SP Publications
International Journal Of English and Studies (IJOES)
An International Peer-Reviewed and Refereed Journal; **Impact Factor:**8.337(SJIF)
ISSN: 2581-8333|**Volume 8, Issue-11(November);2026**

Haunted Residencies and Hungry Archives: Colonial Haunting, Literary Prestige and the Reclaimed Margin in Tlotlo Tsamaase's *House of Margins*

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Article Received: 05/10/2026
Article Accepted:07/11/2026
Published Online:10/11/2026
DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2026.8.11.89

Abstract

In Tlotlo Tsamaase's House of Margins (2026), Anaya Sebeya, a young African writer, finds himself in a colonial mansion, Günter Huis, located on the slopes of Devil's Peak, where a literary residency not only bestows him with a place in the canon but also renders him vanished. Rereading the novel as a postcolonial Gothic, it is a text that challenges three economies: the colonial economy of land and possession symbolized in the house; the literary economy of prizes and residencies that polices African writing for prestige; and the media economy of true crime that transforms missing bodies into media content. It offers a novel rethinking of the margin, following Avery Gordon's sociology of haunting, Achille Mbembe's necropolitics, Ann Laura Stoler's imperial ruination, and bell hooks' theory of the margin, in terms of a point of view from which the violence of the centre is made legible. It also claims that the sisterly relationship between Anaya and Ranewa provides an ethic of witness, one that can oppose the sacrificing and consuming logic of the house and the podcast.

Keywords: Tlotlo Tsamaase; *House of Margins*; postcolonial Gothic; haunting; necropolitics; literary prestige; true crime; marginality

1. Introduction

The status of literature has been a long-standing issue in the African literary sphere: who can speak and whose speech qualifies as literature? Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o claimed that colonial education separated African writers from their languages, imaginations. Binyavanga Wainaina ridiculed the clichés in which the continent is sold to foreign readers.In her description of a world republic of letters, Pascale Casanova speaks of a process of the

accumulation of literary capital in a few metro-areas, and its distribution to the periphery on the terms of the centre. These accounts collectively outline a field in which the margin is not a place but a relation of power. House of Margins (2026) by Tlotlo Tsama is a work that explores this relation through its theme and its architecture.

Tsamaase is a Motswana author whose first novel, Womb City, was reviewed by others for its exploration of surveillance, misogyny and class. In House of Margins she adopts the Gothic, a genre that early readers have associated with an attack on post-colonial racism and infantilisation of black writers. The argument presented here is a first critical engagement with the novel, and not a contribution to a growing body of criticism on the novel.

The concept of this novel is very stark. A talented young writer, Anaya Sebeya, is invited to a prestigious residency at an eerie colonial mansion, called Günter Huis, on the slopes of Devil's Peak. She is one of five emerging writers vying for a grand prize and is expected to produce a landmark of African literature. She never goes back home. Afterwards, a sensationalised true crime podcast purports to uncover all the details of what transpired in the house, and her sister Ranewa, skeptical and angry, must balance its version with her own. In the house, Anaya's nightmares take hold and time passes away, and only a sacrifice can end the cycle of evil in the house, but neither she nor her fellow residents are willing to make it.

This article suggests that House of Margins is a postcolonial Gothic, in which three economies are played out: the colonial economy of land, labour and possession, represented by the house; the literary economy of prizes and residencies, which curates African writing for prestige; and the media economy of true crime, which turns missing bodies into content. The novel restakes itself to the margins of these economies. The margin is not a place to be admitted to the centre, but rather a place from which the centre's violence can be witnessed and named, and the relationship between two sisters provides an ethic of witness that defies the logic of sacrifice of the house and the logic of consumption of the podcast. The discussion unfolds in a theoretical framework, readings of the house, the residency, the haunted time of the narrative, the podcast, the generic and formal decisions of the novel and the sisters, and a short conclusion.

2. Theoretical Framework: Haunting, Necropolitics and the Margin

Three strands of theory frame this reading. The first is haunting. Avery Gordon’s *Ghostly Matters* treats haunting as the way in which social violence that has been officially

ended or buried continues to make itself felt, demanding acknowledgement and some form of redress (Gordon). Jacques Derrida's hauntology similarly understands the spectre as "neither fully present nor absent, a figure that unsettles linear time and the settled inheritance of the past" (Derrida). Mark Fisher extends the idea to cultural forms "haunted by futures that never arrived" (Fisher 16). For a novel in which a writer's future is consumed, these formulations are productive: the ghost is less a supernatural visitor than a claim that history has not finished.

Sigmund Freud's account of the uncanny, in which the familiar returns as strange and the homely turns *unheimlich* (Freud), and Gaston Bachelard's phenomenology of the house as a shelter for memory and daydream (Bachelard) supply the Gothic house with its conceptual grammar. The Gothic mansion inverts Bachelard's protective dwelling: it is a home that does not shelter and a memory that does not console. In colonial settings the inversion acquires specific content, since the house stands for possession. Edward Said's reading of imperial culture insists that "empire is a matter of geography as much as of history, a struggle over land that is also a struggle over narrative" (Said).

The second strand is necropolitics. Achille Mbembe extends Foucault's notion of biopower to argue that sovereignty lies in the power to decide who may live and who must die, and that colonial and postcolonial formations sort populations into those whose lives count and those who are exposed to death (Mbembe 11). Ann Laura Stoler's account of imperial debris and ruination adds that colonial power persists less as a vanished event than as an ongoing process that inhabits places, materials and people (Stoler 191). Rob Nixon's concept of slow violence, "a violence that is delayed, dispersed and often invisible, helps to name the house's endless cycle of evil" (Nixon).

The third strand is the margin itself. bell hooks distinguish "the margin imposed by domination from the margin chosen as a site of resistance and radical openness, a position of deprivation and of critical perspective at once" (hooks 341–43). Kimberlé Crenshaw's "Mapping the Margins" shows how people positioned at the intersection of race and gender are failed by institutions able to see only one axis of subordination at a time (Crenshaw). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's question "whether the subaltern can speak reminds us that to be spoken for is not to speak" (Spivak 275–76). Taken together, these thinkers allow us to ask of Tsamaase's title what it means to live in, to write from and to be consumed by a house of margins.

Methodologically, the article reads the novel's structural features, namely its setting, institutional frame, narrative situation and the relation between its two sisters, as a set of

arguments in their own right, and places theory in dialogue with these features rather than applying it as a template. Postcolonial theory, Gothic theory and media criticism are drawn together because the novel itself braids them. The argument also tries to remain attentive to the specificity of the South African setting, resisting the temptation to treat Cape Town as a generic site of colonial memory, while recognising that a Motswana author writing about the Cape also speaks across a regional border and thereby invites comparison between southern African histories of dispossession.

3. Günter Huis: Colonial Architecture and the Politics of Place

The first fact the reader learns about Günter Huis is where it stands: "on the slopes of Devil's Peak, above Cape Town" (House of Margins 47). The setting is not neutral. The mountain's slopes hold the Rhodes Memorial and the University of Cape Town, where in 2015 the RhodesMustFall movement forced a public reckoning with the monuments and curricula of empire (Nyamnjoh). A colonial mansion on this terrain inevitably speaks to a landscape in which possession has been inscribed in stone and in toponym. The name itself, with *Huis* the Dutch and Afrikaans word for house, carries the linguistic residue of the Cape's settler history. In naming its house, the novel situates the reader within a lineage of Dutch and British appropriation before a single character speaks.

Following Said, we can read the mansion as a cultural form that naturalises possession: its rooms, corridors and views transform appropriated land into domestic comfort (Said). Stoler's concept of ruination is more useful still. Imperial debris, she argues, is not simply what remains after empire but the continuing action of the past upon the present, a process that damages the people and spaces it touches (Stoler 191). Günter Huis is described as an eerie colonial mansion, yet it is also a functioning institution, a prestigious residency to which writers are invited ("House of Margins (Hardcover)"). It has not been abandoned to decay; it has been repurposed, its history converted into atmosphere and its prestige into an invitation. The Gothic convention of the haunted house exposes how colonial wealth may be laundered through cultural patronage: the house that once housed colonial power now hosts the production of African literature, and the continuity between the two functions is the horror.

Bachelard's house shelters the dreamer (Bachelard); Günter Huis consumes her. The publisher's synopsis tells us that within its walls Anaya's nightmares overwhelm her ("House of Margins (Hardcover)"), and the Freudian uncanny is activated at once: the residency promises the familiar comforts of a writer's retreat, namely quiet, time and recognition, and yields estrangement (Freud).

A house is built by labour as well as owned by wealth, and the Gothic mansion invites the question of who built, cleaned and maintained it, a question that colonial architecture's grandeur is designed to obscure (Said; Stoler). Reading Günter Huis as a site of this forgotten labour suggests that its haunting may be plural: the spectres of a colonial house belong not only to its owners but to those who worked in it and were dispossessed by it. The synopsis's emphasis on a cycle of evil rather than a single crime is consistent with such a reading, since a cycle implies many victims across time (House of Margins 93).

Slow violence is architectural here. Nixon's term directs attention to harm that accumulates gradually and out of sight (Nixon), and the house's endless cycle of evil, as the synopsis frames it, is such a temporal structure: a violence that does not erupt once but recurs across the occupants who pass through it. The Gothic thereby becomes a mode of historiography, a way of narrating a history that official accounts have declared closed.

4. The Residency and the Economy of Prestige

If the house is the colonial past, the residency is the literary present. Residencies, fellowships and prizes are among the principal institutions through which contemporary literary value is produced and distributed. Sarah Brouillette's analysis of the creative economy shows how such institutions entwine literary production with market and state imperatives, valorising the writer as a figure of flexible, self-managing creativity (Brouillette). Casanova's model of literary capital explains why an emerging African writer might seek consecration from institutions with the power to confer it. The novel's premise condenses these dynamics: five young writers are gathered in one house to compete for a single grand prize, each expected to produce nothing less than a landmark of African literature.

Two features of this arrangement deserve attention. First, the competition atomises. A prize with a single winner converts a community of marginalised writers into rivals, so that the solidarity that might allow them to name the institution's violence is eroded by the very structure of the opportunity. Michel Foucault's analysis of discipline is helpful here: the examination, he argues, combines hierarchical observation with normalising judgement and renders individuals into comparable cases (Foucault). The residency, with its enclosed space, its schedule of production and its public verdict, functions as a disciplinary apparatus in which writers are watched, measured and ranked. That Tsamaase's earlier fiction was praised for its treatment of "surveillance" (House of Margins 77) lends this reading added resonance.

Second, the grand prize prescribes a kind of subject. The demand for the "great African" book assumes that Africanness is a theme to be delivered, and Wainaina's satire

shows what follows: African writing is invited to supply the suffering, exoticism and redemption that foreign readers expect (Wainaina). Homi Bhabha's analysis of colonial mimicry, in which the colonised subject is encouraged to resemble the coloniser yet is never permitted to be identical, has a literary analogue (Bhabha): the emerging writer is asked to produce work legible to the centre while remaining visibly marginal. Ngũgĩ's insistence that the politics of language and form cannot be separated from the politics of power (Ngũgĩ) reminds us that such legibility has costs. An early endorsement that reads the novel as an engagement with the infantilisation of Black authors names the paternalism embedded in the arrangement: writers are treated as promising children to be mentored, tested and ranked by institutions that claim to nurture them.

The residency therefore dramatises what Wainaina and Casanova describe in the abstract: that the global circulation of African literature depends on institutions whose genealogies are colonial. Günter Huis makes the genealogy literal. The house that once embodied colonial authority now certifies African literary authority, and the novel's Gothic frame insists that certification and possession are not as far apart as the language of patronage suggests.

The presence of four other writers beside Anaya adds a further dimension. A cohort of emerging writers represents a miniature literary field in which each member holds a different relation to the prize, to the house and to the sponsors who stand behind both. The synopsis describes them as "fellow writers," a phrase that implies solidarity ("House of Margins (Hardcover)"), yet the structure of the competition makes fellowship precarious. This tension between collegiality and rivalry is a version of the dilemma Bhabha locates in colonial ambivalence: the institution invites a community into being and at the same time compels its members to distinguish themselves from one another (Bhabha). The cost of that dilemma, in the novel's terms, is borne by those who cannot or will not compete on the institution's terms.

5. Nightmares, Slipped Time and the Cycle of Sacrifice

The synopsis's most suggestive details concern time. At Günter Huis, Anaya's nightmares consume her and time slips away from her. These details signal a narrative organised by disrupted temporality, and Derrida's reading of a time that has come loose from its hinges is apposite (Derrida). For a writer under pressure to produce a masterpiece within a fixed residency, slipping time is at once a Gothic effect and a figure for creative labour: the hours of the residency are consumed by the house as raw material. Fisher's hauntology, with its attention to futures cancelled by the persistence of the past (Fisher 16), suggests a further

reading. Anaya is described as a "rising star," the "future of African letters" in miniature, and it is that future the house threatens to absorb. The horror is as much about foreclosed possibility as about physical danger.

Nightmare in postcolonial writing also has a clinical and political lineage. Frantz Fanon's analysis of colonial war and mental disorders shows how colonial violence lodges in the psyche of the colonised and returns in dreams and symptoms (Fanon). Anaya's nightmares can be read in this lineage, not as individual pathology but as the return of a history that the house has absorbed and that her body, as a young African woman in a colonial space, is positioned to receive. Gordon's insistence that haunting calls for something to be done (Gordon) completes the point: the nightmare is a summons.

Anaya's predicament as a writer deserves attention in its own right. The residency's premise is that time and space are given in exchange for work, the old bargain between patron and artist, and Brouillette's analysis suggests that this bargain increasingly demands that the writer's own life become productive material (Brouillette). Under such conditions even suffering must be made to yield a manuscript. Anaya's nightmares are therefore doubly charged: they are the symptom of the house's haunting and, potentially, the resource from which a prize-winning book might be drawn. The institution that frightens her is also the institution that would reward her for turning fear into literature, and the novel's Gothic frame lets that complicity appear as horror rather than as the ordinary business of literary production.

The summons takes the form of sacrifice. According to the synopsis, ending the house's cycle of evil requires a sacrifice that neither Anaya nor her fellow writers are ready to make. The structure echoes Mbembe's necropolitics: the house operates as a small sovereignty that decides whose life is expendable (Mbembe 11). That the price must be paid by young writers who are already positioned as marginal exposes the logic by which systems of domination reproduce themselves, demanding payment from those they have already disadvantaged. Sacrifice in this context cannot be separated from the literary prize. The competition's single winner and the house's demand for a sacrifice invite us to read the two together, as though the economy of prestige and the economy of death shared a grammar of scarcity.

Nixon's slow violence and Stoler's ruination converge here. The cycle is endless because it is not a single crime but a structure, a form of ongoing violence that makes new victims in each generation (Nixon; Stoler 191). The Gothic convention of the curse is thereby politicised: the house is cursed not by an ancient wrong alone but by a continuing one.

6. The Podcast and the Commodification of the Missing

Anaya's disappearance generates a second narrative form: a sensationalised true-crime podcast that claims to reveal everything that happened at Günter Huis ("House of Margins (Hardcover)"). The publisher positions the novel between *Serial* (Koenig) and *The Other Black Girl* (Harris), a pairing that points to the book's two satirical targets, investigative audio storytelling and the politics of the publishing industry. The podcast is thus no incidental device. It extends the novel's critique from the institutions that produce literature to the institutions that produce stories about people.

True crime is, as Rachel Monroe's study of the genre and its women audiences traces, a cultural form in which empathy and appetite are intimately entangled; identification with victims can shade into fascination and consumption (Monroe). The genre's conventions, the confident narrator, the promise of revelation and the cliffhanger, transform a person's disappearance into a serial product. One early endorser identifies the novel's concern as the "commodification of missing and dead bodies" ("House of Margins"), a phrase that captures the stakes: the body, absent or dead, becomes content, and the story's owner becomes whoever tells it best.

Spivak's distinction between speaking for, representation as political proxy, and re-presentation, as portrait or depiction, clarifies what is at issue (Spivak 275–76). The podcast speaks for Anaya and about her while she is unable to speak, and its claim to reveal everything is a claim to total representation. Spivak's warning that the "person spoken for risks being silenced by the very act of rescue" (Spivak 296, 308) finds a contemporary form in the true-crime host who retrieves the victim's story from obscurity only to own it. Saidiya Hartman's meditation on the archive adds a historical dimension. Writing of a young woman who appears in the archive of Atlantic slavery only through the records of those who destroyed her, Hartman proposes critical fabulation, the careful imagining of what the archive forecloses, as an ethical response to the violence of the record (Hartman 11). The podcast in *House of Margins* is an archive of this kind: a record produced by those with the platform, which fills Anaya's silence with its own narrative.

The podcast's form matters as much as its content. Audio narration creates an intimate, confiding voice, and the true-crime host's intimacy with the listener is a device of authority: the audience is invited to trust the narrator because the narrator seems to share their curiosity and concern. Koenig's *Serial* popularised this mode of open-ended, investigative address (Koenig), and its conventions have since become a template for narrating missing persons. When the template is applied to a Black African writer who

vanished inside a colonial mansion, the risk is that the story's pre-existing grooves, the mysterious house, the brilliant victim, the unsolved question, will shape what can be said, much as Wainaina's clichés shape what can be written about the continent (Wainaina). Ranewa's fury is thus not only grief but a protest against genre.

The doubling is crucial. The house consumes Anaya's future; the podcast consumes her story. Both are institutions that take a young African woman's creative and personal life and convert it into value for others, one as literary prestige, the other as audience engagement. The novel thus extends the Gothic's traditional concern with the haunted house to the haunted media landscape, in which the missing body returns as audio and the ghost acquires an audience. Against this archive Ranewa's scepticism and fury function as a counter-archival practice: she reads the podcast critically, refuses its claims, and in doing so models the reader's own obligations.

7. Genre and Form: The Unhomely Gothic and Mediated Narration

The choice of the Gothic is itself an argument. Homi Bhabha's concept of the unhomely, developed from Freud's *unheimlich*, names the moment when the borders between home and world become confused and private space is invaded by the history it had tried to exclude (Bhabha). In postcolonial writing the unhomely is not a psychological curiosity but a political condition: the colonised person is made a stranger in a landscape that is nominally her own. Günter Huis is an unhomely house in exactly this sense. It is a place of work and prestige that cannot be a home, set in a country whose history the house embodies and conceals. By choosing the Gothic, Tsamaase uses a form that already knows how to represent the return of what a social order has repressed, and she attaches it to a historical archive that the form's European originators rarely confronted.

Frantz Fanon's description of the colonial world as a divided, Manichaean space (Fanon) offers a further way into the genre. The Gothic house is also a divided space, with its public rooms and hidden chambers, its official function and its buried secrets. In *House of Margins* that division maps onto the difference between what the residency presents, the generous host, the prestigious opportunity, the creative community, and what it is. The reader's experience of the novel is, at least in part, the experience of passing through the partition. The genre's pleasures of suspense and dread are therefore inseparable from its politics, since the suspense is produced by the gap between the institution's story about itself and the story the house keeps.

The novel's structure of multiple narrating positions deepens this effect. As the publisher's description makes clear, the story involves two vantage points that cannot see

each other: Anaya inside the house, and Ranewa outside it, with a podcast that purports to bridge them. A structure of this kind makes the reader a kind of listener, positioned like the podcast's audience, and then holds that position up to scrutiny. Wainaina's satire warns that Africa is routinely narrated by those who profit from the telling (Wainaina); the novel's mediated structure dramatises the warning by asking whose voice organises the story at any moment and whose has been displaced. Reading becomes an act of discrimination between narrators, and the reader inherits some of Ranewa's critical responsibility.

8. Sisterhood, Witness and the Reclaimed Margin

Ranewa's position as the sister left behind is the novel's ethical centre. The publisher's description presents her as both sceptical and furious ("House of Margins (Hardcover)"), and these two attitudes, doubt and anger, are the dispositions of a critical reader. She does not accept the house's version, the institution's version or the podcast's version. Gordon's idea that haunting produces a demand for acknowledgement (Gordon) casts Ranewa as the one who answers the demand; her investigation is a form of witness that refuses to let the missing be reduced to content.

Crenshaw's argument about intersectional invisibility helps to explain why such witness is necessary. A young Black woman writer who disappears occupies an intersection that institutions find difficult to see; harm to her may be recognised under neither the category of race nor that of gender nor that of class (Crenshaw). The residency's failure and the podcast's sensationalism are both failures of intersectional seeing. Ranewa's labour of attention repairs, in part, what the institutions cannot or will not see.

hooks's distinction between imposed and chosen margins (hooks 341–43) is central to the novel's title. In the house of margins, the margin is initially assigned: the writers are admitted as emerging, as African, as promising, and are thereby kept at the edge of the canon they are told they will join. The sisterly bond, however, reclaims the margin as a space of critical perspective. From the edge, the sisters can see the structure of the house; the centre cannot see itself. This is not a romanticisation of marginality, for hooks is explicit that the margin is a site of deprivation as well as resistance. The novel's insistence on sacrifice, on the cost borne by those who see, honours that double character.

Sisterhood also complicates a familiar Gothic pattern in which the female protagonist is isolated within a house of concentrated power. Here isolation is countered by a relationship that extends beyond the house's walls. The novel's dual structure of inside and outside, residency and aftermath, suggests that confronting an institution's violence requires

both the testimony of those who were within and the persistence of those who were not, and that neither is sufficient alone.

9. Conclusion

House of Margins makes the Gothic house a question about institutions: who builds them, who inhabits them and who pays for them. Through Günter Huis, Tsamaase reveals the continuity between the colonial estate and the contemporary literary residency; through the podcast, between the colonial archive and the contemporary media economy. In each case the margin is a space from which the young African writer is invited to produce value for others. What distinguishes the novel is its refusal to accept that this is the margin's only meaning. By aligning Ranewa's furious scepticism with hooks's chosen margin and Gordon's ethic of response, the novel proposes that the haunted can become witnesses and that witnessing is itself a form of authorship.

Further research might trace the novel's engagement with the specific histories of Cape Town, its place in the traditions of African speculative fiction and Gothic horror in which Tsamaase's earlier work has been received, and its formal use of multiple media. As the novel enters classrooms and critical conversation, such work will test and refine the argument offered here. What is already clear is that *House of Margins* belongs among the texts that ask who gets to author Africa's literature, and what the house of African letters has cost the writers it has housed.

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