

what it means to survive: time, grief, and care in the narrative work of iris yirei hu

Written by Carol Zou
Edited by Ching-In Chen

There is something so utterly Californian about iris yirei hu's work; it makes my heart ache. It immediately recalls memories of driving down the Pacific Coast Highway with the windows rolled down, catching the sunshine on one's face and inhaling the sharp saline ocean air, and feeling like one is at the edge of possibility. Watching the sinking sun spread its searing red rays over the unending Joshua Tree desert and learning to hear the music that echoes through dark night. It is this ability to evoke psychic landscapes that speak to deeply embedded dreams, myths, and memories that has enthralled me about hu's work since my very first encounter.

I first met hu in person over soup dumplings in Manhattan's Chinatown, after she finished an MFA in Visual Arts at the prestigious Columbia University School of the Arts. It was a challenging experience; classmates often didn't understand her work. How *could* they understand

her work, I wondered, in this cramped city where it was a luxury to live in a shoebox, a city that reeked of old money and Abstract Expressionism? For I too had been raised with the interiority of the desert—though mine was in the harsh glare of Arizona and Texas—and to possess the interiority of the desert is to carry within oneself the oscillation between infinity and solitude. The desert is privation during the day, but the desert is also the susurrations of life that emerge in the moonlight.

I have been away from California for almost 3 years, so perhaps I am invoking a mythology rather than the reality of apocalyptic traffic and poor air quality. The need for myth and mythmaking is one of the key threads in hu's work, exemplified in her series of *Survival Guide* installations (*Survival Guide: joy* (2017); *Survival Guide: when the Sun devours the Moon* (2017); *Survival Guide: inheritance* (2018)). Through juxtapositions of idiosyncratic imagery

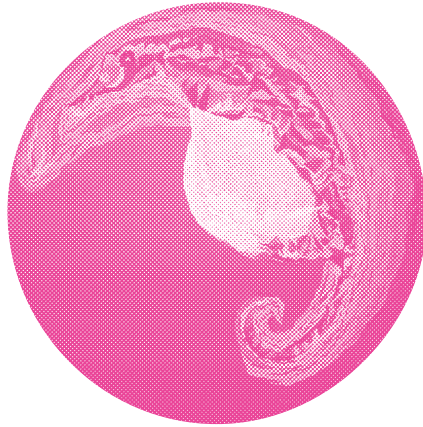
and narrative language, hu creates worlds that are psychedelic, startling, and primordial, utilizing a color palette lifted directly from a desert sunset. Her immersive installations ask us to ponder alternative universes, cosmologies, and places in which an alternative mythology of ourselves can occur.

Why is it necessary to create an alternative mythology? hu and I both come from Chinese-American immigrant families, and I venture to say that the ontology of being an immigrant is an exhausting, never-ending mythmaking. There is the myth you give of yourself at the citizenship office. There is the myth you give of yourself when you are ready to leave home, and there is the myth you give of yourself when you return. Some of us have lost our birth certificates, abandoned old passports, cannot trace our bloodlines beyond two generations, and thus we possess no origin myth except for the one which we give ourselves.



In hu's work, I recognize bits and fragments of the mythology of the medicine rabbit on the moon, a story my mother used to read to me, which has been recombined with images, textures, and sensations drawn from hu's wanderings in order to forge a hybrid environment

that feels at once familiar and new. Immigrant time is a time that looks both backwards and forwards, and hu's work recombines temporal



elements in order to disrupt the sensation of linear time, to open up a space of possibility beyond the limits of a Western understanding of time.

In a way, hu's work asks us to give birth to ourselves anew. hu is not the first artist to work with desert imagery or with the idea of deep time—see: Robert Smithson—but she is one of the few to do it with such tenderness. By steadfastly fusing her explorations of desert landscapes and deep time to explorations of tenderness, grief, and care, hu imagines a world situated outside of the cis male-dominated Land Art tradition. Instead of a site for heroic intervention, the earth in hu's cosmology is imagined as a giver and receiver of care.

hu's 2017 installation at Visitor Welcome Center, *Survival Guide: joy* (2017), consists of delirious

narrative collages of paint and Taiwanese Hakka fabrics that spill to the floor in soft umbilical cords, connecting to a brightly colored textile womb on which hu stages performances and happenings. The space, painted midnight blue from floor to ceiling, becomes a container; not just of hu's work, but of the immensely complex rituals of grief and passage that accompanied the sudden passing of poet and friend emi kuriyama. Hints of kuriyama are scattered throughout the installation, most notably in a piece of burlap embroidered with a fragment of her poetry. *Survival Guide: joy* takes on narrative and artmaking as an alchemic process that uses mythology to reinscribe the present, and thus alter the



future. Through mythology, kuriyama's spirit becomes eternal. *Survival Guide: when the Sun devours the Moon* (2017) revisits elements from *Survival Guide: joy*—the pieces

of kuriyama's poetry, the textile womb—while adding an additional linen layer depicting hu's mother's practice of Chinese medicine, suggesting that perhaps grief has transitioned into healing. Each *Survival Guide* is a reworking and continuation of the former; once again, a circular, iterative mythmaking.

In *Survival Guide: inheritance* (2018), hu's work turns to weaving as the inevitable next step of a practice addressing iconic imagery, inherited traditions, and deep time. Hu has invited eight other artists—Cynthia Alberto and her daughter Kaya Fridman; David Bell, his mother Carole Bell, and his grandmother Mary Lukasik; Sonia Louise Davis and her mother Jill Heller; Sarita Dougherty, her partner champoy, and their daughter Lidagat Luna Dougherty Lim; Jeanne Hoel; laub and marbles; Jane Leese and her daughter Ann Leese; and Paula Wilson—to contribute to a collective site-specific “magic carpet” installation at Women's Center for Creative Work (WCCW). A grass-roots feminist mecca founded on principles of collective care, WCCW is the ideal site for hu to continue her exploration of creating physical, aesthetic, and emotional space for others. *Survival Guide: inheritance* spatializes the lessons of healing inherited from hu's mother in *Survival Guide: when the Sun devours the Moon*. Every Monday morning in March, hu's mother teaches Baduanjin (八段錦), or Eight Sections Brocade, an ancient form of Chinese qigong, at WCCW as part of *Survival Guide: inheritance*.

Relationships are woven throughout the installation, from hu's relationship with the other artists, to the artists' relationships with their own collaborators, and to hu's relationship with her weaving mentors. Two large paintings anchor the room and tell the story



of hu's journey in learning Zapotec weaving from Porfirio Gutiérrez and his family, and Navajo weaving from fourth-generation weaver Melissa Cody. The narrative paintings serve as both reconstructed memories of hu's weaving lessons and guides to traditions on the verge of erasure. They visualize knowledges that are passed down through oral tradition, while resisting an extractive approach to cannibalizing indigenous knowledges, as each teacher exercised their agency in carefully selecting how and to whom their skills would be taught. hu speaks of the responsibility of inheriting the craft and the ethical exchange between student and teacher, summing up, "How you learn things is important."

To read hu's work against the legacy of black feminism, and woman of color feminism, is an incomplete and separate essay unto itself. This final section is both a projection of my own and a cultural debt to

be settled. hu's mythmaking follows in the tradition of Audre Lorde's biomythography, put forth in *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*¹, a similar work that breaks the boundaries of existing forms to express what cannot be contained. But I am not only thinking of *Zami*, but also of Lorde's oft-revisited *Sister Outsider* essay "Uses of the Erotic"², in which Lorde asks us to open up our bodies to sensation as a form of revolution. Do I feel new possibilities for sensation, for the erotic, for eros, while experiencing hu's work? I do. The revolution will be expansive, and it will be tender. It will reject the linear narrative of progress and instead invoke multiplicitous approaches to time embodied not only by immigrant ontology, but also by Afrofuturist and indigenous feminists³.

And of course, no feminist theorization of the desert is complete without Gloria Anzaldúa's serpent visions. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*⁴, originating from the author's life in east Texas, claims and complicates liminal spaces between nationalities, ethnicities, cultures, and languages. When asked about the stunning choice of midnight blue walls omnipresent in the *Survival Guides*, hu replies that the midnight blue signifies a dream space, a place for rest and regeneration. It is the color of the sun setting over our respective deserts. Both Anzaldúa and hu find refuge in this liminal space, utilizing poetry and narrative to prod at existing binaries and open up space for reflection.

It is no coincidence that hu's explorations of grief lead me to invoke the names of the dead. As Grace Kyungwon Hong writes in *Death Beyond Disavowal*⁵, naming the dead is a way to animate the legacy of those who have passed, claim them as part of the ancestral heritage of present, and reclaim their memory from neoliberal necropolitics. From deep, mythical time to more contemporary ancestors, the past is everywhere present in hu's work. hu breaks apart time, form, and space in an attempt to grapple with the very meaning of grief and care. In doing so, she suggests a cosmology in which the dead are not always gone, but find a way to exist among us.



Footnotes

- 1**
Lorde, Audre. *ZAMI: a new spelling of my name*. S.I.: Penguin Books, 2018.
- 2**
Lorde, Audre. *Sister outsider: essays and speeches*. Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2015.
- 3**
A few titles come to mind, most notably the shapeshifting Anwatu who survives through generations in Octavia Butler's Patternist series. Butler, Octavia E. *Wild seed*. London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1983.
- 4**
Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: the new mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute books, 2012.
- 5**
Hong, Grace Kyungwon. *Death beyond disavowal: the impossible politics of difference*. Minneapolis (Minn.): University of Minnesota Press, 2015.

Biographies

Carol Zou is a first-generation Chinese-American raised in pre Mexican-American War Mexico, and is consequently preoccupied with questions of place, identity, and power. Informed deeply by radical pedagogy and social activism, her work ranges from facilitated community collaborations to more personally driven, conceptual works. Her work questions the bounds of cultural production by engaging site-specificity, collective authorship, and temporary/durational outcomes. She is a former Women's Center for Creative Work artist-in-residence and the current Director of Programs at Asian Arts Initiative.

Ching-In Chen is author of *The Heart's Traffic* and *recombinant* and co-editor of *The Revolution Starts at Home: Confronting Intimate Violence Within Activist Communities* and *Here is a Pen: an Anthology of West Coast Kundiman Poets*. A Kundiman, Lambda, Watering Hole and Callaloo Fellow, they are part of Macondo and Voices of Our Nations Arts Foundation writing communities. Their work has appeared in *The Best American Experimental Writing* and *Troubling the Line: Trans and Genderqueer Poetry and Poetics*. They serve as the *Texas Review's* poetry editor and on *Thinking Its Presence: Race, Advocacy, Solidarity in the Arts' Executive Board*.
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iris yirei hu is an intergenerational storyteller and image maker. She uses painting, sound, poetry, and installation to rearrange habits of sharing time and making life. Her art, pedagogical, and curatorial projects explore the shifting possibilities of love in relation to systemic and institutional power. Selected solo exhibitions include: *Survival Guide: when the Sun devours the Moon*, Lenfest Center for the Arts, NY (2017); *Survival Guide: joy*, Visitor Welcome Center, Los Angeles (2017); *Con/Safos* with Rafa Esparza & Clockshop (2015). Her work has been featured in the *Los Angeles Times*, *CNN*, *Sinovision*, and *KCET*. She holds an MFA in Visual Art from Columbia University in the City of New York, BA from UCLA, and is a 2016 Paul & Daisy Soros New American Fellow.
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