Sublime cities: the metropolis as gateway to the past - A comparative reading of *The House of Shattered Wings* and *City of Stairs*

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Abstract

In Aliette de Bodard's *The House of Shattered Wings* (2015) and Robert Jackson Bennett's *City of Stairs* (2014) the metropolis used to be at the center of a wealthy and powerful Colonial Empire. With the decline of the empires, both cities have fallen to ruins. The cities remains effectively function as an archive to the past for the characters in the novel, and allows them to interact with both the physical and ethereal remains of the past. In both novels, contemporary events force the characters to uncover the hidden past, which leads to the past manifesting itself in the presence. For *The House of Shattered Wings* the past manifests itself as a Gothic haunting in the form of a spectral tree, while in *City of Stairs* mythological creatures from the past manifest themselves physically and pose an immediate and violent threat. These interactions with the past allow the characters to negotiate the future. The metropolis in *City of Stairs* will be rebuilt while Paris in *The House of Shattered Wings* will remain unhealed.

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Introduction

The House of Shattered Wings (2015) is a post-apocalyptical fantasy novel by Aliette de Bodard. Right off the bat, real-life history, such as World War I and the French colonial regime in Vietnam and Cambodja, are interwoven with a fictional narrative on angels, magic and curses.

The setting is Paris in 1974, 'The Great War' has lasted for 60 years and has left Paris in complete ruins. The city, as well as the rest of Europe, are governed by a feudal system of different Houses, who struggle over power and authority. The protagonist Philippe is referred to exclusively as 'Annamite', the French colonial name for any Vietnamese person, regardless if they were from the Annam region. He was forced to fight for France in the war and due to the utter destruction of the war and lack of transport to Vietnam, he is unable to return home. In the opening scene of the novel, he is captured by Selene, head of House Silverspires, who magically binds him to the soil around the Notre Dame in the heart of Paris, where he accidentally sets off an ancient curse.

Even though the novel falls in the fantasy genre, I got the sense while reading, that the colonial past of France played an important role in the novel. Since the author has French-Vietnamese heritage, I was very curious to look further into this.

In the book *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature: Habits of Whiteness* Helen Young asserts fantasy literature is inherently 'Othering' because the narrative often revolves around describing the unfamiliar and strange. Because of this, the genre has proven quite excellent in foregrounding problematic ideologies and underlying power structures by telling stories from a new perspective (114, 120).

For my BA thesis, I wanted to go beyond a postcolonial reading of *House of Shattered Wings*. When brainstorming over different angles to approach this novel, I came across the novel *City of Stairs* (2014) by Robert Jackson Bennett. Immediately I noticed strong parallels between the novels: both were set after the fall of a colonial Empire, both plots revolved around solving a murder mystery, and in both novels there was a strong emphasis on the metropolis, the old capital of the colonial empire, which has fallen to ruins.

In *City of Stairs*, the fictional colonial empire of 'the Continent' has been overthrown by Saypur, one of their colonial subjects, and their Gods were killed. When these Gods disappeared, all the 'miracles' they had performed vanished as well. This meant the glorious city of Bulikov, whose structure and buildings relied on such 'miracles', collapsed unto itself.

Buildings and entire neighborhoods appeared to have vanished into thin air, while other buildings simply shrunk or collapsed entirely.

In both Bulikov in *City of Stairs* and Paris in *House of Shattered Wings* the destruction of the metropolis is continuously foregrounded, which means that inevitably the destruction of the war and the lost Colonial Empire are also foregrounded.

For this thesis, I will do a comparative reading between *House of Shattered Wings* (HoSW) and *City of Stairs* (CoS) to explore how the Metropolis enables the characters to interact with the past.

In the first chapter, I will use theories from memory studies and the realm of urban anthropology to understand how a city can function in mediating the past and to which extent this can be applied to the cities in both novels.

In the second chapter I will analyze the interactions between the characters and the metropolis's material remains of the past, and demonstrate how this interaction allows to learn and interpret the past.

In the final chapter, I will give examples of how the metropolis enables the immaterial past to materialize and analyze these instances from within the framework of the Gothic sublime.

After these chapters, I hope to will have formulated an extensive answer to the question: in what way does the metropolis in both *House of Shattered Wings* and *City of Stairs* allow the characters to interact with the past?

Chapter I: what remains?
The metropolis as archive of the past

Ahead was the dark mass of the Galeries Lafayette: the dome had miraculously
survived the war and everything thrown at it [...]. It had been sixty years, and
none but the insane would enter the Galeries now.

- HoSW (8)

Since you are always living in the present, you cannot experience the past directly. As such, we require physical remains of the past to experience the past through. Any site which preserves some part of the past, is an 'archive' to the past.

A metropolis can function as archive, as the buildings itself are physical remains of the cities past. However, unlike an institutionalized archive, such as a museum, it does not function as a simple physical marker on which a very static image of the past is inscribed. Institutionalized archives often disseminate a very specific cultural-historic vision of the past, which is presented as objective truth (Rao 372).

Institutionalized archives offer no room for alternate interpretations of the past, which forces contestations of this official mode of remembering to fall in the private sphere (Winters 37). Which mode of remembering is perceived, and which are (made) invisible is known as 'distribution of the sensible' (Rancière 36). Sensible referring to 'sensory', literally: what is perceived in what space.

In contrast to these institutionalized archives, the metropolis is inherently dynamic. It perpetually produces temporary experiences between the city itself and its inhabitants. Through these temporal interactions between the city and the individual, a subjective 'sense of the past' is invoked, rather than an objective, static history. (Rao 374)

In this chapter I will demonstrate that the metropolis as a setting in both *House of Shattered Wings* and *City of Stairs* function as an archive of the past to produce temporary and subjective histories.

House of Shattered Wings (HoSW) is set in the most iconic places within Paris. The majority of the book takes place at House Silverspires , which is located on the 'Île de la Cité'(HoSW 34), both literally and figuratively the heart of Paris. Most scenes take place in the Hotel Dieu and the Notre Dame cathedral. By reading the names alone, most readers will evoke their own sense of Paris, which De Bodard can cleverly use to contrast her fictional metropolis.

The novel opens in the Galeries Lafayette, referred to in the novel as simply 'the Grand Magasins'. It is immediately evident that the Grands Magasins is a remnant of the past and is no longer in use as a building. 'None but the insane would enter the Galaries now.' (8) The description of the setting references two historical events within the novel. The more recent past, the Great Houses War, which coincides with the start of World War I in 1917, and secondly the 'more innocent age' (2), which refers to the age before the Great War.

The Grands Magasins are described as complete ruins: 'fragments of advertisement posters, colored scraps; bits and pieces of idealized human beings' (2); 'the stairs, blocked by debris; the faces of broken mannequins stared back at them' (2); 'the vacant eyes of models in burned posters, past the tarnished mirrors and the shards of chandeliers' (4). The objects, such as the posters, chandeliers and mirrors refer to the glorious heyday of the warehouse, right after it was opened, and the destruction is a reference to the Great War.

It is impossible for the characters to navigate the rubble of these ruins without being confronted with not just the destruction of the Great War, but also the society which was lost through this War.

The descriptions quoted above are from presented the perspective of Philippe. Philippe identifies himself as 'second-rate' citizen and colonial subject of France (12). Philippe has a special relation to the setting as his freedom is constantly restrained throughout the novel. In the beginning of the novel he is literally 'bound' to Paris by 'an invisible collar that trailed around his entire body before earthing itself into the floor of the House' (29), on which he comments he had 'been on a French leash sixty years before' (35) when he was taken from Vietnam to fight for the French army. The 'sense of the past' which is evoked through Phillipe's interaction with the city is heavily informed by this.

His interaction with the city and the past which is evoked through this, focusses on the transient nature of the material culture (chandeliers, mirrors, ads for fashion, a display of perfumes etc.). The affluence of the Grands Magasins is physical evidence of its blood-stained past: 'the mad rush to colonize other countries and bring their wealth back to the motherland' (64). And for what? To be destroyed and left in ruins. It emphasizes the senselessness of both

the war and colonialism. It's important to note that Philippe has lived for a very long time, due to the divine nature of his being, so for him these ruined artifacts of the past don't reference an ancient past but they are remains of a past he himself has lived in and has been a part of.

During this same time, Selene is also in the Grand Magasins, and her interaction with the space evokes a different sense of the past. Following the theory from urban anthropology, the difference in interaction with the metropolis is greatly influenced by the social mobility and opportunities of various individuals engaging with the city-as-archive (Rao 376). This is true for the protagonists in *House of Shattered Wings* as well. Selene's sense of the past is more romanticized. Her descriptions aren't focused on the destruction or the war, but she conjures a romantic image of that which is lost. 'the great hotels before the war, their names like a litany of what had been lost: the Printemps, the Galaries Lafayette […]' (8); '[…] the insouciant crowds that had once filled the shops at the beginning of the twentieth century, marveling at hats and brocade robes, sitting in droves in the tearoom and reading rooms, were all gone.' (8).

Selene has a great social mobility: she is one of the new ruling elite of Paris. She enjoys imagining Paris in its grandeur, unspoiled by the war, because she hopes this to be an attainable future and to restore Paris to its former glory. With her at the top.

The characters can use the city-as-an-archive not just to view the past but to navigate the present and imagine the future (Rao 382). This becomes evident when, at the end of the novel, Selene can no longer bear to witness the layers of dust or the sound of a key unlocking the door to the cellar. When she wonders why she is so sensitive to the 'pall of neglect' (HoSW 270) she realizes it is because '[…] she couldn't lie to herself anymore: the house *was* in decline, and it would never, ever claw its way back to its former glory […]' (HoSW 271, cursive in original).

Philippe also negotiates his future within Paris through the setting. He believes he *deserves* to stay in the city as long as the curse is still within him. '[…] he ought to make a home here in Paris, in this city of murderers who sucked the resources of [Vietnam] like so much lifeblood.' (HoSW 266, my modification). I will return to the topic of his curse and restricted freedom in chapter III.

In *House of Shattered Wings*, Paris' heyday of colonial and economical power is juxtaposed to the destruction of WWI. The broken glass and rubble hasn't been picked up and cleaned, because there was no governing institution to do so, and thus France fell into a slow

and steady decline. The glamour of the metropolis lies under a layer of dust and dirt, but this evokes a sense in the reader that perhaps one day, as Selene hopes, the city can be recovered to its former glory. The street plans and buildings are, more or less, intact.

In *City of Stairs*, the destruction of Bulikov was instantaneous and dramatic. Bulikov is the great capital of a land which is exclusively referred to as 'the Continent' or 'the Empire'. Because Bulikov is a fictional space, albeit a thinly veiled Moscow, there is more poetic freedom for how and why the city fell to ruins. When the Old Gods died, the buildings they made by performing their 'miracles' have collapsed into and unto each other. Some streets and neighborhoods have been teleported to a different plane of existence, like a small parallel universe which can be accessed through a portal. Shara calls these alternate planes 'pockets in reality'. The result is a great, white city of marble which collapsed into itself to form an Escher-esque maze of towers and buildings jutting out of each other and countless of stairs leading nowhere in particular. The 'floor plan' of the city is unrecognizable. The city isn't particularly dusty or dirty, but it is only a shadow of the great colonial empire it once was.

The skyline has 'strange, alien forms out among the rooftops: a half-collapsed temple, the ruined skeleton of an estate, the curlicue twist of tottering stairs.' (CoS 94) The lay-out of Bulikov and its buildings are damaged beyond repair, but the emphasis is not on the destruction, but on the strange and unnatural lay-out of the city.

It is evident that the history of Bulikov isn't evoked through the buildings which *remain*, but by the glaring absence of *what is no longer there*. When a colonial subject from Saypur defeated the Continental Gods, the 'glorious' colonial empire of Bulikov collapsed and the city collapsed with it. Like in HoSW, the consequence of this destruction is that the society which has been lost, is constantly foregrounded in every space. In example, one of the characters would turn a corner on a street, only to find the street suddenly ends in a brick wall. The street used to go somewhere, but not anymore. It no longer functions as a street, a passageway, but it's transformed into a useless object which has been cut off from it's original purpose. It's only function now is to signify that there used to be something there, where the street would lead to.

In Bulikov, the Saypur government actively tries to censor the past by banning any reference to the Old Gods of Bulikov. Any evidence of the old divine is stashed in the 'Unmentionable Warehouse', which functions as an institutionalized archive of the divine and miraculous. The warehouse is both kept, maintained and denied by the Saypur occupation force at the same time. The history which could be accessed through the interaction with this archive, is kept away from the residents of Bulikov. The only characters with access to this

warehous are Saypurian. The Saypurian govnerment works hard to completely control and censor any 'sensible' remains of the past. However, by actively pushing regulations that no one can refer to, or speak about, that which is no longer present, the opposite is achieved; the unmentionable past is continuously foregrounded through the novel. A great example of this is the opening scene of the novel, where a hatter is fined because his shop sign looks too similar to a divine symbol of the old continental Gods, but simultaneously he could never have known this, as everything containing these divine symbols have been removed from the city. To prove the two symbols are similar, the divine symbol is displayed next to the hatters sign. Eventually, an entire court is in session for hours and hours to discuss a divine symbol, because it cannot be referred to and its existence has to be denied. Again, the opposite is achieved from what the Saypurian govnerment is trying to do.

Unlike HoSW, where the ruling elite of Paris simply started infighting and fell in decline, Bulikov and Saypur switched places as master and subject. There are distinct spaces in Bulikov, like the Saypur Embassy, which are regarded as Saypur soil by legislation, but there are also spaces which are heavily coded Saypurian culturally. The office of the Chief Diplomat is 'a perfect recreation of a stately office in Saypur' on which Shara notes: 'none of this is at all […] a melding of cultures, a show of learning and communication and post-regionalism unity, as all the ministerial committees claim back in Saypur.' (CoS 21).

As an ambassador and minister from Saypur, Shara is met with a certain suspicion by the locals and the City Fathers who are governing Bulikov. She fears she's being spied upon and thus mistrusts the streets and buildings itself. The mistrust for the city grows when multiple of these enemies appear to disappear into thin air, as if they use invisible doors within the city.Despite being treated hostile, Shara wishes to see Bulikov restored in former glory, to give the reign back to the Continent and to return home to Saypur.

It is clear that the metropolis in both novels functions as an archive to the past and allows for temporal and subjective readings of the past as the characters engage with the metropolis from within their own social background. The sense of the past, which is evoked through these interactions, enables them to envision a future of both themselves and the metropolis.

Chapter II: no stone unturned
The metropolis as a tool in uncovering the unknown

'But here, in Bulikov, every piece of history feels lined with razors,

and the closer I try to look at it, the more I wound myself.'

– Shara (CoS 329)

In both *House of Shattered Wings* and *City of Stairs*, the constant interaction with the past is necessary to propel the plot forward. In both novels, the quest to uncover certain mysteries leads the characters into different spaces of the city, which all have links to their historical past. Solving a mystery is, after all, nothing more than uncovering the unknown past.

In the case of *House of Shattered Wings*, Philippe goes inside the Notre Dame to find out why Morningstar, the old master of House Silverspires and the first of the Fallen, has disappeared. Like the rest of Paris, the Notre Dame is a ruin. Philippe identifies the building within its past function, rather than its current function within House Silverspires. 'It had been a church, once.' (39).

Hidden below the throne, Philippe finds a relic of the past: a heavy black stone disk with a paper wrapped around it. Once Philippe touches the surface, he is physically transported to a scene in the past. He is still in the Notre Dame, but it is no longer the present building, which is in ruins. It is the Notre Dame of the Past, which is displayed in its former glory: 'rich paintings and tapestries'; 'light streaming through the stained-glass windows' (43). The church is fully intact and 'majestic and overwhelming, as it had always meant to be.' (43).

Morningstar is sitting on his throne, which places this scene before the Great War, when France was thriving economically due to their occupation of the colonies. In this stone induced vision, Philippe observes the memory of Nightingale, who placed the stone there, from her perspective and shares her desire to be turned into a weapon by Morningstar. However, Philippe does not stay in the role of mere observer of the past. His 'oppressive

anger and hatred' released 'something darker, quieter – that had lain biding its time […]
(HoSW 44-45).

Here, Philippe is a catalyst which releases an ancient curse laid there by Nightingale to
take revenge on Morningstar. The past materializes in the present through the interaction with
Philippe, which allows other characters to interact with this past as well.

The characters interact with the immaterial past in several instances in HoSW; The throne
in the Notre Dame 'exuded a quiet power.' (41) This is explained by Isabelle: "He sat there,
[…] Morningstar. […] Can't you feel it?" (41).

In HoSW the past is an immaterial presence in the city, which is only invoked through the
interaction of the characters with the city-as-archive. In *City of Stairs* the opposite is true.

In order to solve the murder of Efrem Pangyiu, a historian, Shara has to understand how
his work is a threat within the context of contemporary and past politics of Bulikov. These
activities are also immaterial, and difficult to reconstruct through the city-as-archive.

The activities of the inhabitants of a metropolis are a form of "invisible urbanism". A city
is more than the sum of its buildings and streets, it functions through its inhabitants and their
activities and networks (Rao 379). When reconstructing the past through the metropolis as an
archive, the characters cannot easily reconstruct the experience of the people who have lived
within the city.

In both HoSW and CoS the protagonists set out to uncover some type of mystery, but are
required to uncover the political framework and contesting voices within the past, the
invisible or immaterial urban life of the past, before being able to make sense of anything
contemporary.

In HoSW this search is propelled by the immaterial presence of the past, which is
foreboding and suggest something worse is to come. (This 'aesthetic of unrest' will be
discussed in Chapter III). However, in CoS, the past appears dead and long forgotten,
deliberately censored by the Saypur government. It is something that can only be found in
dusty books and scribbled notes. The past is as absent as the old city and its buildings. It is
true that the city is a constant reminder of the Blink, but the most iconic buildings of Bulikov
before the blink, simply disappeared without a trace. As I pointed out in the first chapter, the
greatest evidence of past Bulikov is that which is not there. Throughout the city the
inhabitants experience something which can be best described as 'glitches' in reality. This is
due to the fact that, in that specific space, there used to be a 'miracle' performed by the old
Gods. When the miracle disappeared, the reality collapsed unto itself, but didn't do so
seamlessly. They are similar to 'stitches' or 'scars' in the fabric of reality which indicate that

there used to be something there which is no longer present. Shara refers to this as 'reality static'.

During the blink, not all of the city was destroyed, but some parts simply 'vanished', and turn up intact inside a pocket of reality, or a 'fold' in reality, behind one of these 'scars in reality'. By using the reality static to step into thjs pocket Shara is able to make visible which has disappeared. However, it is only the material which is preserved: 'the city is completely abandoned: the gardens are barren, the courtyards empty, the ornamental ponds all scummed over. Everything is very clean and white, though' (CoS 327).

There is no organic material remaining. The barren gardens imply time has passed inside 'Old Bulikov' just as much as in 'New Bulikov'. It is not a portal to the past, but more so a portal to a present in which the past has not been completely erased.

But even in this space, where Shara can undo some of the destruction of the War and recover some of the city in its former glory, there is no 'invisible urbanism': the several cultural groups who live(d) and work(ed) in the city are not represented and their thoughts and actions remain unknown.

A similar thing occurs when Shara uses an actual portal to enter the Unmentionable Warehouse. The use of a portal makes it seem as if this space is severed from the 'reality' of the present, in an *autre monde*. However, both the warehouse and Old Bulikov are physical spaces in the present whose function as archives of the past have been limited because they are made invisible (either by the Saypur government or by the Blink) and both spaces contain *only* the lifeless remains of the past.

There are two instances where actual beings from the past have remained and appear physically in the present. The first instance is when *Urav the Punisher* is released from the Warehouse and proceeds to decimates both the city and population (CoS 250-262), and the second instance is when two of the old gods, long thought dead, are released from their prison and attempt to decimate the city and population (CoS 361-386). In both instances, these ancient beings are both are seen as immediate threat. Not just to Saypur's colonial occupation, but to the wellbeing of Bulikov and the entire Continent as well.

The interaction with these beings is limited to violence. Eventually, the two gods ask to be killed because, as Shara points out: 'this world doesn't want you any more. And, what is more, *you* don't want *it*.' (CoS 368, cursive in original) This is the closest we can come to forming an image of the invisible urbanism of Old Bulikov: the Gods share the values and beliefs of the past inhabitants, and these are unable to merge with contemporary ideals. Even

though the old buildings are glorious, it is clear that any revival of the past Bulikov is undesirable.

Throughout *City of Stairs* there is a lot of attention for contemporary politics in Bulikov and the governing elite of the past and present, but there's little attention to which groups and their histories are erased and how the occupation of either Saypur or Bulikov influences this. The entities of the past who are released back into the present, are seen as immediate threat, by both the inhabitants of Saypur and Bulikov. Symbolically, it is the first time since the occupation Saypur and Bulikov stand united as one front. Because Shara deals with these threats quite well, she gains the favor and trust of the locals and, by the end of the novel, she is able to push through real changes for making Bulikov semi-independent from Saypur again.

By releasing the Urav and old Continental Gods, problems from the past emerge into the present and form immediate threats which have to be dealt with in the here and now. This allows Shara to strengthen her own political role and re-negotiate the dynamics between Saypur and Bulikov.

House of Shattered Wings follows this same pattern: as Philippe releases Nightingales curse, the past becomes an immediate threat to the present and requires immediate action.

It is no coincidence Philippe releases Nightingale's curse. There's a distinct parallel between the stories and histories of both characters. They are bartered away by their oppressors for a fragile peace among the ruling elite and to be tortured over something they didn't do. 'he had been taken apart piece by piece – the same thing that had happened to Nightingale'(HoSW 353) Uncovering the way the Houses operates politically uncovers the mystery of what happened to both Morningstar and Nightingale, and allows Philippe to draw parallels to his own experiences in the Great War: 'A House took me, once. Tore me from my home and marched me all the way here, to fight in a stupid, senseless war […]' (HoSW 304). In this way, the interaction with Nightingales memories and the uncovering of the mystery surrounding her death, and the curse, functions to make visible the invisible suffering of Philippe, as Vietnamese, under French occupation 60 years prior.

In both novels the interaction between the protagonists and various spaces within the metropolis plays a vital role to uncover political frameworks of the past. This is required for them in order to understand how to deal with the immediate threat which figures and events of the past pose to the here and now.

Chapter III: ghosts of the past
The metropolis and the gothic sublime

'How do you appease a ghost, if they're right?'

– Philippe (HoSW 305)

In *House of Shattered Wings*, the past manifests both through the descriptions of decay (see chapter I) and the immaterial presence of the past, which results in a mysterious curse (see chapter II). The curse spreads through the house and generates the feeling of impending doom. This, combined with the dark aesthetic of decay and ruined buildings (see chapter I), can be characterized as a classic aesthetic of unrest, characteristic of Gothic literature.

The aesthetic of unrest suggests there is something more than meets the eye beyond the empirical world: the immaterial world beyond, or, what is known as the gothic sublime. The friction between the empirical and the sublime disrupts assumptions about our reality (Devetak 623-626).

A great example of this aesthetic of unrest is when Philippe, Madeleine and Isabelle return to the Notre Dame at the end of the novel. The stained glass and the vaulted ceiling are the empirical world, but there is a clear presence of the sublime: 'The glass windows were dark and dull, their colors and brilliance drained away; the remnants of the ribbed vault weighed down on them, like the fingers of a giant hand pressing them down into dust.' (HoSW 275).

The sublime in this case, is the sense of history. It is the exact space where the curse was released. The curse is explained as the releasing of the Erinyes, or the furies, who will execute revenge: 'Justice for the murdered, the betrayed, the silenced; the unique dead, hungering from beyond the grave.' (HoSW 278). This sublime is the past manifesting itself in the present. The interaction with this sublime transforms the Notre Dame from the iconic heart of Paris into a murder scene. It is contaminated, cursed. And the characters feel this.

Philippe carries a lot of anger with him because his home, Vietnam, had been occupied by France and he was taken to fight their war. Throughout the novel he classifies himself as a second-rate citizen (See chapter I). In the novel, it is this 'oppressive anger and hatred'

(HoSW 44) which released 'something darker, quieter – that had lain biding its time […] (HoSW 45), which turns out to be Nightingale's curse.

In the previous chapter I discussed the similarities of what has happened to Philippe and Nightingale, but that's not the only reason Philippe is able to release the curse. Nightingale recognizes the feelings of anger and revenge within him, and these are powerful enough to set off her curse.

The sublime foregrounds that which is not there in the empirical world and thus forces the reader to look beyond and find new meaning. Therefore it is an effective literary strategy to ascribe new meaning unto history. Besides posing postcolonial critique on past events, it can also foreground ongoing exclusions of the ex-colonial subjects as citizens (Holden 353-356).

It is important to note that Philippe didn't simply release her curse. The spectral form in which the curse manifests, is more closely linked to Philippe rather than Nightingale: it takes on the form of a Banyan tree. The place where the tree roots, is below the Notre Dame, the heart of Paris and the heart of House Silverspires. Before long, not just the Notre Dame is completely overtaken by the Banyan tree, but most of the House: 'Instead of pillars, a host of fluted trunks; and an impassable canopy of branches and leaves masking the view of the Heavens. […] The smell of a tropical jungle became overpowering: loamy earth and the peculiar sharpness that comes after the rain.' (377).

Philippe notes he believes the House 'didn't deserve anything – except to crumble and fall.' (304), this sentiment is mirrored by the Banyan tree only one page later: 'the soft, crushing sound of that huge thing hungering to reduce the foundations to dust' (305).

The reader might interpret the Banyan tree as a 'strangler tree'. This is the Eurocentric gaze, 'For botanists, a strangler tree […]' (369), but for the Vietnamese a 'banyan meant rebirth; meant the dead walking the earth once again. Meant that ghosts, perhaps, could be brought back into this world.' (369). The Banyan tree is portrayed as both a strangler tree choking the House, and the dead coming back to walk the earth. When asked what exactly threatens the House, Philippe replies '"A ghost," he said, feeling the memory of darkness within his chest. "Anger. Revenge." Not revenge […]. Justice.' (297).

City of Stairs has certain aspects of the Gothic, but it completely lacks the aesthetic of impending doom. However, as discussed in Chapter I, there is a continuous foregrounding of that which is not there. The missing parts of the city, the complete denial and active legislation of the Continental divines and miracles. The 'Unmentionable Warehouse' both kept, maintained and denied by the Saypur occupation force at the same time.

This contradiction of something that both is and isn't there, that which is both past and present, is the similar to the Gothic sublime (Holden, 2009).

The city itself is the ultimate example of the uncanny: Shara is able to use the reality static of the blink in order to step into a pocket of reality where a large part of the City of Bulikov remains in its former glory. – The city both is and isn't there. It is neither the past, since as there are no plants or humans, time has clearly passed, nor the present as it is in a different reality pocket. Does it even really exist? In fact, it can be reasoned that Old Bulikov both is and isn't a metropolis. Without its inhabitants it is just stone upon stone.

The sublime is an ideal strategy to foreground the violence of erasure, because it is continuously confronting us with that which isn't there. In Chapter I, I addressed the example of the hatter, in this case the sublime clashes with the empirical in such a way it is nearly humorous. But even though this literary technique functions well to critique the Saypur foreign policies, the ending does not truly offer a step away from colonialism. I will address this below.

So, does the gothic sublime enable the characters to negotiate a future of the metropolis?

There's a common trope in fantasy: a kingdom or empire that has lost its sovereign power falls in disarray. Eventually, tyranny will end and peace will once again fall upon the land as the rightful ruler is placed in power whether he is the rightful ruler by blood or prophecy) (Ekman 180-182).

HoSW and CoS only follow the first half of that trope: it is clear that the fall of the sovereign power equaled the fall of the colonial empire. However, the way to peace is not in the rise of a new sovereign power.

In the case of CoS, Saypur replaced Bulikov as sovereign power and has repressed the economic and political progress of the metropolis. The 'happy end' consists of Shara deciding Saypur will invest and rebuild Bulikov, even giving them some independence in their governing. The metropolis will be restored and rebuilt, but it will never be as grand as in it is Colonial heyday. And that is alright by the people, as they have seen they no longer desire the Gods which gave them Colonial power to begin with. The interaction with the past through the metropolis allows Shara to negotiate a vision of the future, although it is a bland one.Besides that, the notion of Colonialism isn't rejected, as the Continent will remain under Saypur rule. The fact that the Continentals love Shara and that she's a morally just ruler, attempts to justify her colonial domination.

In HoSW, the idea of a sovereign power is completely rejected and the city will remained unhealed as the Houses continue their endless struggle over power. On the last pages, we find Philippe back near the Grand Magasins where the novel had opened. The novel has come full circle. He is not bound to a House, not bound to French soil any more, but still unable to leave. Despite the fact that the past, or the death of Nightingale, has been uncovered and laid to rest, there is a sense that for Philippe himself, nothing changed at all. He remains, just like Paris, unhealed: 'The curse was still within him; the pull of the darkness that had once doomed him. He had been a fool to think that he would ever be free of it […]' (198).

There is a direct parallel between the haunted metropolis and the haunted Philippe. They can never fully recover from the war and thus, any future negotiated through this metropolis is a very bleak one.

In both novels, the continuous foregrounding of the past functions as Gothic sublime. Besides the empirical world, there is a continuous sense that there is more beyond the ordinary world. The past still looms in the present, the past still haunts both cities. In HoSW this haunting takes on a literal meaning when the ghostly Banyan tree overtakes the House. In CoS the focus is primarily on the uncanny, on the discrepancy of what simultaneously is and isn't there.

Conclusion

In the first chapter I have demonstrated that the metropolis can function as an archive to the past and thus inform the present. Both the metropolis and the sense of the past which is evoked through interaction, are temporal and dynamic. The sense of the past is greatly influenced by the social mobility of the inhabitants, and as such the metropolis allows for interpretations of the past which aren't necessarily in line with the official historical narrative which is mediated through institutionalized archives.

This is especially evident in *House of Shattered Wings* where Philippe's interaction with the past is deeply coloured by his own experiences as a Colonial subject. His interactions with the past through his surroundings limit themselves to transient materials, which only reminds him of the wealth which has been drained from his home in Vietnam, while Selene views these materials as evidence of a great Paris, which she hopes to rebuild to its former glory and then take her place as its ruler.

The past is dynamic and materializes in the present through the interaction with Philippe, when he unleashes a curse upon House Silverspires. The sublime nature of the curse, and the aesthetic of unrest and foreboding violence places this novel in the tradition of the Gothic literature.

The past in *City of Stairs* is foregrounded through the metropolis as the uncanny: it both is and isn't there. Many buildings and streets have lost their function and their only function now is to signify that there used to be something there. In HoSW the buildings aren't referred to by their current function, but solely to their previous function (hotel, church, grand magasins). The only exception on this is the hospital, which still functions as such.

In *City of Stairs*, the past reappears in the present as both a demon and as two Gods who are released from their prisons and unleashed upon the world. In *The House of Shattered Wings* the past materializes as a curse, a ghostly Banyan tree which overtakes the House.

The sublime and immediate threat forces the characters to research and understand the invisible urbanism of the past, the political frameworks and, especially in HoSW, the contesting voices in these frameworks, in order to understand and 'appease' the past, to eliminate the threat.

In HoSW, the past manifests itself into the present through the Gothic haunting. The curse overtakes House Silverspires and is almost material. Even before the Banyan tree overtakes

the Notre Dame, shadows seem to move over the ceilings and in the crystal glasses. The curse manifests itself physically within the heart of Paris, rooted deep in the Parisian soil. But even when the curse is lifted, the darkness within Philippe still remains. He 'appeased' the Ghost of Nightingale, but the past of Philippe and Paris have not been appeased. There is no sense of the future, in which either Paris or Philippe will be healed from this past trauma, and it seems a dystopic ending. But this literary strategy is 'making visible' what unhealed trauma still lies between both France and the French-Vietnamese, which is the first step in healing. In the words of Franco Moretti: "The literature of terror is born precisely out of the terror of a split society, and out of the desire to heal it." (qtd. in Holden 357)

In conclusion, in both novels the metropolis allows the characters to experience both the present and the past. The past manifest itself as the Gothic sublime, by which the past both is and isn't part of the present.

I think any analysis on novels with an urban setting might greatly benefit from looking at the metropolis as an urban archive, and to perform close reading on the interactions between the characters and the metropolis as a tool to understand their sense of the past, their sense of the future and their position in between these.

Further research

For additional research, it would be interesting to analyze the religious motives in *House of Shattered Wings* and *City of Stairs* against a framework of postcolonialism, as both novels explicitly state the divine powers were the only reason behind their success as Colonial Empire. Both novels also state these divinities slaughtered the divinities of the countries they colonized. I haven't even scratched the surface when it comes to the religious motifs in HoSW, such as the Apocalypse and the fall of Lucifer, but that was simply beyond the scope of this thesis.

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