

## we are the ghosts, we are the mirrors

by Bea Rubio-Gabriel, 23 Nov 2023

a written response to Michele Lee's *How Do I Let You Die?*

Though my life experiences give no reason for it, I fear ghosts. I love the adrenalin of watching a horror film, but I am terrified to be followed by something I cannot see. Stumbling across my mother's bootleg copy of *Feng Shui* (2004, dir. Chito S. Roño) at too early an age, I am now haunted by mirrors, afraid to look at my own reflection after midnight. I brush my teeth in the living room.

Something that appears recurrent across Asian horror cinema is how it is often blanketed in our lore and culture. Ghost Women, with their bloodless skin and bloody tears, dragons that sleep below the river's surface. Since the first sunrise, we have passed down our stories as a way to understand the world. Scattered recounts of vengeful ghost wives, dangerous spirits roaming the jungles and mountains, we negotiate how the only way to die well is to live well. In a way, I can equally imagine the toils of a Ghost Woman attempting to navigate a fresh fruit market. *The metaphor is real. The metaphor is life.*

In The Philippines we have Ghost Women, too. These are the ghosts I fear. The ones who do not die well. We call them White Ladies, but before the Americans came, they were known as **Kaperosa**.<sup>1</sup> As I read Michele's script it strikes me that I have forgotten the tagalog word for ghost. After digging through childhood memories of being tormented by my cousins, my mind brings forth the word: **multo**. But this word for ghost has the flavour of fear. The word is rusted metal on the tongue. Multo haunt you. Multo are dangerous. I realise there is also no singular word for ghost in my language, spirits take on the characteristics they had when they were living. Different from the Anitos –spirits– who are not always of the dead. Sometimes they are spirits of the earth. There are two spirits at the front of my parents' house, though I'm not sure of what kind. Like *neeb*, anito can also attach and follow you.

*When I was a child, I fell from a tree. Not a particularly tall height but high enough that I braced myself for the impact of reaching the bottom. Only, it never came. There was a slight pause where I felt the air cradle my back before I landed on the ground softly. This seemed to coincide with the time I lost the ability to walk. I went from running around the driveway to dragging my body along the floor to get to the bathroom. Distraught that no western doctors could find the cause, my father took me*

---

<sup>1</sup> Ian Spike, "The Tragic History of the White Lady in Filipino Folklore," Exemplore, Nov 12 2023, <https://exemplore.com/paranormal/The-Tragic-History-of-the-White-Lady-in-Filipino-Folklore>

to an *albularyo*.<sup>2</sup> After my first visit I could feel tingling in my legs. Painful, but an improvement. The healer told my parents that a spirit had caught me somewhere but did not want to let go. It took about three visits to finally be released and I could walk again. I'm told the spirit used to be a teacher when she was alive. She meant no harm.



*How Do I Let You Die?* film still, Ari Tampubolon

Death is a regular guest at our door in my family. My mother dreams of death. If there is an uncle somewhere who has died, she has already seen it in her sleep before it happens. Before her eldest brother passed, she dreamt that too. That's how she knew to fly over to him. It was then or never. *I'm screwed the day you dream about me*, I joke with her. *Bea, that's not funny*. But my mother has dreamt about me. Somewhere dark, alone. Crying. *So much pain*, she told me when she called to ask if I was okay. She always has that dream of me in my worst pits of depression. The truth is, I have those dreams too, sometimes. When I find myself particularly concerned for someone, my dreams confirm my worst worries. I wonder if one day I will also begin to dream of my parents in the lead up to their passing.

---

<sup>2</sup> A healer, a doctor –what was then considered our general practitioner. They fight off curses (*kulam*), create medicine from herbs, and convene with the spirit world. If a spirit has attached itself to you, you go to an *albularyo* to have your soul called back home.

My mother says she doesn't believe in ghosts –white ladies, ghouls– but she believes in lost souls, wandering the earth not yet ready to pass –or worse, rejected from an afterlife and unable to. *Aren't they the same thing?* I ask her. **Kaluluwa ng patay**. The souls of the dead.

She is unafraid of them. Dreams about death often enough, I suppose. My father says he doesn't believe in ghosts but he believes in spirits, that they are everywhere. Good spirits and bad –I learn only then that this is the **multo**. The spirits who want to harm. He respects spirits. He doesn't dream of death.

I don't know how to let my parents die. Before I began writing this text I spoke to Michele on the phone about her play and I tell her about how I've been wanting to call my parents –I long for sustained, consistent calls over a period of time. To know that a connection is there. As they get older, I feel a sense of responsibility to bridge that gap.

*You never come over*, my mother chides me one day.

*You never invite me.*

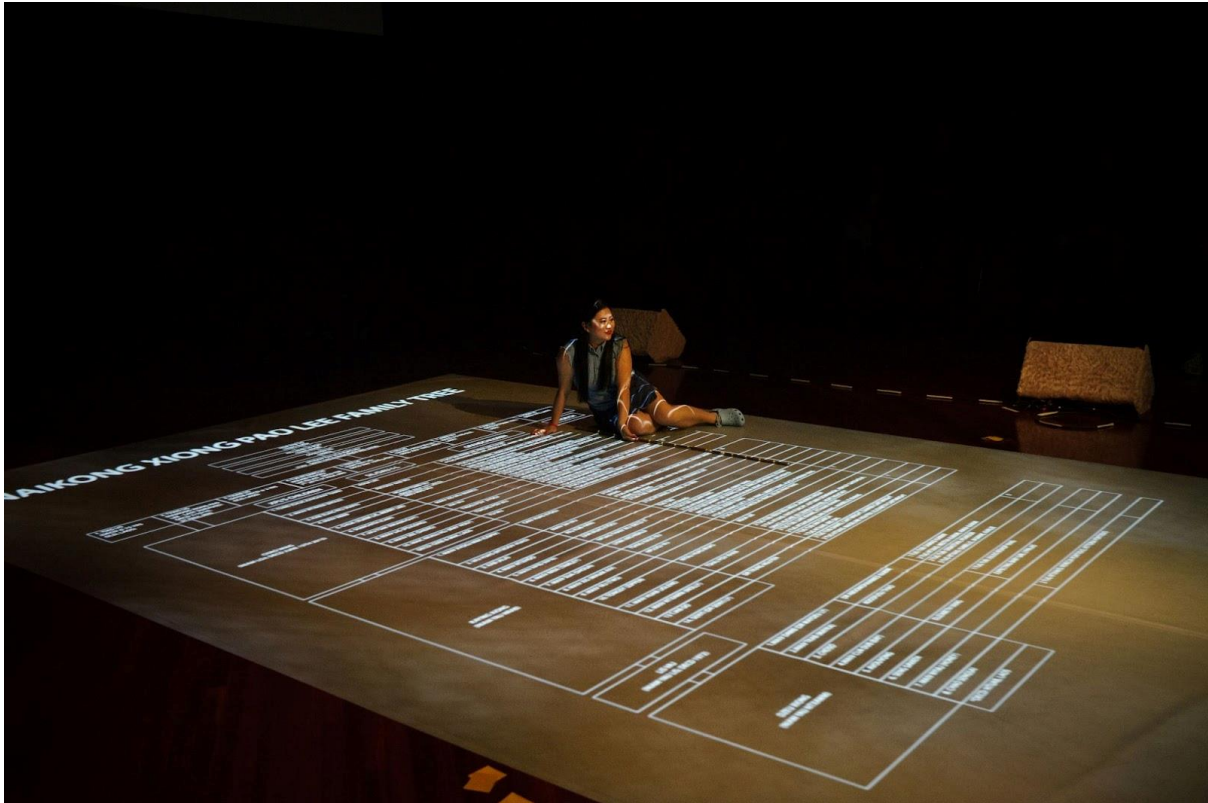
*Why do I need to do that? This is your house, too.*



Production Images: Sarah Walker

As the play goes on, I realise that very little was actually spent talking about how Michele lets her parents die. A hard enough question to wrangle out of migrant families. A lot of the play is actually talking about their lives. The many wars waged in and through Laos, leaving behind a home because you *can't see a future there*, meandering through an impressively

extensive family tree, the beginnings of Hmong history in Australia. Very honest snapshots, underpinned by almost 30 voice recorded phone calls. It's beautiful. If *the metaphor is life*, in order to understand how to let someone pass, we must understand how they have lived.



Production Images: Sarah Walker

My father will go back home before the end of the year for the exhumation of his brother's body. **Bogwa.** It has been 10 years since my uncle passed. I was surprised to learn we disturb the dead, but my mother tries to explain how it is a tradition of love. They unearth their dead to remember them, they gather and eat together. Funerals can illuminate how little you know about your own family –and how little you know of them. Strangers gathered around the same resting relative, in a way death can finally close that distance.

There's a family plot at the back of my dad's childhood house in Lagawe, that's where my uncles are buried. My mother loves to laugh about how my father was terrified that his older brother might rise prematurely and haunt everyone, but she says she never saw anything. My grandmother tells us it's okay if we cannot send her back home to be buried there but my mother is insistent. I tell my mum it's nice of her to be so considerate. *We must let her rest, Bea. I'm not about to be haunted by your grandmother.*

My parents have already written their will though I am not privy to what is in it. I'm not sure what was delegated to whom, but I migrated here in the 90s with my parents. It is not lost on me that my inheritance will not be wealth. When my mother first began to really start feeling her age, she wouldn't stop talking about what we must remember to do when she dies –*don't forget to send money to your Ate K and tita, remember to try and send back the balikbayan box every year. If you can, it would be nice for you to visit them once in a while, but it's okay if you can't, you don't have to.* My inheritance when my parents pass is duty. I can talk to my mother about death when she brings it up but if I broach the subject - - -

I try to visit at least once a month now. Now that the weather is better my parents are in higher spirits and they barbeque a lot on the grill in our dirty kitchen.<sup>3</sup> Mum loves to call me at the most inopportune times to invite me over. As they get older, I do my best to visit whenever they ask. They have learned that food is the best social lubricant for our family. We don't have much in common but we can gather around food. In a family of *silent chasms*, I realise that there is perhaps an entire generation of us who do not know how to ask *how do I let you die?* We would all have to come to terms with our parents' lives first, but there's still so much history to lay bare. Ghost money and post-it notes earmark death as Michele reminds me of how we are all mirrors to one another. That our history is not the past, but an inheritance of the future. Whether it was the delicacy of death or the adversity we overcome in life, it warmed my heart to have, in some way, a part of my own family seen through hers. *Their lives are significant, even if they don't describe it as such.*

*Bea Rubio-Gabriel is a writer, artist, and curator born in the Philippines now living and working in Naarm/Melbourne. Approaching writing as artform and ephemera, ergodic texts and homemade books become new modes of access and dismantle dominant knowledge and power structures. Their research focuses on the moral economy of labour and migration, care critique, and the politics of translation.*

---

<sup>3</sup> The kitchen outside the house (usually in the garage if, like my family, you don't use it to keep cars) where you can barbeque meat and fry fish without worrying about the smell and smoke weaving into the fabrics of your home.