

WHAT HAPPENS  
WHEN A WITCH GETS  
WI-FI? MEET THE  
WOMAN WHO USES  
SACRED SPIRITUALITY  
TO ENCHANT OUR  
DAILY LIVES (AND  
MAYBE EVEN SAVE  
OUR MENTAL HEALTH)

# EMILIA ORTIZ

PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRAD OGBONNA

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BY ISABELIA HERRERA

The *bruja*—Spanish for “witch”—sitting across from me proudly sports a BROOKLYN chest tattoo in sprawling Gothic letters. I first notice it peeking out from under her baby-pink tube top, announcing her roots with the same defiance as her sharp Nuyorican accent when she greets me at the East Williamsburg vegan diner Champs—a favorite of hers, primarily for its seitan asada. “How y’all tricked my Puerto Rican ass?” she says jokingly about the fake meat before settling on a more indulgent (though still vegan) meal: macaroni and cheese, a side of fries and a banana milkshake.

Emilia Ortiz’s playful irreverence has no doubt burnished her internet fame, but that fame can mostly be attributed to what she promulgates. She’s part *bruja*, part healer and part mental-health advocate, and she draws on an eclectic collection of spiritual practices, including candle work, reiki and meditation, to help people live better lives. In minute-long Instagram videos—she practices both privately and publicly—Ortiz doles out affirmations and guidance to some 227,000 followers. She’s often sitting in front of her vast collection of houseplants. They’re named, of course: Chachi, Rosa, Conejo Malo, etc.

Instead of the hushed tones you might expect from a counselor, Ortiz punctuates her videos with expletives: “In case you ain’t already know, I’m a tell your ass: You are a magnificent-ass being. Your guts are made of motherfucking stardust, okay?... I’ve been checking up on your ass in the collective consciousness, and let me tell you: *You’re beautiful.*”

This tough talk distinguishes her from her peers—a growing cavalcade of women who are reclaiming previously denounced forms of spirituality. In pop culture, online and in real life, there has been a resurgence of sorcery. Consider the recent flood of witch-inspired television shows, such as *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, *American Horror Story*, the *Charmed* reboot and *Game of Thrones*. As of 2014, approximately 700,000 American adults identified as Wiccan or pagan, compared with just 8,000 Wiccans in 1990. Although organized religion is losing favor among younger people—about 35 percent of millennials don’t identify with any religion, according to a 2014 Pew Research Center survey—the cultural demand for spirituality, self-help and wellness is booming.

In Latinx communities in particular, a renewed focus on *brujería* signals a long overdue resurrection of sorts—a revival of the once-condemned mysticism entwined in our heritage. Throughout the colonial era, the Catholic Church persecuted *brujas*, branding them evil enchantresses. Today *brujas*

can practice openly, which means a new generation is exploring *brujería* in the same place they explore everything else: the internet.

Ortiz is among the most beloved practitioners working today, and she has always been surrounded by magic. The bodegas in the New York Afro-Caribbean neighborhood where she grew up sold *agua de florida*, a sacred ritual water used for protection spells and cleansings. The local botanica, a sort of apothecary dedicated to folk religion and alternative medicine, stocked every candle, amulet and statuette she would ever need. These totems were part and parcel of her diasporic upbringing.

Her spiritual gifts manifested through her dreams as a young girl. She would astral project, an experience closely related to lucid dreaming. “I would feel everything in my dreams, have control of my dreams and not be able to figure out if I was dreaming or if I was awake,” she says. “As a kid, that’s fucking scary, so my father would talk to my grandmother about it, and she’d help me figure it out.”

It was her *abuela* who first exposed Ortiz to *brujería*. As in many Caribbean families, Ortiz’s grandmother cultivated her practice from a wellspring of traditions passed down by ancestors. Some folks are formally initiated into a particular religion, such as Santería, but many of the skills Ortiz’s *abuela* imparted—such as dream interpretation and candle work—are embedded in the cultural memory of Puerto Ricans and other Caribbean communities. Her grandmother’s approach was a dexterous bricolage of rites that included everything from *limpias* (cleansings) to numerology.

“Whatever kind of *limpia* you needed, she got you. Whatever kind of *vela* [candle] you needed, she got you,” Ortiz says. She recalls a childhood incident when her grandmother dispelled bad spirits from a home her parents had just moved into. “Somebody kept cursing juju on the apartment,” she says. Her grandmother doused the place in *agua de florida* and lit a candle (in a bucket so the family cat wouldn’t tip it over and set the apartment on fire). According to her mother, Ortiz says, “the house smelled like Florida water for a whole fucking week.”

Other lessons included healing techniques, spiritual bathing and menstruation rituals. As Ortiz matured and confronted anxiety and depression in high school, she came to rely on such rituals for strength. That’s when she realized she could help others.

Today, Ortiz marries her personal experiences with digital advocacy, offering one-on-one spiritual guidance over the phone and using Instagram to raise awareness and reduce the stigma around mental health, especially in low-income communities of color. Multiple studies have suggested that

# “Y’ALL ARE OUT HERE MAKING THIS A TOURIST DESTINATION.”

depression among Americans of all ages is on the rise, but diagnoses among young people are increasing the fastest, by as much as 47 percent from 2013 to 2016 among 18- to 34-year-olds, according to a 2018 Blue Cross Blue Shield report.

As witchcraft’s influence on the zeitgeist grows, Ortiz’s philosophy of merging the contemporary and the ancestral sets her apart, but it also invites criticism. “While things are evolving, tradition is something that should be kept in mind,” she says. “I’m not a strict traditionalist, because not everybody should be one, but we should be honoring the ancestors in our modern world and continuously re-educate ourselves on the traditional ways.”

Witchcraft’s infiltration of popular culture has sparked a thorny debate around authenticity, exploitation and cultural ownership. With sacred spirituality proliferating on digital spaces, more people are seeking out these alternative forms of healing. This includes outsiders alongside descendants of people who depended on such practices for basic survival. The ayahuasca boom is one example of the rapidly spreading interest in Latin American folkloric healing practices: Stroll the streets of Williamsburg and you’ll find multiple healing centers offering \$500 ayahuasca ceremonies guided by amateur practitioners who claim to have studied with Quechua and Shipibo shamans in the Amazon rain forest.

Ortiz’s Caribbean roots mean she doesn’t specifically work with the hallucinogenic brew, but as a *bruja* she remains concerned about unqualified outsiders profiting off ancient practices. “There are so many people trying to preserve this for their culture, and y’all are out here making this a tourist destination,” she says. “Everybody needs to go find their something and figure it out. If we work toward that, where people have reclaimed and are actually practicing their own shit, there will be a point where it’s okay to share knowledge.”

To some Latinx folks, claiming the *bruja* identity is a means of normalizing once-maligned traditions.

For others, it’s a form of virtue signaling and clout chasing: a careless erasure of the discipline and years of training required to become a spiritual healer. After all, Ortiz’s public practice lives on a platform known for meme-ifying the human experience and cataloging it for mass validation, not self-preservation. In Puerto Rico in particular, ancestral spiritual practices were attacked throughout the colonial period. As late as 1879, the Spanish crown targeted *espiritismo* by mandating municipal permission for *veladas*, or nighttime séances. Now you can conduct your séance on Instagram Live.

Given the tangled history of oppression, Ortiz views her practice as a way of memorializing our forebears. “We’re honoring ancestors by doing this in the present day, and especially by being open with it. We’re honoring them in a way that’s like, ‘This is how you should have been able to practice, and I honor you by doing it in this way.’”

At the same time, she acknowledges the pitfalls of performing certain rituals without proper training—not only out of respect for tradition but in recognition of the potential danger to the self. “Witchcraft and *brujería* are for everybody, but you need to be mindful of what you’re practicing,” she says. “I would not advise anybody to go out and start performing.” She warns me about the dangers of botched ceremonies and individuals who perform divination sessions without the mentorship of an elder.

“If you’re just trying to see if it’s for you, then get some books, go to a botanica and ask about it a bit. But don’t just decide, ‘All right, I’m gonna go cop a Yemaya statue because I like how she looks.’ If you get into this shit the wrong way, you can end up opening yourself up to things you don’t want to touch, and you won’t have anybody to help you remove it or protect you.”

Ortiz admits to being wary of the gatekeeper role, particularly since the meaning of these practices has shifted over time, creating new belief patterns. What is the meaning of modern *brujería*, I wonder.

“I’m not an elder yet, and our elders are probably who should be answering such questions,” she says. “They did this through the times when they were persecuted.”

Clearly, Ortiz doesn’t want to position herself as an authority, especially when so much of her advocacy is based on her own experiences. “As I continue to get older, I’m becoming more private with my personal practice,” she says, adding that she hopes to open a family practice focused on accessibility. She doesn’t see herself following a traditional trajectory into priestesshood until she has children—who, she predicts, will have gifts just as she does. “I’ll probably be losing my mind over my children’s intuition and their guides telling me things about myself that I don’t want to hear,” she says with a laugh.

Before we part ways, Ortiz offers this: “I want people to feel like it’s doable. Magic, in this day and age, is not the unknown. It’s making the unknown part of the everyday.” ■

