Folk Survivals, Spurned Witches, and Thwarted Inheritance, or, What Makes the Occult Queer?

Sydney Sheedy, *Concordia University*

Astrology is booming, and it's queerer than ever,"[1] muses a think piece writer in 2018, the year I started my PhD on this topic. In the past few years psychic healing and occult practices like astrology and tarot have exploded in popularity, and lay writers have increasingly documented the ways they are married to a progressive politics among millennials looking to summon the power to resist.[2] Queer people have been central to this "revival," formulating the occult as a form of self-knowledge that has the capacity to heal, and thus empower, those cast out of communities.[3] In my own experience in Montréal, I have witnessed (and participated in) the flourishing of nonbinary tarot nights, queer tattooers offering astrology-themed flash days, crowd-sourced queer tarot decks, being asked my birth chart on the first date, and essential oils tailored to your star sign, not to mention the thousands of conversations I have overheard, or participated in, that have spun

1. Heather Dockray, "Astrology is Having a Moment, and It's Queerer Than Ever," *Mashable*, last modified May 4, 2018, https://mashable.com/article/astrology-lgbtq-stars-resurgence-diverse-voices#sDZLVl9XBgqV.
2. Katie West and Jasmine Elliot, *Becoming Dangerous*: *Witchy Femmes, Queer Conjurors, and Magical Rebels* (Newburyport, MA: Red Wheel, 2019).
3. Dockray, "Astrology Is Having A Moment."

out the question "why do queers love astrology?"[4] While astrology is the poster child of this so-called revival, I refer to the practices emphasized here under the umbrella term "occult," as a means to call into question a broader range of approaches that are, in the eyes of their practitioners, part of a hidden or undervalued subculture related to magical healing.

This article forms part of a larger project, in which I explore, through interdisciplinary research and ethnographic fieldwork, how queer followers of tarot, astrology, or self-reported "occult" formulations in Montréal reflect on their practices as forms of divestment from regimes of power, as well overwhelmingly justify their involvement as part of a kind of queer legacy of scorned witches and silenced healers: a "transcestry of elders."[5] Prompted by the pervasive claim that the occult is the natural inheritance of the outsider,[6] my PhD research poses the question: "by virtue of what theory of history is the occult queer?" Put differently, how did the occult come to be imagined as a kind of kin hermeneutic to queer politics?

In this particular paper, I aim to historicize the putative queerness of the occult by looking at the ways it came to represent the constitutive outside of modernity, including how this relationship has been invested in both by its detractors, and contemporarily, its sympathizers. Demonstrating how this oppositionality was actively constructed in the long nineteenth century through a boundary war over what constituted legitimate

4. Chani Nicholas, "Why Do Queers Love Astrology?" *Chani Nicholas*, accessed August 23, 2022, https://chaninicholas.com/why-do-queers-love-astrology/.
5. Anonymous informant, in interview with Author, April 2022.
6. Author's Fieldnotes, March 2022.

knowledge, how to interpret phenomena, and who should have access to scientific authority, scholarship on Victorian scientific cultures has been generative, bringing into relief the stakes of jockeying for epistemic power in an era of uncertain empire. By interrogating Victorian scientific cultures, I hope to show not only how the occult came to represent an (always contested) illegitimacy, but also how its relation to the hegemonic was a temporal one, wherein certain bodies, practices, and modalities of knowledge were relegated to a temporally distinct "elsewhere." In so doing, I am interested in persuading the reader of two things. First, that the occult can be understood as a historiographical concept, which has been suggested by some scholars.[7] Second and more pointedly, that looking at the occult as a historiographic concept brings into relief the stakes of witchcraft or other related occult currents as forms of critical historical encounter. In imagining themselves to be recuperating an object that was apparently erased or repressed, informants in my interviews position themselves in opposition to the disciplinary power they see as responsible for such a relegation. By exploring the modern as emergent through marking out certain bodies, knowledges, and lifeways as historically prior, I am able to theorize the taken for granted "countercultural" bent of the occult as inextricably linked to a theory of history in which the past comes to represent the enchanted detritus of modernity, and thus available for practitioners to reclaim in order to imagine alternative routes of the social other than those we currently have.

While perhaps (fittingly) a little unorthodox in a journal of religious studies, I see my contribution to the current issue as

7. Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

primarily an incitement to take seriously the queer occult as a significant phenomenon, and to consider this magical counterculture as a kind of knowledge relation that has the potential to deconstruct certain historical "truths." Despite being widely considered as trashy, regressive, and out of joint with secular modernity,[8] I am interested in how the designation "occult" is bound up with technologies of discipline and power which designate certain populations, worlds, and knowledge as *past* in the first place, so that modern magic can only ever be legible as a revival: indeed, how the status of "revival" is part of its political appeal. With respect to the current theme, this means that I take the prompt not necessarily as an opportunity just to "enter into past conversations," but to interrogate how the human sciences, including religious studies, have helped to construct the past itself, as a distinct elsewhere legible through modernity's putative rupture. How have the human sciences, including religious studies, ripened through the expulsion/incorporation of certain traditions of knowledge, and in what ways does this expulsion form an ontological foundation for current social critique? Answering this question also means taking seriously the ways that interventions

8. See, for example: Theodor Adorno, *The Stars Down to Earth and Other Essays on the Irrational in Culture*, ed. Stephen Crook (New York: Routledge, 1994); Barry Singer and Victor A. Benassi. "Occult Beliefs: Media Distortions, Social Uncertainty, and Deficiencies of Human Reasoning Seem to Be at the Basis of Occult Beliefs," *American Scientist* 69, no. 1 (1981): 49–55; Paul R. Thagard, "Why Astrology Is a Pseudoscience," *PSA: Proceedings of the Biennial Meeting of the Philosophy of Science Association 1978*, no. 1 (1978): 223–34; Tevfik Uyar, "Astrology Pseudoscience and a Discussion About Its Threats to Society," *Journal of Higher Education and Science* 6 (2016): 1.

into past conversations in religious studies or spiritual life are *already happening* outside of academia, which ethnography offers a way to access and analyze. What motivates some people to take up the occult as a way into history, and how are its methodologies construed by many as always already queer?

The article unfolds in the following way: in the first section, I highlight scholarship interested in how Victorian investigative cultures set up the occult as an allegory of the modern, and the stakes of this epistemic crisis. Second, I discuss the disenchantment thesis, or the supposition that modernity is defined through a rupture from an enchanted past, and how burgeoning disciplines such as anthropology of religion and folklore studies evolved to map out this rupture. Next, I consider how contemporary occultists themselves operationalize the occult's oppositional status as a location from which to speak to power, wherein evocative myth is heralded as a form of reparation in the face of historical violence. Drawing from interviews with informants, I put occultism in conversation with work on queer temporality in order to begin to theorize its appeal as a "way into history," bringing into relief the stakes of this phenomenon in terms of current social crises of belonging, inheritance, and identity.

The Epistemic Crisis of Victorian Science

In western esotericism, religious studies, history of science, anthropology, and other fields that have challenged the secularist thesis, any consideration of the apparent "paradox" of magic's persistence within modernity relies on interrogating the very concept of modernity itself, and how the occult operates as an

allegory for it.[9] In this article, I bring together scholars who do not take for granted the occult's status as "rejected knowledge," but rather go to work on deconstructing this as a relationship to power. Such a deconstruction involves "examin[ing] the terrains with governed its appearance, shaped its potential utterances […] and created its believers and skeptics."[10] Thinking of the occult/modern relationship as a crisis of method rather than belief,[11] I can begin to sketch out a context for understanding why my informants may refer to their practices as resources or forms of attunement to the unknown – as "an alternative wisdom source,"[12] or, "a space to speculate and imagine something else."[13] Literature which focuses on the ways modernity works through disciplinary technologies is useful to understand what is at stake in targeting certain knowledge and bodies for correction, as well as to theorize how the consequent status of "rejected" offers an appealing location from which to criticize such disciplining.

The period where psychical investigative cultures like Spiritualism and Mesmerism reached their peak in the US and Britain is the same period which saw the emergence of the "modern" as a horizon of expectation and desire: whose temporal and spatial boundaries were actually co-constituted with the nascent scientific cultures it claims to have engendered, and whose legacies

9. Tatiana Kontou and Sarah Willburn, eds. *Ashgate Research Companion to Nineteenth Century Spiritualism* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012).
10. Roger Luckhurst, *The Invention of Telepathy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 10.
11. Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).
12. Anonymous informant, in conversation with Author, May 2022.
13. Anonymous informant, in conversation with Author and other group participants, June 2022.

continue to shape what is recognizable as occult knowledge today.[14] According to Roger Luckhurst, "one of the appeals of analyzing "marginal sciences" such as Spiritualism and Mesmerism in the nineteenth century has been to question the assumptions behind demarcations of science and non-science, proper and improper knowledge."[15] Indeed, if the late Victorian era in general has become of special interest to scholars in recent years because it represents "an important conjuncture for comprehending the contours of our late modernity,"[16] the fact that the proper pursuit of science and its function for society are a chief subject of this writing makes a case for how central these disputes are to the modern itself. Examining debates in this period over what counted as evidence, how to interpret phenomena, and who should have access to scientific authority have been fruitful to expose the boundaries between orthodox and heterodox knowledge as constructed and volatile rather than given, with their legacies of what constitutes the occult or marginal still felt today.

In their introduction to the book *Strange Science*, Karpenko and Claggett write: "for Victorian audiences, thinkers, and scientists, the category of the scientific […] was remarkably if not jubilantly unstable and existed in a disorderly space marked by heterodox methods of inquiry."[17] By historicizing the process of scientific institutionalization, some scholars have emphasized the

14. Jason Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017).
15. Luckhurst, *The Invention of Telepathy*, 2.
16. Luckhurst, *The Invention of Telepathy*, 4.
17. Lara Karpenko and Shalyn Claggett, "Introduction," in *Strange Science: Investigating the Limits of Knowledge in the Victorian Age*, ed. Lara Karpenko and Shalyn Claggett (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 2.

ambiguity and dynamism of science in this period, and thereby explore what was at stake for its nascent professional disciplines, the public it was increasingly cleaved from, and the state itself. Representative of the work on the ways that occultism overlapped with, and helped to constitute, the core sciences is Alex Owen's *Place of Enchantment* (2004), in which she focuses on psychoanalysis and psychology as drawing from the same well of ideas on human perception as the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and other magical societies active in Britain in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. Her aim is to demonstrate how the so-called occult revival of the period was integral to the emerging concepts of the "modern," rather than an example of what it was leaving behind. She refutes the theory that magical societies operated as a kind of surrogate faith, an approach that scholars like Robert Cox have also criticized.[18] Theosophy, for example, claimed it alone pursued the true mission of science by investigating phenomena that exceeded the materialist limits that normative scientists imposed. The notion that the human mind was only partially knowable, and that strategies of self-realization are needed to harness its power, is a core Theosophical/magical concept that became reformulated in modern psychology as the repressed unconscious. This example is typical of the ways that "science" and "the occult" diverged more so in terms of method and perceived stakes of their investigations than in the object of study. While magicians actively pursued multiple selves in order to expand their self-awareness across multiple realities, early psychologists pathologized the fractured self as a crisis in need of repair.[19]

18. Robert Cox, *Body and Soul: A Sympathetic History of American Spiritualism* (Charlottesville VA: University of Virginia Press, 2017).
19. Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*, 126.

At the heart of scholarship on Victorian science is the debate over what constitutes an expert scientific investigator. In scholarship on this spiritualist "hothouse" era, there has been a shift in perspective from framing spiritualists and their kith as credulous fools to considering them as radical empiricists with their own standards for what constitutes proper scientific inquiry and its stakes for society at large.[20] For spiritualists, it was important that anyone be able to participate in séances, and many even welcomed skeptics, stressing that their claims were based in observation which others should see for themselves.[21] Theosophists shared this dedication to empiricism, although they operated according to a more elitist structure than the parlour room table, requiring years of intensive training for someone to be able to achieve the status of Adept.[22] Put this way, anxiety over the popularity of these kinds of practices in Victorian Britain has less to do with their obvious falsity than their proximity to methods of scientific inquiry concurrently becoming enshrined in the nation's institutions. In unmooring "occult" and "science" from opposing poles, Victorian scientific cultures appear as a struggle for power between kissing cousins rather than a Manichean tug-of-war. "It is important to note the unevenness and ambiguities of expert knowledge and the tactics of inclusion and expertise […] Sciences like psychical research were not counterhegemonic but another emergence along the fault-lines of a new structure."[23]

20. Emily Ogden, *Credulity: A Cultural History of US Mesmerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).
21. Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits* (Boston MA: Beacon Press, 1989).
22. Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*, 59.
23. Luckhurst, *The Invention of Telepathy*, 21.

What was at stake in this jockeying for power across these nascent investigative cultures? Most scholars have focused on how the disputes over occult phenomena helped to demarcate a scientific professional body against the lay public. Richard Noakes argues that "spiritualism threatened to make accessible scientific discoveries that were normally the domain of a trained group of experts."[24] However, far from secure or discrete, this boundary between expert and public was still in the process of crystallizing, and other readings emphasize the extent to which maintaining the boundary between science and everything else was a matter of national importance, foundational to a state's imagined claims to progress, or its path toward modernity's horizon. Corinna Treitel, working in the German context, puts it poignantly in her case study of Anna Rothe, a prominent medium working in Berlin whose arrest for fraud in 1902 and two years' jail time was highly publicized and controversial.[25] Referring to the accusation that Rothe faked the magic appearance of certain objects from the spirit world, Treitel asks: "How […] are we to interpret the fact that Anna Rothe was treated and punished as if she were a serious public threat, when all she had done was pull two flowers out of nowhere?"[26] According to Treitel, Rothe *was* indeed a public menace, in that she threatened the "epistemological order" of *fin-de-siècle* Berlin, the "boundary between science and public, between those who produced new

24. Richard Noakes, "The Sciences of Spiritualism in Victorian Britain: Possibilities and Problems," in *Ashgate Research Companion to Nineteenth Century Spiritualism,* ed. Tatiana Kontou and Sarah Willburn (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), 30.
25. Corinna Treitel, *A Science for the Soul: Occultism and the Genesis of the German Modern* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004).
26. Treitel, *A Science for the Soul,* 166.

knowledge and stoked the engines of socioeconomic and cultural progress and those who enjoyed its fruits but did not participate in its production."[27] Put differently, the voracity with which the state descended on Rothe as she carried out a private séance among satisfied customers only makes sense in the context of a growing German liberalism which upheld the interdependence of science and social progress. On trial was not the parlour tricks of a middle-aged woman, but rather the role the public should be allotted to participate in the scientific enterprise, which was increasingly becoming a synecdoche for German enlightenment itself.

The epistemic crisis and the struggle to legitimize certain methods of inquiry over others provides a good context for understanding the way the occult always emerges in opposition to something else, the constitutive outside of an inchoate modality seeking the seal of enlightened modernity. Importantly for the purposes of this topic, it also temporalizes this opposition, wherein framing something as illegitimate tends to occur through associating it with the undesirable past, as an unlikely survivor of modernity's sweeping transformations. Before exploring this temporal relationship more deeply, I also want to point out the durability of the oppositional thesis of the occult beyond Victorian debunking periodicals and German courtrooms. Scholars themselves have attempted to "resolve" the paradox of Victorian spiritual cultures without challenging the occult-modern binary. For example, Ann Braude's now-canonical *Radical Spirits* (1989) was instrumental in re-framing spiritualism in the U.S. from mass credulity to the first seed of feminist organizing, by describing trance speaking as a transitional phase that allowed women to break

27. Treitel, *A Science for the Soul*, 166.

through limitations on their roles in public.[28] Braude's analysis has been highly influential to a school of writers interested in unearthing Spiritualism's more radical agendas and locating the movement at the centre of a social liberalism that America would come to cherish as uniquely theirs.[29] At the same time, some have pointed out that locating enchanted states as exterior to power ironically reproduces the secular imaginary.[30] In other words, for Braude, spiritual practices only coexist with modernity because they are vehicles to achieve modern (and thus secular) liberal self-possession. This conversation lays bare a major conundrum of the "field" of occult studies: how academics across different epistemological traditions have recaptured occult phenomena according to their own investments in what constitutes a proper pathway to thought or action. In the case of American studies or feminist theory, some scholars have been overeager to find in Spiritualism a portent of later developments central to their fields, rather than stay with the trouble of the strange bedfellows that were made in this era of drastic religious, social, and national reformulation. As I will explore in the next section: if all disciplines in some way create their own object, what might we gain from approaching the occult not as a set of stable practices or beliefs "out there," but as something that emerges as an effect of disciplinary knowledge itself?

28. Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 98.
29. Karlyn Crowley, *Feminism's New Age: Gender, Appropriation, and the Afterlife of Essentialism* (Albany, NY: State University of New York 2011).
30. Ogden, *Credulity*, 230.

The Myth of Disenchantment

Exploring the ways that modernity, construed as "enlightenment," was intertwined with a variable and inconsistent rubric for defining the occult, it becomes apparent that table rapping, astral projection, telepathy, and the other occult doubles of *fin-de-siècle* transatlantic scientific culture were not simply stubborn "survivals" that would inevitably disappear, but instead represent, in the words of Hanegraaff, "the dark canvas of presumed otherness modernity needs in order to paint the outlines of its own identity."[31] In Treitel's discussion of how the state sanctioned one particular community of scientists to monopolize the discovery of knowledge, she contributes a particularly literal example of the "disciplinary" aspect of knowledge and the academe. Thinking of discipline as a verb, rather than as a noun, lays bare how the human sciences actually constructed the very objects they purported to describe or manage. This is the subject of Josephson-Storm's *The Myth of Disenchantment* (2017), a work which highlights the inextricable connection between the goals of the emerging sciences and the colonizing impulse of the states which circumscribed their contours. For Storm, modernity requires a magical or enchanted elsewhere, which the human sciences, still inchoate in the nineteenth century, evolved to describe and usher in.

Storm sets out to disrupt what he calls the "myth" of modernity by tracing "its most important subtype – the myth of disenchantment."[32] He argues that modernity is only legible through rupture, and one of the most pervasive stories of rupture we

31. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 254.
32. Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment*, 309.

subscribe to is the idea that the West was once enchanted, and it is no longer. In other words, modernity becomes visible as both temporally and spatially distinct from the pre-modern through the putative loss of magic. As one example of how the sciences developed to describe and reify this rupture, he turns to one of the most famous popularizers of modern disenchantment: the anthropologist E. B. Tylor. In Tylor's well-known theory of cultural evolution, religion represents an outdated form of human rationality which will eventually disappear, of which any remaining traces threaten the integrity of the natural evolutionary pathway. "Superstition," or beliefs and practices seemingly at odds with modern society were thus marked as prior cultural remnants, and for Tylor, "the goal of ethnography is precisely 'to expose the remains of crude old culture […] and to mark these out for destruction.'"[33]

The new discipline of anthropology, then, in a sense created the dis/enchantment it was tasked with classifying and managing. By constructing an enchanted elsewhere as an object of study, anthropology produced work that was founded on the belief that the observer was essentially different from who he (as it was naturally "he") observed, an essentially colonizing relationship which necessitated the latter's prior temporality. Ogden, like Storm, argues that enchantment itself is a "modernizing gesture,"[34] and always appears as the negotiation between those who are aiming at modernity and those whom they see as retrograde, a negotiation which was urgent within the burgeoning "weird" sciences. Some of the most vehement debunkers of spiritualism were themselves

33. Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, vol. 2 (London: Murray, 1891), 253, quoted in Josephson-Storm, 99.
34. Ogden, *Credulity*, 10.

researchers into psychical phenomena, desperate to gain some credibility by turning the rubric of quackery onto someone else. Tylor himself is a good example, whose "harsh condemnation of occultism as the "lowest known stage of civilization" cannot be read outside of his own anxiety to differentiate his own emerging science of anthropology from those he took as subjects."[35]

However, modernity's putative rupture from an enchanted past was far from unequivocally embraced as good, and was often beset by anxiety, ambivalence, and even staunch resistance. Forged through a narrative of disenchantment, modernity necessarily communicates a kind of loss, a loss which even the most hardcore cultural evolutionists mourned as industrialization and urbanization increasingly romanticized a receding age. Nowhere is this ambivalence better represented than in the advent of folklore studies, which was first institutionalized in 1878 as a kind of "internal" or domestic anthropology largely focusing on the Celts as the cultural precedent of the Brits who studied them. Folklore was a way to measure a given population's imagined distinctiveness from modern rationality, as the only people who seemed to lack folklore were urban, educated, English Protestants, against whom all others were racialized.[36] But folklorists also lamented what they saw as the inevitable disappearance of the myths and customs they studied. This new field was thus both a site of the consolidation of empire and resistance to imperialism, because it marked out and racialized local knowledge systems at the same time that it worked

35. Christine Ferguson, "Recent Scholarship on Spiritualism and Science," in *Ashgate Research Companion to Nineteenth Century Spiritualism*, ed. Tatiana Kontou and Sarah Willburn (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), 424.
36. Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment*, 129.

to preserve them.[37] This ambivalence is not a paradox, but the result of the ways that in the myth of disenchantment, magic appears as always already disappearing.

Accessing the Romantic Past

For the purpose of my project, I am interested in the forms the lamenting of "magic's disappearance" takes, as well as the ways it fits within the modernizing gesture. What of those figures for whom the non-modern was seductive, and who had no interest in the validation of a growing institutional scientific body, or in endorsing modern science as the route to a desirable future? How did enchantment become available to some people as a way to criticize the alienation of modern society and its paranoid hierarchization of systems of knowing, and can this provide a context for understanding the strategies witches and other occult practitioners invest in today?

The desire for the pre-modern actually operates as its own modernizing gesture, which naturalizes the gulf between a magical elsewhere and the inquirer seeking refuge from the ills of alienating modern life. Theosophists and members of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, for example, attempted to unearth arcane knowledge through Egyptology, travels to India, anthropology and other exoticizing processes which temporalized distant places as pre-modern, in the hopes of finding some key to a universal doctrine or principle underlying all things.[38] The celebration, even lauding, of magic, rather than disproving the disenchantment thesis, helped

37. Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment,* 129.
38. Owen, *The Place of Enchantment,* 28.

to naturalize it by locating this magic always in some exotic other place, attached to peoples whose beliefs and practices colonial expansion and its scientific handmaidens made increasingly available. Contemporary occultism emerges from this context, still concerned with what paths we have "out" of the structures of modern life through seeking some pre-existing form to anchor itself to. Any inquiry into this phenomenon today must interrogate, not only what motivates the pursuit of "past" knowledge as a tonic for modern life, but also what such a maneuver risks – namely, the risk of reifying the rift between centre and margin and thus justifying the violence it requires to maintain.

Elsa Richardson's discussion of early anthropology[39] and its overlap with Spiritualism is really successful in laying bare how the fetishization of the non-modern and of the modern are two sides of the same coin. Examining occult practices in Victorian England through the lens of colonialism, she reformulates them, not in opposition to the emergent scientific institution, but as *peer technologies* that both consign Britain's colonial other to the pre-modern. Richardson critically reflects on the stakes of constructing a particular place or time as being with or without magic, and also considers how folklore studies and anthropology were central to both the romanticization and appropriation of racialized knowledge. In her book *Second Sight* (2017), she puts questions of nationhood and the supernatural in close proximity to each other in order to ask what processes of colonization are at stake in constructing second sight as an ancient Gaelic tradition.[40] In particular, she explores "how myths, customs, and lore were harvested from marginalized

39. Elsa Richardson *Second Sight in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).
40. Richardson, *Second Sight*, 4.

communities and put to work in the forming of elite knowledge and the metropole."[41] While work on Victorian science tends to feature urban elites, Richardson focuses on local seers, such as illiterate fishermen and crofters, in the Scottish Highlands in order to displace the putative "science-magic" opposition through an approach more strongly informed by colonization, class, and race. For Richardson, the Scottish Highlands provides an ideal case study in the process of constructing the enchanted elsewhere. The Highlands represented a pre-modern landscape saturated with odd superstitions and inexplicable realities, an "imaginative resource" for the English, whether it was romanticized as evidence of a golden age or demonized as a threat to the empire's collective enlightenment.[42] Occult or magical practices were central to maintaining this enchanted imaginary, and as Scotland became more unified with the empire, this was an image that was invested in by both outsiders and nationalist Scots alike. "Second sight contributed to the marketable image of the poetic ancient premodern land which provided refuge from the industrial South,"[43] a place that could be enjoyed by growing numbers of domestic tourists as well as locals who wished to maintain their distinctiveness from England.

"Victorian spiritualism has been read as a site for working-class protest, radical gender politics, alternative to narratives of secularization and disenchantment and a form of proto-modernist aesthetics. Less has been said about its interaction with popular theories of evolution and scientific disciplines such as

41. Richardson, *Second Sight*, 4.
42. Richardson, *Second Sight*, 45.
43. Richardson, *Second Sight*, 73.

anthropology."[44] Looking to ancient peasant traditions, distant cultural practices, and racial gulfs in order to try and identify an underlying universal principle, "spiritualist histories utilized the same taxonomic and stylistic gestures as comparative anthropology."[45] While anthropology tended to predict the disappearance of second sight and other local forms of "pre-modern" knowledge, members of societies like Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn tended to cherish these as routes away from the ills of modern life. Where these two viewpoints converge is the shared belief that modern Victorian Britain was evolving away from enchantment, which could still be accessed elsewhere, whether as a means of marking out evolutionary difference or as a means of re-learning what they had now lost.

An exploration of the ways in which occultism overlapped with other modern sciences demands investigating both the circulation of knowledge itself, as well as the imperial structure that informed how anthropologists and magicians alike related to the subjects under scrutiny. Richardson and Storm both show how "modern science expanded through the selective absorption and expulsion of local knowledge systems."[46] In the case of second sight, what had once been the "odd portents of a remote people" were made available to British elites as examples of cultural backwardness to consume and delight in.[47] As Richardson puts it,

> [T]ales of dark portents and uncanny pre-sentiments were constituted under the new concepts of body and mind

44. Richardson, *Second Sight*, 107.
45. Richardson, *Second Sight*, 116.
46. Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment*, 14.
47. Richardson, *Second Sight*, 2.

> circulating in midcentury culture. […] what had once existed as part of the folklore of a geographically, culturally and linguistically distant people could now be observed at work in middle class parlours, theatres, lecture halls and medical schools across the country.[48]

Richardson uses an example of a fieldwork expedition to the Highlands by members of the Society for Psychical Research to trace both the colonial extraction of knowledge as well as the ways these findings fueled the Celtic revivalism of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. In fact, one of these field workers shared membership in both groups. "The SPR's expedition into the Highlands took place in the same moment that the HOGD was attempting to excavate the remains of an ancient system of belief from the ballads, ceremonies, and tales of the modern Celt."[49] While anthropology had normally been done "armchair" style, collecting testimonials by private correspondence, the members of this expedition looked to the local seers themselves to collect their data. Freer, one of the ethnographers, was also a medium, and she considered herself the "ideal fieldworker" as a result of having a foot in both worlds.[50] In the attempt to recover what she considered to be ancient traditions bound by orality, Freer constructed a Celtic lineage for herself, aligning herself with the traditions she was seeking in the hopes of recovering ancestral memory. For Freer and others in the expedition, the construction of a particular tradition as pre-modern justified its extraction and recuperation by those in a colonial relation to it. Furthermore, Freer's appropriation of second

48. Richardson, *Second Sight*, 60–61.
49. Richardson, *Second Sight*, 201–202.
50. Richardson, *Second Sight*, 203.

sight as ancestral memory demonstrates how the construction of the pre-modern manifests as an intimate relationship to inherited power and lineage. As I will explore later, the problem of how someone gains access to secrets and traditions is central to their justification for practicing.

In this section I have zeroed in on several authors who delve into Victorian scientific cultures in order to expose the secular modern as a myth, or a prescription whose putative rupture from an enchanted past never occurred. Of particular significance is writing that has shown the ways in which the human sciences themselves evolved in order to discipline and revise what we now think of as "occult" knowledge as an investment in this rupture. Thought of this way, contemporary occult practices come into relief as always already in excess of, or opposed to, sanctioned methodological and epistemological rubrics. At the same time, situated within matrices of power, the "oppositional" nature of the occult, or its taken-for-granted subversiveness, is complicated by the fact that even countercultural pursuits like spiritualism and theosophy still participated in marking out and appropriating certain populations and their systems of belief/knowledge as pre-modern, available for their extraction and redeployment. As we will see in the next section, contemporary occult practices, such as witchcraft, gain their currency in terms of this very oppositionality, even as they paradoxically challenge the disciplinary technologies they identify as creating such a dichotomy.

Contemporary Witchcraft and the Queer Occult

So far in this paper I have attempted to historicize the occult's status as always already oppositional to the dominant order

of things. While this oppositionality is somewhat of a misrepresentation of the ways that certain forms of heterodox science, now labeled occult, have been internal to and constitutive of the scientific rationality they are described as opposing, in this section I will explore the ways in which this antagonistic relationship is something that is actively invested in by witches, NeoPagans, and other occult practitioners *themselves*, as a form of political maneuvering. Furthermore, I will explore some of the ways that I see the hermeneutic of "rejected" as key to understanding the particularly queer bent to the current popularity of occult phenomena.

Over the spring and summer of 2022, I conducted interviews with thirty-seven people who responded to the call for "paid collective discussions and interviews on the queer occult in Montreal." I undertook twelve individual interviews, and three group sessions with 8–15 participants each. The tagline of the poster asked: "What does it mean to claim rejected knowledge practices, like astrology and tarot, as forms of queer politics? Is it possible to disrupt its historical whiteness?"[51] I was assisted by five community members who gave feedback on the research design, and who I trained to be part of the process of peer facilitation. They were recruited through the same process as other participants and took part in group sessions. Inclusion criteria was simply any adult who lives in Montreal, identifies as queer, and is involved in a practice that they consider to fit under the umbrella of occult or rejected knowledge. Over eighty people responded to a couple of social media callouts and paper posters put up in popular queer spaces in Montreal. Individual interviews lasted approximately 1.5 hours,

51. Author's recruitment poster, circulated March 2022.

while group sessions lasted 2.5 hours. Many of the participants expressed interest in joining follow-up sessions or workshops related to the topics we covered. While coding of the interviews is still underway at the time of writing, I feature some of the discussions here as a way to justify how ethnographic work can give shape to further investigation into this phenomenon.

Considering the shifting contours of science and the scientific investigator in the late nineteenth century, I argue that the best way to define the occult is not through a set of inclusion criteria, but as something which the interlocutor herself considers as having been at one point rejected or deemed illegitimate. Put this way, it seems likely that the occult appears attractive to many queer people as a kind of parallel to queerness in its most political sense, as legible only in terms of its relationship to some kind of hegemonic order which requires its denigration. In my current fieldwork, as well as in online think pieces and lay articles that are increasingly popping up on this subject, many queer people consider their practice to be a kind of "inheritance" because of their relationship to power. The pervasive observation among informants that queers have some reason to be skeptical of things labeled unnatural emphasizes the political stakes of challenging a taken for granted system of valuation, one that queer people have likely had intimate experience with. As one informant shared:

> I think for a long time I like, really saw myself as, like, I'm crazy, I'm insane […]it was […] actually, like, important to me to, like, see myself that way because I felt like I was like resisting conformity. I think that there is a really acute connection there for me between craziness, queerness and magic. I feel like being queer is also being against that order, orderly like boxy world of reason and light and truth that was like, really imposed on like Western society. And so

> it's for me, I think like being queer and crazy and practicing magic all kind of go against it.[52]

While a fuller exploration of the stakes of the queer occult as I see them lie outside of this article's scope, in this final section I want to begin to outline a theory for why queer people find oppositional culture in astrology, tarot, and other popular occult practices satisfying, and ground this in the concept of the occult as a historiographic modality. The contours of such a theory will allow me to begin exploring the ways in which the occult is taken for granted as subversive, and also to explore its hermeneutics of absence, which construes all occultism as a recuperation of lost knowledge. Finally, it also allows me to explore how contemporary witches and other occult healers, in connecting to putatively ancient or timeless traditions, understand themselves to be doing a kind of critical history, one that marks a striking continuity with the goals of the feminist new age spirituality of half a century ago. The key to the political stakes of this kind of "queer" historiography lies in how followers either implicitly or explicitly make some claim about the disciplinary technologies which they see as having engineered the rejection or erasure of these belief systems in the first place. As one informant rhetorically asked the group: "I was taught that this was the world, and it's actually another world that I relate to, so is there anything else? Is there anything else that has been, like, that's been hidden from me?"[53] By looking at invented tradition and reconstructionist mythology as strategies to reclaim power, I

52. Anonymous informant, in conversation with Author and other participants, April 2022.
53. Anonymous informant, in conversation with Author and other participants, April 2022.

highlight the ways that contemporary occultism views the past and its instrumentalization in social transformation and justice.

New Age and "Goddess" Spirituality

Making sense of current motivations for an occult "revival" require a brief reminder of some of the key concepts of the New Age movement of the late twentieth century. If Spiritualism and related reform developments of the nineteenth century were driven by a kind of millennial optimism, evidenced by a dedication to the "ability of humans to direct their own lives and to perfect the world around them,"[54] a dissatisfied 1960s counterculture re-deployed these ambitions to heal social unrest in more eclectic and expanded ways that dovetailed with the goals of a waxing feminist movement. While the methods and priorities of New Age healing over that century varied, all those who participated found something broken in a material world wracked by war, inequality, and environmental catastrophe,[55] and located the means of fixing this within the self. For the burgeoning feminist movement, sexuality and gender were sites where healing and personal and social transformation were most needed, and the New Age offered the language to place sex and the body securely within the realm of the sacred.[56] Consistent with what some have argued is the New Age's detraditionalization

54. Sara Pike, *New Age and Neopagan Religions in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 45.
55. Stephen Hunt, *Alternative Religions: A Sociological Introduction* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2003), 135.
56. Pike, *New Age and Neopagan*, 115.

of the self,[57] whereby participants turn away from established institutions to find authority within, feminists found a spiritual justification for a situated view of knowledge that privileged each woman's personal experiences as inherently valid, offering a means to ward off gender-based trauma.[58]

Using the personal narrative as a means to understand the political implications of our lives has been one of the most championed forms of feminist knowledge, and the healing narratives at the heart of New Age spirituality coincided with feminist aims to understand and find empowerment through individual and collective trauma.[59] Experience, instead of belief, is at the core of this spirituality,[60] and women looked to themselves as holy sources of wisdom,[61] consistent with the New Age focus on autobiography, as opposed to history, as a dominant way of making sense of things.[62] "To genuinely love the world, to value it, is to want to tell its story,"[63] and investing in the "myth of ancient matriarchy"[64] is one way that women not only imagined a more empowering role for themselves in the cosmos, but sought historical

57. Paul Heelas, *The New Age Movement: Religion, Culture and Society in the Age of Postmodernity* (Boston: Wiley-Blackwell, 1996).
58. Crowley, *Feminism's New Age*, 54.
59. Catherine Albanese, "The Magical Staff: Quantum Healing in the New Age," in *Perspectives on the New Age*, ed. J. Gordon Melton and James R. Lewis (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992).
60. Hunt, *Alternative Religions*, 133.
61. Crowley, *Feminism's New Age*, 37.
62. Pike, *New Age and Neopagan*, 74.
63. Mary Farrell Bednarowski, "The New Age Movement and Feminist Spirituality: Overlapping Conversations at the End of the Century," in *Perspectives on the New Age*, eds. J. Gordon Melton and James R. Lewis (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), 173.
64. Pike, *New Age and Neopagan*, 128.

justification for an inherited legacy. While belief that a goddess lies dormant in all women is a common New Age belief,[65] some women – especially those in lesbian separatist traditions – aimed to recall what they saw as a matriarchal, Goddess-centric past that was struck down by heteropatriarchal Christianity,[66] and found "evidence" for this in the research of archaeologists and revisionist feminist historians.[67] The wildly successful Goddess movement held that women used to rule the earth, and will again, as long as women learn how to "remember" this origin story.[68] "Goddess worshippers strategically used memory to construct a prehistory that gives them access to bodily power," memory that had been "erased" through the trauma of patriarchy.[69]

The conscious construction of mythology, the valorization of personal knowledge, and harnessing lost ancestral memory represent important forms of healing in feminist spirituality which endure today amongst queer people in Montreal and elsewhere. Importantly however, most of my informants and other media I have come across emphasize a deviation from earlier forms of countercultural spirituality through stricter anti-racism and decolonial frameworks. While mostly white middle class women in the last century bypassed Christian and European contact narratives in order to liberate a more authentic, or indigenous nature,[70] my informants attempt to resolve charges of earlier spiritual genocide

65. Hunt, *Alternative Religions*, 140.
66. Scott Morgensen, *Spaces Between Us: Queer Settler Colonialism and Indigenous Decolonization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 132.
67. Pike, *New Age and Neopagan*, 119.
68. Crowley, *Feminism's New Age*, 113.
69. Crowley, *Feminism's New Age*, 116.
70. See Crowley, 2011; Morgensen, 2011

through an anxious self-reflection over their own identity and situatedness. As Molly, a queer tarot reader, writes in a post in a now-defunct blog: "in order for healing to succeed, we need to acknowledge the depth of the wound."[71] Addressing a white audience, she commands: "Let's take an honest look at our spiritual frameworks, mantras, and practices. Where do we uphold white supremacy and oppression?"[72]

According to Storm, "the more something is marked as anti-modern, the more it becomes attractive as a site from which to criticize modernity."[73] Like the myths that feminist New Agers invested in and circulated to recapture the divine feminine, queer occultists emphasize their opposition to given social orders they see as oppressive, such as heteronormativity, capitalism, and white supremacy. "[F]or queers cast out of communities […] queer astrology gives us space to be reminded that we're holy and connected to the stars, even if there are people who don't see us that way."[74] Many people subscribe to the idea that there existed at some time a worldview/methodology/epistemological framework that posed a threat to an emerging system of power in the West, and thus was relegated to the margins. In pledging a kind of allegiance or political responsibility to recover these frameworks, occultists expose certain forms of power as themselves historical, and strategize different forms of divestment from them in order to usher in something else. "It's about situating yourself almost as the Other,

71. Molly, "Calling in the New Age: Identifying Oppressive Ideals in Our Spirituality," *Witchy and Bitchy* (blog), August 14, 2017, (no hyperlink is available as the blog is no longer active).
72. Molly, "Calling in the New Age."
73. Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment,* 16.
74. Dockray, "Astrology."

and drawing mythic power from that Otherness."[75] The myth of the "Burning Times," for example, or the idea that there was at some point in European history a femicide which targeted wise women healers as threatening and dangerous, is foundational in modern witchcraft and NeoPagan lore.[76] According to Luhrmann, in her canonical ethnography of London witches, it is not important for witches whether the Burning Times is myth or fact; rather, what is important is its evocative pull.[77] Moreover, many witches would agree with Storm that modernity should be demystified: that it was/is in no way an inevitable stage of "progress," but rather is the means and end to a violent mythology that one has the responsibility to disturb and de-naturalize. History, rather than representing an inalienable, universal truth that has been faithfully recorded, is to witches simply the overrepresentation of a worldview whose violence they wish to disinherit. However, the idea of "rupture" so central to Storm's thesis of modernity, remains very much intact as evidence of what witches lost and wish to recover. Turning to myths is one way of creating a satisfying oppositional culture,[78] wherein the real passage of time is subjective and magicians are able to develop a personal mythology that takes some of the power out of

75. Regan Lynch, "A Curse on Capital: Queer Occultism as Radical Spirituality?" *Overland Journal*, May 20, 2016, https://overland.org.au/2016/05/a-curse-on-capital-queer-occultism-as-radical-spirituality/.
76. Sabina Magliocco, *Witching Culture: Folklore and Neo-Paganism in America* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); see also Pike, *New Age and Neopagan*, and Crowley, *Feminism's New Age*.
77. Tanya Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft: Ritual Magic in Contemporary England* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989), 242.
78. Magliocco, *Witching Culture*, 185.

the official record. In this way, contemporary occultists both subvert and reinscribe the myth of disenchantment: they expose modernity as myth at the same time that they need its inherent rupture as a trope to celebrate its enchanted double.

Queer Time

Hanegraaff has called his own scholarly approach to western esotericism "mnemohistoriographical": while historiography describes what actually happened in the past, mnemohistoriography describes the "genesis and historical development of what a given culture imagines to have happened."[79] While I take this distinction to be redundant (all historiography is mnemohistoriography, according to this definition), he argues that one is able to move beyond *a priori* criteria of truth toward an evaluation of the esoteric as one of many dynamic, contradictory and overlapping methodologies deemed dubious in the eye of whoever purports to have the monopoly on truth. If the occult in this paper has represented a methodology, queer temporality scholarship helps elucidate why it may be considered by some to be a particularly "queer" one.

Queers are "untimely,"[80] both because of the ways homosexuality has been pathologized as "backward," and in the difficulty of anchoring the queer figure to some historical precedent that might grant them grounds for political posturing. Queer theories of temporality have privileged time as a key index of the

79. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 375.
80. E. L. McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen, "Introduction: Becoming Unbecoming," in *Queer Times, Queer Becomings*, ed. E. L. McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen (New York: State University of New York Press, 2011), 7.

social, often referring to queer time as a "fold," in that it "resist[s] the straightforward movement of causality in favour of an exploration of the multiple possibilities that may emerge when time works otherwise."[81] If cultural competence itself is a matter of timing, then "queer time generates a discontinuous history of its own,"[82] one that must be understood as providing its own structures and logics of belonging outside of the empty homogenous time of nationalism, identity, development, and other stories of normative progress.[83] Queer temporalities are known in their forms of interruption,[84] departing from straight time's frames of recognition, inheritance, and directionality, and thus also its methods of evaluating what appears as historical.

In this article I have explored how the occult becomes legible as a theory of the historical, wherein its status as rejected or regressive is recaptured by practitioners as an opportunity to mythologize about what kinds of things were "lost" or violently repressed through the ongoing pursuit of the modern and its requisite obfuscation. I see this hermeneutics of absence or loss as a key node to explore in theorizing what it is about the occult that makes many contemporary practitioners claim there is something "inherently queer about magic and other forms of witchiness."[85]

---

81. Dana Luciano, "Nostalgia for an Age Yet to Come: *Velvet Goldmine's* Queer Archive," in *Queer Times, Queer Becomings*, ed. E. L. McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen (New York: SUNY Press, 2011), 131.
82. Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), xi.
83. Freeman, *Time Binds*, xxii
84. Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).
85. Anonymous informant, conversation with Author March 2022.

Queer historiography itself traffics in a "romance of negativity,"[86] a structural paradox in that queer histories can only be known through their absence: wherein evidence is gained through unconventional lines of flights and ways of looking.[87] Just as magic can only ever appear as disappearing, queer historiography represents a kind of impossibility of knowing, wherein any remnant only serves to prove the rule that nothing else was visible. If queer historicism has been forged through a recognition of epistemological impossibility, I see the occult as kind of case study of the queer historical impulse, reconstructing and revalorizing what has been rejected in the attempt to gain some foothold of power – a form of world building that might be at least familiar, if not appealing, to queer people in its methodological aims. As one informant shared, "The literal act of having to re-write your brain and how you understand culture or society or spirituality or religion or science or whatever […] is very similar between like the path of discovering your queerness and discovering the occult. Because you're having to deconstruct and reconstruct within your own mind. To like find where you want to be standing."[88]

This hermeneutics of "re-writing" is inherently political, not only because it rests on a theory of knowledge as inherently tied to power, but because it threatens to expose the constructedness of that power. Magliocco argues that magic is form of cultural critique which involves training the imagination to see patterns where they

86. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 10th anniversary ed (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 12.
87. Anjali Arondekar, *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 7.
88. Anonymous informant, in conversation with Author and other participants in group, June 2022.

have been overlooked,[89] and the political stakes of the queer occult lie within the recognition of why this training is necessary in the first place. For those who are interested in indexing power relationships in their lives, systems of in/visibility form a central part of tracing how that power moves: critically apprehending what is overlooked "points to the limits of the entire apparatus of vision that is the inheritance of colonial modernity."[90] In the words of one informant: "I realized there's a lot of things that were robbed of us, you know, robbed from us or things that were hidden, burned, destroyed, that we had, that was, you know, like a knowledge and a richness of knowledge […] These practices […] were kind of like at risk of disappearing. A lot of them survived. All of them survived for some reason."[91] The notion of survival is the cornerstone of the modern-occult allegory: calling something a "survival" connotes not only the object itself, but some event which could have – or in the minds of progressives like Tylor, should have – killed it. For queer people, that something can survive against attempts to thwart it is the *raison d'être* of queer liberation, giving some insight into why certain forms of occult practice can be easily incorporated into a queer politic. "[F]olk magic is, is complex because it never dies and it's, it's passed on and in ways and maybe not through the worship of the written word, you know [...] But it's passed on and it, and it, it, it mutates to survive."[92] Survival is construed as resistance to erasure: to valorize it as a process is automatically a

89. Magliocco, *Witching Culture*.
90. Gayatri Gopinath, *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 8.
91. Anonymous informant, in conversation with Author and other participants in group, April 2022.
92. Anonymous informant, in conversation with Author, April 2022.

critical position against the forms of oppression which the sympathizer considers as an obstacle to that survival.

I want to gesture toward one last element of the occult I see as central to its popularity amongst queer people today, and which I am in the process of investigating further in conversation with work on critical race, postcolonial and whiteness studies. This has to do with what some have theorized as queer people's "overwhelming desire to feel historical,"[93] the drive to weave a pathologized subjectivity into a form of collectivity. Consistent with some of the invented traditions of feminist Goddess spirituality, many informants in my research are preoccupied with their inheritance of power and, especially for white people in Montreal, the ways that seemingly ancient or timeless magical practices might provide a form of ancestral genealogy that is much preferable to that which they otherwise know they inherit on stolen land. As one person said, "There's, there's…there's guilt for me with regard to ancestors […] because I come from [colonizer] descent […] And so there's this, this, there's been this refusal for me to engage with the ancestors [...] I don't want to heal them or be healed by them […] But I have to deal with it. [White people and descendants of Europeans have to do this work too.] I really wish I had like a lineage and a tradition that I can hold on to and elders […] But I just, I can't do that. And it's, it's, it's like, painful and complicated."[94] In this quote is evidence not only of the shame of the legacy one is connected to, but also the grief of what it means to navigate the severance from that, and the desire to connect to the

93. Christopher Nealon, *Foundlings: Lesbian and Gay Historical Emotion Before Stonewall* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 8.
94. Anonymous informant, in conversation with Author and other group participants, April 2022.

past in another way that might resolve this violence. Taking seriously the occult "revival" as a methodology that allows, in this case, queer people to *do* something with history can provide important insight into the ways that alternative spiritualities are pulled into (and indeed, have always been part of) a broader conversation about whiteness, settler colonization, and the explosion of heretofore taken for granted narratives of truth and belonging. Looking at these conversations through a queer lens also highlights the problem that queer people have a vexed relationship to the historical, and suggests why there may be a particular urgency to resolve or reconstruct certain feelings of placelessness. Many people who practice occult or other related spiritualities describe it as a feeling of "homecoming," or a process of "develop[ing] a relationship with myself […] outside of the mainstream."[95] Informants who participated in my research were recruited based on their interest in talking about whether the occult can offer a homecoming not rooted in whiteness and the naturalization of settler inheritance. In theorizing the entry into past conversations, it is this anxiety of how to "enter" into the past while maintaining a reflexivity over how one is situated within power is where I think the most compelling research into the queer occult can happen.

A Writing Exercise

In asking what motivates queer people to take up the occult, I do not want to suggest that the phenomenon is only a means to an end: an expression of secular political rationality that takes an

95. Anonymous informant, in conversation with Author and other group participants, June 2022.

unexpected detour through the magical. Rather, I want to think of this phenomenon as a *refiguring of the political*, as a response to the failure of secular progress narratives to be good enough in the kind of liberation they promise. Queer political movements and the theories that grew out of them have been so bound up with the secular that, in hegemonic understandings of LGBT freedoms, queerness itself is illegible outside of it.[96] Considering how secular time maintains that history will uncover ever more freedom, including freedom from religious feeling, Ann Pellegrini asks: "how might queer theories of temporality intervene in such a binary?"[97] This article is not a starting point, nor a finished work, but a kind of broadcast from the middle of thinking through what the goals of the queer occult mean to disciplinary thinking, political claims, forms of reparation, and the ways method and belief are intertwined, which share terrain with religious studies in taking as its starting point a critical position toward the mythology of secularism as a location or rhetoric that is anything other than anticipatory. If "queer theology is a sentimental re-education in divine beauties that we were earlier taught to despise,"[98] I see the queer occult sharing a similar goal with respect to the dedication to train oneself to look otherwise. This goal is at its core

96. Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).
97. Ann Pellegrini, "Testimonality and Sexuality, Or, Queer Structures of Religious Feeling: Notes Toward an Investigation," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 10, no.1 (2005): 241.
98. Mark D. Jordan, "In Search of Queer Theology Lost," in *Sexual Disorientations: Queer Temporalities, Affects, Theologies*, ed. Kent Brintnall, Joseph A. Marchal, and Stephen D. Moore (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 301.

historiographic in its assumption that there can be some return to a time prior to this despising.

In the anthology of transcripts and other writings from the first ever Queer Astrology Conference in San Francisco in 2013, the editor asks: "what if our received wisdom no longer comes from cultures which prize domination and which are blind to their own privilege? What if our techniques seek not to stabilize in sameness, but rather orient toward and embrace difference?"[99] For the speaker, like many who are part of the target audience of this question, the occult offers an occasion to exercise a kind of intervention into legacies of knowledge, wherein inheritance is something that can be problematized and opted out of in favour of some other orientation: a queer interruption which is itself a world. Looking at the evolution of scientific investigative cultures in the late nineteenth century, and historicizing how the occult emerged in ontological opposition to the modern, lays bare some of the key aims of contemporary occult practices as attempts to divest from and denaturalize hegemonic formulations of race, gender, and sexuality. If "queer theology is not a field, but a cue—a prompt for a writing exercise,"[100] I consider my informants as taking up this particular prompt in order to navigate worlds that they have heretofore been barred from, wherein the writing is an end in itself. In many ways, this article has been my own writing exercise to reconstruct what "looking backward" means, as well as to ask what forms of training the queer occult proposes in order to look beyond what one has been taught to see. In the modern's false binary of

99. Ian Waisler and Rhea Wolf, eds. *Queer Astrology Anthology* (San Francisco, CA: Queer Astrology, 2014), 5.
100. Jordan, "In Search of Queer Theology," 306.

believers and skeptics, grounding the queer occult in a historiographical enterprise allows a certain kind of reversal to be made, wherein the practitioners featured here emerge as the true skeptics. For queer occultists, the gender binary, homonormativity, and white supremacy are dangerous mythologies, while fairies, witches, and queer magic are real.

Arc – Journal of the School of Religious Studies, McGill University
Volume 50 (2022)