`

‘Haunted Transpositions in Violet Kupersmith’s *Build Your House Around My Body* (2021)’
Author: Alex Carabine
Source: *Moveable Type*, Vol. 15, ‘Movement’ (2023-24)
DOI: 10.14324/111.444.1755-4527.1782

Moveable Type is a Graduate, Peer-Reviewed Journal based in the Department of English at UCL.

Haunted Transpositions in Violet Kupersmith's *Build Your House Around My Body* (2021)

Alex Carabine

Build Your House Around My Body. By Violet Kupersmith. 2021. Paperback, 2022. £8.99. Oneworld Publications. 978-0-86154-416-5

Twisting and uncanny, *Build Your House Around My Body* is a kaleidoscopic hallucination of a novel. Its story fits uneasily in multiple genres, from the Gothic to the *bildungsroman*, and it is told via the seemingly contradictory—yet ultimately sympathetic—techniques of magical realism and historical fiction. The primary protagonist of the book is Winnie, an American-Vietnamese woman whose biracial identity has alienated her from her dual cultures but also, crucially, from her self. Through her narrative we learn not only the histories of the characters around her, but also the recent history of Vietnam. The novel charts a sinuous and haunting movement across time, space and identity, creating a complex yet fascinating book of shifting narratives and meanings.

The story begins with Winnie's arrival in Saigon from America. Young, unmoored and in undefined emotional distress, Winnie has moved to Vietnam ostensibly to live with distant relatives and spend some time as an English teacher, albeit a lacklustre one. However, it becomes clear that her relocation to Saigon was a decision not so much to find herself, but rather to escape her fragmented identity. In claustrophobically close narration, the novel exposes how Winnie feels too American to be authentically Vietnamese, yet too Vietnamese to belong in America. If the Gothic is a negotiation between the Self and the Other, here is Winnie, Othered from her Self, struggling to discover a way to live with (or perhaps, within) her divided heritage. Ultimately, Winnie's narrative is not one of unification.

Like Winnie, Kupersmith is herself of American and Vietnamese descent. She has published a short story collection, *The Frangipani Hotel* (2014), and in her first novel one senses that she wants her readers to be off-balance during their initial experience of the book. The novel begins with a crucial bit of disorientating information, tucked at the top of the page as the first chapter's heading: 'June 2010, Saigon, nine months before Winnie's disappearance.'[1] The movement of the narrative ricochets across timelines from this point on, with each chapter beginning with a heading that locates the temporal events of that chapter in relation to Winnie's inevitable disappearance. As such, the mystery of what has happened, or will happen, to Winnie remains the only anchor in the plot, even as characters' lifetimes weave across the colonial history of Vietnam. Connections between seemingly disparate people and events develop slowly, threadlike, over time. How they connect to the fate of Winnie is left to the reader to piece together on their own.

The blurb leads the reader to expect a binary narrative: it states that 'Two young Vietnamese women go missing decades apart. Both are fearless. Both are lost. And both will

[1] Violet Kupersmith, *Build Your House Around My Body* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2021), p. 3. All future references will be made in the body of the review.

have their revenge.' Yet, as the novel slowly discloses its primary cast of characters, it becomes clear that the text is not binary, but kaleidoscopic, as the novel traces the lives of no fewer than seven subjects. Besides the mysteriously vanished Winnie, there is Binh, a ferocious young woman; the brothers Tan and Long; an enigmatic Fortune Teller and his First Assistant; and, finally, Mrs Ma, whose family live alongside the rubber tree plantation that acts as the background to so many of the book's events. All intersect through the plot of the novel, but readers meet the characters out of chronological order at different, disjointed moments of their lives. For example, Binh is introduced for the first time as a child from the perspective of the Fortune Teller. Several chapters—and narrative fragments—later, the book shifts to the Fortune Teller's youth, where he meets Mrs Ma before she was ever married. Kupersmith expects the reader to hold all the threads in their mind, making connections and remembering interactions until the author brings them together at the end. Only in the final chapters can the reader hope to piece together how all the characters and events are related as the narrative has moved, labyrinthine, through time, and the reader will only be successful in understanding the full plot if they have managed to keep hold of all the threads.

Kupersmith is a deft storyteller of compelling human narratives, and she achieves this intricate plotting against the backdrop of the colonisation of Vietnam by the French, and its occupation by the Japanese during World War II. *Build Your House Around My Body* shows the movement of history through its effects on people, collapsing time so that the past is never safely removed from the present; rather, it is a constant presence, its effects palpable and inescapable. Even Winnie, whose childhood in America ought to have insulated her from Vietnam's cultural trauma, is left reverberating with the echoes of history, and is unable to reconcile the multifaceted nature of her identity as a result. As Prasad Pannian notes in *Edward Said and the Question of Subjectivity,* 'the multifaceted and multivalent ideological state apparatuses of colonialism do not simply disappear as soon as the colonies … [gain] their independence from their former colonisers'.[2] Despite growing up outside of the colonised space of Vietnam, these apparatuses linger spectrally for Winnie, affecting her interactions with the world around her. Sixty-two years before her disappearance, the characters Jean-Pierre and Gaspard are introduced. Immigrants from France, they moved to Vietnam with an eye to becoming farmers. When they discuss the land they wish to buy, the pair have an exchange in which they justify the colonisation of Vietnam:

> But are we not taking their land? countered Jean-Pierre.
>
> Gaspard shrugged dismissively. Well, perhaps. But at least we brought doctors, Jesus and coffee along with us.

The colonial history of Vietnam is intrinsically intertwined with the plotlines of Winnie, Binh and Mrs Ma, and the tragedies and victories of the characters are framed by the country's past. Though Gaspard and Jean-Pierre are the protagonists of this particular chapter (and, indeed, their phantasmatic presence goes on to influence other incidents of the novel), it is their neighbour Louis 'L'Anguille' that exposes some of the particular horrors of Vietnam's experience of European colonialism.

A dissolute epicurean, Louis constructs a lavish French mansion on the landscape of Vietnam, which he fills with the tusks of elephants and eerie taxidermy. His prized

---

[2] Prasad Pannian, *Edward Said and the Question of Subjectivity* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 13.

possession is a scrapbook containing single strands of hair from all the women he has abused, which he calls his 'specimens' (p. 240). The term is significant, as it conflates the bodies of women with those of the taxidermy animals, thereby exposing how both women and the environment can be exploited and mistreated under colonial rule. The Vietnamese woman who acts as cook to Louis, whom he renames Odile, is displayed alongside the dead, indigenous animals of Vietnam, creating a taxonomy of categorisation and display that dehumanises Odile and turns the Vietnamese fauna into a private museum-like display. Vietnamese culture is thus exotically Othered from within the borders of Vietnam itself, the culture of the country essentially emptied of its own individual meaning by the white gaze of the French colonists. The entitlement and rapaciousness of the colonial project coalesces in the character of Louis, who disgusts Jean-Pierre and Gaspard, forcing them to reassess their position as to the positive effects of colonialism.

Of course, it is not simply doctors, Jesus and coffee that the West has imported, but also the novel's primary genre: the Gothic. Through this traditionally Western mode, Kupersmith explores aspects of the Gothic that will be familiar to both the casual reader and the dedicated aficionado of the genre. In Mrs Ma, we recognise the female Gothic, wherein women struggle against patriarchal oppression. Through the Fortune Teller's attempts at exorcism, we see the haunted Gothic, where the malevolent past intrudes into the protagonist's present. There is also the uncanny Gothic double that forces the protagonist to confront their unstable identity through the presence of the Other, represented in the novel by the two-headed snake—a symbol of the inextricable entwinement between the subject and the Other. Because of its European origins and American adoption, the Gothic cannot meaningfully be severed from the West; but, as Judie Newman argued in her piece 'Postcolonial Gothic: Ruth Prawer Jhabvala and the Sobhraj Case', it can 'retrace the unseen and unsaid of culture,' and thus 'the Gothic is very well adapted to expressing the untold and unspeakable stories of colonial experience'.[3] *Build Your House Around My Body* is just such a Gothic adaptation. In her approach to the mode's tropes and their transposition to an Asian setting, Kupersmith skilfully wields the Western mode in order to explore specifically Vietnamese wounds, turning the Gothic on itself to act as a critique of the West.

Gothic is an effective means of exploring moments of transition, negotiating a point poised between the past and the present, the old and the new. It expresses the strain and the fear that can accompany such a precarious and liminal position. Vietnam occupies this position of liminality as a result of its historical occupations, and the characters of the novel teeter on various brinks. Ghosts come back from the dead, chapters contain displaced time and characters return, disappear, and return again in new avatars, new jobs, new personas. Yet, fundamentally, Kupersmith turns the expectations of the Gothic return inside out by having the Vietnamese past rise up against the colonial Other in a way sympathetic to the reader, and Vietnamese history (in the form of monstrous folklore) rise up against the foreign occupiers of the country.

Kupersmith keeps the text tightly personal, and the political ramifications of the plot are suggested without feeling laboured. Readers are led to witness the line of cause and effect between cultural conflict and colonisation through the personal devastation of Winnie and the other Vietnamese characters of the plot, all of whom must negotiate their

---

[3] Judie Newman, 'Postcolonial Gothic: Ruth Prawer Jhabvala and the Sobhraj Case', in *Modern Gothic: A Reader,* ed. by Victor Sage and Allen Lloyd Smith (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), pp. 171–87 (p. 171).

traumatised cultural history with their own individual, present struggles. The Gothic history of the novel is particularly written on the bodies of women: through the triad of Winnie, Binh and Mrs Ma we witness female victimhood, female rage, and, ultimately, female vengeance.

The very title of *Build Your House Around My Body* inverts the expectation of haunted house narratives, as it positions the ghost at the core of the home, rather than as the supernatural parasite with which audiences have grown familiar. Classic Gothic novels end with the containment of the Other, and yet the conclusion of Kupersmith's text speaks to metamorphosis, rather than restraint. It may be true that the past is ever present, but the ways in which the characters bear the weight of their past is transformative. Winnie's struggle to come to terms with her self shows how we can be haunted by aspects of our own myriad identity. Yet her ending, though fantastic, gives her a new way of existing that makes her crisis obsolete. We, the readers, are left with nothing but questions and a lingering sense of having interacted with something strange, wonderful, and haunting. Ghosts may never be fully laid to rest in the novel; likewise, the book will leave its own spectral presence with the reader long after the cover has been closed.