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Apparent Magnitude

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

APPARENT MAGNITUDE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Diana Anaya

2019

To: Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts, Sciences & Education

This thesis, written by Diana Anaya, and entitled Apparent Magnitude, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

Denise Duhamel

Anna Luszczynska

Julie Marie Wade, Major Professor

Date of Defense: March 6, 2019

The thesis of Diana Anaya is approved.

Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts, Sciences & Education

Andrés G. Gil
Vice President for Research and Economic Development
and Dean of the University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2019

DEDICATION

For Marilyn

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

APPARENT MAGNITUDE

by

Diana Anaya

Florida International University, 2019

Miami, Florida

Professor Julie Marie Wade, Major Professor

APPARENT MAGNITUDE is a collection of lyric essays that explores family relationships, the Cuban-American immigrant experience, coming-of-age, and sexual trauma through the dual lenses of science and myth. This collection uses experimental forms, playing with the page. The experiences of an immigrant Cuban family are recounted through extended metaphors of celestial bodies, fairy tales, fables, and myths.

The literary influences of APPARENT MAGNITUDE include Rebecca McClanahan's lyric essay, "Interstellar," as well as A SMALL PLACE by Jamaica Kincaid. McClanahan's use of scientific language and the metaphor of celestial bodies informs the way this collection approaches autobiographical experience. Kincaid's prose style informs the incantatory and declarative tone of various pieces. The visual design and spatial elements of APPARENT MAGNITUDE are influenced by A. Van Jordan's M-A-C-N-O-L-I-A and Tamiko Beyer's WE COME ELEMENTAL.

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Dinner with My Sister

I watched my sister as we ate, her fork pushing around the rice, mashing it up with the beans. My mother stared at her too, scrutinizing every move of the fork as it danced around the plate, pierced a sliver of chicken, pressed it against a napkin, squeezed the juices out, dropped it back on the plate.

We kept watch as she continued, wringing each piece into a dry slice and dumping it into the growing pile of flavorless poultry. I ate quickly, alternating between bites of chicken and mushed-up rice and beans.

When there was none left she paused, chewed on her lip before shoving her plate to the side of the table. My mother's voice thundered through the silence, ordering her to sit back down and finish her food. She huffed, a whisper of breath slipping past her lips, and picked the fork up again.

The air was heavy. I saw the unsteady rise of each bite, fingers gripping the fork like a shovel, forcing it past pale, cracked lips. I studied the movement of her mouth, the creep of yellow into her teeth, grinding the meat into a powder and gulping it down with a grimace.

At last the plate was cleared: chair scraping on the floor, my sister left. It was still – no one moved, breathed, thought. Then, the faint trickle of water.

My mother silently stood up and followed, ear pressed against the bathroom door. My father popped a beer, humming.

Apparent Magnitude

When you were born, you were a protostar.

You emerged in this world with bits of stardust still clinging to your skin, a milky shimmer that revealed your thin veins, your cough echoing across the hospital room. They quickly ushered you out to a chorus of beeps and whispers, tubes and wires attached to every patch of skin.

Your body tried to find its balance, your membrane teetering between the wine red of a failed brown dwarf and the pale yellow of a fusing star. You fought against the growing strain of the doctor who pushed your mother for natural childbirth until your heartbeat was faint – of the needles that dotted your head like a silver crown, of the ringing monitors that filled the room where rows of others like you waited – until your heart relaxed and the heat and pressure finally reached equilibrium.

Despite your nebulous beginnings, you grew into a bright T Tauri star, the dozens of kisses pressed into your caramel skin feeding your budding flames. You were quiet but dazzling, enchanting adults with your little red dress, swishing to the *tambor* and boisterous call of Celia Cruz.

That VHS still exists, Dad cheering you on from behind the camera lens, “*Dale Mari!*” We’re in the living room of our third-floor apartment in Miami Beach, with the large Bay

view windows. Mom dances beside you, she in a black dress and you in red, laughing and clapping as you swing your hips, attempting to copy hers. She still pulls these tapes out of the attic from time to time, sighing. “You were such beautiful, sweet children,” Mom says in Spanish. Our parents could not get enough of your infectious smiles and sweet curly fro, and you could not stand to be apart from them, especially from our mother.

And then, I was born.

My birth was smooth, without complication. I was cut out of the hot, damp cave and lifted into the arms of our cooing aunt. Where your birth was a solemn ceremony, mother and father the sole witnesses to your tumultuous entrance to the world, mine was a public event. I was a spectacle to see: the peach-skinned, blonde-haired, green-eyed baby born to the tan Cuban family. I wasn't a star; I didn't warm the room with a sunset glow. I was a planet.

You set us all in orbit, your birth affirming our parents' roles as caregivers and providers. Mom gave up her plans to return to the nursing education she began in Cuba and stayed home to nurse her fledgling star and planet. Dad abandoned the fight to have his PhD in History transferred to the US, instead taking on the practical job of handyman work. And then you set my role as a planet, a blue marble circling your shine, my Sun. I shadowed your every step and mimicked your every move, the model I would aspire to follow in the years to come.

It wasn't long after my birth that my shiny blue surface began to show its cracks. My leg – my orbit – was crooked. *Blount disease* to my doctors, *samba* to Cubans, it was a growth disorder that made my leg grow in the shape a bow, a crescent moon, and the more I walked, the more pronounced my tilted waddling became.

Our parents were devastated. They had already dodged a bullet with you, and now their Goldilocks was in danger of becoming a barren wasteland. Just a little further from the sun and my Earth-like existence morphs into Mars, the dusty red rock with faint lines deep in the ground that hinted at the past promise of greatness, a graveyard of life.

As we grew older, you continued to expand further and radiate stronger, still learning to control the boundless energy pouring out of you. I imagine you learning early on, once my parents realized corrective boots wouldn't straighten both of my legs, that the spotlight was switching.

I imagine you tugging at our mother's sleeve to show her the hairstyle you gave your Bratz doll, cutting its black hair short and using glops of Elmer's glue to give it faux curls.

"Estoy ocupada ahora, vete a jugar," she says and waves you away, pointing to the phone in her hand. Busy. And on the countertop is a long list of names and numbers, a new one being scratched out with each call.