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Between Apparition and Disappearance: Queer Penumbrae in Wu He's *Ghosts and Fairies*

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Abstract: This essay examines Taiwanese author Wu He's 2000 novel *Ghosts and Fairies* (*Gui'er yu ayao*) through its portrayal of sexual minorities as ghostly beings. The *gui'er* (literally "ghosts") of the title serve as an alternative to the common translation of queer as *ku'er* in Chinese. Bringing together Anglophone theorizations of queer spectrality and Taiwanese scholars Jen-peng Liu and Naifei Ding's formulation of the queer penumbra (*wangliang*) as a figure of ghostly liminality, I explore how Wu He's figuration of *gui'er* straddles the boundary between visible and invisible, present and absent, corporeal and incorporeal, and thereby probes the limits of visibility without recourse to a diametrically opposed politics of invisibility.

In an interview with Chao-chen Hsieh about his 2000 novel 鬼兒與阿妖 (*Gui'er yu ayao*; *Ghosts and Fairies*), Taiwanese author 舞鶴 (Wu He) explains his juxtaposition of the titular 鬼兒 (*gui'er*; lit. "ghosts") and the more familiar term 酷兒 (*ku'er*) in the novel, with the latter being a common Chinese transliteration of the English word "queer." As Wu He notes, his coinage of the term *gui'er*—as an alternative transla-

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tion of queer—maintains a critical distance from *ku'er* discourse in 1990s Taiwan and is meant as a polemical intervention into the local LGBTQ+ movement.

Wu He is one of Taiwan's most acclaimed novelists and is renowned for his experimental style and uncompromising vision to such an extent that literary scholar David Der-wei Wang declares that "when the history of Taiwanese literature of the twenty-first century is written, the first page will inevitably start with Wu He" (qtd. in Berry, "Wu He" 921). Wu He's œuvre is defined by his labyrinthine prose and persistent fascination with historical trauma, erotic desire, and marginalized communities, including sexual and ethnic minorities. Many of his writings possess a haunted and haunting quality, conjuring a world populated by ghosts and ghostly beings. One of his earliest works, 微細的一線香 ("*Weixi de yixian xiang*"; "A Tiny Incense Stick"), for instance, features a narrator living with his family in a haunted ancestral mansion. Keenly aware of the enduring legacy of Japanese colonialism on both his family and Taiwanese society at large, the narrator proclaims, "We are all lingering spirits under colonial rule" (197).[1] In his landmark work 拾骨 ("*Shigu*"; "Collecting Bones"), the narrator's long deceased mother returns as a revenant in his dream, whereupon he decides to exhume her remains while struggling to recollect history from its vestiges.

Wu He's predilection for ghostliness takes center stage in *Ghosts and Fairies*, where his unconventional rendering of queer as *gui'er* foregrounds the fraught yet generative link between queerness and spectrality. The association of queer sexualities with ghostly apparitions continues to be a site of contestation in that the figuration of minority subjects as ghosts has historically functioned as a mechanism of social abjection. Wu He's preference for *gui'er* over the less loaded term *ku'er* stems precisely from the dehumanizing history of the spectral metaphor. Just as the English word "queer" was originally used as a homophobic slur and was later reclaimed as a sign of self-affirmation by the very community it set out to stigmatize, the figure of the specter can potentially elicit discomfort and thus allow for inventive resignification. In this sense, the affinity between *gui'er* and queer lies in the parallel shifts in their affective tonalities.

How does Wu He's vision of *gui'er* grow out of and respond to Taiwan's queer politics at the turn of the century? To what extent does his novel add to existing discussions of queer spectrality while offering a pointed commentary on Taiwan's LGBTQ+ movement? In bringing together Anglophone and Sinophone theorizations of queer spectrality, this essay attempts to contextualize the hauntological conditions

of queer existence in the Chinese-speaking world, with a particular focus on Taiwanese scholars Jen-peng Liu and Naifei Ding's formulation of the queer penumbra as a figure of ghostly liminality. I then situate *Ghosts and Fairies* alongside discourses on queer sexualities in 1990s Taiwan to explore how this novel uses the spectral metaphor to advance a nondichotomous approach to the problems of visibility and representation in the arena of sexual politics.

Queer Spectrality and the Figure of the Penumbra

In her introduction to the 1991 anthology *Inside/Out*, Diana Fuss elucidates how the homosexual ghost haunts heterosexuality as its constitutive outside—a foil against which heterosexuality is defined and buttressed. As she elaborates, heteronormativity disavows its illicit desire and projects it onto an outside in order to secure its own integrity. The consequent association of queerness with ghostly haunting—which is further linked to the unreal, the invisible, and the ephemeral—has found myriad expressions in cultural imagination. Terry Castle's *The Apparitional Lesbian* represents one of the most celebrated treatises on the pervasive motif of the ghostlike sexual deviant. Castle proposes the notion of the lesbian "ghost effect" (2) to chart how lesbianism has been systematically vaporized in Western literature from the eighteenth century onward.[2] She traces not only how lesbian women are imagined as apparitional and thus less than human, but also how this prevalent portrayal—which she calls "murderous allegorizing" (7)—serves to perpetuate their dispossession. To dismantle such a ghost effect, Castle aims to "bring the lesbian back into focus, as it were, in all her worldliness, comedy, and humanity" (2) and urges that "it is time . . . to focus on presence instead of absence" (19).

While Castle insists on the urgency of purging the lesbian of her apparitionality, other queer theorists seek to harness the transgressive potential of the ghost and broker a productive rapprochement between queerness and spectrality. José Esteban Muñoz, for instance, writes in *Cruising Utopia*: "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). Muñoz embraces an openness to spectral visitations, for the hospitality toward ghosts aligns with the queer politics of grief in the face of manifold literal

and social deaths to which nonnormative sexualities have been consigned. The specter's elusiveness, moreover, shares conceptual space with the destabilizing energy of queerness in that both the spectral and the queer play with the tensions between visible and invisible, known and unknown, and familiar and strange.

The figure of the queer specter, Muñoz adds, not only brings a subversive edge to queerness as the phantom other to the heteronormative matrix but also invites self-critical reflections from the queer community itself. In his discussion of public sex in the shadow of the AIDS pandemic, Muñoz suggests that we transpose the specter's relation to the homo/hetero split onto other splits that are "currently being reified within queer cultures" in order to uncover how those "ostracized by many 'legitimate' factions within the queer community" still "[perform] the illicit and [help] these conservative factions formulate a 'legitimate,' sanitized gay world." In this way, the queer specter issues a challenge to the hierarchical distributions of legitimacy in both heterosexist and gay-affirmative thinking.

How, then, does the convergence of queerness and spectrality haunt the Chinese cultural landscape? In their influential essay "Reticent Poetics, Queer Politics," Liu and Ding examine the "interface of tolerance and reticence" (30) that works to maintain "'proper' sexual relations" (32–33) and keep "deviant sex(ualities) in the realm of ghosts" (33) in Chinese cultural tradition. In parallel with Fuss's observation on the homosexual ghost, Liu and Ding explicate how reticence contributes to the ghosting of sexual minorities:

> This ghostly position demands of shadow beings the responsibility (at their expense) for the upkeep of the wholeness and harmony of the very continuum wherein they do not have a place. . . . This is one way in which an effective homophobia works, very much like the fear and patronizing placation of "lone spirits and wild ghosts" (*guhun yegui*). . . . At the same time, the very sense of having to appease and guard against infringement or retaliation marks the powers of "ghosts" and *wangliang* non-persons in relation to institutional persons. (32)

Drawing on Zhuangzi's fable 罔兩問景 ("*Wangliang wen ying*"; "Penumbrae Query Shadow"), Liu and Ding reread the interrelationships between 形 (*xing*; substance), 景 (*ying*; shadow), and 罔兩 (*wangliang*; penumbra) as a model for unleashing counterhegemonic potential from the margins. Liu and Ding explain that while Shadow is characteristically dependent on Substance and is thus assigned a subordinate role, Penumbra, as the "slight shade outlining Shadow, the shadow of a shadow . . . that nothing or no-matter that everyone had almost

forgotten" (50), is relegated to a position inferior to Shadow's. And yet Penumbra pushes Shadow to reflect on its mode of existence by questioning how it always follows the motion of Substance. Much like the specter who refuses to be laid to rest and instead produces "a something-to-be-done" (Gordon xvi) for the living, Penumbra asks Shadow to acknowledge and be responsible for its own role in consolidating the power of Substance.

The figure of the penumbra carries several interrelated valences that are worth unpacking here: first, the term *wangliang* in Chinese mythology can refer to ghosts and monsters, hence an alternative writing of 魍魎 (*wangliang*) with the additional semantic radical 鬼 (*gui*), which means "ghost." Second, penumbra can also designate a partially shaded outer region when a light source is only partly obscured by an object, as in an eclipse. It thus stands for an area of partial illumination. Third, penumbra—as the "shadow of the shadow" in Zhuangzi's fable—supplies a third term beyond the dichotomy between substance and shadow. Etymologically, the character 罔 (*wang*) functions as a negative adverb like "not," while 兩 (*liang*) indicates the number "two," which leads Liu to treat *wangliang* as a signifier for "nonbinary" in an expansive sense.[3] As a ghostly or monstrous creature, a region of partial illumination, and a third term that extends beyond binary oppositions, the figure of the penumbra interlaces concerns about ghostliness, visibility, and nonbinarity, which have also preoccupied the field of queer studies.

With its explicit thematization of queer spectrality, Wu He's *Ghosts and Fairies* is a literary inquiry into both the theorizing and organizing around nonnormative sexualities in 1990s Taiwan. To reframe the novel's titular reference to ghostliness in the context of Liu and Ding's theorization of the Substance-Shadow-Penumbra triad: if heteronormativity occupies the dominant position of Substance, while the most influential strand of LGBTQ+ activism structurally resembles Shadow, then the *gui'er* inhabits the outer rim of Shadow as Penumbra, simultaneously challenging heteronormative and homonormative discourses. Viewed through this tripartite framework, the primary concern in Wu He's work is neither the relation of Penumbra to Substance nor that of Shadow to Substance, but rather the ways in which Penumbrae query Shadow.

Ku'er Discourse and the Politics of Visibility

Structured as a series of vignettes and ruminations with minimal plot, *Ghosts and Fairies* follows the narrator's years-long venture into

Taiwan's queer underworld, the denizens of which are named *gui'er* and 妖兒 (*yao'er*). The narrator initially visits a bar named 心魔 (*Xin mo*; Demon in the Heart) twice a week out of his curiosity about *gui'er*, and later frequents 鬼兒窩 (*Gui'er wo*; Nest of Ghosts), an apartment in which *gui'er*, *yao'er*, and their guests engage in promiscuous sex. As the narrator makes clear from the outset, the designations *gui'er* and *yao'er* are defined against the *ku'er* and *ayao* community active in Taiwan's queer scene. *Gui'er* and *yao'er* refer respectively to male and female subjects who are sexually nonconforming yet detached from local queer activism. *Ku'er* and *ayao*, on the other hand, promote queer visibility in media outlets and endeavor to enlist *gui'er* into their campaigns.[4] In the preface, the narrator delineates the relationship between *gui'er* and *ku'er*, which constitutes the central premise of the novel:

> A *gui'er* is not the same as a *ku'er*. Academically speaking, the *gui'er* could perhaps be considered as a branch of the *ku'er*, with the *gui'er* residing in the core of the *ku'er*. In today's social system, the *ku'er* have many tasks to accomplish, tending to focus on external image but all the while losing touch with their essence. The *gui'er* only concern themselves with core matters, renouncing everything else. . . .
>
> And so, please, *ku'er*, do not incorporate the *gui'er* into your "territory of *ku'er*." The *gui'er* only have a life of the flesh . . . The *gui'er* "do not understand activism" at all. (5–6)

The relationship between *gui'er* and *ku'er* strikes a curious balance between proximity and distance. On the one hand, any definition of *gui'er* must take *ku'er* as a point of reference. *Gui'er* retains what is perceived to be the most essential element of *ku'er*, namely, the devotion to sensual pleasure. On the other, *gui'er* is defined against the foil of the *ku'er*, unwilling to join the latter's quest for visibility.

The term *ku'er* is now the most common translation of queer in Chinese. The English word "queer" was first translated into Chinese as 同志 (*tongzhi*; lit. "same will," which ironically invokes the notion of "comrade" in Chinese communist parlance) at the 1992 Taipei Golden Horse Film Festival, where the section "New Queer Cinema"—a queer-themed independent filmmaking movement in early 1990s North America and England—was rendered by Hong Kong filmmaker Edward Lam as 新同志電影 (*xin tongzhi dianying*). Alternatively, the term has also been translated as 怪胎 (*guaitai*; freak, or lit. "strange fetus"), which is intended to match the pejorative connotations of queer. Whereas these translations reappropriated existing Chinese vocabulary, it is the neologism *ku'er* that has gained

the most traction in the Chinese-speaking world. The term made its first appearance in Taiwan in the January 1994 issue "*Ku'er / Queer*" of the journal 島嶼邊緣 (*Daoyu bianyuan*; *Isle Margin*), guest-edited by prominent critics and novelists Lucifer Hung, Ta-wei Chi, and Tang-Mo Tan. Even though the rendition of queer as *ku'er* is an apparent attempt at phonetic approximation, the compound term *ku'er* evokes multiple semantic associations, with 酷 (*ku*) meaning "cool" or "trendy" and 兒 (*er*) meaning "child" or "person." These connotations of *ku'er* are deliberate on the part of the translators. The *Isle Margin* special issue includes, among others, excerpts from Western queer fiction, scholarly writings, autobiographical accounts, and the essay 小小酷兒百科 ("*Xiaoxiao ku'er baike*"; "Little *Ku'er* Encyclopedia"). In the entry on *ku'er*, the guest editors expound on their preference for this neologism among other translations of queer: "*Queer* is otherwise translated as *guaitai* (lit. "a strange fetus"). As the fetus has grown, it has evolved into a cool and sly kid (*kuxia xiao'er* 酷黠小兒); hence, it is translated here as *ku'er*" (64). The translation of queer as *ku'er* therefore capitalizes on the semantic specificity of this compound term to accentuate the coolness and slyness of this glocalized category.[5]

In *Ghosts and Fairies*, Wu He's narrator draws a connection between the connotation of *ku* as "trendy" and the trend in which sexual minorities in Taiwan are increasingly eager to identify as *ku'er* and strive for recognition under this banner. Wu He relayed in his interview with Hsieh that his writing of the novel was prompted by his encounter with a journal issue titled 酷兒：理論與政治 ("*Ku'er: lilun yu zhengzhi*"; "*Ku'er*: Theory and Politics"). In particular, a transcript of the symposium 酷兒發妖 ("*Ku'er fayao*"; "Speak Out: *Ku'er* and *Yao*") gripped his attention and inspired his satirical portrayal of *ku'er* and *ayao* in the novel. The symposium was sponsored by *Isle Margin* to advance the theoretical and activist agendas of the *ku'er* movement. Presenters included two guest editors of the *Isle Margin* special issue, Hung and Chi, Taiwanese novelist Chen Xue, and academics Josephine Ho and Hans Tao-Ming Huang, to name a few. The presenters reiterated *ku'er* discourse popularized by *Isle Margin* and stressed the importance of fighting for queer visibility. Throughout the symposium, the presenters promulgated the term *fayao* as a verbal conjugation of the noun 妖言 (*yaoyan*; "fairy speech")—culled from the Chinese phrase 妖言惑眾 (*yaoyan huozhong*; lit. "the speech of the fairies confuses the mass")—and put a provocative spin on this idiomatic expression. The presenters elaborated that what they term "fairy speech" (Huang 48) refers to the voices of the marginalized

who have been denied the chance to express their sexual experiences and desires. Not unlike the reclamation of queer in the Anglophone context, the perplexing fairy speech is here reimagined as a strategy of discursive empowerment in the face of heteropatriarchy, as the self-disclosure of the fairies that simultaneously irritates and seduces those accustomed to heteronormative respectability.

Ku'er's investment in disclosure and visibility epitomizes the ambivalent relationship between Taiwan's queer community and the media apparatus. As Guo-Juin Hong puts it, "visibility becomes the battleground wherein problems of inclusion and exclusion are fought according to the two interlaced and competing logics of representation: self and media in tension between disclosure and exposure, authenticity and distortion" (686). On the one hand, nonnormative sexualities were subjected to a hostile gaze in 1990s Taiwan, as evidenced through several incidents in which television reporters intruded into gay and lesbian bars to shoot and then broadcast unauthorized footage, resulting in the forced outing of queer subjects. On the other, the queer community relies on visibility to counteract homophobic media representation. Fran Martin argues that the coming out of queer individuals performs a "*defiant* hyper-conformity to the homophobic command" (235), which exposes the violence of the command and makes visible the hitherto invisible. By making transparent the subjectivity of the gazed-at, the queer community exorcises its own ghostliness to claim representational visibility as a means of talking back to media voyeurism.

Against this backdrop, Wu He's novel figures *gui'er* to decenter *ku'er*'s brand of visibility politics. Inhabiting the margins of both heteronormative society and the *ku'er* movement, the *gui'er* is comparable to how Penumbra is depicted in both Zhuangzi's fable and Liu and Ding's essay, representing not a stable, self-evident identity but a relational position vis-à-vis Substance and Shadow. The invocation of ghostliness in the naming of *gui'er* is particularly apposite inasmuch as the ghost straddles the threshold of visibility and invisibility, which does not nullify but rather enables its haunting force. In what follows, I read Wu He's figuration of *gui'er* as a strategic deployment of the spectral metaphor and examine *gui'er*'s relationship to representational visibility.

Ghosting the Queer: *Gui'er* as *Ku'er*'s Spectral Double

As the narrator reminds us throughout *Ghosts and Fairies*, the distinction between *ku'er* and *gui'er* resides in their different relationships

to the representational field. In contrast to *ku'er*'s engagement in public debates over LGBTQ+ rights and fervent pursuit of visibility, *gui'er* dwell in the underworld and rarely step outside their habitats—namely, the bar, Demon in the Heart, and the apartment, Nest of Ghosts. In his reading of the novel, Christopher Payne draws an analogy between Demon in the Heart in Wu He's novel and the Cozy Nest tavern in Taiwanese author Pai Hsien-yung's classic 1983 novel 孽子 (*Niezi*; *Crystal Boys*). Payne observes that both Demon in the Heart and Cozy Nest serve as meeting places for sexual minorities and are operated by a parental figure who protects the younger generation. I would add that the queer hangouts in these two novels occupy the liminal zone between the visible and the invisible. In *Crystal Boys*, a tabloid reporter publishes an exposé after a visit to the Cozy Nest, which thrusts the young male sex workers into the spotlight as objects of simultaneous repulsion and fascination. In *Ghosts and Fairies*, however, the intruders into the quasi-secret hangout are not homophobic spectators but members of the *ku'er* and *ayao* community. Echoing the discursive strategy advocated during the *Isle Margin* symposium, many *ayao* frequent Demon in the Heart to deliver their "fairy speech" in hopes of soliciting media attention: "If someone who 'watches' *ayao* produces media coverage of them, for example writing an exposé on 'Alternative Performance Art in a Bar Scene,' *ayao* will occupy a new space [in the public arena]" (14). In a move akin to what Martin terms a "*defiant* hyper-conformity to the homophobic command" (235), *ayao* not only put their subjectivity on display but also purport to attract spectators to the bar despite *gui'er*'s lack of interest in publicity.

Near the beginning of the novel, the narrator recalls his first sighting of *gui'er* in the bar, which encapsulates the relationship between *gui'er* and *ayao*:

> The first time I saw *gui'er* was in a bar named "Demon in the Heart." *Gui'er* were slumped on a curved couch in the lower circular area of the bar. Were they smoking opium? I couldn't see them clearly through the smoke. A few limbs were dangling wearily, with no crutch to support. Were these their arms and legs?
>
> There were at least seven or eight tables of *ayao* surrounding the lower circle, speaking and gesturing enthusiastically. . . .
>
> It was almost midnight, and not a single *gui'er* had spoken aloud, jumped in, or given a howl; they were immersed in a "realm" beyond the reach of fairy speech. (11)

The contrast between *gui'er* and *ayao* is established in terms of vision and sound. As the narrator gazes at the *gui'er* upon his entry into

the bar, the smoke obstructs his sightline and lends them a quality of amorphousness and visual ambiguity. In the narrator's field of vision, the *gui'er* lack a definitive shape or a human form, for their body parts, such as arms and legs, can hardly be recognized through the smoke. Surrounding the reticent and nebulous *gui'er* are the hyperactive *ayao*, whose visible and audible presence besieges the *gui'er* through their spatial positioning.

In casting *gui'er* as shadowy figures vis-à-vis *ku'er* and *ayao*, Wu He's novel might appear to espouse a politics of invisibility. In *Unmarked*, Peggy Phelan takes issue with equating representational visibility with symbolic value or political power and instead demonstrates how the visually mediated constructions of racial, gender, and sexual differences can work against the emancipation of marginalized groups: "In framing more and more images of the hitherto underrepresented other, contemporary culture finds a way to name, and thus to arrest and fix, the image of that other" (2). A way out of this predicament, Phelan contends, is to revalue visual absence as a site of agency and radical resistance. In line with Phelan's argument, previous discussions of *Ghosts and Fairies* tend to position *gui'er* as outside the domain of representation and visibility. Payne, for instance, draws on queer theorists Lee Edelman's and Jack Halberstam's reassessments of negativity and passivity to celebrate *gui'er*'s "abandonment of the social" (553) as an act of rebellion. In a similar vein, Chia-rong Wu suggests that *gui'er*'s "complete life of corporeality" (108) promises an escape from human language and political ideology. Despite their different foci, both readings emphasize how *gui'er*'s unmarkedness turns the "binary between the power of visibility and the impotency of invisibility" (Phelan 6) on its head.

However, Phelan's call for a politics of invisibility—as visibility's diametric opposite—leaves intact the simplistic dichotomy of the marked versus the unmarked. To the extent that any postulation of an outside to representation can occur only within and through representation, the unmarked is always already implicated in the logic of marking. Even as Phelan projects her desire for an outside onto the category of the unmarked, its resistant energy still hinges on its position within the entire economy of marking. As Andrea Bachner argues in her critique of *Unmarked*, "what Phelan calls *unmarked* is always only un-marked, marked as that which escapes marking but, unable to shed its allegiance to the mark, dependent on marking for its very definition and existence" (*Mark of Theory* 196). Just as the problematically named "antisocial thesis" in queer theory must acknowledge negativity's imbrication with sociality, Phelan's wager

on the "real power in remaining unmarked" (6) fails to undo the reign of the mark and instead betrays the difficulties of any antirepresentational stance.[6]

The figure of *wangliang*—as the ghostly penumbra—opens up a nondichotomous approach to the problem of visibility. If the umbra is the dark center portion of a shadow where the light source is completely blocked, the penumbra limns the outer edges of the shadow where the lighting is only partly obscured. The sense of *wangliang* as a penumbral region of partial illumination is further accompanied by the term's close association with ghostly apparitions. Even though the ghost is typically understood as the absent or invisible, its manifestation is neither fully visible nor fully hidden; rather, it hovers between apparition and disappearance, as it disappears right away in its apparition.[7] In other words, a certain degree of visibility is a prerequisite for the staging of the specter's disappearance. To revisit Phelan's thesis through this lens, for invisibility to explode the hegemonic regime of visibility, it would have to first make itself felt or "seen" as a palpable absence.

Unlike Phelan's faith in the unmarked or the invisible, Wu He's twist on visibility politics is not that he endorses a straightforward rejection of visibility, but that he keeps the textual imaginary of *gui'er* oscillating between the visible and the invisible, the represented and the unrepresentable. In the narrator's first encounter with the *gui'er*, their spectral (in)visibility, as opposed to the hypervisibility of the *ayao*, eludes his grasp but nevertheless registers in his field of vision. This opening scene not only brings to the fore the distinction between *gui'er* and *ayao*, but also signals the novel's own aporetic operation of representing *gui'er* while constantly reminding us of their unrepresentability.

(Un)writing the Flesh

The paradoxical structure of representing the unrepresentable underlies the entire novel and is played out most acutely in the nexus between corporeality and textuality.[8] *Ghosts and Fairies* features a description of the book as a work of 肉慾書 (*rouyu shu*; "carnal writing") on the covers of both the first and second editions. Indeed, the novel seems to take the carnal as its centerpiece, devoting much of the text to sexual pleasure in baroque excess. To recall the framing of *gui'er* in the preface, the term refers to those who only have a "life of the flesh" and do not share the discursive and political aspirations harbored by *ku'er* and *ayao*. Throughout the novel, the

narrator repeatedly stresses *gui'er*'s detachment from the realm of representation: "*Gui'er* renounces any reconstruction; it renounces any definitions. How to reconstruct such a thing as humanity, or how to define [humanity] and human relationships, the *gui'er* does not participate in any of that" (202).

Apart from pitting *gui'er* against the hypervisible *ayao* and *ku'er*, the narrator further posits *gui'er* as removed from any grid of representation. At first glance, this recurrent emphasis on (extratextual) corporeality might appear to support the line of Payne's and Chia-rong Wu's interpretation in which *gui'er*'s raw materiality is given a priori and untouched by any markers. Yet this attempt to free *gui'er* from the taints of "definitions," "reconstruction," and "humanity and human relationships" is complicated by a set of contradictions just beneath the surface, for the passage—characterized by its definitional impulse—is itself embedded in an instance of textual "reconstruction" enacted by the "human" narrator. A similar paradox is reflected in the phrase "carnal writing," in which the juxtaposition of the carnal and the textual casts doubt on the immediacy of the body as existing prior to and beyond signification. In other words, the phrase points not so much to the autonomy of the carnal as to the entanglement between flesh and text.

While *Ghosts and Fairies* ironizes the incongruence between the sensuous plenitude of *gui'er* and the intellectual disposition of the narrator, many of Wu He's other works tackle the politics of representation within the context of interethnic exchanges, which similarly involve the fraught dynamics between the "civilized" observer and the "primitive" other. His 1999 novel 餘生 (*Yusheng*; *Remains of Life*)—translated into English in 2017—centers on the 1930 Musha Incident, when Taiwan's Atayal tribe ambushed and killed 134 Japanese colonial settlers. Written from the first-person perspective of a Han Chinese narrator intrigued by the Indigenous Atayal community, the novel raises the problem of representing so-called primitive culture by an agent of civilization. This troubling dynamic culminates in a scene where an Atayal woman bluntly questions the narrator's fantasy of exotic alterity, leading him to abandon "the pretense of a neutral point of view and [highlight] his personal emotional investment in his 'object' of study" (Bachner, "Remains of History" 112).[9]

A similar gesture can be found in *Ghosts and Fairies*, where the narrator's "study" of the *gui'er* community is punctuated by his self-reflexive musings. While the narrator stipulates that *gui'er* relinquish language to revel in sexual ecstasy, he also highlights the act of representation as he assumes the role of an ethnographer attempting

to account for *gui'er*'s way of living. The preface to *Ghosts and Fairies*—aptly titled "Speaking for Ghosts"—presents the text as a piece of writing penned by the narrator. Revolving around the interrelationships between *gui'er*, *ku'er*, and *ayao*, the preface is bookended by the narrator's meditations on his own writing about *gui'er*:

> *Gui'er* have no intent of speaking. After all, the flesh and its movement do not need speech. . . .
>
> A "book of *gui'er*" does not concern *gui'er* at all; they don't care. Whether to speak a bit more, should only concern the person who writes the book. . . .
>
> I do not write with the purpose of "documenting" the life of *gui'er*, *yao'er*, or whatever. Because all written words are in essence a fabrication, especially the words that make up novels.
>
> Rather, I write this book for myself, for the remaining years of my life. (5–7)

From the outset, the narrator warns the reader about the inauthenticity of his narration, which postures as a collection of fieldwork notes about his observations of and interactions with *gui'er*. At stake here is a self-reflexive skepticism toward the façade of objectivity in ethnographic representation, especially when the ethnographer seems obsessed precisely with the unrepresentable nature of his informants. In this regard, the pseudo-ethnographic novel simultaneously operates on two distinct levels of representation: it sets out to represent *gui'er* directly while also commenting on the process by which *gui'er* are figured within the text itself.

This self-positioning of the narrator as an ethnographer is paralleled in Wu He's account of his creative process. In an interview with Chao Ch'i-lin, Wu He recounts his expedition into Taipei's queer scene from 1985 to 1986 and defines his visits to gay and lesbian bars as a form of literary fieldwork research. More than a decade later, he came across the academic conversations about *ku'er*, as discussed above, whereupon he began to build on his previous "research" to craft a literary response to *ku'er* discourse. The resulting text is itself a fictional rewriting of the allegedly observed "reality," given that Wu He's self-designated fieldwork research was conducted in the mid-1980s, a time when *ku'er*—as a neologism that emerged in the mid-1990s—was yet to come into being. *Ghosts and Fairies* places the *gui'er* community squarely within the context of the 1990s *ku'er* movement, thereby creating an anachronistic gap between the diegetic setting of the novel and the objects of Wu He's ethnographic investigation. This temporal disjuncture therefore implies, in a ghostly manner, both revenants from the past and arrivants from the future through

this intricate web of diegetic and extradiegetic quasi-ethnographic endeavors.

Just as the narrator's first sighting of *gui'er* in Demon in the Heart is characterized by a lack of transparency, the novel repeatedly foregrounds the failure to capture *gui'er* in writing. As the narrator laments, "I have to resort to some outdated words, phrases, and metaphysical descriptions to write about the 'phenomenal reality' I am facing" (105). The laborious process of discursive and textual production is underscored in several passages where the narrator takes pains to translate sexual bliss into words. For instance, he struggles with word choice when trying to describe a festive routine in which Sister Man—a *yao'er* who serves as the de facto protector of *gui'er*—visits Nest of Ghosts twice a month to be sexually pleased by each and every *gui'er* and *yao'er*:

> From dusk till midnight, I watched a complete act of "肉體祭儀 (*routi jiyi*; carnal sacrificial rituals) for Sister Man." After years of watching every act of 肉體之禮 (*routi zhi li*; carnal customs) dedicated to Sister Man, I turned instead to the term 祭儀 (*jiyi*; carnal rituals). . . .
>
> I had naturally used the word 禮 (*li*). [Yet] the word can imply the worship of the clan ancestors in a mundane sense, so I came to prefer the term *jiyi* since it originates in primitive tribes and dates back to time immemorial. (169)

As the narrator reflects on his intuitive use of *li*—which can mean "rites," "customs," or "etiquette"—he realizes that the term may evoke an instilled sense of civility and propriety, which contradicts his conception of *gui'er* as instinctive and unrestrained. He therefore substitutes *yi* for *li*, with *yi* (lit. "rituals") being putatively free from the inculcation of societal values. The significance of this hair-splitting differentiation between *li* and *yi* is twofold: first, the narrator's meticulous wording both bridges and reaffirms the gap between flesh and word, as it suggests that any access to the flesh is inevitably mediated by language. Second, although the social conformity of *li* is contrasted with the ostensible spontaneity of *yi*, this framing is implicitly subverted by the temporal sequencing of the two terms. The narrator remarks that he "naturally" used *li* as a descriptor for the sexual practice in question, and it was not until years later that he came up with the alternative term *yi*. That is to say, the "natural" word of choice is the one imbued with social meanings, not the one supposedly uncorrupted by social conventions. Rather than treating sociality as an external imposition on the unmarked, the passage reveals how sex must be actively divested of its social implications in order to be

perceived as unmarked. As such, it illustrates the process by which the materiality of sex is—in Judith Butler's words—"retroactively installed at a prelinguistic site to which there is no direct access" (5). The continually underlined primacy of prediscursive corporeality can therefore be construed as a reaction to, rather than a cause of, the narrator's self-critical awareness of his own writing.

The issues of corporeality and representational visibility are brought together in a scene near the end of the novel where the *ayao* community launches an event named "Public Sacrifice of a Virgin" to garner media coverage. The event features a virgin *ayao* who volunteers to have her hymen ruptured in public as a means of combating the fetish of virginity. To further politicize the event, the organizers recruit the narrator to deflower the virgin not with his penis but with a radioactive vacuum tube used in nuclear weapon designs in a provocative interrogation of the nuclear weapons complex and the societal fixation on virginity at once. In his reading of this scene, Chia-rong Wu posits that "the rebellious performance of penetrating the virgin's vagina does not just ridicule the nation state's overcontrol of the privacy of human body, but the act also broadcasts an ideological collision with patriarchal dominance" (107). Whereas Wu's interpretation of the show as an anti-statist and feminist statement certainly accords with the *ayao* organizers' agenda, this scene nevertheless closes on a moment of indeterminacy that questions the very legibility of its political messages. After the narrator inserts the vacuum tube into the vagina of the virgin and successfully concludes the show, he keeps wondering why the virgin does not make a single "sound of pain" during the process. He then speculates on a few possible reasons:

> It is possible that her hymen was abraded by her panties when she was carried back and forth [by other *ayao*].
>
> It is also possible that hymens in the new century have been programmed by computers as something at once existent and nonexistent.
>
> It is indeed possible that there wasn't a sound of pain but a fleeting sound of "membranous rupture" in the universe. We can only blame human auditory cells for being unable to receive the sound waves made by the "rupture of a membrane."
>
> It is even more possible that it was because [I, as a *gui'er*,] am skillful. Of course [I] am. (231)

In the absence of any auditory or visual evidence of defloration—such as the "sound of pain" or the visible sign of bleeding—the previous

and current status of the hymen remain unknown, for the narrator and the audience can never be sure whether the volunteer's hymen was intact prior to this "virgin sacrifice" and, if so, whether it was successfully torn during the show. While an unambiguous scene of defloration would have conveyed the political messages predetermined by the event organizers, the undecidability of hymenal rupture lends itself to a range of interpretations and unsettles the symbolic economy on which the event itself is grounded. If a specter disappears at the moment of its appearance, the hymen is retrospectively acknowledged as having been intact upon the very moment of its rupture. In this sense, the figure of the hymen is itself governed by a spectral logic in which "only virginity's post factum underlines a presence that is already lost" (Bachner, "Hymenologics" 20).

As the novel leaves the narrator's puzzle unsolved, this episode crystallizes *Ghosts and Fairies*' overarching concern with the question of visibility. On the one hand, the silence during the presumptively climatic moment of the show subverts the terms of representational visibility, displaying the shadows that accompany and subtend any meaning-making efforts. On the other, the silence accrues its significance precisely because it is embedded within a highly publicized event, whereby silence can manifest as a perceptible absence. At stake here is—to use Avery Gordon's characterization of ghostliness—"a kind of visible invisibility: *I see you are not there*" (16). By the same token, the novel's textual self-consciousness sets up a dialectic of presence and absence in its figuration of *gui'er*, writing the ghosts into a visibility verging on the invisible.

Pivoting around a cluster of concerns about spectrality, nonbinarity, and (in)visibility, Wu He's figuration of *gui'er* provides a vantage point from which to reconsider the terms of queer politics beyond entrenched dichotomies. In Liu and Ding's interpretation of Zhuangzi's fable, even though Substance does not appear in the story, Shadow is so preoccupied with its relation to Substance that its speech is in fact addressed to Substance even as it appears to be answering questions from Penumbrae. As such, Shadow remains trapped in the terms dictated by Substance and further reinforces the latter's dominance. Meanwhile, Penumbrae—Liu and Ding insist—will continue their que(e)rying of Shadow despite being routinely unheard and unaddressed. In a similar manner, Wu He's *gui'er* hover at the edge of legibility and push against the binary of heterosexist oppression and LGBTQ+ liberation. By probing the limits of visibility politics without recourse to a diametrically opposed politics of invisibility, Wu He's novel alerts *ku'er* to their own adherence to the logic of the

heteronormative mainstream and calls for a more attentive response than Zhuangzi's Penumbra has received.

Notes

1. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.
2. For a discussion of lesbian ghosts in Taiwanese literature, see Liou.
3. Nineteenth-century intellectual and translator Yan Fu uses the term *wangliang* to render the notion of "neuter gender" into Chinese. Liu posits that Yan's somewhat counterintuitive translation—insofar as *wangliang* appears unrelated to considerations of gender—hinges on an etymologically informed reading of the term as a signifier for a "neither/nor" positionality. See Liu (vi).
4. Although notionally *ku'er* applies to all genders, throughout *Ghosts and Fairies* the narrator uses the term to refer to male subjects only. According to Wu He, the novel's gender-specific use of *ku'er* invokes and interrogates how the term has been used disproportionately across gender lines. See Hsieh (248).
5. For a critique of the elitist tendencies and exclusionary effects of *ku'er* discourse, see Lim.
6. For in-depth reflections on the antisocial thesis in queer theory and its relation to sociality, see Berlant and Edelman (xiv, xiii); Wiegman (226).
7. My argument here is indebted to Derrida's work on spectrality. See, in particular, Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (6).
8. For a useful discussion of corporeality and textuality in Wu He's œuvre, see Yang.
9. For Wu He's own fieldwork research for *Remains of Life*, see Berry, "Fiction and Fieldwork."

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