



## Dreamtelling:

*Making meaning from dreams using narrative practices*

*by Carla Galaz Souza*



*Carla has worked with women and children who have experienced violence and abuse in central and southern Chile. She is interested in bringing feminist ideas to therapy and in translating narrative practices to the Latin American context through culturally appropriate methods. Carla can be contacted by email: [carlagalazs@gmail.com](mailto:carlagalazs@gmail.com)*

### *Abstract*

This article explores the consideration of dreams in narrative practice, applying a broad feminist and anti-colonial politics and philosophy. In Latin America, psychology and its practices of dream interpretation have a strong influence on folk cultures. These have located dreams as an unconscious dimension of the internal which require expert interpretation. In taking steps to counteract hegemonic thinking, informed by feminisms and considering narrative practice efforts to reinforce people's sense of personal agency, the author explains how dreams were invited into conversations with Nina, a woman from northern Chile, to support reflexive engagements with life and re-generation of meaning. The article applies narrative ideas to engagement with therapeutic meaning-making about dreams to support the development of alternative stories in culturally appropriate ways.

**Key words:** *dreams; dream interpretation; gendered violence; protest; feminism; postcolonialism; Chile; Latin America; narrative practice*

## Nina's invitation to speak of dreams

Amid the global COVID-19 pandemic, the growing use of online tools opened the possibility for me to offer therapy to women and children in Chile while I was living in Australia. The idea of bringing dreams into the conversation came as an invitation from Nina<sup>1</sup>, one of the Chilean women I worked with online. In an exchange of emails to arrange our next session, Nina wrote that she had been having many dreams and nightmares, and she attached narrations of five of these dreams. Being aware of psychology's influence and its traditions of interpreting and constructing meanings from dreams, I wondered how to embrace Nina's desire to talk about dreams.

My work as a therapist is informed by feminist and narrative approaches that challenge traditional psychology. Women's discomfort has specificities associated with cultural, historical and political contexts. Whereas psychology looks at individuals, feminist theory and narrative practice acknowledge that our experiences are always social and political. Gender values and politics infuse the ways we create our lives (Hare-Mustin, 1994). Psychotherapy, with its Eurocentric and androcentric foundations, can deepen rather than relieve the discomfort of those who have historically been oppressed. It does so through pathologising that very discomfort.

Nina's invitation initiated a journey (White, 2004) seeking other experiences of working with dreams in therapy and translating narrative practices to assist in making meaning of dreams. It became an opportunity to develop new possibilities for therapy.

## Perspectives on dreams

Despite extensive research on dreams, there is no clear consensus on their function. Theories include guarding sleep, memory consolidation, mood regulation and social stimulation (Schredl, 2018). Dreams' emotional charge may reflect the combined influence of stressful and emotionally adverse events and distress occurring in waking life (Schredl, 2018).

In Western culture, dreams are often considered to be mental images that in most cases cannot be understood literally but, instead, require interpretation based on underlying meanings. This tradition is rooted

mainly in psychoanalysis, and locates dreams as an unconscious dimension of the internal. Sigmund Freud is one of the most recognised figures in this realm for introducing a psychological technique for interpreting dreams: understanding them as repressed wishes (Freud, 2008). Carl Jung claimed that dreams speak in a distinctive language of symbols, images and metaphors. His dream analysis approach includes consideration of the collective unconscious, a repository of shared human memories (Hartman & Zimberoff, 2008; Jung & Hull, 1974).

These perspectives on dreams, and ways of working with them, have political implications related to power imbalances in who does the interpreting and what ideas and discourses assist these interpretations. Ron Findlay has said, 'dream analysis all seems to have one thing in common; the dreamer is positioned as a passive recipient to receive this expert dream wisdom' (2016, p. 86). He recognised a double passivity concerning dreams: 'Passive to get them, passive to understand them' (Findlay, 2016, p. 86).

Dreaming had also been considered by many thinkers and cultures long before psychological theories existed. In the cultures of Abya Yala<sup>2</sup>, dreams have occupied an important place. For the Mapuche people, dreams, known as *pewma*, are not seen as hallucinations or a psychological phenomenon, but as being taken on a journey in which things are looked at and seen. They can include instances of being reunited with ancestors, and with the dreamer's origins and identity. In this tradition, dreams are essential in the process of searching for wisdom and knowledge (Ñanculef, 2016). This vision of dreams establishes a relationship between the person – with their history, context and relationships – and their dream.

Similarly, for the Aymara people in the north of Chile, a dream is a source of supplementary information, understood as a premonition. It is connected to the reality of the person and their community. Dreams are discussed and classified within the family, taking in a range of considerations. Therefore, the interpretation of dreams in this context passes through the selective sieve established by cultural appreciations (Fernández, 1995).

Despite the existence of these local knowledges, psychology and its discourses and interpretations of dreams have a strong influence on folk culture in Latin America.

## Making meaning from dreams: A cultural vindication for therapy in Abya Yala

Our understanding of the world and our language is impacted by ongoing colonisation. We have been stripped of our traditions and ancestral knowledge, which have been shamed. Eurocentrism and North American influences also brought with them a psychologisation of language. Today, folk cultures survive in traditions, customs and collective memories, even as they have been transformed by the changes that have occurred over five centuries of colonisation (Gargallo, 2014). In Abya Yala, as in other regions of the world, we are challenged to rescue, reconstruct and redefine therapeutic metaphors based on our culture and history (Akinyela, 2002).

Counteracting Eurocentric and hegemonic thinking means generating and identifying culturally appropriate practices, processes and methods (Akinyela, 2002) to draw meaning based on the stories, history, experience and cultural traditions of the people with whom we work. A starting point for therapy is the narrative practice of engaging with local knowledges and folk culture (White, 2004). Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui's idea of *teoría enraizada* (rooted theory) complements this practice. With this term, the Aymara-Bolivian sociologist, historian and activist describes theory that 'it is rooted in experience, that it does not deny its own history or its own genealogy for understanding the world', and that conceives of knowledge as something that every human being carries (Cusicanqui, as cited in Cacopardo, 2018, p. 187). This idea is analogous to the political orientation that involves centring the insider knowledge and expertise of the person consulting the therapist and refusing to interpret the lives of others (Denborough, 2019).

It is common in my therapeutic practice in Chile that women and children speak of their dreams. Sometimes I have been asked about what a particular dream means by clients seeking an interpretation. I used to ask: 'How did this dream make you feel? What do you think this dream reveals to you?' These questions allowed me to return to discussing what brought them to therapy, but neglected dreams as an aspect of their experience. Having Nina's dreams written down made me review this approach, and prompted me to think about how to respond creatively to integrate dreams into the conversation in ways that would be resonant for her.

The idea of centring people as experts on their own lives (White, 1997) guides my practice as a therapist. I seek to be influential in identifying the dominant discourses that sustain the problem and in recognising other stories, but I do not impose interpretations. The alternative storylines we uncover can support people in telling their stories in ways that 'make them stronger' (Wingard & Lester, 2001) through alignment with their history and context, and with their purposes, beliefs and hopes. This therapeutic posture led me to wonder how I might bring dreams into the conversation to support other ways of talking about the problem and developing preferred stories and identities. How might I avoid imposing a dominant perspective on dreams, and instead open space to explore how Nina understood her dreams and what supported those understandings?

## Narrative possibilities for bringing dreams into the conversation

I found that others had already begun to bring dreams into narrative practice. Milan Colic (2007) explored the meanings of the dreams a young woman, Kanna, was having. Their conversations led to identifying the characters in these nightmares and integrating them into a new support team, leading Kanna to move from the experience of distressing nightmares into 'lucid dreaming'. Ron Findlay (2016) suggested the possibility of attending to unique outcomes, initiatives and responses in dreams.

In Latin America, María Angela Teixeira (2021), with whom I had an inspiring correspondence, had also been thinking about and working on dreams in her hometown, Salvador da Bahia, Brazil. Her approach considers nightmares and recurring dreams as problem-saturated stories that dominate people's lives.

Inspired by these accounts and by Nina's invitation, I explored ways to use narrative ideas and practices to shape therapeutic enquiry about dreams and nightmares. The intentions that guided me were:

- to maintain a decentred position while assisting with making meaning of dreams
- to reinforce a sense of personal agency
- to support the development of alternative storylines.

Considering these intentions, I used the following themes to assist me in developing questions:

- exploring understandings of dreams
- identifying meaningful content and elements of the dream(s)
- acknowledging responses
- connecting with life experiences and the problem.

Inspired by the importance of dreams in the ancestral cultures of Abya Yala, I was interested in learning what encouraged women like Nina to consider their dreams and share them. As there are diverse understandings of dreams within different cultures and territories, I wanted to know what ideas she already had and what place dreams occupied in her life. Were there particular ideas, beliefs and cultural meanings that influenced attention to dreams and the interpretation of them?

To reinforce a sense of personal agency, I sought to apply intentional state understandings that could lead to reflexive engagements with dreams and to re-generation of meaning (White, 2004). I did not employ psychological understandings. Instead, through what I came to call 'dreamtelling', we would make meaning from what resonated with the person, relating this to their history, context, knowledges and values. In this process, I would listen to the account of the dream from a double-listening position to find unique outcomes and relate them to waking life.

Finally, I would link back to the material present and current predicaments by asking questions reflecting on those connections to lead to new understandings of dreams: What difference might the information pulled from your dream make to how you see yourself or how you see the problem? It is possible to develop alternative stories and create new meaning from dreams. Still, it is fundamental to relate that to the problem experience and what difference these new meanings could make. I was aware of the predicaments that brought Nina to therapy, and I kept that at the centre of our conversations.

## *Nina's story*

Nina was a 30-year-old woman from northern Chile. She was an artisan, an actor, a therapist, a mother of two children and an activist participating in an audiovisual collective. Nina consulted me because she

had experienced panic attacks after denouncing her children's father, Bruno, for violence and abuse. Bruno had been leaving threats, and Nina was in a constant 'state of alert'. The first steps in our conversations were to name the abuse and its effects (White, 1995) and to acknowledge Nina's responses to the violence and threats.

I noticed that Nina was carrying totalising understandings of fear and alertness that situated them within herself. However, I felt that the alertness was very much located in her contextual reality, related to leaving a violent relationship and her engagement with political activism. These feelings seemed to be informing the need to take steps towards her safety and to be acting in service of her protection. For example, they contributed to her decision to move to the countryside and pursue legal action.

**Carla:** Somehow, at some point, the alertness enabled you to avoid a situation of considerable risk. You moved to another place to protect yourself and your kids. At some point, being in a dangerous situation, was the state of alertness necessary? What do you think about this? Does this make sense to you?

**Nina:** Yes, I was on permanent alert. And that alertness also brought me conflict with other people who were with me during that moment. They would tell me that I need not be paranoid. That I had to change the idea that something negative was going to happen, so that it would not happen, so that I would not 'call it' to happen. To think positively that this would end. And so, I had difficulties with them in that matter, because I told them that they didn't understand me. That maybe if it were happening to them, then they would understand, but it was me who was experiencing it and I had intense feelings. It wasn't that I wanted to feel it. I did not want to feel anguish; I did not want to feel fear. But I was feeling it, and it was for a reason. But everybody tried to keep me calm; they wanted to give me protection and security. But I didn't feel like that. I still felt alone. I still feel alone. I still feel in danger.

We discussed these efforts to calm her down that minimised and cast doubt on her experience, and how stereotypes about 'paranoia' have been used to delegitimise women's experience. Through such



labelling, the knowledge women have and the abilities they use to survive are silenced and dismissed. For Nina, these 'calming' discourses gave power to fear and despair by leading her to question herself and making her feel that she had no-one to turn to. Externalising the 'sense of alert' and considering the real danger she had faced helped to situate her fear. These conversations were a starting point for exploring preferred ways of naming her experience and exploring how she had survived and the steps she had taken to reclaim her life from violence.

## Bringing dreams to the conversation

In her email, Nina wrote about several dreams and nightmares: 'I have been dreaming for days about things that alert me. They left me with a bad feeling, but later I understood that I should not be afraid of dreams, and I was calmer'. Nina attached descriptions of five dreams she had during that week.

In the following session, I asked Nina if she would like us to talk about the dreams and nightmares she had shared. Some days had passed since her email, and Nina was happy that I brought up the topic. Rescuing her words, I asked about how she had concluded that 'they are just dreams'.

**Carla:** What do you mean by 'they are just dreams'? Could you say more about this and what dreams had meant to you before coming to this conclusion?

**Nina:** I was having many nightmares. Because they were nightmares that I was having, I would wake up badly, with fear. At that time, I thought they were premonitions, that they were showing me that something terrible was going to happen, that they were signs. That scared me because I thought that they were showing me that something terrible was coming regarding him. But then I moved past that, which was a strong thought, and I understood they were just dreams. A whole whirlpool comes from what one has experienced, from what one has lived: images of the day, things that one has passed, people one knows, feelings. Like a whirlpool, all that comes together and creates a dream. It also has to do with the

uncertainty of the future, or with what one drags from the past, with what one knows about people, feelings. A dream is created out of that vortex. And it is only a dream. That is what I understood and what I wanted to believe. And that is what I believe now so that I am not afraid.

**Carla:** Nina, how did you come to that understanding?

**Nina:** Because I asked many people for help. I asked people who knew about dreams to help me. And many people began to say many things. Some told me it was this; others told me otherwise. And from all those things they told me, I concluded this so that I would no longer be afraid of nightmares. It was all because of the nightmares. It was a whole week of nightmares every day. And that week, I was terrified, and I didn't want to feel like that anymore.

I followed this by exploring what motivated Nina to ask others about dreams, what this meant to her, and what had been supporting previous ideas she had about dreams:

- How was the process of asking for help? Whom did you ask?
- What motivated you to ask on Facebook?
- Do you remember what they told you?
- Why did these conclusions make sense to you?
- Before asking others, where did your ideas about dreams come from?
- Some time ago, you told me about your special connection with the Indigenous culture. Are any of your ideas about dreams linked to that connection?

The *mestizo* (interracial) identity in Latin America represents particular complexities with roots in the violence of colonisation (Wade, 2003). In Chile, this has led to the denial of our African and Indigenous heritage. To acknowledge our *mestizaje* means to speak out about the permanent *blanqueamiento* (whitewashing) of our identity by politicians and intellectuals (Montecino, 2007). Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (Rivera, 2018) unfolds the Aymara language's metaphorical richness using the word *ch'ixi* to offer a path to deconstructing colonial imposition. Defined as 'grey with small blends that mix', it is a grey in which the contradiction – white and

black – is neither synthesised nor merged but inhabited. Cusicanqui proposes that we live in contradiction and inhabit it, appropriating its creative and emancipatory potential.

To do so, I asked Nina about her connection with the Indigenous culture, which she had mentioned previously. Nina was from a town in the north where communities are mostly Aymaras. Despite her not identifying as an Aymara woman, Nina recognised the influence of Indigenous culture on her life. The ideas Nina previously held about dreams scared her because she thought of dreams as premonitions. She recognised that this was influenced by ‘mystic interpretations’ and Indigenous cultural beliefs. Nina had spoken about the value she placed on connection with Indigenous people and culture. Still, she decided to change her understanding of dreams to one that gave her tranquillity. This was an act of self-care. Later, to avoid falling into a constricted or simplified understanding of Aymara perspectives on dreams, I shared with Nina what I had read about Aymara culture and dreams. We reflected on the complexity of Indigenous culture. Nina then recognised her sharing her dreams with others and collectively seeking meaning as being close to Aymara tradition.

Two of the dreams Nina had written about involved violence and manipulation by her ex-partner, whom she had recently denounced in court. In the others, she was in danger or struggling: with needles before a wedding, with a homeless man and in the last one with police abuse. In each dream, she struggled, cried for help and made decisions. In one of her dreams, she called for her father to help her; in one, she discreetly alerted a friend about the danger so he could help her; in another, she was struggling along with other protesters. This realisation about Nina’s actions in her dreams guided me in our subsequent conversations.

## *Acknowledging responses and further connections*

Intending to generate and support double-story development, I asked Nina about her responses in her dreams, inspired by the idea that people always respond to predicaments in their lives, even in sleep states (Findlay, 2016).

**Carla:** Do you remember something you did in your dream to deal with the situation?

**Nina:** I was just afraid and asked for help. I would cry and ask for help, like I couldn’t do it by myself. And that repeated every day. Every day I screamed, every day I asked for help. As if I was in a situation that was too difficult, and that was very real. Like when you get distressed and your voice does not come out. And it occurred to me that I was paralysed in sleep, and my voice did not come out ... I asked whoever was there for help.

**Carla:** You mean not only in this dream but in all of them, also those dreams with Bruno?

**Nina:** Yes. I did not face it alone, I did not have courage in the dream, and I asked others to help me.

Ron Findlay highlighted that ‘as with tough waking times, initially it may be understandably hard for a person to see any responses or actions they did themselves in their tough dreaming times’ (2016, p. 89). A hazardous idea from the dominant culture – that courage is only present when someone is acting alone – influenced Nina to minimise the responses she made. I asked Nina more about this and about any connections between ‘asking others for help’ and her life experiences.

- What does it say that you tried so hard to protect yourself in a difficult situation in your dream?
- What do these nightmares say about values you have or what is important to you?
- Why is it important for you not to be alone in this?

Asking these questions and reviewing her dreams gave Nina space to make significant representations of them beyond the singular sensation of panic. It allowed Nina to connect with her experiences and draw conclusions about what she valued in life and how they shaped the steps taken to reclaim her life from violence.

To connect Nina with a sense of contributing to others in similar situations of responding to violence, I asked:

**Carla:** What would you say to other women who are going through a similar experience? Is there any message you could give to them?

**Nina:** To seek support. Now I feel that I can act alone, but at one point, I could not. I’d say that they do not need to leave that place alone ... Women can lean on other women, on support networks.

## Dreaming of police abuse

In one of our sessions, we began by talking about the country's political situation. While my conversations with Nina had been taking place, Chile was experiencing the effects of an ongoing political crisis, as well as being in lockdown due to the global pandemic. The October 2020 national referendum on a new constitution had recently taken place and Nina had a strong view about this. She spoke about how the protests should continue despite the outcome. I recalled that Nina had dreamed about police abuse: 'Nina, I remember one of your dreams was about the police. Do you remember?' This dream related to the operation of a special task force. I will share a part of her telling of the dream:

I was in a front garden that was very small, typical of these little houses from SERVIU<sup>3</sup> that are very tiny. I was there, and suddenly I looked ahead, and there was a giant green building, like the colour of the military. And a special task force came, many police ... Everything was very fast, like these operations they do. They tried to open the gate, the gate where I was, and they tried to grab me. They said they had to enter.

The dream occurred at a time when there were many raids in the city. In fact, they had raided the guys in the front line, at the front of the confrontations. I dreamed they were going to raid me. That was my fear.

Here I asked questions about what it meant for her to dream of police abuse in the context of the October uprising. She believed she was at risk of being persecuted and threatened by the police because she participated in protests. Later she realised that it was her ex-partner who was chasing and threatening her.

We spoke about dreaming of police brutality at a time when massive protests and human rights abuses by Chilean police and armed forces were happening. This opened the possibility for Nina to talk about her experiences in a safe space. From there, she could name the violence and threats she had experienced from the police and witnessed happening to her friends. She said they were terrified of being raided, and of police finding material that might put other protesters in jail. Speaking of this connection between her dream and her life experience led to acknowledgment of the importance of the relationships she had formed within the protests. These people had also supported her in protecting herself from Bruno.

## Dreaming of Violeta Parra<sup>4</sup>

With the support of her friends, a lawyer and our conversations, Nina gained a feeling of security in her life, and the state of alert started to have less influence on her. She began to have more hopeful dreams about the possibilities of solving things.

In one dream, Nina saw herself within Bruno's family – people she had not seen for a long while and with whom she used to be close.

I gathered strength. I had already gone through all his relatives, who kind of wanted to greet me, but they could not. As if there was a family secret. And I gathered strength, but still with great sadness ... I told his aunt: 'I am going to talk.' I was about to leave that house as if nothing had happened, and then I said to her: 'I am going to talk. I am going to sing. I am going to get there where he is, where all the family members are, and I am going to sing.'

When I sang, it was felt through and around. I could expand my voice a lot ... It was like representing Violeta Parra, who made everyone shut up. I had that image, that I was going to start singing that song<sup>5</sup> and that everyone would stare at me and listen. And I said to his aunt: 'When I finish singing, I'm going to talk. I'm going to say everything that happened to me.' She cried and said to me: 'Kid, speak, speak. I am going to be here for you, stand behind me, sing and talk.'

I then got to the back of the house, and many people had come for me. People from my family and close friends. Many friends from life, not only from my city, from many places. All those people had come for me.

We identified many alternative storylines in this dream: gaining strength and having a voice, perceiving a family secret, the relationship with her ex-partner's aunt, hopes of solving things and people being there for her. An additional storyline was identified through asking Nina what it meant for her to dream of Violeta Parra.

**Carla:** Nina, what does it mean for you to have dreamed of Violeta? Specifically with a song by Violeta. I know you said it was a performance that you used to do, but does it have some particular meaning for you to dream of this figure?

**Nina:** She is my reference. First, for being a mother: despite being a mother, she never stopped doing things ... Having two children meant for me not being able to do the same as others. It was hard then, studying with two children. Second, she was always going against everything. And another thing is that she was multifaceted. She not only sang, but she did many other things. She did not stop, and she was always very humble – many things that I feel I have in common with her. She is a reference for my personal life and my artistic life.

The man from whom she had experienced violence had been dislodged from Nina's dreamscapes and replaced by Violeta Parra and the aunt. Re-membering Violeta Parra opened a space for Nina to draw conclusions about her identity by acknowledging another woman and her influence.

## Conclusion

As humans, we spend roughly a third of our lives sleeping, and about a quarter of this period is filled with dreams (Schredl, 2018). Even though much of our lives is spent dreaming, many people do not take their dreams in consideration. Until I received the written dreams from Nina, I had overlooked dream allusions by clients in my practice as a therapist. Embracing Nina's initiative and the exploration it prompted made it possible to engage in conversations about a previously neglected aspect of experience.

In my conversations with Nina, I sought to open spaces to develop preferred meanings about dreams and their relationships with hardships in waking life. When experiences are understood as being outside our control or influence, it can be challenging to introduce or retrieve a concept of agency. In nightmares, people often see themselves as paralysed or unable to protect themselves from difficulties. Acknowledging responses in dreams and connecting them to responses in waking life can lead to the development of preferred meanings of the dream, and of the person's life and identity.

In my conversations with Nina, dreams provided a way of connecting with complex ideas and experiences related to fear, meaning and identity. It became clear

that dreams also offered potent spaces of connection, cultural knowledge, personal reflection and strength beyond being internalised sensory experiences. Similarly, by drawing links between dreams and waking life, these dreamtellings offered a way of recognising skills and knowledges that Nina has used to respond to her situation.

Considerations of culture and gender assisted in meaning-making by reminding us that, as historical beings, we are located in a specific place and time – the particular context in which problems feed, reproduce and perpetuate themselves (Letelier, 2017, p. 47). For example, when exploring Nina's dreams about police violence, we made connections with the political crisis that was happening at the time in which police were committing human rights abuses. This enabled us to draw further meanings and connect to life experiences.

There are diverse ways in which dreams can be explored using narrative practices. Entering the dreamworld can be an opportunity to make new connections with people's waking lives. On the other hand, these connections can support the person to develop preferred understandings or interpretations of the dream. I hope that the 'dreamtelling' questions presented here suggest further possibilities for exploring problems and supporting the development of alternative stories.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> All names have been changed to protect the identity of the client.
- <sup>2</sup> Abya Yala is the Kuna name that, especially in South America, is used by Indigenous leaders and communicators to define the Latin American continent. America is a colonial name that they do not want to use to identify their common territory (Gargallo, 2014). Some autonomous and community feminists have adopted this way of naming this common territory. I have used Abya Yala when referring to the cultures and ancestral knowledges from this region.
- <sup>3</sup> SERVIU is the abbreviation of the Chilean housing and urban planning service. Nina is referring to houses provided by the government.
- <sup>4</sup> Violeta Parra (1917–1967) was a Chilean composer, singer-songwriter, folklorist, ethnomusicologist and visual artist. She is a leading figure of Chilean folk music and her compositions are still inspiring new generations.
- <sup>5</sup> 'Jardines humanos' [Human gardens] by Violeta Parra is the song that Nina pictured herself singing in her dream.

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