

Artspeak Postscript 67:
The Women in Our Lives: Response to
"Perla/Pervize"

DADA DOCOT
on "Perla/Pervize"

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I. Perla/Pervize

"Perla/Pervize" is an invitation to witness the weight of the artists' affections for the most important women in their lives. The summoning of the paired names of Perla/Pervize suggests that these two women's narratives are as connected as they are separated. Their energies, labours, even burdens and exhaustions, are distinct from, as they also perhaps fold into, each other. Moreover, reverberating in the works exhibited in Perla/Pervize are also stories about the artists, Jasmine/Christian.

Christian and Jasmine elaborate upon the emotional work of figuring out these women's stories of both strength and vulnerability. Set on the exhibition floor are desiccated cacti which were the result of the artists' experiment on testing the endurance of these resilient succulents by exposing them to the heat of a kiln. The kiln is an extreme comparison to the already oppressive environments in which succulent plants could survive, even flourish. I do not and will not know the complete stories of

Perla and Pervize but the sense of decay and drought signified by the artists' cacti project tell us how descendants may ponder on their own and their families' feelings of uprootedness and dislocation. Anthropologist Behar (2013) tells us, "Travelers are those who go elsewhere because they want to, because they can afford to displace themselves. Immigrants are those who go elsewhere because they have to. If they don't displace themselves they'll suffer: their very existence is at risk."

My familiarity with Pervize is limited to Jasmine's reverence of her through creative labour. Jasmine reproduced Pervize's sandal using clay. The drape of a curtain made from sheets of ceramic chains linked by metal binders hangs over the ceramic sandal. In the remaking of these two objects into clay, lightness metamorphoses into heaviness, and they now press upon and gravitate towards the earth undisturbed by the occasional waft of air that enters through the gallery doors as visitors enter. This unwieldy curtain's title, "Third Shift," is a curiosity. It may indicate one's temporally segmented labour, or it may

refer to identifying one's generational descent and attachments. I would like to know more about Pervize's life story, to learn about the conditions of her travels perhaps simultaneously imbued with limits and choice. I may never know completely, but Jasmine's retelling of her grandmother's narrative through her works point to a kind of traveling that could have been – as anthropologist Ruth Behar (2013) describes her own journeys between Cuba and the United States; perhaps containing a similar ontological heaviness.

Plastered on the two walls are risograph prints on which we read an alliteration: "Pilipino Fainting Filipino Painting." In his poem printed on the back of these prints, Christian continues: "a painted body, a painting body, a fainting body." I repeat this word play in my mind, and I am reminded of the story of Doña Consolacion in Jose Rizal's classic novel written during the Spanish occupation of the Philippines that helped inspire the Philippine Revolution of 1898. Doña Consolacion, a native or an indio, received slaps from her husband, the town's Spanish

lieutenant-general, each time she mispronounced Filipinas, named after King Felipe of Spain. "Felepinas, Felipenas, Felifinas, Filepinas..." Tired of, and pained by, her husband's beatings, Doña Consolacion began to stammer. But Doña Consolacion is painted by Rizal in complexity. She fought back when beaten, and she expressed her frustration about her status as being both privileged and oppressed by tormenting her fellow indios. Perhaps confused by the context where she is rendered powerful in some sense yet also subordinated, she retreated to hand-gesturing, and eventually, she refused to speak in any tongue. One day, an indio sings to her a kundiman (serenade) that for her prompted a remembrance of words – and feelings – that she knew were not yet forgotten. Her muteness was her form of lamentation.

Christian writes that his mother fainted for the first time after 16 years of work in Canada, but that she continues to labour with her hands despite realizing the fragility of her weakening body. Aware of the different, perhaps less intense labour that art production demands from his hands, Christian writes

that he has not painted in months. In Christian's problematization of artistic productivity by not painting, he shares this heaviness by performing the "light" yet emotionally loaded act of "non-work." Christian communicates a wish for his mother Perla - time for rest.

II. Lydia

What follows is a write-up about a day of importance to my family members who are now dispersed all over the world. My account below is based on my filming of the events of October 30, 2016, when members of my family and our friends gathered at a Catholic Church in Los Angeles, California, for the christening of Enzo, the newest addition to our ever-growing and increasingly transnationally separated clan.

I am behind the camera. My teenage cousins Tatum and Tati are in the frame, sitting on a pew. Tatum sits on the left, gently holding Enzo who is today in his whitest clothes as required by the church for his baptismal rites. Her sister Tati sits beside her. Enzo appears restless, and he bends backwards, stretching his

fragile body perhaps to see Tatum who is busy chatting with Tati about the unfolding events in the church, now getting busier as family members and guests arrive. My mother sits one pew behind my cousins, caught right in the middle of the frame. From the camera, I see my mother as she claps her hands in a steady rhythm, hoping to catch Enzo's attention. Enzo turns to my mother. Pleased, my mother smiles widely, and she begins to open and close her hands while singing a familiar song that Filipinos sing to their young ones who are being taught the most basic of motor skills. Hearing the tune, Tatum exclaims, "What a Filipino thing, this 'close-open!'" Laughing, she continues, "Why don't we also teach him, 'beautiful eyes!'" touching on the joke common to Filipinos that the f sound is often (sometimes unconsciously) interchanged with the p sound. (For example, Filipino/Pilipino. Painting/Fainting.) Tati giggles as she tries to capture Enzo's attention by inviting him to imitate the exaggerated fluttering of her eyelids. Wanting to hold Enzo's attention, my mother quickly changes her entertainment tactics. She sticks her tongue out, and gives out her

biggest smile after each playful gesture.

My siblings and myself now live in four different countries: the U.S., Canada, Australia, and the Philippines. I roam the church for scenes that could be captured on video, and a relative asks if my filming is a continuation of the short comedy documentary that I had made about my mother. My mother jokingly tells her friend sitting beside her that she could be her co-star in the film this time. Somebody suggests that we should take a family photo, so my immediate family members gather around a pew for this rather rare photo opportunity. From the left of the pew is my eldest sister's American husband David, Manay (sister) Malou who cradles Enzo on her lap, their only son named Marco, and then, my mother. Standing behind them are Manay Weng and her New Zealander partner, Paul. My mother tells me to pass on my videocamera to Tatum so I can join in the picture, for after all, I excused myself from studies and work in Vancouver to attend this occasion. My mother jokingly says that we will just add Patrick, my brother, to the photograph later. Patrick is her only child still in the

Philippines. This time, he was not given a visa to fly to the U.S. My mother keeps her hopes high that some day, Patrick's papers to immigrate to the U.S. will be approved. Today's occasion is a festive one, but I know that she shed tears upon learning about my brother's unsuccessful visa application. An American citizenship would be a gift for Patrick, so that he could perhaps move more freely to see the rest of his dispersed kin. She keeps on reminding us, her children, that it is her last wish for all of us to be reunited. She once joked that she wishes that this occasion when her children are all together would not be on her "final viewing." The last time that she could gather all her four children was over 20 years ago, on the occasion of her husband's funeral rites.

My mother is now limited by movement, although her residence and access to a needed health care in the U.S. were made possible by the immigration of Manay Malou. Her children continued to find new homes all over the globe and she carries the burden of maintaining familial solidarity despite time zones and distances. If her life were not

constrained by her health conditions, she would choose to occasionally visit her children. Her plans for a reunion with her four children are mediated by the state, seasons, and her children's life schedules that are dependent on their respective ventures. The reunification of her nuclear family is becoming a seeming impossibility. In fact, Enzo's baptism in L.A. was a demand by my mother that opened a possibility for a brief yet momentous family reunion as much as it was his rite of passage to Christianity. As Perla/Pervize is a story of Christian/Jasmine, this piece is also inescapably a personal introduction - or rather, a discomfoting public revelation - of my own impetus for taking on the emotive work of understanding Filipino migration.

Works Cited

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