wood carved spoon from a visit to the Philippine collection at the Field Museum, Chicago, IL 2017
What does it feel like, look like, to mourn for, to attend to, to yearn, to long, to need, to split the tides and drown under their weight, to be held by death and to live with its spectre? What does it sound like, to remember, to contour, to ache within generational loneliness? A life of vacancies and occupations, an arrogance required to know and learn about yourself because no one else will desire it for you, coupled with infinite listless traversals, of no particular place, of unspecified time, alongside and inside haunting, with all the carriers of memory, of who you are and all your relations, disappearing each passing year and each passing mile?

Many of us live in a narrative of loss. Born out of suffering and named and unnamed death. We find ourselves years too late, through an inheritance of violent images and news reports, by trudging through the archival residue of our oppressors, through whispers between relatives who want to forget and the family albums without voice. Far too often through the eyes of another, a loss that is only seen and known through their eyes.

We see how they see us, how they have never seen us at all. They portray us as diminished and distraught, if not dead. And if we are not dead we are halfway to it, and if we are not halfway we are exotic, the privilege of our difference. They extract the best from us and the best of us while rendering us in perpetuity as inferior or unintelligent. They pretend to be us and then simultaneously pretend we do not exist, leaving us bereft of lineage. Our pain is used to alleviate their guilt, and our threshold for pain is their frame of understanding. Our deaths are treated as ordinary and inevitable. It is a death that must be performed again and again.

To account for our bodies is to account for something that they don’t want to comprehend or empathize with or make real, to turn into fact. And for many of us we never get to leave our bodies, our content, our biographies, the legacy of death that is carried inside of ourselves. It gets dragged into every space like a tangled black hole, an impossible mess whose very presence challenges this house and its rightful occupants. It constructs through suspicion and doubt a rejection of facts that are witnessed instead of lived. It denies the use of bodies to fortify this house without first acknowledging that this house was built on the exploitation of our bodies.

When does a portrait become a body? And what happens when we enter that body? How do we demand space in a narrative, to insist that a portrait become a body and for a body to become a fact, and for a fact to be a fact, and for that fact to be understood as not only told but an actual...
truth? A truth that is shared and is known, a truth that does not necessitate its own undoing in order to finally be seen. And to be seen as a living thing, a thing that is not only dead, but undead, that is not relegated to the past, because to be seen as anything else is to waste it? A life as the longest sentence in the longest story.

You ask what it means to create out of damage. Here it is.

**ACCUMULATION**

So much of diasporic existence is cobbling together a sense of self, a life as accrual. There is first realization of what was never taught or told, followed by a constant and unskilled removal of the colonial plaque from our psyches. Erasure occurs through submersion, when the ocean of dominant histories and narratives swallows those of our kin. Yet within this shipwreck of memory we still search for the ancestral ruins that are without language or form. The further you endeavour down this path the more apparent it becomes that we conjure the dead with each step. The longest way home in the longest story with no end.

Evoking death is not about reliving loss in order to create a narrative of visibility. It does not reclaim our ghosts. It is an argument for estrangement and multiplicity, to recognize and refuse to be seen as a single subject, a single body, as a single death. Grace Hong states that, “To bring out your dead is to remember what must be forgotten, to find the ‘evidence of things not seen’... To bring out your dead is to say that these deaths are not unimportant or forgotten, or worse, coincidental. It is to say that these deaths are systemic, structural. To bring out your dead is both a memorial and a challenge, an act of grief and of defiance, a register of mortality and decline, and of the possibility of struggle and survival.”*

How do we preserve the breath and life of these unaccounted for bodies? How do we miss who we do not remember? How do we love what cannot last?

Collage detail

Dean C. Worcester archive, Newberry Library, Chicago, IL 2017
These are vessels, harbourers of stories. They hold our ghosts, who have been summoned from music and the shadows, in the flowers and from the weeds, from the remains of our familial connections. Layering, building, erasing, rubbing, sanding, carving—an insistence of their presence with each stroke, each angle, each texture. They are tended to for months at a time with a careful affection, a transference of energy and humanity from maker to hand to body. An intergenerational letter from the dead to the undead. What amasses adds meaning as much as it conceals what lies below. Obscurity as protection and material accumulation as remembrance and perpetual care. A refusal of disappearance.

The memories recognize us before we unearth them.

What lurks in the trees, as much as we, are real. The branches and vines envelop our mothers and great aunts, our sisters and brothers, the children of relatives unknown. Father emerges from grandfather. A funeral procession on an eternal summer night. Neither we nor our ghosts survive these bodies, but we will endure this life. Even if we live amongst wolves.

DESIRE

Meanwhile, the ghosts continue to bewitch our dreams. We awaken each day delirious from the scent of cigars and the taste of their construction, our chests weighted by the damp branches. We hear the percolation of streams and feel the fresh cut wood. Tracing the indentations on the furniture we restore their bodies one leg at a time. The unconscious meets hallucination the more we wonder about survival as desire.

To allow yourself to remember, to embody, to reinvent a life that is not your own is a constant reorientation. What is broken can be reborn but what is reborn is inevitably broken. To love this body and mistrust how it was written. To acknowledge that the conquered body is forever unresolved while still wanting to resuscitate it. We retain it to understand its intricacies only to misinterpret its vocabulary. How do we safeguard the actual memories without sacrificing the invented ones? As much as we are tormented by our ghosts we are seduced by their mystery—it is a process that reveals the longest string of contradictions while burying ourselves deep within its constellations. The search for a sky without a North Star.
We follow the painful rivers of work to lead us *through* not beside, an ongoing practice of unfolding secrets. Our complex personhood means we can desire light in a future time while still wanting to feel his face in our hands and to feel her hands with our ears. The reminders of our survival and resistance are littered within the uneven surfaces and between the consonants and vowels, imperfect and slivered. After all we, like our ghosts, hunger to be *seen*. In the leaves, in the birds, in the window sills and on the boats, laughing and dancing, eyes beaming, through the kisses and the embraces. We gather the unremembered piece by piece until we reach a luscious nocturne of aquamarine and lavender and apricot, beyond *our* imagination and beyond *their* possession.

Untethering our dead, one long story at a time.

Stay with us. We’re just settling in.

—Kim Nguyen
Maia Cruz Palileo (b. 1979, Chicago, Illinois) lives and works in Brooklyn, NY. Recent solo exhibitions include *The Answer is the Waves of the Sea*, Monique Meloche, Chicago; *The Way Back*, Taymour Grahne, London; *Meandering Curves of a Creek*, Pioneer Works, Brooklyn; and Maia Cruz Palileo at Katzen Museum, American University, Washington, D.C. Palileo received an MFA in sculpture from Brooklyn College, City University of New York and a BA in studio art at Mount Holyoke College, Massachusetts.

*Maia Cruz Palileo: Long Kwento* is curated by Kim Nguyen and organized by Diego Villalobos. This exhibition is made possible thanks to generous support from Pamela and David Hornik. Special thanks to Monique Meloche Gallery, Katherine Farley & Jerry Speyer, Michael Sherman & Carrie Tivador, Ashlee Jacob & Michael Darling, Charmaine & Roman Mendoza, Bill & Christy Gautreaux. The artist thanks their family, gallery, Dahlia Nayar, Margaret Paek, Loren Kiyoshi Dempster, Tim Daly, Simon Liu, Inc., Kim Katzberg, Sara Jimenez, Ginny Huo, Taymour Grahne, Asianish, Nancy Graves Foundation, Art Matters, and the Wattis Institute staff. The exhibition travels to the Kimball Art Center, Park City, Utah and will be on view beginning January 14, 2022.

The CCA Wattis Institute program is generously supported by San Francisco Grants for the Arts, the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts; Wattis Leadership Circle contributors the Westridge Foundation, Penny Coulter, Lauren & James Ford, Jonathan Gans & Abigail Turin, Steven Volpe, and Mary & Harold Zlot; and by CCA Wattis Institute’s Curator’s Forum. Additional support provided by the Phyllis C. Wattis Foundation. Phyllis C. Wattis was the generous founding patron.

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