A sensitive surface: exploring queer spectrality through lens-based paranormal methods

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A SENSITIVE SURFACE:

EXPLORING QUEER SPECTRALITY THROUGH LENS-BASED PARANORMAL METHODS

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A thesis in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts (Research)

School of Art and Design
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Abstract 350 words maximum: (PLEASE TYPE)

My research concerns Queer Spectrality - a term that encapsulates the erasure and absence of queer people throughout history, culture, and society. Queer spectrality is derived from Jacques Derrida's theory of hauntology first introduced in Spectres of Marx (1993). It looks at history through the figure of the ghost - an entity that challenges ontological notions of being and exists in a liminal space, traversing categorical distinctions. The ghost parallels the marginalisation experienced by queer people as well as the way queerness blurs rigid boundaries created by Western, colonial, patriarchal systems. Queer spectrality challenges the histories created by such systems and invites a reimagining of lost histories and voices in order to create alternative futures. Queer spectral disruptions challenge the perception that time is inherently “straight”, suggesting instead that it is non-linear, and multiple rather than fixed. Using experimental paranormal methodologies my practice is an attempt to resurrect one specific queer ghost whose trace I followed throughout Paris in 2019. Her name is Qiu Miaojin and she is a queer Taiwanese writer who lived in Paris during the early 90s. In 1995 Qiu committed suicide at the age of 26 leaving behind her final novel Last Words from Montmartre. The book is written as a series of letters and diary entries dated between April to June followed by her death on June 25th. During my residency in Paris at the Cité Internationale des Arts I recreated a response to Qiu Miaojin’s novel through temporal, geographic, psychical and embodied practices. In 2019 I was also 26 and the residency took place at the same time as Qiu’s novel between April to June. In Paris I retraced her steps, reading and embodying her novel on the exact dates she wrote them. From this intensive three-month immersive performance I created video diaries relating to each letter by Qiu; the footage is taken from the specific places she visited or themes she wrote about on each day. Through this work I have attempted to place myself in her shoes and to act as a human mirror. My project involves a process of becoming a medium who has opened themself up to being haunted, allowing Qiu’s words to come alive again through my physical embodiment. These works explore the intermingling of our lives, the cyclical nature of history, and synchronicity. It is an attempt to reach back through time and through death to make connections with queer kin.
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INTRODUCTION

This body of work titled *Double Witness* (2020) explores queer cultural haunting and queer spectrality through a creative practice that blends performance, video, photography, and storytelling with paranormal methods. Queer spectrality is a term that encapsulates the ways queerness has been rendered spectral and erased from history, culture, and society. By following the queer spectre and exploring the absences, erasures and spaces that it represents, my practice participates in a reparative re-imagining of the past, present, and future.

Although queer spectrality represents the disavowal of a minority as a whole, within that minority there are many individual voices and many stories that have been left untold. The vast amount of voices that were lost are far too many for this project to address completely and with enough depth and consideration. So for the purpose of this project I have decided to focus on one queer spectre in particular called Qiu Miaojin. She is a queer Taiwanese writer who lived and studied in Paris during the early 1990s. Regarded as Taiwan’s best known lesbian author she is an iconic figure for lesbian readerships both in Taiwan and internationally. Her books are often considered classics in local Taiwanese lesbian subcultures (Heinrich, 2014). An English translation of *Last Words from Montmartre* by Ari Larissa Heinrich was finally published by New York Review Books in 2014 and a translation of *Notes of a Crocodile* by Bonnie Huie was published in 2017. The latter won the 2018 Lucien Stryk Asian Translation Prize, introducing a new generation and culture of readers to Qiu’s work. Qiu Miaojin lived in Paris for a number of years during the 1990s, writing and studying under acclaimed feminist theorist and philosopher Hélène Cixous at University of Paris 8. In 1995 she wrote her final novel *Last Words from Montmartre* in Paris before committing suicide at the age of 26. The novel was written and dated between April to June in 1995 before her death on June 25th. As the title suggests, Qiu Miaojin intended for this novel to be her final words before her death and left instructions for its posthumous publication and release. The novel is written as a series of twenty letters that are each dated and detail her thoughts and musings on everything from her relationships to friendships, films, family, depression, art, love, betrayal, and gender. The style is very intimate and diaristic which has allowed me to form an incredibly personal relationship with her and her work. It also gives the audience an immediate and
subjective perspective into the experience of queer spectrality rather than a more broad and superficial overview of the topic.

The majority of my fieldwork for *Double Witness* took place in Paris during a residency at the Cité Internationale des Arts between April to June 2019. I chose these dates specifically so I could be in Paris on the same days that Qiu Miaojin wrote her novel. My work began by reading her novel on the exact dates the letters were written. For example, I read the first entry titled *Letter One* which was dated April 27th on the same date in 2019. I did this for all the entries, and following the reading of each entry I created a video diary in response. Using footage I collected on the specific date, I filmed things that related to the specific letter written on the day. Often this involved going to the places she visited that day or filming things that related to what she had written about in a more metaphoric or symbolic way. I specified for the work to be undertaken in 2019 because during that year I was also 26, the same age as Qiu Miaojin when she wrote the novel and when she committed suicide.

The paralleling of our age, the dates, and our identities as Asian, lesbian, gender-fluid people is the basis of my mediumistic approach to this body of work. This paralleling represents a feeling and process of haunting, doubling, and repetition. By retracing Qiu’s final steps throughout Paris I embody the notion of the ‘medium’ in both a psychical and artistic sense. This allows her story, her thoughts, memories and emotions to be resurrected through a creative practice that embraces the possibilities of the paranormal. The purpose of haunting and its relationship to queer spectrality is explored in Chapter 1. In this chapter I outline what Queer Spectrality is and how it emerged from Jacques Derrida’s theory of hauntology developed in *Specters of Marx* (1993) I discuss how the investigation of haunting is relevant to a re-interpretation of history, and how the ways histories have been told (or left untold) effect the present and futures we create. Storytelling is a critical aspect of re-interpreting histories, and ghost stories in particular reflect the kind of histories experienced by marginalised people. Terry Castle investigates the invisibility of lesbian narratives in *The Apparitional Lesbian* (1993). Through the telling of ghost stories we are able to give voice to those who have been denied recognition and existence in the past, and therefore present and futures. I draw upon Avery F. Gordon’s *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the*
Sociological Imagination (2008) as a principal theorist on the development of haunting, ghost stories, and the language ghosts offer us to articulate histories that were lost. Carla Freccero is another essential theorist who wrote Queer Spectrality: Haunting the Past (2007) as an alternative model for how queer history may progress. It illustrates how a queering of history and historiography opens up spaces that were closed due to strict teleological narratives of reproductive futurity.

Imagining alternative futures is a major aspect of exploring queer spectrality. In Chapter 1 I draw upon José Esteban Muñoz’s Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity (2009) in my discussion of Queer Temporality. Time is a fundamental element of the artistic practice I have used for Double Witness. Therefore I discuss the ways queer spectres disrupt linear notions of time that open up ways to repair and reimagine histories and futures. Like Muñoz, this project and the ghosts it summons positions itself against “straight” time as it is inherently damaging to queer people and queer life. Imagining and embodying queer temporality is a way to open up more spaces for queerness to exist rather than simply in the margins of society. Jack Halberstam’s In a Queer Time and Place (2005) also provides a foundation for my understanding of queer temporalities and how queerness is much more than simply a sexual identity. To Halberstam, queerness encompasses time and a way of life that is full of many complexities, economies, relationships and life schedules. The understanding of queer time and a queer way of living also includes forming queer relationships and kinships. Creating a relationship with queer spectres is a crucial part of this project and reflects a queering of normative relationship dynamics. In the first chapter I consider Making Kin Not Population: Reconceiving Generations (2018) edited by Adele Clarke and Donna Haraway in the way I form kinships within queer histories and communities. Queering the ways in which we relate to one another challenges heteronormative, patriarchal, imperialist and biological connections that form the basis of society.

I create a relationship with queer spectres through my artistic practice by utilising paranormal methodologies which I outline in Chapter 2. In this chapter I discuss contemporary queer and feminist contexts for paranormal art practices and their relevance to current social and political climates. Drawing upon artists such as boychild and Hilma af Klint I investigate how there has
been a resurgence of interest in the occult and Spiritualist practices. These methods have been reclaimed by queer and feminist artists as a source of empowerment against misogynistic, colonial, patriarchal power systems. The reclamation of the figure of the witch is outlined by Silvia Federici in *Caliban and the Witch* (2004). From this I derive the reasons for why many queer and feminist communities feel such an affinity with the use of occult and magical practices. I situate my own practice amongst this greater context and describe the paranormal methodologies I use. Here is where I describe the paranormal art practices I encountered during my residency at the Cité International des Arts in Paris.

Since this project emerged from a predominantly photography-based practice, I draw upon Daniel Wojcik’s paper “Spirits, Apparitions, and Traditions of Supernatural Photography” (2009) who gives an insightful overview of the Spiritualist movement during the 19th century, and how Spiritualist methods merged with photographic practices. Clément Chéroux’s *The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult* (2004) is another book with a collection of images and essays that describe the way the photographic medium can also be used as a spiritual or psychic medium. From these sources I describe how spirit photography influenced my paranormal art practice in *Double Witness* and how creative practices can be fused with psychical, paranormal and spiritual methods. Spectrality requires its own visual language and mediums that embrace paranormal methods. Using creative mediums and methods that are in themselves seen as strange or othered reflects the otherness of queer spectrality. I relate these methods to spectrality in art practice through Sas Mays and Neil Matheson’s *The Machine and the Ghost: Technology and Spiritualism in Nineteenth-To-Twenty-First-Century Art and Culture* (2013). Mays and Matheson exhibit the ways the spectral has been communicated in contemporary art through artists such as Tony Oursler, and an extensive list of exhibitions concerning haunting and spectrality. In *The Ghost in the Machine: Spectral Media* by María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren from *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory* (2013) the writers discuss how 19th century technologies transformed the ways we visualised the invisible. They discuss the “phenomenologies of the inside” developed during this crucial period that I relate to methods of visualising queer spectres in my art practice.
Finally in Chapter 3 I discuss the alienation, invisibility and marginalisation experienced by queer people by drawing upon Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet* (2008). Sedgwick illustrates the feeling of existing as a queer spectre by conceptualising the closet as compartmentalising and concealing certain parts of one’s identity either by oneself or because of one’s family members, friends, colleagues, superiors, or society at large. In order to combat these feelings of invisibility and marginalisation, especially for parts of the queer community who are treated as less visible than others, I turn to radical self love. Using Olu Jenzen’s “Revolting Doubles: Radical Narcissism and the Trope of Lesbian Doppelgängers” (2013). I outline the ways artists such as Claude Cahun and Laura Aguilar have reclaimed the lesbian doppelgänger and lesbian Narcissus trope into a practice of radical self love, self acceptance, and recognition. I relate lesbian radical narcissism to my doubling of Qiu Miaojin through my process of haunting and retracing. Qiu Miaojin and I become mirrors to one another that bring each other into visibility and understanding. This chapter also features a queer interpretation of the Narcissus myth through a reading by José Esteban Muñoz. In a section from *Cruising Utopia* (2009) called “Queer Aesthetics as Queer Refusal”, Muñoz demonstrates the way Narcissus serves as a symbolic figure of the queer refusal of heteronormative reproductive sexuality. Through his reading of Marcuse’s *Eros and Civilisation*, Muñoz describes Narcissus as a figure representing queerness as “The Great Refusal” and rejection of normal love that keeps a repressive social order in place. Queer artists are an essential part of demonstrating how the Narcissus myth in aesthetics can be used to express such a refusal. I feature Félix González-Torres and his work *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)* (1991) that ties into themes of mirroring, synchronicity, and queer memorialisation which are so prevalent in my own work.

Queer spectrality examines a part of society and history that continues to struggle with marginalisation, repression and representation. With the rising visibility of only certain parts of the queer community in Western society, there are still many people that remain invisible and histories that have been left untold. With a history that has largely been erased and suffered from violence, queer identities have little foundation to build upon. This project aims therefore to creatively contribute to a reparative queer re-imagination of histories past, present and future. It aims to develop creative and paranormal ways of forming queer connections and queer kinships with the
living and the dead. It intends to demonstrate that queerness encompasses much more than the limited, simplistic and fetishistic representations of queerness in mainstream, heteronormative cultural media and history. Queer spectres will continue to exist in many forms and temporalities, disrupting Imperialist binaristic notions of gender, sexuality, identity, relationships, and ways of living and dying.
METHODOLOGY

*Double Witness* betrays conventional, patriarchal, heteronormative, imperialist disciplinary methods of inquiry. I achieve this through a combination of historical and theoretical research, auto-ethnography, parapsychological investigation, literature, memoir, ghost story, performance, video, installation, and photography to investigate queer spectrality. My practice amalgamates several methodological processes into a paranormal queer methodology. In *Female Masculinity* (1998) Jack Halberstam refers to his interdisciplinary method as a queer methodology as he has had to creatively craft a methodology out of varying available disciplinary methods. Instead of being confined to only literary texts, Halberstam (1998) combines “textual criticism, ethnography, historical survey, archival research, and the production of taxonomies” (10). What Halberstam (1998) achieves by blending multiple methodologies and disciplines is a text that reflects “the multiple forms of gender variance presented within female masculinity” (9). The multiplicity of queer methodologies traverses boundaries by combining a number of disciplines in an unconventional way. Like the figure of the spectre, *Double Witness* models its methodology upon the exploration of liminal spaces and blurring of boundaries. My work employs multiple practices and methodologies to reflect the multiplicity and complexity of queer narratives, histories, identities, and queer ways of existing and non-existing. Paranormal and affective methods are a primary focus as modes of sense, intuition and feeling are still considered taboo, invalid, or simply “not real” in relation to Western scientific rationalism and patriarchal systems. As such the dehumanising and derealising effects of queer spectrality can be poignantly reflected through paranormal and affective methodologies.

An ongoing documentary Youtube series created in 2016 called *Queer Ghost Hunters* was an important methodological influence and starting point for this project. In this series a group of queer paranormal investigators recover and re-imagine the lost stories of queer ghosts in Midwest America. They discover that many of the deceased queer people in their local community were institutionalised or incarcerated. They focus much of the investigation around prisons, asylums, and convents. They locate queer spirits ranging from gay and transgender prison inmates to lesbian nuns using a combination of historical research and paranormal gadgets such as EMF
detectors and dowsing rods. A homosexual spiritual medium then attempts psychic contact with varying degrees of success. The group make light of the unconventionality of their methods throughout each episode, however their paranormal methodology is in many ways justified by the lack of physical and historical records of queer stories written by queer people. Queer people and their stories simply were not allowed to exist. To address this absence, this lack of physical and material evidence leads them to meta-physical and immaterial means of making contact with the marginalised queer voices of the dead. The group uses humour and the format of the web-series to create accessibility into an issue that is rife with grief, death, homophobia and transphobia. They explore rejected spaces, histories and paranormal ideas that are largely uncharted, and ask the fundamental question: “Why do people always assume ghosts are straight?” The assumption of heteronormativity even after death reveals how deeply entrenched the denial of queerness and queer lives is in society.

FIG 1: Queer Ghost Hunters, 2016
Inspired by the *Queer Ghost Hunters* series I decided to focus my research on one queer ghost in particular - Taiwanese writer Qiu Miaojin and her novel *Last Words From Montmartre*. The book is written as a series of twenty letters all of which are dated. It begins with Letter One commencing on April 27th and ends with Letter Twenty written on June 17th, a week before the author’s death. I first read *Last Words* in April 2018, twenty-three years after Qiu Miaojin began writing it in Paris in 1995. On this first reading I kept a notebook detailing personal responses to some of the letters. On Friday the 18th of May 2018 at 8.17pm I read Letter Seventeen and realised that it was also dated 18th of May. Realising by coincidence that I was reading the book on the same dates they were written I decided to match my reading pace with the time in the novel. I began to feel synchronicities and parallels appearing between my life and Qiu’s. I felt a connection with her through time, and each day I read and responded to her writing became an anniversary.

Carl Jung’s *Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle* (1981) forms part of the paranormal timing method that I use. He creates a theory around “meaningful coincidence” and discusses the ways meaning can be created for a subject through coincidences that seemingly have no causal or direct connection. One example he gives is “When for instance I am faced with the fact that my tram ticket bears the same number as the theatre ticket which I buy immediately afterwards, and I receive that same evening a telephone call during which the same number is mentioned again as a telephone number” (11-12). This example appears to be a coincidence, and although there are no direct causal relations between the numbers on the tickets or phone-call, there is a significance created for the individual subject. These coincidences are not intended to be defined by fact or rational explanations, rather their significance comes through from a subjective and symbolic experience. Moments of synchronicity arise when an external experience of the world mirrors one’s interior world. Noting specific dates, times, and “meaningful coincidences” and how they interrelate are all part of my methodology. For instance, on Sunday 20th of May 2018 I wrote an entry at 12.20pm about my response to Letter Eleven dated May 20th. In the entry I wrote about how I was annoyed at getting my period that day before going to work, however at work whilst reading Qiu’s entry for the day I discovered that she got her period too.
This coincidence triggered a realisation that the connection I felt in reading Qiu’s work was not only temporal but also physical and needed to be explored further. The results of the initial reading became the basis of the project I proposed to the Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris. In 2019 I was accepted for a three month residency between 3rd April to 27th June. My project was to read the novel again on the exact dates they were written in Paris and to physically retrace Qiu’s final steps over the last three months of her life. 2019 was the only year this could be undertaken because I was 26 years old, the same age as Qiu when she wrote the novel and when she committed suicide. My goal was to mirror Qiu through age, location, gender, sexuality, spirituality, thoughts, feeling and relationships. By creating a physical-temporal-emotional embodiment of her through a three-month documented endurance performance I aimed to resurrect her ghost. In many ways it emulated a spiritual possession, albeit through an artistic and conceptual lens.

The aim for Double Witness was to become a human mirror of Qiu and her work - to become both a visual and spiritual medium. Stemming from a photography-based practice, mirrors have been a recurring element in my practice due to their connection to photography as well as to the occult. My Honours research project titled Black Mirror (2015) explored occult scrying practices and their relationship to photography, something which I discuss further in Chapter 2. However this is the first project in which I myself have become the mirror, a human mirror. Taking the meaning of the mirror away from the physical and literal, and moving it to the conceptual and performative has transformed my understanding of the many layers of meaning contained within the symbol of the mirror. Through this embodiment of mirror practice and methodology I am discovering new ways to engage with themes of queer visibility and identity politics.

Double Witness is similar to and influenced by the work Arthur Rimbaud in New York (1978-79) created by David Wojnarowicz. It is a photographic series in which Wojnarowicz embodies the French poet Arthur Rimbaud by wearing an image of Rimbaud’s face. Salvador Nadales writes that through Wojnarowicz’s embodiment of Rimbaud he is taking on “his identity and highlighting the parallels in their lives: the violence suffered in their youths, the feeling of being denied freedom, the desire to live far away from the bourgeois environment and the fact of their homosexuality. Wojnarowicz is juxtaposing the historical time of the symbolist poet with the artist’s present” (Nadales, 2020). Following on from this significant work about queer visibility,
queer death and the HIV epidemic, *Double Witness* also explores the parallels between my life and a queer literary figure living in France. Like Wojnarowicz my work focuses on queer subjectivity in the way we experience connections with the queer figures and stories that have come before us, and how they continue to exist through us. By paralleling Qiu Miaojin I explore my own identity and what it is like to be a queer, lesbian, “female-bodied”, gender-fluid, East Asian person.


I began by creating a time map, marking on a calendar each of Qiu’s entries. The undated entries I included with the closest dated entry. The next step was embodiment. Physically going to the places she writes about on the day she wrote them was a way of embodying Qiu and her work. It was an attempt to open myself, my body and my practice to being inhabited by her. I visited the small park in Montmartre where she buried the pet rabbit she shared with her girlfriend Xu called Bunny. Qiu gives instructions on how to find the spot where she buried her rabbit which I followed. I went to the park, through the exact gate, past the exact bench and toward the exact
tree she specified. The feeling was uncanny. Having already envisioned it in my mind, I experienced a strange sense of return before arriving. Receiving instructions to a place from a person who has already died was also an uncanny experience. The physicality of the space itself stood in such stark contrast to Qiu’s absence that it deepened the feeling of being haunted. At this important site where Qiu buried her Bunny and her love for Xu I attempted psychic contact with her through the use of dowsing rods which I learned how to use from the *Queer Ghost Hunters* series. Holding the rods loosely I was able to have a basic Yes/No conversation with Qiu and documented the experience through video.

FIG 3: Meng-Yu Yan, *Double Witness* video still, 2020
I filmed my response to each entry in a series of video diaries. Film had a significant impact over Qiu’s writing and she frequently references films and directors such as Theo Angelopoulos. Time is also a crucial element so it was important to use a time-based medium to respond to her letters. Some days would be inspired by the Situationists psycho-geographic wandering of Paris based on Qiu’s geographic routes. For instance, in Letter Eight on May 4th Qiu details her walk along rue du Mont Cenis toward Place Albert Kahn, continuing to the flea markets at Porte de Clignancourt. After reading this entry on the 4th of May 2019 I filmed the streets as I walked along following her route. Entries such as these would be concerned with physically retracing her steps; allowing her words and spirit to guide my physical body.

Other days were symbolic, based on chance and intuitive wandering. For instance in Letter Seven on May 2nd Qiu mentions a story she wrote called “The Red Scorpion”, and as I wandered through Chatelet that day I filmed a scorpion I discovered in a shop window. By embracing intuitive wandering and chance encounters as paranormal method I focus on allowing the ghost to lead. Avery F. Gordon in Ghostly Matters (2008) writes “The willingness to follow ghosts, neither to memorialise nor to slay, but to follow where they lead, in the present, head turned backwards and forwards at the same time. To be haunted in the name of a will to heal is to allow the ghost to help you imagine what was lost and never even existed” (57). Intuition, feeling, and imagination are all part of the tools used in haunting as a methodology. In my response to Letter Five on May 19th I use intuitive methods such as tarot, séance, scrying, and a full moon ritual in my response to Qiu who writes “Even if I die, you’ll still be in this relationship” (70). Her words convey a continuing relationship even after death which I attempt to connect with.
Western astrology is used as a paranormal method within Double Witness to create a connection between Qiu and I. Qiu was born in the astrological sign of Gemini, the sign of the twins; a significant symbol relating to the mirroring I produce in Double Witness. The astrological twin of Gemini (the sign directly opposite also known as the sister sign) mirroring it across the astrological chart is my own sign Sagittarius. I see myself as a twin of Qiu not in a literal sense but in a symbolic sense across time. Eastern zodiacal timing techniques are also used to create meaning. Qiu wrote her novel and died in 1995, the Year of the Pig in Chinese and Taiwanese cultures.
Coincidentally, the filming of *Double Witness* also took place in the Year of the Pig in 2019. In the Chinese zodiac there are twelve animals that represent a twelve year cycle which repeats. The Pig is the last animal of the cycle before it repeats from the beginning. It signifies an ending and also a sense of imminent rebirth. The doubling that occurs within this project is created not only physically through the embodied experience of places in Qiu’s novel but also temporally and symbolically through dates, ages, and astrological or zodiacal significations that I make reference to within the work itself.

**Fig 5:** Meng-Yu Yan, *Double Witness* video still, 2020

Bibliomancy is another method I use and by which I obtained the title *Double Witness*. It is a method of divination that uses books which is meaningful to this literary-based project. One of the most famous examples is the *I Ching*. Bibliomancy can be enacted by simply taking a book, closing one’s eyes, and picking a passage by random or intuitively. This is what I did with Qiu’s novel. I landed on the final page of her book titled “Witness”, which is symbolic as my work continues where she left off. I combined the word ‘witness’ with the theme of the double which I discuss in Chapter 3. Another method that I use is shrine-making and offerings derived from
Taiwanese and Chinese spiritual practices that I elaborate further in Chapter 2. These paranormal methods involve belief, magic, imagination and systems to create sense and meaning. They attempt to tie together loose threads to fill in the absence created by Qiu's death.

After filming I sorted the footage by date in accordance to the letters. The editing and filming process was very rigorous for the duration of the residency, creating first cuts of each video letter the day of or day following each shoot. This was done to achieve a level of immediacy, and for each video letter to be imbued with the thoughts, feelings, and energy of the specific day. It uses purely diegetic sound to create the sense for the viewer of being where I was in Paris. The sounds range from being everyday, mundane to being musical and poignant. Alongside the videos and diegetic sounds, subtitles of my thoughts are included as a silent monologue. The viewer reads the videos like one reads a letter with their internal voice. The chaos of the external sounds amplify the silence of the internal written monologue. In this way it recreates my experience of reading Qiu's novel and mimics the feeling of being inhabited by the writer.

My engagement with Qiu's spirit through her novel may be termed a “literary seance”, a phrase I came across in the translator's note to Conversations with Dvora: An Experimental Biography of the First Modern Hebrew Woman Writer (1997). The book is written by psychologist and writer Amia Lieblich who imagines conversations between herself and early modern writer Dvora Baron. Like Lieblich I engage in a dialogue with Qiu through my practice and close-reading of her text. Qiu’s book becomes a portal through which I can communicate with her even though she is no longer alive. What I contribute is my own part of the conversation through my creative responses. I discovered Lieblich's book in “The Purposes, Practices, and Principles of Autoethnographic Research” (2014) by Carolyn Ellis and Tony E. Adams. Autoethnography is a vital element of the methodological practice behind this project. Ellis and Adams (2014) illustrate the importance of “research, writing, stories, and methods that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political” and “recognise and respect a researcher's relationship with others, treat research as a socially conscious act, and help humanise emotionally sterile research processes” (2). Using my practice to research a community and history that I am part of is aligned to a decolonial methodology. My understanding is derived from Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples (2012). Using my practice as a
way to imagine a queer past and future I counter the imperial imagination that Smith (2012)
describes as having “enabled European nations to imagine the possibility that new worlds, new
wealth and new possessions existed that could be discovered and controlled” (23). Smith (2012)
urges us to “decolonize our minds” (24) and this project does so by challenging the colonial,
patriarchal, and heterosexist histories that exclude minorities and their stories. Queer spectrality
describes how queer people have been de-humanised by society; and as a queer person of
colour writing and creating work about my own history I prove that I am human and that I exist.

Qiu’s novel records the breakdown of her three year relationship with Xu. She is heartbroken by
their separation and a large part of both the novel and her suicide is dedicated to her love of Xu.
Their relationship is tumultuous and even abusive at times. My partner of three years came with
me throughout the course of the residency. During the project my relationship came to an end and
my experiences of grief, desperation, violence, heartbreak, betrayal, and self-destruction began to
mirror the physical, emotional and psychological experiences Qiu describes in her novel. Despite
intentionally mirroring Qiu and allowing myself to be open and haunted by her, I did not account
for it to invade this private and personal part of my life, and the life of my partner. The project
forced me to confront my own ghosts and personal feelings of trauma, fragmentation, relationship
dynamics, shame, guilt and more. Another interesting relationship that emerged from the novel is
Qiu’s deeply erotic relationship and love affair with a French girl called Laurence. This relationship
was coincidentally mirrored when I began a relationship with a French girl called Margaux during
my time in Paris who is mentioned in the videos. There are echoes between Margaux and
Laurence mirrored in the physicality, eroticism, desire and sensuality of our relationships. Personal
feelings, thoughts, and relationships became part of the methodology and the work invaded many
private aspects of my life.

This project is highly emotional and psychologically challenging, so it is important to recognise
these as aspects of the methodological practice. Weekly telephone sessions with my therapist
were required during my residency due to the psychological and emotional demands of the work,
and focus of suicide and queer death. It is important to recognise that research is not without
risks and not always carried out in a sterile environment free from human emotions and
relationships. Lived experience, therapy, journaling, and personal relationships all became part of
my practice. There was an intertwining and intermixing of my life with Qiu's. Affect is a crucial aspect of my methodology and I draw upon Sarah Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness* (2010) who writes “Emotions are not ‘after-thoughts’ but shape how bodies are moved by the worlds they inhabit” (231). Emotional feelings are what drive the physical retracing and re-enactment performed in my work. Affect also underpins my connection with Qiu. For as Ahmed writes (2010) “Affect is what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects” (231). Affect is what also sustains the connection within interpersonal relationships and histories too.

My methodology traces the absence around queer spectres and recognises how much nuance, intricacy, and intensity is contained within each space. Paranormal and affective methodologies are tools we can use to make contact with queer spectres that fill in vital historical gaps. These methods help us engage with the complexity contained within these spaces in order to create alternative presents and futures.
CHAPTER 1: QUEER CULTURAL HAUNTING & QUEER SPECTRALITY

This chapter defines queer spectrality deriving from Derrida’s theory of hauntology. It outlines why queer cultural haunting is important and how it contributes to a reparative re-imagining of the past, present and future. It discusses how queer spectres disrupt binary systems and linear temporalities, contributing to this re-imagining. This chapter ends by examining queer spectral kinship and how it emerges from these disrupted temporalities; providing us with meaningful connections to queer ancestors and shared histories.

i. Defining Queer Spectrality and the Importance of Queer Cultural Haunting

Jacques Derrida coined his theory of hauntology in *Specters of Marx* (1993) contemplating the dead king in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, “a ghost whose expected return repeats itself, again and again” (10). The ghost disrupts linear notions of time and history by its return. This revenant destabilises the key ontological question posed in the play: *To be or not to be?* According to Derrida (1993), haunting defies ontological notions of being and thinking altogether since “one does not know if it is living or if it is dead” (5). Instead, the ghost exists in an inherently liminal state, fluctuating between being visible and invisible, being dead and alive. Ghosts exhibit their inherent interstitiality highlighted by Derrida (1993) who writes: “Here is-or rather there is, over there, an unnameable or almost unnameable thing: something, between something and someone, anyone or any-thing, some thing, ‘this thing’, but this thing and not any other, this thing that looks at us, that concerns us” (5). The difficulty Derrida finds in naming and situating the ghost as one thing or another, as here or there, past or present is a defining feature of the spectre. These qualities enable the spectre to serve as a potent figure of the “in-between”, and this liminality gives it the power to destabilise rigid binarical systems that divide and separate society into male/female, heterosexual/homosexual, black/white, self/other, alive/dead, human/nonhuman etc. As José Esteban Muñoz writes in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009) “The double ontology of ghosts and ghostliness, the manner in which ghosts exist inside and out and traverse categorical distinctions, seems especially useful for a queer criticism that attempts to
understand communal mourning, group psychologies, and the need for a politics that “carries” our dead with us into battles for the present and future” (46). For this reason the ghost becomes a poignant symbol for the experience of marginalisation and liminal existence of queer people in society.

What is the connection between haunting and queerness? According to Juda Bennett in *Toni Morrison and the Queer Pleasure of Ghosts* (2014) “The evolution of ghost theory, indeed, runs parallel with the rise of queer theory” (4). Bennett (2014) refers to Derrida’s hauntology and “asks us to consider everything a ghost – history, memory, text, and indeed, the world as we perceive it” (4). In the same way that Derrida invites us to question “What is not a ghost?” Bennett (2014) poses the question “What is not queer?” (4). Hauntology, a concept that Derrida insures precedes ontology, is described by Bennett (2014) as “not unlike deconstruction - an application of thought and not a thing in itself, and in this way it conceptually manoeuvres like queering, eluding definition and stasis, and, alternatively, emphasising open inquiry” (4). Bennett (2014) makes the point that just as nothing can escape the ontological problems of presence and absence (4), no one can escape the issues surrounding rigid binarical systems governing gender, sexuality, and identity. Hetero-centric, colonial, patriarchal structures and systems of seeing are what render queer lives invisible and spectral. Examining the ghost as symbolising the repression of queer voices and representation over time we re-examine lost histories that are necessary in creating an inclusive present and future. Just as the ghost disrupts traditional notions of linear temporality and history, Bennett (2014) suggests that the ghost can also act as “an active participant in disruptions of compulsory heterosexuality” (2). By challenging one’s traditional and normative assumptions of time, history, gender, and sexuality, the ghost offers a new realm of possibilities for being and connecting outside confining systems that divide and marginalise. Ghostly disruptions invite us to challenge ontological realist modes of thinking and understands the past as multiple rather than fixed.

Kathleen Brogan in *Cultural Haunting* (1998) explains that modern ghost stories offer minority authors a way to come to terms with their lost cultural identities. Brogan (1998) believes that all ghost stories serve “to re-create ethnic identity by imaginatively recovering a collective history
that in many cases has been fragmented or erased”. *Double Witness* has been a process of telling my ghost story. As a queer non-binary person of colour I have repeatedly experienced being ‘ghosted’ by family, friends, co-workers, governmental bodies, society, history, and culture at large because of the intersections of my identity. Discovering Qiu Miaojin, I stumbled upon a voice that resonated with my own. I encountered an enlivening sense of recognition and visibility, like looking into the mirror and being seen for the first time. By reading and re-enacting her story, by chasing after her ghost, I am also telling my own story. I have opened myself up to being haunted and through that experience have granted myself the right to accept my own power to haunt. Avery F. Gordon writes in *Ghostly Matters* (2008) that the purpose of exploring hauntology “is sometimes about writing ghost stories, stories that not only repair representational mistakes, but also strive to understand the conditions under which a memory was produced in the first place, toward a counter memory, for the future” (22). Exploring haunting by creating ghost stories re-visualises the past in order to create alternative futures. Gordon (2008) writes “To be haunted and to write from that location, to take on the condition of what you study, is not a methodology or a consciousness you can simply adopt or adapt as a set of rules or an identity, it produces its own insights and blindesses. Following the ghosts is about making a contact that changes you and refashions the social relations in which you are located” (22). To believe in ghosts is to believe in my own existence despite my existence and the existence of many who lived before me being repeatedly denied by history and society. There is a process of filling in the gaps that is made by telling ghost stories and to allow them to haunt you. Gordon (2008) writes to be haunted is “about putting life back in where only a vague memory or a bare trace was visible to those who bothered to look” (22). By reclaiming the power of being a queer spectre my aim is to use the power of haunting to reconfigure the ways we look at our histories, our stories, and how they are told.

In 2007 Carla Freccero published a chapter titled “Queer Spectrality: Haunting the Past” and writes “The past is in the present in the form of a haunting. This is what, among other things, we imagined for queer history, since it involves openness to the possibility of being haunted, even inhabited, by ghosts” (195). This project is about opening oneself to being haunted and inhabited by queer spectres and breathing new life into lost voices. To Freccero (2007), queer spectrality is about exploring ways a queering of history and historiography acts to open up space of foreclosed possibility by reworking teleological narratives of reproductive futurity (195). Freccero
(2007) writes “I want to think about the question of haunting - a model of ‘precarious life’ - as an alternative model for how queer history might proceed. I thus want to explore the possibilities of spectrality for queer historiography, why it might describe a more ethical relation to the past than our current historicism permits, and how it might counter the symptomatic fantasy of reproductive futurity without necessarily adopting its binaristic representation of ‘death’ as the only (compulsory) alternative” (195). The absence that the queer spectre represents can be redefined as something positive - a space that allows for a re-imagining of lost histories and therefore future possibilities that our current histories do not make room for.

In The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory (2013) María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren describe how Freccero is concerned “not with recovering specific queer subjects in or from the past but with mobilizing the combination of queer thinking (with its emphasis on multiplying sites of affectivity and pleasure) and spectrality (as an anti-teleological and non-binary mode) to challenge ‘the implicit heteronormativity of historical continuity, the way historical succession is tied...to heterosexual reproduction’” (313). Blanco and Peeren (2013) discuss how the queer spectrality that Freccero proposes is “designed to enable a more ethical historiography that eschews burial (associated with melancholia) or mastery (colonization) of the past in favor of the permission to mourn (to be revisited by a demand) signified by the ghost” (313). Queer spectrality stresses a need to re-evaluate the stories that are told which inform our identities and how we related to one another. Blanco and Peeren (2013) suggest “Mobilizing spectrality to address dispossessing histories and imagine more inclusive futures at the concrete level of, for example, the subaltern woman of a particular time and place rather than that of generalized victims of history or the new world order can only be effective if the figures of ghosts and haunting are subjected to a sustained effort of demarcation and specification” (313). This is one of the reasons why I decided to focus on the specific voice of Qiu Miaojin for this project due to my connection with her work but also because the amount of voices silenced by history is far too large. This project focuses on the resurrection of one specific life with as much fullness and detail as possible rather than a broader, generalised, less detailed overview of the many queer spectres that continue to haunt society. Furthermore, within the queer community people of colour, lesbians, and non-binary or gender-fluid people are largely more invisible than their cisgender gay male counterparts. It is one of the main reasons why it has been
important for me as a queer, lesbian, non-binary, Chinese-Australian person to tell my own story and that of Qiu Miaojin who is similarly queer, lesbian, gender-fluid, and Taiwanese.

The liminal spaces that spectres inhabit is discussed by Marisa Parham in her book *Haunting and Displacement in African American Literature and Culture* (2008). She writes that haunting is not necessarily interesting “because it resonates with the supernatural, but rather because it is appropriate to a sense of what it means to live in between things—in between cultures, in between times, in between spaces – to live with various kinds of doubled consciousness” (3). This uncharted liminal space inhabited and created by ghosts is a space of possibility, change and renewal of outdated colonial, patriarchal and hetero-centric traditions. Susan Stryker also comments on the power of this “in-between’ or interstitial space that ghosts represent in her article “Transing the Queer (In)Human” (2015). She writes “I embraced ‘darkness’ as a condition of interstitiality and unrepresentability beyond the positive registers of light and name and reason, as a state of transformable negativity, as a groundless primordial resource” (227). What Stryker describes is a kind of negative power that the queer spectre represents. In Terry Castle’s *The Apparitional Lesbian* which was published the same year as Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* in 1993, Castle describes the “not-there-ness” of the apparitional metaphor (46). To haunt, as Castle (1993) describes, is “to visit often,” “to recur constantly and spontaneously,” “to stay around or persist,” or “to reappear continually” (46). According to Castle (1993) “the ghost, in other words, is a paradox. Though non-existent, it nonetheless appears” (46). Queer spectres hold a negative power - the power to persist despite being repeatedly made abject, absent, and marginalised.

Visibility is an important connection between queerness and spectrality. Castle (1993) points out: “Why is it so difficult to see the lesbian—when she is there, quite plainly, in front of us? In part because she has been ‘ghosted’—or made to seem invisible—by culture itself” (4). Paradoxically in some cases the hypervisibility of queer people (particularly queer people of colour) leads to their invisibility. Gordon (2008) quoting from Ralph Ellison explains “the ‘high visibility’ [of the African American man] actually rendered one un-visible. Hyper-visibility is a persistent alibi for the mechanisms that render one un-visible: ‘His darkness...glowing...within the American conscience with such intensity that most whites feigned moral blindness toward his predicament’” (17). The
difficulty of seeing, reading, or expressing queerness is also described by Muñoz (2009) where he writes “Queerness has an especially vexed relationship to evidence. Historically, evidence of queerness has been used to penalize and discipline queer desires, connections, and acts” (65). This is one of many reasons why the existence of queer history is so limited and why queer people are forced to live as ghosts. Muñoz’s solution (2009) “is by suturing it to the concept of ephemera. Think of ephemera as trace, the remains, the things that are left, hanging in the air like a rumor” (65). A spectral language or secret code is suggested in recognising queerness which developed from marginalisation. The language of ghosts is something Gordon (2008) grapples with asking “How do we reckon with what modern history has rendered ghostly? How do we develop a critical language to describe and analyse the affective, historical, and mnemonic structures of such hauntings? These questions have guided my desire to articulate, however insufficiently, a sense of the ghostly and its social and political effects. I use the word sense here deliberately to evoke what Raymond Williams called a structure of feeling - perhaps the most appropriate description of how hauntings are transmitted and received” (18). Deriving from Gordon, this project also relies upon sense in its methodological haunting. Queer feeling and subjectivity are important aspects of this ghost hunt. Using unconventional paranormal methodologies, senses, intuition, feeling, emotion, embodiment and imagination alongside concrete locations, dates, and writing taken from Qiu Miaojin’s novel is necessary to pick up on the traces, gestures, and ephemera of queer haunting. Although the image of the spectre suggests disembodiment, the feeling of being haunted and inhabited is deeply affective and physical. As Gordon writes (2008) “Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as transformative recognition” (8). Queer embodied subjectivity is a significant aspect of queer spectrality as it re-embodies the spectres that were once unable to survive, let alone feel and live freely.
ii. Queer Temporality

“The present is not enough” (27) writes José Esteban Muñoz in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009). “It is impoverished and toxic for queers and other people who do not feel the privilege of majoritarian belonging, normative tastes, and ‘rational’ expectations”. Because the present is not enough, Muñoz (2009) turns to the past to discover traces of queer ghosts, memory and ephemera, and he turns to the future to create space for a queer utopia. He describes queerness as “an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future” (1). Like Muñoz this project positions itself against “straight time” which is so inherently damaging to queer people. Instead, *Double Witness* investigates queer haunting as a methodology used to disrupt Western, colonial, patriarchal, binaric temporal systems built on oppression and othering. I search for ghosts that disrupt such systems that emerge out of queer diaspora and queer utopian longing. Muñoz (2009) doesn’t reject the present completely, he writes, “The present must be known in relation to the alternative temporal and spatial maps provided by a perfection of past and future affective worlds” (27). Muñoz understands time and histories as multiple, non-linear, and inter-connected. The many versions of the past, present, and future all continually impact one another.

By recovering lost histories we attempt to revisualise the present and future of queer people in society. Muñoz (2009) writes, “it is important to call on the past, to animate it, understanding that the past has a performative nature, which is to say that rather than being static and fixed, the past does things” (28). Calling upon ghosts is one way of communicating with the past, bringing it back to life in the present. We do this through memory and Muñoz (2009) writes that “Memory is most certainly constructed and, more important, always political” (35). The ritualised tellings of memory through film, video, performance, writing, and visual culture has “world-making potentialities” (35). By creating my own memory and version of queer history fused with Qiu’s story I create new worlds, new futures. Jack Halberstam’s *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (2005) portrays queerness as “an outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices” (1). To Halberstam
what has made queerness compelling “has to do with the way it has the potential to open up new life narratives and alternative relations to time and space” (1). The multi-layeredness of stories, memories, histories, and time is part of the multi-dimensionality queerness brings to a society that attempts to flatten, dissect, and polarize. Queer temporalities make room for the telling of many stories instead of just one.

To Halberstam (2005), queer temporality develops predominantly “in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction” (1). Instead of complying to heteronormative and patriarchal temporalities based on homo-normative reproduction, Halberstam imagines a different timeline for queerness to exist. Queer people often have to follow temporalities that wander of the linear path of marriage and nuclear-family-making. Halberstam (2005) asserts that “queer temporality disrupts the normative narratives of time that form the base of nearly every definition of the human in almost all of our modes of understanding” (152). To Halberstam (2005) there is a tendency to “applaud the pursuit of long life (under any circumstances) and pathologize modes of living that show little or no concern for longevity” (152). Qiu Miaojin certainly chooses a different timeline. Her decision to commit suicide differs from normative pathways and her reason to end her life at 26 was for a large part based on queer love and desire. The most obvious difference between queer and heteronormative temporalities is that queer time was often cut short. Muñoz (2005) writes about the diminishing effect HIV/AIDS had on the horizons of possibility for queer time. He quotes from poet Mark Doty who writes “All my life I’ve lived with a future which constantly diminishes but never vanishes” (13). This constantly diminishing future emphasises the present and “the urgency of being also expands the potential of the moment and…squeezes new possibilities out of the time at hand” (13). The compression of the present created by impending death is why each moment recorded in Qiu’s novel is so significant.

In Paris I presented the first edits of my video diaries from *Double Witness* during an experimental curatorial project created by Taiwanese curator Yves Chiu called *Art in Jetlag*. It explored the time difference between Paris and Taiwan and the feeling of “lag”, lethargy and displacement experienced by transitioning between the two countries and cultures. Qiu Miaojin must have experienced this cultural and temporal lag herself. The project lasted for twelve hours straight from 3am until 3pm. It involved sound pieces, artworks, a night walk through Paris, artist
presentations, a panel discussion, and performances. A film screening of Tsai Ming-Liang’s film *What Time is it There?* (2001) preceded my own screening highlighting a beautiful dialogue between my work and the film. Set between Paris and Taiwan the film follows a young man called Hsiao-Kang (played by Kang-Sheng) whose father just passed away. Hsiao-Kang sells watches as a street vendor and encounters a young woman wanting to buy a dual time watch before leaving for Paris. Although he shows her many types of watches she only wants the one he is wearing himself. He refuses at first because it is unlucky to give someone a watch whilst grieving. The woman desperately wants his watch and so he finally gives in. The film follows the parallel lives between these two people after their meeting and their connection through time. After encountering this woman Hsiao-Kang begins to change all of his watches to Paris time. Like the film I adjust my time to synchronise with Qiu Miaojin’s. In my response to *Letter Eight* on May 4th I encountered many street vendors selling watches and filmed them as a reference to the film.

![FIG 6: Yves Chiu, *Art in Jet Lag*, 2019](image)
The film was created following the passing of both the director and the lead actor’s fathers. In an interview with IndieWire in 2002, the director reveals his belief that the ghost of his father was actually haunting the set of the film. He said “We had a very smooth production process when we made the movie because we had the protection of my father’s ghost. It was like a charm. When we made the movie, especially during the scenes inside the apartment, if an actor did not really get it, I would call Kang-sheng’s father’s name, or say ‘Uncle, come out and help me.’ Suddenly the actors would become very good. So I think that it is a real ghost story movie…I think Kang-sheng acted as well as he did because the spirit of his dead people helped him to perform” (Tsai
Ming-Liang, 2002). The time difference between Taiwan and France serves as a greater metaphor for the difference between the world of the living and the dead. It creates a constant feeling of missing the other person, lag, and disconnection. Yet there is a longing for and a striving to make a connection; to synchronise times despite distance, alienation, and death. *Double Witness* follows from this longing and attempts to synchronise times between Qiu Miaojin’s life and my own. It hopes that if I am at the same place at the same time our worlds may be able to collide.

**FIG 8:** Meng-Yu Yan, *Double Witness* video still, 2020
Making Kin not Population: Reconceiving Generations (2018) edited by Adele Clarke and Donna Haraway proposes the idea of “Making kin” non-biologically (2) to confront the human-related and human-caused burdens on the planet, “including both our expanding numbers and devastatingly extractive, unjust practices of living and dying” which are immensely corrosive and destructive of too many human and nonhuman ways of life (1). In the introduction Clarke (2018) suggests “We need to generate new kin inventions, new concepts and practices for making kith and kindred, as well as attending and attuning to how people and peoples already make and value other-than-biogenetic kin in non-imperialist ways” (2). My project attempts to create kinship non-biologically through experience, empathy, understanding, and communication. Clarke (2018) quotes from Sahlin’s recent book on kinship which “transculturally asserts that people become kin largely by sharing experiences and generating a sense of belonging” (3). She writes that “Kinfolk are parts of one another to the extent that what happens to one is felt by the other, such that we live each other’s lives and die each other’s deaths. Biological connection is not requisite” (3). This is exactly what my project does by walking in the steps of Qiu Miaojin, living her life and dying her death. Through my paranormal and creative practice I have created an invaluable life-changing bond with Qiu Miaojin that is not based on blood relation.

To many queer people “chosen family” are more valuable than the biological families from which they have been outcast. My personal experience has emphasised shared belonging, identity, and experience, over shared blood. Clarke (2018) writes “Valuing such ‘belonging’ as much as - perhaps more than - ‘blood relation’ is what we are urging…such belonging - such kinship - can not only be across species but blur such boundaries. The human/nonhuman binary is a distinction that many beings on this planet do not make, instead seeing and sensing continuities of being through non-Enlightenment, non-secular approaches to understanding such as Indigenous cosmopolitanism, religions, or spiritualities” (3). Creating kin with the non-human, the spectral and disembodied is an important aspect of continuing histories that are at risk of being lost or forgotten. For minorities othered by society relating with the non-human and spectral can be incredibly empowering.
There is an over-emphasis on blood and physical relationships over other kinds of relationships and intimacies. Society tends to fixate on how queer people have sex over any other part of queer identity. This is a limiting belief that prevents us from broadening our identities, histories, relationships, and communities. My research into queer spectrality uncovers alternative ways in which we can relate to other people, whether alive or dead. Citing Foucault, Halberstam (2005) writes “homosexuality threatens people as a ‘way of life’ rather than as a way of having sex” (310). Halberstam (2005) imagines queerness as an entire network rather than a singular act or identity. He writes, “In Foucault’s radical formulation, queer friendships, queer networks, and the existence of these relations in space and in relation to the use of time mark out the particularity and indeed the perceived menace of homosexual life (1). In an interview with Foucault for the French magazine Gai Pied (April 1981), Foucault suggests “The problem is not to discover in oneself the truth of one’s sex, but, rather, to use one’s sexuality henceforth to arrive at a multiplicity of relationships. And, no doubt, that’s the real reason why homosexuality is not a form of desire but something desirable.” Forming queer relationships in marginal spaces is challenging yet full of potentialities. Furthermore, creating alliances and connections with people outside of sanctioned patriarchal and heteronormative modes of marriage and reproduction destabilises existing power structures.

My investigation into queer spectrality looks into spaces and absences created by the exclusion of queerness from society and history. These spaces can be reclaimed as room for imagination; to conceive alternative relational dynamics and futures. Muñoz (2009) imagines future queer utopias by challenging limiting binaries. He writes “But must the future and the present exist in this rigid binary? Can the future stop being a fantasy of heterosexual reproduction?” (49). Forming our own queer fantasies is part of creating futures. In “Black AfterLives Matter: Cultivating Kinfulness as Reproductive Justice” (2018) Ruha Benjamin suggests that “Imagining life after death, and what it might mean to craft kinship with the dead, requires experimenting with fiction” (52). Double Witness parallels the ideas of Benjamin (2018) who writes “No body ever comes back, perhaps, but spirits and ancestors might. And here is where our stories of what is and what is possible matter. They produce meaning and material with which to build (and destroy) what we call ‘the
real world” (52). Connecting with spirits and those who are no longer with us physically forms the basis of queer kinship. It produces a foundation from which one can build one’s sense of self and place in history. Even if forming kinship requires a little creativity and imagination. As Benjamin (2018) writes “All kinship, in the end, is imaginary. Not faux, false, or inferior, but, as Alondra Nelson shows us, a creative process of fashioning care and reciprocity” (65). Embracing creativity is an essential part in the formation of kinship, as well as in the formation of past and futures.

Queer spectrality and queer cultural haunting contribute to the way history is generated and how the future might proceed. I have outlined in this chapter how queer spectres represent the marginalisation and erasure of queer people. Yet they also represent alternative ways of engaging with temporality by disrupting binaristic systems. Making connections with queer spectres provides us with new ways of forming relationships not only with the living and the dead, but also with our own identities and histories.
CHAPTER 2: PSYCHICAL RESEARCH AND PARANORMAL METHODOLOGIES
IN EXPERIMENTAL PHOTOGRAPHIC ART PRACTICE

In the previous chapter I outlined what Queer Spectrality is and the importance of queer cultural haunting. In this chapter I discuss the paranormal methods by which we can make connections with queer spectres and how this is explored in contemporary art. This is derived from an investigation into 19th century spirit photography and the convergence of Spiritualism with new technologies that enabled the visualisation of what was once invisible.

i. Contemporary queer and feminist contexts for paranormal art practices

In April 2019 I began my residency at the Cité Internationale des Arts searching for the ghost of Qiu Miaojin. That same month Hilma af Klint a formerly obscure female, Swedish, Spiritualist painter and mystic from the 19th century broke the attendance record at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. Curated by Tracey Bashkoff the exhibition titled Hilma af Klint: Paintings for the Future (2018) attracted over 600,000 visitors (Davis, 2019). Her paintings predate supposed male pioneers of modernist abstraction such as Kandinsky, Mondrian and Malevich. Spiritualism was a large part of her theosophical philosophy and artistic practice. First participating in séances as a teenager, it continued to influence her art practice into her adult life. By the mid 1890s she met weekly with a group of four other women who called themselves The Five. According to the Guggenheim “The Five believed they could communicate with mystic beings named ‘High Masters.’ In trance-like states, they transcribed messages from these beings, who identified themselves as Amaliel, Ananda, Clemens, Esther, Georg, and Gregor” (Bashkoff, 2018). Turning away from realist depictions of landscapes and portraits these experiences encouraged her to focus on abstraction and representations of the mystical, divine, and otherworldly.
The popularity of the Hilma af Klint exhibition reveals a resurgence of interest in the occult and Spiritualist practices from a feminist perspective. A contemporary art, curatorial, queer, feminist, ecological magic school called the Golden Dome organised popular psychic tours of the Af Klint exhibition. They taught visitors how to “practice receiving spirit messages through select paintings as a group” (Golden Dome, 2019). In “Spirits, Apparitions, and Traditions of Supernatural Photography” (2009) Daniel Wojcik describes the freedom women and other minorities experienced through Spiritualism explaining: “the movement frequently attracted liberal reformers and abolitionists, as well as those involved in the early feminist movement, as Spiritualism sometimes allowed women to gain authority and leadership roles that were denied by
established religions and dominant society” (110). Spiritualism offered alternative spaces, practices, and beliefs that enabled a rethinking of established orders.

Occult practices and witchcraft have a dark history relating to the mass murder of women during the Early Modern period. History of the witch-hunts has largely been ignored according to Silvia Federici in her seminal text on feminism, witchcraft and capitalism Caliban and the Witch (2004). Describing it as a “war against women” (164) Federici (2004) writes “The witch-hunt rarely appears in the history of the proletariat. To this day, it remains one of the most understudied phenomena in European history or, rather, world history” (163). Federici (2004) continues that “it was only in the wake of the feminist movement that the witch-hunt emerged from the underground to which it had been confined, thanks to the feminists' identification with the witches, who were soon adopted as a symbol of female revolt” (164). Feminists reclaimed the symbol of the witch and occult practices as a source of empowerment against violent patriarchal and misogynist systems. Federici (2004) indicates that “Feminists were quick to recognize that hundreds of thousands of women could not have been massacred and subjected to the cruelest tortures unless they posed a challenge to the power structure” (164). Witchcraft and occult practices become symbolic tools exemplifying the enormous threat that women represented.

There are a number of contemporary artists who recognise the potential witchcraft and occult practices contain in subverting power structures. One notable example is non-binary transgender artist boychild whose compelling, radical performances rebel against hegemonic masculinity producing new ideas around gender, spirituality and the posthuman body. In an interview with i-D (2013) boychild says: “I somehow knew that I wanted my character to be a clown but also a kind of... healer. So I started doing all this research into the ways that clowns functioned in non-western cultures, medicine men, shamans, witches. Those figures were suddenly interchangeable in my mind. To me it makes sense that clowns in a community might use humour and knowledge (magic) in a very cunning way to heal those around them” (boychild, 2013). boychild is a prominent artist who represents the way queer and gender-diverse artists have reclaimed occult practices and witchcraft into their art-making methodologies. In this instance magic infused with art-making has been a healing process for the artist and those who experience the performance.
FIG 10 & 11: Korakrit Arunanondchai and Alex Gvojic collaboration with boychild, *No history in a room filled with people with funny names 5.*, 2018
I was able to see boychild’s collaboration with Thai American artist Korakrit Arunanondchai and Alex Gvojic at the Venice Biennale in 2019. Phantoms haunt this three-channel video work shown at the Arsenale, titled *No history in a room filled with people with funny names* (2018). In an interview with Artsy (2019) Arunanondchai says: “The new piece is about invisible systems, things that feel like ghosts, and occupy certain spaces of superstition. I wanted to acknowledge that as real, even if it’s a story. Storytelling is real. It’s part of reality-making” (Arunanondchai, 2019). Both boychild and Arunanondchai validate the ways occult, magic, ghosts, superstitions and other paranormal ways of thinking contribute to storytelling, trauma healing, and a revisioning of both the past and the future. I relate to Arunanondchai and boychild as storytellers who embrace the convergence of the paranormal with queerness in their art practices. Exploring superstition, magic, occult and paranormal methodologies has been a way of exploring ideas othered by Western, colonial, patriarchal society.

Queerness has often been relegated to hidden spaces and realms throughout history, much like occult and paranormal practices. The occult concerns that which is hidden and for queer spectres it serves as a perfect medium to discuss invisibility, recognition, and power. My solo exhibition at Dominik Mersch Gallery in Sydney in 2017 titled *occulere: vision & concealment* took its name from Latin meaning to hide, conceal, or cover up. The exhibition explored scrying, a form of divination where visions are received through water or mirror gazing. The exhibition consisted of photographic self-portraits and sculptural works which were warped with mirrors and water. I experimented with a number of different tools such as black mirrors, regular mirrors, water, crystals, and other reflective surfaces. Scrying involved confronting my own reflection for an extended period of time in a meditative or trance-like state. I delved into questions about my experience of existing as a queer ghost in society, and the aggressive disavowal of my identity from my family circle. This practice was a way for me to take back power and recognition, and for self-healing.

FIG 13: Meng-Yu Yan, *Now I am a Lake*, 2017
During my residency in Paris I encountered a number of artists from across the world who were exploring paranormal and occult methodologies in their practices. Coincidentally, the first open studio I experienced was a séance run by artists Hadar Mitz from Israel and Nicola Goerdes from Germany. Before the séance we were asked to take a fortune cookie and were only allowed to participate if the fortune was positive. I remained and the group was asked to hold hands around a candle-lit salt circle. Three participants were invited to enter the circle and place two fingers upon a central glass. There was an amazing atmosphere created in the room by the collected sense of belief, suspense, and anticipation. This open studio was my introduction into the artistic community of the residency and to Paris itself. It felt like a significant initiation into the project I was about to begin in my search for Qiu Miaojin.

**FIG 14:** Meng-Yu Yan, *Séance at the Cité*, 2019
Following this was an intuitive drawing workshop based on remote viewing by American artist Mark Farina. A box was placed in the middle of the table and each person was given drawing materials. We were asked to intuitively draw what we thought was inside the box. After a few minutes the object within the box was changed. We created five drawings corresponding to the five different items within the box. Once all of the drawings were complete the objects were revealed one by one and we went around the table to see if there were connections with what we drew. I managed to intuitively draw three: long rounded shapes which turned out to be ear plugs, a crab-like shape with claws and inside the box was a dead crab, and finally I drew an eye and within the box contained a stone called an “eagle eye stone”. The séance and workshop expanded my use of occult and intuitive methods, opening new avenues to explore. Being part of this collaborative making and meeting other artists who were interested in occult practices validated by own research methods and gave me a sense of recognition, legitimacy and inclusivity.

ii. The Perfect Medium: Spectral Media and Paranormal Methodologies

The intersection between technology, art, and spectral or paranormal methodologies has been a point of interest for many artists. This is explored in The Machine and the Ghost: Technology and Spiritualism in Nineteenth-To-Twenty-First-Century Art and Culture (2013) edited by Sas Mays and Neil Matheson. They discuss how “Within the visual arts, speculation concerning the paranormal, haunting, spiritualism, and spirit photography expanded enormously in the first decade of the twenty-first century, seeing a wide range of exhibitions focusing on those topics, either in themed shows or in more historical exhibitions” (2). They list a great number of examples (3-4), including Tony Oursler’s The Influence Machine (2002); a spectacular light projection staged in London and New York. According to Mays and Matheson (2013) the projections took place where “John Logie Baird first demonstrated a TV broadcast, transmitting a spectral face across the attic room of the house” (3). Oursler’s sinister projection of faces, bodies, and text upon trees, buildings, and clouds of smoke blends new technologies in art practice that conjures ideas of haunting and
altered states of consciousness. The work is one example of how technology is inhabited by spectral analogue influences; exposing things that were previously invisible or unrepresentable.

**Fig 14:** Tony Oursler, *The Influence Machine*, 2002

Like Oursler I experimented with light projections in a shadow theatre for a solo exhibition at AD Space called *Shadow Shrine* (2019). It explored haunting through an installation of monstrous cardboard cutouts whose shadows were projected onto the walls and ceiling of the gallery. Stemming from a photographic practice, the installation used only the most fundamental elements of light and shadow to produce ghostly images that could immerse the viewers. The exhibition was produced with very simple analogue elements that proved affective to viewers even in our modern digital context. There was a playful and nostalgic quality to the work evoking memories of childhood shadow puppets imbued with darker elements of haunting and death. Amongst the ghostly figures was the name of Qiu Miaojin; as the work was created as a shadow shrine dedicated to her. The light projections reflected the ephemeral quality of spectres in the way they can be animated and disappear without a trace. I was inspired by ancient Chinese shadow puppetry tracing back to Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty. According to legend, the
Emperor's favourite concubine died leaving him in great distress. His minister suggested creating a puppet of the concubine in a shadow theatre, bringing the concubine back to life (Rollins, 2019).

Fig 15 & 16: Meng-Yu Yan, *Shadow Shrine*, 2019

The shrine became a ghostly stage the audience could enter into. Visually it was inspired by Christian Boltanski’s *Théâtre d’ombres* (1989) whose practice also delves into themes of death and memory. The work was one of a few shrines that I created to Qiu. Another is contained in a
video letter responding to *Letter Thirteen* on May 29th. Here I created a small shrine in celebration of Qiu's birthday, buying her a cake from a nearby French bakery, lighting candles, and writing her a birthday card. The video depicts my offering to her beneath her photo. This practice mimics offerings I have experienced, a Chinese custom where offerings of food are left for spirits and the deceased on special days.

![Cake with candles](image)

**Fig 17:** Meng-Yu Yan, *Double Witness* video still, 2020

Merging technology with occult practices traces back to Spiritualists of the 19th century who were connected to the technological avant-garde. Wojcik (2009) explains “From its very inception Spiritualism was understood by its adherents through analogies based in technology, as the original phenomenon of disembodied raps upon the walls of the Fox cottage in 1848 had much in common with the tapping communication of the electromagnetic telegraph, unveiled just four years earlier by Samuel F. B. Morse” (111). From the rappings of the Fox sisters who communicated with spirits through possibly an influence of Morse code, other new technologies created new methods of contacting the spiritual world. Again Wojcik (2009) describes how in
“1895 the discovery of X-rays and the production of the first radiographs by Wilhelm Conrad Röntgen seemed to bring scientific support to the cause of spirit photography, proving the possibility of rendering the invisible visible through a form of photography” (115). The invention of photography in 1839 by J.M. Daguerre occurred around this same period where Spiritualism and new technologies intertwined. The blending of new technologies and scientific method paired with paranormal or occult practices offered new ways of seeing the previously invisible.

In a chapter titled “The Ghost in the Machine: Spectral Media” (2013) by Maria del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren, they discuss how the boom in technologies during the 19th century revealed what was once impossible to visualise. Drawing from Akira Mizuta Lippit, they discuss the micro-history of 1895 that saw the advent of X-ray technology by Wilhelm Röntgen, the publication of Breuer and Freud’s *Studies on Hysteria*, and the Lumière brothers who patented the cinematograph (203). Lippit labels these three major events as “phenomenologies of the inside” for they “represent modes of invasion of the internal world of the subject that fundamentally ‘changed the terms by which interiority was conceived, imagined, and viewed’” (203). Likewise my practice attempts to visualise the internal world of queer spectral subjectivity. Because of the erasure of queerness throughout history and society, visualising queer subjectivity becomes an attempt to visualise the subjectivity of a ghost.

Retracing Qiu’s steps physically, emotionally, and symbolically I have attempted to mark an outline of a ghost and give shape to her absence. Lippit calls the sciences used to explore subjectivity within the other as introducing the concept of the “phantasmic interior” (203). We see the exteriorisation of the phantasmic interior manifest in 19th century spirit photographs of ectoplasm. These images of ectoplasm transform the human body into a new technology: a psychical-photographic machine. Wojcik (2009) describes this phenomenon writing that “The odd physiological manifestations of ectoplasm, exuding from the bodily orifices of mediums, became a regular part of some séances, and in some cases these ectoplasmic forms contained images of spirits within them. In these types of photographs, the body of the medium becomes a spirit–image producing system, both a camera and corporeal darkroom that develops and emits images of the dead” (113). In this display the body of the psychic medium becomes another medium altogether - a photographic medium.
Playing on the double meaning of the word “medium” is used in Clément Chéroux’s *The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult* (2004). The book is the accompanying catalogue to the popular exhibitions of spirit photographs held at the Maison Européenne de la Photographie in Paris and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York between 2004-2005. In the first chapter Pierre Apraxine and Sophie Schmit give a definition of photography as such: “Photography is here defined as a recording on a sensitive surface, either with or without the use of a camera, of a phenomenon visible or invisible to the human eye” (14). The definition of photography as “a recording on a sensitive surface” enables almost anything to be considered photographic - including the body of the medium. Wojcik (2009) continues that “later, certain photographers or the sitters themselves acted as mediumistic ‘sensitives’ and claimed to produce material apparitions that became visible to the camera or, in some cases, they psychically impressed images directly onto unexposed film through a process called ‘thoughtography’” (113). We see a parallel here between the sensitivity of a photographic negative and the mediumistic “sensitive” in the body of the psychic; both as surfaces able to capture something invisible and render it visible. In my practice my body and entire self becomes both artistic and spiritual medium. I become the sensitive surface upon which the phantasmic interior of Qiu Miaojin’s queer spectral subjectivity is inscribed.

According to Wojcik (2009) spirit photography emerged during an interesting time following the American Civil War. He suggests that early spirit photography took the form of cartes-de-visite. Often collected and shared among family and friends, they depicted soldiers departing for the American Civil War quickly becoming memorial photographs of the dead (111). Spirit photography took hold of the public imagination during this period of high mortality and the war itself had an enormous impact on the emerging field of photography. Wojcik (2009) illustrates how the public was faced with images of corpse-strewn battlefields documented by photographers such as Mathew Brady in newspapers for the first time, “confronting mass audiences with images of death in a manner previously unimaginable” (111). Further connections between photography and death
Fig 18 & 19: William H. Mumler, spirit photographs, c. 1870

were reflected in post-mortem photography when it was socially acceptable for families to commission pictures taken of recently deceased loved ones, in particular children. Wojcik (2009) describes how “a few decades after its invention, photography had become deeply associated with death and mourning. In this context, spirit photography fulfilled a human yearning for tangible proof of an afterlife and a visual connection with deceased loved ones” (112). Roland Barthes captures the connection between photography and death in Camera Lucida (1980) writing about “that rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph: the return of the dead” (9). Barthes (1980) explores the experience of having his own photographic portrait taken saying “I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object: I then experience a micro-version of death (of parenthesis): I am truly becoming a spectre” (14). Photography as a medium is intricately bound to death, grief, and mortality. Emerging from a photographic practice this project uses a lens-based method of performance to illustrate notions of haunting and spectrality.
The title *The Perfect Medium* was re-used in 2018 when the Art Gallery of New South Wales hosted the exhibition *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Medium*. Again playing on the multiple meanings of the word, it marked Mapplethorpe as a transgressive liminal figure who brought to light the underground and invisible world of queer and kink sexuality. The image that stood out to me was *Self Portrait* (1985) a long exposure shot that depicts Mapplethorpe as a spectre fading into darkness. It was taken only a few years before his death to AIDS. Mapplethorpe is one of a number of queer artists of the time that used photography to confront the high mortality rates of the AIDS epidemic. Another example is William Yang’s *Allan* (1990), a confronting intimate look at his former lover and the final moments leading up to his death. Here the camera fuses with his body becoming his eyes as he witnesses the death of a loved one. Yang becomes another medium connecting queer ghosts to the public who were not able to witness them as they began to fade away.

**Fig 20:** Robert Mapplethorpe, *Self Portrait*, 1985
Similarly *Double Witness* traces the final months before Qiu’s death. However I try not only to be a witness of Qiu’s death but attempt to step into her life, to re-embody her. My work does not attempt to resuscitate Qiu’s writing, rather it reveals how alive her work is within me. Often I felt possessed by Qiu, her work, and this practice as a whole. Her novel invaded deeply personal areas of my psyche, relationships, and emotions - all of which I document. Rather than being just the lens of a camera, I have attempted to become the entire sensitive surface upon which Qiu and her work could be impressed.

Paranormal and occult methods are powerful mediums by which the visibility of queer spectres may be exposed and queer stories may be told. They offer mediums to visualise what appears impossible to render visible. There has been a resurgence of artists, myself included, interested in the possibilities and unexplored territories that the occult and the paranormal represent. These methods counter the limited beliefs of Western, imperialist, scientific rationalism and open up spaces that allow for the existence of queer spectres.
CHAPTER 3: GHOSTS OF QUEER RADICAL NARCISSISM - DOUBLES, DOPPELGÄNGERS AND REPETITIONS

This chapter explores how doubling is performed in my practice as a method of haunting. I investigate the motif of the double in popular culture and how it has been reclaimed by queer artists as a form of self-recognition and self-validation. I draw upon Muñoz and his use of the Narcissus myth as a radical queer symbol of refusal against a repressive heteronormative social order.

i. The Queer Uncanny: Reproductions and Repetitions

My practice haunts through a process of mirroring and doubling achieved through performative retracing and repetition of Qiu’s trajectory from her novel. I mirror her through age, relationships, ethnicity, lesbian gender-fluid identity, shared Taoist and Buddhist cultural spirituality, geographic location, and temporal movement. These repetitions haunt because they produce a feeling of the uncanny. In “The Uncanny” (1919) Freud relates the uncanny explicitly to the return of the dead (17), and I produce Qiu’s return through repetition. This repetition carries risks and what unsettles most viewers when I have presented at public talks, conferences, exhibitions, and conversations is the fate of Qiu and her suicide after finishing the novel. People fear that by retracing Qiu’s final steps throughout Paris I will also recreate her death with my own. The uncanny evokes a fear of repetition compulsion, a need to repeat early trauma which Freud discusses in Beyond The Pleasure Principle. However, Double Witness is not about repeating inherited trauma, rather it is about healing intergenerational wounds by empathising with queer spectres and ancestors.

There is an inherent cyclical nature and sense of return in Qiu’s text that my practice engages with. The novel begins with the death of her rabbit “Bunny”, a symbol of the love she shared with Xu. It ends with the pet shop in Pont Neuf where Bunny was first bought, and the final place I visit in Paris as part of this project. Throughout the project I chase after Qiu’s ghost, but also the ghost of her love in the form of Bunny. The return of Bunny at end of the novel and its focus as the final
video in my series suggests a sense of rebirth, reincarnation, and repetition. There is a deep desire to start things all over again. Reincarnation is referred to explicitly in *Letter Six* dated May 1st, and in my response I play upon the idea that I could be a reincarnation of Qiu. This notion is not entirely impossible in accordance to Buddhist and Taoist beliefs that Qiu and I share. At the very least *Double Witness* is a reincarnation of her novel into a visual performative medium. Freud (1919) asserts fearing the return of the dead is “primitive” (17), and this view forms part of Western and colonial ideologies that negate many cultures where spirits, ghosts, and ancestors continue to exist among the living. My work subverts these views and uses the uncanny to play upon colonial fears that the dead can return to haunt us in one form or another.

![Fig 21: Meng-Yu Yan, *Double Witness* video still, 2020](image)

*Fig 21: Meng-Yu Yan, *Double Witness* video still, 2020*

Queer history is full of trauma that may be passed down from one generation to the next. *Double Witness* is directly haunted by Qiu and her text, yet Qiu herself is also haunted by queer spectres that came before her. Paulina Palmer writes in *The Queer Uncanny: New Perspectives on the Gothic* (2012) “Another meaning that the ghost acquires on account of its connection with ideas of return and repetition is that of the double or copy” (66). Palmer (2012) suggests that
reproduction across literary, cinematic, and visual mediums “gestures towards the spectral dimension of narrative and textuality” and concludes that “Since all texts emerge from others, they appear culturally haunted by them” (66-67). As I am haunted by Qiu, she in turn is haunted by queer Japanese writer Yukio Mishima. One of his most famous works is *Confessions of a Mask* (1949), a fictional text that has strong parallels with his personal life; describing his closeted homosexual desires, yearning for sexual violence and death, and suicide ideation. Mishima committed ritual suicide and influenced Qiu in his writing style, his sexual identity, and the way he died. Her work is haunted by queer ghosts such as Mishima, as well as the suicide of Antinous; a beautiful Greek youth who sacrificed...
himself for his love of the Roman emperor Hadrian. Qiu relates herself to him in *Letter Nine* on May 7th, and in my response I filmed several sculptures of Antinous at the Louvre. *Double Witness* is haunted by Qiu, but also by all the queer spectres that came before her.

![Fig 23: Meng-Yu Yan, Double Witness video still, 2020](image)
Suicide has different connotations, consequences and meanings in Taiwanese and Japanese cultures compared to Western Christian associations with shame, sin, and guilt. According to Govindasamy Agoramoorthy and Minna J. Hsu in their article “Suicide in Taiwan’s Society” (2009), “Taiwan’s major religions such as Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism are passive and they do not emphasise stringent regulations to forbid suicide…suicide is not only morally permissible but also admirable if it’s done for the sake of promoting compassion and righteousness” (140). In this context it can be interpreted that Qiu, who made a conscious decision to commit suicide and planned this novel for months to leave as a kind of suicide letter, had seen it as serving her own truth and values. That is not to say that there is no stigma attached to suicide in Chinese and Taiwanese cultures, however the culturally embedded religious views are very different to Western views and it is important to take this into consideration. My work relies on a method of affect and empathy so as not to pathologise or judge, but to treat this topic with the greatest care and sensitivity.

Regarding the double and its uncanny significance, Palmer (2012) cites Wolfreys who describes it as “the figure of haunting par excellence” (91). What makes it noteworthy is “its ability to evoke the ‘fragmented divided self’ and, by interrelating the unfamiliar with the familiar, ‘remind us of the otherness that inhabits the self-same’”(91). Queerness is often associated with fragmentation of the self due to an inability to show one’s true self in a heterosexist patriarchal society. Queer people have needed to create multiple selves, one that can appear to the public or even friends and family, and another self that is hidden. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes this in depth in *Epistemology of the Closet* (2008) and the disconnection queer people feel between the different parts of one’s identity, as well as a disconnect with society, friends, family, and history at large. Sedgwick (2008) writes “Even at an individual level, there are remarkably few of even the most openly gay people who are not deliberately in the closet with someone personally or economically or institutionally important to them. Furthermore, the deadly elasticity of heterosexist presumption means that...every encounter with a new classful of students, to say nothing of a new boss, social worker, loan officer, landlord, doctor, erects new closets whose fraught and characteristic laws of optics and physics exact from at least gay people new surveys, new calculations, new draughts and requisitions of secrecy or disclosure” (67-68). My practice frequently confronts these themes, and unconsciously I have
created many fragmented self-portraits layered with multiple selves. Sedgwick points out the
duality within queer identities as the closet creates a splitting within one’s identity. One feels
they must conform to the norms, rules and expectations of heterosexist, patriarchal, Western
society. Therefore parts of one’s identity remain hidden or closeted in order to uphold societal
expectations, and the decision of whether to disclose one’s identity is often a dilemma.

Feelings of secrecy, alienation, and separation are common aspects of the queer experience. As
Sedgwick (2008) writes “Even an out gay person deals daily with interlocutors about whom she
doesn’t know whether they know or not; it is equally difficult to guess for any given interlocutor
whether, if they did know, the knowledge would seem very important” (67-68). The fluctuations
between disclosure and non-disclosure of identity resonates with fluctuations of visibility in the
way that Palmer describes queer spectrality. Queer spectrality concerns not only invisibility, but a
fluctuation between visibility and non-visibility. To Palmer (2012) the figure of the ghost evokes
“the ‘now you see it, now you don’t’ effect familiar from Gothic film – it can operate as an image

Fig 24: Meng-Yu Yan, Mirror Gazing, 2017
for liminality and border-crossing, as illustrated by its ability to traverse the boundaries between inside and outside, present and past and, even more mysteriously, life and death. Cixous portrays the ghost existing in a limbo region, ‘neither alive nor dead’ but ‘erasing the limit between the two states’” (66-67). The spectre reflects the queer experience of fluctuating between states of being in and out of the closet, fluctuations of visibility, fluctuations between gender roles and performance, and fluctuations between private and public. Sedgwick (2008) discusses these binarisms in relation to the “open secret” of homosexuality, writing how it “does not, as one might think, bring about the collapse of those binarisms and their ideological effects, but rather attests to their fantasmic recovery” (84). The queer spectre resembles the open secret or the “glass closet” Sedgwick describes; it acts as the elephant in the room people are well aware of and yet refuse to acknowledge or mention. The feeling of being inside a glass closet is the same feeling of being a queer ghost, one’s identity and one’s self cannot truly be seen, heard or acknowledged. The result manifests in forms of disconnection, isolation, fragmentation and fracturing of one’s self and the self from society.

Palmer (2012) discusses how writers employ alternate selves “to investigate different forms of psychological division and fragmentation reflecting the phenomenon of ‘the doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self’ discussed by Freud” (68). Whilst the double has commonly been used to represent splitting within the self, I have attempted to use doubling as a connecting methodological practice. This is done by using synchronicities and similarities as an antithesis to fragmentation and disconnection. The point of this project is not to reproduce Qiu’s death but to share in her experience of life.

ii. Queer Narcissism and Lesbian Doppelgängers

My doubling of Qiu is situated amongst broader, recurring, popular culture motifs of the lesbian doppelgänger and narcissistic lesbian trope. Olu Jenzen investigates this in “Revolting Doubles: Radical Narcissism and the Trope of Lesbian Doppelgängers” (2013), writing “Popular culture of different kinds—from fashion photography to advertising, TV, cinema, and porn—is full of images
dramatized by the fantasy of female lovers that look the same” (345). The article lists numerous films playing upon the lesbian doppelgänger trope including *Persona* (1966), *Single White Female* (1992), *Desperately Seeking Susan* (1985), *All About Eve* (1950), *Heavenly Creatures* (1994), *Mulholland Drive* (2001), *She Monkeys* (2011), *Basic Instinct* (1992), and *Black Swan* (2010). This example “emphasizes hegemonic femininity and is generally seen as serving a male voyeuristic erotic economy” (346). Popular culture and Hollywood representations of lesbian doppelgängers simultaneously eroticise and pathologise lesbianism. Jenzen (2013) explains that the lesbian doubles motif is coded both “sexy” and “antisocial” (347), and this negative figure of the antisocial counter-cultural lesbian can be traced to its connection with Narcissism and psycho-pathological conditions (347). These associations “pathologize dissident sexuality…[and] also positions homosexuality as non-productive and non-contributing to society” (347). Narcissism has been “discursively coded female and queer, as the other of good sexuality” (348).

Western popular culture often associates lesbian doppelgängers and lesbianism in general to suicide, psychosis, and mental illness; seen in Jenzen’s reading of Darren Aronofsky’s film *Black Swan*. Jenzen (2013) writes “With her declining mental state Nina approximates the well-known staple character of popular culture, the “psychotic queer woman” —a figure that haunts dominant culture” (352). *Double Witness* actively challenges these discriminatory, fetishised representations of queer people, suicide and mental illness by using the lesbian doppelgänger trope to sensitively and self-reflexively explore platonic queer kinship. Jenzen (2013) highlights artists who have used the trope in a way that does not seek to serve the same heterosexist male voyeuristic capitalist economy. Examples include “Gluck’s famous work ‘Medallion’ (1937) and the work of Surrealist artists Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore, to contemporary artist Barbara Hammer’s *Nitrate Kisses* (1992), Zanele Muholi’s *Being* (2007), and Sadie Lee’s portraits” (347). These artists represent lesbian doppelgängers who do not adhere to the gendered expectations and beauty standards imposed upon people.

Hollywood, popular culture and pornographic representations that capitalise on the lesbian doppelgänger motif are challenged by artists who subvert the image as a political tool. An artist who raises visibility for marginalised groups is queer Mexican-American photographer Laura
Aguilar. Her series of *Nature Self Portraits* (1996) reveal a drastically different lesbian Narcissus; an un-eroticised, large-bodied person of colour. She is one of many people who are unrepresented and generally rendered invisible or erased. Aguilar writes in an artist statement that even “Within the Lesbian and Gay community of Los Angeles, people of color are yet another hidden subculture; we are present, but remain unseen” (Purdue University). Aguilar’s body blends in with the landscape that surrounds her and the images illustrate the experience of how large, brown, queer bodies form part of the landscape and yet are not recognised as part of it through homonationalist and heterosexist imaging. When marginalised and disavowed by society, queer people are left to turn their focus, recognition, validation, and love toward the self like the figure of Narcissus. I do this in my photographic practice and I continue it in my mirroring of Qiu. Doubling her has helped to connect the pieces of my own fragmented identity. Through her I see myself and my own reflection; feeling a sense of solidarity and visibility.

Fig 25: Laura Aguilar, *Nature Self Portrait #14*, 1996
Duane Michals is another queer photographic artist who created a series called *Narcissus* (1974) and a different series again titled *Narcissus* (1985). Mirrors are repeatedly used throughout his practice seen in *Dr Heisenberg’s Magic Mirror of Uncertainty* (1998) and *Who Am I?* (1994) perpetuating this Narcissus imagery. The reflections that reoccur throughout his practice warp and ripple the subject; mimicking the moving, distorted surface of a lake as though the reflection had its own life. His work has immense influence over my photographic style. I often create self-portraits using mirrors to duplicate or distort my own reflection, creating doubles and layers of selves upon selves. These self-portraits illustrate feelings of queer alienation and fragmentation described earlier in the chapter. Yet they are also therapeutic and self-affirming, proving that I exist and that my reflection is valid and visible. Mirrors and double exposure produce a haunting quality in Michals’ work seen in *The Spirit Leaves the Body* (1968). In this sequence Michals uses double-exposure to create a ghostly effect; showing a reclining body whose spirit sits up and walks out of the room. Michals uses a circular construction where the first and last images are the same – suggesting that what happens in-between these images is an act of haunting that could repeat in a cycle endlessly. By queering the linear narrative of this sequence Michals brings a
ghost to life. His work produces echoes that I attempt emulate, communicating the multiplicity of hidden selves within queer identity.

![Image](image.png)

**Fig 27:** Duane Michals, *The Spirit Leaves the Body*, 1968

Queer gender-bending androgynous photographic artist Claude Cahun is also well-known for her mirrored self-portraits such as *Self-Portrait* (1928) and *What Do You Want From Me?* (1928). From Jenzen’s analysis it is clear that Cahun took pride in her narcissism, conceptualising and using it as a political tool (353). Jenzen (2013) implies “that narcissism is an act of resistance that when radically performed subverts the previous derogatory usages of the term by the medical and psychoanalytical establishment” (353). Cahun describes “absolute Narcissism” as a form of revolt, a “Non-cooperation with God. Passive resistance” that is a challenge to authority (353). Similarly, Jose Esteban Muñoz reclaims narcissism in a radical queer utopian way in *Cruising Utopia* (2009). Citing Marcuse, Muñoz queers the myths of Orpheus and Narcissus, writing how they both reject normal Eros for a “fuller Eros” and in doing so, protest “against the repressive order of procreative sexuality” (134). What Muñoz (2009) describes through the Narcissus myth is “The Great Refusal”,

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explaining how “queerness is not just homosexuality but the rejection of normal love that keeps a repressive social order in place” (134). According to Muñoz (2009) Narcissus represents revolts against the performance principle of patriarchal, heterosexual “normal love”. In the performance principle “Men do not live their own lives but perform pre-established functions. While they work, they do not fulfil their own needs and faculties but live in alienation.” (135). In contrast, queerness offers ways to break out of such dynamics allowing “the human to feel and know not only our work and our pleasure but also ourselves and others” (135). The doubling in my work is similarly an attempt to better know my self through a profound connection with Qiu. Queer radical narcissism is one way of breaking free of social restraints and restricted existence through self love and kinship.

Fig 28: Claude Cahun, *Que me tu veux?*, 1929
Mirroring and doubling is evidently a recurring method amongst queer artists as a way to radically recognise and love the self that society has rejected. It is a powerful and unifying symbol of solidarity. It reveals a fracturing or splitting in one’s identity and yet at the same time a coming together, a connection or unity with oneself and/or one’s loved one. Another notable queer artist who portrays the double less figuratively is Felix González-Torres. This is illustrated through works such as *Untitled (Orpheus Twice)* (1991) featuring two large mirrors placed side by side, *Untitled (Loverboy)* (1989) featuring two windows with billowing curtains positioned side by side, and my personal favourite *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)* (1991) featuring two identical clocks side by side, synchronised and ticking in unison. This last work is incredibly powerful in its simplicity and was created when the artist’s partner was dying of AIDS. González-Torres acknowledged that eventually the clocks would fall out of sync or that one would eventually stop ticking before the other. The work contains a sense of impending mortality, and the ghost of the artist’s partner. It is an incredibly moving work that addresses the trauma of the HIV/AIDS pandemic and the way queer people were stigmatised and ghosted by society. Despite this, the work also reveals a deep sense of love and mutual connection between the artist and his partner. The work is a poignant symbol of the connection between all people who have suffered through this trauma. These clocks represent something so commonplace and yet one rarely sees two clocks ticking together side by side in unison. It conjures the queer uncanny. The doubling of this seemingly mundane object expresses a profound connection; the ability for two people to be bound together through time and through death.

Through this chapter I have explored the ways doubling has been reclaimed by artists as a radical approach to self-validation and self-recognition. It is a motif rich with both positive and negative connotations and cultural significance that can be drawn upon to produce manifold representations of queer spectres. Doubling is one method of putting back together the fragmented pieces of queer identity and history.
Fig 29: Felix González-Torres, *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)*, 1991
CONCLUSION

By nature the spectre flickers between visibility and invisibility, between endings and beginnings. My research into queer spectrality predominantly stems from my personal experience of being treated as a ghost by my family, society, culture, and history at large. When I began writing the proposal for this research project in 2017 I also began therapy. I felt that it would be hypocritical and irresponsible for me to conduct a research project about queer cultural haunting if I wasn’t addressing my own ghosts and traumas. This meant confronting myself, seeing myself, and bringing myself into visibility. Both therapy and this research project became very intertwined, and the goal for both undertakings was to confront the invisibility and erasure queer people have to endure, to repair past traumas, to heal the present, and to create future possibilities.

In Chapter 1 I sought to outline the basic premise of queer spectrality, what it means and why it is an important area of research. Theorists such as Bennett and Castle were highly impactful in terms of recognising the psychological trauma induced by societal ghosting queer people have had to undergo through literary examples. Yet alongside Freccero they reclaim the spectre as a powerful figure that has the capability of changing the past by haunting the present. Drawing from Derrida, Gordon introduced haunting as a compelling methodology and framework through which to confront these invisibilities and erasures. *Ghostly Matters* created a language based on sense and affect to describe the absence that once seemed impossible to put into words, and from which I could begin articulating what queer spectrality is and represents.

Theorists Halberstam and Muñoz were transformational in my understanding of time through this work. Like many things I once believed were fixed such as gender, sexuality, identity and the way life had to be lived according to social constructs and rules, I realised time too can be queered. My work *Double Witness* and this research project protests “straight” time and presents it instead as multiple and fluid. Perhaps the past may not be able to be changed in and of itself, yet the way we engage with it is always changing. Here lie the temporal possibilities that this work attempts to explore, and this understanding of time is essential to healing past trauma.
By encountering queer spectres I have discovered a vast supportive network and community that challenges the isolation, concealment, shame, guilt, fragmentation and fear I experienced caused by society and its repressive systems. Alongside Halberstam, Clarke and Haraway's *Making Kin Not Population* demonstrated that there are many networks, relationships, intimacies and kinships to be explored. The relationship I created through *Double Witness* with Qiu Miaojin has been life-changing, and I have realised that connecting with queer spectres and ancestors is foundational to building a resilient and strong queer identity. Encountering our queer spectres rather than repressing and silencing them is an empowering process. I have witnessed just how much positive change can occur when we embrace these spectres as part of our histories and identities.

Forming relationships with queer spectres engages with history without being didactic, stagnant or fixed. Queer paranormal and occult methods in art practice have been a vital means of forming these connections that I detailed in my Methodology chapter and Chapter 2. They push against the dogma of scientific rationalism that is largely Western, Imperialist and patriarchal. By examining artists such as boychild, Hilma af Klint, and the artists I met during my residency in Paris I have discovered a resurgence of interest in paranormal and occult methods in art-making that is largely experimental, uncharted, and full of many new avenues to investigate. *Queer Ghost Hunters* instigated my search into queer spectres and validated the use of paranormal methods to locate unheard voices and missing stories. These examples reveal that artists have the ability to act as liminal figures that can, with the help of ghosts, traverse countless boundaries, bring together missing pieces and disrupt rigid binaries.

My analysis of queer doubles in Chapter 3 was where I finally reached a point of recognition and visibility through my work with Qiu Miaojin in *Double Witness*. Jenzen’s essay *Revolting Doubles* illustrated how queer doubles were fetishised in mainstream portrayals but also how artists such as Claude Cahun reclaimed the motif as a radical form of self-love and self-affirmation. Muñoz’s queer reading of Narcissus was also part of this recognition and informed the way I approached doubling in my work. I looked to artists such as Laura Aguilar, Duane Michals, Felix González-Torres, and David Wojnarowicz to inform my own mirroring of Qiu Miaojin. They demonstrated that
within this seemingly simple trope contained multitudes of queer meaning and significance relating to time, death, identity, shared histories, self-love, and shared love.

_Double Witness_ required a great amount of emotional, physical, psychological, and spiritual investment. This experience has not been without pain, suffering, grief, and much sadness. Yet Qiu’s novel and queer spectrality as a whole is not solely about grieving the loss of queer lives and loves. This process has also been full of humour, bizarre coincidences, meaning, happiness, romance, magic and intimacy, all of which reveal the myriad intricacies of queer life and death. The research project opened up a broader way of thinking about connections between people, stories, trauma and healing. The past is not something that is simply dead and buried. To change the rigid binaries built by repressive social systems requires engaging with spectres in a transformative and enlivening process. I have attempted to demonstrate that change does not only come by looking into the future, but also into our past. Marginal spaces are full of queer spectres that represent a multiplicity of ways to engage with ourselves, others, and queer ancestors. There are still many absences containing multitudes of voices and stories yet to be told.


Cahun, Claude. *Que Me Tu Veux?*, 1929.


