

---

Rachel Hill<sup>1</sup>

P. Djèlí Clark, *THE HAUNTING OF TRAM CAR 015*, Tor.com, 2019.

Dirigibles and djinns, revitalised ancient Egyptian iconography and old streets threaded with new hybrid technologies: welcome to P. D. Clark's counterhistorical Cairo of 1921. Forty years previous, a maverick Sudanese mage, using "a mix of alchemy and machines,"<sup>2</sup> punched a hole into another dimension, leading magical beings such as djinn to become an integral part of Cairo's citizenry. The magical power this interdimensional rupture released rebalances the scales of power, ousting British and French colonial powers, to allow a progressive new world capital to emerge in their stead. As a rapidly modernising city awash with new magical-mechanical technologies, Cairene society is in transition between the familiar old and the radically new. Adjacent to this influx of exotic technology is a mounting campaign for women's suffrage, explorations of gender and questions around the rights of machine-people. *The Haunting of Tram Car 015* thus (ad)dresses intersectional feminist politics in the clothes of an unconventional ghost story-come-police procedural, to great effect.

With his wizard-like ability to conjure *mise-en-scène*, it is no surprise that Phenderson Djèlí Clark is a historian by trade. His small but much lauded fictional output re-imagines colonised and marginalised sites as counterhistorical cosmopolitan hubs. One such site is the free city of New Orleans in the novella *The Black God's Drums* (2018), which benefits from Haiti's technological curtailing of US dominance in the region. A testament to Clark's increasing success, *The Black God's Drums* was shortlisted for the best novella in the 2019 Nebula awards, with his short story *The Secret Lives of the Nine Negro Teeth of George Washington* (2018) going on to win the best short story. Continuing with this run of thought-provoking work, *The Haunting of Tram Car 015* marks Clark's novella-length return to the Cairo formerly seen in his celebrated short story *A Dead Djinn in Cairo* (2016).

---

<sup>1</sup> Rachel Hill is a Cultural Studies MA student at Goldsmiths, University of London. She regularly reviews speculative fiction for publications such as "Foundation: The International Review of Science Fiction," "Women's Review of Books," "The Quietus," "Asymptote," "Rain Taxi" and "Strange Horizons".

<sup>2</sup> Clark, 27.

In the opening scene of *The Haunting of Tram Car 015*, the pompous Superintendent of Tram Safety & Maintenance Bahir is holding forth about the supernatural entity plaguing one of his vehicles. His office is adorned with paintings by the “new abstract pharonists,”<sup>3</sup> alongside a framed photo of the current king and novels by recent Alexandrian writers. All these commodity objects and cultural artefacts immediately point towards the vitality of Cairo as a cosmopolitan centre of commerce, and are characteristic of Clark’s economic but robust world-building.

Sent to investigate this ghostly phenomenon is the seasoned agent Hamed Nasr and his rookie partner agent Onsi Youssef, both from the Ministry of Alchemy, Enchantments, and Supernatural Entities. A swift debate ensues between Bahir and Onsi about the telpher system developed in London, but refined in Cairo, to which Hamed looks haplessly on. Here modernisation, as symbolised by the tram system, is situated as a net good, as well as a driver of ethnic and religious diversity. Further reinforcing the accelerated modernisation Cairo is undergoing, the central transportation hub is “a structure of glass and iron done up in the latest Neo-Pharaonic style,”<sup>4</sup> a fusion of the ancient with the contemporary, which brings about new perceptions and forms of (ghostly) inhabitation. Yet, as Hamed observes, “while the country proudly touted its modernity, it yet yearned wistfully for some simpler past.”<sup>5</sup>

Clark skilfully elides modernisation with nostalgia (manifest as haunting), demonstrated by Hamed quip that he had “heard of haunted buildings...but a haunted tram car? That was new.”<sup>6</sup> This webbing together of modernity, spectrality and technology is evocative of the move from gas to electricity captured by German theorist Walter Benjamin in his incomplete fragment *Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century* (1939). The trams’ spectral inhabitation literalises the phantasmagorical dimensions of technology, whereby it remains haunted by the forms of life it replaces and renders obsolete.

It is in part Clark’s reconceptualization of technology which makes his work such an important contribution to the contemporary Black Fantastic, being spearheaded by artists such as N. K. Jemisin, Marlon James and Janelle Monáe. A term coined by Richard Iton in 2010 to identify how culture can be wielded as a means of bringing about more emancipatory black futures, Clark’s iteration of the Black Fantastic recalibrates technology as a counterhistorical means of repelling, rather than buttressing, colonial forces. His alternative

---

<sup>3</sup> Clark, 9.

<sup>4</sup> Clark, 32.

<sup>5</sup> Clark, 28.

<sup>6</sup> Clark, 14.

uses of technology help to build progressive social relations premised upon diversity, instead of propagating the assimilatory practices so essential to European colonialism.

Clark is also known for his intertextual celebrations of other black artists, such as in *The Black God's Drums* where an airship is called The Midnight Robber – an obvious reference to Nalo Hopkinson's (2000) novel of the same name. In *The Haunting of Tram 015*, Clark also nods to key Afrofuturist touchstones such as Sun Ra's film *Space Is the Place* (1974), with his inclusion of reclaimed gods and imagery from the Egyptian pantheon.

Returning to our agents, after Hamed and Onsi realise that they need a magic practitioner to rid themselves of the tram-haunting spirit, they seek out Sheikha Nadiyaa, who is versed in Zār rituals – a branch of folk knowledge which is practiced, and relied upon, by Cairo's women. Nadiyaa is based in the Egyptian Feminist Sisterhood HQ, giving us the opportunity to witness preparations ahead of the parliamentary vote on women's suffrage. This vote adds a plentiful amount of background tension to the narrative and allows for political commentary to structure the plot in a non-cumbersome way. Whilst passing through the offices, Hamed notices “there were also rural women from the countryside, recognisable in their simple but elaborately wrapped gallabiyahs,”<sup>7</sup> thus emphasising how the women's movement has cross-class solidarity.

Nadiyaa is flanked by her djinn secretary Jizzu, who presents as both male and female, and is described as extremely attractive. Nadiyaa's retinue also includes Fahima, a “boilerplate eunuch” who has, through encouragement, become “a liberated machine.”<sup>8</sup> With the explicit inclusion of autonomous “machine-women” and rural working-class women, Clark represents an intersectional feminism, which counts the struggles of other marginalised communities alongside the fight for female emancipation.

Clark's characters frequently experiment with gender presentation, signalled most obviously through clothing. Agent Fatma el-Sha'arawi, the detective from Clark's previous sojourn in Cairo, makes a cameo here, “resplendent as ever, in a lavender Englishman's suit and matching vest with a white shirt and a deep purple tie, topped off with a black bowler no less.”<sup>9</sup> It also becomes necessary for Hamed and Onsi to dress in drag in order to complete their mission, allowing them, temporarily and partially, to inhabit a feminised position within the public realm. Increasingly then, clothing becomes an index of personal freedom and societal progress in Cairo.

---

<sup>7</sup> Clark, 51.

<sup>8</sup> Clark, 61.

<sup>9</sup> Clark, 126.

Sophisticated in its world-building, thoughtful in its politics and playful with its characters, *The Haunting of Tram Car 015* is an excellent ride. It is a refreshing read, not least because at each stage in the plot, it is the knowledge, organisation and solidarity of women that allow our agents to succeed. Clark is clearly well into his writerly stride, and hopefully, this will not be his last foray into Cairo's magical-mechanical streets.