The Guest (Ghost)

The Guest (Ghost) (from the series *Guesthouse*), 2024

> I have been amazed more than once by a description a woman gave me of a world all her own which she had been secretly haunting since early childhood. (Cixous et al. 1976: 876)

In 1998, behind the locked door of their hotel room, Adam Dade and Sonya Hanney were getting to work on dismantling the furniture. They began with the bed, since it occupied most of the space. Then they took apart the bedside tables, the wardrobe, the chair, unscrewing every last bolt. The fixtures and fittings were also removed: the curtains, the lights, the paintings. Once everything was undone, they stacked the furniture in the centre of the room, photographed it and then put everything back in its place.

Dade and Hanney repeated this routine in several hotels they stayed in over the course of a few years, yet no one was any the wiser to what was going on – neither the hotel managers, the housekeepers nor the guests who occupied the rooms after them. The only evidence of these rituals is a series of photographs and videos documenting the process. Dade and Hanney's sculptures thus became monuments to the hotel.

The hotel room, amongst several other sites, has previously been designated a non-place (Augé 2009). A non-place is a product of what Augé terms 'supermodernity' (2009: 109), referring to this era which is increasingly concerned with organization and panoptic power in its production of spaces. Non-places are temporary places in which people move through anonymously, never establishing relationships with one another or engaging in meaningful activities. Traces of human practice are unable to accumulate because they are constantly being effaced. As such, non-places lack historical and cultural identity, and this is why they are contrasted by Augé to places. Hotels erase what once was. Beds are made-up, rooms are cleaned; if forgotten, belongings are removed and sent back to their proprietor. Through unmaking the furniture, which mocks the comforts of home, Dade and Hanney also undo the fabrication of the hotel, exposing it as an interim place.

The non-place was developed for the transit of nameless crowds. In the hotel, in exchange for one's name and payment, a room number is given. You are no longer referred to as simply 'Mrs Smith', but 'Mrs Smith from Room 110'. In this sense the hotel (under the guise of 'a home away from home'), operates as a machine, moving constantly towards efficiency for its guests through the limitation of social interaction. Non-places intend to be fast-paced, since another characteristic of supermodernity is impatience (concerning time). Options such as room service and self-checkout ensure interaction is not a requisite of the hotel. Guests move to and from their rooms like ghosts, rarely making themselves known to one another.

Of course, in passing each other in the hallways and the lobby, guests do encounter one another. They are brief encounters, however, and certainly reserved. The restrained interactions are given away by the hushed voices at breakfast in the hotel restaurant. Aside from the shuffling of chairs as people get up from their tables, only crying children, who have not yet understood the codes of the hotel, make noise. One may hear the footsteps of other guests moving past their room or their voices, which are often muffled. Perhaps one may even come to know their neighbours through their adjoining walls but never meet them. The encounters between hotel guests are always partial-meetings, and it appears that this is the aim of the hotel. For clarity, the hotels to which I am referring are chain hotels – corporate hotels rather than smaller bed and breakfasts (B&Bs). These hotels have strict check-in and check-out schedules so that guests do not overlap in their stays.

Joanna Walsh (2015: 13) observes that hotels can never successfully be haunted because other ghosts are always remaking the space. The word guest is haunted by the word ghost when Walsh recalls an

interaction with a French-accented hotel manager who, when speaking, would modulate the vowel in guest, causing it to sound like ghost. Walsh then used the term ghost to refer to the hotel workers – particularly the housekeepers – who carry out ghostly activities. These ghosts sneak in and out of one's room unseen, replacing used supplies and remaking the beds. They never attempt to disguise themselves: they are seen in the hallways moving between rooms, wearing unmistakable uniforms (Walsh 2015: 12). Like the guests, the housekeepers and other hotel staff move about the hotel, making and remaking the space. Their movements are determined by the conditions of non-place and are therefore restricted, much like a haunting.

Though the surplus of human activity is mostly effaced, hotels do contain hidden information. Traces of the non-present are divulged through worn-down carpets or scuffs on the walls that reveal preferences of passage around the room. It is in this sense too that guests make themselves known to one another. The rest is hidden in the basement by the ghosts (the housekeepers). Sheets are taken to be washed and ironed, ensuring no traces of bodies are left behind. Underneath the hotel, beyond the room of Dade and Hanney, an entire production is taking place.

Dade and Hanney, through engaging in laborious activities within the room of their hotel, both comply with and refuse the terms of being a guest. By re-ordering the space around them to accommodate themselves within the conditions of place, the pair play the perfect guests: making themselves comfortable and allowing their desires to be met. However, being a guest also demands labour, in the form of production, Walsh suggests. From tidying the room before the housekeeper visits or making oneself up before going down to breakfast: 'hotels are for those who understand performance: ghosts, actors, women' (Walsh 2015: 17).

The hotel then becomes a theatre. Guests pass each other by in the hallway, each in their costumes, like the housekeepers. Dade and Hanney took the bed from its historical function as a space for sleep and transformed it into an object for viewing. The hotel room, for a moment, was transformed into a gallery space. Non-places should not be thought of as a category which excludes place, since non-places do have the potential to become places too. By rebuilding the furniture they had previously dismantled, Dade and Hanney resume their compliance with the hotel's policy: transience. In the same way that the word ghost has been haunting the word guest, the presence of ghosts haunts the stability of place.

As a person's experience of place may shift its significance, the term non-place is subjective. For the hotel workers, the hotel cannot be a non-place since they spend a lot of their lives there. It is no

coincidence that the designations guest and host are etymologically connected to one another, but as ghosts, the guests and those providing hospitality differ. It is true that the hotel allows one to project one's desires onto the space; it is furnished with this very purpose in mind. Yet it is also true that the hotel projects its aspirations onto its guests. It is a set in which one may perform, but the guest must take their cues from the name of the hotel, its décor and the etiquette of the staff. In this sense, the guests simply play as ghosts. The conditions of the hotel demand that the guests must also furnish it. From wearing the robes which have been set out for them to maintaining polite conversation in the communal spaces, guests peddle the hotel's vision. However, it is being able to move from one hotel to another, rather than being confined to one locale, that gives their spectral pretence away. They are 'paying ghosts', as Walsh writes (2015: 14).

The hotel workers are the true ghosts: they haunt the place regularly and therefore cannot remain anonymous to one another. They speak the hotel's language, its modes of speech, which do not quite sit outside of language but add to it. They do not require it to be decoded in the way that the visiting. ghosts do. All hotels are haunted, and the outdated term 'maid' is evidence of this. The linguistic turn from the designation 'maid' to 'housekeeper' shelters within itself a long history of cleaning being a gendered profession – a profession which today is still predominantly female. The change in language is an attempt to repress the gendered term and make the working conditions in hotels appear equal. The term maid also implicates class structures and often poor pay, which its successor also shelters.

Precisely because it is a transient place, the hotel allows for desire. Walsh likens the hotel to a dream because it must 'avoid the disappointments of the actual' (2015: 138). It is a place suited to guests and ghosts alike, for those who are excluded from 'proper' places. Hotels are places that may house the homeless or refugees; they may accommodate those experiencing divorce or those trying to negotiate their identity privately – away from the expectations of the home. Though Augé does not view the non-place as a gendered place, it becomes apparent that the hotel (as is the case with other sites) is significant to women and historically othered bodies. I mentioned earlier that the practice of making and remaking appears, historically, to be a feminine practice. Walsh also notes that hotels are places for women, though she does not go further than this.

One may imagine that Walsh was writing about exclusion in their comparison of women to ghosts (2015: 17), since ghosts are excluded from the present by continuing the actions of the past. It would make sense that women, having been excluded from an entire history of language, would speak the language of the hotel better than most. The hotel is full of repressed language, in the form of codes,

outdated terminologies and its mode of speech, which evades time. Walsh writes that the hotel has issues with the active voice: 'Not "No Problem" but […] "You are most welcome" […] not "We're serving your dinner at eight," but "dinner is served"' (2015: 8–9).

The repressed survives in the unconscious, which, Cixous (1976: 880) suggests, is where women survive. The hotel, like the unconscious, is a place for those who operate in the dark, beneath the surface, like the maids – making and remaking. It is a place where identity can be worked out, negotiated and rethought. She – the woman, the ghost, the unrepresentable – operates with ease within the hotel because it allows for temporary appropriations of space and character – for ghostly occupations. Ghosts, like Dade and Hanney, may only work temporarily in the dark of night before the maids begin to haunt the place again.

Walsh writes that hotel rooms are 'invitations to failure' (2015: 9), from making decisions such as deciding how best to spend one's time in the hotel room, what time to order room service and which item on the menu to order. Mastery must be left at the hotel doors. The hotel requires that their guests adjust their desires to be able to give in to luxury, and this is not always easy. The ability of women to appropriate space is rooted in them having so much of themselves; they are able to give parts of themselves up. Cixous writes: 'I, too, overflow: my desires have invented new desires' (1976: 876). These calls to failure are perhaps what makes a hotel room so inviting. The hotel room, like an artwork, always fails to encapsulate the ineffable.

Not long after their work in the hotels was complete, Dade and Hanney seemed to just disappear. The chair I am sitting in is unsteady as it rocks back and forth with the shifting of my weight. I get up to retrieve the information sheet, laid out for me on the desk by the hotel staff. I fold it up and place it under one of the legs. This steadies it. I unpack my suitcase, placing my wig carefully on the bed and my camera next to it. I get to work.