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## Imaginary Borders: A phenomenological Memoir on my Immigrant Journey

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**Imaginary Borders:  
A Phenomenological Memoir on my Immigrant Journey**

Senior Project submitted to  
the Division of Social Studies  
of Bard College

By

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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
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For Nelson  
For Edwar  
For Marco  
For Wilmary  
For Evelyn  
For Elias  
For Wailly  
For Edibeth  
For Meylin  
For Nora  
For Ivan  
For Flor  
For Keyla  
For Angie  
For Emmanuelito  
For Julieta  
For Ronaldo

*Gracias por emprender este viaje conmigo y por enseñarme el valor de luchar por nuestras metas aún en una realidad que no nos pertenece.* Thank you for embarking in this journey with me and for teaching me the value of fighting for our goals even in a reality that does not belong to us.

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## **Abstract**

The nature of the immigrant journey is one of my biggest preoccupations. The immigrant emigrates to another country from developing countries armed with a language and a culture that will not be useful in coping with the many difficulties of his new life. In my project, I combine personal narrative from a first-person perspective, poetic, and philosophical writing. It is an investigation on the question of the immigrant and his human condition as a conscious agent who exchanges one mode of being in his home country with another one in the US. In my analysis, I explore the immigrant passage as a way of learning through my phenomenological experience. A passage unique to the immigrant experience. By using my personal narrative as a child of undocumented immigrants and an immigrant myself, I argue the aforementioned points by claiming that once a person goes through a process of mental and physical uprooting, their perception of the world bifurcates. This psychic shift happens when one trespasses corporeal, philosophical, and imaginary borders. And therefore, immigrants essentially gain access to a broader understanding and a more nuanced perception of reality. That perception of the world is similar in comparison with W.E.B Du Bois's (1994) theory of double consciousness that allows him to see reality from a different light but that also causes philosophical anxiety. I will also be examining the idea of Errantry from Edouard Glissant (1997)—a Caribbean philosophical theory of a rhizome that is Antithetical to one particular Western tradition of thought. A rhizome resembles an individual that does not grow roots and is instead in a state of movement driven by a scared motivation—to argue that immigrants fulfill the conditions to become errants and essentially learn in reading the book.

## Introduction

The trauma of an event that happens to us in the course of our lives has the power to wake us up from a pleasant slumber of willful ignorance. Events that snaps the dormant epiphanies in the mind and disrupts the pleasant flow of the kind of homogenous hegemonic thinking. Suddenly, one is stuck in the wakefulness of a surrealist conscious experience to which falling back asleep is but a bygone pleasure; a no longer possibility. Here by trauma I mean an experience that enters the triviality of life and breaks it from the inside with a sudden shift in conventional thinking. This inner trauma can build up in the mind and later snap to create a mental seismic wave strong enough to shake the foundations of the architecture of the mind. Kohan would state this would also stress that these events can also be “seemingly banal, colloquial, [and]without great transcendence” (3) Events in a person’s life that can “present themselves in the moment of *Kairos*, they cause an earthquake, which causes everything to change place, position and state of being” (3). Through my years of learning and throughout my epistemological journey in the US, I experienced a similar awakening in my call to adventure. The trauma would later snap to catalyze a form of a mental awakening. My perception was once grounded in a reality that purely perceived objects as banal. Simple apparitions outside my consciousness that I saw with my eyes. But things that are pleasant are not meant to last. We are destined to battle the horseman of illusion at some point if we care about the truth. W.E.B Du Bois experienced a rupture in his life when he saw himself as being different than everyone else and at that moment he describes a veil falling in front of his eyes. This created a duality resulting in what he came to refer to as *Double Consciousness* at a younger age when growing up he begins to see himself as different. Du Bois was a scholar and activist in his time. He was born on February 23, 1868, in Great Barrington, Massachusetts. He earned a Ph.D. from Harvard University in 1895. His ideas reflected the philosophical and Christian tradition of

dividing the mind into three. Plato divides the soul into a tripartite soul while Christianity makes God, the world's mind, into a trinity. Du Bois however, does something slightly different by instead dividing consciousness into two. Perhaps such duality stems from his studies in German philosophy, particularly German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* where, in his idea of the Lordship and Bondsman dialectic, Hegel describes two psychic agents in a battle for recognition where one of them eventually will supersede the other and become the lord over the bondsman. This battle of two subjects is reflected in African American history in the United States. I will be paying specifically close attention to what Du Bois says about Double Consciousness and how his theory can be applied to my immigrant experience. In order to delve further into the immigrant journey, I would also have to look closely at the ideas of 20th-century philosopher and poet Edouard Glissant and take out certain ideas from his book *Poetics of Relation* where he does much work on Caribbean philosophy and expounds on decolonizing practices. These are two of the most important thinkers that I am using in my project. In essence, I am bringing Glissant and Du Bois in conversation with the immigrant phenomenon. They will serve primarily as the backbone of my project so that their thoughts can add philosophical support to my immigrant telling. My goal is to place Glissant and Du Bois as optical prisms the same way scientists use the telescope and the microscope to inspect something and reveal important data. I will use their theories of "Double Consciousness" and "Errantry" as accompanying pieces to my story. My story will be told through a phenomenological perspective to reveal important aspects of aesthetics and the way I primarily perceive the world as an immigrant. That way I can have some support from philosophers to substantiate the claims I am making while telling my story. I am taking a phenomenological approach to the question of the immigrant. A phenomenological method attempts to showcase the structure of a person's experiences through a first-person



perspective as opposed to explained through a theoretical framework. I always took notice of the way in which I wanted to tell a story. I felt that I was always irking to tell people about this special experience that I have lived through. Many of us immigrants almost never get the opportunity to tell the world our stories. As Kohan would suggest once again, "...we cannot split life from writing. When life becomes the object of writing, as is the case here, when we write about a life in a strict sense, about the life of a human being, we affirm it twice" (xxiii). When we place such monumental importance in telling each of our stories, we can come to the realization that many do not have equal opportunities to tell what they have learned and what it has been for them to experience a life of toil. Or what they have learned from their own struggles in life. I felt it important to tell my story this way because in doing so I am honoring those that do not even speak the language, those who remain in the shadows because they do not possess a document that grants them legitimacy to learn or go to school or be treated as *people*, "in writing our stories, we affirm our lives as possessing innate value" (xxiii). And even when I stray from a homogenous path of thinking in my project I always come back to the issue of immigrants as beings who also have a story to tell but are unable to. Writing my stories comes here as a privilege. Even though I could have written about Sartre's existentialism or about Hegel's ideas, I chose instead to write about the immigrant phenomenon which remains still merely political. Philosophy is a discipline that allows us as humans to place as the center what matters most to us; to find questions of extreme importance and scrutinize them to reveal ways in which they relate to the truth and to living a good life. Most philosophical discourses focus on big questions concerning reality and truth. Here, however, I have chosen to take immigration from the periphery and place it at the center of my project. Here at least, I can commend efforts of people traveling to another reality as an effort that holds massive philosophical importance. In my project, besides offering glimpses of what was going in my head

in a retrospective telling, I morph metaphorical language to capture the imagery in my mind and present it to the reader. Moreover, with the use of Venezuelan philosopher and educator Simon Rodriguez story as an errant of Latin America, I seek to embody his philosophical mission in embracing the world as my home not as an errant but as an immigrant. I go into several scenes of my life that depict important realizations about the world and that once they hit me, they have imprinted themselves into the journal of my memory. Eventually, these moments accumulated and led me to have pleasant but conflicting waking moments in my journey. I start my project by retelling the journey to school in Guatemala and then I go into detailed thoughts about the way in which the journey to the United States in 2010, when I was 16, looked before my eyes the day I emigrated from Guatemala to the United States. In order to ground some philosophical concepts of locomotion I use the thoughts of Caribbean philosopher and poet Edouard Glissant and in that way offer some rationale as to why it is that most of us immigrants move and what can be said of that movement and if it reveals a different way of learning. Then I resume the narrative to explain a kind of dual perspective that I felt as a Guatemalan student living and studying in the US which was not only a unique aesthetic vantage point but an emotion of gratitude in having many blessings that make life unique. I bring in Du Bois as someone who does much analysis in his idea of *second sight* so that I can compare it to my notion of dual perspective. However, ultimately my dual perspective notion falls into the umbrella of Du Bois's *double consciousness*. I argue that after having lived in Guatemala and having immigrated to the US, I essentially awakened some form of second sight and that this ability gave me a unique view of life whereby allowing me to understand the accumulation of experiences that I gained through my immigrant journey. But I also attempt to capture something that might be common to other immigrants. Say, for example, if Latin American immigrants have been through several traumas then they will mostly be in a world of

illusion given that what they have seen will essentially disconnect them from reality. This disconnection happens because trauma can cause one to become disoriented and when one comes back to their senses, one remembers such disorientation but now sees it from an oriented mind. However, instead of calling this a form of psychological damage or post-traumatic stress disorder, I shall call it, “funds of knowledge”. Consequently, I can go ahead and claim that libraries are not the only legitimate epistemological storehouses. One can view errantry—and by extension the immigrant journey—as a new form of knowledge making. Libraries are indeed the reigning epistemological storehouses of the world of academia but an interesting competitor would be the knowledge accumulated in the vessel of immigrant's memories. Vessels overflowing with experiential knowledge they have acquired through their own world experience. The immigrant journey reveals a way of life that is itself experiential learning, a journey that for undocumented immigrants is no adventure but a way of life. Undocumented immigrants are students whose textbooks are their very own memories of a lost home, memories that remind them to keep pushing their rocks even in the face of social rejection. Undocumented immigrants remain resolute in working and moving forward even without the force field that a Visa or a Green Card can provide. Despite their limitations, I have seen many still willing to pursue their goals and to me this reflects an indomitable strength that can take our breath away. If philosophical discourse is asking questions that matter to us humans, then I want to pose the immigrant journey as an important theme and take it from the periphery of philosophical discourse and place it, in this project at least, at the center.

### **The Market in Antigua Guatemala - Mastering the Labyrinth**

Guatemala is a country in Central America that became independent in 1821 from Spanish oppression. The small country in Central America was an Edenic world to the Ancient Mayan

Civilizations. The weather is *cálido*<sup>1</sup> and soft to the skin. Some people nickname her as, “the land of eternal spring” because it is never too cold or too warm unless one lives closer to what Guatemalans call ‘la costa’. As a child whenever I had no school to attend, I would travel with my parents to different destinations because they were both merchants in Guatemala and so they used to have shops at different places. Some of these places were Alotenango, San Antonio, Antigua Guatemala, and later I would become an assistant worker with my aunt at Ciudad Vieja and stayed with her from time to time at San Isidro. Although these were not major for my intellectual growth, they allowed me to wander around different places and see different things. There is one specific place where I will always remember as fostering an inner passion for walking, my first venture into being a flâneur. This place was called *el mercado*<sup>2</sup> where I would come back later as a college scholar to revisit and delight in nostalgia. When I came back to *el mercado* 7 years later after having lived in the Bronx and gone to Bard, it seemed small in proportion to what my mind had become used to when I was younger. I figured that my perception of the aesthetic was different. Experiencing big cities like New York and Paris had shifted my way of absorbing the world. To the child I used to be, however, *el mercado* was a gigantic labyrinth where I was a constant walker. Going inside this place was like entering a labyrinth because it was divided by different blocks. Different paths lead to different destinations at *el mercado*. It was a miniature city, a small model of the country where marketing happened. It seemed almost never ending. To me it was a puzzle I wanted to solve by constantly walking in it and learning all the different combinations and algorithms through taking different paths. It was also a place for long expeditions to the unknown until my hippocampus managed to absorb the different combinations that had to be used on the paths to get to the different places. What is quite important about this is that the human interaction

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<sup>1</sup> Warm

<sup>2</sup> The marketplace

with his/her surroundings is simply locked eternally in place: we are always going to be trapped in the physical ground because of the gravitational pull of the earth. The subject and object, the person and his geological place, are married here forever experiencing the flesh of the other. Friction between a conscious agent and the earth (the world outside of the mind) creates reality as we know it. As one is thrown into existence, to borrow here an existentialist phrase, the process of constant consumption of outer stimuli begins to revolve around the epicenter of our sensorial faculties leading to the projection of the outside world to the inner mind. It was there, in that disorienting merchant forest, that I found some tranquility of mind.

### **A Book is a Reality Warping Device**

I remember once I reverse engineered a clock because I had an inner drive to understand the inside of this mechanical thing. And after much effort and with my fingers bruised and lacerated from the process, I absorbed its entire fabric to the interior of my brain. This instance represented a process of pure empirical learning in my childhood and one that I think many philosophers can relate to. Similarly, I wanted to understand the inner mechanism of life despite my realization that doing so was nearly impossible. It occurred to me, years later upon reflecting back to that moment when I was a curious child, that if I opened up life as I had opened up the clock, I would need tools from a sophisticated toolbox. Then I would be able to become a watchmaker that can break life apart from the inside out and put it back together. Maybe, I thought, by studying philosophy I could understand the mechanics of the world and know the nature of the screws, metal springs and strings and cogs and gears and all the other mechanical devices that holds life together and make the clock run smoothly and function as beautifully as it does. I remember once having a conversation with a friend about the way in which we learn as children and he told me that part of what he would do to learn was breaking up his toys into pieces to see

the inside of them. It immediately made me think of Ibn Tufayl's Arabic tale, *Philosophus Autodidactus*. In one of the more memorable scenes, the main character Hayy Ibn Yaqzān, dissects the heart of his mother doe, a female deer that took him as her child in the wild, to try and save her from dying of a fatal disease. He finds the source of life in the heart but he is at the end unable to cure or resuscitate her and she dies. The inability to do anything to save someone dear to him awakens Hayy's awareness of how little he knows about the natural world where he must remain a prisoner. This impotence to solve issues, like saving someone from an illness, pushes him to learn more about the world and his quest for learning eventually leads him to achieve a state of ecstasy—a kind of rational enlightenment. This Muslim philosophical tale resonated with me in many different ways when I read it during First year Seminar at Bard because I also constantly cursed my inability to know ideas outside my reach. Is there a God? Do we have an intrinsic human essence? I know that at times I am unable to access complex knowledge like that of Mathematics because the demon of idleness defeats me and the puppeteer of sloth controls me. I am like Tantalus, attempting to drink from the waters of his own prison and eat the fruit of his own despair, yet is unable to reach forever. However, I have always been a curious person even when growing up in Guatemala so my curiosity rescues me from boredom and banality. One of the technologies I began to use to aid me in my journey for understanding was, naturally, literacy. Learning to read is a hallmark of intellectual pursuit. Reading is to the mind as brooding is to the egg—transformative. I still remember my first teacher who helped me cross the universal border from illiteracy to literacy; her name was Milsa, *Seño*<sup>3</sup> Milsa for everyone. I have many pleasant memories of learning to read and write in her class. She was very strict and would not hesitate to strike her students with her cane when they were not paying attention or when they misbehaved in

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<sup>3</sup> Short for señorita which is Spanish for Lady and denotes respect when addressing someone.

class. My mom would always describe her as the best teacher of the school. Upon meeting her, however, I got the impression of an old mean lady who could barely walk. I remember I wanted to be with my friends in the other sections with other teachers but I was stuck with her for my first year in elementary school. Little did I know that being her student would be one of the best experiences in my life that, to this day, I continue to treasure the pleasant memories of her passionate guidance. I remember how every day after school, a couple of my childhood friends and I would walk a long distance to her house to continue to go over the main class book. It was a small green book with a cover depicting a little boy and a puppy reading together. The name of the book was *Victoria*. But a year before entering school, I would look at my older brother's book, *Nacho*, to delight myself in its pictures since I was still unable to read. When it was finally my turn to go to school, I remember the school days as warm and pleasant. Days when everything I wanted to know was at the palm of my hand, inside this book with pictures and letters. Back then, when I was 8, this book functioned as a portal opener to enter another reality—the literacy realm. This realm was different and only accessible to me. Inside this intellectual realm, I am able to experience the surrealist world as I read worlds written by the wild imagination of the ghosts of writers past<sup>4</sup>. Before I received the aid of *Seño Milsa*, literacy was deep magic that I admired and constantly contemplated but could not access. Frustrated I would ask my sister Nora, who already knew how to read at age 11, to please explain to me this rare power. I could not put together how it was that people were able to pronounce words and utter sounds from simply looking at, what to me seemed at the time, cryptic symbols. Nora would read stories to me and my two little sisters, Flor and

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<sup>4</sup> Language borrowed from Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*. Writers usually create worlds contained inside books where it only takes someone willing to read them. In reading them one can enter different realities like Alice did when she fell inside the rabbit hole. I call them ghosts because they continue to be alive in the DNA (letters) of the books they have written in the past and that continue to remain present in the memory of readers today.

Keyla, from a book called *El Sembrador*<sup>5</sup> during afternoons when our parents were out working. When the phonetic sounds coming out of her mouth through the use of her perfect diction would strike my ears, my imagination would ignite and create mental panoramas of colorful imagery. Scenes depicting a rooster fighting a Sultan for a diamond<sup>6</sup> would conjure up in conjunction with the movement of my sister's lips and then appear in the theater of my imagination. I was sent into a small trance of imagination. It was quite like watching a movie with genius cinematography but without a screen in front of my eyes. This psychic creation happened in my mind and it was a beautiful display of color and form that cannot be described even through analogy. Literacy also seemed to the 8-year-old me a kind of magical power. It would appear to me that when someone took up a book and read its words out loud, they were engaging in wizardry—like magicians reading spells from a magic book that would conjure up objects and rabbits from a hat. That by reading the arcane spells of these books, my sister could bring to life entire fantastical worlds where animals could talk and humans could fly: worlds not bound by rules or laws. Stories had their own breath and light, they had a face and flesh. They were thrilling phantasms of the mind brought to reality with the invocation of a book. I longed to transport myself into these worlds whenever I wanted, to be able to magically conjure up these chimerical creatures. This desire led me to take learning seriously. However, there has always been a challenge in my own intellectual battle and that has been attention and focus. I have always been very *despistado*<sup>7</sup> but it is because I continue to make stories in my head every time I am able to. Naturally, I am always the hero in these stories. In my time as an undergrad at Bard, I realized that I often take refuge inside my mind

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<sup>5</sup> The Sower

<sup>6</sup> The Little Rooster and the Diamond Button. A Turkish Folktale where a little rooster finds a diamond but a wealthy greedy sultan steals it from him before he can give it to his poor owner. The rooster manages to annoy the Sultan so much through a series of courageous acts that the Sultan gives up and give him back the diamond.

<sup>7</sup> Distracted, lost in thought



when things are difficult, when I am too cognizant of the tragedies of the modern world or when I cannot support my family the way I would like. When the world is in chaos, I can transport myself inside the world of the mind for “the mind is its own place, and in itself [one] can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven” (Paradise Lost, I.254-255). The journey to Seño Milsa’s house remains pleasant in my memory but the everyday walk to school is a different story.

### **Bored at My Desk - Psychonautica**

Going to school filled me with dread because I often would not have money to buy snacks for lunch. It is difficult to think and be creative when your stomach is empty and when you know that it will be for the next couple hours because an empty stomach does not create much possibilities for a "life if the mind" or literacy. Even so, I would once again escape to my mind as a way to cope. The highway that I had to walk every day in the morning with my three siblings—Nora, Ivan, and Flor—was a narrow path, an ever-curving road in the form of a gigantic snake where cars would constantly go down at speeds of forty-five miles per hour. There was always danger of getting hit by one so “watch out!”, my mother would say as she gave us a last pat on the back and walked us to the other side of the road from where we would part. It seemed that the street itself led to a higher reality since I somehow always felt that I was walking upwards against the cars passing me by. These cars on the highway were just cars and it never felt that there were humans trapped inside. The humans of all these passing cars did not matter and the only thing that my eyes often absorbed were color, shape and size. This cognitive shortcut gave me the illusion that cars going down the highway was a never-ending cycle of metal ants and metal wasps<sup>8</sup> running on a one-way street; one way only to the ending point that disappeared in the nothingness. In the

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<sup>8</sup> Allusion to Julio Cortázar’s “The Night Face Up”. It is a story about an Indian dreaming he was riding a metal wasp but that to the modern reader, it appeared as a story of a man riding a motorbike, denoting thus a play in dreamlike states and technological anachronisms.

nothingness at the end of a perspectival point. Once having overcome the hardships of the highway, tiredness and cold, I would be rewarded with finally being able to sit down at the desk where the triviality of life would once again disappear because it was in that space that my mind would ignite. Suddenly, a ritualistic trance would amplify my imagination and I would travel to the stars of the cosmos inside my mind. My mind was a realm where I could be whatever I wished to be. Students often describe school analogous to a prison but even though I had to remain still in my desk for hours, I could always have freedom of thought and wander the chambers of my mind. The inside of the mind is a mirror image of the cosmos as, according to Pierre Bourdieu, “the mind is a metaphor of the world of objects which is itself but an endless circle of reflecting metaphors.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, the structure of the mind has its own rules and binding contracts with its own mental laws. What happens inside of the mind is accessible only to the perceiver of their own mind. The architectonic of the mind is reflected in what we humans create out there and manifest as direct physical objects that are first born inside of the mind—once again, the mind is its own place. However, perhaps my distraction was an issue. A problem of being ever distracted by illusion. Like Calvin, from the comic strip *Calvin and Hobbes*<sup>10</sup>, I was a champion of daydreaming. My flights of fancy have now translated to my actual life where now it is philosophy, the transporting machine, that teleports me to other realities. I would resort to daydreaming to negate boredom; constantly wishing of a perfect reality in contrast to my actual one where I had to be seated at a desk with no money for lunch. I would at times curse my inability to pay attention to a single thing in class and at other points I would instead hyper-focus on a single object. This distraction would

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<sup>9</sup> Pierre Bourdieu Outline of Theory and Practice

<sup>10</sup> Perhaps one of the most famous comic strips next to Garfield. This whimsical comic depicts the adventures of a boy in various intergalactic only real to him adventure. He is always accompanied by his friend Hobbes who remains only real to him. The comic was published on 1985 in many newspapers by creator Bill Watterson when he retired from it on December 31, 1995. From calvinandhobbes.com

disorient my sense of time and break my internal clock. Moments later after deviating from the straight path (staying focused), I would come back to my senses and tell myself, “come back to reality”. I would warn myself years later to stop having my head in the clouds because then I could one day fall into a well just like Thales of Miletus did back in his unfortunate time. Growing up in Guatemala was quite difficult because at age ten I stopped having the support of my parents. They left to migrate to the US in pursuit of better economic opportunities. After that, the feeling of isolation in my mind worsened. I started feeling trapped inside a giant mechanical ever-moving apparatus. Inside this perpetual machine that moved itself on its axis, I felt as if I were a marionette. Such mechanical feeling was caused by the structure of the classrooms at the local public school, *Escuela Oficial Urbana Mixta*<sup>11</sup> in Guatemala. I started to get tired of the school system and wishing to reunite with my parents ever more. Guatemala had begun to turn into an illusion from which I wanted to escape. I keep thinking that part of it was because of the school structure. At the school, desks were ordered in a row-by-row structure with a white board in the front where the professor would dictate pages from books and the students would simply copy them down into their notebooks Middle Ages monk style. The desks were often worn by time, etched with epigraphs and engravings of students long past. I would often go to class with hopes of killing some time, as an excuse to forget about the simplicity of my life. The space of the desk itself was a spaceship in the eyes of my childish mind—a way to let go of reality and tele transport the self to more interesting worlds. I would transport myself to bigger and better worlds simply because I was bored; simply because I did not want to pay attention. When I was a student of the *Escuela Oficial Urbana Mixta* in Guatemala, I somehow imagined the inside of the class as an enclosed moving inner place where I would spend hours caged in boredom. I felt trapped inside the confines

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<sup>11</sup> Official Urban Mixed School

of a moving clock from where I could observe all its mechanical structure and harmonious movement and, in my head, visualize how cogs and gears affected and pressed one another. In fact, this mode of breaking things down is how I have come to analyze quotidian life. I did not fully understand the manufacture of the aforesaid metaphorical clock, its essence or composition, but it was a nuisance in my head that motivated me to know the nature of the mechanics of the classroom and the properties that made it work the way it did. I could not stop the hunger to understand its inner workings. I wanted to know, for instance, what teachers did and how classes had formed, how the hierarchical status of principals and parents came to be. School back then was some kind of game where every school year was a level to pass with the only sacrifice of waiting. There was always some form of wonder, a streak of asking questions to myself. I was always there plucked into the epicenter of occurrences that never made sense to me as if thrown into existence without a manual for understanding them. There would be moments in which the program of my reality would be distorted, a moment of distinct angst that would stop whatever I was doing and send me into a small frenzy of thinking, and in that moment, shorter than a minute, I would ask myself how do I know that I really exist and that I am who I think I am? Some of my days would be exemplified by this Cartesian anxiety, sometimes even in the stillness of my nights. The questioning would continue when going to church and being ever fascinated by the Judeo-Christian biblical stories. Back in school, in order to escape the poltergeist of boredom, I devised a form escapism—a way of fleeing to the inner mind. This transformation from a marionette to a psychonaut would get me through long hours of apparitions and voices in an atmosphere for which I could not care less. My desk would often transform into a rocket, a psychic shuttle, to navigate the vastness of imagination. Part of what fed my boredom was that I wished to see, to see beyond the limits of my horizons. I would often wonder what stood beyond the mountain, past the

volcanoes and green life at the periphery of my vision. This wonder was ever present when I looked at a small red hut that stood on the hills across from the window of my house. I remember intense yearning for the power of flight so I could visit that house and salute the people there. I wanted to be at that point where the little red hut stood and wave hello to the other *I* standing at the window, sick with wanderlust. Luckily, the opportunity to fly and finally see what stood beyond those horizons and hills would present itself years later when I was 16 years old. I remember the day my mom called crying to tell my siblings and I that we had been accepted into the program *Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of New York*. This nonprofit organization helps families reunite. When she called to give us the good news I was lying in bed with both my hands placed on my chest, already having given up on seeing the outside world. This is the queen moment of my memory, a moment in which my life was about to experience a turning point in both perception and worldview.

### **My Immigrant Crossing - Swallowed by The Whale**

There I was, the day of departure. I was leaving the reality I had known with as much intimidation as anticipation. A 16-year old transgressing the boundaries of two worlds. In my own vision, the beginning of my journey perhaps starts when I underwent a journey that was characterized by the uprooting of my personhood and the altering of my consciousness that followed. The immigrant reality would have much to say about this constant breaking of illusion. The beginning of the journey exemplified such a struggle for after trespassing two dimensions, one's optics can never be the same. My four siblings, Nora, Ivan, Flor and Keyla and I left to the airport with friends from our community and other family. They all seemed to want to bestow one last gesture of kindness. Neighbors came outside their houses to see us off yet the only thing I was overcome with was a feeling of excitement. Nothing and no one in Guatemala mattered anymore.

I would be lying if I said that saying goodbye was hard because I could not feel anything other than the extreme excitement of leaving Guatemala to come to the United States. I had repressed the feelings of sadness for the people I grew up with because I felt a lack of ambition in my community. The feelings I did not display when I said goodbye to everyone would later come back to haunt me when I would long for Guatemala months after coming to the US. Upon entering the airport, I felt that I was already in a different dimension. The ground felt different, the people felt different; life ceased to be the same. New light was entering my eyes. The inside of the airport felt clean and shiny and things appeared proportionally bigger than before. My perception was undergoing an inner transmutation to adapt better to the moment I crossed the gates separating Guatemala and her people. My psychology was being altered by the environment without me realizing. I gather now that I could not feel the impact of the shift in perception because I was lost in elation. Entering the airport itself can be seen here as *initiation*<sup>12</sup>; the beginning of a completely new journey into an unknown land to which I had only a manufactured image, an image of an Elysium which was collectively constructed by the imagination of others and the ones that had previously traveled to America and told their stories about this distant, familiar yet unfamiliar, land. There was a person from church in Guatemala that once told a group of friends and I that one of his friends living in the U.S.A had been bitten by a dog and that he had been given money for the damage caused. I immediately thought of America as a land where it is easy to get money. These almost fantastical stories are ubiquitous in Guatemala. Cousins of mine that had been deported to Guatemala would also recount the wonders of living in America. They would often come back with a better economic situation. I think that immigrants who travel to America partially hold these stories to be true and manufacture them as an illusion in their minds that breaks the

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<sup>12</sup> Anthropological term that describes the beginning of a rite of passage or the end of liminality (a subject trapped in between two states).

moment they come to America and are faced with isolation and loneliness. If you accompany me into the thinking of 20th century French writer, poet, and philosopher Édouard Glissant, we could go deeper into the question of what might cause the immigrant to move to another world and abandon their previous reality. This next section will explore *Errantry* and *Locomotion* as lenses to investigate immigration and then I shall resume our narrative.

### **Édouard Glissant - Errantry**

I would like to focus here, if you allow me, on Édouard Glissant who was a Caribbean philosopher from Martinique. His framework as philosophy serves him well in his philosophical discourse as a way of existing that challenges a totalitarian root. My story attempts to capture what it is like to experience the uprooting of traveling to another land that one knows exists but about which one has no schemas about. Errantry is the philosophical practice that can connect two pre-existing realities; either imaginary or physical realms. However, before I can delve into the interesting parallel between immigration and Errantry, I need to do some groundwork on the word errantry itself. The word “Errantry” showcases a human activity of locomotion to achieve certain goals. If we break the concept down into its etymology, it might prove useful for our discussion. According to the Random House Unabridged Dictionary, “err” has connotations to straying from the correct path. Errancy is defined as “the state or an instance of erring. Latin. *Errantia* a wandering”. An errant is defined as “1. deviating from the regular or; straying. 2. Journeying or traveling, as a medieval knight in quest of adventure; roving adventurously. 3. Moving in an aimless or lightly changing manner” and lastly, errantry is defined as “conduct or performance like that of a knight-errant” (659). Dante Alighieri's epic poem *The Divine Comedy*, a poem partially about exile as an educational model, begins with “In the middle of our life’s journey / I found myself in a dark wood / for the correct path had been lost” (Inferno I. 1-4). We will come back to

this idea of epic poetic form as a maquette of errantry later. The notion of the right path or the right way is one that is cemented in our *a priori* infrastructure of understanding. For instance, one associates home as a place safe from predators and protection from the cold—our safe cave dwellings. And a place one can fully make their own. When one can establish oneself at a specific place, one is then an ideal citizen who is perfectly able to act in society. An exile, on the other hand, often falls outside the ideological state apparatus as either a political criminal or an outcast. Consequently, exiles are usually seen as anomalies of society. Errantry inverts this negative connotation and allows us to see that erring can be actually a good thing for the person that is erring: even proverbial wisdom tells us that one can always learn from making mistake—*errare humanum est*.<sup>13</sup> However, I must stress the distinctive types of errantry, because it can at times appear “disguised ‘within’ very personalized adventures—just as the appearance of Western nations had been preceded by the ventures of empire builders” (14). The desire to conquer another land can be dressed under the garments of errantry, but if we have agreed that the parameters of errantry are mainly spiritual in nature and are but performed in search of a sacred motive, then imperialism through errantry is but a wolf in sheep’s garments.

Simon Rodriguez offers an interesting take on *Errantry*, in *The Inventing School Master* Kohan ventriloquizes Rodriguez as stating that he wanted to live life as an errant because he did not want to “be like the trees which bury roots into the ground, but rather like the wind, the water, the sun and all things that wander without end” (22). Glissant sees roots as the ones that “make the commonality of errantry and exile, for in both instances roots are lacking. We must begin with that” (11). Roots are ingrained in the soil to keep the plant from being torn up by strong winds while they also absorb vitamin D through photosynthesis. Their roots essentially take in the

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<sup>13</sup> Latin - To err is to be human



vitamins and minerals that the stem needs to the plant's leaves, thus securing its survival. The analogic language here compares the root to the Western practice of imperialism that has drained the countries of raw materials. But in saying that when one is in a state of errantry or exile a subject behaves more like a rhizome which does not affix itself in the soil but instead expands through the ground to nearby soils that allow other forms of life to emerge. The Rhizome is the coexistence of many roots at once. Glissant essentially found the perfect image to refer to the locomotive nature of a nomad. Nomadism plays a large role in Glissant's Caribbean philosophical framework which advocates for a more natural way of life:

Neither in arrowlike nomadism nor in circular' nomadism are roots valid. Before it is won through conquest, what "holds" the invader is what lies ahead; moreover, one could almost say that being compelled to lead a settled way of life would constitute the real uprooting of a circular nomad. There is, furthermore, no pain of exile bearing down, nor is there the wanderlust of errantry growing keener. (13)

Roots are the enemies of an exploratory ambition for understanding. However, it is important to remain vigilant in the way one wishes to understand. In cases of the past, others have hungered for knowledge to see other parts of the world and that hunger led conquistadors to desire the reaches of other lands.

Zooming our mental lenses into Glissant's worldview and his notion of errantry could be helpful to see how errantry relates to the immigrant passage. *In the Poetics of Relation*, Glissant lays down various ideas that challenge and attempt to expand de-colonial philosophies including those of Franz Fanon. Chief among his ideas are those of the rhizome as an antithesis to the root. The notion of errantry as separated from a stationary state of existence is one that he expounds upon with various examples including those of circular and arrow-like nomadism as well as *exile*. In the chapter "Errantry and Exile" of *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant explains that the "idea of errantry, still inhibited in the face of this mad reality, this too functional nomadism, whose ends it

could not know, does not yet make an appearance. Center and periphery are equivalent. Conquerors are the moving, transient root of their people” (14). He also says that,

at first this thought of errantry, bucking the current of nationalist expansion, was disguised "within" very personalized adventures—just as the appearance of Western nations had been preceded by the ventures of empire builders. The errantry of a troubadour or that of Rimbaud is not yet a thorough, thick (opaque) experience of the world, but it is already an arrant, passionate desire to go against a root. (14)

In essence, for Glissant, errantry holds both an invading power but also a transformative power that is entirely dependant on what the individual in movement has in mind. The subject in errantry can have in mind to conquer lands, as was the case with historical figures like Christopher Columbus and Hernán Cortés or as others errants who simply practice errantry as a way of life as did the nomads of the Americas, i.e., the Atacama people of South America. Errantry plays a role in redefining the way in which people operate within the space of the world. A state of errantry denotes a state of locomotion: a state of being between two spatio-temporal points in the world map.

The notion of the epics written in the past point to the important idea of language as a unique human technology. Most of these epics have been passed down to different generations through the sound base form of language like storytelling that, for Glissant, is vehicular: “the great Western languages were supposedly vehicular languages... Relation, in contrast, is spoken multilingually. Going beyond the impositions of economic forces and cultural pressures, Relation rightfully opposes the totalitarianism of any monolingual intent” (19). This is to say, Western languages, for Latin American immigrants often speak Western languages, are conducive of change, i.e., when a hispanic arrives at the U.S. and interacts with a person that has spoken English all his life, there is a space in that moment that gives rise to cultural exchange for both parties. This is where the immigrant becomes trapped in a state of “in betweenness” as language is important

to determine what constitutes parts of their identity. This happens because the language that Latin Americans who move to the US speak—and the mechanism by which they develop thinking—is placed in jeopardy because they must partially abandon it in exchange for English as it does not aid them in their social lives. When Hispanics learn English a second world is open to them and two languages begin to merge. There are efforts to preserve the language as when people move to concentrated places where immigrants from Latin America live, but the pure essence of Spanish becomes convoluted. However, this is merely to bring to our discussion the idea of motion in language as vehicular—vehicular implies that the language moves *something* out of somewhere and brings that *something* to another location or place. Language plays an important role for in the immigrant journey and I must stress its examination because it comes intertwined with the immigrant phenomenon. That is, language is responsible for the expansion of culture given that when someone goes to another place, they are bound to clash with other cultures and when that happens, cultural exchange ensues.

Glissant uses a variety of explanations of errantry. One of the examples I think is important in the idea of errantry is his ideas of the epics. Glissant says that “the great founding books of communities, the Old Testament, the Iliad, the Odyssey, the Chansons de Geste, the Icelandic Sagas, the Aeneid, or the African epics, were all books about exile and often about errantry” (15). As per Joseph Campbell’s “Monomyth”, epic poems often depict a hero embarking on an epic journey. The hero first receives the call to adventure, then sets out on an epic quest where he has to first fight against monsters and defeat gods before performing *Katabasis* by visiting the underworld and then returning to the real world. This dual errantry of journeying the worlds between heaven and hell transforms the hero into the master of two dimensions. Errantry is but a precondition for the hero to achieve all his goals in the *Monomyth*. The hero must often descend

to the underworld (*Katabasis*) and later ascend to heaven (*Apotheosis*), which is the case for heroes like Hercules and Aeneas. None of these heroes can achieve such a high status without undergoing a journey of epic proportions. In fact, the journey is almost a precondition for gaining such high office. The protagonist, the poet, and the reader in a story embark together on a three-way effort journey; all three perspectives work in tandem whereby errantry from all of them emerges since if one of the—three elements the poet, the reader or the hero—is missing from the equation, the journey cannot come to life.

But not everything is glorious about errantry in stories. Perhaps a paradigm exemplar of an errant gone wrong is *Don Quijote de la Mancha* by Miguel de Cervantes. He performs errantry the moment that he goes insane by reading one too many books about knights and giants<sup>14</sup>. He starts to confuse illusion with reality and embarks on a journey full of adventure with his companion Sancho Panza. Marvin Lazerson points out in his article about Don Quixote “*Knight Errantry & Undergraduate Education*” that, “we all understand the reference to this extraordinary novel of the early 17th century. It reaffirms the advantages of the common educational experience ...” (1) reiterating the notion of the journey as a mode of knowledge making. He continues, “would that youthful reading stand up? Given my preoccupations of today, are there messages about reform—in this case, the improvement of higher education—for me to ponder? To answer these questions, I return to the knight errant, determined to retake a long-ago journey” (57) Don Quixote mainly performs errantry in the sense that when he sets out on his journey, he does not know for sure what it is that he is after and what it is that he is looking for:

Don Quixote's mission is “to undo endless wrongs, set right endless injustices, correct endless errors, fix endless abuses, and atone for endless sins.” Enamored of romantic books on chivalry, Quixote sets out dressed in a shabby replica of knightly

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<sup>14</sup> In a very interesting scene of Don Quixote, he fights windmills consuming them for giants. Delusion works well here in contrast to imagination where our childish selves can at times imagine everyday objects as fantastical creatures like dragons and Cyclops.

armor, riding an old and emaciated horse, with a crafty peasant, Sancho Panza, by his side to re-create the era of chivalry long since abandon. (56)

In other words, Don Quixote's journey best illustrates that which is erratic about setting out on a journey in the honest pursuit of a goal. However, the incentive for the journey leads us to a paradox because in the Glissantian errantry, the errant is going *somewhere* without fully knowing *where* it is that he/she will arrive at. At the same time, knowing, at least, that one is going to arrive at *somewhere* is enough incentive for the journey.

The paradox of direction and motivation that misleads people to a wandering motion is where the immigrant and the Quixote-like journey perfectly converge. In every means of transportation (i.e., cars, trains, boats or planes), the mind of the immigrant envelopes itself into a cocoon state and morphs into something else due to the pressure of traveling a long distance. The immigrant moves, as exemplified by an immigrant who crosses the borders in different forms of transportation (i.e., getting inside an airplane, on top of a freight train, in a sailboat, by car or simply by foot), in search of economic, educational and social resources; in that sense, they become the nomads of today. The human intrinsic need for movement has, here at least, evolved into the modern phenomenon of immigration. It is important to alienate this issue of movement and examine it with care because movement is the action immigrants must perform to achieve their ends. Ends, however, are not always clear since the immigrant does not know anything about the country he/she is going to other than the stories that they hear from other immigrants. According to Lazeron, "Quixote's behavior has become a metaphor for the useless and delusional, taking on challenges that cannot be won." we must bring to the surface the danger of aimlessly wandering and not being able to find the path or the *straight way*. In a sense, the immigrant has a blind spot navigating a society that does not inherently attune to his sense of identity and that does not provide

him with the welcoming that he needs after traveling a long distance. Here, I am of course speaking about those who travel to the U.S.A and are not given the proper care. Such traumatic events have the potential to break people. Still, the notion of an errant, as Glissant paints it, is not entirely negative in supplementing someone's education. For, as we have already postulated, when one wanders and strays from a homogenous path, one behaves more like a rhizome<sup>15</sup>, thereby broadening their worldview to encompass new horizons. This expansion then leads to learning which happens when one strays from the correct path like Dante suggests in the opening lines of *The Divine Comedy*<sup>16</sup>.

Moving to the issue of epics will clarify some questions. Epics glorify the erratic motion of heroes sailing seas or navigating lands that have never been attempted by others before. Their erratic journeys open the gates to new imaginary continents in the mind and lead readers to wander as they wander, which in turn, leads readers to the acquisition of new knowledge. This, too, is the case for Don Quixote since he “affirms the importance of experience. Cervantes argues that ideas are strengthened by experience and that “when experience and texts are combined, wisdom ensues” (57). So one could say that the immigrant is like Don Quixote as the errand hero, but at the same time the immigrant is its anthesis. Cervantes makes fun of Quixote because he is all text and

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<sup>15</sup> An arboreal metaphor that is, according to Deleuze and Watari, the image of thought. It is a bifurcating subterranean plant. Glissant uses it because it is a Caribbean plant.

<sup>16</sup> Here the idea of the straight path versus the erratic path deserves some attention. Dante in his vocation sees erring as something necessary to attain a visionary vocation. According to the Digital Dante, “The Undivine Comedy treats the concept of “non falsi errori” from Purgatorio 15.117 as a foundational index of Dante’s overall textual strategies: see Chapter 1, p. 13, and Chapter 7, “Non False Errors and the True Dreams of the Evangelist.” Chapter 7 deals with visionary experience, and thus with the “non falsi errori” of Purgatorio 15 and 17”. My mentioning of Dante here is purposeful because here I can ground the idea of errantry as more than a philosophical concept and make it as well as spiritual journeying. This is in my efforts to merge Glissant’s idea of errantry as a spiritual motivation. I am also here interested in Dante’s Selva Oscura (dark wood)—New York is described by poets often as a concrete jungle—where Dante starts his journey upon having lost the correct/straight path. I interpret this spiritual, psychological and physical Selva Oscura as a disorienting space that has the power to affect our sense of orientation and force us to experience the destabilization of the mind. I am aware here that this is a literary tactic and therefore literature, not philosophy. However, it is a form of poetics pertaining to the epic and so I thought it would be fitting for offering the reader an idea of errantry as erring.

no practical wisdom. The truest wisdom the immigrant holds is precisely his own experience. This point about experience working in tandem with texts for the emergence of new knowledge is a point that relates more to the educated immigrant who, after having gained the life experience of crossing a border, is able to strengthen their analytical thinking and gain a new way of exploring their own ideas by looking at the text. The “possibility that this novel has something to say about higher education today” (56) even after 350 years strikes me as much as it strikes Lazerson. The possibility also that we can use Don Quixote as a metaphorical representation of the education of the immigrant which very often is simply implicit learning that occurs when he immigrates to another country. In addition to this, we also have to bear in mind that the novel “asks us to contemplate the relationship between texts and wisdom, an issue central to the current reform of undergraduate education. Books set Don Quixote's mind aflame... Books matter, for they change the way people think” (57). But let us shift our focus not to what Lazerson says about the books but about the metaphor of reading the world as a book. Consider here the different pieces of land you *recorres*<sup>17</sup> and once you have traveled those pieces of land, you know them well, like you know the palm of your hand. The travel would suggest that one is constantly calibrating different environments as one walks; it is quite like reading pages from a book.

One lesson Don Quixote communicates, then, is that higher education reformers have to expand their efforts beyond questions of what courses and texts students should study and pose questions about the relationship of student experiences to learning. By inquiring how students learn from texts and experience, we challenge ourselves to help them become wise. (57)

The purpose of our dwelling on Don Quixote here is to ground the idea that experiential knowledge is important in epistemological discourse given that Don Quixote puts what he learns into practice and embraces it as if it was reality. Moreover, he goes out to the world as an errant and embraces

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<sup>17</sup> travel

the nature of making the world the subject of appreciation. However, this is something that can come up as an aphorism in any form of philosophical text that any one has encountered. In fact the notion of “know thyself” points us to the kind of folk wisdom that is often acquired by experience and is, strictly speaking, empirical. I want to push this idea further and relate it to the nature of our thinking, which is also erratic in nature. We encounter movement at the micro level in the inner mechanisms of our very construction. This proves that movement is intrinsic and necessary to the way humans operate.

There is a parallel between thinking and moving in the physical and metaphysical sense. Let us come back to the concept of *Errantry* and lay down some more groundwork before we move to discuss what is meant here by a physical and metaphysical parallel of movement. Nomadism is a form of errantry. The way in which the European conquistadors sought to understand this was to conquer other lands and, in this case, exploring different continents of the planet is what Glissant sees as a form of “Arrow-nomadism.” This form of nomadism can actually become corrupt when the incentive for movement (locomotion) is monetary gain; “Circular nomadism” in the other hand, is that which is practiced by native Americans. For Glissant circular nomadism is a form of nomadism that has respect for the land and does not corrupt the land but as nomads going to different places for the resources and after exhausting the raw materials they simply leave the land for it to recuperate itself and go through the cycle of life for others to enjoy. Arrow like nomadism has the goal of settling and conquering as the practice of going out into the world becomes parasitical as was the case during ‘The Age of Exploration, dubbed ‘The Age of Exploitation’ since “during this period of invading nomads the passion for self-definition first appears in the guise of personal adventure” (14). The agent that travels to another place already has a great deal of life experience, contained in the vessel of their memory, and as they go to a new place and as



they bring with themselves their own experience: ““their capitals went where [the conquerors] went. ‘Rome is no longer in Rome, it is wherever I am.’” The root is not important. Movement is” (14). Glissant’s idea of movement is what I identify with my notion of the locomotive immigrant. Not only do I connect it to a practice of imagination when I was a child and would constantly wander the soil of my mind but more importantly the impetus to go to a different location has driven people to move for the sake of discovery. The reason for the immigrant, however, is socioeconomic as they must move to the US in search of employment or seeking refuge from violence. This is specifically concerned with the immigrant who is forced to flee the security of his home either for socio-economic reasons or for existential threats. There are of course other immigrants who are simply motivated by tourism or simply because they can afford it. I want to make the focus on the discussion those who cross the border illegally - not every immigrant condition is created equal.

We have focused our discussion on the conditions of the immigrant as they travel to another reality which vastly evolves their subjective awareness. With this in mind, I investigate the immigrant’s mind. I am, moreover, offering my personal story to supplement what I am investigating here. The immigrant essentially has the kind of second sight that Du Bois describes precisely because their human essence is stained with the mark of *othering* in the world where they live as immigrants. Immigrants social lives in the US as well as how they are perceived by the general population that places them inside the umbrella of *othering*. The second sight accumulates in their minds as a direct trauma of transgressing the border and is then released which essentially *activates* their second sight; a power they would not have otherwise. The preconditions for gaining this second sight is mainly traumatic experiences that results in a kind of awakening. Their condition is parallel to those of the knight errant but their motivations are socio-economic in

nature. Even so, the “funds of knowledge” that they are able to produce as they travel to another dimension through a spatial passage is the event that essentially allows immigrants to have a different and completely unique experience of the world as a category of human in the world. This realization is a major turning point in, besides growing older, being comfortable with our acknowledging and our blessings—it is also the main turn in our lives that have made us aware of our privilege and where we stand in relation to other immigrants that are undocumented or simply unable to access the education I have. There are many reasons why - not only being undocumented. The fact that we have become immigrants that have won scholarships has awakened a sense of gratefulness within us. The suffering of my parents, and many other immigrants’ parents, are the grounds on which I have been able to stand because “if I have been able to see further, it is because I have learned to stand on the shoulders of giants.”<sup>18</sup>

These ruminations you have accompanied me to inspect were issues I never thought about upon exiting Guatemala. Here it is possible for me to reflect heavily on them. Inside the Guatemala airport *Aurora* on that fateful day of 2010, I had no time to worry about any of the things I have so far discussed, like motivation or the rational for the movement with much detail and labor. I was not even interested in the nuances and shifts of thought that occur to a person who travels from place to place. I was simply drunk with in the new moment of being inside an airport. In that space inside this teleporting chamber, I was already transitioning into something completely new. For example, the moment I saw the airplanes parked waiting for the passengers, they appeared to me as gigantic metallic whales. The steel beast with a Delta sign on its back threatened to devour me whole. Was I Jonah? The sudden shift of thought was born when I was sitting inside the belly

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<sup>18</sup> Isaac Newton used this line in his correspondence with Robert Hooke to denote his humility upon his major scientific discoveries. In doing so, he disposed to give praise to his genius predecessors and acknowledged that without their herculean efforts in the honest pursuit of truth, he would not have been able to make it far in his scientific inquiries.

of this gigantic mobile bird. Ever since that day, a new authentic feeling of gratitude took over my heart. In moving from one space to another, there was a distinct sense of learning, in the passage from Guatemala to Atlanta and from Atlanta to New York. The same mundane objects I was perceiving began to acquire a different taste. They appeared to have a different breath and essence they did back when I was in Guatemala—I could see things through banality no more. Inside the airplane, I remember being fully awake, it was a place for pure mental exercise. Airplanes are now my favorite mode of transportation. Every time I board one, this very memory comes and sits on the throne of my contemplation. The action of boarding an airplane now takes me back to the moment of boarding the Delta flight on September 10th, 2010. The sensation is quite pleasant and rare. But it is also a sensation that so violently strikes me whenever I board a plane because it reminds me of the miracle that I can perceive from my own vantage point: the rules of equal exchange dictate so—if I were at one end of the scale that propelled me upward and ascended me to the light of a better world (America), then it meant that at the other end, descending into the darkness, was another Guatemalan like me with the same dreams and aspirations but who never was given the chance to come to the United States armed with a visa and possessing the conviction of new prospects for new opportunities. This is the feeling I was seeing, a feeling of gratitude that somehow added color to my mind and breathed new life into the reality floating outside my mind. This was a thought that I am now able to share with utmost humility as I am able to picture it in my head. I was sitting in the airplane meters away from the ground. I was then able to perceive myself in the seat as someone who had been given a special gift, as if I had been given the gift of fire by a god and had suddenly had an emotional revelation. I knew at that specific moment when I was sitting by the window and able to see through the window down to the earth that this was perhaps a gift from above or a sudden stroke of luck. But my emotions, body and mind had been

elevated to the skies. In the chambers of my mind, I could see elemental billiard balls hitting one another, the white ball hitting the red ball and the red ball hitting the yellow ball. These balls were my life events affecting each other like a domino effect or like billiard balls hitting each other. All the pieces had collectively contributed to a *cause* that led me to be sitting in that airplane that day—all of the events in my life that had inexorably led me to that place where I was sitting. The events of my life as a child of parents that used to fight all the time, a child who had been struggling with existential questions in his sleep and who had previously been a sperm vying for the egg. Dr. Manhattan puts it better in Alan Moore’s graphic novel *Watchmen*, when he says that there are events in life “with odds against so astronomical they’re effectively impossible, like oxygen spontaneously becoming gold”. What Dr. Manhattan says next is something that I found upon reading and that resonated so well with me. He says:

And yet, in each human coupling, a thousand million sperm vie for a single egg. Multiply those odds by countless generations, against the odds of your ancestors being alive; meeting; siring this precise son; that exact daughter... Until your mother loves a man she has every reason to hate, and of that union, of the thousand million children competing for fertilization, it was you, only you, that emerged. To distill so specific a form from that chaos of improbability, like turning air to gold... that is the crowning unlikelihood. The thermodynamic miracle. (Allan Moore)

Dr. Manhattan (Allan Moore) puts it very eloquently but it is actually a thought that my brother Ivan had given me. On one occasion while hanging out with our childhood friends, my brother suddenly came with some kind of epiphany he was bursting to tell everyone. He said: “*o ya se mucha: ¡la vida es linda y complicada! Todos nosotros ya somos ganadores porque de todos los espermatozoides, fuimos nosotros los que ganaron. Eso ya nos hace campeones.* (Life is beautiful! All of us are the champions from all the sperms competing for the egg, it was us that were born and that miracle already makes us winners).” Our friends laughed at him and told him to stop because he sounded crazy. His face changed from excitement to sadness. But I was standing there too, watching from a distance, hurt by his humiliation but equally intrigued by his thoughts,

as I said in my head, “*Yo lo entiendo, manito y se lo que está tratando de decir* (I understand you and I know what you are trying to say).” Allan Moore’s poetic words echo my brother’s thought; yet that very thought was still embryonic when I first boarded my first airplane and would grow to define my adult thinking in the US. It existed as a perfect picture in my mind at the time but I could not put it into words until I came across *Watchmen*. Engaging myself with the language of philosophy and literature helped me articulate this chaotic thinking—it served as a mode of thought and expression and, that at the same time, helped me situate myself in a life that was hard for me to even begin to articulate. In that unique moment of peace in the comfy seat of the airplane, however, I could experience freedom of thought and sail my small boat in the oceanic trenches of thought. There I could also board the psychic shuttle I had built in my imagination during my many flights of fancy on boring school lectures. This was a parallel between body and soul experiencing the right to let go and ascend to the world of thought. I was someone eager to explore the world and the very realization of being in that plane struck my soul like a lightning bolt. But the world, if often go back to thinking, “is so full of people, so crowded with these miracles that they become commonplace and we forget... I forget. We gaze continually at the world and it grows dull in our perceptions.”<sup>19</sup> Not only were a form of thinking and an appreciation for the world both born that day, I also thought back to the times when I was about 6 years old. I used to stare up at airplanes passing through the skies above my courtyard. These flying wonders appeared to me as miniature specks crossing the skies. They were mere illusions. Nothing could then stop me from staring at them since I would often wonder, who is inside that thing? Do they have faces and noses and hair and legs and hands? Do they have a body? What are they thinking at this precise moment? Or is it simply an empty object passing by? But that day of September as I took my seat, I had become

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<sup>19</sup> *Watchmen*

that person who was inside *that* thing. Someone who had a face, who had a nose and hair and legs and hands. The person who had a body and who was thinking at that exact moment: I cannot go back to the old *I* after this event. I was now the person I had wondered years back when I was younger and I was then, at that precise moment, the object of question for another curious mind looking up to the airplane from the ground. That was my *Kairos*<sup>20</sup>. The opportune moment that allowed me to meet *La Fortuna* face to face. I knew that among the thousands of children like me who desired to board a plane for a better tomorrow, I was given *that opportunity*. I could not help but feel exalted and anxious because I could see a better tomorrow; because hope was sitting right next to me; right next to that plane seat to tell me “your wish to see what is inside that red hut standing on the hill has now transformed into your reality.” In retrospect, I realize that I love the idea of flight. I contemplate the birds flying through the skies and often feel incompetent because they remind me that even though we humans have the capacity to build flying objects, we are ourselves incapable of flight. Even so, I did experience what it is like to fly but I can never have the experience of a bird as they see us humans down here. I often see the moment in the airplane as a turning point in my life because being inside the airplane meant I had to change my way of life and my way of thought. When the “big fish” swallowed Jonah, he had to be reborn. He had earlier denied his vocation as the preacher of the word of God but was later empowered with a new mission: he found his vocation and craft. When I boarded that airplane a part of my way of life died and had to be resuscitated but what came out of that was an immigrant with a new goal in mind. That goal was to live life with gratitude.

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<sup>20</sup> Greek word that means “opportune moment” or “the right time” to do or say something. I am mimicking here the preface of the Inventing School master when Rodriguez saw Little Thomas and was changed by the little child’s intelligence despite not having an education.

### The Link of Two Realities - Reality is Created by The Mind

As I have mentioned before, my life in Guatemala was banal and quotidian. Nothing more existed outside the concentrated space of my house and the streets nearby. The people I knew were just people, the trees I looked at were just trees. They have become different elements now in this multiplicity of objects that together work to make the world what it is and whose natures could give us the subject matter to write millions of books. Artifacts and objects are now infinitely more interesting. Now, I finally understand that my perception and my appreciation for the world has forever changed. What I saw in Guatemala at times as a simple flag, a soccer ball and a bird now appear to me as more surrealist. I am infinitely in awe, like a romantic, by nature every day for now even the sight of a diminutive rock laying in the ground can send me into the abyss of thought and I cannot help but think that this is because my eyes started to perceive patterns differently after my perception was uprooted in the passage on the airplane. *Pero incluso cuando me doy cuenta de que yo soy para el universo lo que una neurona es para el cerebro—una vasta rareza clavada en la multiplicidad del caos maquillando a la hermosura del macrocosmo—desde ahí tengo la tendencia de olvidarme de este hecho. Al parecer podemos tan fácilmente olvidarnos de que la interconectividad que es en sí misma es un milagro. Un milagro tan único que incluso Dios se felicita así mismo con una palmadita en la espalda al contemplar su creación mientras Él sonríe desde su trono de luz.*<sup>21</sup>

There was a similar moment of violent realization when I took a small trip to the Dominican Republic in January 2019. As I was in the seat of the airplane my gaze affixed itself on the window. It reminded me of the first moment in the Guatemalan airport when I was inside the airplane as it

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<sup>21</sup> But even when I realize I am to the universe what a neuron is to the brain—a vast rareness in the nailed in the multiplicity of the chaos painting the beauty of the macrocosm—from there I have the tendency to forget about such fact. It appears we tend to easily forget the interconnectivity that in itself is a miracle. A miracle so unique that even God congratulates himself with a pad in the back while He smiles from his throne of light.

first took flight. As the airplane in Guatemala took off to the US, my eyes were looking outside through the window and that moment I experienced something completely new. The outside panorama of land visible in the small frame of the window began to bend itself as if reality was moving in a wave-like motion. My body experienced some kind of vertigo that struck my sense of balance. Later on, as I had boarded more airplanes, that feeling that was once sweet and new, had grown dull. Every time an airplane took off, the feeling had become part of a simple way of life. Even so, the feeling that I had experienced at that time was, quite fittingly, mind bending. At that moment, my reality was being reshaped: my perception was being changed and thus I came to realize that at the specific time of the take-off from Guatemala, it was not reality that was bending but it was, quite literally, *me* (i.e., my mind). I come back here to the Guatemalan moment because back then it seemed that it was my reality that was bending. However, upon later contemplation, I knew that it was simply an optical illusion produced by the mind. The important philosophical conundrum of *Mind* as separate from *Reality* is important for the immigrant's bridging of two ontological realities. If my mind was then, on that day, bending then it means that my perception, which comes directly from intricate mental mechanisms, had begun to destabilize, shift, and bend. As a consequence, if my mind was reshaped by such an experience of traveling and being inside the airplane<sup>22</sup>, that mind-altering experience can explain why it is that my reality was also bending<sup>23</sup>. I here want to focus on an interesting thought I had upon witnessing a palm tree in a

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<sup>22</sup> I am fully aware here too that I am writing this memoir as a 25-year-old and that the experience that I am describing is coming from the perception of an older person who has had the opportunity to read a lot in college. Neurobiology tells us that the more a person studies the more their brain changes. This goes to show that the fact that my world view is changed could be attributed, too, to the fact that as one reads and studies more, connections between neurons become strongest and the shape of the brain changes. That said, the mind here is but a complex metaphor for the brain and so if the brain has changed, the intake and interpretation of reality will also change.

<sup>23</sup> In the 1999 sci-fi film the Matrix, Neo converses with a child prodigy inside the Matrix which in the film is a computer simulated reality created by AI machines to essentially keep its prisoners (humans) captives for their energy reserves. In the scene where Neo and Morpheus visit the Oracle, Neo meets a child who is bending a spoon without touching it. The child tells Neo that when he realizes that there is no spoon and that it is not the spoon that is bending but that it is "yourself", only then can you realize about the truth--there is no spoon. This pushes the



beach house I was staying in The Dominican Republic about how that palm tree did not exist an hour prior to seeing it. However, I was aware of this philosophical problem that Bishop George Berkeley (1685—1753) tried to battle with previously. Idealism showcases the subject as merely experiencing a copy of reality. That is, a human mind is bound to experience the world through her sensory equipment. Whenever some form of outer stimuli enters the senses, the brain captures such energy and transforms it into perception - but that perception is nothing but a projection of the reality in our minds and is not reality itself but a projection of what reality is. It is, so to speak, a copy. In other words, the power of the mind is what organizes chaotic sensation into organized perception<sup>24</sup> so perception of the reality is the inner working of a supercomputer (brain) and the intake of reality has already been changed by the filters of the mind. Moreover, reality as it is in itself can never be captured by the human mind and as a result pure knowledge of the *objective* world is unattainable to the human mind. The impossibility of perceiving the world as it is in itself creates an inherent binary between two realities: Subjective reality (as experienced by the perceiver) and Objective reality (the way reality is when no one is perceiving it). In this sense, we could say that there are as many subjective and relative realities as there are people. However, there is only one objective reality. Philosophers call this duality the *Universal* (objective) versus the *Particular* (subjective). All of us understand the objective by the relational connection between all of us humans with one another and together agree on the *Universals*; thus, creating a kind of web or intellectual net that comes to be a unified whole known to us as the objective or *Universal*. Here George Berkeley again comes to mind. In his work *A Treatise concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (1710), Berkeley argues that reality is all a creation of the human mind. It is

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argument that reality is non-existent as per Berkley. If it is one (one's mind) that bends then, reality viz. the spoon also bends as a result.

<sup>24</sup> The philosophy of Immanuel Kant by Will Durant

the mind that creates reality and human consciousness is all happening within the spatial plane of the mind. As humans perceive the world with their senses, all they are doing is simply projecting ideas onto an outside world separate from the mind—like a projector displaying images from its lens onto a blank wall. The famous philosophical maxim, *esse est percipi - to be is to be perceived* - demonstrates a very important argument within the philosophical tradition. It is the case that in order for *something* to exist, there must be a perceiver. Otherwise the object does not exist. However, there is an important discovery here that must be addressed. The fact that one cannot experience the existence of an object does not necessarily prove that an outside reality does not exist, as Plato would argue centuries back in his Allegory of the cave—the fact that the cave prisoners did not have access to the outside world of the cave did not affect the ontological existence of the outside world in any way. In other words, the fact that one is *not* perceiving the outside panorama (the world in itself) does not cause the world to suddenly disappear. The material world might very well always be there but if it is not perceived by anyone then to anyone it does not exist. Berkeley would later argue that the cosmos itself is but God's inner mind and that it is God who is the eternal perceiver of all things. Therefore, even if no one perceives reality, it is safe in God's perennial passive perception and thus objective reality exists eternally. That is, galaxies and natural phenomenon as they exist are simply the eventuality of God's inner ideas—some form of *reality prime*, if you will. This argument sounds somehow promising but it leaves us with a very important discussion. We could say then that reality is not only one but many. If we accept the fact that mind is (cogito, sum), and that each person's inner reality is a collision between our senses and the stimulus that is constantly bombarded to our senses by the outside world then it means reality is different for everyone else since it is an irrefutable fact that everyone has a mind. That said, if objective reality, (*reality prime*) is separate from everyone's subjective individual realities

(deviants from *reality prime*), then deviant realities are created by the mind because everyone has a mind. It is the case that outside reality exists on its own accord—there is no question about it—but if a person is not perceiving objective reality then such reality does not exist for their own subjective experience. And if it were the case that an evil genius would erase humans out of the world, would this not mean the cessation of millions of realities? The argument here is not that objective reality does not exist but that everyone is capable of creating their own reality as they see fit and that this holds massive importance since to have a mind means to possess a unique reality and one must be that reality's guardian. Like God's mind containing the cosmos of ideas so does every single person contain a cosmos inside of their minds. I came upon this thought as I began to fill my head with more knowledge and as I began to experiment with my outside reality more and to be hyper vigilant about the way in which I took in perception coming to me from all directions outside the world. Here I can come back to that moment when I experienced the moment I stepped in the Dominican Republic and my sight came into contact with the aforementioned palm tree. That specific palm tree, its color, shape, size and position was an object that had never been absorbed to the interior of my own memory and had thus never been perceived and as a result it did not exist to *me*. However, it did exist to another person that has lived close to that palm tree. Prior to seeing the palm tree, there were two different realities: 1) my reality which had not seen the aforesaid palm tree and 2) the reality of the person who had already seen the palm tree. In the same way there are people at the moment that I do not even know exist but that are nonetheless out there *somewhere* in various points of space and time in the grid board of the world and whose realities have experienced different things than I have. What I mean to say, to put it simply, is that we all perceive things differently and as a consequence have our own ideas of realities in our minds. As atoms and molecules exist at determinate spatiotemporal points in reality so do we exist

in space and time which leads us to perceive an object from different angles and thus we have to paint different realities on the canvas of our perception. However, *reality prime* also comes as direct result from what we organize as *common*. The world outside exists because we have all signed a kind of mental contract that links us to the common understanding that reality out there exists. This mutual agreement might be what everyone has come to understand as *Common Sense*.

So far, I have discussed the way in which reality is created by the mind and how different minds are bound to create small realities in relation to *reality prime*. But this discussion leads us to a very interesting paradox. We have stated that individual subjective realities are created once someone perceives *reality prime*, as I called it, and yet each individual subjective reality, that is itself simply a copy of reality, necessitates *reality prime* to exist. Yet still, *reality prime* necessitates a mind to exist in order to have some form of existence even if it is simply subjective existence. This nicely ties back to Berkeley's idea that the outside world does not exist if it is not perceived by a *cogito* (mind). Both reality prime and the deviant realities have an unbreakable link—they create one another. The way in which I saw this was my journey America, where I came into contact with a different world and thus this world, just as it began to exist to the prisoner's mind the very moment that he escaped the cave, began to exist to me as I became, at the same time, an immigrant. Perceiving the US reality would not have been possible if I had never taken the trip here. My reality became much broader the more I knew, but with knowing more came more anxiety about being thrown into the world because then my thinking became more unstable and multifaceted. This must be something that is universal to other immigrants as well. They passively learn and adapt to another reality.

Sometime after the transition from high school to Bard, my perception became even more encumbered: perception that is laden with experience. The heavy bulk of perception caused some

kind of kaleidoscopic vision making me then see the world through metaphors and analogies. It was as if I was wearing metaphoric and analogic shades that tinted my worldview with different colors. Then I began to feel as if I were trapped inside a dream, but never able to pinpoint when it was that the dream had begun—perhaps it had begun inside the airplane. One is simply dropped into the illusion of a dream but one is never able to remember falling asleep. This was also similar to the feeling I had at the airplane. I was simply there but never stopped to question the innumerable clashes of cause and effect, what billiard ball hit the other billiard ball that consequently hit another one, etc., in the script of my story that had led to that very moment. Everything that I was, my ancestors, winning against stellar odds, had led me there where I was at a point in the vastness of space. Being awarded a visa demanded many sacrifices, among which was the abandonment of a fundamental reality. The sacrifice that being rewarded with the visa I had demanded from several things, including the abandonment of a fundamental reality—the Guatemalan security that assured me that there was nothing else to see and nothing else to worry about. I developed a specific feeling after coming to the US. That feeling was that nothing after the breaking of my perception could be as sane as it appeared in Guatemala. Everything after the breaking of the Guatemalan roots I had buried into the ground that stood as my reality would be characterized by anxiety about what I was supposed to do with the gift I was given on the day of departure to the US. I did not want the feeling of gratitude to dissipate into the nothingness; I did not want the thinking I had experienced that day to grow dull in the chaos of life's eternal continuum.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> I use this phrase to refer to the way in which we tend to forget very important things about life as a defense mechanism. In the sense that if we started pondering about everything, we would fill ourselves with overthinking and anxiety. What gets lost in life's eternal continuum is the feeling of willing to forget about existential questions and safe ourselves from self-inducing existential crisis. But when we forget about such questions that elicit dread, we put aside important discoveries because valuable lessons only come at the outset of despair. When we deviate and err from the straight path and enter Dante's disorienting *Selva Oscura* (Dark Wood).

### **Getting to the United States**

Arriving in America was one of the best days of my life because I was experiencing something so unique and I knew that in every step I took. However, when I got to the South Bronx in New York, it was a different experience. I was isolated, alone with no friends and I did not speak the language. I felt that my world had been taken away from me. I wanted to get it back but I also wanted to be strong and stay. About a month after arriving, I was enrolled in Pan American International High School at Monroe. During the first days of attending the school, I hated it. Every day would be a constant reminder that I was not in Guatemala. I would tell myself “I should've never left my pitiful country.” Depression and homesickness followed shortly thereafter. Fortunately, things started to get better once I started learning English. I created my own notebooks of study and would watch cartoons with my two-year old brother to learn English expressions and idioms. I would peruse National Geographic magazines and books I got from school to extract complicated words and translate them with Google translate on my Android phone. I created whole taxonomies of language and would memorize them every day after school. Then I supplemented everything by studying a free course online that I found on Google. I made flashcards to distinguish similar words like “hair” and “hear”. With such effort, I was able to become a good student at my high school and teachers would constantly tell me they admired my enthusiasm for learning. This encouragement eventually made me give a hundred percent even though I would continue to struggle with the cultural shock and crippling homesickness. Somewhere inside myself, however, I would still have an indescribable feeling to keep moving forward even though I would remain sleep deprived since the jetlag lasted for a while due to the city noise. I started experiencing severe anxiety for the first time in the South Bronx where I felt trapped once again as I had felt in

Guatemala but slightly worse, but the image of school and the education that I had access to in the US became my fortress of comfort. Eventually I was reading Oedipus Rex and Hamlet as well as learning about complex themes and theories in World History and Science. I knew that my education would only get better from there. My eyes were beginning to open and become more receptive to the educational opportunities that I had at Pan American International High School at Monroe. It was only a matter of time before I would encounter Plato.

I strive to live in intellect and long to be talented in many aspects, to always grow and become as good as I can be; I seek to understand the fabric of reality. I always look for the best in what I am encountering in my education. So, the following episode strikes me as something worth mentioning. Let me here speak about this gem of intellectual thought, the treasure I found in Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*. The Allegory of the Cave helped me see life in its nakedness but also traumatized my sense of perception of the world once more because it ignited my curiosity and, ever since I read it, I have been wanting to know about ideas and adapt them to my own understanding. In *the Republic*, Socrates (Plato) anthropomorphizes the mind into a mere prisoner and shackles her inside a psychological and physical prison under the earth. Inside this cave there is a flame that provides some illumination in darkness. When I read it, to me it was as if these prisoners were not facing a theater stage where marionettes were dancing and talking. Rather the prisoners had their backs turned to the wall and could only see the shadows projected by the moving marionettes. The problem is that the prisoners cannot move their heads to perceive the real marionettes and simply perceive their shadows. The prisoner also attributes the sounds to the shadows. However, on a fateful day, the prisoner is released and is finally able to fully perceive the puppeteer show and realizes that it is all an illusion. He perceives the ethereal hands maneuvering the appendages of the marionettes' bodies with each finger and finally sees the light

on top of the theater but it blinds him momentarily. With his sight burnt, the prisoner can now see things differently and comes back to tell the other imprisoned minds what he has seen. Unfortunately, they do not believe him because they think that being released has made the prisoner delusional and they cannot begin to fathom the ineffable (the theater stage they are unable to perceive)<sup>26</sup>. I have adapted the cave analogy here to what it seemed to the 19-year-old me when I read it in high school. But the real reason for me mentioning it here is that when I read the allegory of the cave, I could fully identify with the prisoner that had been freed. I could identify with the pain that he felt upon seeing the radiant light of the sun outside of the cave. The world that I had transgressed from the cave to the outside world was Guatemala to the United States. But just as the prisoner, I had seen another reality and thus my eyes were now endowed with a different sight. The cave analogy was the sole scene from *The Republic* that made me want to study more rigorously and it was the poetic analogy that made me want to become a philosopher, mainly because I had finally stumbled upon the perfect analogy to articulate the specific emotion of discovery that I experienced in solitude after coming to the US. Before finding the analogy and pasting my experience onto it, in my mind I was a vagabond out of my home with tears in his eyes clinging into the arms of the sane people and pulling on their shirts as I begged them to listen to what I had seen, imploring them, “please listen to what I’ve seen and take heed of what I have to say.” As we know, the human psyche lives a life bound by limitations of both individual knowledge and subjective awareness. This is the way in which the mind boldly attempts to understand the fabric of reality. However, both awareness and reality are equivocal, subjective and contingent to

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<sup>26</sup> The allegory of the cave perfectly allegorizes idealism. The idea that the perfect world exists outside the world in which we all live. This idea is taken by Judeo-Christian tradition in which the world is but a shadow, or a copy, of heaven (paradise). We must all direct our eyes towards this world and its forms and contemplate the form of this transcendental realm which exists in a different astral plane of existence. The outside of the cave here equates to the transcendental world that the prisoner perceives after he goes outside the cave or in my version when he becomes aware of the stage and the marionettes and the inside of the cave equates to the earth.



every single individual—one's reality might be another's illusion. We must live reality understanding it at least at its most basic level, but that goes to show that it is more than what we are sometimes able to see. My Guatemalan reality was the one I thought encompassed my whole being but after moving to the USA, I saw that everything I knew was merely a small portion of the entire puzzle (a mirage) of the world and the fact that there was much more to see in the timeline of my life filled my being with purpose. As the watchmaker opens up the interior of a clock to examine it, he realizes that it has been carefully created by a talented entity<sup>27</sup> because it has been meticulously constructed with an intricate internal manufacture consisting of intertwined cogs, a pallet, main wheel, mainstream, winding pinion and hairspring. He notes that every piece has been put together with precision and in the right place in order for the clock to work perfectly. From the outside, however, the clock looks as though it is nothing more than a tangible artifact with 12 Arabic numerals and three different sizes of needles on a white surface. Nevertheless, as he unpacks the artifact and observes the inside, he is delighted to see the great workmanship of the interior and so concludes that it is only by dissecting the clock that the true essence of the object can be understood. Such was I while also inspecting the life that caged my mind as walked the triviality of everyday but came into contact with new ideas; a life that consisted of a monotonous perception of time that runs cyclically and parallels the circular movement of the minute hand of the clock. In order for me to dissect life and realize its innate beauty as the same child who had opened up the clock years earlier, I needed to undergo the immigrant's *rite of passage*. The rite here is the crossing of a physical border which is also the crossing of an imaginary one. This passage is the one that the immigrant undergoes as part of his pilgrimage and with it I can formulate

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<sup>27</sup> Known in philosophy as the watchmaker analogy to prove the existence of God. A watch requires a creator because of its intricate construction, so does the perfect universe require a creator. Therefore, the fact that the world exists, would suggest that a creator has exists because something as complex and beautiful as the watch cannot come to existence out of spontaneous generation

the hypothesis that most immigrants at least come to the realization that life is more than meets the eye. Thus, realizations—like the one I had regarding the perfect harmony of life that mirrors the harmony of the clock—are also lessons because they advance and strengthen our thinking and transform our perceptions; making them a form of education that happens to immigrants as a result of coming to the United States.

Out of my own volition, I chose to move to the US but things for me were slightly easier than for many others who do it chasing a dream or the ones who travel in pursuit of higher education or job opportunities in exchange for giving up some aspects of their reality; the attempt at bettering the odds of survival have always struck me as having elements reminiscent of a suicide mission—an old self will have to die to gain access to the land of the Eagle. I could see that if I had not entered the plane through the help of Catholic Charities U.S. that bettered my odds, I would be in the far future crossing the border on the back of what many desperate immigrants know as *la bestia*. Many immigrants regard this train as the means of transportation to attain the richness of the American world, or to at least gain understanding of social mobility and the freedom to *become*. Traveling by land or on the train to the US is important in my analysis of the immigrant passage because it reflects the theme of locomotion and errantry. The movement and transitory state by land gives a person the ability to see things in constant movement, mere apparitions of places in the scenery of the world. These apparitions in the scenery of the world disappear soon after and they are constantly being left behind as time passes and as the body moves. I can turn to the experience of my own family and the post-traumatic stress that they have had to endure to arrive and settle in the U.S as outsiders. The shift in focus would offer some empirical support as to the pain that goes into the passage of the immigrant. Is one then in a state of liminality like the

anthropologist would describe him or be in a superposition state of Nepantla?<sup>28</sup> At the end of the day, the immigrant is in between two worlds—I knew this feeling because I longed for my hometown while I hoped to make my current lifestyle resemble the home I had lost by telling my mom to cook her wonderful *tortillas*. However, there was no second Guatemala to me after becoming educated. I had to abandon my old lifestyle in order to create a new one and I decided to do so in applying to Bard’s Higher Educational Opportunity Program. As I got accepted to Bard and once again beat the odds, education fully awakened me from a dormant state to which I cannot go back. After yet another rupturing due to education, I was convinced that there was no way to go back to the old state of pleasant slumber. Reality had expanded to its millions of possibilities before me and the sea ahead was open, inviting me to embark as a sailor-student. Once one kills the goose that laid the golden egg, a blissful ignorant state, there is no way to revive it. There is only one way to go and that is forward.

### **Border at Bard College - Spirit Hunter, Catcher of Ideas**

The golden key to a higher education—a fight of numbers to the Bardian classroom. When God, or *la fortuna*, threw the dice to dictate what my life's next steps would bring. I essentially scored the highest possible number. *La fortuna* had led me to Bard College and, from the outside, the classroom seemed mundane and simple; nothing more than individuals in a classroom like people making up a caravan but who walk only in *thought*<sup>29</sup>. There was a sense of profound

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<sup>28</sup> Nepantla here is used in its Nahuatl origins. The term is defined by Anzaldua as a feeling of in betweenness. The *mestizaje* that came as a result of the Europeans invading the Americas. The mestizaje made the terms of relation between Europeans and Native Americans more complex and nuanced after the abrupt cultural exchange between pre-colonial and post-colonial realities. The Aztec consciousness would be born as a child in betweenness that after a while could experience the feeling of two realities. The Immigrant can get a glimpse of this since they are caught in between two point inside their minds if we agree that their consciousness is on that has the experience of two worlds.

<sup>29</sup> This walking in thought refers to the ability of people to be sitting but be able to wander the soil of their consciousness. The psychic self can at times let go of reality and walk to the past, to the present, and to the future. One is not affixed by place or time in the mind for one can be free to wander. We also do this kind of wandering when we read and imagine things. This is to say that movement is both physical and mental.

security inside this epistemic womb; mutual respect in dialogue; all of us with knowledge manifested in the palm of our hands. At times I could not stop comparing my situation to that of the immigrants inside the caravan—worlds and borders apart yet so close to my very being. Fear, stress, angst; the possibility of life holding onto so thin a thread. This existential threat superimposed on their being, on a being that belongs—nowhere. Even so, their sheer desire out of their respect for living helps immigrants transgress the fear of death to the nothingness that reigns in the onward march of painful learning to the US. A journey that to me appeared almost mystical. To them, however, it *is* as real as their very flesh. After I had made it to the American classroom, I knew that what I had was the greatest opportunity one can have to engage in learning. I knew that it was also because I had been able to cross the border without danger and without the experience of others who travel across long distances, cold and hungry. Essentially, I had climbed the social academic stratum but my Guatemalan memory—which some philosophers consider the vessel of identity—had stayed with me even after the rupture and transformation from a Guatemalan to an Immigrant<sup>30</sup>. The access given to me was also a question of numbers and I had to prove myself worthy enough for a scholarship that infinitely bifurcated not only my way of thinking but also the way in which I saw my possibilities of success; how to unlock my potential as an individual to have a better life. I was aware of these opportunities every moment I was in the Bardian classroom. It was as if the world I was in, constantly reminded me of the gift of life.

At Bard, upon reading some of the ideas of Caribbean philosophers I understood that ideas are spirits in us. They transform who we are and can possess us. We pass from being a mere sack of flesh in a schematic rack of bones and reveal that the small organic tissue in the summit of our human architecture is an agent of tremendous power of navigation and collector of myriad ideas.

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<sup>30</sup> Some empiricists like John Locke consider one's ability to remember one's past events and continuity of life as the vessel that contains one's identity and that gives us moral value as humans.

The word “spirits” here is not to be taken as invisible dead souls but as abstract objects which we adapt to our own thinking in order to gain a new understanding of the world. As a student I wanted to hunt these spirits the same way I collected stamps when I was younger. And we understand, whether consciously or subconsciously, that we can use these ideas to our advantage; and make the world a better place inside our thinking studio in which we device the dynamite to blow up preconceived rules about how we ought to govern ourselves. We can essentially, with these ideas as we hunt them down, transform our worlds and make them more suitable to our needs. I realized this while studying philosophy at Bard, I went ahead and created my own world of hunting down philosophers and adapting them to my own thinking arsenal. When I was younger, because my family was very poor, I could never afford to own fancy toys and so it was up to me to create my own; I used my imagination as a playground the same way I escaped the boredom in the Guatemalan classroom. Imagination was my best friend because in my mind I had all the toys and there were no limitations of money or quantity. Collecting stickers or cards was something I would do to try and kill the inherent boredom of my world and my lack of fancy toys. The immigrant experience is one where boredom disappear as one comes to know a different reality. This was the effort of my flights of fancy; they essentially served as links to know a reality that was different from my own because then I would have something else to inspect: a fresh start in a new life. However, this fresh start comes with its own series of setbacks given that one is constantly outside of one’s comfort zone. I have been always a collector of these objects of desire. These cards I collected and stored in my pocket would in times of extreme solitude gift me with some form of mission. Eventually, I grew up but that habit of collecting stayed with me. Only now, instead of collecting different stickers, I began collecting philosophers, as well as other intellectuals of the history of the world. Suddenly, I found myself being transformed by their ideas. I would now look

at the world through their eyes—they were still very much alive in the realm of my mind—and not simply through my own. This made my pondering so much more lucid but also psychedelic. Chief among my favorites is Immanuel Kant because his idea of the Copernican Revolution, which proposes the mind as the constructor of our reality, obliterated my sense of reality and constructed it anew when I read him in History of Philosophy at Bard. Reality started to become more than simply breathing and it transformed into an interconnected web of wonder. This wonder would make me see the world now not only as a place to exist but as an infinite archive and this archive could be adapted to the library of my mind and hence expand my way of being. Reality was no longer a place for the mere collecting of stamp or cards; it was now a place to hunt down philosophers and absorb their ideas so that I could become as intellectually curious and strong as I could ever possibly imagine—there was no end to this possibility and it was a discovery I came to because of my innate curiosity, as I had previously discovered the inside of that clock. This gave my life a sense of an epistemic journey that I embraced every day and that made me fall in love with education even when I have bad—and have them very often—days. Now when engaging in dialogue with others, one is not fighting alone. There is always a spirit manifested on your back to fight on your behalf. Debating others about the basics of existence and the nature of reality is exciting and with the help of these intellectual gladiators on your side you are not alone in your battle against illusion—you can win. These philosophers, be it Blaise Pascal or Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz can be there to help you fight off erroneous ideas about what you believe. The thoughts of others can destabilize the flow of dull thinking and at times reroute the mind so that when it resumes again, it is fresh and ready to appreciate aesthetics from a different point of view. As one grows up one learns but at times one believes the wrong things about the nature of life like believing in Santa Claus at 5 and then maturing to the point that one can see how ludicrous that

belief was. I became aware of the deficient ideas I had in Guatemala. Having to overcome them was always a difficult challenge. Moreover, light will hit the retina of the philosopher's eyes, in my poetic vision for these people are gone and only exist in my mind, before the light can reach my retina, photons will hit the retina of the philosophers that are psychologically manifested in front of my eyes and the light is thus filtered *first* through their optics before it gets to mine. Hence this mental phenomenon creates a stratum of vision. In other words, the way that I see the world is now 'infected' by the philosophies of many thinkers of the past. The prism of their eyes will also change the nature of the light that hits my eyes and so my vision is now kaleidoscopic. It can be sometimes difficult to see too much. One is always in danger of not being able to land their spaceship on safe ground and of getting lost in the limbo of the psyche. Nevertheless, this can be difficult because my beliefs are a collection of what many thinkers have said and my truth depends heavily on their ideas and worldviews. All the philosophers in my mind, in effect, together paint the canvas of my reality with their own individual brushes. This battlefield where ideas clash with one another can, therefore, lead us to a problem of belief—if we believe in many things, what do we believe in?

When I came to the United States, I had to enter its cultural zeitgeist and a different temporality. I was struck then by a chaos of urban cities and an overwhelming lightshow at Times Square. These were big cities I was not used to seeing as a child that grew in a small house always happy to pet his puppy and eat beans with tortillas and *queso*. But in the US, I saw myself as a modern nomad, or the human in a non-stationary state (immigrant). In my country I was an individual; in the US, I was an immigrant. I think that after much consideration and rumination about one's unhappiness with life in one's country, one is forced to make a *Faustian* bargain in

one's country with the *coyote*<sup>31</sup>—the trickster figure and aid in the immigrant's journey—to help one cross the desert and river through the woods and finally arrive at the US border. In order to gain the life we immigrants aspire to have, we are willing to abandon citizenship, a safe feeling of being inside one's sweet home, food dear to one's heart, familial ties and their faith in God as well as many other innumerable things which my quill can enumerate no longer. This contract opens the portal to the world of Washington and thus accessing the mystic land offers a boom of economic growth via *remesas*<sup>32</sup> in exchange for one's soul—one signs the contract once one transforms from being a human of one's country to being an alien of another. Disenfranchisement of immigrants, as many cannot vote, is preceded by psychological decay which leads to the dying of dreams in the confines of existential solitude as one becomes a cog in the US machine<sup>33</sup>. We immigrants might be like the absurd hero going against the sentinels of the ideal world that are somehow chasing them to expel them from society. It is here where the immigrant becomes a tragic being. They are flawed because they cannot see that the abandonment of their homes will take away something more than their customs and lifestyles.

After becoming educated, things started to be different because my mind was inundated by a large array of different ideas. I would get lost in thought at times and would have to ground myself, even though navigating big questions is always a source of pleasure to me. But the knowledge from books would not have been so impactful for me if I were unable to apply them to real world scenarios. I was drawn to the idea that as an immigrant studying philosophy I had developed some kind of double perspective. The way that I saw it in my mind was having two artifacts in my hand that symbolize my two different lives. I saw it too as a blessing of probability

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<sup>31</sup> Human smuggler. Also, could have some kind of connotation to the Native American trickster as a fox or coyote.

<sup>32</sup> Remittances

<sup>33</sup> Allusion to Marx's language and his critique of Capitalism



and sight: the gift of dual perspective. By dual perspective I simply mean the ability to see from a Guatemalan perspective while living in the US. The ability of having a point of reference (the Guatemalan lifestyle) from which to compare and contrast my other artifact (the American lifestyle). Without having another artifact in addition to the artifact that I already have (the knowledge of my Guatemalan lifestyle) to reverse engineer and analyze the artifact's different constitution (the US lifestyle), I would simply see life from one perspective alone and see only one artifact. Similarly, if one has no other view to combat, one becomes trapped in a chamber that only resonates with itself and continuously resonates and agrees only with itself. For instance, I would at times find myself looking at the classroom at Bard as a student and I would compare it to the Guatemalan classroom. This was possible because of memory. Without memory I would not be able to remember my other school and I would not be able to compare and contrast school experiences, hence being able to now hold two artifacts. W.E.B Du Bois can offer some valuable insight into this double perceptual phenomenon.

### **Poetic Optics - W.E.B Du Bois**

My intention here is to take W.E.B Du Bois's metaphor of the veil in this section to illuminate important sociological and philosophical aspects of what it is like to be an immigrant in American society. However, it is important to point out that it is Du Bois's lenses that I am after—his lenses can be my observational instrument in my quest for clear inspection of the immigrant experience. That is, I want to use the lenses that Du Bois deploys as a poetic optic to scrutinize the experience of *othering*. It is important to not equate the African American experience with that of the immigrant experience but in a way use *Double Consciousness* instead as a mode of poetic form that can somehow shed light onto the issue of the immigrant's dual perception—a kind of psychic gemini. Philosophy is a shelter for those who, under the storm, seek understanding. I want to

explore the details of the immigrant phenomenon because there is a preoccupation with it, I think one should look into, to reveal important philosophical questions about social epistemologies. I will be looking at the theory of W.E.B Du Bois as a cognitive model and an experiential mode that essentially breaks mental seeing into two. In order to move on with my discussion of what I am calling the *immigrant dual perspective*, I think it is necessary to break down the mechanics of the veil and *double consciousness*. There are three main elements that Du Bois deploys to illustrate the complexity of what he calls “a distinct sensation”. They are 1) the veil images, 2) double consciousness and second sight and culminating with 3) the second gift of second sight of the immigrant. I am here taking his analysis of the African American experience and superimposing it on the immigrant experience in an effort to support my claim of *dual perspective*. I will break the three aforementioned elements down in the next chapter.

Before I go into the machinery of vision, I want to analyze the problem of the immigrant in American society as the immigrant is seen within the realm of *othering*. The immigrant undergoes a passage that corresponds to the human need for movement. There is a relation between all of us that allows us to connect to the intrinsic motivation of deviating from a homogeneous path and forming new paths of discovery. Here one moves through the world as an errant where movement creates new possibilities for thinking and evoking paths for conceiving of the other as an agent with their own rights. There is always significant importance is human experience to reveal universals even in the wake of relativism. This here is but a phenomenological interrogation through my own mental visualization of the phenomenon. My hope is to detect within subjectivity—my subjective experience—something common to the immigrant experience. That is, potentially something that is universal in all the particular immigrant experiences. There is something about the process of immigration that has ontological and epistemic significance.

Experience is a valid ground from where we can construct epistemological edifices. Interrogation of experience can reveal interesting aspects of truth. That is, the category of immigrants or refugees are beings that essentially transgress the boundaries of two dimensions. There has to be meaning in the process of their transition from one place to another. This interrogation always seemed to lead me to a certain importance about the immigrant experience as my intention was to constantly question it and attempt to understand what it is like to become an immigrant the moment one arrives at the US border. There are always opportune moments in our lives, what Walter Omar Kohan in his book, *The Inventive Schoolmaster* would come to call *Kairos*. Opportune moments that induce epiphanies about the world in which one realizes an important aspect of reality: an upgrade in thinking. A virus that will propagate in the mind and possess us to act differently in how we navigate the world. Events packed with emotion or trauma with the power to provoke a perceptual metamorphosis. I want to take an epistemic approach to the question of the immigrant. I saw a recurring parallel in the relation between the *one* and the *other* that sparked my interest to investigate the question of the immigrant mind. The historical Leonardo da Vinci's Vitruvian man as the center of the universe has taken roots in the infrastructure of our thinking as a homogenous humanism—which does not allow other forms of humanism to flourish. One usually understands Western ethnocentrism as reflected onto the Vitruvian man—the idyllic Homo Sapiens. The Vitruvian man being a miniature model of the center of the cosmos, therefore, insinuates that it is European *humanism* that everyone should mold their humanity on. Consequently, the human being develops an unbreakable link between his *self* (one's cogito at the periphery) and that of the Western *self* (the *cogito* at the center). This deadlocked relation between the *one* and the *other* creates a condition that dictates that all humans have to be measured against this anatomical model—the Vitruvian man here working as the standard for the perfect human—which in turn

creates a notion of normality and abnormality. Any human that does not fit the anatomical map of the Vitruvian man, i.e., a woman or a child, falls outside the norm and becomes an anomaly in the social program. The immigrant if pressed against this manufactured ideological and anatomical model will fall outside its radar as it is neither authentically European nor at the center. The immigrant becomes trapped at the periphery to the Western's epicenter or the bondsman to the lord: the immigrant is stuck perceiving himself through the lens of a Duboisian double-consciousness as he constantly perceives his nature through the eyes of the other and not through his very own. What is worse, the constant comparison of his consciousness and self-worth to this Eurocentric picture cages his conscious agency; undermining his psychic mastery which manifests itself in the immigrant's daily life, as the laborer in society that builds houses which will never belong to him. I thus hypothesize that there is a fundamental flaw in the majority's minds that relegates marginalized people to remain at the bottom of the socio-economic stratum. If one does not accomplish unity of thought, seeing oneself through the eyes of others, one can have trouble moving forward to encounter more opportunities and climbing the ladder to a more suitable lifestyle. However, this place is a mirage for the illegal immigrant since having no documentation means lacking some kind of social force field that protects them and gives them the liberty to navigate the new country's unknown grounds. Engaging in the American labor market where we can work and have something to do is enough to keep us occupied, but it blinds us from our self-imposed servitude to a country that is not ours but will nonetheless reap the benefits of our work. This is problematic in the sense that the money we produce does not benefit our countries as much as it benefits the United States. This asymmetrical imbalance in power in the immigrant reality is a form of servitude that places an immigrant in shackles and isolation. My family is composed of a large group of undocumented immigrants and their busy jobs do not leave them with the space

and time to do anything other than work to live and live to work. Being faced with a reality that is not ours can be upsetting and can shake our fundamental beliefs, sometimes leading to mental illness. This, however, is pushed to the back of our minds because our priority as immigrants is to work and get ourselves out of our individual holes. Thus, with the help of a detailed analysis that uses my own phenomenological experience as the method of inquiry I came to the understanding that even though the experience was completely mine, it was a valid understanding of the immigrant phenomenon. This led me to formulate my thinking in regards to the question of how a person changes when they must abandon all they have ever known in exchange for their own dreams. As I have already mentioned, there are events in our lives that mark us and that redefine our paths in life.

### **Section I - The Image of the Veil**

Naturally, in front of everyone's eyes, there is a pair of epistemological spectacles that allow us to perceive our surroundings and perceive the world as we know it. These lenses allow us to know the world but they alter the nature of the stimulus that hits our retina and which our brain transmutes, transforming stimulus into biochemical signals, and later computes and organizes into perception. Such perception in the mind is then also reflected directly to the outside world, like a projector displaying images onto a white wall. One cannot say, given that one is unaware of the shades in front of one's eyes, that our perception of a greyish world is not true to our own subjective experience for what we see is true to us according to our own parameters and standards of knowing. The world can be whatever it wants to be, black and white, but if we do not become aware of the pair of spectacles that is changing the magnitude of the photons before they hit us then whether the world is truthfully black and white is irrelevant. There exists a divide between the perceiver and the perceived. Du Bois uses the literary sophisticated technology of

“metaphor” to paint in the mind what it is like to be a black individual in the United States. The veil metamorphosizes both experience and perception of not only what it is like to be behind a veil but also what it is like to be seen behind a veil.

Before we do any preliminary work on sight, my rationale here for paying much attention to sight is because Plato emphasizes the nature of knowing the Forms in plane of the intelligible world as akin to seeing physical objects in the physical world. I go into the mechanics of sight because Du Bois uses them as a metaphor for second sight in describing his double perceptual power. That is, the poetics of sight/perception in the mind, which alone can only exist as metaphors and analogies, resemble the body’s perception of the real world through its sensory organs. In a sense, sight and perception are two sides of the same coin. Poetic optics are different than physical optics: they are purely analogic because the knowledge of the mind cannot be brought to the surface but through analogies. Let me here pin the analogy of perception with the mechanics of seeing as reflecting in the mechanics of perception because if the way we *understand* is akin to the way we *see*, we can conclude that the way the mind knows is akin to the way one sees. One would not be able to know, and by extension learn, if one did not have sensorial equipment that absorbs outer stimuli. The main organ I want to focus here is the eye. First, we must establish that vision and light are intrinsically connected, as even Plato admits how “generous the creator of the senses was when he created the domain of seeing” (136). And that the “sense of sight and the ability to be seen [...] is far and away the most valuable link there is” (136). I connect the necessary link between light and sight from this passage. But there is also a scientific basis for the connection given that sight is not possible without light. When light particles travel across space, they bounce off of objects and are reflected onto a person’s cornea. The cornea and as the rays pass through the round pupil that expands and contracts to capture light, the light particles entering the optic nerve

are then transmuted into electrochemical impulses the brain then interprets as objects standing in the outside. The iris regulates the amount of light entering the chamber of the eye. However, if these particles never enter the eye, as when one closes their eyelids, then they cease to exist within one's subjective experience. The rays of light continue passing through the eye lens when the eyes are open. This is done in a meticulous way by the eyes' organs as the shape of the rays changes once they enter the eyes. The retina is a thin layer of tissue where millions of micro sensing nerve cells reside and capture the energy coming from outside. These are called rods and cones. These cells in the retina convert the light into electrical impulses and are then sent to the optic nerve. The optic nerve sends them to the brain where the image is interpreted. There is no doubt that the world outside is the shapes we perceive. Without light particles (photons) bouncing off objects, sight would not be possible. We will come back to this point shortly when looking at Du Bois's own words. The scientific optics here are important as they reveal the building blocks of how it is that a human is able to see the world. Perception is, therefore, the explanation we give to seeing. However, the mechanics of the poetic optics are slightly different in the sense that seeing works an extended analogy for knowing, within the realm of the mind. Du Bois points out the issue of perceiving the outside world through this psychic veil because it is how the sensation feels. Moreover, the sensation obstructs mutual recognition from other subjects because what others see is a mask and not a face.

What follows in Du Bois's description is the use of a veil which in this case would not only be a metaphorical veil but more importantly a psychological veil. Veils are tight-woven nets made of a combination of silk and other fabrics. They partially block the face of those who are behind them, as in the case of a widow's black veil or a bride's white veil, keeping the subject's countenance obscured and somehow mysterious. They may function, too, as a solar screen which

would explain the blockage of light that would, as a result, *not* make direct contact with the perceiver of the outside world—in this case the *other*. Such an obstructed condition will lead the perceiver to have some kind of darkly tinted spectacles in front of his eyes and it is precisely this condition that allows his vision to become two-fold for the perceiver sees objects from his own optics but is likely able to imagine how someone that would not be obstructed by the spectacles would see that same panorama. The light that is entering the marginalized perceiver's eyes is, therefore, filtered *first* through the fabric of the veil before it hits the optic nerve of the perceiver. However, the nature of this veil is, presented by Du Bois as purely *mental*—it is a distinct sensation. It hinders the ones, those who have this veil in front of them, from seeing objects as they are in themselves inside or outside of the mind. In essence, they have a perceptual handicap. The manifestation of this psychological disparity presents itself in a lack of understanding, a form of blindness if you will. However, it also results, at least in my view, in the awakening of a unique form of perception Du Bois calls second sight. Essentially, the veil here is a psychic veil that blocks the eyes of the mind. As we have seen before, photos enter the retina for objects to be perceived. In the same way in the plain of the mind, the veil (here a psychic/mental veil) blocks knowledge to the eyes of the mind. All the linking between eye mechanics to perception mechanics is to ground the metaphor of the veil as existing also in the mind. Given that the African American is divided by a veil and unable to see clearly, they must find alternate ways of navigating the world which results in the awakening of double consciousness as a mechanism of survival. I think the immigrant experiences this to some extent because they must also go about life being seen as the *other*.

## **Section II - Double Consciousness and Second Sight**



For Du Bois, the veil is responsible for second sight but that veil divides only the consciousness of those marginalized. A perception that vastly bifurcates as a direct result of having a veil in front of them. The eyes here function as a metaphor for the faculty of understanding—for a mind has no eyes other than the mechanism by which it is able to cognize objects once the brain interprets the bioelectrical signals bombarded by the perceiver's sensory equipment. But let us now proceed to Du Bois's own words and unpack them. In *the Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois describes second sight as:

The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (2)

The story of the seventh son is a folktale where the seventh son of the seventh son gains special powers of foresight, namely, the gift of second sight due his fateful forthcoming. The African American possesses this psychic power of second sight, which aligns him with the trope of the blind prophet, i.e., Homer and Tiresias, who despite being completely blind is able to see the second plane of existence, which remains inaccessible and hence invisible to everyone else. Plato, in *The Republic*, uses poetic form to insist that perception in the mind, such as possessing sane judgment (understanding) and having access to complex knowledge like that of the *Good*, is akin to perceiving objects clearly in the physical world. However, a slight difference in Du Bois is that the *other*, given his lack of a fully actualized perception as a direct side effect of the veil in front of his eyes, is unable to clearly perceive the world as long as he remains behind the veil. That said, the fact that he perceives the world behind a veil gifts him with second sight. And this second sight, for Du Bois, transforms the eyes of the perceivers into an optical prism whereby vision

intensely bifurcates—becoming kaleidoscopic. Let us pause for a moment and explore a popular culture reference to strengthen this point of “unfiltered sight” in our discussion.

We can turn to popular culture for a modern conception of the type of vision that Du Bois is pointing out. The British science fiction anthology *Black Mirror* is obsessed with the idea of mirrors and optics. In one of the more popular episodes entitled “Nosedive”, the series interrogates the question of superficiality and the dangers of ever-growing technology. The title of the series, *Black Mirror* itself refers to the human psychological need for recognition. What I mean to extract from the series is the valuable final scene where the protagonist’s contact lenses, which display a person’s ratings from one to five stars, are removed and she experiences some form of transcendental experience once the 'veil' filtering her interaction with reality is removed. The episode evokes pathos in the reader when, after the protagonist experiences a series of unfortunate events, she is socially degraded and thrown into jail. As she looks upward, she perceives dust particles falling down from a window, letting light into the cell, and she begins to cry. The scene is bittersweet in that the character is now in prison, but is somehow free to actually see the beauty of things as banal and diminutive as dust now that her blind obsession with superficiality is over. This illustrates very clearly how I see the second sight Du Bois speaks of. Awareness of the diminutive aspects of life is what I want to emphasize through this example. One can sometimes perceive specific aspects of life, as did the character in perceiving something as insignificant as dust, and this is a paragon example of the distinct feeling that the I see Du Bois is emphasizing. However, just as in the episode, the protagonist ends up in a cell when the veil from her eyes is finally removed and she is able to see the world as it is in itself, but at the cost of social expulsion, thus falling outside of the standard norms of a working citizen. Something similar happens to the African American but in reverse: the veil adds an extra layer of perception that gifts a kind of

transcendental sight. However, the veil comes at the cost of social rejection and isolation that place that veil in front of their very eyes and, as a result, their vision bifurcates and the second sight is born.

The idea of sight and perceiving is illustrated well in the episode described above, but I argue that the immigrant does experience double consciousness but only because they have the same or a similar experience to that of the African American subject, who experiences the warring of two psyches inside one conscious experience. Instead, I also suggest that the immigrant possesses this distinct form of visualization of the world as a direct effect of having experienced emigrating from one place to another. The reason for this change in cognition is because if a human from birth is subjected to a specific experience of the outside world *a posteriori*, then we can conclude that the learning of an individual—and by extension his whole orientation and place in the world—becomes *cemented* into one's own geological and spatiotemporal parameters. In other words, one's perspective of reality will take firm root into the soil of one's conscious experience. When one attempts the *desterracion*<sup>34</sup> of a plant from the ground, one will inevitably lift the earth covering the stem of the roots and in doing so, hurt both the earth where the plant was buried and the plant itself. If one attempts to plant the roots of a rhizome in a different soil, that plant will cease to be the same. In the same way, when one attempts to change a fundamental reality in a person that has been cemented in the soil of the mind, it is possible that the person will feel completely disconnected, but it is indeed impossible to connect that person back to where it was uprooted because the plant would have already experienced what it is like to be in another place; that experience cannot be deleted from one's memory once it has been lived—Oedipus could not

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<sup>34</sup> Unearth. Here, the word offers a more creative translation in the way that I want to use it given that *desterrar* points to exile or banish someone from their land while also having a quotidian usage to refer to the unearthing of a plant from its roots

forget the things he came to clearly know even when he desperately gouged his eyes out in a useless effort to forget. Like a rock thrown into a pond causes a rippled effect in the water so does the experience of coming to the U.S.A. cause an important disruption in the soothing waters of the immigrant mind.

### **Section III - Immigrant as The Other**

Du Bois's own explanation of his 'peculiar sensation' aids me to express my own ideas of alienation and a sensation of twoness within the world. Du Bois puts this difference clearly when mentioning that, "being a problem is a strange experience,—peculiar even for one who has never been anything else [...]" (2). The relationship of the one and the other is *a priori*—it is the case that one thing is forever in relation to the other. What this marriage between two conscious subjects presents is a deadlocked state: one cannot find oneself if not through the other. In essence, the mirror in front of one's inner psychic self as projected in the chamber of the mind cracks and one's perception is redirected to other aspects of life given that one is no longer super hyper-focused on the narcissistic mirror of the mind. This sudden adjustment of one's perception evokes some kind of psychic metamorphosis—one transitions from being egocentrically focused on their own subjective perception of the self to being hyper-aware of the objects floating outside of one's subjective mental world. Attention is no longer turned inward but rather faces outward and then—in a sudden shift of visual inversion—is redirected to actually looking at oneself through the eyes of the *other*. Du Bois worked this perceptual projection very adroitly here when commenting on the way that society imagines the African American but my reasoning for bringing Du Bois's useful imagery is that it also applies to the experience of the immigrant self because once he is a "member" of American society, the immigrant becomes an outcast and an outsider. Being behind

the veil is but the eventuality of being trapped within the confines of diversity. Pain and trauma are the walls that enclose the *other* in a psychic prison.

The veil can be seen as something that holds back specific groups of individuals in a society but it also works as a very sophisticated image to illustrate the way in which the *other* is alienated from the rest of the people—anyone would be if they remained behind the curtain of a theater as the audience would never be able to discern who they are or see them for who they truly are—hence the prejudiced separation of the *one* and the *other*. The *other's* condition behind the veil is important because the element that provides a sense of alienation and the second sight is the very condition of being behind a veil. What I mean to say here is that it is because one is behind a veil that one sees themselves as different from the other people. The nature of seeing in the second sight comes into play because perception is only possible with sight. This formulation adds to the idea that being behind the veil is a double-edged sword. However, the case of having a different form of sight is not what places the individual behind the veil but rather that being placed behind a veil is what awakens that unorthodox form of seeing. This perceptual phenomenon happens as a direct result of having a veil in front of one's eyes. For instance, when I refer to having a second sight, I am merely pointing out what it is like for immigrants to embark on a journey to the U.S.A—they must endure the benefits and setbacks of seeing themselves as the *other*; the journey is a transformational one where they become the other. Moreover, the perspectival activation that I was able to experience in the US came as a direct result of having once experienced a different life because, after a while, the life I was living in the States was a second life which gifted me with a different vantage point.

The experience of the passage transmutes into experiential learning (wisdom) for the one that experiences it. There is a friction that arises when an immigrant or a refugee comes to the

States and is suddenly faced with a racial divide. But what kind of political message is the idea of the immigrant trying to make? I used to think that there was no danger in wanting to write my story about the way that it has been for me to cross the border and eventually make my life in the US. Is my project trying to raise awareness about many of us that few of them know since there is an issue of xenophobia on the political spectrum? Or, I have to wonder, did I simply want to be original? There is no question that navigating a completely new world touted as the promised land is a task that leaves us speechless in the face of penning our stories—to vanquish the monstrous shadow hovering behind us. Regardless of the rationale for this project or what primary focus the process would eventually reveal, that is a matter I leave to you.

### **Conclusion**

It is possible that after the trip to the US, a journey that brings about a rebirth. A consciousness sliced in half after a painful journey of crossing the threshold dividing two realms. If the traveling machine the immigrant uses to cross the border is the egg, then the portal one transgresses would undoubtedly be the breaking of the eggshell to the light of new life. One could take pride in being born by the heat of brooding like the Mayan quetzal or the Aztec eagle but with a new flaming rebirth common to the phoenix. As I have already mentioned, if I went through some kind of psychic metamorphosis then it is possible many other immigrants' minds have also experienced some form of change. The journey to the US that many immigrants and refugees take has to tell us something important about learning. As Kohan would say about Rodriguez, the reformation of the self can be achieved by adopting an erratic nature. Through errantry one is able to reinvent oneself. When I read, I also walk the world and read it as I would read a book and can let go of the real world even though I know I am letting go of the world and letting illusion take possession of my mind. If I remained ever vigilant to the way my mind wanders then reality would

be no fun. Fiction requires the reader to let go of the imposed boundaries of reality so that one can trick the self into the verisimilitude of the fictitious world and the real world. A world divided by imaginary borders. In this way, everyone has the power to enter different dimensions that are bridged between the real and the surreal. When we read people's stories, our life takes on new paths and our thinking is disrupted and rerouted—almost as if turned off and then resumed to troubleshoot anew. This rerouting of the mind is but a kind of spiritual awakening that shows us the many possibilities of the world in which we live. Leaving us with a shift in cognition that serves as the principle, the rule, that breathes fresh meaning into every other experience. Without a shift in cognition, experiences are simply dull = but if they leave us with something new we can see them as events that are worth exploring in the studios of our mind. My perception is intertwined with those of many wandering the forests to reach new worlds—although of course at different existential levels—each undocumented immigrant goes through their very own Katabasis (descent to the underworld). Even though my own experience has not been of that nature, the experience of both my parents and several of my cousins who have endured the pain of a difficult journey informs my very own perception. This is one journey that you cannot come back from unscathed, since coming back means failure and disgrace. This pain detonates the dynamite in consciousness which then disrupts the lenses of the eyes to see things in a different light and it therefore becomes the condition to gain a different form of seeing—one's second sight is awakened. Two minds work more efficiently than one. This is an emotion one can feel when one develops a broader scope which enables higher understanding: two heads (minds) here merely work as a metaphor to describe the emotion I feel when I ponder my own existence and place as an immigrant in this mechanic machine that is the United States. The reason why this sometimes can be unpleasant for the self is because one might suffer from a lack of unity of thought. This is the feeling that I often

get when I walk and find myself asking questions related to my condition as an immigrant who has come to a place of vast cultural exchange. This is one of the emotions that never accompanied me in my life in Guatemala and it sometimes creates an affliction that segregates me from the present moment in my life. At the same time, it makes me wonder about Guatemala as a country that I never experienced from a deeper perspective and wonder how much I missed by not being able to formulate this depth of thinking while I was trapped in its confines. Whenever I strike success in the US, my mind always wanders to Guatemala and an unshakeable nostalgia overtakes me. This is one of the ways in which I feel like my consciousness is split. My thinking is in time as I find myself standing in the United States of America but my cultural and spiritual self was left behind and this leads me to feel as if I am missing a more complete sense of self. It does not help that the dreams I have while sleeping are also peppered with different memories that I have experienced as a child, memories that have stayed with me and impede me from being fully *here*. The mental pondering of two cultures and two lives divides me into a double state of existence.

*¡Oh Verdad! dispuesto estoy a este precio pagar, si tan solo puedo regocijarme en contemplar tu divinidad, y aunque sea por un milisegundo tu rostro tocar: te ofrezco hoy mi dualista percepción<sup>35</sup>.*

But love for writing would not be possible without the appreciation of philosophy as an art form. The feeling that I often experience is like the flash of light striking the sensitive, naked eye when one remains in a dark room for too long and suddenly goes outside. One must close their eyes or place their hands over their forehead like a retired sergeant just so one can block the pain of too many photons hitting the eye all at once. I often experience this feeling when I think about all the things I want to know. The chaotic vastness of the world cannot be taken in by the senses

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<sup>35</sup> Oh Truth! I am willing to this price pay, if only I can rejoice in contemplating your holiness, and even if for a millisecond your face touch: I offer you today my dualistic perception.



because it becomes mentally and psychologically overwhelming. One is unable to know everything at once because it is mathematically impossible and whoever knows all is here at the borderline of insanity. Using philosophy as an apparatus for focusing my eyes helps me see things a bit more clearly in this unpredictable universe. If I, for instance, want to know about *how* it is that one knows and *why* it is that one wants to know (taking a psychological approach would resolve the question easily but that takes away the fun of the journey), I can turn to epistemology as an astro compass to place in front of my eyes—lenses that expand and contract, changing volumes of light intake on their fixed optics—to inspect the universe with such questions and thus things start to gradually become clear and less blurry. Philosophy, as opposed to popular opinion, is not the mere pondering of ideas that lead nowhere but a practice that can serve as a guide to inspect the schematic terror of the world through a systematic and logical way that brings us to a higher form of thinking. And this form of thinking can itself awaken in us the power of becoming a better *us* in a world full of toil and pain. This of course takes much time and effort and I am always defeated by custom, laziness and wishful thinking. Whatever the case is, every day I find myself coming back to that training chamber, to the philosophical learning school ever present before my eyes—the book of the world.<sup>36</sup> Perhaps we can take philosophy to help us defeat the things that plague us as humans and use it to look into issues that matter to us. That way we can put into practice philosophical learning in our eternal journey to living a good life. But what do I know? As far as I know, I know nothing.

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<sup>36</sup> Echoing Descartes resolution in his *Discourse on Method* to rely on what he learned from himself and from reading the book of the world. The world is an archive that can be forever read. There are ideas laying in the floor everywhere waiting for us to discover them.

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