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## MAGICAL PASSES

MILLIONS KNOW CARLOS CASTANEDA AS THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF NONFICTION CHRONICLES OF HIS PEYOTE-FUELED JOURNEYS THROUGH THE DESERTS OF MEXICO WITH THE BYRONIC SHAMAN DON JUAN MATUS. AN INVESTIGATION INTO HIS LIFE AS A NEW-AGE CULT LEADER, HOWEVER, SHOWS THAT HIS BOOKS, PHILOSOPHY, AND EVEN HIS PERSONAL LIFE WOULD BE MUCH BETTER DESCRIBED AS SEVERAL THOUSAND PAGES OF REALLY GOOD FICTION.

DISCUSSED: *Magical Passes, Magic Parts, Golden Piss, The Metaphysical Travelogue Tradition, Various Supernatural Powers, Returning to This World, The Path to Enlightenment, The Nagual of Freedom, The Luminous Egg of Man, Magic Bathtubs, Buckminster Fuller, Black Mountain College, Assemblage, Pixie Haircuts, Falun Gong*

### INJURIOUS ENERGY FROM THE OVARIES

**O**n a Sunday night in late November, an exuberant and sweaty crowd left the White Street Center for Movement and Bodywork's Tribeca studio after a two-hour kung fu workout, while a smaller, more subdued group of four students took its place. By 7:35 p.m., the evening quartet had begun a sequence of movements resembling the wayward love-child of tai chi and charades. The sequence, or "magical passes," included gestures ranging from the balletic *tendues* and *ronds de jambe a terre*, to the less virtuosic and more mad-



dening effort of pulling one's own hand with one's other hand to extract the "magic parts" contained in the shallow webs between the fingers. Movements ranged from athletic to gestural/absurd. I was one of the four (and most likely *only*) people in New York City practicing the allegedly sacred art of Tensegrity on this particular Sunday night in November. To prepare, I changed into clothes befitting a modern dance class—track pants and a tank top. When the other three participants arrived wearing loose-fitting clothes, I quickly gleaned that Tensegrity is not something for which you merely get dressed and undressed. For these people, Tensegrity is a way of thinking and moving, and possibly a way of life.

To begin, we formed a small circle. I followed the lead of the two experienced practitioners who frequently disagreed over the sequence of movements and various hand positions.<sup>1</sup> We began with a parallel stance, a slight knee bend, and a thrust of the arms forward in space (on the inhalation) before pulling the hands back to rest below the armpits (on the exhalation). The second movement consisted of the same arm thrust, but we capped it by tracing two circles in the air with our wrists stiffened, a choreographic decision that I mistakenly interpreted as an ode to the ovaries. (As it turns out, Tensegrity addresses the ovaries in another movement called “Squeezing Out Injurious Energy from the Ovaries,” as part of the “Series For the Womb.”) Special attention was afforded to our hands, which, as instructed, took the handle of an imaginary “whip.” Things grew slightly more athletic as we reconfigured our hands into hooks, as if preparing to “walk like an Egyptian.” Slowly, we linked the movements to form a sequence that we practiced in semiretarded unison. I was tentative with my “whip,” but managed to mimic the bodily shapes. We finished the class with a tribal-like fire dance, some stomping, some coming together and moving apart.

Though the practice group I attended was small, Tensegrity prac-

<sup>1</sup> I later learned we were practicing the “Westwood Series,” a *kata*-like progression whose title promised something more resembling an evening soap opera than a sequence of movements.

tioners consider themselves part of something larger, on both tangible and intangible levels. On a tangible level, they are part of a growing international body of practitioners (several hundred people recently participated in a Personal Power Tensegrity workshop held at UCLA). On the intangible level, they are purportedly part of an ancient tradition transmitted to the modern world by one of the most controversial and financially successful literary figures of the twentieth century, Carlos Castaneda (1925–1998). The New York City Tensegrity practice group meets consistently, two times a week, to conscientiously study Castaneda’s movement sequences, known as “magical passes.” Do they care that Castaneda, a Peruvian, claimed to be Brazilian? Does it trouble them that his death certificate said he’d never been married though he’d actually been married three times? That he said he was raised by “a Jewish, anarchist, bomb-throwing grandmother and his sexually obsessed grandfather, who advised him, ‘You can’t fuck *all* the women in the world, but you can try!’” though he was actually raised by his parents, and his father was a middle-class jeweler? Did they buy his typology of humankind, as Castaneda once explained it to a reporter? (“Don Juan categorized people into three types,” according to Castaneda. Farts, golden piss, and puke. Castaneda identified himself as “a smelly fart—very assertive.”) Or Castaneda’s claim that all people are born “bored fucks” or “non-

bored fucks”? (The “non-bored fucks” are children conceived during orgasm, in which case, according to Castaneda, the child has extra energy and can freely spend it on sex. The “bored fucks,” however, were conceived during lackluster unions, and must conserve all sexual energy for themselves.) If the Tensegrity group cares about these discrepancies and the quasi scientific babble, they don’t show it. They enter the studio ready to work.

#### **CLEARGREEN IS NOT AN ALGAE- SELLING OPERATION IN VERMONT**

**T**ensegrity first appeared in 1993 as the occasion for Carlos Castaneda’s dramatic return to public life, following a ten-year silence that had, in turn, followed Castaneda’s near omnipotence as a best-selling author, New Age guru, and multimillionaire for more than a decade. His books assumed a place in the “metaphysical travelogue” tradition, specifically following the author along his path to enlightenment, on which he was led by a shaman with the suspiciously Byronesque alias of don Juan, or don Juan Matus. So vast was Castaneda’s cultural reach, even nonreaders knew that don Juan was the alleged Yaqui Indian sorcerer-informant whose message had inspired up to eight Castaneda books and seduced a generation of peyote smokers to take Castaneda’s journey into the netherworld (dubbed the “Second Attention” or “infinity”). Most of

these bookish stoners took Castaneda's travelogue as fact rather than metaphor, a stance still upheld by many devotees.

Though marketed as "Carlos Castaneda's Tensegrity," Castaneda claimed the movements he presented in the nineties were passed down through twenty-seven generations of shamans, and were over 10,000 years old, even though this math alone is suspect (twenty-seven generations do not span across 10,000 years). Castaneda nevertheless broke with the shamanic tradition when he set up a corporation named Cleargreen Incorporated to promote Tensegrity seminars and workshops. Though Cleargreen's name evokes images of an algae-selling operation in Vermont, it's based in Culver City, California, and focuses solely on selling and operating Tensegrity workshops (and other Castaneda byproducts), the first of which was held in 1993 at the Rim Institute in Arizona. At the weekend seminars, which cost anywhere between \$200 and \$1,000, the elusive Castaneda appeared with three female *chacmools* in tow who dressed in black robes and demonstrated the movements. From 1993 through 1999, Cleargreen held forty-three workshops internationally, from Germany to Mexico City.

Castaneda's own explanation for presenting the sacred movements to the public after twenty-seven generations of secrecy hinged on his claim that he was the last heir to don Juan's sorcery. "My decision to end the secrecy

that had surrounded [the magical passes] for an undetermined length of time was, naturally, the corollary of my total conviction that I am indeed the end of don Juan's lineage," he wrote in one of his last books, published in 1998, *Magical Passes: The Practical Wisdom of the Shamans of Ancient Mexico*. "It became inconceivable to me that I should carry secrets which were not even mine. To shroud the magical passes in secrecy was not my decision. It was my decision, however, to end such a condition." Skeptics claimed Castaneda was dried up on the literary front and had no choice but to design a new gimmick.

Always surrounded by his robed entourage, Castaneda called his apprentices—Taisha Abelar, Florinda Donner-Grau, and Carol Tiggs—chacmools after the "gigantic, reclining guardian figures of the Mexican pyramids." All three had various supernatural powers as well, though the details of their circumstances changed over time. The most brazenly inconceivable claim related to Carol Tiggs—also known as Muni Alexander, Carol Aranha the *nagual* woman (the *nagual* is supposedly an egoless being, no longer human, who can shift into various animal forms), the nickname "Chickie," and by her birth name, Kathleen Pohlman. According to Castaneda's mythology, Tiggs left this world for ten years and resided "in the Second Attention," returning to "this world" in 1983, where she, by one account, reentered jogging in a sweatsuit in

suburban Los Angeles (an auspicious reentry indeed!).

Though Castaneda may have shown respect for his apprentices in the public setting of his workshop, even ascribing extra-human qualities to them, Castaneda denigrated these same women semi-privately, playing them off one another and, more peculiarly, subjecting them to an exhaustive set of rules. These included compulsory compliance regarding their hairstyles (cut by him), length of pubic hair and brand of antiperspirant. He even went so far as to regulate and monitor the ways in which they hugged their families and had sex. He married both Tiggs and Donner-Grau in Las Vegas in 1993, just two days apart. Most indicative of the perversity of these relationships was the grisly outcome following Castaneda's death in 1998.<sup>2</sup> Both Abelar and Donner-Grau disappeared. Cleargreen continued to offer vague and eerie explanations for their absences, claiming that Donner-Grau was "traveling" and "supervising current workshops," while Abelar was "directing the workshops from a distance." Both are believed to have killed themselves.<sup>3</sup> Tiggs, who Castaneda deemed his

<sup>2</sup> Though first reported by the press in June of 1998, Castaneda died in his Los Angeles home nearly two months earlier on April 27, 1998.

<sup>3</sup> To this day, both Abelar and Donner-Grau remain missing. The case is now reportedly under consideration by the FBI. A third woman, also part of Castaneda's coterie and still unaccounted for, is believed by some to have moved to Ireland and opened a print shop with money delivered by Tiggs.

female counterpart, inherited the royalties from Castaneda's books as well as the profits of Cleargreen's ongoing seminars, making her a reclusive multimillionaire and beneficiary of Cleargreen's ongoing Tensegrity seminars.

### THE LUMINOUS EGG AND ETC.

**W**hen Castaneda died in 1998, his connection to Tensegrity was obscured by his literary success. His first book, *The Teachings of don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge*, published in 1968 by the University of California Press, was later sold to Simon and Schuster for mass market release, along with his second book, *A Separate Reality: Further Conversations with don Juan*. In the early seventies, the paperback edition of *The Teachings* sold at a rate of 16,000 copies a week. None of his ten books has ever gone out of print. Several people have clamored unsuccessfully for movie rights, including Jim Morrison, Federico Fellini, and Pier Paolo Pasolini; Oliver Stone even named his production company—Ixtlan Productions—after Castaneda's third book, *Journey to Ixtlan*. His books have collectively sold over eight million copies in seven-teen languages.

For many readers, the memory of Castaneda's books is clouded in a haze of peyote, jimson weed, and psychedelic mushrooms. The early books explicitly described the path to enlightenment as one lined with

psychotropic plants. In his third book, however, he backed away from this assertion, a move that may or may not have been related to his mass-market success. In an interview with writer-editor Sam Keen in *Psychology Today* magazine (1972), Castaneda explained that "Don Juan used psychotropic plants only in the middle period of my apprenticeship because I was so stupid, sophisticated, and cocky. I held on to my description of the world as if it were the only truth. Psychotropics created a gap in my system of glosses... But I paid a tremendous price. When the glue that held my world together was dissolved, my body was weakened and it took months to recuperate... if I behaved like a warrior and assumed responsibility I would not need them." Most readers were too stoned by this time to notice that Castaneda had rescinded his endorsement. Under the influence, he accomplished the unthinkable in his books, including flying and reading minds, while somewhere along the way he relinquished his lowly human ways for his new incarnation as "the nagual of freedom."

While none of the books' paranormal and allegorical elements slowed their commercial success, they rankled a great number of scholars, academics, and even a few Yaquis who objected to the books' claims. They took issue with the most obviously troubling aspect of Castaneda's paradigm—that he called his work nonfiction. Joyce Carol Oates (as guilty as Castane-

da, perhaps, of glutting the literary market), however, served as a quasi champion of his books, while reserving her right to enjoy them as fairy tales. "They are beautifully constructed. The character of don Juan is unforgettable. There is a novelistic momentum, rising, suspenseful action, a gradual revelation of character." Other supporters claimed that we must be finding truth in these books if we continue to buy them, one critic going so far as to say, "He lied to bring us the truth."

When UCLA's anthropology department not only condoned such undocumented "fieldwork" but actually awarded Castaneda a Ph.D., an amalgam of forces inside and outside the academy raised heated objections. (*The Teachings of don Juan* began as a master's thesis; *Journey to Ixtlan* earned him his Ph.D.) Castaneda allegedly first met don Juan at a Greyhound bus station in Nogales, Arizona, while studying medicinal plants, and began his apprenticeship with the sorcerer a year later. He conveniently lost all field notes and documentation of his travels and admitted don Juan was a pseudonym. Skeptics argue that he was protecting his own fictions from exposure. Whether or not it seems plausible that an ancient Yaqui sorcerer visited a Ph.D. grad student at an Arizona bus terminal, Castaneda historically exhibited a tenuous attachment to some very basic facts regarding his own background. Castaneda has lied about his birth date, name, marriage sta-

tus, military service, nationality, parents' names and occupations, health, drug use, dietary habits, sex life, mother's death, and his supposed "double."<sup>4</sup> Still, according to one Cleargreen employee, to get hung up on details such as these is to miss the point: "The thing that's missing when people talk about Carlos is not whether don Juan lived, or who lived in what house. It's about becoming a voyager of awareness, about the six hundred locations in the luminous egg of man where the assemblage point can shift, about the process of depersonalization he taught."<sup>5</sup> Tracy Kramer, Castaneda's agent who currently represents the Rug Rats, Duck Man, and the Real Munsters, had a more bafflingly mystical explanation when he compared his clients for one reporter, saying "There's a purity about all of them."

#### APPARENTLY MEANINGFUL BABBLE

**A**t the center of Tensegrity are several concepts and key terms, most notably the *assemblage point* and the *luminous egg*, or ball. According to Castaneda, don Juan defined the assemblage point as "a point of

greater brilliance" atop the balls of luminosity in which we are enveloped.<sup>6</sup> This special point, an arm's length away from the spot between our shoulder blades, is universally located for the entire human race, "thus giving every human being an entirely similar view of the world," (a patently impossible claim to stomach in today's political and religious climate). Despite the presumed benefits of any form of shared perception among humans (Isn't this what many of us have been striving for?), Castaneda argues that this uniformity is a reductive state resulting from socialization. What we should be seeking, he suggests, is a sensitivity beyond the "known," moving the assemblage point to dispel the sense that the perceived world is the only world, and to produce a "heightened awareness," to gain greater sympathy for other (i.e. otherworldly) views. Practitioners of Tensegrity try to shift their assemblage points through various movements; other so-called experts believe a true shaman can move his assemblage point by "drumming, psychotropic plants, fasting, singing, dancing, and other practices." According to Castaneda, when a person successfully moves his or her assemblage point, he experiences a major shift of consciousness, moving from what he calls the "First Attention" to the

"Second Attention." Tensegrity's magical passes are yet another, more formalized option available to those willing to pay for the training, \$19.95 for a videotape to \$315 for a weekend workshop.

A persistent theme in Castaneda's life, books, and in Tensegrity is "letting go of personal history." Students of Tensegrity keep their hair short in order to get rid of personal history. They also initiate many movements from their fingernails, because, as I was told at my second Tensegrity session (held in a large Chelsea dance studio on a Sunday afternoon), "fingernails have the least personal history." According to don Juan, our personal history holds us back and renders us inflexible, beholden to our past patterns and perceptions. Members of Castaneda's coterie were encouraged to get rid of their pasts by collecting all childhood toys, books, and photographs and forfeiting them to Castaneda; he promised to put them in his "magic bathtub, where things disappear by themselves when you're empty enough." Conveniently, Castaneda's complete revision of his past, and all the lies therein, were now part of a spiritual endeavor, and all inconsistencies, contradictions, and hypocrisy were promoted to sorcery rather than deceit. Those who gave Castaneda the benefit of the doubt thought he was invoking the concept of the "multiverse" popular among various Native American tribes (along with science-fiction buffs and quantum physicists), in which sep-

<sup>4</sup> Castaneda claimed on several occasions that he had a double; conveniently, the double committed the less-than-spiritual deeds that were caught and exposed to the general public.

<sup>5</sup> Though Castaneda claimed that cancer was a result of tension, and that Tensegrity was the antidote to cancer, Castaneda died of liver cancer, an irony that may or may not have been lost on his followers.

<sup>6</sup> I was disappointed to learn that in recent years these cocoons have shifted from egg-shaped ovals to round balls (I find this less romantic), a shift don Juan explains as a loss of energetic mass over the generations.

arate realities can exist at once. Those believers are therefore relieved of the Carol Tiggs puzzle: how was she simultaneously stuck in the Second Attention for ten years and living in this world with her mother in Berkeley, California?

**D**uring my second Tensegrity class we moved through several magical passes, followed by a short rap session about the sequences, which expanded into a discussion of much (much!) more. This experience was equally intimate and ran, as did my first class, like an experimental modern dance class for nondancers, the kind of class where you might physically role-play various predators and prey from the animal kingdom, or embody the movement and nature of “Fire” and “Love.” The V of my sternum, according to my new teachers, is the decision-making place, and should therefore be kept in motion. Within my first ten minutes in the room with four complete strangers—soon fast friends—I had brushed the energy down my neighbor’s arm and joined the others by pinky fingers to yell “intent!” at the wide bay of windows. Despite my convincing tenor, I actually had no idea what exactly my intent was.<sup>7</sup>

The woman acting informally as teacher that day encouraged another woman to “Stalk that and

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<sup>7</sup> We did not discuss “the flyers” in class, even though Castaneda wrote about them frequently. According to Castaneda, the “flyers,” or “Bobbys” are vulture-like inorganic beings that feed

put it in your log!” a directive that sounded like a thickly veiled insult to the uneducated ear. M., a devoted student of Tensegrity, had been describing a strange state she called “dreaming awake.” She said she’d be talking to people but would find herself “stalking” herself, saying hello to someone and then looking at her own hand, stuck in the “hello” position, wondering if she had recently said hello. While this struck me as a minor symptom of life in New York City, the group discussed this thoroughly. P. exclaimed that he’d experienced this, too. Meanwhile, while I was “there” but also forgivably “not there,” I felt both admiration and sympathy for this small remnant group trying to practice without a leader, trying to make sense of something predicated on apparently meaningful babble.

#### **NATURALLY, BUCKMINSTER FULLER IS INVOLVED**

**T**he word *tensegrity*, derived from the words “tension” and “integrity,” was coined by Buckminster Fuller who applied the word to architectural structures. As an architectural or biomechanical term, tensegrity

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on the sheen of our own cocoons, and are consequently responsible for our constant self-reflection. When pressed to explain the meaning of “inorganic,” Castaneda explained that the flyers exist in a parallel universe—in the same time and space as we do, but not in the same realm of awareness. This is why we never notice them. In fact, he added, this is what people really mean when they say, “I’ve been licked.”

ity refers to objects “with components that use both tension and compression in a combination that yields strength.”<sup>8</sup> Though Castaneda clearly credits architecture for the term in *Magical Passes*, he never mentions Fuller by name. Allegedly, Fuller was distressed by Castaneda’s appropriation—though, ironically, Fuller was by no means an innocent victim of intellectual property theft. If Castaneda stole from Fuller, then Fuller stole much more significantly from his young student, a sculptor named Kenneth Snelson.

Snelson first met Fuller in the summer of 1948 at Black Mountain College, near Asheville, North Carolina. BMC was founded in 1933 as an experimental college, and one of its most eminent faculty members was Bauhaus-trained artist Josef Albers. Snelson, only twenty-one at the time, originally traveled from Pendleton, Oregon, to BMC to study under Albers, but, in the end, he studied instead with Fuller, who shared Snelson’s interest in structure. Despite Fuller’s later status as an architectural iconoclast and cult hero, he was largely unknown to the student body or anyone else when he arrived that summer, even though he had

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<sup>8</sup> Kenneth Snelson argues that this definition of tensegrity is meaningless. “If everything is tensegrity then tensegrity is nothing,” Snelson points out, before offering a more precise definition: tensegrity is “a closed spatial system made of compression struts suspended in a network of tension tendons, built in such a way that the struts don’t touch one another but press outwardly against the tension envelope to form a sturdy prestressed structure.”

already shown his Dymaxion automobile at the 1934 Chicago World's Fair. Extremely charismatic, Fuller infused the students with an interest in structure and geometry, and Snelson returned to Pendleton, Oregon, at summer's end with the desire to explore what he'd begun at Black Mountain, making small sculptures, or models, influenced by Fuller and Albers. By the autumn of 1948, Snelson says he designed a primitive version of what would later become known as the tensegrity structure, which he shared excitedly with Fuller. Snelson described this early version as "X-like" in design.

"It's like a kite you play with as a child," Snelson recently explained on the phone, speaking from his New York City studio. Snelson, now a renowned sculptor with work in major collections around the world, continues to work with the principles of tensegrity, which he originally called "floating compression." "A kite has two sticks to make it firm, a very ancient, beautiful structure. What I invented was the use of kite frames hooked together modually, to create a tension envelope, as it were. I showed Fuller this and he said it was all wrong, that it shouldn't be an X." This did not stop Fuller, however, from borrowing the small model. Fuller later modified the tensegrity unit—or "mass," as he called it—and made the X into something Snelson described as a "tripod with an elevator extension." Snelson believes Fuller was too embarrassed

to go back to the X form, altering it just enough to get a patent, although the tripod-form had obvious limitations that the X never had. By 1959, Fuller came back to the original X form, including it in his show at MoMA that same year without attributing Snelson. Ultimately, Snelson alerted the show's curator, Arthur Drexler, who shared enough of Snelson's concern to accommodate his work in the exhibition, in a separate showcase. Still, the rift between the two mavericks never healed. Today, on Snelson's website, the sculptor has given into calling his "floating compression" principle "tensegrity," though he says he feels stuck with the word and has only made peace with it in the last few years.

Fuller and Castaneda make strange bedfellows. But they share a pomposity and a sense of utopian thought, albeit different visions of utopia met via different means. Additionally, each has a large and devoted following. And both men consider themselves anointed through some divine or otherworldly appointment. In a famous moment in Fuller's own mythology, he stood over Lake Michigan one day in 1927, contemplating suicide, when a question came to him: "Could I use myself as a scientific guinea pig... on behalf of all humanity?" Supposedly, he decided that day that he would "make the world work for one hundred percent of humanity in the shortest possible time through spontaneous cooperation without ecological

offense or the disadvantage of anyone." Snelson heard the story differently. In August of 1948, Fuller himself told Snelson that his wish to end his own life was cut short by a single voice that came to him: "I was walking along Michigan Avenue in Chicago. It must have been a Sunday morning because there were few people on the street. I suddenly heard a voice say, 'You will no longer require temporal attestation for your thoughts; you will think the truth.'"

Snelson compares Fuller to Hamlet, "one frailty... virtues galore," the vice being his dishonesty. I think of an equally apt line from Hamlet that applies to both Fuller and Castaneda: "Though this be madness, yet there is method in't."

The total irrelevance of the Snelson/Fuller tensegrity concept to Castaneda's Tensegrity is *most* relevant to this conversation, because it may be the most typical example of Castaneda's creative fusion m.o.—sloppily combining various symbols, signs, and lexicons to generate something new. The term *assemblage point* is fittingly similar to the French word *assemblage*, which describes the form of collage in which unlike objects are slapped together. Castaneda's philosophy, under the specter of don Juan, shares much with the medium of *assemblage*—arguably pasting Yaqui culture, drug culture, Alan Watts, martial arts, anthropology, hermeneutics, and New Age miscellany together. In one Castaneda obituary, reporter J. R. Moehring

called his first book “a strange alchemy of anthropology, allegory, parapsychology, ethnography, Buddhism and perhaps great fiction.”

If Castaneda stole Tensegrity, in name, from Fuller, he arguably stole the content of the magical passes from martial arts, especially kung fu, which he studied from 1974 to 1989 under kung fu teacher Howard Lee. Many people compared Tensegrity to kung fu, tai chi, yoga, and qigong, yet Castaneda took objection to this. In an interview with Benjamin Epstein, in *Psychology Today* (1996), Castaneda said, “To compare Tensegrity with yoga or Tai Chi is not possible. It has a different origin and a different purpose. The origin is shamanic. The purpose is shamanic. It has to do with our reason for being. Our reason for being is to face infinity.” Despite this denial, rumors flew that Castaneda paid his teacher Lee not to sue. The most fantastic part of the rumor was that Castaneda sealed the payoff by offering Lee the phallus of a puma.

### THE CHACMOOLS STRIKE BACK

**I**n addition to working on his kung fu *katas*, what was Castaneda doing during his so-called absence in the eighties? Though his literary fans considered him “silent,” he was quite busy—if we’re to believe Amy Wallace’s recent memoir—running a bawdy harem-house in a tony section of L.A., while breaking Wallace’s heart. In the spirit of

Joyce Maynard’s *At Home in the World* (her 1998 tell-all about her love affair with reclusive writer J. D. Salinger), Wallace’s *Sorcerer’s Apprentice: My Life with Carlos Castaneda* (2003) shares and then overshadows her eight years as one of Castaneda’s lovers, a story awash in textbook cult behavior, a cartoonlike impression that’s hardly recognizable as a scene from the 1980s and ’90s. I was fully immersed in the salacious and seemingly insular drama when the mention of things such as “cell phones” or “a treadmill” gave me pause, at which point I’d have to reconcile the bizarre events described in the book with what I’d like to think of as our collective post-seventies wisdom. Clearly, no one had shown Wallace (who took on the name ELF), Patricia Partin (Blue Scout), or Chickie Pohlman (Muni) the alarmist anticult movies of the early eighties (Remember Peter Fonda in *Split Image*, 1982?) in which kids succumb to the cult, are kidnapped in vans by their parents, then deprogrammed, and everyone’s happy again.

These women stuck around while Castaneda periodically gave them standard-issue pixie haircuts, provided them with the group’s designated brand of antiperspirant (first a crystal rock and later Tom’s of Maine), made them write lists of people they’d slept with so he could breathe away “the noxious power of these unions,” and engaged them in three-day sex-binges called “energetic mar-

riages.” He told Wallace to pull his sperm to her brain when he orgasmed. (Should you find Castaneda totally unsympathetic, he did warn Wallace that more sex with him might move her assemblage point and make her tired.) He instructed his housemates on family affection: “Never hug your parents face-to-face. Don Juan taught me that we have a ‘key’ in our abdomens, and our parents have the energetic ‘lock.’ With a direct hug they steal our energy. Always approach them from the left side, only putting an arm around them.” He also recommended: “There’s a weed that grows all around Los Angeles in the cracks of the sidewalks, a relative of the chamomile plant called pineapple weed. Grind it in a mortar with butter, and rub it on your chest: it will generate a subtle feeling of awareness.”

When Wallace wrote *Sorcerer’s Apprentice*, she joined a literary tradition of women who expose famous men. In her acknowledgments, she reserves special thanks for Joyce Maynard, “whose bravery and love of freedom and truth inspired me.” Both Wallace and Maynard go to great lengths to expose the idiosyncrasies and pathology of the famous male antagonist. But the tell-all, get-even genre is a challenging one; it’s hard to look good while spitting. Wallace’s book, though juicy, may have proved that the sword is sometimes sadly mightier than the pen. Wallace includes a few memorable anecdotes. Castaneda once berated



Wallace when he banged his head on her “damaged aura” after trying to lift her “energy body,” an accident that Castaneda claimed sent him to the UCLA emergency room with a concussion. Wallace was not in the room with him at the time of his accident.

Tensegrity is not mentioned prominently in Wallace’s book until three quarters of the way through, but the scene is memorable if only to remind us of what might constitute an overshare. Practicing Tensegrity nude with several “friends” of Castaneda, Wallace lets out a loud fart, at which point she fears she will not be invited back. In fact, she is not, and she tells this as part of a larger sob story of emotional torture and insecurity. She well illustrates the latter point when she asks other members of Castaneda’s inside circle whether she was excluded from the nude Tensegrity classes for her gaffe. The book’s press material calls it “a disturbing spiritual memoir,” which strikes me as whole new genre altogether and perhaps one whose rules I’m still learning. Nevertheless, by February 2004, Wallace’s book was number 14 on the *Los Angeles Times*’s list of nonfiction bestsellers.

#### WANTED: GURU

**A**fter my second practice, my Tensegrity group went to Anaheim for a Tensegrity conference (I did not attend). M. led my next session after their return, and she was

clearly transformed by her trip—enthusiastic, glowing, and moving with the grace of a dancer. Watching her go through the new passes she learned, which were divided into the North, South, East, and West winds, I admired the movements and the power with which she executed them, all fairly athletic. We followed and went through a few of the *kata*-like passes. Divorced from Castaneda’s dogma, Tensegrity is, basically, an appealing combination of aspects of kung fu, tai chi, qigong, and yoga, plus the benefits of any regular practice, the benefits of unison and group movement, physical contact, and breathing intensely.<sup>9</sup> The bodies in the room felt liberated from the dogma rather than

<sup>9</sup> It’s impossible to ignore the parallels between Tensegrity and falun gong, though the latter clearly holds sway over a much larger population. Seventy million people practice falun gong in China alone. Falun gong (popularly known as qigong), a movement practice first made public in 1992 by Li Hongzhi, claimed an equally ancient, private lineage, and accompanies a set of teachings and lifestyle recommendations. Unlike Tensegrity practitioners, those practicing falun gong in China have been brutalized since 1999, when the government began a program of “eradication.” In 2002, it was estimated that 500 practitioners had died from maltreatment while imprisoned. Like Tensegrity, the falun gong beliefs, on the surface, are harmless. The three guiding principles are truth, compassion, and tolerance. Li Hongzhi has been nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize four years in a row. Also like Tensegrity, however, some of the finer points are questionable, such as a belief in separate but equal heavens for people of different races, and beliefs in extraterrestrial life. Even though, for both groups of practitioners, the movements bring the principles to life, their movements also transcend the group’s respective principles.

enslaved to it once they started moving, though I wasn’t fond of the “rap sessions” that brought us back to the room.

Currently, Tensegrity has a growing audience and practice groups have been established all over the world. Hundreds of people attended the conference in Anaheim, California (near Disneyland). The practice has become mainstream enough that *Yoga Journal* featured Tensegrity in a 1998 issue, excerpting Castaneda’s own writings. Still, Tensegrity has remained a largely underground movement. And though Tensegrity practitioners may hope that it becomes the newest fad among the Hollywood elite (yoga meets Scientology), Tensegrity shares more with Esperanto than it does with Pilates or the relatively newfangled gyrotomics. Esperanto, first proposed in 1887 by Dr. L. L. Zamenhof as a “universal language,” has receded into random pockets across the world. Instead of growing into the great democratizing force Zamenhof first envisioned, Esperanto is now part of a larger tradition of esoteric movements. Like Esperanto, Tensegrity is a multinational movement, but the movement part might be overstating its scale. Two past workshops included: “An Appointment with Silence,” July 24 and 25, 2004, in Buenos Aires, and “Carlos Castaneda’s Magical Passes, ‘The Two-Way Bridge: Dreaming and Stalking,’” in Amsterdam, June 25–27, 2004.

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(though his sets of sonnets make beautiful wholes). The 1988 paperback *Collected Poems*, edited by John Weir, tops 650 pages—longer than the standard edition of Yeats's verse, if not for the latter's long notes. (Baxter's *Collected Plays* is a separate book; *Collected Prose* would be hefty if it existed.) Baxter rarely stopped writing, and he composed far more than he chose to publish: seven full books of previously-uncollected verse saw print in New Zealand after Baxter died, with more new poems revealed in the *Collected*. Baxter offers the pleasures peculiar to prolific talents (you can read him for years and still find overlooked gems) along with the disadvantages (some poems repeat one another; some are just bad). The sheer amplitude of his work (and the often derivative nature of its first half) means that though we should be glad a *Collected Poems* is now in print in America (thanks, Oxford University Press!), that mountain of a book makes a hard place to start. Better to begin, if you can, with *New Selected Poems* (published by Oxford Australia-New Zealand, edited by Paul Millar), or even with Weir's slim *Essential Baxter*.

"Poems and stories," Baxter wrote in 1956, "are not pills, manifestos, or blueprints of Utopia, but ways of coming at life, as private as a kiss and as public as a morgue." By the Jerusalem years he had become at once humbler and more ambitious: the poems warm themselves at "the flame of non-possession// That burns now and always in the heart of the tribe." Baxter believed—as Americans like to say—that his poetry could "make a difference," and that he as a poet could save at least a bit of his nation; he grew increasingly ambitious, and increasingly rueful, about the part he played. Late poems addressed, and apologized to, the Father, the Son, Baxter's wife, children, friends, country, even the Maori source of life and death, "the dark unknowable breast/ Of Te Whaea, the One who bears us and bears with us." The last word on how to hear Baxter might come instead from a sonnet addressed to Satan ("Hatana" in Maori), which also speaks to Baxter's posthumous readers: "you sift and riddle my mind// On the rack of the middle world, and from my grave at length/ A muddy spring of poems will gush out." ★

The scene that I first encountered in Tribeca last November was a touching one—a small group of dedicated followers who have lost their leader (of sorts) toiling in obscurity (admittedly, it's a stretch to call any spot in Tribeca "obscure"). Our quartet was embarrassingly harmless, even as we zealously harnessed our warrior spirits. How would I feel if the room had been filled with a thousand people "fusing energy"—instead of four? Afraid. Very afraid. The question for those seeking the Second Attention is whether a remnant group can not only maintain itself, but grow into a full-fledged movement. If so, can a movement rely on alleged ancient Yaqui shamans, or does it necessitate a contemporary guru?

**W**hen the news of Castaneda's death was finally leaked to the *Los Angeles Times* by Castaneda's estranged son, C. J. Castaneda (also known as Adrian Vashon), in June 1998, the major newspapers flipped madly through archives and photo banks for images of the deceased. Castaneda didn't like to have his picture taken. *Time* magazine featured a trippy illustration as its cover art for the accompanying 1973 cover story on Castaneda. Other compromises and uneasy solutions for a photo-shy publicity-hound were half-erased charcoal drawings or photographs with one hand over the face. In the end, the AP unwittingly published a photograph of a Mexican politician with the same name, then issuing the following correction: "Due to an error by the Associated Press, a picture accompanying an article on the death of Carlos Castaneda in Saturday's style section was incorrect." The media divided their attention between a conventional obituary and a more sensational story of the mystery that continued to surround Castaneda. After his death, his first wife and child stepped forward and countered the authenticity of the signature on his will. Three separate but concurrent marriage certificates were dug up, along with other unsavory evidence. On his death certificate, his "employment type and occupation status" read: Teacher, Beverly Hills School District. ★