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CULTURAL WORKS

La Manda

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Abstract

This creative non-fiction piece written in Spanglish called 'La Manda' reflects upon faith and ritual practices from a personal and transnational perspective. From dance, to fairs, to nun school, this story focuses on the difference in religious perspective held by two American siblings raised in Mexico. The narrative voice in this piece provides a unique perspective broadening dialogue(s) on Mexican American identity.

Keywords:

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Una manda is a promise you make to a Saint, to God, o a la Virgen. It's a negotiation, an agreement. Every year el Piti, goes to Talpa on horseback to see la Virgen de Talpa. Son cuatro días a caballo de ida y vuelta. It's a pilgrimage. He's never told us why he does it, he just does. Cada año sin falta. When he comes back, tiene la cara pálida y cansada, pero en paz.

I'll never forget the first time I saw mandas. It was a Saturday night y estábamos en la plaza. It must have been fall because the air was cool and the bobos were out, swarming around the lamp posts. Adults would sit around the plaza, chatting and eating elote or churros mientras corríamos y jugábamos all sorts of elaborate games involving singing and rhyming. Cuando eran días de fiesta, tocaba el conjunto: todos de vaquero y con camisas brillosas. Bailábamos en la plaza, alrededor del kiosko o en el salón de eventos, depending on what type of event it was. Si era quinceañera, pues en el salón; if it was an average weekend, conjunto en la plaza; si eran las fiestas, venía la banda al kiosko. Geña taught me to dance cumbia when I was ten. It was weird because Mecano's 'Ay, que pesado' was playing on the radio and that's not a cumbia,

but Geña taught me anyway and the rhythm she gifted me that day, still remains in my core like a heartbeat. I loved going to Saturday night dances. It was a family affair. When my school friends would stay overnight, we would all go al baile and I'd show them how to dance. As soon as a song started and they'd see a boy approaching them, they'd ask me:

—'¿Esta cómo se baila?'

—'Quebradita ...,' I would whisper in their ear as they walked onto the dance floor:

—'Lenta,' if it was a slow one,

—'Cumbia,' if it was a fast one danced apart.

The gringuita middle schooler was teaching her Mexican peers the nuances of rural social dance. In college, I brought my friends home to the fiestas, the fair, and ... same thing exactly: '¡ñorrr. ¡Vamos a los toros and we'd all jump down into the bullring at the end, mientras tocaba la Banda el Limón. If we wanted to be real crazy we'd go to the bullfights in Santa María and dance to every song La Recodo played.

The first time my brother and I saw *mandas* no sabíamos what to make of it. We were all playing in the plaza, when in the corner of my eye I saw a kid my age dressed like an altar boy. I had never seen anything like it outside of church. No era Halloween, ni era época de Posadas, it wasn't for a school play. ¿Qué onda? Cuando alguien hace una manda they dress up like the Saint they pray to. This boy was dressed like San Martín de Porres: de blanco y negro con un rosario colgando. Believers make a promise to an intermediary of God, in exchange for a miracle. La familia del niño se compromete a vestirlo en honor al santo for a period of time of their choice, in exchange for his continuous health after surviving an accident, or something. I also remember seeing girls with their hair cut off short and lots of kids wearing escapularios. Do those even exist anywhere else outside of México? Creo que estaba como en tercero de primaria when I ran home and begged my mom to buy me an escapulario immediately. Madre Filipita said if we died without wearing one we might rot in Purgatory. I didn't know what that was but it sounded horrible y ni mais que yo quería eso. This was the same nun who had us kneel every morning with our arms extended and hands in the form of the cross, while we prayed the rosary aloud. By the end of it, my triceps would be burning. Madre Luz María was much kinder. Her warm demeanor me hacía acordarme de mi abuelita paterna. In fourth grade, I remember telling her I didn't want to confess. Qué raro, arrodillarme al lado de un padre al que ni conozco y decirle todo lo que hice mal. That's just weird and scary. De adulta, valoro la noción de responsabilizarse por los errores que uno comete and owning it, but back then ... qué susto. Madre Luz María had me confess anyway, but after our grade's First Communion she said I could just confess frente a una imagen de Jesucristo antes de comulgar. Did I mention she was one of my favorites?

Los domingos veíamos a la gente entrar a misa de rodillas. Church parishioners would kneel at the entrance and make their way up to the altar, rezando todo el camino. When we saw this for the first time, El Piti asked la Sra. Linda:

—'Do *we* have to do that?' with a scared look on his face.

—'Why do they do it?' I chimed in.

—'Faith' contestó.

Interesting concept. Faith. My dad says mine wavers. Mi amiga costarricense dice:

—'Si no crees en Dios ¿de qué te agarrás, maje?'

Dios. La Divina Madre. Madre Tierra.

I went to an encierro juvenil when I was fifteen and hated it. They kept playing tricks on us: we were all sinners, we had to repent. It doesn't surprise me that I was one of the initiators who planned a failed youth retreat midnight escape. Nos cacharon al brincarnos la barda.

—'Bájense, hijas de la ...'

—'Pos, ya ni modo' we said.

They caught us and I falsely promised I would say the rosary every day in repentance.

—'Cada rosario es como una rosa que le das a la Virgen' said the nun in charge.

And, *of course* the poet in me wanted to cover la Virgen with roses (much like Alma Lopez did in her art piece). But in reality, I just couldn't commit to saying a rosary a day just because someone said I had to. La fe nace; no se impone. Maybe that's why la fe del Piti es tan fuerte. 'The force is *definitely* strong with him.' Tenía un cuadro de San Martín de Porres en su cuarto. El santo mulato que cuida a los enfermos y a los pobres, el que se comunica con los animales. I never saw El Piti dress like San Martín, but that same boy who questioned if we had to kneel from the entrance of the church to the altar, now understands why it's done, desde dentro. His four-day pilgrimage every year, his faith in la Virgen de Talpa, his fasting, his blackened, swollen feet illustrate why. Meanwhile, I walked among pilgrims in Santiago de Compostela a few summers ago, and I fast intermittently, still studying the benefits of why. I question faith and religious institutions. Creo en algunas cosas, pero en otras no puedo. I find peace in nature: en la Divina Madre.

My church is a panoramic view of a body of water,

the breeze is the music,

the pews are the tall grass.

Los colores del cielo unidos son el saludo de paz.

When I last visited el Piti's house, I was faced with an enormous image of Our Lady of Guadalupe kissing the Pope's forehead. Surrounding it, were all the wallet-sized family photos I've sent him over the years. La fe nace y en él floreció. I can lecture you on it, pero en mí no nace así.

As a cultural analyst, informed by anthropology and performance theory, respeto los rituales y me interesan las diferentes expresiones de fe. In Portland, I grew up surrounded by Middle Eastern and Asian family friends. During sleep-overs I would see my Muslim friend and her family pray, hablaban urdu y pronto aprendí a distinguir las frases en árabe que decoraban las paredes de su casa. De muchacha, me invitaron a una mezquita in Portland, where women of all ages had an open discussion about hygiene during menstruation. The younger women in the Mosque complained about not being allowed to shower during their period, while the older women claimed it was dirty to let their period blood run down their bodies. Por dentro, me moría de la risa. My thirteen-year-old self, kept wanting to burst into laughter every time I heard 'period blood' mentioned with such distress, but the intensity in the mood quickly made me control myself.

Faith and rituals can unite and separate communities. Pareciera que me contradigo: I question religious institutions but enjoy visiting places of worship. Me interesa estudiar diferentes rituales, pero tiendo a rechazar las que -en teoría- me aplican. I pick and choose, pero estoy en paz. La fe es personal. Mi papá me decía: 'follow your bliss'—porque es fanático de Joseph Campbell—y, eso es lo que he hecho a lo largo de mi vida. I remain open to what

calls me; me rijo por el instinto. So, when my friend was battling breast cancer, I didn't think twice when her Jewish mentor offered to include me in the blessing offered for my sickly friend. I respectfully bowed my head, said: 'Shalom' and felt a part of that faith community. Las mandas, más que una negociación divina, are a coping mechanism for people who feel the need for action as a means to silence their worries; son un performance cultural del sincretismo Latinoamericano. Mandas are a performance of faith.

When we were kids, mom and dad took us horseback riding through Paricutín. There we were, surrounded by volcanic rocks, imagining what the-now half swallowed- church looked like in its full splendor. A couple years ago I went back with a group of college students. While I was there I couldn't help remembering the pictures of el Piti and me: two gringuitos riding a pelo. His Nike shirt, my Rainbow Brite tennis shoes—the definition of otherness, amongst the backdrop of indigenous, rural Paricutín. Being there again facing the buried church sparked introspection. Was it the memory of the idyllic time our family spent there? ¿Era el imaginarme lo que pudo haber sido el pueblo sin la devastación causada por el volcán? ¿... el contacto entre lo celestial siendo tragado por lo que parece ser el inframundo? No sé ... It remains one of my favorite places to visit.

El Piti wears his escapulario proud, while I only wear my Virgen de Guadalupe necklace when I travel. More recently, I added una medallita de San Cristóbal, patron saint of journeys para no sentirme tan sola en mi camino. My faith waivers, but my inner self is strong. Maybe El Piti and I aren't so different after all.