

I Wan'na Be Like You, Persijn Broersen & Margit Lukacs

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“Ghosts,” sociologist Avery Gordon famously wrote, “are reminders of lingering trouble.” “[They] are characteristically attached to the events, things, and places that produced them in the first place.” Ghosts, then, are place-bound; driven by the impulse to return to the site of trouble and then loitering there for as long as the trouble remains unresolved. But ghosts, are also very much time-bound, leaving the past and making their presence felt in the present, and most possibly in the future too. The ghost, as Persijn and Margit show in *I Wan'na Be Like You*, is as much an unsettling figure as it is a seductive one, beckoning us in. And once we're pulled in by its dance and the curiosity it inspires, this ghost, this spectre, this phantom wants to tell us or show us something but is unable to really do so. The onus is on us, the viewer, to figure out what it wants.

So, what might this nameless figure, trapped in this ruin, want? This figure seems out of time, out of place, both human and nonhuman, and seemingly transcends any form of categorisation. It seems neither from the past, present, nor the future, but in a strange way embodies all these timelines all at once. Does it belong at all in this ruin? Why does it haunt it? In many ways, it is a joyous, transgressive, and almost comical figure, swaying to the music, drawing us in even further. But into what? Is it perhaps celebrating that its home, a composite of greenhouses, lies in ruins. Because ruins, though they signify an ending, are also quite speculative and signal new beginnings. Is our ghost excited about what is to come? A trickster of sorts, it lures us deeper into this shattered glasshouse in which nature can no longer be contained. It shows us how nature spills out when it has been held captive for too long and when the illusion of harmonious co-existence between the precarity of nature and unbridled resource extraction, polluting industry, and mass consumerism, has been upheld for too long. At a time of looming ecological catastrophe caused by humans, that is quite the statement.

From what is nature escaping then? Glass houses found in European botanical gardens, beautifully designed and architectural wonders, are also sites of trouble. Built as conservatories to “show off” exotic plants, these “crystal palaces” mostly have their origin in the 17th and 18th centuries. Think of the Hortus Botanicus in Amsterdam, Kew Gardens in London, or the Jardin des Plantes in Paris. We tend to think of these places as sites of life, full of greenery and bloom, where plants are cared for and a public can marvel at nature and be educated about plant diversity. But at the same time, we need to remember that these glasshouses are the product of colonial exploits and empire. Plants have been uprooted from their natural habitat and have been relocated to a foreign country in an artificial home of glass, where their main function has been reduced to study and display. From this research whole landscapes and eco-systems in colonial territories have been

reshaped and destroyed by the plantation economy to produce ever higher yielding crops, with labourers being enslaved, marginalised, or oppressed. Of course, this legacy of exploiting nature and humans for profit continues till today. The fact that this film is on loop demonstrates that. The palm oil industry is only one example of how monocrops completely destroy flora, fauna, and not to forget, human ways of life too. What, where and how plants can be, is thus very much controlled. From a colonial perspective this is true for humans too.

In much of their practice Persijn and Margit draw on the relations and power structures between human and nature. At the core of this is turning that which seems “natural” to us, unfamiliar. Nature, landscape, whether in forests, mountains, jungles or carefully contained in botanical gardens is always strange, eerie and suspended between reality and the imaginary. While their work is heavily researched, the actual outcome is always playful, visually stunning and captivating to listen to. Still, it is always ominous. Unlike the see-through glass houses, which feign transparency and show us a narrative of opulence, the video shows us shards of glass, a skeleton architecture and broken imagery of plants mirroring a narrative that is much more complex, multi-layered, and indeed fragmented. The splendour of these crystal palaces is entangled with historical injustice, colonial violence, and ecological damage. Perhaps this is what the ghost is trying to convey: glass houses are not only repositories for plants, archives of the plant world, albeit very selective and exclusionary ones. But they are also archives of loss and trauma. Redress of many of these issues in the form of acknowledgment or reparations is still pending, and so these sites remain haunted.

And yet, this ghost with no name, this undefinable figure also urges us to pay attention to something else: Who has the power to narrate? Who can speak back, and in which language? There is a reason why Persijn en Margit take great care to show us plants that are accompanied by information signs and labels. Not only have these plants been displaced, but they have also been categorised, named (probably in Latin), and taxonomized by Western botanists. They have been robbed of their indigenous names and of their indigenous speech. Like so many enslaved or colonised people have been too. The avatars of Black Harmony skirt the perimeters of the glass house and defiantly sing “Na mi,” I am. Their song ruptures the loop mentioned earlier. I am sure the plants, pushing through the ruins hum along with them in agreement and answer back “I am” in their own language. And this too might be something the ghost rejoices in because it offers hope that someday it might be laid to rest.