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# 26 China Miéville, *Embassytown* (2011)

**Abstract:** The contribution discusses China Miéville's Science Fiction novel *Embassytown* (2011). In the first section (Context: Author, Œuvre, Movement), after a brief overview of Miéville's writing, it sketches the literary history of Weird Fiction and attempts to place both writer and novel in this context. Section two (Basic Coordinates: Central Topics and Concerns) focusses on *Embassytown*'s obsession with language and on its blend of space opera and (post)colonial notions. The third section (Aesthetics: Narrative and Literary Strategies) sheds light on the novel's narrative strategies, most importantly its intricate design of sequential pieces and its refusal to describe the indescribable – both of which are, as will be demonstrated, again conducive to the text's linguistic concerns. The final section (Reception and Theoretical Perspectives) provides a survey of contemporary research on Miéville's œuvre by emphasising his exchanges with the academic world as well as the impact of fan culture attempts to discuss and visualise his work.

**Keywords:** Weird Fiction, Science Fiction, postcolonialism, cognitive estrangement, language

## 1 Context: Author, Œuvre, Movement

The first striking aspect about Miéville as a writer is his double-tracked career. On the one hand, he is a significant figure in the academic and political left-wing domain: besides being a member of the International Socialist Organisation and one of the editors of the Marxist journal *Historical Materialism*, this side of Miéville is probably best known through his PhD thesis entitled *Between Equal Rights: A Marxist Theory of International Law* (2005). On the other hand, Miéville stands as the contemporary spearhead of the so-called New Weird (see below). His consistently expanding œuvre comprises mostly novels, covering a vast range of genres (↗ 3 Genres) and literary modes, and all of them aptly demonstrate the outstanding capacities of twenty-first century fiction. His debut novel, *King Rat* (1998), already paved the way for Miéville's remarkable blends of fantasy and horror set in an urban environment, thus moving away from the classical (and reactionary) modes of Tolkienian fantasy as observed in academia since Darko Suvin's *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979). His next major project was the Bas-lag trilogy (*Perdido Street Station* [2000]; *The Scar* [2002]; *Iron Council* [2004]) which further elaborated on notions of urban fantasy horror with a good dash of steampunk thrown into the mix. He also explored new ways of writing children's literature in *Un Lun Dun* (2007) and *Railsea* (2012). In 2009, Miéville

turned to the detective novel by writing and publishing *The City & The City,* which was awarded no less than five literary prizes and tied for a sixth while also receiving more critical acclaim from academics than any other of his works up to this point. The most obvious display of his roots in the literary Weird is *Kraken* (2010), a dark comedy heavily indebted to H. P. Lovecraft's myth of Cthulhu. *Embassytown* (2011), deeply concerned with the impact of language on sentient species and postcolonialism alike, is Miéville's most striking venture into the realm of SF. Additionally, he published three short story/novella collections (*Looking for Jake* [2005]; *The Apology Chapbook* [2013]; *Three Moments of an Explosion: Stories* [2015]). Occasionally, Miéville also moved into comics (*Hellblazer* #250 [1988]; *Justice League* #23.3 [2011]; *Dial H* [2012–2013]). When reading Miéville, it very soon becomes obvious how his dedication to Marxist dialectics infuses his entire œuvre since virtually all texts, it has been argued, "offer a striking example of twenty-first century literature's ability to imagine political alternatives at a time of crisis for leftist ideas within the political realm" (Edwards and Venezia 2015, 8). In a way, this statement also hints at the reasons why Miéville should be a part of any *Handbook of the English Novel*: because his works demonstrate such a vast variety of different genres seamlessly woven together while simultaneously "invit[ing] us to reflect upon the role of fiction within the broader public sphere and to consider what it is that the contemporary literary imagine might achieve, which such non-fictional discourses as philosophy and political debate are unable to articulate" (Edwards and Venezia 2015, 8).

Weird Fiction as a thriving genre has been aptly described by Miéville himself in *The Routledge Companion to Science Fiction*. Its origins are usually traced back to the publication of the *Weird Tales* pulp magazine in 1923, but Miéville also hints at an even earlier start in the late nineteenth century. H. P. Lovecraft is usually considered to be the genre's most influential representative, but it includes dozens of writers associated with the *Weird Tales* cycle or its ideas, for instance Clark Ashton Smith, Algernon Blackwood, William Hope Hodgson, Arthur Machen, or M. R. James, to name but a few. "Weird Fiction is usually, roughly, conceived of as a rather breathless and generically slippery macabre fiction, a dark fantastic ('horror' plus 'fantasy') often featuring non-traditional alien monsters (thus plus 'science fiction')" (Miéville 2009, 510). The result, according to Miéville, is the genre's "oscillation between serious, abstract ideas and a vivid postpulp narrative" (Naimon 2011, 59). Thus, Weird Fiction's vibrant productivity on the level of genre is already made transparent and problematized at the same time: it is frequently stated by reviewers and researchers alike that Weird Fiction in general, and Miéville's Weird Fiction in particular, transcends genre (see Manglis 2011, n. pag.). Certainly, the Weird is fed by horror, fantasy, Science Fiction, steampunk etc. – but according to Miéville, that is not really the point. Genres, according to him, as helpful and traditional as they are, have always been feeding on each other and, more importantly, this is primarily the case because genres always impose fairly blurry categories on texts; thus, writers of Weird Fiction embrace the very basic idea of their mode of writing "as a tradition that glories in that blurriness" (Naimon 2011,

64) instead of tearing down barriers which only need to be taken down because they have been established somewhat arbitrarily in the first place. Thus, Weird Fiction, even in its beginnings (and potentially peaking in Miéville's works), already anticipated the post-Suvinian liberating moment which most prominently effaced the hierarchical imbalance between fantasy and Science Fiction (see Edwards and Venezia 2015, 16 and Freedman 2015, 143–154). Miéville rather takes issue with his work being described as transcending genre in the sense that his work is not, say, Science Fiction proper, but Science Fiction evolving into literary (as in high-brow realist/modernist/ postmodernist) fiction, his point being that the fantastic is, in various ways, much more capable to "pick at the skin of the real world" (Naimon 2011, 63) due to its specific strategies of estrangement used as a productive testing ground for discussing actual-world issues, be they political, philosophical, theological, economic, or epistemological. In this context, the fantastic in general and Miéville's œuvre in particular can be closely associated with Michael Löwy's concept of critical irrealism – a mode of writing attempting to come to terms with actual-world problems, but on the grounds of an irrealist setting which is nevertheless represented in a realist fashion (see Löwy 2010).

In terms of poetics, Weird Fiction primarily functions as "a placeholder for the unrepresentable" (Miéville 2008, 111) and, simultaneously, as an escape from the known. Be it the inconceivable idea of an entity such as Cthulhu or the impossibility to fully describe and grasp the appearance of the Hosts in *Embassytown*: virtually all monsters and entities of Weird Fiction "are a radical break with anything from a folkloric tradition", a break most obvious in "Weird Fiction's obsession with the tentacle, a limb-type absent from European folklore and the traditional Gothic" (Miéville 2009, 512). Not only are the monsters different from their European predecessors – the inability to fully describe them also emphasises humankind's incapability to conceptualise the greater cosmic (un)design of the sublime which cannot be understood: "The focus is on *awe*, and its undermining of the quotidian. This obsession with numinosity under the everyday is at the heart of Weird Fiction" (Miéville 2009, 510), and it is often present as part of the texts' narrative strategies which struggle with or celebrate the Weird's underlying epistemological insecurity by asking a very fundamental question: How does one describe the indescribable in words? In this basic framework, scholars tend to assert a shift in focus from the Haute Weird spanning from 1880 to 1940 (see Miéville 2009, 510) and the New Weird, which builds on its predecessors while also becoming indebted to 1960s and 1970s Science Fiction, horror fiction of the 1980s, and the cultural movement of Surrealism (see Gordon 2003, 357). The New Weird, it is argued, maintains the "sublime terror of early pulp monsters" while "mixing it up with an updated sensibility that had become fascinated with the monsters themselves, in addition to the supernatural terror they inspired" (Edwards and Venezia 2015, 2–3). It is exactly due to this fascination with the monster itself, in conjunction with Miéville's stunning "taxonomic playfulness" (Edwards and Venezia 2015, 1) aiming at representing life forms so alien that language itself seems to capit-

ulate in its descriptive function, that *Embassytown* (rather than the highly decorated *The City & The City*) has been chosen for inclusion in this handbook.

# 2 Basic Coordinates: Central Topics and Concerns

*Embassytown* is set in a far future in which the human race is still eager to colonise new planets. The novel's main protagonist and sole narrator is Avice Benner Cho, a female human who lives on the rather recently colonised planet Arieka located at the rim of human expansion. There, a small colony named Embassytown has been established within a larger alien city hub inhabited by the native Ariekei (often referred to as 'Hosts' by the Embassytowners). Despite Arieka being quite far away from the rest of human civilisation it is, due to is strategic position (granting access to further unexplored systems) and the Hosts's biorigging technology (including living implants, data chips, and breathing architecture), of vital importance to the elusive multi-planetary faction called Bremen located on Dagostin of which Arieka is a colony. Human existence on Arieka is completely dependent on a series of biorigging products (including so-called aeoli which enable humans to breathe the planet's otherwise poisonous air) and, of course, on the Hosts's consent. Interracial contact, despite this vital exchange, is only possible via Ambassadors, genetically created pairs of human twins, because the Language of the Ariekei (capitalised throughout the novel text) is so utterly different from any other language that communication is virtually impossible. The power relations between Ariekei and humans are turned around as the Ariekei become addicted to Bremen's most recent Ambassador's EzRa's way of speaking Language. The spreading addiction brings about the slow collapse of interracial relations as the Hosts neglect their work which is necessary to maintain human existence on the planet; the mounting resistance on the Hosts's part ultimately turns into a revolution by a splinter of group of Hosts who try to free themselves and their fellows from their addiction by tearing off their so-called fanwings (the limb/organ roughly equivalent to the human ear) – and by eliminating the humans, who brought it to their planet after all.

## 2.1 Language and language

Primarily, *Embassytown* is a novel about various aspects of language: referentiality, figural speech, instrumentalisation of language and the resulting means of control and repression, but it also negotiates language as a tool of power, resistance and progress. These major notions hinge on the basic communication problem between the Embassytowners and the Hosts. While the humans in the novel seem to speak a – by the readers' standards – rather straightforward language called Anglo-Ubiq,

"evidently a far-future descendant of the modern English that we know" (Freedman 2015, 116), the Hosts's Language is unique – in fact, it is so unique that it defies the very basic principle of any human language which is provided by Miéville in the form of a quote by Walter Benjamin (taken from "Language as Such and on the Language of Man" from 1916) preceding the story: "The word must communicate *something* (other than itself)". This is exactly what words in Language do *not* do. Language is a language that does not signify; thus, only things which actually exist can be conceived of.

Here, Miéville delves deeply into linguistic theory: beyond the basic question to what extent language determines thought (most prominent in the so-called Sapir-Whorf hypothesis; see Nediger 2014, 21–22), Language is primarily influenced by notions of reference and signification, the cornerstones of modern linguistics as established by Ferdinand de Saussure, one of the most influential linguists of the twentieth century. According to de Saussure, there is a fragile stance "both between language and extra-linguistic reality, and within language itself" (Freedman 2015, 106). De Saussure, in *Course in General Linguistics* (1966 [1916]), describes the relationship between the word itself as a linguistic sign (say, the word "tea") and the referent the word refers to. As emphasised ever since in linguistics, the relation between these two items is arbitrary: the word "tea" might as well refer to something completely different, and tea might be described by the word "car". There is no inherent, fixed relation between sign and referent – just the one English native speakers, by convention, have agreed on. However, the sign itself is a bit more complex. It consists of the signifier (the written, spoken, or drawn representation) and the signified (the mental concept associated with the signifier in the human mind). And again, the relation is arbitrary: the three letters and the two sounds making up the word "tea" do not in any way inherently refer to the mental concept of tea: "Like referentiality, signification is held together by a structure of differentials" (Freedman 2015, 107). Additionally, as hinted at by Carl Freedman, language in itself is not too stable. Most prominently in the deconstruction of de Saussure's theory by Jacques Derrida, the (allegedly) fixed relationship between a sign and a referent is only possible because the sign is distinguished from all others signs ("tea" refers to something different from what "car" refers to). Even worse, the meaning of any word can only be explained by turning to other words, which then again use other words for definition and description. In short, "signification flickers equivocally" since "[i]n Derrida's terminology, there is no transcendental signified that controls or holds in place the process of signification" (Freedman 2015, 108). Thus, Language in *Embassytown* even goes beyond Derrida because what is at stake in Language is "not the deconstruction of the distinction between signifier and signified but the absence of that distinction altogether and *tout court*" (Freedman 2015, 117). "Language – with the capital L – is thus without polysemy: each word can mean one thing and one thing alone, since meaning derives not from a system of differences à la Saussure, but from the one-to-one correspondence of original thought/thing and word" (Vint 2015, 53).

All these realisations display both the drawbacks as well as the assets of human language: On the one hand, the equivocal flickering of language inevitably leads to misunderstandings, miscommunication, lies, and arguments about what any given word should mean, in which context it should or should not be used, and who is in charge of controlling the meaning of words. On the other hand, though, a flickering language also means (!) that it bears a lot of potential for creativity (artistic combinations, puns, expressing something in different ways) as well as for evolution or at least productive change, since speakers of a 'living' language will always abandon certain words which have become unnecessary and coin new ones in order to describe newly emerging phenomena in the world that demand signification. The Hosts' Language, in its purest and most static form, does not offer these possibilities. One character in particular, a linguist named Scile, is fascinated by Language's purity and is eager to preserve it. He "praises Language as the only mode of discourse of which Hegel's (or, as he puts it, 'some philosopher's') romantic-idealist assertion is true: 'The human voice can apprehend itself as the sounding of the soul itself'" (Freedman 2015, 117). While his wife Avice, the novel's main protagonist and narrator, mocks Language as "the language of God. The Ariekei are angels. Scile's their messenger, maybe. And now it's the fall" (265),[1] this is exactly Scile's opinion. The religious vocabulary used also alludes to biblical notions of humankind's divine language before the Fall of Man (see Freedman 2015, 121) – and Scile, it seems, against the backdrop of humankind's fall, is trying to prevent the Hosts' fall from linguistic divinity.

However, the novel demonstrates that, at the time of the events described in *Embassytown*, Language has already begun to change, and that Scile is fighting a battle already lost. Even his murder of Surl Tesh-echer, one of the most progressive Hosts who indulge in Anglo-Ubiq's introduction of lies and figural speech to the Ariekei, is ultimately insufficient to prevent Language's progression from reference to signification. This progression hinges on two developments, one of them being imported through the Hosts' contact to humans (and, possibly, other species speaking signifying languages), the other being a feature apparently deeply embedded into Language before the first humans landed on Arieka. First, the Hosts are fascinated by the idea of lying available in language – so fascinated, in fact, that they celebrate the principle of lying. The Hosts hold so-called Festivals of Lies – or, as Avice calls them with a brief digression into Welsh, "eisteddfods of mendacity" (96) – where the most daring Hosts prod Language's boundaries by trying to lie (i.e. to state something that is untrue) in a Language that does conceptually deny this very idea (because it only allows to conceive of things that actually exist). Thus, "the lie is so exciting because the listeners simultaneously believe it (because what is spoken in Language is, almost by definition, true) and disbelieve it (because they independently know it to be false),

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**1** Unless otherwise indicated, page references in brackets without further designation refer to Miéville 2011.

which produces an extreme form of cognitive dissonance" (Nediger 2014, 31). Several techniques are used, most of which can rather be treated as *approximations* of genuine lies without ever getting there. For example, a common technique is to either speak so slowly that the words are barely understood as belonging together; the opposite strategy is "quick-lying" (149): To speak so quickly that the lie comes out too fast for the speaker to realise it before it is out. While these only come close to being proper lies, they at least hint at the possibility of lying in Language because of "the fact that these noises can be *heard* as untruths by the listening Hosts" (Freedman 2015, 121). The truly pioneering lie, though, is performed by the aforementioned Surl Tesh-echer in a three-step sequence. He starts with the utterance "Before the humans came we didn't speak so much of certain things", which he then repeats while dropping the end of the sentence: "Before the humans came we didn't speak so much" (148); ultimately, the Host reduces the utterance to an outright lie: "Before the humans came we didn't speak" (149), which is enough to cause a riot at the Festival.

The second transition of Language into signification, though, started much earlier, and it is bound to how the Hosts themselves develop Language. "In Language, with the capital L, words *are* the things to which they point and the only way to make something speakable is to make it exist" (Vint 2015, 52). Therefore, the Hosts indulge in the creation of similes by means of performance, usually with the help of Embassy-towners, and it is a great honour to be part of or embody a simile. Similes, of course, are possible in Language because "the simile is the one figure of rhetoric that does not assert a literal truth. The simile simply asserts that one thing is *like* another" (Freedman 2015, 119). Avice, the main protagonist, was made a simile in her childhood by being subject to the following performance: "*There was a human girl who in pain ate what was given her in an old room built for eating in which eating had not happened for a time*" (28), which is later shortened to "the girl who ate what was given her". Thus, the Hosts are then able to use this simile in another context: X is like the girl who ate what was given her. Similarly, other humans also become similes; in at least one case, the simile is in simple present, the result being that the act of "making do" (134) has to be repeated on a regular basis so the simile can continue to exist: "*the man who swims with fishes every week*" (124). As the story progresses, Avice becomes dissatisfied with being a simile and, in order to become a metaphor (see 345), she pushes Language further toward signification. It is an extremely exhausting process for the first Host (called "Spanish Dancer" by Avice) to understand and speak figural utterances in Language – but in the end, the way is paved for an entirely new conceptual grasp on (and understanding of) the world, the trigger being that metaphors in particular and figural language in general depend on the aforementioned flickering relationship between signifier and signified.

## 2.2  Two Mouths, One Mind

Besides the fact that human languages and Language are so different with regard to referentiality and signification, there is another serious problem for any cross-species communication: The Hosts have two mouths, and both mouths are necessary for speaking Language. More to the point, these two mouths need to speak two different utterances simultaneously with one mind behind both utterances. This 'divergent stereo' is the reason why Ambassadors need to be created and trained in order to make contact: a singular human is, after sufficient training, able to understand Language without too much effort (see 58–59); two ordinary humans may be able to speak with two mouths, but they are unable to convey the underlying, unifying idea since they are thinking (and speaking) with two independent minds. In fact, Hosts themselves are unable to understand recordings of their own utterances because any utterance "needs a mind behind it" (63). In contrast, the genetically created Ambassador twins come as close to two minds thinking as one as possible.

How does one represent a language spoken by two mouths simultaneously in narrative fiction? *Embassytown* cleverly employs mathematical fractions as a very stunning strategy of graphic representation. The name Surl Tesh-echer, when spoken in Language, is expressed as $\frac{surl}{tesh\ echer}$, the numerator being referred to as "Cut" while the denominator is called the "Turn" (64). In itself, this attempt to represent an utterly alien language in which lying is impossible ties in with SF's more general, Suvinian strategy of cognitive estrangement of language as we know and describe it. Thus, "the aesthetic project of *Embassytown* is to make this impossibility into what Aristotle would call a 'probable impossibility' [...], one that is delineated with such plausibility as to induce a quasi-Coleridgean suspension of disbelief in the reader" (Freedman 2015, 110). In terms of genre, this attempt solidifies *Embassytown* as space opera at its best because it "tackle[s] cognitive issues that could not be handled, or handled so well, in any other kind of fiction" (Freedman 2015, 112).

Furthermore, once the Hosts cannot only use figural language but also learn other languages since they understood the basics of signification, the representation in fractions also elucidates the Hosts' new options to creatively play with words. Especially Spanish Dancer (better: $\frac{spanish}{dancer}$), the Host closest to Avice, displays the Hosts' never-ending craving for developing Language, of which the similes were only the most humble beginning. Being asked whether it regrets having learned to lie, it ambiguously answers: "$\frac{I\ regret\ nothing}{I\ regret}$" (403). Avice is even more pleased by Spanish Dancer's playful variations of the Anglo-Ubiq word "metaphor" not simply as "$\frac{metaphor}{metaphor}$," but as "$\frac{lie\ that\ truths}{lie\ that\ truths}$" or "$\frac{truthing}{lie}$" (395), which adroitly sums up the basic concept of the metaphor stating a lie which nevertheless points at a truth. In more grandiose terms: "Spanish Dancer has thus arrived at what, on earth, has always been – at least since Aristotle's refutation of Plato's attack on mimesis – the classic justification for

fiction: That it departs from truth in the literal sense only to tell the truth in some more indirect, more complex, and more profound way" (Freedman 2015, 125). The most striking use of mathematical fractions, however, occurs at the very end of the novel as the meaning of "Embassytown" itself has changed for both humans and hosts. While before, Embassytown referred to the human enclave within the Ariekei city, it now comprises the entire urban area, and this new sense of unity and community is expressed as "$\frac{embassy}{town}$", "$\frac{town}{embassy}$" (here, the former, established fissures are still visible graphically) – or, most aptly, as "$\frac{embassytown}{embassytown}$" (405).

## 2.3  Postcolonialism at the End of the Galaxy

*Embassytown*'s profound exploration of the fundamentals of language (and Language) is, on the story level, embedded in a more typical action-adventure of a small, outnumbered colony on a distant planet fighting against wave after wave of alien attackers who try to wipe the colony off the map. This situation, as mentioned earlier, is brought about by the larger frame narrative of Embassytown's existence as a colony of Bremen. While usually Embassytown breeds its own Ambassadors (a fact which ensures the colony's exceptional position and autonomy), EzRa is sent to Arieka from Bremen to break the town's monopoly. Direct access to the Hosts would enable Bremen to exploit Arieka's massive supply of biorigging technology without Embassytown as an intermediary. Thus, in a colonial context the Hosts can be read as an allusion to earlier imaginations of noble natives uncontaminated by the effects of civilisation (or alternatively, as the ultimate 'other', existing in an essentialised opposition to the humanly known; see Sarkowsky and Schulze-Engler 2012, 302), Bremen can be read as the colonial master nation, and Embassytown functions as a peculiar in-between colony having contact to both sides, its major asset being its unique Ambassadors. Against the hope of Bremen's executives, EzRa turns out be an imperfect attempt to copy local Ambassadors, and their slight imperfection in mind and voice proves to be so irritating and fascinating for the Hosts that they get addicted to EzRa's voice. Very soon, the addiction spreads and turns the Ariekei into desperate junkies constantly hungry for new words which are fed to them in public speeches and, after Ez's murder of Ra, are also passed around in the form of recordings because there is no new/genuine material anymore.

A growing number of Hosts, though, is trying to fight the addiction by tearing off their and other Hosts' fanwings so that they become unable to hear the painful pleasures brought about by EzRa's speeches. Soon, this group of rebels is called the Absurd – a fairly ambiguous name: the prefix 'Ab' itself primarily refers to the utter alterity of these muted and mutilated Hosts out for a kill as a group while being unable to communicate with each other (obviously, they cannot speak to each other anymore, and Language does not feature a writing system either). Thus, 'Ab' is also

strongly linked with Miéville's aesthetics of the Weird as something that 'has *never been known*' (in contrast to the rather suppressed and re-emerging notion of the uncanny; see Tranter 2012, 424). On the other hand, the syllable 'surd' is a pun on the Latin word *surdus* for 'deaf' (see Tranter 2012, 425). As their numbers grow, the Absurd as the 'deaf who have never been known because they are so utterly alien' start to close in on Embassytown and its human inhabitants, who can only expect belated and half-hearted support from their colonial Bremen masters. Luckily, the revolution is brought to an end by Avice and her ragtag group of likeminded individuals: shortly before the ultimate assault of the Absurd, Avice, in the aforementioned linguistic revolution, manages to teach metaphorical speech to the Host Spanish Dancer, who is then able to communicate with the Absurd and start 'The Parley' (as indicated by the title of Part Eight, 347). However, in order to understand Spanish Dancer, a second linguistic or mental revolution is necessary: the Absurd, in absence of their fanwings, start to use their giftwings for communication; obviously, a rebel army needs some means of communication in order to be a functioning army in the first place – and the Absurd army's attacks are performed with 'freakish precision' (344) enabled by their invention of body language:

> They were communicating: there was no other explanation for such efficient murder. Language-less, they still needed and made community, though they might not have known that's what they were doing [...]. I'd seen them gesticulate. Their commandos or commanders indicating with their giftwings. The Absurd had invented pointing. With the point they'd conceived a *that*. They'd given the jag of the body, the out-thrust limb, power to refer. That *that* was the key. From it had followed other soundless words. *That. That? No, not that: that.* (344)

By pointing, signification enters Language beyond Spanish Dancer's transition from similes to metaphors. Language is thus freed from its rigid conceptual constraints as soon as the deictic element "that" starts to soften the formerly rock-solid relation between word and referent, between signifier and signified:

> Each word of Language meant just what it meant. Polysemy or ambiguity were impossible and with them most tropes that made other languages languages at all. But *that*ness faces every way: it's flexible because it's empty, a universal equivalent. *That* always means *and not that other*, too. [...] It was base and present tense. But its initial single word was actually two: *that* and *not-that*. And from that tiny and primal vocabulary, the motor of that antithesis spun out other concepts: me, you, others. (344)

Now that the Absurd have found a signifying way of communication, another barrier falls, too. Before, they were unable to identify sounds produced by humans as language at all – but the concept of thatness lets them see that humans can also use thatness. The Absurd begin to recognise human speech as communication and, as a consequence, humans as a sentient species worth a diplomatic parley in the first place.

As pointed out by Nediger, *Embassytown*'s overall obsession with language is also striking in the context of colonialism and postcolonial studies because "[d]etailed descriptions of language are often conspicuously absent from the various non-fictional accounts of colonial encounters we have available to us" (Nediger 2014, 19) – which is quite surprising with regard to postcolonialism's "writing back paradigm [which generally] sees literature in terms of poststructuralist accounts of language and literature, for example by stressing the necessary indeterminacy of language produced by the ambiguous relationship between signifier and signified [!]" (Sarkowsky and Schulze-Engler 2012, 307). And even then, issues of language are hardly ever presented in such depth as in Miéville's novel. The reason for *Embassytown*'s highly productive engagement with language in a (post)colonial context stems from its unifying but nevertheless ambiguous ending: the colonised Hosts do not remain the pure, 'noble savages' they had been, and the colonising Embassytowners do not stay the heroic or greedy occupiers they may have started out as. On the one hand, the story can be read as a positive process of cultural formation in the sense of postcolonialist transculturality (see Sarkowsky and Schulze-Engler 2012, 309; ↗ 5 The Burden of Representation): Communication enables the aforementioned new sense of community, expressed in the creation of the new double word $\frac{embassytown}{embassytown}$, and this new sense of community can be read as a new "openness of a cultural in-between [which] produces unexpected effects that fundamentally question the possibility of fixed boundaries between cultures" (Sarkowsky and Schulze-Engler 2012, 309). On the other hand, the price to be paid, especially by the Hosts, is high. Signification has torn down language barriers and enabled contact, communication, and community, but it also irrevocably changed Language – from Scile's point of view, Language's essence itself has been destroyed. The question then is whether the advent of signification in Language also leads to a succumbing of the Hosts' culture and identity to the colonisers' because arguably, changing Language strips away their singularity and replaced it with human ways of thinking as Arieka is absorbed by the epistemology of the spreading human empire. In the novel, the Fall of Language and the new sense of unity uneasily hover next to each other. In this "morally opaque tentacular" (Miéville 2008, 111), the connection to the overall conception of Weird Fiction is highlighted again:

> In this sense, the Weird may be understood as the literary equivalent of breach: the moment when disparate and wholly incompatible entities are yoked together into a bastardized assemblage which cannot be reconciled into any form of union, but jostle uneasily. Such a breach transgresses taxonomies, linguistic parameters, species boundaries, and philosophical precepts. It seeks to name new conjunctions through a process of lexical articulation [...]. (Edwards and Venezia 2015, 14)

Such an understanding of Weird Fiction in general and *Embassytown* in particular reveals the full potential of the genre and of Miéville as a writer – beyond providing

stunning stories and characters, the playful prodding of genre boundaries, and the implementation of political and philosophical discourse into narrative fiction.

# 3  Aesthetics: Narrative and Literary Strategies

*Embassytown* is exclusively told by Avice Benner Cho in homodiegetic mode. On Arieka, she occupies an intricate in-between position: as a simile, she is recognised and appreciated by the Hosts; on the other hand, while she is technically a commoner, her former occupation as a far-travelled immerser (an interstellar navigator) also grants her a privileged position among human administrators and Ambassadors alike (see Freedman 2015, 124). Being very familiar with various customs from other planets as well as being a child of Embassytown is also reflected in the way she mediates her story, and it is a thin line between providing information to unknowing earthling readers and not elaborating on certain things because they are obvious to Avice and do not need specification. Miéville himself aptly describes the narrative technique as "a kind of memoir of somebody who inhabits a world that she takes for granted [...]. You have to – I hope – glean your own sense of what these things look like, sort of behind the back of the words themselves" (Naimon 2011, 61). Terms such as terretech, biorigging, shiftparents, or aeoli need to be decoded without further explanation by the narrator and start to make more and more sense as one progresses through the story; thus, Avice's narration is in tune with *Embassytown*'s overarching contemplation of how language works.

The novel opens – as most of Miéville's texts do – with a puzzling sequence *in medias res*: Here, it is most obvious to what extent Avice takes things for granted as she throws the reader right into the arrival of EzRa, the "impossible new Ambassador" (4) without explaining the significance of their arrival, herself as a character, or the fact that the story is going to take place at the corner of no and where in the galaxy. *Embassytown* thus denies the reader guided access to the story world and its characters in order "to avoid the cumbersome and boring task of first explaining that world (in some sort of encyclopedic preview or purview)" that can occasionally be found in the fantastic according to Moylan (2000, 6). This strategy is an intended disconnect or "culture shock" which again ties in with SF's notion of estrangement: At first, the fictional world of *Embassytown* is presented as bewildering and fragmentary, but this way of introduction functions as a "productive hermeneutic" nevertheless (Naimon 2011, 60) because the irruption of particularities proves to be much more engaging than the aforementioned formalising and totalising strategy of immediately providing the full picture ("In the year XXXX, the interstellar Bremen Empire was threatened by..."). The text takes the reader by the hand while simultaneously forcing him/her to leave the comfort zone of common narrative practice. As in any ambitious SF text,

> [t]he generically informed reader of such a text therefore learns the strange new world not by way of a condensed reality briefing but rather by absorbing and reflecting upon pieces of information that titrate into a comprehensible pattern, by which the reader subsequently "makes sense" of the plot and character development unfolding within that alternative spacetime. (Moylan 2000, 6)

This narrative strategy of sequential pieces also functions as the novel's crucial structural element. Right after the short opening, a section called "Proem: The Immerser" spends three chapters to inform the reader about Avice's childhood (the chapter is titled '0.1'), her becoming a simile (0.2), and finally becoming an immerser (0.3). The decimals are only used in the Proem, and one might wonder at first about their function; a quick answer would be that readers need to take these three preparatory steps to tackle the first part of the story (Part One: 'Income'). However, the arrangement is a bit more complex, and it depends on another aspect that might appear to be irritating at first: That is, one might wonder about the necessity of elaborating on Avice's career as an immerser when interplanetary travel itself does not play a significant role in the novel since virtually the entire story is set on one single planet. And yet, the insistence on immersion is part and parcel of the overall idea of active reader involvement. In the fictional universe of *Embassytown*, one distinguishes between the so-called 'immer' (the German word for 'always') and the 'manchmal' (German for 'sometimes'). The former is either read as "what an earlier science-fiction tradition [...] often called hyperspace: a space that exists differently and more capaciously than the mundane Newtonian space we know (which in *Embassytown* is called the manchmal") (Freedman 2015, 114) or as a "poetic and metaphorical [...] subspace" (Wolfe 2011, n. pag.). The exact configuration of 'immer' and 'manchmal' is hard to pin down, as Avice explains: "The immer's reaches don't correspond at all to the dimensions of the manchmal, this space where I live. 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" (34). Being immersed into the immer by certain mental techniques, immersers are able to navigate spaceships through this space, thus reducing the vast 'sublux' (slower than light – 33) distances between planets in the manchmal. Besides the obvious linguistic reference which again demonstrates *Embassytown*'s obsession with language – "the universe as a kind of deep-structured grammar, and a kind of foreshadowing of the novel's central themes" (Wolfe 2011, n. pag.) – the relationship between manchmal/actuality and immer/hyperreality also points to the greater significance of literature in general and SF in particular. The manchmal is just as inevitably intertwined with the immer as our reading of texts "underlies or overlies, infuses, is a foundation, is langue of which our actuality is parole". The exact relations may be undecipherable, but our world is deeply influenced by (and a crucial part of) the greater and boundless second-order hyperreality of fiction – and every sometimes ('manchmal'), whenever we pick up a book, we are made aware of the immer of literature. In this context, SF and the fantastic at large prove to be most valuable since

they stage their fictionality outright while insisting on Löwy's critical irrealism. Thus, the figure of Avice as an immerser and the three introductory sections of the novel's Proem come full circle: Avice as the main narrator needs to immerse herself while travelling through the immer so the readers can in turn leave their actual-world manchmal and become immersers themselves – immersed in the immer of which *Embassytown* is a most remarkable part.

After the Proem and the resulting immersion, all following chapters are titled without decimals; however, the narrative now distinguishes between 'Formerly' and 'Latterday' chapters. The latter, starting with 'Latterday 1', pick up from the opening, thus providing recent events since EzRa's arrival. Conversely, Formerly chapters shed light on the more distant past (thus assuming a supportive feedback-loop function) and take their cue from the Proem sections. The end of Part Three (subtitled 'Like As Not'), then, coincides with the tenth and last Formerly chapter. In concordance with Moylan's assertion of SF's textual 'bit-by-bit' strategy, the reader is now ready to fully engage with the actual story told in the six following parts, all set in the Latterday and presented in chronological order.

Another important feature of *Embassytown*'s narrative design deserves a few words: its occasional refusal to fully describe the ineffable. Beyond the struggle of representing and writing about Language as something incomprehensible to the human mind, two further features stand out in this regard: the utterly nebulous description of Avice's becoming a simile, and the novel's overall inability to convey what the Hosts look like. As stated in the introduction, questions of how to (not) describe the indescribable against the backdrop of SF's cognitive estrangement are probably the most pressing concern of Weird Fiction in general. On the one hand, of course, the task seems quite impossible: How, for instance, can a human being writing in a signifying human language adequately represent a language that is not only non-human and non-signifiying, but also non-existent? Miéville himself is quite aware of the problem and admits that "it's literally impossible. If you are a writer who happens to be a human, I think it's definitionally beyond your ken to describe something truly inhuman" (Staggs 2011, n. pag.). Yet, the mere attempt – in tune "with the Aristotelian idea of a probable impossibility" (Freedman 2015, 120) – is worth the effort because it can produce remarkable results. In Miéville's words: "the very asymptotic aspiration is very exciting. You can play games – you can imply consciousness beyond ours, you can hint at things obliquely, you can not [sic] say too much [...]. I don't think you can succeed, but I think you might just fail pretty wonderfully" (Staggs 2011, n. pag.). Beyond this very pragmatic basic idea, the somewhat underrated charm of describing the indescribable seems to hinge on the ambiguity of the phrase "you cannot say too much": of course, one cannot say too much about, for example, the Hosts' appearance because they are non-existent, so one is literally unable to describe them adequately – but at the same time, one has the liberty of *not having to say* too much either, and this insistence on obliqueness is Weird Fiction's most compelling line of thought.

To elaborate on the non-description of the Hosts, the most detailed or coherent description provided in the novel is the following: "We thought of Ariekei in terms of stuff from an antique world – we looked at our Hosts and saw insect-horse-coral-fan things. Those were chimeras of our own baggage" (141). The problem is a fairly substantial one, and it is again tied to linguistics: it may be possible to say (in a striking inversion of the Hosts' obsession with simile making) that parts of the Hosts look *like* parts of an insect, others *like* parts of a horse, and so on – but it does not help too much. Not because the overall composition looks like a hard-to-describe chimera, a wild accumulation of different body parts, but because the body of a Host *is not* that of a chimera, and because the body of a Host *does not hav*e insectoid parts. The Hosts are aliens with unique alien bodies which only appear chimerical or insectoid to us, and all attempts to describe them by means of comparison to what we humans know from our "antique" world are only desperate attempts at approximation weighted down by the baggage of our own languages' borders. Even if we had or invented a word for what the Hosts look like, it would only join the arbitrary, open-ended play of signifiers and signifieds which do not hold any fixed meaning. And yet, any oblique or playful attempt to (not) pin down what cannot be expressed in words is part and parcel of Weird Fiction's epistemological insecurity. In Scile's words: "Now, granted, [...] words can't actually *be* referents, *that* I grant you, there's the tragedy of language, but our asymptotic efforts at deploying them aren't nothing either" (32). At the same time, *Embassytown*'s elusive descriptions of the Hosts in particular invite its readers to participate in the imaginative game of probable impossibility – and, as described in the section on reception and theoretical perspectives, they also trigger very concrete results as readers start to visualise what the Hosts look like in their heads.

The performance that turns Avice into "the girl who ate what was given her" is an equally compelling example of *Embassytown*'s agenda of the indescribable. Avice herself starts to describe the act of becoming a simile as follows: "What occurred in that crumbling once-dining room wasn't by any means the worst thing I've ever suffered, or the most painful, or the most disgusting. It was quite bearable. It was, however, the least comprehensible event that had or has ever happened to me. I was surprised how much that upset me" (26). No details are provided – the reader is not informed how Avice was hurt, what she had to eat et cetera. The incomprehensibility of the simile performance is tied to Avice being a little girl at this time, and since she as the main protagonist might simply not fully have understood what was going on, it makes sense to leave the readers in the dark, too. Furthermore, Avice herself tried to distance herself from the performance: "I know now to call what I did then dissociating. I watched it all, myself included" (27). Her insistence on watching indicates that there is an event worth narrating which nevertheless, due to her status as an uninvolved bystander, defies the act of narration. Beyond these vague statements, she only mentions how the Hosts spoke during the preparation of the performance and how she was waiting for it to be over. According to Tranter, the events at the restaurant amount to "a disturbing lacuna at the center of the story, a trauma that refuses

narration" (Tranter 2012, 423) – and therefore to a trauma that unfolds its terrifying, oblique awe mostly in the reader's mind triggered by the non-description's obscurity. However, in contrast to the comparatively playful openness of the Hosts's appearance, Miéville's non-narration of Avice's becoming a simile also points towards a more bitter conclusion. Of course, readers want to know 'what happened' – but it may not always be productive to be greedy for narrative. In Miéville's own words: "the notion that it's *obviously good* [to be 'hardwired for story'] is just odd and question-begging. What if it's one of the great tragedies of humankind that we're hooked on stories" – just as the Hosts are hooked on EzRa's voice? "It's certainly the case that narrative involves a winnowing down of the complexity of reality, a subjective and thus inevitably political/ideological narrowing" (Tranter 2012, 432). Thus, a certain wariness or scepticism about the possibilities, limits, and basic functions of narrative and fiction in an extremely complex reality, as a counterpoint to its celebratory pulp origins, finds its way into Weird Fiction's poetics as well.

# 4  Reception and Theoretical Perspectives

Miéville's Marxist background has primarily and unsurprisingly spawned research taking the same angle. The most influential journal in this regard is *Extrapolation*, which also published a special edition solely dedicated to Miéville's works in 2009. While monographs on contemporary authors generally have a hard time providing a full picture, Carl Freedman's *Art and Idea in the Novels of China Miéville* (2015) discusses the majority of Miéville's œuvre (covering all novels from *King Rat* to *Embassytown* and his PhD while leaving out the comics as well as the short stories) against the backdrop of – as suggested by the title – art and idea as crucial categories of Marxist dialectics. In the same year, a second volume containing a series of essays was published (*China Miéville: Critical Essays*, edited by Caroline Edwards and Tony Venezia); most of these essays originated from the first conference solely dedicated to Miéville's work (*Weird Council: An International Conference on the Writing of China Miéville*, 2012) at which the author himself was also present. Thus, Miéville stands out as a writer who is quite at ease about sharing his thoughts with the academic world, as the considerable number of interviews with scholars, published in academic journals, demonstrate. Early Marxist readings have mostly celebrated and examined the Bas-Lag trilogy, identifying *Iron Council* (2012) as the œuvre's most powerful discussion "of unionist and revolutionary political protest" (Edwards and Venezia 2015, 9). Similarly, Anthony F. Lang's readings of *The City & The City* and *Embassytown* mostly concentrate on the novels' conjunctions with Miéville's *Between Equal Rights* (see Lang 2015). However, scholarship has also elaborated on questions of genre (SF, fantasy, horror) and the (New) Weird as a literary tradition, spatial concepts, the

various figurations of urbanity in general and London in particular, and – most prominently in *Embassytown* – Miéville's use of language.

As mentioned in the introduction, unlike *The City and the City, Embassytown* was not showered with awards with the exception of the 2012 Locus Award for Best Science Fiction Novel. Gary K. Wolfe, in his review for *Locus Magazine*, praised *Embassytown* as "a novel that demands reflection" and "one that offers, in Conrad's terms, 'that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask'" (Wolfe 2011, n. pag.).

Contrastingly, discourse on Miéville's works is also heavily indebted to bottom-up fan culture, again demonstrated by the vast number of interviews in corresponding magazines or on websites as well as by Matthew Sangster in his study on reader expectations on the web platform *goodreads.com* (see Sangster 2015). As is often the case in fan discourse, readers of Miéville are quite eager to not only discuss the primary material they endorse in online forums and blogs, but to elaborate on it, and the primary impulse seems to hinge on visualisation. For example, there are various reader-made maps of the Bas-Lag world as well as of other cities in which Miéville's stories take place. In general, the most striking fan productions are those which try to visualise the indescribable. Some people, for instance, have attempted to draw or paint various ragtag characters of the Bas-Lag trilogy; in the context of *Embassytown*, one can find various representations of the Hosts' appearance (see *outtherebooks*, n. pag.). At first, these attempts seem to repudiate the fundamental impulse in Miéville's writing associated with the sublime of the indescribable, an impulse ultimately aiming at precluding reification and visualisation – but on second thought, the apparently pressing need to visualise what words necessarily fail to express in the novel is only conducive to Weird Fiction's thrust of cognitive estrangement on the level of language.

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