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Border-Crossing Travels Across Literary Worlds: My Shamanic Conscientization

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Border-Crossing Travels Across Literary Worlds: My Shamanic Conscientization

by

Scott L. Neumeister

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
with a concentration in Literature
Department of English
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Florida

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	iii
Introduction	1
Notes	13
Chapter One: Shifting to New Worlds: Initiation and Identity in <i>The Agüero Sisters</i>	15
Shamanic Intentions and Initiations: Santería World Traveling	17
Bless Me, <i>Virgen</i> , for I Have Sinned: Confessional Cleansing	20
It Will Take Something of a Divine Intervention: Influential Luminaries	25
Offering Her to the Sky: Making Sacred, Making Whole	33
Voices Gather in Her Head: Intuitive (P)re-visioning	37
Lightning Has Its Work to Do: Stitching the Self with Motley Embroidery	40
Skin and Bones: Body and Racial Politics.....	41
Erotics and Employment: Sexuality and Class Power	48
Everything Elegguá: At Home at the Crossroads	56
Notes	58
Chapter Two: The Old (Sha)Man and the Student: Finding My (Heming)Way into Manhood	61
Male Psychic Anatomy: (En)Gendering a Theoretical Approach	64
Battle, Wherein Is the Warrior's Glory: <i>Agon(izing)</i> Manhood	67
What a Man Can Do and What a Man Endures: Wounding Self to Be(a/s)t the Other	71
The Happiness of the Garden That a Man Must Lose: Sighing for Eden	79
For Whom the bell hooks: Writing as a Farewell to Harms	91
Notes	93
Chapter Three: Sick and Tired: Night Journeys in Literary and Literal Ability.....	98
Trusting in Myself: Hoping to Transcend.....	100
Power and Speed Be Hands and Feet: By the Labor of My Hands Only	103
Gasping for Breath: Dark Nights in Liminal Spaces	110
Virulent Impairment: Mono(lithic) Weakness.....	115
(In)valid Resonance: Connecting a White Man to <i>Our Nig</i>	117
Spirituality in the Dark: Traveling to the Sublime.....	123
Remade: Crossing Between the Mean and the Sublime	128
Notes	131
Chapter Four: Hoodooed by <i>Mumbo Jumbo</i> : How a White Man Caught Jes Grew.....	134
Lindsay's Liturgy: The Source of "Infection"	137

Resisting Apollo: Dionysus Drums the Music of the (Hemi)Spheres	145
Playing on the Plantation: Jazz in Color	150
Picture This: Racial Politics, National and Local	155
Shifty Healers: Mediation at the Border	157
Notes	164
Conclusion	167
Works Cited	176

ABSTRACT

Border-Crossing Travels Across Literary Worlds is an autocritographical journey that places a group of U.S. literary texts into critically conscious dialogue with the “text” of my life. As a white, American, middle-class, cishetero, able-bodied man, I historicize, contextualize, analyze, and deconstruct the process by which my ten years of graduate academic studies at the University of South Florida fostered my ongoing awakening to critical consciousness—the personal and political evolution Paulo Freire terms “conscientization.” I present the analytical insights I realized about landmark feminist and womanist texts I encountered during my graduate studies that resonate with the prominent literary works and events from my youth. By identifying personal contexts and identity-aware frameworks for how I read these influential texts in my past, I give concrete examples of how hegemonic systems of gender, race, class, sexuality, and ability operate within such writing. I also demonstrate how utilizing feminist and womanist theoretical lenses allows a scholar to re-vision and recover problematic texts. Across all my autocritographical travels, I imagine my own life experiences, as well as the positionality of my selected texts’ protagonists, in terms of the archetype of the shaman—a liminal, border-crossing person who walks between worlds to function in the capacity as a messenger, intermediary, and balance-bringing healer.

INTRODUCTION

From the very outset of this dissertation, I wish to call out—in the sense of both “divulge” and “decry”—my identity as a white, American, middle-class, cishetero (heterosexual whose gender matches the birth-assigned one), able-bodied, fifty-two-year-old male. As such, I hold the most advantages in what bell hooks labels the “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy,”¹ because I stand at the intersection, as Kimberlé Crenshaw² has termed it, of many historically-privileged stations of hegemonic power. By default, I have been handed “the keys to the *kyriarchy*,” using Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s word for “intersecting multiplicative structures of oppression” (118). Moreover, as Michael Kimmel has asserted, these identity constructions hold the summative advantage of obscuring their own power: “The privilege of privilege is that the terms of privilege are rendered invisible. It is a luxury not to have to think about race, or class, or gender” (363). My encounter with feminist/womanist³ ideology upon entering the graduate English literature program at the University of South Florida in 2007 began the inner revelation of and “thinking about” my invisible advantages. At the halfway milestone of my graduate studies, I rendered some of these visible as my 2012 master’s thesis *Circling Back Home: My Lifelong Odyssey into Feminism*. Now, this revelatory dissertation offers the culminative product of an eleven-year pupillary awakening to critical consciousness, the personal and political process Paulo Freire terms *conscientization*.⁴ For this reason, my writing, both in its topics and its self-positioning, embodies the forsaking of my identity-based luxury in the name of waking up to systems by which I benefit but am also dehumanized.

The methodological approach of this dissertation links inextricably to the purposes for which I write it. Black feminist scholar Michael Awkward has repurposed the term *autocritography*—coined in 1992 by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.—to describe the merging of critical analysis of texts with autobiographical, or memoir-based, inquiry. In *Scenes of Instruction*, Awkward envisions the term to include “an account of individual, social, and institutional conditions that help to produce a scholar and, hence, his or her professional concerns” (7). Autocritographical writing both upholds and subverts longstanding methods within the academy. In my employment of it, I purpose to follow the tradition of close reading as a staple of literary scholarship. Nevertheless, at the same time I resist the custom of minimizing the scholar’s first-person narrative presence within the analysis. Often in academic writing, the “I” that critiques is absent, with the author posing as a rationalistic, disembodied, and supposedly unbiased entity. When present, the “I” generally appears as secondary to the investigation and lacks an intersectional personhood with race, class, gender, and other such designations. I argue that this practice is complicit with the kyriarchal tradition of rendering privilege invisible, per Kimmel’s statement. Autocritography permits a fully-revealed author—an identity-conglomerate with a history, emotions, and a body—to interpret literary texts in relationship to a personal story within a social and political flux.

Given my presence in my writing, the keen reader may ask: what is new to be gained here? Haven’t men with privilege always produced the dominating voice of both fiction and non-fiction works, as well as in the academy? Isn’t interpreting most writing, as Judith Shapiro⁵ posits, *de facto* men’s studies? The difference here lies in my ambition to historicize, contextualize, analyze, and dismantle, in Awkward’s words, the “individual, social, and institutional conditions” that fashioned me. To phrase it colloquially, I wish to “pull back the

curtain” to reveal some of the workings of kyriarchy. Particularly in my youth, these processes constructed a person very capable of welcoming hegemonic luxury. In my graduate career, however, oppositional processes reconstructed me as a traitor to kyriarchy. I would speculate that for a woman of color, for example, or an LGBTQ-identified individual to utilize an academic writing platform such as a dissertation to resist hegemonic systems might be “expected,” “understandable,” “reasonable.” On the contrary, the awakening wrought by my encounter with feminism/womanism at the University of South Florida was not expected, reasonable, or normal precisely *because of my identity*. For me, embracing conscientization meant radical change within my soul; moreover, speaking it *personally* carries risk, as I break trust with the kyriarchy that trained me to be one of its privileged members.

The foundational literature for this dissertation’s autocritographical inquiry consists of key texts I have investigated during my doctoral work. Each of these texts prompted conscientizing self-reflection. The order of my chapters illustrates a sequential chronology of how I encountered the texts: accordingly, Chapter One, based on reading Cristina García’s *The Agüero Sisters* from my spring 2014 Latina literature with Dr. Ylce Irizarry; Chapter Two, connected to reading Dr. Lawrence Broer’s *Vonnegut and Hemingway: Writers at War* and co-authoring with him a conference paper for the summer 2014 International Hemingway Conference; Chapter Three, from reading Harriet E. Wilson’s *Our Nig* in a spring 2015 class on early American literature with Dr. Sari Altschuler; and Chapter Four, based on encountering Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo* in my final doctoral coursework semester in spring of 2016, again with Dr. Irizarry. As I progressed toward my PhD, each of these readings prompted a journey in memory—whether to the somewhat recent past, such as to my first feminist theory course in 2009 with Gary L. Lemons, or the distant past, as in my fourth-grade English class in

1976 with Mrs. Walker. In all these explorations, not only “individual, social, and institutional conditions” but other texts worked as forces to “produce” me. These include transformative writing from my graduate studies by feminist and womanist theorists like bell hooks, Gloria Anzaldúa, Barbara Christian, and Elizabeth Meese. Conversely, influential yet problematic texts from my youth also shaped me, such as Ernest Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea*, Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “Self-Reliance,” Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*, and Vachel Lindsay’s “The Congo.” Surprisingly, though, I found that even the white male authors’ works often contain both the problem *and* the cure for some of my kyriarchal attitudes when I examined them self-reflexively.

My approach follows much of what Adrienne Rich began with her call in 1972 for “re-visioning,” although with some critical evolutions. Rich espouses the “act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction” that specifically targets gender for interrogation in literary critique (18). Even more significantly, although Rich primarily envisions women as re-visioners, she also opens the possibility for a man like me to do exactly what this dissertation intends: “I am curious and expectant about the future of masculine consciousness . . . One thing I am sure of: just as woman is becoming her own midwife, creating herself anew, so man will have to learn to gestate and give birth to his own subjectivity” (25). My approach to the “old texts” enlarges re-visioning in two important ways: by bringing an intersectional analytical breadth that is not simply gender-focused; and by encompassing both texts written by others and the text of my own life. My intersectional re-visioning of the texts that conditioned me to comply with their hegemonic reinscriptions indeed advances and enhances the work begun by Rich. Moreover, my resisting old kyriarchal programming helps “give birth to [my] own subjectivity.”

The chapters that follow hold one aspect that benefits from some elucidation: my use of the archetype of the shaman as a conceit. Just as I employ *The Odyssey* as the metaphorical analogue within my master's thesis, I wanted to mindfully tap into a deep transcultural symbol to frame this autocritographical dissertation. In the spring of 2017, I had mentally constellated the ideas for all its chapters, but I still had no "connective tissue" in the form of a linking metaphor. I serendipitously attended the American Stage production of August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* in St. Petersburg, Florida. In the play, the character Bynum Walker works as a "conjure man," a shaman who helps protagonist Herald Loomis heal from his past and advance toward self-actualization. Soumya Jose and Sony Jalarajan Ray explain, "Loomis wants to forget his past, but Bynum forces him to remember his enslavement as a way of confronting that history; as a means of going back in order to move forward . . . interpreting the past and illuminating present action" (98). In a stunning epiphany, I realized that this shaman character, a "walker" across time and worlds, perfectly epitomizes the healing workings of autocritography. The above-mentioned theorists, from their own standpoints and using different terms, write about their worlds and linking them to others: hooks' utilization of *margin* and *center*, Anzaldúa's *mestiza* and *borderlands* framework, Christian's *highs* and *lows* of black feminist criticism, and so on. I realized I could imagine my own life experiences, as well as the positionality of many of my selected texts' protagonists, in terms of the figure of the shaman—a liminal, border-crossing person who walks between worlds to function in some capacity as a messenger, intermediary, and/or healer.

I need to establish several points about my adoption of the shamanic archetype. First, although I often reference the germinal work on global shamanism, Mircea Eliade's *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, I am often not writing about the literal practice of shamans. I use

the figure of the shaman as a depth psychologist might, seeking to explore the workings of the soul and its repeated expression in the human journey using archetypal patterns and symbols. Next, just as I more liberally apply the term *shaman*, I also see the designation *world* broadly, and I draw from María Lugones with her “world-traveler” concept in her essay “Playfulness, ‘World’-Travelling, and Loving Perception.” Actual shamans traverse between the mundane and divine worlds. Figurative shamans may cross boundaries between physical areas, such as between countries or regions, or ideological ones, like those separating religion, identity, or even—as with Loomis—personal history. These travelers, however, act not as opportunistic or consumeristic tourists, but in the true shaman role as healing, loving, and playful allies linking different realms. Finally, as a white man, I cannot hesitate to call out the potential for appropriation of a term and a role that emanates primarily from non-white and often colonized indigenous cultures.⁶ The ancient and mostly-shrouded origins of the shaman indicate that her or his function works deeply in human psyches, across time and peoples. While social advocates rightly decry predatory coopting of various cultures’ sacred practices, the very fact that something more profound than fetishized exoticism draws people to shamanism should indicate its transpersonal power. I therefore intend to work with this concept in the same way a shaman works—across worlds but with due respect and in the name of bridging difference, not exploiting it.

The other concept I interweave throughout this dissertation that needs clarification is empathetic imagination, particularly as it relates to appropriation. My project contains multiple instances in which I strongly relate the circumstances and even the suffering of people, real and fictional, who are very different from myself. Especially because this difference often embodies inequalities in power, the danger of appropriation always lurks if I am not sensitive to how my

kyriarchal privilege is operating. Both Karen Halttunen's "Humanitarianism and the Pornography of Pain in Anglo-American Culture" and Laruen Berlant's "Poor Eliza" problematize the lurid sentimentalization of hardship, as well as the potential feel-good voyeurism into the lives of literary characters. Equally as important, Saidiya V. Hartman warns against empathy that oversteps beyond "projection of oneself onto another in order to better understand the other" into erasing of the distinct and perhaps unknowable feelings of the other (19). Given the extensive scholarship on the subject, I am well aware of the hazards presented in using empathy to approach historically-disadvantaged identities.

The positive aspect of the critique that "Your suffering is not a bad as their suffering" is that it serves as a caveat to respect difference. In studying the craft of autocritography under Gary L. Lemons for nine years, however, I have learned from a scholar adept at building bridges that do not erase difference. In *Black Male Outsider: Teaching as a Pro-Feminist Man*, Lemons offers a quote from one of his white students that serves as his pertinent guideline: "We must remember though, that striving for empathy through comparing experiences does not necessitate equalizing them in any way" (131). Lemons' pedagogy has helped me grasp how the autocritographer can properly traverse divergent worlds using empathetic imagination. She or he first must seek patterns of similarity beyond the basics of matching or proximate identity categories and the life events they directly foster. Even when similarities appear, however, distinctions must remain, and one must never forget, as in Lugones' metaphor, that one is a *traveler* and not a colonizing occupier of another's world.

Difficulty arises from the non-nuanced you-can't-compare objection when it halts the empathetic impulse. William S. Hamrick suggests a balance within this challenge that harmonizes with Lemons' ideology: "Empathy creates a 'we' as the subject of the experience,

but this is a ‘we’ in which the boundaries between the ‘I’ and the Other necessarily remain intact.” Contemporary U.S. society has become quite expert at classifying and labeling identity differences and boundaries. Over the past few years, for instance, we have seen the categorization LGBT grow justifiably into LGBTQ and then LGBTQIA or LGBTQ+.

Recognizing more Other identities must at some point, however, morph into the complex process of movement back across boundaries. The deep question “How are we still a ‘we’?” must eventually impel (re)connection. Hamrick extends his argument, “Empathy, knowing the Other as Other, always conjugates similarity with difference, closeness with distance, proximity with tactful differentiation, unity with diversity, and compassionate intervention with appropriate withdrawal” (116). Autocritography dares to hold in tension our near-obsessive question “How are we different?” by counterposing “How are we also the same?” Like the shaman crossing worlds, it strives to discover and highlight paths to unity, closeness, proximity, and community. Doing so often unsettles those who, for comfort or power, wish to erect impermeable borders. Autocritography never abandons, however, the “personal” critique of those systemic hierarchies that fetishize or oppressively weaponize difference. This compassionate process ultimately can begin the healing of wounds caused by divisive systems and thus can foster productive, non-appropriating empathy. My greatest hope is that the chapters that follow embody and model that process with their use of empathetic imagination.

I begin the dissertation with “Shifting to New Worlds: Initiation and Identity in *The Agüero Sisters*,” investigating Cuban-American author Cristina García’s novel first to question concepts of identity. Its plot details how an earthquake throws its Cuban female protagonist, Reina, into a tree, lightning hits her, and then others donate their flesh to patch up her burned body and save her life. She then emigrates to Miami, beginning a process of reconnecting with

her sister and exploring her family's past. In reading this novel, I, like Reina, was “thrown”—out of seeing its story as only verisimilar narration and into viewing it symbolically. I argue that Reina's patchwork skin emblemizes the stitching together of her identity from internal and external sources, representing the postmodern dilemma of social construction versus essentialism. I contend that various occurrences in the novel parallel the Santerían ritual of *asiento*, the installation of a person as a shaman. I show how García clearly signals that Reina symbolically becomes a santera, a border-crossing shaman who, after her own healing, then heals her family.

I also examine in parallel how approaching Reina's story autocritographically led me to an introspective juncture in which I realized the quilted nature of my own identity, as well as what parts of it could be viewed as essential versus constructed. Moreover, I compare the bolt that hits Reina with my memories of the equally powerful “lightning strike” of encountering feminist/womanist theory in 2009 with black pro-feminist/pro-womanist professor Gary L. Lemons. Finally, I demonstrate how my experience of that theory course itself become, for me, like an *asiento* that initiated me into the world of feminism and womanism. Having used this first chapter to thus investigate the shamanic archetype's appropriateness in both literary and literal settings, I hope that the reader will begin to understand the power of autocritography as a transformative mode of academic discourse that invokes self-reflection—related to literary interpretation and analysis.

Next, Chapter Two addresses Ernest Hemingway. “Papa” stands as the most imposing white, male, American giant in my personal literary history. My initial graduate school examination of Hemingway via a feminist lens, taught by white professor emeritus Lawrence Broer, established a foundation for my masculinity studies. Nevertheless, that Hemingway

course did not ask me to write in a self-examinatory manner. After subsequently discovering the method of autocritography, I sought to engage Broer in an autocritographical dialogue that we ultimately presented at the 2014 International Hemingway Conference. In it, we discussed the critical feminist theorists who influenced our awakenings, rehumanized us, and unmasked Hemingway's "tough guise." Within that dialogue lay the seeds for further investigations into my relationship with Papa's work.

"The Old (Sha)Man and the Student: Finding my (Heming)Way into Manhood" presents my autocritographical re-visioning of *The Old Man and the Sea*, particularly how the character Santiago helped "produce" my identity in high school. The first of two shamanic figures I examine, Santiago walks between the worlds of nature and humanity, acceptance and non-acceptance in his angler community, and the Canary Islands and Cuba. I investigate how this influential novel crystallized my gendered conceptions of *man* and *sea*—or more broadly, nature—in ways that both marred and healed me. The second shaman is Broer himself, who bridged the gap between aloof theoretical inquiry and the interrogation of my closest-held identity: manhood. I discuss my return to Hemingway as a scholar and how I, as a graduate student, both learned from my professor and inspired him to co-examine the shared influence of Hemingway's writing on both of our views of masculinity in a white context.

Aside from Hemingway, the white male Transcendentalist philosophers Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau influenced my secondary school years the most. "Self-Reliance" and *Walden* exerted a major force on my ideologies about life when I read them my junior year. This fact resulted from my lower social status as a male at my high school, primarily based on my construction of masculinity. While I would have wanted to be as accepted as those physically tough, sports-obsessed men that I saw as the "alpha" males around me, I did not

perform up to those standards. I needed a manifesto for “a man apart”—and Emerson and Thoreau provided it. Nevertheless, hidden within much of their philosophies of independence are subtle messages about masculine power, privilege of race, and able-bodied identity which, unexamined, were disempowering to me as I grew older.

I examine in Chapter Three, “Sick and Tired: Night Journeys in Literary and Literal Ability,” how intersections of race, class, gender, and ability work together in three texts. First, I re-vision these two transcendentalists’ canonical works, highlighting how their philosophies’ specific assumptions of ability, linked primarily to gender, target—and hence slipped past the blind spots of—a white man with an identity such as I have. Secondly, Harriet E. Wilson’s *Our Nig: Sketches from the Life of a Free Black*, read as part of an ability studies course on nineteenth-century literature, allows me to contrast Emerson and Thoreau with another New England denizen, one with opposite identity and social positions. Having lived through the ability studies truism of “we are all only temporarily able-bodied,”⁷ I delve into my own time of disability with mononucleosis. I explore the accompanying thoughts and feelings of loss of agency, privilege, and manhood, in resonance with the three authors’ experiences. Finally, I illuminate how the phenomenon of the “dark night of the soul,” a liminal time of difficulty, connects me to these authors and fosters a shamanic interpretation of how disability worked in our lives.

I proceed into the final chapter, “Hoodooed by *Mumbo Jumbo*: How a White Man Caught Jes Grew,” reaching far back into my academic and personal history to span the time from fourth grade through my undergraduate years to the present day. I thematically interrogate the place of music and art in my life as a locus of intersectional politics, using Vachel Lindsay’s and Ishmael Reed’s works as the starting texts. In the chapter title, “Jes Grew” refers to the psychic

“epidemic” in Reed’s novel that counters monolithic kyriarchal power via music and rhythm. I proceed through key life moments when thematic aspects of Reed’s novel coincide with my experiences. In particular, Reed’s approach to the dyads of thought and feeling, as well as control and freedom, dovetail into my life themes of identity, language, and power.

In diagnosing my “infection” with Jes Grew and using that term in the beneficial sense that Reed intends it, I show how “hoodoo” infiltrated the kyriarchal quarantines through several unexpected avenues: white poetry, in Lindsay’s “The Congo”; white music, via the all-male, white Canadian band Rush; and white college life, at my undergraduate institution, Duke University. All along the arc of this topic from 1975, liminal, shaman-like figures pointed the way beyond whiteness, some white themselves—e.g. Lindsay, my fourth-grade English teacher, Rush—and some black/people of color—Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo*’s protagonist Papa La Bas, Duke Jazz Ensemble director Paul Jeffrey, Jesse Jackson, Dr. Irizarry. I both employ the work of Henry Louis Gates, Jr., on the “Signifying Monkey” and extend his reading of *Mumbo Jumbo* as engaging both the shaman archetype and a closely-associated one: the trickster. I close the chapter examining the place of both the shaman and trickster roles in the ongoing work to cultivate a more socially just and balanced world.

I aim with this dissertation to enliven and enrich politicized academic scholarship by rendering its personal contexts visible and presenting identity-aware analytical frameworks for a group of U.S. literary works. In utilizing the autocritographical approach, I undertake placing the text of my life into critically conscious dialogue with the writings I have selected. My intention is to provide concrete examples in two categories. The first is how kyriarchal systems of gender, race, class, sexuality, and ability operate and replicate via literature, as well as by Awkward’s “individual, social, and institutional conditions.” The second is how these hegemonies can also

be resisted and re-visioned via literature and critically conscious self-reflexivity in reading it. I offer my autocritographical dissertation particularly to an audience with multiple areas of privilege and hegemonic power, but truly to any current or potential ally in social justice. My hope is that my writing in this dissertation would model a discursive means by which people of all identities, “giving birth to their own subjectivity,” can become comrades in the struggle against kyriarchy. In a time when borders, separation, and fear of the Other increasingly wound and tear humanity into isolated subdivisions, the call for each of us to embrace the shamanic healer archetype grows daily. Like Wilson’s Bynum, all who, within themselves and other, “conjure” self-actualization, critical consciousness, and solidarity across differences of race, gender, class, sexuality, and abilities befittingly take up the mantle of the border crossing/world-traveling shaman.

Notes

1. See hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*.
2. See Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics.”
3. For the purposes of this dissertation, I often link but also keep verbally separate the terms *feminism* and *womanism*. In using *feminism*, I mean the branch of thought which primarily, though not necessarily only, interrogates gender without the complications of other identity constructs. By *womanism*, I intend primarily the definition Alice Walker creates, “a black feminist or feminist of color,” and that “womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender” (xi). Womanist theoretical writing expands feminism’s tendency to highlight (white, straight, middle class) gender issues by embroiling race, class, sexuality, transnational status, and ability into its critiques of kyriarchy.

4. Freire created this term, *conscientização* in the original Portuguese, in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

5. See Shapiro, “Anthropology and the Study of Gender.”

6. For further reading, see Wendy Rose’s “The Great Pretenders: Further Reflections on White Shamanism” and Dagmar Wernitznig’s *Going Native or Going Naive? White Shamanism and the Neo-Noble Savage*.

7. This phrase first appears in Charles D. Goldman’s “More than a Wheelchair: The Disabled Need More than Sympathy, More than Charity...” in 1978.

CHAPTER ONE:

Shifting to New Worlds: Initiation and Identity in *The Agüero Sisters*

Knowing that something in you, or of you, must die before something else can be born, you throw your old self into the ritual pyre, a passage by fire. In relinquishing your old self, you realize that some aspects of who you are—identities people have imposed on you as a woman of color and that you have internalized—are also made up . . . So, you reason, if it's all made up, you can compose it anew and differently.

—Gloria Anzaldúa, “Now Let Us Shift...The Path of Conocimiento
...Inner Work, Public Acts”

The displacement [in my work] comes from navigating so many borders—personal, cultural, narratively, mythically—that are perforating, shifting unpredictably.

—Cristina García, Interview with Chris Abani

The world changed with the earth shaking and a thunderbolt—this description matches the touchstones of this chapter, and I intend the statement in two senses. The literal meaning of the statement derives from the narrative of Cristina García’s *The Agüero Sisters*. I encountered this novel as the initial reading assignment in the spring 2014 class taught by Dr. Ylce Irizarry, U.S. Latina Literature. In the story, Reina Agüero, a Cuban electrician in the Revolutionary era, undergoes a life transformation, precipitated by her enduring a double natural catastrophe of earthquake and lightning strike. The second, metaphorical sense of a seismic and galvanizing introduction links to the novel’s themes of understanding identity, exploring personal history,

and crossing borders. By interrogating them autocritographically, I envisaged a symbolic way that Reina's earthquake and lightning experience were analogous with my introduction to feminism and womanism in a feminist theory course taught by black pro-feminist/pro-womanist scholar Gary L. Lemons, five years prior. Moreover, I recognized how García's questioning of identity concepts mirrored and advanced a questioning of my own identity formation, inspired by the very feminist/womanist theories I had first met in that feminist theory class.

The novel begins near El Cobre, as Reina attempts to repair a broken water pump needed to drain the copper mine. An earthquake suddenly blasts her down the side of the hill, throwing her into a giant mahogany tree. As she is pinioned high in the branches, a lightning bolt strikes her, burning her skin. Only after "other people, dead and alive, gave Reina their skin, unblistered, unsinged" to replace her body's incinerated parts does she survive as a fleshy patchwork (*Agüero Sisters* 35). The novel's successive chapters jump from points in the past to the present, weaving together how three generations of the Agüero family have suffered from the killing of Reina's mother, Blanca, by her stepfather, Ignacio. The opening natural cataclysm ultimately propels Reina's emigration to Miami, the recovery of her history, and her reconciliation with her past and her family.

Equally as surprising as the novel's jolting start, in retrospect, is the fact that one semester into my PhD studies, García was the first Latinx novelist I had studied in my graduate work. Dr. Irizarry's curriculum, focusing exclusively on Latina writers, corrected that fault in abundance. Her reading list also included authors such as Nelly Rosario, Ana Menendez, and Mayra Montero. As I proceeded through the semester, I began to observe how Irizarry's novel selection intentionally emphasized the pervasiveness of the racial identity, family history, and expatriation thematics in Latina literature. The class's discussions constantly raised these topics

and theorized their significance across the novels we read, interrelated with the histories of the various Latin American countries they depict. Nevertheless, of ten novels I read that semester, *The Agüero Sisters* resonated most with me, inspiring both an end-of-term paper and this, my first dissertation chapter.

Shamanic Intentions and Initiations: Santería World Traveling

In considering the distinctly Latinx elements of the story, I also discern that this novel, inflected with the Afro-Cuban religion Santería, bears hallmarks of magical realism. This genre bends rational perceptions of reality and calls into question inflexible personal and political ideologies. In an interview with Andrew Lynch, García explains that “[magical realism is] a way . . . of questioning assumptions that work, not just about reality or facts, but about politics, about anything else. It’s a way of shattering and snubbing the rules” (00:07:20-00:07:30). The novel’s relationship to Santería manifests within this challenging of standards. Indeed, Lyn Di Iorio Sandín relates how the author admits that “Santería permeates the deepest fibers of the narrative,” yet such ties are “submerged, fragmented, and elided,” and the various ceremonies in the novel—both overt and implied—“seem decontextualized.” Di Iorio Sandín posits that García thereby represents Cuban American psychic fragmentation and distancing from foundational religious narratives. I furthermore argue that García applies this move as a counter-hegemonic stance against, as Di Iorio Sandín labels it, “an extremely patriarchal religion,” and by extension opposing rigid, oppressive thinking patterns in general (25).

The novel’s paradigm-shifting opening also induced the effect that I myself was thrown beyond the literal narrative’s boundaries and into seeing it emblematically and non-conventionally. As Gloria Anzaldúa conceives this metaphorical kind of earthquake, “Este arrebato . . . jerks you from the familiar and safe terrain and catapults you into nepantla . . . In

this liminal, transitional space, suspended . . . where the outer boundaries of the mind's inner life meet the outer world of reality, is a zone of possibility” (544). As I perform autocritography inspired by Anzaldúa’s vision and García’s rule-breaking, I thus explore figurative connections and symbolic correlations beyond the “zone of possibility” that standard literary analysis might allow. I argue in the first half of this chapter that García uses events in Reina’s life to portray her metaphorical initiation as a santera—a Santerían priestess. For Reina this ritual, known as the *asiento*, follows some of the religion’s prescribed guidelines; however, it also “shatters and snubs” the exact actions, methods, and order of the rite. The text both suggests religious allegory and simultaneously opposes the ability to consistently draw exact correspondences. Autocritographically, I attempt to demonstrate side-by-side the ways in which my 2009 Feminist Theory course embodied its own form of *asiento*—a semester-long initiation into feminism/womanism.

The last half of the chapter contends that Reina’s skin, a patchwork of her own flesh and grafts from others, symbolizes the stitching together of her identity from internal and external sources. This depiction heightens García’s positioning of her as a liminal, hybrid figure, further representing her role as a border-crosser, what Gloria Anzaldúa calls a *nepantlera* and AnaLouise Keating terms “threshold person.”¹ I correspondingly reflect on how approaching Reina’s story via this theory leads me to an introspective juncture in which I pose several questions: how is my identity also quilted? What parts of my identity might I view as essential versus constructed? And finally, how have my struggles with identity also shaped me into a type of “threshold person”?

García’s use of *asiento* elements in *The Agüero Sisters* must begin by perceiving the shaman archetype within the novel’s magical realism context. As I have discussed in my

introduction, I define the shaman archetype as a person who is aware of multiple worlds—as conceived by María Lugones—and can move in and out of them. The shaman’s travels occur particularly with the intention of healing her or his community. Typically, shamans have some momentous event to awaken and “call” them into these other worlds and this avocation. I read the lightning strike as the most obvious sign that shamanism is an operative paradigm for Reina Agüero.² Mircea Eliade explains, “Sometimes one becomes a shaman after a divine election or an accident; for example, the gods choose the future shaman by striking him with lightning” (*Shamanism* 19). After such a fateful event, the future shaman must learn, via training and initiation, to walk between “worlds” and explore the liminal spaces along the seam of the natural and supernatural.

As a santera, Reina would traverse the boundaries between reality and surrealism. García herself recognizes that “those boundaries . . . [are] very perforated” (Lynch 00:06:25-00:06:30). Her professed love of “that space between those dashes . . . the perforation” (00:06:35-00:06:52) informs her creation of a leading character who gets initiated into and embraces the shaman archetype. Via the shaman’s path, Reina travels and “plays” in liminal areas, as Lugones indicates in her essay title “Playfulness, ‘World’-Travelling, and Loving Perception.” Reina’s “world travelling”—both in her magical realism journeys between rational and non-rational experiences and her transnational border crossing—accordingly brings personal healing, familial integration, and an inchoate vision of political atonement across national boundaries.

The asiento itself remains a practice not fully revealed to the public, its concealment signifying a protection of access to power and a respect for its spiritual mysteries. For my main resource on Santería, I employ Migene González-Wippler’s *Santería: The Religion*, a text—though unacknowledged—that García herself uses.³ Individual asiento ceremonies undoubtedly

have numerous variations. Nevertheless, David H. Brown identifies its four quintessential phases as consecration, presentation, sacrifice, and divination (136). I use these as guidelines for my analysis, first detailing the indications of each *asiento* phase in García, then correlating that phase's attributes with my initiation-like experiences in Feminist Theory.

Bless me, *Virgen*, for I Have Sinned: Confessional Cleansing

The *asiento*'s beginning step—consecration—opens the initiate, or *iyawó*, to become worthy and capable of assimilating power from the Santería *orishas*, the religion's deities. This is the *ebbó de entrada*, what González-Wippler describes as “a remedy, a cleansing” and an act of atonement (176). She details two separate cleansing processes: one in which the *iyawó* is prepared bodily via washing with water, having her hair cut off one lock at a time, and being stripped of clothes; the other in which sacrificial animals are passed over the initiate's body to absorb negativity. The first component symbolizes a release from what has ensnared the initiate, as well as liberation from what remains tied to any progress-blocking history. The second represents the ability of another entity to help mitigate the burdensome suffering of the past. To begin her figurative initiation, Reina must undergo a coming-to-terms with the past. García intends that Reina's dealing with both personal and communal history as directly as possible provides her with self-recovery and “remedy,” as well as the ability to be a conduit for her family's healing.

The metaphorical body preparation occurs in several parts in the novel. Each time, I also find García overtly representing Reina's increase in power, an energetic infusion. First, the water cleansing aspect operates as bookends to Reina's story. In the opening, as Reina ascends the hill to the mine's entrance and begins trying to move the water pump, “unseasonable”—therefore, preternatural—rain pours down, thoroughly washing Reina before calamity strikes. The final

cleansing transpires in Reina's final appearance in the book when she enters the ocean after making love to Russ. In each case, lightning electrifies her, post-washing—both the actual strike that hits her in the beginning and the figurative “storm of moist lightning” in her womb at the end as she conceives a new life (*Agüero Sisters* 294).⁴

Just as the iyawó loses her clothes to leave old energy and identity behind and take on new, Reina's strippings—related to her washings—also illustrate power augmentation. The first time, only implied in the text, occurs in the hospital after the lightning strike, when her charred jumpsuit is removed to permit her skin graft surgery. The new skin then literally enlivens her, a “condition of survival,” as García titles the chapter. The second transpires as she makes love to Russ, “naked and willful,” which emblematically magnifies her to “four times her normal size” (*Agüero Sisters* 294). The other bodily ritual, hair removal, takes place when the earthquake hurls Reina into the mahogany tree and “a tangle of her hair is pulled out by the roots” (17), again as a prelude to the lightning's impact. In this manner, Reina undergoes the required bodily preparation customs, albeit in “submerged, fragmented, and elided” fashion.

For the element of animal-based sanctification, Reina's lover Pepín visits her in the hospital to perform a curse-removing ritual with a white rooster. Although not a santero himself, Pepín prays over Reina while holding the rooster above her stomach and asking her to concentrate. When he completes the prayer, the rooster flies out the window, “blazing newly black against the wild, colluding sky” (*Agüero Sisters* 40). Here, too, ambiguity and non-conformity undercut exact connection to approved Santerían prescriptions and a straight allegorical reading. In an asiento, the sin-bearing animals are sacrificed, not allowed to go free. Also, the “newly black” description of the rooster could mean it has magically changed color and has absorbed Reina's “sin,” or it could simply imply that the rooster only *looks* so, being

silhouetted against the sky. The text's inconclusiveness reflects the border space between reality and the fantastical—between certainty and uncertainty—that García expresses as a favorite zone of exploration.⁵ Moreover, I deduce in the novel an even more profound offering, not from animals, but from people: the skin grafts themselves. Others *sacrifice* their own flesh to not only mitigate Reina's suffering but to transfigure her into something more than she was—more richly connected to her community. García plays between the concepts of animal sacrifice and human *self*-sacrifice, expanding the multi-religious connotations of this chapter's pivotal event.

At least one other ritual consecration element, outside González-Wippler's account, exists in *The Agüero Sisters* and aligns more with a traditional Christian rite: confession. Suffering from insomnia, Reina visits the shrine of La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre the day before her mine repair job. "Bless me, *Virgen*, for I have sinned," she prays as she kneels and crosses herself, then backtracks into "Well, I haven't sinned exactly . . ." (*Agüero Sisters* 12). This scene again plainly describes rule-breaking, chiefly in that confession can only be heard by a priest—and consequently only by a man. The ritual stipulates the words "Bless me, *Father*." García extends the situation's uncertainty when she explains Reina's awkwardness is due to forgetting much of "the rituals of [her] Protestant boarding school" (*Agüero Sisters* 12). Protestants do not make official confession to clergy, so these words could not have come from an earlier Protestant milieu. All the same, this fact does not matter in the end; Reina's uncertainty of proper ritual technique and her ambivalence about her own "sinful" condition do not impede her humble desire for some kind of atonement with La Virgen and a subsequent healing.

García adds a third religious distinction into the scene, highlighting syncretism as another thematic expression of blurred boundaries. She refers to La Virgen's syncretization with the Santería/Yoruban goddess Oshún—as well as to her brown skin—and thereby underscores the

creolized natures of La Virgen, of Santería, and even subtly of Reina herself. Margarite Fernández Olmos comments, “The view of Creolization has expanded in recent years to become synonymous with ‘hybridity’ and ‘syncretism,’ transforming and challenging the static and binary Western rhetorical oppositions of white/black, center/periphery, civilized/primitive, and so on” (64). García “perforates” the hard boundaries between patriarchy and matriarchy, between Catholic, Santerían, and Protestant, and between European and African descent, right from the outset of Reina’s story.

I begin my first transition out of the novel and into my feminist/womanist “initiation” via Gary L. Lemons’ 2009 Feminist Theory course.⁶ The fundamental parallel I would like to draw between Reina’s consecration phase and my experience in this class concerns the release from a psychic past that ensnared me—into higher energetic potentialities. Lemons’ pedagogical employment of the autocritographical method enabled the same coming-to-terms with the past in his students that Reina undergoes in the novel. Autocritographical writing by its nature includes personal history, a past to be revisited via critical lenses; it is accordingly often confessional. bell hooks, contemplating her experience of autocritography as confession in *remembered rapture*, adopts the imagery of both a purification process and clothing removal, hence tying it profoundly to the asiento metaphor: “Confession[al writing] was a process of unmasking, stripping the soul. It made me naked and vulnerable . . . the experience was cleansing and redemptive” (7). Particularly in the case of the kyriarchally-privileged writer, autocritography calls for the recognition and acknowledgment of the oppressive hegemonic thought structures and belief systems rooted in the past and ingrained into his psyche. Confessing the truths of my history, especially my complicity with oppression, allows the liberatory process to work and the transformative “remedy” of this *ebbó de entrada* to manifest.

The pedagogical setup of Lemons' class worked to promote the "purification" process for its members in three ways. First, the autocritographical engagement with the theorists we read happened *every* week—each class period required us to turn in at least five-hundred words of writing. The effort in producing this personal analytical writing proved exhausting at first. Almost like developing a muscle, though, the regular engagement in deep self-reflection created an adroitness in recovering the past and applying critical theory to memoir. Next, writing in this manner created a keener awareness of my constructed reader, a greater sensitivity to who the "you" would be, given that I naturally was using "I" so frequently. Autocritography begets a "relational model" of writing, as Nancy K. Miller postulates: "The writing autobiographical subject—female or male—always requires a partner in crime . . . it takes two to make an autobiography, to perform an autobiographical act" (422-23). As the instructor, Lemons was the most obvious other half of "the two," but Lemons' third pedagogical feature also expanded my idea of who could find kinship with, and perhaps an empathetic imagination about, my words.

This final class technique that advanced the confessional and relational goals of our writing was to have students read their papers aloud each week, sitting in a circle format. In this way, each of us in the classroom community also became the other half of each other's act of autobiography. I felt that both speaking and hearing the autocritographical words imparted, just as in Reina's moments of purification, a certain power augmentation. In our dialogic essay "'Brothers of the Soul': Men Learning about and Teaching in the Spirit of Feminism," Lemons and I explore various turning points in that course. I recall a crucial moment of "stripping," as hooks denotes it in *remembered rapture*, in front of the class:

When it was my turn to read, however, an energetic sensation engulfed me like none I had experienced before. This was not the blood rush of embarrassment, shame, guilt, or

any other negative emotion; this was what I can only describe as a spiritual fervor, a soul earnestness, and an anointing that I had not felt in my life. I believe that my “confession” before the men and women of that class . . . brought me into dialogue with my Higher Self and my Higher Power in a way that just writing it would not have done. (518)

I undeniably felt some sort of energetic and spiritual infusion in the coming-to-terms with my past. It felt like a “consecration,” even if it was not in the express service of a shamanic initiation ritual.

This and other moments in the course embodied the hooksean ideal of “the radical possibility of self-transformation that confessional writing can evoke” (*rapture* 5). Moreover, I sensed these “purifying” junctures in Feminist Theory, without my stating the exact words, as akin to “Bless me, *Virgen*” moments. They acknowledged my past critical *unconsciousness* in the light of the elevated ideals of feminism/womanism and opening myself to their liberatory power. In hindsight and informed by García’s shamanic archetype, I see the resonance of how those who would walk between “worlds” must themselves experience, and be ready to foster in others, healing and liberatory consciousness.

It Will Take Something of a Divine Intervention: Influential Luminaries

Following consecration, the *asiento*’s presentation phase, what González-Wippler identifies as *la parada*, refers to naming and honoring the various orishas invoked during the ceremony. García, at points throughout the novel, “parades” two orishas by name who exert major influences in Reina’s life: the lightning god Changó, syncretized with Santa Bárbara, on whose feast day the lightning strike occurs; and Oshún/Ochún, goddess of love and rivers, whom I have already mentioned as Reina’s patroness. Several scholars have interpreted García’s representation of these deities—most notably Olmos, who elucidates Reina’s paternal link to

Changó, and Amparo Marmolejo-McWatt, who details the associations between Reina's mother and Ochún. While I discuss Reina's implied genetic ties to Oshún and Changó later in this chapter, here I briefly describe their emblematic *la parada* in the novel. Afterwards, I detail some of the signs about two other major divinities vital to the story and the asiento theme.

La parada, also known as the “crowning,” allows the orishas’ power and blessings to flow into the iyawó from the head down. After cutting the initiate’s hair, the *iyalochas*—official assistants in the ceremony—place markings and cloths in the orisha’s colors on the iyawó’s head and face. I readily apprehend the figuration of Changó himself “crowning” Reina, striking her *from above* with lightning, while supporting her in the mahogany tree. Dalia Quiros-Moran presents the mahogany, likely syncretized with the African Ayan tree, as belonging to Changó (187), and Henry B. Lovejoy affirms mahogany as a specific wood type used in constructing Changó’s sacred drum, the *bátá* (290).

Oshún appears much more subtly in this scene, without the violence of Changó’s signs. Where García narrates that “overhead, an aura vulture wheels through the air” (*Agüero Sisters* 17), Lucía Anglade De Aguerrevere observes “the vulture is a clear substitute for Oshún” (“es evidente que el buitre es Oshún”; my trans.; 26), a symbol of Oshún in one of her aspects, or *camino*s, called Ibu Kolé. I extend De Aguerrevere’s scholarship by arguing that Ibu Kolé’s attributes include mud (“The Story of Ibu Kole” Omi). Since here “the mud sucks at [Reina’s] knee-high regulation boots” (*Agüero Sisters* 16), this goddess acknowledges her iyawó from the crown to her feet. Both Oshún and Changó therefore undergird and overshadow Reina at a key ritual moment.

Santería ritual protocol dictates that, for the orishas’ acknowledgement to begin properly in any ceremony, the god Elegguá must first be honored. Elegguá is a trickster figure, the god of

the crossroads, whose sacred number is three. González-Wippler associates him with “opportunity, chance, and the unexpected” (33). He is a liminal figure, present at transitional junctures where alterations to a given path of certainty can happen. Nevertheless, he does not appear by name in the novel, so one must read the “submerged” manifestations of his placation and attendant blessing. The pump that Reina must repair sits near the copper mine entrance—a place of crossing from the upper to the lower world, and accordingly a location sacred to Elegguá. When Reina approaches the pump, stuck in the mud, she surveys the best way to move it, portentously deducing, “It will something of a divine intervention” to accomplish her task. García’s language afterwards—“She circles the machine once, twice, three times”—signifies a ritualistic element about Reina’s movements that invoke and honor Elegguá’s number (*Agüero Sisters* 16). Near the novel’s end just before her romantic interlude with Russ, the trickster god himself seems to materialize. García states that Reina “sees a three-legged raccoon peering down at her from a tree” (293), not only referencing three again, but also blurring the line between the trickster figures in Santería and Native American traditions. Both Elegguá appearances do indeed correspond to crossroads moments for Reina: the earthquake/lightning strike and her pregnancy. With the orisha of opportunity recognized, change can happen more readily.

The other orisha that, although named once, remains very cloaked in *The Agüero Sisters* is Yemayá, goddess of the sea, beauty, motherhood and womanhood, who is syncretized with Our Lady of Regla. She is known by the color blue, her love of sweets like sugar cane syrup, and her symbols—including oars and the moon, particularly the half or full moon. García repeatedly signals Constancia, Reina’s sister, as representative of Yemayá. Constancia creates a beauty line and sells her products in blue bottles. Seeking a prophetic message, she “randomly” selects a Bible passage with a woman having “the moon under her feet” (*Agüero Sisters* 253). She

purchases “treacly cane juice” on Yemayá’s feast day in Cuba (290). Finally, on the day she at last discovers Ignacio’s diary and the account of her mother’s murder, Constanica finds the “sky . . . rubbed a *preternatural* blue” (295; emphasis added). Yemayá’s heavy identification with Constanica permits a reading of how the orisha remarkably “crowns” Reina in the chapter “Flowers in Exile.”

Constancia seeks the services of the santero Oscar Piñango to determine the cause of her face astonishingly being replaced with her mother’s. The santero prescribes an intricate set of rituals, on land near a river, as well as at sea where she must make an hour’s swim naked on her way to Cuba. At the riverside, García portrays that “Constancia appears taller under the moon, an elongated priestess.” As she journeys seaward with Reina, Constanica’s divine transfiguration proceeds, and a halo appears: “The wind lifts her hair until it looks like a quivering nimbus about her head” (*Agüero Sisters* 270). The author continues with the submerged Yemayán intimations, narrating, “There is light enough from the half-moon to catch a flash of her own reflection. Nothing in focus, just a vague ocean promise of her presence” (274). When Reina and Constanica finally clash about exactly how their mother died, Reina uses an oar, another Yemayán symbol, to physically demonstrate how Blanca could not have reached the trigger of her own rifle to commit suicide. As the furious sisters begin to fight, Constanica “lifts the paddle end and, with all the force she can muster, brings it crashing against her sister’s head” (276), causing Reina to fall into the sea.

As if the figuration of Yemayá in this story could not be any more straightforward, Miguel A. De La Torre relates a pertinent *pataki*—a sacred Santería story—with which García is undoubtedly playing. In it, Yemayá takes her adopted son Changó onto the ocean to teach him a lesson and knocks him into the sea with a wave. Moreover, santero Ota Omi adds in his telling of

the pataki that Changó and Yemayá struggle with the oars (“When Chango first saw the light of day”). In all cases, García surely here intends to present Yemayá “crowning” Reina/Changó. In this manner, all four orishas—Changó, Oshún, Elegguá, and Yemayá—recognizably attend Reina’s *la parada* to represent aspects of her personality that she needs for initiation into her figurative role as santera. Yet, García continues with her “submerged, fragmented, and elided” techniques, especially with her fragmentation of *la parada* into different points in the novel.

Correlating the presentation of orishas in Reina’s initiation, I also recognize the feminist and womanist scholars who came to inhabit a pantheon of luminaries in my life during Feminist Theory. In each week’s readings from *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, edited by Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl, I felt degrees of resonance with the authors. A few, ones that I now would identify in *la parada*, wrote pieces that resonated quite powerfully with me. Gloria Anzaldúa’s essay “*La conciencia de la mestiza: Towards a New Consciousness*” contains the hallmarks I would see in later critics’ essays—an autocritographical stance; an interference with expected language usage, especially Spanish remaining untranslated to English; and an inclusion of her own non-academic writing, poems in her case. She then supercharges these methods with terminology that vitalizes her theoretical approach: the connection between inner states of being/self-concept with external conceptions of territory and location. Anzaldúa is the world traveler—“I, a *mestiza*, continually walk out of one culture and into another”; she is a hybridity embracer—“I am in all cultures at the same time”; she is resident of an in-between space—“in a constant state of nepantlism, an Aztec word meaning torn between ways”; and she is a shape-shifter—“a constant changing of forms” (765, 775). Anzaldúa’s concepts lead the field of identity and space relationships, and her languaging gelled my understanding of the adept feminist/womanist as the epitome of a shamanic archetype.

Anzaldúa herself would only once explicate her shamanic identity in the brief essay “Metaphors in the Tradition of the Shaman,” acknowledging “I realize that [in writing *Borderlands/La Frontera*] I was trying to practice the oldest ‘calling’ in the world—shamanism” (99). Other critics—especially AnaLouise Keating in “Speculative Realism, Visionary Pragmatism, and Poet-Shaman Aesthetics in Gloria Anzaldúa—and Beyond” (2012)—have more extensively revisited Anzaldúa’s congruence with this identity.⁷ I esteem her and her work with the *borderlands* concept as preeminent to the other socio-spatial designations like *liminal*, *between worlds*, and even García’s *perforation* that further the shamanic conception I am advancing in this dissertation.

Another of the transformative scholars I encountered was Barbara Christian, whose essay “The Highs and Lows of Black Feminist Criticism” was among the class’s first assignments. Christian outlines a herstory of prominent black women’s entrance into the literary world, essentially a *la parada* itself, and posits some of their critical contributions. Additionally, she encourages a vigorous effort to include multiple and especially underrepresented viewpoints and experiences into what we call artistic and scholarly work. Christian inquires into what we consider “high” and “low”—terms from Alice Walker—in literary, artistic, and critical discourse, wondering if academic study only serves to further dichotomize these concepts. Moreover, she suggests a “middle” world between these two. Christian advocates theories, perspectives, and voices both coming from and speaking to all the worlds—she herself acting as a vanguard border-crosser between them.

The triple world framework connects Christian directly to shamanism, as Mircea Eliade describes a common shamanic principle of “three great cosmic regions which can be successfully traversed because they are linked together by a central axis” (*Shamanism* 259). Christian’s

shaman-like “re-visioning” (54), seeking to move more freely along the axis between the worlds and appreciate their distinctive qualities without hierarchization, requires that “we acknowledge that we are both-and” and oppose those who “persist in seeking either-or” (55). Only this inclusive vision where “as we look high, we might also look low” facilitates world travel, or being “situated in a dynamic rather than a fixed world” (54).

In 2009, reflecting on Christian’s essay, I came to the stark realization that the education system I had experienced as a white, male student—and was then reproducing as a teacher at a middle-to-upper-class, majority white school—had almost exclusively labeled one voice as “high,” and that voice emanated from people very much like me: “male thinkers, preferably dead and European” (55). I understood my complicity with the same academic system Christian decries that esteems certain kinds of styles, languages, and artistic products over others by placing values on them matching hegemonic sites of privilege. In terms of academic writing, I had also prized the analytical above the narrative; yet, right in front of me, Christian had performed insightful analysis *and* boldly but naturally had inserted herself and her story, in a relational way: “Like any other critic, my personal history has much to do with what I hear when I read. Perhaps because I am from the Caribbean, Alice’s *high* and *low* struck chords in me” (51). Providing me the first example of an autocritographical voice in Feminist Theory, Christian’s essay moved me out of the “fixed world” of analysis-only writing and into a state of hybridity—another variant of liminality. She further exemplifies the work of the luminaries who serve as models for those who transgress boundaries, cross thresholds, and “play” across worlds.

The next critic I esteemed as a “higher power” in the Feminist Theory course was Elizabeth A. Meese. Her essay “When Virginia Looked at Vita, What Did She See; Or, Lesbian: Feminist: Woman—What’s the Differ(e/a)n(ce)?” addresses both the androgyny of Virginia

Woolf's character Orlando in the novel of that title and Woolf's own lesbian relationship with Vita Sackville-West. Just as with Christian, Meese speaks of play. She broadens the ideas of ambiguous gender and sexuality into the play of identity, language, and meaning. Meese illuminated for me how these concepts—as solid as we try to make them—are in fact slippery. If, as Meese affirms, “imperfections in the letter demand caution” (468), a sense of play and a healthy skepticism of either/or absolutes properly become essential skills in navigating both literature and life. In a direct echo of Christian's thoughts, Meese postulates, “Androgyny is a way out of the *either/or* trap through the substitution of a *both/and* relationship” (471; emphasis added). Meese's essay shattered even more boundaries between academic “high” and personal “low” writing than Christian's, because she intersperses her theory with her own lesbian *billets-doux*. Meese, reinforcing Anzaldúa and Christian, exemplified and modeled for me fluid thinking, rule-breaking, and exploration outside of rigid academic boundaries.

Meese's essay also impelled me to deconstruct and question my identity as I wrote about it in one of my weekly autocritographical papers. I began with gender, asking myself if I could be flexible enough to loosen the rigid definitions that I assumed comprised “male,” especially by doing or not doing certain behaviors. For example, “Real men don't cry,” but I cry; “real men don't like to receive floral bouquets as gifts,” but I love them. This self-examination awakened me to the shifty nature of identity definition, a topic I explore later in this chapter. Then I interrogated sexuality: for example, I had never contemplated that, because I am romantically attracted to women, I share practice with lesbian-identified women.

With each successive inquiry, I began to see how imperfect and elusive meaning and identities constructed with words and practices truly are. As much as we rely on their precision, we are trapped by that reliance, nor do they operate flawlessly. Woolf herself insists that words

“hate anything that stamps them with one meaning or confines them to one attitude, for it is their nature to change” (90). Meese’s theorizing about the instability of words, gender, sexuality, and finally identity allowed me to begin dissolving the hard boundaries between Self and Other. I began to know that in some way I am linked to all whom I oppress, and that for all the distinctions that identity—bound to language and meaning—create, there exists some deep connective tissue between me and all humanity. By propelling me into boundary-transgressive thinking, Meese’s ideas awakened me and inspired me into “world travel.”

Just as Reina in her metaphorical role as shaman must recognize her empowering divine influences, I honor Anzaldúa, Christian, Meese, and other feminist/womanist thinkers I engaged in 2009 as being, in fact, like Reina’s crowning orishas. They all reinforced my budding vision of the shamanic view as indispensable to critical consciousness. Under their auspices I not only received information “through the head” but experienced transformation of the heart and access to other “worlds.” Their written gifts of wisdom empowered my coming to critical consciousness, and their entry into my life, into *la parada*, remains “something of a divine intervention.”

Offering Her to the Sky: Making Sacred, Making Whole

The third phase of the asiento involves animal sacrifice. Their ritualistic killing serves to amplify the orishas’ powers now transmitted to and acknowledged within the iyawó. I view the sacrificial aspect of Reina’s initiation in *The Agüero Sisters* as another way García plays with border areas. Instead of animals being killed—*outside* entities—Reina is the sacrifice *herself* when pinioned in the tree and struck by lightning. First, when in the hospital she “believed the world had converted to fire” (36), Reina represents a form of Old Covenant burnt offering, an immolation—in its denotations that play with both its sacrificial and fire meanings. The burning

aspect of Reina's "sacrifice," although not initially of her own free will, relates to Anzaldúa's concept of personal sacrifice in order to change: "Knowing that something in you, or of you, must die before something else can be born, you throw your old self into the ritual pyre, a passage by fire" ("Shift" 558). Reina must give up her old self bodily because of the lightning's fire, and later she must abandon old identities that no longer serve her, so she can compose herself "anew and differently." Reina has to renounce her attachments to Cuba and her family's denied past to energize her destined shamanic healing role.

Her figure also becomes an offering like Christ on the cross, as well as the sacrifice of a person instead of an animal indicating a leaning toward standard New Covenant theology, which maintains that perfect human sacrifice could substitute for animal sacrifice. García's Mass-like, Christian language after Reina is lifted high onto the tree connotes a crucifixion or even ascension: "It is another kingdom entirely . . . the merciful scent of the earth slowly ascending . . . all the gifts of the world are here . . . offering her to the sky" (*Agüero Sisters* 17). Moreover, during Reina's hospitalization, "her pores ooze blood and water" (35), a conspicuous reference to the liquid flowing from Christ's pierced side at the crucifixion found in John 19:34. While lightning, fire, and the mahogany tree all signify a presentation to Changó, García subtly interweaves allusions of Biblical sacrifice to keep the figure of Reina playing in the syncretized boundaries between the indigenous Yoruban aspects of Santería and its influences from Judeo-Christian religions.

More deeply inside the asiento's sacrificial phase, the santeros and the community eat the sacrifices made, unlike in the sin atonement killings previously mentioned. The power of the newly-crowned santera is not for herself only but is to be of service to the people in the society. Here, I believe, García does not use Reina's initiation to change her employment service in a

fundamentally unusual way. Certainly, in Cuba she is a government-employed electrician, while she ultimately becomes an independent car mechanic in Miami; this shift simply flows from the two countries' different economic systems. For Reina, the community she is intended to serve and (re)join is her familial one. The lightning strike and earthquake initiate and motivate her departure from Cuba, as well as her reunion with her sister, niece, grandniece, and daughter, all of whom consequently become their own collective in Miami. This move then expedites her reconnection with her dead parents and even earlier ancestors via explorations of her own and her family's memories. At the novel's end, the sum of these events mysteriously allows her to conceive a new family member. The past, present, and future Agüero sisters' family, then—with its differences yet similarities, its conflicts yet love, its separation yet alliance—emblemizes a model for the greater society. Reina, as the archetypal shaman, acts as the agent of healing in service of that community, made of people “dead and alive,” just as the skin grafted onto her own.

Reina's connections to facets of sacrifice relate well to what happened to me in Feminist Theory. My weekly autocritographical engagement with so many compelling theorists' ideas equally required self-reflection and inspired self-reflexivity. I iteratively assessed my past and its effect on my beliefs and actions, as well as revisioning certain beliefs and actions based upon my assessments. Via this process, I became aware of my need to “sacrifice” the parts of me that did not match what I felt aligned with my highest self—the identity to which I aspired, evoked by so many of the theorists. I felt I must “offer up” myself to the transformative feminist and womanist ideologies that could renew my mind and heart. Often, my realization of oppressive aspects of my thoughts, words, and deeds led to remorse; however, I knew that simply wallowing in white guilt, and indeed *any* identity-based regret, would neither facilitate true healing for myself nor

prove beneficial to others. Rejecting guilt's passivity, I embraced both mental and physical activism, propelling myself forward to think and act differently.

I write with Lemons about one such mental activism⁸ in "Brothers of the Soul," awakening to my tendency to "erase" Latinx people from my vision: "I think the cultural weight behind the struggles of Blacks has made their suffering much more prominent in my mind, whereas for me the suffering of Hispanics has taken a back seat. . . I now know my own perception is somewhat illusory, and that my lack of attentiveness to their struggles would not be aligned with the attention deserved" (528). I had to sacrifice the ease—in truth, the white privilege—of being able to ignore a subset people. I surrendered to the ultimately healing task, weighty for a kyriarchally privileged man, of seeing my entire community as equals. My writing this opening chapter about a novel on Latinas by a Latina embodies this ongoing, activist "seeing." For Reina as much as myself, the act of sacrifice, whether driven by the lofty ideals of spiritual ideology or feminist/womanist ideology, can serve to innervate the participant's motives and empower the initiate personally and the community at large.

In a genuine *asiento*, the sacrificial animals emblemize giving something up for a higher purpose; they then feed the community, both literally and symbolically, to redeem that loss. The germinal attachments I needed to sacrifice were my ignorance and my passivity. Michael Kimmel's assertion that "The privilege of privilege is that the terms of privilege are rendered invisible" constantly reminds me that a powerful advantage of my white, American, middle-class, cishetero, able-bodied maleness is that it keeps its power hidden from me (363). By first immolating my privileges of critical *unconsciousness* and inertia, I then could embark on the "world" travel advocated by Lugones, learning to embrace the shaman archetype. I connected the herstory of those prior "world" travelers' sacrifices with my own, in the name of my "living

sacrifice” of my privilege, ignorance, and dominating behaviors. Finally, I brought renewed thoughts, words, and deeds to my own communities—my classroom, my family, my neighbors, my community—in an activism that is still transforming me by my continued walking in the worlds of feminism and womanism.

Voices Gather in Her Head: Intuitive (P)re-visioning

The final aspect of Santerían asiento is divination—known as *itá*—and consists of the attendant santeros/santeras reading the iyawó’s future via the throwing and interpretation of cowrie seashells. Oscar Piñango uses these seashells to significant effect in directing Constancia back to Cuba to recover Ignacio’s diary and reveal the past. Constancia herself seems consumed with the mysterious and interpreting almost everything as divine omens, as typified in her slavish listening to the radio show *La Hora de los Milagros*, the Hour of Miracles. In contrast with her sister, Reina never seeks the oracular through external ritual or overenthusiastic belief in signs. Whereas the mysterious is Constancia’s “obsession”—according to her husband, Heberto—Reina is simply “intrigued” with it (*Agüero Sisters* 25, 238).

While Constancia looks to her santero to toss a divination, Reina’s only “tossing” is her own body into the mahogany tree. Her prophetic insights come not from another person’s possession-induced declarations, but from her own trancelike states that combine mysterious pronouncements with reflections on her past. García describes them: “Voices gather in her head . . . late at night, unfettered by logic, utterly imprecise . . . Sleepless and adrift in the dark, Reina circles and soars over the decades of her life . . . She hisses and creaks and scolds herself for what she sees, for what she might have changed, for what she cannot” (*Agüero Sisters* 71). Even beyond any supernatural or natural inferences, though, Reina also organically intuitively many things—when it is time to leave Cuba, what different employments to seek in Miami, and

eventually how to heal her soul and re-knit her family. Her final scene of spontaneously walking naked into the ocean, visualizing the moon entering her body, and finally achieving orgasm after nine months of inability to do so undoubtedly illustrates her instinctive powers to divine the right course of action. She embodies her own cowrie shells—whether gifted by her lineage from Changó, energized by the lightning strike, or derived from her shaman-like push to access other worlds, including those beyond the purely rational.

Since autocritography's discursive strategy works "from the outside in to the inside out," the autocritographer's future also changes for both inner and outer worlds: awakening critical consciousness provokes transformation. Lemons' Feminist Theory course necessitated my focusing overwhelmingly on the past and present. Nevertheless, what exactly my future would be at the time—some prediction as to its shape or outcome—remained amorphous in my mind. Without knowing exactly what it looked like, I did firmly want to be an ally in feminist/womanist movement but also hoped for guidance as to how to proceed. González-Wippler documents that part of the *asiento*'s divination includes revealing "which further initiations [the *iyawó*] had to undergo, and how she might protect herself against enemies and other dangers" (186). Concluding the "Brothers of the Soul" dialogue that I wrote with Lemons after the course, I sought a "divination" of my future from him, asking how I could continue evolving on my pro-feminist/womanist journey. As if addressing the realm of my "further initiations," he responded, "You must continue to ground yourself in feminist thought by women across diverse race/ethnic/transnational, class, and sexual differences" (530). Like Reina's tuning in to the "voices in her head," I knew I should not just frequently revisit my "crowned orishas"—Christian, Meese, and Anzaldúa, as well as others from the course—but extend my "world"

travel, reading other diverse feminist/womanist authors inside and outside my graduate coursework.⁹

Lemons also divined my need for ongoing “intellectual engagement in feminist literary theory and criticism . . . turned into a place of critical self-reflection” (531), since, intricately linked with reading these authors must come an internalization of their transformative messages. Seeing the need to operate contemplatively as Reina does, who “circles and soars over the decades of her life,” I now discern this oracle as having two meanings concerning “protection from dangers,” the dangers of slipping back into the critical unconsciousness and the inertia I previously mentioned. First, in my “world” travels I must always keep a critical eye on my history; second, I must be ready to bring any internalized kyriarchal values I might find in it into a discursive interaction with my tools of consciousness, to, as Lemons words it, “enable [the] process of self-liberation to actuate holistically” (531). Perhaps this “holistic” evolution correlates to Reina’s intuitive method of knowing how to proceed: emotional but also rational; uncovering the past to heal the present and progress in the future; and secular but also spiritual.

Whether instantaneous or drawn out over a semester, transformative events presented both Reina and me with the same calling that titles a germinal essay by Gloria Anzaldúa: “Now Let Us Shift.” In concluding my analogy of Reina’s and my own *asiento*/initiation, I see Anzaldúa’s earthquake imagery in a way much like, narratively, Reina’s launch into the mahogany tree and, metaphorically, my arrival in Gary L. Lemons’ 2009 Feminist Theory course. While Reina is not an “official” *santera* at the novel’s conclusion, nor was I a “real” shaman at the course’s end, we had been invited to and accepted the possibility of embodying the shamanic archetype. We could therefore travel between “worlds” to assist healing self and other, and to, in Anzaldúa’s words, “recognize interrelatedness, and work for transformation.” *We must*

do so, because the shamanic home in “nepantla is the only space where change can happen” (“Shift” 574).

Lightning Has Its Work to Do: Stitching the Self with Motley Embroidery

I now turn from correlating the narrative and academic initiations toward one of their principal effects: the critical analysis of identity as a patchwork. In approaching García’s representation of Reina’s grafted skin over her natural skin as an emblem for a non-unified identity, I recall Michel de Montaigne’s assertion that “We are all patchwork, and so shapeless and diverse in composition that each bit, each moment, plays its own game” (244). The thunderbolt that electrifies Reina forces her into *receiving* patches. For me, the metaphorical lighting strike of feminist/womanist ideologies galvanized me into *realizing* that I too have a patchwork selfhood—one which has many patches that I do not like.

My shocking encounter with feminist/womanist theory awakened me to the intersectional oppression that women of color particularly experience, especially relating to racist notions of fixed identity. The scholarly “orishas” illuminated how race, class, gender, and other identity categories are, in fact, constructed. In my weekly autocritographical examinations of my past, I also unmasked my own struggles with essentialism and constructionism, agency and structure, and they jolted me to the awareness about my identity and its formation. Each time I wrote autocritographically, I openly interrogated my complicity with—and my dehumanization by—oppressive hegemonies in my life, and I investigated how I became who I was. I grew deeply interested in how external forces, internal choices, and my intrinsic facets colluded to shape me. My weekly “stripping,” as hooks labels it, consequently led to revealing my patchwork “skin”/identity.

bell hooks states that one of postmodernism's significant invitations is "the quest to find ways to construct self and identity that are oppositional and liberatory" ("Postmodern Blackness" 10). Ultimately, despite identities patched onto Reina that counter her desires for self-construction, she largely achieves what hooks advances: denial of and freedom from white male kyriarchal control. Reina admits that she "understands that lightning has its work to do. It's an atmospheric discharge . . . yet [she] cannot accept a rational explanation" (*Agüero Sisters* 36). As the novel progresses, the lightning's *non*-rational work—for her soul—emerges: energizing her to recover and reconstruct herself and her family. I intend that my autocritographical engagement with this novel substantiates Lemons' claim that critically conscious self-reflexivity can aid me personally in this *hooksean* aim—that the lightning is doing its work.

In analyzing Reina's and my own identities, I adopt James Paul Gee's theories as my theoretical lens. Gee divides his identity categories into "nature-identities, developed from forces in nature; institution-identity, authorized by authorities in institutions; discourse-identity, recognized in the discourse/dialogue of/with 'rational' individuals; [and] affinity-identity, experiences shared in the practice of 'affinity groups'" (100). For both Reina's and my own identity categories, I undertake the knotty effort to both differentiate them and determine how they interact as I ask questions that drive toward that elemental but profound question: who am I?

Skin and Bones: Body and Racial Politics

The first inquiry into Reina's identity concerns her physicality. Arturo Romney, one of Ignacio's colleagues, rhymes, "*What is bred in the bone has a mission all its own*" (*Agüero Sisters* 196; emphasis in original). Romney poetically advocates the essentialist side of the postmodern debate and opens an interrogation of the body and positionality. Genes supposedly

manifest essential qualities, and this motto implies that no imposed structure or agency can change what is “bred” in them. Gee labels this “nature-” or “n-identity.” Physicality does not exist in a vacuum, however, and matters of the body, despite any innate “mission,” ultimately confront societal judgments. Gee asserts that n-identities only become meaningful because they “collapse into other sorts of identities” and “gain their force” via other actors, i.e. institutions, discourse/dialogue, and affinity groups (102). As a person maneuvers within this hegemonic social realm, dominant ideologies police her or his n-identity. While control of bodies affects both genders, Teresa Derrickson posits that in the novel, “Women’s bodies (and, by extension, women’s lives) . . . are never fully owned or controlled by women themselves” (479). What happens to their bodies, taken both literally and metaphorically, illustrates the constant struggle between nature, instrumentality, and domination. Still, Reina employs her essential qualities and leverages them in the agency/structure discourse, achieving the most control and self-possession of all the novel’s women.

Who is Reina, physically, and how does her body both operate within her nature while resisting male control? She stands five feet eleven inches, a height which García remarks is “a good four inches taller than most of the men with whom she works” (*Agüero Sisters* 10). With prodigious physical strength, she lugs her seventy-pound tool box “as if it contained no more than a pork sandwich” (15) and moves the large water pump with “the speed and strength of a wrestler” (17). Her hands dwarf her lover Russ’s, at twice their size. To allow her “natural” body to simply be, she neither wears deodorant nor shaves her armpits. Nevertheless, her fellow male electricians are attracted to the feminine “size and swing of her buttocks” (10). Their proportion might be considered an n-identity trait, but their flow could be some combination of “natural”

and performative; that is, she may have augmented a genetically predisposed style of walking with motion observed in and assimilated from other women.

Reina's physical identity conglomerate occupies a hybrid and liminal space between the masculine and the feminine. While simultaneously exhibiting strong female-coded characteristics, she also displays male-associated power, speed, and size attributes. These, along with her body care practice, garner her a significant nickname among her comrades: Amazona. Derrickson comments that Reina, like the matriarchal Amazons, "flourishes in a realm where the prevailing gendered ideology in no way resembles the misogynistic pathology of contemporary global politics" (498). Both her identification with various male-associated affinity-groups—like wrestlers or warriors—and her traits labeled as masculine in the discourse- or d-identities reveal how her body's "mission" enters the hierarchy of social construction and related schemes of social power. Much of Reina's physicality demonstrates transgression both into the stereotypically male and against male expectations while retaining female-coded traits. Reina's body walks in both masculine and feminine "worlds" and thereby represents navigation in one of García's unpredictably "perforated" borders (Lynch 00:06:28).

I, like Reina, have physical characteristics that do not meet the common assumptions for masculine physicality. These most notably include a lack of muscular definition, more readily labeled "weak"; leanness, branded "wimpy" or "non-threatening"; and gawkish, evaluated as "unskilled." I have long, bony fingers—amusingly the opposite of Reina's, whose hands "spread and thickened . . . to luxurious disproportion" (*Agüero Sisters* 196). My childhood nickname was "Bones," oddly coinciding with Arturo Romney's rhyme in the novel. I would contend that what's bred in *my* bones has a mission antithetical to idealized masculine hegemonic body images. Additionally, my lack of physical prowess and bulk meant that I could not readily

succeed in such male-coded sports as football, basketball, or soccer. Instead, as a child I chose swimming, not high on the list of sports that validate and necessitate masculine-coded traits or behaviors in its participants. Despite my competitive success in the pool, my peers at school did not consider me as masculine in stature or movement as a male “should” be. Simultaneously, in middle school, I once embarrassed myself in front of my male classmates by being unable to perform a single pull-up, a story I detail in Chapter Three. Although as a male I “owned or controlled” my body more than women, my n-identity, right from my formative years, nevertheless foundered in the dialectic of body politics of the d-identity and a-identity realms.

These male performativity issues, occurring in my adolescence, embody the first “patch” onto my physical identity that I distinctly recall. How did I deal with these areas of physicality? In some ways, I carried on, Reina-like, with what I felt “fit my body.” I continued my swimming through high school and reached the state championships three of my four years. My long, thin fingers/hands served well as both water-grabbing surfaces and for playing guitar and piano. All the same, the humiliating experience of being unable to perform adequately in a masculine-policed setting impelled me to accept a major ideological imposition: to “get into shape.” This kind of “shape” was socially defined, an a-identity measured by the prescript that “men can perform pull-ups,” even though I could have beaten any of those peers who were doing multiple pull-ups if I had raced them in the pool. As a result, I began a weight training program that strengthened me and added bulk, to more conform to the masculine standard I was expected to uphold.¹⁰ My subsequent pull-up exhibitions in middle school produced more socially acceptable, “manly” results. Indeed, while some of my body and its operation could be morphed via effort to meet male n- and a-identity, I, like Reina, remain a hybrid of gender traits. I

struggled to work through the complexities of what is “bred in the bone” and what I could control by performative adaptation or enhancement based on social construction.

No investigation into Reina’s n-identity would be complete without discussing her parentage, and this analysis necessitates interpreting aspects of the orishas Changó and Ochún. Clearly García wishes to signal both physical and personality attributes that her parents/orishas transmit to her. Marmolejo-McWatt explicates the portrayal of Reina’s mother as embodying the Santería goddess of love. Her arguments include Blanca’s and Ochún’s irresistible beauty and their sexuality beyond the confines of monogamy, and the scholar indicates that Reina certainly has acquired/inherited these attributes. I would add two other Ochún-related qualities that Reina manifests: their nature connection—Reina “understood . . . the private language of nature”—and their associations with rivers—Reina “is a river of sinew and muscle” (*Agüero Sisters* 36, 294). Olmos discerns several of Changó’s traits in Reina, including her strength, polyamory, and androgyny (84). I would augment Olmos in one significant point. Reina’s flesh tone, inherited from her “evening black” orisha father, scandalizes the Galician Ignacio, as he “heard the neighbors’ whispering, noticed their eyes on her nutmeg skin” (194, 264). The sewing of lighter skin over her n-identity’s darkness therefore moves beyond a literal, medical “condition of survival” and into the emblematic.

How then does the superimposed patchwork signify white kyriarchal inscription onto her n-identity? While Derrickson explores the patches’ symbolism of state-imposed control (496), I extend her approach by envisioning the grafts as impositions of colorism and racial politics. After the transplants, “[m]ost of Reina’s nutmeg color is gone . . . a few patches of her skin are so pink and elastic . . . they look like a newborn pig’s” (*Agüero Sisters* 66). Later, Constancia observes that Reina’s forearm patch “has dulled to the color of butter” (274). The *lightning* has

precipitated a *lightening*, i.e. her patches have made her whiter. The light skin now sewn onto Reina emblemizes white identity being forced onto her. Constanica, herself quite white-skinned, seems to have inherited that quality from Blanca, whose portrait highlights her “white throat,” as her name might imply (72). Reina’s sister recalls herself as a “white sun” in her youth, and even in Miami her apartment is “decorated in every shade of white” (131, 176). Moreover, Constanica brags that her family are “true *criollos*” when speaking of her grandfather’s Galician origin (12). Her imposition of whiteness extends from the physical into the ideological, with its attendant class implications.

Reina’s stepfather, Ignacio, also significantly reinscribes white heritage and culture, constantly reading aloud and quoting Euro-centric texts as guides for living and working. As Ylce Irizarry highlights, Ignacio also represents the enforcer of white “colonial patriarchy that requires punishment for racial straying” (210) by murdering Reina’s mother, who sleeps with two black men during their marriage. Blanca, who to Ignacio should exemplify unadulterated *blancura*—whiteness—crosses racial boundaries that he must guard. “One naturally wonders,” Irizarry muses, “if he would have killed her had she born a white child or had not intercourse with a black Cuban” (211). Both her sister and her stepfather affix ideological whiteness upon Reina as a “condition of survival,” just as the physical skin is. After receiving the “skin, mismatched and itchy,” losing her natural “hot, black scent” (*Agüero Sisters* 66), and being somehow deprived of the ability to experience orgasm, Reina realizes her attachment to her essential color and non-white n-identity.

I would like here to explore my earliest constructions of whiteness, connecting to body ideology, specifically the patching onto me of white superiority via performed bigotry. Up through high school, I attended majority white private schools, and ideas of white supremacy,

accompanied by racist and classist notions, seeped into my consciousness. Despite this fact, I never wished any person of color physical harm for their race or used overtly racist language or commentary. Being white, I simply felt I was vaguely “better” than non-whites—a passive, silent white supremacist.

On a sophomore year school trip, some friends and I sat in the rear of a school bus driven by an older black woman wearing a nametag labeled “Queen.”¹¹ Something in the atmosphere of that almost totally white bus began a spark of racial bigotry, and several of my fellow white male students began, amid the noise and conversation of the bus, to faintly, then conspicuously, ridicule Queen. I joined in, saying things like, “Sho' 'nuff, Queen. You gonna drive this bus t'Orlando” and “We gonna get stop fo' some Church's chicken, right, Queen?” Given the insidious nature of white male supremacy, I am not surprised at how quickly racist words sprang to my lips, employing the stereotypes of “fried chicken,” Southern black speech, and “Queen” as a black name mixing with classist notions of what kind of job a “queen” would have. I will never forget the look in Queen's eyes—the sadness, pain, and stifled anger—as she silently gazed into the large rear-view mirror that allowed her to see the passengers. More importantly, I am still haunted by the suffering that I inflicted on her at the intersection of race, class, and gender.

I would now characterize that incident on the bus, using García's patchwork symbolism for a conceit, as a self-grafting of bigotry onto my exposed identity, an affixture I worked upon myself to solidify my racial a-identity. I wanted to be white *by my practices*, not just by my n-identity. When I stepped onto that bus, I held no conscious ill will for Queen, but in the moment of seeing how I could gain approval for acting racist, I affixed the patch my peers offered. The fact that more than thirty years later the recollection of this incident brings me to tears validates two facts: first, that the patch truly was only “skin deep” and not a part of some deeper identity;

second, that white racist notions can work deeply injurious wounds, even into those—namely white males—who ostensibly would hold and benefit from them. Still, that feeling of being “better” would take years, as well as my life-changing encounter with feminism/womanism, to address. Just as Reina suffers a loss of enjoyment from the grafting process, I also experienced a self-loathing that via the black feminist/womanist process of autocritography I continue to explore and heal.

Erotics and Employment: Sexuality and Class Power

I begin treating the area of sexuality, dovetailing with these themes of the body, by quoting Reina’s daughter, Dulce. Moving from Cuba to Spain, she finds, just as back home, employment as a sex worker. Her comment that “in Cuba, sex was never so complicated” (203) overtly refers to the types of services her customers pay her to render in the Old World. It also serves my purpose here in illustrating the complexities of maneuvering within kyriarchal society’s convoluted sexual politics. An attractive and sexually potent woman, Reina can choose whatever lover she wishes and wear him out, “leaving him weak and inconsolable for months” (10) while she “basks in the admiration she receives in her trade and in her bed” (15). Reina realizes the strong, anti-kyriarchal aspect of her role as sexual initiator and controller.

The external patch of sexual identity seems to come from almost every male eye that sees Reina. From the “men who linger behind her, mesmerized” to the “workmen and waiters [who] line up on the dock to watch her,” Reina cannot escape the male gaze of desire and the expectation of sexual favor (10, 198). The male-constructed lust for her physical attributes no doubt contributes to much of the staring. The implication also arises here of the black woman represented as hypersexual. Pepín declares that “every inch of her body . . . is an open invitation to pleasure” (196). In building off Laura Mulvey’s theory of cinematic gaze, Catriona Elder

describes women of color as occupying for white men “an overdetermined site of ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’” (144), being Other in both gender and race. Nevertheless, while Reina cannot control the gaze or block male desire, she asserts her essential love of sexuality and her power to control what happens *after* the gaze.

Reina does truly enjoy an active sexual life with multiple partners, and her image veers into the territory of the Jezebel stereotype. The paradox of the Jezebel image—created “to control Black women’s sexuality” and “at the heart of Black women’s oppression,” according to Patricia Hill Collins (81)—lies in the fact that it resists moralistic control and yet provokes kyriarchal oppression. In Gee’s terms, in attempting a counter-dialogue as a d-identity, it becomes controllingly labeled as a certain a-identity via its sexually libertine practices. As with all the controlling stereotypes, the Jezebel can conform to negative or positive ideology, depending on how one views it. In *The Agüero Sisters*, I assess Reina’s sexuality as a combination of fulfilling her n-identity love of pleasure and her d-identity refusal to let men curtail or control her erotic power. She enjoys both the resistant autonomy of her sexual decisions and the inversion of power her sexuality bestows, all in the name of the bodily pleasure she also naturally relishes. Here again is an example of Reina functioning in a liminal space that accommodates and yet challenges kyriarchal notions.

My own experiences with essential versus imposed sexuality link to Reina again as a mixture of opposition and compliance with kyriarchal expectations. As in Dulce’s statement, I found sex to be complicated: by the gender, body, and social politics of the system within which I operated. Conversely to Reina’s voracious libido, I had a below average erotic appetite as I matured, even as I faced clear heteronormative assumptions that I should not only be a sexual aggressor but also enjoy objectifying women and their bodies. My innate shyness, combined

with internalized negative body image and my above-mentioned marginal social position, made it difficult for me to possess the confidence that such male assertiveness needs. I found speaking to females intensely challenging, much less being flirtatious or asking them out. This fact still further reinforced my peripherality in the masculine power structure.

This type of constant pressure to conform openly with the patch of “compulsory heterosexuality,” as Adrienne Rich titles her 1980 essay, relates to greater arenas of identity than simply gender or sexuality. In *Dude, You’re a Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High School*, C. J. Pascoe hypothesizes, “Engaging in very public practices of heterosexuality, boys affirm much more than just masculinity; they affirm subjecthood and personhood through sexualized interactions in which they indicate to themselves and others that they have the ability to work their will upon the world around them” (86). My sexuality was elaborately tied to my social acceptance. Still, I found myself in conflict with most practices I was expected to perform as I traversed a difficult adolescent sexual milieu that scraped against my essential and constructed natures.

This patch proved complex to handle, as I sometimes conformed, sometimes resisted it. Like the men ogling Reina in Miami, I was a *gazer*, enjoying looking at women but also not wanting to be seen doing so. Being caught staring nevertheless affirmed to my peers that I was not “a fag,” although this one practice never fulfilled all the a-identity expectations of being a “red-blooded male.” On the other hand, I also deliberately employed several counter-hegemonic strategies. I resisted entering the heterosexual dating world from high school¹² all the way into my mid-twenties. At the same time, I employed a tactic of silence related to women and sexuality in general. While many of my male associates would tell objectifying sexual jokes or regale others with their tales of sexual conquest—termed “locker room talk” in recent politics—I

listened, occasionally laughed, and allowed their complicity with the kyriarchal expectations of masculine sexual positionality. Unlike my previous example of performing racism to gain acceptance, I withstood this kind of spoken misogyny, albeit passively.¹³ Predominantly, my position of some conformity to various heteromascuine identities *and* some resistance allowed me access to male environments but not full privileges—another liminal condition, as I have repeatedly asserted about myself.

Progressing into adulthood, I learned to manage my sexual world's convolutions, confronted my body image wounds, and overcome my shyness. I gained confidence in my stance against the practices of heteronormativity—so much so that I experimented with homosexuality during my late adolescence. Likewise, while Reina celebrates her essential sexuality and refuses to let the male gaze entrap her, I resisted my overt heterosexuality being witnessed as absolute or essential by, for a time, embracing my bisexual a-identity. Using my experiences in the sphere of sexuality to bolster my understanding of the kyriarchal system and galvanize my desire to dismantle it, I refuse the patch of compulsory heterosexuality on my identity.

I now turn to the occupational and societal roles of Reina's life. Her job as an electrician, a traditionally male profession, follows and benefits from her n-identity's strong—identified as “masculine”—physicality. Her large, “magic hands” deftly execute her job's manual tasks, and her powerful thighs enable her to climb poles readily. Her description as “visiting master tradesman” solidly positions her within a state-sanctioned institutional-identity, per Gee, and attests Reina's encroachment into the masculine and her resistance to male proscriptions.

How then does the imposed patchwork concept relate to her societal role? Ignacio grafts onto Reina his ideological patches concerning her work and position. Before his death, her stepfather—an ornithologist—brings Reina on many of his specimen-hunting excursions in what

amounts to an apprenticeship, but her role is always under Ignacio's strict patriarchal control. Reina has internalized at least part of her father's ideological graft, because some forty years after his death, she still maintains Ignacio's books and preserved fauna basically untouched and lives in his museum-like apartment. Only in her move to Miami can she begin to escape her father's singular vision of her role.

Connecting the physical to the societal even further, Reina's proficiency and skill give her leadership over her electrician peers, as well as a class signification higher than most people in the areas she serves. Her mechanical adeptness and desire to teach permit her to "conduct seminars for local electricians" (10). When she leads both her fellow electricians and "a colorful procession of El Cobre's truants and elaborately underemployed citizens" (15-16) to the repair job at the copper mine, she carries her own toolbox, casting herself as a befittingly-employed *compañera* and a self-sufficient character. When the men, fearing electrocution, embarrassingly refuse to help her move the broken water pump, she does so independently. Her body from nature, her personality from some combination of nature and nurture, and her electrician skills by nurture allow her job—her i-identity—to act in resistance to the normal control of women.

Who inscribes the patch on Reina that says her role is to follow and not to lead, or the patch to let men be in control or take care of her? With his ornithological teaching, ideological and technical inculcation, and finally his donated specimen and note collection, Ignacio ostensibly expects Reina to "follow" him in some way. Reina's lover Pepín insists on performing the Santería ritual on her with the rooster, taking the control she usually exerts. Pepín, who has donated a patch of his backside that affixes onto "the glossy hollow of [Reina's] back," admiringly tarries over his own skin when later making love to Reina (66). I cannot miss the symbolism in Pepín cherishing what he sees from himself imprinted on/in her, nor the

representative idea of his (over)riding Reina with his buttocks planted on her back as if he were astride an animal. Later, her lover Russ hides her toolbox from her, only unwillingly returning it and tempting, “I’ll pay you whatever you want . . . I need you close by” (235). Thus, while she can fend off her fellow electricians’ chivalric attempts to carry her toolbox, she still must negotiate the desire of men close to her to control her or assume more power than she chooses.

Turning to my own societal roles, I must first address my n-identity that empowered my first career, just as Reina’s gained her entrance into electrical work. In middle school, my logical intellect granted me access into the world of computers and information technology. While in early adolescence I was failing to impress my male peers with my physical prowess, I also was taking a strong interest in the emerging personal computer world. The same youthful pursuit, however, contributed to my marginalization. While most of my male school peers played sports during their recess, I sequestered myself with the school’s new computer and learned how to program it, eventually becoming one of the few students to gain technical proficiency. Unlike Reina’s master electrician position, however, my computer knowledge and skills—especially at the 1970s—hurt my social standing in the white male hegemony and, tied with my lack of stereotypical male physicality, furthered my lowering in the social dominance scheme to the role of “nerd.”

Choosing information technology as my first career suited and leveraged my “essential” nature and my socially-assigned geekiness. It also expressed a form of resistance, especially considering the occupations that most of my classmates pursued: doctors, lawyers, entrepreneurs, and the like. Lori Kendall, following R. W. Connell’s hegemonic masculinity framework, clarifies how computer programmer “nerd” culture formed among predominantly white males—especially in its embrace of “lack of sports ability, small body size, lack of sexual relationships

with women”—as a form of resistance to aspects of prevalent masculine requirements. It nevertheless benefitted by embodying select hypermasculine ideals, such as “intellect, rejection of sartorial display, lack of ‘feminine’ social and relational skills” (264). Only via the continued rise of the personal computer, the internet, and wireless/smartphone technology did technical savvy, as much as the stereotype of white men most drawn to achieving it, become a valued commodity in U.S. society and nerdiness move from its marginalized status. That level of acceptability certainly did not exist up until my career’s start in the late 1980s.¹⁴

Who inscribed the patch on me that insisted my role—especially as a white, middle-class man—was to lead and not to follow? Matching Reina once again, I had a highly influential and coercive father, an executive in a Fortune 500 company. He trained me from an early age, not in the scientific and ornithological, but in the corporate. In the same manner that Ignacio entrusted his books to Reina, my father presented his to me, mostly on effective business leadership and corporate strategies. He also passed on various mementos from leadership conferences, akin to Ignacio’s preserved fauna. I, like Reina, was also groomed by a man who both embodied and required me to become “the epitome of rationality and enlightened thinking,” as Katherine B. Payant characterizes Ignacio (174). As a specific example, one of the handed-down mementos from an IBM conference my father attended was a desk sign that said “THINK” in bold letters.¹⁵ Knowledge and leadership, correlating strongly, would hence engender corporate position: identity. When I dutifully joined the information technology world after college as an entry-level computer programmer, my father fully expected me to rise eventually above my “technician” status to become a supervisor, then a manager, and perhaps a director or vice-president, as he had done. I was to become a “master,” like he.

Outside of my day job, however, I was offered a position as an assistant swimming coach which could leverage my knowledge from my years of participating in the sport. The big shift in my life happened my final year of coaching. The head coach asked me one day, “Why aren’t you a teacher?” This thought had never occurred to me so starkly, and it sat in my heart for eight years, pondered but not investigated. In 2003, I made the decision to pursue this calling, which felt like both a literal call from my coaching partner and a more mysterious one which matched what I saw as my identity. My switch of careers from computers to teaching broke my father’s hold over me, comparable to Reina’s move from Cuba to Miami, thereby becoming *el exilio*. Moreover, I disposed of my father’s management books and corporate memorabilia, including the THINK sign, just as Reina speaks of painting all her father’s preserved birds black in mourning at the end of *The Agüero Sisters*.

While I was no longer following my father’s expectations, I also fulfilled them, in a way, since teaching requires its own kind of leadership. With my commitment to feminist/womanist pedagogy, however, I must understand and negotiate issues of power and authority alongside influence in a critically conscious manner. While I know that to this day my career choice has frustrated his vision for my life, I also realize that this is a common occurrence with men who resist oppressive patriarchal indoctrination. Bob Pease, in his study “Beyond the Father Wound: Memory-Work and the Deconstruction of the Father-Son Relationship,” researches men’s injury under kyriarchy. For many, they “feel that their fathers are disappointed in them. They come to learn, though, that they can never fulfill their father’s expectations and are unable to gain the approval, respect and acceptance they want from their fathers” (13). My liminal status as only a “pseudo-leader” and never a true “master” means I am neither metaphorically *exilio*, rejecting leadership altogether, nor *compañero*, embracing the “company man” role. Even the word

master needs critique, tied as it is to the white supremacist slavery institution. Both Reina and I resist the kyriarchal “master” narratives of how we are to work in society and find roles that can operate, as García explains, in the perforation between “worlds,” a form of the Anzaldúan borderlands.

Everything Eleguá: At Home at the Crossroads

Reading Anzaldúa’s essay in the 2009 course actuated a decade of ruminations and insights for me. At the time of the class, I reflected upon how, from young adulthood on, I myself had embodied a borderlands figure—based on my surrounding social structure and, more pointedly, my subaltern expression of masculinity. Largely I felt a rich emotional response with facets of my identity and psychic history. I “got” what a certain nepantilism feels like, and I had enough empathetic imagination to attune with Anzaldúa and also comprehend her political objectives to represent her lesbian-identified Chicana identity blend. By merging Christian’s and Meese’s concepts with Anzaldúa’s, I have grasped that *all* people—by the very nature of society, culture, and language—travel between worlds of some kind, embody hybridity, experience ideological transitions, and shift in many aspects even beyond these. I now theorize that all people could benefit in a comparable manner by embracing the shamanic archetype that Anzaldúa represents and urges so eloquently.

Revisiting my overall intentions for this chapter, I find that autocritographically interrogating García’s construction of Reina as both a shaman-like figure and a patchwork identity awakened me to my own participation in these frameworks. While I am not like Reina in so many ways—indeed, many people would consider comparing myself to a mulatta, Cuban, openly sexual, blue collar woman to be foolish—the core questions of what forces shape our lives and how we deal with the changes they compel absolutely resonate between us. García

chooses to emphasize Reina's role as an Anzaldúan nepantlera, among those who, according to Keating, "enters into and interacts with multiple, often conflicting, political/cultural/ideological/ethnic/etc. worlds, and yet refuses to entirely adopt, belong to, or identify with any single belief, group, or location" (12). García affirms that Reina values most "the freedom from a finality of vision, of a definitive version of life's meaning" (*Agüero Sisters* 12). Of all the orishas, Elegguá embodies this lack of final vision—always being at the crossroads, with ambiguity present every step of the way but also the freedom of multiple paths to the divine. Interviewed by Chris Abani, García herself avers, "I want everything Elegguá represents to be reflected in my work." Her Elegguá-inspired themes of worlds of difference and transformation for Reina spoke deeply to me about my own life's fluidity and need to mindfully embrace a shaman-like "world" traveler calling.

I offer the representations of shamanic initiation for both Reina and myself to demonstrate how, at an archetypal level, forces both operate on and are ritualized by human beings that transform their "world" and create a paradigm shifts. The facts of modern life have intensified and accelerated our encounters with difference, most prominently along lines of race, class, gender, sexuality, and culture. Despite this truth, the human tendency to simplify, rather than complicate, urges facile, monolithic notions of good and bad, high and low, and in- or out-group. We like our own worlds and want clean and solid borders around them. Nevertheless, as Anzaldúa observes, society's changes and interactions have forced a new reality upon us as we are "undergoing profound transformations and shifts in perception. All . . . are caught between cultures and bleed-throughs among different worlds" ("Shift" 541). Without the ability to shift smoothly, to operate across difference and between "worlds," humanity seems doomed to what Joseph Campbell has labeled a "schizophrenic crack-up" (107). Campbell's term, though perhaps

over-pathologizing, conveys the inability to reconcile disparate realities and to achieve the psychic balance that W. E. B. Du Bois calls “double consciousness.”

Campbell defines the shamanic initiation itself as a falling into the borderless “*whole* unconscious,” from which the shaman then recovers and learns to integrate and navigate (107; emphasis added). Surviving the initiation into shamanhood—whether literal or metaphorical—requires basic “conditions of survival”: an opened awareness of multiple realms’ existence, an understanding of deep connection across difference, and an embracing of the mysterious paradox of fluidity and solidity in all things. This dichotomy between the changeable and the unchanging flows into the concept of identity as a zone between essential or constructed, between individually autonomous and connected to our surroundings. F. Scott Fitzgerald praises the shamanic/Du Boisian intelligence that can “hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function” (69). Put into the language of my approaches to this chapter, the shamanic archetype functions highest in embracing a patchwork reality. It acknowledges differences yet can skillfully embroider them into a beautiful unity. In an era obsessed with the dissimilarities of each other’s patches, we all would benefit by initiation into the shamanic archetype’s mysteries of weaving them together.

Notes

1. AnaLouise Keating clarifies Gloria Anzaldúa’s theory of the *nepantlera*, based on the Náhuatl word *nepantla* meaning “in-between space,” by defining it as “a threshold person or world traveler” (12). See Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* for her original use of the term.

2. In fact, the word *agüero* translates as sign or omen.

3. The novel contains a near-verbatim wording of the myth of the sun, moon, and stars from González-Wippler’s *Santería* (González-Wippler 243, García 258).

4. Another potential occurrence of the washing theme occurs when Constanica, Reina's sister, knocks her off their boat and into the sea, discussed later in the chapter. This instance, however, does not have any accompanying electrical reference or stripping, so I do not feel it to be as representative of the asiento's cleansing dynamism.

5. Di Iorio Sandín claims that García "distorts [Santería rituals] out of ignorance and American bravado" (26). Margarite Fernández Olmos, however, counters, "The informed reader will note the authentic representation in the novel of *Santería* rituals of worship and in references to the characters and their ritual identification with the *orishas*" (84). No matter the actual reason for the undisputed "distortion," García clearly referenced González-Wippler's germinal text in writing the novel. See note 3 above.

6. I must note here that Gary L. Lemons is also an ordained, gender-progressive Christian minister. His attunement to spiritual matters operates synergistically within his classroom and infuses his own pro-feminist/pro-womanist stance. Undoubtedly, his pedagogy and his spirituality inform each other. See his monograph *Black Male Outsider: Teaching as a Pro-Feminist Man*.

7. See David Carrasco and Roberto Lint Sagarena's "The Religious Vision of Gloria Anzaldúa: *Borderlands/La Frontera* as a Shamanic Space" and Betsy Dahms' "Shamanic Urgency and Two-Way Movement as Writing Style in the Works of Gloria Anzaldúa."

8. See my master's thesis, *Circling Back Home: A Lifelong Odyssey into Feminism*, for a detailed example of my pedagogical activism as a middle school teacher.

9. I subsequently took an advanced feminist theory course with Diane Price Herndl after Lemons' class, and my autocritographical foray into women of color theory and literature continued in future classes with him as well as Ylce Irizarry. My most-read theorist outside of

my graduate coursework is bell hooks—who, although I only read one of her essays in Feminist Theory, by later influence also belongs in my personal *la parada*.

10. The bulk I added by weight training incidentally vanished when I stopped my regimen.

11. Just as I find the synchronicity of “Bones” with “bred in the bone” curious, I also am surprised at another coincidence here: *Reina* translates to *Queen*.

12. An example of my resistance would be that I never attended homecomings or my senior prom.

13. As I’ve pondered why this quirk was true for me, I have wondered whether my upbringing in “Southern chivalry” by two parents from Kentucky influenced me. An unfortunate kyriarchal truism of this ideology: respect women, but only white—and often just middle- and upper-class—women.

14. See Chapter Four for my reference to Bill Gates, whom I consider one of the culture’s leading white male emblems of the “rise of geekdom.”

15. The legacy of this slogan remains in the company’s notebook computer, the ThinkPad.

CHAPTER TWO

The Old (Sha)Man and the Student: Finding my (Heming)Way into Manhood

To become a writer I needed to confront that shadow-self, to learn ways to accept and care for that aspect of me as part of a process of healing and recovery.

—bell hooks, *remembered rapture: the writer at work*

If he wrote it he could get rid of it. He had gotten rid of many things by writing them.

—Ernest Hemingway, “Fathers and Sons”

Ernest Hemingway saved my life—as a white male literary scholar “confront[ing his] shadow-self” (hooks 11). I experienced this stunning realization as I was co-authoring “Fortuitous Couplings: The Masculine/Feminine Dynamics of Hemingway’s Creative Evolution,” a paper for the 2014 International Hemingway Conference, with University of South Florida professor Dr. Lawrence Broer. The narrative arc of this chapter relates the story of how Hemingway engendered this salvific effect via his literary and biographical influence on my coming to critical consciousness. The chapter’s first section elaborates the re-visioning of Hemingway I undertook, actuated by our “fortuitous coupling” as professor and student in Broer’s 2008 course on Hemingway and Kurt Vonnegut. I hope to illuminate how his class introduced me to both masculinity studies via feminism and the shaman as an archetype. I intend the story of Hemingway’s life-saving role to detail a thread of my conscientization, especially as Freire defines it as “the process of developing a critical *awareness* of one’s social reality through reflection and action” (Freire Institute; emphasis added).

Reverting to 1981, I next explore my positioning as a fourteen-year-old first reading *The Old Man and the Sea*. I consider the social and literary influences that shaped my concepts of what *man* and *sea*—or more generally, nature—interconnectedly signified to me. In each case, I also explicate how these forerunners primed me to fall “in love with Papa,” as Linda Patterson Miller titles her essay about surprisingly “how much Ernest Hemingway would take over my life” (3). I then address *The Old Man and the Sea*’s ideologies that either reinscribed harmful notions of masculine behavior or instilled new, positive ones, particularly the shamanic archetype. I finally circle back to 2014, recalling how my work as a student autocritographer inspired and persuaded my professor to co-author the Hemingway conference paper.

I came under the tutelage of Dr. Broer in 2008 as I entered the University of South Florida’s English graduate program. He had developed the Hemingway/Vonnegut course based on his concurrent writing project comparing the authors’ lives and works. In his ensuing monograph, *Hemingway and Vonnegut: Writers at War*, Broer explicates the premise we students learned in that course: through deeply reading the authors’ works and understanding their biographies, one can reveal their psyches and appreciate their profound linkage. Although Hemingway and Vonnegut had similar life circumstances—particularly in their exposure to trauma from combat—their divergent responses to what Broer terms the psychological “head wounds” of war and other events produced overt antagonism between them, despite their connectedness (40). Both writers infused their fiction with veiled memoir to therapeutically write out their lives and suffering, trying to access and heal the wounded Other within themselves. Broer explains that both fictively and vicariously pursue an evolving path of “confession, redemption, and rebirth, distinguished by the hero’s increasingly open conversation with the suppressed ‘other,’” or in Jungian terms, the shadow self (88). The course’s interrogation of the

writers' psychological histories and healing quests created a foundation for my later scholarly aim, guided by the method of autocritography. bell hooks, both an autocritographer herself and an advocate of writerly self-recovery, asserts, "To become a writer I needed . . . to learn ways to accept and care for that [shadow-self] aspect of me as part of a process of healing and recovery" (11). The fact that Hemingway's and Vonnegut's traumas and healing dealt so inextricably with white masculinity fostered a connection that both implicated and engaged me personally.

Broer assigned the class Linda Patterson Miller's "In Love with Papa," from *Hemingway and Women: Female Critics and the Female Voice* (2002) that he edited with Gloria Holland, as preparation for reading Hemingway. Unlike the scholars I had read in my sole graduate course to that point, she presented a both academic and personal essay in which she narrates her lifelong evolution into feminist Hemingway scholarship.¹ She recounts how her feminist colleagues dismissively judged that since "Hemingway's world of machismo both alienates and subordinates women" (4), it merits disdain and not study, much less appreciation. Additionally, Patterson Miller relates stories, gathered via both published sources and her personal relationships, from Hemingway's close acquaintances. Her quotations and anecdotes introduce Hemingway as a more complex author and human being than his monolithic, hypermasculine portrayal would suggest. She ultimately appeals to the scholarly community to defer outright dismissal of Hemingway for reasons of his supposed "crudity or violence or exclusionary politics" in order to "show us who we are and how best to live our lives" (22). Not only would I read more essays that semester by scholars heeding this call, I myself would in the course of time enter into their ranks.

Male Psychic Anatomy: (En)Gendering a Theoretical Approach

I had little understanding about identity studies in my nascent graduate career and had barely examined the constructs of gender in literature or my life. Reading Patterson Miller's essay revealed my *unawareness* and *naiveté*: Hemingway's world was macho? And machismo can be a problem? Following Broer's intention in assigning this essay, I began to ponder: what comprises masculine and feminine according to societal dictates? How do those categories operate in Hemingway? I grasped foremost in Patterson Miller's writing that one *could examine* masculinity as a discrete category. Secondly, I appreciated that a deeper, balanced inspection of gender in Papa's work constituted an emerging and provocative academic pursuit. When she maintains that Hemingway scholarship is really "only beginning to reassess [his] supposed heroic code and the macho world associated with it" (9), I felt a desire to be part of that inquiry. Accordingly, from the course's outset, I wanted to start reading for varying ideas of gender identity. This intention, doubtless motivated by my own, unexplored masculine "head wounds," marked my intentional entry into feminist studies and its later evolution into intersectional critical theory studies.

The 2008 class readings followed Hemingway's life chronologically. I eagerly reread *A Farewell to Arms* and immersed myself in works I had not read, such as the Nick Adams stories and *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Nevertheless, I was anticipating one book more than any other: *The Old Man and the Sea*, which I had not read since 1981. Although I could not articulate why at the time, I knew the importance it held in my own personal literary canon. Before arriving at *Old Man*, however, the constructions of masculinity and Hemingway's fictional engagement with them started to crystalize in my mind via both class discussions about the readings and co-assigned scholarly articles. His philosophy of the code hero's "grace under pressure"²

particularly registered as an important theme explored by masculinities scholars. Thomas Strychacz's *Hemingway's Theaters of Masculinity* illuminated for me the code hero's "manhood on display" as "theatrical gestures" (6, 10), self-depictions crafted to gain social acceptance. In a time before I had read Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, the realization that *male* is something one *does* versus something one *is* astonished me. Harmonizing these and other critics' work, Broer argues that Hemingway and his protagonists theatrically mask their vulnerability; they do what they can to exude manhood, often at the expense of qualities of the soul coded as "feminine."

I also appreciated Hemingway's metaphor of the iceberg³ in its different meanings. I "felt things strongly" below the surface of his protagonists and noted a compelling psychological rapport with them. I perceived a connection with these white men's stories and their ways of navigating masculinity. The iceberg alludes to another phenomenon linked to the protagonists' masking. Mark Spilka's *Hemingway's Quarrel with Androgyny* explicates how Hemingway was "raised by a blend of feminine and masculine versions of manhood which later became submerged and dominant strains, respectively" (5). The submerged iceberg represents how the author/protagonist hides or freezes out the unshowable: traumatic pain, weakness, "the feminine," or further "otherness."⁴ The iceberg and the theatrical mask work together to leave unexpressed and unreflected those qualities, emotions, and memories too painful or acceptable to reveal. A code hero must sustain a manly presentation, no matter the depth of his inner turmoil.

Broer's theoretical approach dovetails the metaphors of iceberg and mask with his use of Jungian concept of the anima, the feminine aspects of the male psyche. On one hand, scholars such as Naomi Goldenberg⁵ argue against Jung's gendered theory, disfavoring his notions such as "the eternal Feminine" as essentializing and stereotyping. Nevertheless, kyriarchy ineluctably genders and hierarchizes qualities of both inner and outer worlds. The kyriarchal Western

overculture bases how it relate to these facets on the appraisal it gives their gender coding. For example, if I am emotionally sensitive, and the overculture genders tearful expression as feminine, then I am by association feminine in that way. Whether emotionality is truly “eternally feminine” or not, if I am trained kyriarchally to devalue the feminine, I must somehow negotiate my emotionality *as a problem*. Consequently, the feminine, expressed by either men or women, must be controlled and repressed. I will conceal it, deny it, and wound myself in the process of suppressing it. This self-rejection injures both men and women and entails relegating the feminine to the shadow self. The shadow for Hemingway—and for myself and Broer, as I was to uncover later—was the wounded anima, the buried and masked feminine in our souls.

Two moments in Hemingway’s Nick Adams stories touched me as models of this pattern as I read them for the first time in Broer’s course. In “Indian Camp,” a young Nick sits in the back of his doctor father’s canoe, returning home after witnessing both a mother’s traumatic Caesarean section and a father’s suicide. Unable to speak in an emotionally open way with his father, “Nick trailed his hand in the water. It felt warm in the *sharp chill* of the morning” (70; emphasis added). Nick touches the water to help him submerge the *sharp* emotional content of what he has seen, since he cannot freely grieve in the presence his father’s *chilling* stoicism. Returning home traumatized from war year later, Nick goes fishing in “Big Two-Hearted River.” He resists proceeding into the swamp and feels “a reaction against *deep* wading . . . in the swamp fishing was a *tragic* adventure” (180; emphasis added). The older Nick feels the manly, stoic mask might slip off, *tragically* overwhelmed by feminine-coded emotions, by going *deep* into traumatic memory/water. In both scenes, water represents the subconscious, a physical emblem for a place to store psychological pain. Nick’s submerging his “head wounds” showed me a pattern that appeared in much of Hemingway’s work and, I would discover, in my own life.

Broer's use of the shaman archetype as a critical lens, drawn from the work of Mircea Eliade, also inspired me. In "Images of the Shaman in the Works of Kurt Vonnegut," Broer elucidates in the author's heroes a shaman-like "drive for awareness, self-possession and moral responsibility" in pursuit of "a more just and harmonious social order" (201). Broer also discerns this archetype as it appears posthumously in Hemingway, where "his reconsideration of personal sins against himself and others, animals included . . . identifies the author as a fellow shaman, a healer of self, then . . . as a healer of others" (*Writers* 178-179). Despite a few other references to a shamanic pattern in Hemingway, Broer did not much expand this inquiry in *Writers at War*. I will extend Broer's analysis of shamanic leanings in *The Old Man and the Sea* later in this chapter when I discuss Santiago's relationship to the sea. First, however, I will analyze my encounter with the novella's construction of masculinity.

Battle, Wherein Is the Warrior's Glory: Agon(izing) Manhood

I must first investigate key life events that shaped my concept of what it means *to be a man* in order to create the background for my fourteen-year-old self who would read *Old Man*. The first one deals with a topic that Hemingway would use as the name of his final Nick Adams story: fathers and sons. My father, despite having the masculine-coded attributes I mentioned in Chapter One, did not conform to a male ideal in his physicality. His greatest exertion was doing yardwork, and he participated in no leisure sports.⁶ Rather, he spent much of his recreational hours tinkering with a model railroad. His executive job position did entail occasional "working vacations" in which his corporate associates would gather to both conduct business and enjoy leisure. These trips might involve fishing near Homosassa, Florida, but this fishing was always for Nick Adams-style, smaller game. When I was eight years old in January of 1975, one such trip took him to Stuart, Florida. Little did I know that this one would involve big-game fishing.

Upon his return, he regaled me with the story of how he had caught a sailfish in the Gulf Stream and was getting the fish “stuffed”—preserved by a taxidermist for display. Weeks later, the prized sailfish arrived, and Dad proudly mounted it on our family room wall, opposite the household television. Thereafter, if I were ever watching the TV, the enshrined creature loomed over me and stared at me unblinkingly with an eye, although fake, that “looked as detached as the mirrors in a periscope or as a saint in a procession,” as Hemingway describes the marlin in *Old Man* (74). By catching that sailfish, my father “proved” his manliness to me in the way that Hemingway describes how people masculinize the sea: by defeating “a contestant” (27), and a sizeable one, in battle. The sailfish hanging on the wall represented a trophy to his masculinity and epitomized what Strychacz calls one of Hemingway’s “theatrical gestures.” The fish also reminded me daily that I, too, must someday justify being called a man.

The moment of truth arrived four years later in seventh grade: the single-most influential occurrence in my youth that led me to equate hierarchized physical power with masculinity. My school had decided at that time to participate in the Presidential Physical Fitness Awards program, which tests and ranks youth athletic performance in various challenges. One activity of this testing requires students to perform pull-ups. On the day of this challenge, my physical education teacher directed the males to gather around a pull-up bar, hang one-by-one from it, and then perform as many repetitions as possible. When it came to my turn, I jumped to the bar, dangled momentarily, and then attempted to pull. With the eyes of every one of my male classmates on me, I struggled and strained but could barely move even part way into one pull-up.

I unmistakably read my male peers’ reactions. A few averted their gazes, some deflated their postures or shifted their bodies restlessly, but most simply glared. No one offered support or encouragement. I had performed embarrassingly in their eyes, and at once I internalized this

disgrace. Therapist Terrence Real, having watched such a “learning the rules” moment happen to his son who once wore a feminine-coded outfit, speaks of this “normal traumatization of boys”: “Without a shred of malevolence, the stare my son received transmitted a message . . . [in] a potent emotion: shame” (78). The pull-up bar challenge had morphed into a contest for judging manliness, because upper body strength somehow epitomized masculinity for my peers. Not being strong in that way, I learned, meant not being a man and afterwards not enjoying full male peer acceptance. I had failed, as Strychacz terms it, in putting my “manhood on display.” Moreover, just like Nick in “Indian Camp,” I immediately had to submerge my trauma and mask any tearful reaction in the face of their chilling stares. This incident became the first of my Broerian “head wounds”: a loss of white male “tribe” and feeling of expatriation.⁷

Although I never received any direct insults or taunting afterwards, I clearly understood how this test/contest helped congeal my social masculine hierarchy. Judith Butler claims that “those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished” (522). Already lacking in other male status-securing attributes,⁸ the very public confirmation of my athletic deficit assured that my white male peers would punish me and relegate me to the margins of approval. I began noticing these peers more regularly picked me last for team games and increasingly excluded me from conversations about sports and women. Beyond this microcosmic social system, the national fitness aspect—now the white, male *President* ranks me as weak—further stressed the magnitude of this concept that bodily power and the kyriarchal comparison of how males perform it were the standards for my budding manhood. I also deduced that the key to and goal for my societal acceptance was strength authenticated in competition.

Two major texts I read in that seventh-grade year, Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, simultaneously reinforced the rising specter of hegemonic masculinity. They merged into my

patriarchal training guide on how to be a man.⁹ James Garbarino reflects on this link between the written/visual and the social, observing, “Where and how do boys learn what it means to be a man? They seem to learn it all too often from the mass media and from the most visible males in their community, particularly their peers” (169). Matthew A. Sears proclaims of *The Iliad* that even today it “serves as a sort of manual of manliness,” and my enthrallment with the Homeric epics predisposed me to a certain kind of masculine hero. Principally, Hector and Odysseus established themselves as exemplars I most wished to emulate as a twelve-year-old. I admired Hector for his noble leadership, who “learnt ever to be valiant” himself to avoid “the very sore shame” he might face if he did not fight (Book VI). I appreciated Odysseus for his *metis*—his quick, strategic mind and flexibility of thinking. Both men, however, displayed the quality that my “loss” in the pull-up contest had internalized and enshrined as masculine: strength proven by comparison in *agon*—contest, struggle, or battle. Sharing this ideology, Hemingway’s novella would eventually become Part II of my patriarchal training, reinforcing ideas about being a heroic male that would prove to be harmful psychically as well as physically.

My immersion in Homer prepared me for Hemingway both rhetorically and ideologically. As Kathleen Morgan and Luis Losado have detailed, Hemingway’s “eyewitness style” parallels Homer’s descriptive narration. Many word choices in *Old Man* also duplicate the Lang, Leaf and Myers-translated (LLM) *Iliad*, which Hemingway read in high school, and the companion, Butcher and Lang-translated (BL) *Odyssey*.¹⁰ I find it striking but not surprising that the LLM and BL were also the translations I read in the seventh grade. My interest here lies in the authors’ mentions of strength; in fact, the words “strong” and “strength” occur altogether nearly two-hundred times in the LLM and over forty times in the novella. The ambition to be “the best,” *proven* in some sort of masculine “battle, wherein is the warrior’s glory” (Book VII),

emerges as the main ideological foundation that Homer laid and Hemingway later built upon. Hector, “the best of men bred [at Troy]” (Book XXI), could rightly “exulteth in his might” (Book IX), a quality which makes Manolin label Santiago “the best” (23). Odysseus must demonstrate his physical superiority in the Phaeacian discus competition, after which he “fain would know and *prove* [any challengers to his masculinity] face to face” (*Odyssey* Book VIII; emphasis added). Santiago, meeting his struggle, addresses this same challenge of proof, and “The thousand times that he had *proved* it meant nothing. Now he was *proving* it again” (53; emphasis added). Manhood, I grasped, always lies in the proving, within a culture of male supremacy.

The underlying Homeric acceptance of physical dominance in *agon* as masculine validation reinforced what societal patriarchy was teaching me. David Buckingham, referring to text readers, notes that they arrive “positioned in society and history, and will therefore bring different kinds of prior knowledge to the text” (qtd. in Beach 129). My father’s sailfish catch and my male peers’ physical ranking constituted my personal gendered history and close social influences. After awakening to the hegemonic masculinity’s hierarchy in the pull-up “battle,” I became fully sensible to physical performance as a social ranking system, not just as a sport or game. Coincidentally reading Homer just codified this notion and added the heft of thousands of years’ worth of history and social reinforcement. Magnified by Homer’s protagonists, my ideal of success crystalized as proving myself to be a man through some combination of Hectorian brawn and Odyssean brains. Hemingway’s protagonist would fulfill these ideals when I first arrived at *The Old Man and the Sea* with all of this “prior knowledge,” just two years later.

What a Man Can Do and What a Man Endures: Wounding Self to Be(a/s)t the Other

My ongoing attempts to care for my masculine “head wound,” as much as my lowered social ranking, greatly influenced how I assimilated *Old Man*’s ideology in 1981. Its basic story

of a man dominating a strong and noble opponent, paralleling my own father's "theatrical gesture," riveted me. I completely identified with its overt dogma of male performative success requiring power, dexterity, and strategy. Nevertheless, before Santiago ever places his "manhood on display," I empathized with him an outcast, alienated and labeled *salao*—"the worst form of unlucky" (13). When I read that "many of the fishermen made fun of the old man" (14), I resonated deeply with his lack of belonging. I also sensed that his fishing community blamed factors besides luck for his inferiority, perhaps a lack of ever-needed strength or strategy. Hemingway never emphasizes the old man's subpar performance as a problem for his economics or his survival, i.e. Santiago never thinks, "If I don't catch a fish, I will make no money, be homeless, and starve." Hemingway frames the old man's work specifically as a question of male social rank and acceptance. Santiago laments the fact that Manolin's father has ordered his son to shun the old man to somehow quarantine the boy so that he will not also become a *salao* angler. In this way, Santiago's social otherness and loneliness come both from male peer rejection and, even more distressingly, from an individual patriarch's decree.

Even as a fourteen-year-old, I also felt, in Hemingway's iceberg approach, that some phenomenon beyond Santiago's fishless streak and its underlying masculinist implications affected his Otherness. The most obvious characteristic is his advanced age as his primary identity, so much so that Hemingway only calls him "Santiago" four times, versus the more than two-hundred references to him as "old man." Another signifier of Otherness that Hemingway employs is "strangeness." Santiago twice refers to himself as a "*strange* old man" (*Old Man* 16, 53; emphasis added), and Hemingway comments early in the novella about his "strange shoulders" (19). Although he also remarks about the marlin's strangeness of age and strength in admirable terms, I could not help but construe most of his internalization of his own differences

as repellent, not laudable. However, the later realization Santiago makes about the marlin—their shared strangeness—eventually facilitates a connection across difference, a theme I discuss later in the chapter.

I also noticed that, besides his status as an outcast fisherman, Santiago's dialogue with Manolin and his dreams adumbrate his condition as an ethnically and racially strange man, living outside his country. The old man's nightly visions of lions playing on the African coast and "the different harbors and roadsteads of the Canary Islands" (*Old Man* 24) reveal his longings to return to his origins. Stuck as he is in his Cuban village, he yearns for home. Manolin's "I know . . . You told me" (22) chiding about Santiago's dream recollection indicates how often the old man indulges in open reminiscence. For Jeffrey Herlihy, Santiago's waking and sleeping attention to his origins demonstrate "the anguish he endures as a result of the permanent separation from his native land" (41). Herlihy's essay delineates Hemingway's understated signals of the old man's racial and ethnic otherness, such as his "eyes the same color as the sea," his particular use of Spanish, and even his nickname El Campeon, evocative of El Cid's epithet. Furthermore, Herlihy illustrates how a *Canario* expatriate would have faced social intolerance in Cuba beyond what his *salao* epithet might indicate. Santiago's European whiteness would have contrasted with the more predominant Afro-Cuban darkness, connecting him to the island's oppressive colonizers. He could readily be an object of hostility by way of cultural memories of the Spanish-American war fifty years earlier. While Hemingway only narratively *suggests* Santiago's degraded community rank for issues beyond just his fishing luck, I still perceived his exclusion as more complex than just superstitious avoidance.

The main factor that I now recognize as operating for both Santiago and myself in our shunned/expatriate state is the tying of demonstrations of worth in the theater of masculinity to

self-image. We both wanted to feel good about ourselves and regain standing in the community. The old man must prove his excellence by catching a fish not just for economic sustenance but as evidence of his worth along intersectional lines of gender, race, and even age. Still trying to redress my masculine “head wound,” I sought proof of white manhood in athletic “battle.” I had already begun trying to compensate for my supposedly inferior masculinity after the Presidential Fitness debacle by engaging in a strengthening program. An improved pull-up display in eighth grade notwithstanding, by the time I read *Old Man* I found my biggest challenge to be counterbalancing my participation only in the co-ed, non-contact sport of swimming.¹¹ True, I had won some high school swimming races and had dreamed of a future district victory earning me a berth at the state championships. Still, I did not yet have the firm intention or motivation to push myself harder to accomplish that dream.

My fourteen-year-old’s understanding of Hemingway’s novella authorized and galvanized me to pursue more fiercely this objective of becoming the equivalent of Santiago el Campeon: Scott, the Champion of the Pool. I felt the potency in Santiago’s statement “I wish I could show him what sort of man I am . . . Let him think I am more man than I am and I will be so” (*Old Man* 52). I knew that being the best swimmer at my high school could never equate me to being the best white male soccer or basketball player. Still, I felt that I must perform with a Hemingwayesque grace under pressure and dignity to see how much my status might rise. As I speculated after finishing *Old Man*, why else would Santiago bring the shredded fish carcass into shore for the village to see? Tattered as they are, the marlin’s remains revalidate his worthiness of at least some level of belonging in the community. Why else, after earlier lamenting his dishonor as *salao* and his social rejection, does he think afterwards that “many others” (85) would have missed him when he is gone so long? Why his revised assessment of “I live in a

good town” (85) at the novella’s end? He knows that the fish’s ruins, worthless in the economic marketplace, will still earn him respect in the masculinity’s hegemonic marketplace and intersectionally alleviate his linked oppressions of his race, age, and whatever othering “strangeness” he manifests. In parallel fashion, I internalized/reasoned that if I am still being shunned for my version and expression of masculinity and additional reasons of otherness, I can at least bring in a symbolic carcass, too, and perhaps also live in a “good town” with “many others” who validated me as a (hu)man.

When Manolin speaks to Santiago after his return, the boy asks, “How much did you suffer?” Santiago accurately and curtly replies, “Plenty” (*Old Man* 93). I would apply this evaluation to the *agonizing* journey to becoming my high school’s swimming male “champion.” This suffering consisted mostly of much physical hardship in the name of training. I had to swim two workouts a day instead of one, increase the frequency of my weightlifting, and augment my conditioning with aerobic cross-training in sports like running and stationary biking. These more masculine techniques notwithstanding, I also submitted myself to more feminine-coded ones. I donned women’s pantyhose during practices to increase the water’s drag on my body and train my muscles harder. For the district meets I shaved my legs and wore a swimming cap to reduce drag. These regimens occur commonly within the swimming world, but to my soccer-, basketball-, and baseball-playing peers in high school they appeared womanish. Just as Santiago wounds his already deeply-scarred hands catching the marlin, my female behaviors were in some ways exacerbating the “head wound” from the pull-up incident. Nevertheless, by the end of swimming my senior year, I had risen to the position of team captain, walking around campus with my letter jacket and pins broadcasting my “rank.” I had not only topped districts in my two main events and competed at the state level, I had set school records in them.¹² Undeniably, the

sharks of hegemonic masculinity ate away at the merit of my “non-contact,” “coed sport,” “shaved-leg and bathing cap” performances. Still, I felt a Santiago-like honor in landing “such a fish” (59).

Another, more subtle way in which I suffered was the ideological reinforcement of *agon* with and domination of the Other as proof of self-worth. In the middle of his struggle with the marlin, Santiago recalls an arm-wrestling match with “the great negro from Cienfuegos who was the strongest man on the docks” (*Old Man* 56). The negro is the only racial Other directly mentioned in the novella, and he most meaningfully represents what Toni Morrison calls “the Africanist presence” as a means of white definition. She asks of Hemingway’s *To Have and Have Not*—but clearly could inquire of *Old Man*—“What does establishing a difference from darkness to lightness accomplish for the concept of a self . . . so powerful and coherent in the world?” (79). In my case I competed against vast majority white male opponents in the pool and vicariously the white males in my high school who held hegemonic male power *as Other*. I internalized that domination of the Other, as represented in both the “great negro” and the marlin, evoked a self of power and coherence. Any form in which *agon* could take place, therefore, represented a chance to (re)construct a self chronically suffering from uncared-for “head wounds.”

María Lugones specifically elucidates her differentiation between *agon* and playfulness in her essay “Playfulness, ‘World’-Travelling, and Loving Perception.” For her, the tenets of agonistic play “have, ultimately, to do with contest, with winning, losing, battling . . . the players are imbued with *self-importance* . . . since they are so keen on winning given their own merits, their very own competence” (15). The *agon* model internalized by many participants in physical activities like sports and hunting can then seep out of into broader social realms. My racist

mockery of the bus driver Queen, as I described in Chapter One, underscores this distortion from play—"it was just *playful* teasing"—into white supremacy. That moment bears pieces of both competitive sports' and Hemingway's negative *agon* model. In contrast, Lugones emphasizes egolessness, fluidity, and creativity within *loving playfulness*: "We are not self-important . . . We are not worried about competence. We are not wedded to particular ways of doing things" (16). My egoic dedication to *agon*, in the pool and on that bus, was dedicated to myself and my power. It did not value the Other, especially across difference, and epitomized hierarchized thinking and destructive hegemonic action.

My application to Duke University, undertaken weeks after my final state championships, asked me to write an analysis of a proud achievement in my life. I naturally related the story of my just-finished competitive success. In answering the writing prompt, I recounted my cultivating both Hectorian success factors like strength and endurance and Odyssean strategies like shaving my legs and wearing a cap to gain milliseconds. I will never forget that essay's final line, based on a saying I had heard at the time which struck me: "Some may say that my swimming success was a matter of luck, but I feel that luck is when preparation meets opportunity." My use of this maxim, closing out the highest-stakes writing I had done to that point in my life, now confirms to me Santiago's/Hemingway's influence. I was at a deep level, in fact, echoing this precept from *Old Man*: "Every day is a new day. It is better to be lucky. But I would rather be exact. Then when luck comes you are ready" (29-30). Even though the preparation-exactness parallel is apparent, why did I even try to frame what I had achieved as "luck"? Because I had embraced Santiago's view of *salao* as a condition to be remedied by masculine-coded performance. I indeed felt that what I had accomplished had influenced "many

others” to respect me and that, with only half of my senior year remaining, I now lived, if not “in a good town,” at least in a better one than when I first read Hemingway.

Several after-effects followed my having “proven” my manhood by watery *agon* in the lineage of Santiago. On the same Duke application, I marked no interest in swimming. Physically and mentally exhausted, I was done with competitive athletics, because I, like the old man, had suffered “plenty.” Still, the amelioration of my *salao* condition had strengthened my belief in the dominance-as-social-hierarchy scheme that led me to go “out too far,” as Santiago did (*Old Man* 89). As an individual athlete relying on no other team member, I had embodied and aggrandized the ideal of male-coded self-reliance, just as Santiago accomplishes his feat without the boy. In my adolescent years, I began to venerate, especially in books and films, this man-against-the-world paradigm.¹³ I apprehended the notion of multiple venues beyond sports as “theaters of masculinity,” e.g. the military, law enforcement, and survival scenarios. In my senior year of college, I seriously considered joining the Coast Guard, a career that would embody all three of these theaters and allow me the adventure of the sea, like Santiago experienced.

As I grew into adulthood, the information technology workplace became the locus of my competition and dominance efforts, removing physicality. In this theater, the white male with Odyssean brains is ascendant, and I found myself in intellectual *agon* with other males as well as with gender and racial Others for promotions, and thus class privilege. As a young white man rising into middle age, the venue and style of “battle, wherein is the warrior’s glory” may have changed, but Hemingway’s, Homer’s, my middle school peers’, and my father’s underlying values of dominance in that struggle still infused my thinking and actions. Moreover, beneath this worldview, my original “head wound” of strength equaling acceptance festered. Only via Broer’s course would I even begin to experience conscientizing Freirean *awareness* of

masculinity and acquire the tools to deconstruct my biography, with Hemingway as my “secret sharer.”¹⁴ Yet the realm of masculinity was only half of Santiago’s influence on me.

The Happiness of the Garden That a Man Must Lose: Sighing for Eden

The second of my “head wounds” heavily shaped my relationship to nature and influenced how I would read *The Old Man and the Sea* as a high schooler. In the summer of 1975, six months after my father had landed the sailfish, I discovered that I had the ability to climb the thirty-foot oak tree in my Tampa home’s back yard. Almost daily I would ascend the oak, then spend hours enjoying the physical pleasure of hoisting my body up and down the various limbs near the trunk. I reveled in the sensation of the upper trunk’s sway and the limbs moving under me in the summer breeze. All my senses engaged there: the feel of the bark and the wind; the sound of the leaves rustling; the smell of the nearby magnolia and cut grass; the look of dappled sunlight on the tree limbs; and even the enjoyment of the apples and carrots I brought with me. Tree climbing was, as its most basic level, a sensory feast.

I noticed as the weeks progressed that I was also climbing for other reasons. Even as a child, I felt an introvert’s need for privacy, and by ascending the tree, I could be alone more regularly. Moreover, other than the food I mentioned, I never brought anything with me—I detached completely from the world of fabricated objects. Because I was undistracted, I began to feel and appreciate a bond with the tree itself and the animals that inhabited it. I observed the various fauna that would appear: the ants, crickets, and cicadas; the frequent squirrels and rare bats; and the variety of birds, including blue jays, mockingbirds, and cardinals. My quiet interactions with the tree’s denizens and the sensual pleasures of nature gave me a peaceful contentment I had never felt before. My happiness in this idyllic summer getaway was not to last, however.

The fall of that year brought me back to school, and the transition to fourth grade proved difficult. Besides mounting classroom rigor, the homework amount and frequency increased tremendously over the previous year, and these pressures intensified my stress level. Upon returning home daily from school, I would immediately ascend the tree to recuperate, unwind, and commune with nature—generally until the evening meal or darkness spurred me back down and into the house. Susan Cain, in *Quiet Power: The Secret Strength of Introverts*, relates the story of Maria, an introverted middle-schooler in California who climbed a tree every lunch period to eat alone and help her recover from the academic pressure she felt. “Some of her closest friends . . . thought her hiding-in-a-tree time was weird,” Cain notes, “but . . . up in the branches, she could recharge her batteries” (143-144). Initially, like Maria, I would use my restored energy to complete my homework after descending from the tree, attempting to maintain my academic performance of the past years. I found, however, that my interest in being a “top student” started to wane. I began putting little to no effort into homework, and I lied to my parents when they would ask if I had completed it. Fundamentally, I was trying to operate between two worlds, but I had prioritized my nature school over my parochial school. I could not, however, sustain this pattern, given the strict oversight of my fourth-grade homeroom teacher. She eventually caught me not doing my homework and sent me to the headmaster for corporal punishment. He notified my parents of my disregard for my assignments.

My father is a very rational, cerebral man who privileges the intellect above all else. Concomitant with this mind-first ideology, he believed in my supreme commitment to A-plus academic performance. Upon his discovering my scholastic negligence, his disappointment was unequivocal: how could I forsake the most important task of my young life, the cultivation of my mind? Then he learned that I was devoting my time to tree-climbing instead of homework. As

chilly stoic as Dr. Adams in “Indian Camp,” and as authoritarian as Manolin’s father, he issued a decree: I was banned from the tree, and he only permitted homework after school. This scenario, in retrospect, echoes the biblical story of the banishment from Paradise. Just becoming deeply sensible to the natural world, I was starting to feel a connection with it when a patriarchal lawgiver revoked my nature-linked state of grace. In the eviction from my arboreal Eden, I felt like I had been exiled for the “sin” of loving nature more than school, and of desiring sensory learning more than rational education.¹⁵

As I would learn in Broer’s course, my feelings after this event correlate to Hemingway’s persistent, thematic longing, which Papa outright declares about *The Garden of Eden*, for “the happiness of the Garden that a man must lose” (qtd. in Baker 460). Many critics have observed Hemingway’s lifelong search for private Edenic beauty, such as the “secret place” Nick seeks in “The Last Good Country.” We repeatedly witness, as Ann Putnam describes in “On Defiling Eden,” the Hemingway’s hero “travelling across paradisaal landscapes” (117). “This [is the] search that Hemingway has implicitly suggested through his fiction,” Anna Gayle Ryan avers, “Each man is an Adam, seeking . . . the way to regain the lost paradise of innocence” (28). I am not surprised that, years later in Broer’s course, I would read the idyllic ending to Hemingway’s “Indian Camp” and nostalgically recall moments in the oak tree: “The sun was coming up over the hills. A bass jumped, making a circle in the water” (70). Part of my sensed affinity with Nick came from remembering and longing for my nine-year-old self’s wonder at natural beauty before “the fall.” For me, a major “iceberg feeling” from Hemingway therefore comes from his recurrent Adamic subtext, the drive to re-enter the Garden.

Furthermore, just as Nick touches the water to store his trauma, I had been using the tree as a locale to alleviate my anxieties. Of course, I had not yet suffered anything as severe as a

Nick, a Jake Barnes, a Frederic Henry, or Hemingway himself. I could nevertheless feel, once fourth grade had started, what I now characterize as an encroaching sterility in the wasteland of academic pursuits and purely intellectual ways of knowing. John Leland elucidates what he observes as Hemingway protagonists' repeated flights from Eliotian wastelands to pockets of Eden, "be it Michigan trout stream, Spanish or African hills, or Swiss Alps" (52). Commenting on "The Last Good Country," Laura Gruber Godfrey agrees that Hemingway's secret place in nature "offers the security and solace (and even the salvation)" that Nick lacks in his everyday life (74). In relation to the idea of a tree as comforting and salvific, Robert Jordan, in his last moments in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, undergoes a pre-death epiphany of feeling "integrated" as he "touched the bark of the pine trunk that he lay behind" (471). I clearly empathized with Hemingway's nature-drive as a means of escape, restoration, and wholeness, even though I had not yet experienced the traumas of adult life. My father's ripping me from my paradisaal refuge, much like Dr. Adams performing the Caesarian in "Indian Camp," became a trauma of *disintegration*.

At the time of my banishment, I neither overtly coded my tree-climbing as relating to the "Eternal Feminine" nor sensed "Mother Nature" in the experience. I *did* frame my father's forbiddance of it and my headmaster's physical punishment as masculine. Gradually, though, many secondary aspects of the situation conveyed to me masculine- dominating feminine-coded dualities: thought over sensation, structure over freedom, activity over passivity, aggression over peace. Chiefly, I internalized the following message: my patriarch—and thus patriarchy—hates nature, and my desire for the natural world, as well as the pain of being torn from it, must be suppressed. If machismo subordinates the feminine, then my father had congruently done so to a natural world I subsequently categorized as such. Just as Spilka notes in Hemingway's

upbringing the “feminine and masculine versions of manhood which later became submerged and dominant strains, respectively” (5), this experience of having to mask, submerge, and freeze out the anima to conform to my father’s commandment worked the same effect upon me.

Before moving beyond the tree loss episode, I wish also to explore how the shaman archetype is active in my personal story and incorporates the motifs of Eden and integration as I critically analyze them. Mircea Eliade finds the ascent of a special tree as a common motif among shamans worldwide. He sees this tree as symbolizing the Cosmic Tree or Center of the World that connects the three levels of sky, earth, and underworld. “By climbing it,” he explains, “the shaman undertakes an ecstatic journey to the Center” (*Shamanism* 120). Eliade discerns that the trans-cultural theme of *axis mundi* ascent implies “the possibility . . . of returning to the origin of time, of recovering the mythical and paradisaical moment before the ‘fall’” (*Shamanism* 493). Although not in an arboreal setting, this same feeling emanates from Hemingway’s final, transcendent line of “Indian Camp”: “In the early morning on the lake . . . [Nick] felt quite sure that he would never die” (70). Those words, and many others I would read in Hemingway, helped me recall my nascent awareness of something beyond life and mortality in my tree climbs.

In the “secret place” of my World Tree, I was beginning to individuate, especially in the rejection of the white kyriarchally mandated “school first, always, and only” mentality. J. V. Downton compares the ascent of the world tree, linked to the concept of the shamanic initiation, with the individuation process, which Jung describes as the “synthesis of the self” or self-actualization.¹⁶ I was absorbing the natural world through my senses and not just via book learning. Although the pendulum swung very far in the direction of ignoring my studies, I view what was happening in my tree as akin to this initiatory shamanic goal of conscious realization

across the dualities of body/mind, natural/artificial, animal/human, and temporal/immortal. Shamanic access to the sky, earth, and underworld levels here symbolizes admittance to, and therefore familiarity with, these dyads of experience and the “middle ground” between them—walking between worlds/across difference. When my father cut short this self-actualizing process (especially in the sensory aspect), my longing for it to continue remained. This desire to reconnect with what I now term the shamanic view of nature would have strong resonances when, six years later, I would first encounter Hemingway.

Santiago’s connection to the natural world, presented in beautiful narrative style and with sensory details, mesmerized me in that initial reading of *Old Man*. Three of the five senses arrive in a burst as Santiago leaves the Cuban shoreline: “He left the *smell* of the land behind and rowed out into the clean early morning *smell* of the ocean . . . He *saw* the phosphorescence of the Gulf weed in the water . . . as he rowed he *heard* the trembling sound as flying fish left the water” (27; emphasis added). Touch appears when “The sun was hot now and the old man *felt* it on the back of his neck and *felt* the sweat trickle down his back” (36; emphasis added). Finally, as Santiago eats a bonito to maintain his strength, he tastes, and “It was not unpleasant . . . this is hardly sweet at all” (49). Hemingway describes the primary sense of sight in beautiful particulars: “He saw the red sifting of the plankton in the dark water and the strange light the sun made now . . . the purple, formalized, iridescent, gelatinous bladder of a Portuguese man-of-war” (32). I could not help but recall my silent observations of the sunlight filtering in through my oak’s branches and my up-close examinations of that light playing on the iridescent feathers of blue jays. Hemingway’s descriptions felt so immersive that—as he penned to Bernard Berenson—the old man’s story indeed seemed “completely palpable” and became “part of [my] experience” (*Letters* 837). As I read, I remembered and still yearned for the experience of nature

as savored through the body in the tree, and I found myself relating with the old man's feast of the senses.

Scholars such as Earl Rovit and Gerry Brenner emphasize Hemingway's pleasure in both experiencing and narratively depicting physical sensations. They remark that he "could not deny the fundamental *joie de vivre* of experiencing physical action, of delighting in the increasing awareness of life and self that the operation of his five senses so abundantly offered him" (86). *Joie de vivre* exactly describes what I had felt in the arboreal secret place. The sensate emphasis also reminded me that my father's insistence on book knowledge had blocked a germinal epistemology of the body, an almost Epicurean way of knowing that values sensation over thought. Adrian Bond remarks, "By placing weight on sensory experience, Hemingway privileges body over mind, favoring largely unconscious modes of knowing" (56). Despite this emphasis, Santiago does not completely stop his thinking mind while he fishes. He seeks to walk between the inner worlds of thought and sensation and the outer world of the tasks at hand. I was envious in reading how Santiago seemed to harmonize his worlds, as ever since abandoning the tree my life had been lived predominantly in my intellect, conforming to my father's ideology.

Beyond the sensory aspects of *Old Man*, Santiago's personal relationship to the natural world held my attention. As I mentioned above, I had eventually coded nature in my secret place as feminine. Hemingway devotes an entire paragraph to explaining why the sea is the feminine *la mar*, based on Santiago's heteromasculinist love for her. The masculine *el mar*, he explains, wrongly constructs it as "a contestant . . . an enemy" (27). Susan Beegel posits the novella as "an American romance" between Santiago and the sea (83). Santiago mainly, though not consistently, expresses love for the natural world, inanimate as well as animate. He appreciates that "the wind is our friend" (*Old Man* 88) and knows at Rigel's and other stars' appearing that

soon “he would have all his distant friends” (59). He conveys a tender intimacy with birds, like the warbler who lands on his fishing line. “Take a good rest, small bird,” Santiago urges, “Stay at my house, if you like” (46). He fondly considers the flying fish “his principal friends on the ocean” (27), amongst other friend-creatures such as the loggerheads and porpoises. Eventually calling the marlin whom he must kill his brother, Santiago regrets the killing as much as rejoicing in it. His love affair with a feminized natural world awakened my masked affection for nature from six years prior in the oak.

I find Santiago operating here in terrain that Eliade addresses about shamanism. The old man’s constant speech to various animals—and more generally his understanding of what the natural world around him is “saying” to him—reflects what Eliade calls “paradisaal syndromes.” This denotes the shamanic ability to return in some way to a state before “a primordial catastrophe” which made animals enemies. Eliade argues, “Friendship with animals [and] knowledge of their language . . . are so many signs that the shaman has re-established the ‘paradisaal’ situation lost at the dawn of time” (*Shamanism* 99). Santiago laments the tragedy of the primordial catastrophe, that “everything kills everything else in some way” (*Old Man* 80). Still, he rejoices that he need not kill “the sun or the moon or the stars . . . it is enough to live on the sea and kill our true brothers” (60). In my paradisaal memories, nature also operated in harmony and accord. Beegel imagines Santiago’s idealized world as “a Peaceable Kingdom, an Eden unspoiled by sin . . . a place where viewing nature as a contestant or an enemy is no longer possible, and love alone remains” (96). Santiago seemed to me, at age fourteen, as in touch with paradise as one could be. Hemingway’s beautiful rendition of this shamanic figure, awash with echoes of prelapsarian love, provided relief from what William Willimon terms my “sighing for Eden” and worked as a psychic salve for my “head wound” from six years prior.

While Santiago embodies positive qualities of the shaman archetype overall, he is nevertheless imperfect in it, showing aspects of what Spilka labels Hemingway's "deadlier leanings" (11). Despite the friendship that the old man feels with so many of the creatures at sea, this amity does not extend to those who would hurt him or his fishing objectives. Santiago's vilification of the "hateful sharks" (*Old Man* 81), whom he masculinizes, and the feminized "whore" Portuguese man-of-war (32) undermines the Edenic qualities found in the story. Santiago reveals an enmity with nature if it stands in the way of his human instrumentality and ambition. By extension, this inclination reinscribed the legitimacy of my antagonism with any Other that stopped me from reaching my goals. This deficiency in Santiago's shamanic characteristics, a shortcoming from his philosophy of dominance-as-worth, here expresses as both misogyny and misandry. As I mentioned above, this attitude would emerge as these, as well as racism, for me.

Notwithstanding Santiago's flaws as a model, his more progressive qualities in the shaman archetype profoundly influenced me as well. Eliade explains, "Healer and psychopomp, the shaman is these . . . because his soul can safely abandon his body and roam at vast distances, can penetrate the underworld and rise to the sky" (*Shamanism* 183). Santiago easily passes from his current zone—here the sea surface, instead of earth—into the other two realms. Proceeding over the "great well" where the ocean floor suddenly drops, he imagines the submarine underworld below with "concentrations of shrimp and bait fish and sometimes schools of squid in the deepest holes" (*Old Man* 27). As the marlin takes the baited hook, Santiago envisions the fish "down there six hundred feet in that cold water" (37) and "moving away in the darkness with the tuna held crosswise in his mouth" (38). When an airplane flies overhead, he projects himself into the sky: "They should be able to see the fish well if they do not fly too high. I would

like to fly . . . and see the fish from above” (57). Santiago world-travels beyond his physical location by creatively repositioning his perspective.

Santiago correspondingly displays empathetic imagination, whereby he can exchange himself with the animals around him. Eliade describes this ability as the temporary donning of a “new identity for the shaman, who becomes an animal-spirit” (*Shamanism* 98). Likening himself to a sea turtle, the old man expresses, “I have such a heart too and my feet and hand are like theirs” (*Old Man* 33-34). He imagines life as a sea bird and laments, “The birds have a harder life than we do . . . birds [are] so delicate and fine . . . when the ocean can be so cruel” (27). He recalls his catching of a female marlin when her male partner remained nearby and jumped “high into the air beside the boat to see where the female was” (42). Santiago empathetically calls the male’s desire to stay with his mate to the death “the saddest thing I ever saw with [marlins]” (43), especially considering his losing both his wife and the boy’s companionship.

The most stunning examples of shamanic attributes emerge after Santiago has killed the marlin. Santiago secures the marlin to the side of the skiff and is returning home, but “Then his head started to become a little unclear and he thought, is he bringing me in or am I bringing him in? . . . they were sailing together lashed side by side and the old man thought, let him bring me in if it pleases him” (*Old Man* 75). Foremost, this moment of “bringing in” resembles the aforementioned shamanic activity as a psychopomp—a guide for a soul, typically after death. Santiago’s head becoming “a little unclear” also loosens his egoic association with the self, embodying Lugones’ sense of loving playfulness that allows for “world-travel.” She imagines, “The reason why I think that travelling to someone’s ‘world’ is a way of identifying with them is because by travelling to their ‘world’ we can understand *what it is to be them and what it is to be ourselves in their eyes*” (17). Santiago’s trance-like moment then allows him to question the

certainty of who is guiding whom and of who “won” the battle: am I the fish, or is the fish me? Am I guiding the marlin’s soul, or is he guiding mine? After the old man’s ecstatic link with the marlin, he realizes his pride in going “out too far” and the marlin’s indignity in being eaten by sharks he prevented it from facing. Santiago’s three apologies to the marlin afterwards indicate that this experience has further initiated him into a shamanic worldview.¹⁷ The old man’s initiation has built a stronger bridge to the marlin brother/Other that, with introspection, can expand into connections with non-human and human Others, as well the Other within—his own “strangeness.”

My claim is that, despite parts of *Old Man* reinscribing detrimental, kyriarchal ideologies, Hemingway’s depiction of a person using empathetic imagination to explore solidarity across the differences of human and animal spoke to me in subconscious ways as deep as Santiago’s fishing grounds. Eliade conceives that “Each time a shaman succeeds in sharing in the animal mode of being, he in a manner re-establishes the situation that existed . . . when the divorce between man and the animal world had not yet occurred” (*Shamanism* 94). The autocritographical method I now employ holds the tension in the contradictory pair of notions that “I and the Other are different” and yet “I and the Other are the same.” While not eliding or romanticizing difference, it equally values the connectedness we share with the Other that was perhaps realized more strongly before, reworking Eliade’s phrase, the divorce between self and Other occurred. This shamanic capacity of traveling to the Other’s “world” is ultimately a healing function for both the practitioner and the Other. The one who travels must heal the “head wounds” that have resulted in the masked, submerged, and frozen Other within his or her psyche. Then both the internal and external Other have a link of solidarity, and reconciliation in the “divorce” becomes possible.¹⁸ This solidarity, as Broer suggests of the shaman, includes “struggling against

tyrannical systems of control, and in becoming a self-healer and then a healer of others” (“Shaman” 201). This process of Freirean conscientization can only begin with an intensely self-reflective method that unmask the wounds; autocritography is such a method. The narrative of my journey from my 2008 re-encounter with Hemingway, to discovering autocritography, and finally to my epiphany of Hemingway’s redemptive importance in my life occupies the close of this chapter.

My “fortuitous coupling” with Lawrence Broer in his Hemingway/Vonnegut course lead me to interrogate masculinity and revision Hemingway from a feminist standpoint. In getting to know Broer personally, I discovered that our mutual, lifelong, and mostly internal conflicts as white men with the masked Other drew us together and into a resonant space with so many men across racial, class, and other differences in our society. Neither my wounds nor my professor’s wounds exactly matched the authors’. Still, we had been injured by a white patriarchal hegemony that forced us to mask parts of ourselves, especially parts coded feminine, in order to conform. We noted that our struggles with the feminine primarily mirrored Hemingway’s “quarrels with androgyny,” as Spilka terms it. Broer had, via years of scholarship, grasped how these men had addressed their wounds in their writing. They had attempted to dig up and unmask the feminine and “confront that shadow-self,” as hooks speaks of confessional writing’s aim, in the public forum of their works. Broer helped illuminate for me the path of these authors, their “hero’s awakening to the destructive consequences of the masked anima—and to a willingness to access that dangerous self-knowledge so long hidden beneath the iceberg’s surface” (*Writers* 92). He revealed a different sort of hero than the kind focused on domination, a hero seeking what he calls “creative advance,” “the spiritual quest and its progression at the heart of their work, a struggle for healing and psychic balance” (9). Broer and I viewed with respect and perhaps envy

the creative advance of these authors, yet neither of us had embraced our own writing-of-self as creative advance at the time of our class. The major steps in our own creative advance, driven by our solidarity as two wounded white men, were yet to come.

For Whom the bell hooks: Writing as a Farewell to Harms

After our course's conclusion, I remained in touch with Broer. A newly-minted Professor Emeritus, he continued his teaching, speaking, and scholarly writing, and I worked as a research assistant for him on *Writers at War*. The galvanizing influence of his class, however, impelled me to more deeply explore feminism. Consequently, the following year I enrolled in my first feminist theory class with Gary L. Lemons, as I detail in Chapter One. There I fully engaged with his autocritographical pedagogy, based on bell hooks' ideas of "writing [that] has enhanced our struggle to be self-defining, . . . [that] emerges as a narrative of resistance, and . . . that enables us to experience both self-discovery and self-recovery" (5). In Hemingway scholarship terms, I dove beneath the iceberg's surface and began to unmask after years of masking. My writing, like Hemingway's and Vonnegut's, indeed experienced a creative advance. At the end of the course, Lemons and I co-wrote the essay entitled "Brothers of the Soul: Men Learning and Teaching in the Spirit of Feminism." In it, we speak dialogically about the bond we shared across racial difference but in solidarity "as men immersed in Feminist Theory." We also discuss the "genesis of the course's design and pedagogy," especially the influence of bell hooks' confessional autocritographical work.¹⁹ Our highest goal, though, was to demonstrate the "efficacy of feminist studies in our personal and public lives in and outside the classroom" (511). We wished to show the socially and personally transformative potential of men of varying identities within academia who dialogue with each other and with texts that they read and teach.

As I was completing my M.A. degree in 2012, I asked Broer to serve on the committee to read my thesis about *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. He enthused how the autocritographical method, though unfamiliar to him, struck him as a dynamic approach to literature one finds personally impactful. He suggested that I write a paper about Hemingway's effect on me in the same way. Moreover, he encouraged me to submit it for the 2014 International Hemingway Conference in Venice, Italy. The spirit of inspiration hit me very soon afterwards: to invite Broer to recreate with me the same kind of dialogic writing experience, instilled with the hooksean spirit of confession, I had enjoyed with Lemons for "Brothers of the Soul." Little did I think that the student could influence the professor, but indeed, he accepted my proposal to co-author a conference paper.

"Fortuitous Couplings" was my first major conference presentation of autocritographical scholarship. In it, Broer and I dialogue about Hemingway's outsized influence on us as young white men and the connection that formed between us from that shared experience. We speak about our awakening to our own masks, wounds, and icebergs via a feminist approach to Hemingway, his course's theoretical keystone. While the paper shared qualities with "Brothers of the Soul," a significant difference here was that I was passing on a legacy handed to me by one professor to another, a dynamic as rare as it is powerful. I was able to facilitate Broer's own creative advance via what hooks envisions as "the radical possibility of self-transformation that confessional writing can evoke" (5).²⁰ Ultimately, I feel that this experience of transmitting the healing efficacy of autocritography embodies Freire's vision of "reflection and action" that defines conscientization.

And so the question remains: how did Papa save me? By serving as an exemplar of a white man wounded by patriarchy and whose reaction to that trauma I could both empathize with

and learn from. Certainly, I never adopted the machismo that he, in some ways, or his protagonists did. My blindness to its corrosive effects—until I read Linda Patterson Miller—nevertheless shows how effectively kyriarchy indoctrinates men and obscures the harms it causes. I considered hypermasculinity an unobjectionable and even desirable option for men, despite my unexamined “head wounds” from its concomitant masculine hierarchization scheme. The promptings I received from Broer to read for varying ideas of gender identity and to interrogate the “masculine/feminine dynamics of Hemingway’s creative evolution” firmly set my direction into a sustained commitment to feminist studies. This expanded into Lemons’ intersectional feminist/womanist approach and autocritography’s writing-as-recovery, a hooksean space to bid farewell to kyriarchal harms. Finally, I was able to reciprocate to Broer and facilitate some of the psychic healing he saw in Hemingway’s and Vonnegut’s “confessional and redemptive” work. Both “old men,” Broer—almost seventy at the time of our class—and Santiago, served as shamanic examples of men, as Linda Patterson Miller suggests, demonstrating how reading Hemingway indeed can “show us who we are and how best to live our lives” (22).

Notes

1. I would now term Patterson Miller’s essay as autocritographical, because it details, per Michael Awkward’s definition, “an account of individual, social, and institutional conditions that help produce a scholar” (7). Moreover, by placing herself into the analysis, she bolsters her esteem of ongoing feminist Hemingway scholarship with her self-positioning as a woman, someone whom his assumed misogyny should repel.

2. As Philip Young describes it, grace under pressure is “made of the controls of honor and courage which in a life of tension and pain make a man a man” (63).

3. Hemingway defined the iceberg as a writer only exposing one-eighth of the story and the reader “feeling . . . those [submerged] things as strongly as though the writer had stated them” (*Death in the Afternoon* 192).

4. Broer lists “understated style, [hidden] secrets . . . emotional repression, stoical fortitude” as hallmarks of the iceberg in operation (*Writers* 139).

5. See Goldenberg, *Changing of the Gods: Feminism and the End of Religious Traditions*.

6. Such activities as boxing, big-game hunting, or bullfighting certainly held no appeal for my father; he could in no way be described as Hemingwayesque.

7. I use *expatriation* in both its associations with *pater*—my father, whose sailfish trophy reminded me I must become a man—and hegemonic *patriarchy*, which determined how I must prove my manhood.

8. Cornell psychologist Ritch Savin-Williams, exploring adolescent male rankings in his germinal study “Dominance Hierarchies in Groups of Early Adolescents,” deduces that “. . . only three variables – leadership, athletic ability, and pubertal maturation – significantly predicted status rank . . .” (933).

9. I write in detail about the intersectional effects of Homer’s work on me in my master’s thesis, *Circling Back Home: My Lifelong Odyssey into Feminism*.

10. See Morgan, *Tales Plainly Told: The Eyewitness Narratives of Hemingway and Homer*. In Morgan and Losado’s “Santiago in *The Old Man and the Sea*: A Homeric Hero,” they most notably cite the shared use of the words “champion,” “confidence,” and “huge” (37). They also correlate Odysseus “of many devices” and “full of wiles” with Santiago who “know[s] many tricks” (46). I find other verbal correspondences equally germane, such as “great” and “noble,” each appearing over two-hundred times in the LLM and applying fifteen times combined to the

marlin. Moreover, some key words appear in similar combination. Santiago vows to himself, “I’ll kill [the marlin] . . . in all his *greatness* and his *glory*” (53). Hector, facing Achilles in his final duel, reveals Hemingwayesque grace under pressure, saying to himself, “At least let me not die without a struggle or *ingloriously*, but in some *great* deed of arms” (*Iliad* Book XXII; emphasis added). Odysseus, “the *great glory* of the Achaians,” shares much the old man’s savvy mind (*Iliad* Book IX; emphasis added).

11. Various studies (Matteo 1996; Alley and Hicks 2005) often code swimming as gender-neutral, making it more problematic as a masculinity-validating sport.

12. In fact, my two-hundred-yard freestyle record lasted sixteen years before being broken, and thirty-five years later that performance remains in the top ten at my high school for the event.

13. Authors such as Jack London and works such as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* reinscribed this paradigm for me. In the movie world, unaided cop John McClane (Bruce Willis) in *Die Hard* and nonconformist naval pilot Pete “Maverick” Mitchell (Tom Cruise) in *Top Gun* exemplify the same solo practitioners of the drive to assert their individualism via domination. Even year later as I watched the film *Gladiator*’s Proximo (Oliver Reed) give a speech to the men he has trained, the thrill I felt at his words simply was in their echo of Hemingway’s hero code: “Ultimately, we’re all dead men; sadly we cannot choose how, but we can decide *how we meet that end* in order that we are remembered *as men*.”

14. In *Writers at War*, Broer often employs the concept of “the secret sharer” based on the Joseph Conrad short story of the same name. Although Broer never specifically makes the connection, the secret sharer is akin to the shadow self, the unacknowledged and buried portions

of the psyche. Thus, while I—like my father—could never be described as Hemingwayesque, the author and I shared deeper qualities that connect us in unexpected ways.

15. This personal reflection also ties to Alice Walker’s concept, in her book *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, of a womanist “loving” all that is natural—rather than obsessed with kyriarchal ideas of intellectual power and male, egotistical *authority*.

16. Jung theorizes that individuation is a “conscious realization of *everything* the existence of an individual implies . . . Individuation does not isolate, it connects” (*Letters Vol. 2* 504; emphasis added).

17. Whether on a future angling trip Santiago would speak of and treat the sharks and man-of-wars as his brothers and sisters or not remains uncertain. After the experience of this trip, however, he can more ably empathize with their actions in the face of survival. Lugones suggests that “Given the agonistic attitude, one *cannot* travel across ‘worlds,’ though one can kill other ‘worlds’ with it . . . One needs to give up such an attitude if one wants to travel” (16). Just as he has loosened his grip on the agonistic qualities of landing marlins, he may be able to do so in dealing with more “hostile” creatures.

18. I see Santiago himself performing this introspective work in his repeated submersion into his memories of the Other. He reflects on both moment of complicity with domination, e.g. “the great negro from Cienfuegos,” and resistance to it, e.g. his empathy with the turtles and with the marlin who lost his mate.

19. hooks directed Lemons’ Ph.D. dissertation at New York University, and her influence over his theoretical approach and pedagogy cannot be overstated.

20. As of the time of my writing this dissertation, Broer is producing his academic memoirs. Unsurprisingly, he is doing so in an autocritographical style. Broer rejoices in “the happy

realization that my academic passions, reading, research, writing, were never divisible from my personal struggle for healing and psychic/creative advance” (personal email).

CHAPTER THREE

Sick and Tired: Night Journeys in Literary and Literal Ability

It is a surprising and memorable, as well as valuable experience, to be lost in the woods any time . . . By night, of course, the perplexity is infinitely greater . . . Every man has to learn the points of compass again as often as he awakes, whether from sleep or any abstraction. Not till we are lost, in other words not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations.

—Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

And now in this dark, trying hour,

O God, forsake me not.

—Harriet E. Wilson, *Our Nig: Sketches from the Life of a Free Black*

I began a course on nineteenth-century American authors in 2015—seven months after weighing Hemingway’s influence on my constructions of masculinity. Just as Lawrence Broer’s curriculum compelled my re-examination of a crucially formative text from my youth, Sari Altschuler’s class induced a similar reassessment. The works in this case included Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “Self-Reliance” and Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*. Additionally, my first-time reading of Harriet E. Wilson’s *Our Nig: Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* in this course, combined with Altschuler’s theoretical focus, precipitated a deep soul-searching about my personal construction of ability. By reading *Our Nig*, I began to interrogate how I have viewed ability, linked particularly with notions of my masculinity and whiteness. As part of my conscientization, I needed to “wake up” to ability’s importance in identity politics.

Until that point, my theoretical scholarship had almost exclusively addressed intersectional constructions of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Altschuler's pedagogical design facilitated my learning how to further analyze each reading assignment from the critical standpoints of ability and labor. We read many texts particularly examining the overlapping issues of slavery, bodies, and disability. These included primary works such as Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and critical writings such as Dea H. Boster's *African American Slavery and Disability: Bodies, Property, and Power in the Antebellum South*. I realized via this course that my academic, as well as personal, investigation of kyriarchy must also constellate ability with other identity markers. Namely, as a pro-feminist/pro-womanist scholar grappling with intersectional oppression, I must be ready to challenge harmful constructions of ability as compellingly as the other forms of societal hegemony.

In this chapter, I autocritographically correlate my literary and literal experiences with ability, detailing how I first embraced, then later awoke to, my particularly harmful form of ableism. I first connect my inferiority in demonstrating masculine-coded physical strength in middle school to the mixed blessings I received from Emerson's and Thoreau's work in high school. Next, I analyze my debilitating encounter with mononucleosis as an adult and how it facilitated my empathetic imagination—across the differences of so many identity areas—about Harriet Wilson and her life. I uncover how the framework of the “dark night of the soul”¹ unlocks meaning in the shared disability ordeals in Emerson's, Thoreau's, Jacobs', and my life. In understanding the initiatory quality of my dark night, I finally relate the shamanic theme of this dissertation to our mutual experiences and goals of travelling across worlds of difference as educators and healers. Overall, I intend to reveal how, in my “dark, trying hour” as Harriet

Wilson terms it (75), I “lost the world” of ability and thereby fully realized “the infinite extent of [my] relations” to all people experiencing various degrees of disability (Thoreau, *Walden* 162).

Trusting in Myself: Hoping to Transcend

I write in Chapter Two that my inability to execute a pull-up in the seventh-grade Presidential Fitness Test created a “head wound” that influenced my early notions of masculinity. Without the capacity to analyze this incident critically and maturely, I formed a belief that performing bodily strength provided one of the surest outward signifiers of manhood and also the keys to male peer acceptance. Little did I realize at the time, but I likewise had assimilated the concept of strength as bonded quintessentially with notions of mobility, control, and able-bodiedness—as in the misapprehension of quadriplegics having weak muscles rather than spinal cord injury. In this way, I unmindfully developed a solid association between masculinity and ability. Looking at the disappointed faces of all my able-bodied male peers after my pull-up fiasco, I also made an “assumption of ability,” that we all somehow had the innate capacity to reach the Presidential goal set before us. All that any substandard performer such as myself needed was the will to power,² that is, the ambition and discipline needed to create a strong body. The other identity markers of my peers, such as white, heterosexual, and middle-to-upper class, also subtly intersected in my mind, effectively correlating the capable masculine man with other kyriarchal ideals that I also saw reflected in books, movies, and advertising. The pain and subsequent hegemonic inculcation of abled masculinity from this episode inscribed early ideologies that would remain with me until, as an adult, I could critically reflect on and start to dismantle them.

The move into high school, as I describe in Chapter One, continued my distancing from the “in” group. Although all my intersecting areas of privilege granted many advantages, I still

disappointed in some of the heteromasculine ideals of behavior, for example contact sports participation and intense, sexualized interest in females. Additionally, despite my school's supposedly intellect-friendly, college prep environment, I often seemed to my peers to be too highly invested in my studies. I was a nerd in a place and an era that viewed nerdiness as an omega rather than an alpha trait. Whether a symptom or a cause of my social isolation, my enthusiasm for hours programming the school's lone computer further sequestered me. Although I did have friends occupying my social stratum, and even some in higher levels, I still equated my longing for acceptance with loneliness. At the time, I did not have the self-possession to analyze what I really wanted and why I was experiencing the lonely feelings. At the crux of my emotions, I felt trapped in a system that marginalized me, and I internalized this rejection as something wrong with *me* and not the system itself.

As I proceeded through high school, the magnetism of literature's ideologies that I describe in this dissertation continued. While I had met a guiding philosophy in Hemingway just before my sophomore year, other authors were exerting influence to reinforce old, or bring new, tenets. I wanted—I *needed*—a vision of living that empowered me just as Hemingway had done with masculinity, but in a broader paradigm. I sought to be legitimized in operating and thriving outside of what my peers deemed normative values, yet still craved to be affirmed in my white masculinity. Initially, the notion of the sublime in the male British Romantic poets had captivated me, as it potently addressed both of my “head wounds.” Primarily, as Anne K. Mellor expresses, “the sublime is associated with an experience of masculine empowerment” (85), especially its location in nature as a both a place of struggle where manhood can be tested and in its feminization of beautiful, healing landscapes. It also resonated with my Adamic desire to return to nature, as I discuss in Chapter Two as an affect of Hemingway's writing. While the

British Romantics indeed raised my vision, my literary encounter with the Transcendentalists in my sophomore year would ultimately provide my sought-after philosophical system for living.

I would be guilty of understatement to declare that Thoreau and Emerson affected me profoundly. Foremost, their cerebral approach established their *ethos* as nerds of their day, creating an immediate personal resonance. I also found that their prose also compellingly blended the direct rhetoric of essays with Romantic poetry's metaphorical language, symbolism, and nature-worship that I already loved. Providing the antidote to the nagging internal pressure I felt to fit in, their philosophies addressed my feeling of powerlessness within a social system that demanded conformity. Emerson, in particular, countered my longing for acceptance-by-resemblance. "Envy is ignorance," he asserts in "Self-Reliance," and "Imitation is suicide" (133). Moreover, I felt he could sympathize with my loneliness and created a new outlook for me when he prescribes, "The great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude" (136). Within the milieu of adolescent male behavior and talk where I did not feel I belonged, I started to believe I could remain an independent figure by heeding Emerson's words. Thoreau, also praising the solitary life, adds this thought to his building crescendo regarding uniqueness in *Walden*'s conclusion: "If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music he hears, however measured or far away" (305). I received from these authors a clear message: it is acceptable for you to be your own man and do your own thing. In a way, *Walden* and "Self-Reliance" operated as the first self-help works I ever read, for their message of independence gave me a feeling of hope for a life not constricted by arbitrary social structures.³

Culled from Emerson's and Thoreau's rhetoric, as well as their topics addressed or unaddressed, another, subtler belief permeated my psyche: they promoted autonomy that was not

just intellectual and social but also encompassed physical self-sufficiency. True, I basked in their message of empowerment; simultaneously, however, their writings also reinscribed the presupposition of strong- and able-bodiedness in creating external as well as internal independence. Whether the authors used physical abilities as rhetorical metaphors or themselves held ableist notions, I unwittingly absorbed their notions of ability right along with the other legitimizing credos I adopted. Here I begin to explore the language and subjects of “Self-Reliance” and *Walden* to extricate their indirect but persistent messages of abled-normativity.

Power and Speed Be Hands and Feet: By the Labor of My Hands Only

Emerson interweaves representations of power and labor throughout his essay, not only as emblems of intellectual work but as expressions of independence. One must not just think for oneself, he posits; one must also express thought as action, “for the inmost in due time becomes the outmost” (132). In the second epigraph of “Self-Reliance,” Emerson alludes to Romulus and Remus:

Cast the bantling on the rocks

Suckle him with the she-wolf’s teat

Wintered with the hawk and fox

Power and speed be hands and feet (1-4)

He opens with the imagery of the hypermasculine, toughened twins, given bodily and social agency to become Rome’s founders via the physically toughening conditions of their upbringing. Emerson next unleashes a torrent of rhetoric aimed at uniting ability, labor, and power with the kind of autonomy he promotes. When he pronounces, “No kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given to him to till,” Emerson is not merely comparing self-cultivation to agriculture; he is implying that, without the ability to

perform labor, humans remain undernourished or incomplete. He furthermore asserts, for those who would access it, that “Almighty effort” is “working through their hands,” insisting that accessing divine providence must automatically generate outward productivity (133). Emerson deepens his usage of ability to represent independence when he exhorts, “But do your work, and I shall know you. Do your work, and you shall reinforce yourself” (136-137). Right from the essay’s outset, I grasped that labor and strength exist as the ultimate means of identity manifestation and self-affirmation, goals I had prioritized for myself.

Emerson bolsters his arguments by using the perceived negatives of feebleness and impairment. In addressing the call of the Eternal on the human heart, he contends, “And we are now men, and must accept in the highest mind the same transcendent destiny; and *not minors and invalids* in a protected corner” (133; emphasis added). Rosemarie Garland Thomson observes about this explicit reference to disability, “Emerson reveals the implicit assumption of an exclusionary physical norm incorporated in the ideal of an autonomous individual self . . . unimpeded by the physical limitation that history and contingency impose upon actual lives” (42). As I read Emerson’s ableist verbiage, I grasped that, to mature and accept the self-reliant calling, I could not be in any way “handicapped” like an invalid. He extends his analogizing of strength and ability with instrumentality as well as goodness, “He who knows that power is inborn, that he is weak because he has looked for good out of him . . . instantly rights himself, stands in the erect position, commands his limbs” (153). Emerson repeatedly employs the rhetoric of the strong, abled body as the normative human condition and an outgrowth of mental and social states of independence.

Emerson’s direct references in “Self-Reliance” to physical ability or lack thereof merge power with a natural, and thus moral, state. He articulates, “Power is, in nature, the essential

measure of right. Nature suffers nothing to remain in her kingdoms which cannot help itself” (144). This problematic affirmation, fraught with complex undertones about agency, defines ability as a normative, organic condition. Garland Thomson elaborates how the invalid naturalizes this state, “Emerson’s atomized self demands an oppositional twin to secure its able-bodiedness . . . the cripple, the invalid, the disabled . . . are representational, taxonomical products that naturalize a norm . . . registering social power and status” (44). Emerson proceeds to complicate this essentialization of power by dignifying “the bended tree recovering itself from the strong wind” as a paradigm of natural strength. From this statement, which ignores trees which from disease or decay cannot rebound, he concludes that we can see evidence of “the self-sufficing, and therefore self-relying soul” (144). Even more than his power-as-natural argument, this assertion in its converse proves dubious, i.e. that a “non-natural” person—feeble, impaired, or unable to recover from injury or disease—must somehow possess an insufficient, relying, and consequently inferior, soul. The physically helpless individual, I imbibed, opposes nature itself and the quintessential role of agency. As I detail later, those very notions about being unable to rebound after the “strong wind” of illness profoundly affected how I dealt with my bout of mononucleosis. My training in self-reliance, however, did not stop with Emerson; his most famous friend bolstered this ideology.

Henry David Thoreau’s writing also inspired me to operate independently in high school and yet also fostered my budding ableism. Thoreau opens *Walden* with the statement, “When I wrote the following pages, or rather the bulk of them, I lived alone, in the woods . . . and earned my living by the labor of my hands only” (1). By starting in this manner, he immediately defines the independent and abled character of his experiment. *Walden* espouses individual work for the maintenance of one’s food and shelter, as well as advocating labor’s purposes beyond

sustenance. While he, like Emerson, employs the rhetoric of the able body, Thoreau more often advances his theories presupposing his reader's ability to work. In his opinions and silences concerning health, happiness, and self-actualization, he builds his panacean arguments on this presupposition. Scott DeShong declares this presumptive tendency as the prime motivator for including ability in the matrix of oppression. He posits, "The theoretical study of disability largely concerns the assumption of ability, focusing on ableist assumptions that emerge constantly, by which behaviors and conditions appear as if they were real or natural." DeShong considers the individual's prospect of full autonomy to be an "ideology of subjective human possibility" that "permits anyone to do anything she or he can desire, imagine, and work toward" (6). It creates a mindset, as Thoreau and Emerson held, where "any inability becomes emphatically a deficiency or defect in the subject" (72). In my devotion to Thoreau, I assimilated his call to both mental *and* physical independence, right with this assumption that I had an enduring capacity for them.

The same milieu that encouraged my commitment to strength likely helped forge Thoreau's labor fetishization: the opinion of peers. After graduating from Harvard, and then working as a teacher and a pencil manufacturer at the age of twenty-one, he was feeling the demand to obtain a stable income yet also have time for his engrossing thought life. Thoreau confides in his journal about the sting of being labelled as unproductive by both external opinion and internalized guilt, "What may a man do . . . ? He may not do nothing surely, for straightway he is dubbed Dolittle—aye! Christens himself first—and reasonably" (Vol. I 34). Thaddeus William Harris, one of Thoreau's Harvard instructors, quips, "There were people who criticized Thoreau as being an eccentric loafer . . . It is not known who all these were. Apparently, their sole claim to immorality lies in the fact that they criticized Thoreau" (qtd. in Petrulionis xxi).

Vexed by his peers increasingly regarding him as lazy, he resorted to day labor, in one case journaling about a job on which he “earned seventy-five cents heaving manure out of a pen” (*Natural Man* 36). Thoreau’s desire to obtain a livelihood that did not pose, as David B. Raymond suggests, “an obstacle to the real work of self-culture” (141) in part led him to such an experiment as *Walden* chronicles. Nevertheless, his need to avoid the “Dolittle” label pushed even more his ambition to prove to himself and others that he was in some conventional way productive. Indeed, as in my case, social pressure to conform measurably inspired his actions.

Thoreau’s drive to conspicuously perform independence and to then distill that ambition into advice creates a blind spot in *Walden*’s philosophy. In his purpose statement, he proclaims, “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately” (85). Philip Cafaro unpacks the word *deliberately* to enrich our understanding of Thoreau’s underlying ability beliefs. He proposes, “Thoreau makes it clear that [life’s grand possibilities] can be explored only by those who live *deliberately*. The term encompasses both the ability to consider alternatives and the ability to act.” Thoreau wants to persuade his readers to take those volitional options. However, simply having expanded intellectual choices cannot impart the physical capabilities they might require. Cafaro extends his argument, “The presence of *liber* and *liberate* suggests an essential connection between such deliberation and human freedom” (18). Thoreau’s lifestyle inextricably yet tacitly bonds complete freedom of choice and freedom of action, an unfortunate oversight when one must always consider the problematics of individual agency.

Besides Thoreau’s vision of agency being uncommon—and most often held by white, middle-to-upper-class men like Thoreau and Emerson—one cannot presume it in the physical realm. Thoreau discounts those who might intellectually accept his alternative but lack the bodily ability to act on it. Indeed, his primary exemplar, besides himself, of deliberate living is Therien,

the French-Canadian woodsman. Although Thoreau assesses him as child-like in many ways, the author respects that Therien knows the expanded choices for his life and has elected to act as he does. Nevertheless, Thoreau praises the woodsman mostly for his physical body and the woodcutting prowess he displays. Therien can live the deliberate life Thoreau imagines ultimately because “disease . . . seemed to have hardly any existence for him” and he has a “stout . . . body . . . yet gracefully carried” (*Walden* 137). Therien has freely chosen and acted on his labor because he *can*. Thoreau leaves unaddressed those who *cannot*.

Several times throughout *Walden*, as DeShong decries, Thoreau assumes the healthy body as the normative entity and posits that a connection to nature—either by outdoor activities or by consuming products from the natural world—is the primary cure for decrepitude. He also establishes the quintessential body as built to work. He quotes from Raleigh’s translation of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, using the myth of Deucalion and Pyrrha to hypothesize the foolishness of a labor that one cannot enjoy. Closest in parallel to Noah and his wife, these two, after surviving a worldwide flood, obey an oracle and inattentively cast stones behind themselves to recreate the human race. One cannot overlook the line which reads “Our bodies of a stony nature are” (4), inherently toughened for living. Thoreau, in employing Ovid/Raleigh, subtly implies that any somatic condition other than a lithic hardness is not only unnatural but perhaps antithetical to the body’s divinely appointed essentiality.

Thoreau addresses labor’s connection with ability by extolling what it imparts to human nobility and achieves for responsibility. Expressly speaking about college students, he theorizes that anyone who misses the opportunity for bodily work by “systematically shirking any labor necessary to man” is thereby “defrauding himself of the experience which alone can make leisure fruitful” (*Walden* 46). Economic historian Christian Becker distills this Thoreauvian ideology by

adding, “Any work that is elementarily necessary is an essential part of human existence. Whoever does not accept such work, but tries to escape from it, does not experience the elementary dimension of human existence and may thus fail to live a fulfilled life” (219). In converse, by *not* doing whatever his or her “necessary” labor might be, a person cannot properly enjoy living to the fullest. This incomplete person, accordingly, has self-victimized and limited self-actualization. But what about a person who has not *chosen* this “shirking,” someone who physically cannot execute such work? Is such a person doomed to an unfulfilled life? If, as Raymond summarizes, one of Thoreau’s ideologies is “If we . . . eliminate labor . . . then we lose something vital to our humanity” (141), does Thoreau mean to claim that a person who cannot or does not labor is less than human? This, in fact, is what I subtly inferred as a high-school reader, creating problematics that would emerge in my future encounter with disability.

Thoreau elaborates his idea by contrasting “shirking” with “trying the experiment of living,” which in his examples might include a person “lay[ing] the foundations” of student housing, “survey[ing] the world . . . with his natural eye,” “learn[ing] how his bread is made,” or “[making] his own jackknife from the ore which he had dug and smelted” (*Walden* 46).

According to his tenets, in order to truly live, one must be able enough—not just in hands but feet, eyes, and other body parts—to accomplish these supposedly life-affirming tasks. Much of *Walden* suggests his attempt to expand into a generalized paradigm his personal “constant and imperishable moral” and the “classic result” (148) from the experiment. Sadly, Thoreau’s ensnarement in the cult of the “labor of the hands” seems to assume the ability to labor and makes no acquiescence to those who, either from birth or by accident, disease, or aging, cannot perform the masculinist tasks of the “labor necessary to man.” Equally as important—and

although *man* was normative for him to use in reference to *people*—Thoreau’s overt ableism intersects with other assumptions of his idealized reader: male, white, and middle class.

Gasping for Breath: Dark Nights in Liminal Spaces

As a high school reader, I learned no details of Thoreau’s or Emerson’s lives beyond the scope of their major writings. I needed to delve into their journals and biographies to understand how their emphasis on self-reliance and the able body developed from their life paths. In the background of their Transcendentalist vision-casting, these two authors’ early and iterative encounters with tuberculosis clearly affected their self-reliant, and accordingly one could argue dissembling, philosophies. Thoreau contracted the disease in 1825 at the age of eighteen, and the condition proved fatal at forty-five. His grandfather, father, and sister Helen all died from the condition. Consumption, dogging Emerson from around the age of twenty, suffocated Emerson’s brothers Edward and Charles, as well as his first wife, Ellen. Both authors lived with the kinds of disease and attendant disability that, for all human life’s potentialities and all our desires for freedom to become who and what we want, stand in the way of unlimited self-actualization.

Within the confines that their debilitation placed on the agency they both held so dear, Emerson and Thoreau lived in a “dark night of the soul.” For my purposes, I adopt religious scholar Thomas Moore’s analysis of the term as equally a distressing, troublesome life season and a transformative spiritual episode.⁴ Although the human spirit may seek transcendence, the truth of the human condition—in a phrase adopted in disability studies—is that we are all only temporarily able-bodied. Moore describes this friction between the Icarus-like desire to soar with the wings of human potentiality and the gravity of embodiment’s restraints as follows: “As a human being you have limits. Your soul is vast and participates in the infinite, but your life is bound by time, place, and the laws of nature and humanity” (281). How one responds to the

bounds of illness, not just in terms of physical and social concerns but also in soul matters like psychology and spirituality, produces meaning out of suffering.

Each author's writing about his health reveals different processes of the dark night of the soul from their illnesses. Emerson's words more often present a fearful and depressed psyche. In an 1826 letter to his brother William, Emerson laments, "I have recently taken into my bosom certain terrors . . . for my lungs without whose aid I cannot speak, and which scare me" (*Letters* 176). His untitled 1827 poem, penned at Cambridge, laments his "unserviceable limbs" (5) from "grim Disease, that would [the soul's] peace affright" (13). He worries again in 1828, "It is a long battle, this of mine betwixt life and death, and it is wholly uncertain to whom the game belongs" (*Works* Vol. XIII 135). Convalescing in 1832, Emerson mourns, "I am a-weary of my helpless hopeless arm chair. I gain nothing, I rot ever" (*Letters* Vol. One 360). He confesses in an 1848 missive to his second wife, Lidian, "I truly acknowledge a poverty of nature, & have no really proud defence at all to set up, but ill-health, puniness, and Stygian limitation" (*Letters* Vol. Four 33). One can find in this last admission no embodiment of Emerson's metaphor in "Self-Reliance" of "the bended tree recovering itself from the strong wind" (144). Appearing eight years after the essay's publication, his stunning acquiescence contrasts sharply with his lofty ideals of the autonomous human.

Emerson's language—"terrors," "betwixt life and death," "grim," "rot," and especially "Stygian"—attests to his ongoing dark night as an underworld encounter with mortality. Moore formulates one approach to the dark night via a Stygian perspective by relating it to the myth of Persephone. She is dragged from the upper world by force, tricked into becoming an Underworld citizen, and learns to travel between the two places (70). Emerson's forced periods of idleness, while constraining a soul which longed for physical freedom, nevertheless endowed time for

deep contemplation. In the *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, Lewis J. Moorman argues that Emerson's disease may, in fact, have empowered his genius, as he "struggled with his soaring aspirations in the face of his ever recurring exacerbations of his tuberculosis" (369-70). In the concluding lines of the 1828 Cambridge poem, Emerson admits the relationship between his Muses—philosophy, writing, and speaking—with his managing the underworld harpies of his dark night: "Please God, I'll wrap me in mine innocence, / And bid each awful Muse drive the damned harpies hence" (13-14). From this perspective, Emerson's ongoing dark night motivated his persistent, meaning-creating lifework of Transcendentalist *muse*-ings, his most notable arguably being his paean to autonomy, "Self-Reliance." Understanding Emerson's disability allows me to now approach this essay seeing a man in constant fear of losing the very quality of independence he extols.

Thoreau, in contrast, often exhibits stoic distancing from his condition, seeking optimism in his dark night but still feeling inferiority. In an 1841 journal entry, he resolves, "If I have brought this weakness on my lungs, I will consider calmly and disinterestedly how the thing came about" (Vol. I 221). In his August 7, 1843, correspondence to Emerson from Staten Island, Thoreau states, "I must still reckon myself with the innumerable army of invalids" (*Correspondence* 221). In 1851, he shows a hint of emotional opening when he opines, "If I were to become a confirmed invalid, I see how some sympathy with mankind and society might spring up" (*Journal* Vol. III 106). A few years afterwards, however, his journal still affirms his internalized notion of health-equals-worth: "Now [September 16, '55], after four or five months of invalidity and worthlessness, I begin to feel some stirrings of life in me" (Vol. VII 417). Despite his stretches of incapacity, Thoreau's relationship to it remained contradictory. Later in the 1851 journal entry he declares, "I felt that that expression of my sympathy [with mankind

and society] . . . was something mean, and such as I should be ashamed” (Vol. III 106).

Afterward writing *Walden*, he asks conversely, “Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other's eyes for an instant?” (8-9). His desire to escape “invalidity and worthlessness” and his ambivalence about permitting disability within himself or others signal his enmeshment with the Latin root *valere* for the words *valid* and *value*—meaning both to have worth and to be strong.

Thoreau’s early bouts with tuberculosis constrained him to prolong his college student years and reinforced the stigma of indolence he had internalized by age twenty-one. By the time he reached almost twenty-eight years old, he still felt he must prove his adult worth. Thoreau declares his purpose for the Walden experiment, “to front only the essential facts of life” (85), i.e. to work hard and rely on his own abilities to survive. Here he seeks what I would call the “validation of self-reliance,” becoming a “Domuch” to repudiate the Dolittle epithet.⁵ Moore envisions Thoreau’s intention for Walden to be an initiation, his “way to make an important shift, a concrete rite of passage” (31). Moore stresses that cultures globally have crafted such rituals for individuals, especially at the time of transition from youth into adulthood, that enforce comparable scenarios of deprivation and isolation.⁶ These rites purposely construct a liminal *physical* state to mirror the *social* one. Quoting Victor Turner, Moore emphasizes the transitional state as likening to “death, like being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness” (qtd. in Moore 39-40). Thoreau, at almost twenty-eight years old, fashioned such a rite for himself in the liminal space outside of Concord. His dark night of anxiety about his validity—in both denotations—helped actuate the ritual/initiation documented in *Walden*.

I now clearly detect the shades of their dark nights creeping into both Emerson’s and Thoreau’s rhetoric and thinking, especially given what I now know about these two

philosophers' lives. This was not the case as I read them at sixteen years old and passively absorbed their words. I uncritically conflated intellectual and social power with bodily ability and labor, especially as a young man in a masculinist society. As I related in Chapter Two, my high school years brought me into the bloom of physical strength and endurance within the competitive swimming arena. While I was not employed in labor for economic gain, my "work," besides my academic efforts, manifested foremost in the pool. There I could truly embody Emerson's "power and speed be hands and feet." There also, as primarily an individual competitor, my success came via a Thoreauvian "labor of my hands only." All along, however, and inspired by Hemingway's Santiago, whose trust in his own Herculean labor of landing the marlin secures him male social rank, I held this attitude: whatever goal I set myself to, I could obtain it. I accepted the "if you believe it, you can achieve it" mentality. In other words, I had subscribed to DeShong's "ideology of subjective human possibility" (72) in the direction of my goal—swimming pool champion. Never for a moment did I question my assumptions of ability, nor the fact that I had yoked my masculinity to that ability.

While I felt myself on the margins socially in ways I have mentioned, I still "fit in" with—and enjoyed the advantages of—my high school's able-bodied peer group, right along with their predominantly white, middle-class-and-higher, heterosexual, Christian identities. By reading *Walden* and accepting Thoreau's permission to step to a different drummer, I carried on with a newfound comfort about my differences. In my unquestioning enjoyment of privilege even *with* those differences, I adopted Emerson's admonition in "Self-Reliance" to "Insist on yourself" (150). Nevertheless, that self had emerged—and continued to form—in the context of many false assumptions about identity, assumptions that my naïve reading of the Transcendentalists bolstered. I needed more years of living, critical thinking, and introspection to

actualize a self that would properly frame my masculinity and my ability. My illusion of the wholly self-reliant white man in the mold of Thoreau and Emerson would require my own dark night of the soul to dispel, another of the shaman-like initiations that theme this dissertation.

Virulent Impairment: Mono(lithic) Weakness

What happens when life circumstances clash with ideology to create cognitive dissonance, or more specifically, when an “autonomous” man meets a crippling virus? In 2011, I was teaching seventh grade English at a middle school. As the school year neared its end, I began feeling feverish but without any other symptoms that would indicate cold or flu. The first week passed, my energy flagged severely, and my neck lymph nodes began to swell. I tried to ignore the signs, pushing myself to maintain my presence at school and continue performing my role as a single father. I wanted to “tough it out” long enough for the illness to pass, just as all other instances of these kinds of symptoms had previously in my life. I therefore decided to skip going to the doctor. With the school year finally ending, I mustered the “courage” to seek medical attention. After a series of examinations and blood tests, my physician diagnosed me as having the Epstein-Barr virus, the condition commonly called mononucleosis.

I continued getting physically weaker as the disease persisted. At first, just standing for any length of time caused me to break into a sweat and incapacitated me for an interval, during which I could recover my strength. I then discovered that tasks like twisting off the lids of bottles and jars, as well as opening sealed bags such as for cereal, became increasingly difficult and then impossible. I was in bed or on the couch for progressively more hours during the day. With growing alarm I noted that I could not without major physical effort even stand upright to walk to the bathroom or kitchen. Even these short walks were punctuated by pauses and propping myself against objects to rest. I eventually was forced at times to crawl or even drag myself

along the floor to get to my destination. My condition finally reached a point where to climb up the box springs from the floor onto my bed's mattress proved too taxing. I resorted to sleeping on the bottom of my daughter's Ikea low bunk bed, because its thin mattress sat right on the carpet and did not require any climbing to mount. I could simply roll on or off the mattress to crawl or drag myself where I wanted to go.

Forced into prostrate groveling and inactivity for almost two months, I felt as debased and helpless as that seventh-grade boy hanging in front of those shaming, disappointed faces. I found myself questioning my masculinity and even my personhood throughout my long weeks of debility. Who am I if I am thus impaired? Am I still really a (hu)man? What is my life without self-reliant power? My fears of weakness and the disillusionment about enduring autonomy mingled intensely in my soul. While I knew that mono was never a fatal disease, the seemingly endless days that never lead to Emerson's "bended tree recovering itself from the strong wind" from "Self-Reliance" (144) saw me reiterating these questions of my value, identity, and meaning. I felt the same "invalidity and worthlessness" as Thoreau by reason of my Emersonian "unserviceable limbs." Yet, without the energy for philosophical introspection, I called what I was feeling depression and hoped it would quickly pass after my convalescence. Moore, understanding the broader view of such depressive periods, explains, "The experience involves you as a person, someone with a history, a temperament, memories, emotions, and ideas. Depression is a label and a syndrome, while a dark night is a meaningful event. Depression is a psychological sickness, a dark night is a spiritual trial" (xiv). To interrogate just how my invalidism could stir up such deep feelings of existential crisis, I would require a catalyst, something to explore all of the personal factors Moore invokes—in fact, an autocritographical intervention, almost four years after my disabling illness.

(In)valid Resonance: Connecting a White Man to *Our Nig*

I often discover that studying an exceptional literary work using the autocritographical method of analysis will immediately evoke memories of a comparable event, person, or circumstance. Consequently, the work provides a key to meaningful self-reflection based on a present-moment reading. Such is the case when in 2015 I first read Harriet E. Wilson's fictionalized autobiography, *Our Nig: Sketches from the Life of a Free Black*, in Dr. Altschuler's class. Even across differences of race, gender, and class, not to mention the separation of eras, I—a white man—connected with Wilson's black female protagonist, Frado or "Nig." As I write in this dissertation's introduction, I embrace Gary L. Lemons' pedagogical goal of empathetic imagination in this connection, having now been his student for nine years. The self-reflexive act of autocritography, conjoined with empathetic imagination, empowers "students come to know intimately the (trans)racialized lives of the writers we read" (*Black Male Outsider* 53). In my linkage with this story's protagonist, I in no way think my difficulties or layers of oppression *equate* to those of Frado/Wilson. Nevertheless, I felt what Lemons advocates, "a sense of empathy with [a] systematically disempowered [person], and . . . an immediate connectedness to resistance struggle" by reading *Our Nig* (132).

An interesting factor relates to my empathetic responsiveness to Frado as a character and to Wilson's authorial intentions. If I were alive in Wilson's time with the same identity markers I possess now, I would be one of the intended white "gentle readers" to whom she addresses her book. When she states about Frado that, "Still an invalid, she asks your sympathy," she is protectively distancing herself from my white gentility (72). In addition, Wilson critiques and subverts the common, sentimentalized view of white middle- and upper-class disabled women in nineteenth century American writing—women like Edgar Allan Poe's *Ligeia* and Harriet

Beecher Stowe's Eva in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. As Jennifer C. James and Cynthia Wu indicate, "Wilson implies that those narratives—already romanticized—are nullified if the disabled body is black" (7). Wilson pointedly contrasts the sympathy for the Bellmonts' invalid daughter, Jane, and the utter contempt and disregard for Nig. As a white, middle-class male, I *should* be more invested in someone like Jane. On the contrary, not in my *sympathetic* but my *empathetic* investment in what James and Wu call "the first example of black autopathography," I am resonating with the actual effects that both Frado and I experienced in our illness, even across identity difference.

The mulatta Frado occupies what Karen Kilcup calls "a crushing matrix of disadvantage" (342) in terms of race, gender, class, and eventually ability when, at the age of six, she arrives at the Bellmonts' house. Her mother and stepfather abandon her to an indoctrination into her role as an indentured servant to this white family. I find this coming-of-age story in a marginalizing environment my first entry point for insight into Frado's condition. We both learned "the rules" within systems of oppression from childhood and struggled with their internalization for many years thereafter. Then, as the story progresses, Frado's unspecified illness forces her to slow her work, an action that brings both self- and external recrimination. In Judith Butler's phraseology, for failing to do her performance right she is punished, a plight I knew well in the arena of masculinity. Frado's attempts to placate Mrs. Bellmont and her daughter Mary's racial animosity force Nig to strain herself physically to the point of semi-permanent impairment. As I shall explore next, however, Nig's experience of and response to her progressive disability also resonated with me but in complex and problematic ways.

Reading the brief scenes of Frado's various bouts with sickness repeatedly evoked my affliction with mono. Once her illness manifests in the narrative with the forceful exclamation

“Nig was taken sick!”, the celerity with which she would fatigue profoundly compelled me to recall my own devitalization (36). She would “work while she could remain erect, then sink down upon the floor, or a chair, till she could rally for a fresh effort.” When ordered by Mary into some task, “She attempted to drag her weary limbs along, using a broom as support.” Nig thereafter laments this utter exhaustion, crying, “Work as long as I can, and then fall down and lay there till I can get up” (42). In one of the longest descriptions of her struggle, she tries to maintain her duties in the face of overwhelming weariness.

She was at last so much reduced as to be unable to stand erect for any great length of time. She would *sit* at the table to wash her dishes. If she heard the well-known step of her mistress, she would rise till she returned to her room, and then sink down for further rest. Of course she was longer than usual in completing the services assigned to her. (46)

Other short glimpses of Frado’s condition dot the remainder of the story.⁷ Each expression of her invalidity potentially aroused my unacknowledged memories of the physical struggles I encountered during my most intense enervation.

My feelings of affinity with Nig, however, are not limited to the correspondence of our symptoms. Frado unceasingly attempts to soldier on, despite the impairments of her affliction. This determination seems a personality trait of hers, displayed from her youth. Nonetheless, her fear of the physical and emotional punishment she will receive if she slacks in her duties presses her even harder. When her fatigue causes delay in performing a task for Mary, the mistress’s daughter hurls a knife at her. Later, Nig’s honesty with Mrs. Bellmont about her weariness evinces a violent response: “She suddenly inflicted a blow which lay the tottering girl prostrate on the floor . . . snatching a towel, [she] stuffed the mouth of the sufferer, and beat her cruelly.” Given her desire to avoid retribution, Nig often tries to pretend ability for her mistress, “to throw

off all appearance of sickness in her presence . . . but it was increasing upon her, and she could no longer hide her indisposition” (46). In addition, she internalizes the fear of revealing signs of her illness, even after her manumission. When she later works for Mrs. Moore—a “kind friend to her” and far from the mean-spirited female Bellmonts—she is “anxious to keep up her reputation for efficiency, and often pressed far beyond prudence” (65). Frado has learned the lesson well that every attempt must be made to hide suffering and enact strength at all costs.

Wilson presents *Our Nig* mostly in the third person, using Frado as a substitute for herself. Her authorial choice indicates a decision to protectively distance herself, if only moderately, from her suffering protagonist. In relation to her illness, the narrative moreover avoids overemphasis on Frado’s symptoms. Diane Price Herndl observes in this rhetorical strategy, “Despite the fact that illness seems to be the motivating factor in Wilson’s writing the narrative . . . [she] remains guarded about depicting a black woman’s illness” (565). Wilson’s irrepressibility and her minimal writing about her infirmities mark her resistance to the kyriarchal notions of women as inherently weak, both in physicality and determination. Indeed, upon my first reading of *Our Nig*, her will to power elicited a spontaneous, deep-seated admiration. Her unquenchable drive to persevere was a quality I myself had tried to exhibit during my mono. Nevertheless, the male coding of such courage also aligns with what bell hooks formulates as a regendering of black female slaves, who are not viewed as “‘real’ women but . . . masculinized sub-human creatures” (*Ain’t I a Woman* 71). I now realize my admiration attests in part to my complicity with kyriarchal thinking, conflating male views of strength and ability to white notions about black female slaves. I read Frado’s reticence about her illness as admirable in its defiance of oppression, but I also see as problematic a comportment that masks her female personhood with dehumanizing stereotypes.

As I reflect on my mono in relation to Frado's illness, I obviously had no Belmont mistresses threatening me to keep working daily. On the contrary, I occupied a situation of privileged freedom and autonomy within my white, middle class, able-bodied teaching milieu. Nonetheless, just like Frado, I had another "master" in the form of *internalized* fear of punishment, in my case the demand of toughness from hegemonic hetero-masculinity. I demonstrated these beliefs through my continuing to teach and disregarding the need for medical attention in the disease's initial phase. Thoreau himself—strikingly employing the language of slavery—describes this internalization of beliefs that held both Frado and me in thrall: "It is hard to have a Southern overseer; it is worse to have a Northern one: but worst of all when you are the slave-driver of yourself" (*Walden* 5). Likewise, in his February 23, 1841, journal entry, Thoreau discourages those of us who "feel so ready to desert our posts when we are harassed" by illness (Vol. I 221). In continuing to perform ability at my job, I was responding to inner voices telling me that I must remain strong, just as Frado does, and so I likewise "pressed beyond prudence" (Wilson 65). Thoreau's compliance with ableist beliefs, despite his awareness of harmful interiorized assumptions, demonstrates their menace. More importantly, this notion of mental constructs exerting as much power as exterior physical and social circumstances facilitates my empathetic imagination of solidarity across all the differences Wilson and I hold.

The ruling imperative within hegemonic hetero-masculinity teaches men of all colors to constantly display power, often to their physical detriment. Will Courtenay, in his aptly-titled *Dying to Be Men*, lists the following as such bravura: "denial of weakness or vulnerability, emotional and physical control, the appearance of being strong and robust, dismissal of any need for help" (14). When I refused to go to my physician during my major symptoms' onset, I was attempting to represent such power. Courtenay describes this behavior as "another form of social

action that allows some men to maintain their status and to avoid being relegated to a subordinated position in relation to physicians and health professionals, as well as other men” (17). When I state above that I needed courage to finally seek medical attention, this paradox underlies the situation: I “should” be courageous as a man, yet I feared the vulnerability of the “subordinated position.” In this manner, hegemonic masculinity creates a no-win situation relating to men and illness. This impasse results in the fact, as Noone and Stephens conclude in their 2008 study, that “men tend to delay more and visit their doctor less often than women” (711). My postponement in visiting my doctor did not, in truth, defer any remedy for my disease; no treatment exists for Epstein-Barr virus other than palliative care. However, my decision to continue working and not rest doubtlessly exacerbated the viral impact on my body, and like Frado, my exertions while sick prolonged and magnified my impairment.

What of the racialized juncture of Frado’s and my belief in autonomy? Did the construction of race inform the foundational influence on me of Emerson and Thoreau? The response again is complicated. Frado’s resistance to her mistresses’ oppression and my complicity with a sexist and ableist self-reliance engendered similar ideologies. Prompting an investigation of what whiteness means and how texts represent it, AnaLouise Keating asks about Emerson’s essay, “Should we code key themes in ‘Self-Reliance’—such as the desire for independence, a sense of self-confidence . . . —as ‘white’? To do so leads to additional problems when we encounter these ‘white’ themes in texts by writers of color” (909). She cites Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative* as also containing such topics. *Our Nig* fully displays them, and accordingly Keating might also ask of Wilson’s text: when James, one of the Bellmont sons, encourages Nig in her religious pursuits, so that her transformed qualities “might become useful

in originating a *self-reliance* which would be of service to her in after years” (39; emphasis added), is he reinscribing whiteness onto her?

I would answer Keating’s original question thus: I do not wish to fully essentialize the motifs she mentions as either just white-coded or panhuman. Neither every person in the world nor an identity-limited subset of people desires to be self-reliant, independent, and autonomous. Those who do seek these qualities, however, will find them mirrored in literature, repeating in works that span great varieties of authorial identities. In light of this fact, even across difference I found affinity with Wilson’s struggles and archetypal wish for freedom. While her social conditions mismatch my own, we both underwent the constraining disability of illness. Although even in health she was not independent, my life-changing episode of physical limitation allows me to not only empathize with her invalidity but to empathetically imagine her other restrictions beyond the physical. The tenor of her thoughts and feelings in *Our Nig* moreover signifies a truly universal human ordeal: a dark night of the soul. The aspect of understanding dark nights as meaningful events and spiritual trials connects even closer Wilson’s hardships with Thoreau’s and my own.

Spirituality in the Dark: Traveling to the Sublime

Thoreau went to Walden to not only seek validity in *doing* much but to *experience* much, especially the spiritually transcendent. Michael Keller deduces that, having undergone transcendental “illuminations” from youth, Thoreau felt an inkling of a dark night stemming from his progressively abating mystical experiences. “Although his illuminations continued,” Keller observes, “Thoreau became dissatisfied with their sporadic occurrence; long periods without illumination left him feeling desultory and purposeless” (60). Thoreau complains three years before going to Walden, “What am I good for now, who am still marching after high

things, but to hear and tell the news, to bring wood and water, and count how many eggs the hens lay?” (qtd. in Keller 61). His intent to both amplify life’s coarseness and re-encounter its transcendent qualities impelled his purpose of subsistence living. Keller highlights these survival aspects as the “fearsome element in the Walden experiment, the [facing of] self-loss necessary for real life-change” (62). At Walden Thoreau could “drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be *mean*, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it . . . or if it were *sublime*, to know it by experience” (qtd. in Keller 62; emphasis added). Thoreau met his fear head-on, formulating a rite of passage to catalyze his own dark night. He therefore hoped that his initiatory liminality would propel him into, as Emerson describes it in “The Over-Soul,” an “ascension of state, such as can be represented by metamorphosis—from the egg to the worm, from the worm to the fly” (240).

Indeed, in the middle of the literal and metaphorical dark night at Walden, Thoreau has mystical experiences that join the “mean” and the “sublime.” He recounts feeling the tug of horned pout on his line as he fished at midnight:

It was very queer, especially in dark nights, when your thoughts had wandered to vast and cosmogonical themes in other spheres, to feel this faint jerk, which came to interrupt your dreams and link you to Nature again. It seemed as if I might next cast my line upward into the air, as well as downward into this element, which was scarcely more dense. Thus I caught two fishes as it were with one hook. (*Walden* 166)

Thoreau’s moment of “catching” the duality of life, of hooking up the “two fishes” of inseparable human meanness and sublimity, proved an important spiritual realization of his dark night. Perhaps even the numerical symbolism of his completing the Walden experiment after two years, two months, and two days reveals his mystical encounter with two-ness to stimulate

Keller's "real life-change," an homage to the inescapable liminality of humans as both earthly and divine.

Wilson's dark night in *Our Nig*, rather than bringing her back to spirituality like Thoreau's, urges her into it. Her religious path begins when she finds relief from the Bellmont mistresses' abuse through befriending the two most sympathetic white folks in the household: Mrs. B.'s sister-in-law, Aunt Abby, and invalid son, James. Both these Christian individuals not only provide Frado comfort but show concern about the "Spiritual Condition of Nig," as Wilson titles Chapter VII. Frado becomes a "serious" religious seeker, attending evening church meetings where she appears "very thoughtful and tearful." Soon afterwards Mrs. B.—nominally a "professor of religion" herself—angrily discovers Frado "reading and shedding tears over her Bible."⁸ Frado then retreats to her own Walden, "her room, uninviting and comfortless; but to herself a safe retreat" where she seeks to "rise to the communion of saints." During this time period, Frado's "anxiety increased . . . though she said nothing of her inward contest" (48). She is, as Moore expresses as common for those in a dark night, dealing with the "emotions and sensations" of the inner struggle that sometimes require that one "wrestle with them, like Jacob and the angel" (266). The divine metaphor applies even more deeply in Nig's case of spiritual conflictedness, as she varyingly "wished she could see God and ask him for eternal life" (55) and then "resolved to give over all thought of the future world" (58).⁹

The fluctuations of Wilson's physical capacities resemble her alternating trust and mistrust of orthodox Christianity's tenets.¹⁰ Her frequent wrestling with both spiritual and constitutional angels portrays what Moore recognizes as the iterative nature of life's rites of passage: "Life constantly ferries us to a new level of maturity. Each of us is like a boat passing through a long series of locks that *lift us up or take us down* to a new plateau. We go from one

phase to another, each change a challenge” (23; emphasis added). Wilson’s spiritual evolution, instead of an ever-ascending road, moves along both an ascending and descending path, linking her to Thoreau and Emerson. Both men, due to their tubercular infections’ irregularity, also underwent rises and falls of their physical well-being, emotions, and spiritual fulfillment. Thoreau precisely captures this variability in an 1842 journal entry: “My path hitherto has been like a road . . . now climbing high mountain, then descending into the lowest vales. From the summits I saw the heavens, from the vales I looked up at the heights again” (Vol. I 320). *Our Nig*’s final chapters relay in quick succession the changing plateaus of Wilson’s physical and social condition. While the vale moments do carry an increasing spiritual undertone, they still represent her as a seeker, not a convert. She remains a liminal figure—not lost, and not found.

The close of *Our Nig* leaves Wilson in a precarious state—physically, financially, and spiritually. She appears to walk in a lowest vale time and looks to the heights for support in all three areas. One must progress beyond the narrative’s scope to discover the remarkable Emersonian metamorphosis that transpired afterward, giving spiritual meaning to Wilson’s dark night trial. R. J. Ellis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., expound upon Wilson’s post-*Our Nig* career as a leader in the Spiritualism movement. She established herself as a “colored trance speaker” and “healing medium,” lecturing and effecting curative techniques with distinction around Boston. Moreover, she opened a “Spiritual Progressive School” to provide a “liberal” education for children. Ellis and Gates emphasize that Wilson’s renewed health, which appeared so fragile in *Our Nig*, seemed to bolster her stature in the Spiritualism movement (235). Additionally, they posit that in the “unspeakable cruelties” of her servitude she “may have had tortured reveries that led her into a spiritualist career” (255). Although Wilson herself may not have constructed it so, her dark night of “tortured reveries” with its physical and spiritual struggles became, if not a

traditional conversion narrative, an initiation both into the ecumenical Spiritualism movement and an impetus to service beyond the oppressive indentured slavery system.

My time of mononucleosis also had its spiritual aspects. I experienced moments that I can only describe as mystical during several extended transition periods between waking and sleeping. I would sense an expansiveness and projection outside my body, then perceive a constraint within it. I would feel myself as gigantic and heavy, then at other times I would undergo the sensation of being a tiny, floating point in a vast, almost universal space.¹¹ Similarly, Thoreau journals in 1852, “When first returning to consciousness in the night or morning . . . I am conscious of having, in my sleep, transcended the limits of the individual . . . As if in sleep our individual fell into the infinite mind, and at the moment of awakening we found ourselves on the *confines* of the latter” (Vol. III 353; emphasis added). Thoreau uses *confines* here meaning the liminal space between, as he termed them at Walden, the “mean” and the “sublime.” He expounds about his liminal “moment in the dawn when the darkness of night is dissipated, and before the exhalations of the day begin to rise, when we see all things more truly than at any other time” (*Walden* 354). During these times, I discerned a loosening of my egoic self, a sensation that what I thought of as “I” was actually fluid and not as solid or limited as I constructed it to be.¹²

After several weeks of isolation when I finally had the energy to leave my apartment, I felt an intensity of all my senses that bordered on the surreal. In these moments I considered the womblike aspect of my dark night, because I sensed that I was emerging like a newborn baby, experiencing the world afresh. Still feeling traces of the liminal consciousness, I then had moments similar to Emerson’s in “Nature”: “Standing on the bare ground, — my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, — all mean egotism vanishes. I become a

transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all” (6). I remember vividly in this sensory hyperawareness my first time going back to a grocery store, walking with a measured gait, treading each aisle at a slowed pace. I became cognizant of joining those around me who walked as slowly as I did, who were impaired in their movement in some way by age or other disabling factor. I finally *noticed* these individuals, whereas before I simply would have ignored them or unwittingly raced around them. I no longer needed empathetic *imagination* . . . I felt actual empathy, not only being disabled myself but having stepped outside of my “mean egotism.” I approached, nearly as I could, the “miracle” Thoreau describes as “for us to look through each other's eyes for an instant” (*Walden* 8-9). Though my “illuminations” faded as I recuperated, I still retain the life-changing memories of these mystical experiences.

Remade: Crossing Between the Mean and the Sublime

Many qualities of Emerson's, Thoreau's, and Wilson's dark nights correlate with mine. With all the shades drawn in my apartment, and often being too weak to turn on lights, like Emerson I felt a sense of “rot” entombed in my Stygian space. I also shared in his Harpy emotions of fear and helplessness. My debility elicited Thoreauvian feelings of “invalidity and worthlessness,” as I had to “front only the essential facts of life,” the “fearsome element” of initiatory subsistence, as Keller describes it. Being neither totally disabled nor completely abled calls to mind Moore's frameworks of the liminal state, not chosen like *Walden* but enforced like Frado's room. One aspect that I have not yet addressed, concerning the spiritual element most akin to Wilson, marks my dark night as a shamanic “vocation” in the spirit of Mircea Eliade's work—an initiation Moore denotes as “a painful passage that has the power to remake your personality and your life” (27).

In *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, Eliade describes the vocation of shamans as indicated by external signs, usually accident or infirmity that forcefully wrenches the person from everyday life. Their “sicknesses, dreams, and ecstasies [are] in themselves an initiation; that is, they transform the profane, pre-‘choice’ individual into a technician of the sacred” (33). The germinal affliction often produces a foundational ecstatic occurrence, a disconnection from the ordinary world. Often the ecstatic “initiator process continues long after this” (20), as was the case with Thoreau, as well as Wilson, who employed trance in her Spiritualist ministry. The process may be “celestial,” “infernal,” or both (34), indicating that the word *ecstatic* does not necessarily imply blissful. Moreover, Eliade describes the ongoing initiation as “twofold . . . both ecstatic and didactic” (14), thereby affirming the role of knowledge acquired from both transcendent occurrences and “profane” learning. Even removing the aspects of mystical visions, Eliade advocates in his journal the intention of a seriously ill person to construct a shamanic framework for his or her illness: “Insofar as he takes on his illness as an initiatory trial, the patient truly succeeds in *achieving* a spiritual alteration that is in all respects comparable to the process of shamanic initiation” (211). Viewed metaphorically, the “vocation” or calling of those struck by enervating disease is to affirm it beyond its “profane” medical aspects and explore the implications of its clear meaning: we are all only temporarily abled.

At the nexus joining Eliade’s work to Moore’s, I embrace my illness as a metamorphic dark night of the soul where I experienced a shamanic alteration. My initiation ordeal categorically accomplished what Moore suggests: “Sickness may cure you of your misconceptions” as “it invites you to reflect on your way of life, spotting gaps where your soul is neglected and complaining” (288). At an unfathomed depth, I had undeniably neglected my soul’s complaint about my oppressive constructions and assumptions of ability. I realized my

misconception of enduring autonomy and of building my worth as a (hu)man on it. Even having seen loved ones debilitated by stroke, cancer, and aging, I had ignored the fact that any abilities that allow me to feel independent could evaporate. The length of time that I had dwelt in the belief in self-reliance had given me the misconception of permanence. Reflecting on my way of life allowed me, as Eliade notes of certain transcendent Buddhist ecstasies, the “reducing [of] life by thought to what it really is, an ephemeral illusion in perpetual transformation” (*Shamanism* 63). This disillusionment created a dark night but gifted me with a shaman-like perception—the lens of temporary ability. This viewpoint helped me spot gaps in my awareness of disability in its many forms, gaps that my able-bodied self had previously had the privilege of ignoring.

Moreover, I cannot understate the serendipitous confluence of scholarly factors after my illness: Eliade’s “didactic” portion of the shamanic initiation. These include a graduate course reading Wilson and re-reading the Transcendentalists, Dr. Altschuler’s highlighting labor and ability studies, and my personal engagement with Eliade’s and Moore’s work. My critical readings permitted me a more nuanced understanding of self-reliance’s sources and conditions. They gave me my first opportunity to concatenate disability with the other areas I as a womanist-identified scholar must interrogate to understand kyriarchy in all its forms. My autocritographical approach provoked me to question my identity privilege particularly as able-bodied in intersection with white, male, middle class, and so on. I began to wonder: do I employ rhetoric, like Thoreau and Emerson, that promotes ableism? Who do I assume has ability that may not? Can I still see—and not “erase” as I had done before—people who do not conform to some normative ableist ideal? Can I maintain my lens of temporary ability? How can I expand from just empathy with those who do not have power, bodily and socially, to solidarity with them? All

of these important questions of social justice also pertain to my commitment to operate as a shaman-like “technician of the sacred.” I, in the spirit of Wilson and using Thoreau’s language, have ultimately dedicated myself to work as a “remade” autocritographer and a teacher between two dimensions: the “mean” boundaries of a flawed and sometimes unjust world and the “sublime” healing and liberating potentialities of “higher education.”

Notes

1. The Roman Catholic priest and mystic St. John of the Cross (1542-1591) originally used this term in a poem written between 1577 and 1579.

2. In using the phrase “will to power,” I also note that Friedrich Nietzsche, who coined it in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, once obliquely referred to his dark nights, “Emerson with his essays has been a good friend and cheered me up even in black periods” (339).

3. I have little memory about how Mrs. Markowitz, my tenth-grade English teacher, brought Emerson and Thoreau to life for me. My high school’s class sizes were about fifteen students, and I do remember her leading lively discussions around the conference-style table about the Transcendentalists. As was true of all my education up until graduate school, I do not recall any classroom discussions about the race, class, gender, or ability implications of their works.

4. Moore’s work on the subject is *Dark Nights of the Soul: A Guide to Finding Your Way Through Life’s Ordeals*. Cf. Gerald G. May’s *The Dark Night of the Soul: A Psychiatrist Explores the Connection Between Darkness and Spiritual Growth*.

5. Thoreau seems to advertise his “Domuch” qualifications in a letter not one month after leaving Walden: “I am a schoolmaster, a private tutor, a surveyor, a gardener, a farmer, a house painter, a carpenter, a mason, a day-laborer, a pencil-maker, a glass-paper maker, a writer, and

sometimes a poetaster” (*Correspondence* 308). I cannot help but still note underlying fear of being cast as a Dolittle.

6. While one might assume that isolation and deprivation are solely male coming-of-age rituals, Bruce Lincoln finds that females also share in the archetypal pattern he calls “enclosure, metamorphosis (or magnification), and emergence” (101).

7. Some further examples of Frado’s debility from illness: “A little light work was all she could accomplish” (65); “What seemed so light and easy to others, was too much for Frado” (67); “The horrors of her condition nearly prostrated her” (71); “The man who came for me . . . helped me carefully into the wagon (for I had no strength)” (74-75).

8. Two approaches to the Bible were common in the era of slavery. The first promoted slaves reading it in order to both pacify them and permit slave owners to selectively use Bible verses that seem to authorize slave ownership. See Stephen R. Haynes’ *Noah’s Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery*. On the other hand, slave owners feared any kind of slave literacy, since it might threaten the slave’s position of inferiority. See Heather A. Williams’ *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom*.

9. Wilson is even more guarded in her disclosures about her inner religious life than about her illness. Elizabeth J. West, resisting the classification of Wilson’s story as a conversion narrative, by turns designates Wilson’s conversion “failed,” “purported,” “unsuccessful,” “seeming,” “un-,” and “anti-.” Conversely, William L. Andrews finds straightforward evidence of Wilson’s Christian conversion that “transforms her self-image, endows her with a genuine sense of power and hope, and spurs her toward intellectual achievement” (20). I think the reality for Wilson lies somewhere between these two extremes.

10. She especially grapples with a religion whose “professor,” Mrs. Bellmont, was so fiercely cruel, as well as with a God that seemed to create her blackness as “less than,” socially. West posits that the reader can best find Wilson’s conspicuous desire to “demonstrate the failure of Christianity to stand as a critique of white hegemonic ideals” (21) in Mrs. Bellmont’s hypocritical beliefs and actions.

11. Viewed from a medical standpoint, these experiences may have been a potential side effect of mononucleosis called Alice in Wonderland syndrome, in which perceptions of body size alter. See M. Cinbis and S. Aysun’s “Alice in Wonderland syndrome as an initial manifestation of Epstein-Barr virus infection.”

12. I would relate this loosening of the ego I experienced with Santiago’s similar state as he brings home the marlin in *The Old Man and the Sea*. See Chapter Two.

CHAPTER FOUR

Hoodooed by *Mumbo Jumbo*: How a White Man Caught Jes Grew

Walk with care, walk with care,
Or Mumbo-Jumbo, God of the Congo,
And all the other
Gods of the Congo,
Mumbo-Jumbo will hoo-doo you.
Beware, beware, walk with care,
Boomlay, boomlay, boomlay, boom.

—Vachel Lindsay, “The Congo (A Study of the Negro Race)”

Almost 100 years ago HooDoo was forced to say
Goodbye to America. Now HooDoo is
back as Neo-Hoodoo
You can't keep a good church down!

—Ishmael Reed, “Neo-HooDoo Manifesto”

For my final semester of doctoral studies coursework in 2016, I returned to Dr. Ylce Irizarry’s classroom to study multiethnic fiction. While the 2014 class I had taken with her highlighted Latina authors, this one more broadly addressed Multiethnic American literature. Dr. Irizarry chose readings from writers encompassing African, Asian, and Eastern European, as well as Latinx American and Chicanx, communities—including Ishmael Reed, Theresa Hak Cha, Andrei Codrescu, and Salvador Plascencia. In the variety of ways their fiction deconstructed

national, communal, and individual identity, the novelists all addressed postmodern concerns about history, violence, language, gender, nation, and the self. Here I once again entered the pattern of academic reading inspiring autocritographical conscientization, and I found myself drawn into Reed's novel *Mumbo Jumbo*.

Mumbo Jumbo indeed hoodooed me, but Reed's novel did more than develop my social reality awareness. He employs the conceit of a physical, viral infection called Jes Grew to emblemize conditions operating at a deep soul level, in resistance to Western society's privileging of intellect and rationality. Reading *Mumbo Jumbo* introspectively, I began noting Jes Grew "symptoms" within myself, because these manifestations involve desire for freedom of expression and rebellion against kyriarchal control in many forms. I detected—and here I "signify on"¹ protagonist PaPa LaBas's role as HooDoo sleuth—Reed's phenomenon within analogous parts my own "character arc" that I had not yet considered. Beyond the novel motivating my private investigations, it also provokes my entry into the larger scholarly conversation about *Mumbo Jumbo*, especially its underexamined relationship to Vachel Lindsay's poem "The Congo." Since it empowered such constructive activities, hoodooing here should not imply some negative connotation such as bringing bad luck but rather the opposite. I view the liberatory writing that the process inspired as beneficial, because it allowed me to approach *Mumbo Jumbo* as a gateway to interrogating my constructed position as a white man via its multicultural Neo-Hoodoo aesthetics.²

The autocritographer endeavors to find her/himself within texts and to contemplate the self within that reflection. Relevantly, Reed contrives Jes Grew's main purpose as "seeking its word. Its text" (6), and the novel itself has served as such a text for me, an object to help my "lost liturgy seeking its litany" (211). In this chapter, I progress through compelling junctures of

my life where Reed's text converges along themes of language and religion, as well as music. Specifically, I consider the ideological resonance between Reed and the Canadian rock band Rush, interrogating how *Mumbo Jumbo*'s spectrum of emotion to reason has appeared in my history. Finally, I uncover how Reed's protagonist, PaPa LaBas, evinces a character who serves as both a literal shaman and an archetype in the mode I am proposing with the overarching theme of this dissertation. In doing so, I also attempt to demonstrate how the shamanic themes of liminality, boundary-crossing, and healing connect to another archetypal character important to Reed: the trickster. Ultimately, I intend to diagnose how I caught Jes Grew, but how the infection—I use “infection” throughout this chapter in the same positive sense Reed does—edged into my life despite kyriarchal attempts to quarantine me.

I wish here to acknowledge a fellow white male scholar who has treated *Mumbo Jumbo* somewhat autocritographically and with some striking parallels to my topics. Novelist and creative writing professor Madison Smartt Bell published “Mumbo Gumbo” in *Transitions*' special 2013 edition focusing on Haitian narratives. His essay contains a section in which he recalls his Southern upbringing and learning to play the blues guitar, hence submitting—and he here adopts the voodoo concept of a possessing spirit—to a “loa that Jes' Grew here in America among our people. We call it Blues”³ (Reed qtd. in Bell 97). Bell, although early in his life surrounded by “black retainers . . . [who] had a considerable hand in his raising,” bemoans being “born to largely unreconstructed white Southerners in rural Tennessee” and later in life feels the “corrosive quality of American apartheid” in his Brooklyn neighborhood. Only in his extended trip to Haiti did he fully immerse himself in a place where he could be truly possessed, and not just by the figurative spirit of the non-white Haitian society. Eventually he underwent what he regards as “an episode of [voodoo] spirit possession—in which the ego was thrown out of its

saddle on the brain-stem” (97). My autocritographical project overlaps Bell’s in several ways: we both encountered blackness strained through a pervasively white environment, felt a calling to emotional expression via music, and required a different milieu to induce a new understanding of the Other, without and within. Unlike Bell’s piece, however, my essay uses memoir as a frame for critical inquiry, rather than inquiry containing a memoir portion; I am present as the author throughout this chapter, not just in an isolated section.

Lindsay’s Liturgy: The Source of “Infection”

My “liturgy” commenced in 1976 when I first read and memorized my epigraphic “The Congo” (1914) by Vachel Lindsay—a white man—with my majority white group of fourth grade classmates. Directed by my bohemian, white teacher, Mrs. Walker, we afterwards stood facing a student body of a similar racial makeup and performed the poem in our school’s church. Our audience most likely did not consider the problematics of these verses’ meaning, their primitivism and essentialism, and their casual racism. Mrs. Walker no doubt envisioned the progressive or subversive nature of performing such a poem to such an audience. Reciting “The Congo,” very pointedly about *black* people, created a singular, radical moment in my ten-year experience at that school. No one ever academically broached the subject of race, before or after that time. Mrs. Walker led no discussion of the poem’s racial aspects in class, and even nine- and ten-year-old white kids knew that to so much as speak about race would be uncomfortable and possibly even forbidden. Kyriarchy most effectively sustains racism by making any talk about race taboo, especially whiteness. Accordingly, silence overruled any of my classmates’ potential wish for dialogue, and we were left to glean what we could from the poem’s meager footnotes. I distinctly recall reading the poem’s most striking contextual information in a note about the following lines:

Listen to the yell of Leopold's ghost
Burning in Hell for his hand-maimed host
Hear how the demons chuckle and yell
Cutting his hands off, down in Hell. (37-40)

The note indicated that the white European King Leopold II had brutalized the Congo's inhabitants. Accordingly, my primary critical engagement with "The Congo" produced a fourth-grader's inkling about colonialism—not a terribly cogent result, but important to my affective response.

The poem struck me emotionally via its contrasts: oppression versus freedom, death versus life, fear versus hope. Even one of the poem's earliest critics, W.E.B. Du Bois, curtly encapsulated the oppositional nature of "The Congo": "Mr. Vachel Lindsay knows two things, and two things only, about Negroes: The beautiful rhythm of their music and the ugly side of their drunkards and their outcasts" (182). Mirroring the poem's duality, I felt both repulsion and enchantment. The inebriated noise of its "fat black bucks in a wine-barrel room" (1), juxtaposed with images of native Africans who "kill the Arabs" and "kill the white men" (34-35), intimidated me. The scenes of jubilant cakewalk dancing and the inexorable rhythmic quality of the poem's repeating "Boomlay, boomlay, boomlay, BOOM" thrilled me. Intoned at regular intervals, the ominously repeated incantation of "Mumbo-Jumbo will hoo-doo you" (49-51) haunted me. Despite the poem's vision of white, colonial Christianity triumphing over African "Mumbo-Jumbo, the god of the jungle," a lone vulture still echoes that refrain as the poem's final lines. Mrs. Walker coached my fourth-grade class largely using Lindsay's paratextual recitation instructions included with the poem. She was able to elicit a highly dynamic and emotional performance, from "speed and racket" to the vulture's final "penetrating, terrified

whisper.” Our audience reacted, first with stunned silence, then polite clapping. I, however, carried the specter of hoodoo and the “boomlay boom” deep within after that applause ceased. I had become a Jes Grew Carrier.

My reading of *Mumbo Jumbo* forty years after “The Congo” reawakened memories of that first hoodooing. The novel’s title certainly invokes the poem’s frequent refrain, as does its paradoxical use as both the white-inscribed meaning of “nonsense” and the African-rooted spiritual practices of the “Mumbo Jumbo Cathedral.” I kept encountering key words I recalled: “Place Congo” in New Orleans; Jes Grew’s incorrect characterization as conjuring “primitive, superstitious, *jungle* ways” (34; emphasis added); cakewalking as a symptom of Jes Grew; and “Europe the ghost rattling its chains” (152), for example. In contrast with these relatively minor instances, I most connected the poem to Reed’s novel in Chapter 51 where Hubert “Safecracker” Gould, a white man in blackface, performs a poem entitled “Harlem Tom Toms.” Here, the image of Lenox Avenue as a Congo-like river, the “big Black bucks” standing on its edge, and the “Do-bloom, Da-bloom, Da-bloom a-loom” drum beat strongly parallel Lindsay’s words (158). Because of the memories that Reed’s novel kept evoking, I reread “The Congo” for the first time since fourth grade. Moreover, I accessed one of Lindsay’s “Congo” performances on YouTube in which he follows his own instructions to the reader to imitate “a touch of negro dialect,” something I’m grateful Mrs. Walker did not make us do. The poet’s recitation strengthened my conviction that Gould acts as a parodic Lindsay stand-in. Beyond my own observations and theories, I knew that the explorations of my own Jes Grew must begin with investigating the links between Reed’s and Lindsay’s works and commence by reviewing what other scholars had argued about the correlation between them.

Only superficial commentary and scholarship exist on the relationship between “The Congo” and *Mumbo Jumbo*, notwithstanding these similarities. At the authorial level, Reed has spoken little about Lindsay. His eight-line poem “The Vachel Lindsay Fault” curtly calls him “a dud” (*Collected Poems* 141). In a 1988 interview with Shamooun Zamir, Reed briefly discusses several white poets’ contribution to evincing jazz’s rhythmic sensibilities in verse. Reed summarizes his feelings about the poet: “Vachel Lindsey [*sic*] is kind of corny” (1134). Moving beyond Reed’s own words, I found that Robert Elliot Fox mentions the poem briefly when he observes the dichotomy between the Anglicized “mumbo jumbo” and its African roots, a difference that indicates and strengthens Reed’s novel as a work of NeoHoodoo. Fox explains, “At the same time that the words [mumbo jumbo] lost their original meaning, they took on a meaning which troubled the spirits of whites, invoking the fearful, atavistic vision of the ‘dark continent’ . . . which Vachel Lindsay summed up in his poem ‘The Congo’” (97). Reed’s scorn for Lindsay—especially as seen in the “corny” Safecracker character—and his consequent novelistic reclamation of the kyriarchally-appropriated term “mumbo jumbo” suggest two preliminary conclusions about these artists’ link. First, Reed seeks to counter years of negative associations about “mumbo jumbo,” a noted perpetrator being Lindsay. Additionally, his overarching commitment lies, as Fox phrases it, in putting “an old new twist to the braided strands of Western reality” (97), one of those strands being “The Congo.”

The other essay that perfunctorily mentions this association is Henry Louis Gates’ “The ‘Blackness of Blackness’: A Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey.” Fox and so many other Reed scholars cite this work or its equivalent chapter in Gates’ *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* that one should consider it a foundational work on *Mumbo Jumbo*. Gates asserts, “Reed is also echoing, and signifying upon, Vachel Lindsay’s

ironic poem . . . which so (fatally) influenced the Harlem Renaissance poets, as Charles T. Davis has shown” (*Signifying Monkey* 230-231). While I agree with and have extended Gates’ argument that *Mumbo Jumbo* in part manifests a response to “The Congo,” I find his reference to Davis entails some revisioning. The cited chapter in Davis’s book *Black is the Color of the Cosmos*—which Gates incidentally edited—is titled “Prose Literature of Racial Defense, 1917-1924: A Preface to the Harlem Renaissance.” It neither addresses Lindsay in particular nor elucidates white poets’ impact on black ones in general. Davis, in point of fact, only explicates how both white *and* black critics claimed that Negroes’ primitive African roots led to a distinctive quality in their art. Nowhere does he connect this claim with white artistic output, much less how Lindsay or any white poet “(fatally) influenced” a black Harlem Renaissance one. Moreover, despite quoting from “The Congo” in his epigraph, Gates disappointingly only makes the single-sentence—and, in my opinion, slightly blurry—reference to it in his entire piece. In this way, Gates began a tradition in 1983, most notably continued by Fox in 1984 and by Richard Swope in 2002, of gingerly and scanty criticism regarding the artistic dialogue between Reed and Lindsay. I am surprised to find that I am breaking a legacy of cursory engagement.

Gates and many other Lindsay critics miss what Susan Gubar finds as one of the poem’s undeniable socio-psychological nuances—that hoodoo’s survival should act as a cautionary example that ideological domination cannot totally succeed. She sees the end of the poem as “an admission that white efforts to control black representation will be doomed to failure” (142). Gubar asserts narrowly that the Lindsay’s poem “will fail to extirpate the alien powers of Otherness that haunt *his* imagination and shape *his* artistry” (142; emphasis added). I argue that this failure extends much broader than the poet’s individual level, because powerful but oppressed ideologies become creolized, syncretized, and diffused but never totally disappear.

Their call for expression cannot be stifled because they are as organic as a virus that can mutate or go dormant to survive.

Besides the aforementioned lone vulture's refrain, the poet specifies other evidence of hoodoo's ongoing presence, despite the forces that would overcome it. When he sees the Congo transformed by angels, it contains temples, not churches. He hears and sees Leopold's ghost punished in Hell, not praised in Heaven, for his colonization atrocities. The narrator portrays a Christian camp-meeting, replete with preaching and hymns, that nevertheless evokes the old African pulses within its Bible-beating and the "[slamming] their hymn books till they shook the room" (119). Further illustrating Mumbo Jumbo's survival, the shouts of "Glory, Glory, Glory" then syncretically awaken the ancient, rhythmic "Boom, Boom, Boom" in response (120-1). These scenes manifest what Fox terms "a complimentary relationship of opposites . . . a requirement for the full realization of life . . . the meaning of . . . the Chinese diagram of the Supreme Ultimate" (97), known to many Westerners as the yin/yang symbol ☯. In the same way this figure has a touch of black within its white side, and vice versa, "The Congo" incorporates elements of that which it overtly purports to supplant.

I find here the meaning unexplored by so many scholars concerning the poem. While ostensibly celebrating white Christian ascendancy and reinscribing limiting and oppressive stereotypes about blacks, "The Congo" nevertheless contains moments advocating the very same spirit that resists the oppression—Jes Grew, if you will. The poem's narrator, perhaps even Lindsay revealing his own attitudes, begins with an acknowledgment that he is *moved* by this spirit in the things he witnesses: "THEN I had religion. THEN I had a vision. I could not turn from their revel in derision" (8-9). On one hand, the poem seems to glory in Mumbo Jumbo's defeat and the misguided rescue of Africans from "their stupor and savagery and sin and wrong"

(118). On the other, it affirms what Reed maintains: “They will try to depress Jes Grew but it will only spring back and prosper” (*Mumbo Jumbo* 204). Mumbo Jumbo’s spirit lives on in dance but more generally in rhythm—not just in the drum beat, but also in “That rhythm you drum from your lips” (152). Even more than within the poem’s narrative, the seeds of Jes Grew still lie at the meta level in Lindsay’s “poetry in blackface,” as T.R. Hummer phrases it (37). This white poet and my white teacher helped plant these seeds within me at nine years of age, thereby showing, as in Reed’s conceit, that the spirit of Jes Grew simply hibernates or transmutes when threatened, but never really dies. As Reed stresses in his “Neo-HooDoo Manifesto,” “Now HooDoo is back as Neo-HooDoo. *You can’t keep a good church down!*” (421).

I mention above that my classmates and I performed “The Congo” in our school’s church. The students at my parochial, Episcopal school attended a service daily and Eucharist every Wednesday. We also had weekly “Divinity”—Episcopalian religion classes. By the time I graduated from eighth grade, I had received a thorough indoctrination into Episcopal Christianity, a dogmatic form that considers itself the true path to God. More importantly, however, it represented an intellectual, non-emotional form of liturgy and worship that leached into daily academic life. Access to the divine, it decreed to me, comes through mental assent to a system, as well as stoic devotion to equanimity in study and worship. Reed critiques the totalistic and cerebral nature of Western culture, and this form of religiosity most specifically, in *Mumbo Jumbo*. A major project of the novel is the re-articulation, in the sense of re-piecing the story together, of the West’s religious origins. Here I briefly outline my reexamination of the binaries of closed versus open religions and reason versus emotion in my middle and high school years.

Reed delves into ancient Egyptian deities in *Mumbo Jumbo*, at first for terminology and later for mythical stories. Those who seek to control, dominate, and oppress he labels as *Atonists*,

people whose monolithic/monotheistic tradition continues in the name and character of those worshipping Aton, the sun's disk. Atonism's adherents "don't tolerate those who refuse to accept their modes" (35) and insist on "measuring every 1 by their ideals" (133). Anyone who thinks with "an Atonist mind . . . [seeks] to interpret the world by using a single loa," and hence with a limited and restrictive dogma, tries "filling a milk bottle with an ocean" (24). Reed presents the mind as Atonism's central inhabitation and emotions, particularly the joy expressed in Jes Grew's dancing, as the ideology's adversary. So, while I steeped in the overculture's generally racist, sexist, and classist ideologies, all which Reed would call Atonist, the most powerful ideological superstructure operating for me in my first ten school years was a religion I saw peopled with white middle- and upper-class folks. It influenced a learning environment that sought to malign or ignore the Other—primarily the non-believer, but many Others, by extension—and the emotions. Mrs. Walker had indeed been subversive to even sanction speaking of the Other in the church, much less to do so with dynamic feeling. She may have paid for it, too: she was gone the following year. Whether she was "let go" or moved on I can only speculate. Moreover, not only would my classmates and I read no more works about, much less by, people of color, we would give no more emotive performances in church ever again. The quarantine was in place—that church would never be a "Mumbo Jumbo Cathedral." The infection of Jes Grew went dormant within me. Under the Atonist-like threat that "all carriers [will be] isolated and disinfected, [and] Immuno-Therapy will begin" (17), I underwent more years of hegemonic training that ensured Jes Grew's reawakening via my future encounters with the Other would be fraught with the problematics of internalized kyriarchy and potential cultural appropriation.

Resisting Apollo: Dionysus Drums the Music of the (Hemi)Spheres

The controlling academic milieu around me somewhat relaxed when I entered my non-religious high school. Although a strong intellectual bent still pervaded, freedom of expression and emotion held more sway. Rock music also entered my life in a significant way, and its viscosity further inspired my opening to emotion. In my junior year, I was captivated by the white Canadian rock trio Rush.⁴ The band's music conveyed a sense of power, and the lyrics employed an intellectual approach. Later in the decade, *Rolling Stone* critic Michael Azerrad would disparage Rush's "muscle-bound technique [and] quasi-profound lyrics," but I had not heard such a captivating blend in many songs before. Of the three band members, drummer and lyricist Neil Peart most engrossed me. His intense drumming technique, alongside his thought-provoking and affective words, epitomized a bridge between music's stirring expressiveness and its intellectual component. My buttoned-down religious schooling to that juncture had privileged the latter and buried the former. Peart inspired me to start playing the drums in that year, and my accompanying introduction to rock drumming reawoke the dormant "boomlay boom" rhythm I first had embodied in performing "The Congo" six years earlier.

The 1982 album *Signals* introduced me to Rush's music with its lead single "Subdivisions." This song caught my attention not only musically with its heavy and sophisticated interplay of guitar, synthesizer, and drums, but also with its lyrics. The title's double entendre refers to both suburbia and also social classifications that isolate people within it. The chorus spoke directly to my social plight at the time: "Subdivisions, in the high school halls, in the shopping malls, conform or be cast out . . . in the basement bars, in the backs of cars, be cool or be cast out." Here, just as with Hemingway's Santiago, I found solace with fellow

outcasts. Like with the Transcendentalists, the fact that these were fellow “geeky” white men also reinforced their appeal.

I explored Rush’s back catalog to fully unearth Peart’s artistry in both percussion and verse. Many of their songs concern resisting menacing forms of oppression, often contained within fantasy or science fiction settings. “The Necromancer” from 1975’s *Caress of Steel* heavily references the tyrannical wizard Sauron from J. R. R. Tolkien’s works and narrates a deliverance from the character’s dark rule. The epic “2112” from the 1976 album of the same name relates a bleak future where a totalitarian priesthood bans rock music, and a lone person, discovering an ancient electric guitar, rebels. On the 1981 release, *Moving Pictures*, “Red Barchetta” tells of the narrator escaping a dystopian government’s surveillance to enjoy the emotional—and illegal—thrill of driving an old sports car through the countryside. Peart’s lyrical topics clearly embrace the same rebellion against dehumanization and control as the Romantic poets I loved and, I see in retrospect, as Reed’s anti-Atonist *Mumbo Jumbo*.

Nowhere did Peart’s words and rhythms affect me as deeply as on the 18-minute-long title track of the 1978 album, *Hemispheres*.⁵ The lyrics explore the strife between Dionysus and Apollo, using as a conceit the alternate functions of the brain’s two sides. As notably employed in Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*, the former god represents freedom and emotion, while the latter personifies control and intellect. “They battled through the ages, but still neither force would yield,” bassist Geddy Lee sings, “The people were divided, every soul a battlefield.” The internal struggle, of course, manifests in the external world. Just as Peart capitalizes on the two meanings of *subdivisions*, here he uses the multiple denotations of the song’s title: “Looking down from Olympus on a world of doubt and fear, its surface splintered into sorry hemispheres.” Peart and his bandmates also illustrate this struggle musically, sometimes playing with abandon,

other times with restraint. The multi-movement piece concludes with an authorial move that compliments Reed's. Peart re-articulates an ancient mythic tradition, creating a new story in which the song's protagonist gains an apotheosis as Cygnus, the god of balance, bringing harmony to the dyadic forces.

Reed devotes a sizeable portion of *Mumbo Jumbo* to creating a similar "remythology," and at its core—like Peart—he employs two established and oppositional deities, Osiris and Set. Paralleling the archetypes of Apollo and Dionysus, these Egyptian gods represent the antagonistic concepts of control and freedom. Just as Nietzsche does, Reed seeks to locate these archetypal forces within human psychology and behavior. Jonathan Lewis asserts that Reed "employs this binary to show how humanity, and not the gods, creates and sustains barbarism and fascism to enslave and delimit the lives of other groups" (82). *Mumbo Jumbo*'s struggle between the emblematic deities, as in "Hemispheres," unfolds on both personal and social levels. Osiris spreads his message to other countries through a music and dance tour. He encourages people to dance, to connect with nature, and to love. Peart's Dionysus similarly proclaims, "I bring love to bring you solace . . . I bring laughter" as the people "danced and lived as brothers" after "the cities were abandoned and the forest echoed song." Set, jealous of his brother's popularity and more concerned with an agenda including "hard work to be done, countries to invade, [and] populations to subjugate," tricks Osiris into what appears to be a lethal trap (*Mumbo Jumbo* 163). Set establishes an iron rule thereafter and imposes draconian measures, including outlawing dancing and banning music—much as the priests do in "2112." Ultimately, "By establishing his own religion based upon Aton . . . he felt he would overcome the nature religion of Osiris" (174). Nevertheless, the irrepressible Osirian spirit lives on in, and Reed's

new myth—somewhat belatedly in the novel—gives exposition and framing to the story’s modern battles of the Atonists and Jes Grew.

As Reed narrates the “remyth,” he specifically introduces Dionysus into the arena of Osiris and Set’s conflict. Reed pictures Dionysus acting as choir director in Osiris’ travelling show. When Dionysus later comes to Greece, he “kept the faith of his school chum and home boy,” instructing the Greeks in Osirian ways (*Mumbo Jumbo* 168). Lewis dubs their shared musical trek “a modern rock tour” (85), and he further comments that Reed “figures rock music as a Neo-HooDoo and Osirian art form because it evolved from African and African-American musical styles and because it inspires people to move, to ‘shake things up’” (86). In fact, dancing, Jes Grew’s main symptom, links inextricably to rock and emotion. Robert Pattison suggests that in the rock ethos, “The ability to dance is the equivalent to the ability to feel. It is the ritual celebration of the sentient self imitating the Dionysian infinity” (185). Pattison does underline elsewhere the fact that rock, an undoubtedly white art form, appropriates from the black blues. Nevertheless, Reed’s remyth suggests that rock’s ability to activate Jes Grew across racial lines unwittingly honors Osiris and the archetypal need to balance control with freedom of expression. Under layers of whiteness, rock music still carries the Jes Grew infection, and Reed intends to awaken those like myself who readily overlook its true roots and its forgotten appropriation.⁶

Mumbo Jumbo’s dramatized struggle between head and heart provoked me to revisit the lyrics of “Hemispheres,” much as I had done with “The Congo.” Pondering Reed’s and Peart’s remyths in conjunction with Reed’s project, I came to an awakening realization. In 1983 “Hemispheres,” as well as Rush’s music in general, had enacted what Reed describes as “the call to come forth and declare [my] soul to the glory of rock ’n’ roll” (*Mumbo Jumbo* 168). I

crystalized a complex memory: that, as a junior in high school, I had needed to embrace some form of Osirian liberation; I had decided to throw off the layers of Setian training and enclosure; and the “boomlay boom” was to be a major portion of that path. Drumming simply inflamed my smoldering Jes Grew infection. My percussive journey was yet to take me closer to Reed’s vision.

I began taking drum lessons from a white man named Jim. I asked him to teach me rock techniques, of course with a bias towards those of Neil Peart. Over time, though, he began giving me recordings *outside* of groups and styles I had heard before, all in the name of “opening up” my musicality. As I listened for the first time to non-white genres such as Jack DeJohnette’s jazz, and world music such as Bob Marley’s reggae and Flora Purim’s samba, I was moved by their more deeply African-based rhythms. I now realize these experiences of the Other’s music infected me deeper with Jes Grew. Additionally, as I began to feel these rhythms and then work with them, I realized that Peart himself was integrating them into his music. I perceived Jes Grew’s influence on my idol, without naming it as such. For example, I detected reggae and swing in “New World Man” and “Digital Man” on *Signals*, and samba in his live drum solo. The more Jim “fed the loas” with different world music styles, the more convinced I grew that my path in drumming was to involve jazz, reggae, funk, and samba, as well as rock. Artists that played in this merged genre, jazz fusion, caught my ear the most—bands such as Weather Report and Spyro Gyra. Unfortunately, the showband I had joined at my high school did not cover any jazz or fusion styles—we were much more engrossed in pieces such as John Williams’ “Imperial March.” When I applied to Duke University, I still wanted to keep drumming in a group setting but not in a show or marching band. For that reason, I placed jazz band as my extracurricular interest on my application. Because I had indicated this, the university sent information along

with my acceptance letter about scheduling an audition with Paul Jeffrey, director of the Duke University Jazz Ensemble.

Playing on the Plantation: Jazz in Color

As I walked into the audition in the fall of 1984, I had no idea who Paul Jeffrey was and, to be honest, no idea what constituted “real” jazz. I did approach what I was entering with the basic understanding that LeRoi Jones posits in “The Myth of a ‘Negro Literature,’” that “blues and jazz have been the only consistent exhibitors of ‘Negritude’ in formal American culture” (125). It therefore came as no surprise when I stepped into his office that Paul Jeffrey was black. For eighteen years of my sheltered white life, however, I had never been under the tutelage of a black person. My “boomlay boom” had arrived in my life overwhelmingly through white folks—Vachel Lindsay, Mrs. Walker, Neil Peart, and Jim. Still, I felt no racial tension in the introduction to Jeffrey; my nerves in the moment solely arose from my anxiety about showing my drumming skills. That fact was about to change.

I first completed the technical part of the audition in which I had to sight read some drum music. A conversation about jazz ensued that clearly drew a line between my pretension to jazz and authentic jazz: a discussion about what artists I enjoyed. When I enthused over jazz fusion as my main interest, a sour look crossed Jeffrey’s face. He offhandedly commented that jazz musicians had “taught those guys how to do it.” He asked, “What about Ellington, Blakey, or Basie?” “Sure,” I replied blankly, “I like all kinds of jazz.” When he offered Miles Davis as an example of a jazz musician who played both traditional and fusion, I responded, “I’ll have to check him out.” Jeffrey spoke a bit, clearly unimpressed with my naiveté about true jazz. At this juncture of our initial cross-racial meeting, however, I pinned his “personal attack” for my musical tastes on his race. As a component of jazz fusion, rock music—I reasoned in the

moment—was more a “white folks thing.” I imagined that Jeffrey must have racial prejudice against the mingling of white music with black. When to my surprise Jeffrey told me I had passed the audition, he informed me that I was the fourth-string drummer, with three other young white men in the rotation ahead of me. I also discovered that Jeffrey was a saxophonist of some stature in the jazz world, a world I was stumbling into blindly.

Jeffrey’s anti-rock grievances did not stop at my audition. The Duke Jazz Ensemble, like the university student body in general, was majority white. The drummers, bassist, guitarist, and pianist all clearly enjoyed rock and pop, as we often jammed on music in those styles before and after official rehearsal. Jeffrey’s objection to those genres was both spoken and emoted when he happened to be within earshot of the playing. I distinctly remember a conversation with the other freshman drummer about Jeffrey’s disapproval of anything non-jazz in which I remarked, “He probably hates the Beatles.” I said this overtly to indicate he couldn’t appreciate the creativity of the Liverpool musicians, but I definitely underlaid it with the subtext that they were white and he was not. Now that the *Jes Grew* with which I had become infected had met its natural venue for expression, I was encountering years of layered resistance to the strain. Infinitely more significant, though, was the fact that I was facing the reality of my kyriarchal privilege and biases.

In my critical reanalysis of my perceptions of Jeffrey, I proceed from a viewpoint inspired by Reed’s concept of Atonism. Jeffrey, an accomplished jazz artist, was born in Harlem in 1933. Emerging from the heart of the Renaissance, he worked to earn his musical way in a dangerous, racist, white world. Reed would describe him as a *Jes Grew* carrier hemmed in by Atonist systems. While touring with B.B. King in the late 1950s, for example, Jeffrey recounts, “We were in Birmingham, and they shot at the Gaston Motel, where we were staying. We went

to the bus station to get something to eat, and I didn't know you had to go around the back. These guys grabbed me" (Ratliff). In 1983 he came to Duke to direct the Jazz Ensemble in the somewhat improved, but still racially troubled, South. Duke's white president, Terry Sanford, while progressive on race issues himself, oversaw a campus which Henry Louis Gates, Jr., becoming a Duke professor the year after I graduated, would disparagingly call "the Plantation." What *really* was Jeffrey's expected role on the metaphorical "Plantation"? To what white, kyriarchal racist agenda did he cater in order to obtain and keep his job? In other words, who were the Atonists in Jeffrey's world there?

One aspect of this line of questioning relates to my story. With four drummers and a pecking order among us, I had quite limited my performance time; however, I did consistently play on the song "Moon River." In reflecting about this fact, it occurred to me that a white man, Henry Mancini, wrote it. I also recall the Ensemble playing another white man-penned tune—Chuck Mangione's "The Children of Sanchez," a song which I would categorize as fusion. Was Jeffrey told to throw in some songs to appeal and cater to his majority white audience and possible benefactors? Was his reaction to his band members' music simply a response to his years of inability to escape Setian control?

I also want to propose an even deeper reading of Jeffrey's resistance and oppressive commentary, reassessed in the light of former "Plantation" resident Gates' theories. Gates categorizes *Mumbo Jumbo* overall as an act of signifying. In Reed's terms, it does an Osirian dance in the face of a Setian scowl. Gates posits that "signifying can also be employed to *reverse* or *undermine* pretense or even one's opinion about one's own status" ("Blackness" 691). Perhaps Jeffrey's act of undervaluing my musical heroes was actually signifying, primarily a way to undermine my pretense that I could simply *play* jazz without experiencing something emotional

and multi-layered. Jeffrey's apparent stance might, in reality, have exemplified an act of both clever trickstering and kindness, a performance with a hidden but positive agenda.

Because of my tension with Jeffrey over his supposed disapproval of my white music, I channeled my emotion into my playing, in a way to prove myself to the band leader *as a white man* in a jazz band. While I would not describe my psychic state as what Bell would indicate as *loa* possession, my initial frustration and irritation at Jeffrey, definitely egoic, eventually led to what Bell describes as “the ego . . . thrown out of the saddle of the brain-stem” (97). I played *as if* a man possessed. My fellow drummers remarked on the intensity and clarity of my work, as Jeffrey brought my playing to a new and better level. LeRoi Jones (as Amiri Bakara) remarks in his article “Jazz and the White Critic” that “Negro Music is essentially the expression of an attitude . . . about the world, and only secondarily about the way music is made. The white jazz musician came to understand this attitude” (138). Perhaps, just perhaps, my feelings of marginalization and the attempt to “prove myself” in some small way mirrored what black jazz musicians have felt in overwhelming doses in white culture. This feeling consequently propelled me to “lose myself” in the experience, if ever so briefly, of jazz as an *expression of feeling* and not as a genre. So, to encapsulate, what Jeffrey did for me was to signify upon the oppression blacks have historically felt about “their” music, his Osirian purpose being lovingly Setian—or, in Peart's imagining, to provoke the needed Dionysian emotion in me via craftily-imposed Apollonian control.

I left the Duke Jazz Ensemble after my freshman year, partly because I was bothered by what I had perceived as Jeffrey's attitude and partly because my playing time was so limited by the four-drummer roster. The former excuse is racist, and the latter is petulant, by my current reckoning.⁷ While I did continue with the “boomlay boom” during my summer vacations, Osiris

found other avenues to manifest Jes Grew within me at Duke. Nevertheless, the presence of Set always lingered and delimited most aspects of how it “grew.” I attended the Duke Reggae Festival, swaying to the Caribbean rhythms live that I had only heard on recordings, yet it was sponsored by the majority white Interfraternity Council. My sophomore year, I purchased an electric guitar, just as Madison Smartt Bell did, continuing to let the Blues and Rock loas possess me; however, I bought it at a white-male owned store with majority white male patrons in Durham. I continued listening to an even wider assortment of world music, and I loved the musicians’ artistry and the Osirian beats. Nevertheless, I now understand that my ability to even have their recordings was constructed via the efforts of white, patriarchal colonialism and capitalism—King Leopold plundering the musical Congo, if you will. The commodification of the musicians’ talents chiefly profited that kyriarchal system, not the players themselves.

As far as Jes Grew finding any kind of text to fully summon its power, I neither had courses with professors, nor read any literature by authors, of color. I was working in an overwhelmingly white milieu, with much attendant Atonism—indeed, Gates’ “Plantation.” In my entire four-year experience, Paul Jeffrey was the sole person of color I studied under, and he himself, as previously mentioned, probably heavily circumscribed by “Plantation” values at Duke. Not being around him, and not having any critically conscious influence, my “Other” way of being got lost for the moment. My Jes Grew could not find a text that truly activated it, and the infection lay mostly dormant. Nevertheless, as Reed warns about Jes Grew’s disappearances, “We will miss it for a while but it will come back, and when it returns we will see that it never left” (*Mumbo Jumbo* 204). Reed and Lindsay agree on one fact: hoodoo lingers.

Picture This: Racial Politics, National and Local

The real inception of finding “the text,” the litany that the liturgy of “The Congo” had implanted, came my senior year at Duke. In addition to my musical ventures—I was playing guitar and drumming in a rock band—I had taken up photography as an artistic outlet. I note that Reed has strategically placed photos and paintings throughout *Mumbo Jumbo*, revering his own pronouncement that “at the time of Osiris every man was an artist and every artist a priest” (164). I had joined the *Duke Chronicle* newspaper staff as a day photography editor, solely responsible for non-sports pictures one day a week. That year, my white editor-in-chief gave me two photo assignments that, in hindsight, changed my life and brought me in touch with, if not a printed text, at least a verbal one.



Fig. 1. My photograph of Jesse Jackson announcing his candidacy for President. Duke University

Libraries Digital Collection. *The Chronicle*, Vol. 83, No. 32, 12 Oct. 1987.

The first came when I was sent to Raleigh on Saturday, October 10, 1987, where Jesse Jackson announced his bid for President (see fig. 1). In a milieu not dissimilar to my “Plantation,” he declared, “It is indeed prophetic that we announce our candidacy here in the South” (28). Here was the lone voice daring to cry into the silence, trying to resist the Atonism of the country as exemplified in ongoing Southern oppression. As if in opposition to the white

pronouncement in the “The Congo” that “*Never again* will [Mumbo-Jumbo] hoo-doo you” (131; emphasis added), Jackson declared/signified, “If I can be elected president, *never again* will women have doubts. *Never again* will race, sex, or class threaten the American dream” (32; emphasis added). When interrupted in a quiet moment by a delighted yell of “Jesse!” from the crowd, Jackson responded, not with Setian control, but with Osirian encouragement: a smile, a wave, and a “Right on! He’s in the Spirit!”—to thunderous applause. Although I was aligned with the Republican party at the time, Jackson’s words moved me in a profound way, in hindsight because they were working as part of the Reedian “text” being found. My photograph of Jackson graced the cover of *The Chronicle* the following Monday morning, a picture I treasure even more today than I did then, due to seeing the import of the moment from pondering Reed’s novel.



Fig. 2. My photograph of William Chafe and Melvin Peters discussing Duke’s Black Faculty Hiring Practices. Duke University Libraries Digital Collection. *The Chronicle* Vol. 83, No. 138 (14 Apr. 1988).

The second time in which my artist/priest photography role met with the anti-Atonist text occurred just weeks before my graduation from Duke, on Wednesday, April 13, 1988. I was sent to a discussion led by Drs. William Chafe and Melvin Peters concerning the issue of black faculty hiring practices (see fig. 2). Peters, a black associate religion professor, spoke as cogently and passionately as Jackson had about racial issues, here advocating the need to balance out the color of Duke's faculty. This time, however, rather than the lone voice, two were heard; the other was from a white man, Chafe. Accordingly, I witnessed an example of anti-Atonist solidarity across difference, of two ostensibly varied people supporting a united Osirian cause. Most importantly, to hear the text from Chafe's mouth planted another seed alongside of all the ones already mentioned. A white man could join in a conversation about social justice and ally with those wishing to resist any group who seeks to "delimit the lives of other groups," as Lewis observes. After reading *Mumbo Jumbo*, I e-mailed Peters to introduce myself, twenty-eight years to the day after that panel and my photo of it. I revealed myself as an audience member in that room and told him the impact that single discussion had on me. In his response, he called Chafe "a tireless soldier in the battle for fairness and equity in America." So, while Peters' words resonated with me through the years, Chafe's alliance with him left an equal impression.

Shifty Healers: Mediation at the Border

Blending Reed's hoodoo vision with Gates' work on *Mumbo Jumbo*, I transition here to the theme of the shaman that saturates this dissertation's autocritographical inquiries. I imagine allies such as Peters, Chafe—and even someone like me—as figures like PaPa LaBas, *Mumbo Jumbo*'s "noonday HooDoo" protagonist. This "obeah man" works tirelessly as the artist/shaman resisting Atonism and trying to assist Jes Grew in reaching its text. Reed describes LaBas as a "two-headed" character, and Gates presents LaBas as expressing the indeterminacy and plurality

of the Signifying Monkey. Gates affirms LaBas's West African roots in the trickster deity Esu-Elegbara, whom he describes as "master of that elusive, mystical barrier that separates the divine world from the profane" (*Signifying Monkey* 26). The position as liminal border-crosser joins the trickster with the shaman in this and other traditions. Carl Jung recognizes that "there is something of the trickster in the character of the shaman," and the trickster's "universality is co-extensive, so to speak, with that of shamanism" ("Trickster Figure" 196). The trickster's ability to change form, or to think in "two-headed" ways, allows shaman-like freedom to move across whatever border separates worlds. When one focuses on the dissimilar qualities of yin versus yang, one easily forgets that, within a given side, a bit of the other/Other is needed. Two-headedness, the ability to work between opposing forces, is critical for both trickster and shaman; however, just as with the yin-yang symbol, they cannot be completely invested in either side of the duality.

Gates' theory rests on the concept of signifying as both the specific practice of African American vernacular and the broader Saussurean theory⁸ of words representing ideas. Just as words act as both attached yet sliding nexuses between signifier and signified, so the trickster takes on the slippery role of being two, if not more, things at once. Too much locking down—of meaning, religious expression, or identity, for example—represses the Osirian essence; too much freedom leads to utter chaos. The trickster/shaman role of go-between emerges as PaPa LaBas's "Work"⁹ with other neo-hoodoo practitioners of helping Jes Grew resist out-of-balance Atonism. Gates suggests, "As tricksters they are mediators, and their mediations are tricks" (*Signifying Monkey* 26). Conventional detectives, for example, base their crime-solving on complete rationality, whereas trickster LaBas resists that Setian notion: "[Empirical] Evidence? . . . I dream about it, I feel it, I use my 2 heads. My knockings" (*Mumbo Jumbo* 25). Moreover, while

LaBas champions the distinctly African origins and manifestations of Jes Grew, he realizes that he cannot be limiting even as he promotes that tradition. When one of LaBas's associates calls him out for strict adherence to Africanism, the trickster adjusts: "Stunned by Berbelang's attack on him as an 'anachronism,' he has introduced some Yoga techniques" (50) at the Mumbo Jumbo Cathedral. If I may use Gloria Anzaldúa's words as a *modus operandi* here for the adaptive shaman/trickster, she or he works by "developing a tolerance for ambiguity" (*Borderlands*).¹⁰

PaPa LaBas could represent Reed himself functioning as a liminal trickster figure who ultimately works toward the shaman's goal of societal healing. Kameelah Martin Samuel contends that *Mumbo Jumbo* itself "is situated at a metaphorical crossroads" in which it "occupies a space prone to trickery and illusion." She calls attention to Eshu's role as god of the crossroads where "ambiguity and duality" reign. Reed, Samuel continues, "does not reconcile [being both American and Negro], but occupies the liminal space between the two" (110). Indeed, while the novel heavily criticizes Judeo-Christian restrictiveness, it does not simply call for its overthrow by "merely replacing one dominant discourse with another" (116). In fact, Samuel argues that Reed's choice of Haitian spirits such as Legba and Erzulie, signified into Papa LaBas and his assistant Earline, indicates how syncretization, or what I might call "sliding association," fits this larger project of working in the liminal space across borders of religious traditions. To achieve Reed's articulated goal to "humble Judeo-Christian culture" (*Shrovetide* 133), he must both strongly push his African-rooted NeoHoodoo aesthetic and also not completely condemn any other tradition.

This concept of pulling hard to one side of a binary in order to re-attain balance is the single-most stunning memory I have of Melvin Peters' words at Duke. As with many small-

minded whites, I felt at the time the concept of affirmative action to be unfair. I reasoned that, if people do not “deserve” a job, no matter their race, they should not have it. Peters beautifully articulated his counterpoint: you cannot have a system that has been completely unfair for hundreds of years, and then simply say, “Well, now we’re even. It’s an even playing field. Hire ‘fairly’ from here on out.” Just as Reed uses the conceit of Atonism and conspiratorial groups such as the Knights Templar to explicate historical and systemic bias, Peters succinctly reminded me that “deserving” hasn’t been a part of hiring for centuries. We cannot passively wait for the system to regain equilibrium. Tireless allies like Peters and Chafe must work to attain it, sometimes through means that whites such as myself would call unfair. Until kyriarchy is humbled, much as Reed would do to Judeo-Christian culture, the shamans must “trick the system” to jumpstart the healing process.

For tricksters like PaPa LaBas, humor also works as an enlivening quality that counters the deadening effects of rigid systems. Sharon A. Jessee asserts about Jes Grew’s protean energy, “The primary condition for maintaining that desired personal energy is laughter” (127). The humorous quality of Jes Grew allows Reed to cast his protagonist, as much as himself, in the trickster role in *Mumbo Jumbo*. Jessee enumerates parody, lampoon, pastiche, satire, and caricature as comedic techniques Reed uses in *Mumbo Jumbo*. Gates suggests that the *Mu’tafikah*, NeoHoodoo’s military wing, puns on “motherfucker,” and the Wallflower Order parodies the Ivy League (*Signifying Monkey* 241). Even terms such as *wordplay* and Derrida’s *freeplay* of signifiers¹¹ allude to non-serious aspects of language’s, and therefore life’s, trickiness. All aspects of word ambiguities, from symbols and metaphors to puns and double entendres, are forms of signifying. At the broader level, all Jes Grew-provoked humor that Reed says is “electric as life and is charged by ebullience and ecstasy” balances out the excess yin of

“decomposing” stricture (*Mumbo Jumbo* 6). The previous examples of allies contribute to this assessment. Jesse Jackson, in the middle of his earnest campaign announcement, used an audience member’s outburst to smile and crack a joke, yet his “in the Spirit” comment also morphed, even for just a moment, the Raleigh Civic Center into a black church.¹² Within the serious milieu of calling out racial injustice on the “Plantation,” Melvin Peters has a bit of a smile in the picture I took of him. Perhaps if I had remained with Paul Jeffrey long enough, his own humorous side would have emerged once I and my white peers were *feeling* jazz to his satisfaction.

I, too, have embodied the quality of the “Signifying Monkey.” Synchronistically at the same time I first read Henry Louis Gates’ work in 2009, he was appearing in the news for his unjust arrest.¹³ As I recount in my essay co-written with Gary L. Lemons, I found myself in need of a haircut after teaching one day:

In my first career developing software, I looked quite the “Bill Gates” part with my Oxford shirts, dress slacks, and glasses. Although I have changed careers [to teaching], I still regularly wear this uniform of habit. I recently walked into my usual barber shop, one that is in a multi-racial/multi-cultural section of Tampa, and one of the Black barbers called out, “Hey, it’s Bill Gates!” Without hesitation, I replied, “Man, I’ve got more in common with Henry Louis Gates than Bill Gates!” (529-530)

Even at the time, I knew my spontaneous wordplay on which-Gates-am-I had more than just laughter as its goal. I felt myself in a “now let us shift” moment. While I was still performing the upper class white businessman, inside I was beginning to cross a boundary. I wanted to humorously deflect my white label and *signify*—here I use the meaning “indicate”—my budding alliance with the Other. I wanted to openly show across difference, particularly at that time and

in that location, solidarity with this fellow scholar being arrested for “going to your own home while black,” as Al Sharpton called it (Smith).¹⁴ This was my first clear embodiment of what I would call the trickster spirit in the name of border crossing, an Anzaldúan “shift.”

Other junctures in my life after this one have suggested this shamanic trickster archetype. The essay that Gary L. Lemons and I cowrote bears the main title “Brothers of the Soul.” The title evinces ambiguity: how can two men from different mothers, and most pointedly of two different racial identities, be brothers? The essay would appear as a chapter in *Feminist Solidarity at the Crossroads*, and although editors Lemons and Kim Marie Vaz did not consciously intend it, I am struck by the connection of “crossroads” to the trickster Eshu. In my master’s thesis *Circling Back Home: A Lifelong Odyssey into Feminism*, I adopt mythology, in the manner of Reed and Peart, to cast myself as Odysseus, one of the most renowned tricksters. I narrate how I stealthily “infiltrated” the very same Episcopal school I attended where kyriarchy trained me in order to teach literature in a critically conscious way—taking further “The Work” Mrs. Walker began when I was a student there in fourth grade.

Leaping forward to the present (2018) moment, even this dissertation represents a border-crossing and hint of tricksterism. To some, the autocritographical approach might seem more at home in a creative non-fiction writing environment. Those who read it expecting unadulterated, left-hemisphere literary criticism will find they have been duped, just as will be those who expect PaPa LaBas to be, in Richard Swope’s words, the “classic detective seek[ing] the certain path, the one right way.” My work therefore stands in the tradition of and in solidarity with those who traverse the social frontiers, learning to “live in a spatial amalgamation on the borderline, for it is only in this space that Reed’s vision of multiculturalism can be realized and differences

embraced” (626). As Jackson emphasized in his candidacy speech, we must “in a diverse region of people, customs, and traditions . . . find common ground” (28).

In my revisitation of *Mumbo Jumbo* for this dissertation, I find remarkable the web of events that led me to this autocritographical juncture. Some of these events just “happened” to me: having female teachers who chose for their class to read “The Congo” or *Mumbo Jumbo*; being on photography duty to attend key critically conscious events. Others were by choice: taking up the drums, guitar, and photography; going to Duke University and auditioning for the Duke Jazz Ensemble. But to attempt to split these occurrences neatly into “controlled” or “uncontrolled” bespeaks too much Setian overdetermination on my part. I, like the “Glory”/“Boom”-mixing worshipers in “The Congo,” like the Cygnus character of “Hemispheres,” like the two-headed Pa LaBas character in *Mumbo Jumbo*, must ultimately seek balance. Sometimes to achieve balance, as Peters argued, the scales must be forced in the direction they have not been. Sometimes to evoke more Osiris, as Jeffrey did with me, one needs to invoke more Set. Ultimately, as Bell concludes in his essay, Jes Grew “comes not only to empower black culture but to liberate white culture—from its acutely anxious, self-suffocating stringencies” (102). So, in the name of reversing the overwhelmingly controlling, monolithic ideologies I have been immersed and trained in since birth, I will declare that my life, my circumstances, and my choices “jes grew” naturally. The opportunity to autocritographically reflect on the parts that reading *Mumbo Jumbo* has offered is, as Bell discerns, a liberatory occasion.

Meeting with “the text” of *Mumbo Jumbo*, reading it and much accompanying critical material, and reflecting on the infection that started with “The Congo” has allowed me to properly frame my journey into music, into critical consciousness, and into a greater

understanding of the binaries operating in the world and within me. Along this course, the powers of whiteness, which Reed labels as Setian or Atonist, have controlled and filtered my experiences—hegemony has tried to hedge me in. Beyond Lindsay’s whiteness, my English and drum teachers, my school and band peers, and Rush were all white. Artists like Marley and Purim performed on white record labels. Paul Jeffrey, William Chafe, Melvin Peters, Henry Louis Gates, and *The Chronicle* all served under the auspices of a majority white Duke administration. As John Kevin Young reveals in “Black Page, White Copyright: The Politics of Print in Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo*,” Reed himself encountered controlling white publishing companies and editors along his career. Nevertheless, all of these individuals, to one extent or another, carried Jes Grew, and through means both Osirian and Setian, infected me and affected me in many more areas than music.

No matter how primitivist or reductionist Lindsay’s intention behind the mantra “Mumbo-Jumbo will hoo-doo you,” Reed echoes that exact sentiment in the penultimate line of his book of the same title: “What goes around comes around” (218). Life out of balance will always attempt correction. I believe that the only hope for a more balanced, just, and peaceful world is much more hoodoo, spread by those shamanic tricksters who work to produce that balance. Only their border-crossing “Work” can effect a symbiosis between the hemispheres, a fusion of the genres, solidarity across—but not erasing—the subdivisions, and a Cygnusian balance between the Setian/Apollonian and the Osirian/Dionysian.

Notes

1. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., provides the following simple definition for *signify*: “To rename is to revise, and to revise is to Signify” (*Signifying Monkey* 18). It is, however, a more complex term encompassing several meanings for black folks. The Signifying Monkey, a

trickster figure from African-based religions, utilizes playful language and rhetoric to produce effects that bamboozle straightforward, orderly, and serious communication.

2. See Reed's "Neo-Hoodoo Manifesto/The Neo-Hoodoo Aesthetic." Reed declares of its multicultural roots, "Neo-Hoodoo borrows from Ancient Egyptians . . . Neo-Hoodoo borrows from Haiti African and South America. Neo-Hoodoo comes in all styles and moods" (418-419).

3. While the technical definition of *loa* is a deity in Voodoo, it can extend to the psychological concept of an archetypal principal, need, or expression.

4. From Toronto, Canada, Rush consisted of members Geddy Lee (vocals, bass guitar, keyboards), Alex Lifeson (guitar), and Neil Peart (drums and percussion).

5. The full name of the track is "Cygnus X-1 Book II: Hemispheres." The previous album, *A Farewell to Kings* (1977), ended with the track "Cygnus X-1 Book I: The Voyage." In it, a space traveler aims his ship into the black hole Cygnus X-1, hoping to be transported through an astral portal.

6. Reed is very clear that he worries more about recognition than appropriation in an interview with Wajahat Ali. In the area of music, he laments, "I can't understand why Blacks can't achieve royalty status when it comes to the forms they have largely created . . . [why t]here's a White King of Rock 'n' Roll, there's a White King of Jazz." When asked if whites creating novels about black experience is problematic, Reed asserts, "Of course not! . . . I'm not against white writers writing about Blacks as long as they are . . . objective." Thus, I argue that part of Reed's aim in *Mumbo Jumbo* is to re-cognize, aggrandize, and objectivize historical African culture and ideology for white Americans.

7. Evan Ratliff does opine in his 1996 article on Jeffrey, "A forceful personality like Jeffrey's is bound to attract some students while turning others off."

8. Ferdinand de Saussure first theorizes about the operation of the signifier, signified, and sign in *Course in General Linguistics* (1916). Jacques Lacan introduces the term *sliding signifier* in his 1957 essay “The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason since Freud.”

9. Reed capitalizes “The Work” in *Mumbo Jumbo* to refer to the anti-Atonist endeavors of PaPa LaBas and his associates.

10. Gloria Anzaldúa writes of the new *mestiza* that she “copes by learning a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity . . . She has a plural personality, she operates in pluralistic mode” (*Borderlands/La Frontera* 101).

11. Jacques Derrida’s “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences” (1966) introduces the term *freeplay* in discussing how meaning is always a fluid concept.

12. I must point here to the parallel between the syncretized civic center/church and Lindsay’s blurring of the lines between the camp-meeting and African religious practices. In fact, throughout the poem when he repeats “THEN I SAW THE CONGO . . .”, the narrator manifests a certain shaman-like trance state that transports him to Africa even as he encounters hoodoo still alive in America.

13. On July 16, 2009, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., was arrested at his home in Cambridge, Massachusetts, after a woman reported him as trying to break into it. In a shamanic gesture of mediation and healing, President Barack Obama later organized a reconciliatory meeting of Gates and the arresting officer, Sgt. James Crowley.

14. Sharpton’s full quote is, ““This arrest is indicative of, at best, police abuse of power, or, at worst, the highest example of racial profiling I have seen. I have heard of driving while black and even shopping while black but now even going to your own home while black is a new low in police community affairs” (Smith).

CONCLUSION: Standing at the Crossroads, Travelling Both Roads

As a way of closing this dissertation, I now refer back to the event I write about in its introduction: attending August Wilson's play *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. Foremost in my memory, Mujahid Abdul-Rashid and Calvin M. Thompson utterly moved me when they so compellingly performed Act 1, Scene 4 as Walker Bynum and Herald Loomis, respectively. In it, conjure man Bynum "walks" former slave Loomis through the latter's traumatic memories of the Middle Passage. I wept profusely watching it and even today become emotional remembering it. After the curtain call, I approached the two actors still in an affected state where I imagined I was going to speak to them as much as to Loomis and Bynum. I said to Abdul-Rashid, "You really *did* conjure something tonight." Of course, I was playing a bit like the signifying monkey, punning on his shamanic role. I also was speaking a greater truth—his performance that evening had provoked ruminations that would eventually consolidate and evince this dissertation's theme. Additionally, that scene expresses compellingly so many aspects of how both autocritography and the shaman archetype cofunction that it serves as my touchstone in concluding.

I first wish to emphasize that, just as for Loomis as a fictional individual, the national injury of the American slavery system lies at the root of a collective need for real-world healing. Remarkably, autocritography also springs from this root. The lineage of critically-conscious American memoir writing, blended with analysis and contextualized for social critique, began with the black slave narratives of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries. This tradition evolved through milestone works such as *The Interesting Narrative and the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, The African* (1789); *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American*

Slave (1845); and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs (1861). Each interweaves personal accounts of intersectional oppression with theorizing on social, religious, philosophical, and political themes. True, inspiring the empathy of their majority white readers and evoking solidarity across identity difference in the name of human rights stood as the authors' primary intentions. Still, one should not discount the writers' motive of self-recovery, as bell hooks describes in *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*. These authors wrote, just as Loomis speaks, to become psychically whole again.

The "talking cure" and, in autocritography's case, the "writing cure" are not new. As the Scottish proverb states, "Confession is good for the soul," and the need for psychological healing using it still resonates just as much today as in bygone eras. As an illustration, in Chapter Two I present Lawrence Broer's contention that both Ernest Hemingway and Kurt Vonnegut utilized submerged memoir for their own sanative purposes. Autocritography, however, innovatively stands at the juncture of unconcealed memoir and critically-conscious analysis. It also straddles the psychological and the social. By interrogating social power and hierarchy—both of the oppressor and the oppressed, as Freire designates—it considers the external conditions of life. In addressing the causes and effects of those conditions in the psyche, it involves the inner life of the human soul. Freire asserts, "As the oppressors dehumanize others and violate their rights, they themselves become dehumanized" (*Pedagogy* 42). In both cases, whether one perpetrates oppression or undergoes it, psychic wounding inevitably results to both parties. The oppressed are all too aware of this harm but rarely meet an opportunity to deeply reflect on then articulate it. For oppressors, a potent force must first rouse them from their nescience of the pervasive yet invisible kyriarchy which sociologist Allan G. Johnson describes as "the symbolic sea we swim in and the air we breathe" (41). Then, they also must articulate both their complicity with and

suffering from its dehumanization. Moreover, as I exhibit in this dissertation, they must render visible the masked processes by which kyriarchy operates.

The crossing of the border from present tense into memory needs a guide—a shaman to help catalyze the healing yet to come—in the same way Bynum works for Loomis and as Gary L. Lemons functioned for me. This person stands as both a loving witness to the unfolding recollection process and an encouraging guide when the process gets stuck. When Bynum walks with Loomis into Herald’s memories, he keeps asking, “What you done seen, Herald Loomis? . . . Tell me what you seen . . . And then, what happened, Herald Loomis?” (81-82). Just as Bynum does with Loomis, I also clearly remember Lemons, in the moments after students would read aloud their autocritographical papers in the Feminist Theory course, saying, “And then? . . . And so?” He was always urging us to go deeper. His questions to me in the dialogic essay we co-wrote reveal this same persistent, loving determination to explore further the memories and realizations within the autocritographical moment. The soul needs a psychopomp to guide it from one world to another, especially into the “underworld” of memory. The shaman figure operates in that role for the one needing healing.

The great divine psychopomps, such as Hermes in the Greek tradition and Elegguá/Papa LaBas/Eshu in the Yoruban, extend past being guides to also playing tricksters. They need to be (at least) two-headed to operate between worlds. Moreover, they sometimes must “trick” their ward into an Anzaldúan shift. Beyond those two cultures, I recall a story the Buddha taught in the Lotus Sutra of a father whose house catches fire with his children inside. When he urgently explains the logic of fleeing the danger, the young ones are too enamored with their toys to listen. The father then promises them better toys outside. Once the children rush out, they see the danger in which they had previously been, unknowingly. The father then bestows on them even

greater gifts than he had promised. Just as in this parable, I also was “tricked” in the 2009 Feminist Theory class Lemons taught. I came to that course hoping for a “toy”—an intellectual grasp of just another philosophy for my scholarly analytical toolbox, merely for me to “play with” because academic publishers deem it marketable. I did not know that greater gifts awaited and that a soul-transforming process would occur. Yet here I am, forever grateful for my professorial shaman, the “trick” he worked, and the shift he walked my soul through as a psychopomp.

Like the soul guide empowering the perspective shift to a new world, autocritography itself capacitates discovering patterns of similarity in its approach to memoir and literature. The reader may have noted above and in the preceding chapters that I consistently intersperse the concept of “just as . . . so also” throughout my analyses. For example, in Chapter One I correlate the Santerían *asiento* ritual that I find submerged in García’s *The Agüero Sisters* with the initiatory qualities of my Feminist Theory class. This practice of viewing events, people, or things as potential representations of or symbols for something else enriches autocritography’s capacity to work beyond narrow, rational thinking by bridging overtly disparate concepts. Arrangements of connection emerge with a shift of perspective. Metaphor, symbol, and allegory hence may become the autocritographer’s stock-in-trade. This figurative component relates to the moment in *Joe Turner* where Loomis tells Bynum what he sees in his ecstatic trance: “I seen these bones rise up out of the water. Rise up and begin to walk on top of it” (81). Of course, these represent the dehumanized slaves having crossed in the Middle Passage, but Bynum never works as an interpreter of the symbols. He simply affirms Loomis in his vision, knowing that the power of the signifiers works far more than their mundane signs. As an occurrence of figuration in published autocritography, Michael Awkward’s technique in *Scenes of Instruction: A Memoir*

of ending each section with a graduation permits these ceremonies to emblemize larger rites of passage in his life. Even his slippery use of the word *instruction* allows him to slide between discussing the narrow concept of purely academic schooling and the grander learning “scenes,” especially related to the teachings of his mother, that extend beyond classrooms and libraries. Pattern recognition and usage are thus central techniques in autocritography.

The capability to bridge symbolically across ostensible difference, as seen in these examples, arises from autocritography’s shamanic potential. I most regularly use the word *difference* to indicate not just the contrast between, say, a graduate course and a Santería ritual, but I employ it mainly in the sense of identity difference. For example, in Chapter One I closely identify Reina’s patchwork identity with my own condition. A skeptical reader might protest that for a white, American, middle-class male to so closely identify with someone so *different*—a Cuban, working class woman of color, fictional though she may be—epitomizes identity appropriation. This person would object that doing so elides or romanticizes difference and perpetuates the kyriarchal habit of erasing the Other and the herstory/history of oppression in the name of maintaining white male hegemonic power. On the contrary, autocritography vigorously incorporates history and difference; the writer employing it always remembers the labels and categories that cause hierarchies to exist and reproduce. The respectful “world traveler” never forgets that she or he is not a permanent resident of the places visited. Nevertheless, this healing sojourner also seeks the commonalities, those crossroads where alliance and coalition can take place. A simple instance of this would be my preference to be labeled as a pro-feminist/pro-womanist man rather than simply a feminist/womanist. By using *feminist*, I venerate the origins of the tradition as it began with female identity. In the “universalist” spirit of Alice Walker’s *womanist*, I expand to the broader intersectional view of one who “*Loves the Folk*” of any gender

identification (xii). In adding *pro-* and *man*, I both affirm my stance as an ally and extend it with the still-radical concept that men would invest themselves in the kyriarchy-dismantling projects of feminism and womanism. I stand at the crossroads and honor both roads.

I must also mention here the potential for archetype to help bridge difference(s). If I continue with my example of García's novel, the concept of identity as being non-unified and constructed from various external sources embodies one such archetypal pattern. One can find it in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and in Shelley Jackson's hypertextual literary work *Patchwork Girl*. It exists in Walt Whitman's poetic assertion "I am large, I contain multitudes" (1326), in W. E. B. Du Bois' concept of double consciousness, and Gloria Anzaldúa's mestiza consciousness theory. The same facet of transpersonal, transhistorical patterning also holds true for the rite of initiation, a paradigmatic activity that can underlie both a Caribbean sacred ritual and a university course's radical feminist/womanist pedagogical approach. Archetypal correspondence furthermore allows syncretization and creolization to work, such as how they manifest as intertwining aspects of the Yoruban Changó and the Catholic Santa Barbara within Santería. Obviously, these overlapping qualities are never exact—each conception retains its unique qualities. But in their commonalities, where the crossroads meet, world travel becomes possible.

I here purposely introduce a metaphor to both exhibit doing so in a metacognitive way and clarify my meaning. Near the American Stage Theatre in St. Petersburg where I saw *Joe Turner* sits the Salvador Dalí Museum. The gallery houses one of my favorites works: *Gala Contemplating the Mediterranean Sea which at Twenty Meters Becomes the Portrait of Abraham Lincoln—Homage to Rothko* (1976). The image appears exactly as the title suggests. At a close viewing distance, Dalí's wife, Gala, looks out of an aperture onto a cloudy, watery expanse. As

the viewer steps farther back from the painting, its other aspects, large blocks surrounding the window, combine with Gala to slowly morph into Lincoln's distinctive face, hair, and beard. I find, even at twenty meters, that squinting helps me see Lincoln even more clearly. I wish now to "metaphorize" the viewing of this painting to make my point. Things that appear to have one meaning when viewed from one perspective may become something else when seen from another. When Gloria Anzaldúa admonishes "Now let us shift," she advocates the person who "operates in pluralistic mode" in mestiza consciousness ("Shift" 79). At the metaphorical twenty meters, the shamanic autocritographer "squints" to enter such a mode of vision.

I wish to highlight one last feature of autocritography in these concluding remarks: the role of empathetic imagination. It relates to this idea of "squinting." Seeing oneself reflected in a work of literature comes with varying degrees of difficulty. For a contemporary reader to make the imaginative leap into, say, the character Frado in Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig*, the closeness of the reader's and the character's identity areas serves immensely. The more that a reader's identity construction overlaps Frado's, the closer the experience of injustice and kyriarchal power structures. In the case of a white, middle-class hetero-male such as myself, however, this reader-character leap "appears" more difficult, especially in trying to bridge the experience gap between oppressor and oppressed. Often when I have pondered "Where am I?" in a text, I see myself in the role of the oppressor. In fact, I might have more easily approached Chapter Three delineating how I resonate with Mrs. Bellmont, Frado's cruel white mistress. I have called out such resonances with kyriarchal figures in my graduate coursework's writing.

The main aspect of my identity-conglomeration helping me to empathize with those who suffer oppression has been my alternative to heteronormative, kyriarchal, and masculinist ideas of manhood. On the surface, this fact might appear problematic: doesn't kyriarchy value even a

subordinated masculinity more than any form of femininity? This type of questioning again launches into the quandary of comparing suffering. In the pragmatic realm, however, there was enough critical mass in my struggle with male exclusion to at least begin an empathetic process. The rest of that process arises from the other non-rational quality I have practiced: imagination, and more pointedly, imagination driven by studying literature. William S. Hamrick cites Paul Ricoeur to highlight “the [imaginative] way the reader of a story assumes the roles held by the characters” (qtd. in Hamrick 125). Even more to my thematic point of shamanic world-travelling, Ricoeur asserts, “Reading, as the milieu in which the transfer between the *world of the narrative* . . . and the *world of the reader* takes place, constitutes a privileged place and bond for the affection of the reading subject” (emphasis added). A conscientizing reader adopts the shamanic role of crossing into another world and opening to the possibility of affect. Clearly, affective narratives moved me deeply in my resonance with Frado’s illness in *Our Nig* and in Santiago’s outcast position in *The Old Man and the Sea*. Emotion, heightened by Abdul-Rashid’s and Thompson’s performances, likewise worked as part of my entering into *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*. In each case, I then expanded on those entry points to find other connections, fostered by a critical consciousness of both human difference and sameness as represented in literary study. My point here is that, despite varying degrees of any given reader having weathered Otherness and its accompanying oppression, compelling literature—read autocritographically—can inspire the empathetic imagination into that “privileged place and bond.” At that crossroads, worlds can intersect, solidarity across difference can form, and healing can actuate.

I cannot overemphasize here in closing the power of autocritography as a strategic writing mode and praxis both for the individual scholar and as a pedagogical technique for students. I contend that this genre must find an expanded role in academia. As writers and

teachers, we academics create influence via both the example of our scholarly output and our teaching methods. Just as Gary L. Lemons instructed and guided me in the academic employment of autocritography, so I am advancing it in the undergraduate literature classrooms where I teach. As I demonstrate in this dissertation, I believe scholars and teachers who personally and critically engage autocritography will consequently fill the role of a Herald Loomis, using memory to illuminate truths of the psychological and the social—or, per the feminist motto, “the personal and the political.” Moreover, they will actuate their own healing from kyriarchal dehumanization, as oppressor, oppressed, or both. Then, having also engendered their own self recovery path, these scholars and teachers can bring autocritography to their research projects and classrooms. They will then find themselves in the role of a Walker Bynum and serve as loving witnesses and encouragers of students experiencing the same process. Suffusing all of these unfoldings, the work of the shaman endures, traveling across borders of difference in the literary and literal worlds. We all can, to some extent, become what Mircea Eliade has called “technicians of the sacred” to bring both personal and societal healing, justice, and balance.

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