Although hip hop has been around for more than thirty years, it still has a global reach when it comes to conscious and unconscious dialogue that extends far beyond the art form, far beyond the space in which the dance is performed. In this paper I argue that hip hop dance, or breakdancing, has the potential to spark dialogue and revolution as exhibited in interdisciplinary artist Jefferson Pinder’s performance piece “Dark Matter.” In the year 2015, most people have some knowledge of hip hop, whether it be the music, the art (graffiti), the dancing, or the culture as a whole. But few have examined the dance as a form of social protest, as a way of creating a dialogue between performer (b-boy or b-girl) and audience. In this paper I research the historic origins of hip hop dance, how it’s possible to choreograph empathy, and what role breakdancing plays in the wake of the police brutality and protests that occurred in Ferguson, Missouri after the shooting and death of Michael Brown on August 9, 2014.

Much of Pinder’s art deals with performance, video work, and objects that challenge the viewer to think about society at large. Classically trained at the University of Maryland, he went on to grad school at Florida State University but dropped out of the program after the first
semester. As an artist, he started out with a very individual frame of mind, thinking about his body and the power of the black body as a whole. His performances were not too literal or direct, but focused more on physical performance, such as him pulling a telephone pole down the street. However, after a while people kept asking why is work was always about him and he wanted to start a bigger conversation, something outside of himself. In 2009 he created “Lazarus,” a performance that involved community members pushing a once-dead car, and “Ben Hur,” a group of young men rowing in suits until the last one collapses. One thing has remained constant for Pinder in his work: the need to create work that uplifts his people, that is always about the struggle.

Inspired by the protests that took place in Ferguson, Missouri, “Dark Matter” is both a logical progression and departure for Pinder: It’s the first time he worked with trained physical performers (breakdancing crew Lionz of Zion) and created a piece based on current events. At a December 2015 panel at Prizm Art Fair, Pinder explained how the idea came about:

For years my mother told me ‘Be careful of this, don't do that. Keep both hands on the steering wheel, make sure you let the police officer know when you’re going for the glove box. All these things make sense to me, but when you see the visual imagery that’s been coming out [of places like Ferguson] in the last couple of years, it’s evidence. Of course, there was always physical evidence of the black body and damages being done to it, but actually seeing police in cold blood shoot down someone that’s running away from them, watching police repeatedly shoot someone that’s on the ground […] that visual imagery is compelling because it’s the stories that my mother told me over and over again, happening in real time to real people. And there’s a certain amount of helplessness that comes over you because obviously the act has already happened, so how do you interact with these images? How do you come to terms with it? That conversation really began for me with the imagery that came out of Ferguson. The smoke, the heroic figures, the awareness of the camera, it was all very much like street theater. To me it all had a theatricality about it that I wanted to capture and present with my work.

The concept of doing a breakdancing performance came about rather organically for Pinder, who wanted to show what it was like for millennials to protest, which is very different than the protests that took place in the 1960s, such as the Watts riots in Los Angeles, partly due
to the awareness of the camera and the awareness of the environment. Pinder began talks with a local arts coordinator, Peter Chang, who he looked to for advice on how to go about working with break dancers. Breakdancing fit into his idea of performance, in large part because of its ties to protest, to the working class, to kids who wanted a creative outlet, oftentimes in response to horrible living conditions. “I wanted to create a story in which the breakdancers could begin to tell a narrative and could begin to tell about the physicality of protest,” said Pinder.

In Susan Leigh Foster’s Choreographies of Protest, she works to demonstrate “the central role that physicality plays in constructing both individual agency and sociality” (395). She goes on to define classic theories of political protest, conceptualized as “the calculated pursuit of narrowly defined interests, which emerges when the political or economic opportunity to leverage a complaint presents itself” (396). Pinder, as the choreographer and visionary behind the performance, as well as Lionz of Zion, are waging a protest against racism, and more specifically, police brutality against blacks and other minorities. Their interest is to bring attention to these issues, create empathy between the dancer and audience member, and get people to talk about the issues rather than let them keep happening over and over.

The title “Dark Matter” came from a conversation that Pinder had with physicist Lisa Randall who was talking about dark matter in a very abstract way—you can’t see it, it’s a part of us, it’s not really black. If you’re looking through a telescope, the only way you can see it is if there’s a bright light that is illuminating it from behind. Here, Pinder describes a conversation he had with Randall:

It’s strange where you get your influences. On the one hand I’m looking at this Ferguson footage trying to figure out what to do, and then I’m having this conversation with this physicist who’s talking about dark matter and I can’t help thinking about black identity. And I go up to her after a talk and I asked her if she was talking about race when she was talking about all of the science
related to dark matter, and the fascinating thing is that her eyes lit up and she said ‘Yes, I was talking about race. I’ll have to send you my first chapter because it was all about race but my editor told me to take it out.’

Because of Pinder’s background in physical theater, he knew from others before him that the power of theatrics isn’t limited to a black box and what you do in a small space with six performers could reverberate outside what we understand. Thus, “Dark Matter” could be more than a group of individuals in uniform, it could be more than just entertainment—it could be a protest. Despite this hope, Pinder is cautious in regards to the potential influence of “Dark Matter”: I hold back from calling myself an activist because in part I do think it’s theatrics; it’s not like I’m saying what we’re doing is going to change the world, but hopefully we’re going to get people to think and get people to understand and maybe initiate, be a catalyst, for change. And that’s what I’m hoping for, and maybe I’m starting small but I feel like a catalyst can be a really powerful thing as well.

The History of Hip Hop: Battles, Foundation, and Race

Not surprisingly, when discussing the songs used in many hip hop battles, the vocabulary could just as easily be used to describe an actual battle. Eddie Luna, founder of the Dynamic Rockers, discussed the emotions classic hip hop anthems spark in b-boys in Joseph G. Schloss’ “‘Like Old Folk Songs Handed Down from Generation to Generation’": History, Cannon, and Community in B-Boy Culture:

That is the adrenaline. If you know b-boy, that’s like anthems, you know? This is where you stand up. This is where you gotta do what you gotta do. I mean, when I hear—to this day—the beginning of “Just Begun,” “Apache,” “The Mexican” during its breaks…and “Drummer’s
Beat,” when it starts, when you hear those bongos going, it’s just—oh, man! It’s war time. It is. It’s just this rush…Like, you don't care no more, you just go ahead and do it. Doesn't matter what it costs! You didn't even practice this move! You’re at the point, I mean, whatever comes out is gonna come out, you know what I mean? You have a black eye or a scratched arm or whatever. Because the adrenaline rush that you get from the music…“Apache”? Forget it! I can’t listen to Apache. I just—I start sweating, you know! And I get angry! And it’s like, I wanna hit the floor!

(416)

Looking to the music for inspiration, to the beats and pauses, the bongs and breaks, is an integral part to breakdancing. However, many of the cuts that b-boys favor are not hip hop songs at all, such as the aforementioned “Apache” by The Sugarhill Gang (1973), “Give It Up or Turn It a Loose” by James Brown (1969), “T Plays It Cool” by Marvin Gaye (1972), “The Mexican” by Babe Ruth (1972) and a few others. Schloss explains that these songs “are the rock and funk songs that b-boying’s originators danced to in the half-decade between hip-hop’s emergence as a socio-cultural movement around 1974 and the development of an associated musical genre in 1979” (411). That there is such an adherence to history and convention, that there are real roots in hip hop, adds to its significance as an art form and as insight into social and political upheaval.

Originally, breakdancing took place between individuals or groups at block parties and “park jams,” whereas “b-booing now exists primarily in the context of ‘battles,’ or formal contests at which b-booing is the primary style performed and virtually all attendees are b-boys and b-girls” (Schloss 413). Instead of having the crew compete against another crew, Pinder uses Lionz of Zion in a show in which they worked together, not for a competition, but for a piece of performance dance art, something he stated worked quite well for his overall message:

Taking the b-boys out of the environment in which they’re constantly competing against each other and they’re working to create a piece like “Dark Matter” was really kind of a new thing for everyone. I hope that folks not only come out and marvel at their physical expertise, because they really are quite marvelous, but I want people to at least think about the content and try to figure out where is that space in between where it’s beautiful to watch but it’s also twisting your insides at the same time.
In B-Boying and Battling in a Global Context: The Discursive Life of Difference in Hip Hop Dance, Imani Kai Johnson states, “Yet over the course of b-boying’s more than thirty-five-year history, the foundational elements of the dance that the majority of older and experienced breakers cherish have developed into philosophies of movement and living that grew out of the social environment of the South Bronx, and thus carry a perspective on b-boying’s history.” She goes on to quote from Schloss’ Foundations: B-Boys, B-Girls, and Hip-Hop Culture in New York:

Foundation is a term used by b-boys and b-girls to refer to an almost mystical set of notions about b-boying that is passed from teacher to student. In addition to the actual physical movements, it includes the history of the movements and the form in general, strategies for how to improvise, philosophy about dance in general, musical associations, and a variety of other subjects. The idea that a core b-boy philosophy should be so important that it requires a special term says a great deal about the dance and why it is so significant in the lives of its practitioners. (12.)

Much like the anecdote that Pinder gives in his lecture about his mother warning him to act right, to be on his best behavior, to be wary of the police, this is a fear and an awareness that is passed down, that is learned from teacher to student. His mother probably experienced more racism than he did, growing up in the Civil Rights era, whereas her parents experienced it even more acutely in the Jim Crow era and slavery before that. There is no way to think about, write about, or participate in hip hop without thinking about race, whether consciously or unconsciously, especially not in the US, and the concept of the battle. “Despite the implied
individualism, the whole of b-BOYing culture is shaped by the outcome of a multitude of battles—big or small—that happen every day” (Johnson 173).

What are these “battles” that happen every day, when it comes to black men? On a large, or “big” scale, the battle is survival, the battle is not getting shot, not dying. In Roxanne Gay’s essay, “The Last Day of a Young Black Man,” from Bad Feminist, she discusses the film Fruitvale Station, directed and written by Ryan Coogler and about Oscar Grant, a young black man who was shot in the back by a BART police officer on New Year’s Day in 2009. “Each time Oscar says good-bye to his girlfriend or family in Fruitvale Station, he adds, ‘I love you.’ Coogler remarked that many young men in the inner city do this because ‘every time we leave the house, we know we might not make it back.’ Such is an uncanny burden” (249).

Many of the moves b-boys and b-girls make seem like natural inclinations but are actually learned physical responses to those everyday battles. It’s important to know the songs, to know the moves which then allows for improvisation and reactions without conscious thought. Uprocking, for example, was created by Puerto Ricans living in Brooklyn in the late 1960s, as an alternative to gang violence by using jerks and “burners, “dance moves that were designed to insult an opponent by miming physical attacks” (Schloss 421). Watching b-boys uprock and battle each other, replace real guns with hand gestures of guns, grab their crotches to mime sexual dominance or masculinity, and many other gestures carry more weight when given the social context at a given moment in time. In the context of “Dark Matter,” the stakes are different than New York in the 1960s and 1970s, the issues have shifted, but breakdancing is still being used as an alternative form to violent protest.

No matter where the dance may be today, there are things about history that can never be changed and should not be forgotten. While it’s true that the Lionz of Zion crew is mixed—there
are white, Asian, and black b-boys (though no b-girls)—historically, hip hop was a black and Latino dance. Johnson interviewed several b-boys and b-girls on the subject and much insight is drawn on the subject of race, especially from the answers of Rokafella, an Afro-Puerto Rican woman who had been a b-girl since the 1990s:

I was having a conversation with [a young white b-girl]. Because I was telling her you know, ‘You being white, that’s never gonna go away. This being a black dance, that’s never gonna go away either. You have to first become well versed at acknowledging the fact that slavery or oppression of a European country on their colonies, you have to be able to acknowledge that that shit is wrong. And that it’s still wrong. So that, you know, when conversations come up, you can honestly say, ‘Yes, that was wrong. And that has nothing to do with me.’ Because that isn’t even your generation. It’s not your mom’s or your grandmother’s generation. We’re talking eons, oh my gosh, of imperialism. But for you to acknowledge it helps me precise you as an ally. And the fact that you renounce your privilege in this society is, is…is helpful. What is also helpful to you is to become a soulful dancer. You have got to study this dance and be good, without a doubt. And always contribute back to the people who created it, back to the people who teach you. Because you have to give back to the people who teach you. Because you have to give back to the communities [and not just] be able to take away from it.

The idea of recognizing the history of not only the dance, but the culture, of racism and imperialism in the United States, is perhaps idealistic, but it is not unattainable. Like much art, on the surface hip hop is hip hop—the dance can entertain people, can be a marvel of physicality. But beyond the moves, there is a knowledge, a history. There are roots. Rokafella implies that if a dancer doesn't know the history of hip hop, doesn't know the history of struggle, then that b-boy or b-girl lacks soul. The dance is not a selfish one and it should be something for an individual within a community, which Johnson agrees with. “Through battles we can become aware of the range of deeply personal and political stakes in b-boysing: whether the culture operates in a realm of social healing; whether it challenges racism, classism, and sexism; whether the dance can retain fundamental qualities that were once its foundation but have since waned in
importance” (192) and “As dynamic and exciting a dance as b-boying is to watch, the things we
do not see are especially important to the battle. Moreover, dance is a significant (though
unexplored) form of meaning-making in Hip Hop—especially with regards to its global
context—which allows us to recognize the capacity for dance to play a role in how difference is
negotiated and understood” (193).

More Than Just a Hip Hop Show

What is the meaning-making, then, of “Dark Matter,” and how can we read the moves to
get at what is below the surface, what cannot be seen by the naked eye? Pinder is acutely aware
of these challenges, and it is something that he struggled with, and still views as a challenge.
“There are a lot of ways people can read the performance. First of all, is it even a dance show? I
think one of the worst insults I ever received was when someone said it was a great hip hop
show. It’s not just a hip hop show; we’re trying to reinterpret it and get to the core of what the
music and art form means.” One of the ways to get at the meaning is to study the history of
protest in relation to choreography. Forster argues that the physical interference in protest makes
a crucial difference: “Approaching the body as articulate matter, I hope to demonstrate the
central role that physicality plays in constructing both individual agency and sociality” (395).
She discusses three nonviolent protests—the lunch counter sit-ins of 1960, the ACT-UP die-ins
of the late 1980s, and the World Trade Organization meetings protest in Seattle, Washington in
1999—to show how each realized social change. In viewing “Dark Matter” as a nonviolent
protest, there are many parallels that can be drawn from those she discussed, especially the lunch
counter sit-ins.
“Dark Matter,” like the sit-ins, takes up a distinctive issue (racism), addresses a social injustice (police brutality), and has a grass roots profile (breakdancing is not normally used as a stage for conscious theater), coming onto the social stage in an unanticipated way. When audiences hear that there is a breakdancing performance, they expect to see a dance, to be entertained. With “Dark Matter,” that is but a small element of the performance. The other part is to “frame a new perspective on individual agency and collective action, one that casts the body in a central role as enabling human beings to work together to create social betterment” (Foster 397). Whereas Foster reconstructs the three events in her article, asking of them the kinds of questions that a dance scholar might ask, I use several of her questions in order to read “Dark Matter” as a dance scholar might, in the hopes of understanding what the movements and gestures mean, how they create empathy, and how the performance can create social betterment. The questions she laid out and which I paid particular attention to are as follows:

1. What are these bodies doing?
2. What and how do their motions signify?
3. What choreography, whether spontaneous or pre-determined, do they enact?
4. What kind of significance and impact does the collection of bodies make in the midst of its social surround?
5. What kind of relationship do they establish with those who are watching their actions?
6. How is the body of the researcher/writer implicated in the investigation?

The performance which took place in Miami during Art Basel was not the first one for Pinder and Lionz of Zion, but the venue was unique and added a different level of meaning to the
show. Due to rain, the battle didn't happen outside, but rather, indoors, amongst various displays of art from black artists and surrounded by an audience of mostly black members. The crew was comprised of six men, half of whom played SWAT team members, and the other half young men (either black or Asian).

A square was drawn in tape on the floor, which served as the “cypher,” a term from the Nation of Gods and Earths, an offshoot of the Nation of Islam, as explained in Schloss’ article: “It is this usage in particular that has made its way into hip-hop, most commonly referring to any hip-hop activity that is performed in a circle, particularly rapping and b-boying” (413). Before the performance started the b-boys huddled together, along with Pinder, highlighting the community aspect of breakdancing. Afterward, the b-boys crouched on the floor and waited patiently for the deejay to begin playing a record, which signals the start of the battle. Once the music started, the b-boys went into the cypher individually using a mixture of uprocking and floor work to signify what it means to travel through the world as a young black man or as a young man of color. Their bodies were alone in the cypher, sometimes upright, and sometimes rolling on the floor, and spinning. There were also one-handed handstands, using balance, power, and freeze poses to accentuate their prowess and individuality. Both sides (SWAT and non SWAT) performed and battled, and although their costumes signified differences, there were none seen in the motions.

A major change in choreography came when the deejay played music with the sounds of gunshots, signaling a practiced, pre-determined enactment of police brutality against one member of the crew. At each sound of a shot, one of five members lifted their arm, made a “gun” with their hand, cocked, and pointed at one individual in the middle of the cypher. The question of what kind of significance and impact does the collection of bodies make in the midst of its
social surround is answered here, in the seriousness of the faces in the b-boys, in the audience, in
the stiffness of their arms, in the stillness of their bodies. This was a moment of reflection, of
symbolism that had no alternative meaning, that could not be misconstrued: a killing in cold
blood, one or multiple people with guns against one unprotected individual, much like what
happened with Michael Brown, with Eric Garner, and countless others.

While the first part of “Dark Matter” is not so concerned with constructing ethnicity—the
b-boys who “shoot” the individual (who is Asian) are of different races (black, white, and
Asian)—the second part of the performance is much more purposeful in constructing ethnicity
with direct ties to Ferguson, Missouri, and the Black Lives Matter movement. The way in which
“Dark Matter” constructs ethnicity with the choreography is by focusing on the two b-boys with
dark skin, two very young men in their twenties who, whether they like it or not, exist in a world
that judges them for their skin color. In this part of the performance, the second act if you will,
the two b-boys uprock and battle against each other. However, the spirit of the battle is
friendly—they slap hands and hug after their battle is complete, congratulating each other on
their separate performances, showing the audience with their physicality that they are connected,
they are brothers, not merely because of their skin, but because of their b-boying skills.

Up until this point in the performance, the relationship between dancer and audience was
more or less indirect; audience members watch the b-boys perform and react as they would to
entertainment, clapping and yelling in admiration. However, after the battle between the two b-
boys, there was a moment of direct confrontation with audience which drastically shifted the
tone and mood of the performance through the use of the b-boys’ physicality, as well as stillness.
As if they know that the audience has been interacting with their performance on a mostly
superficial level, there is a moment of breaking the fourth wall in which the two b-boys walk
around the cypher, staring at individual audience members. One of the b-boys stopped in front of me, held my gaze for at least two seconds, creating a connection between dancer and viewer, which caused a visceral reaction and directly implicated me in the investigation.

As an audience member, researcher, and writer, I felt exposed and without protection in that moment. There was nothing between myself and the b-boy, save for a few inches of space, and he was not looking at a spot in the distance, or at the floor, or at another dancer, he was looking right at me. Within that look, I felt recognized, acknowledged, and also, responsible. Something was learned, and it could never be unlearned. Yes, I could have looked away, but I wasn't watching television or a movie—I was watching a fellow human being. In that moment I felt an acute sense of empathy, a transference of feelings, not of pity, or sorrow, or guilt, but of a deeper understanding, of viewing the b-boy as more than a b-boy, more than a performer, more than a young black man, but as a human being.

After this bit of strategic choreography, the b-boy is “shot.” Again, the hands are used to symbolize guns, and the young man falls to the floor. It is in that moment, in the stillness, in the silence, another moment for empathy is created and shared. After the b-boy is shot, the deejay cuts the music, heightening the sense of drama and tension, something Pinder put much thought into: “For ‘Dark Matter,’ the sound is something we wrestled with. There is something about having a solid tempo and drive; it’s an adrenaline throughout the piece. But you know, sometimes you want to hear the breathing, that thud when the body hits the ground.”

And indeed, the thud of the b-boy’s body on the floor, the after effect of the silence, was heard in the audience. By staying in this moment for several minutes, Pinder forces the audience to become involved in the event, to look straight at the body instead of away. He gives us time to
look at the body, look at the face, and think about Michael Brown, think about Eric Garner, and
so many others wrongfully killed by police. It is a powerful moment not only because of what we
see, but because of what the body, dead and alone, is associated with, the history that comes
along with the black body. In the moments after the death of the b-boy, I was also reminded of
Roxanne Gay’s essay, “Holding Out for a Hero” in which she discusses the death of Trayvon
Martin:

Trayvon Martin is neither the first nor the last young black man who will be murdered
because of the color of his skin. If there is such a thing as justice for a young man whose life was
taken too soon, I hope justice comes from all of us learning what happened. I hope we can rise to
the occasion of greatness, where greatness is nothing more than trying to overcome our lesser
selves by seeing a young man like Trayvon Martin for what he is: a young man, a boy without a
cape, one who couldn't even walk home from the store unharmed, let alone fly (284).

Although “Dark Matter” is a fictitious portrayal of events that have taken place and will
continue to take place in the US, by performing it Pinder is asking audiences to rise to that
greatness which Gay discusses. Unlike what is seen on the news and other major media outlets,
proper time and dedication is given to the murdered b-boy. After the silence, three crew
members surround the b-boy and slowly encircle his body, bringing to mind the outlining of a
corpse with chalk. Next then they pick him up and parade him around the cypher—a funeral
procession for the audience to see, another moment to connect the performer with the viewer.

We are meant to mourn this fictional death, to mourn all the wrongful deaths of many
young black men in the twenty-first century. As Johnson states, “Dance and performance
scholarship have made evident that movement can carry history and communicate ideas and
messaged to knowing communities non-verbally. From a practitioner’s perspective this process
is called embodied or kinesthetic knowledge. Kinesthetic knowledge captures the imprint of history and cultural knowledge within movement. Meaning is bound up with past narratives and current debates, not merely as their reflection, but as representations of particular ways of understanding within the culture” (181). In other words, we see the b-boy being carried, his body still, his head thrown back, and we know that this is meant to be a funeral.

After the eerie calm of the funeral the third act begins: there is a protest (a protest within a protest) and stylistically the performance switches to involve both two sides, the SWAT versus the b-boys in a direct battle. Symbolically the b-boys have bandanas tied around their faces to protect from the smoke, much like the pictures that came out of Ferguson, with their hands up, referencing the “hands up don't shoot” chant. Batons were used as props, as well as gas masks, adding to the authenticity of the moment, and both sides using rapid footwork and floor work to battle each other. At the end of this battle within a battle, the final result is the savage beating of two more b-boys, both black, their bodies curled up in pain in the middle of the cypher.

Toward Empathy

Just as the events in Ferguson are complex and about more than just a racial struggle, so too is “Dark Matter.” By linking the performance to black power and the history of police brutality in America, Pinder finds a way to archive a current moment in history that coincides with the Black Lives Matter movement. In the age of social media and smartphones, racism and inequality have paradoxically become more “real” through visuals and video. Pinder takes those current events a step further in “Dark Matter” in order to create a dialogue between artist and
viewer within and outside of the black community. “Dark Matter” challenges viewers to look at history, but to look at it in a different way and with a different knowledge. It is contemporary art that will revitalize what we think about when we think about black bodies, racism, and violence, and push us to move beyond being voyeurs. Once you see that it’s more than just a b-boy battle, you have to think about it, talk about it, and ultimately, it’s “gonna make you move,” and make you want to do something about it. At least, that’s the hope.
Works Cited


Creative Work

The Odyssey Hotel: A Novel
When Juan, the director, first told me about his project—a biopic about Puerto Rican baseball player Roberto Clemente—I wasn’t overly invested. I was more excited by having my first starring role as his wife, Vera, and getting paid, even if it was a minimal amount. The cast and crew was a mix of Dominicans, Cubans, and Venezuelans, all men. Because I was mixed—half Chilean, half white—I was nicknamed Blanca, which I hated. I wanted them to call me Sadie, but I also didn’t want to cause problems, so I said nothing.

On the plane ride from Miami to Managua, where we’d be shooting for four months, I sat next to Juan, reading a graphic novel about Clemente that he’d lent me. When the stewardess came by to pass out snacks, I put it down and turned to him.

“Did you ever find out if we can shoot in Fort Myers?” I asked.

He shook his head, opening the packet of peanuts with his teeth. “Too expensive. We’ll just shoot some B-roll or go to Atlanta.”

“Molly told me Managua’s not much cheaper than Florida.”

He raised his thin eyebrows. “Molly thinks she knows everything. We got a good deal at the hotel, believe me.”

Molly was Juan’s wife and also our hair and makeup artist. She was supposed to join us in a few days after she finished working on a car commercial in Key Largo.

We ate our food and afterwards, when Juan fell asleep, I continued reading about Clemente. One panel in particular held me for a long time. It showed him coming up to bat in
Pittsburgh, fans from both sides shouting slurs like “jungle bunny,” “gator bait,” and, of course, “nigger.” Then there were close-ups of scenes around town, highly-detailed drawings in a sepia wash: an admin ticket for the “colored” bleachers, Clark’s Café “for whites only,” and the King Theatre “for colored people.”

By the time Nicaragua came into view, I’d almost finished the book. I laced my fingers together and watched the brown and green form shape, turn into land, then houses and streets. Juan stirred, yawning. “Are we there?”

“Yeah,” I nodded.

It was only my second time out of the country, the first being when I was sixteen and went with my parents to Chile, where my father was from. We spent a few days in Santiago, and the rest of the week in Cochrane, Patagonia, a tiny town of 5,000 people where drinking maté and going to the rodeo were the main forms of entertainment.

“Land of volcanoes and lakes,” I said to myself. I felt a hand on my shoulder and turned around to look at Seraphin, my costar.

“You been practicing your Spanish, I hope?” he asked with a smile.

“You know I’m Chilena.”

“Were you born there?”

I rolled my eyes. “No. Were you born in Haiti?”

“It’s in my blood on both sides,” he said. “I’m probably a descendant of Toussaint.”

“You’re stupid, you know that?”

He shrugged. “You’re just mad ’cause I’m right.”

This was a version of a play argument we’d been having since we first auditioned together in Miami, back in February. When I first met him, I’d thought he was flighty and way
too pretty to play Roberto with his high cheekbones and long eyelashes. But when we started the scene, his voice and body language, even his aura seemed to change. Instead of a fresh-faced twenty-year-old Miami Dade College student, he became a man hardened by racism in the U.S. in the fifties and sixties, who walked around with the ghost of his sister hovering close, who always knew he’d die young.

During rehearsals, we’d gotten close. I’d seen Seraphin’s bravado fade away, and with each week he grew more introspective. We spent many nights walking along Biscayne Boulevard or the Miami Beach boardwalk, talking about what we wanted to get out of the film. For me, it was recognition. For Seraphin, it was honor and respect, the chance to play someone who mattered as opposed to an inner city youth or a criminal.

The plane landed to thunderous applause by the passengers on board. It was almost five and we walked quickly across the tarmac to the airport. Inside, there were dozens of hotel and ride service representatives looking for tourists, many of them approaching me. I ignored them and stood close to Seraphin in the baggage claim area. Once we had all of our bags, we headed outside to meet the manager of the hotel who had insisted on picking us up.

The climate in Managua was like Miami’s, except even more humid. We’d arrived during the wet season, and there was a dampness to the air; along with the car exhaust and cigarette smoke from taxi drivers waiting for customers, it was like being smothered slowly and wetly.

“Señor Salinas? Hello? Señor Salinas?”

An older man with a sizeable stomach, balding head and thick, black mustache waved at us. “I’m Dagoberto, from The Odyssey Hotel. I recognize your picture from the Gmail.”

“Hola,” said Juan, shaking hands with him. “This is the crew, for the most part. We’re still missing my wife and a few others, but they’re coming from different cities.”
Dagoberto shook his head enthusiastically. “No problem, none at all. Let’s put your things in the van and I’ll take you there now so you can rest and shower, no?”

We loaded our suitcases in the back of a large private van and climbed in, Juan in front, Seraphin and I behind Dagoberto, the rest piled in behind us. There was no air conditioning and I took out a piece of paper and tried to make a fan, waving it at my face.

“Have you been here before?” Dagoberto asked Juan.

“No, first time.”

“You look like you have some Nica blood. Where is your family from?”

Juan ran his hand over his shaved head. “They’re all from Puerto Rico, with a lot of Taino thrown in.”

“Ahh, es el indio pues. We all have some indio in us.”

Looking at them both, skinny Juan with the deep-set eyes, plump Dagoberto with almost-jowls, I saw no resemblance at all.

Dagoberto maneuvered out of traffic and away from the curb towards a two-lane road.

“It’s very big, Managua, and a little poor, but every day it’s getting better,” he said. “If you have time, you should go and see Granada. Now that’s a great city.”

As we stalled in traffic, I stared at the street vendors selling common items like water and popcorn, and not-so-common ones like iguana meat and turtle eggs. The light changed and we moved into a less condensed area, away from the bottleneck of taxis, buses, motorcycles, and bicycles, the people in the streets replaced by billboards, some with shampoo and movie ads, many more of them advertising Nicaragua and its president, Daniel Ortega, with the slogan, Cristiana, Socialista, Solidaria!, in pink bubble letters.

“That guy is a straight up murderer,” Seraphin said.
“Who?”

“Ortega. He was with the FSLN, planned a fucking assassination, and now he’s president.” He paused. “Haven’t you researched this place?”

I shifted a bit, trying to unstick the backs of my thighs from the vinyl seats. “I know he was financed by drug money.”

“And he changed the constitution so he could be elected for another five-year term! He’s a fucking dictator.”

At that last word, Dagoberto glanced at us in the mirror and said something to Juan, who turned to us.

“Seraphin, maybe you could talk about something a little happier?” he said. “It’s a touchy subject.”

“Dictator,” Seraphin whispered. He crossed his arms, silent for the rest of the ride.

The Odyssey Hotel was located in the city center of Managua, nestled amongst smaller buildings with barred windows and in various stages of disrepair. When we pulled up to the entrance of the hotel, several of the crew whistled in approval. It was stunning—stairs decorated with blue and green Moroccan tiles led to a white-gated entrance framed by thick bunches of red hibiscus,

“Damn,” Seraphin said. “We’re in a fucking palace.”

Dagoberto nodded. “It used to be a convent, but in the nineties a Spanish architect came to Managua and converted it into a hotel.”

Juan moved to open the back door and start bringing in our bags but Dagoberto quickly blocked his way with his body.
“Please, leave your bags, our staff will take care of it, we’re here to serve you, really. I’m sure you all want to get some air conditioning and relax, so please follow me.”

We trekked up the stairs and past an old man dressed in a white bellhop uniform with gold hat and gloves, an outfit I thought almost cruel in the day’s heat. But he held the door open for us with a large, gap-toothed smile, ignoring the sweat running into his dark eyes.

Inside, the lobby had marble floors shiny from a recent polish, walls covered in religious paintings framed in gilded wood, and tiered crystal chandeliers dangling from the ceiling. As Juan checked us in, I nudged Seraphin with my elbow.

“How do you think he can afford this?” I asked in a low voice.

“Molly told me that he got a good deal,” he said.

“Yeah, I know, but look at this place.”

I motioned towards the arch at the end of the lobby, through which we could see an open-air courtyard and large swimming pool. Sheer white curtains hung on either side of the arch so that every time a breeze came, they billowed out like wisps of soft fog.

“I bet they have a shitload of incentives to film here,” said Seraphin. “Third world country, kickbacks, bribes. It makes sense to me. They’ve got nothing to lose.”

I wasn’t so sure, but I planned on asking Molly again when she arrived to the hotel. We were much closer than I was with Juan, who was often in his own world, determined to make this film his breakout, his Moonlight. While he was passionate, he also had moments of rage, and in those moments, I’d learned to keep quiet and not challenge him.

The cast and crew had rooms on the right side of the courtyard near the deep end of the pool, and Juan and Molly were the opposite side, closer to the lobby. Once we’d been checked in, Dagoberto put his hand on Juan’s shoulder.
“I just wanted to say thank you again for choosing our country, and our hotel, to be part of your film journey,” he said. “If you need anything, please don’t hesitate to ask. Also, any staff member can be relied on as well. Beatriz,” he motioned to the receptionist, a thin, blond-haired woman with pearls and a white-collared shirt with a gold nametag above her right breast, “is excellent with English.” She nodded and he continued. “Make yourselves at home. Dinner will be served at seven in the dining room.”

Everyone separated and I tried to grab Seraphin’s hand. “Ready?”

He shook his head, pulling away. “I want to check something with the receptionist first. You go ahead.”

I walked slowly down the hall, pausing to admire the courtyard, the perfectly mowed lawn and thin papaya trees. My shoes clicked against the tiles as I passed the pool, wondering if I’d have time for a quick swim before dinner. When I opened the door to my room, my bags had already been delivered and neatly stacked by the closet. A gift basket had been placed on the large, white bed, filled with products of Nicaragua like Flor de Caña rum, chocolate, and coffee beans. Next to the bed was a floor-to-ceiling window that looked out at the pool.

Someone knocked at the door and I opened it to an incredulous looking Seraphin holding his own Flor de Caña. He held it up to show me.

“I know,” I said.

“Might as well enjoy it,” he said, filling two glasses. “Even though the bastards who own this shit don’t care about their workers and they’re dying of chronic kidney disease.”

I stared at him, then at the glass he held out. “Do you ever get tired of all these negative conspiracies you carry around?”
“Conspiracies?” he touched his neck. “Woman, that shit is a fact. I’m just saying what’s real and there’s some real fucked up shit here.”

I took a sip. “Tastes like vanilla.”

“Sangre de cañero.”

“God, you ruin everything.”

“Same shit’s happening in Florida…”

I threw a pillow at him and he ducked out of the way, then sat on the bed.

“What do you think Dagoberto said to Juan in the van before?” he asked.

“I wasn’t listening.”

“He looked scared. Like he thought Ortega might have his van bugged or something.”

“Don’t exaggerate,” I said. “Maybe he’s just not used to having a loud Haitian talking shit about his country and its president.”

“Whatever. Better a loud Haitian than a silent cracker like you.”

There was a beat of silence and then we both cracked up, leaning into each other and almost spilling our drinks on the floor.

“I’m glad you’re here, even if you are an annoying doomist,” I said.

“Me too.” He kissed my cheek. “I’m gonna take a nap. I’ll see you at dinner.”

When he left, I stood and placed my forehead on the window, staring at the pool, the turquoise color like a streak of thick paint. Just then, a short woman appeared in a black bathing suit and swim cap. She walked slowly over to the deep end, curling her toes over the edge, her back now to me, still as a statue. Suddenly, she dove into the water, barely making a splash, and began to swim laps. I watched while I finished my drink, then took a shower, and when I went
back to the window she was still swimming. At seven, almost an hour later, her rhythm had not stopped—in fact, she seemed to be moving faster, like a black blade slicing back and forth.

“Very impressive,” I said to myself.

I placed my room key in my pocket and went to dinner, hungrier than I realized. At the long communal table, despite the continuation of rum, laughter, and jokes, whenever there was a lull in conversation or a topic that didn’t interest me, I thought back to the mysterious swimmer, wondering who the woman was.

The next day I spent most of my time catching up on sleep and lying in the bathtub re-reading through the script, preparing for the first scene which came towards the middle of the film, during the 1972 Caribbean world series between Puerto Rico and Nicaragua. The day after that, we were supposed to begin shooting, but Molly still hadn’t arrived. I called Seraphin’s room, and when he didn’t answer, I knocked but there was no reply, so I explored the hotel and tanned myself by the pool while going over my lines. I’d hoped to catch the swimmer, but I was the only one out there for hours, the only sounds the soft clinking of the chimes that hung from the wooden beams of an outdoor gazebo. By the third day, all of the lighting equipment and costumes were safe and secure at the hotel, but Molly had been held up by severe weather in Miami. On the fourth day, I began to get really stir crazy and tried calling Seraphin’s room again.

“Alo?”

I laughed at how quickly he’d adapted to the Nicaraguan’s way of answering phones.

“What are you doing?” I asked. “I’m so bored.”

“I was going to walk to the market. Want to come?”
I glanced at the clock. “Give me half an hour.”

“Okay. Bring dollars so we can exchange them to Cordobas.”

Excited at the prospect of getting out and about in the city for the first time, I changed into a yellow summer dress, which, compared to Vera’s costumes, felt light and airy, like walking around in a slip. After I put on a pair of high-heels I checked myself in the mirror, happy with the reflection, my smooth, tan skin against my recently dyed black hair set in perfect corkscrews.

I met Seraphin in the lobby and when he saw me, he raised his eyebrows. He was wearing a simple V-neck, basketball shorts, and bucket hat.

“Are you off to South Beach, darling?” he asked.

“Are you going on a safari?” I shot back.

“I’m just trying to help,” he said, motioning at my chest. “They see that cleavage and those legs and they’re going to say some mad shit.”

“And how is that any different from Miami?” I asked. “Believe me, I’m used to it.” I linked my arm through his. “I’m not changing. This is what I want to wear.”

“Suit yourself.”

Outside in the streets, the best way to describe the city was chaotic. Shop after shop was filled with a variety of either hyper-practical items—mattresses, bread, and cleaning supplies—or hyper-useless—piñatas, bird cages, used DVD’s from the eighties. On the sidewalks in front of the shops, various street vendors sold their wares, anything from sliced mangoes and fried plantains to watermelon and hamburgers. Some had a variety of items, while others specialized in just one thing—a wheelbarrow full of fresh papaya, a cart of passionfruit juice sold in plastic bags.
We stopped in front of a Banco de America Central where a group of men stood, each with a fanny pack stuffed with Cordoba’s, waiting to trade the gringos for dollars.

“How much did you bring?” Seraphin asked.

“A hundred.”

“That should work for now. Hold on.” He took out his notebook and did some calculations. “If he wants to give you less than 6,000, go to another one.”

The first man smirked at me, tried to give me 5,000 and I refused. The second did the same, and the third gave me 6,000, staring at my breasts the whole time.

“Come back anytime,” he said with a wink.

“Dirty old man,” I muttered under my breath, slipping the bills into my wallet.

We continued on to the market, Seraphin stopping every once in a while to jot a note down, to point out something that reminded him of Roberto.

“I wish I could be that disciplined,” I said as he wrote down the address of the museum he wanted to come back and visit when it was open.

“It’s something you work on,” he said. “I wasn’t always like this. But being here, I feel more pressure to get it right, to really capture what Roberto was about. Don’t you feel that with Vera?”

“Yeah, I want to do a good job.”

He closed the notebook and slipped it into his back pocket. “You know, this is my first time out of the country, and the first time I feel like I can walk around and not be scared? It’s crazy to feel that when you’re twenty, like my whole life before this moment was someone else’s or something.”

“You feel scared walking around Miami?” I asked.
He gave me a look like I was stupid. “There’s your privilege talking again. Of course I did, and I probably always will until people start looking at me like I’m a human being and not some fucking animal.”

“But it’s not like we live in Clearwater, or Jacksonville, or somewhere in Georgia,” I said. “Miami’s pretty liberal, at least the younger people are.”

“Come on, man. Miami’s just as racist as any other place, they just dress it up different. Cubans think they’re white, Argentinians think they’re white, and don’t get me started on the Dominicans. Everyone’s claiming their fucking European heritage. And then black people think they’re better than Haitians, who think they’re better than Jamaicans and on and on and on. But here? Here I can just be. I can breathe.”

I remained silent, thinking about what he said because I had nothing to add to it. It was true—I’d had the privilege of passing, growing up with a Jewish mother and Chilean dad, born with a lighter complexion and light eyes. At twenty-four, I’d done little interrogating, easily floating between gringa and Latina, depending on the crowd.

Finally, I managed a weak, “I’m sorry. It’s not fair that you have to feel like that.”

He shrugged. “It’s been unfair since forever, aint nothing new. You hungry?”

I nodded and realized we’d arrived at the Roberto Huembes market, a network of open-air stalls in front of which were numerous taxis and buses waiting to take people home after shopping.

“I’ve been looking forward to this,” he said, rubbing his hands together. “I want to see if we can find some iguana.”

“That sounds nasty.”

“When in Rome, right?”
We stepped out of the sun and into the maze of tables and stalls. I immediately felt overwhelmed, whereas Seraphin seemed to come to life. He said hello to everyone and stopped at every table, delicately touching the bags and hammocks, keychains and fruit as if they were newborn children.

When he spotted a display of fresh cheese, he made a beeline for it and immediately struck up a conversation with the vendor, despite his broken Spanish. While she sliced up bits of different cheeses for him to try I checked my phone. I’d received several messages from my mother since our arrival to Managua, but I’d only sent one brief message to let her know I’d arrived. Today, she’d sent a few photos of my cat, Olive, which she was taking care of, and the garden she and my father had been working on in the backyard for the past few months.

I heard the laugh before I saw her, loud and deep like a beating drum, unconstrained. I put my phone away and turned towards it, my gaze landing on a woman a few stalls down with dark hair in a high bun, a thin layer of frizz framing her face like a halo. Her head was thrown back, her hand on another woman’s shoulder, and for a brief, inexplicable moment, I felt a sharp longing for that touch.

“I’m going to look around,” I told Seraphin, who nodded and didn’t break his conversation.

I walked to the table where the women were, pretending to carefully examine the tortilla presses, wooden earrings and spices. They didn’t seem to notice me, as if I were a ghost, and not until I picked up a necklace made of purple shells did they stop talking. The woman behind the table was young, probably not more than sixteen with two long, black braids. She smiled and held up a hand mirror.

“You can try anything on, I’ll give you a good price,” she said.
I nodded and took the mirror, slipped the necklace over my head. As I admired it, I saw the other woman behind me in the reflection.

“It suits you,” she said in English.

“Purple is my favorite color,” I responded in Spanish. She exchanged a look with the other woman. “Your Spanish is very good.”

“My father is Chilean.”

“Oh, I thought you were one of the Swedish students at the hotel.”

“The Odyssey Hotel? You work there?”

She raised one eyebrow. “Yes. I’ve served you breakfast a few times.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, fumbling with the necklace, trying to get it off. “I’m still getting used to the place, and I was probably with my crew and distracted, I’m sure I noticed you I just—”

She put up a hand. “Don’t worry about it. It happens.”

Feeling awkward, I decided to buy the necklace, plus two tortilla presses and three keychains in the hopes of looking less like an asshole.

“Thank you,” I said when the vendor handed me back my purchases, now wrapped in newspaper. I turned to the other woman, held out my hand and said, “I’m Sadie.”

“Okay.”

“And you are?”

“Tina.”

“Nice to meet you. And again, sorry.”

I turned, looking around for Seraphin, but he was no longer at the cheese table. I must have looked confused because Tina tapped me on the shoulder.

“Is everything okay?” she asked.
“I came here with my friend but I don’t know where he went. It’s not a big deal, I’ll just go back to the hotel.”

“Do you know how to get there?”

I shook my head. “No, but I have GPS on my phone, I’ll be fine.”

“Come with me,” she said. “I’m working the night shift today and I was going there now anyway.”

She reached for my package and when I protested she pointed at my dress.

“You’re going to get that all stained, it’s better if I hold it. And watch your hands.”

I turned them over and she was right; my fingertips were already smudged gray.

I followed her out of the market, out from under the shade of the tarps and back into the hot day. She knew the quiet streets to take and we walked past small concrete houses and stray dogs picking through trash on almost every corner, some piles black and burning, some yet to be burned.

“How long have you worked at the hotel?” I asked.

“It’s been almost six months.”

“Why did you think I was a student?”

She shrugged. “There’s a small group of study abroad students there now for orientation and you have white skin. I just assumed.”

I examined my arms, which Molly had referred to as “honey.” To play Vera, she’d made me a few shades darker on my face, chest and arms, a color she’d dubbed “rich ginger.” I also wore brown contacts when we filmed.

“But you thought that even after I spoke Spanish?” I asked.
“I didn’t really think about it, to be honest.” She wiped her forehead with the back of her palm. “So, if you’re not a student, or a tourist, why are you here?”

“I’m an actress. We’re filming a biopic about Roberto Clemente.”

“The baseball player?”

“You know him?”

She stopped and put her free hand on her hip. “Everyone here knows him. He was a hero. He died for us. All of this in fact,” she gestured at the one-story houses with clotheslines in the front, the street full of potholes, “was completely wiped out—”

“—by the 1972 earthquake,” I interrupted. “And he died in a plane crash flying from Puerto Rico to deliver aid to people in Managua because they weren’t getting what he sent, it was being taken by the government or the corrupt police.”

“You know the history,” she said, impressed.

“I’m playing his wife so I figured I should know about her husband as well.”

“What? You’re playing Vera?” she shook her head in disbelief. “But you don’t look anything like her!”

“Our makeup artist does a great job. She straightens my hair and puts it in a bouffant, and then I wear dresses styled from the sixties. Look.”

I took out my phone and showed her a picture of me in full hair and makeup I’d posted on Instagram a few weeks ago, dark eyeshadow and pink lips.

She examined it closely. “But your nose is too thin. And you’re too skinny, and so tall.”

“That’s what acting is,” I said. “Why should it matter what my nose looks like? Is that all that Vera was, her nose?”
I started walking again, more quickly now, and she caught up to me, putting her fingers lightly on the back of my arm. “I didn’t mean it like that. You’re not too skinny, you’re fine. I mean, not just fine, you’re very pretty.”

“Gee, thanks.”

My feet had begun to swell in the heat, the straps rubbing deeper into my flesh, adding to my irritation.

“Give me the name of a Puerto Rican actress,” I said.

She blinked. “What?”

“Tell me one. Just name one Puerto Rican actress who’s alive.”

“Rosie Perez.”

“She’s too old to play Vera.”

“Oh. Well, then, Rosario Dawson.”

I smiled. “She’s lighter than I am. And at this point, she’s too much money for an independent film like ours.”

Tina bit her lip, thinking. “I don’t know any more actresses.”

“Because there’s not a lot to choose from. That’s all I’m trying to say. The director chose me for a reason. If it wasn’t me, it’d be some other non-Puerto Rican. But I’m good. I’m a good actress.”

She nodded. “Okay. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to offend you, really.”

We turned left and the quiet dissipated, making room for the noise of the city, taxis and buses honking, bachata and salsa blasting. Tina picked up her pace now and I struggled to keep up in my heels. Men of all ages stared at us, made kissing noises and flung out piropos. Being
from Miami I was used to the catcalls, but here they were more creative and persistent—some even followed us a few feet until Tina turned around, angry.

“Que fue, boca de mierda,” she shouted, and they scattered like chastened kids.

“That’s quit a saying,” I said.

“Those mamabergas don’t know when to calm down,” she said. “I apologize.”

“It’s fine. Hold on a minute.” I stopped and lifted up one of my feet carefully, flexing my toes. “Fuck, I’m never wearing heels here again.”

“You should take them off.”

“I’ll just put on some band aids when I get back.”

Tina bent down, touching my feet softly, gently slipping her fingers under the straps.

“You’re bleeding. Take them off and we’ll walk carefully.”

“I’m okay.”

“Sadie,” she said, looking up at me. “Take them off.”

“Okay.” The second I did, I immediately felt better.

“You’re a bit stubborn aren’t you?” she asked.

“Maybe.”

She smiled, and it was then that I saw her dimples. Two deep lines that changed her entire face, revealed a brief but powerful warmth. We continued on more slowly now, both of us looking down, careful to avoid glass or anything else that could cut.

“Are you from Managua?” I asked.

“No, I’m from the Islas de Maíz, off the eastern coast.”

“What’s it like?”
“It’s small and very beautiful. It’s also complicated. I can’t explain it easily; I’d need hours to do that.”

“I’d like to hear about it sometime, if you want to tell me about it.”

“Maybe.”

A few minutes later we arrived at the hotel, but when I stepped off the sidewalk to cross the street, Tina remained unmoving.

“Aren’t you coming?” I asked.

She shook her head. “You go ahead. I need to buy a new swim cap.”

“You’re a swimmer?”

She shrugged. “I’m no professional, but I do swim every day in the pool before work.”

“I think I saw you when we first got here. You were in a black bathing suit?”

She nodded. “Nobody else swims except for me. I usually go early, at 6:30, when most of the guests are still asleep, but I couldn’t that day.” She handed me my package. “Have a good night, Miss Sadie.”

“You too.”

After she left, I walked up the steps to the hotel, where I was greeted by the bellhop.

“Buenas, señora Olivares,” he said.

“Buenas.”

He held the door open and I stepped inside, walking gingerly past the receptionist’s desk, still holding my shoes in my hand.

“Miss, what happened?” asked Beatriz. She stood up from behind the desk and rushed over to me. “Did you get robbed?”

“No, no, I just wore the wrong shoes, they were hurting me.”
“Oh, yes, those are not good for walking. Do you need some alcohol or bandages? Do you want me to help you get cleaned up?”

“It’s not a big deal, really, I’ll just soak them in the tub for a few minutes.”

“Well, if you change your mind, just call the desk and ask for me, Beatriz.” She pointed to her name tag. “Were you alone, miss? You shouldn’t walk around here alone; it can be dangerous for a woman like you, even during the day.”

“I was with a woman who works here, actually, she helped me find my way back. Nothing happened.”

“Which girl?” Beatriz looked at me closely. “Was it Sol? Or Jesu?”

I didn’t understand why she was so interested in knowing who I’d been with, and because of that, she put me on edge.

“I’m going to go to my room now, I’m a little tired,” I said.

“Yes, yes, of course, miss. Just call if you need anything. I’m always available to help.”

Back in the room, I had just enough time to soak my feet before dinner, just enough time to wipe the dried blood off and think about where Tina’s hands had been just minutes before, her hand cupped around my arch, her fingers briefly passing over my toes, cradling my foot as if it were something delicate, like a hurt dove, a broken-winged bird. Something that needed protection and care.
Self-assessment

After several drafts and iterations of *The Odyssey Hotel*, a structure was chosen in order to organize and move the action forward. First, splitting the novel into two parts: the Wet Season and the Dry Season. Initially, Wet Season began in Miami, moving back and forth between Managua with various flashbacks to high school. In the current iteration, Wet Season begins immediately in Managua and I cut out the flashbacks because they were slowing down the narrative and taking away from the real crux of the novel: the relationship between Sadie Salinas and Tina Fitzgerald. Dry Season originally began in Miami, and in this iteration, still begins there.

Originally, the book opened on Tina’s eyes, in Managua, the first thing that Sadie noticed about her. Now, the book opens on the airplane with Sadie and the film crew flying to Managua. This draft has much more about the film in it, with a much more developed B-roll. In that sense, there is a story within a story, a biopic about Puerto Rican baseball player Roberto Clemente. Writing the B-roll was important to the overall project as it added layers not only to the B-plot, but the main plot at hand.

It served as a way to develop the characters, the country, and the story of the film, which reflects themes of the novel overall: being othered by the dominant culture both in Nicaragua and Miami (for Roberto Clemente, in the US); discrimination between classes in Nicaragua; how tourism helps or hurts a country; passing as another culture; machismo; how men and women move around urban spaces; and living in a socialist country.
The relationship between Sadie and Tina develops within a space of secrecy, in a country where it is not illegal to be gay, but also not fully accepted. Nicaragua is a very Catholic country, and the fact that Tina is an employee of The Odyssey Hotel and Sadie is a guest there along with the movie crew, adds complicated layers to their romance. In earlier versions, the main inciting incident of the novel is Tina’s death, who is found dead in the hotel’s swimming pool a few months after Sadie’s arrival.

For the current thesis, I took more time to develop scenes beforehand, so that her death doesn’t come until near the end of part one. The death causes the film to stop, and Sadie to go home and heal, or at least try to. Part of me wants a little more buildup, and I also didn’t want the story to be a who done it. I wanted it to be a story of a woman, Sadie, who finally reaches the point where she is comfortable with her sexuality, and the tragedy of losing the person who helped her get to that place.

The Dry Season begins in Miami, and to Sadie’s surprise, the person who helps her the most through her pain is her father. They work together in Homestead, though she secretly hopes to return to Managua to finish the film. She is depressed, confused, and in pain, but she is also the sort of person who doesn’t want to leave the job unfinished. She also wants to finish it for Tina, to make her trip to Nicaragua not feel like a failure, or for nothing.

Originally, Sadie went back because she received a letter from Kevin, Tina’s younger brother in Big Corn. Now, she gets a letter from Rosa, Tina’s first girlfriend. Rosa asks her to come, to provide some closure. At the same time, the film gets new funding and the director lets everyone know they will be resuming filming in a few weeks. Before she returns to Managua, Sadie travels to Big Corn to meet Rosa, Tina’s family, and try to figure out what exactly happened the night of Tina’s death, which is still somewhat of a mystery.
When going back to revise the first chapters, and moving forward, I’m trying to focus on lingering in the scenes and action. One of the pieces of advice that I have focused on for my edits that I took from my closing conversation is to not make everything so convenient for Sadie. I’m trying to complicate the scenes, to have people move in and out more, and not have everything handed to her. I’m also aware that Seraphin plays a big role in the beginning and then disappears a bit, so I’m working to keep him in.

Still left to work on for the book is to develop part two, to give Big Corn and the return to Managua texture and context. I’m ready for the next part of the journey, and will be traveling to Nicaragua this summer in order to do research and add more layers to the book overall.
Annotated bibliography

*Everything I Never Told You*, Celeste Ng

This book was helpful for me when studying and thinking about point of view. Ng went between characters in different chapters, which I initially thought to do in my book, but which in the end, did not work. However, it was important to various points of view to get to my ultimate point of view, which is a close first on Sadie Olivares.

*The Periodic Table*, Primo Levi

This novel was important to me to see non-typical ways of organizing a book. In it, Levi names each chapter by elements, as opposed to numbers. I chose to structure my book in a non-traditional way as well. There are two parts, Wet Season and Dry Season, and in Wet it goes by numbers, as opposed to Dry, which goes by place.

*Americanah*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Set in multiple countries, mainly the US and Nigeria, Adichie’s book lent a model for the outsider in a new place story. The main characters are from Nigeria but living in countries and cultures different from their own, which helped me with Sadie and Tina’s emotional depth.

*Open City*, Teju Cole

Travel, rhythm, and word choice were very important in this book and helped provide inspiration for me and my own book. As I go further with my edits I hope to achieve the same level of artistry and tightness in my sentences to set a mood of discovery, inspiration, and loss.
The Buddha in the Attic, Julie Otsuka

Another story, or rather, many stories about strangers in a strange land who are never able to integrate themselves from Japan to the US. Not because they don’t want to, but because they are always seen as different, or held in place, or shipped to labor camps. How sometimes, even if you work hard and are smart and good, you still struggle.