

**Inviting the Other in:
Porous Thinking and Dissolving Borders in
“*Tropical Spirit: Biography of a Jasmine
Garden*”**

by

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Abstract

Tropical Spirit: Biography of a Jasmine Garden is a site-specific performance piece I developed as my final M.F.A Project. This paper outlines a chronology of the making of the piece in addition to presenting critical frameworks through which the project can be analyzed and situated in relation to contemporary aesthetics. I use critical frameworks borrowed from a variety of sources. Recent research done on borders by Performance Studies scholars Ramon Rivera-Servera and Harvey Young provide the basis for the analysis in this paper. In addition, anthropologist and cultural theorist Michael Taussig's treatise on colour as well as recent research done by Emilie Conrad and Susan Harper in the field of Somatics help articulate somatic strategies at work in the piece. Using frameworks from heterogenous sources, this paper attempts to provide an interdisciplinary analysis of the piece which can be understood as a highly layered theatricalization of borders.

Keywords: borders; Maldives; site-specific; somatics; storytelling; performance

*For the delightful company of artists who have
worked with me on this project. This is for you.*

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1. Introduction:

Seepings between Bodies and Borders

Tropical Spirit: Biography Of A Jasmine Garden (referred to as *Tropical Spirit*, in the rest of this document) is a site-specific theatre performance that I presented in July 2011 as part of the requirement of my Master of Fine Arts (MFA). I wrote the fragments of text and formed the stories that were told in the piece and performed the two main characters in the piece which was created for my home. Although I was responsible for making up the stories of *Tropical Spirit* I worked with a company of seven actors, a director, choreographer, a costume designer and my domestic partner at the time who designed the space. The piece had fourteen showings between July 8th and 22nd, and was seen by ten audience members each night.

Tropical Spirit can be understood as a heavily layered theatricalization of the concept of borders. It explores the experiences of being on the border, sometimes being the border, moving through borders. It hinges on the consequences of traveling across borders, the myriad performances along borderlands, and the spatial and temporal losses and gains that inevitably result because borders exist.

The process of composing *Tropical Spirit* is, in fact, the result of a number of weavings between multiple borders: literary, theatrical, psychosomatic, political, choreographic as well as borders of race and gender. The performance was generated from a combination of heterogenous sources. Virginia Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography* inspired me to form a narrative structure for the piece. A psychosomatic movement practice called Continuum Movement generated autobiographical fragments in the form of sensory images. These images were woven into the 'text' along with the sensual elements of performance such as choreographic imagery and the use of particular scents and sound. The 'text' itself is composed of a curious combination of oral traditions and several fragments of poetic prose that I wrote based on inspirations and memories I encountered during my somatic explorations, from stories that I had heard as a child,

and from the news over the period of eighteen months while I developed the piece. There was never a completed piece of text, or a complete script of any sort, but there were drafts which helped the company to keep track of the narrative of the piece as it gathered momentum and transformed throughout the process until the final performance. *Tropical Spirit* remained true to the oral traditions of the island nation I was born in.

The work is not without its contemporary and Modernist influences, however. The aesthetics of artists from Pina Bausch to Frida Kahlo (among many others, in varying degrees) influenced the aesthetics of *Tropical Spirit*. Michael Taussig's philosophical treatise on colour as a "polymorphous magical substance" that gets us in touch with our "bodily unconscious" shaped many of the somatic strategies used in the piece. ¹

Another kind of border crossing occurred while composing the project. Let's call it a seeping between, because *Tropical Spirit* occupies several artistic and cultural traditions at once, refusing to land squarely in one tradition or another but instead, seeping back and forth between disciplinary and cultural traditions. While related mostly to the discipline, processes and working methods of theatre-making, *Tropical Spirit* combines writing and storytelling, painterly and somatic use of color, song, a full-length choreography, mural painting, installation art and performance art. Certainly, some of these elements, such as storytelling and choreography, have always had a home in the theatre, however, what seeps between is the unusual combination of written text and oral tradition, and the way in which a full length choreography is the medium through which the two acts of the piece flow from one to the other. Inside this seeping between disciplines are also collaborations between artists of different disciplinary expertise: crossings within crossings. One could argue that ideas from performance art and installation art are becoming common in contemporary Western theatre, and in this sense, *Tropical Spirit* moves within familiar territory; however, *Tropical Spirit* also

¹ Taussig, Michael. *What Color Is the Sacred?*, 42.

reaches across the edges of the discipline of contemporary Western theatre.² Most theatre performance in the Western tradition I have encountered or read about takes place on a stage in a theatre, or in the case of contemporary work, increasingly within alternative spaces such as art-galleries or other site-specific locations. Having been made for and performed in my home *Tropical Spirit* contributes to this contemporary site-specific theatrical tradition. However, In *Tropical Spirit* the audience is invited into the artist's home and carries into performance a tradition of hospitality that is often found in cultures whose (often, oral) traditions are embedded in ritual that creates a communal, ritual space within the performance act. In *Tropical Spirit* seepings between forms/sources and disciplinary and cultural traditions take place in an environment of collaborative transformations.

Perhaps because it was made out of such a diverse set of cross-pollinations *Tropical Spirit* brought me into encounters with a dynamic variety of borders. Sometimes the encounter was literally with guards at the borders of nations. In other cases the border transgressed was one of race and gender by the use of cross-gender and "colour blind" casting. The borders between the visible/invisible worlds and sensuous/non-sensuous worlds are often alluded to in the piece and the border between autobiography and fiction is one that is subversively played with throughout. The border as a highly porous entity despite its intended functions to separate and contain becomes the central image of the piece.

Chapter 1 of this paper, following this introduction, presents a summary of the performance to remind/introduce you of/to the piece as it was performed in July 2011. Following that, in Chapter 2, I discuss, in detail, a chronology of the process through which I made the piece. In this chapter I employ what is called autobiographical criticism,

² European and North-American avant-garde theatre has been in a process of reinventing itself over the last four decades as Hans-Thies Lehmann outlines in his study *Postdramatic Theatre* (1999). The aesthetic of *Tropical Spirit* is formed squarely on the border of the Western *Postdramatic* moment and the oral tradition of ritual storytelling I grew up with in the Maldives. This is further discussed in Chapter 5 of this paper.

and discuss the necessity of using this form to articulate an ontological map of what was a highly personal, unusual and critical process of art making.

In Chapter 3, I introduce the “bodies” explored in *Tropical Spirit*. I conceptualize a system of “contrary bodies” as the central metaphor through which the politics of the piece is formed. The central tension within these contraries is found between what I identify as “the porous body” and “the enclosed body”, conceptualizations that in themselves make allusion to the body as a site at which a politics about borders, both their porosity and their ability to demarcate can be explored. I describe aspects of the somatic practice of Continuum Movement through which I formed the idea of the porous body. Using anthropologist and cultural theorist Michael Taussig’s theoretical treatise on colour, in combination with the principles of Continuum Movement that contributed to the conceptualization of the porous body, I outline the politics of a “bodily knowing”³ and why this forms the basis of the politics of *Tropical Spirit*. In this chapter I also discuss some of the somatic strategies utilized in the performance, including the use of rituals of hospitality, scent, colour and song as a sensual forces that a porous body is able to get formed in the context of.

Chapter 4 locates *Tropical Spirit* in the context of contemporary Theatre and Performance. I use aspects of Hans-Thies Lehmann’s discussion of Postdramatic Theatre to discuss *Tropical Spirit* in relation to the current moment of Theatre history in terms of Western thinking. However, I also discuss the peculiarities of *Tropical Spirit* in relation to this tradition and try to get a deeper understanding of the piece’s cultural locations by examining crucial points of conflict between postdrama and the unique aesthetics of *Tropical Spirit*. I end by briefly outlining a politics of the project that makes its utterances from and soaks up strength from the borderlands between Western and Non-Western artistic traditions.

³ Taussig, 15

2. Tropical Spirit: A Biography of a Jasmine Garden: A Summary

2.1. Yakout and Yasser

The audience member has been issued an invitation by Yakout Aiteur, a mysterious woman who claims to have constructed a dance choreography that she is eager to show audiences. The piece is to be shown in her home in East Vancouver and the details of time and place have been arranged between her and each individual audience member. When the audience arrives, Yakout welcomes them but seems somewhat frazzled, a contrast to the boisterous woman who issued the invitation in the first place. In the original prose piece she is described as “moving inside a hush, her eyes painfully present, her body tense, as if she were a firefly about to burst into darkness at any moment.” Apologizing for the state she is in, she explains that her nephew Yasser, who was going to join them for the evening, can no longer do so because he is resting in bed, debilitated by bad news that has arrived for him. She goes on to explain that Yasser has been living with her while he completed his university education in Vancouver and that he has been trying to immigrate to Canada. The bad news that he has received prior to the audience’s arrival is of the decision by Immigration Canada to reject his case for Residency. Yakout seems shocked and frustrated by not being able to understand the vague bureaucratic language of the letter of rejection, but in a state of graceful acceptance, goes on to assure the audience that she will proceed with the evening as soon as her friend Janine, a nurse, comes and to take Yasser away for some fresh air. As the guests are led into the kitchen, they glimpse Yasser in bed, fast asleep. Over the course of the next hour, Yasser and his fate are forgotten, except for two brief moments when Yakout brings him up in her stories.

2.2. The Jasmine Garden

Once everyone is gathered and Janine arrives to takes Yasser out, Yakout thanks the audience for coming to see the piece and begins to tell the audience the story of a Jasmine Garden at her childhood home, planted by her great-great-great grandfather Kasanji. This Jasmine Garden, she tells us, is the inspiration for the choreography that the audience is about to see.

“The garden still exists,” she tells us, then tells us that this garden was an unusual one, for several reasons; first, for the fact that the type of night blooming jasmine that grew in it was impossible to grow on the central island, Male’, where she and her family lived. She goes on to tell us that this type of jasmine is common to the North, “where the soil is much richer.” Yakout tells us that Kasanji spent a brief period in the North, in an island called Kadahalagala and that it was on his return to Male’ from Kadahalagala that he was supposed to have brought two small plants that he “planted and arbored into a magnificent garden, the tiny white flowers spreading their most delicious scent into the air at night.”

The other unusual thing about this garden, she tells us, is that there were rumors that “it was haunted, by a beautiful spirit, a *Faiymini*,” who would wander through the garden at night, singing. “Everyone who listens to her song, is said to lose their mind and humans must be very careful, they say,” she tells us mysteriously as we hear a song seep into the space from an unseen corner of the apartment. But then, breaking her own haunting tone, she mischievously tells us “not to worry, that it was only an old wives tale,” placating us, but just barely.

After taking a brief pause to show the audience where the Maldives are on a globe, specifically Kadahalagala and Male’, the two places important to her story so far, and after serving the audience the first course of the meal she has prepared for them: “a dish native to Kadahalagala” as she claims, she continues with the story of the Jasmine garden, now starting to weave herself into the story.

“My mother was a very superstitious woman and wouldn’t allow anyone under her supervision to go into the garden past sunset,” Yakout tells us, “but sometimes, I would stand at the gate of the garden, watching swarms of fireflies get drunk on the

nectar of the forever abundant flowers, imagining my great-great-great grandfather Kasanji lovingly nurturing this beautiful garden.” She then tells us that despite her fascination and deep desire to go into the garden, she dared not disobey her mother. She also tells us that Kasanji’s story was a “somewhat scandalous story that she would never have come to hear, had she not dared to go into the garden one night.” She tells us what caused her to give herself permission to transgress her family’s decree, the unseen border that keeps the garden a forbidden space. “Of-course, I would not have dared to go into the garden, if not for Malar.”

2.3. Malar

Here, Yakout’s story starts to get much more complex. Now, we hear not only the story about the garden, but also Kasanji’s story, and the story of Yakout and Malar’s relationship. “Malar came to work for us as a nanny, for my nephew Yasser,” she tells us. Yakout tells us that Malar was a Tamil girl from Jaffna, the northern region of Sri-Lanka. She goes on to say that because she and Malar were around the same age, “it was not unusual that my mother asked us to share a room”, and that she and Malar became the best of friends, becoming “quite inseparable.” “The thing about Malar was that she was an adventuress, much more than I ever was,” Yakout tells us, then saying that, “Malar would not hear of wasting such a beautiful garden, especially at night, when the jasmine flowers spread out their incredible scent.” Caving into Malar’s persistence, Yakout follows her into the forbidden garden.

In the garden, perspectives shift. Yakout tells us that despite her anxiety at being in the garden, one night she found herself relaxing at the foot of one the trees as Malar sat high up on the branches where “she had climbed like a monkey”. As they both sat “lost in thought,” Yakout heard the most beautiful song fill the garden with resonant sound. “The song moved things in me, things that had been frozen in me all my life,” she tells us, “I felt different, braver I think and I allowed myself to breathe in the jasmine way deeper than I had ever dared to before and let the warmth of the air settle on my skin.” Yakout then describes staring up as if in a reverie into the branches where Malar sat, saying that Malar looked “more at home in my home than I had ever felt, leaning into the branches, melting into the foliage, as if she was an aspect of the geography of the

place.” Yakout tells us that it was with surprise that she realized that it was Malar who was singing.

As Yakout sits absorbed in Malar’s song, she hears footsteps from the other side of the garden. She peers around the corner to witness a glowing figure-- the *Faiymini*-- “snaking through the garden, weaving through the garden, her long hair flowing down her back, her skin dark blue, absorbing the moonlight as if she were a jar of molasses left outside on a moonlit night.” Having opened up into her senses, she watches as if in a trance, forgetting that she has been taught to fear the *Faiymini*. To Yakout’s surprise, as the figure turns around to face her direction, she realizes that it is not the *Faiymini* but her mother. “I had never seen my mother like this before,” she claims. “She looked as if she was seventeen and she had this pale blue fire in her eyes” as she “joined in, in Malar’s song, dancing wildly, clinging onto the branches.” The reverie is broken, Yakout tells us, when “clumsy Malar fell out of the tree with a thud.” Yakout tells us that her mother, embarrassed and ashamed at having been caught in the garden at night herself, dragged the girls back into the house, scolding them.

Yakout tells us that in the aftermath of the transgressions in the garden, her mother tries to silence the girls and distract their attention away from herself by focusing in on the television, watching “handsome Rajiv Gandhi” the newly elected Prime Minister of India, whom Yakout tells us her mother was obsessed with at that time. (Rajiv Gandhi becomes important to the rest of the narrative, but this will be explained as we go along). Despite her mother’s attempts, the girls cajole her into telling them the story about the garden and what it was about the garden that was so foreboding. Mother gives in, and we get to listen, finally, to the story of Kasanji and the *Faiymini*.

2.4. Kasanji and the Faiymini

“Everyone told him not to go Kadahalagala in the first place,” says Yakout, recounting her mother’s telling of Kasanji’s story. We are told that Kasanji travels to the North, “despite everyone warning him that the native islanders were stark mad.” We are told that none of the aristocracy wanted to go to the North despite the Sultan having planted clove and cinnamon plantations to trade with the Bajra traders from the Southern

Coast of India and that Kasanji, being an ambitious man, took on the position of book-keeper at the plantations, anxious to get a foothold into a position of society unavailable to him by virtue of his birth. We are told that Kasanji, being a meticulous man, would walk through the plantation every evening, “examining every leaf on every tree,” all the way down the hill to the edge of the sea “where the ruins of an old temple lay, where spirits and Djinni gathered in the space between night and day.” Despite being warned not to spend time at these ruins, Kasanji returns nightly, and the story goes that he gets bewitched by a *Faiymini*, a spirit beautiful to behold and one who lures in her lovers by the power of her song. Kasanji starts behaving erratically and is shamefully sent back to the capital, Male’. Yakout tells us that upon his return he “built a separate cottage, far away from the main house,” and arbored this magnificent garden all around it. “No one in the family was allowed anywhere near his residence,” causing great strife between Kasanji and his wife and family. Kasanji, despite the rumors that he had been bewitched by a *Faiymini* and that he lived with her in his separate cottage, barely spoke a word to anyone, spending all his time in the garden or by the sea. Two years after his return from Kadahalagala he is found dead, under the Jasmine trees he had so lovingly nurtured.

The night of his death, when the family returned from burying him, Yakout tells us, they discovered a magnificent meal prepared for them, laid out on the kitchen table, spiced with cinnamon and cloves, presumably prepared by the *Faiymini* for her lover’s family upon his death. Unfortunately, instead of understanding this as an offering of peace, Kasanji’s widow flies into a rage, “ordering the food be thrown out, the beautiful jasmine trees be slashed down to the ground, and the cottage burned down.”

What is eerie, Yakout tells us, is that by nightfall the next day, the dismembered jasmine trees “had grown to their full height, the branches blooming full clumps of white flowers despite the rain.” Kasanji’s widow, now terrified, calls the Medicine Man on the island to protect her family from what seems to be a powerful supernatural occurrence. It is the Medicine Man who is said to communicate with the *Faiymini*, coming to the agreement that the garden would be shared between her and the family: before dusk, the garden belonged to Kasanji’s family, but after dusk, the garden belonged to the *Faiymini*, and that she would come to wander through it and sing in her lover’s memory. This, Yakout’s mother explains to the girls, is the story behind the decree of not entering the garden past sunset.

2.5. Love Found/The Garden of Exiles

Having recounted Kasanji's story in detail, Yakout now switches back to the awe that it inspired in her and Malar. Yakout tells us that "having heard the story of the *Faiymini*" Malar now wanted to go and look for traces of her in the garden at every available opportunity, "sometimes taking little Yasser with us." Malar would hold him in her arms and "sing her beautiful melodies" while Yakout "wove the tiny white flowers into her hair."

We are slowly drawn away from Kasanji's story into Yakout's, the garden being what connects it all. Describing the beauty of the garden and the trees again, Yakout vulnerably admits to the audience that Malar and she "kissed under those trees once." We begin to understand that the girls' relationship is a much more intimate one than a friendship, echoing both the forbidden nature of Kasanji's relationship with the *Faiymini* and the forbidden nature of the garden.

2.6. Times of War/Love Lost

"She had to leave us, you know," Yakout then tells us, unexpectedly filled with grief. Here Yakout tells us a most unexpected story. "I often think of her, sitting under those trees that last time, silently this time," she says, describing the afternoon that Malar left to return to Jaffna. Yakout goes on to recount the 1988 invasion of Male' by the People's Liberation Organization of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE), a Tamil insurgent group who were fighting to establish an independent state in Jaffna. Yakout tells us that in the aftermath of the invasion, much of the Tamil working population in Male', even though most of them had nothing to do with the PLOTE, chose to go back "to their war-torn country" in the face of the racism they encountered after the PLOTE was defeated. The Maldivian state was reinstated with the help of the Indian Government under Rajiv Gandhi. What adds insult to injury for Yakout is that neither she nor her family "would be alive if not for Malar."

Apparently it was Malar who communicated with the rebels in Tamil as they stormed into the courtyard of Yakout's family home, negotiating with them to feed them

and give them space to rest, in exchange for the safety of the women and the children of the family. As she tells this story, Yakout has an emotional meltdown, becoming somewhat disoriented and telling the audience more than she intends to. “I couldn’t help but wonder about her when those boatloads of Tamil refugees arrived on the coast of Vancouver just last summer,” she blurts out, “but of-course, I maintained no illusions that she could be on one of those boats.” She cries as she loses hold of her wine glass and it shatters into pieces. Being snapped back into the present moment by the shattering of the glass, Yakout apologizes profusely to the audience and excuses herself to “go freshen up,” saying that her dancers will escort them into the living room to present the choreography and that “she will join them shortly.” As the dancers come in and lead the audience into the living room, we are left to wonder why Yakout was so sure that Malar wasn’t on one of those boats.

2.7. Saturated Combustions: The Choreography

The choreography seeps into the space from all corners of the apartment. Ghostly figures move in and out of door frames, carrying with them moving boxes, half packed, that they leave on the floor in the living room. Malar enters with a suitcase, changes out of her costume into contemporary civilian clothes then helps one of the other performers to put on Malar’s outfit. The *Faiymini* wanders through the space, dancing and crying. Couples move through the space. A man and a woman enter the living room from one of the bedrooms and they hurriedly prepare to go out to an engagement party. They begin fighting. All the couples in the room begin fighting, using the same repeated text. We can hear Yakout, presumably, turn the shower on in the bathroom. The fights end in break-ups. A phone rings. The bathroom opens, and out runs a naked man, a man who looks distinctly like Yakout. He does not seem to see the audience. He picks up the phone and says, “Yasser speaking.”

2.8. Love Lost/Times of Deportation

It is easy, in the confusion of the present moment, to forget about Yakout. But the question lingers as to where she is. We do find out, later.

Through the one-sided phone conversation, it becomes clear that Yasser is arranging for a taxi to take him to the airport later in the evening. Having made the arrangements for the taxi, he sits naked on a bench, looks at the half packed boxes and weeps. The dancers sit around the edges of the space as if they are unseen ghosts.

Yasser gathers himself together, he wanders through the apartment, drying himself, gathering things into the boxes and packing them. As he does this he comes across a video camera and is amused at finding something he had lost, sets up the camera and begins, "I found your camera, Robyn."

Over the course of the next few sentences, we gather that Robyn is his lover, whom Yasser calls a "coward" for his "not being here to see me leave after all our years together...I don't even get the respect of a kiss goodbye?" But then, calling himself "a coward, too," Yasser tells Robyn (mediated through the camera) how strange he's felt over the previous few days: "I've felt so empty, I feel like I'm about to burst into nothing." As he continues speaking to the camera, he gets dressed.

2.9. Dreams of Fireflies and Ashes

Malar's song fills the room again and Yasser falters, asking the camera "Can you hear that? I think I'm going mad, Robyn". Yasser goes on to tell Robyn that he keeps hearing the song that his nanny Malar used to sing to him, and that he keeps having a recurring dream about her. In the dream he says, he "is by a riverside in Sri-Lanka, where Malar was from." Then he goes on to say that even though he is in a completely different country, there are jasmine trees lining the side of the river and that "they were the same Jasmine trees from the garden back home," the supposedly haunted garden that his "ancestor Kasanji built for his Spirit lover." He is leaning against one of the trees holding an empty urn wondering what to do with it. Then he says, "a brilliant swarm of fireflies fill up the entire sky" and Malar walks up from the river. "She has a deep black scar running right down the middle of her chest." "Although I know why the scar is there," he says that in the dream he asks her where she has been and why she has been gone so long. He tells us that Malar begins to answer, but that the fireflies swarm right at her and attach themselves right down the line of her scar and all the way around her midriff.

“For a moment, she glows so perfectly,” he tells us, and then “she leaps into the air and BOOM! She bursts into fine white ashes against the night sky, and I collect her into the urn I am carrying, and start to walk into the river to release her.”

2.10. What the Ghost of Yakout Could never Bring Herself to Say

“I know what the dream is trying to tell me, I think,” he says to the camera. He goes on: “I don’t know if you heard about this all the way in Vancouver at the time, but in 1991, the Prime Minister of India, Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated.” He goes on to explain that the act was carried out by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), a Sri-Lankan Tamil rebel organization, displeased with Gandhi’s pro-Sinhalese policies. He explains that this was one of the first times in the history of terrorism that RDX explosives had been used in a suicide bombing. He then goes on to say that after the day of the assassination, he came across a newspaper on his Aunt Yakout’s desk that printed the details of the assassination and that with the article was his old nanny Malar’s photo. He tells the camera that he was going to ask Aunt Yakout what had happened, but that Yakout, seeing him reading the paper at her desk scolded him, claiming that “children shouldn’t go through peoples desks, they hold private information,” tersely silencing any opportunities for questions.

“Later,” he tells the camera, “I heard her crying in her bedroom,” and then wryly goes on to add “ Oh Aunt Yakout, always crying, barely speaking a word to anyone. Apparently she stopped eating soon after I left for Vancouver. She’s the Aunt I told you about, who was found asleep in the Jasmine garden, never to wake-up again.”

The audience’s entire experience of Yakout becomes completely discombobulated. If Yakout has been dead for a few years, who was it who invited them to this house? As for Malar, there is little doubt at this point, as to what becomes of her as she leaves Male’ and Kasanji’s jasmine garden.

2.11. What I Never Told You, Robyn

“Do you remember the song?” Yasser now asks the camera; “I sang it to you once... when you were exhausted and fell asleep on my bed.” It is the “song of waking,” he claims, “it is the song that woke me up from the darkest sleep I ever fell into”. Then regretfully, he looks at the camera and asks, “I never told you any of this did I? But then, how do you tell someone a story like this? In what context in our happy life in Canada was I supposed to say, oh, by the way, when I was four and a half, Tamil terrorists invaded my city, took my father hostage and I went catatonic for four days.” Then, gathering his will again he says to the camera, “You deserve to know who you’ve been living with for the past six years.”

2.12. For in that Sleep of Death What Dreams May Come

Over the course of the next few minutes, Yasser tells the story of the invasion and kidnapping of his father. He claims not to remember much after that except for a deep darkness, and the sound of footsteps and voices here and there. He tells us that what brings him to consciousness is this song. He remembers waking up, in Malar’s arms, in the jasmine garden. He remembers Malar promising him that “Rajiv Gandhi was going to bring all the Maldivian Dads back home.”

As they sat in the garden, Yasser tells the camera, footsteps approached that scared him. Clinging to Malar, he peers around her to see a man that looks like “one of his toy soldiers.” Malar convinces Yasser that he is a nice man: “Sarath is a boy from a village very close to mine. He has a little boy just like you in the village, I’m sure he would love it if you would play with him while I go to the kitchen and get some food for him and his brothers who are resting just past our garden”. What Yasser does not quite understand at the time is that Sarath is one of the soldiers of the PLOTE.

Yasser tells us that after his initial fright, Sarath charms him by carving “the most beautiful little horse out of a jasmine branch.” The man and the boy have a beautiful moment in the garden. “We hugged each other for a very long time,” says Yasser about

Sarath. The man who has left his son behind in Jaffna and the boy whose father has been taken hostage during the invasion find solace in each other's humanity in a moment at which history pits them against each other.

Upon Malar's return from the kitchen, Yasser claims that he gave the little toy horse back to Sarath to take to his son when he goes back home, not understanding that the chances of Sarath ever going back home were very slim. Filled with compassion for each other, the three say goodbye and Malar takes Yasser out of the garden, "to see Aunt Yakout and Grandmother, who have been very worried that you've been asleep for too long." As she leads him out of the garden, Yasser tells us, "she picked me up and sang right into my eyes, and I could feel the nerves in my arms and legs firing up with joy."

2.13. Malar Stops Singing

Yasser slowly tells us the story of that night, after he had been "fussed over" by his Aunt and Grandmother. He tells the camera that he "insisted on sleeping with Malar." He tells us that Malar put him to bed, "like she always did." Yasser then tells us the story of waking up in the middle of the night, hearing the sound of gunshots coming from the direction of the jasmine garden. "What I heard that night was Rajiv Gandhi's army come to finish off the Tamil invaders," he claims. Instead of Malar, he finds his Aunt Yakout sitting on the bed and when he asks Yakout where Malar is, all she can do is cry and repeat, "I don't know," over and over again.

"Malar did return later that night," he tells the camera. He describes never having seen her in this state. After "stepping gingerly out of Yakout's embrace," she demands that Yasser go back to sleep. As she sits down on the bed next to Yasser, Sarath's little horse falls out of her dress, "one of its legs snapped right off," signaling to us that Sarath is no longer of this world. "Sarath's horse, but it's broken now" Yasser claims to have said to her, and her reply: "Yes its broken now," breaking into sobs of agony, then stopping as abruptly as she began. "I had never seen her like this before," Yasser exclaims. Searching the words to describe her state he says to the camera, "She looked spiritless."

As he articulates this, the performer who plays Malar in the second Act puts on the dynamite that she has been sewing into a vest throughout Yasser's story. "Let's sing Malar," Yasser claims he said to Malar that night as they sat in bed together. In the theatrical piece, Yasser moves desperately towards Malar and holds her. As Malar breaks from Yasser's embrace and moves out of his reach, Yasser reports her as having said that night, "Singing...that is not something I can do any more". "I did not dare ask any more questions and went to sleep as was asked of me."

2.14. How Our Fates Collide and Blow Up

"A day after, that Rajiv Gandhi's army had cleared up the entire operation, and as promised by Malar, my father did come back, although he was in a wheelchair for a little while. Things went back to normal...more or less," Yasser tells the camera. "But I never did hear Malar sing again...and soon after that Malar left us. No one even mentioned her again."

Then falling silent for a moment, he asks: "What could have possessed her, Robyn? I wonder what it is that makes somebody make a decision like that? I wonder what that feels like." As he says these three sentences, Malar comes up behind him and gives him an embrace, which he drinks in deeply. At the end of the embrace, we see that the dynamite jacket has now been transferred onto Yasser's body.

2.15. I Don't Know What I Walk Out into Tonight

For a moment after this, Yasser re-imagines Malar's fate: "I still wonder if it was her in the newspaper," he claims. "I wonder if she is on one of those boats that arrived on the coast of Vancouver just last July," he says echoing Yakout's woeful statement in the first act, "or if she's alive, somewhere in a café in Toronto."

As the song fills the space again, he asks, "I wonder, if I had sung this song with you in happier times, would things have been different for us?" He apologizes to his lover for "falling asleep, even to you," and regretfully claims that Robyn "left him entirely

at the wrong moment.” “Things are so muddled now,” he claims as the telephone rings announcing the taxi’s arrival.

Slowly, Yasser gathers his things and says his final goodbyes to the camera. “I don’t know what I walk out into tonight, he says. “The funny thing is, I keep making up these stories about this fantastical jasmine garden, but now that I might have to go back there I am certain that there’s no space for me in it. What will a lipstick wearing, poetry reciting homo like me do in a place like that? I will defect in London, or Europe somewhere or even bloody Africa. Who cares?” he exclaims.

Switching the lights off, he leaves the apartment, buttoning up a coat over the dynamite belt.

3. Utterances from the Borderlands: What the Body Does Not Forget

3.1. Autobiographical Criticism: A Chronology of the “Shadowlands” of the Border

While writing *Tropical Spirit*, I found myself occupying many *liminal* spaces. After leaving the Maldives, I had found a sense of belonging inside the academic institution in the West, a sense of belonging that was surprisingly called into question during my graduate degree and left me bewildered for a long while. In addition to this, during the making of this project I experienced a difficult immigration process during which my *personhood* was untied from its moorings for a period of an excruciating eighteen months. I also lost my father to death, and there was the deeply shocking beginning of the end of my relationship with my beloved and the loss of the home I had created with him in Vancouver. I found myself constantly off-kilter in the somewhere and nowhere of what seemed to me like “shadowlands,” the shadowlands of the border and the “shadowlands” in which the characters of *Tropical Spirit* dwell: immigrants, exiles and ghosts.

In the aftermath of the project, I was dismayed to discover that many people interpreted *Tropical Spirit* literally, as if it was an autobiography, but it is no such thing. Perhaps I have no right to be dismayed, because it does contain autobiographical elements, and I named one of the characters after myself, so I can see why audience members would interpret it as such. But it is important to remember that while the circumstances of the character of Yasser in the performance reflected aspects of mine, the performance also contains several other completely fictional parallel narratives. In fact, it is crucial to remember that while the character of Yasser, whose circumstances parallel mine-- in the piece, the character Yasser is packing up to leave his home and Canada because of a deportation order and presumably the end of his personal relationship with his lover Robyn—in my case my request for Permanent Residency was

granted. I am not a suicide bomber. The response from many audience members asking me if *Tropical Spirit* is “my story,” if somewhat misguided, has made me reflect on another border that I played with throughout the piece: the border between autobiography and fiction.

The autobiographical aspect of *Tropical Spirit* exists because the piece is, in many ways, a layered response to the politics of the liminal spaces I found myself occupying as I made the piece. But I use both fiction and autobiographical elements to formalize that response. The roots of the piece are deeply embedded in the politics and culture of the everyday circumstances I negotiated as a *person* while I made this piece. My work is firmly rooted in my rootless relationship to the world I live in, but many of the incidents related are fictional. I engaged with and was influenced by theoretical and aesthetic concepts and ideas, and their influences will be discussed throughout the paper. I find that I think and write from a borderland with porous borders. I absorb whatever schools of thought seem pertinent.

In order to write about my process in conceiving *Tropical Spirit*, a work that developed over time and not entirely within an academic context, I will employ a methodology African-American Queer Performance Studies scholar E. Patrick Johnson calls “autobiographical criticism”. This type of criticism uses experiential, vernacular knowledge learned through the negotiation of the daily business of living life. This type of criticism is often left out of “high” academic theorizing and is often employed by agents who find themselves on the borderlands of communities whose values are in conflict. It becomes a way of making sense of and providing a critique of the values of the worlds one must negotiate. Much of the work of critical theorists such as bell hooks and Eve Sedgwick falls into this genre of criticism. Johnson writes of the need to address

...the topic of performance in the borderlands from the perspective of autobiography in order to grapple with the larger questions of identity politics and belonging in both the academy and the various communities

in which I have lived...trying to negotiate the politics of the academy on the one hand, and staying true to my roots/routes on the other⁴

Johnson feels that it is important to acknowledge “that there are various modes of theorizing in the academy,” and there are “theories generated and produced in one’s homeplace/community that go unacknowledged by the hallowed halls of academe....”⁵ For him, “despite the subjugation of that knowledge in some academic circles, theories of the everyday persist inside the ivory tower – from the vernacular performances of students from ‘unlearned’ backgrounds, to the interventions of faculty who include alternative materials on their syllabi....”⁶ As an artist who found myself in an MFA program that required a consummate level of critical thinking, yet as someone who was neither comfortable nor familiar with the Western philosophy prominent in the program, I was looking for a more comprehensive mode of ontological inquiry. I also felt that *no one* school of thinking could provide a sufficient ontological basis for the type of work I was interested in making. Thus, Johnson’s analysis of the need to use various modes of theorizing to provide an ontological basis for work that straddles worlds whose values are in conflict, makes complete sense to me.

Johnson’s use of “autobiographical criticism” as a way of critiquing both the academic community he belongs to *and* his home-community simultaneously is useful to me in thinking about communities whose values are in conflict and the individuals who live on the borderlands of such communities. For such individuals, neither side of these borders is wholly nurturing or wholly discouraging. In Johnson’s words, “they are *liminal* spaces that require agents within them to simultaneously conform to and transgress the temporal boundaries and borders that enclose them and the politics that emerge

⁴ Rivera-Servera, Ramon H. and Harvey Young. *Performance In the Borderlands*,147. This anthology has deeply influenced my retrospective reflections around *Tropical Spirit*.

⁵ *Borderlands*, 157

⁶ *Ibid*

therein.”⁷ Throughout the making of *Tropical Spirit*, I was such an agent, and I straddled a variety of such liminal spaces.

The “shadowlands” of these spaces turned out to be a strong influence in shaping the choices that made up the piece. In the following chronology I outline how the layers that formed *Tropical Spirit* came together. You will begin to see how these layers unfolded in the sometimes terrifying, sometimes ecstatic liminal spaces that I existed in at the time.

In the early, amorphous days of the project there was more feeling than concept, more flashes of colour than lines that formed confident shapes. I call what follows a chronology but it is not meant to imply that one piece merged into the next in a continuing line in time, like a perfectly falling line of dominoes. Instead, I travelled back and forth in time between ideas. Sometimes the discovery of a new idea seemed to cancel out the last, but then the previous idea would come back refreshed with new meaning and a deeper understanding much later on in the process. Thus, this chronology is meant to introduce you to the spaces, events and ideas that informed *Tropical Spirit*.

3.1.1. Spring 2009: Before Tropical Spirit: The Tide, My First Year M.F.A Project

In April 2009, at SFU Burnaby, I presented *The Tide*, a forty-five minute theatre-dance piece that I had written and co-directed with Ann Sullivan and choreographer Marc Arboleda. I adapted the text of *The Tide* from a short piece of poetic prose by Virginia Woolf entitled “The Watering Place”. In the making of this piece, I used Woolf’s writing as my main source and workshopped with a group of four actors for three months, getting them to use the text and the imagery within it to make conventional and unconventional theatrical compositions. During the workshop process, I watched the

⁷ Borderlands, 147

actors engage with this non-theatrical text in sometimes frustrating, but always imaginative ways. I used their compositions to get inspiration for coming up with my own theatrical text. I was working with actors, whose medium requires them to use their physicality and they always managed to lift the prose off the page into their bodies, using time and space to interpret various aspects of the source text. I called this process “visceral translation,” and found the method of transposing from page to stage incredibly inspiring although I am an artist who has always occupied the borderland between literature and theatre making. The juxtapositions between body and text opened my eyes to possibilities I had previously not considered.

The Tide became a lyrical, densely written literary play with poetic monologues, choral speeches and dialogues. I invited a co-director, a choreographer, designers and a complete cast of actors to work with me in a somewhat unusual collaborative process. Over the next three weeks, we came up with staging for the text that looked like a ritualistic dance piece and presented it to audiences. Our process and aesthetic was inspired by Pina Bausch’s *Tanztheatre*, the SITI company’s Viewpoints method and Jerzy Grotowski’s psycho-somatic Acting techniques in addition to Woolf’s prose.

The Tide was successful in two ways. Firstly, I felt that we had been able to make a dynamic, visceral adaptation of the original Woolf piece, “The Watering Place.” *The Tide* managed to use flashes of interwoven narrative to create a complex text that reflected Woolf’s original structure, although in a highly original way suitable for a theatrical performance. More importantly, the poetry of Woolf’s piece was dynamically present in our theatre-dance piece in the way we layered and intertwined fragments of narrative with poetic staging, lyrical language and heightened physical/emotional states. It was a *jouissance* of sorts because *The Tide* at once carried recognizable remnants of the literary source it came from but blew apart the structures of its origins in its *viscerality*. *The Tide* was very much its own piece, but audience members were given a daintily rolled piece of paper at the end of the show that contained the text of “The Watering Place.” This enabled the audience to see the process of visceral transformation that Woolf’s prose had undergone in the hands of a physical theatre company. As an experimental theatre maker, I was excited to give the audience a sense of the process we had created.

The second way in which we succeeded was in how well the company, composed of artists working within different mediums, worked collaboratively, creating a cross disciplinary aesthetic. This was due to the ensemble building work I did with my collaborators at the very beginning of the rehearsal process, which included one overnight ritual of psychosomatic movement as a group. The result was the formation of company that was able to work expressively with each other in the service of a common aesthetic, even during sustained periods of high tension and emotion.

What I was not completely satisfied with was the type of language I had written. It was too 'literary'. The aesthetic of the piece, and the commendable commitment of the performers to the text lifted language off the page beautifully at times, but I knew that for my final MFA project I wanted to take on the challenge of writing language that seemed more 'spoken' even though it might be structured lyrically.

From the process of making *The Tide*, I knew that I wanted to carry three aspects forward with me into my final MFA Project. I knew that I wanted to build a complex aesthetic born out of collaboration between artists from various disciplines. I also knew I wanted to use somatic and psycho-somatic exercises to "write from the body." While, in *The Tide*, "writing from the body" was done by watching other bodies engage in visceral adaptation of text, I wanted to find out if there was a way of writing from my own body.

I also knew that I didn't want to work directly from a conventional theatrical script. In working with Woolf's text and getting actors to do compositional work inspired by that text, I found that they worked much more imaginatively, making dynamic theatrical connections between source and performance. For example, in one of the workshops, one of the company members chose to fill the room with yoga blocks arranged in a perfect circle of dominoes. At the beginning of his presentation, he started the domino effect, and as the yoga blocks fell one by one through the room creating a wave, he spoke pieces of the Woolf text he had carefully selected. The effect was that of three waves layering in and out of each other: one of language, one of the visual image of yoga blocks falling through space in a perfect domino effect and one of the sound created by the rhythm of the blocks falling mixed with the sound of the actor's voice. Somehow, the composition had not only captured the central image of "The Watering Place" but also gave us a sense of Woolf's use of repetitive images and layers in the

way she uses language in “The Watering Place.” This type of dynamic, creative thinking is very hard to come by when working directly with a theatrical script because young performers, especially, tend to focus directly on character and ‘performing the script’ rather than creating an overall aesthetic. From these experiences, I knew that I wanted to once again use a piece of prose, preferably lyrically layered, from which to ‘mine’ a theatrical text. Since I had already worked with a text by Woolf, I considered using *The Waves* as a natural progression from *The Tide*. Although I rejected *The Waves* as my choice, it is curious to note that *The Waves* is a novel written in six soliloquies and that *Tropical Spirit* is a performance consisting of two soliloquies. However, for reasons outlined below I started to become more attracted to *Orlando: A Biography* as my next adaptation.

3.1.2. Choosing Somatics: Stretching Inside Liminal Space # 1: The Borderland of Home and Academy

In September 2009 I began my second year of graduate studies. During the Fall of 2009, I was required to take a seminar course on theory, a class in which we were meant to contextualize our artistic practices in relation to artistic, cultural and theoretical discussions. During this class I fell out of love with the ideas I had about adapting *Orlando*. I felt pressured to explain, in theoretical terms, the *relevance* of using *Orlando* as source material. I was attracted to two aspects of *Orlando*: namely, the play between fact and fiction, and the change of gender. But unlike “The Watering Place,” *Orlando* created a very clear, linear narrative. In my seminar, ‘narrative’, and ‘text-theatre,’ were looked at with some level of condescension. With frustration and humiliation, I decided to give up the idea of *Orlando*. In retrospect I realize that what had caught my attention about *Orlando* was that Woolf constantly blurs the border between fact and fiction in this work, a forceful concept at work in *Tropical Spirit*. That this border is also blurred through the metaphor of a body that changes gender back and forth throughout the narrative was one that clearly resurfaced in my thinking and, in fact, provided me with the spine, which holds *Tropical Spirit* together.

In addition to the trouble I had with articulating *Orlando*’s relevance to my work and trying to describe the visceral aesthetics I had created in *The Tide*, I tried to talk

about working with movement, ritual and bodies, and was met with the kind of blank, amused look that seemed to say, “What on earth is he talking about?” I began to reevaluate what it was that I had wanted to do with a visceral aesthetic. What kept recurring in my mind was a concern that my audience members should acknowledge something intangible but real: perhaps a feeling, light, or temperature, something, perhaps invisible even in the theatrical event. The notion of audience members acknowledging something that was intangible and invisible landing in their viscera and making itself felt kept returning to me. In retrospect, I think I obsessed about ‘things’ leaping past physical boundaries into the organs of people because I wanted to point to mystery as a relevant force in contemporary art-making and thinking. This obsession continued despite the hyper-rational articulation of artistic process that an academic context seemed to be demanding from me.

Once I was able to phrase it as such-- to leap into the other-- I became aware of the aggressiveness of the statement. I recognized that I was being reactive to something, although I did not yet know to what. But I felt doubtful about wanting to generate work from such an impulse. It was not a war or an invasion that I was interested in staging. I was aware that while the image of things flowing between bodies was something I was interested in, ‘leaping into’ wasn’t the right articulation. While I was frustrated at not being able to articulate this feeling any further, I had found a place to begin unpacking what it was that captured me about this desire to move through the boundaries of bodies. This was at the beginning of November 2009.

My experiences over the previous year and a half in the MFA program certainly shaped this desire to move through boundaries. In order to explain what I mean by this I will go back to Johnson. For me, like Johnson, the “consciousness around sexuality was one of the ways in which I transgressed the boundaries set in my home community around how a ‘respectable’ black man [in my case, Maldivian man] should behave...Queerness was beyond the boundaries of authentic blackness”-- and

Maldivian-ness.⁸ In Johnson's words, "borders and barriers which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory, can also become prisons, and are often defended beyond reason or necessity."⁹ My awareness around the taboo that was my sexuality caused me much anxiety growing up. I felt closed in, in my own home, having to choose between home and freedom. My sexuality became one of the main reasons that I decided to leave the suffocating atmosphere of Male', the city I grew up in the Maldives.

Johnson proposes that, "for the intellectual, one place to find an alternative to one's home community is the academy. Represented as the pinnacle of formal knowledge production...It is also thought to be a place where difference is accepted and alternative epistemologies are embraced."¹⁰ Johnson could have stolen the words out of my mouth. Being book smart, I had found opportunities to leave my country by applying for scholarships in Canada. I arrived in Canada by myself at the age of sixteen, and managed to win scholarship after scholarship and to put myself through high school and an undergraduate degree. It was certainly in this spirit of acceptance and being accepted that I began my graduate work in the MFA program at SFU.

Johnson describes the process whereby the "idealistic vision of the academy" that he created when he left his home community to enter academia started to disintegrate as "the false boundary" he had created in his mind between his "two homes" was quickly called into question."¹¹ For Johnson, this process occurred when the alternative methods of teaching and unconventional sources in his syllabi were called into question by his fellow faculty members. For me, the most significant way in which this questioning occurred was around the use of language. As someone who negotiated, in silence, integral components of my identity as a person, I am highly susceptible to an awareness of the things that *cannot be talked about* or at least *cannot be talked about with ease and acceptance*. I remember very clearly the day in my first year theory class

⁸ Borderlands, 154

⁹ *Ibid*

¹⁰ *Ibid*

¹¹ *Ibid*

when I brought up the word *Spirit* as one of the curiosities that drove my practice. Having no formal training in Western Philosophy to this day, I have not been able to completely understand the resistance that I felt in the room when I brought this up. Perhaps it was a confusion of Spirit with Religion that hearkens back to academia's roots in the Church, roots that are today anathema to contemporary, secular thinkers. Whatever it was, the response was mostly an uneasy silence that smelled a lot like unacknowledged fear disguised as condescension. It was easy, I suppose, to dismiss me as a beginner, a theatre-*practitioner*, "unlearned" in Johnson's terms, without the *right* language just yet, to talk *critically* about what I do.

Ironically I had used the word to critically question the ways in which I had encountered the "spirit world" in my upbringing in that other home, the Maldives. The Maldives is an officially Sunni Muslim nation (Islam being the only officially recognized religion in the country). However, like many seafaring places where ancient civilizations have interacted and been bastardized, the islands have a fairly syncretic worldview that is lodged comfortably in daily life. What was common to both my Muslim and Islander worldviews was the existence of worlds parallel to those of the human world in which "spirits" or "Djinni" resided. In verse 15 of the *Quran*, three parallel levels of sentient beings created by the Muslim God, Allah, are described: Humans, Djinni (made of smokeless fire) and Angels, and there are many references to these beings scattered throughout the *Quranic* verses. Along with the Islamic worldview, the islands have a long history and tradition of superstitions, stories and rituals about the 'spirit world' which include not just Djinni according to the Quranic definition but a wide variety of "good" and "bad" spirits who cohabit the earth with humans. I had effectively become an atheist by age fifteen. Nevertheless, remnants of the "spirit world" lay coded in my system even though, rationally, I denied their existence. What is rationalized yet hard to shake off often transforms into curiosity. And I did experience, as a boy, events that defy rational explanation.

In my undergraduate theatre training, I explored a variety of somatic practices including a deep engagement with psycho-somatic work developed by Polish theatre director Jerzy Grotowski and his contemporaries. At the beginning of my graduate work in September 2008, on my Senior Supervisor Penelope Stella's suggestion, I started studying a somatic practice called Continuum Movement. I give a more detailed

description of Continuum Movement in Chapter Three, however, one of the principles I encountered in this work suggested that our sensory capabilities move past the boundary of our skin. In some ways, when we share a space with other bodies, we have the capacity to move in and out of the sensory field of all the bodies that occupy the same space, so to speak. This was an idea that helped me to think about this business of moving past the boundaries of bodies.

As I began to experience the body's capacity to change itself according to social, cultural and emotional contexts, I became curious about experiences I had been told of and witnessed growing up on the islands. These included incidents and interactions between the spirit and human world. What was common to these experiences of 'bewitchings' was that an afflicted person would often accomplish feats of extraordinary physical agility or express a wild violence in the body when a "spirit" entered their bodies. I witnessed the beginnings of an exorcism once where the woman who was being "treated" leapt off the bed she was on and in one swift movement, clung to the springs on the underside of the bed frame like an upside down cat in panic. Through the various somatic and psychosomatic practices I have engaged with over the last six years, I have been able to understand these experiences of "bewitchings" in highly technical language that describes neurobiological processes at play during *jouissance*, which makes them accessible outside of a religious context. In retrospect I think I was also trying to experience and articulate the "wild body" as a source through which our organismic intelligence is released into the world, an intelligence that functions in relation to the other bodies around us, including the body of the planet we live in. In Chapter Three, I discuss, using Michael Taussig's analysis, the political and philosophical implications of examining this organismic intelligence. In Western thought, this intelligence has been *Othered*, viewed as irrational and excluded from serious consideration.

It was in this line of inquiry about "wild bodies" that I brought up "Spirit" in the theory class nearly three years ago and encountered that uneasy silence, a silence that reminded me of other much more lethal silences. The Maldives was effectively a dictatorship for the thirty years preceding November 2008. I grew up in an environment where speaking out against the government had dangerous consequences. Using your voice meant that you would get blacklisted and that your life would shrink and be

severely limited as a result of systematic bullying. During my sixteen years of growing up at home, my father and one of my brothers were continually under surveillance. (I can't remember a time when our phones weren't tapped by the police; oh that ghostly click before hello.) Two of my siblings, a brother and a sister, were arrested without warrants, and physically and psychologically tortured more than once. Most members of my family were harassed constantly with petty and vicious bullying. My family was an activist family. I remember entering a singing competition at age eleven and being bumped from third place to seventh because the song I sang might be interpreted as a political message. As a child I did not understand this and believed that I was simply not good enough. Needless to say, I do not take to collective silencing with an easy grace, especially in an environment where we have the privilege of engaging in difficult conversations with generosity and *without the threat of being tortured*. For better or for worse in my art practice, when I sense a collective around me unable to break a silence, it becomes my concern as an artist to investigate that silence. What is so intolerable that we decide as a group to encircle it with that most cowardly strategy: silence?

To go back to Johnson's terms I was caught in silence in a conflict between home and the academy here in a "*liminal space*" that required me to simultaneously conform to and transgress the temporal boundaries and borders that enclosed me.¹² This contentious borderland is one of the liminal spaces from which the roots/routes of *Tropical Spirit* grew. My autobiographical past and autobiographical present collided in silence and called for attention. I sensed that somatics would be the knowledge system that would enable me to approach, wrestle with and begin giving expression to this borderland where I belonged to neither side.

¹² Borderlands, 147.

3.1.3. Finally Finding a “Somewhere”: A Turn to a Third Kind of “Home”: The Domestic Space

So far, I have discussed two homes in their cultural contexts: a home in the Maldives that I could not reconcile with my sexuality, and a home in the academy that I could not reconcile with my interest in “Spirit” and “narrative,” both apparently “outdated” and “taboo” subjects in the specific academic art-making environment in which I found myself. There is also another “home” of a very different kind that shaped, almost in one fell swoop, the most concrete underpinnings of *Tropical Spirit*. In my mind this is the choice that clarified the manner in which the rest of the piece would come together.

In December 2009, my partner at the time, Ari, and I moved into a new apartment in the Mount-Pleasant area of Vancouver. The apartment was a dingy Vancouver special, the second floor of a duplex, the walls of which had accumulated tar from cigarette smoke that seeped into the walls over the years. Following Ari’s leadership we settled on a policy of removing rather than adding to: the carpets were ripped out, we opened up walls creating much more flow in the apartment and we decided to depend mostly on paint to brighten the place up. So the floor, sans carpet, the cracks in the concrete showing, were painted with a gleaming white paint meant for garage floors, which lit up the floors, giving the space an ethereal, expansive quality. We also decided to paint bright colors on the walls having moved into our new home at the greyest possible time in ever grey Vancouver. The living room was painted indigo, blood red, burnt orange and Matisse blue and the kitchen a bright green bouncing off the walls. The bedrooms, bathroom, staircase and stairwell followed suit with every bright color imaginable painted onto their surfaces.

As I sat slowly becoming absorbed into the color around me I experienced a revelation. In December 2009, a month before the Vancouver 2010 Winter Olympics, arts funding in BC had just reached its sorriest state in the decade. All around me, artists seemed to spend more time at protests and in disagreement with each other about tactical approaches to renew funding than in making work that was meaningful to them. The issue of the scarcity of funding was reflected in its own way in the academy. Canada had recently started to define itself as a Knowledge Society/Knowledge Economy, meaning that there was funding to be had if we could describe our work with the *right*

language. Our graduate classes, were used for strategizing, shaping our ideas into a language that would enable us to get more and more funding. In my opinion, the classes needed to be focused on a discussion of diverse art making processes and philosophies in a respectful, critical setting. Under the pressure to bring in funding, the environment became competitive and I witnessed my colleagues becoming brilliant strategists pitted against each other in the race for the biggest awards, the largest spaces and the fanciest gadgets. Collaboration, that idealistic word, more often than not got left by the wayside. Perhaps because I was an International Student at the time and therefore did not qualify for over 95% of the grants awarded graduate students, I watched this unfolding with irritation and a sense of loss. Luckily for me I observed this from a distance. I was invisible despite my colourful scarves and jolly personality from another world, but I could see what was happening around me.

Back at the apartment, as I sat on the old couch, my senses heightened by Indigo, Red and Blue, I saw the space that was being created around me as a metaphor for the direction I wanted to move in my work. I decided to construct the piece for the apartment and to base it around ideas of “home,” inviting the elusive spectator, getting more and more drawn into the titillating world of I-phones and Flat Screens, into the artist’s personal space. In order to see *Tropical Spirit* guests had to call Yakout Aiteur, and talk to a person and be invited rather than buying a ticket online, or communicating only via email with a completely faceless, voiceless entity. That December evening, staring at the previously dingy walls color morphed into something extraordinary. “Leaping into” changed into “inviting into” and became the origin of an artistic choice: making a piece for “home”.

The choice to make a piece for the domestic space at “home” offered a way of sidestepping the war over money and grants and the need for institutional space to make work in. This choice also offered me a way of thinking about the liminal borderland I occupied between my various homes. The reason why I could belong to neither home completely was because neither could nurture me wholly, for I carried in me aspects that could belong to one but not the other. The culture of spirits and eros that I had left behind in the Maldives was not one that I could engage with in academia. My Queerness on the other hand was something that could contribute an accepted point of view in contemporary academia and vice versa, but it was anathema to my home of Origin.

“Home” as domestic space in a nation where my sexuality was not a criminal offence was somewhere where wholeness might be nurtured. Inside the domestic space, bodies rest, colours awaken the senses, stories belong and ideas are formed, conflicting parts are accepted. Inside *this* “home,” beyond both the imprisoning borders of home of Origin and the ivory walls of the academy, I could make bold choices. I could freely mix all the elements that I wanted to make my work with, be they narrative or postdramatic, somatic or non-sensuous. In contrast to the agitation that occurred in the borderland between home of Origin and Academy, and in the face of the war over money which was exhausting our creative resources, I wanted to pose a solution to this problem in the form of a question. What would it look like, if we made art with what we already had, with the things that nurtures our lives: our homes, our food, the colors we live with, maybe even the stories we tell ourselves?

In the excitement of having clear choice of venue to locate the piece in, the ideas around *Orlando* that I had discarded during the frustration of the theory seminar came back in playful, delightful ways. What if I performed a hostess who invites the audience into her home, feeds them delicious food, and tells them stories about someone named Yasser, possibly a family member of hers? This would allow me to play on ideas about biography and gender that had caught my attention in Woolf’s novel. What if this hostess suspiciously disappears halfway through the piece? What if Yasser then comes out and wanders through the house not seeing the guests but seeing the remnants of the food, used dishes etc. and has a complete fright? (What would be implied by the fact that Yasser does not “see” the guests is that they are ghosts, unseen presences invading someone’s private home, just like the hostess who had invited them into the apartment in the first place.) The structure that I had been so attracted to in *Orlando*, that of fact and fiction being blurred through the performance of multiple genders in one body, re-emerged and collided with an aspect of the Spirit stories I had heard in my childhood, might find expression at “home.” Inside the domestic space I could heighten and play with the eros of the everyday too, by involving food, scent, warmth and all those things that belong deeply to a culture of the body. From this safe space in the borderland I could collect the pieces that seep in through here and there and make art out of it by putting it into form.

I realized even at the time that the idea was somewhat clumsy in that I would have to figure out the details of what would get played out both in terms of what the hostess would tell the audience and what exactly Yasser would *do* at the discovery that someone has had a party in his home while he was asleep. These were all questions that needed answers. The next step was to fill those parts into the structure that I had found.

3.2. Things Fall Apart: A Chronology of Loss

3.2.1. *Between Eros and Thanatos: Liminal Space #2: The Borderland between Canada and Maldives*

The following events took place while I was letting the exciting idea of making a piece for “home” percolate. They changed the course of my life, and the project, entirely.

December 15th 2009.

I applied for Canadian Permanent Residency (PR), a status I had worked hard to qualify for over the last decade. The granting of this status would mean that I could live permanently in a place that did not consider my sexual orientation a criminal offence. As I have stated before, one of the reasons that I left the Maldives was because of this. As an openly Queer man, the stakes were high for me in regards to Canadian PR.

December 23rd 2009.

My father, my only parent remaining alive, died, in a hospital in the Maldives. For those of you who have not experienced the death of your parents, you will not understand the physiological, emotional and cognitive shifts that occur afterwards, until it happens. No amount of words can describe the states that followed the death of my father. I cannot possibly communicate the discombobulation of the senses that occurred in me, and so I will not try to describe it to you in any comprehensive way. The fact that I could not return home for his funeral was an added stress. What is important to this document is how these choices that I made in relation to life seeped into and clarified the choices I had to make to keep weaving the pieces of Tropical Spirit.

3.2.2. Another Nowhere

What I did not realize, when I applied for my Canadian PR at the time I applied, was that the moment one applies for a change in status (in my case going from a Student Visa to PR), one loses one's citizenship status for the duration of the processing of the new status applied for, in my case, for the following eighteen months. What this meant effectively was that if I left the borders of Canada during this time period there would be a very good chance that I would not be allowed back in, considering I was "a case in process." This could severely jeopardize the chances of my PR being granted. I might be needed for an in- person interview/ consultation/ interrogation. I was literally stuck on the border.

I can't leave? I can't go home? To see my father buried? I am throwing an apple at the cabinet window in my kitchen with as much force as I can. It lands with a thud and splatters through the air. The movement of apple chunks through the air is beautiful and the juice leaves a wet stain on the green door. I am scaring my sweetheart. I've begun to ruin his life with my constant anxiety. Gnarl. But I could go home. I just have to get on a plane. But what if they don't let me back in? What if? PR. PR. Your father's already dead, why give up something you have worked for, for this long? Sweetheart. My inner legs start shaking. This is a familiar sensation but I can't remember why. When this shaking starts I know I have to get ready for the ride that's about to follow. I am calling my partner who has left for work. I need to know if the bus made it safely through traffic. I try to ride the wave of shaking in my body by making pastel drawings. The motion of my fingers applying pastel in smooth layers makes sense, and the colours are able to contain my rage. What if? I need to sleep. I need to sleep. I need to sleep now, that'll make it go away.

I was, legally nowhere: I had no citizenship status in Canada, although my body and my daily life was in Canada. The only place I "existed" was in the Maldives. My bizarrely dis-placed position on the borderland, one foot on either side, my personhood and dignity belonging to neither.

Ring-Ring. Hello. Hi. No, I can't come. It's my visa- if I leave now they won't let me back in. Extenuating circumstances? Yeah, I called and asked. I could send a letter asking for permission to leave, but at the moment, any correspondence received at

Citizenship Canada takes a month just to be opened. By that time what's the point? Who was there when he died? How is everyone? Right. I'm doing okay. I don't know. I don't know. My student visa is cancelled because I already applied for PR. Fuck. I don't know how to explain this to you, this fucking Maldivian passport doesn't cut it, OK? Don't you think I want to be there? Once I have my Canadian passport this'll all become much easier. Silence has the smell of ice cubes melting. I'm exhausted. All the time. School's fine. I'm trying to get it done. I have to make my final project. Friends? Don't be stupid, I'm not alone. I've tons of good friends. I'm fine, really. Sigh. Stop it. I love you, too. Click.

To put it perhaps crassly, but clearly, if I were a Swedish citizen applying for Canadian PR, my experience would have been very different, because the borderland of Sweden/Canada is one that is a lot less complicated than the borderland of Canada/Maldives. If I had a passport that didn't require me to get temporary visas every time I entered and exited Canada—a privilege allowed by most European, white Commonwealth and North-American passports-- I could have gone home to see my father buried and come back in without any trouble. I am tempted to construct an Orwellian thought: "All Others are equal, but some Others are more equal than other Others."

The particular understanding of the borderland I occupied contributed to the ways in which I created characters and narratives--characters I call "shadow beings." A decade after 9/11, in a world simultaneously gone wildly terrorist and hysterically policed, the stories that are told in *Tropical Spirit* bring its audiences into encounters with immigrants, exiles and terrorists, that is, shadow beings who occupy and relate to borders and bodies in highly contentious ways. Of course, these shadow beings exist mostly outside the borders of Western nations, in the shadow nations, of what used to be called the Third World.

3.2.3. *Clowning, Playing with and Reading about Colour*

In December, before the death of my father reminded me of the very real borders that I had crossed in order to live freely, borders that my body now was enclosed inside,

I made the choice to make the piece for the apartment and came up with the narrative structure that involved the hostess and Yasser.

In January, the new semester began at school. I tried to write, I tried to find out what it was that this hostess told her audience, but to no avail. In the dry spell that followed I was happy to have enrolled in a Clowning class because it gave me six hours a week of doing creative work and gave me a sense of purpose and connection to my artistic work. The reason I enrolled in this class was because I knew that to keep on working would keep me sane but, at that time, I did not realize that two of the concepts that I would come into contact with in this class would contribute methods that would become foundational principles in the making of *Tropical Spirit*: that of play with bodies and colour.

During this period, my thoughts circled alternatively around the need to keep working on my project and being stuck on the border between acceptance and rejection. I hoped, day in, day out that my PR would come through as soon as possible. Often, paranoia about the possibility of not being accepted into Canada would completely paralyze me. In retrospect, I see that I had no reason to feel paranoid, but the uncertainty of the whole situation and the opaqueness of the bureaucracy made me feel powerless over my destiny. In the meantime, the pressure to keep working on my final project loomed over me like the ghost of my father.

I'm trying to get it done. Goddamit. Sweetheart, I think what I need to do is write this thing as soon as I can. Get it over with. By that time, I'll have my PR, I'll be done with this fucking degree. We'll go away somewhere. Why the fuck is Citizenship Canada taking so much time? There's no way of knowing if the application has even been seen by an officer. I'm throwing an apple at the cabinet window in my kitchen with as much force as I can. I'm just angry, NOT AT YOU! Apple juice has left a soft brown stain on the bright green door. It's visible, but barely. I'm scaring my sweetheart. Yes, I need to get it done. Words. Words. Words. But there are none to be written. Only colours. I have no time, I gotta give this thing time. I'm sorry. There's that shaking feeling again. I broke another wine glass. It's the third this month. At least we can laugh together about my unceasing clumsiness. Sometimes. Less complicated, that's why. I can't. I need to.

I wanted to stop working and take a break. I was crumbling under the pressure to move through the motions of daily life with so much uncertainty looming over me. I consulted my supervisory committee and I decided to keep working. My Senior Supervisor Penelope Stella advised me to get into the studio and do a somatic practice every day. “Note down the images that come up in the work,” she advised me. I talked to my Supervisor Colin Browne. He advised me to write every day. “Don’t worry too much about what you’re writing, just write three pages in the morning,” he encouraged me. It took everything in me to get it together enough to sit down and write three pages every morning. Sometimes, there were fragments of memories, other times I described what I saw outside my window and at others, I wrote short stories that I thought had nothing to do with the project I had imagined. Nevertheless, I kept practicing if only for the sake of practicing.

The non-narrative strategies of the piece started to slowly take shape, when in Clowning class, we began to work with colour. The exercise involved letting colour pass into us as if it was a drug and letting our bodies and voices get affected by this absorption. The expression that took over the room during the exercises with colour was nothing like I have seen in a studio. The sense of play that we managed to access was incredibly freeing in every possible way imaginable: physiologically, emotionally, intellectually, conceptually and seemed to function in constantly mutating structures. Inspired by this, during this dry period for writing, I decided to pursue conceptual research around colour because colour seemed to find expression in the body in a wild way, reminiscent of the *jouissance* accessed in the ‘bewitchings’ I had been interested in for so long.

It was in mid February 2011 that I first picked up Michael Taussig’s *What Color Is The Sacred?* Two points in Taussig’s poetics of colour leapt out at me in particular. The first was his conceptualization of colour as a “polymorphous magical substance.”¹³ His description of walking through the woods during a winter dusk, watching the sunset,

¹³ Taussig, 42

seemed familiar to me and awakened in me a desire to use colour in the project with this new awareness. Taussig writes about:

the unnamable color- a type of light purple, some subtle mist of blue and green with some red and yellow in there too that was, you realize, more than color as in coloring but some other medium altogether. It was, you want to say, a curious lightness, some quite other medium is what you want to say—floating, passing, radiating across the valley through the air, twisting through the branches of the forest as if it were the breath of the dying sun.¹⁴

Thinking about colour “as some other medium altogether,” as a “polymorphous magical substance,” allowed me to begin thinking about the connections between the ordinary and magic. The apartment, the space for which I was constructing the piece, was filled with colour. In addition to this, the idea of colour as magic started to conflate in my mind with the type of moods and tones evoked in the Spirit stories that I had wanted to explore with the piece, anyway. I knew that an important connection was beginning to be made and decided to investigate Taussig further.

The second concept that I was drawn to in Taussig’s discussion of colour was his ideation of color as heat. Taussig writes that

to equate calor [heat] with colour as did Isidore of Seville detaches us from a purely visual approach to vision and makes colour the cutting edge of such a shift. Colour vision becomes a less retinal and more total bodily activity to the fairytale extent that in looking at something, we may even pass into the image.¹⁵

*We may even pass into the image....*This was certainly a phrase that mirrored the work with colour that I was doing in the Clowning class. This excited me because here was a surprisingly direct link between creative practice and theory. Even more than that, this concept of colour as heat directly invoked an understanding of colour as a

¹⁴ Taussig, 39

¹⁵ Taussig, 6

visceral form. Reading Taussig's theories around colour pertinently hearkened back to my earliest impulses about bodies and the spirit world. In reading him, I slowly began to understand a history of color (and bodies and spirit/sacred/magic) that the West had othered and why it had. With Taussig's analysis of "chromophobia", I began to understand Western Civilization's uneasy relationship with Otherness: the Otherness of colour, the Otherness of bodies and their capacity for liberation in the form of *jouissance*, the Otherness of the irrational, and the Otherness of the Sacred that gets formed at the furthest edges of *jouissance*.¹⁶

In addition to providing me with ideas about how to practically utilize colour as a somatic strategy, Taussig's ideas about colour started to give me a sense of the politics of the piece I was making. Considering the painfully bordered existence I lived in at that moment, borders shaped by the historical forces of colonization and neo-liberalism, Taussig's discussion of the history of colour began to help me articulate this politic that was implicit in all the choices I was making. This is further discussed in the following Chapter.

3.2.4. Somatic Practice: Re-membering Spirit in the Body

Written on the body is a secret code only visible in certain lights: the accumulations of a lifetime gather there. In places the palimpsest is so heavily worked that the letters feel like Braille. I like to keep my body rolled up away from prying eyes, never unfold too much, or tell the whole story.

Jeanette Winterson, Written On The Body

Following my Senior Supervisor Penelope Stella's advice, I started going into the studio, by myself at first, to engage in somatic practice. As mentioned before, I had studied Continuum Movement since the beginning of my graduate work in the Fall of 2008. I had attended various retreats over the previous two years with master teacher

¹⁶ Taussig, 12

Susan Harper and found the practice much subtler and far deeper than the psychosomatic work I had engaged with in my undergraduate training as an actor. An introduction to the practice and a discussion of the neurobiological principles at work in the practice are detailed in chapter 4.

In terms of my own creative process, I used Continuum Movement for all our warm-ups during the three month workshop process in making *The Tide*. During that process I found that Continuum Movement almost always resulted in the actors being able to be more compassionately themselves in the present moment inside the work room. Whatever it was that occurred during the practice, the actors would report being able to access their present emotional states with ease. From the point of view of the facilitator/director, this was certainly visible in the way they effortlessly related to each other on stage after these warm-ups. In the retreats I attended there wasn't much theoretical discussion except for the introduction of basic principles, and one of these, repeated throughout the five modules I attended over the two and a half years, was that of the need to create safety for the body, opening up its capacity to receive information from its immediate spatial locations.

A letter from Immigration Canada. You've got to be kidding me, why the hell didn't you call me? It says I have first stage approval. What? I got it? No? First stage...how many stages are there? It says to call this number? 27 minutes of listening to a computerized piano playing Bach, during which I imagine celebrating with the love of my life, booking a plane ticket home to go visit my family whom I haven't seen since before our father died, dancing with my friends. Hello! My Client ID is...Yes, thank-you, that's what the letter says. How many stages are there exactly? So there are two stages. How long does the second stage take? Nine months. Nine months? But the first stage took Nine months. I have to wait Nine more months? Nine more months of blood curdling anxiety, dissociation, self-inflicted lack of intimacy. What a sicko, what a wimp. The red on the living room wall seems uncouthly bright right about now. I can see him turn away and sigh. I can't do this anymore. Red. Just stare at the Red on the wall. The woman on the radio wails. Let's go away to Victoria next weekend. Take a break from all this. That would be nice. You know that I love you? Sigh.

The Continuum retreats I attended were primarily a space for therapeutic practitioners to learn somatic strategies in dealing with physical and psychological ailments. Participants came from a variety of healing modalities: mostly consisting of psychologists, counselors, bodyworkers and a few dancers and education professionals. As a performer, I found the work was incredibly potent in allowing me to be present in a fully articulated, emotionally and intellectually integrated body. As a writer, I found the practice superbly fascinating because often during the movement explorations, memory would surface through the body, not as cognitive, narrative memories but as sensory images: light, colour, sound, dream images and so on and so forth. As a writer, I could then begin to engage with this imagery inside the movement and oftentimes, I would discover deeply held memories that I could de/re-construct into fiction. This was a process I had wanted to explore ever since I had worked on *The Tide*.

One little white jasmine flower. The scent is so delicious. I used to walk down the street right beside him, slightly behind. I was thirteen, he was fifty-nine. He would be up by two a.m., praying. They said that right before he died, he would often wake up in the middle of the night thinking he was on a ship out at sea. He would wake me up at four, to study, but really to keep him company. At five-thirty we would walk through the empty island streets. The scent of jasmine would float down from the park and fill the air. Throughout most of the walk he would look stern, focused, walking was walking for him, not dreaming as it was for me. But as we walked by the park, his face would soften, and his steps would slow down. If I had dared to hold his hand, he probably would have let me. On days that he seemed more tired he would sigh. He was not aware of any of this, of course. If he had been, he would have masked these impulses. But I saw. My mother had a Jasmine bush she obsessed over. After she died, he replanted it in another public garden away from the house. Two white little jasmine flowers. Three, four. The scent is that of peace. A whole bush. A whole garden. Maybe if I grow the garden in my mind I will be peaceful. And like his, my sweetheart's eyes might soften. He might stay for the garden, if he could smell it on me.

One particular experience I had during one of the Continuum retreats illustrates the type of discovery that would set my writing brain on fire. We had been working on finding movement in the fluid of the veins and the surrounding tissue of our limbs that afternoon. As was customary, I was settling into a moment of stillness after moving

about the room, taking impulses from my limbs, when I was overcome with the memory of a hallway in my childhood home. What was interesting to me was that I could remember the smell of the hallway but not the exact dimensions or architecture of it. I decided to follow the smell and ended up sitting next to one of the other participants in the room. As I sat next to him, I remembered the feeling of the wall in the hallway. The hallway was one in which I would often hide. I would lean against the wall, pressing up against it to stop my body from melting into tears. As I settled next to the man I had sat beside in the movement session, I could feel the warmth emanating from his body and seep into my spine. I remembered, with great clarity, a story I had told myself once, in that hallway. As I walked back to my spot in the room, I could no longer remember the scent of the hallway as sharply as it had at first arrived, however, I realized that the story I had told myself and had gotten used to believing was in fact a lie I had told myself in order to survive a particular circumstance. This, to the writer, is precious material, it shows us how story gets formed. This was the kind of “writing from the body” that I intended to experiment with when I began to practice Continuum Movement. To access images and strip them down to their twisted core.

Fireflies. Lights up, bursts into darkness. Ghostly hostess appears and disappears. The sleeping man wakes up and wanders through an empty apartment as if he is about to burst into darkness. A magnificent Jasmine garden smells of solace. Why am I angry? If you are so angry with me over something this simple then something is very wrong. I'm not angry at you. You're not? I suppose I am. I don't know. Get in the car. I don't know if we are going to last, Yasser. Let go. No. This is ridiculous. Sigh. I don't have fight in me. If there is nothing to save I guess we are over. Mourning upon mourning. Why must the measure of love be loss? No more shaking, just an unearthly stillness. Empty. Mother, check. Father, check. Beloved, check. Home. Home. That too? Even the Blue room? Completely. The fireflies burst into darkness again, and again, and again. Another broken wineglass.

In the stillness that I would experience after hours of moving in the studio, I would often spend some time writing down whatever surfaced. I was not so surprised when some of the pieces that I wrote turned out to be memories of or stories about the spirit world I had heard as a child. Many of these stories were about a type of spirit called Faiymini, a beautiful spirit said to lure human beings into falling in love with them, often

through their bewitching song. It was inside these “rememberings” that I began to articulate the way in which these Spirit stories function as a system of metaphors through which profound bodily experience could be understood. As I wrote down fragments of these memories, often inspired by the opening up of the senses that occurred during Continuum movement, it occurred to me that at the level of storytelling, the ghostly hostess I had imagined could tell a story about mortal encounters with the supernatural world. The delightful twist would be that she herself is a supernatural being who tells a story about encounters with the supernatural world, without realizing or at least acknowledging that she herself belongs to that world. The stories of the Faiymini, that I started to remember inside movement, thus started to fill the structure that I had noted down almost six months previously. That ghosts and Faiymini are supernatural creatures who occupy the territory between the human and spirit world is particularly interesting to note in light of the fact that the human beings who occupy the narrative of Tropical Spirit are also shadow beings: immigrants, refugees, exiles, desperados and terrorists.

3.3. The Borderland of Past and Present: History Comes to Haunt the Autobiographical Present

3.3.1. Hauntings of Post-traumatic Memory

Throughout the Spring of 2010, I engaged in play with colour and Continuum Movement as a way of gathering fragments and images through which to fill the mostly empty structure I had outlined for Tropical Spirit. As outlined before, sometimes what would be remembered during this work was complete memories, such as the stories that I heard growing up about creatures such as the Faiymini. At other times, I would access dream images (images that appear and disappear in a flash) such as the image of fireflies and jasmine flowers, filled with sensory information. These images would sometimes inspire fragments of memory, such as the walks I took with my father in the early mornings, or with the case of fireflies, gardens that I had visited in the Sri-Lankan hillsides with my family as a child. In the events that transpired over the following

Summer and Fall, I saw how the fragments of my memories would become intricately woven to make up the fictional narratives of Tropical Spirit.

The looming of another death completely debilitated me in the Summer of 2010. I had struggled in my personal relationship throughout the early part of the year, for reasons that do not belong in this paper, but certainly agitated by the anxieties I lived with in my powerless existence in the shadowlands. In the Summer, my partner confessed to me that he felt deeply unhappy in our relationship, and had been for a long time, and was considering breaking up our life together. I was not surprised at this information but I felt shaken to the core that he wanted out. While we did not break up anytime soon after that, and tried many ways of staying together, it was the beginning of the end. I felt deeply betrayed and alone. The discombobulation of the senses that occurred in me through the following months were similar to the physiological combustions that I experienced after my father's death, except this time the ghosts had much scarier faces, or no faces at all. Again, while I will not try to comprehensively describe the details of what that loss felt like, I will refer to how, in the aftermath of this second debilitating death I had to make certain choices in relation to life. I mean life as both the daily unfoldings and life as the mysterious force that kept me breathing even though I did not quite know where I was and how I was.

I remember sitting beside English Bay one afternoon, watching the sea, wondering how, within the course of half a year, I had lost my power, my dignity, my father, my ability to travel, my lover and my home. To complicate things further, I had still not heard anything from Immigration Canada, and in the face of my disintegrating relationship my irrational fear was deeply compounded. What if the next logical step in this series of losses would be being asked to leave Canada? These losses bubbled in me constantly, sometimes at a low simmer, at other times, shaking through my body with such strong force that I would put myself to sleep with the aid of various easily available drugs. I grew more and more tired. I did not care about my graduate degree and started to feel deeply ambivalent about being alive. I began to make a plan: if I was asked to leave Canada, I would pack my bags, fly quietly to some place I could enter freely with a Maldivian Passport, get a hotel room, write letters asking for forgiveness from those whom I loved, and kill myself. As I write this document retrospectively, I realize that to the reader this might be shocking information. Had circumstances turned out the way I

imagined, and had I actually dared to make the choice to end my life, this would have been a personal choice that I feel no need to justify to anyone. The only reason this information is in this document is because the dark shadows of this borderland between life and death were a crucial autobiographical underpinning that informed very specific choices in *Tropical Spirit* and as such, need to be acknowledged.

I spent my days in waiting, only for one thing: to find out whether or not I would have permission to stay in Canada. I gave up writing. I gave up research. If I was allowed to stay, I would worry about it then. My Continuum practice became a space in which I could breathe rather than a space to generate material. At home, I would sit in the blue room that I loved, slowly mourning its loss. The project I had started to imagine for the space seemed to mock me as it hid under the colours of the walls, the colours that seemed to be the only fragments I could absorb and take with me wherever I went.

While I waited, I needed to find a way to stay alive. If Immigration Canada gave me the answer I was hoping for, I would still have to make sense somehow of my new reality. I needed to examine all the things I believed, and why I believed them, and which of these, if any, I might carry into a new life. I started seeing a therapist to examine my beliefs. It was inside the sessions I had with this therapist that I discovered a crucial piece of information that would create the funneling point through which all the fragments I had been gathering in my work over the previous eight months would come together to form the complex, dynamically woven narrative of *Tropical Spirit*.

In therapy, I remembered an incident that I had always passed off as something that just 'happened' when I was four years old. This event was the invasion of the Maldives, in 1988 by a Sri-Lankan Tamil terrorist group called the PLOTE. During the invasion, my father was taken hostage. I was asked what I remembered about the event and I realized that I actually didn't remember much of anything about it, except that I had fallen asleep for a long time during it. The Indian government under Rajiv Gandhi's command helped the Maldivian government and crushed the Tamil terrorists, and my father eventually was brought back home with much pomp and ceremony. As far as I was concerned it was business that was done and gone. The therapist asked me how long I had been asleep and I replied that I thought it was for a day. Upon her suggestion, I called my family to ask how long I had been asleep and was surprised to find out that I

had been asleep for four whole days. At this point, the therapist carefully informed me that the shaking feeling, the obsessive need for sleep I had, and the disconnection from my partner were all symptoms of a condition called Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and that I was having flashbacks to being catatonic as a child. I did not like this term/diagnosis and refused the type of treatment that was suggested as I did not believe in the need to relive traumatizing memories. Even the little I knew about psychotherapy I did not trust enough to engage in without doing more research. I stopped therapy, but it had brought me to a crucial bit of information.

I couldn't help but be reminded over and over and over again that the character of Yasser in Tropical Spirit, is asleep when the audience arrives at the apartment. They are greeted by their ghostly hostess. The sleeping man has reasons to be asleep.

While I did not engage in clinical therapy, I began to see this event in my childhood as having shaped much of my unnaturally anxious response to life and its natural uncertainties in the present moment. I felt terrible at the knowledge that had come too late, that an event that I did not even remember had seeped into my life in such unseen ways and created utter chaos. But this knowledge also made me realize that if I were to ever become healthy again, there was only one thing to do: to forgive those who had orchestrated an event that had imprinted me with such anxiety, and to begin developing compassion for myself and the broken world I lived in.

Ironically enough, during this same Summer, as I was remembering the Tamil invasion of the Maldives and the effects it had on my personal life, The M.V Sun arrived, on the coast of Vancouver in August 2010, carrying nearly five hundred Tamil Refugees from Sri Lanka. Thanks to passing coverage in the media and being “demonized and politicized” by the Harper Government, the M.V. Sun and the human beings on it had considerable effect in some social circles in Vancouver.¹⁷ Still, the majority of Vancouver's citizens were not particularly concerned that survivors of one of the most

¹⁷ Dhillon, Sunny, *It's been a difficult year, but Vancouver's Tamil migrants would do it all again.* Globe and Mail, August 12, 2011.

strategically organized genocides of our century were at its coast, some of whom could have been involved in terrorist activity. Vancouver was not concerned about innocent survivors or terrorists who were foreign to the borders of its premium-real-estate-comfort.

For me, the writer who had been searching for connective tissue to make sense of the fragments that I was creating for “home,” the MV Sun offered great possibilities because it connected the two places I wanted to write about. Here was a highly politicized Other in relation to both places that I called home. In Vancouver the Tamils were regarded as a nuisance and a danger by virtue of the fact that five hundred traumatized Tamils, some of whom could be terrorists, waited at its port to be granted refugee status. In the Maldives, the Tamils were an enemy because of the invasion I have discussed above.

If I were to work the MV Sun into the narrative of the piece I was making, I had the ‘funneling point’ through which the autobiographical present of Vancouver and the autobiographical past of Maldives could merge. Moreover, this funneling point brought into contact the volatile crossroads of the personal and the political. This demanded from me, the storyteller, a deep engagement with the values of forgiveness and redemption. It was clear to me that here was the opportunity to use fiction to reformulate the historical traumas associated with borders, their existence and the transgressions associated with them, even on a personal level. Add to this, the fact that at the time of the Tamil Tiger’s invasion of the Maldives, I had a Tamil nanny, Malar with whom I felt safe and protected. This gave me a personal perspective on the Tamil Other that perhaps many Maldivians would not share. By virtue of my relationship with Malar I never saw all Tamils as Tigers or terrorists. Perhaps it was Malar’s love that kept me from becoming hateful towards an entire race of people when I discovered how the invasion that had happened so long ago was causing such chaos in my present life.

Occupying the textured shadowlands between life and death and “home” and “homelessness”, I observed the Tamil refugees go through an even more complicated process of finding home. As I did more research around the history of the Sri-Lankan civil war and its effects on the South-Asian region, I came to remember that Rajiv Gandhi, the same man who had effectively “saved” my father, was assassinated by a Tamil terrorist.

Writing from the shadows of multiple borderlands, complicated by the sense of uncertainty I carried with me throughout a cold, long, drawn-out immigration process, in the aftermath of the death of my father, the beginnings of the loss of my beloved, the imminent loss of the safe home I had created, while I questioned whether I would actually make the choice to kill myself if I was asked to leave Canada, the narratives that became *Tropical Spirit* came together. Two of the narratives in the piece end with suicide: Malar's story exploring a fictional history related to Rajiv Gandhi's assassination in 1991, and Yasser's story revealing a character who walks out of the apartment with a bomb strapped onto this chest.

From all these shadowlands I occupied at that time, I began to understand that when everything is taken away from an entire race of people, some of them are bound to blow themselves up for a cause. When everything is taken away from you, death becomes freedom. I wondered what it would look like if I shaped place through the eyes of characters who directly occupied the shadowlands where everything is off kilter: immigrants-in-process, refugees, exiles, terrorists and ghosts, all of whom occupy borders with a great deal of uncertainty.

Carrying these stories with me, I started working with the company I had formed, to make the Performance that would become *Tropical Spirit*. Sometimes we worked from fragments of prose I had written during the Continuum explorations, at others we worked from stories I would tell them and at others, we would construct images from the senses such as the scent of jasmine, the song of the Faiymini or the architecture of the apartment for which we were creating the show. Slowly, mixing visceral aesthetics with poetic prose and oral traditions, *Tropical Spirit* took form. In the following chapters, I discuss some of the ways in which we rehearsed but also the aesthetics and politics of the piece considered retrospectively.

4. The Porous and the Enclosed: Through the Bodies of *Tropical Spirit* a Politics Begins to Emerge

4.1. The Bodies of Tropical Spirit

As I have discussed in the previous chapter, *Tropical Spirit* is a project that I generated using visceral processes, a project in which I utilized various somatic strategies both in rehearsal and in performance, and a project that makes allusion to the wildly sensual culture of spirits and magic. The bodies I encountered through Continuum Movement and Michael Taussig's discussion of the "bodily unconscious" influenced the ideas of the porous, the erotic and enchanted bodies that I wanted to write about. The politics of the piece emerge because I also explore their contrary bodies. The porous, enchanted body and the "organismic", irrational intelligence it releases are often repressed by institutional thought, (whether it's in the rational West or the Mosque,) numbing the body's intelligence and ordering it to the point of exhaustion.¹⁸ This leads to chaos of another kind: the wildness of the combustible body that blows itself up. Having made this piece while being stuck on the border between the Liberal West and the Islamic East in the age of terrorism, the body became a political site of contestation. Let us now take a look at the bodies that we encounter in the making of and the presentation of *Tropical Spirit* and the psychosomatic process that led me to them.

From the previous chapter you will have gathered that *viscerality* and *jouissance* are subjects I have been interested in since long before *Tropical Spirit*. Much of the form

¹⁸ By organismic intelligence, I refer to the idea that the body's system is analogous to the systems we find in all of nature and the universe.

and content of *Tropical Spirit* was generated from the Continuum Movement I practiced throughout the making and performance of the piece, and it is inside this practice that I encountered the direct experience and idea of a porous body. In what follows, I will briefly introduce you to the practice and to a principle derived from this practice; namely, the “resonant field.” I’ll also show how Taussig’s discussion of the body in relation to sorcery helped me to conceptualize what I have called the porous body.

Later, I’ll also discuss how the “porous body,” and the organismic intelligence it releases help us to look analytically at the various bodies and the politics of these bodies in the narrative. In order to do this I make connections between the ideas of Continuum Movement, Taussig’s concept of the *Sacred* and the “spirit stories” that inform every aspect of *Tropical Spirit*. At the end of this chapter, I will outline some of the somatic strategies that we attempted to use in the performance to create an environment that was immersed in Eros.

Tropical Spirit celebrates Eros and the “porous body” making allusion to the organismic intelligence that is released in *jouissance*, and begins to form its politics by exploring the cost of abandoning desire. It does so by contrasting the “porous body” to the “enclosed body” and regarding them as contrary states.

4.2. Experiencing and Conceptualizing the Porous Body Using Continuum Movement and Taussig’s “Bodily Knowing”

Continuum Movement is a practice that conceptualizes the human body as movement; the practice begins with the precept that movement is not something we do, but that something our bodies always *are*.¹⁹ When we begin to think of movement in this

¹⁹ The basic principles I have learned about *Continuum Movement* I have learned from master teacher Susan Harper, who is one of the co-founders of the practice along with Emilie Conrad. The information I present about the practice I have learned in the various retreats I have attended with Harper.

way, even stillness becomes conceptualized as a state of movement at the level of micro-movement within the vibration of cellular fluid. One of the practical inquiries of Continuum is to examine the implications of the fact that our bodies are composed primarily of fluid. Emilie Conrad, founder of the practice, conceptualizes all of the fluid of the body as “a system of intelligence,” the cerebral spinal fluid, blood, the fluid in connective tissue in one’s membranes, brain and viscera amounting to approximately 70% of the total composition of the human body.²⁰ One of the implications of this, as outlined by Conrad, is that because fluid is one of the most “resonant elements, meaning [that] it is not bound by any form, all the fluid in bodies, the fluid of the planet and the fluid of the galaxy...function as one resonant whole.”²¹ Let me explain, how, at the level of practice, this ‘resonant field’ begins to get formed.

Part of the basic practice of Continuum includes working with sound. As Continuum Movement teacher Cherionna Menzam-Sills describes, “Continuum sounds are usually not projected outward for an audience to hear...In Continuum, we usually intend to make sounds into our bodies.”²² According to Conrad, “our tissues shift depending on context.”²³ “Our tissues, being fluid, vibrate in resonance with the sounds we make. The vibrations of the sounds we make gently shake and loosen our tissues, dissolving whatever tensions or patterns they hold.”²⁴ It is in this dissolution of pattern at the level of our tissue that we begin to vibrate the fluid in our system, fluid that might have become densified and impenetrable in the process of the over-focused, rigid patterns of movement required to survive in a world obsessed with linearity. This fluid that might have become dense then begins to vibrate, allowing our tissue to become more porous to the sensory stimuli in our environment, and as such, begins to vibrate with the fluid of the bodies around us. In effect this process allows us to be in play with each other and the fluid in our environment, creating what Conrad calls a “resonant

²⁰ Conrad, Emilie Interview 2003

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Menzam-Sills, Cherionna. “What Is Continuum,” 1

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

field”. This is deep play; it moves beyond/between what Conrad calls the boundary of a body.

Inherent within this notion of the play between bodies is the expansion and opening up of the body’s capacity to receive sensory stimuli. Continuum opens up the porous or erotic body. Certainly, during and after a Continuum Movement session, it is almost always the case that participants report seeing colours more brightly or being able to sense the draft of air as it approaches them through the expanse of a room even before it touches their skin. Often one is able to sense the movement of the bodies of the participants in the room with more precise awareness. In a session I facilitated with my company, one of the actors had the profound experience of having a drink of water during a break and sensing it trickle all the way down into her stomach in a way that she had never imagined she could sense. The heightened sense of receptivity of the senses that allows our bodies to function inside a “resonant field” is certainly at the basis of the Continuum practice, and begins to give us access to our porous body; sensual and erotic.

As we discuss the way in which Continuum allows us to access the “erotic body” I would like to introduce Taussig into this discussion. Taussig, who does not talk about bodies in the physiological way that Conrad does, nevertheless describes a process of bodily exchange. The context within which Taussig discusses bodily exchange is within a critique of Walter Cannon’s article “Voodoo Death”, an article that draws on reports written by Western doctors on deaths due to sorcery in order to come up with a “scientific explanation of mystical phenomena.”²⁵ What I find fascinating about Taussig’s critique of Cannon is that he invokes his own contemporary understanding of sorcery. In relation to Cannon’s article, Taussig claims that for him the article

suggests something quite different as well, another form of sorcery, perhaps wherein and whereby bodies relate to other bodies, human and non-human—animals, plants, the seasons, tides, and the movement of

²⁵ Taussig, 16

the stars and the winds—forms of sensateness, of bodily knowing, that exist below the radar of consciousness....²⁶

While parallel to the physiological process of flow implicated in Conrad's "resonant field," for Taussig, the concept is expanded. He writes that the notion of "flow directly implicates not one but several bodies and energies flowing into and out of one another across borders accessed by dream, surreality and animal visions."²⁷

The "resonant field" and the organismic intelligence that is relaxed within it were practical concepts through which I could begin articulating the porous, erotic body that I had been interested in for so long, a body that at once allows the world in and reaches out into it, like the fluid of our cells, shifting their shape when in sync with the systems of nature. It was also a concept through which I could begin imagining what Taussig calls "bodily knowing, that exists below the radar of consciousness", what I imagined to be *organismic knowing*. Because Taussig invokes the borders that are accessed by the world of magic in relation to a "flow between bodies," I began to see that *Tropical Spirit* carries within it, bodies that wheel through the tensions created between the porous and the enclosed bodies.

4.3. The Porous and the Enclosed Bodies

It became clear to me in retrospect that "spirit stories" carry in them a vernacular knowledge as in Taussig's "bodily knowing that exist below the radar of consciousness."²⁸ In *Tropical Spirit*, for example, Kasanji is warned not to spend time on the beach (the liminal space between water and land) at dusk (the moment through which day fades into night). The border is a place of opportunity *and* mortal danger. It is within the bounds of these borders and transitions, the shadowlands between

²⁶ Taussig, 15

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

water/earth, night/day, heat/coolness that he becomes bewitched by the *Faiymini*. Kasanji, a “meticulous man,” a book-keeper of all things, gives into erotic desire in his encounter with the *Faiymini*. This is a desire only satisfied through deeply somatic means. Kasanji gives everything else up for the ecstasy of scent, sound and erotic love: the Jasmine garden, the *Faiymini*’s song and the wild communion between human and supernatural being. *Tropical Spirit* is a narrative that explores the cost to the erotic body of civilization and civil order.

The notion of “bodies” is crucial to a retrospective and political analysis of *Tropical Spirit*. I began to recognize that there emerges within *Tropical Spirit* a circulatory system of contrary “bodies” that is best understood in terms of the relationship between what I call the erotic, porous body and the self-involved, enclosed body. The “porous body” is one that is open and porous to all the senses, to desire, and as such is connected to Eros. It is associated with colour, with passion, irrationality, enchantment, magic and the body. The “enclosed body” is one that is guarded and self-involved and as such, connected to Thanatos. It is associated with reason, order, convention, duty and abstraction. Both these bodies also carry within them a set of contrary forces. In *Tropical Spirit* each of the characters experience a life-changing encounter with the porous or erotic body which leaves him or her in a state of permanent exile from the familiar world.

Kasanji the book-keeper and Yakout the obedient daughter are seduced by desire within the sensuality of the garden. Kasanji devotes his life to the *Faiymini* and Yakout can never love anyone as intensely as she loves Malar. In Kasanji’s case his bond with the *Faiymini* leads to a total disordering of his rational senses and a destruction of the world order he once embodied. Of course, Kasanji would say that he has finally come to his senses. Kasanji’s enchantment with the *Faiymini* shows us the porous body in its wild, irrational, ecstatic sense and the same thing happens to Yakout’s mother who dances wildly in the garden. In Yakout’s case, her body is opened up in the garden when she falls in love with Malar and her enchanted song. Eventually, the world conspires against her and leads her back to the enclosed body, a body that becomes catatonic and which is subjected to a quiet, excruciating withering.

Yasser's story both echoes and contrasts that of Yakout. In the garden, as a child, his experience is entirely porous. The adult Yasser knows that the enclosed body dies a slow death and it is to speed up the process that he walks out of his apartment with a bomb strapped to his chest. In the following section of this chapter I will show how the tensions between the porous body with its receptive/wild contraries and the enclosed body with its catatonic/combustible contraries reveal the politics of porosity that is inherent in *Tropical Spirit*.

4.3.1. The “Receptive” Porous Body

We hear the story of Kasanji through Yakout. Yakout tells us about the *Faiymini* and its enchantment; however, she has never seen the *Faiymini*. When she thinks she hears and sees the *Faiymini* it turns out that it is her mother. Whether or not she comes into direct contact with the enchanted world, her story does contain evidence of an experience of the porous body. Moved by the power of song, she “allows herself to breathe in the scent of the jasmine, deeper than she had ever dared to before, and the warmth of the air to settle on her skin.” This gives her access to her sensuality. This is an example of the quieter side of the erotic body, that which I call the “receptive body,” the body in which the senses begin to heighten the subject's perception of the world. This is the type of receptivity that opened up in my Continuum Movement sessions with the company, whereby the actor I mentioned before, sensed water trickle through her insides all the way into her stomach, profoundly changing her sense of self and her environment.

4.3.2. The “Wild” Porous Body

The other aspect of the erotic or porous body entertains the ecstasy and abandon that is described when Yakout's mother dances wildly in the garden, “as if she was seventeen, clinging onto the branches and joining in on Malar's song.” This is an example of the wild side of the erotic, the “wild body” that excites *jouissance* and displaces ordered understandings of the world. I have mentioned previously that the psychosomatic work I have engaged in over the last six years has helped me understand the “bewitchings” I heard about and witnessed in the Maldives, outside of a religious context. It is with great clarity I remember in one of the Continuum Movement

retreats, a seventy year old, arthritic woman who, during the third or fourth evening of the retreat accessed this wild *jouissance* and moved about the room with great force, doing cartwheels among other acts of extreme physical agility. The description of Yakout's mother's bewitching was directly informed by this memory.

We must remember that Yakout, despite her obsessions with smell, taste, texture and sound is a character who has always repressed her porous, erotic body, in whose body are coded the repressions of the deeply judgmental world around her, a world that would value book-keeping, that would forbid the enjoyment of the deeply scented garden at night and that would, in fact, support the "slashing down of the magnificent jasmine garden to the ground." That she is a closeted lesbian who ends up starving herself to death is tragic, but it is not a surprise. In *Tropical Spirit*, Yakout's demise is contrasted with Yasser's decision to follow his desire to live freely and openly as a gay man. He is of a later generation, and as a man has greater social mobility. But Yakout, returning as a ghost, reminds us of how she once tasted forbidden love also.

Perhaps the character in the piece who is most in tune with her wild side is Malar, the "adventuress." Malar has no qualms about freely running into the garden, "climbing up into the trees like a monkey." She has the ability to "lean into the branches, melting into the foliage, as if she were an aspect of the geography of the place". Yakout describes her as "being more at home in my home than I had ever been." Malar, the Tamil "adventuress" from beyond the shores of Yakout's home on the Maldives, can more easily "melt into the foliage" and lose herself into organismic intelligence, into *jouissance*.

4.3.3. The Garden

In this discussion of the porous body, it is also crucial to acknowledge another kind of porous body altogether, the body of the garden-- the body of the earth-- for it is in the garden that they are initiated into a porous, erotic body. The garden contains within it the whole range of the porous body: it invites the inhabitants of the ordered world beyond it into it with its seductive scent, it nurtures young love, it provides safety for the uprooted, it wakes up the catatonic body before it dies a slow death but also it excites wild *jouissance*. It turns book-keepers into madmen, it is home to the *Faiymini* and her

song, it re-grows itself overnight. It is no coincidence that the erotic body is associated with the Jasmine garden. Like the original garden, the garden of Eden, the Jasmine garden is forbidden. The exile from Eden was the moment of the disenchantment of the world, and exile led to the separation between body and Spirit, in both the Judeo-Christian and Islamic texts. Contemporary Western thought still seeks to divorce its rationality completely from the body. In *Tropical Spirit*, the forbidden garden is a site at which the wild irrational, or the “Sacred” according to Taussig, and the Body become reunited in a wild disordering of the senses. The garden “brings lovers together in the strangest ways; it loosens all desire. It is the revenge of the passionate, chaotic earth against human order.”²⁹

4.3.4. The “Catatonic” Enclosed Body

The contrary of the “receptive” porous body, the catatonic body, is a traumatized body that can neither receive nor respond to stimuli. This is most obvious in the case of the character of young Yasser whose body shuts down in the face of great terror. He is awoken from the catatonic body by “the song of waking” which Malar sings to him. This is one of the moments in which the opposition between receptive and catatonic bodies is explored. “She carried me in her arms and sang right into my eyes,” Yasser tells us, “and I could feel the nerves in my arms and legs firing up with joy.” The body becomes alive and receptive to the deeply resonant vibrations of song. The grown up Yasser revisits the catatonic body as he struggles with his imminent loss of love and home. “I’ve been falling asleep, asleep even to you,” he regretfully says to Robyn, his lover. He leaves the home he’s made in Vancouver, not “knowing exactly what” he “walks out into tonight.” In the catatonic body, the archetype of the exile is invoked. Yasser’s story is echoed in Kasanji’s story too, and Yakout’s story of her self-imposed starvation, and of course, the story of Malar. For, the catatonic body is also the body that Malar experiences upon the murder of Sarath. “I had never seen her like this before ...she looked Spiritless,” recalls Yasser as he tells the story of the evening of Rajiv Gandhi’s army coming to

²⁹ Browne, Colin. Email Correspondence, May 26, 2011.

“clear up the Tamil rebels.” The contrast between the catatonic body and the receptive body is a narrative site for asking questions. What is the price of numbing and excluding the body? I suggest that this kind of numbing is what leads to what I call the “combustible body.”

4.3.5. The “Combustible” Enclosed Body

Explored through the recurring image of fireflies, the combustible body also becomes the metaphor for the death of the body, be it through starvation, heartbreak or suicide.

The combustible body is one that is foreshadowed from the very beginning of the piece. Yakout is immediately associated with fireflies, described as “about to burst in to darkness at any moment.” Yasser tells Robyn that he is “about to burst into nothing.” Malar’s body becomes the ultimate site of the combustible body. In order to rid the world of a repressive, colonial border, she blows herself up. The body in ceasing to exist becomes a weapon of destruction. Malar’s body goes through a process of transfiguration throughout the piece: She moves from the receptive, to the wild body, to the catatonic body, to the combustible body. In presenting Malar’s process of transfiguration from adventuress to terrorist, I inquire as to what happens when we become completely bodiless despite the body being bawdy, chaotic territory confronting us with notions like “spirit” and phenomena like bewitchings that cannot be rationalized.

A decade after 9/11, in a world simultaneously gone wildy terrorist and hysterically policed and where borders have proliferated, the stories that are told in *Tropical Spirit* bring its guests into encounters with these transforming bodies that transgress the borders of the rational and the irrational, and the borders between nations. Both the “wild” porous body and the “combustible” enclosed body are bodies that act out, daughters of the same womb. What makes them distinct is that the receptive, porous body allows the world in, allows itself to become the world in all its inherent irrationality, to be in play with the world. The combustible body, on the other hand, is one that blows itself up along with the world. This is what I understand to be the result of a disconnection with the world around it. When we no longer have a body to lose, it becomes easy to blow it up.

4.4. Somatic Strategies at Play in *Tropical Spirit*

In a project that had deep concerns with the body and viscosity, we used several strategies in the performance of the piece to create a space as richly textured with Eros as possible. This section discusses some of these strategies as a way of giving you an idea of how at the level of practice I tried to engage the guests in a bodily process without invading their sense of agency or violating their bodies.

At a very basic level, the creation of the ritual space of hospitality that I grew up with certainly helped create some of these somatic strategies. The use of food in the show was one of the ways in which this environment was created. As the audience members arrive, and before they are led to the kitchen they can smell the scent of spices emanating from the stoves where food was being cooked. Throughout the piece the guests eat and drink, keeping their sense of taste active and alive. Before greeting each guest (in the guise of Yakout), I put jasmine oil behind my ears and on my clothes so that as I hugged and kissed them in greeting they would already be introduced, sensually to the jasmine garden, even before they hear about it. The space, as discussed before, was filled with colour and texture, inviting the guests to settle into their senses as soon as they arrived.

4.4.1. *Am I a Beautiful Substance that Flows into Blue?*

Because of Ari's design of the space, colour surrounded the audience throughout the piece. Instead of keeping colour contained within the vertical and horizontal walls, he had painted a large semi-circle of red spreading onto the ceiling from the wall. In the same way, in the orange section, the colour moved across borders onto the ceiling in a perfect triangle. The purple flowed in a pool onto the white floor. Even when I made the initial choice to make the piece for the apartment, this movement of one thing into the other, this *seeping between*, the wall continuing onto the ceiling and the ceiling continuing onto the wall via colour, was something that had deeply inspired me. In retrospect I realize that the notion of *seepings between* borders was also present in the design of the space, in the way the planes of the space blended because of the way the colour flowed between them. In the way it uses colour, the space invites the viewer to

start looking at the planes of the space not as completely fixed entities but as shifting, moving, seeping entities.

The decisions that were made in relation to the “surrounding” colour made it seem even more alive and tactile. The decision to fill the kitchen, painted mostly bright green, with tropical plants, layering green upon green, gave rich texture to the space, emphasizing its tactility, what Taussig describes as “the way color dissolves the visual modality so as become more creaturely and close, so close in fact that the image-- or what was the image-- becomes something which can absorb the onlooker.”³⁰

The decision to time the show so that the first act, which takes place in the kitchen is performed in the hour before sunset, was a choice made to take advantage of the fact that “when we see color, we are actually seeing a play with light in, through, and on a body, the body of color itself.”³¹ The light of the setting sun is itself color in its most elusive form, described by Taussig as a “curious light lightness.”³² When combined with the tactility of the green of the kitchen, this “curious lightness,” as it passed through the large windows into the kitchen, helped create a space filled with texture in which “color can seem to be a polymorphous magical substance” that the audience senses around them.³³ They may even allow themselves to get absorbed into the play of it, but cannot touch it. In the same way the decision to use mostly candlelight in the living room for the second act, which was timed to begin after the natural light had mostly faded from the sky created an interaction between light and colour evoking texture. In the second act, the tone is more sinister, less stable. Even the walls extending onto the ceiling and floor in pools of colour reflected the process of the disordering of the senses as expressed in the text and dramatic action.

³⁰ Taussig, 19.

³¹ Taussig, 42

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

Finally, there was the 15' by 10' mural that I made that was the last image that the audience engaged with before they left the house. Ever since I began to think about 'leaping into' bodies I wanted to make a mural, traditionally a two dimensional form, that would flow out of itself into the space. I used soft pastel, a medium that 'lifts off the paper' both because soft pastel needs several layers of pastel to be laid on top of each other for the color to resonate and because, at the slightest vibration, the powder easily lifts off into the air. The large size of the mural was an invitation to the audience to engage with it with their whole bodies. In retrospect, I would have liked to place the mural in a part of the space that was more open. I felt that because of where it was placed, most audience members did not have enough distance from it to truly engage in a peripheral, total body experience with it. However, one audience member sat against the wall opposite the mural for a long while. She said that she felt as if the mural was a microcosm of the whole piece. I asked her if she could explain what she meant and she replied to me that she felt like, "it was moving even though it was meant to be still and that the fragments of colour that it was composed of seemed to be pulling towards each other."

4.4.2. Song as Somatic Strategy

In writing the narrative of *Tropical Spirit* I used a song as a device that connected the three interwoven storylines. It was not originally my intention to use it as a somatic strategy. However, in lifting the piece off the page, it became clear to us that live singing inside the space offered a direct somatic strategy. We had previously not considered this despite all of the work in the Continuum practice which used sound to resonate our fluid tissue, dissolve pattern and create a resonant field. In rehearsal one day, in the scene in which we first heard the song coming from far away, from an unseen part of the apartment, we realized just how powerful song was in connecting us as bodies. As Janelle Reid, the performer who sang the song extended her voice into the space that first time, an electrical sense filled the air, a buzzing that passed through all of the bodies in the room, renewing our energy. Song, after all "is the great medium," as Taussig tells

us: “as breath and rhythm it collates and connects the vibratory quality of being. Emanating from the chest and throat, connected to dream... a wide arc of possibilities and impossibilities.”³⁴

In discussion with the company, I decided that it was imperative to include the song at significant narrative points in the performance, during transitions and whenever it was possible to do so without interrupting the flow of the piece. Adriana assigned each of the performers the task of learning folk songs in languages other than English. The piece included songs in Armenian, Korean, Farsi, Italian and Dhivehi. The purpose of this decision to use unfamiliar words and music was to engage an English speaking audience with the sound of singing rather than the meaning of the songs. In that sense the somatic experience was privileged rather than the narrative. What Taussig says about shamanic songs resonates here:

Shamanic songs the world over often use archaic and bizarre terms. Could we dare think of color in the same way? As that which is at odds with the normal, as that which strikes a bizarre note and makes the normal come alive and have transformative power.³⁵

In retrospect, colour was used with some success, but I think song is a strategy that was underused in the piece. Certainly, in the moments that it was used it was always very powerful. In fact, as a performer it was always in the moments that the songs vibrated through the space that I was able to melt into the audience and sense their acceptance of me as performer. If I were to present this piece again, I would have the performers fill the space with song as the guests arrive. The performers would sing from hidden places filling the space with the sound. In the same way that the light of the setting sun creates a “polymorphous” texture, so the sound would penetrate the audience member.

³⁴ Taussig, 15

³⁵ Taussig, 8

5. The Body of Delight: *Tropical Spirit* and the Theatre

5.1. Theatre: A Porous Site for Movements across Many Borders

In the last three sections of this paper, ideas have been suggested about bodies and viscosity, about borders that imprison, boundaries that invite combustion and the shadowlands of exile in which *Tropical Spirit* developed. You have encountered receptive bodies, wild bodies, catatonic bodies, and combustible bodies, stories about terrorists and exiles, truthful fictions and the encounter with troublesome notions like “spirit.” I have not yet addressed the way in which I came to choose the medium of theatre as the site at which to formalize an aesthetic of porosity that draws from heterogeneous disciplinary, aesthetic, cultural and philosophical traditions.

The site of theatre has been contested over the last twenty years and has been pronounced as an “outdated” form by many. Hans-Thies Lehman in his defence, and redefinition of contemporary theatre in his study, *Postdramatic Theatre* (1999), proposes that the theatre is “catching up” with the rest of the art-forms at the current moment and forms his notion of the *Postdramatic* by linking contemporary theatre to characteristics of *Poststructuralist* philosophy.³⁶ In composing *Tropical Spirit*, I was drawing from the oral tradition of the culture I grew up in and the theatre, as a de-centred site in which informal oral traditions such as communal creation of stories through gossip, local stories passed by word of mouth and experiences remembered and pieced together by several

³⁶ Lehmann, 13

narrators might be shared. I was not troubled by the lack of an authorial voice or by the Western traditions of theatre for which I have great fondness.

Although I knew that my final MFA project would include aspects of performance, I did not originally set out to make a piece of theatre. It would be equally true to say that I did not set out *not to* make a piece of theatre. I was trained in theatre performance but being in an interdisciplinary graduate program, I decided to use the freedom it provided, at least in theory, to explore ideas across a variety of disciplines without having to give my practice an identifiable name. Therefore, I explored and was open to ideas around bodies and borders in several media. Formal frameworks were suggested by my colleague Edith Artner's installations, my colleague Myra Moreta's exciting ideas around combining video images with interwoven genres of "World" and "Western" music, the paintings of Frida Kahlo and Mark Rothko, Pina Bausch's *Tanztheatre*, newspaper articles, documentary footage about the Tamil genocide in Sri Lanka, my memories of Spirit stories, my personal relationship to the border as an immigrant-in-process and the somatic and psycho-somatic forms I encountered in my theatre training. As I collected the ideas about viscerality, sensory images, fragments of narrative from several different sources, including my own body, memories and the news, I trusted that inside the process of play a form would materialize.

I had engaged many times with the process of play in the tradition of devised theatre making that I was introduced to in my undergraduate training. Several of the professional productions I had worked on with companies in Vancouver, such as the *Leaky Heaven Performance Society*, *Proximity Lab* and *Radix Theatre*, all followed processes that used play as a way of making contemporary theatre by combining aspects of performance art, installation and theatre. During the Clowning class I took in the Spring of 2010, I experienced what master teacher David MacMurray Smith describes as "the body of delight: a frame of mind and body...made up of experiential memory in the body that can be inspired into presence." He further explains that "the memory released in this body is one of visceral delight and permission to release into

the flow of the moment and play.”³⁷ Because I knew I was interested in blurring disciplinary boundaries, because I knew that I was using heterogenous sources to create a work, and because I never really had a complete script to work from, I decided not to predetermine what the form of the piece would be. Instead, I decided to discover its form during the devising period with my company, using the visceral feeling of delight that I experienced inside play in the clowning class and the specific methods of play that I had engaged with in my previous work. In the end only theatre offered a place where such play could take place and where crossings between such a set of heterogenous forms could be facilitated.

The theatre is a complex discipline that has developed tools and processes to weave together vastly heterogenous media. Sound, the movement of bodies, storytelling, visual imagery, affects of space and time, are all contained within the form of theatre. In the theatre, I could joyfully mix and formally test out all the fragments that interested me. In retrospect, looking at the form of *Tropical Spirit*, I would argue that it is a piece of theatre. It uses the discipline’s inherent interdisciplinarity to produce a complex artistic form that mixes the fragments I brought into rehearsal (as outlined in detail in Chapter 3). This is not to say that, at times, *Tropical Spirit* does not also seep into its sister disciplines of performance and installation art. In addition to this, *Tropical Spirit* lands squarely between the traditions of contemporary Western theatre and the oral tradition of storytelling I grew up with.

For example, actors act “parts” in *Tropical Spirit*, but at times the audience wonders whether the author of the stories is performing himself, blurring the boundary between theatre and performance art. In addition, a crucial dramatic action in the first act is the act of hostessing. This includes the preparation of food and its serving to the guests. The performance is grounded in the immediate relationship between guests and hostess and the ‘spontaneous’ needs of the moment.

³⁷ David MacMurray Smith, *Clownage Notes*, 4

At times, there is a fourth wall behind which the audience observes the action. Often the wall becomes as porous as the bodies of the performers who seem to invite their guests into a resonant field that contains them all. The piece was written for and performed in an apartment invoking the genre of site-specific art that grew out of visual art practices. Upon knocking on the door and entering, the guests first sit by themselves in a colourful room, engaging with it as if it were an installation. After the piece is over, the audience is invited into another room where colour and shape in a mural function to frame the evening.

Given all these aesthetic and disciplinary border crossings, how do we contextualize *Tropical Spirit* in relation to a contemporary theatre aesthetic? Lehmann's theory of the "Postdramatic Theatre" offers a starting point with which to locate the piece in relation to contemporary Western theatre. As I have mentioned, through my work with contemporary theatre companies and probably because of it, it's clear to me now that certain aspects of *Tropical Spirit* conform closely to the strategies laid out in Lehmann's study. Because *Tropical Spirit* draws heavily from the oral tradition and the rituals surrounding that tradition, however, I am reluctant to situate the piece too firmly within the Postdramatic tradition. Nevertheless, Lehmann's analyses are appropriate for beginning to understand its aesthetics.

5.2. Relating *Tropical Spirit* to the Postdramatic Theatre

One of the strategies that Lehmann associates with the Postdramatic tradition is the seeking out of site-specific spaces. In discussing the use of space in "Postdramatic Theatre," Lehmann claims that site-specific theatre is made to "speak" and is *cast in a new light* through the theatre."³⁸ He favorably quotes Heiner Goebbels in relation to his collaboration with Magdalena Jetelova:

³⁸ Lehmann, 152

I am interested in a theatre where all the means that make up theatre do not illustrate and duplicate each other but instead all maintain their own forces but act together, and where one does not just rely on the conventional hierarchy of means...I therefore try to invent a stage reality that has also something to do with the buildings, with the architecture or construction of the stage and its particular laws, and which also finds resistance in these...³⁹

In addition to the principles of de-hierarchization and engagement with site specific space, Lehmann also discusses a recurring characteristic of Postdramatic theatre that he calls scenic poetry. The most clear example of the discussion of the scenic poem is found in his discussion of Jan Lauwer's work:

his works are united by a stage aesthetic brought to the theatre by the visual artist: the visual details, gestures, colours and light structures, the materiality of things, costumes and spatial relations, together with the exposed bodies form a complex web of allusions and echoes.⁴⁰

In the following paragraphs I will explain how each of these strategies are explored in *Tropical Spirit*.

Although I had not read Lehmann's work before the production of *Tropical Spirit*, the strategies that I have outlined above are certainly contained within *Tropical Spirit*. As someone who had been working within the contemporary theatre scene in Vancouver, responding to the sort of theatre defined by Lehmann, it is no surprise that my aesthetics correspond to some of what he identifies.

For example, being created and performed *in situ*, *Tropical Spirit* "casts" the apartment it was made for, as well as the city it was made in, in a new light. The piece explores central themes of the conditions on the borderlands and the experiences of "home/homelessness." The conflation of my home of origin (the Maldives) with the home I was living in (Vancouver), "spoke" and made a contribution to my understanding of the

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Lehmann, 88

notions of place and home. The open layout of the apartment and the way the colour on the walls moved across planes all contributed spatial meaning, adding another layer of understanding to the idea of *site* of “home” as an unstable space.

In addition to creating a site-specific theatre piece bordering on the edge of installation, I collaborated with Pegah Tabassinejad, a choreographer, and ended up using a thirty minute, fully choreographed dance to separate the two acts of the piece. This corresponds to what Lehmann discusses as a de-hierarchization of means in the theatre. The existence of a thirty minute dance within a full length piece of theatre creates the sort of parataxis that Lehmann identifies as a characteristic of the Postdramatic Theatre. Partly because Yakout invites her guests under the pretext of showing them the choreography she has devised, I intended that the audience be in anticipation of a choreography. After the dance, Yasser replaces Yakout. The audience is put in the position of having to re-evaluate its own relationship to the performance which changes completely in the absence of Yakout. Therefore, I needed to have a choreography that would function as a separate dance piece that could stand on its own, but also somehow be connected to the two acts of the theatre performance that it occurs in between. I used this opportunity to collaborate with Pegah Tabassinejad, asking her to engage with the aesthetic and contribute to it in her own terms. Pegah, decided to locate her choreography in an aesthetic similar to the *Tanztheatre* of Pina Bausch, knowing that I had been influenced by Bausch in my previous work. Her choreography was congruent with the aesthetic of *Tropical Spirit* but stands as its own as a work of art.

In reading Lehmann subsequent to the performance, I also realized that our use of various visual and sensory images ‘installed’ in the space correspond to what Lehmann identifies as the creation of scenic poetry. Images such as the young woman who is glimpsed standing at the edge of the balcony of the living room, the wine-glass that breaks into the sink, the crayon that one of the actors melts into an electric frying pan, the cloves scattered throughout surfaces in the kitchen and the various shamanic talismans that hang in the windows of the kitchen invite the audience to “read the

scene.” Lehmann suggests that such formations/processes, situated in between poetry, theatre and installation are best described as a *scenic poem*.⁴¹ Certainly, although not done consciously, what Lehmann describes as the process whereby “the spectator of the new theatre searches, pleasurably, wearily or desperately-- for the Baudelairean *correspondances* in the ‘temple’ of theatre,”⁴² is deeply relevant to the aesthetic of *Tropical Spirit*. As a piece that is heavily layered, *Tropical Spirit* demands that its audience engage with it as poetry, searching for the traces of connections between its elements, scenic and otherwise.

5.3. Other than the Postdramatic: Playing on the Border Again

Implicit throughout Lehmann’s analysis is a dismissal of theatre that centers around narrative. In Lehmann’s study, the notion of narrative and what he calls “text theatre” is often not very clearly delineated and the vagueness around this notion is contentious, especially in trying to locate a piece such as *Tropical Spirit* that corresponds to principles of the Postdramatic. The piece does *not* centre itself around a written script or a “text” of any sort, although at its centre there are a number of oral histories and stories told. If in fact, what he calls “text theatre” refers not only to theatre based on a script but also to theatre that is formed around narrative, then it is important to me to note that he does acknowledge that

...by alluding to the literary genre of the drama, the title ‘Postdramatic Theatre’ signals the continuing association and exchange between theatre and text. Nevertheless, the discourse of *theatre* is at the centre of this book and the text therefore is considered only as one element...of the scenic creation, not as its master. Important texts are still being written, and in the course of this study the often dismissively used term ‘text theatre’ will turn out to mean a genuine and authentic variant of

⁴¹ Lehman, 111

⁴² Lehmann, 84

postdramatic theatre, rather than referring to something that has supposedly been overcome.⁴³

I wonder if my work could be described as an “authentic variant” of Postdramatic Theatre or whether *Tropical Spirit* dwells in the shadowlands between drama and postdrama. I would be happy if this were the case.

As I have discussed throughout the paper, *Tropical Spirit* draws from the rich oral tradition of storytelling that I grew up with, a tradition that is beyond the borders of Western theatrical tradition within which Lehmann forms his Postdramatic theories. *Tropical Spirit* does not quite fit into a discourse of the Postdramatic and cannot be precisely located in relation to this tradition although it does have a relationship to Performance Art, a variant on Non-Western ritual and ceremonial practices.

In the oral tradition stories are told informally, almost in the form of gossip or conversation and told with a great deal of self-reflexivity, humour, and a sense of play with the immediate circumstances, even when the stories themselves might have been about serious or tragic content. Unlike the Western understanding of classical narrative, what Lehmann calls “the model for a desired, imagined or promised development of history,”⁴⁴ the traditions of storytelling I grew up with had more to do with the creation of a communal space through ritual and the sharing of stories. Often, the stories that I heard, even though they had passed from generation to generation, were changed slightly with each telling, and were almost never presented as the *truth*. In fact, if the story was being told as something that may have happened in real life, by virtue of the fact that it was constructed in conversation by a group of participants trying to piece together a story from fragments rather than having a storyteller who would stand on stage, the reliability of the narrators and the “wholeness” of story as a “grand narrative” would be in question, implicitly.

⁴³ Lehmann, 17

⁴⁴ *Ibid*

In *Tropical Spirit*, with the character of Yakout, I attempted to create this informal atmosphere, relating the stories I had heard as if they were gossip, often involving the audience by asking them questions and making space for them to ask me questions about places and people. Sometimes the show looked much closer to this non-Western oral tradition, and at other times, the piece looked much more like a conventional Western theatre piece. As is apparent from this discussion, another borderland in which *Tropical Spirit* forms its aesthetic is the borderland between the contemporary Western theatre tradition and the oral tradition of communally constructed stories.

5.4. The Politics of *Tropical Spirit* /The Play of Theatre

Tropical Spirit belongs to the theatre because theatre is a discipline that is made with live, performing bodies and, as such, the site at which to frame certain questions -- questions about the effects of bodiless-ness in the global age of terrorism. Because live theatre can open up and deeply engage with the unbound, bawdy territory that is the body, it also becomes a site in which attitudes of play, subversion, melting, mixing and delight can flourish. The theatre as a discipline has always carried within its walls the wonderful sense of play that moves us into and sometimes beyond the anxieties associated with "master narratives." The theatre is a space in which *Tropical Spirit* had the freedom to blur the boundaries of the borderlands it explored. This is porous thinking, and porous thinking is no stranger to the theatre, or to the storyteller. Life itself is fully porous, and a theatre that cannot see this or take this into account is doomed.

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