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Liminal Existences: Marginalised Voices and Narrative Disruption in Ali Smith's *Hotel World*

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I would like to thank Sara Martín for guiding me through this process, Ali Smith for writing a novel full of hidden corners, and my family, friends and partner for helping me keep my demons at bay, and encouraging me to always reach the finish line.

Abstract: Ali Smith's novel *Hotel World* (2001) traces the intertwined stories of five women connected by a hotel: Sara, a chambermaid who dies inside a dumbwaiter; Else, a homeless woman who lingers nearby; Lise, a former employee facing illness; and Clare, Sara's sister. This dissertation contends that *Hotel World* uses Sara's ghostly narration as a haunting lens through which the other characters' experiences emerge as spectral manifestations of the systemic mechanisms of marginalisation under capitalism. Sara's ghostly presence disrupts spatial hierarchies and challenges heteronormative norms; Else's haunting of the hotel's threshold reveals the social invisibility imposed on homeless people; and Lise's experience as an ill person exposes the bureaucratic dehumanisation that reduces the sick to economically unproductive figures. Moreover, certain formal elements of the novel—Sara's defamiliarised spectral voice, Else's heteroglossic speech, and Lise's list-like narrative—are analysed to illustrate how the novel's social critique is interwoven with its narrative form.

Keywords: Ali Smith, *Hotel World*, spectrality, marginalisation, defamiliarisation, heteroglossia, social critique

0. Introduction

0.1. *Hotel World* and Ghost Stories

Ali Smith is an acclaimed Scottish writer known for dealing with matters of social contemporaneity in her fiction: her writing addresses sexuality, identity, migration, and social justice. Her work is concerned with the intersection of the personal and the political. Smith's writing is saturated with themes of presence and absence, liminality, and the blurred boundaries between life and death, reality and memory. Her novels and short stories often incorporate ghostly motifs—both literal and symbolic—through metaphorical hauntings, elusive figures, and disruptive characters that unsettle conventional narratives. These recurring motifs reflect her enduring interest in the invisible forces that shape identity and perception. While such motifs appear throughout her writing, *Hotel World* stands out as the most explicit and sustained portrayal of a ghost character in Smith's long-form fiction.

Ali Smith's novel *Hotel World* (2001) begins with the death of Sara, a young hotel chambermaid who, after betting with her co-worker that she can squeeze herself into the dumbwaiter, falls to her death when the elevator cable breaks and the dumbwaiter crashes down. Sara's death in the hotel provides the narrative framework for exploring the personal stories of five women, each of whom is, at some point, connected to the establishment: Sara herself; Else, a young homeless woman; Lise, a hotel's receptionist who falls ill; Penny, a journalist; and Clare, Sara's sister. By exploring the lives of these five women, Smith not only investigates individual stories that intersect at the hotel, but also narratives bound together by the characters' experiences of social exclusion—with only Penny standing apart. Sara's death thus prompts an examination of capitalism's mechanisms of marginalisation.

Sara's ghostly voice frames the novel, a structural and thematic decision that is central to the interpretive approach of my reading, and which warrants a brief consideration of the function of ghost stories in literature. Ghost stories, which constitute a particular category of the Gothic, are defined by the fact that they create the sense of uncanniness characteristic to the genre by introducing supernatural events in the form of the existence or the apparition of ghosts. Sigmund Freud, in his thesis on the uncanny which is still prevalent in studies of the genre, quotes German philosopher F. W. J. Schelling, for whom "everything is uncanny that ought to have remained hidden and secret, and yet comes to light" (qtd. in Briggs 178). Within the prevailing Western mindset, death continues to be treated as a taboo; the institutionalisation and medicalisation of death, the individualisation and pathologisation of grief, and the romanticisation—sometimes even aestheticisation—or the sanitisation of death in cultural and artistic narratives, etc., are all symptoms of the Western's cultural unwillingness to confront death barefacedly. Consequently, it is no surprise that Freud argued that death is the uncanny par excellence (Freud 241): it is something both familiar and intensely repressed. In this light, ghost stories instantiate the outing of the repressed in its most explicit and quintessential expression. Nevertheless, ghost stories do not just represent the Freudian return of the repressed because they defy the mainstream cultural mindset by tackling issues of death and afterlife, but also because they deal with further issues of oppression. The Gothic genre has, from its very inception, been responsive to and concerned with issues of cultural, social, and political significance—systemic physical and psychological patriarchal oppression, social ostracism, religious tyranny, political corruption, and so forth. As David Punter notes in the introduction to *A New Companion to the Gothic*, an expanded and updated edition of his earlier work, Gothic writing has always been entangled with questions of social

organisation and, even from its earliest forms, it could "'take the stage' in foregrounding social issues and in forming social consciousness" (4). Ghost stories have provided the means of exploring social matters by introducing the figure of the ghost: the dead are freed from the social structures and constraints which confined them in life and return as spectral reminders of what society seeks to suppress—very often reclaiming the agency denied to them while alive.

Commenting on systematic and particularistic violence in the postmodern, late-capitalist world, Avery Gordon argues that the ghost works as a metaphor for modernity's mechanisms of exclusion and rejection. She writes: "The ghost is not simply a dead or a missing person, but a social figure, and investigating it can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life." (8) The ghost functions as an allegorical representation of the marginalised and the dehumanised which confronts us with "modernity's violence and wounds" (25). Emily Horton, who analyses the depiction of homelessness in *Hotel World*, and who also cites Gordon, invokes Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's notion of *spectral humans*: those individuals who, by reason of factors such as age, gender, race, nationality or labour status, are disqualified from citizenship and cast out from the juridical structures that confer legal recognition, thereby being actively positioned as stateless (qtd. in Horton 132). On this systematic dehumanisation upheld and perpetuated by the institutions that concretise the ideological framework of the system, Butler explains that, it is not simply that some humans are treated as such while others are systematically dehumanised, but that dehumanisation becomes central to the production of the human since the "'Western' civilisation defines itself over and against a population understood as, by definition, illegitimate, if not dubiously human" (132).

Spectrality has, then, become a recurring trope in contemporary cultural productions by which to pore over issues of exclusion and exploitation. In the context of literary studies, Emily Horton proposes the birth of a new genre unfolding in contemporary literature, one defined by its engagement with the spectral and which she has named "post-millennial Gothic." The works which fall under the definition of this genre are those that, stemming from the traditional Gothic themes that have been used to explore trauma and abject experiences, employ ghosts and hauntings as a way to address contemporary concerns surrounding violence and socio-economic marginalisation not only as interpersonal or private struggles but as broader social realities. The twenty-first century ghost has come to carry a profound ideological weight.

0.2. Unveiling Marginalisation Through the Spectral and the Formal

Considering *Hotel World* through this lens, the first part of this dissertation examines how Sara's ghostly voice, which both opens and closes the novel, introduces a spectral aesthetic that permeates the entire text and which is employed by Smith to reflect on issues of marginalisation within a contemporary capitalist society. By invoking ghostliness through the figure of Sarah's ghost, Smith situates *Hotel World* within the Gothic tradition—long associated with otherness and marginality—as a method to explore social erasure, economic invisibility, and queer marginality. Sara's accidental death triggers a profound exploration of capitalist invisibility and exploitation: Sara's ghost comes forth as a figure of economic invisibility in a world governed by capitalist structures and provides the narrative framework for the other characters' stories—as well as for her own narrative as a lesbian—, that entail experiences of marginalisation, including homelessness and illness. Together, these narratives serve as a means of

addressing the traumatic dimensions of capitalist alienation and systemic oppression. Like Sara's haunting presence as a ghost, these characters exist in liminal spaces, embodying the estrangement and erasure produced by structural subjugation and marginalisation. While Horton has already made this claim, her work primarily focuses on the depiction of homelessness in Smith's novel. This dissertation analyses instead how the spectral aesthetic is constructed and imbued with ideological significance in the chapters that centre on Sara's story, and also examines how it resonates throughout Else's and Lise's narratives.

The second part of this dissertation explores how the novel's themes of otherness and marginalisation materialise through formal techniques of narration. Sara's estranged narration unsettles habitual perception, and Else's distinctive idiolect and Lise's list-like narrative introduce further formal disruptions. These narrative strategies open a window through which to look at the social, economic and historical forces underlying these processes of marginalisation.

1. Spectral Existences: Ghostly Realities of the Working-Class, Queer, Homeless and Ill

1.1. Spatial Politics of Class Marginality and Queer Silences

Sara's fall down the dumbwaiter shaft literalises the violence of capitalist spatial hierarchies. The narration of the accident of her death exposes the hidden infrastructures of class inequality, and her ghostly wanderings throughout the hotel reclaim the spaces she was excluded from in life—her presence after death becomes an act of subversion. Sara is a working-class girl. She lives in a small house, shares a room with her younger sister, and is working a badly paid part-time job as a chambermaid in a hotel located in an unnamed city (although the city is never explicitly named, the novel includes hints of

different English locations, intermingling references to both London and Scotland in a deliberately blurred urban setting). Sara is like so many thousands of other working-class young women across the world. Sara dies inside a dumbwaiter—a space scarcely larger than 50 x 50 x 70 cm—"curled like a snail in a shell with (her) neck and the back of (her) head crammed in, pressed hard right up against the metal roof, (her) face between (her) arms, (her) chest between her thighs" (6). The almost no-space in which Sara dies serves as a simile for the limited space that she, as a working-class individual, was allowed to take up when alive. Sara's ghost, whose voice frames the novel by both opening and closing it, describes the house that Sara used to live in along with her mother, father and sister, as a "lack of space," and claims that "a chair in that house can take up almost one whole wall" (10). The claustrophobic spatial dimensions of Sara's death parallel those of her life, and, by extension, speak for the material conditions of the working-class. While Sara is not forced into the dumbwaiter, and her decision to enter it is certainly reckless, it is her status as a chambermaid that exposes her to this hazardous space—not inherently dangerous but fatal as misused by her—, and presents her with an opportunity for missteps that privileged guests, for whom the dumbwaiter remains inaccessible, are not exposed to. Aside from being extremely small, a dumbwaiter is a monochromatic unrefined space, bare and utilitarian in nature. Opposite to the narrowness and crudeness of the dumbwaiter in which Sara draws her final breaths, is the sophisticated and spacious infrastructure of the hotel she falls parallel to (though not a five-star establishment, the hotel is refined and elegant enough to signify privilege and serve symbolically as a site of economic stratification). The floors are tall with quality flooring, linked by a "wide grand stairwell," and the rooms are "very newly and tastefully furnished with good hard expensive beds and corniced high-ceilings" (4). However, not all the rooms are equally luxurious. The rooms on the

floor where Sara finds herself when she enters the dumbwaiter are the smallest in the hotel. They served as the servants' quarters when the old house had a staff (back in the late eighteenth century), and when the house later became a brothel, they were the rooms where the more diseased or ageing girls offered their services. Furthermore, although most of the floors have thick carpets covering their surfaces, the basement—where the dumbwaiter crashes—is paved with stone. Sara's descent into death—both literally and metaphorically—starts in the cheapest rooms and culminates in the hard stone basement. The only moment Sara comes into contact with the real opulence of the hotel—which functions as a metaphor for wealth in general—is when she is working; she remains otherwise excluded from it, even in her fall, which begins and concludes in the two least distinguished floors of the premises.

The dumbwaiter, as employed by Smith to convey meaning, functions as what Henri Lefebvre terms a *representational space*—a space imbued with symbolic significance that concretises lived experience. According to Lefebvre, representational space "overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects" (39). The dumbwaiter serves as an allegorical space that starkly contrasts the working-class' harsh material realities with the visible yet perpetually distant affluence accessible to the elite. Building on this contrast, with a tone both sardonic and bitter, Sara's ghost, reflecting on her fall and comparing the hotel's space to Sara's childhood home, writes that "The house is small; it has no upstairs, no place for a proper fall." (10)

The way Sara is allowed to occupy the space of the hotel changes once she is dead. As a ghost, Sara returns to the building where she died, and is now allowed to inhabit the confines of the hotel freely: she coasts down corridors, wafts about the restaurant, slides up banisters, crosses rooms, pirouettes down the building, etc. In this way, *Hotel World* conveys what Avery Gordon argues when she writes that haunting is

"that moment (...) when things are not in their assigned places," a mislocation that "registers the harm inflicted or the loss sustained by a social violence done in the past or being done in the present" (xvi). Sara's ghost returns to inhabit the spaces from which she—and by extension, the working class—was excluded in life, thereby exposing the broader structures of economic inequality and systemic violence. The novel's opening spatial logic and its allegorical implications are crucial as they establish both the thematic framework and the symbolic landscape from which the narrative emerges.

Leaving behind the particulars of Sara's death, I move on now to address the depiction of sexual repression in Smith's novel. Sara's posthumous confession of her queer desire reveals the violence of heteronormative repression.[1] Unable to articulate her love in life, she speaks from beyond the grave through the abject body: her corpse now freed from social constraints. Sara's ghost (different from Sara's corpse, as we will see) is the one who acts. Just as the ghost reclaims the spaces denied to her when in life, it asserts an affective presence and reclaims her desire. Her haunting return unsettles the normative boundaries that led her to remain silent. Sara likes women. She falls in love with the shop assistant at a watch shop she resorts to when her wristwatch breaks. The way we find out about Sara's love story is worth considering; as it is not through the voice of Sara's ghost but rather through that of her physical buried body. On the one hand, we have Sara's ghost, whose voice opens and closes the novel, and who acts as a ghost wandering the world of the living and occasionally appearing to certain people. On the other hand, we have Sara's body, buried underground, whose voice tells her personal story—a story the ghost does not know, despite speaking in the first person as

[1] Ali Smith's fiction has frequently been interpreted through a queer lens. Notably, her novels *Girl Meets Boy* (2007) and *How to Be Both* (2014) have attracted scholarly attention for their representations of gender fluidity, same-sex desire, and non-normative identities. For instance, Monica Germana discusses *Girl Meets Boy* as challenging conventional notions of identity and offering a culturally progressive Scottish identity (Studies in Scottish Literature, 2017), and Corpus Navalón-Guzmán examines *How to Be Both* through queer temporalities, highlighting its challenge to normative models of developmental time (Forum for Contemporary Issues in Language and Literature, 2019).

Sara (frequently) and referring to a past life lived as a human being. The ghost of Sara asks Sara's body to tell her about the fall—which we instinctively think refers to the dumbwaiter's fall—and Sara's body tells her the story of her falling in love. The parallel drawn between her falling into death and her falling in love is evocative; Sara's falling in love with a woman represents her descent into a position of marginality. Although ideological progress regarding sexual orientation was significant by the late 1990s (the period in which the novel appears to be set), it is undeniable that a non-normative sexual orientation would still place her in a position of subalternity.

Even though Sara (when alive) had admitted to herself that she was in love with a woman, there were moments when she struggled to believe it—in a context of heteronormativity, which led her to assume that she was heterosexual, she was caught off guard by her unexpected falling in love with a girl—, and even declared: "In the dark I decided to let myself think a little more about the girl. It was a lot easier in the dark. It didn't feel anywhere as risky as it did to catch myself thinking about her with the light on" (22). Sara (while alive) did not tell anyone about her being in love, not even the girl she loved; in fact, she did not even dare approach her ever again after their first encounter: for three weeks after they met, Sara went back to the watch shop and stood outside it, watching every move of her beloved from afar, but never having the courage to come close and speak to her. Sara claims that "falling for her had made (her) invisible" (23). While this statement may be read in the context of an inexperienced girl who does not know how to proceed when confronted with infatuation, it also speaks to a broader truth: by acknowledging that she is not heterosexual, she has become socially invisible—or rather, she has become the object of invisibilisation. Once she is dead, however, her corpse refuses to remain silent.

In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva writes about the abject, which she defines as that which disturbs systems, disrespects borders, and defies boundaries: the abject is ambiguous, it inhabits the in-between (4). The corpse—considered from a secular perspective and leaving scientific analysis aside—is, therefore, the utmost embodiment of abjection: it represents the ultimate threshold, the border between life and death, the border between subject and object; and in its disruption of the structures that govern the living, it "shows (one) what (one) permanently thrust aside in order to live" (3). The corpse holds the power to reveal what the living body was constrained from. Butler, drawing on Kristeva's concept of abjection, and linking it to queer theory, argues that abjection is the foundation upon which the *heterosexual matrix* has been constructed and is upheld, she claims that the possibility of *being* a subject is predicated on the repudiation and disavowal of those identifications that would trouble its coherence (169-71). Queer people, deemed incoherent by the system yet whose very incoherence underpins the system's functioning, represent another iteration of those *spectral humans* Butler and Spivak wrote about. In light of all this, Sara's corpse, which represents the abject not only because of its condition of transitional matter but also because it represents the socially marginalised—Sara's corpse mainly talks about her lesbian love story—, no longer tied to the normative dictates of the world of the living, is capable of asserting her queerness.

One more thing to take into consideration on this point is that the confession I have just discussed is prompted by Sara's ghost, who insists that Sara's corpse tells her story so that she can "take (it) to the surface" (15). Moreover, Sara's ghost not only dares to approach Sara's lover but also "passe(s) through her," and pressing its mouth to the side of the girl's head, compels her to listen to a message that remains undisclosed to the reader (29). Although it is uncertain whether Sara's lover can actually hear the

ghost's message, the mere audacity of the ghost to communicate—and especially if we accept that this message is Sara's confession of love—constitutes an act of disclosure and empowerment, which resonates with Gordon's idea that that the ghost "is one form by which something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there to our supposedly well-trained eyes, makes itself known or apparent to us*"* (8). Sara's love for women in general, and for the watch shop girl in particular, remained buried within her and never materialised into real experience. By breaking this silence and revealing what Sara kept hidden, the ghost does more than unveil a private personal story—it exposes the broader silence imposed on queer individuals and the experiential possibilities denied to them. The ghost is "pregnant with unfulfilled possibility, with the something to be done that the wavering present is demanding" (Gordon 183). What needs to be done does not constitute a return to the past, but rather a confrontation with its repression in the present, a reckoning with what has been lost, even if it was never actually possessed (Gordon 183).

1.2. The Politics of Homelessness and Disability

The second chapter of *Hotel World* tackles issues surrounding homelessness and poverty. Else, who lives on the street, exists as a social ghost—visible enough to be ignored or dismissed but invisible enough not to be fully recognised as a person with rights and dignity. Her presence around the hotel's premises embodies Derrida's spectral logic, which he develops primarily in his book *Specters of Marx* (as it is most commonly referred to): haunting public space while remaining unacknowledged, exposing the structural erasure and neglect that perpetuate poverty. Else stays outside the hotel in a small recessed area in the wall near the hotel's main entrance, and she begs. Else's presence on the street, though largely ignored by passers-by, unsettles those

who would prefer that she—and, by extension, all homeless individuals—be erased from view. Some of the things people—among them policemen and policewomen—have said to Else are as follows: “Move along. People don’t want to see it. And I don’t want to see it,” “Is that your stuff? Move it. Or we’ll bin it. Move it. Move,” “You’ve got a home. Everybody’s got somewhere. Go home now,” “Now I’m telling you straight and I’ll only tell you once. You want a good raping, and you’re for it. You let me see you in here again and you’ll get it. I *mean* it” (42-3). Society’s tendency to overlook people like Else, even as it depends on them to construct its own identity through opposition, while simultaneously being deeply disturbed by their presence, underscores the ghost’s contradictory nature: the ghost is simultaneously there and not there, its unsettling nature stems from the fact that it is present by virtue of its invisibility.

Along these lines, Derrida, who prefers the term “spectre” over “ghost” because of its greater conceptual ambiguity, writes: “The spectre (...) is the frequency of a certain visibility. But the visibility of the invisible.” (125), the visibility of what should have remained hidden—recalling here Shelling’s words. *Hotel World* grapples with the tension between ongoing systemic invisibility and occasional instances of visibility positioning Else within a Derridean spectral logic. As a homeless woman, systematically rendered invisible yet occasionally acknowledged, Else occupies a liminal space that blurs the line between the visible and the invisible. Nevertheless, the moments in which she attains recognition are either anecdotal acts of pity-driven altruism—Lise’s offering of a room in the hotel for one night and Penny’s momentary offering of a cheque—, or the result of a failure to properly read her situation. Penny, who meets Else inside the hotel, fails to acknowledge Else’s situation as a homeless person and, believing she is either a “druggy eccentric guest” or a “minor ex rock-star”

(139) (both of which would make for a good story), shows an interest in her. However, once Penny discovers Else's true situation, her interest dissipates, and her gesture is ultimately rendered void. Later, back at the hotel, Penny cancels the cheque she wrote for Else because she considers it to be too much money—although she then chooses to pay for a porno channel on TV—and claims: "If you were poor, you were poor. You couldn't handle money. Money was nothing but a problem if you weren't used to it. It must be a relief, to have none.", proceeding then to completely forget about her (178).

In light of the above, we see that while Else does attain brief moments of visibility, these do not empower her; rather, they serve to further isolate her and highlight her marginalised position. This is precisely why we contend that Else's character is positioned within a Derridean spectral logic: like Sara's wraithlike behaviour when still alive, Else's liminal existence—simultaneously present and absent—underscores the underlying conditions that generate spectrality: poverty, structural exclusion, and the common practice of turning a blind eye. This aligns with Derrida's assertion that haunting is a political phenomenon: the ghosts of today embody the unresolved problems of past societies, some of them being very willingly unresolved.

While the fleeting moments of visibility Else experiences do not translate into true agency—the system remains deeply rooted in its foundational structures—, they nonetheless constitute significant disruptions. These instances bring Else into focus, placing her within spaces from which she is usually excluded and among people who often behave as though she does not exist. In this way, although she is alive, Else takes on the role of a ghost: trespassing boundaries and unsettling the established order. Drawing on Gordon's concept of the ghost as a social figure, Else's visibility challenges the official narrative, exposing histories that are systematically suppressed. Much like

Sara's ghost, Else similarly transgresses the boundaries set by her marginalisation by entering the hotel and asserting her presence within a space that consistently excludes her.

I turn now to exploring how illness creates a different kind of haunting by disrupting the relationship between body and self, a haunting that deepens into a spectral existence through societal mechanisms of marginalisation. Rejecting the traditional Cartesian mind-body dualism, French philosopher Merleau-Ponty develops the concept of *bodily intentionality* in *Phenomenology of Perception*, his foundational philosophical text. This concept refers to the body's innate capacity to be purposefully oriented toward the world without the need for conscious deliberation. Bodily intentionality understands the body as an intelligent entity, one that far from being merely an instrument or a means, serves as our expression in the world. Inasmuch as the body is the medium through which we engage with our environment (the body maintains an ongoing dialogue with it), it becomes the very core of our existence: "The body is our general means of having a world" (Merleau-Ponty 147). Therefore, the body plays a central role in shaping our understanding of agency and subjectivity. Illness unsettles this essential relationship, as the body loses certain functional abilities and becomes restricted in its interaction with the environment. Merleau-Ponty also talks about the *ambiguity of the body*, which underscores the body's dual status as both subject and object. He draws a distinction between the biological body—the body as a physical object—and the lived body—the first person experience of the biological body. In health, these two bodies are aligned, harmonious; we primarily experience the lived body, while the physical body remains in the background, perceived as nothing more than a facilitator of our actions. In illness, however, the harmony is broken; the physical body, now compromised, becomes the centre of our attention. As philosopher Havi

Carel observes in her phenomenological account of illness, *Illness: The Cry of the Flesh*, this disruption in bodily experience leads to a feeling of alienation from one's body, which, in Carel's words, becomes "uncanny and unfamiliar" (77). Thinking of Kristeva again, illness exemplifies the *abject* not because of illness itself, but insofar as it disrupts identity (4). In *Hotel World*, Lise embodies this disruption. When filling out a medical form, Lise is asked to provide a description of herself. She initially writes: "I am a nice person" (81). She then crosses out the word *nice* and writes above it *sick*: "I am a sick person". (81, 85). The qualities Lise once believed to conform her identity now feel meaningless against the weight of illness. Her sickness overshadows the person she used to be. Falling ill turns her into a stranger in her own skin. Illness disrupts the phenomenological unity of body and self, causing the self to feel estranged from the body it once inhabited comfortably. The subject's identity becomes spectral, existing in an ambiguous space between embodiment and absence, between past wholeness and present alienation.

Lise's experience of illness constitutes a double estrangement: alongside the disruption of bodily unity previously discussed, it also exposes the social marginalisation imposed by neoliberal systems, which render the sick as economically unproductive and therefore worthless. By revealing how bureaucratic structures demand that the ill continually justify their condition, forcing them to continuously prove their unfitness for labour, *Hotel World* demonstrates how illness is transformed into a site of surveillance, where the suffering subject is not supported but scrutinised, and identity becomes dependent on economic legibility. Smith transcribes a section from a questionnaire Lise is required to complete, which reads: "Incapacity For Work Questionnaire. Do not delay filling in and sending back this questionnaire or you could lose money" (86). This form, which demands detailed accounts of what Lise can and

cannot do, drives Lise to question whether she is actually sick. Essentially, the form's message is: "You probably aren't ill—prove to us how ill you really are" (95). This bureaucratic instrument, which does not attempt at capturing the true suffering of a sick person, reveals a system designed to control its citizens, ensuring that those who are absent from work are subjected to scrutiny and forced to justify their absence from labour under the constant threat of losing monetary support. We recall here David Harvey's comment in *Spaces of Hope* that "under capitalism sickness is defined broadly as inability to work" (106). With all this, we see that Lise's body has become ghostly: visible only in terms of what it cannot produce, erased as a subject with agency, and existing solely as an object of bureaucratic scrutiny. Adding to this critique, Smith imagines a future in which Lise has recovered. In this scenario, Lise attends a social gathering where someone "asks her in that way that means who are you, *what do you do*"—exposing how the system has led us to believe that someone's job is the primary marker of their identity. Lise would then respond with her new "job description"—Else similarly describes her homelessness as her job—by saying, "I've been ill," to which she would then add, "someone has to do it" (100)—the system needs the sick in order to define itself in opposition to them. Lise's "job" of having been ill shows how her identity stays ghostly even after her recovery—defined not by who she is, but by her illness and what she cannot produce. She exists as a shadow, visible only through her lack, revealing how the system erases her full personhood.

2. Echoes of Exclusion: Narrative Techniques and Social Othering

2.1. Narrative Defamiliarisation and the Politics of Seeing

The second section of this dissertation investigates how *Hotel World* translates its engagement with marginalisation and otherness into narrative form. The novel employs

a range of formal devices—from Sara's ghost's estranged perception, to Else's fractured and coded speech and Lise's mechanised list-like narration—to push the boundaries of conventional storytelling and ultimately reveal the forces that shape exclusion and invisibility. While Emma E. Smith has already analysed the novel by applying a political concept of democratic communal relations to the novel's polyphonic narrative structure, and Sánchez (2010) reads it through the lens of the critical theory of trauma to argue that the novel reveals how trauma provokes a crisis in representation and narration, I focus instead specifically on how some of the radical formal strategies used by Smith expose the mechanisms behind marginalisation and erasure.

Sara's ghostly voice not only frames the narrative of *Hotel World* but also introduces a destabilised mode of perception that anchors the novel's exploration of narrative form and becomes central to the novel's ideological project. Sara's ghost enacts a process of defamiliarisation which Smith uses to interrogate the mechanisms through which habitual perception of language causes the loss of the essence of things, ultimately serving as a reflection on how automatic, habitual perception of the world fosters indifference. Sara's ghost, beyond being dead, is caught in a process of gradual disintegration through which her sensory perception is fading: she can no longer perceive certain colours, sounds become increasingly dim, and the names of things begin to slip from her memory. Accordingly, Sara's ghost instead of saying "eyes," refers to them as "the things we see with," a definition she later extends to: "The things we see with, two of them, stuck in a face above a nose. In birds they're black and like beads. In people they're small holes surrounded in colour: blue, green or brown. Sometimes they can be grey" (8). Through these linguistic reformulations, the ghost undermines what Viktor Shklovsky, in his essay *Art as Technique*, calls the automatism of perception—the way familiar language and habitual thinking dull the essence of

things. Shklovsky argues that words often lose the essence of the things they represent because our thinking becomes "algebraic": words are reduced to mere symbols that no longer have the power to evoke real essence (3). In his essay Shklovsky introduces the concept of defamiliarisation (*ostranenie*), which he traces to Tolstoy's technique of making the familiar strange by avoiding direct naming: instead, Tolstoy describes things as if he were seeing them for the first time, shielding in this way the object's essence from the dulling effects of automatic perception (4-9). Under the pretext of forgetting the names of things, the ghost does exactly the same. She refers to the dumbwaiter as "the lift for dishes, very small room waiting suspended above a shaft of nothing," (6) and to toast as "heated-up bread." (9) Defamiliarisation—understood not simply as a refusal to name but as an inclination toward description as a way to prevent the loss of a thing's essence through habitual recognition—as voiced by the ghost parallels what *Hotel World* enacts on a broader scale. The novel shrinks from simply naming the situations faced by those in marginal positions—in contrast to mainstream narrative that reduce homeless people to superficial portrayals, such as newspapers' articles that show photographs of the inside of their pockets (77). Instead, it delves into their experiences, trying to capture their essence through nuanced narration and resisting the oversimplifications that arise from labeling complex experiences with names like "homelessness" or "illness". Following the same logic of *ostranenie* just discussed, after recounting Sara's death story, the ghost states, "It has tired me out telling you her story," and then seemingly clarifies the meaning of "you" by adding: "all you pavement-pressing see-hearing people passing so blandly back and fore in front of the front door of the hotel" (26). The ghost exposes how, just as automatic perception causes the essence of things to be lost when naming them, automatic unreflective living

has caused us to lose the ability to truly perceive—and consequently empathise with—those around us.

2.2. Narrative Fragmentation and Ideological Voices

The second chapter of *Hotel World* introduces another linguistic device, which I analyse in the context of heteroglossia. Else's heteroglossic idiolect functions as a narrative and ideological rupture that draws attention to the socio-historical forces underpinning her marginalisation. Her linguistic choice hence becomes a politically charged expression of exclusion. Although Else's chapter is narrated in the third person, her own utterances frequently break through the mediating narration. Else does not use full words but truncated half-words: she omits vowels claiming that she does not need them. For instance, instead of saying "Can you spare some change," she says: "Cn y spr sm chn?". Else's distinctive mode of speech exemplifies what Bakhtin, in his essay *The Dialogic Imagination*, terms *heteroglossia*, a concept he regards as deeply infused with ideological significance. Bakhtin claims that the change in terminology from *polyphony*—the coexistence of multiple individual voices—to *heteroglossia* (in literary studies) signals a shift in focus from individual voices to socially charged languages. Crucially, for these different heteroglossic languages to find expression within the novel, they must be embodied by a speaking subject. Following Bakhtin's reasoning, Else functions as a vehicle that transforms what would otherwise be a mere semantic variation into a "socio-ideological conceptual system" laden with meaning (113). Each discourse style within the heteroglossic fabric of a literary work represents an ideological-belief system, a particular way of perceiving the world (Bakhtin). In this regard, Else's idiolect—we refer to it as such because Else is the only character in the

novel who employs language in this specific manner—is the materialisation of an independent consciousness.

Else's speech breaks into the mediating narration, into the narrative flow, opening a window into her personal ideological world. This manner of speaking, Else claims, derives from the way secretaries used to write before the advent of Dictaphone machines, during the time when shorthanders still existed and 100-word-per-minute typists were common. Else's speech pattern reflects how secretaries used to write—dropping vowels for speed—, and also stems from the fact that as a child, Else thought she might one day become one of them. However, those secretaries no longer exist—"they're all redundant now" (46), "they're history" (47)—, Else reflects. She imagines that they are all out on the streets now, like her.

This thought resonates with Else's reflection on the notion of history, which she considers to be dead. Reflecting on the city where Else lives (which we have already characterised as an indistinct, composite urban landscape combining features from various large British cities), Smith conveys her character's thoughts: to Else, "this historic city she's sitting on the pavement of, full of its medieval buildings and its modern developments teetering on top of medieval sewers, is all that's left of history now; somewhere for tourists to bring their traveller's cheques to in the summer" (45). In light of this, Else's heteroglossic idiolect—which she employs when addressing passersby to ask them for money—represents a rupture in the narration that reasserts her ideological world. This narrative breach brings the ideological implications of Else's speech to the fore and compels the reader to reflect on Else's experience, the circumstances she lives in, as something larger than herself, symptomatic of broader social structures of exclusion and historical erasure. Just like the disappearance of secretaries responds to the systemic historical economic displacement of working-class

women, Else's condition as a homeless person is the result of the commodification of basic human needs and the systemic prioritisation of profit over people.

The third chapter of *Hotel World* uses a list-like narrative to present Lise's story, formally mirroring the institutional structures that regard her only in terms of her economic utility. This fragmentation anticipates her later illness and the bureaucratic scrutiny she will be subjected to when she falls ill, revealing how her identity is already stripped from individuality and reduced to quantifiable entries by a system that values efficiency over human individuality. The third chapter of the novel explores Lise's story: both the story of the not-yet sick Lise who works in the Global Hotels and the later sick Lise. A section of the character's story (of the not yet ill Lise) is presented through a list-like narrative structure. This catalogue format does not simply organise the events in the story in chronological order; rather, it fragments experience into disjointed, itemised entries. The list accounts for Lise's bodily actions—"She puts her finger in her mouth," "She walks across the room with brisk purpose," "She straightens her uniform" (107)—alongside her physical and psychological sensations—"Her neck is hurting" (118), "Still high with what she's done" (113, 115)—, but also registers and describes elements of the space: the speakers, the lobby, the surveillance cameras at the front of the hotel, the clock on the computer, etc. This narrative list includes the description of the material characteristics of a waste bin, the explanation of the inflammatory response of the body's coagulation system, clarifies acronyms, etc.

This breakdown of narration into bullet-like fragments mirrors the format of the medical form Lise is compelled to fill in when she gets sick. The form in question—which I have already briefly discussed—demands Lise to tick the statement which best applies to her regarding any difficulty she may have sitting comfortably in a chair from a list that reads as follows: "I cannot sit comfortably for more than 10

minutes, without having to move from the chair / I cannot sit comfortably for more than 30 minutes, without having to move from the chair / I cannot sit comfortably for more than one hour, without having to move from the chair (etc.)" (99). The list-like narrative fragment mimics the structure of the medical form. Through its fragmentary descriptions and the use of the third person, the character becomes objectified: Lise is nothing more than another of the necessary objects which contribute to the functioning of the hotel. This format brings to the fore the character's position—and by extension, the position of the working class—within capitalist labour systems: as depersonalised components, only valuable as long as they are efficient. This list-like fragment functions as an ominous omen of what Lise will have to deal with when she gets sick—even though the narration of Lise's life before getting sick appears as a memory of the older Lise. Working Lise, perceived by the system as a component in a mechanism designed to ensure the proper functioning of the productive system, becomes incapable of contributing to the operation of that very system, and is forced to account for the precise nature of her incapacity—to explain, in detail, how unwell she truly is. This list-like format reflects the impersonal nature of bureaucratic documentation and functions as a warning: it is not only when Lise becomes ill that her identity and experience are reduced to checkboxes and data points, her existence was already perceived as nothing but a functional unit within a system that values productivity over personhood.

3. Conclusions and Further Research

In conclusion, Smith's use of Sara's ghostly narration introduces a spectral framework through which the novel interrogates marginalisation under contemporary capitalism. *Hotel World* interrogates the spectral realities faced by those marginalised through class, queerness, homelessness and illness. Through Sara's fall and her spectral return, Smith

exposes the spatial hierarchies that constrain and exclude the working-class from privileged spaces. Sara's posthumous assertion of her queer desire both reveals and breaks through heteronormative structures of oppression. Else's presence as a homeless woman haunting the hotel's threshold exposes the social erasure and invisibility imposed on the poor—her crossing of the hotel's boundaries further emphasises the ghostly nature of her marginalisation. Lise's illness exposes how bureaucratic surveillance reflects a system that regards individuals solely in terms of their productive capacity, turning the sick into ghostlike figures stripped of autonomy and defined only by their lack of economic productivity. Building on this thematic framework, the novel's formal strategies further reveal these mechanisms of exclusion. Through Sara's ghost's defamiliarised voice, Else's coded speech and Lise's mechanised list-like narration, *Hotel World* further exposes the mechanisms of marginalisation, erasure, and systemic oppression embedded within capitalist society.

This dissertation argues that *Hotel World* uses ghostliness not only as a theme but as a narrative and ideological device to expose economic and social marginalisation, extending the Gothic tradition as a critical lens on capitalist invisibility. While previous scholarship has focused on the depictions of homelessness and chronicity in the novel (Horton 2013, Henry 2023), this analysis moves beyond those readings to examine how multiple ghostly existences linked to class, queerness, and illness collectively expose broader structures of capitalist invisibility and erasure. Moreover, this dissertation links narrative form to the novel's political critique of marginalisation. My research moves beyond previous scholarship which has analysed the formal aspects of the novel—E.Smith in terms of its polyphonic structure and Sánchez through trauma theory to show a crisis in representation—by focusing specifically on how the novel's formal strategies reveal the mechanisms of marginalisation and erasure.

Further research could focus on the language Penny uses in her review of the Global Hotel (a review that serves as her pretext for spending a night there) through the lenses of critical discourse analysis and consumer culture theory. This analysis should explore how her language naturalises consumer desire and obscures labour relations, while also comparing it with the ways other characters use language. Furthermore, an in-depth analysis of the doubling introduced at the beginning of the novel (as represented by Sara's ghost and her dead body) would be valuable, focusing both on its narrative repercussions throughout the text and on its connection with the broader literary history of doubling.

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