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Breach and suture in China Miéville's interstitial cities

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ABSTRACT

Henri Lefebvre, seeking to point the way towards a different space in *The Production of Space* (1974), describes his project as straddling 'the breach between science and utopia, reality and ideality, conceived and lived'. In China Miéville's novel *The City & The City* (2009), two fictional cities, Besźel and Ul Qoma, occupy the same geography but are kept separate by a semiotic code by which their inhabitants deliberately 'unsee' the other city; to disregard this sign system is to commit Breach, a crime punishable by the police force of the same name. Yet Breach itself operates interstitially, transgressing the boundaries it is tasked to keep intact, threaded 'like a suture in and out' of both cities. This essay will examine the subversive topographies of Miéville's fiction as spaces that activate interstices on three levels: in the built environments of his worlds; in the gaps between genre boundaries; and in between representation and reality. The interstices of his cities materialise the dialectical tension between opposing yet juxtaposed elements, generating change via a process of contradiction towards a social and historical totality. Through these breaches and their suturing, he seeks to point an interstitial way towards a different space.

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'Deep inside the town there open up, so to speak, double streets, doppelganger streets, mendacious and delusive streets'.[1] This line from Polish Jewish writer Bruno Schulz's short story 'The Cinnamon Shops' (1934) forms the epigraph to British writer China Miéville's *The City & The City* (2009).[2] What lurks in the inevitable interstices between double streets and doppelgänger cities is at the heart of Miéville's urban imaginaries; this essay will examine how he activates interstices in the built environments of his fiction, in the gaps between genre boundaries, and in between representation and reality. The interstices in his fiction materialise the dialectical tension

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between opposing yet juxtaposed elements, generating change via a process of contradiction towards a social and historical totality.

The word 'interstitial', according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is derived from the Latin *intersistĕre* – *inter*, 'between', and *sistĕre*, 'to stand'. An interstitial space is thus an intervening space, especially a small one, between 'that which stands'. Urban geographer Andrea Mubi Brighenti defines an 'interstitial space' as one surrounded by other spaces that are 'either more institutionalised, and therefore economically and legally powerful, or endowed with a stronger identity, and therefore more recognisable or typical'.[3] Interstitial space is thus associated with the minoritarian or the marginalised. In architecture or urban geography, interstices are traditionally seen as gaps that are the result of a failure in planning: leftover spaces, wastelands, abandoned ruins, unexpected cracks in an otherwise homogeneous structure. Scholars such as Brighenti have argued, however, that rather than being a mere gap – which denotes emptiness and passivity – the interstitial can in fact be an active component in the making of a city, and they have sought to reclaim it from its residual status. On an urban scale, interstitial spaces intervene between, trouble and even transcend the dichotomies that previously structured the city. Interstitial space thus has the potential to unsettle, disrupt or even challenge 'that which stands'.

Miéville, who identifies as a 'classical Marxist', sees his work as informed by dialectics, which focus on 'blurred interstices, gray areas, hard cases – but as part of a social and historical totality. The conception of totality is absolutely central to my political and theoretical life'.[4] He posits that 'real' life under capitalism is a fantasy; his own use of fantasy emphasises the gap between mimetic realism and reality.[5] There is no single urban reality, only the illusion thereof. His approach to genre is similarly interstitial. He has been aligned with the 'New Weird', which was first coined as a genre category by M. John Harrison in the 2002 introduction to Miéville's novella *The Tain*.[6] Miéville sees the Weird as that which 'punctures the supposed membrane separating off the sublime' to allow 'swillage of that awe and horror from "beyond" back into the everyday'.[7] As Roger Luckhurst notes in 'The Weird: A Dis/orientation', weirdness inheres in the 'strange elasticity' of borders, which create 'extraterritorialities that are also intraterritorialities' that suggest 'a weirded interstitial alterity'.[8] This alterity answers to Miéville's consistent interest in the interstitial as a form of intervention.

Few authors are as explicitly interstitial as Miéville; the word and its variations pepper his texts, two of which, *Perdido Street Station* (2000) and *The City & The City*, have conclusions that hinge upon the 'interstice' or the 'interstitial city'. Yet the notion of the 'interstitial city' in his works has been under-examined, particularly in spatial terms. Among the more extensive considerations so far are Eric Sandberg's analysis of the abovementioned two novels, which focuses more on hybridity, and Mark P. Williams' discussion of Miéville's London-based fictions.[9] Williams argues that Miéville concretises the fantastic potential of mundane London by focusing on

'interstitial places and moments that characterise the abutment of one view of the capital with another'; this creates 'Un-Londons'.[10]

Though 'interstitiality' is often used interchangeably with 'hybridity' and 'liminality', I choose to distinguish them. There is certainly overlap between these conditions, particularly 'interstitiality' and 'liminality' – both can be said to be 'in-between'. Neither liminal space nor interstitial space, however, is merely 'in-between'. Liminal space is anthropological in focus and remains oriented around the state of the person occupying it – they are typically in transition and/or undergoing a rite of passage, and their 'neither/nor' status stems from this. They must occupy this limbo until they have crossed from one threshold to another – however, the purpose of liminal space remains this transition. In contrast, the focus of interstitial space is spatial and it requires boundaries to define it. There is an element of secondariness to interstitial space; it exists in between other more established or powerful spaces. This has contributed to its traditional characterisation as leftover or residual, and its tendency to be dominated by other kinds of space, such as abstract space. Miéville subtly distinguishes 'liminal' and 'interstitial' in *Perdido Street Station's* final scene, when the disavowed Yagharek, a garuda (bird-man hybrid), is solicited by the rebel leader Jack Half-a-Prayer, who offers to share 'his bastard liminal life, his interstitial city'.[11] Jack's 'liminal life' stems from his fReemade hybridity – as punishment for his crimes, he had his arm replaced by a mantis claw. Jack belongs to neither of the social groups he has a foothold in but is thus able to disregard social norms and rebel from his liminal positioning – his 'half-breed world', as Yagharek puts it.

To grasp the nuances of the 'interstitial city', we must examine the two other mentions of 'interstitial' in *Perdido Street Station*. In the first, the Construct Council, a sentient artificial intelligence, declares through its avatar, a zombified human man: 'Mine is an interstitial existence […] I was born of an error, in a dead space where the citizens discard what they do not want […] My interventions are hidden'.[12] In the second, an 'interstitial burrow' leads to the nest of the slake moths, the horrifying psychic predators whose rampage through New Crobuzon is the novel's main source of conflict.[13] To get to the nest, the protagonist Isaac must crawl through a tunnel carved into a deserted house that has been partially 'decapitated' by the curve of a great glass dome – a 'subversive topography'.[14] Isaac notes that the tunnel does not seem wide enough for the slake moths, which exist on multiple planes: 'I don't think they work quite according to … uh … regular space'.[15]

Both the Construct Council and the Slake Moths have located dead spaces produced by the city's churn – the residual gaps resulting from what geographer David Harvey calls 'the inevitable uneven development of capitalism' – and, with their capacity for operating across multiple planes of space at once, transformed them into 'subversive topography'.[16] Their hidden interventions have the potential to bring the city to its knees, each in their own

harrowing way. Jack's rebellion aspires to something similar, though later works such as *Iron Council* (2004) reveal that he will be captured, assassinated, and made iconic by his martyrdom. The interstitial city is not in and of itself either positive or negative; what it is, however, is a space of constant struggle, and Miéville seeks to show the complex ways in which it may be activated as a form of intervention, transformation or resistance.

The interstitial spaces of Miéville's writings include the 'dead landscapes' of his non-fiction essay, *London's Overthrow* (2012), a post-apocalyptic expedition through areas wracked by the city's growing inequality. These troublesome neighbourhoods are prescribed a 'managed decline' by policymakers – an euphemism for 'leaving them to rot' – but retain signs of life: a small vegetable garden, a gathering of young parkouristes who 'lurch in ways architects never intended along the buildings' innards' in a 'tough ruin ballet'.[17] It is in such London hinterlands in which Miéville locates *Kraken* (2010), in which a major clash between cultists takes place in a 'space between concrete sweeps of flyovers. Where the world might end was turpe-industrial. Scree of rejectamenta'.[18] There is the London of a million crevices in his debut novel *King Rat* (1999), whose eponymous sovereign claims his kingdom can 'fill all the spaces in-between'.[19] He tells the protagonist, Saul: 'All the main streets, the front rooms and the rest of it, that's just filler, that's just *chaff*, that ain't the real city. You get to *that* by the *back* door'.[20]

As Saul learns to embrace his rat identity, London is transfigured for him, a spatial expansion Carl Freedman describes as the 'Marxist urban sublime'.[21] This culminates in Saul defeating the city's 'conspiracy of architecture', a concept Miéville expands on in an essay of that title, in which he argues that humans have become alienated from their built environment by capitalism, under which buildings cannot but be commodities. He draws on Henri Lefebvre's work in *The Production of Space* (1974) to show how 'not only architectural production, but space itself – experienced space – changes with social structures'.[22] Under capitalism, architectural production enables the creation of a built environment that conditions humans to devote part of their agency to maintaining it, alienating the house from its original role as repository for humans; 'They are not there to house us: we are there to feed them'.[23] As Saul, crouched on a roof and regarding London at an angle it was never meant to be seen from, observes: 'He had defeated the conspiracy of architecture, the tyranny by which the buildings that women and men had built had taken control of them, circumscribed their relations, confined their movements'.[24] The Marxist urban sublime enables Saul to reimagine his back-door city not as a kingdom but as a collective; he dethrones King Rat and installs himself instead as Citizen Rat, reclaiming the city through his own topography of subversion.

Another instance of subversive topography occurs in Miéville's short story 'Reports of Certain Events in London' (2004), which takes the form of a

series of documents mistakenly sent to the address of the narrator, also called China Miéville. The documents detail the doings of a secret society of urban explorers who track 'Viae Ferae', 'feral streets' which move around and manifest impossibly between buildings, then 'unoccur' just as stealthily, leaving no gap as before. These interstitial streets, with names like Varmin Way – again, evoking rats – are thought to fight and mate with each other. The narrator grows increasingly paranoid about the construction going on at the bottom of his street – echoing, again, the anxiety induced by the 'conspiracy of architecture'. He wonders if the Viae Ferae in this new age arrive 'not suddenly but so slowly, ushered in by us, armoured in girders, pelted in new cement and paving', and if his own street might not awaken someday and vanish, him and his neighbours with it.[25]

A tale of two cities

The notion of an urban topography revealed as inexplicably duplicitous and thus estranging the unwary flâneur culminates in *The City & The City,* in which Miéville constructs a thought experiment of twin cities in a situation that is logically improbable, yet not entirely unfamiliar. The fictional Besźel and Ul Qoma are separate cities which occupy the same geography, following a traumatic event in their history referred to only as 'the Cleavage'. This complex state of affairs is maintained by the inhabitants of each city keeping to painstakingly delineated zones, deliberately 'unseeing' and 'unsensing' all aspects of the other city. To acknowledge, interact with or cross over into the other city is to commit Breach, a crime punishable by the seemingly omnipotent, omnipresent force of the same name that polices the segregation of the cities.

The cities have no obvious counterpart outside fiction, although critics have drawn parallels with various real-world divided cities, such as Belfast, Jerusalem, and Cold War Berlin.[26] For Paul March-Russell, the cities are suggestive of the collapse of the Soviet Union in and around 1989; Elana Gomel thinks they reflect Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall.[27] Many have compared the spatial uncertainty of the novel to that induced by Israel's strategies for controlling the Occupied Palestinian Territories.[28] Robert Duggan, for instance, connects 'unseeing' with what Israeli architect Eyal Weizmann calls 'self-imposed scotoma', a deliberate blindness to any presence that might 'complicate or threaten the national narrative of belonging'.[29]

It is easy for the reader to establish distance between Miéville's scenario and their own if they can pinpoint a specific troubled city which the novel is critiquing, less so if such direct parallels are denied. An invitation to an international conference for 'Policing Split Cities' is regarded as an insult, as Besźel and Ul Qoma do not consider themselves a split city, like 'Budapest

and Jerusalem and Berlin'.[30] Likewise, Miéville has disavowed clear-cut allegories between the novel and real-life political situations. In a 2011 interview, he recalls a *Christian Science Monitor* article that proposed a solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict which resembled *The City & The City* – 'a single urban space in which different citizens are covered by completely different juridical relations and social relations'. The idea, he adds, is 'completely demented. I don't think it would work at all'.[31] As Duggan notes, however, it is this very emphasis on the absurdity of such a system of segregation being applied to a real city that registers the 'experimental thinking' at work in sites such as Israel, where physical infrastructure is used to sustain political illusions.[32]

Visibility is a central concern of *The City & The City;* however, the tensions here are not merely between the visible (that which can be seen) and the invisible (that which cannot be seen), but also with a third element, the 'unvisible' – that which must be consciously unseen.[33] Rendering something 'unvisible' ironically requires a high degree of attention towards it; for example, a Besź driver would be hard put to avoid an Ul Qoman pedestrian if they had not clearly observed who and where they were to begin with. The novel sets out this triad of visibility from the start, as Besź police inspector Tyador Borlú is tasked to investigate the murder of an American archaeology student, Mahalia Geary, killed in Ul Qoma and dumped in Besźel. Borlú arrives at the crime scene and notes, in the opening sentence: 'I could not see the street or much of the estate'.[34] He himself is made patently visible in the next sentence, however, to the rest of the neighbourhood, who are 'eating breakfast and watching' the scene from their windows; the only person to whom he is not visible is the dead Mahalia: 'She looked unseeingly at me'.[35] This variety of unseeing, while uncanny, is not generically out of place. The narrative path Borlú has been prescribed, as a detective in a crime novel, is to locate the invisible and make it visible. Yet the chapter segues suddenly into a very different kind of 'unseeing' as Borlú glimpses an elderly woman walking away from him 'in a shambling sway'. When he meets her gaze, he realises 'that she was not on GunterStrász at all, and that [he] should not have seen her'.[36] This abrupt introduction of the cities' unusual arrangement intrudes upon the set-up of the police procedural, opening up a new generic dimension to the novel that is suggestively unnatural. It foreshadows how Borlú's pursuit of Mahalia's killer, as well as his attempts to bring the facts behind her murder into visibility, will constantly be complicated and undermined by the 'unvisibility' that dictates his existence in the cities.

The event that caused the cities' separation, the 'Cleavage', is never explained. Cleavage is a contronym; its double, opposing meanings are 'split' and 'convergence'.[37] The duality of 'Cleavage' fits the politically fraught nature of the cities' mysterious origin(s), which could be 'schism

or conjoining'.[38] Each has its own implications for the cities' various political factions, from the underground Unification movement, who want Breach abolished and the cities united, to far-right nationalist groups such as the True Citizens, who want their city to be the only one occupying that space. The success of either camp would result in urban homogeneity, leading to the end of both cities as we know them; it is the interstitial Breach that maintains their diversity. Breach, in the context of the cities, also becomes a contronym: it is both the crime and the policing thereof. The cities are defined by both the boundaries policed by Breach and the breaching of those boundaries, which enables Breach to do its work. 'The two cities need the Breach', realises Borlú. 'And without the cities' integrities, what is Breach?'[39]

Lefebvre describes how a society's spatial practice produces its space at the same time as it masters and appropriates it; the spaces of Besźel and Ul Qoma are thus socially produced through the ways they are perceived.[40] It is worth noting that *The Production of Space's* English translator, Donald Nicholson-Smith, chooses to render a key word in Lefebvre's project, *intervalle,* as 'breach':

> By seeking to point the way towards a different space, towards the space of a different (social) life and of a different mode of production, this project straddles the *breach* between science and utopia, reality and ideality, conceived and lived. It aspires to surmount these oppositions by exploring the dialectical relationship between 'possible' and 'impossible', and this both objectively and subjectively.[41]

In this light, one may see Besźel and Ul Qoma as opposing cities in a dialectical relationship, differentiated and defined by a breach that cannot be closed, only straddled. It is through this breach that Miéville seeks to point an interstitial way towards a different space.

Signs taken for wonders

Urban space has an essentially signifying nature, writes Roland Barthes: 'The city is a discourse and this discourse is truly a language'. The problem, he adds, is that an expression like 'the language of the city' remains purely metaphorical; 'the real scientific leap will be realised when we speak of a language of the city without metaphor'.[42] The conflict that Barthes identifies between signification and reality, or at least the reality of objective geography, is prevalent in Besźel and Ul Qoma, which rely heavily on a system of signs to unsee and unsense each other. Inhabitants use signifiers – 'architecture, clothing, alphabet and manner, outlaw colours and gestures' – to know which city they are in.[43] The semiotic codes of the cities are complicated, however, in places such as Besźel's Ul Qomatown, where Ul Qoman expatriates and exiles live; the Besź instinct is to unsmell the scents of Ul Qoman

incense and cooking, but small details – such as the use of Beszel Blue, a colour that is illegal in Ul Qoma, in building trimmings – are meant to clarify to the discerning urban-dweller which city they are in.[44]

All this corresponds to Lefebvre's representations of space, which are conceptions of space that tend towards a system of signs.[45] Lefebvre warns, however, against conceiving of the city as a closed signifying system, as 'established relations between objects and people in represented space are subordinate to a logic which will sooner or later break them up because of their lack of consistency'.[46] Those who actually inhabit the cities' lived spaces of representation frequently experience flaws in the signifying system. Besź Ul Qomatown aside, there are everyday lapses of certainty in the form of 'protubs': a window broken in UI Qoma that leaves glass in the path of Besź pedestrians, for example.[47] That signifiers correspond with the signified is a polite fiction that the populations of both cities maintain by unspoken agreement. This semiotic mania renders the spaces of Beszel and Ul Qoma inherently self-destructive, demolishing the absolute space of their objective geography and deepening the spatial domination of artificial boundaries in the cities. This leaves them susceptible to a crisis of meaninglessness brought on by a severe collapse in the sign system.

The unseeing of *The City & The City* literalises the metaphor of urban coexistence through unacknowledged difference. Beyond that, however, it also concretises the ways in which language and perception shape lived experience. It is a metaphor for literalising metaphor. Metaphor – and the literalisation thereof – is, for Miéville, what unites the genres of fantasy and science fiction. As he says in an interview: 'To literalise your metaphor does not mean that it stops being a metaphor, but it invigorates the metaphor because it embeds its referent within the totality of the text, with its own integrity and realism'. He prefers the unstable, 'fractally begetting' nature of metaphor to allegory, with its straightforward allegiance to what is perceived as the real world.[48] Elsewhere he highlights how the counterfactual tension of a metaphor – that x is y, even when x is not, in fact, y – places one on guard for estrangement.[49] It is this resistance inherent in the metaphor that, as Sherryl Vint observes, estranges us from what we perceive to be the 'real world' and highlights the gap between mimetic realism and 'reality'.[50]

Susan Ang reads the figure of the ampersand, &, which links the cities of the title, as a 'meta-metaphor' that stands for the polysemy of meaning. The ampersand is a ligature that derives its name from a corruption of 'and per se and'; it is equivalent to but not identical to 'and'. For Ang, it embodies in its ambiguity the paradox of simultaneous sameness and difference, oneness and doubleness.[51] This evokes the many interstitial passages that connect and couple the dialectically opposed throughout *The City & The City,* the

most notable of which is Copula Hall, the building through which people can officially pass between Besźel and Ul Qoma. Miéville describes Copula Hall repeatedly as 'interstitial':

> … it is not a crosshatched building, precisely, nor one of staccato totality-alterity, one floor or room in Besźel and the next in UI Qoma: externally it is in both cities; internally, much of it is in both or neither […] a juncture, an *interstice*, one sort-of border built above another.[52]

'Copula', as Matthew Hart points out, derives from the Latin 'to fasten' or 'fit'; grammarians use it to describe words such as 'is', which join subject and predicate or noun and verb.[53] Andrea Ong notes that copulas are crucial connectors in the functioning of metaphors; they are 'existential declaratives – saying X *is* Y makes it so (and real), just as an Ul Qoman passing through the no-man's land of Copula Hall is then brought into existence in the Other space of Besźel'.[54] She observes, too, that Miéville deletes the copula from certain descriptive passages – including, ironically, one about the hall itself: 'Copula Hall *like* the waist of an hourglass, the point of ingress and egress, the navel between the cities'.[55]

The hourglass-navel metaphor is, strictly speaking, a simile. According to Miéville, a simile is especially effective when it asserts a similarity that is not self-evident but 'with sufficient confidence and plausibility to do the job of persuasion in passing'.[56] It is with a similar 'confidence and plausibility' that the cities' populations are persuaded to mentally segregate themselves. The deletion of the copula here, however, foregrounds the comparator 'like', and thus the meta-apparatus behind the construction of this comparison. It might be said to foreshadow how Borlú is later deleted from legal existence in the city, when a witness he is escorting is shot by a gunman from across Copula Hall, perverting its purpose as an embassy in order to elude Breach. When the assassin escapes into Besźel, Borlú pursues him in Ul Qoma but lacks the jurisdiction to arrest him; instead, he shoots the killer across the border, committing breach. In order to bring the culprit to justice, he has to expose the constructed nature of the cities' either/or binary, revealing that their abstract space *is* not their absolute space, only *like* it. He drops the copula to be a cop, and so drops out of the cities and into the interstice.

A third thing, a heartish city

The friction between metaphor and simile – and how this relates to the interstice – is further developed in *Embassytown*, the eponymous city of which is a human colonial outpost on an alien planet on the edge of the known universe. The indigenous species, the Ariekei, speak a language that is absolutely literal, in which words are their referents and it is impossible to express

abstract concepts, untruths or even ambiguity. This is referred to as Language, and requires two words to be spoken at once; the only humans who can communicate with the Ariekei are the Ambassadors, genetically engineered pairs of twins who speak in unity with two mouths and one mind. The Ariekei sometimes recruit humans to enact or embody similes so that they can refer to them. The narrator, Avice Benner Cho, performed such a service as a child, literalising the simile 'the girl who ate what was given her'.

This harmonious co-existence is disrupted by the arrival of a new Ambassador pair, EzRa, who are not genetically engineered and thus speak both with and without unity; the 'there-not-there' paradox inherent in their speech proves disastrously addictive for the Ariekei. This rupture of meaning, much like the massive breach that occurs towards the end of *The City & The City*, is a cataclysm that devastates the city, as the drug-addled Ariekei descend into violence. Avice discovers that the only cure is to teach the Ariekei to lie, to engage in the transgression of signification. 'I don't want to be a simile anymore', she tells them. 'I want to be a metaphor'.[57]

Avice's first encounter with the Hosts as a child takes place in a literal interstice, the zone where the brick-and-cement buildings of Embassytown organically give way to the bio-materials of the Host city. She later grows up to be an 'Immerser', a deep-space voyager, and so begins to grapple with articulating space in linguistic terms: the space she traverses is referred to as the 'immer' and the space where she lives the 'manchmal'.[58] *Immer*, in German, is a temporal adverb meaning 'always' or 'ever'; *manchmal* means 'sometimes'.[59] Avice tries to explain this using Ferdinand de Saussure's framework: 'The best we can do is say that the immer *underlies* or *overlies*, *infuses*, is a *foundation*, is *langue* of which our actuality is a *parole*, and so on'.[60] *Langue*, as Saussure conceptualises it, refers to language as an abstract, signifying system, whereas *parole* refers to the instance of its precise, individual utterance.[61] Just as *parole* concretises but does not encapsulate the system of *langue*, so too do the dimensions of the manchmal map but not match precisely the reaches of the immer. This is also a kind of interstice, both imaginary and real, into which what Lefebvre would describe as the 'space of speech' insinuates itself in pursuit of a paradoxical self-transcendence:

> Words are in space, yet not in space. They speak of space, and enclose it. A discourse on space implies a truth of space, and this must derive not from a location within space, but rather from a place imaginary and real – and hence 'surreal', yet concrete.[62]

This transcendence through transgression – splicing imaginary and real, concrete and conceptual, occurs towards the end of *Embassytown*, as Avice teaches the Ariekei metaphor: 'The city's a heart, I said, and in that a heart

and a city were sutured into a third thing, a heartish city, and cities are heart-stained, and hearts are city-stained too'.[63] A suture, in the surgical sense, is 'the joining of the lips of a wound, or of the ends of a severed nerve or tendon, by stitches'; it is also an instance of the stitch used for this purpose.[64] Sutures, literal and figurative, proliferate throughout *Embassytown*. Like breach, they have a double meaning: they are simultaneously the splicing of two disparate edges and evidence of a split. When the death of one half of EzRa requires the survivor, Ez, to be conjoined with another severed Ambassador-half, Cal, the surgical operation leaves Cal's skull 'crossed with dark sutures' so crude that Avice wonders if it were really medically necessary, or rather an exaggeration of the spectacle.[65]

If a metaphor is an act of suture, it is one in which violence is implicit. When the Ambassador MagDa gives the brutal order to dissect a captured Host, she phrases it as finding out what is happening inside its '*bone-house*'.[66] The Old English *bānhūs* is a kenning for the body; it notably appears twice in the poem *Beowulf,* in both instances as something that is broken: '*ac him hildegrap heortan wylmas/ bānhūs ġebræc*' ('but battle-grasp the beating of his heart/ his bone-house broke').[67] A kenning is the crudest form of semantic suture, yoking together two disparate referents to create a compound word with a new meaning that draws on both components. 'Bone-house' at once constructs a parallel between body and architecture and suggests the destructibility of one through the fragility of the other, in the crack of 'bone' and the literal breaking of the heart. Inherent in the suture is both join and break. There is a dialectic at work when Avice sutures 'city' and 'heart' in her metaphor, transcending both to create a third thing, a 'heartish city'; in so doing she mutually 'stains' both the referents 'heart' and 'city' with each other's meanings – a bleeding, a contamination, a breach.

By the end of *Embassytown*, the city has been split between the 'addicts', who remain incapable of the transgression of metaphor that would cure them, and the rest, who have either mutilated themselves beyond hearing Language or learnt to adapt by speaking language. 'It's two cities now […] that intersect politely', observes Avice, echoing the doubled set-up of *The City & The City*.[68] As with the unspoken history of the Cleavage, the new generation of Ariekei 'know their city wasn't always this way but can't imagine it other'.[69] The New Ariekei use their capacity for metaphor to engage in a form of wordplay that operates as a dialectical kenning, speaking two disparate, even diametrically opposed meanings at once to create a third meaning. Instead of 'metaphor', for instance, they say $\frac{\text{lie that truths}}{\text{lie that truths}}$ or $\frac{\text{truthing}}{\text{lie}}$.[70] This has extended to the naming of the city, which is sometimes $\frac{\text{embassy}}{\text{town}}$, $\frac{\text{town}}{\text{embassy}}$ or $\frac{\text{embassytown}}{\text{embassytown}}$. It is, in the suturing of a city cleft in two, a third city.

Once more into the breach

A type of hidden interstitial space that proliferates in Besźel and Ul Qoma is the *dissensi,* zones which Ul Qoma thinks are Besź and Besźel thinks are Ul Qoman. These neither-nor spaces are thought to conceal the entrances to the secret third city of Orciny, which exists in between the other two larger cities. Despite its purportedly tiny size, conspiracy theorists have invested Orciny with enormous power. 'It runs things', says a Besź unificationist.[71] Borlú thinks of it as a 'tick-city, quite ruthless'.[72] Its interstitial nature makes it both para-site and parasite.

While Orciny is considered a fable, Breach has a very real existence in the cities; it is woven into their legal and political system and impacts every aspect of daily life for its inhabitants. Yet Breach and Orciny, in their interstitiality and powerful yet taboo nature, are essentially the same city viewed from two irreconcilable sides. Like Orciny, Breach initially appears in the novel as a force of supernatural standing; Borlú ascribes to its members powers that are 'almost limitless' and 'frightening'.[73] Their preternatural appearance is enhanced by what appears to be a spectral cloak of semi-invisibility. Borlú's colleague, confronted with Breach, claims he could not see them, only hear a voice.[74] They become starkly visible, however, after Borlú's own breach; he can now see them as a 'void full of angry police'.[75] Daniel Hourigan observes that the 'unsensing' practised by the citizens is 'ontological rather than merely phenomenological'; Breach is not actually invisible, but the inhabitants of the cities have been so conditioned to ontologically reject the spatial interstitiality represented by Breach that they are pathologically incapable of perceiving it, even when witnessing it with their own eyes.[76]

Besźel and Ul Qoma have previously been cast as Foucauldian heterotopias, given how they juxtapose in a single real place multiple incompatible spaces.[77] I would build on this to argue that Orciny and Breach function as *doubled heterotopias* with differing functions in the interstices of their host cities. Orciny adapts the idea of utopia into a heterotopia of illusion, of the variety that contests the site of its reality by, to quote Foucault, exposing 'all the emplacements in the interior of which human life is enclosed and partitioned, as even more illusory'.[78] It is also a heterotopia of deviation; although its existence is repeatedly denied throughout the novel, Mahalia's belief in it instigates a chain of transgressive behaviour among the other characters, with real – and fatal – consequences. The heterotopia of Breach is, conversely, one of crisis and compensation, which orders the spaces of the cities by absorbing those in spatial crisis and suppressing change. Orciny and Breach thus operate dialectically in tandem, setting transgression against prohibition; the space of the cities is shaped by the balance between these two forces.

Orciny is initially presented to the reader as something akin to geographer Edward Soja's theory of 'Thirdspace'.[79] Soja draws on both Homi Bhabha's post-colonial concept of the third space and Lefebvre's resistance towards dyads in favour of triads – 'is there ever a relation only between two terms? One always has Three. There is always the Other'.[80] He conflates Thirdspace with both Foucault's heterotopia and Lefebvre's lived spaces of representation, positions it as a space of marginality, hybridity and difference, and simultaneously imbues it with the infinite and impossible qualities of the Borgesian aleph. It is, he argues, 'a lived space of radical openness and unlimited scope, where all histories and geographies, all times and places, are immanently presented and represented, a strategic space of power and domination, empowerment and resistance'.[81] Thirdspace, *tout court,* is everything everywhere all at once.[82]

The interstices of Beszél and Ul Qoma may appear, at first glance, to be fertile sites in which to locate Soja's Thirdspace. I would argue, however, that *The City & The City* is in fact an object lesson on the dangers of romanticising the 'radical openness' of Thirdspace as blithely and broadly as Soja does. One cannot toss 'otherness', 'marginality' and 'hybridity' into a blender and pour the resultant slurry into a container marked 'lived space', with the expectation that it will take a discernible shape denoting difference. The approach in *The City & The City* is, rather, an interstitial one, which takes into consideration the residual and the fragmentary and seeks to activate these towards totality.

The murder plot of the novel is instigated by Mahalia's determination to make contact with Orciny and prove its existence. In reality, however, Orciny is a fabrication by an Ul Qoma-based Canadian academic, David Bowden, who has planted these 'hidden signs' to trick her into aiding an artefact smuggling operation bankrolled by a transnational corporation, Sears & Core. She is murdered not for her belief in it, but for ceasing to believe and threatening exposure. This is what Freedman deems a 'deflationary tactic of genre': Miéville inflates the reader's expectations for an outcome out of weird fantasy by setting up Orciny as a secret utopia, then deflates these expectations by grounding the novel's denouement in the gritty realism of crime fiction.[83] This transition is unsubtly visualised in the BBC Two television adaptation of *The City & The City* (2018), which departs from the novel to show, in a flashback, Mahalia following the trail of her smuggled artefacts through the sewers.[84] She is entranced at first by what seem to be ethereal lights shimmering in the distance, suggesting the entrance to an otherworld; upon drawing closer, however, she realises these are merely the reflections of the massive LED screens emblazoning Sears & Core's headquarters. The hidden powers guiding the plot have not been a mythical utopia but capitalism, the root cause of Beszél's under-development, which has also fuelled the rise of xenophobic nationalist movements

in both cities. When Breach attempts to arrest the corporation's American representative, they expect him to submit to the local awe in which they are held; instead, he scoffs:

> You think anyone beyond these odd little cities cares about you? […] It's funny enough, the idea of either Besźel or Ul Qoma going to war against a real country. Let alone you, Breach.[85]

The reader knows, of course, that Besźel and Ul Qoma are not real countries, but the puncturing of the fantastic here serves to illustrate how, under a capitalistic world-view, 'reality' is defined by those at the top of political and economical hierarchies, and what we perceive to be 'realism' is, as Miéville argues elsewhere, 'as partial and ideological as "reality" itself'.[86]

The denouement of *The City & The City* collapses the notion that Third-space can be privileged as a space that is inherently radical and open. Interstitial space can be weaponised to serve the individual or dominated by the powers of abstract space. Bowden demonstrates this when he exploits the *dissensi* to escape arrest, walking through cross-hatched areas and using 'urbanly undecidable' gait and mannerisms that do not signify as either Besź or Ul Qoman.[87] Because it is unclear which city he is in, neither police force dares arrest him for fear of committing Breach; by maintaining an ambiguous liminality as 'Schrödinger's pedestrian', he himself has not yet obviously breached and thus could technically walk with 'pathological neutrality' out of the cities altogether.[88] It is an extraordinary, calculated manipulation of *dérive*, which Vincent Kaufmann, in his discussion of the Situationists' psychogeographical tactics, describes as 'not an art of walking, but of displacement: a rejection of the fixed, the static, the monumental, as well as a refusal to be identified'.[89] Bowden manages this because he belongs to neither city but is a scholar of both, thus allowing him to carve a neutral escape route through the city's interstices. His eventual surrender to Borlú stems from his curiosity towards Breach, of the possibility of existing perpetually in the interstice.

This is ultimately Borlú's fate, as he is recruited by Breach, which is revealed to be staffed by those who breached previously and were press-ganged into policing the cities. His new interstitial existence allows him the licence of full vision, a long way from his inability to see at the beginning; neither city can remain 'unvisible' to him any longer. However, the capacity for complete visibility comes at the price of exile; he has become invisible to everyone he knew before, since it would constitute Breach for them to acknowledge him. Niall Martin argues that Borlú's experience in Breach demonstrates how questioning the social fiction of the city leads not to the discovery of new worlds but to one's erasure from existing ones, as the detective Borlú is replaced by the Breach avatar Tye; he becomes not just policeman but *polis* man, a man of the city, no longer bringing the invisible into visibility but policing what may or may not be seen.[90]

Borlú's elevation from 'unseeing' to all-seeing requires him to enter a state of urban alienation. The alienated city, to quote Fredric Jameson, is 'above all a space in which people are unable to map (in their minds) either their own positions or the urban totality in which they find themselves'.[91] Urban alienation occurs when the city-dweller cannot relate their lived space to the abstract representation of the city; similarly, social alienation occurs when the individual fails to politically contextualise and historicise their lived reality within a social totality. What has the capacity to reassemble and relate these fragments of space and experience is everyday life, as Lefebvre conceives it:

> In a sense residual, defined by 'what is left over' [*ce qui reste*] after all distinct, superior, specialised, structured activities have been singled out by analysis, everyday life defines itself as a totality.[92]

We may examine the term 'residual', which resonates with the interstitial, in the light of Jen Hui Bon Hoa's reading of Lefebvre's *Critique of Everyday Life* (1947). Hoa's interpretation is that totality is not merely the equivalent of the residual, nor is the everyday simply a 'space of undecidability between them, a paradox about which nothing more specific can be said'; rather, 'totality is the residual made active, into a meaningful – that is, dialectical – opposition to specialisation'.[93] In *The City & The City*, the residual, '*ce qui reste*', is made active as the interstitial city in a continuous and open-ended search for totality.

Borlú's own alienation proves vital to the critique of everyday life in the cities. He comes to literalise the metaphor of the suture, learning to travel as Breach does between the cities, threaded 'like a suture in and out of Besźel and Ul Qoma'.[94] His role is to keep the cities together by keeping them apart, continually transgressing their borders to maintain 'the skin that keeps law in place. Two laws in two places, in fact'.[95] In so doing he exists in a third space that is interstitial – or, one might venture, 'inter-stitch-al'. As he concludes: 'I live in the interstice, yes, but I live in both the city and the city'.[96]

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