

Exploration of the Traditions of Magical Realism and Caribbean Literature

Through the Lens of a Memoir

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## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

### EXPLORATION OF THE TRADITIONS OF MAGICAL REALISM AND CARIBBEAN LITERATURE THROUGH THE LENS OF A MEMOIR

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Based in the Latin American staples of magical realism and Caribbean literature, I crafted a memoir exploring my move at an early age from Puerto Rico to the American mainland, and back again years later to revisit family following a health concern of an older member. What follows is not the memoir in its entirety, but excerpts highlighting each section of the given timeline, exemplifying hallmarks of the previously mentioned genres.

My life story was melded and interjected with local folklore, allowing this memoir to be Puerto Rican in its inception, and giving me the chance to infuse magical aspects to these mundane events. Beyond that, the second section of my memoir inspects the impact English learner placement courses has on an individual, in terms of their identity, language acquisition skills, and their delayed journey of securing their heritage language.

Before delving into the memoir, I offer a survey of magical realism and Caribbean literature, explaining how my situation of moving from Puerto Rico to the mainland invites these genres into my own tale, giving shape to the raw material.

In closing, I reflect on my creation and the process I undertook to develop it.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the initials 'LA' in a cursive, stylized font.

May, 25, 2023

**Signature of Investigator**

**Date**

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## **Section 1: The Research**

### **The Importance of Magical Realism and Caribbean Literature**

Magical realism is a well-known genre that is often tied to, but not in any way limited to, writers of Latin America. Most notably, the Colombian author Gabriel García Márquez has propelled this genre into the international spotlight with his various novels exploring life in Colombia. His 1967 novel, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, explored his homeland during the years of *La Violencia*, a turbulent time where “widespread and systematic political violence” plagued the republic “between 1948 and 1958.” This period ended in an estimated 200,000 dead and countless others forcibly displaced from their homes. (“Columbia: La Violencia”). This element of violent unrest and instability has become part of the fabric of the genre.

As with many Latin American countries, the effects of colonization have long left the lands in disarray and prone to such heated discrepancies among its shattered people. Through the lens of magical realism, authors like García Márquez provide audiences with a grounded work of fiction, realistic in its portrayal and often firmly situated within historical events as mentioned, but with the nonchalant inclusion of fantastical elements that need no introduction. The genre has been boiled down to being a “quintessentially postmodern art form, with a reliance upon textual play, parody and historical re-conceptualization” (Ahmad & Afsar 4). There is no concern with explaining to audiences the purpose or reason for the existence of parrots that are able to fully articulate thoughts and speech in Spanish, ghosts with vivid memories of the past that assist the living in the present, or even the clairvoyant abilities of characters. Instead, the genre treats these inclusions as everyday occurrences that are not in need of gawking or elaboration.

While other genres tend to create a divide between the real and the imaginary, magical realism opts for not “eliminating one for the sake of the other, or reversing permanently the positions of dominance or subjugation,” and, in doing so, allow for “a third category” to emerge that respects and harmoniously accepts the real and the fantastical as coexisting (Polanco 64).

In a similar, collapsed vein, Caribbean literature seeks to examine the aftermath of colonization as, "Caribbean society bears the legacy of colonial oppression, exploitation, and marginalization" (Taylor 1). European strongholds shook the cultural foundations of many nations deemed to be uncivilized or of monetary usefulness to the white man. What were the people to do when faced with such brash means of assimilation and domination? How did the victims of the colonizers identify? And what of their native tongue and practices that were labeled as unfavorable or savage? Authors sought to make sense of these inquiries, crafting texts that explored the notion of forced identities, displacement, and the aching isolation that spanned generations of the colonized.

### **Intention with This Creative Endeavor**

The goal of my project is to join these two labels into a memoir that showcases hallmarks and expectations of both. Being that I am Puerto Rican and was born on the island, my life as it is reflects many of the elements of what would be anticipated for Caribbean literature. My homeland has never been granted the ability to be a state, but is merely a territory that was once of value to the United States of America. Today, it seems as if my home is nothing but a burden to the mainland—a mouth to feed—that occasionally pops up in conversations regarding its purpose.

Puerto Rico has a rich supply of folklore and colorful urban legends that could be incorporate nicely and without heavy fanfare to allow for the genre of magical realism to be activated. Tales of the chupacabra—“a creole totem and anti-hero, a source of laughter and gothic humor for many”—, the myths of the roaming *Vampiro de Moca*, the mixture of Catholicism and *brujeria*, or witchcraft, that seems to permeate daily aspects of life, and the stronghold superstitions have on the people could seamlessly be interjected into the memoir as everyday occurrences (Derby 291). In doing so, I will be continuing on with the Latino tradition of magical realism from a contemporary standpoint.

Due to the similarities between the chupacabra and the *Vampiro del Moca*, and the fact that these two supposedly supernatural events happened near my hometown of Isabela, my memoir heavily focuses on the two imaginary blood-sucking cryptids, with me assuming the role of Moca’s most famous resident, as I was actually born in a clinic in Moca.

In the past, *bruja*— meaning witch—was used to shame women, but now many have “reclaimed the *bruja* identity as a form of empowerment” within the Latino community (Cores 129). My work with magical realism will reflect modern attitudes and empathetic viewpoints that tend to be excluded from the male-led, heteronormative texts of yesteryear. In doing so, I offer a counter presentation to the colonization that has birthed such mentalities and viewpoints left to fester with the unattended colony.

Calle 13, an alternative hip-hop group consisting of half-siblings, known for their brash and unapologetic lyrics, have openly discussed the island’s function—or lack thereof—to the greater mainland, proclaiming on the introduction to their album “Entren Los Que Quieran”



(translation: “Enter Those Who Want To”) that they hail from Puerto Rico, “la colonia más importante del mundo” (Calle 13 0:05). In the same breath that they jokingly talk up about the importance of the colony, they lambast its people for being more concerned about beauty pageants as opposed to education, “Y el único lugar/Donde le prestan más atención a *Miss Universo*/Que a la educación” (Calle 13 0:08). This push and pull of Puerto Rico’s stance and cultural ambiguity is explored further in the album, and is something I sought to incorporate into my memoir.

The reach of colonization is endless and boundless, infecting every aspect of life on the island which sees itself constantly dealing with political corruption and scandal, lack of proper resources, and unchecked violence that makes living itself a dangerous feat: perfect ingredients for a slice of Caribbean literature.

The material I created was given an activist angle in that it did not purely focus on the positives, but was able to highlight issues in hopes of betterment down the road. Being Puerto Rican, being a part of the culture, I am given a stance that allows me to offer criticism, while applauding and being celebratory in the same breath—much like Calle 13 does. We can point out the destructive forces that colonization has wrecked on our homeland, but that doesn’t mean we are immune from acknowledging deficits within our own culture, whether products of colonization or not, that have presented barriers in the way of our people’s progression and stability.

## **An Examination of Identity**

Another key aspect of Caribbean literature is the notion of disconnection with the language or ancestral land, and the seemingly endless, sometimes doomed-to-fail attempts at reconnection. “Caribbean writers have adopted a postmodernist aesthetic emphasizing plurality and fragmentation,” to highlight this very erosion of one’s roots and past at the hands of colonizers and their enduring legacy. In turn, “Caribbean writing has been directed towards reconstructing an emancipatory counter-narrative in opposition to the dominant European discourse,” the very discourse that has maintained ownership of their land, people, etc. for years upon years (Taylor 79).

The reason I believe a magical realism infused memoir would be the best vehicle for this exploration of concepts is due to my firsthand experiences with a complete disconnect with my culture and assimilation into American culture, creating a fragmented journey of identity. Again, although Puerto Rico is a territory of the United States of America, it has never been granted with the privilege of being a state. It belongs to the Caribbean, and with that, comes a variance in customs, traditions, beliefs, and—most notably—the language.

With literature out of the Caribbean, we are made privy to the victims of colonization—often generations removed from the original infliction—as they attempt to find their place in a world that has all but disintegrated their culture. Audiences see the anguish of characters trying to find their roots, and in doing so, they often make the pilgrimage back to their homeland. Another key aspect of this reintroduction to their ancestry concerns the relearning of a character’s native tongue. As someone who moved to the mainland when I was young, I was

quickly put into English Learner (EL) classes, then labeled as English Second Language (ESL) courses—a problematic title in of itself.

A heritage language learner (HLL) has had exposure to their heritage language (HL) early on in life, possessing a degree of bilingualism, having, in the words of linguistic Eve Zyzik, “an ethnic/cultural connection to the heritage language,” and owning a dominant language that prevented the HL from achieving that exact title (20). In terms of the bilingualism, learners may be able to proficiently speak their HL, but perhaps lack in another modality of communication, such as writing. Even within the modality of speaking, it may not be entirely grammatically correct, but a basic understanding of the HL exists and is in use to some degree.

If this HLL would have been a product of the American educational system, like I was, it would mean English would have been the language that would have overthrown their HL, creating a rift in identity. Typically, we see this situation occur “from immigrant, indigenous, or colonial backgrounds, and situations of adoption” (Conrad et al. 56). We can comfortably label my situation as one of immigration, moving from the island to the mainland.

My skill set with Spanish was deficient, but I was still able to hold on to a familiarity with the language, as I was exposed “to the HL in the home,” typically by means of my family or other manifestations of cultural ties, like *telenovelas*. (Conrad et al. 56). In America, English is the dominant language in virtual every aspect of life. Some caveats exist, but non-native speakers are encouraged to assimilate into the language fully to immerse themselves into American culture. This push causes the weakening of the HL development, and the individuals never fully grasp the skillset required to master the language, much like I experienced. And within this

limbo, San Diego State University professor Marcela Polanco argues, “new multisubjectivities emerge, in my case, from the melding of Spanish and English into what is called Spanglish,” creating the concept of bilingualism—a purgatory of deficiencies within two realms (65).

Much later in life, I found myself wanting to grasp Spanish more, wanting to create that stronger bond to my family and my culture. When asked to describe themselves, an individual may rattle off a variety of characteristics. While listing these traits, the person being questioned is providing the listener with an image of how they perceive themselves to be. In other words, they are identifying themselves. Language is often viewed as a huge component of identity, being seen as something more than merely a matter of communication. Language carries cultural ties, and in that weight, the impact is felt. I was missing part of my identity through the lack of proper knowledge of my language. I had to relearn my native tongue in order to “(re)claim [my] ethnic identity through language study, reflecting the predominance of ideologies that conceive of ethnocultural identity as embodied in language” (Leeman 100).

This circumstance I described can be incorporated into the memoir as an element of Caribbean literature. Outside of retracing the linguistic steps of my ancestors, the whole concept of a HLL can be viewed as a figurative crusade back to one’s homeland if we are to accept the undeniable connection between identity and language.

### **An Additional Influence**

It goes without saying that Sandra Cisneros’ 1984 classic *The House on Mango Street* has shaped how many Western audiences view Latinos, especially Latinas in a contemporary setting,

one still suffering from a sexist cultural dominance. Its reach has spread across “settings ranging from elementary school classrooms...to middle school book clubs...to graduate level seminars... 20 years after its initial publication” (Wissman 19). It would be a dishonor to not acknowledge this piece of literature, regardless of it existing outside the parameters of genres that I have selected.

Esperanza, the protagonist of Cisneros’s pseudo-memoir, explores not only her girlhood and budding womanhood, but her identity in context of her background and culture. The fragmented vignettes allow readers to peek into spots of the character’s life, giving just enough detail that we begin to make sense of the disconnected episodes in terms of the overarching themes and musings of what it means to be Latino, a girl, a woman, an outsider.

With my memoir, I emulated this formatting, choosing to not only avoid wasting time on explaining magical occurrence, but also choosing not to provide every single detail in a specific occurrence or event, creating a bareness and disjointed feeling to the writing that offers enough without over explanation or excess.

### **Personal Goal with this Creative Creation**

My upbringing, situation, and life are not unique to me. Many Puerto Ricans and other Latinos have undergone similar upheaval and transplanting onto the mainland, rocking their core, forcing them to question their identity, as they start to become aware of the concept of oneself. Through this creative project, I not only want to bring to light the dangers of forced assimilation,

colonization and its never ending reach, and the concept of identity, I also wants to celebrate the genre and writing styles made popular by those like me in Central America.

## Section 2: Excerpts from the memoir titled *El Vampiro De Moca: A Memoir*

### Part 1: Ayer

#### 1. La Isla

La Isla del Encanto is a fantastical, living, breathing lump of dark, damp dirt, unbothered by the hands of time or cruelty, where wonders yet occur, where people never wither or die or forget or become memories to be forgotten.

Fruit, always plentiful and bright, grows as it pleases. Stray dogs have free roam of their kingdoms without limitations, regardless of the parasites churning in their protruding bellies or the kicks to the face by kids that will probably grow up to only have their lives ended on a sidewalk, bleeding out onto the pavement, their blood mixing with rain water to mimic the slick shine of oil bubbling in pothole of a parking lot.

The old, while stuck in their ways, are warm and welcoming. The sun, though relentless, is warm and welcoming, too. As is the crystal water that keeps trying to swallow la isla, but always gets put in its place by Dios.

## 2. Guests from the 90s

In my youth, many relatives, whose names I have forgotten, sometimes voluntarily, but most times against my will, would come out and visit us from la isla, using our apartment as a hotel in the 90s. My dad's car was the taxi-limo service they upgraded to, free at no charge whatsoever.

They would come out during Semana Santa, Navidad, and during el verano. They would come hungry, ready to be fed comfort, sights, and food at the expense of my parents, whose hands were in constant pain. Our guests' hands were clean and free of callouses, at least during their holidays at the Nieves'.

Sometimes they would stay a month, because two weeks wasn't worth it, they'd say. Claiming ignorance, and yes, the majority of them were stupid, they'd require my parents to purchase their tickets to get back to la isla, with the promise of repayment that was never kept.

They would make our home stink of that food we have long gotten away from. A sickly, thick scent of grease and pork flesh would cling to my coat, my pillows, my bed sheets, and the walls, making itself at home where it was not invited. My tongue had given up on those tastes and would only dance for American flavors. I hated the smell of rotting pork.

The word 'pork' nauseated me.



Ma would calm me down by saying the smell was also guest in our home. That it, too, would eventually pack its bags with whatever its steamed hands could casually toss in its valise, and head back to where it was loved.

### **3. Mama y Papa**

We'd drive up to Newark to pick up our guests. I wouldn't look forward to seeing them, but I was always in high spirits when my eyes locked on the neon eagle flapping its stuttering wings over the Budweiser factory.

Ma would say my Spanish was beginning to splinter and crack off in chunks, and that my English was being to gel nicely.

The only guests I looked forward to seeing at the arrival gate of that cold, sterile, hospital-scented airport were Mama y Papa.

The only guests I hugged with all my might as soon as I spotted them were Mama y Papa.

The only guests that left me in tears when they returned to la isla were Mama y Papa.

#### 4. Ma

Ma came from Mama y Papa. Ma's face, in particular, is Mama's, only in a lighter wash.

People from la isla, who were not Mama or Papa or Papote, would say Ma wasn't raising me as she should. They claimed she was being too soft with me, and in turn, I would be made too soft, as well. Mama told them to pound sand and showered me in an avalanche of hugs and kisses.

Ma would claim some babies would get stiff, their chubbiness being reduced to a rigid hardness that was never warm. Ma told me I was plump and malleable and loved to be held and was always warm. As a baby in loving arms should be.

## **7. Guests from the 90s in Our Room**

When they came from la isla, they would ask and ask and ask and take.

Papote would give up our room, our bathroom, and most infuriatingly, our bed to them without question. Their smells would seep into the mattress, and it would have to be cleaned as soon as they returned to la isla, but not in front of them because they would take offense. And Ma hated to offend.

They would lock the door to our room, and Ma would have to ask permission to get her hairbrush or my blanket or Papote's work clothes through a closed door, hearing replies from a disembodied voice that would sometimes not even bother answer and instead snore.

Mama y Papa would never do that to us. They would sleep in the living room, so as to not intrude into our lives. They were like wallflowers, dust, the eyes of neighbors—always there, but never bothering anyone with a breath. I sometimes wondered if they were ghosts, but they were far too warm to be phantoms.

## **8. Papa**

Papa is what Ma always called Papa, my grandfather.

You can love both of your parents equally—with all the might your red beating muscle could muster—but you will always have a favorite. Papa's was Ma's favorite. Ma was my favorite.

Papa was a strong man even with his small, scrawny body. He could eat and not gain a single ounce, his skin stretched over his boniness, taut like expensive, real leather that became softer with each passing year.

His hands created many treasures I would bury in my room in hopes of finding later. His smile never faded from his face until I was much older, and even then it would pop up when needed.

His mind was unmatched! Ma would always tell me how her father befriended numbers, knew them intimately, and made them obey his will with the flick of a pencil. No one else in our family had that gift, that I know of at least.

## **10. Casa**

Before we moved from la isla, we lived on Mama y Papa's land. The two built a house on top of their own house for me, Ma, y Papote to call our own. We were only a staircase through the banana trees away from one another.

Mama had a private jungle, full of plants whose name I couldn't pronounce and still can't. Papa was good with numbers, but Mama was a sorcerer with vegetation.

She would mold leaves into funny shapes for me to keep in between the pages of a useless phone book. She would tell petals to turn into peaks, mimicking a beak, and have them squawk like finicky chickens to make me laugh. Snails and frogs would hop, hobble, and hurry into her Eden to feast, but Mama would politely, yet firmly, tell them to find a new abode, and they always listened, grunting as they marched their way out.

I liked to sneak up on Mama as she worried and worked away in her oasis. Mama would never notice me because my steps were so light.

I would gently tap her back and reveal my cunning self.

"Creiste que estabas sola, Mama?" I would open my mouth to show off my sharp, sharp teeth in a grin.

Mama always seemed spooked at my sight, but she would quickly scoop me up in her arms and say, “Si, pense que estaba sola, Joito!”

Then she would tell the banana leaves to hide me from the sun, as I made my way back into the house.

No matter how quick I was, I could never fool the leaves. They always seemed to know my next move.

## **11. Papote**

Papote is my second favorite out of the two and I love him dearly. Sometimes I don't understand what he says, but I know he's telling me how much he loves me.

For someone so serious, Papote loves to laugh and make others laugh. Besides work, this is what he mostly concerns himself with. That, and loving Ma and me and whatever pet we have at the present time no matter how many legs the creature might have or not have.

Papote tells me stories about his roots, but they're not humorous even when he tries his absolute best to make us laugh.

He lived with his two brothers, both older, his own Papote, and a monstrous thing that couldn't have been further from Mama and Ma.

He called her Mami Miriam. I never called her anything in her presence or absence, but I was respectful in both situations.

She reminded me of a witch without magic.



## **16. Luis Johanna Nieves**

I am of Ma. I am of Papote. And they wanted the world to know this wondrous miracle.

Ma, who Mama named Johanna, lent me her first name to act as my middle name.

Papote, whose name was taken from with his own Papote's name, passed down the heirloom, delicately so as to not break it when singing the certificate.

Regardless, everyone just calls me Joito inside of my home and on la isla. When we left la isla, no one could say 'Joito' properly.

## **20. December 15th**

Even though it was December, the asphalt smoldered, the air hung heavy, and whatever puddles lurked in potholes boiled angrily.

They say a child born on a Wednesday is one of sorrow, but Ma, Papote, Mama, y Papa would have to disagree with that statement.

A nurse, wearing a pretty face of concern and distress, approached Papote breathlessly repeating, “Viste los dientes? Viste los dientes?”

Papote just let her know those teeth proved I was Ma’s creation. He smiled to himself when he spoke these words, or so he tells me when he repeats the story every 15th of December.

## **21. Milk Teeth**

Neighbors and family—who have long since died and rotted away—came out to visit Ma and her baby boy. They brought various gifts, mostly ones I could wear and not eat, but I'm sure I was grateful nonetheless.

They would line up to kiss my forehead, but their smiles faded when they saw my teeth poking ever so slightly from my mouth.

Ma would notice their apprehension, their mistrust, and she would smile at them to let everyone know she was my mother, and we carried the same smile.

Papote would come up behind them and say, "Precioso verdad?" And everyone had no choice but to agree and leave, but not before kissing me above my eyes and congratulating Mama y Papa for becoming welos.

## 22. Milk

Ma did admit I was an unruly baby that would get up in the middle of the night often, wanting to be fed, but she said she never minded coming to spend time with me, as the moonlight snuck into my room through the slits in the metal blinds. While the entire house slept.

As months melted and my mouth molded, I became more vocal about my hunger, standing up in my crib at varied hours of the night asking for “Eche! Eche! Eche!” not leche. I hated leche because of how fatty it felt on my tongue. I only wanted eche.

In complete darkness, without turning on a single light, Ma or Papote would sleepily make their way to the fridge and fetch me my eche, but not before making sure it was warmed up enough that it would sit well in my little belly.

Before they gave me the bottle, they would let a few drops dribble onto their right wrist to make sure it wouldn't burn and curl my tongue.

It would leave a stain on their skin, as if they had slit their wrist. Ma would lick it off. Papote would always wipe it away, spreading and smearing it.

### **30. No Blood**

As a child, I was wild, perhaps I still am, much like Ma.

I would run through Mama's jungle, hiding behind the orchids and papayas until the roots tangled around my feet to let me know that such nonsense was not appreciated. Mama would scold her vegetation and gave me dominion over the wilderness again. I would grin, my teeth shining in the senseless sun, in front of the flowers and fruit.

Out of pure pride, I would gnaw on a grapefruit, the first and lowest hanging one I could reach, never swallowing the red flesh of the citrus, just chewing on it and spitting it on the trunk of the producer of the bounty, merely to prove a point.

One day, after boosting my place in the jungle, a wayward root caught my leg, right below my knee, sending me to the floor. My head met a rock.

I squirmed on the ground, searching for a scream in my throat that I couldn't release.

Suddenly the sun disappeared, and all I saw were leaves around me, comforting me with a shaky embrace.

Ma must have sensed something was wrong because when I finally found my voice, I noticed I was in her arms, and I found comfort there that I could not have among the staining foliage.

She stared at my wound. She saw straight to the bone, past the shredded muscles and wild hair, but there was not an ounce of blood.

Mama called for Papa and Papote, while Ma carried me to the car, my vision blurring and blacking in waves.

### **31. Doctor**

For a hospital, it sure was homey and inviting, reeking of burned out candles wicks and strong coffee that had been left out far too long and made cold and bitter.

The doctor didn't wear a lab coat or scrubs; she was clad in a mesmerizing dress that flowed about her like water, even though I can't remember spotting any open windows that would allow such a breeze to move the fabric about.

Ma remembered visiting this doctor at a young age, and she was greeted as family.

The doctor, who told me her name was Iris, spoke to me smoothly, holding my hand in hers, which was adorned with various rings, gems, and deep wrinkles itched into her skin from the ruthlessness of the sun.

She assured Ma I would be just fine, as she placed split roots and leaves inside my wound, while whispering into my ears all of the best parts of the ocean.

After I could stand again, she told me familia to wait outside while she made me broth to keep the cold out of my body.

I sat in a dining room full of saints and crucifixes; their tears seemed to be falling on me. I felt my shirt dampen.

Iris came out from behind a curtain with a boiling bowl of broth. She told me to make sure I ate all of it, especially the white feathers for they were the best.

I did as I was told, no matter how much the feathers tickled my mouth, throat, and all the way down to my stomach.



### 32. Iris

Later in life, when I was much older, I asked Ma about Iris the doctor. Ma lit up and told me about Iris, her grandmother, and how she could do just about anything with her hands and some leaves

### **33.) Ma When She Was Young**

When Ma was young, she became ill, collapsing from time to time when she walked, with her skin abandoning all color and heat. Sometimes she wouldn't even be able to walk at all and had to stay in her bed under heavy wool blankets, even when it wasn't raining outside.

Doctors from hospitals told Mama y Papa she would remain seated for the entirety of her life, and to give up hope in favor of saving money, as her bones would curdle, and there was nothing to do about it.

Doctors, like Iris, said there was hope.

After seeing Ma's teeth, Iris understood what Ma's body needed to grow. She knew Ma was different from the hordes of other babies born in the 70s.

And Ma grew, strongly and beautifully.

**Section 2, cont.: Excerpts from the memoir titled *El Vampiro De Moca: A Memoir***

Part 3: Hoy

**70. Familiar Phantom**

Walls that had seen me through my infancy were strange and unrecognizable to me now. At times, I would spot an item or detail—a crack in the shape of a cross on the ceiling, a ceramic cat waiting to be brought to life, a painting crying for an audience to appreciate it—that would jolt my mind into the past, but it wasn't enough to make me marinate in memories.

The unfamiliar and familiar casa was cool and dry; the outside was anything but.

Hair messed up, still in my pajamas, I braced to dive headfirst into the warmth and opened the door.

I stood, for a moment, breathing in the heat, at the top of the steps. Deep in the tangled vines and banana leaves, I spotted my Mama.

Grinning, I chanted softly, “Creías que estabas sola, Mama. Creías que estabas sola. Creías que estabas sola, Mama. Creías que estabas sola.” With each refrain, I got louder and louder until it was a screech ringing throughout her green oasis.

The words winded through the vegetation and into Mama’s eardrums. She dropped a planter, black dirt now covered her sandals and feet. She searched about frantically, trying to see if the whisper turned scream was nothing more than a memory itself.

Our eyes locked and she yelped, claspng her mouth in disbelief.

“Mi bebe! Eres tú, o eres un fantasma? Siento que estoy parada frente de un fantasma!”

I assured her I was no spirit, and we ran into each others’ arms

## **75. Gringo**

I felt like I first did when left la isla. I felt strange, foreign, alien, and I hated every moment of the sensation of being lost in places that should have brought back memories.

I felt like a gringo, and perhaps this was my reality.

### **Section 3: Reflection**

Identity is of the upmost value, and with this creative work I wanted to shine a spotlight on how my identity—or perhaps the collective identity of Latinos—has been transcribed and preserved through two distinct genres. Again, magical realism is not exclusive to Latin America, but the genre has found its home here and has been put to good use. Caribbean literature is a regional occurrence, and Puerto Rico has experienced many of the maladies and transgressions other islands have faced in the Caribbean seas at the stained hands of colonizers.

With this work, I wanted to honor the writers and traditions of the past and present, while still incorporating my own specific identity into the mix. I have long been fascinated by Puerto Rican urban legends and folklore and sought to create parallels between my life and these supernatural occurrences. Being born in Moca, the legend of the local legend of the vampire that haunted the town offered me a way to offer a magical lens to my upbringing.

I once took a non-Western literature course in which the professor made it known we were not in familiar territory with the class's list of required readings. The novels and plays we explored were not penned with the intention of catering to Western sensibilities that concern themselves with distinct story-telling methods or manners, traditional narrative structures, or explaining belief systems or languages.

I held onto this idea as I worked on this memoir. This is not for the colonizer; I am not here to explain what my language is saying to those that don't attempt to understand. There is no reason for me to divulge why Latinos hold certain things sacred just because someone can't

comprehend. I merely told my story as a Latino would to another Latino, someone who understands and empathizes and has lived the experience. If there are those that come across this text and cannot understand each word, imagine how we have felt at having our native tongue ripped from the seam.

To close off, in emulating Sandra Cisneros' fragmented memories and interjecting so many different aspects of my beloved culture, specifically the revered genres of the region, I hope I have been able to offer another text to the continually growing roster of Latino texts that don't worry themselves with offering explanations or reasons, just magic.

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