Of Tigers and Panthers
Anjali Benjamin-Webb
What does it mean to know revolution yet hold no possession of the very nature of disrupting possession itself? To be nursed from body to body, and have shaped by language the repressed and the scorned. To exist of dreams, of egos, of an unattainable beyond. To honor, to hold to self-inflict, and to allow trauma to shape our origin.

Of Tigers and Panthers derives the experiences of those born of the dreams of their most revolutionary ancestors. It echoes the immense sadness felt as they watch us grasp onto the crumbs of their material and folkloric selves. It speaks to a grand confinement of our creative potential as we hold their pain.

This work of prose actively subverts the way in which we learn to voice histories, and is a departure from more western forms of linear storytelling. It is built upon political theory, oral history, and realities imagined and lived. There is intention behind every word.

On Portraiture/2
On Birth/Dreaming/5
On Ritual/Creation/9
On Pleasure/11
On Genocide/13
On Letting Go/15
On Portraiture

California (2-Channel Video Installation)

Yesterday, Melina and I sat around a pub interrogating the self. The artist, the ego, the conditioned, and the controlled. I am inspired by her, to assemble myself, just as she does, within my own work. And I confront me, as the subject of my own imagination.

California was pivotal in heightening my awareness of where I fall in a given frame. It began predictably with an officer tow, in a town too quiet to follow a real lead. Parked preemptively by the family-owned block of amusement and retail, the cop awaiting the next out of state plate that dared cross his path.
Further back began in London beside my father where military police kindly welcomed us to step off of the bus alongside their loaded semi-automatic weapons, Erzulie Mansur, my spirit protector, grounded in the seat beside me keeping me safe as he stood in indignant resistance.

Where was it said that because white men can’t police their imaginations, black men are dying? And I still have to interrogate myself? I must imagine my gender my utility my place and my meaning all the while imaginations of me still stand unchanged.

“You working this block?” His sliver of chapped lip asserts over me. “You know that’s illegal here, right?” When five minutes ago you thought I was selling on the block, and now that my hood’s off, there’s something about me? My sweet scent, the surely there curve of my hip and shadow of an ass in my two sizes too big sweatpants. Portraits of the imagination.

And the interrogation persists. Getting Sunday morning ready in that holy spirit kind of way. Bending over to fix the bow of my left church shoe. Going back inside because I forgot my belt like my baby brother. Interrogating the rise of my pant and the fall of my hair. Sticking out my chest as if an inch and a half more of me will make up for what’s left of me.

And maybe that’s why staring into a lens and letting interrogations and imaginations become the first standing portrait of me feels honest, or maybe it’s deflection. And I kept myself there, under the harsh light and amorphous frame of last night’s dance with death. In fear and shaking knee accepting my fate just as I had watched my father stand in the same resistance.

And through that double screen inversion of all of these imaginations, my father rolls up the car window, merging back into Saturday traffic muttering something about how a brother can’t even drive his own car without something or another.

My white friend on display as if anything could distract from the imagination of me. Easier for her to be speechless than to make sure every morning that my hair is laid, hoodie down, hands out of my pockets; for the love of god keep your hands out of your pockets.
California. Love your body’s capacity to hold imaginations of cops and 2nd-period teachers and artists. California, a portrait that everyone seems to already know.
I forgot to give you other info about හෝරෙ. Her given name was THOMMASIA wife of Saviri (localized form of Xavior). Thommasia is the feminine form of Thomas. She was born after 1895 and probably in
1897. She had three older brothers. Her father Anthony Motham Lawrence was among those relocated in 1902 (confirmed by the land registry) by the British when they created a new rice paddy cultivation scheme. He must have passed away soon after. Motham is a title granted by the Portuguese colonizers to community leaders. The title survived the Dutch and English periods and is used to this day!

When the four kids were of school-going age, Thommasia's mother sent the boys to school and kept the girl home. She was keen about learning. She, therefore, memorized anything she got hold of. Her mother took particular care of the boys. She wanted to make sure that the boys were well fed as long as they were in her care. She wasn't sure if her future daughters in law would care for them properly. She would say to Thommasia, "You will be able to cook for yourself, whereas they can't." Thommasia was given in marriage when she was probably about 15-18 in about 1912-15. She had a baby girl called Rachel. When Rachel was about 12, along with Victoria (Ammammah's Ammah), she went to a premier girls boarding school in Jaffna. Thommasia's personal aspirations were fulfilled for her in her daughter.

Thommasia lost her first husband around 1920. She remarried around 1923 and had two children - Saaraal and Joseph(1933). She lost her 2nd husband Saviri in 1960. She lived by herself for many years. Around 1980, at her son, Joseph's insistence, she went and lived with him in Murunkan and later with her daughter in Chundikuli and passed away around 1985.

And this is how my grandfather sees her, by dates and titles and relation, but my mother, my mother had an imagination full of கிளகாட்டு’s spirit. For my mother, கிளகாட்டு was the conception of her understanding of independence--of feminism. As a child, my mother remembers watching கிளகாட்டு Smoke cigars and repair her mud hut, no need for a man or little helping hands. And my grandmother, well, she recalls கிளகாட்டு as the center of the world, misremembering stories of கிளகாட்டு acting in village productions of nativity scenes and ancient Tamil poetry.

Never mind literacy, கிளகாட்டு existed beyond. And it is through performance that I am able to reach her creative spirit. By way of the warm smell of tobacco rising from the carefully sculpted letters of her name, I honor her very fitting title of great-grandfather.
On Birth/Dreaming

Portrait of the Artist (Digital Image/GIF)

If someone that you love is in pain, ask them about their birth. More often than not, the root of our pain can be found in our beginnings. If dreams are our first waking remembrance of where we once were, ask of the first ever known, the one that repeats, and the faces that reappear.

The morning of my arrival, Dia de Los Inocentes, brought with it a world of chaos. Just as traditions of remembering lost infants fell under the sweet summer sun, their memories were contorted, now trembling under a hollow November moon, thrust from sacrifice to sainthood, no longer innocent and suckling milk from heavenly trees.

My mother, La Catrina, in search of her American dream, labored quickly to become a state far from home. And I, the first soul, ran frantically to catch the caramelsos rolling from her fingertips. As my spirit ran alongside the others, I got lost, straying off the path that I had followed so many times before. And maybe I ran too far. Looking for sweets between my mother’s hands, leaping from her womb
to taste milk fresher than what the trees had to feed me. Maybe this is why mi ofrenda stands a little small and full of sweets: a devotion to my birth.

I fall asleep by the light of my daily offerings, and every so often I return to the dream of my origin. It begins in a '97 Toyota Camry. My mother parks the car in an infinite lot of Sunday shoppers. Unbuckling me from my car seat, my father lifts me in his arms and begins to walk towards an apartment complex.

The dream is one of distrust and disbelief. Of men and one mother and one girl inexplicably tied to the death of one boy. Each time I dream this dream, the boy changes, as do the reasons for his death. Each time, the shapeshifting man eyeing the snap of my shorts takes many forms.

I try to tell my parents of the shapeshifting man. Didn’t you see him in the clown wig? That surely couldn't be real. We would have seen, we would have known. Imaginations, my sweet child. My waking fear soon became premature and inexplicable death paraded around by the next new thing in advertising furniture and wilted produce. The shapeshifting man always taunted me with the death of that boy at a volume too soft for onlookers to hear.
On Ritual/Creation

Routine is so often confused with ritual. I once thought that dulling my senses meant that I had created something holy, something that did not rely on sensing things greater than myself. And routine became destructive: it anchored me to my physical being, and allowed my pain to become me.

My routine started before bed every night, a single streetlight beyond my window seeing the process through to completion. Exit the room, enter the room, lights off, exit the room, enter the room, back to the door frame, door frame digging into my spine. And every night I felt the same dull pulsation in the center of my back as if someone were whispering my next step before I had even made it. And every night at the door frame I would press the ringing of fear and the unknown outside of myself. Light two, spring into bed, blanket under feet, body cocooned. The pulsing slowly returning to take over my entire body as I lulled myself to sleep.
What I had yet to understand was the importance of that surge of elsewhere in the middle of my back. It was this very routine, one of my own design, that kept me from my ritual of today. Now, every night begins with the phantom smell of cloves. I am present and the room is full. I speak aloud fragments of what I need and breathe into the center of my spine. I awake to the same smell of clove, but in the mornings with a hint of cinnamon. I am welcomed back from dreaming, and given my daily caution. The ritual is not my own. It is of smell and unlikely company and listening and opening.

The thing about ritual is that it is not a solitary act, it is one uniting the multiplicity of self, and lineage, and tradition. It is a constant negotiation between our most immediate needs and a process that brings us closer to knowing how to ask for them.

In performance I act in ritual, allowing all that is to come, to come. In sculpture, I antagonize the senses from burning cigar to crystal white sand. Through film, I speak to emotion, to the discomfort of bearing witness. In print, I challenge perception and bend conceptions of dimension. In all of these things, ritual is what guides me to create, and intuition is deeply involved in the execution.
I have this theory that every child of immigrants is the product of immaculate conception. Or probably comes from the mouth of a stork, but that’s the story that they don’t want you to hear because where was Jesus in all of that? And the way I learned it in school, every black woman in history wouldn’t dare experience pleasure. No plate at the table, no desire, no impulse. And the way I saw it at home we all had a part to play whether we liked it or not.

For those figures tied to narratives of trauma and suffering; whose bodies are rendered of use only for purposes of production and labor, presentations of pleasure are conveniently sequestered to that part of our social code that allows no room for the imagination.

And the way I see it now, well, after Pynk and falling in love for the nth time, pleasure is the hidden dimension that makes it all make sense. The buoyant laugh that carries through a crowd, the pit of the stomach that rumbles after an accidental glance turns to half smile.
Pleasure like a relationship that is more than utility, and food, yes food.

Joy like cheekbones kissing your eyes and feeling the sun giving you life. Like throwing it back and dancing in the studio. There is always music blaring from the studio lifting my work off of and onto the walls in perfect rhythmic harmony. With joy, I am able to relive moments when I had none. I am able to create with love, images of pain.

And because of all these pleasures, I insist on imagining the endless complexities and simplicities of pleasure throughout the ages. Wholeness of life--pleasure and love and joy that liberated and moved and shook the core our very sense of being.
On Genocide

No Fire Zone (Sculpture/Installation)
It is January 2009, the nearly 30-year civil war persists. The government and the Tigers take to their bases. Except it is a minefield bearing the name of a “No Fire Zone”. Red crosses hovering over hospitals and 300,000-400,000 civilians seeking out safety.

It is 2004, CNN reports on the rising tides of the Tsunami. By train, I watch as my family swallows the sea. What doesn’t matter is if I saw it bordered by breaking news blotters and live from studio 8 reporting on compounding death in the third dimension. Or if I saw it because I, too, had swallowed the same sea. What does matter is that the image of their muffled cries and pruning fingertips was so readily accessible to my brain lodged within my body of only 7 years? All of this glazed over my eyes as my mother slept surely in denial of what had just passed.

My grandmother walks us through the carcass of a building that she once sold milk toffee to help raise from the ground. Between the bullet holes and the saltwater breeze, she steps over the uneven floor, toeing invisible borders as if the blueprint of the original structure were still there. A closet here, and a desk there. Plaits on either side of her rounded cheeks, she was the fastest and the strongest and the best at drawing roses and devouring the ocean’s many sweets.

A house rigged like Macaulay Culkin would have in the olden days. Watchdogs and a newborn crying out in the background. The north still rings out and empty fields are better left unexplored. Conditioning us not to see what we have received as good enough.

It is January 2009 and the government begins a shelling campaign. It is January 2009 and the Tigers will not stand down. The UN tells us of each thousandth body hand counted and declared as dead deceased and departed.

With Sebastian, I can speak of my own genocide without invalidating his. And we speak like this at first. Owning “our” trauma, defending its existence/validity, until we don’t. Until we see it as more than denial and less than humanity. By stripes and numbers and unleavened bread we remember his genocide, and in martyred mother and child, mine. That same question of humanity and remembrance bubbles up and I no longer feel the same.
Letting go begins with revisiting the cautionary tales of our maternal figures, in the ways in which we were taught to fear for our own survival. It is found above us as we transverse chaos below: seeing our ancestors balancing swords in harmony over us in order for a circle of forest to flourish beneath. In all of these beautiful and complicated things, letting go exists.

Letting go is an invitation to feel others. It is within our own knowledge of what to hold and where to heal. In finding the source of struggles that are not our own, we unite water and fire, something that has always lived as an impossibility. Fire and water no longer act in contradiction. Just because we are in pain does not mean that we are meant to be split apart. Just because we have not seen the ocean’s waves ignited by fire, does not mean that is futile. Even though we have not known it to be exemplified in our communities, our
families, and within ourselves, does not mean that we do not have the capacity to unite these elements. It is in this unification that we can finally let go. In this breaking of maternal caution that we begin to live. Reconfiguring our relationship with death and dreaming and birth and trauma means becoming conscious and present and alive. Let the waves of our many selves unite with the many souls within us.


