## Rites: Yanitsa Rodriguez on Reconnecting

Yanitsa means *desired by God*, though she prefers *desired by the universe*. She grew up in Southern Texas, a place called Baytown. Her mother had migrated at six years old, seeking refuge from the Sandinista-Contra war in Nicaragua. Her father is native to the San Benito area, just minutes from a historically fluid border. Yanitsa's journey to know her heritage hasn't been easy and it's far from over.

Able to trace her roots back as far as the Mexica people, or Aztec people—though they did not call themselves Aztec—but the exact tribal connection is murky, washed away by colonization and the hard-to-track, nomadic history of groups like the Coahuiltecan people. "That information was stolen," she says, pressing that "there is so much power in reclaiming that [identity]. We *have to* remember, we *have to* reclaim it."

In a beautiful effort to realize this reclamation, Yanitsa turned to her work with Wild Mountain Retreats, an organization dedicated to helping people connect the wild within themselves to the wild places on the land. They offer guide training, mentor programs, and even facilitate Rites of Passage ceremonies. Yanitsa's journey with the organization began after a particularly intense period in her life. "I was following this crazy calling after sitting with plant medicine," she says, "and it was telling me that my next job is outside. 'Go outside. Get outside for your ancestors.'" Unsure of whether that meant she would be cutting yards again—like she did with her dad when she was twelve—or something more, she followed the call. Yanitsa describes this period as Severance, a calling before ceremony lasting months or even years. She says that Severance comes with the sense that everything is falling apart, that "Everything is being completely destroyed to bring whatever it is in. And you can either listen to it or ignore it, but the ceremony is going to keep calling, and Severance is going to keep happening."

Growing up, she had been an "indoor kid," never even camping before she moved to Colorado two years ago. Like many BIPOC individuals, Yanitsa's introduction to the outdoors wasn't exactly welcoming. "It was this weird elitist culture like *conquering* , and that didn't feel right in my body, my bones, and my soul. I just knew something was weird about that." As a result, she became bitter about the outdoors. After moving to

Leadville, Colorado, Yanitsa got a job with an organization seeking to help people experience the outdoors. Her first unruly brush with nature came when she had to teach a group of kids how to ski. “I had never skied before. It was my first time even really being in snow, and they put me on telemark skis.” She laughs at the outrageous thought of it, at the idea that she didn’t even know the right questions to ask. Three days into her ski week, Yanitsa tore everything in her knee. She went through four operations and is still, two years later, recovering from the injury. The experience reinforced the distrust for the outdoors that she was harboring. So she did away with it all. She set aside the elitist, competitive way of experiencing the outdoors and turned to tradition, diving headlong into her Rites of Passage. She says, referring to Colorado’s history of colonization, “This land is Mexico. And how many people of Mexican and indigenous descent don’t even have the access to recreate?” She credits her fast for her more genuine connection to nature, “Rites of Passage is keeping me alive, it’s keeping me connected to the land in a way that’s natural and accessible.” She would find, in her communion with nature, a tranquility in knowing that this is how her ancestors knew the land, through ceremony and respect.

Having answered the call of the outdoors, Yanitsa found herself in a guide training, a precursor to her Rites of Passage during which she would fast for four days in the wilderness. The first step was what she calls “mirroring.” A process in which she sat in front of a council and told her story. All while her own guide mirrored it back to her, physically embodying her history. She remembers feeling, for the first time in her life, really seen. “I’ve always been informally around ceremony, ritual, we were lighting candles growing up, but there’s such a colonized hold on my family that these practices always felt very far from me; practices that are a part of my heritage.” Yanitsa even admits that her family is unaware of their colonized tendencies. It rears its head everywhere, from her grandmother worrying that she might get too dark in the sun, to her relatives’ insistence that she “better the race” or “whiten the race” through marriage. “It takes a lot of work to unlearn that,” she says about this performance of whiteness, “and I’m in that right now.” After her mirroring, Yanitsa was invited back to the land to perform her own Rites of Passage ceremony, a four day fast, alone, in the backcountry.

She began with her intention statement, her purpose, her reason for pursuing these Rites of Passage. Her intention in her fast was to reconnect with her trust, her intuition, two things marred by both childhood traumas and life as a woman. Once her intentions were set, the next step was choosing a location. Yanitsa recalls exploring the land accessible through Wild Mountain. Her guide mentioned that, one ridge over from where they were hiking, there was a location called Dance Floor. An avid singer and dancer, Yanitsa knew she had to check it out. She made her way to the valley floor and then up the next ridge to Dance Floor. “It was like I entered this vortex of silence,” she remembers, “it was like a vacuum.” On the walk back to camp, Yanitsa paused, listening to see if she might find that same silence. But there was always the steady hum of her surroundings. She decided to return to Dance Floor to ask the land for permission to hold her fast there. “Before you reach the top of the ridge, at the lower part, you come to this sort of amphitheater,” she says. “I pictured my ancestors coming to visit me and I was singing to them.” Yanitsa, being a singer with a resonant, commanding voice, made an offering to the land with a song. She sang “Te Quedó Grande La Yegua,” stepping into its strength, performing passionately for an amphitheater of her ancestors. When she finished, emotion swelled in her. She collapsed and wept. She cried and cried into the silence, sure that any wildlife in the area would turn and run from her outburst. Gathering herself, questioning this sudden release, Yanitsa whispered, “¿Puedo estar aquí?” *Can I be here?* Immediately after she spoke, no more than ten feet from her, an entire herd of elk scattered from the bushes. Yanitsa smiles as she relives the moment, “I took that as a yes.” So, she began her fast on Dance Floor. Each day, Yanitsa participated in self-generated ceremony. She played, conducted a death lodge ceremony, even wrote vows and married herself, communing with the land and her ancestors the whole time. “For me, it was a remembering of the lineage,” she says. “This ceremony has been part of my people. I was just so grateful to be able to remember these practices that felt so natural.” She pauses, “It was a celebration.”

On day one, Yanitsa was full of energy. She kept singing, exploring, spending time reconnecting to this land which she felt she had strayed so far from. At the end of the day, hunkering down under the watchful

night sky to sleep, Yanitsa recalls the flurry of shooting stars she saw. “Every time I opened my eyes, there was another one.” She wonders at the moment, joking that it was as if the universe was flirting with her.

On day two, Yanitsa set in on claiming her queerness. She was on her way down the ridge to the valley floor in search of a small bag containing some paper and pencils. The materials were there in case she decided to wander off somewhere; she could write down her heading so that, on the off chance that she got lost, she could be found. On her way there, however, Yanitsa came across a fallen tree. Its long, sun-washed trunk was decaying into the soil of the valley floor. The center of the trunk was carved out, leaving a cavity just big enough for her to fit in, making it resemble a casket. Yanitsa decided that this was her opportunity to perform her Death Lodge ceremony. She lay down in this natural casket, settling in for her ceremony. She had been told that, during her Death Lodge, and because of her intention statement, bygone queer relatives may come to visit her. Strangely, Yanitsa began thinking about a passed uncle. Having grown up in a hyper-religious, catholic household, Yanitsa remembers praying for this uncle after his passing. “I had this OCD-like, incessant prayer that I would repeat to myself for Tio Eliseo.” She says, “It felt like I couldn’t go to bed without repeating it like fifty times.” The habit eventually dwindled, and she thought of her uncle less frequently. Years later, lying in the tree, she called out: If you’re here show me. “You can’t make this shit up;” she laughs, “the clouds formed the letter E.” It was a sure sign that her uncle had joined her. After her Rites, Yanitsa confirmed with her father that Eliseo had been gay, giving that much more gravity to her reconnection with him as a queer person herself. “Eliseo and I hung out a lot during my fast.” Yanitsa says that “He really wanted to be seen and make himself known so it didn’t surprise me that he came to visit.” This encounter with her queer ancestor helped her to put to rest so much shame that she had felt around her sexuality, allowed her to reclaim a lost sense of pleasure, and guided her easily into day three where she wrote vows, and married herself.

But these Rites aren’t always overtly happy. Yanitsa recalls the darkness that you have to confront both within yourself and the world. After days of fasting, that darkness can become cacophonous. “I remember, on the last day, I was really struggling to feel okay in my choice to come out here and fast.” She remembers being flooded with images of hungry children, overlaid by the ringing of church bells. Coming to

terms with her choice to fast, when so many people don't have the time or resources to even consider such a ritual, was a major hurdle for Yanitsa to clear. To snap herself out of it, she had to dump a jug of water on herself. "There are parts of your fast and your story that are sacred. And there are parts of your story that won't even make sense until years down the line." She says, "I'm interested to see what that means."

On her fourth night, in her most altered state of mind, Yanitsa performed her Purpose Circle ceremony. This particular ceremony involves an all-night vigil. She created a circle, placing stones around her to the north, south, east, and west to act as protection in her spiritually vulnerable state. Cold and sleepy, Yanitsa stayed up all night, facing the west, shaking her rattle, crying out for a vision. "The idea is that you're so empty that there is space for the source, spirits, your ancestors to fill you," Yanitsa says. "You have no one to talk to." As the night went on, she leaned back onto her backpack and eventually caught herself falling asleep. Sitting up, Yanitsa saw something out of the corner of her eye. The Northern Lights, occasionally—when we're lucky—make an appearance at altitude in Colorado. Two nights before the lights were predicted to appear, Yanitsa was given her own personal preview. A streak of pink invaded the night sky above her. In her vows to herself, the day before, she had described her soul as pink, promising to love it. "This was my pink soul!" Yanitsa realized as another shooting star tore through the softened night. Her vision grounded her in this place, in her commitment to these Rites of Passage.

She recognizes that we elect to be in these spaces of ceremony. "It is to collectively remember our power and what we are here to do and who we are here to serve," she says. "There is this disparity of having the privilege to sit for two weeks in ceremony while there's a whole world out there that doesn't even have access to food. I think that being responsible for who you are and how you're going to show up in this world is connected to being able to be of service to the world, eventually."

Today, Yanitsa continues her work with Rites of Passage ceremonies. She is apprenticing, learning how to guide, and participating in a series of ceremonies both for queer and BIPOC folks over the next year. Eventually, Yanitsa will return to the wilderness to fast again, this time with the intention of coming into her role as a guide. In the meantime, she is working on a program of her own. "I wish there was a space for

cycle breakers," she says, "for people like me who are the first in their lineage to feel all of the pain that has been avoided." The ultimate goal is to generate a community for people seeking to decolonize their lineage. Though her journey is far from complete, and likely to be a little bumpy along the way, Yanitsa is taking bounding steps toward a reality where we know ourselves and the land as one moving, breathing entity. Her work in ceremony and her approaching endeavors serve as a beacon for those looking to remember, to reclaim the wild within themselves, and to plant the seed for future generations to connect with the land in ways they thought lost. She says, with the hopeful warmth of her spirit radiating from her eyes, "Ceremony and the land knows why you're there. It's like it's waiting for you to be there, and it's so ready to hold you."