

Oshún's Calabash

Dancing across Cuba into the Memory of the
Embodied African Soul and Finding Home

Alisa D. Orduña

Jasmine Walker, Editor

Copyright © 2018 Alisa D. Orduña

All rights reserved.

ISBN:10:1727481891

ISBN-13:97817274881891

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the Mothers. Those still with us and those who have transitioned into the world of the ancestors. These pages hold special, sacred space for Dora Jones Brou, Joyce Jones, Florence Jones, Aliese Robinson Jones, Florence Tolbert Orduña Hickerson, Arlene Jones Pope, Carlotta Chapman, Nancy Baker Orduña, Iya Wilhelmina Obatola Grant, Joyce Looney, Tiguida Kaba, and Fayomi Osundoyin Egbeyemi.

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	i
1 Prologue	1
2 Take Off	Pg 8
3 Arrival	Pg 15
4 Havana	Pg 19
5 Matanzas	Pg 24
6 Camagüey	Pg 31
7 Santiago de Cuba	Pg 40
8 Guantánamo	Pg 44
9 Return to Santiago	Pg 48
10 Cobre	Pg 54
11 Epilogue	Pg 56

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This story would not have been possible without the support of so many people including Dr. Nuria Ciofalo, Dr. Mary Watkins, Danys “LaMora” Perez Prades, the women of Dos Aguas 2013, Awo Falokun Fasegun, Anne-Marie Jones, Jasmine Walker, Delta Sigma Theta “13” F’91, and the many talented, dancers, musicians, singers, and other cultural preservers in Cuba – sustaining the African tradition in the heart of the Americas.

1 PROLOGUE

Relax! Relax! I try to ease my discomfort and lower my heart rate aboard this Air Cubana flight. I am a little skeptical at the beginning of my three-day adventure as I look around and notice that the plane is much older than I am – at least by 25 years. Besides entering the plane from underneath like in an old James Bond movie, there are no oxygen masks, no emergency exits, no folding food trays, not even lights to illuminate the aisle in case of a power outage. I can even look directly into the cockpit and observe the pilots from my seat. Instead of the normal performance of what to do in the event of a sudden loss of cabin pressure or other flight-related emergencies, the flight attendant is passing out pieces of candy and welcoming us to Cuba. (Journal entry - 1993)

This was written in the early 90s while embarking on a three day weekend excursion to Havana, Cuba. At the time, I was in Jamaica for a study abroad program; intrigued by the ads to the forbidden island nation – at least forbidden to Americans – and could no longer resist the urge to visit. Too close not to. I saved up enough of my allowance to purchase a tour package that included

airfare and stay at Hotel Inglaterra. This was the “Special Period” in Cuban history, the sunset years after Russia pulled out as a major investor. Basic food commodities were rationed; electricity ran for only a few hours a day; there was no petroleum for cars, leaving many people to walk long miles to work. Working bicycles and cars were recreated out of discarded parts; tourists were not allowed to stay in private homes or purchase home-cooked meals, and there were long lines everywhere for every transaction needed to support daily life. Tensions between the United States and Cuba were also intense. A few days before this journey, a group of clergy were prosecuted for breaking the long-standing embargo that included travel to Cuba and sentenced to jail. I knew I could face the same fate or worse – not be allowed into Cuba. Heart pounding, I followed the rest of the passengers, mostly Jamaicans and Europeans, into the airport under the constant eyes of soldiers with rifles wearing pea green uniforms and old-style WWII hard-shell hats. When it was my turn to step up to the Customs window I handed over my American passport to a young, smiling, handsome Customs officer. I nervously smiled back, not sure if that would disclose my secret of entering the country by leaving a fingerprint of my journey to alert U.S. officials when I

returned home. Instead he stamped a few numbers and said in perfect English, “Welcome to Cuba.”

Behar (1996), a daughter of Cuba, observed that “ultimately we go back to prove to ourselves we’re not afraid to go back.” Although Cuba has never been my physical home, the spirit of this place impregnated my soul with dreams of liberation. I always envisioned Cuba as a safe haven – a sacred geography suspended in a sea of manifested destiny that had the gall to fight back against 500 years of violence, dominance, and exploitation of people, culture, and land for profits. The country interested me since high school when I read the exile stories of Black Panthers Huey Newton and Assata Shakur, and was deeply moved by Alice Walker’s description of Cuba as a “race-less” society. Compared to the ongoing weight of racial oppression in the United States, my image of Cuba was of freedom, a place of sacrifice for the greater good of the whole, a place where I wished our nation could be.

This weekend excursion was a crash-course in radical transformation. I saw, experienced, and participated in too much to understand in words. Much of what I felt was contradictory. On the one hand, every person had housing, access to education, food, and medical

care. Yet, under the omnipotent eyes of President Fidel Castro, *El Comandante*, life was constrained, the individual will subjected to the wellbeing of the whole. All goods were rationed out equally based on need, not merit. Everyone except the elderly and those with extreme disabilities were expected to work and contribute to the production of food and goods for all citizens. A different worldview than practiced in the U.S. where the will of one group is imposed on to the land and on people of color. In a non-judging way, I learned the value of liberation through seeing its true costs to the people. In my journal I wrote:

On the plane, I begin defining a revolution, trying to assign meaning to the experiences of the past seventy-two hours. The faces of the [Cuban] people keep coming to mind – the faces of the Customs officers, the couples in the restaurant, the parade watchers, the ladies gossiping out of their windows, and the grave faces of the sisters [revolutionaries in Castro's 26th of July Movement] captures in the Museum of the Revolution photo. It occurs to me that a revolution is a desire to make a change for the better. . . a commitment to change by a loyal group of people who are not afraid to die, even when their loved ones are being tortured. A people so sincerely attached to their cause, that death in the name of revolution is not only acceptable but also heroic. A true revolution destroys oppressing structures and rebuilds frames made of unity and equality. (Journal entry, 1993)

The wake of unbound emotions calcified into embodied wisdom and understanding, latent in my inner dwelling like dormant seeds waiting for the chance to sprout.

Twenty years later, a desire to return to Cuba stirred within like a gentle, but incessant desert breeze. Imagine cooling, yet, uncomfortable sand and dry air hitting the eyes. At the time I had just begun my doctorate program in Depth Psychology with a concentration in Community, Liberation, Eco-Psychology. I was curious to uncover why were African American men over-represented in Los Angeles' homeless population. In 2013, African Americans composed 43% of the homeless population, but only 8% of the L.A. City's population. At the same time in the collective consciousness of the nation, the White man's insecurity over the Black man's body – the Black man's *being* – flamed up out of the shadows through a series of fatal killings of unarmed Black men by police and civilians¹. This was an intense time as if it were not bad enough that families were losing their loved ones due to violence, but the persons responsible for the killing were being acquitted – in some cases not even being arrested nor brought to trial. The memory of Jim Crow South cloaked in a neo-millennial dressing of white fragility came full frontal to the experience of everyday life.

¹ Later through the work of Kimberlee Crenshaw and the “Say Her Name” Movement, I would learn of the slow, yet steady genocide against Black women – many of whom lived with mental illness and died in a moment of crisis, when they needed the grace of society the most.

Were we losing hope? Were we becoming a cultural group in hospice care – slowly dying, no longer able to see a future?

So many images of broken Black bodies, men pushing all of their belongings in shopping carts, or lifeless bodies bloodied and strewn across the urban landscapes, became overwhelming. I started questioning my own destiny, accepting my vocation as a community healer but was I to ease the pain into an ethnocidal mass cultural death? Or resist and call forth an army of other spiritual warriors to prepare for radical transformation in racial attitudes to birth a more harmonious model of human relations so that my little Black nephews would not have to grow up in a world of fear? I did not have the answers. Something in me refused to die. Those seeds of courage planted twenty years ago were itching to germinate. There was untapped wisdom dwelling within ready to emerge. I needed to reconnect to my ancestors for guidance. My ancestors responded through the Yoruba spirit guide Oshún from the Ifá spiritual system, the guardian angel supported by my Ori/Head/Primordial Consciousness. Oshún, the Divine Feminine, embodiment of grace, fertility, beauty, protector of children, and warrior. First through dreams, then through dance, Oshún guided me back to Cuba – an

OSHUN'S CALABASH

island calabash to gather the medicine of memory; deep ancestral memory – to plant roots and plan to stay. At the time I intended to create my own dwelling place in the face of adversity, to be an example and change agent. Here is my story – not facts, not fiction – memorial to my experience.

2 TAKE-OFF

I landed in Miami after midnight, and my roommate assured me I would not oversleep as her alarm was super loud. Sure enough at 3:00 AM the screeching of her alarm jolted me out of bed. I thought it was the fire alarm and the room was on fire. Good lord. Where was I? Oh yes, Miami. I took a quick shower, prayed, threw on my clothes and we hustled to the hotel lobby to grab a taxi to the airport. Today was finally here. We were going to Cuba. Or, more accurately, if you are an American citizen, Cuba was receiving us. Even with improved relations under President Obama, securing a visa was still a little complicated.

Most people will never travel to Cuba in their lifetime, including persons whose families are native, yet twenty years since my first

visit, I was going back. Sanctioned this time. The veil of grace had opened for me.

On the surface, this trip fulfilled a fieldwork research requirement for my dissertation program. I shared with a friend that I needed to go to Cuba and he had recommended that I apply to Oyu Oro's *Dos Aguas* summer intensive dance immersion program. Oyu Oro is a New York-based Afro-Cuban folkloric dance company founded by Danys "La Mora" Perez, a former principal folkloric dancer from Santiago de Cuba. I have little dance experience, but the trip, fifteen days dancing across Cuba, was more for the cultural exchange and learning the history of the people *through* dance. I was thankful when my application was accepted by Danys and quickly designed the fieldwork as a dance research project.

The beauty of my field of study – Depth Psychology – is that we seek out ways of knowing the interior of the mind, body, and soul. There is no exact science so qualitative research methods and immersion experiences are valued. For this project, I wanted to learn how Afro-Cubans had survived historical periods of oppression, especially through moments when practicing African influenced spiritual traditions like Santeria and Lucmi was illegal. How did they preserve

these traditions and how were they practiced today? How had they maintained a positive sense of self and pride? What could I learn to bring back as medicine to infuse into homeless intervention strategies for African American men experiencing homelessness? I had previously conducted research on the Afro-Cuban identity as a unique cultural group, but it was all through second-hand sources. This experience was an opportunity to learn first-hand how Black Cubans identified themselves and how had (if it had) the survival of African spirituality, culture, and values helped protect this identity from internalized negative perceptions of self.

On a spiritual, personal level, this journey was a response to a calling from Oshún, the African Yoruba deity of motherhood, beauty, protection, and wealth, who came to the Americas in the souls of her children during the Transatlantic Slave Trade. It has been more than a decade since I last danced for Oshún in a women's healing ceremony in Philadelphia, a second home for sixteen years, yet a lifetime ago. At the time I was studying the African spiritual system of the Akan and was training to become a priestess. Events went awry when at only twenty-seven, I was unable to process personal and familial shadows arising as I emerged more and more into the

mystery of knowing myself. I projected these wounds onto my spiritual family who were, I am sure, confronting their own shadowy wounds, thus creating conflict that became an excuse to flee. I escaped into the arms of a Muslim man, whom I married. One day he threw out all of my spiritual pots – vessels that contained sacred items – including the vibrations of my daily prayers. Slowly, I forgot about Oshún.

Years later after my mom passed away, I divorced, and moved back to Los Angeles – my hometown that I had abandoned for twenty plus years pieced together with college, graduate school, and phase one of my adult life in Philly – Oshún was back with a vengeance. She doesn't like to be ignored. I became reacquainted with her through dance, Afro-Brazilian dance to be exact. Subsequently she came to me in dream state, showing up in different ways but always making her presence known.

In describing rebirth, Carl Jung stated, “this ‘other-being’ is the other person in ourselves – that larger and greater personality maturing within us whom we have already met as the inner friend of the soul.” Oshún was reminding me that life was not over. . . I had to continue to fight personally and for the collective, for a more just and

equitable society. She was giving me a chance to be born again, to fall back into alignment with my priesthood calling so that I would have the medicine, knowledge, and fortitude to fulfill my destiny in working with Black people experiencing homelessness; to recreate society so that we all experience a sense of belonging without discrimination of skin color and cultural identity. She was calling me to take a precipitous journey into the unconsciousness, into the world of the ancestors. I had to go to Cuba to get clarity on the message she wanted to gift me.

Within the Americas, Cuba is the territory of Oshún, an island calabash overflowing with her love, beauty, fertility, and defiance. She is the embodiment of the Divine Feminine, the conceiving lifesource necessary to reproduce. My Babalawo (Ifa Priest), Awo FaSegun taught that Oshún traveled in the psyche of her devotees during the Transatlantic Slave Trade to bring sweetness and hope to survive the harsh conditions of enslavement and the aftermath of Jim Crow and mass incarceration.

Others say she is the syncretic Cuban patron saint La Virgen de La Caridad del Cobre – the celebrated Lady of Charity who rescued three male youth at sea. There are many cultural stories on how she

came to the Americas and why, however her presence in Cuba is real, as if it is a sacred geographical shrine to her. I believe that Cuba, a major trading post of enslaved Africans, is the heart of the African Diaspora in the Americas where the ancestors of Black people left a footprint, making it a gathering space for surviving generations, disconnected from their homeland in a perpetual state of homelessness, to return. So of course Oshún the Mother, would be embodied in the virgin landscape of Cuba to welcome her children home. If home is more than shelter, or a dwelling to protect oneself from the elements, but a place where one's soul is welcomed, affirmed, and loved, then Cuba has become an existential home for Blacks throughout the Diaspora, and Oshún the *dueño* of this place.

Our journey began as soon as we arrived at the Miami airport and entered the revolving doors of an unnamed terminal – only numbers, much like the stamp in my passport a decade earlier. While the space had the normal layout of any terminal it felt different, more like a movie set. There were no brand logos behind the check-in counters, just plain cream colored walls. Lines were forming, yet there were no monitors to tell you flight numbers or airlines. There were people;

some looked like they had spent the night on the uncomfortable blue vinyl chairs and others were carrying a lifetime of possessions including wide-flat screen televisions, bicycles, and oversized suitcases.

Our travel group swelled from just my roommate and I and another woman to about twenty people – all women and one man – in total. Many were practitioners of Lucumi, the spiritual tradition of Ifá as it emerged in Cuba combined with Native American, European, and other African traditional religious influences. In fact my roommate, who would remain my roommate for most of the journey, is a child of Sango, one of Oshún’s divine lovers. Within this group, I was understood, I did not have to hide my emerging dance with Oshún. I was truly heading “home.”

As we began the check-in process it hit me that everyone in the terminal was on our flight going to Cuba. No wonder the airport had felt so weird. We were all going to Cuba. On the ground in Miami, our individual desires had temporarily merged into one collective psyche focused on getting to the same place, on time, and together.

3 ARRIVAL

Although the flight was only a half hour, the energy in the biosphere of our flight cabin changed just as the Cuban land mass appeared through the clouds below. Fields of lush green and coffee brown came into view, creating a hush on the plane. As if choreographed, people stopped talking and immediately leaned into the nearest window portal with a sense of awe. In the sudden silence, I stopped looking out the window to notice the other passengers and began to imagine the thoughts going through their minds. Was this their first time home since leaving after the Revolution? Had a family member just pass away or a new baby born? Was this the very first time that someone was visiting their family home? I began to feel like an intruder amongst a private family affair so I sat back in my seat so that the young woman next to me could have a full view.

Once outside the airport terminal I took in a deep breath of Cuban air and exhaled. The spirit of this place has shifted from when I was here before in 1993. There seems to be a much more relaxed attitude among the customs officials who appeared tired of upholding the strict military discipline that was the organizational culture of the Revolution two decades earlier. They no longer wore the military uniforms. While walking over to our tour bus, I heard a cacophony of street noise. It came back to me that during my previous trip there was silence. People spoke in whispers and the roads were all but empty of vehicles due to the fuel shortage. Now, families eagerly greeted arriving loved ones right outside the terminal. The parking lot was full of cars with radios blasting. The cars themselves ranged from the classic 1950 and earlier styles to current model Saabs and other European makes. Havana has experienced its own rebirth and I was curious to learn more.

The road in to Havana from the airport resembled a memorial to the Revolution. Large, industrial buildings laid vacant with collapsing roofs overgrown with weeds. Old propaganda murals with slogans such as “Gracias Che por su ejemplo” or “Socialismo o muerte” were beginning to fade on the sides of concrete walls that ran the

length of the old factory sites. White stone busts of 19th century Independent War Veterans such as Jose Martí were oddly stuck into the landscape in front of most public buildings. Newer billboards were in a more collective voice compared to the authoritarian tone of a father shaking his finger. These signs no longer held the face of Fidel Castro, but conveyed the sense of a collective victory, such as “Hasta la Victoria siempre. Vigilantes y combatives” and “Los cambios en Cuba son pára mas socialism.” There are also even more subtle propaganda in the form of red and black flags waved over private homes, businesses, and in public squares that simply say, “26 de Julio.” It is as if Fidel Castro as the face of the Revolution is being woven into a newer national narrative of resistance and struggle; a more inclusive construct to uphold the old ideology in the face of rapid change. Ricoeur (2004) stated that “imposed memory is armed with a history that is itself ‘authorized,’ the official history, the history publicly learned and celebrated.” These iconic images seem to be a last attempt to enforce the official history of the Socialist regime in a changing society.

The changing society emerged from the landscape with a sense of vibrancy that I did not feel the last time. This almost celebratory

feeling became most notable in the “Barrio de chino,” Havana’s Chinatown where we had lunch. Chinese began settling in Cuba in 1857 as indentured workers to cultivate the sugar crops. Overtime as the community grew, Chinatown had maintained its unique identity with facades resembling traditional pagodas and ornate streetscape designs of brass dragons. The area was a bustling pedestrian center designed with narrow cobblestone streets that made it walkable and feel like an open air market. We ate at a Chinese buffet whose building also housed a private fitness gym. Next door a woman was selling small religious memorabilia out of her living room, without fear as entrepreneurship was now legal. Next door to her a woman offered tailoring services. Across the street someone had set up a permanent vending stand that sold basic household goods such as personal care items (shampoo, lotion, toothpaste), socks, and t-shirts. Chinatown was my first introduction to capitalism under a socialist regime. Within this place, the struggle of the entrepreneur to find success as he pursues his own dreams resembles the struggle of the nation to be as successful in trying to modernize on the world stage while maintaining its commitment to freedom.

4 HAVANA

Instead of walking we are dancing our way across the landscape disembodied the stories wrapped in each rhythm, song, dance, and movement. What seeds were planted here in this land that bring those of us with consciousness to this place? What is inside of me that allows me to move so freely here? What makes me feel at home and at ease in spite of the language and cultural barriers? (Personal communication, Fieldwork Journal, August 5, 2013)

We arrived to the dance studio right after lunch. Tucked into the corner outside a new shopping mall we get acclimated to our dancing home for the next three days. The studio was spacious enough with hardwood floors, similar to most studios in the U.S. except this one did not have any mirrors, nor air conditioning. I would soon learn that these conditions were the norm in studios across the country. Havana's heat and urban grime was a great welcoming to the Island

culture. Our instructor was Ildoliva Ramos Jame, from Raíces Profundas, a famous local dance company. With her patience (often repeating the most basic move at least 10 times), we were introduced to most of the styles of dance that we would be learning over the next two weeks. These styles included dances for the Orisha (deities in the Yoruba/Santería traditions), the Foudoun (deities in the Arrá tradition), Congo Palo, and Rumba. We also learned salsa from La Mora's nephew Alex who was a dancer with a folkloric group in Santiago.

With the exception of salsa, all of the dances were interpretations of stories or myths from indigenous African religious traditions that had been adapted over time within the Americas. In Cuba these practices had been even further modified by region. In support of Maya Deren's ethnographic work about Haitian Voodoo, Joseph Campbell stated, "the mythical archetypes live on-within the heart of man; so that by knowing them in their various inflections we know man, too, in his variety...." Dance became a vessel to portray local cultural narratives through the unique ways in which Afro-Cuban deities were venerated and the stories they portrayed. For instance we learned several dances and songs for Elegua, also known as Eshu, an

archetype that appears in many pantheons that are practiced in the African Diaspora and universally known as the trickster archetype that sits at the crossroads. Elegua is also the linguist for the Supreme Being, and is given reverence at the beginning of all ceremonies. Elegua is also consulted anytime someone has to make a major decision or has to travel. While in some places, dances for him represented a child-like nature to capture his trickiness, in Havana we learned his role as opener of the road. This dance mocked carrying a staff to “open the road” and moved with a more serious and intentional energy- looking forward, but also stepping side to side without ever losing the strength of the center.

In addition to understanding “who” we were dancing for and their energy in place, we also learned that the synchronization of dance, music (i.e. drumming), and song were equally important. It is the intersection of the three cultural tools that help interpret the embodied narratives of indigenous Afro-Cuban culture. It is also the collective energy of the three that generates the energy for the deities to become present in ceremonies, on stage, and sometimes even in our dance classes. For this reason, dance in Afro-Cuban Folkloric traditions were a relationship between the dancer and the drummer

or other musicians, the singers, and each other, and the audience. It is the collective energy that creates vitality of the choreography and in some cases when the energy gets really high, the improvisation.

During our final lesson in Havana, I began to learn a piece of the puzzle that I had been seeking. As one of Endolita's drummers began teaching us songs for Elegua, he began to share the history of how the traditions were retained so that they could share with us today.

During slavery, unlike in the U.S., the Spanish allowed the slaves to separate by ethnic group. This enabled language and other traditions to be reinforced through commonality and new arrivals. The field slaves and the domestic slaves also coordinated for the collective action of preserving the traditions. Those in the house stored sacred objects in common household items such as soup terrines where the mistress of the house never looked. This tradition continued until today whereby consecrated shrine "pots" were created out of beautiful porcelain soup terrines. Sacred ceremonies were held on national holidays such as Three Kings Day when slaves were allowed to gather together. These narratives continue to be altered and passed down through the intersection of dance, song, and music.

OSHUN'S CALABASH

After a while, I surrendered and allowed my body to absorb the new learning – moving thought from my head to my body. Not having mirrors had helped and forced me to tune into the rhythm of my dance mates and the sound of my own movement. Instead of dancing perfectly being a goal, dancing in rhythm became the goal. I became energized by what I was learning.

5 MATANZAS

Through all that we are learning, I am not sure how one can learn about Cuba without learning the dance, the music, and the songs. All of these art forms and spiritual practices embody the history. Even in the more popular songs like rumba, we learn about community and dating practices. We learn the interconnection between dance, song, rhythm so that we learn these activities were not meant to be done solo, but require the effort of the community. (Personal communication, Fieldwork Journal, August 7, 2013)

Matanzas was about two hours east of Havana and is known as the cradle of Afro-Cuban culture. It is a port town and has several waterways that pass through it. As a special treat, we stayed at an all-inclusive resort in Varadero, right across the street from the beach. Varadero sits right on the ocean of the Gulf of Mexico and shares the beautiful turquoise water with Florida's coast. It used to be a place just for the elite, but now welcomes tourists from all over the world.

OSHUN'S CALABASH

The slow pace of the resort was a welcome change after the heat and hustle of Havana. Our dance classes were held on site in the resort's amphitheater. We danced for about three to four hours in the morning before lunch and for an hour or two after lunch before our song class. Our instructor was an older and very graceful dancer. He had an amazing ability to provide feedback to each of us individually about how to adjust the slightest movement to make the dances more fluid. He introduced us to the movements of the *foudoun* deities from the *Arará* pantheon. This was my first experience with their energy and I found learning their stories and attributes helpful to portray in their dances. Some of the characteristics were similar to the orisha deities such as the comparison between the foudoun deity *Afrekete* and the orisha deity *Yemanya*, both deities representing water, healing, matriarchy, yet their energies were different. The energy of the foudoun is a little heavier and less graceful than the orisha. The movements and space where you hold the dance in the body was closer to the ground. As I learned the meaning of the movements, my dancing, while still far from perfect, became more fluid. My mind and body were finally connecting around a common goal of portraying

my interpretation of the deity. I felt like a wise woman housing the sacred scrolls of African Diaspora history in my body.

One day, we were fortunate enough to have Baba Francisco Zamora Chirino, known as “Menini,” teach our song class. He was the leader of Afrocuba de Matanzas, a folkloric group founded in 1957. He was a Santo for the orisha Obatáala and carried the title “Baba.” Baba Menini was dedicated to preserving the African traditions that originated in the Matanzas area and taught drumming and music to hundreds of students each year. Baba taught us that during slavery many Africans entered Cuba through the port of Matanzas before being sent to Havana or eastward toward Santiago. Matanzas was the gateway from the sea to the sugar cane and coffee production region. The dominating ethnic groups that arrived were the *Lucumi* from the Yoruba ethnic group in the Nigeria region, the *Palo* from the Congo group in central African, and the *Arará* from the Dahomey ethnic group and region of the same name (now Benin and Togo). The number of slaves who entered the port in Matanzas from these groups plus the Spanish practices of keeping members of the same ethnic groups together through the establishment of *cabildos*, allowed many traditional belief rituals and knowledge to be maintained even

today. Baba shared that between the 18th century and part of the 19th, the African population outnumbered the European population in Cuba. Strong clan cultures in their home of origin, leaders and the elders of these groups continued to practice their belief under the auspices of the Catholic religious system through a process called syncretism where the orisha were integrated into the Catholic saint system. Baba strongly stressed that the Africans did not start worshipping the Catholic saints as it is sometimes stated; as psychologically the believer held on to the African image of the deity being venerated. Instead, the Saints became the physical representation to sustain practice. For instance, the orisha of metal and war, Oggún became associated with St. Peter and Oshún became Our Lady of Charity of El Cobre (Ayorinde, 2004). This adaptation was critical for survival through points in history where people were persecuted for practicing African traditional religions.

On our last night in Matanzas, we have an opportunity to go to Baba's house for a celebration known as a *tambour* in honor of Baba Menini's personal spirit guardian orisha *Obatala*. Obatala is the deity known as the "King of the White Cloth," a regal deity who is attributed with the shaping of human beings, higher consciousness,

humility, and mitigating peace. During the ceremony I observed many of the protocols to setting up ritual space, and the songs and dances that we were taught over the past few days. The drummers dressed their sacred drums in special beaded covers. They were the only ones allowed to touch these ceremonial drums as they are considered sacred objects that generate the energy between devotees and the spiritual world known as *ashé*.

In Matanzas, given the various other traditions such as Arará and Congo-Palo, the drummers have to know how to play a wide range of rhythms. Drummers are initiated into the tradition to learn how to care for the spirit of the drums. La Mora and a few other elders led off the tambour with dancing for Elegua. As songs for other deities were played, devotees of that orisha led the dances in the middle of the circle. The *apwon*, another important role in traditional tambour ceremonies, is the lead singer in the Santeria ceremonies and must know a few songs for each of the major deities to greet the presence of the orisha when they arrive during the ceremony. As in many African traditional religions, spirit possession is a component of the practice. During this experience, selected devotees enter an altered state of consciousness described as being “mounted” by the spiritual

energy that rules their head. The experience very much reflects when one “catches the Holy Ghosts” in the Black church tradition. Also similar to the concept of a guardian angel or Saint in the Catholic tradition, in the African spiritual systems practiced in Cuba, it is believed that each person is born under the protection of one or two or more orishas. On occasion, these spirits, orishas, enter the group consciousness during rituals and spiritual celebrations of the tambour through the altered state of one who carries the visiting spirit on their head. In this state of consciousness, messages are revealed that may benefit the individual and also benefits the community. When in this altered state, or under possession, there are guests dedicated to the wellbeing of the devotee to ensure he or she is not harmed by the spirit, and more often time, other guests charging the devotee to receive personal healing advice.

The tambour gathering – creation of a sacred space – requires the presence and participation of the entire community. In addition to the roles listed above, some people prepare food, others welcome guests, while still others are responsible for cleaning and maintaining the shrines. The performance of these roles reinforces the collective action required by these indigenous practices. It would be impossible

for any one person to maintain the rituals and practices by him or herself due to vastness in responsibility. This celebration of community is very different than many Western approaches to religion that focus on the individual and not wellbeing of the community.

I had always believed that the Revolution imposed a socialist system from the outside. However now I wondered if Fidel Castro and the Revolution lacked resistance from the people outside of Havana because those communities reflected the collective value system already present and practiced in indigenous African belief systems.

6 CAMAGÜEY

Cuba is teaching me the importance of place in the identity of the people. It is the attachment to place and the containment of identity through family history, language and regional dialects, music, dance, etc. It is a place with an inherent understanding of freedom through cultural expression, even under repressive conditions. (Personal Communications, Fieldwork Journal, August 9, 2013)

Our next stop was in Camagüey, a U.N. World Heritage site and birthplace of Nicolás Guillén, the late National Poet of Cuba. The drive between Matanzas and Camagüey was about four hours and we definitely entered into the rural heartland of Cuba. We drove past hectares of cattle and goats grazing. At one point we even had to stop to let a cowboy hustle a herd of cows across the road. It was actually a beautiful sight and one that most people living in an industrial world will never see again in their lifetimes. Small towns were sprinkled in between the cattle ranches, often built up around railroad

crossings. Work in this part of the country was arduous as we saw some workers still plowing fields with oxen while others were clearing overgrown crops by hand with machetes. Similar to the collective action needed to keep Afro-Cuban folkloric traditions going, people in these rural communities also seem to depend on collective action to complete the intensity of farm work. I cannot say for sure what it is exactly, but I felt a stronger sense of community in this part of the country than I felt in Havana or even Matanzas. It is perhaps what I saw in their faces, or the observation of casual conversations at the vendor stands, or women talking on their front porches. Perhaps it was the wave of the hand that people gestured to us as we drove through their town. It reminded me of my visits to family in rural Tennessee where I noticed a similar engagement among neighbors that I do not find in cities. I also noticed a difference in quality of life for older people out here compared to the cities. Several sat on their front porches in wheelchairs actively engaging neighbors and other household members in conversation, even nodding at us as we drove by. In the cities I see the elderly sitting in makeshift chairs on their balconies or in the front windows or walking down the streets alone. In the cities they were invisible.

Here they are an active part of the community and this moves me with a sense of nostalgia that I have no idea from where it comes.

We finally reached the city of Camagüey. It is architecturally Spanish with a large town center that feeds into many different plazas. La Mora cautioned us that Camagüey has a large number of mentally ill persons and to be careful when walking around. Having come to Cuba partially to research cultural interventions for mentally ill, chronically homeless men, I was curious to know what “mental illness” looked like within the Cuban context. Intently looking out of the window as if expecting to see a leper colony or something, I began to observe that there were a number of hospitals in Camagüey, including a psychiatric hospital. There was even a church dedicated to Saint Lazarus, the patron saint of lepers and persons with various afflictions including the severely mentally ill. In the Santería tradition, Saint Lazarus corresponds with orisha *Babaluyaye*. He can be a real troublemaker, but is the healer of the sick. He is often represented as an older man limping with a cane and a faithful dog companion. It began to make sense to me that if there is any safe space for persons with mental illness, being under the protection of Saint Lazarus would be the place to be. Did the mentally ill migrate there like those

do in Geel, Belgium or Santa Monica, California? Or were they being steered by the government?

I remembered when visiting years ago, the tour guides showed us a compound for persons with AIDS. Cuba had nearly eradicated AIDS by segregating the population. I thus wondered if severely mentally ill persons were being segregated to Camagüey. I had mixed reactions to this thought. On the one hand it would be empowering to have a city that can host the severely mentally ill so that they can thrive outside of institutionalization. On the other hand, is having such a concentration healthy for their own mental recovery process? And what about the role of family? While walking a few blocks from the bus to the hotel down Camagüey's old, narrow cobblestone streets, we noticed people living with mental illness right away. They were dressed in tattered and dirty clothes and seemed to wander aimlessly. They panhandled aggressively, obsessive to receive anything; food, money, an article of clothing, a pencil. Annoyed by the begging, I had to suspend judgement and question the meaning of "mental illness." Is it defined based on brain diseases and mental impressions of traumatic events? Or has it come to mean persons marginalized by society for whatever reason and now lack shame and beg to meet

basic needs? Are they “mentally ill” to contain their reflection in cracked mirror - a critique of the Revolution’s ideology where the needs of all are provided? I realized that I would not be able to find out these answers during our short twenty-four hour rest over, so I wrote down my questions for further investigation during another visit.

That evening we attended a performance by the *Ballet Folklórico Camagüey Afro-Cubano*, a company founded in 1991 by Reinaldo Echemendía Estrada during the Special Period. The company had received accolades in Cuba and from around the world for being the first to legitimize Hispanic-Cuban folk dance traditions in dance and bringing it to a level of national prominence. In Cuba, all professional dance companies must be approved by the government. The approval process is rigorous and there is a standard threshold that all companies must meet in terms of technique to be approved. Once approved, the government financially supports the company and provides a work stipend to each of the dancers. In Cuba, artists do not have to suffer between choosing to starve and perfect their craft, or starve their creativity by finding a job to sustain themselves. Estrada’s creative ability and tenacity to bridge the humble daily life

of the *campesino* with the mainstream of the Cuban dance world was commendable.

Ballet Folklórico Camagüey performs and practices in an old dilapidated movie theater. The interior of the theater was in need of significant repairs so in front of improvised walls, the company used the lobby with its hard granite floor and makeshift audience chairs. According to the director Mr. Estrada, the company anticipated receipt of funding for building renovation by the government within the next few years.

As an advocate of folkloric traditions, Mr. Estrada spoke with pride about the fact that he was now able to manage his own “artistic projections.” I interpreted this to mean that at some point the government office that oversaw the dance companies must have had a stronger influence in approving (and probably orchestrating) choreographies. Mr. Estrada gave meaning to the dances by sharing the history of Camagüey and its role as the “seat” of Cuba’s Hispanic culture.

The company’s repertoire was inclusive of Cuba’s many cultures. It blended Afro-Cuban spiritual folkloric traditions with the Spanish

folkloric tradition and even popular dances of rumba. The dancers were accompanied by at least a ten-member orchestra that included string and wind instruments along with traditional drums used in Afro-Cuban culture, adding to the vibrancy of the performance.

Ballet Folklórico Camagüey Afro-Cubano was the only dance company during our visit that performed the choreography from the traditions of Abakuá and the Zapateó. Abakuá is a tradition that was transported to the Americas from the southern Nigerian region in what is now called Cameroon. In Cuba, Abakuá developed under the influences of the Yoruba and Congo. as we learned earlier, practices differ by region so what was performed in Matanza would be danced differently among practitioners in Camagüey. During this performance, there were two Abakuá dancers who embody the spirit of the tradition. In representing this spirit, the dancers were covered from head to toe in simple but elaborate raffia customs. They wore bells on their waist to accent side to side movements. Their masks were long coverings of burlap with large eyes sewn onto the front for dramatic effect. Attached to the head covering was a black cowboy hat that just hung. The Abakuá spirits danced with a cane, similar to a road of orisha Elegua, to clear the path and exert their power. The

dressing of the Abakuá spirit strongly replicates the Egungun Masquerade – an archetype symbolizing the collective ancestors – performed during certain rites and ceremonies in Nigeria and other regions of West Africa. The Abakuá culture initially represented resistance to the institution of slavery and now had come to represent resistance to losing indigenous cultural traditions.

According to Mr. Estrada, Zapateó is a national dance that the Spanish immigrants brought with them to Cuba. It resembled the Flamingo. Dancers wore thick heeled shoes and were constantly moving their feet between heel and toe throughout the entire dance, creating their own rhythmic beat echoing off the hardwood stage floor. In the choreography, dancers are paired into couples and create elaborate patterns by switching partners, similarly to U.S. square dances, but with the consistent heel-toe movement. The dance was fun and beautiful.

Ballet Folklórico Camagüey did an excellent job of reflecting the narratives of rural life embodied through dance. As such the context accompanies the dance so that even if modified to include modern twists or artistic creativity, the historical references still existed. The

OSHUN'S CALABASH

history and meaning were preserved and projected into the future in the memory of the experience by the audience.

7 SANTIAGO DE CUBA

I feel coy with Santiago. Others are in a rush to get to know the city, but here I want the city to stand up and reveal itself to me. It is why I think I enjoy listening, looking, watching, and observing in silence. Cuba, like nature, loves to hide. Like its coy protectress Oshún, it shows you what it wants and is good at keeping secrets. On the surface, always loyal to the father – Palmas, Batista, Castro Y Castro – but at the root a deep affection and reverence for the mother, La Caridad del Cobre and La Regla and the African and Native images that these saints represent. (Personal Communication, Fieldwork Journal, August 11, 2013)

We drove through many hectares of sugar cane planted in the valley of the Sierra Maestra Mountains on the way into Santiago. In the comfort of our somewhat air conditioned bus, I looked out the window and created stories inside my head on how people survived working in the fields under the scorching heat of the sun during slavery, and even now. In a moment of reverie I actually heard the voices of those working out in the fields from centuries past. I

imagined the African deity Oggún, whose representation of the blacksmith archetype is so prevalent that he appears in several African indigenous pantheons including the practices of Santería, Arará, and Voodoo. I could see his muscular arms swinging his long machete toward the root of the sugar cane plant during the harvest season, clearing row after row. The site of the actual landscape brought context to the songs and dances for this deity. I also now had a better understanding of how the energy generated through the dance, songs, and rhythm carried them through these difficult times. Ironically in the same moment through casual conversation, the one male member of our group (who happened to also be a Caucasian drummer) said, “It is time to crack the whip...” I turned around to him and politely say, “You may not want to say that right now. Look outside at the sugar cane. I am having traumatic memories.” I knew he meant no harm and it was not until he said it that I became conscious of how much of our ordinary language retained the experience of the enslaved as well as the slave-master. The realization was too much, so I let out a spontaneous laugh to clear the air. It was a way of managing the recognition of the time gap between memory and experience. Dr. Holm – an American Indian scholar who co-

developed the Peoplehood Matrix, a tool mapping Indigenous identities, called out language - in addition to sacred ritual, place, and other cultural components, as a critical input for identity. For persons in the African Diaspora where native languages have been dismantled, and we all speak a different colonial tongue (i.e. English, Spanish, Portuguese, French), folkloric dance and culture had become our indigenous language. Through shared practices we were re-establishing our indigenous and decolonized sense of being.

Santiago de Cuba was central to diverse Afro-Cuban cultures. After quickly checking in at the hotel, we regrouped and visited the Los Hoyos Cultural Center to hear the Los Hoyos comparsa play their traditional carnival music. A *comparsa* is a social club that gathers to form a carnival crew or orchestra. Los Hoyos is an all- male social club that was formed one hundred and one years ago. The music, songs, and rhythms were heavily influenced by the Afro-Haitian and Haitian Kreyole cultures that were integrated into local traditions. The Los Hoyos' sound is a polyrhythmic composition of at least five types of drums and percussion instruments. Car brake pads or other recycled metal objects are used to play the *clave*, or tempo of the songs. The introduction of the Chinese cornet in 1913 gave the music

OSHUN'S CALABASH

an additional unique high pitch sound juxtaposed with the bass of the drums creating an exuberant rhythm to dance to. A few days later on President Fidel's birthday, we were fortunate to participate in an impromptu parade with members of Los Hoyos. We fell in line with other dancers. Without knowing the dance steps, I just let the rhythm lead me as we processed down the streets to waiving crowds along the sidelines, reclaiming a mutual cultural bond shared among our African ancestors. The claiming of public space, space where movement is often controlled by persons in power, was significant and powerful. The experience – the music, the costumes, the rhythms, and the energy – was also familiar. I quickly grabbed onto my college memory at Xavier University when my classmates and I would join a spontaneous procession and “second line” to the rhythm of improv bands across New Orleans' neighborhoods during Mardi Gras season, injecting our right to being.

8 GUANTÁNAMO

The following day we traveled to the City of Guantánamo to visit La Casa de Changüi, a cultural center and museum dedicated to the preservation of the Changüi culture and music tradition. During the Haitian Revolution of 1791-1804, many Frenchmen and their slaves fled from Haiti to settle in the region. Escaped enslaved persons also came and settled in isolated villages high up in the Sierra Maestra Mountains where their descendants still exist today. Residents of Guantánamo identify with French and Afro-Haitian cultures more so than the Hispanic culture found in the rest of Cuba. Many households still speak Haitian Creole in addition to Spanish. As a music genre, Changüi emerged from the countryside in the middle of the 19th century and is played on five main instruments, the bongo drums, maracas, a *guiro*, a *tres* guitar and a *marimbula*.

Changüi is the root of *Son* and other genres (Farr, 2003). The famous song “Guantanamera” made famous in the States by the late Celia Cruz is a Changüi song. Changüi is danced by couples and resembles a Haitian meringue where the feet are never lifted from the floor but shuffle back and forth. Changüi originates out of a very humble rural culture and the musicians take great pride in sharing this musical tradition. They want to ensure that the French influence on Cuban culture is known throughout the world so that their history will be memorialized.

After leaving La Casa de Changüi we visited a Guantánamo neighborhood to participate in a carnival celebration. It was the month of August, the period of the national vacation time so there were many street festivals occurring across the countryside. La Mora was very protective of us when we merge on into the community so she warned that we were only staying for an hour so that we would not travel off too far. Thankfully, we stayed for two and a half. After waiting for a little while in someone’s home (somehow the owner accommodated all 33 of us), we heard the first strike of the drum in front of the home and we all piled out into the street to join a gathering crowd. The drummers began to play a rumba rhythm.

People formed a circle creating designated space for dancing inside. La Mora and a male friend entered the circle first to begin the dancing the Rumba. Rumba movements resemble the movement of a rooster and a hen. It is a sensual, yet playful dance between a man and a woman, or at least the playing of a male and female role. The man dances with a handkerchief and the woman in a skirt. Through the movements that center on the movements of the hips in synch with the music, the man tries to flash his handkerchief in between the legs of the woman. A respectable woman never lets a man enter her private parts so the female dancer's role is to keep out the handkerchief through movement of her skirt. When she believes the man is going to strike, she closes the ruffles of her skirt symbolizing her chastity. If the man is successful, the woman steps out and a new dancer enters. Or, after a few rounds, the dancers rotate out and a new man or woman enters to continue the challenge. A woman or man can also interrupt to change the partners if the dance between the same couple is going on for a long time. The momentum of the series of dancers is too intimidating for me, a novice, to even think about interrupting so I chose to remain a spectator taking in the technique. It was also a great opportunity to learn the songs as they

OSHUN'S CALABASH

were sung in the traditional call and response method, making learning the words easy. Everyone present was full of smiles and laughter creating a bond between all participants through a glimmer in the eye. Dancing and singing became a common language, overcoming barriers of Spanish/English or Cuban/American. It was a good day.

9 RETURN TO SANTIAGO DE CUBA

Over the next few days we had experiential learning with the three leading dance companies in Santiago: Ballet Folklórico Cutumba, Danza del Caribe, Ballet Folklórico de Oriente. Each day we had at least a three hour dance class with a guest instructor from one of the companies followed by a performance. The classes were great because we were taught a range of styles from modern with an Afro-Cuban fusion to more of the traditional dances of the Orisha, Congo–Palo, Voodoo, and rumba.

Congo-Palo became my favorite dance style after finally seeing it performed by Cutumba. The night of the performance I dreamed about the rhythm and felt it riveting throughout my body. The next morning, I was excited when our instructor Jesusito from Ballet Folklórico de Oriente, taught us a Congo-Palo routine. This dance

style is very intense and the movements are precise. At times there is no music played because the sound of synchronization among the dancers' footsteps creates its own rhythm, like an advancing army heading to war. I am certain that the African American fraternity and sorority tradition of "stepping" comes from the Congo-Palo tradition as some of the movements are very similar. While we were dancing and getting into the rhythm of the dance, Jesusito encouraged us to "call down" our own inner Congo to give us the energy needed to perform the dance. The room feels with grunts, loud exhales, and other animal like noises as each of the dancers releases her own "inner Congo." I recalled a dream I had the night of the Zimmerman verdict, the night he was found not guilty for killing Trayvon Martin. This decision came down a few days before our trip. As I was going to sleep that night, I saw a Congo-Bantu African warrior, masked as a lion. As this image re-appeared in mind there on the dance floor in Cuba, I felt a vibration of a purifying fire, spiral up from my root chakra – up through my sex organs, belly, heartspace, throat, to the top of my head, rising in a Kundalini pattern- a divine snake. Flowing out through my crown chakra, my energy mixed with the energy of the other dancers, dripped in sweat from the inner heat and outer

humidity, we made it across the floor in synch with one another. At the end of the class, Jesusito called us over to the drummers where the pace of rhythm intensified and we all let loose; beautiful bodies shaking, stomping, gyrating, releasing pent up memories suddenly awakened. Exhausted at the end of the last drum beat, the dance had been a needed catharsis. I had never felt so powerful, so reconnected back to source. How could I have forgotten the power of my ancestors who survived under extreme conditions from a racialized and violent landscape? It was through their efforts that I could be here in this moment. I was thankful.

The next performance caught me by surprise. It was an interpreted choreography danced by Danza del Caribe set to Billie Holiday's rendition of "Strange Fruit" written by Abel Meeropol. The song witnesses the hanging of Black bodies – men, women, and children lynched during the Jim Crow era decorating the landscape with fear, rage, sorrow, and pleasure to those doing the hanging – mainly in the South, but practiced across the country. At first, I was angered by this piece. I did not come to Cuba to be reminded of the pain we continue to face back home. Why did they select this song? Do they not know the significance of its meaning? Are they standing/dancing

with us in solidarity over the recent rash of police shootings or mocking us? I tried to suspend my inner voice and breathe through rapid heart palpitations triggered by my anxiety. A solo dancer moved across the stage, he contracted and contorted his body – moving his chest and abdominal – with care, yet as if extracting pain like one wrings a towel to remove excess water. Ricoeur (2004) stated, “the work of mourning is the cost of the work of remembering, but the work of remembering is the benefit of the work of mourning.” I lowered my gaze to release the tension in my eyes so I could take in the dance. A female dancer soon joined the male dancer on stage. The two came together in a union as arms/legs/limbs merged in a perfect fit like a puzzle. Love. A warm feeling of love filled the heartspace, although my mind could not quite catch up to the understanding and meaning experienced in the body.

When I think about the act of lynching and the disconnection of mind and body I go back to Descartes and the Cartesian split that rest at the root of colonization and the dehumanization of women, earth, and people of color around the world. I think of the fear that white men generated through acts of lynching innocent Black men, women, and even children to sustain an imposed sense of power.

There were those Black men, too, whom with courage took the life of a white men to protect the sovereignty of Black womanhood, stopping the brutal raping and sexual assaults against their the wives and daughters. Facing the lynch mob and subsequent death with dignity. I think of how families were separated by death or by forced migration when one received rumors that a lynch mob would surround their house that night. I also think of those who gracefully took down the remains to ensure a proper burial and bring back value to the life despite the manner of death. The pain of these internal images gripped me, however the dance reminded me of love and the organic connection of the human spirit.

My own body began to contort with the contraction between love and rage. Standing up, dancing – movement is the only way to process the memories and the present. With love, not anger or rage, the dance respectfully paid homage to the lost souls who died during this reign of terror and to those who continue to die today. I am comforted and challenged. In Cuba, our brothers and sisters made space for our grief. Was this intentional? When the dance was over, I startled myself with loud clapping sound of my hands. I needed to release the internal pain through the stinging sensation of the hard

OSHUN'S CALABASH

claps while graciously acknowledging their recognition of our past and continues struggle. Strangely, on the way to the hotel and even later to dinner, none of us talked about this piece.

10 COBRE

The Afro-Cuban experience is teaching me how to reconstruct self without the confines of artificial constructions of race and even gender. It was more of a human race experiencing itself in a place animated by belief and rituals. Truly remarkable! (Personal Communication, Fieldwork Journal, August 21, 2013)

Our final official visit in Santiago was to the Basilica of La Virgen de La Caridad del Cobre, to me a sacred shrine of Oshún. Walking into the Basilica I baptized myself with the Holy Water out of habit from my Catholic upbringing, and headed down the center aisle toward the front of the church. I slid in to an available pew and pulled down the cushion to kneel. I opened my hands and bowed my head to pray. I could not think of any words to say, so I let the tears rise up and fall down into my opened hands, resisting the urge to wipe them away. In the glistening moist surface of my hands I saw

the reflection of my past. I saw my mom and aunts who all had passed away. I saw the little girl still waiting on the couch in front of the living room window for her dad to come and take her to Disneyland – even after the sunset. I saw the husband and marriage that I had always wanted but did not think I was good enough to receive so I settled for a spiritually incompatible relationship. I saw the child-spirit of the little girl who asked me to be her mom, but for whom I lacked the courage to conceive. As I quietly wept, I felt a ray of warm and gentle energy shine down from the glass-enclosed case of the Virgin encased on the altar, begin to embrace me. A voice simply said, “Let go. I can hold your pain.” I took in a deep breath and exhaled. Looking for some change in my purse to leave a donation, I found a mirror. I decided to check to see if my mascara had streaked down my cheeks in black war-paint brushed on by my tears. I paused at my reflection. I finally *see* me; an image I have felt but never had witnessed. I am no longer a secret. I no longer have to hide. I am not alone. I have a home. I am here. My precipitous journey had ended.

EPILOGUE

There is energy within me calling me to develop a model of trauma recovery based on the collective action philosophy embedded in African indigenous belief systems. I believe that it could provide a historically sensitive and compassionate model for the community, especially African American men, to heal from the horror of slavery and face the pain through non-verbal, creative strength-based approaches. The Afro-Cuban folkloric traditions have inspired me. (Personal Communication, Fieldwork Journal, August 19, 2013)

I wake up from a dream the day I was finally heading back to Los Angeles after a night in Miami. The dream image was of a white jewelry box that contained petite, painted white missiles wrapped in yellow bows. They emulated grace and reminded me how dainty I thought my friend's small pearl handle pistol looked in its box in her drawer. The perfect size gun for a woman – totally disconnected from its use as a weapon. Looking up from the box I noticed that I was outside on a lawn in someone's backyard. In front of me was a group of women friends dressed in all white with their hair wrapped

as if dressed for a tambour. It is a tambour but for whom I am not sure. I carry the box with me to the circle of singing, clapping, and dancing women. I wake up.

Landing on the runway I pulled out my phone and turn it on to call my step-mom Nancy and let her know I am back in the states. I noticed a distressed email from Iya Fayomi, my godmother and sister/friend. We were scheduled to meet the following day, however a tragedy had occurred and we would have to reschedule. A young man from our spiritual and Capoeira communities had committed suicide. It is said that he shot himself in the head. He was African-American. He was twenty-nine years of age. The Saturday before his passing he was dancing for Oshún. Hillman (1997) describes the symbolic suicide as one “who immolates his body, symbolically following an archetypal model of dismemberment.” The image of him purposefully separating his own head from his body weighed heavily on me.

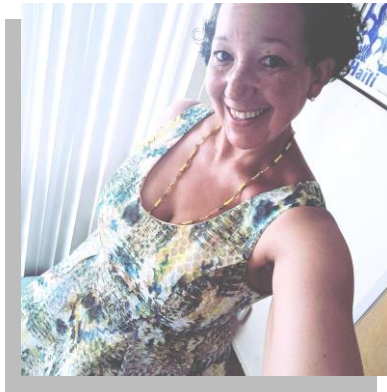
Watson and Shulman (2008) reflect how in these times we live in an “environment of amnesia where past situations of oppression and violence are silenced.” The images of the deaths of Black men come back to me. I am reminded of the man who set himself on fire on the

Capitol lawn. If suicide is an expression of the soul, then I believe the message is that our men and our society are suffering in silence. And what about Black women whose names never make the news? I, we, /must make noise to break the silence. I began to hear the drum rhythm of the Congo-Palo dance and start shifting my feet to recreate the rhythm I created with my fellow dancers. If we can just recall this dance, the dance of the African indigenous rhythm that dwells inside, we can reclaim our space back on this earth so that wherever we plant our feet, we create home in the footsteps of our being.

WORKS CITED

- Ayorinde, C. (2004). *Afro-Cuban Religiosity, Revolution, and National Identity*. Gainesville; FL: University Press of Florida.
- Behar, R. (1996). *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that Breaks Your Heart*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Belenky, M., Bond, L., & Weinstock, J. (1997). *A Tradition that has no Name: Nurturing the Development of People, Families, and Communities*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Chilisa, B. (2012). *Indigenous Research Methods*. Los Angeles: Sage.
- Cushman, P. (1995). *Constructing the Self, Constructing America: A Cultural History of Psychotherapy*. Cambridge: Perseus Publishing.
- Deren, M. (1953). *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*. Kingston, N.Y.: McPherson & Company.
- Farr, J. (2003). *Rites of Rhythm: The music of Cuba*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Hillman, J. (1992). *The thought of the heart and soul of the world*. Putnam: Spring Publications, Inc.
- Hillman, J. (1997). *Suicide and the Soul*. Putnam: Spring Publications, Inc.
- Holm, T., Pearson, J. D., & Chavis, B. (2003). Peoplehood: A model for the extensive sovereignty in American Indian studies. *Wicazo Ša Review*, 18(1), 7–24.
- Hurston, Z. (1983). *Tell My Horse*. Berkeley: Turtle Island.
- Jung, C. (1969). Archetypes of the collective unconscious. In *The collective works of C.G. Jung* (Second., pp. 3–272). Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Ricoeur, P. (2004). *Memory, History, Forgetting*. (K. Blamey & D. Pellauer, Trans.). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Thompson, R. (1983). *Flash of the Spirit: African & Afro-American Art & Philosophy*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.
- Watkins, M., & Shulman, H. (2008). Liberation arts: Amnesia, counter-memory, counter memorial. In *Toward Psychologies of Liberation* (pp. 232–265). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



My mother once wrote, *“Our history is the gateway to our future . . . there will be many more rivers to cross. Let the spirit of those who have made the crossings guide you and give you the courage to keep going.”*

It has been five years since this last trip to Cuba where my soul was awakened. With the assistance of my ancestors, I am now preparing for another journey – travel home to Nigeria after waiting for over 500 years, for initiation into the Oshún priesthood.

Oshún endowed me with medicine for personal healing during my trip to Cuba, medicine through a five-year slow drip that patiently guides me to greater knowledge of self and my purpose for being on earth. The trip to Nigeria will enhance this knowledge so that I may have the strength and courage to help others heal, especially from the false belief of homelessness. In Cuba I learned that we are all born with a sense of place and belonging. It is society that tricks us into not *being*. We have to learn to look into a different mirror to see ourselves. We have to re-learn how to look into Oshún’s calabash, into her medicinal waters, to see the true reflection of who we are and the possibilities for who we are to be.

Thank you for your purchase of this story and your investment in the next leg of my journey.

Blessings,

Alisa

Florencealise@gmail.com