

Supernatural Staycation: Armchair Travelling and Urban Fantasy Literature

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Introduction

When in spring 2020, strict lockdowns confined millions of people all over the world to their homes, for many, daily walks quickly became the only regular activity outside of their home. For these people, being restricted to a small radius around the home meant that the only option was to wander their own neighbourhoods. With currently 55% of the world's population living in urban areas (United Nations 2018), this suggests that every second person worldwide found themselves (re-)exploring their immediate urban environment. Given the context of the pandemic, it comes as no surprise that staycations gained popularity in the months to follow. These exceptional circumstances, however, are by no means a one-off phenomenon. Much rather, they are symptomatic of a general trend. Not only does the propensity for staycations remain above pre-pandemic levels in the summer of 2022 (Braff 2022), but environmental concerns have also stoked interest in domestic travel.

Despite the middle-class countertrend observed during the pandemic, both in Britain and beyond, of citizens fleeing the city in search of a more idyllic life in the countryside (Marsh 2020), one can simultaneously observe a reinvigorated desire of urbanites to explore new parts of their cities or to find fresh perspectives on well-known urban spaces. This ongoing desire to re-explore one's home city has long found its way into both television and literature, as for example famously demonstrated by Iain Sinclair's *London Orbital*. As Paul Smethurst states, Iain Sinclair's 'occult mapping and alternative cartographies' provide 'a commanding counter-vision of the city.' (2016: 761–762) Such works thus provide their readers with yet another possibility to re-explore the urban environment without ever leaving the comfort of their own home, a phenomenon commonly referred to as armchair travelling.

Although urban fantasy does not fit narrower, traditional definitions of armchair travelling or travel literature, this essay argues that it can facilitate a specific form of armchair travelling that offers valuable insights into contemporary urban spatial practices and socio-political discourses. While all forms of fantasy present an opportunity for the reader to

explore unfamiliar places, creatures, people, and cultures, thus enabling them to mentally escape their known environment without physically leaving the safety of their own home, urban fantasy presents a special case in point. This is due to its juxtaposition of realistic and fantastic elements that allow for a unique dual perspective on the urban environment. By introducing supernatural elements to the well-known, realistic urban elements in a heterotopic and palimpsestual fashion, thus forcing the protagonists – and by extension the readers – to re-evaluate their understanding of these cities and the very mechanics of space, urban fantasy achieves an effect of defamiliarisation. This defamiliarisation is strong enough to render even primary world settings sufficiently unfamiliar to allow for a re-exploration of urban environments. Furthermore, as urban fantasy’s settings are characterised by dirt, grime, an abundance of danger, vice, and waste, as well as by dark, disorienting, abandoned, decaying, and labyrinthine settings, urban fantasy literature further marks a significant shift in armchair travelling, as it moves the “destination” from traditionally exotic, idyllic, and idealised far-flung places to seemingly well-known, grittier urban places potentially located right on the reader’s doorstep.

By employing China Miéville’s *The City and the City* as an example, this essay will demonstrate how urban fantasy frequently employs supernatural elements to expose extratextual spatial practices and socio-political issues related to the contemporary metropolis. The novel provides a counter-example to urban fantasy literature’s tendency to depict the city from within (Clute 1997: 975), as it employs the often incredulous reactions of international travellers as a narrative technique to juxtapose outside and inside perspectives on the cities’ intricate spatial practices and rules. This duality of perspective, which can also be observed in travel narratives, highlights the need to refine existing definitions of urban fantasy literature that merely assume an inside perspective.

Urban Fantasy Literature as a Form of Armchair Travelling

Given the association of travel literature with factual representations, at first sight urban fantasy may appear to be the polar opposite. Yet, there is in fact a surprising amount of overlap, as famously demonstrated by Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, which diffuses the genre boundaries between travelogue and fiction – or even fantasy. Many definitions of travel literature apply an author-oriented approach to determine the nature of the work in retrospect: ‘For texts to count as travel writing, Hulme [, for example,] believes their authors must have

travelled to the places they describe' (Hulme and Youngs 2013: 4). Other definitions of travel literature as '*predominantly* factual, first-person prose accounts of travels' (Hulme and Youngs 2013: 3; my emphasis) move towards a slightly more flexible definition. Jan Borm proposes that travel literature is 'not a genre, but a collective term for a variety of texts both predominantly fictional and non-fictional whose main theme is travel,' (qtd. in Hulme and Youngs 2013: 3) thus equally suggesting a broader definition by promoting content-oriented rather than author-oriented approaches. Thouroude suggests a similarly broad definition, which, he argues, 'allows us to regard travel narratives as generic category (mode) [and] leads us to [...] detect a fundamental attitude connected to travel, displacement, and territories in contemporary literature' (qtd. in Hulme and Youngs 2013: 6).

Narrow approaches such as Hulme's would categorically exclude fiction – let alone the fantastic – from the category of travel literature, as the supernatural elements of e.g. urban fantasy literature make it by definition impossible to visit the supernatural places depicted in these texts. Furthermore, unlike travel literature, urban fantasy literature does not presuppose that the protagonist/narrator leaves their home and travels to another place. Yet, they undergo similar journeys and developments as the characters of traditional fantasy texts and travel literature. In addition, although the urban fantasy reader does not leave their home to experience new places, cultures, and peoples in reality, this type of literature yet achieves a mental cultural displacement (via supernatural elements) – if only for the duration of the reading experience.

While this may also be possible in the case of other forms and genres of literature, urban fantasy is an especially powerful genre in this context, as it features a spatial compression of the protagonist's journey and provides a strong focus on disadvantaged and underrepresented social groups such as the homeless, poverty-stricken individuals, or ethnic minorities. Thus, it provides the potential to sow seeds of mutual understanding and respectful cooperation between otherwise disconnected groups. The aforementioned definition of travel literature provided by Thouroude is especially relevant in the context of China Miéville's *The City and the City*. Albeit this novel's primary focus does not lie on representing a travel account, it features travel and different forms of displacement as significant plot elements that reveal the texts' core focus as well as attitude on questions of territory as well as on spatial practices and conflicts. While Miéville's works continue to receive ample attention and their astute portrayal of contemporary socio-political, cultural, and spatial practices and discourses has been widely discussed, this essay argues that travel

and displacement are key strategies of achieving this critical reflection on contemporary practices and discourses in *The City and the City*, yet have been widely ignored. It is thus by approaching Miéville's supernatural cities via the angle of travel narratives and armchair travelling that we are not only able to gain more nuanced insights into his representation of the contemporary metropolis and its citizens but also to stoke more balanced definitions of urban fantasy literature as a whole.

Travel literature features a number of challenges for which urban fantasy may offer surprising, yet powerful, creative solutions. One such struggle is the need to find innovative material. Alison Russell states that there is

a sense of exhaustion of the planet and [...] of the forms we use to write about it [causing many] contemporary travel writers [to] struggle to find unexplored territory and new ways to travel [...]. Many [of them thus] seek challenging means and methods of moving through familiar terrain. (Russell 2000: 9)

She considers this response a turn towards the past, arguing that it raises 'the question whether such efforts reveal a nostalgia for earlier times, when difficult journeys offered the rewards of discovery, strange new sights, or the satisfaction of physical exertion' (10).

Despite the fact that today's society is extremely familiar with urban settings, and therefore cities would be the last option we think of when trying to find "unexplored territory," they are able to provide potential solutions to these challenges. Firstly, they fulfil the desire to re-explore the past, as it is omnipresent in the city, especially in its architecture. Secondly, '[since] the city can never be understood or conceptualised as a whole, it always possesses an uncertain, spectral quality of its own' (Bell 2019: 8) and thus provides an endless supply of hitherto unexplored places and experiences – if only on an individual level. Consequently, it is an unexpected yet ideal candidate for innovative material in travel writing, as it includes a multitude of lacunae that provide new spaces to both explore and depict, resulting in a potential sense of novelty.

This holds especially true for the postmodern city, which I argue is strongly characterised by its diverse, layered, and fragmented nature and constitutes a hyper-complex web of numerous overlapping and interconnected sensory (Neef 2022: 245), spatial, cultural, social, temporal, and ontological layers and can thus only be experienced fragmentarily. Consequently, as Tiffin observes, 'the visible city moves inward, becomes the city of the imagination: cultural space is continually constructed within the individual's own interior

life' (2008: 34). It is hardly surprising that contemporary genres such as urban fantasy and the new weird make extensive use of urban settings and employ its spectral quality as well as unique juxtaposition of inside and outside perspectives, of Self and Other, to critically address contemporary socio-cultural phenomena. Furthermore, urban fantasy, which especially highlights the unexplored, fantastic side of the city, is part of the broader contemporary trend of attempting to re-explore familiar urban spaces. The supernatural (and also urban fantasy), when considered through the lens of travel literature, also offers a potential creative solution to the increasing resemblance of contemporary cities, as according to Steve Pile, the phantasmagorias of different cities are unique and thus serve as distinguishing features. For example, while some urban phantasmagorias are more likely to feature ghosts and magic, others focus primarily on vampires (Pile 2005: 22). These sets of supernatural beliefs and elements then 'reveal the desires and fears of cities, and they do so differently in different places' (Pile 2005: 22). In other words,

the specific phantasmagorias of historical and geographically diverse cities [reveal] [...] the distinctive "structures of feeling" that their particular supernatural entities and elements foster, enabling us to engage not just with the physical environment, but with the emotional and imaginative topologies enfolded within them. Underlying this [approach], then, is the notion that spatial practices are discursive. (Bell 2019: 3)

In *Supernatural Cities. Enchantment, Anxiety and Spectrality*, Karl Bell provides a framework for exploring the different functions of magic and the supernatural in urban contexts. His analysis considers the aforementioned idea of a turn towards the past – and with it also a turn towards the supernatural (2019: 1) – an attempt to '[re-read and re-enchant] mundane spaces and places' (13). In addition, 'magical enchantment [...] serves as the most assertive gesture towards urban agency and a desire for, if not control, then at least supernaturally enriched comprehension of the urban environment' (Bell 2019: 18). Moreover, '[the] supernatural imaginary [...] articulates real-world urban social and political issues.' (Bell 2019: 2) This is particularly true for urban fantasy – an extremely political genre that demonstrates a pronounced awareness of contemporary social and political conflicts and issues as well as of spatial practices and peculiarities. For this reason, Karl Bell's statement that an exploration of the urban supernatural 'provides glimpses into *hidden geographies within the known city*, not necessarily unseen physical places so much as their affective typographies of emotion, memory, and influence,' (3; emphasis added) holds especially true for urban fantasy. Considering urban fantasy a form of armchair travelling is therefore far

from removing travel literature's aim to provide an objective portrayal of the depicted locations. Much rather, one can argue that it is precisely via the additional supernatural layer that urban fantasy allows for crucial new insights into these locations and their respective structures of feeling. The supernatural, according to Karl Bell,

[enables] urban dwellers to articulate and manage anxieties ranging from exterior concerns about socio-economic pressures and cultural or political tensions to interior concerns linked to a sense of spatial unease, environmental and historical guilt, communal breakdown and reconstruction, and perceived boundaries between the self and the other. (2)

Furthermore, it also fulfils an empowering role, as it provides spatial enrichment, contributes to urban community formation and identity politics, and provides a sense of (re-)enchantment related to the urban environment (Bell 2019: 2). The relationship between urban fantasy's protagonists and the urban setting is subject to a similar duality, as the characters are frequently torn between fear and anxiety related to the newly-discovered supernatural urban elements on the one hand, and a passion for or enchantment with the city, on the other.

Another function of the supernatural, mentioned above, can be to contribute to the depicted cities' uniqueness. Similar to the overall tendency to consider magic and the supernatural 'unmodern, even anti-modern' (Bell 2019: 1) this frequently involves a turn towards the past. Both travel writing and urban fantasy exhibit an interest in the connection of past and present. Paul Smethurst, e.g., argues that 'literary travel writing on cities provides an imaginative conduit to history to create a sense of the past living in the present' (2016: 752). In his view, travel literature is becoming more likely to turn towards cityscapes of the past, as modern cities are increasingly alike and thus hard to distinguish (765). Similar tropes relating to the past (re-)erupting in the present are also extremely popular in urban fantasy; amongst other reasons due to the strong influence of Gothic literature on this genre.

In addition to these functions of the supernatural, urban fantasy's second core distinguishing element, namely cities, provide especially suitable settings for urban fantasy, since they cater to the genre's tendency to critically reflect on contemporary socio-political issues and spatial practices. According to Julian Wolfreys, the city 'resists ontology, and [...] affirms its alterity, its multiplicities, its excesses, its heterogeneities' (qtd. in Bell 2019: 8). Jessica Tiffin describes the relationship between the postmodern city and its inhabitants as follows:

Urban space [...] is [...] [a] multivalent ground, its scale and density permitting a breadth of human and cultural tapestry which is, in today's age of globalisation and drifting populations, essentially hybrid. The city's multicultural space is, however, paradoxical in its promise of cultural belonging, in that the scope of its possibilities both includes and excludes. Many cities exhibit tensions between native and immigrant cultures; these obvious divisions act as an intensification of the more general process by which the city as a whole ultimately excludes any of its dwellers. The individual city dweller, whether native or immigrant, is unable to participate in the totality of the city because of its scale, and is thus always isolate against the ideal of belonging [...].
(2008: 33–34)

The contemporary metropolis is thus an ideal candidate for supernatural imagination and provides a striking mix of inside and outside perspectives, and of Self and Other.

The city is a paradox: it offers and refuses experience, estranges while it absorbs, promises belonging while simultaneously withholding it. In this, it both encapsulates and becomes emblematic of the experience of the individual in contemporary Western society, the difficult amalgamation of belonging and otherness which characterises a contemporary lifestyle which is increasingly migratory. (Tiffin 2008: 33–34)

Travel literature is characterised by a similar duality of perspectives. Firstly, it consists of a striking juxtaposition of different perspectives on the places it depicts, as Holland and Huggan point out. On the one hand, it aims to provide a realistic and objective documentation of a place (qtd. in Hulme and Youngs 2013: 173). On the other, 'it is always to some degree, consciously or not, a self-portrait – a record of [the] subjective individual [...] point of view' (Cooke 2016: 15) of the narrator and, potentially, the author. (Bale 2016: 153) Travel literature is therefore extremely suitable for exploring the cultural discourses involved in the formation and representation of Self and Other and rendering them visible. Secondly, travel literature is by definition providing an outside perspective on the places it depicts. Nonetheless, it attempts to present close, first-hand, insider insights into these places. As Michael Kowaleski states,

no matter how much "inside" description a traveller employs in evoking another culture and its people, a crucial element of all travel writing remains the author's "visitor" status. He or she remains, as the reader's surrogate, a cultural outsider who moves into,

through and finally beyond the places and events encountered. (qtd. in Hulme and Youngs 2013: 7)

However, the genre has recently moved towards more ‘self-conscious explorations of the ways language constructs the world through which one travels’ (Russell 2000: 11). Hence, the genre has the ability to ‘raise crucial questions about the ways we construct, use, and travel through [...] space’ (Russell 2000: 11). Alison Russell even postulates that postmodern travel literature has brought forth a new type of traveller who exhibits an increased self-critical stance on travelling (6–7): the post-tourist. This new type of traveller ‘knows that he is a tourist: not a time traveller when he goes somewhere historic, not an instant noble savage when he stays on a tropical beach [...]. Resolutely “realistic,” he cannot evade his condition of outsider’ (Feifer 1986: 271).

The trope of displacement and of insider and outsider positions is also of core relevance in many fantasy texts. Much like travel literature, fantasy

lends itself very well to thematising questions of identity. This is facilitated through journeys to other worlds or times, taking the protagonists out of their original contexts [...]. They discover anew who they are and develop a stronger sense of self, of their identity [...]. (Binder 2018: 122)

In urban fantasy, such journeys become more conceptual, as the characters are not required to travel far in order to explore an entirely new world – the fantastic realm lies right in front of their feet, in the city they live in. We can thus refer to this as a spatial condensation of the characters’ journey or displacement. Urban fantasy presents an interesting case in point due to its inversion of the trope of describing a foreigner’s journey to and perspective on a hitherto unknown travel destination. Urban fantasy is typically ‘told from within’ (Clute 1997: 975), i.e., from the perspective of a character living in or at least currently finding themselves in the depicted city. The protagonist in these texts already knows the city extremely well in the beginning of the text. However, they will then become aware of, gain access to, or become initiated into a part of the city that they were so far unaware of: the fantastic part of the city that stays hidden from the broad majority of society. Consequently, they will then need to (re-) adjust and familiarise themselves with this new version of the city, which typically results in turning from an ‘ordinary’ urban resident into what I refer to as an ‘urban expert’. After an initial stage of scepticism, confusion, and loss of orientation in response to the newly revealed fantastic side of the city, they become increasingly skilled at

perceiving, understanding, and navigating the complexity of the urban environment in a way that far exceeds the other characters' knowledge and skills in perceiving the hyper-complex, postmodern city. In other words, there is a movement from *assumed* urban expert to (disoriented) outsider and then to *true* urban expert, which results in a dual nature of the protagonist as both insider and outsider that very much resembles the role of the travel literature narrator/protagonist. This has a specific effect on the reader. Via the urban expert stock character, the reader is introduced to the supernatural, heterotopic alternative city. While the complex, palimpsestual, fragmented, and heterotopic urban fantasy settings induce a de-familiarising effect on the reader, it is via the urban expert character and their unique, all-encompassing perspective on the urban setting and their ability to combine the layered, palimpsestual fragments of the urban fantasy city into a meaningful whole that the reader gains a sense of re-orientation.

Urban fantasy thus commonly features two types of outsiders. Firstly, the protagonists who assume a position of outsider themselves, as they explore new places and hidden peoples and enter a fantastic urban environment with which they are not familiar. Secondly, at the same time, the humans and other creatures that inhabit these hidden, supernatural parts of the city simultaneously function as Others, as they are frequently social outsiders, outcasts, and minorities inhabiting abject spaces due to their subordinate role in society as second-class citizen or even entirely ignored individuals.

Consequently, in urban fantasy, the characters, and, by extension the readers, experience a unique mix of spatial de- and re-familiarisation. *The City and the City* is a special case in point, as it features both insiders/urban experts and their dislocation, as well as foreign visitors to the city. As the following analysis of *The City and the City* will reveal, it is precisely this juxtaposition of familiar places and spatial defamiliarisation alongside inside and outside perspectives on the urban setting that allows urban fantasy to depict and critically reflect on contemporary real-world discourses of identity, spatial practices, and socio-political issues. In this venture, urban fantasy literature appears to have benefitted from its inherently contemporary perspective, as it has e.g. been critically examining different forms of Othering ever since its emergence as a distinct literary genre or movement, typically assigned to the late 1980s (Mannolini-Winwood 2016: 5). Large parts of urban fantasy texts challenge identity- and culture-related prejudices and misrepresentations and attempt to tackle past and contemporary (socio-) political issues as well as social inequalities. In addition, these texts frequently challenge traditional concepts and representations of space

and point toward contradictions and injustices of underlying real-life spatial practices – something that also becomes obvious in many of China Miéville’s texts. Nonetheless, as e.g. exemplified by A. K. Benedict’s *Jonathan Dark or the Evidence of Ghosts*, this does of course not mean that these texts are entirely free from social and cultural stereotypes and cultural injustices – even when attempting to achieve the very opposite (Neef 2022: 249).

Many urban fantasy texts employ specific narrative styles as a means of representing diversity, complexity, and fragmentation of the contemporary metropolis and its inhabitants’ identities. This ties in with Bentley’s observations on literary representations of postmodern cities in general:

[The] postmodern city is defined in terms of the narrative experience of both its material and imaginative spaces. The point of observation thus complicates any fixed definition of the urban. Fiction is a privileged form in this context as it allows for the manipulation of point of view through the deployment of partial and plural narrative perspectives. The complexity of contemporary urban space is [...], [amongst others,] rendered in the postmodern novel through [...] multiple perspectives that produce heterogeneous representations of the city. (2014: 186)

Urban fantasy follows this tendency of employing multiperspectivity to represent the heterogeneity and the fragmented nature of both the inhabitants’ postmodern urban identities and their individual urban experiences. In other words, urban fantasy frequently employs multiperspectivity to represent the complex postmodern city as a mosaic consisting of a multitude of unique, fragmentary experiences of the same overarching superstructure.

There are characteristic forms and functions of multiperspectivity in urban fantasy. One example is employing a dual narrative voice to represent both the fantastic and the realistic side of the city. In these cases, one narrative voice typically focusses on the character re-exploring the city due to the newly revealed fantastic elements whilst the other provides the perspective of those individuals who have known the supernatural side of the city for much longer or, perhaps, for all their lives. China Miéville, for example, applies this technique in *King Rat*, where the intermissions of King Rat interrupt the main narrative that follows Saul’s re-exploration of both the city and his own identity. In other cases, such as in China Miéville’s *Perdido Street Station*, a dual narrative perspective serves the purpose of presenting the perspectives of two characters who are both familiar with the supernatural elements in the city, yet present unique outlooks on the city due to their different body,

identity, and thus diverging positions in society. In many urban fantasy texts this technique provides an insight into the perspective of an Othered individual – in the case of *Perdido Street Station*, this is Yagharek. By lending a voice to the diverse inhabitants of the postmodern metropolis and their individual experience, urban fantasy achieves more complex, heterogeneous representations of the city that do not turn a blind eye to the real-world issues faced by the city's minorities on a daily basis. As some of these themes and strategies are employed to present the struggles of individuals who are disadvantaged due to their national origin or ethnicity, urban fantasy frequently exhibits postcolonial undertones.

The characteristic combination of inside and outside perspectives as well as of defamiliarisation and (re-)orientation that becomes visible when exploring urban fantasy through the lens of travel literature is symptomatic of postmodern concepts of space, as 'a postmodern map of the world must do two contradictory things at once, rendering the sense of placelessness even as it suggests new ways of orientating ourselves to that placelessness.' (Connor qtd. in Russell 2000: 14) While urban fantasy is a form of literature, it can be considered a literary form of mapping or a means of representing urban geography nonetheless. This argument is supported by Rhona Trauvitch stating that we 'need [to broaden] [...] our conceptions of possible cartography' to include other forms of cartography, such as literature (2014: 212). She goes on to state:

Perhaps we can view mapping [...] less in terms of fixing an entity in spatiotemporal and ontological coordinates, and more in terms of understanding how this entity fits into our *Weltanschauung*. After all, our experiences, thoughts, and emotions cannot be mapped according to spatio-temporal and ontological coordinates, and literature, among the arts that feed into our experiences, thoughts, and emotions, should not be bound to these coordinates. (212)

Considering the above, viewing urban fantasy as travel literature may provide opportunities to depict and explore the culture and spatial practices of contemporary cities in a way that conventional travel literature is unable. The inclusion of supernatural elements in urban fantasy is thus by no means a hindrance to an otherwise truthful representation of contemporary urban society and culture but rather provides a new perspective on otherwise well-known environments that lends more depth to our impressions of these places and people, thereby allowing us to make visible nothing less than the contemporary *Weltanschauung*.

Travel and Displacement in China Miéville's *The City and the City*

Unlike many other urban fantasy novels that present the urban setting as a dual place that is divided into a supernatural, hidden and a well-known, realistic side, China Miéville's *The City and the City* presents a dual setting of another nature. Rather than presenting two parts of the same city, this novel is set in two distinct cities that preoccupy the same geographic location. While parts of the urban space are undisputedly in one of the two cities, other areas, known as 'cross-hatched' zones (Miéville 2011: 29), are assigned to either city by means of selective sensory perception. From childhood on, the citizens of Ul Qoma and Beszel have learned to un-see the respective other city and its inhabitants, as they would otherwise commit a crime called breach. The affiliation with the given city determines the citizens' identity and culture, as both cities harbour distinct architecture, language, and cultural manners, such as dressing styles (21; 93). In other words, space is a core determining factor of the Ul Qoman and Besz populations' identity. Thus, it comes as no surprise that Inspector Tyador Borlú's investigation into the murder of Mahalia Geary taking him across the border of the two cities raises numerous geopolitical questions and emphasises the cities' extraordinary spatial practices. While Borlú is required to cross the official border between the two cities, it turns out that Mahalia became obsessed with attempting to debunk the illusion of the two cities and to find a hidden third city – Orciny. Following the preceding theoretical considerations, Orciny serves as an example of a (fictional) supernatural, hidden city turning all 'regular' citizens into outsiders.

The novel is a striking mix of genres, which is not surprising for urban fantasy and new weird literature in general, and China Miéville, in particular, who is well-known for his attempt to subvert genre conventions in a truly postmodern manner. The text qualifies as crime novel and is frequently referred to as science fiction. However, seeing as it does not present a setting that is likely to be achieved and function in this way in the future or offer scientific or realistic explanations for the dual urban setting, I deem the terms immersive fantasy¹ and urban fantasy more appropriate. The novel, which – in typical crime novel form – is told entirely from Inspector Borlú's perspective, follows the trend of other urban fantasy novels to present a juxtaposition of insider and outsider perspectives on the cities. However, it presents minor changes to the characteristic plot structure depicted above. In addition, the concept of spatial compression in this novel is taken to an extreme – even when compared to other urban fantasy texts – as the bipartite society can experience the respective other city

without even moving a single meter. Instead, all that is required in order to perceive and thus visit the other city is a mere change in perception. It is for this reason that such behaviour – referred to as breach – is strictly prohibited and with it come manifold legal, cultural, and bureaucratic mechanisms to artificially maintain the cities' division. For example, tourists visiting one of the cities are required to undergo mandatory training to enable them to navigate the unique spatial practices of Ul Qoma and Beszel (69; 93). These mechanisms, which contribute to maintaining stereotypes and fixed cultural identities, clearly mirror real-world social and cultural stereotypes:

Not very long ago the equivalent tests would have involved being asked about the different national character of Ul Qomans, and judging who from various pictures with stereotyped physiognomies was Ul Qoman, Besz, or "Other" (Jewish, Muslim, Russian, Greek, whatever, depending on the ethnic anxieties of the time) (161).

The extreme spatial compression consequently renders mundane concepts of space, especially borders, absurd. In addition, it underscores similar real-world daily social and spatial practices such as willingly 'un-seeing' the homeless in the streets or deeming our next-door neighbour an Other due to arbitrary categories such as religion, national origin, culture, or ethnicity.

While Borlú also sets out as someone well-accustomed to his home city (Beszel), he becomes an outsider when his job requires him to travel across the border to Ul Qoma. It is for this reason that he cooperates with another inspector from Ul Qoma, as it is only with his help that Borlú is able to orient himself in this city. This cooperation as well as his gradual learning process allow him to slowly re-gain a sense of orientation. In addition, Borlú's linear journey ultimately ends with gaining simultaneous access to both cities and understanding the complex, fragmented, and layered nature of the different cities better than most inhabitants of either city. In other words, his ability to combine the urban fragments into a meaningful whole allows him to re-gain his orientation and become familiar with the cities once again. However, his newly gained insights into the complexities of urban space leave him questioning both his own identity and the very nature of the space he lives in: 'We are all philosophers here where I am, and we debate among many other things the question of where it is that we live' (373). Consequently, Borlú simultaneously and paradoxically experiences a loss of and an increase in orientation, a sense of placelessness and a sense of understanding the urban space unlike most others. The novel's protagonist thus serves as a convincing

literary representation of the real-life city's tendency to both exclude and include, as described by Tiffin. Much like the journey undertaken by Borlú, the novel takes said urban spatial practices and socio-cultural phenomena to an extreme by describing an intense spatial condensation. The novel thus serves as a literary example of Karl Bell's remarks on how supernatural imagination can be employed to critically explore and comment on real-world urban social and political issues (2019: 2), allowing the reader to view their own experiences from a different angle and to re-explore them via the characters' dual perspective on urban space and spatial practices. Yet, despite this potentially confusing dual state, Borlú is portrayed as content. The novel's conclusion thus seems to imply that blindly accepting the largely arbitrary man-made borders that are part of our daily lives keep us from achieving true contentment, or, at the very least, reaching a state of genuine truth.

In addition to the complex perspective on the cities that is achieved via the protagonist's journey and the narrative perspective, the novel supports these themes by depicting different types of foreign visitors to the cities. The novel depicts the different processes undertaken for those that do not originate from either Beszel or Ul Qoma, such as tourists (Miéville 2011: 93), Mahalia's parents visiting after her passing, foreigners immigrating to one of the cities (188), and foreign students. The novel directly connects their outsider status with an increased likelihood of committing breach:

You can't avoid all breach, not in a place like this, and not with kids like these. These aren't locals, and I don't care how much training you give them, they've never seen anything like this before. [...] You think they're going to play loyal? (225)

It is a similar curiosity that initially drives Mahalia to start researching the possibility of a third, hidden city. The novel's inclusion of foreign visitors to the city and their disruptive power is thus not merely a narrative strategy for explaining the cities' spatial practices and the laws surrounding breach but also a core plot element. This becomes especially obvious in the final stages of the novel, when Bowden is revealed as the murderer of Mahalia. Ultimately, it is Bowden's status as an outsider (he is originally from Canada and only based in Ul Qoma) that enables him to gain outstanding expertise in the cultural and spatial practices of the people of Ul Qoma and Beszel and thus walk between the two cities, i.e. in the liminal space that is neither subject to Ul Qoman nor to Besz legislation. "How could he do that? Walk like that?" "He's been a student of the cities," Ashil said. "Maybe it took an outsider to really see how citizens mark themselves, so as to walk between it" (368). In this

manner, *The City and the City* follows a similar pattern that is also described by Stefanie Lethbridge with respect to Ben Aaronovitch's *Rivers of London* and that can be observed in many urban fantasy texts. There is a clear tendency in these texts to promote hybridity, diversity, and multiculturalism. This is also supported by the novel's discussion of different groups and individuals fighting for a unification of the two cities as well as by the depiction of a fruitful cooperation between investigators from both cities in order to tackle an overarching, cross-border issue.

Conclusion

The theoretical considerations of this article as well as the exemplary analysis of China Miéville's *The City and the City* have demonstrated the potential of applying a new approach to urban fantasy – namely considering it in the context of armchair travelling/travel literature – for exploring the genre's tendency to critically reflect on contemporary spatial practices as well as socio-political discourses and anxieties. Simultaneously, the supernatural elements of the texts' settings enable the readers to fulfil a contemporary desire to re-explore the real-world urban environment and thus provide opportunities for a re-enchantment of the readers with these spaces. The subsequent exploration of the themes of travel and displacement in *The City and the City* has revealed that the novel employs a range of foreign characters as visitors to the city to provide a crucial addition to the domestic characters' perspective on the city. By juxtaposing inside and outside perspectives on the city, the text follows an overarching trend of urban fantasy to represent the extremely fragmented, complex, multicultural, and diverse nature of the contemporary metropolis and its inhabitants from diverging, individual angles.

While John Clute defines urban fantasy as an account of an experience set in a city and told from within (Clute 1997: 975), this essay advocates for a more nuanced definition. This should account for the many instances of urban fantasy juxtaposing inside and outside perspectives on the urban setting, which is reminiscent of travel literature's conundrum of aiming to provide both a personal report of an outsider exploring a new place and a well-informed, objective, and factual insider perspective at the same time. Urban fantasy, with its unique combination of realistic and fantastic elements of the urban setting may not seem like a likely candidate, but it proves to be an especially suitable genre for solving some of the challenges faced by contemporary travel literature. Not only can it provide a potential source

of re-enchantment with the ordinary real-world city but also a strikingly critical and astute representation of contemporary socio-political discourses and spatial practices, thus confirming Karl Bell's proposition that magical enchantment demonstrates an underlying desire for ameliorating our comprehension of the urban environment (Bell 2019: 18), in this case, the postmodern metropolis.

Endnotes

¹ Farah Mendlesohn defines immersive fantasy as fantasy that 'presents the fantastic without comment as the norm both for the protagonists and for the reader: we sit on the protagonists' shoulders and [...] we are not provided with an explanatory narrative.' (2002: 174) Her definition also supports considering *The City as the City* an immersive fantasy, as just as in *Perdido Street Station*, the setting is already fantastic rather than introduced via an intrusion that brings about a sense of wonder or surprise on behalf of the characters. (174) This also sets the novel apart from many other urban fantasy novels, in which the supernatural is hidden from the majority of the urban inhabitants and thus causes a sense of disbelief, shock, and surprise in the protagonists when they are first confronted with it.

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