

ATABEY

L05

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PREFACE



Fig 1. Atabey, the supreme goddess of the Tainos.

This paper contextualizes my own associations with dreams as vessels of self-reflection, idea generation, and ancestral communication. Given the importance of memory as a source for the manifest content of dreams, I will reflect on topics such as my own relationship with dreams, memory, ancestral connection, and diasporic identity, acknowledging my own relationship to and displacement from my Afro-Caribbean roots. This paper will also investigate my relationship to cinema, especially

within the context of dreaming, as well as two cinematic case studies that will identify motifs that help communicate the language of dreams to viewers. This is intended to provide a foundation for discussing the artwork component of my thesis, which seeks to explore my artistic, cultural, and spiritual relationships with dream spaces through immersive cinema.

Inspired by Carl Jung's *Red Book*, I have loosely written this so that dreams and stories are interspersed and interwoven with theory, analysis, and interpretations.

INTRODUCTION

I am listening now with all of my senses, as if the whole universe might exist just to teach me more about love. I listen to strangers, I listen to random invitations, I listen to criticisms, I listen to my body, I listen to my creativity and to the artists who inspire me, I listen to elders, I listen to my dreams and the dreams and the books I am reading. I notice that the more I pay attention, the more I see order, clear messages, patterns, and invitations in the small or seemingly random things that happen in my life. In all these ways, I meditate on love. This practice lets me connect to the part of myself that is divine, aligned with the universe, and the place within myself where I can be a conduit for spiritual truth—I don't know what else to call it. What comes forth, as lessons and realizations and beliefs—doesn't feel political, or even about organizing. It feels like spirit leading me to the truth.¹

— adrienne maree brown

¹ brown, adrienne maree. *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (AK Press, 2017), 10-11.

On the same day I began my graduate education at UCLA, Hurricane Maria struck the island of Puerto Rico, causing catastrophic damage, the worst electrical blackout in U.S. history, and an estimated 2,975 lives lost.^{2 3} It was a devastating, horrible time for all Puerto Ricans and their families. My grandmother Frances was living in Puerto Rico, along with cousins, aunts, and uncles, and I was constantly checking in with my mother as we tried to contact family on the island and make sure they were OK. My grandmother had been living in a nursing home near my Aunt Darlene, and her health was rapidly worsening as power was nonexistent and food and water became rapidly scarce. After a couple of weeks, her condition had become critical.

My family sprang into action, and with the help of a lot of people including a signal boosting retweet from Lin Manuel Miranda, they were able to get her evacuated off the island to Michigan where she could receive the medical attention she needed and be under my mother and father's care.⁴ The time since then has been challenging for both my grandmother and my parents. My grandmother is unable to speak, her body stiff and unable to move, and she has been suffering from a wound that will not heal for almost two years. She can still hear, and she still understands, making it all the more difficult to imagine what she might be going through and the burden it places on my mother. Only through my mother's tireless care has my grandmother's condition remained stable.

² Fenn, Larry. "Puerto Rico Issues New Data on Hurricane Maria Deaths." *NBC News*, June 13, 2018. <https://www.nbcnews.com/health/health-news/puerto-rico-issues-new-data-hurricane-maria-deaths-n882816>.

³ Baldwin, Sarah Lynch, and David Begnaud. "Hurricane Maria Caused an Estimated 2,975 Deaths in Puerto Rico, New Study Finds." *CBS News*, August 28, 2018. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/hurricane-maria-death-toll-puerto-rico-2975-killed-by-storm-study-finds/>.

⁴ Miranda, Lin Manuel. Twitter Post. October 1, 2017, 5:11 PM. https://twitter.com/Lin_Manuel/status/914613742951960577

This entire ordeal has been a wakeup call for me and has sparked a realization that I wish I had come to sooner in life. Unable to talk with and learn from my last living grandparent, I faced the reality that there is so much about a generation of my family — my grandparents, my direct ancestors — that is forever gone. No longer could I ask my grandparents questions, learn recipes, discover the music they listened to... listen to stories.

I could, however, talk with and learn from my parents, and as I considered how I would approach my thesis work, I decided to make this the primary goal of my work: to learn about my grandparents through my parents, and in turn deepen my relationship with my parents. Through this work, I also hope to offer a space of contemplation and conversation for others who long for family, find power in dreams and memories of ancestors, and can identify with the simultaneous joy and isolation that comes from being of a diaspora.

In the past six months, my parents and I asked each other questions, collected stories, conducted interviews, had conversations, shared photos and videos, and expressed love and appreciation. From this process, I wanted to create something that uplifted my parents and grandparents and expressed some of my own diasporic story and identity. These exchanges with my parents and the consideration of my own relationship with family, diaspora, and identity are reflected in the stories, theories, and artwork that follow.

THE FIRST VISIT

My father was extremely close with his mother, Gloria. I can tell from talking to him that she was the type of person who truly and unconditionally loved her children. Any time one of them walked into a room, her eyes would sparkle, and her joy would light up the room. Ill with rheumatic fever as a child, she suffered from various health complications throughout most of her life, experiencing mitral valve issues and several strokes while my father was still a child. As a nine year old, my dad would brave the train by himself across New York City to visit her every day while she was recovering from one of her surgeries. Her family adored her, and despite being in chronic pain, she seemed to always have a positive disposition, making sure her children were fed, cared for, and loved. My own faint memories are of her smiling, radiating warmth and love for her family.

When she joined the ancestors in 1988, I was four years old and barely old enough to really understand death, grief, and mourning. I remember traveling from Michigan to New York with my parents to attend her funeral, and it was one of the only times I had ever seen my father cry. He had gone from having daily contact with her while living in New York to feeling painfully separated, and having her pass away while he lived so far was almost unbearable for him at the time.

Shortly after our return home to Michigan from the funeral in New York, I had a vivid dream in which she visited me:

My grandmother and I were in a room with cherry wood paneling and trim. She sat in a wooden rocking chair, covered by a blanket. She was resting slightly to the right of me, and a small room divider stood to the left of me. The room didn't quite have walls; beyond the wood panels was a deep, Egyptian blue expanse that stretched infinitely into the distance. Despite being a boundless space, the setting was intimate, warm, and personal. I remember talking with her for a while, feeling as if time had frozen in this special place, that it existed outside of my usual perception of temporality. She asked how my father was doing, and when I described his sadness, she asked me to tell him she was happy and so proud of him, that she was at peace. Her presence communicated a deep contentment, and she exuded a comfort and wisdom that was palpable, even to my four year old self.

I woke up from this dream with a clear understanding that I had dreamt, but I also knew that this dream was special. I had really spoken with my grandmother, and she had asked me to pass on a message to my father. I hopped up from my bed and ran through the hallway into my parents' room, the early morning rays of sunlight spilling through the window blinds. As I hoisted my small frame up onto my parents' large bed, they asked me why I was so excited, and I shared with them my experience. Having discussed this memory with my parents decades later, my father described feeling at first surprised by my recollection, and then content in a way he had not until that point. My mother

remembers that morning as being a turning point in my father's grief. Hearing about my dream, about my grandmother's message for my father, let his mind be at peace knowing she was at rest.

A HISTORY OF DREAMS

Humankind's fascination with dreams can be traced back to the earliest eras of our existence. Mesopotamian civilization was the first to develop writing and the first from which literary texts of any kind remain, dating back to the late 3rd millennium B.C.E. These early texts contain the earliest recorded dream in history from Dumuzi of Uruk, a Sumerian king and deity:⁵

A dream! My sister, listen to my dream: Rushes are torn out for me; rushes keep growing for me. A single growing reed shakes its head for me. A twin reed, one is removed from me. Tall trees in the forest are uprooted by themselves for me. Water is poured over my pure hearth. The bottom of my pure churn drops away. My pure drinking cup is torn down from the peg where it hung. My shepherd's crook has disappeared from me. An eagle seizes a lamb from the sheepfold. A falcon catches a sparrow on the reed fence. My goats drag their lapis lazuli beards in the dust for me.

⁵ Curtiss Hoffman, "Dumuzi's Dream: Dream Analysis in Ancient Mesopotamia," *Dreaming* 14, no. 4 (2004): 241.

*My male sheep scratch the earth with thick legs for me. The churn lies on its side, no milk is poured. The cup lies on its side; Dumuzi lives no more. The sheepfold is given to the winds.*⁶

This dream account is intriguing to me on several levels. On one hand, it is a vivid, almost visceral vision, a passage which reminds me of my own dream journals and their fragments of various figures, symbols, characters, and interactions. This dream also exists within a cycle of Sumerian myths, the stories of Inanna and Dumuzi. Read as poetry, it takes on a hybrid form of both oneirocritic recall and poetic literature, demonstrating a certain rhythmic cadence and hypnotic repetition that have since become hallmarks of literature. As with countless myths that have followed, it has been likely filtered through the deft hand of a storyteller, or many storytellers, as is often the case with matters of oral and written narrative tradition.⁷ It may come as no surprise, then, that this dream is also accompanied by the first known recorded dream interpretation. Dumuzi's dream so startled him that he turned to his sister Geshtin-anna to interpret his dream, who saw it as a predictive vision and advised him to hide from the imminent danger of Inanna's summoned demons, a fate from which he was ultimately unable to escape after he failed to mourn Inanna's death. In many ways, Dumuzi's dream lays the foundation for an age old legacy, blurring lines between the oneiric and the real, between mythology and historical record.

⁶ Bendt Alster, *Dumuzi's Dream : Aspects of Oral Poetry in a Sumerian Myth* (Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1972), 55-57.

⁷ Alster, *Dumuzi's Dream*, 43.

As is demonstrated by Dumuzi's dream, there exists a long cultural legacy of dreams and dream worlds that begins at the dawn of recorded human history and is manifested within virtually every society to date. Dreams have arguably been a catalyst for some of the most profound cornerstones in Western thought, from Descartes' questioning of reality as a means of introducing rationalism into philosophy to Freud's use of dreams to explore the unconscious mind and establish the field of psychoanalysis. And before that, many indigenous and non-European cultures have had very deeply rooted relationships with dreaming that date back millennia. Fourth century BC Chinese philosopher Chiiang Tzu asked, "If I wake from a dream that I am a butterfly, am I a man who has dreamed he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming that I am a man?"⁸

⁸ Kracke, Waud H. "Cultural Aspects of Dreaming." In *Encyclopedia of Sleep and Dreams* (Santa Barbara, Calif: Greenwood, 2012), 151-55.

The Anishinaabe people believe that the physical and dreamed world are one, that they are equally real.⁹ Garry Raven, an Anishinaabe leader from Hollow Water First Nation, writes:

Dreams

Remember your dreams

They tell you what you need to do

Ask elders what your dreams mean

You will learn more about

Choices

Meaning in Your Life

The Contributions you should make¹⁰

Anishinaabe elder Tobasonakwut Kineu refers to this as *ando pawachige n*, which means “seek your dream, live your dream, understand your dream, and move forward with your dream... It points to the fact that when I go into the forest, often I realize I have been here before, although I know full well that I have never before set foot in this particular piece of land. This particular piece of forest reminds me of a different time.” He continues, “when I go to sleep at night, I may have a situation that

⁹ Anthony Shaftor, *Dream Singers: The African American Way with Dreams* (Wiley, 2010), Kindle edition, Chapter 3; Simpson, Leanne. “Stories, Dreams, and Ceremonies: Anishinaabe Ways of Learning.” Tribal College Journal of American Indian Higher Education (blog), May 15, 2000. <https://tribalcollegejournal.org/stories-dreams-ceremonies-anishinaabe-ways-learning/>.

¹⁰ Riewe, Rick, and Jill Oakes, eds. *Human Ecology: Issues in the North, Vol. 1* (Edmonton: CCI Press, 1992), 53.

I cannot comprehend. I make offerings, and invariably the choices I have to make to resolve the problem become clear.”¹¹

Dreams and dream spaces are the domain of the unconscious, where our waking inhibitions relinquish control to our boundlessly imaginative and associative sleeping minds, but it's this consideration that dreams are mental, emotional, and spiritual experiences just as real as those of the waking mind that so resonates with me. Reflecting on my formative years, I find myself increasingly interested in better understanding my relationship with dreams, their communicative power, and the influence they can have on my creative practice. As an active dreamer since childhood, many of my strongest memories are of dreams, some dating back to when I was as young as four or five years old. I have come to epiphanous technical solutions otherwise elusive to my waking thoughts and have found myself dropped in medias res into surreal, non-sequitur narrative journeys that give critical insight into my thoughts, feelings, and inclinations. I have on several occasions carried lucid conversations with ancestors. It is this last aspect of my dreams that has especially sparked such personal intrigue and exploration.

In many African spiritual beliefs, dreaming is seen as a direct channel of communication from the ancestors to the living, and African American drama professor and Yoruba priest Songadina Ifatunji describes the Yoruba spiritual belief that “when a person dies, part of even the funeral rite, part

¹¹ Oakes, Jill, Rick Riewe, Kathy Kinew, and Elaine Maloney, eds. *Sacred Lands: Aboriginal World Views, Claims, and Conflicts* (Edmonton: Canadian Circumpolar Institute Press, 1998), 33.

of the traditional thing that is said is, ‘From now on, we will see you in our dreams.’”¹² It is no coincidence, then, that I recently learned my mother’s father believed in Espiritismo, that his mother was a well known medium in her village, and that my mother’s sister was once developing skills of receiving spirits. While Espiritismo is not to be confused with Santeria, both are syntheses of Catholicism, the ancient Yoruba religion Ifa, and Taíno spiritual beliefs that occurred when enslaved Yorubans and indigenous people were no longer safe to practice their faiths under Spanish rule of Puerto Rico beginning in the late 14th century.¹³ My family referred to it as “the school of spiritual guidance,” and a core belief is that when one dies, their spirit sometimes doesn’t know how to live in the next realm and needs help finding its way. A devout Catholic, my grandmother felt it all had to do with the devil and wanted no part of it, and so my grandfather abstained from taking part in Espiritismo. He did, however, tell my mother that when he died he would make his spirit known to her. Though my mother said she never really felt his presence after he joined the ancestors, her sister Darlene, my aunt, has; and so have I.

¹² Shafton, *Dream Singer*, 18.

¹³ Betancourt, Sarah. “The Religion No One Talks About: My Search For Answers in an Old Caribbean Faith.” *Longreads* (blog), March 30, 2018. <https://longreads.com/2018/03/30/the-religion-no-one-talks-about-my-search-for-answers-in-an-old-caribbean-faith/>.

ANCESTRAL COMMUNICATION

At the 2016 Allied Media Conference, I attended the “Ghost Writing: Black Cosmic Mythology” session led by Whitney French and Carrie Love. I remember eagerly walking into the classroom before the start of the session, and I sat down as they were explaining that only people who considered themselves Black and of the African diaspora were allowed to be in the room. They asked anyone who did not identify in this way to please respectfully exit the room in order to preserve the room as a safe space. As a person of color, I understood and appreciated this, and I also felt an immense amount of inner conflict, questioning whether or not I belonged in the room. My family on both sides are from Puerto Rico, a major hub of the Transatlantic slave trade, and I was well aware of our mixed ancestry that includes West Africans, Spaniards, indigenous Taíno people, and more. While I knew that I am technically Afro-Caribbean, I was certain that no one had ever looked at me and identified me as Black, and I had never before presented myself as such. In fact, I have for so long felt so disconnected from my Puerto Rican identity that I would just tell people I’m from Michigan, and the most at home I have ever felt outside of with my immediate family is within the Black community.

Confused and uncomfortable, I got up from my seat and started to shuffle towards the door, only to hear the entire room exclaim in unison, “Where are you going?!” I explained that I wasn’t sure if I belonged in the room, and when they asked me to share my ancestry, I said that I was Puerto Rican. People immediately told me to return to my seat, with someone humorously exclaiming, “You better sit your ass back down!” This was a rare moment of acceptance, both by a community of people within which I had always intellectually known I exist, and by myself, acknowledging my own Blackness and all of the complexity that comes with Afro-Latinx ancestry.

Feeling already emotional and vulnerable, I sat down and committed myself to being fully present as Whitney and Carrie began leading the group through a ritual of ancestral communication. We created an altar for our ancestors, and they guided us through what I can best describe as a trance or meditation over the course of about an hour, asking us to call out to our ancestors with our hearts and minds; I did, though I was uncertain of who would respond, if anyone. While deep within this alternate consciousness, I came into a dream-like state, and I saw myself riding in a spacecraft as it was leaving the Earth. I was the lone passenger, and I felt myself running from the planet’s many hostilities, flying deep into the emptiness of space to live between the distant stars. As I started to fall into a despair of loneliness, I turned to find my grandfather Rafael, my mother’s father, sitting beside me, looking serenely out the window.

“It’s beautiful,” he said. I agreed, but he could see my pain. He looked at me with a warm smile and placed his hand on my shoulder. A few moments passed as we sat in silent appreciation of each

other. I dropped my head slightly. “I just want to feel at home somewhere, grandpa. I want to feel part of a community, like I have roots and a culture I can identify with. I feel so lost sometimes.” His eyes gleamed, and I could feel his loving energy.

“Carlito, your ancestors, we pass through you. Our shared experiences guide your empathy. We trust in you to help shape a just future.” He paused, continuing, “Your family are those who resonate with this same energy.”

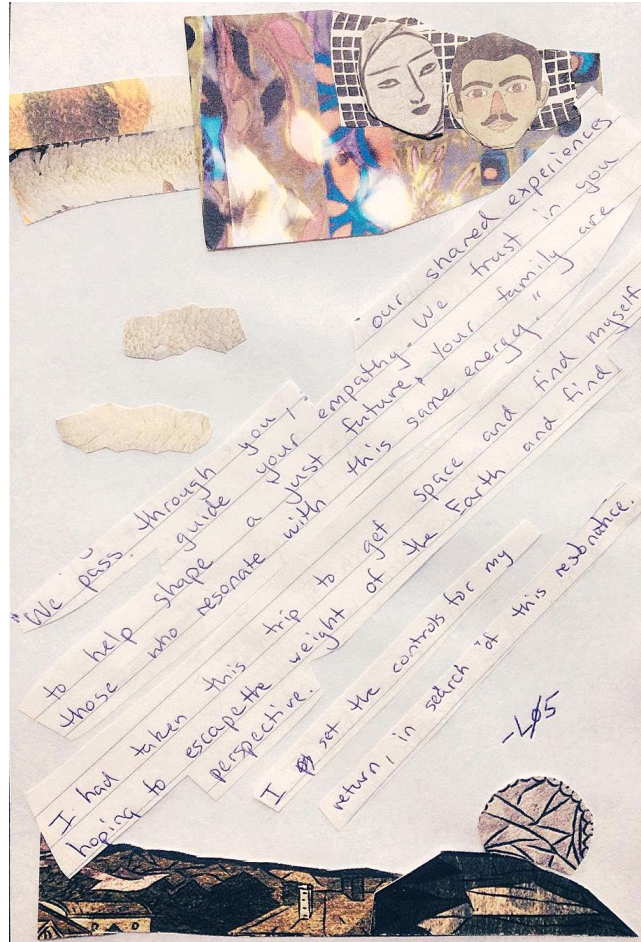


Fig 2. Collage created directly after the dream experience.

I felt myself crying, realizing that I had so much to be thankful for, so many people with whom I had felt that resonant energy of which he spoke. I sat there for a little while longer, staring out the ship's window, taking in the wondrous view of the curving Earth, the stars, the moon, so happy to be in my grandfather's magical presence once more. I missed him.

And then I knew it was time. I set the controls for my return, in search of this resonance, and I felt myself come back towards the ground. When I opened my eyes from this waking dream, there

were tears streaming down my face, and I felt as if I had just reached into the depths of my soul and into another plane of existence. I immediately wrote down as much as I could remember from the experience and created a collage of it. When I shared this story with my mother, she cried in astonishment, happy tears. She said those are exactly the words my grandfather would have used to describe a cultivated community, a family of like minds.

With each of these ancestral dream experiences, the link between each of my grandparents and me felt undeniably real. I felt more in touch with them in those moments than I do with most people in my waking life. It's as if my blood and flesh had possessed some space time signature that enabled me to communicate with my family across time, across planes of consciousness, from the physical to the metaphysical. I have meditated on the spiritual existence of my ancestors and have felt very real emotions of fear and joy, love and pain. Through my dreams I have heard music and seen patterns, learning of symbols and rhythms before I was ever aware of their cultural and historical context.

DIASPORIC IDENTITY

I'm ethnically Puerto Rican, which is to say my grandparents, my parents' parents on both sides, were born and raised on the island. They moved to New York City when they were in their teenage and early adult years during a period in the mid-20th century described as "The Great Migration." As a result of the Great Depression and World War II, tens of thousands of Puerto Ricans migrated to New York City as the Island's economy transformed from a monocultural plantation economy into a platform for export-production in factories.¹⁴ Their experiences echo those of countless other immigrants, working extremely hard at jobs including sewing, insurance sales, carpentry, and social work so they could start families and aspire to the American Dream of creating a better future for their descendants.

My parents, both born in New York, grew up as Nuyoricans in the Bronx during what was arguably one of the most tumultuous times in the borough's history, coming of age in the late 60s and 70s. At the peak of New York City government's war on the Bronx, mayoral official Roger Starr

¹⁴ "Puerto Rican Migration in the 1950s." Accessed May 24, 2019.
<http://lcw.lehman.edu/lehman/depts/latinampuertorican/latinoweb/PuertoRico/1950s.htm>.

articulated a policy of “planned shrinkage” in which health, fire, police, sanitation, and transit services would be removed from the inner-cities until all the people that remained had to leave, too—or be left behind.¹⁵ Despite the many struggles of Bronx residents during this time, there also existed a rich cultural bloom that saw the creation and rise of innovative musical styles such as Hip Hop and Salsa. By no accident, my parents were heavily involved in the salsa music scene from the 60s into the early 80s. My father was a gifted drummer and played in his family’s band, *White Cloud*, which performed locally for years throughout New York City.¹⁶ My mother’s siblings sometimes contributed as guest instrumentalists and vocalists in various bands including *White Cloud*.



Fig 3. Video still of my father playing drums in *White Cloud* circa 1975.

¹⁵ Fitch, Robert, *The Assassination of New York* (London: Verso, 1993), vii-viii.

¹⁶ The band was first named *The Toa Alta Kids* after the town from which my father’s parents Juan and Gloria came. The band later used the name *Nubes Blancas*, and as they started to play gigs in English, performed under the name *White Cloud*.

My parents' Bronx was often as difficult to live in as it was culturally rich and inspiring, and as they ventured into New York City professional life, they encountered a good deal of pre-judgement and discrimination for being "Puerto Ricans from the Bronx." When I was born in 1984, they sought to raise me and my future siblings elsewhere and had dreams of owning a home with a backyard where their children could go outside and play without fear of falling prey to street life. To do this in New York at the time felt nearly impossible to them. While they were surrounded by friends and family in New York City, space was both rare and expensive, and they were forced to look past the city limits. My parents came to visit Michigan in the early 80s, where my mother's Aunt Catin and Uncle Joe were residing in Dearborn, about a half mile beyond the border of Detroit. Encouraged by the career prospects in Metro Detroit, they were able to find a small, affordable ranch-style home with a cute little yard in Dearborn Heights.

This home became my frame of reference for the first 13 years of my life. My neighborhood felt warm, and I made friends from the surrounding blocks. We would play soccer and roller hockey in the street, co-create imaginative role playing games in each others' yards, and geek out about the latest video games. My friend group consisted of a fairly diverse mix of first, second, and third generation immigrant families, mainly of European and Middle Eastern descent. I would visit my Titi Catin and Uncle Joe often, and for the first five years of my childhood, I would stay with them during the day while my parents both worked. Besides Titi Catin, Uncle Joe, and my immediate family, I never really had the opportunity to live around other Latinx people during my childhood, let alone other Puerto Ricans. In an effort to have me better learn English and assimilate into the American educational and

professional ecosystems, my parents chose not to teach me Spanish. The many studies that have proven the benefits of multilingual childhood education did not exist at the time. I'm certain this, combined with a general feeling of isolation from Latinx culture, has contributed to the partial disconnect I feel when I contemplate my Puerto Rican identity.

It was clear from an early age that I was definitely not "white." I was usually one of the darker kids in my class and was treated as such, typically through microaggressions (I of course did not identify them as such until later in life). It wasn't until my family moved to Milford, Michigan to be nearer to my father's job at the GM Proving Grounds that I experienced hostility in a way that actually felt threatening to my physical and emotional safety. It was in this distant, Southeast Michigan suburb that I learned of racist terms for people of color, was beaten up by skinheads and Neo-Nazis, saw the only Black student in our school threatened with nooses, and became all too familiar with the sight of Confederate flags, whether during sports practices or, more astoundingly, behind my eighth grade social studies teacher's desk.

I spent most of my high school years either hiding or feeling invisible. In a school population of around 2200, I was one of five non-white students. While this often rendered me a target, most of the time I felt more like a ghost. I imagined myself as a small bioluminescent pond fish swimming in a sea of ignorance, too smothered by my surroundings to be able to shine. The notion of "whiteness" I encountered in high school was new to me and deeply unsettling. While growing up in Dearborn, most of my friends seemed to identify with their families' immigrant cultures: Italian, Lebanese,

German, Egyptian, Polish, etc. That is not to say I wasn't aware of constructs around race and ethnicity, I just never remember being introduced to the concept of "whiteness." However, in Milford it seemed that when asked about their ethnic or cultural background, most people simply identified as "white." What's more, many were proud to either fully embrace white supremacy as tradition or tacitly endorse it by simply watching me go through hell and saying or doing nothing. The Confederate flag, for instance, was considered by many to be "white tradition."

I have reflected on these experiences with my parents, and they have expressed to me the guilt they felt at bringing my siblings and me to live in a place where we would feel isolated and persecuted. I fully acknowledge the complexity of trying to create a better future for your children, only to realize that as a parent there will always be factors beyond your control, dimensions to a situation that you may not and cannot have foreseen. I have always felt that each decision they made was with unconditional love for my siblings and me, striving to push the tides of progress and possibility one more step forward. In some ways, my experiences in Milford fortified me with the defense mechanisms and social tools to navigate the challenges inherent in higher education and professional settings so often steeped in systemic white supremacy.

When I finally escaped Milford and went to study at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, my sheltered self felt as if I had stepped into a diverse utopia. I was around other people of color who weren't my immediate family for the first time in my young adult life, specifically Black and Latinx people. I unfortunately felt very othered by the Latinx community for not speaking Spanish,

not being able to dance salsa, not knowing how to cook certain meals... not being “Latinx enough.” As described earlier, these are issues with which I have struggled for years, the unfortunate byproduct of my own insecurities about the authenticity of my relationship to Puerto Rico and more broadly to the assimilatory term that is Latinx culture.

It wasn’t until I started experimenting with artistic expression as an adult that I began to better understand myself within cultural and ethnic contexts. Starting in my late teens in college and continuing into my twenties, I found love and inspiration in Hip Hop and R&B music and dance. It was as if they awakened a dormant muscle memory, familiar to my soul, felt in my dreams, yearning to be active once again. Exploration of melody, harmony, and rhythm gave me a channel through which to communicate my own diasporic experience and better understand the foundations of Black and Afro-Caribbean culture from which I began to draw knowledge and inspiration. I studied the history of Hip Hop and learned more about its history in the Bronx. For the first time, I felt like I could grasp the environment and conditions in which my parents came of age, the challenges they experienced, the wellspring of creativity and culture that was their home. Hip Hop also gave me an initial framework to explore and learn about music production, poetry and lyricism, visual art, improvisation, dance and movement, social awareness and activism. While my relationship with Hip Hop has inevitably morphed over time, I still identify it as a catalyst for my artistic and personal growth and core to my polymathic drive to master the elements.¹⁷

¹⁷ The five elements of Hip Hop are often recognized as DJing, MCing, Breaking, Graffiti, and Knowledge of Self.



Fig 4. Me, dance battling at the 2006 Detroit Electronic Music Festival in Hart Plaza.

DJ Lynnée Denise coined the term "DJ Scholarship" to explain DJ culture as a mix-mode research practice, both performative and subversive in its ability to shape and define social experiences, shifting the public perception of the role of a DJ from being a purveyor of party music to an archivist, cultural worker, and information specialist who assesses, collects, preserves, and provides access to music determined to have long-term value.¹⁸ While I am not a DJ, Lynnée's reframing of the role of DJ as being not only an artist and performer but a researcher and cultural worker deeply resonates with

¹⁸ Denise, Lynnée. "Bio." DJ Lynnée Denise. Accessed June 2, 2019. <http://www.djlynneedenise.com/bio>.

me. Through studying “sample culture” as it manifests in Hip Hop music, dance, and visual arts, I began to better understand the propagation of knowledge and history and in turn contextualize my own cultural and diasporic identity.

I am a second generation Puerto Rican living in the mainland United States, the child of two Nuyoricans who lived in the Bronx during the birth of Salsa and Hip Hop. I am a Southeast Michigan native who came of age steeped in Detroit Hip Hop and Techno. And, like many Millennials, I am a hybrid child of a media rich, internet-connected world. These streams of identity are the contexts within which my waking self experiences life and synthesizes creative and cultural contributions to the world.

ONEIRIC CINEMA

Talking about dreams is like talking about movies, since the cinema uses the language of dreams: Years can pass in a second, and you can hop from one place to another. It's a language made of image. And in the real cinema, every object and every light means something, as in a dream.¹⁹

— Federico Fellini



Fig 5. Watching a movie and beginning to build a new “world”, 1996.

¹⁹ Cott, Jonathan. “Fellini’s Language of Dreams.” *Rolling Stone*, May 10, 1984.

Throughout my life, I have always connected movies with dreams. As a child, I spent thousands of hours in my basement watching animated features and sci-fi epics, enthralled with film's ability to collapse time and space with reality and unreality through the manipulation of light and sound. I may not have seen myself visually represented on-screen, but it didn't limit me from dreaming big. My younger siblings and I would create our own imaginary "movies," building out small, fictional worlds with LEGOs, K'NEX, Construx, Erector sets, and any other building toys we could get our hands on, and we populated these worlds with brilliant, adventure-seeking scientists, artists, engineers, doctors, astronauts, superheroes, and extraterrestrials. We watched well worn VHS tapes of our favorite movies while playing out our own narratives, improvising our own "scenes," projecting ourselves onto imagined characters, and developing nascent skills as amateur writers, directors, voice actors, and puppeteers. The basement felt magical, a place where we could safely create stories and worlds illuminated by the CRT glow.



Fig 6. Waking Life

It wasn't until over a decade later that I saw *Waking Life* for the first time, which had a profound impact on my relationship with dreams and my understanding of how cinema can be used to communicate dream and memory spaces.²⁰ *Waking Life* was my first formal introduction to the concept of lucid dreaming, and I became enveloped by a personal study of dreams, using the film as a starting point from which to perform my own research. I began recording dream journals to extend my dream recall and improve my ability to lucidly dream, even using some of the methods described in *Waking Life* to develop my awareness of existing within dream states. I have not only learned more about my fears, desires, and relationships by studying my dreams, but I have also been able to identify distinct personal dream types, each with its own thematic leanings and aesthetics. The taxonomy is as follows:

Relational

Imagery and settings are secondary to people and characters. Not often vibrant in color, but they possess an intensity in lighting. Usually having to do with interpersonal relationships, whether with known friends or people with whom I have never before conversed. Close friends tend to have recurring appearances in these dreams, especially if we've had a recent interaction or if I'm contemplating our relationship.

²⁰ *Waking Life*. Directed by Richard Linklater. (2001; Los Angeles, CA: 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2002), DVD.

Fear/Paranoia

Visually, these dreams are often grayscale or very stark with high contrast visuals: film noir. I often have an increased awareness of who or what is an antagonizing force, and I frequently feel trapped within a repetition of obstacles or physical encounters until the point of an anxiety-induced awakening.

Phantastic²¹

Vivid, imaginative dreams that tend to venture into the realm of non sequitur fantasy. My notes from dreams of this type tend to be written in sentence fragments or phrases, like I am riffing between illuminated memory fragments; the recall process is much more excited and frenetic than in other types. These dreams seem to represent the brilliantly unencumbered wanderings of my mind and imagination as it processes a wealth of interrelating thoughts. They are experientially and sensorially akin to a mashup/remix, montage, or “experimental film”.

²¹ When creating a loose taxonomy for categorizing my dreams, I chose “phantastic” as an elision of “fantastic” and “phantasmic,” which felt like an appropriately comprehensive way of referring to my dreams of this type with a single word.

Lucid/Powered

Within this state I have varying levels of lucidity and am usually able to float around, almost possessing the ability to fly but with limited control. This requires a great bit of focus and that I hold a still position in order to freeze my airborne trajectory. At its peak, I am able to control where I am and materialize new environments/settings at will, though this takes quite a bit of concentration. I usually remember these dreams as having a distinct visual “glow” with vibrantly exaggerated colors and wonderful atmospheric effects.

Ancestral Connection

Very rare. This is a direct conversation with a family member; it’s always been with someone who has passed. These are some of the most true feelings I have ever had in a dream: calm, content, at peace, never lasting long enough. Occurring in sleek and minimal environments, often creating a sense of atemporality or existing within an alternate or parallel celestial plane.

The strong parallels between my dreams and cinema may not be surprising given that cinema has been evoking dreams since the early 20th century, beginning with works such as Georges Méliès’ *La Voyage dans la Lune*. Perhaps more intriguing, however, is that my dreams seem to be a reflection of my own personal experiences with cinema, both thematically and aesthetically. For example, this is particularly evident in a recurring nightmare I had as a child. In this dream I am running along a street

on a small planet, flanked by trees, buildings, and vehicles, being chased by a moon-sized monster that is eating the planet, sending debris into the air around me. I run endlessly, darting from foothold to foothold, attempting to out pace the monster but never managing to gain any ground.



Fig 7. Sketch of the childhood nightmare: being chased by a planet-eating monster.

Even as a child, I could precisely identify the influence for this recurring dream as *The Transformers: The Movie*, specifically the opening scene in which Unicron, one of the film's primary antagonists, destroys the planet Lithone. Unicron is a robot whose scale is of planetary proportions, and he is able to literally transform into a planet that consumes other celestial bodies; within the Transformers fictional universe, Unicron serves as the god of chaos, devouring whole realities. It seems only fitting, then, that I would dream of such an entity consuming my unconscious reality.



Fig 8. Unicron approaches Lithone and proceeds to devour the planet as its inhabitants attempt to flee.²²

My experience does not exist in isolation; visual imagery does in fact have a significant impact on the way we dream. Research conducted throughout the first half of the 20th century unanimously

²² *The Transformers: The Movie*, directed by Nelson Shin. (1986; Wilmington, NC: De Laurentiis Entertainment Group, Home Video, 1986), VHS.

concluded that the vast majority of people dreamed in black and white, with between 9% and 29% of subjects reporting colored dreams. This tendency to report black and white dreams suddenly disappeared in the 1960's, with studies conducted in 1962 and 1968 reporting color found to be present in 82.7% and 69% of dreams, respectively.²³ It is no coincidence that this directly correlates with the first national color television broadcast in 1954 and subsequent “color revolution” in 1965, which saw a surge in color broadcasts during primetime programming.²⁴ ²⁵ Furthermore, Eva Murzyn’s more nuanced 2008 study showed that less than 5% of participants under 25, and less than 10% of those over 55 who grew up with color television, reported black and white dreams. In contrast, nearly 25% of those over 55 who reported growing up without color television said they dream in black in white.²⁶

Driven by my relationship with dreaming and a keen interest in the clearly profound impact cinematic arts can have on the unconscious mind, I began to study how cinema may communicate the world of dreams, memories, and the unconscious. There is of course a long and rich legacy of wonderful examples from early 20th century works such as *Sherlock Jr.*, *Metropolis*, and *Wizard of Oz*

²³ Murzyn, Eva. “Do We Only Dream in Colour? A Comparison of Reported Dream Colour in Younger and Older Adults with Different Experiences of Black and White Media.” *Consciousness and Cognition* 17, no. 4 (December 1, 2008): 1228–37. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.concog.2008.09.002>.

²⁴ Bellis, Mary. “The History of Color Television.” ThoughtCo, Last modified January 12, 2019. <https://www.thoughtco.com/color-television-history-4070934>.

²⁵ “Color Revolution: Television In The Sixties.” Television Obscurities, Last modified April 26, 2018. <https://www.tvobscurities.com/articles/color60s/>.

²⁶ Murzyn, “Do We Only Dream in Colour?” 1228–37.

to more recent films like *The Matrix*, *Inception*, and *Paprika*.²⁷ For the sake of scope, I have highlighted below two of the works that demonstrate cinematic scenes, themes, and conventions that have influenced my thesis work.

Steven Universe

Rebecca Sugar’s phenomenal animated series *Steven Universe* is a coming-of-age-story of a young boy, Steven Universe, who lives with the Crystal Gems — magical, humanoid aliens named Garnet, Amethyst, and Pearl — in the fictional town of Beach City.²⁸ In the episode *Rose’s Room*, Steven discovers and gains access to his mother’s magical room, which seemingly grants him the ability to manifest anything he wishes, similar to high level lucidity within a dream space. This newfound ability seems almost too good to be true, and Steven soon discovers none of it is real and that he is trapped within the room, trying to “wake up” and leave. The room in turn tricks him into believing he has left when in truth he is still stuck within its bizarre depiction of his waking world. As the episode unfolds, we begin to see that the room is really a reflection of Steven’s unconscious. He grows increasingly anxious as the room’s presented reality becomes more disjunct, eventually fracturing apart as he descends into terror.

²⁷ Levine, Matt. “A Ribbon of Dreams: Dreams and Cinema.” Walker Art Center. Accessed February 24, 2019. <https://walkerart.org/magazine/dreams-cinema-history-matt-levine>.

²⁸ “Steven Universe.” In *Wikipedia*, May 21, 2019. https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Steven_Universe&oldid=898161171.



Fig 9. Steven Universe experiences a nightmare within his mother's magical room.²⁹

Rose's Room draws heavily from the language of dreams both visually and conceptually. Each scene is relatively sparse but contains focused points of visual and sonic attention, communicating the fixation of the unconscious on specific environmental details during dreams. There is also a noticeable tonal shift as Steven goes from initial wonder and curiosity to increasingly anxious; the room begins pink and full of comforting clouds, and transitions to muted, dark tones, film noir lighting treatment, and a fracturing landscape to reflect Steven's amplified fear and discomfort. Steven's experience of being trapped within the room is analogous to a false awakening while dreaming, and the portrayal of his anxiety is in alignment with many accounts of false awakenings.³⁰

²⁹ "Rose's Room." *Steven Universe*. Directed by Ian Jones-Quartey and Elle Michalka. 2014. Burbank, CA: Cartoon Network.

³⁰ Peters, Brandon. "Are You Awake or Asleep? The Funny Paradox of False Awakenings." *Verywell Health*. Last modified November 26, 2018. <https://www.verywellhealth.com/what-is-a-false-awakening-3014835>.

One aspect of this dream sequence that especially resonates with me is the collapsing of space, and as Steven progresses through the dream, he is moved in a temporally linear way through incongruous spaces. For example, when Steven runs through the dream version of Big Donut, he passes through a door that the show had already established as the store's storage room entrance in previous episodes. However, in the *Rose's Room* sequence, Steven confusedly steps into a parking lot when passing through the same door. This is contrasted with the way memory recall is often portrayed in film and television as temporally nonlinear jump cuts or flashbacks; in the case of this dream sequence, we are clearly witnessing a single linear timeline of actions and events.

While *Rose's Room* establishes Steven's mother's magical room as a dream space within which we see Steven confront his unconscious mind, the show pushes the concept even further in the episode *Storm in the Room*, venturing into the realm of ancestral communication through dreams. At the beginning of the series we learn that Rose Quartz, Steven's mother, is no longer alive. As the former leader of the Crystal Gems, she was a beloved and highly respected figure, and throughout the series, Steven is constantly trying to live up to her larger-than-life legacy and feel more connected to her. In *Storm in the Room*, Steven is feeling alone and missing Rose dearly, reminded of his mother after his friend Connie is worried for and then reunited with her mother. As he sits on his sofa in despair, staring longingly at a portrait of his mother that hangs on the wall, her magical room opens up to grant him access. Steven enters nervously, remembering his last encounter. Understanding his lucidity within this space, Steven realizes he has the ability to manifest his mother, or at least his mother's likeness, and begins to have a conversation with her. Steven experiences a flurry of emotions as he

shares with his mom his feelings of sadness, solitude, and longing for her presence, and she provides comfort by playing catch and video games, listening to him and assuring him that he's not alone. The scene pivots as Steven tries to take a selfie with his mother and sees only himself, causing him to question the authenticity of this experience as he realizes this version of his mother is a manifestation of his unconscious mind.



Fig 10. Steven has an ancestral dream in which he communicates with his mother's spirit.³¹

³¹ "Storm in the Room." *Steven Universe*. Directed by Joe Johnston and Ricky Cometa. 2017. Burbank, CA: Cartoon Network.

Steven expresses frustration that she abandoned him and their family, and Rose responds by acknowledging that while her existence within his dream isn't real, her feelings of love for him are, as well as her spiritual presence with him throughout his waking life. Upon this resolution, she disappears, and Steven walks out of the magical room and back into his living room, laying down on the sofa.



Fig 11. Steven is shown napping on the sofa at the end of the dream sequence.³²

As with *Rose's Room*, *Storm in the Room* employs several visual and conceptual motifs to communicate that Steven is within a dream space. We see a similar color palette shift emphasizing the change in tone as Steven's emotional state transitions from comfort and happiness to frustration and sadness. Instead of ending in an anxiety-induced fracture, *Storm in the Room's* dream sequence ends with a hopeful note, and this is atmospherically depicted with the glow of a sun low in the horizon, as

³² "Storm in the Room." *Steven Universe*.

if rising or setting. The strength of Steven's feelings of understanding and connection with the characters in his dream are also visually represented in the way their faces are drawn. In the case of *Storm in the Room*, we can clearly see Rose's face when Steven feels seen or understood, but as soon as he begins questioning her authenticity, her face becomes obscured. As mentioned earlier, the show creators seem to visually drive home the metaphor of room as dream with one of the final images of the sequence, Steven laying on the sofa.

Solaris

In Andrei Tarkovsky's 1972 classic sci-fi film *Solaris*, based on the similarly titled 1961 novel by Stanisław Lem, a psychologist is sent to a space station orbiting a planet called Solaris. While investigating the death of a doctor and the mental problems of cosmonauts on the station, he discovers that the water on the planet is a type of brain which brings out repressed memories and obsessions.³³ Whereas *Steven Universe* is quite literal with its depiction of dreamspaces and the liminal space between the conscious and unconscious, *Solaris* is much more abstract.

The opening scene immediately sets the tone of the movie with close ups of seaweed and grass wavering in a shallow stream, the camera slowly panning across plant life as it brings Kris Kelvin, the main character, into view for the first time. Everything has an otherworldly softness to it, a nuanced

³³ *Solaris*, directed by Tarkovsky, Andrei. (1972; New York City, NY: The Criterion Collection, 2011), Blu-ray.

glow that suggests this is not quite reality. Perhaps most noticeable is the sound, or rather, its sparseness. Each sound seems to come in and out of focus, more hyperreal than real. First, the gentle trickling of water. Then, the tweets of a bird, followed by the crackle of footsteps as Kris begins to walk alongside the creek. This slow, purposeful unfolding of the scene makes it feel as if we are lost in the wandering thoughts of Kris, yet we hear no monologue. It immediately establishes the cerebral nature of the film, primes the viewer to question what is real and what is unreal, and foreshadows the importance of water, fog, and mist as a recurring theme of the movie.



Fig 12. Stills from the opening sequence of Solaris.

In a subsequent scene, we join Kris, his family, and Berton, a retired pilot who had been returned by the government from Solaris after seeing what appeared to be a large child on the planet's surface. They are together in a living room, gathered around a large television as they watch documentation of a testimony regarding Berton's trip to Solaris. The Berton on the television appears much younger than the Berton standing in the living room, which, along with the opening sequence, throws into uncertainty this world's relationship to time. The scene also depicts screens as questionable mediators of truthfulness. Both the Kelvin family and the investigators that appear on television seem unsure whether to believe younger Berton's account in his testimonial; did he actually see this impossibly large boy, or was it all a hallucination? Furthermore, the investigators are shown to watch footage of Solaris's surface, but the footage offers no further insight into the veracity of Berton's claim. The scene seems to suggest the viewer might be wise to approach everything in *Solaris's* fictional world with skepticism, questioning the authenticity of the film's reality.



Fig 13. The Kelvin family watches Berton's testimony.

Later in *Solaris*, Kelvin sees Hari for the first time, or the planet's manifestation of Hari, Kelvin's late wife, which is based on his memories of her. As Kelvin is awakening from sleep, we see Hari sitting in a chair, watching him intently as the intense orange sunrise bathes her in light through the space station window. In time, we come to learn that the planet has the ability to tap into humans' unconscious and present lost loved ones as fully flesh and blood. These visitors are neither alive nor dead, and within this dream-like space, Kris Kelvin and the other astronauts are forced to communicate directly with the spirits of people from their past.



Fig 14. Hari appears to Kris for the first time.

Cinema not only makes possible the communication of stories, memories, and dreams, but it enables us to imagine new realities and unrealities. Starting with the advent of cinema in 1895, we have seen a remarkable transformation in the way cinema and related art forms have increasingly mediated the ways in which humans experience the world, create and access memories, and imagine new futures. Furthermore, the past two decades have ushered in a proliferation of access to powerful technologies such as game engines, 2D and 3D animation software, and digital audio production, all of which have profoundly expanded the ability of individuals and small teams to depict fantastical stories and worlds immersively, cinematically, and with stunning detail. I have been particularly drawn to computer graphics and animation because they enable me to create otherwise impossible spaces as a team of one, and this has been invaluable as I explore how to share with others my self reflections through dreams and imagined worlds.

This leads me to the following questions: if cinema has the power to both depict and influence our dreams, and dreams can function as a communicative medium in their own right — between our conscious and unconscious minds, between us and our ancestors, and between each other through interpretation and storytelling — is it possible for me to use cinema as a channel of communication between viewers and my unconscious experiences? Can cinematic depictions of personal and cultural experiences affect and influence the unconscious minds of those who view my work, and can this work provoke empathy and understanding, or at least start questions and conversations? And on a more personal level, can my family and loved ones find greater insight into my own spiritual and diasporic experience through my cinematic work?

SYNTHESIS

The artwork component of this thesis is entitled *Atabey*, named after the supreme goddess of the Taínos, the female entity who represents the Earth Spirit and the Spirit of all horizontal water, lakes, streams, the sea, and the marine tides.³⁴

This component is a synthesis of the research and writing presented in the preceding sections and my own artistic exploration of these topics. Formally, *Atabey* is presented as: a three-channel panoramic video projection onto three adjacent, perpendicular walls; a vertically mounted 4K display, positioned opposite of the center projection wall; four ceiling-mounted speakers delivering four-channel spatialized audio. The panoramic projection and accompanying spatialized soundtrack plays as a 6 minute audiovisual loop, and the 4K display features a 10 minute, 18 second looping video; both loops are conceptually and contextually related but are played asynchronously.

³⁴ Lamarche, Sebastián Robiou, and José Juan Arrom. *Mitología y Religión de los Taínos* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2016).



Figs 15. Still photo of Atabey during the thesis exhibition.



Figs 16. Still photo of Atabey during the thesis exhibition.

Atabey is a cinematic interpretation of an ancestral dream, a diasporic portrait, and an offering to my family. The three-channel projection serves as the primary narrative experience, and the rear display functions as an additional narrative context.

I made two specific choices when considering the visual presentation. The first is that the sequence would be rendered as a three-channel visual panorama instead of a standard, single-channel video, which is intended to increase the immersiveness of the experience, and create a sensation of hyperreal perception. The shots are also composed so that there are multiple details within each scene, meaning that repeat viewings may alter and recontextualize a viewer's experience as they notice additional elements. For instance, many viewers didn't see the Trigonolito sculptural figures laying in the countryside until they had seen it more than once, despite the figures' large scale.

The second choice was to use the cinematographic language of camera movements, depth of field, and lens effects. As explored in the chapter *Oneiric Dreams*, dreams and cinema are undoubtedly linked, and I am invoking elements such as lens flare and post processing effects as a way of experimenting with the bidirectional influence of oneiric cinema.



Figure 17. Map of northeast Puerto Rico specifically showing the three referenced locations in Atabey.³⁵

The three-channel projection comprises a single take that moves through three sections — Luquillo, El Yunque, and El Campo — each harkening to a locale in Puerto Rico of which I have significant childhood memories. This cinematic sequence unfolds in a temporally linearly fashion within dreamspace but is collapsed spatially, creating a seemingly seamless movement through geographic locations that are in reality incongruous.

³⁵ “Google Maps.” Google Maps. Accessed June 7, 2019.

<https://www.google.com/maps/place/El+Yunque+National+Forest/@17.9556789,-65.9032439,46944a,35y,35.71t/data=!3m1!1e3!4m13!1m7!3m6!1s0x8c035a3c348b2caf:0xee8088d8b7c1ba4a!2sSan+Lorenzo,+00754,+Puerto+Rico!3b1!8m2!3d18.189402!4d-65.9609971!3m4!1s0x8c04a1b32efdd0c9:0x8342f6bc9bb224d1!8m2!3d18.2952094!4d-65.7998657>

The rear display is an abstraction of my childhood basement in Dearborn, Michigan, in which I spent many hours enraptured with movies and toys, building imaginary worlds and watching family videos.

I. LUQUILLO.



Fig 18.1. Still from three-channel panoramic video.

The first scene fades into view as we hear the sound of a boom, revealing the face of a teenage boy, upside down and motionless in deep blue water, head resting upon the ocean bottom. To the left floats a body board, and underwater plant life dots the surrounding ocean floor.

As a child I often visited my grandparents in Puerto Rico, usually during the summer school break. Some extended family owned a small apartment one block from the beach in Luquillo, a small town along the northeast coast of Puerto Rico, and I visited my grandparents alone when I was 16. We stayed in the beach house, and I would spend afternoons bodyboarding at the beach. One afternoon, I had been out in the water for about 2 hours, and a storm was slowly rolling in, causing the waves to grow larger and larger. “One more wave,” I thought to myself, “and then I’ll head in.”

The wave swelled beneath me to a height of 15 feet. I tried to guide my board so that I was at the right height to be propelled forward, but I couldn't keep from getting pushed towards its peak. The wave crested, and I could feel myself become weightless as it hurled me into the air, crashing down head first into sand. Time froze in this moment, and I realized how very lucky I had been to hit sand, considering my mortality for the first time in my brief life. In a daze, I thought about how worried my grandparents would be if I didn't make it back, how foolish it was of me to be out bodyboarding alone in the midst of an incoming storm.

My board was strapped to my ankle and I came to as I was being pulled back to sea by the undercurrent. Reaching down and undoing the strap, I scrambled to the surface and gasped for breath, finding my board and carefully paddling back to shore. I was so happy to see my grandparents that afternoon, and I never shared with them what had happened.



Fig 18.2.

The camera slowly pulls out and turns to the right, rising towards the surface, the bubbling sound of ocean water swirling about the installation room. The boy remains motionless underwater, a small, faint orb of light suspended a few feet in front of the boy's chest. A school of fish swim by, and ripples of light dance along the surface above.

There are three metaphors at play here: the feeling self, the dreaming self, and the dying self. Self doubt, grief, isolation, and depression often feel like drowning, being stuck upside down at the bottom depths of a blue abyss. Sometimes dreams begin from a similar darkness, a resting of the waking self as one sinks into slumber. The floating orb of light is representative of both the unconscious mind wandering into dreamland and the spirit leaving the body after death.



Fig 18.3.

As we emerge from the water, the view changes from the blue haze of submersion to the warm light of sunset, water briefly dripping down the lens. Seagulls fly about the left, and a boat bobs atop the waves to the right. The camera dollies forward, creating the sensation of gliding above the water surface as we approach a nearby beach, dotted with palm trees and red lifeguard houses.



*Fig 19. A beach in Luquillo.*³⁶

³⁶ “A Day at the Beach in Luquillo – Monserrate Balneario.” Puerto Rico Day Trips Travel Guide, October 13, 2018. <https://www.puertoricodaytrips.com/balneario-monserrate-luquillo/>.

We have emerged and are now journeying through the realm of dreams and memories. The camera's floating movement evokes an out-of-body or lucid experience, and the focused nature of the environmental sounds simulates the selectivity of memory and fixation on specific details often prevalent in dreams. I spent many childhood summers on the beaches of Luquillo, running along the shoreline, listening to the birds and lapping waves.

I believe this metaphor extends beyond the personal. We are at a crossroads in history where those who have all too often been relegated to the shadows or kept contained by artificially imposed ceilings are now presented with and are actively creating opportunities to share their light and assert agency. The emergence from the dark depths of the sea into the golden lit shoreline not only represents my own personal and cultural awakening, but also the waves of social change driven by powerful social movements across the world.



Fig 18.4.

The camera continues slowly through two clusters of rocks, floating forward over the sandy beach towards the mist filled forest. The sound of seagulls fades to the left, and the boat's bell rings in the distance.

II. EL YUNQUE.



Fig 18.5.

We enter a brief section of rainforest, floating above a footpath through dense tree thickets and vibrant tropical foliage. Mist fills the space between the trees, fireflies weave between leaves. The surrounding sound of crickets, wildlife, and coquis is calming, the tranquil dreaminess of a picturesque Puerto Rican sunset. The golden sunlight slips through treetops, shadows dancing along the ground as leaves waver in the wind. Several coquis, tiny frogs native to Puerto Rico, dot the ground, their little heads swiveling around as they sing the day to rest.

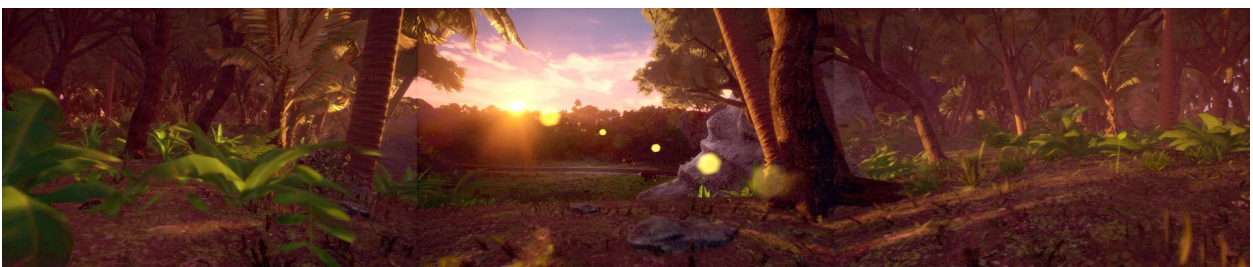


Fig 18.6.

We continue forward and reach a clearing, sun peaking over distant hilltops. Ethereal chords ring out as the burning ember disc of evening light emerges from behind a tree. As the camera dollies forward and down a hillside, ferns and grasses sway and dance in the evening breeze.

My family took many visits to the El Yunque National Rainforest when I was a child, and it was the first place I felt a deep presence of ancient life and wisdom. El Yunque is considered a treasure by Puerto Ricans, and I loved hiking along the trails, wondering at the lush, vibrant forests, alive with the sounds of wildlife. My grandparents were master hikers, even in their older age, and my brothers and I would always marvel at how our grandparents would deftly and easily maneuver through the winding paths and underbrush. This scene is not only nostalgic from a familial perspective, but also nostalgic for the forest itself in light of catastrophic climate change. Several visitors to the thesis exhibition immediately recognized the setting, sharing that they felt strong emotional responses from hearing the iconic coquis and were contemplating the effects of global warming on the island and its many ecosystems.

III. EL CAMPO.



Fig 18.7.

A large stone sculpture lays against the slope, resembling a rounded pyramid; a wide-eyed, half grimacing, half smiling face is carved into the facade. Its worn surface suggests an era long ago. The sound of the rainforest fades into the lull of crickets and rustling hillside creatures. Several animals graze in the field, making gentle noises as they search the ground for food. The camera begins to truck left along the roadside as a small white SUV emerges to the right from behind the sculpture, headlights tracing the pavement.



Fig 20. Driving through the countryside to my grandparents' house.

When visiting my grandparents' house in the campo, we would drive in my grandfather's white Suzuki Vitara, which was such a distinct memory for my brothers and me. We loved cars as children and would get so excited each time we'd get to ride in the truck, which had a manually activated 4 wheel drive mode. Coming from the suburbs, it always felt magical driving through the countryside, seeing the lush green trees and plants, cows grazing near the road, hills rolling in the distance.



Fig 21. A hand carved figure of Trigonolito.³⁷

³⁷ Kerchache, Jacques. *L'Art Taino: Chefs-d'Oeuvre DES Grandes Antilles Precolombiennes*. Illustrated edition edition. (Paris: Paris-Musees, 1994).

The large semi-pyramidal sculpture in the sequence is of Trigonolito, a Taíno god of fertility, often referred to as the Yucca God. One of my favorite aspects of family gatherings was and is the food, and it is important not just to my family memories but to Puerto Rican and Caribbean culture as a whole. I lived for my grandparents' platanos maduros, tostones, yucca, arroz con gandules, mofongo, pasteles, alcapurrias, guava pastelitos, and so much more.



Fig 18.8.

The SUV pulls forward as the camera continues to track left, floating over roadside brush as it curves along the bend. As the vehicle passes into view on the center wall, the text *VITARA* written along the vehicle's side door, countryside and vivid sky reflected upon its surfaces. Another sculpture rests within the pit of the road bend: a large, face carved into stone.



Fig 22. A hand carved figure of Boinayel.³⁸

The large crying sculptural head within the sequence is that of Boinayel, the Taino god of rain, whose magical tears become rainfall and bring life. When I first saw this figure, I was struck by the image of a crying face being the rain giver, a source of life, and it made me think of multiplicity. For instance, it is possible to shed tears of grief and mourning and still uplift a loved one's memory in joyful remembrance. In another sense, as I became more open and honest with myself and my family about my neurological challenges and idiosyncrasies, my struggles with depression and isolation gave way to understanding, empathy, and adaptation.

³⁸ Kerchache, *L'Art Taino*.

In the light of Hurricane Maria and the increasingly perilous effects of climate change on my loved ones' homelands, this took on additional meaning. The invocation of Boinayel also functions as a call for gentler rains. Detroit water warrior and activist Charity Mahouna Hicks, who joined the ancestors in 2014, taught me and many others to say, "Water is life." As my ancestors before me, I am praying, both awake and in dreams, that the rains falling on the Carribean are rains that bring life and not destruction.



Fig 18.9.

The camera slows to let the car pass from right to left and then continues gliding, now along the right side of the road. The sculpture comes into full view along the right wall, gleaming tears streaming down its face, palm tree shadows grazing its face. The SUV continues driving along the road as sun beams peek through the trees. The ethereal pulsing synthesizer continues its chord progression, perpetuating the sensation of floating.



Fig 18.10.

The vehicle approaches a small casita atop a hill as it wraps behind the camera and then up the driveway to the right, coming to a stop beside the house. The camera slowly trucks forward and pedestals up the hill towards the house. Fireflies float about and the familiar sound of coquis returns. The synthesizer pulses grow more dramatic, creating anticipation.



Fig 18.11.

Two figures grow illuminated and appear standing on the house's front porch, dressed in white, looking peaceful and at home. They appear to be older, and their pose suggests a tranquil wisdom. The sun emerges from behind foliage as the final chord plays, accompanied by a bass hit that rings out, creating a sensation of wonder and resolution. The scene slowly fades out as only the sound of crickets and coquis remains.



Fig 23. My cousin Darlene's painting of my grandparents Frances and Rafael.

So many loving memories were spent at this house, my grandparents' casita in the outskirts of San Lorenzo. Memory is inextricably linked to place, and when I close my eyes and think of my grandparents, this is the first location that comes to me.³⁹ It always felt like such a magical place for my family and me, and we spent many a summer day eating, playing, sharing, and enjoying each other's company. As the sun would set, a chorus of coquis and crickets would sing throughout the hills, and we would all listen to music and tell stories on the back patio.

³⁹ Bures, J., A. A. Fenton, Yu Kaminsky, and L. Zinyuk. "Place Cells and Place Navigation." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 94, no. 1 (January 7, 1997): 343–50.

In a sense, this final shot is a portrait of a portrait. My cousin's painting has been shared between family members in the years following my grandfather Rafael's passing, and it was a way for my grandmother to still feel connected with him. As a gift to my parents and family, I chose to build on this legacy. This of course also exists within larger cultural contexts and traditions of honoring elders within black and brown and indigenous communities.

IV. DEARBORN

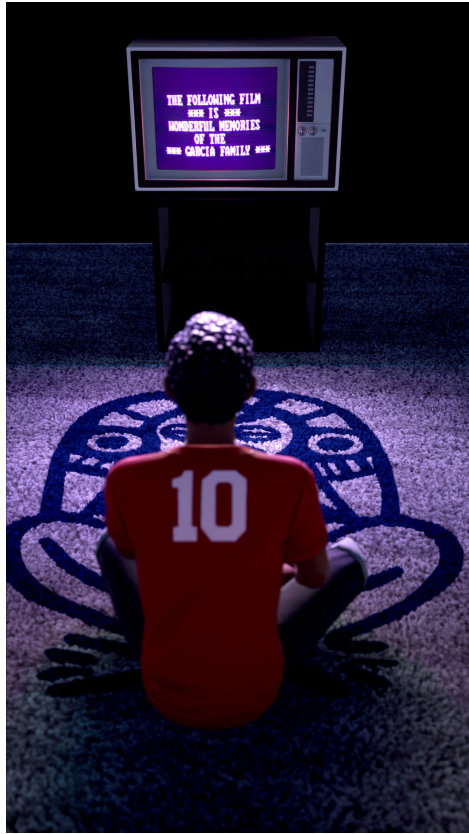


Fig 24. Video still from Atabey.

A young boy sits cross legged on a carpeted floor in front of a CRT television, watching 8 mm family films showing people celebrating and enjoying each other's company. The boy is wearing a soccer jersey, and the carpet contains a symbol of a sitting woman, which is partially obscured by the boy's body. The boy appears to be the same character seen at the beginning of LUQUILLO (see Figs. 17.1, 17.2).

The “fourth wall” of the installation space is meant to be a window into my childhood, a portrait of diasporic identity. I sometimes felt isolated and disconnected from my cultural roots and the world as a whole, which is reflected in the slightly somber tone of the image. I heard from several visitors to the exhibition that this sense of isolation and longing for familial connection deeply resonated with them. It was referred to more than once as feeling very much like an immigrant’s diasporic story, depicting the feelings of displacement and loneliness that result when one and one’s family has traveled so far from their geographic and cultural roots.

I didn’t grow up on the island of Puerto Rico — far from it — and I spent the vast majority of childhood in my family’s basement, building stories with toys, playing games, tinkering with computers, and watching movies. I learned about family and Puerto Rican history through VHS tapes, and I imagined my future through science fiction and imaginative storytelling (see Fig. 5). I always felt loved and in spiritual conversation with my family through dreams and intuition, represented in the depiction of Atabey, the Taíno supreme goddess of life, underneath the boy.

CONCLUSION

When I entered graduate school, I set three goals for myself. The first was to learn how to work by and for myself, having primarily worked in collaborations and collectives prior to being here. The second was to learn to make work that was more personal, more vulnerable and honestly representative of myself. I had previously had a tendency to start my personal work as an engineer, approaching work from a technical perspective rather than asking myself, “What story do I want to tell?” The third was to approach my thesis work as a springboard rather than a culmination, to create around a set of ideas that excited me and felt generative moving into my post-graduate life.

I spent my first year exploring smaller projects, gradually shifting from technically focused projects to ones that began to challenge and explore my notions of identity, develop my passion for storytelling, and get me over the fear of experimenting with new ideas. As I strived to make work that was more personal, I realized how important it was for me to include my family in the process, and I started asking the questions, “How can my work serve as a way to grow closer with my loved ones? How can I feel more fulfilled artistically and personally, creatively and spiritually?”

I began to reconnect with my past, paying attention to my subconscious dreams. Thanks to experiences such as Tananarive Due's Afrofuturism and Black Horror classes, I realized the important connection between my love for cinema and storytelling and my intuitive and spiritual relationship with dreaming and memory. I talked with and interviewed my parents for hours and hours, learning bits of family history we had never discussed, and reigniting a tradition of oral history and intergenerational storytelling.

Through this all, I started to create artworks for the first time that made me feel fulfilled, that were drawing from the various parts of myself. This is just the beginning, the springboard from which I am excited to continue leaping into and exploring my dreams, figuratively and literally.

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