over in my mind, and really, I haven’t stopped asking myself since: *What is my purpose?*

The word “purpose” dates back to the 14th century, to the Anglo-French word *purposer*, meaning “to design” or “to propose” (“Purpose,” n.d.). I’d always thought of purpose in terms of predestination, as though there were only one thing I was meant to be or do in this life, as though I had no choice. Now, I think of purpose as something I design for myself.

It had been easy to fall into a reactive pattern when bad things happened, to think of things as happening *to me*, rather than *because of me*. Following my training, I realized there were things that I could do to move toward productive action and healing. In this chapter, I visit the “middle world” -- that is, the ordinary world that we see and know, and the nonordinary world just on the other side of our waking consciousness -- to explore the ways I have reached past my inner exploration toward community activism.

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For Florida and the Caribbean, September 2017 was the month of the Hurricane.

As Hurricane Irma approached, television stations propagated panic. Throughout the state, supermarkets were cleaned out and gas stations faced fuel shortages days before the projected landfall. On social media, concerned friends and family posted prayers for Florida and the islands. I watched neighbors agonize about whether they should evacuate and heard about strangers fighting over the last generator at Home Depot.

In the midst of the frenzy, I took the opportunity to rest. School and work were cancelled, and I had a few rare days to myself. I calmly did what I needed to do, what I’d learned from many drills growing up as a native Floridian: I gathered food, made ice, filled every vessel in my house with water, and moved things away from my windows. When that was done, I sat alone in my room and meditated on my busy year. I’d been working full time and writing my dissertation on nights and weekends, with few breathers. I’d been feeling the old anxiety returning.

I paused for the first time in months, and a quiet descended on me. I recognized it as the silence of my childhood, the kind I would seek under a tree when I needed to get away from home. In that silence, I traveled to the wildness of my early years, when I played outside in thunderstorms. I remembered my first hurricane in 1992, and how fear was mixed with excitement as the community joined together in preparation for Andrew. We united against the elements. We channeled stress into productivity and held family closer than possessions.

My family huddled in the converted garage of our rental home -- my parents, my brothers, my dad's brother, and my grandfather, who had been Elsie's husband -- and we listened to the massive roar of the wind. As Andrew's eye moved over us, the quiet seemed even more oppressive than the storm that had battered us for hours. It was like a bomb had detonated and left us deaf. My uncle carried me on his back as we silently walked through the house to take in the damage. All the windows were broken and part of the roof had been ripped away.

In the middle of all that destruction, I felt imbued with the power of the hurricane. Even then, I realized how rare it is to find oneself in the midst of such a terrible storm, unscathed. I was full of wonder, as if I'd embarked on a sudden, unplanned adventure.

Now, I realize that what I felt then, and what I feel now -- this ability to see the bright side of destruction -- comes from a position of privilege. I have the choice to evacuate or to occupy a sound structure with a fair chance of standing up to the destructive winds.

The people of the Caribbean were not so lucky.

In Havana, 36-foot waves crashed into the Malecón as Hurricane Irma devastated the island's banana, rice, and sugar crops (Anderson, 2017). A recent article in the *New Yorker* by Jon Lee Anderson describes the culture of resilience among Cubans in the face of such chaos:

Fidel's spirit of defiance, shouting at the wind -- literally in this case -- conditioned many Cubans to weather hardships in ways that Americans cannot imagine; many take pride in their national reputation for stoicism, a Cuban equivalent to Britain's Churchillian "Keep Calm and Carry On" legacy. (Anderson, 2017)

This is a country used to apocalypse after apocalypse, and the expectation is that the old Cuban resourcefulness will always overcome.

The expectation is damaging to the most vulnerable populations of people in the Caribbean; even as we scramble to make sure we are safe in Florida, we expect that the islands will bounce back on their own, that they're "used to this"; we treat the Caribbean as a commodity to be consumed. Alexander quotes a Cuban journalist's bitter post-Irma report:

There are places, I tell you, where everything is perceptibly the same: the piles of garbage on the street -- not from the cyclone, but the normal garbage of old, ruined barrios that no storm is ever going to sweep away; the studios and little art galleries that have flowered in Havana and that only sell to travellers passing through; the bicycle-taxis and rental cars that double their fares; a little boy who jumps with joy when he asks if there is going to be school tomorrow and is told no; a Spanish tourist who tells me he is sorry, but how wonderful that his airline has delayed his departure home by one more day; the tourists shooting photos of the open-air museum in ruins, to take back to their countries and exhibit them in their timelines. (Alexander, 2017)

The bitterness extends beyond the disaster of the hurricane to the economic ruin that is a staple of Cuban life, as the country is exploited for entertainment but ultimately abandoned by those passing through.

During my trip to Havana, I experienced such bitterness when a singer in a jazz club pointed straight at me and sang, “You’re not Cuban!”

At that moment, I realized that I really wasn’t. What I had been conceiving as my family’s “past” was still reality for Cubans. I will probably never feel so desperate, never know what it is like to attempt the perilous passage of the Florida Straits. If you can get past the government patrols, you are still likely to die from dehydration, drowning, or a shark attack. Between a quarter and half of Cubans attempting the 90-mile crossing never make it to the U.S. (Gunn, 1991). This is why we say that a hurricane is no big thing to the Cuban people.

To us, theirs is a “nonordinary” reality.

When Hurricane Irma reached me, I stayed awake all night, as I had during Andrew. Irma was an emissary of nostalgia. She carried the water from the narrow passage between my world and the world of my ancestors, a sea full of courage and hope. The tears and sweat of my abandoned people travelled hundreds of miles to rain down on me.

--

I bet Elsie thought she was witnessing the end of the world, when Castro’s planes fired down on her home town. Doesn’t every generation feel that it’s living in unprecedented times?

In the last few years, it seems political, social, environmental, and economic disruptions have become the norm. Not a week goes by that a major event is not rocking my reality. Are things really getting worse, or is something changing inside me to help me pay better attention?

It seems that everyone around me is paying more attention, that people are starting to see the nonordinary all around them. We are not just standing aside as disasters happen. We are taking action. We are beginning to experience a new wave of activism in response to the recent disruptions in the environmental and political scene (Sydell, 2017).

A hurricane is now upon us, and many of us are developing a greater sense of purpose in the midst of the storm. My own purpose took root in a little yoga studio my friend Kelly opened on Florida Avenue in Seminole Heights, at the beginning of 2016. It is there that I realized my potential for helping other second-generation women like me.

Moon Sisters

I am journeying to the middle world.

I am journeying to the middle world.

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In the pre-dawn gray of the studio, I can almost make out the deity figurines on the wooden cabinet that serves as our altar. We sit in front of it, side by side, cross-legged and cold on the smooth hardwood floors. Kelly's silver hands move through the space between us. A spark from her fingers sets afire a bundle of sandalwood. Her face shines momentarily. A wave of onyx hair crashes around the jagged lines of her shoulders.

I try to slow my heart and elongate my breath. I suck dusty incense through slightly parted lips. The white of my silken robe reflects the light I can't yet see. My hands grasp one another, as if they'd forgotten they belong to the same body.

"Close your eyes," Kelly says.

She leads me in a chant to Durga/Kali, a Hindu demon-fighting goddess and representation of Shakti. She is said to appear as a beautiful woman to the seekers of truth and as a terrible monster to those who choose to remain blind.

Hey Ma Durga, Kali Ma ...

I fight the urge to spring to action, forcing my attention onto the sound. Our voices meld into one. The minutes stretch. I almost forget about time. But the light coming through my eyelids slowly reddens, and I know that it will be day when our chant is done.

I journey to that morning so easily, because it is the morning that I was married. August 1, 2016. A day full of anticipation and hope.

I was divorced ten months later.

I see now why Anna said I should be careful with middle world journeys. We go to places full of emotion that we might not be ready to face. All the scripts tell me I should be sad about that day, that I should let it go and never revisit it. If I try, I can conjure the spirit of sadness, or the countless mistakes that were responsible for the downfall of my new marriage.

But I can also choose to remember the beginnings instead of the endings, and the peace I felt that morning in Kelly's yoga studio. She had named it *Sattva*, after a Sanskrit term denoting clarity of mind. We were both full of hope for what was to come.

Looking back, I choose to remember the nurturing power of the space that has since welcomed hundreds of women in all stages of their lives. The studio has remained steady as it has witnessed sorrow, joy, sickness, health. Even after what's happened, I can close my eyes and imagine that I am like that space, clear and bright and welcoming through it all.

Kelly ends the chant with a resounding OM. I open my eyes to see the studio has filled with detail. The ridges of the crown molding. The beads on the hanging tapestries. The eyes of the little altar gods. Everything has an inner shine. I feel a sudden warmth in my low belly, and the restlessness that had been coiled there all morning loosens, vibrates, moves up to my chest, my throat. My face fills with fresh blood.

Kelly moves a small mallet over the rim of a singing bowl. The sound starts slowly, intensifying into a deep ring, and just as slowly fades, signaling the end of our meditation. I remain in my spot on the floor, eyes still closed, trying to meld with the spirit of the studio, to brighten my mind, to balance my excitement and my fear.

Kelly chants a mantra in Sanskrit, and then translates: “Oh, child, you are not the body. You are the Spirit. You are pure Atman. Namaste.”²⁷

“Namaste,” I repeat. I bow.

When I look up, Kelly’s compact frame is still bent to the earth. She is my foil, clad in a black robe that accentuates her cool skin and dark features. She has a touch of the occult in her, one of those people who ooze mystery without trying. I call them water people.

I am also thin like her and just as fair, but I have no water about me. I am an earth person. Beside Kelly, I always seem sun-kissed, my hair a wispy highlight, my eyes a flash of green agate.

“I should probably start getting ready,” I say. My voice is like the singing bowl, faint at first, gaining strength. I force myself to stand slowly, to walk with purpose, though my impulse is to hurry. I walk to my dress, which hangs in the threshold leading from the practice space into the foyer. Now it looks surreal, translucent in the morning light, a spectral form. I pass my hand behind it and watch my shadow move across the fabric.

I make my way to the spare room off the foyer, which I use as my dressing room. Kelly has set up a makeshift vanity for me on a rolling filing cabinet. I pull up a chair and sit in front of it and look into a small round mirror at my bare face. I listen. I hear Kelly preparing on the other side of the house.

²⁷ “Atman” is Sanskrit for “self,” or “soul.” “Namaste” is a Hindu word that is used both as a salutation and a valediction.

Last little bit of alone time.

I remember our full moon circle a couple of weeks ago, when the studio was at its fullest, beyond capacity. Fifty women were settling into their places on the floor of the studio, arranging their belongings around themselves, protective little semi-circles of leather-bound moon journals, pashminas, and prayer beads. They lined the walls and spilled into the foyer, shoulder to shoulder.

I hadn't prepared to speak to such a large crowd. I ran through my words in my head and felt my face flush in anticipation. Kelly hushed the room with her harmonium, a mahogany pump organ from India she uses to tune the group into the space, to create the container for our practice.

"Bring your hands to the center of your chest," she said, as she played F and A sharp together. "Let's breathe in together for the sound of three OMs. You can just listen if you want. Hearing is the most divine sense we have, and listening is as good as doing."

The women's voices vibrated lightly in unison, rocking me, soothing me. I remembered my mother, how her singing voice became more touch than sound as I pressed my little ear to her neck.

When the chanting was done, the space was hot with all our breaths.

"Lorraine and I wanted to create an opportunity for women to congregate outside of the usual bachelorette party or baby shower or birthday," Kelly said, emphasizing these last words with little flicks of her wrist. "This is our seventh full moon circle. There were just nine of us in the first one back in January. Look how we've grown."

The faces were rapt. My heart was pounding. Kelly looked to me.

My turn. I cleared my throat and spoke.

“We all come from different spiritual backgrounds, so it’s not our intention to impose a way of knowing on you,” I said. “We are here to hold space for each other, to help each other reflect on our lives consciously. We encourage you to keep a moon journal, so you can look back and remember what you were thinking and feeling. We are always changing, and we so easily forget ourselves.”

I opened the space to the women and acted as moderator. They touched each other’s shoulders and hummed in support of one another as they took turns talking. They talked about loves lost and problems at work and hopes for their futures. Some laughed. Some cried.

At the close of the session, our voices joined together in a chant, louder than they were at the start. Some women chose complementary notes, creating a beautiful harmony of sound.

One by one, the women faded, until it was just me and Kelly left.

It was nighttime, and the only light was an orange stained glass scone on the wall. I was pulling Kelly’s cards as a final ritual.

I pulled the High Priestess card. As I held it up, I pointed out the pomegranate imagery, representing the Greek archetype of Persephone, who travels between worlds and carries the unconscious of the underworld out into the open.

“She represents the divine feminine in every form, shadow and light,” I said. “It’s scary sometimes, to know we are both.”

Kelly nodded, understanding. “Kali is the dark side of Shakti. People fear her, because she shows us our demons, but she is full of life.”

I thought of the images I’ve seen of Kali, standing with a bloody sword, her feet over the skulls of men. The imagery is intense, but the message is powerful: We can fight. We can rise.

“Yes, we need more shadow women,” I said.

But I am all light today. I walk into the foyer and tenderly take down my dress. I pull it over myself, enjoying the brief moment when I am cocooned in white lace.

Kelly meets me. She wears a simple dark blue dress and black boots and holds a small journal between her palms. She looks official, like a member of the clergy, pious and somber, her striking beauty harnessed behind plain clothes.

“Are you ready?” she asks.

I pull at my dress and take one last look around, as if to make sure I’ve gathered my belongings. But what I’m really doing is saying goodbye to a part of myself, closing a chapter with my eyes. For so many years, I’d been looking for home. This isn’t quite it, but in some way, it holds the spirit of me. Nonordinary, wondering, searching, hopeful me.

“I’m ready now,” I say.

Creating Home, Health, and Purpose

Empowered Communities

After the breakdown of my marriage, I kept facilitating full moon circles with Kelly. At the time of this writing, we have hosted 20 continuous circles. They have provided a constant refuge in the midst of great turmoil for me and for the dozens of women who have attended. Slowly, we have built a new community focused on facing our collective troubles and engaging in self-care practices.

Some of the women have told me that circle is the only place where they can commune with other women and leave feeling energized and empowered. They say they feel overwhelmed by all that’s happening in the world. Some of them can’t share their feelings at work, where they

are taught to be in competition with each other. At home, it's often taboo to speak of their bodies, of heartbreak or abuse, even with their friends.

I took a few cues from my sessions with Anna to design our meetings. Each circle follows a basic structure that the women have come to recognize, and the familiarity creates a level of comfort that allows them to share their stories and intentions. I also learned from Anna that it is powerful to record intentions, and just as she helped me write my own, I coach the women on how to craft specific and practical intentions for the month in what we call "moon journals." This process allows the women to narrate their experiences without shame and to let their ideas take shape over time. Through writing, we learn to let ourselves be imperfect as we work toward our goals. For many of us, writing down the mundane details of our lives has ultimately become the most sacred practice; in the process, what begins as bad or disordered turns into productivity and health.

The moon itself provides both a practical way to track time and an archetype for us as women, as our cycles shift throughout the month.²⁸ The rituals we set forth help us tune back into nature and the basics of self-care.

This is the inner revolution to which we aspire: to realize for ourselves that we matter, outside of our families and our careers and the larger world. To see this, we need to first let go of expectation that our words must immediately make sense, that they must have value to someone else. We must let the words out, as I did during my own narrative process. We must let ourselves be messy and disordered and weird. As the months pass, we can look back on our words and start to make meaning of them and to move toward purposeful action.

²⁸ We acknowledged that the cycle was a metaphor, as some women do not experience a menstruation, and transgendered women were also in attendance.

Another cue I took from Anna was to observe without interpreting others' experiences for them. As I listened, I looked for patterns; I noticed that the women who come to circle are generally after the same things I was searching for: home, healing, and a sense of purpose. The women are more diverse and younger on average than the yoga practitioners who attend regular classes, which revealed to me that there is a demand among young people and minorities for free self-care services. A few have approached me after class and told me that they don't have health insurance, and that they want to take their mental health into their own hands and help others do the same. Now, some of them are creating their own circles, using the structure of our meetings to guide other women in this kind of narrative self-care.

I like to talk about how I am working for them, for "the community," but when it comes down to it, I need the women circles as much as anyone else. Among them, I have found my voice and my motivation to serve.

Though I don't think our current moment is particularly unique in terms of the hardships we are facing (we've seen this kind of civil unrest before), I do think we are entering a distinctive wave of intersectional activism with the help of social media, and spiritual activism (Carmichael & McIntosh, 2016) led by women is on the rise. We watched as the female leaders of the Sioux tribe led a massive protest against the Dakota Access Pipeline at Standing Rock (Levin, 2016), putting indigenous issues at the center of public discourse.

Over the last few years, a spiritual counterculture has been rising in response to social and environmental injustices (Phillips, 2012), and increasingly, women of color, feminists, and third-world activists are at the forefront of such movements (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2002; Facio & Lara, 2014). Gloria Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating (2002) predicted this "new mode of

citizen-subject, citizen-warrior, [and] spiritual activist” (p. 25). They call for a science that will join indigenous wisdom with technology to connect the spiritual and political realms.

We are living in an important time for women of color; we are caregivers, investigators, activists. We often carry on these roles for free, because we care about what we are working for, with little thought for personal gain. Or we ignore so much of our natural talents in pursuit of what we are conditioned to think is better. It’s clear to me now, writing from the current political landscape, that we as a culture have become disconnected from our female and indigenous roots, that our histories have been written over in man’s quest for power. We are starving for female wisdom and connection.

It’s time to organize and face the world together.

Intersectional Spiritual Activism

Following the election of Donald Trump, there has been a surge of *bruja feminism* (Flores, 2017; Lara, 2005), led by Latinx²⁹ immigrants who seek to reclaim the power of their spiritual pasts in acts of resistance against racism and discriminatory practices. All around the world, Latinx women are claiming the label *bruja*, the Spanish word for witch, and challenging its negative connotation. In the U.S., brujas are becoming the emerging voice of the second-generation Latinx immigrant; “witchcraft” is becoming more popular among young Latinxs who reframe *brujería*³⁰ as a set of empowering practices aimed at resisting oppression.

Patrisia Gonzales, professor of Mexican American Studies at the University of Arizona, says that the kind of *brujería* they practice represents both their disconnect from their histories and a form of reclaiming the power of their ancestry (Ruan, 2017). The practices often revolve

²⁹ A gender-neutral term to Latino that is becoming more popular, especially among the second-generation *bruja* community, as it is inclusive of trans, queer, and gender fluid individuals.

³⁰ Spanish for witchcraft

around self actualization and connect to the larger self-care movement that is sweeping the nation post-election (Harris, 2017), as young people develop personal practices that promote health and wellbeing in the midst of political turmoil and in the absence of consistent institutional support.

Irving Orozco, a 25-year-old Mexican American student at the University of California, says he has been practicing *brujería* as a way to cope in difficult times: “It’s a reconnection with yourself, your ancestors and the natural world,” he said. “It’s about the understanding of how everything is connected, how everything is woven together like a fabric” (Ruan, 2017).

The witch has been a central archetype in feminist movements since the 1960s, and it is now experiencing a resurgence among creative and politically oriented women (Doyle, 2015). Feminists took a word that usually carries a negative connotation and applied it to the fight against bigotry and hatred. Ecofeminist Starhawk writes, “To reclaim the word witch is to reclaim our right, as women, to be powerful” (Doyle, 2015).

Indigenous and minority women are at the center of this new form of witchy feminism, calling themselves *brujas*. The epistemology of the modern *bruja* is rooted in what Anzaldúa (1999) calls *conocimiento*, literally “knowledge,” a term which signifies an inner revolution directed toward public acts. *Brujas* have taken to social media to connect over large distances and challenge the boundaries their governments seek to impose on them.

The *bruja* feminism movement is seeing second-generation immigrants mobilizing for the first time around their spiritual roots, creating an identity centered on reclaiming the ancestral wisdom of their native traditions and transforming negativity into creativity. Like the second-generation artists whose legacy is the Holocaust, these new *brujas* do not wish to appropriate the past of their ancestors, but rather to reanimate it into a new production. They seek to change the

stereotypical image of the bad witch or the crazy witch (Flores, 2017) into an activist who is connected to the events of the world and the suffering of others. There is an imaginative, empowered activism that has arisen in response to the rhetoric of violence, hate, separation, and limitation.

At the core of the bruja movement is language, something in between Spanish and English, between scientific philosophies and indigenous ways of knowing. Brujas invoke multiple voices; the way brujas communicate over social media is akin to holding a séance, both a performance steeped in traditional lore and a radical departure from what's been done before. Brujas thrive on nonconformity; their bodies are all shapes, colors, and sizes. Bruja language is partially made up, like poetry or spells. Through this hybrid language, they learn to speak out; they give words to what has been incomprehensible, and they express the confusion, passion, and possibility of existing between vastly different ways of knowing. They are doing what they can to face the challenges of a new, ever-changing, and increasingly difficult sociopolitical climate.

Brujas transform the struggles of their past into spiritual activism; they reframe their troubles as a spiritual sensitivity and offer empowerment to other second-generation Hispanic women as they seek to establish stability, health, and purpose in their lives. At this time, the bruja movement is still emerging and fragmented, and social media is the primary vehicle for individual brujas to express themselves. The most visible and organized group, *Brujas*, based out of New York, is an “urban, free-form, creative and autonomous organization that seeks to build radical political coalition through youth culture” (About, 2017).

This movement possesses the potential to grow as second-generation immigrants continue to come of age and challenge the political systems that have historically limited their families. As the current administration seeks to block immigration and deport undocumented

immigrants, young immigrants are rising up in protest. When President Trump announced the end of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival (DACA) program that protected children of undocumented immigrants, Mexican-American “Dreamers” banded together to have their voices heard, proclaiming “We are America” (Sachetti & Stein, 2017). Some DACA supporters dressed like faceless witches in protest, reinforcing the witch as a symbol of resistance (Graham, 2017).

The forms of protest conducted by *brujas* have been largely symbolic. They have recently been cited as the force behind the “hexing” of Trump (Lodi, 2015), as they posted incantations and instructions for rituals to “bind” the president from harming minorities, particularly in response to the deportation of undocumented immigrants and the wall he seeks to build along the U.S.-Mexican border.

For the first time, second-generation Latinx immigrants are making themselves known. We will see them organizing more in the years to come.

Reclaiming *Bruja*

My *Bruja* Identity

Before I knew that *bruja* was a political concept, I felt that I was the one in my family to take up the role of the “mystic” after my great grandmother, but I didn’t know why, and sometimes I felt silly taking up the label, like I was playing pretend. Still, my family reinforced this role, calling to ask me to read their tarot cards and tell their futures. It was the way my family had tacitly agreed to ask each other for help. In effect, I was the family counselor, the one who listened.

In early 2015, just before I met Anna for the first time, my mother sensed that I was taking on too much. She called me and said, out of the blue, “Lori, if you don’t take care of yourself when you have troubles, when you’re older they will come back strong to get you.”

My mother and I rarely spoke in depth, so as she talked to me I wrote down her words. I realized that she was talking about the female resilience that had become her legacy:

I am not afraid. Human beings sometimes feel fear, but you know, I just wake up the next morning and start over. My mother never had education or power, and one day she decided to leave her country with six children. To fight... And it's scary. I appreciate it, because when I went back and saw that environment, you can see the poorness. If you're living there, in the night you can just hear the bugs. Those places where nobody knows you exist. I saw a dog on the side of the road, and I felt so bad. Every time he saw a car, he barked and ran after like, "Take me, take me." He is probably dead now. Life isn't fair sometimes [...] When I was 15, I would go outside and wonder where I was and how I could be seen. I felt like I was in a deep hole, and nobody could find me. It was just poor people everywhere. It was a town with no future. People just wake up and live and smoke and drink and die. It's like when you are here and you just work and there's no future. At least now I have my three children. You have power because you have your mind. Maybe I will go back to my country, but if you don't have a lot of money, you are very poor. At least here you can live comfortably if you work hard [...] Unfortunately, we are in this place of power and looks. I have to prove I'm earning my money. I have to explain myself to my boss. These are things you have to deal with because they pay you. When you study, you have the power in your hands. They pay me, but they take everything they can from me. Sometimes I feel like exploding and yelling "Go to hell," but I can't let another person to take my mind from me. I can't let them take my peace. I feel the pressure all the time, but I don't have the luxury to leave. I need my check. But I'm not

gonna let them take my tranquility. (G. Martinez, personal communication, January 2015)

Later, I would realize that this resilience is at the core of what it means to be a bruja. It's not about magic or talking to spirits. It's about getting up every day and transforming challenges into opportunity. It's about acknowledging where you come from without allowing yourself to be limited by the past.

Partly because of my mother's resourcefulness and that of her mother before her, I am now able to work toward something I believe in, a privilege that previous generations of my family haven't enjoyed. I hear her words reflected in what Anna told me: *Part of your gift to the world is helping people make the connections to each other and to all that is. There is Spirit in everything. Your observations will help you see the truth. Your own truth will illuminate others.*

It turns out that the sensitivity I had been experiencing before I began this journey became my greatest strength. The shadow made way for light. The stress and sense of obligation that was paralyzing me became an inspiration that broke my world wide open. What I had perceived as "disordered" shifted to "nonordinary." I turned from the shadow of my ancestral past to another kind of communal orientation, as I sought to connect with strangers as they worked through their own shadows.

I began this dissertation with the concept of the "ancestral shadow" to ultimately point to the unique wildness of my life. I looked to my past to understand my own shadow, but the growth I experienced during the course of this project didn't occur because I found "answers" in my homeland or in the depths of my psyche. Rather, my inner revolution took place when I realized the infinite possibility of my life, that there is no fatedness to my existence. I now see that I possess relatively more privilege and power than my immediate ancestors, and though

there are limitations based on my past and my family's past, I can choose to interpret my experiences in a way that empowers rather than limits me.

The Wild Woman

The story I have created here is sometimes weird, occasionally verges on cliché, and mostly flies by the seat of its pants. It is the most *me* thing I've ever made, and that's what I call "wild," because it represents my unrestrained acceptance of myself in my constant pursuit for understanding life and living it well.

The word "wild" comes from the Old English *wilde*, which means "in the natural state, uncultivated, untamed, undomesticated, uncontrolled" ("Wild," n.d.). A search for the etymology of the word "witch" will return varied results. I like the interpretations that make use of the root "weg," meaning "to be strong, to be lively" ("Witch," n.d.).

Language and interpretation is at the core of every social movement, and our ability to resist oppressive politics begins with our words. George Orwell recommended "starting at the verbal end" to instigate change (Moyd & Komska, 2017). One way activists have done this in recent times is by appropriating words and phrases that used to have negative connotations, like "witch" and "nasty woman" (Gray, 2016). This kind of "linguistic disobedience" (Green, 2012) has proliferated social media, as more and more people seek accessible ways to express resistance.

I've tried to use language in this way in this dissertation, particularly with the use of the word "nonordinary" in place of "disorder," which I learned from my training in shamanic journeying. I have centered on the wild woman, not as a crazy or scary entity, but as an emerging archetype of resistance. As Clarissa Pinkola Estés, author of *Women Who Run With Wolves*, said:

Wolves and women are relational by nature, inquiring, possessed of great endurance and strength [...] They are deeply intuitive, intensely concerned with their young, their mate and their pack [...] Yet both have been hounded, harassed and falsely imputed to be devouring and devious, overly aggressive, of less value than those who are their detractors. (Johnson, 1993).

The wild woman shows her teeth in public to fight against injustice. The wild woman takes it upon herself to fight battles, even as she works for peace.

In times like these, I am reminded of my great grandmother, who invited unknown spirits into her body for the benefit of those who desperately needed answers. I think at the core of the wild woman is this openness and ability to be a medium between worlds, to show people that there is much that cannot be seen with the naked eye. The medium translates trouble into opportunity and opens pathways of possibility. She walks in uncharted territory and returns with healing stories.

The medium and the wild woman are, above all else, storytellers. Through this process, I have begun to allow myself to tell my stories, however incomplete they are. I have attempted to show myself in my “natural” state, untamed and uncontrolled. Strong and lively.

I believe it is time for the wild woman to emerge, for women everywhere to reclaim their roles as their own healers and champions. It is time to break free of our personal shadows, to accept our vulnerability, to move from a fight or flight mentality toward a collaborative creativity directed at achieving positive social and political change. What troubles us can become what inspires us, if only we keep faithfully returning to self-reflection and compassionate connections to the communities around us.

What will we make of it all?

AFTERWORD:
THE WRITING STORY

“The mantra for your life is *abracadabra*. I create as I speak.” (A. Oliver, personal communication, March 2015)

The writing of this dissertation has been a journey in itself. In early 2015, just before I met Anna and traveled to Havana, I visited my grandmother Elsie’s grave in Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn. At the time, I was searching for my family’s story, hoping to bridge the gap in my narrative inheritance caused by my family’s exile. I thought “going back” would help me understand why we experienced so much emotional and economic trouble as a family.

I stared at the plaque on my grandmother’s grave and saw my face reflected on the opal which carried my second name. *Elsie*. I tried to summon a feeling of closure, but there was really nothing to close. Elsie’s story was her own, not mine.

What I was really looking for was an opening.

As I began to explore and write over the following year, I was swept away into wonderful worlds I had never experienced, and these worlds opened me up to more questions, ones that led me away from dwelling on what was wrong toward actively changing my life for the better.

As emotionally laborious as this dissertation has been at times, the writing has been a process of healing for me. Now, after my trip to Cuba, my training in shamanic journeying, and the writing of this document, I have opened to the possibilities of my own path. My world is so full. It is full of questions, and it is a privilege to follow the questions wherever they may lead.

Where is home?

Before I met Anna, I had been paralyzed by fear, like an invisible hand was keeping me in place. By journeying to the lower world, I learned to point the light of my curiosity into the darkness and to give shape and words to experiences that had long been shrouded by my fear. As I reflected on my journeys, I remembered my child self, the one whose sense of adventure always overcame her fear of the dark. I remembered that the dark is a place of incubation, full of the energy of exploration.

During my training, I also reflected on my trip to Cuba. I am one of many second-generation Cuban immigrants to recently go “back.” As travel to Cuba has opened, this has become a controversial topic between Cubans, as the older generation largely maintains that they would never return, some even suggesting that it is morally wrong to go back. Alyson Krueger writes,

For most Cuban-Americans born [in the U.S.], the island of Cuba has existed as only a mythological ideal: a place whose culture, language and food could be recreated in exile but whose physical land could only be experienced through stories passed down from immigrant parents and grandparents. (Krueger, 2016)

The stories we’ve been passed down are incomplete, and as we get to know Cuba, we come upon conflicting narratives and feelings that are difficult to process. Though we consider ourselves Cuban, visiting Cuba is, to many of us, our first contact with the global south, and it is not the reality to which we are accustomed.

I’ve learned that in Cuba, people aren’t scared of the dark, because they know what’s waiting for them. Every corner of their world has been explored. There is so much light. Too much light, sometimes. They welcome shadows. They place altars in the corners of their homes

and pray for what they can't see. Those who attempt to escape usually do so in the dark, choosing the unknown of the perilous miles of water between their land and ours over the oppressive familiarity of their everyday lives.

But most have to stay, and they choose to love their land. They have faith that everything will be well, and they have faith in their descendants and in the future. They have shown me that because of my freedom, I am the faith of my own ancestors, the medium between the old world and the new. While I have felt guilty that I have narrowly escaped the hardships they face, I am thankful for what my trip has taught me about home and belonging -- that I carry home with me wherever I go.

I hope my story will, in part, serve as inspiration for other second-generation immigrants who long to reconnect with their ancestries and homeplaces. Ultimately, I think the value of visiting and researching the histories of our our native countries is in the realization of our own positions in the world.

How do I heal?

My first meeting with Anna brought attention to my body and its connection to my mental state. Through my journeys to the upper world, I developed a metaphor between the snake and the female that reframed the interpretations I had learned from my early education in Catholicism into something more productive for me.

I gathered all the female figures that had been surrounding my life -- Elsie, Elvira, Anna, Fidela, Alice, Eve, Lilith, Shakti -- and I imagined how they were teaching me to heal. I created a strong female archetype as I wrote, and I was amazed by my ability to create such an imaginative figure as I narrated my experiences.

Anna says that Spirit is the great communicator, and it will take forms that challenge and resonate with each practitioner. It often takes the form of a power animal that guides us through the different worlds; some power animals are shadow ones, meant to show us what we are scared to face about ourselves. When the snake called Shakti first appeared to me, she unlocked difficult bodily memories I had been trying to forget, and immediately after, I experienced an extreme bodily response: an ovarian cyst ruptured.

Whatever the cause of that rupture, the snake turned my attention to my body again. She reminded me that my body is connected to everything that is going on in my mind, and that I had been ignoring that connection. She opened up a realm of exploration into the female body and the female condition that brought me to terms with my own “suffering” and helped me see how that suffering was a privilege.

Part of that healing involved remembering a moment in my life that I had been trying to forget -- the abuse I had experienced at the hands of someone I trusted. Doing so helped me be kinder to myself and look forward to my life. So many of our myths teach us to see ourselves as evil and cursed, and as much as we learn and evolve, it’s sometimes hard to shed that construction and be kind to ourselves. I explored those myths as I wrote, and I realized I had been feeling shame even though I had done nothing wrong. I had been holding myself back.

It took years for me to be able to admit that I was assaulted. I circled around and around my shadow, and it took writings tens of thousands of words for the shadow to clarify. Some women are still living in silence. I am energized by the recent outpouring of support in the media for those who have experienced assault, and I hope that more and more women will feel comfortable sharing their stories in their own ways, in their own time.

What is my purpose?

This is an ongoing question, and increasingly, I am realizing the answer lies in community, in relationships. I hope that when others read my story, they will take heart that there are others who are also searching, that there is no straight line to healing, and that they can wander in search of their own purpose in their own words. I hope this will encourage other second-generation female immigrants, in particular, to write their way through their journeys, because their stories are largely missing from our cultural consciousness. Theirs are important stories of resilience and ingenuity.

As I wrote and gained clarity, I felt more confident in exploring the confusing and labyrinthine nature of my own emotion and memory. I was able to revisit difficult experiences from my past more easily, to come to terms with them even as I knew they would always affect me. I want my readers to know that when I began writing this, it was an incoherent mess, a wild thing that could never fully be tamed. I wish for those who perceive their lives to be a mess to be inspired to take the first step, the first word toward making meaning and finding a purpose of their own. This meaning making is an ongoing process. We never arrive at the end of learning ourselves and how to be with and exist in the world of others.

As for me, I will continue cultivating communities of self care and health. While mental health reform is necessary, there are things we can do to help each other and to achieve a stronger voice that we might wield toward changing policy in favor of minority populations. I will continue working with other second-generation female immigrants to put our stories out into the public. My greatest aspiration is to help women see that they can move beyond the obligations to their troubled pasts. That they can move toward a future of their own making.

That together, we can create beautiful pathways between our worlds.

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