A Place Apart: Myth and Sacred Space

Diana Hazel

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A Place Apart:
Myth and Sacred Space

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Candidate for B.F.A. Degree
in Computer Art with Honors
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APPROVED


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Abstract

“When old myths are lost, new ones are needed. Myths flourish and fade and die, but new myths are born, old ones are resurrected, and hybrid forms combining new and old emerge when times change or cultures mingle” (Graves: 1959, 9).

The original concept of this project was to create a CD-ROM database of mythology from various cultures and time periods throughout history. The first few months of my work were carried out with this end in mind. Since then, the project has taken a more personal turn. Instead of presenting the mythologies of other people, I have created my own. The final manifestation of my project is an original creation myth, illustrations of said myth and a sacred space encompassing the ideas presented in my text.

This project, more than a simple encyclopedia, incorporates more of who I am as an artist and a person. Even though my major is computer art; most of the work I do on my own is based in other mediums. To me, this project is a summation of my four years at Syracuse. Over that time period, I have taken a number of different art studios and I believe I have utilized most of the skills learned in those classes in my thesis. The two main techniques I have relied on are those of construction and digital production. My thesis was assembled using both bought and manufactured items. I tried to make everything in my space have some personal connection to me. Most of the objects I chose to incorporate are objects from home that I have had for years and keep for their sentimental value. In designing the room, I chose to not think of the space as a project or something temporary. Instead, I treated my project as if it were an area in my home that would be utilized for years. With that in mind, the space became a place that can be altered as my needs for it change.
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Advice to Future Honors Students

❖ Make time for your friends. Even though schoolwork is important, it is your friends who will catch you when the world kicks your feet out from under you and they are the ones who will celebrate with you over good things. Most of all, they will keep you sane.

❖ Learn the art of expressing yourself. Good communication abilities in writing or speech will get people’s attention, even when you think you are saying nothing important at all.

❖ As overly mentioned as it is, work on time management. Start things early so if you get distracted later on, the work is at least partially done. Even if you only do a little now and then, it helps. Also, get plenty of sleep. Sometimes staying up to do work does more harm than good if you start sabotaging yourself.

❖ Read something you actually want to read for a change. School has a habit of making reading a painful experience. Take time out every now and then to read something you actually will enjoy, whether it is a comic book or a novel.

❖ Get a card for the Syracuse Public Library. Books can be sent from any number of libraries to a branch near campus. Sometimes it is helpful to have another source for books for research projects or classes.
Acknowledgements

My thanks to Steve Ginsberg for all his assistance in the Woodshop.

My thanks to Greg Thomas and Arthur Flowers for proving to me that sometimes classes can be both interesting and educational. I’d also like to thank them for teaching me about Eshu/Legba as I stand before some crossroads of my own.

My thanks to Candace, for all her long conversations about what is wrong with the world and how to deal with all that craziness.

My thanks to Toni, who has stood by me from the first moment she met me on campus and through the subsequent four years.

Most of all, my thanks to my parents for, among countless other things, inspiring my love of stories.
The Process

As in all endeavors, especially those of an artistic nature, the more time allotted to it, the more likely it is to evolve. When I first applied to the Honors Thesis program, I fully intended to have a heavily researched, totally computer based project. Two years later, this piece is still heavily researched, but it now has far surpassed the CD-ROM database I had intended. With one sentence form my thesis advisor, my project spiraled into something more difficult, but also much more fulfilling. During the course of a meeting one afternoon he turned to me and mused about how interesting it would be if I wrote my own myth. That seed of an idea buried itself in my mind for months. Finally, while on vacation last summer, the first vestiges of what would become my creation myth found its way out of my head and on to paper. By September, my myth had a full form, but I still found it difficult to fully discard the more than sixty pages of notes I had recorded in anticipation of creating my database. Somehow, I still thought it possible to maintain my original idea and add my own myth.

At this point in time, I also decided to create my own sacred space; included would be a computer for the presentation of my myth and database. I decided to illustrate my text using computer-generated images and animated in Flash. In this way, I could create a digital text with which a user could interact. My intention was to have my text written in an alphabet of my own creation, translations of which appeared based on mouse navigation. This was to be that semester’s project for my Computer Art class. As the fall progressed, however, I became more disillusioned with my project; the biggest frustration was my text. As much as I stood by what I had written, I found the task of illustrating it nearly impossible. The images I could envision in my head seemed locked there with no key in reach.

In an attempt to inspire me, a friend lent me a few books from Neil Gaiman’s Sandman series of graphic novels. These were the first comics I have ever read, and they rely heavily upon mythology, preexisting and author created, to tell the story. I was enthralled with these works and read as many of them, as well as Gaiman’s other works,
as I could get my hands on. I made an attempt at illustrating my own myth in this comic style, but I was unable to advance with the idea. Perhaps if I enjoyed drawing I would have found this easier, but then again maybe not. Perhaps using different references would help, but then again, maybe not. As the semester wore on, I frantically bounced back between one style and another, never finding satisfaction.

By Thanksgiving break I had next to nothing to show during meetings with my professor. I have never experience such a long drought of inspiration, and it was spilling over into my other work. I had no motivation to finish other aspects of my thesis and accomplishing the simplest of tasks was a monumental struggle. During Thanksgiving, I made one last, mad dash at illustrating my text, this time in the style of an illuminated manuscript. By that time, however, it was too late and there was not enough time to finish all the designs I had in mind. At the end of the semester, I sat in front of my class and proclaimed my disdain for my work. It is, in my opinion, my academic biggest failure.

During the break between semesters, I tried to spend my time mulling through the details of my sacred space. By the start of spring semester, I had an idea for my altar, and little more. Having given up on my myth, and therefore my database, I no longer had a component of my thesis that was related to my major. Though I had tried to think of another option, one had not presented itself. I headed back to campus, and to the office of my thesis advisor, with a hard decision to make. As I saw it, I had three options; I could waste more time trying to think of a new idea, I could return to my original idea of a database, or I could make a second attempt at illustrating my myth. My advisor gave me his truthful opinion and told me exactly what I did not want to hear; I could not let this project beat me so badly and walk away from it without making another attempt at completing it. I knew he was right, as much as I did not want to concede that fact. So, for the second semester in a row I made an effort to illustrate my text.

Once again this became the focus of my Computer Art class, though this time with a different professor. After showing him the mess I had made of my last attempt, I sat down and tried to formulate a better plan. After a few weeks of little progress, I felt
like I had put myself in the same situation I had been in last semester. I decided to rewrite my myth to reflect a more contemporary stance, thinking that it might help me envision my illustrations better. Armed with a new myth, I was finally able to visualize most of what I wanted to create. I finally settled on a series of six frames made to reflect the graphic novel style that I had been immersed in lately. Most of the panels are based on photographs that I have edited in order to create a more hand drawn feel (For images, see Appendix D). Despite various periods without inspiration, this second generation of the work progressed much better than the first.
By the time I had decided to write my own myth, I already had a substantial body of research to use for inspiration. I decided to write a story of creation because it was the most prevalent topic amongst the thirty something cultures I had investigated. Going through my notes, I made lists of certain characteristics of each myth. Special attention was paid to the state and shape of the universe in the beginning, the number, kind or gender of deities present, and the process taken to create the animals and plants of the world. In the end, I chose to utilize the common themes of a void, a primordial mother and humanity molded from a natural material at the end of creation. Of the dozen cultures whose creation myth began with a void, more than half mentioned that there was darkness, so I included that as well. Materials used to create humans ranged from bodily fluids of the gods to natural materials like corn. I chose to include the most often mentioned substances, those of clay, wood and stone.

In my story, the universe starts out in darkness until the first being brings herself into being with a thought. Powers swell within her until they explode and she divides into two beings, one female and the other male. These two beings create the sun, moon, earth, animals and insects. Their three children, Veda (female), Anil (male) and Derval (androgynous), create humanity. They are the forces of Invention, Change and Desire respectively. There is a forth child that is a blind and deaf shapeshifter, Destruction, who embodies all the evils in the world (For full text, see Appendix B).

It is the second account that is illustrated in my final product. Both myths contain the same forces of Invention, Desire, Change and Destruction. The first version, however, is more based on the majority of myths I researched in terms of the fact that my forces were named, personified and, for the most part, gendered. Creation ends, as it does in many other tales, with the emergence of humanity. The second version does away with as much personification as possible; now each force is more related to the elements of air, fire, water and earth. Instead of ending with the appearance of man, it ends with a warning to mankind.
In this new narrative, the universe begins in darkness until the three powers of creation come together to form one entity. These powers are Invention, Desire and Change. The form they compose is not strong enough to contain them, and as it breaks Destruction is brought into existence and the powers of creation scatter back into the universe. All four of these powers shape the world and all living things. None of them are inherently positive or negative; it is all a matter of balance. It is precisely this balance humanity is in danger of forgetting, and if they do, they will bring about their own destruction and all will be darkness once more (For full text, see Appendix C).
The Space

From the moment I decided to make a space, I started researching, churches, temples and sacred outdoor sites from around the world. Though there were many ideas that interested me, not all off them were applicable to my project. Outside of class, though I was still unsure of the exact layout, I focused on gathering together the objects that I would incorporate into my space. The first issue I had was where to place my installation. A small, intimate room was what I pictured in my mind as ideal; this was, however not very compatible with having multiple people exploring it simultaneously. I therefore made a compromised and decided to carve a small space out of the larger area of Gallery 120 in the Shafer art building.

Once I had a space to work with, I needed to pin down the elements that would be included within it. The inspiration for my altar came from Robert Thompson’s book *Face of the Gods*. Included in the illustrations was one Cuban woman’s altar to various deities of Santeria. I liked how she used a simple and ordinary cabinet; this allowed her the choice of concealing or sharing her faith with others in the room at her discretion. Traditional Japanese rooms inspired the seating area of my thesis. The mats are not joined together so that they can be rearranged as I see fit. The space also contains red silk cushions for comfort and a low table. The table can be used for individual activities or for more communal events, like teatime with friends.
The Altar

I designed my altar with simplicity and versatility in mind. It is made to house various items that I always keep around for one reason or another. One object is my mother’s statue of Kuan Yin, a Buddhist Bodhisattva of mercy and compassion. Another is a hospital bracelet from my last ear surgery, when I was sixteen. I keep it in the hopes that I will not have another surgery (For description of all objects, see Appendix E). The inside of the altar consists of a series of shelves and drawer boxes, all of which can be removed. In total, the altar has six shelves and three boxes. The lack of fixed shelves enables me to change their locations in order to accommodate whatever objects I want without being confined by the altar’s construction. Even though I have specific colors representing my universal forces, I decided not to paint the altar to match one or another of them. Instead, by choosing a more neutral stain, I can dedicate my altar to a different force, or multiple ones, by adding fabric or other colored items.

Creation of the altar took up a good part of the semester, from start to finish. It is made from poplar plywood and is probably the most extensive wood project I have ever created. Repeatedly it was pointed out to me that purchasing a cabinet to use as an altar would have saved me much time, if not money as well. No one seemed to understand that buying that piece of furniture would negate my reason for having it. The altar, the most sacred part of a sacred space, is made more special by the thought and care that went into its manufacture. Its color, height, hardware and style is all tailored specifically to my needs and my values; in my mind the same claim cannot be made about a store bought item, something would have been compromised.

The boxes inside the altar are used group items that need to be taken out and used in other areas of my space. The theme of one box is tea; in everyday life, cups of tea tend to be made with expediency, not sacredness, in mind. Tea bags are used, water is heated in the microwave and the tea is gulped down without thought. I decided to ensure that tea drinking was performed as a ritual in my space. Aside from a Japanese tea set, the box also contains four teas in loose-leaf form. I chose four flavors of tea
based on the thoughts I associate with them, a black tea/hibiscus blend, a chai blend, South African rooibos, and mint. Apart from the time required to boil water, each tea needs to be steeped for five to seven minutes, creating a time for contemplation as the scent of tea fills the air.

The other box is for things that are burned. It contains four sets of four candles, one set for each of the forces in my myth. Each scent is something that I find relaxing, Sunflower Days, Macintosh, Fresh Comfort and Midsummer's Night. Also in this box is a copper bowl for burning notes. My mother always told me that if I had a problem I should write it down and then burn it. I made this bowl specifically for the purpose of symbolic destruction. Matches, handmade notepaper and a pen are also included in this box.
Story’s End

I have learned much more from completing my thesis than I had originally intended. For months I learned about other cultures and the ways in which they explored and explained the worlds in which they lived; this was knowledge I expected to gain from my project. The unexpected lesson I learned was how to deal with failure. I learned the insurmountable task of trying to accomplish something without passion driving its creation. I discovered that inspiration could not be forced and that it cares nothing for whatever deadlines I might have to meet. Most of all I learned, after all is said and done, that sometimes the only thing left to do is stand up, admit defeat, and move on; at other times, one needs to step back long enough to regain strength, then push forward again will the totality of one’s being.

This project became much more personal to me that I had originally intended. Over this last school year especially, it has dominated my life, with both negative and positive results. I think that, in the end, I needed to do this project not for academic reasons, but for myself. Through completion of this project, I have gained a peace I do not think I had before. In addition, I have more confidence in my abilities to overcome obstacles and stick with a difficult task over a long period of time. This is the most time consuming work I have ever undertaken, and I doubt that, just because I am graduating and moving out into the world, this project will end. I see this piece becoming part of my life, revisited and revised for years to come. Perhaps then, the tale has actually just begun.

“Hail to the speaker, hail to the knower,  
Joy to him who has understood,  
Delight to those who have listened”  
Sources Consulted


Appendix A: Entire Space
Appendix B: Original Myth

In the beginning there was nothing but a void. In this darkness, the First brought herself into being with a single thought; I AM, and it was so. Within herself, power and light expanded for more than ten billion years, straining against the bounds of her being like liquid. She imagined her own division, and at that thought she became two, thus ending her own existence. Of the two newly created, one was like the First herself, the other her male counterpart. During this division, some of the light that had been contained within the First escaped into the darkness, creating a gray pre-dawn, for still there was no sun.

When these male and female entities were one being, they shared the same thought. Now, as two beings, they could no longer communicate wordlessly. They parted their lips and created the first sound. They spoke of the First. From the remains of her being the earth was created, as they too were of her body. They gathered together the light that had scattered and separated day from night. This divine couple gave birth to the moon and her brother the sun. They hung the stars in the sky to dance at nighttime and the clouds to play in the sunlight. Together they fashioned the world, from hill to valley, from sea to desert. For almost five billion years they shaped and reshaped the world, destroying, altering and creating as they saw fit. They kissed the waters of the earth and breathed life into the soil, creating animals, insects and plants.

In addition to the moon and sun, the first couple had given birth to four children. The first three were beautiful and pure beings. The first child was a female entity, Veda, the embodiment of Invention, patron of artists, writers, craftsmen, and the sciences. Anil, was the second child, and he is the embodiment of Change. His domain is communication, travel and crossroads. The Third Child, Derval, is simultaneously neither male nor female and both. It is Desire, patron of love and ambition. These beings are the triple Fate, givers of life, designers of Fate, bringers of death.

The forth child was not like its siblings; it did not share their goodness. It was unstable, a blind and deaf shapeshifter prone to tantrums. It could become any form it pleased simply by willing it so. It is responsible for natural disasters, evil and untimely death. The last child is Destruction in its many forms, the bringer of pain, tragedy and misfortune.

These four siblings are not gods, though they are invoked as such, for gods die when men cease to revere them. They are the Eiliv, the Everliving; they will never die, they will never fade into oblivion. Instead, they are renamed, and they bear many titles, some forgotten, some ancient and some new.

The Fates were given the task of creating humanity. Veda gathered clay and began to form a human. Though beautiful in body, the clay was too soft and the figure could not stand upright nor travel with any sort of grace. Anil chose wood to create his figure. Though able to stand upright and move, it lacked the beautiful smoothness of the clay. Derval tried carving man from stone. Though durable, there was no softness in its flesh or lightness in its step. The three siblings decided to build man of stone and wood, covered in clay. Finally there was a way to make a man who was strong and beautiful. The siblings decided that they all would make humanity together. To make the task easier, they each divided themselves in half. Veda and Anil became two women and two men respectively. A man and a woman were created from Derval’s separation. The pairs created of the Fates shaped and breathed life into the figures to gave them a soul.

Each human was shaped by one half of one of the Fates. This human was therefore destined to love another shaped by the other half of the same Fate. Women created by Veda will love other women, just as Anil’s men will love other men. Those women created by Derval will love men, and vice versa.
Appendix C: Final Myth

In the beginning there was darkness, but do not believe that without light, and without sound, the beginning was nothing more than a void. Darkness is not the absence of essence; darkness is simply the beginning.

...and what is a beginning but a promise of things to come?

Out of this darkness came thought, the first touch of creation, flowing like a breeze. Then aspiration burned through the channels of that idea, strengthening it with the will to be. Finally, there was transformation, a tide converting the will to exist into actuality. With these three processes in conjunction, the first being was One, made from many.

...creation, however, is not the only energy at work in this universe. The triple powers of Creation were contained within the One, but certain forces cannot be restrained within boundaries permanently. There were too many ideas, too much passion and too many transformations to be made to tolerate confinement. The forces pressed and pushed until they broke free, spilling into the darkness and forever ended the existence of the One.

...thus, with creation, there is also demolition.

Each element was now free to become form on its own, and from the thought that initiated creation came Invention. The second force was Desire, followed by Change and, finally, Destruction. These four beings are responsible for the world and everything in it. They are not gods, though they are invoked as such, for gods become powerless when men cease to revere them. Instead they are the Everliving; they will never die, nor fade into total oblivion. Instead, they are renamed, and they bear many titles, some forgotten, some ancient and some new. Together they fashioned the world, from hill to valley, from sea to desert. For eons they shaped and reshaped the world, destroying, altering and creating as they saw fit. They kissed the waters of the earth and breathed life into the soil, creating animals, insects and plants.

They created humans and imbued them with a taste of all their powers. Invention, as the power of communication and creativity, patron of artists, writers and craftsmen, created the mind. Being the benefactor of love and ambition, Desire made the heart. Change, a spirit of discovery, presiding over travel, science and technology, molded the hands. Finally Destruction, the bringer of death, and of endings, but also overseer of the paths to new beginnings made the feet.

The world is a balance of these forces, which must be maintained and never forgotten. There is no shame in valuing one force over another, after all specialization occurs among all types of living creatures. However, as civilizations have grown in size and culture, many have forgotten the importance of this balance. There are those who rule without respect to equality. There are those who have forgotten that any force, no matter how positive, is detrimental when used in excess. Those who remember are seen as stuck in an age long past and are seen as people of no consequence.

There is a reaction to every action, and with a lack of equilibrium, the world will tip and slide into oblivion. Those that preach an apocalypse know little of the times; those who discount the possibility of absolute destruction know even less. The end of the world will have nothing to do with the forces of the universe. Fire and flood long ago became impotent in the face of Destruction incarnated in man. However, there is never a predestined ending, just a mutable fate, and the course can always be altered. Destruction can only serve as reminder now of what could be. Humanity, out of balance, will bring its own annihilation with that which it has created. If that happens, there will once again be darkness.

...darkness, and the promise of things to come.
IN THE BEGINNING THERE WAS DARKNESS, BUT DO NOT BELIEVE THAT WITHOUT LIGHT, AND WITHOUT SOUND THE BEGINNING WAS NOTHING MORE THAN A VOID. DARKNESS IS NOT THE ABSENCE OF ESSENCE. DARKNESS IS SIMPLY THE BEGINNING.

...AND WHAT IS A BEGINNING BUT A PROMISE OF THINGS TO COME?

OUT OF THIS DARKNESS CAME THOUGHT, THE FIRST TOUCH OF CREATION, FLOWING LIKE A BREEZE. THEN ASPIRATION BURNED THROUGH THE CHANNELS OF THAT IDEA, STRENGTHENING IT WITH THE WILL TO BE. FINALLY, THERE WAS TRANSFORMATION, A TIDE CONVICTING THE WILL TO EXIST INTO ACTUALITY.

WITH THESE THREE PROCESSES IN CONJUNCTION, THE FIRST BEING WAS ONE, MADE FROM MANY.
Creation, however, is not the only energy at work in this universe.

The triple powers of creation were contained within the one, but certain forces cannot be restrained within boundaries permanently. There were too many ideas, too much passion and too many transformations to be made to tolerate confinement.

The forces pressed and pushed until they broke free, spilling into the darkness and forever ended the existence of the one.

Thus, with creation, there is also demolition.
Each element was now free to become form on its own, and from the thought that initiated creation came invention. The second force was desire, followed by change and, finally, destruction. These four beings are responsible for the world and everything in it.

They are not gods, though they are invoked as such, for gods become powerless when men cease to revere them.

They are the everliving. They will never die, nor fade into total oblivion. Instead, they are renamed, and they bear many titles, some forgotten, some ancient and some new.

Together they fashioned the world, from hill to valley, from sea to desert. For eons they shaped and reshaped the world, destroying, altering and creating as they saw fit. They kissed the waters of the earth and breathed life into the soil, creating animals, insects and plants.
They created humans and imbued them with a taste of all their powers.

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THOSE WHO REMEMBER ARE SEEN AS STUCK IN AN AGE LONG PAST AND ARE SEEN AS PEOPLE OF NO CONSEQUENCE.
There is a reaction to every action, and with a lack of equilibrium, the world will tip and slide into oblivion. Those that preach an apocalypse know little of the times, those who discount the possibility of absolute destruction know even less.

The end of the world will have nothing to do with the forces of the universe. Fire and flood long ago became impotent in the face of destruction incarnate in man. However, there is never a predestined ending, just a mutable fate, and the course can always be altered. Destruction can only serve as a reminder now of what could be.

Humanity, out of balance, will bring its own annihilation with that which it has created. If that happens, there will once again be darkness.
Appendix E: Altar and Objects
Box One, containing candles, matches, pen, paper and bowl with stand for burning notes.

Box Two containing Japanese tea set, chai, rooibos, hibiscus and mint loose-leaf tea.