PART FOUR

“IN SEARCH OF MY MOTHER’S GARDEN, I FOUND MY OWN”:* BLACK FEMALE PHOTOGRAPHERS AND THE MATRILINEAL SPACE

Dear Muholi

A year has passed, and then another: we have not seen each other in too long. I miss you, my friend. And I hope that you are feeling well, safe, loved, cared for, held—I believe, hope, that you are.

This is not really a letter, but rather a collection of fragmentary notes, re/memories, ideas, quotations, to frame—hold—your words and images, here. I have not felt much like writing, lately. Words have not been forthcoming, nor flowing freely, these past two years; thoughts, yes—ruminations, circulating and morphing endlessly—but not written words, somehow. Today however is important ... as you know, of course.

In lieu of writing, I have been walking on my own, for hours and hours, appreciating the time for reflection that these solitary excursions offer despite the precarious we face each time we walk alone ... but I digress. Where was I? Walking, yes, and today. As I write, an anniversary beckons. On this day in 1956—9 August—something extraordinary happened: the Women’s March on Pretoria.

My thoughts circle back to 2016, when you first told me about this important event in your ancestral (his)story, 60 years on, while we discussed a new commission to be unveiled at our future exhibition [at Autograph]: a new chapter in your growing, living, breathing visual memoir and archive-of-the-self that is Somnyama Ngonyama.

We spoke about commemorating—in our present—a constituency of courageous women from the past: brave, determined, revolutionary women who refused the apartheid regime’s intimidations, limitations, and violations. Thousands of women—black, white, brown, queer, straight, lesbian, bi, trans,
cis, non-binary—coming together to march for their—our—freedom(s) ... for you, for us, for them; for their daughters, mothers, sisters.

And we talked about prescription and inscription—in art, in life—to ensure that no one is left behind, forgotten or ‘lost to history’, but all are accounted—and advocated—for. When we revolt and protest against myriads of permeating injustices, from racism to classism, homophobia to misogyny, and many other discriminatory ideologies, we do so, of course, to birth revolutions from a space that is resolutely ‘for’—for freedom, for love, for equality, for visibility, for justice ... for different, possible futures: to imagine and pursue this generative ‘otherwise’—the remedial for—explored in my last letter to you, if you remember.

Today, as I revisit the three images you created in response to this significant moment in time – *Bayephi I, II and III*—I see both a potent visual meditation of loss—the loss of lives, the loss of freedoms, the loss of selves—all so pertinent now, in this pandemic time of perpetual turmoil, contagion and viral dis/ease, as well as a commemoration of tremendous courage, care and commitment to change, of prescience and, importantly, hope. Are not all revolutions—personal and universal, collective and individual—birthed from, in and with hope?

In *Bayephi III*—in tandem with this sense of acute/resolute aspiration—I see resilience, too, imbued within the image’s dissonant chromatic zones of being and becoming—a futurity, if you will. The cracks on the wall symbolise an opening, or rather multiple openings, plural, and multiplicities: new ways of seeing, feeling, sensing, doing, and looking.
that fill me with hope, and with an ambience of resolution and tenacity, in these times of precarity.

I am deeply grateful for these images, for the healing, remedial currency—visual, textual and otherwise—they hold. How relevant they are today, as analeptic, as tonic: a remedy and a reminder of the courage we require to face—and keep facing—the daily challenges and injustices so deeply
ingrained in our systems, institutions, laws, and societies, exposed so very violently and openly in the wake of the pandemic with its devastating impact on communities of colour, especially in the global south.

I remember the day you went to Constitution Hill, armed with your camera and blanket, to create these portraits: conjuring, commemorating, calling those who dared to walk—to ‘reclaim these streets’—60 years ago. I recall asking you about the meaning of Bayephi in your mother tongue—the conscious naming itself an act of indigenous reclamation, revelation, re/creation and liberation. I remember you telling me that Bayephi constitutes both a question and a proposition: ‘where are they? / they are here’, which reminds me of something poignant I reread recently, about photography and its enduring presences, and how those portrayed are always ‘still here’. And this is what you told me, then:

‘The 1956 protest was based on women saying “enough is enough”: enough with these passbooks, enough with restricting our liberty to move freely, enough with violating our rights—as human beings, as mothers, workers, sisters, daughters, lovers. These portraits are about the women’s struggle in South Africa during apartheid—they are about solidarity—but they can be read as a metaphor for women and queer people’s ongoing struggle elsewhere, too. They connect Somnyama Ngonyama directly with black lives and black bodies in incarceration. The former women’s jail, where the photographs were taken, was built in close proximity to the Old Fort: a space of confinement, a place of brutality, where precious lives were lost, taken ... a space where countless political prisoners were held during apartheid, awaiting trial for violating pass laws and other discriminatory regulations, for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. The three images speak to each other: the prison cell, the toilets, and the courtyard—the setting for Bayephi III. The open-air atrium was the spot where prisoners could find relief and breathe, momentarily. Inside, the space is dark and cold, haunted: it has the air of a history that leaves you feeling otherwise.’

Otherwise: here it is again, this word—sentiment, idea, premise—which has been with me, intimately, tenaciously, ever since our conversation that day, back in 2016, with all its promise, percipience, and potential. To allow oneself to feel—and imagine—otherwise, is a prerequisite for the birthing of r/evolutions: to practise, cultivate, visualise, manifest and imagine freedom every day. Somnyama Ngonyama represents both a commemoration and a refusal of the here and now, fuelled by a desire to infuse/suffuse the here and now with
illuminating darkness, with beauty and breath and face and flesh: to embody and inhabit the here and now, to claim the here and now, in all its tenses—for the past, the present and the future.

And speaking of commemoration, don’t all r/evolutions also, existentially, fundamentally, begin with our mothers and acts of m/othering? We can think of these as (non-gendered) deliverance, as birthing, caring and nurturing, especially considering that, at the core of Somnyama Ngonyama is your late mother, the breathing, beating heart of the series, whom you commemorate so profoundly, so beautifully, so powerfully in each portrait: simultaneously defined, and refined, by the tools of her labour, her—your—head crowned with scouring pads and laundry pegs; her—your—body wrapped in softly tex-tiled armour, at times enveloped wholly by my pleated garments at our home in London, cocooned in a collaborative, remedial, recuperative embrace. It is such an honour, and a privilege, my friend, to be invited, again and again, into this visual commemoration.
In your own words:

‘In Thembeka II, Bester VI, VII and IX, and MuMu XIX, I use your Issey Miyake pleated dresses, to create a connection—to speak about intimacy, trust, and friendship. And to destabilize notions of elegance and access. How do we learn to look at ourselves, consume ourselves? Reclaim how we want to be seen, or looked at by the other?

Somnyama Ngonyama began as a tribute to my mother, Bester Muholi (1936–2009), who was a maid. She was a beautiful Zulu woman who never made it onto the cover of a magazine. Her prison was someone’s kitchen … so these portraits ask us to bear in mind that Bester herself was locked into 42 years of servitude. They are a statement of reclamation, and the staging of beauty: to release her from a fixed position of servitude. I thought of domestic workers whose beauty had never been celebrated, whose life stories were never contextualised: who deserve to be recognized, like the great heroines of our times …

My practice as a visual activist looks at black resistance—existence as well as insistence. This is what keeps me awake at night … Thus Somnyama is not only about creating beautiful photographs as such, but also about bringing forth political statements, and historical incidents, while giving affirmation to those who doubt, whenever they speak to themselves, whenever they look
in the mirror, to say to them, and to myself: “You are worthy, you are beautiful, you count, nobody has the right to undermine you: because of your being, because of your race, because of your gender expression, because of your sexuality, because of the colour of your skin, because of all that you are.”

I was thinking about resistance photography, the many images that have simply never been captured, and how this lack of access informs our history. Hence, I am producing this photographic document to encourage individuals in my community to be brave enough to occupy spaces, brave enough to create without fear of being vilified, brave enough to take on that visual text, those visual narratives ... to re-think what history is all about, to re-claim it for ourselves: to encourage people to use artistic tools such as cameras as weapons to fight back.\textsuperscript{6}

When you manifest Bester, and the many others—mothers and sisters and daughters—repeatedly, continually transforming our collective labour(s) into generative visuality, you remind us to not only ‘imagine otherwise’\textsuperscript{7} and ‘shape change’,\textsuperscript{8} but occasionally to be still, too—for your mother knowingly named
you Zanele—meaning, as you once told me, ‘enough’ / ‘they are enough’ in isiZulu.

And so, I picture you, again, at Constitution Hill, conjuring all the women who said ‘enough’, who ‘dared to be powerful’, practising refusal, reclaiming these streets—ours, yours, mine, theirs—birthing r/evolutions, m/othering Blackness, ‘transforming silences into actions’⁹, and images, in their moment of radical protest. Feeling your presence palpably, I see the many r/evolutions you have birthed, and keep birthing, visual and otherwise.

Feel embraced.

Yours, always

Renée

Notes

1 Benjamin, W. (1940) On the Concept of History/Theses on Philosophy (‘lost to history’).
2 Bayphephi I, II, III were commissioned by Autograph, London.
3 In-text references include: https://reclaimthesestreets.com (‘reclaim these streets’)

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