These are my Reparations, episode 1: march 18th, 2465

Kim Ninkuru in partnership with Charles Street Video

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Essay by Ayo Tsalithaba

I don't quite know when to start, and I meant to write "where" but I think that my little mishap is telling. Kim Ninkuru's work is always timely, it feels somewhat urgent and yet it has a lasting quality. So, mixing up "when" and "where" feels like a happy accident, or perhaps like something intuitively intentional. Before I watched episode one, which I am writing about, I spoke to Kim to gain insight into the four-episode series as a whole.

This is not the project's first iteration, in fact, it is a re-exploration of a previous installation by the same name in 2019. The earlier version of "These Are My Reparations," in which Kim suggested I watch, the film has a runtime of three minutes and twenty nine seconds. She sent me a recording of it to provide context, so I watched that version first. The setup of the opening shot is for me, as a viewer and filmmaker, a dream. We see a white bust with a reflective head covering sitting atop a pedestal. In front of it, a bright computer screen shining just as brightly as the face of the bust in an otherwise dark room. Behind the bust is a video of a character named Honey, played by Ninkuru, projected onto a white wall. We suddenly hear a voice say:

"Welcome, I'm RadioHead. The first virtually intelligent radio that will play all your favourite songs."

We soon discover that this intelligent robotic creature exists in a post-apocalyptic world and was created by societal elites for the purpose of entertainment. Then, the camera angles switch, revealing Honey, sitting at the computer in front of RadioHead as well as a closeup of the bust as it begins playing songs. The projections behind RadioHead are of Honey sitting strapped in a room, screaming inaudibly.

This version of "These Are My Reparations" leaves the viewer with questions: Who exactly created RadioHead? Who is Honey, the woman in the room, and how is she related to RadioHead or the songs that it is playing? On the phone, Kim told me that she struggles to describe this project in a short, concise way. I told her that I would try to help her find the words for it, and with my limited knowledge of the piece, I proposed: "a speculative worlding project," hoping I was somewhat right. She told me that it is a horror sci fi short, and when asked her intention for her audience, she added "I just want them to have fun!"

Let me now take you to Episode 1. Housed inside the 95" by 52" Window Space at Xpace Cultural Centre, this short film's themes take some time to uncover.

The film begins with Honey, our protagonist from the 2019 version of the project, turning the handle to a door. We are led into a small white room with nothing but a filing cabinet, desk and chair. Honey shuffles around in her seat, looking around nervously, until a stack of papers and a pen are slid across the desk by an unseen entity. Honey paces around the room, sits back down and flips through what appears to be a contract before signing several pages. She looks up at the camera, and we are thrust through the fourth wall into the position of voyeur. Next, an unknown person places a silver bracelet on Honey's wrist and in the next shot, her gaze lands on us once again, this time in a closeup. We are then transported into a different room, where our protagonist is in a strait jacket. Honey's screams are inaudible, but the strain and sense of disarray is evident.

I am struck by the soundtrack to this piece. Like the presentation of the film's themes, it is disorientingly dissonant, and intentionally unsettling from the beginning. The audio tricks you. We hear footsteps in sand, but Honey is walking on carpet at a different pace. Then a faint ringing creeps in along with various other aural disruptions.

Ninkuru draws a clear thread between her 2019 exploration of this concept in 'These Are My Reparations' and its most current iteration. The display of Episode 1 at Xpace mimics the layout of its original 2019 version, extending the visual parallels across time but providing less context for the viewer. We are never fully comforted by a voice, telling us what is going on. Instead, there is only laughter and humming, juxtaposed with the image of Honey yelling in an empty room. Furthermore, Ninkuru subtly channels the themes of technologically fuelled disorder and disruption; while putting discomfort, uncertainty, power and agency (or lack thereof) on full display in this horror sci-fi thriller.

I am led to believe that this first episode is a mere part of a story, not its ultimate beginning. Besides the fact that the project itself had an earlier iteration; my belief comes from Honey's behaviour as she "settles" into the room. Her hesitant willingness to sign the papers presented to her presupposes a context that we are not privy to as viewers, but that we are curious about.

During our phone call, Kim told me that "the fourth episode is not the end," a sentence that not only gave me further insight into her project, but that I promised her would end up in this essay. She is aiming to reveal more of the story in the future, and through her artistic practice, Ninkuru is building a world that I am excited to see more of.

-Ayo Tsalithaba