Queer Identity through the Dismantling of Gender and Self

A Study of Qiu Miaojin's Last Words of Montmartre, Notes of a Crocodile, and "Platonic Hair"

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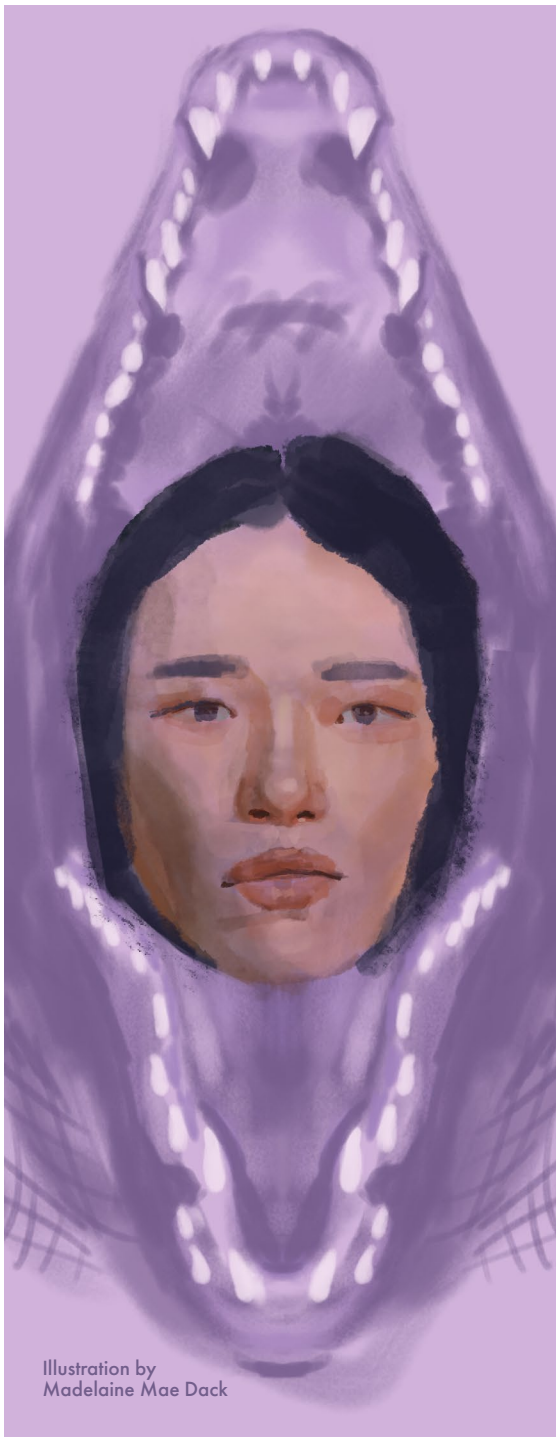
Keywords: Chinese Language Literature, Taiwan, Ku'er Movement, Qiu Miaojin, Queer Theory, Notes of a Crocodile, Last Words from Montmartre, "Platonic Hair"

Trigger Warnings: Discussions of violence, suicide and vivid descriptions of bodies

Abstract:

Qiu Miaojin (1969-1995) is a Taiwanese author recognized for kickstarting the Ku'er literary movement in Taiwan. They are best known for their works that focus on exploration of identity and homosexual love, largely set in a post martial-law era of Taiwan, bringing about a revolutionary perspective for their time. Their debut novel, Notes of a Crocodile (trans. by Bonnie Hue), the semi-autobiographical novel, Last Words from Montmartre (trans. by Ari Larissa Heinrich), and one of their most well-known short stories, "Platonic Hair" (trans. by Fran Martin) have been chosen for this study. The essay aims to study the use of gender expression, identity, and body imagery within these works, and goes on to examine the depiction of violence as a way to articulate queer love. This paper argues that Qiu's depiction of queer identity through these aforementioned facets are influential to shaping the literary landscape of Chinese language literature and the onset of the Ku'er movement.



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Introduction

Qiu Miaojin (1969-1995) is a queer Taiwanese author recognized for contributing to the onset of a new wave of queer literature in Taiwan. They are best known for their novel, *Notes of a Crocodile*, written from the perspective of a lesbian narrator nicknamed Lazi, alongside several other works that focus on exploration of identity and homosexual love, these stories primarily set in the post martial-law era of Taiwan. Qiu's writings were experimental for their time, but ultimately revolutionary to queer literature of the Chinese speaking world. Often cited as the emblem of *Ku'er* literature, these pieces explore themes of gender, body dysmorphia, and death through queer characters finding their place in their world. They present a unique perspective on the LGBTQ community that embraces individuality and rejects labels. Qiu's writing often connects to the audience through an intimate perspective of an obsessive and idiosyncratic narrator.

The essay will delve into three of Qiu Miaojin's writings and explore the representation of gender, body, and death within these works. Their debut novel, *Notes of a Crocodile*, the semi-autobiographical novel, *Last Words from Montmartre*, and one of their most well-known short stories, "Platonic Hair" have been selected for this study. Throughout these works, Qiu emphasizes a distinction between the characters' biological sex, which they refer to as "female" or "male", and the gender expression of these characters, "masculinity" and "femininity". While the former is binary, the latter is depicted as coexisting facets of an individual. This representation of gender provides perspective into queerness that differs from conventional understanding of gender and sexuality as separate. Furthermore, Qiu uses the changing and warping of the characters' physical bodies to paint an image of homosexual desire as alienating and othering. Most famously, *Notes of a Crocodile* intersperses a motif of an unsightly and inhuman crocodile masquerading behind a human skin, an extended metaphor that Qiu likens to the experience of a queer person in heteronormative society. All three pieces also feature violent depictions of bodily disfigurement as a result of a character's supposed twisted nature. The intensity and othering nature of queer love is expressed throughout their writing by interlacing passion with death.

Self Through Gender Ambiguity

The narration of all three pieces are written from the first person perspective and depict a narrating voice that is ambiguous in their gender expression; yet, the three pieces present a vastly different self perception of gender within these biologically female characters. *Notes of a Crocodile* sets up the protagonist as a lesbian right from the beginning, with her declaration that "[they are] a woman who loves women" (Qiu, Notes 21). Lazi, though certain in their identity, does not use any labels and their social identity is overshadowed by their self-consciousness as a woman and a queer.

In contrast, neither *Last Words of Montmartre* nor "Platonic Hair" established the gender of the narrator until much later in the story. In particular, the short story "Platonic Hair" relies on a deliberately misleading masculine depiction of the narrator to create a false sense of heteronormativity in the piece. However, the audience is unable to confirm the "true" genders of the characters as the use of gendered pronouns are written in quotations in the scenes set in the present when referring to the character later established as Han-Han. Both the narrator and their lover are written with intentional ambiguity to further blur the sense of self and gender identity of the two characters.

In *Last Words from Montmartre*, Qiu is particularly vague and uses both masculine and feminine self-referential terms for the narrator, Zoë. It is worth noting that Qiu Miaojin was already established as a lesbian author by the time *Last Words from Montmartre* was published and it was not unlikely that the reader would have had an expectation of a female narrator in approaching the text. This novel is primarily written as a series of letter from

Zoë, who refers to themself as a father figure to their pet bunny, though some of the gendered implications were lost in the English translation (Lee, 61). Furthermore, the narrator romanticizes a version of "Zoë who is handsome and beautiful" (Qiu, *Last Words* 35), emphasizing an ideal self that encompasses masculinity alongside femininity. Zoë's biological female-ness is cemented in later scene describing intimacy between the narrator and another female characters (Qiu, *Last Words* 114).

As their respective stories unfold, all three main characters explore a different side to their gender identity. While Lazi was clear in how they identified at the beginning, we see that label crumble for them, expressing that "though [they] couldn't define the kind of person [they were], [they] knew what [they weren't]" (Qiu, *Notes* 122) and that while others perceive them as a woman, they were a "beast straight out of Greek mythology" in their own mind. Qiu continues to push the boundaries of a gender binary intrinsically tied to biology by introducing Lazi's idea for "a gender-free society" (113), demonstrating a queer character who is grown sick of imposed labels and tired of the societal position they occupy. On the other hand, the unnamed narrator of "Platonic Hair" is "very seldom aware of [their] own gender" (Qiu, "Platonic Hair" 65) and only seems to realize their own female-ness in relation to that of Han-Han. As the both narrators progress in their relationships, the divide between "femininity" and "female-ness" is widened.

Last Words from Montmartre and *Notes of a Crocodile* include musings from the narrator about what it means to be "feminine" and 'masculine" simultaneously. Zoë writes, "I hate that I am too 'male' (and I guess this hatred is driving me to become more 'female')" (Qiu, *Last Words* 83). Throughout the novel, Zoë often cites their imbalanced male-ness as a source or cause of their internal turmoil. Likewise, Lazi wonders at a gender binary that "stems from the duality of yin and yang, or some unspeakable evil" (Qiu, *Notes* 47), establishing the dichotomous nature of gender along with the narrator's disdain towards it. Both of these characters describe the dichotomy of male and female as a painful reality they endure, seemingly unrelated to their homosexual attraction but tied to the way they express love nonetheless.

However, the male-ness and female-ness of the characters in Qiu's works are only imposed upon them biologically and do not correspond with their expression of yin and yang, of femininity and masculinity. Qiu goes on to paint the character Meng Sheng, a "lunatic" gay man who moves in a "womanly manner" (Qiu, *Notes* 112) but remains a masculine figure. Meng Sheng ultimately confesses that "[his] masculine side loves [Lazi], and [his] feminine side loves Chu Kuang" (Qiu, *Notes* 219), the latter of whom is a male character. Such a declaration shows that he claims both yin and yang within himself and establishes these as mutually attractive forces. Towards the end of *Notes of a Crocodile*, the narrator themself begin to reconcile masculinity and femininity as coexisting forces within themself that draw towards one another, not necessarily contradicting. Instances of masculinity and femininity as forces of mutual attraction are also established in "Platonic Hair" when the narrator discusses the masculinity within the narrator being drawn to the femininity of Han-Han (Qiu, "Platonic Hair" 66), disregarding the biological female-ness of the narrator. While Qiu Miaojin's interpretation of a dichotomy between the active yang and passive yin rely on gendered implications, it presents these ideas as two sides of the same, both present in each individual. Unlike other rhetorics that may apply binary expectations onto homosexual attraction, Qiu artfully intertwines yin and yang within these characters without compromising their queerness.

The Body as Abstract

Beyond the coexistence of femininity and masculinity within these queer characters in a metaphorical sense, Qiu Miaojin also manipulates the physical body, drawing on it as a representation of desire and queer identity. Albeit presented in different ways, the narrator of each story experiences a change within the physical body that reflects turmoil of the heart.

"Platonic Hair" depicts the hair of the narrator as a part of one's body but with a life of its own, growing at will and reaching for Han-Han despite the narrator's resistance. As a symbol of the narrator's unwanted homosexual lust, the hair takes on a supernatural nature and seeks to take control of Han-Han. Hair is used throughout the story as both the object of desire as well as the manifestation of desire–desire that was carefully cultivated by Han-Han as the pair "[became] conscientious actors" (Qiu, "Platonic Hair" 57). The short story sets up the character's obsession over hair right from the opening line and the narrator claims that they had "come to depend on [their] love for it" (Qiu, "Platonic Hair" 53). In turn, Han-Han too, uses the narrator's hair to shape them into someone that she could project her love onto (Qiu, "Platonic Hair" 60). When Han-Han's hair is forcibly cut short, she becomes unrecognizable to the narrator who says that they "can't tell who it is" (Qiu, "Platonic Hair" 72), dropping the use of gendered pronouns altogether and completely dehumanizing Han-Han. The femininity of Han-Han, manifested through her hair, is mutilated beyond recognition, just as the love that the narrator had toward her had become twisted and unbearable.

Last Words from Montmartre takes a different, more abstract approach to how desire manifests between bodies. Within this novel, Qiu explores the relationship between Zoë and Xu outside of a gender binary as the narrator, Zoë takes on both masculine and feminine roles within their relationship. The narrator identifies the spark in their relationships as "passion. It's not a male body's and it's not a female body's ... Passion is a quality" (Qiu, *Last Words* 112). The novel navigates Zoë's introspection as they fluctuate between the boundaries of masculinity and femininity, creating what Lee refers to as "a mystique of trans-genderism or de-genderism" (64). The letters that make up *Last Word of Montmartre* are addressed to Xu, who Zoë acknowledges as "the soul [they] have cared for" (Qiu, *Last Words* 105), despite the "betrayal" of Xu. This tender confession of love rejects gender and body, instead declaring the 'soul" of Xu as the true object of Zoë's ardent love. The narrator also iterates a separation between their spiritual self and the secular life they are expected to lead (Qiu, *Last Words* 20), further separating their body and soul. The deliberate dissociation between the corporeal self and that of the heart is brought up again and again; this too, could be understood as a form of bodily manipulation.

Notes of a Crocodile used a recurring emphasis on body imagery throughout the book to express the fixation that Lazi feels towards the physical self. There is an ongoing metaphor of a crocodile masquerading as a human, searching for joy and companionship whilst hiding its hideous, unhuman appearance. The episodes of this crocodile are interspersed throughout the novel and mirror Lazi's journey of identity. However, the bodily fixation in *Notes of a Crocodile* do not appear only in the form of the crocodile self. The narrator believes that their emotional pain is manifested in the body, describing an intimate moment with their lover, Shui Ling, with crude, vivid body imagery: "To paint a picture of our embrace, I'd almost have to use her blood and guts" (Qiu, *Notes* 56). Further, when Meng Sheng takes them to a gay bar, Lazi reveals that they felt as though "[their] mind and [their] body are out of sync" (Qiu, *Notes* 144) after vomiting, unable to reconcile and accept facets of their own queerness, leaving them only able to purge and expel these feeling from their body, perhaps a result of internalized disgust or a case of abstraction. The narrator's self-harming tendencies could also be understood as an attempt for them to reconcile with the body they cannot seem to comfortably occupy, a means to gain control over their "deviant sexual desires" (Qiu, *Notes* 53). While the tragedies Lazi experiences may not always take a physical form, they perceive it as corporeal, thinking that "[they'd] been waiting for the ax to fall, and now a bloody limb hit the ground with a thud." (Qiu, *Notes* 226). Throughout *Notes of a Crocodile*, Qiu draws attention to the discomfort that Lazi feels in their body as a result of an inability to reconcile their attraction to women as well as the masculinity within them.

A Love that Parallels Death

Ultimately, Qiu Miaojin's works were instrumental in shaping perception of queer people as a result of their artistry in expressing the intensity and passion that these queer characters experience. All three narrating voices experience moments of impulse, driven by obsession, resulting in acts of violence. The queer love that Qiu writes of is vivid and painful, intense and destructive.

In particular, *Last Words from Montmartre* portrays a passion between Zoë and Xu that drives both of them to lose control. From the perspective of Zoë, "tranquil love is not love" (Qiu, *Last Words* 94). Throughout the non-chronological retelling of their story along with many musings and meditations on their love, there are ideas that Zoë returns to time and time again. Of these is their belief that the true expression of love is death, feeling that "[they] have a fatal, mortal, terminal passion for [Xu]. Ultimately [they] have no choice but death: an unconditional allegiance, an eternal bond to [Xu]" (Qiu, *Last Words* 77). Not only is death the final demonstration of love, it is also the ultimate unity between Zoë and Xu. While Xu was unreachable to Zoë as they write letter after letter, the narrator believes that this distance could be bridged through death by "extinguishing the dual layers of [their] spiritual life and corporeal life" (Qiu, *Last Words* 53). Death would bring a conclusion and "eternal bond" between the two and offer Zoë themself solace as their spirit and body would be united. Zoë writes of longing for someone "who will be able to look into my eyes and know that I am myself" (Qiu, *Last Words* 48). Inspired by Osamu Dazai and Yukio Mishima, both of whom wrote extensively about the human condition and mortality in the most-war era of Japan before famously committing suicide, the narrator believes that the true self and ideal self would be rejoined through death. Zoë feels that "[their] desire became unhinged and [their] pain excruciating" (Qiu, *Last Words* 77), and thus their love could not be separated from pain and Zoë desperately relied on it.

Through *Notes of a Crocodile*, Qiu writes of a cast equally haunted by their love. Lazi sees an ideal love as something that maintains life, feeling as though "she (Shui Ling) was my lifeline." (Qiu, *Notes* 19). Lazi is not the only character who was dependent on a blossoming romance to get through their daily life. Zhi Rou, another queer character, similarly stated that she chases after love time and time again because "[she didn't know how to live without it. [She'd] have no will to go on..." (Qiu, *Notes* 160). In the aftermath of the breakup, Lazi describes their life as "constantly on the border of life and death" (Qiu, *Notes* 146). Without the "lifeline" of Shui Ling, the narrator becomes increasingly unstable. Not unlike Zoë, Lazi is reliant on a passionate and fulfilling love to drive their life. The desire that these characters experience is both the cornerstone of their sense of self and the source of their pain. Lazi claims that "the problem was the way [they] loved: It was the very cause of [their] pain" (Qiu, *Notes* 124); likewise, the narrator of "Platonic Hair" states that "to be a woman who loves another woman is to be sharply, heart-piercingly humbled" (Qiu, "Platonic Hair" 69). To be unable to fulfill a perfect love is likened to death. The narrator of "Platonic Hair" laments, "I can't protect you... I wish I was dead ..." (Qiu, "Platonic Hair" 72), a sentiment that mirrors from Zoë's "fatal, mortal, terminal passion" for Xu. To be parted from their lover is to experience death; the inevitability of the parting means that to love is boundless pain. The representation of queerness throughout these stories crafts an impactful and personal experience without sugarcoating the tortured underpinnings of "deviant" desires. The intensity of love and of passion in Qiu Miaojin's writing is powerful and striking, inviting the reader into the minds of the narrator intimately.

Conclusion

Qiu Miaojin works have undoubtedly shaped the literary landscape of not only Taiwan, but of the Sino-sphere of literature. Beyond their willingness to explore queerness beyond labels, their post-modernist views of society, politics, and autonomy was groundbreaking for its time and continues to be impactful today. The three texts explore the manipulation of gender identity, blurring and redefining the lines between physical and spiritual self, and the depiction of love and obsession. Through their apologetically explicit expressions of identity and attraction, Qiu MiaoJin's stories dismantle conventional beliefs of queer identity and helped build the foundation for the *Ku'er* movement. Unafraid to challenge the perception of queer identity, these works take on an intimate and personal perspective of the queer experience while pushing the readers to grow and shift alongside the characters. Only scratching the surface of Qiu's work, this discussion of queerness and identity aims to deconstruct the revolutionary approach they took to their work.

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