

[[The Caribbean Tarot]]

by

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Premise

This project originated from a personal curiosity and need. I sought to create something that would supply some degree of “healing” from the devastation that marked 2020. As I made further investigations, however, other reasons started to appear. I began to recognize the creative and spiritual power of “healing” as urgent for many others beyond myself. Illustrating tarot became a way to tell a story that centered alternative healing and divination practices. To start, I connected this project to elements of my Caribbean heritage, particularly those in Jamaica. There, major vital aspects of Caribbean spirituality and theology were historically misrepresented, even on their own ground soil. The nature of Afro-Caribbean spirituality and “witchcraft,” was held in opposition to Christianity. Anything outside of the scope of Christianity was regarded with fear and described as evil. In reality, these religious and spiritual acts entail a plethora of practices that exist as a form of otherworldly enrichment. They do not possess a favoring for the concepts of good or evil, simply as a reflection of how things are.



Tarot card reading is an extension of these forms of enrichment. Tarot can serve as a method to spiritual direction and healing that supplements religious practices. Each card carries a message or warning to heed when combined with at least two others. Historically, tarot has been used by various cultures and generations, beginning from the fifteenth century. But over time, tarot has become a source of spiritual comfort for people of color—even more so within the black community. Tarot offers a form of narrative power and storytelling that has often been denied to these groups.

From the standpoint of illustrators and designers, tarot also provides a unique medium for narration that is open for creative interpretation and visual representation. Each card has an image that tells a story, and how they tie in to one’s daily life is more or less up to the tarot reader. This was a significant factor in what led me to tarot. What I aimed for was a “container” or something that could hold image-making.

As a segue from the standard 78-card deck, I aimed for a set comprised of the 22 major arcana of a tarot deck. These trump cards are comprised of the Fool, the Magician, the High Priestess, the Empress, the Emperor, the Hierophant, the Lovers, the Chariot, Justice, the Hermit, the Wheel of Fortune, Justice, the Hanged Man, Death, Temperance, the Devil, the Star, the Moon, the Sun, Judgement, and lastly the World. Historically speaking, this has always been the case.



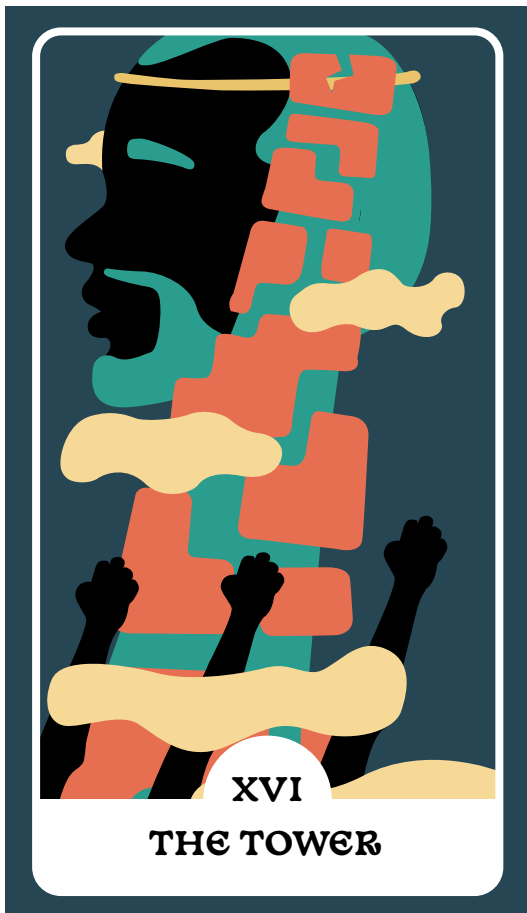
Tarot was not always utilized for the sake of divination and spiritual healing. At first, it was regarded as “little more than a picture book, a system for gaming, possibly a device for gambling” (Sosteric, p.360). It was not until after the 15th century that its usage began to expand to more religious and spiritual purposes, though not always in a positive light. A number of traditional Christians saw the deck as a tool associated with the devil himself, despite the fact that it is more largely seen as well-known method of cartomancy. It is particularly defined by a meta-term known as hermeticism, which is defined by having the capability of being understood through the marriage of mysticism and science.

The term’s origin was drawn from the mythological author Hermes Trismegistus, a figure of Hellenistic lineage inspired by Greco-Roman and Egyptian elements. The psychological aspect of the nature of Tarot becomes more apparent in the Jungian school of psychology. Some would come to see the reading of these cards as not just something for adults to indulge in, but “...as a tool to teach children the ‘three I’s’ of ‘informal education’: intuition, insight, imagination [...] or even as a powerful therapeutic tool, a reflection of the four gateways of childhood.” Many believed that tarot provided “a divine reflection of deep psychology so powerful that it might help heal the inner child and rework toxic socialization” (Sosteric p. 363). Granted, this brings up a rather valid point in regards to the purpose of Tarot not necessarily changing, but expanding as history went forth.



Black Divination Practices

The development of African spiritual practices followed a more tragic route. Although some indigenous cultures around the world have been able to preserve some of their spiritual practices, those affected by the transatlantic slave trade could not escape a near total erasure of their cultural and spiritual practices. Due to the effects of colonialization and the slave trades, those transported faced isolation, forced conversion, and death to those who preserved their languages and religions openly. The dispersing of tribes of Africans across the Americas and the Caribbean islands resulted nonetheless in some resistance and preservation. This birthed an interesting web of spiritual systems that combined key principles and core theology. One could think of this connection as something similar to the Mythological connections between the Greeks and Romans, where they shared a system of deities but still had variations in terms of name.



Afro-Caribbean spiritual systems such as Obeah, Vodou, and Santería all share a similar purpose for those who kept them alive; in fact, much of the theology associated with them can be tied back to Western African lineages such as those of the Yoruba tribe. What remains of their legacy in the western hemisphere lives on in more ways than one can initially perceive. For example, older generations often avoided speaking and openly practicing these forms for fear that they would be ostracized or disenfranchised. Even after the end of slavery across the Americas, the penalties of practicing non-Christian religions persisted. These are the long-reaching effects of colonialism.

Obeah, for instance, is a spiritual practice practiced mainly on the island of Jamaica. It is regarded as something moderately more obscure than its Haitian and Cuban variants, so knowledge concerning it exists at a much lower level. Anyone who practices it is referred to as an Obeahman or an Obeah woman. They are capable of utilizing a multitude of systems that draw on herbal and magical rites to fuel them with the power of Obeah without disrespecting the higher powers of a Christian God.

Despite being historically mistaken as demonic, Obeah is neither inherently good nor evil. At its very core it operates strictly through karma, the law of cause and effect. This would mean, in other words, that a singular individual is responsible for creating their own destiny through their deeds and basic perception of life. Obeah was also a form of spiritual resistance against those who would abuse their own power during the colonial period. Because of this, the practice itself was widely criminalized for a few centuries. The crackdown happened even more so following Tacky's Rebellion in 1760, consisting of an uprising of enslaved Akan people within Jamaica's slave society. This along with cases of poisoning were "...key reasons planters and their allies had misgivings that enslaved people's cosmology posed tremendous threat to their lives and the system of slavery" (Bryson 64).



This was less out of a concern for any sort of moral code and more to do with the threat of the status quo turning in on itself. The Obeah Act of 1898 made it easier to further incriminate the practice; it introduced the 'instrument of obeah' as an illegal category. Said instrument had a significant role in future prosecutions that aimed to maintain some misguided form of status-quo. The criminalization of Obeah would go on for roughly a century later with extreme consequences for practitioners. One case in 1928 involved the conviction of Zachariah Kerr of Westmoreland, in which he received a nine-month sentence in prison for practicing obeah: "The evidence against him was that Kerr had told another man that he could cure him, gave him a bottle of salt water, lit three lamps, spoke in an 'unknown tongue', suggested that the man seeking help join his church, and accepted five shillings." (Paton, *The Racist History of Jamaica's Obeah Laws*).

Voodoo (also known as Vodou or Voudon), manifests primarily in Haiti and the southern United States. It is an extension of Vodou and Voudon practiced in South America and West Africa. Voudon is arguably one of the most popularized and one of the least understood religions of African diaspora. In the context of general knowledge, it is often stereotyped as 'death magic'. This, in reality, is a mischaracterization. It is more accurate to say that Voodoo is a hybridization of Yoruba theology and Catholic faith. Followers of Voodoo, called Vodouisants, believe in a God, but they cannot contact him directly. To achieve that to a certain degree, they must consult the Loa. These spirits serve as representations of natural and physiological forces. They include (but are not limited to) the Baron Samedi, overseer of the dead, and the female spirit of love known as Erzulie Freda. The Erzulie are an entire family of Loa associated with water and femininity, and some are paralleled through Christian iconography.



Santería is an amalgamation of Catholic practices and African folk beliefs. It manifested in Cuba during the 17th Century, embedding itself within Cuban society ever since. Followers of this faith, called Santeros, are more prevalent than Catholics in the island. Its roots are traced back to the Lucumí region, which is tied to the Yoruba tribes of modern-day Benin and Nigeria. The name itself means 'Way of the Saints'. Following the revolution, like Voodoo, Santería was acknowledged by the government but is still criticized as being folksy witchcraft. An overall interest in the practice resurfaced in the 1980s, which continued to spread throughout Cuba well into the modern era. Like Vodouisants, followers of Santería believe in a singular god, but also believe in the deities who served under him called Orishas. They represent spiritual forces as well as forces of nature. One of the most well-known among them is Oshun, who represents the divine feminine. Another notable Orisha is Yemaya, who governs the sea and motherhood. The very concept of her existence was brought to the New World by enslaved African people during the early 16th century.

Making The Tarot

To produce the tarot, I sought to combine various aspects of these cultural symbols. I chose a slightly simplified version of my illustration style, and this project can give me the space to truly explore what that meant to me. Many of my illustrations take inspiration from a respective figure (tangible or ethereal) or event associated with Caribbean spiritual systems. For instance, Erzulie Dantor is the Haitian Loa (Goddess) who is a protector of women and children. I associated her with the Empress tarot, which holds significance for anything regarding maternal influences and love. I chose Papa Legba to portray the Hermit, due to his original portrayal as an elderly man and the card's meaning in regards to introspection and the seeking of enlightenment. Learning more about the functionality of Tarot prompted me to ask further questions about myself, as well as confront unresolved questions about one's psyche. Illustrating the tarot meant confronting how we/I narrate my own personal history. The visual images were meant to share that through implicit meaning. The cards can be rather blunt in that context, so I knew not to take them lightly even if I am rather new to the world that they open me up to.



The base illustrations are 2.75 x 4.75 inches which could each compliment a 3.3 x 5.7 inch card with rounded edges. There were times that I was caught up in the individual card illustrations to the point of overthinking, but later on I began to understand the visual system that tarot cards operated by. Most card decks would have the cards displayed alongside their respective numbers; for example, The Magician would be labeled as the first card while the last of the major arcana would be The World. The Fool is a bit of an anomaly in this scenario, as its designated number is zero. The Minor Arcana are rarely labeled in decks numerically, if at all.

As for the typography, anything that was too rigid was avoided in favor of something that possessed more curved accentuations that complemented the organic shapes in my illustrations. The serif Basteleur, which was inspired by the very type that would be commonly seen on Tarot in the first place, turned out to be a nearly perfect fit for this project since it managed to fit those qualifications to the letter.

Color & Layout Inspiration

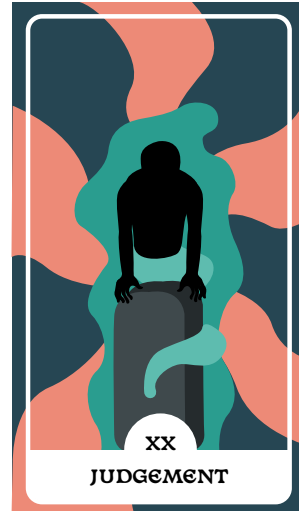
In terms of color choices, I aimed for a palette that would complement my illustrative style and enhance the narrative I intended to go for. It was something that I came upon randomly, but it stuck as these colors began to remind me of that aspect of my heritage that I wanted to connect myself to. At first, I was tampering with the skin color of the figures in my illustrations that resembled humans; however, it felt more intuitive to use Black as a way to distinguish them once I continued with these visuals. I'd use variations of the palette in the ones I created later to complement the implicit meanings of each card. Formatting the typographic system and layout design of each card felt a bit more straightforward. Visual media of this nature, with its organic shapes, called for an approach that could be best utilized by serif typefaces. Tarot cards, especially ones tackled through a designer's lens, rarely used sans serif font families unless the visuals would complement that aesthetic.



Reflection

I would say that, overall, this project fulfilled my desire to fall in love with the process of making again. There were times during my college career where I felt lulls in inspiration and creative blocks that occurred here and there. As the cards have long served to be a unique form of narration, this has definitely played a role in contributing to a journey all of its own. It truly felt satisfying to see how it all came together. While this portion of it is virtually over, I wish to continue it beyond this point so that it may one day become a full deck with both the Major and Minor Arcana.

I also believe that the research aspect of this project opened up my eyes to how Tarot functions as a visual system as well as one for healing. There also seems to be a feeling of cultural reconciliation that occurred while executing this in its entirety. Granted, I still have much to learn; however, with all things, there is always a place to start.



List of Cards in The Major Arcana

- | | |
|----------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1 - The Fool (0) | 12 - Justice (11) |
| 2 - The Magician (1) | 13 - The Hanged Man (12) |
| 3 - The High Priestess (2) | 14 - Death (13) |
| 4 - The Empress (3) | 15 - Temperance (14) |
| 5 - The Emperor (4) | 16 - The Devil (15) |
| 6 - The Hierophant (5) | 17 - The Tower (16) |
| 7 - The Lovers (6) | 18 - The Star (17) |
| 8 - The Chariot (7) | 19 - The Moon (18) |
| 9 - Strength (8) | 20 - The Sun (19) |
| 10 - The Hermit (9) | 21 - Judgement (20) |
| 11 - Wheel of Fortune (10) | 11 - The World (21) |

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