The Functions of the Embassy in the World-Making Experiments of China Miéville

Abstract: What happens when social scientific theorising seeks to take instruction from Science Fiction and Fantasy writing rather than using it as a source of convenient examples? This paper discusses the ways in which the figure of the 'embassy' and ambassadorial functions operate within the work of China Miéville. Focusing in particular on three key novels – *The City and The City*, *Kraken* and *Embassytown* – the paper reads the secondary worlds constructed by Miéville as offering their own self-contained problematics of relevance to social science. These concerns the mechanisms of territorial distinction, the nature of communication and the organization of spatio-temporal relations. The embassy emerges as an embodied site for the mediation of specialized communicative relations that are fundamentally irreconcilable, but which nevertheless offer the hope of reaching outside of human temporality. The relevance of these considerations for a social science of the Anthropocene and the Chthulucene are outlined.

The British author China Miéville has written twelve novels and novellas, a number of collections of short stories, along with comic and picture books, and a separate strand of non-fiction works. Although his work is nominally placed within the genre of Fantasy and Science Fiction (or 'Speculative Fiction'), Miéville has declared an ambition to write a book in every established genre of fiction (see Edwards & Venezia, 2015). Some of his writing – including *Un Lun Dun* and *Railsea* – is aimed at young adult readers. He is based in London, the inspiration for *King Rat* and *Kraken*, both of which draw on a tradition of regional and metropolitan writing that experiments with the 'mystic' and 'secret' history of the capital, principally developed in the work of Michael Moorcock and Iain Sinclair.

Miéville has been politically active, most notably with the left-wing Social Workers Party. He has written a PhD thesis on a Marxist approach to international law, and amongst his recent work is a study of the 1917 Russian Revolution (Miéville 2017). Even so, the present paper does not pursue the rich political themes running through his fiction. Though such an analysis would be worthwhile and illuminating, I try to slow down, to stay away from the socio-political territory recognizable to the social theorist, and dwell instead on Miéville's extraordinary efforts at 'world making' and some of their more oblique implications.

In other words, rather than mining Miéville's work for material in support of already fully shaped scholarly debate, I am interested in examining the construction of these (im)possible worlds, and in 'taking instruction' (as Michel Serres 1997 would put it) from their functions and operations. Only towards the end of the article will I feel sufficiently equipped and confident to speculate on the potential relevance of Miéville's writing for social science.

I focus on three of Miéville's novels – *The City and The City (2009)*, *Kraken (2010)*, and *Embassytown (2011)*. They are from the same period, and, indeed were published sequentially between 2009 and 2011, after the three volumes that make up his fantasy 'Bas-Lag series.' However, their specific place within Miéville's writing biography is not the reason for this selection. It has been made, rather, because a distinctive figure of 'the embassy' appears in each of the three speculative worlds.[1] My focus in the following is on the conceptual function these different embassies play.[2]

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[1] It should be noted that these novels are not the only ones where embassorial activities occur. There is a brief, albeit memorable scene in *Perdido Street Station* (2000) featuring the 'Ambassador of

The City and The City is nominally a 'crime thriller.' The plot begins with the investigation of the murder of a young woman led by Inspector Tyador Borlú of the Extreme Crime Squad in the city of Besźel. It rapidly becomes apparent that Besźel is not the only location in which events unfold. There is, it appears, a second city – Ul Qoma – which occupies exactly the same physical space as Besźel, but is, effectively, in a separate dimension. It is possible to pass between the two cities – to go from one to the other without physically moving. However, historically the two territories have been maintained as separate, and unauthorised movement between the two is considered a violation or 'breach' (with a small 'b'). To prevent this, inhabitants of each city maintain elaborate practices of 'unseeing' the other (and 'unhearing', 'unsmelling,' etc). This cultural practice is policed by a mysterious power, known formally as Breach (with a capital 'B'), the status of which is a major question within the narrative. The only authorised point of passage between Besźel and Ul Quoma is known as Copula Hall. As the novel unfolds, Borlú is drawn into the complex politics of this territorial separation. Traveling this space in pursuit of his investigation, he encounters activists demanding re-unification, and comes across the myth of a third 'ur'-city called Orciny considered by some to be the origins of the two extant cities.

Kraken (2010) is an extraordinary novel of 'weird fiction' set in contemporary London, which opens with the theft of a preserved specimen of a giant squid – Architeuthis – from the Natural History Museum. Billy Harrow, the curator in charge of the exhibition, is interviewed by members of the Fundamentalist and Sect-Related Crime Unit (FSRC) of the Metropolitan Police. Gradually, he learns of the existence of a subterranean network of cults that have existed throughout the history of London. They worship a range of 'ancient Gods,' including several ageless, monstrous sea creatures, like the Kraken itself, of which the stolen squid is a sacred embodiment. The theft augurs an emerging conflict between these cults, fought out through the use of magical powers ('knacking'), brutal violence and the intercession of a range of non-human creatures. Amongst these is The Sea itself, regarded as a primordial animate being, which is both the origin of the human world and the source of its destruction. As befitting its status, The Sea maintains an embassy in London, although the location is a non-descript terrace house, known only to those who are deeply involved in the occult underworld. This embassy proves to be the site of two pivotal narrative moments.

*I*n comparison with the previous two novels, *Embassytown* (2011) seems as a more conventional piece of Science Fiction, heavily reminiscent of the 'fantasy worlds' sub-genre of Iain M. Banks or Brian Aldiss. On the distant planet Arieka, humans originating from Bremen have constructed a colony. The indigenous inhabitants, the Ariekei, who resemble large mammal-insect hybrids with two mouths, tolerate the colonists. The Ariekei also provide technical support through forms of bio-engineering, which allow the colony to maintain its specialised environment within the broader indigenous city, at the centre of which is the large embassy complex. Communication between the two species takes a highly elaborate form. For the Ariekei, language has concrete material reality. Words are direct tokens of an actual event that has occurred. Ariekene language, moreover, has two simultaneous uttered components – a 'Cut' and 'Turn,' with the consequence that human

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Hell,' and in *The Last Days of New Paris* (2017) the character Sam appears to be on a secret diplomatic mission from the Underworld to the Surrealist-ravaged capital.

[2] I apologise in advance that this paper contains 'spoilers' for each novel, and strongly recommend that readers unfamiliar with Miéville's work take the time to read these beautifully constructed novels first (I will still be here when you get back …).

language is both incomplete and inexplicable to the Ariekei. The solution that has evolved is to have pairs of human ambassadors who speak the two parts together. The narrative turns on the arrival of a new ambassador, EzRa, and the involvement of the central protagonist, Avice Benner Cho, in cataclysmic events that ensue as the Ariekei respond to this arrival. As they unfold, the actual nature of the communication between the two species becomes dramatically apparent.

As should be clear, the worlds depicted in these three novels are very different, as are, indeed, the form and status of the individual embassies. Nevertheless, I suggest that the conceptual functions of the embassy, as they are revealed across the narratives, open up some similar questions about forms of territorial distinction, the nature of communication, and the organization of spatio-temporal relations, all of which are of broader sociological and anthropological importance. These themes will structure the following exploration, which moves back and forth between the novels. I conclude with some brief remarks on what 'Miévillian' experimentation in social science might seek to accomplish.

The Skin Between Territories
Across all three novels, the fundamental narrative device concerns a distinction between two 'territories.' In *The City and the City*, this is the sovereign boundary between the two cities. It is not generally possible to perceive the other city, despite their joint existence in the same physical location. However, in particular areas that are 'cross-hatched,' the perceptual barrier breaks down and something of the other city bleeds across. This gives rise to civic practices of 'unseeing', where territorial boundaries become phenomenological boundaries[3]. Unseeing, and the other forms of unsensing, are thus practices of disattending to the percepts of the other city. They are supported and reinforced by semiotic markers of cultural difference (e.g. the use of different forms of dress, architectural codes, urban design etc.) that mark the limits of what should and should not be seen (or heard, or smelt etc). In this way, the formal policing of territorial boundaries is to a significant extent supplemented by the informal, cultural habitus which is acquired by every citizen:

> When an Ul Qoman stumbles into a Besź, each in their own city; if Ul Qoman's dog runs up an sniffs a Besź passerby; a window broken in Ul Qoma that leaves glass in the path of the Besź pedestrians – in all the cases the Besź (or Ul Qomans, in the converse circumstances) avoid the foreign difficulty as best they can without acknowledging it. Touch if they must, though not is better. Such polite stoic unsensing is the form for dealing with protubs – that is the Besź for those protuberances from the other city (Miéville *2009:*80)

Thus far, we are within a recognisable political model of modern states, where juridical power is held in reserve for occasions when the 'policing of self' fails. However, Miéville introduces a third force that exists beyond the relation of citizen and state, and is also extra-territorial with respect to the division of the two cities. This is "Breach," which has no clear location in either city – indeed its existence as a formal entity is not properly revealed until

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[3] There is resonance here with what Goffman (1972) once famously termed 'civil inattention'. Here a discreet awareness of the other is performed without formal acknowledgement, in order to maintain social order with minimal interaction. 'Unseeing' similarly involves, at some level, a recognition of the potential presence of the other, but takes the form of a phenomenological refusal to engage with them as legitimate occupants of the same space. Presumably, one reason why both cities are such challenging spaces for visitors is this ongoing tension between acknowledgement and refusal.

late in the novel. As such, Breach has no formal representation in either city, no embassy, and no obvious markers through which it might be recognised.

But if the enforcement of the division of the cities ultimately falls to Breach, then what is the purpose of the existing structures? As noted, the only formal point of exchange and communication between the cities is an administrative zone known as Copula Hall, which appears as something like a large immigration and customs checkpoint. Whilst citizens appear to be allowed a certain amount of authorised movement between the cities, Copula Hall is the only point where the formal powers meet in a shared space that exists in the same form across both cities. In judicial terms, this is important, because it creates a kind of interzone where neither set of laws seems to fully apply. While Copula Hall is not technically an embassy, it is ambiguous in terms of its formal territorial status, as becomes apparent at a crucial moment when a witness is killed whilst in transit through Copula Hall. Although the bullet was fired from Besźel, the crime happens in the interzone, meaning that it is under the jurisdiction of neither police force.

If Copula Hall is a place of porous boundaries, it is also a communication channel through which persons, goods and messages pass from one city to the other. As such it is akin to what Michel Callon (1984) once termed an 'obligatory point of passage – a place through which persons and other actors from heterogeneous frames of reference are obliged to conduct their relationsips, but which may not necessarily be the most direct or proximate means of doing so. Neighbourhoods in different dimensions are legally linked through the indirect, formal structure of Copula Hall. One must always take the 'long way round' to communicate with neighbours who are close by, but territorially very distinct. To defy this process, by, say, calling to a citizen in the other city, or leaving objects or physical messages where they may be easily found within 'cross-hatched' areas is rendered as an act of 'breach'. The parodox here is that the formal,'obligatory' point through which territories base their relations is underpinned by a near invisible 'power that comes from nowhere'. This quasi-mythic power – Breach – appears to have no need nor desire to legitimate its own actions. Breach simply acts, with rapid and terrible consequences, and in so doing ensures that the formal structure of Copula Hall remains intact.

Embassytown also features the co-existence of two quite distinct groups, albeit without the complex spatio-dimensional arrangements of *The City and The City*. The origins of the neo-colonial relationship of the humans and the Ariekei are left unexplained within the novel. We are simply told that there has not been any widespread conflict between the groups before the events described. The arrival of humans seems to have been tolerated by the Ariekei, who appear to regard them with a kind of bemused curiosity. Indeed, it is initially difficult to imagine what the Ariekei might gain from the presence of humans, and why they would provide bio-rigging technology in return for the meagre goods that occasional transport shuttles bring. We might view this as Miéville's version of the familiar colonial scene where gracious, incomprehending indigenous peoples are exploited by manipulative foreigners. As the novel unfolds, however, we realise that humans have, in fact, unwittingly been exchanging an commodity throughout their interactions with the Ariekei.

Compared with *The City and the City*, the boundaries between the human and Ariekei worlds are well established. Here there are physical rather than cultural markers – humans literally cannot breathe the atmosphere of the host planet, and depend on the bio-rigged environment and aeoli masks that are provided by the Ariekei for their survival. The Ariekene City is built out of living organisms that are specially farmed or bred (i.e. buildings are 'alive'). Formal

visits to the City, which proceed with a considerable degree of ceremony, are limited to ambassadors, whose status is further particularized since only they are able to communicate with the Ariekei (due to the unique pairing of speakers). Each ambassador, in fact, is a twin who performs a particular function, speaking only the cut or turn of the Ariekei language:

> "Please," CalVin said, and brought Scile forward, towards the honoured indigens. I could not read Scile's face. "Scile Cho Baradjian, this is Speaker-" and then in Cut and Turn at once they said the lead Host's name. It looked down at us from its jutting coralline extrusion, each random bud studded with an eye. "kora/shahundi" CalVin said, together. Only Ambassadors could speak Host names. (Miéville *2011:* 91)

The division is marked by the twins sharing one part of a divided name: Cal and Vin, or Mag and Da. They are otherwise identical, and technological measures are taken to erase the emergence of any physical distinguishing marks. This elaborate measure has been taken to ensure that the Ariekei perceive the twins as a single being, thus rendering their simultaneous utterances as intelligible, since both cut and turn must be spoken together to constitute language rather than noise. The ambassadors are thus a unique mixture of identity and difference. Should one twin die, the other will be considered as a horrific dismembered part, an object of pity and revulsion. As the novel proceeds, we are slowly provided with a sense of the origins of these ambassadors, and the breeding programme that has produced this peculiar cadre. In order to survive in this alien world it has apparently become necessary for part of humanity to become 'other,' with fateful consequences. At the same time, however, the Ariekei are becoming other to themselves, as their efforts to communicate with humans prove to be literally corrosive.

What we see in both cases surveyed so far, is that the co-existence of territories requires both the maintenance of particular kinds of boundaries and the invention of specialised modes of formal communication. In each case, the embassy and its functionaries rely on very particular physical arrangements that somewhat resemble specialist 'organs.' In *Embassytown,* this is the arrangement of twins into identical mouths which can simultaneous speak the two different part of Ariekei Language (with a capital 'L' to denote the proper noun). In *The City and The City*, Copula Hall resembles an organic channel through which messages pass, not unlike to an urban 'ear.' Or perhaps we should say, following the linguistic marker that Miéville has provided, that this is a space of copulation, the embassy being the place where bodies meet and entwine. In fact, there is also an awful lot of sexual activity in *Embassytown*. In either case, a sexually charged dimension goes hand in hand with the embassy's boundary-maintaining function.

The extent to which communication between worlds requires the support of specialized organs is also demonstrated in *Kraken* (2010). One of central protagonists, for example, is the feared master criminal known as 'Tattoo,' an embodiment of nominative determinism. Tattoo used to human, but through an extreme case of knacking, he has now literally turned into an inking depending on a host body on which it can be physically manifest. However, acquiring a host body to support Tattoo and perform his bidding is not straightforward and requires considerable coercion. Indeed, Tattoo himself specialises in the exercise of power through body modification, and his gang consists of persons who have been physically transformed, into human fists, for example, or into peculiar mixtures of technologies and human bodies ('radio-men'). Many have been rendered as a specific mobile organ – hand, ear or mouths. In *Kraken*, though, extreme body modification is not limited to Tattoo and his crew. Another major character is a Wati, the spirit of an Egyptian slave, who now has a purely immaterial

existence, that requires him to inhabit or possess containers or statues in order to take on physical form. And there are angels of memory, who build bodies out of component parts, such as preserved animal specimens in jars.

These specialised organs of communication, which we might, punning on Deleuze and Guattari (1983), call 'bodies-with-only-organs,' have a precarious existence. They tap into physical realms and pleasures through their copulative role; by enabling communication between different territorial bodies. One of *Embassytown*'s major plot devices is that the Ariekei experience the language that some ambassadors speak as a literal narcotic, an artificial source of pleasure and stimulation. But in both *Embassytown* and *Kraken* these pleasures come at a cost. For specialised communications also result in a kind of organic degradation over time, especially when identity collapses into difference, such as when one of the twins dies. Crucially, as the Ariekei become addicted to the speech of the new ambassador EzRa, they begin to require increased 'doses' of new utterances to avoid lapsing into the biological degradation and eventual death. As this begins to happen, the physical city of the Ariekei starts to fall apart. The organic collapse suffered by the bio-rigged environment is a literal withdrawal symptom.

Communicative organs suffer simultaneously from narcosis and necrosis in the course of their copulative relations. And these relations appear to be the conditions on which co-existence is founded and depends:

> The city twitched. It was infected. The Hosts had heard EzRa's impossible voice, had taken energy from their zelles and let out waste, and in the exchange the chemistry of craving had been passed, and passed on again by the little beasts when they connected to buildings to power light and the business of life. Addiction had gone into the houses, which poor mindless things shook in endless withdrawal. The most afflicted sweated and bled. The inhabitants rigged them crude ears, to hear EzRa speak, so the walls could get their fix (Miéville 2011: 208)

The embassy and associated ambassadors, then, can be seen as the embodied surfaces through which communication across territories are enacted. They are the territorial dermis, folded membranes that allow for highly specialised relations and actions. This is a highly sensitive position in the double sense of entailing significant responsibility and heightened sensations, one that opens to pleasures as well as injury or death. But between these surfaces, caressing and rubbing against one another, there is a small but nevertheless critical gap that preserves the separation. This dermatological interstice appears to be, and to have, a power of its own. Perhaps it is to this miniscule gap, rather than to the embassy at large, that we must turn, in order to find the operators that make it possible to maintain territorial relations.

Speaking into the Void
Communicare, as the etymological root of the term communication, implies sharing, something that is in common. Thus, it can be placed alongside *communitas,* as part of the collective spirit that defines community. *Communicare* either implies the existence of a formative *communitas*, or embodies hope for its future emergence. In *The City and The City*, the machinery of inter-state co-operation based at Copula Hall provides the two cities with sufficient means to recognise the existence of the other in such a way that the mundane governance of their overlapping geographies can be maintained. There may be separate communities, but the acknowledgement that there is something to be shared lies at the heart of the communication that passes between them.

But what if the relationship between *communicare* and *communitas* was not so clearly implied? What if, to the contrary, it constituted a kind of misdirection on the part of one, or both, of the communicating bodies? Would the exchange between the two bodies still constitute a form of communication at all? *Embassytown* revolves around the possibility of two languages, or more properly of two models of cognition, which fail to recognise the other at all. The idea is not unique, and Miéville has indeed acknowledged that his central plot devices often have their own literary history (Schmeink 2014). However, its use in *Embassytown* is quite extraordinary. The Language shared by the Ariekei has no representational function. Utterances do not stand for something else, but are rather an extension of some state of affairs into current matters at hand. More crucially, for the resolution of the novel, Language has no ostensive function. It is not possible to linguistically 'point' to some feature of the world to qualify the meaning of what is being said (e.g. 'that is what we call green'). What the Ariekei have, instead, is the capacity to produce similes, to say that something is *like* something else. Yet, because Language is treated as an extension of the actual, it is necessary for the root part of the simile to be a state of affairs that has some form of persistence. A key part of the novel describes how, as a child, Avice Benner Cho was required to take part in a strange Ariekene ritual:

> What occurred in that crumbling dining room wasn't by any means the worst thing I've 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 it upset me. For a long time the Hosts didn't pay attention to me, but performed precise mimes. They raised their giftwings, they stepped forward and back. I could smell their sweet smell. I was frightened. I'd been prepared: it was imperative for the sake of the simile that I act my part perfectly. They spoke. I understood only the very basics of what I heard, could pick out an occasional word. I listened for the overlapping whisper I'd been told meant she, and when I heard it I came forward and did what they wanted (Miéville *2011:*26-27)

The purpose of the ritual becomes clear. Avice has been made into a simile – she has become 'the girl who ate what was given to her.' This simile then enters into Ariekene Language as a possible utterance. In this way Language is extended not by adding more words, or possibly conceptual referents, but by literally expanding the states of affairs that can be expressed as similes. More than this, Avice herself becomes a part of Language, since the simile can only be uttered as long as the physical form it expresses remains in place. When beings perish, so do the similes of which they are constituent parts. A small number of the human colonists have gained a status of something like 'star' similes amongst the Ariekei – 'the woman who was kept blind and awake for three nights,' 'the man who swims with fishes every week' etc.

This points towards a way of conceiving communication as functioning in the absence of *communitas*. Humans are recruited into Language; they are the raw materials out of which Language can be developed. Whilst there is an exchange, it is not one of like-for-like, but involves rather two separate forms. Technology and sustenance are provided in exchange for bodies that have become phrases. In this case, communication has obviously nothing much to do with shared meaning or intelligibility. It is, instead, a medium through which a corporeal utility and dependency is enacted. The implications become evident only as the narcotic linguistic powers of the new ambassador EzRa are discovered. When the Ariekei become addicts of EzRa's speech, prior forms of exchange are disrupted, and Embassytown and the Ariekene City in which it is embedded start to sink into an organic crisis. The 'otherness' of humans to Language was the condition of their tolerated presence. EzRa, and their successor,

EzCal, effectively seize control of Language, and exercise a form of physical compulsion over the Ariekei, which they are able to resist only by attack and self-mutilation that 'mutes' them to their own Language.

However, the divergence of *communicare* and *communitas* is most striking in *Kraken*. Critical to the notion of an embassy is the idea of the representation of some recognised state or sovereign power, along with the possibility to exchange messages through the ambassadors. An embassy, like that of The Sea, which, for the most part, is unknown, and through which communication cannot normally occur, seems entirely counter to this idea:

> The sea is neutral. The sea didn't get involved in intrigues, didn't take sides in London's affairs. Wasn't interested. Who the hell could understand the sea's motivations anyway? And who would be so lunatic as to challenge it? No one could fight that. You don't go to war against a mountain, against lightning, against the sea. It had its own counsel, and petitioners might sometimes visit its embassy, but that was for their benefit, not its (Miéville 2010: 295)

The relation between London and The Sea is entirely unequal. The Sea is capable of destroying the city at any moment (hence the need for the Thames Barrier, an actually existing site which features in the novel). London emerged from The Sea, and will, ultimately return to it. When The Sea 'speaks,' it has only one utterance, which takes the physical form of watery destruction. Moreover, the Sea is also the sacred space of the Kraken Almighty, who is similarly both feared and mute. The main purpose of the embassy, then, is to emphasize that The Sea chooses *not* to speak at this moment. And this refusal to speak can be considered as the suspension or adjournment of judgement – "The sea is neutral." To seek out an audience with The Sea, as the characters Billy Harrow and Marge try to do at various points, is thus a tremendous risk, something only to be undertaken under the most desperate of circumstances. Here, the embassy begins to resemble a peculiar form of temple. It is a place of supplication of a greater power made not with a view to direct communication, but rather in the hope that one's words may *somehow* influence the course of fate. Rather than an exchange of messages, this is a realm of prayer.

The idea of communication between unequal partners, where what is sent may not even be recognised as a message, introduces the theme of misunderstanding that runs throughout *Kraken*. For most of the novel, it is clear neither who has stolen Architeuthis, nor what message the act of theft was intended to convey. When it is revealed that the theft was organised by the very group supposed to maintain order amongst the rival cult groups who struggle to determine the fate of London – the Londonmancers – the semiotic basis of conflict becomes clear. Through their ability to read the runic signs that are carved in the archaeological layering of London architecture, and in particular centred on the London Stone (again, an actual object transformed by Miéville), the Londonmancers alone lay claim to the ability to *properly* discern the history and future of the capital. In creating a semiotic puzzle around the meaning of the theft of the squid, they hope to defer the coming of the final Word, the apocalypse to be brought on by The Sea and the return of the Kraken Almighty. We think we are sorting things out in language, while our speech is merely deferring a final act of destruction…

A similar semiotic puzzle is found in *The City and the City*, where Borlú's investigation leads him to an archaeological site in Ul Qoma, at which mysterious artefacts, possibly originating from the 'pre-cleavage' city of Orciny, have been discovered. It appears, moreover, that the

murder he is investigating may have to do with the smuggling of these artefacts, and that they may, in turn, be part of broader political struggles about the possibility of re-unifying the cities. But this proves to be misdirection. Orciny is a ruse that draws attention away from the lack of territorial security between the two cities, which depends, in fact, on the obscure extra-juridical actions of the ungovernable force of Breach. Borlú's mistake is to treat the artefacts as though they had some hidden communicative value that could be deciphered from within their own, when actually they are markers whose meaning comes from the manner in which they have been placed in order to be found at the site. Everything depends upon the position from which the production and exchange of meaning is viewed.

Even more importantly, the status of meaning changes dramatically depending on whether one is within or outwith language itself. Throughout *Kraken*, spiritual familiars – creatures either conjured through knacking, or animal 'familiars' recruited into human affairs – play important roles. However, their intercession in unfolding events is sometimes not grasped by the protagonists simply because they cannot recognise their actions as constituting a form of language at all. For example, Collingswood, one of the officers of the FSRC, is able to conjure spiritual creatures from the "intensely proud memories of canteen banter" (Miéville 2010: 190) in televised "Cop Shows." These ghost creatures, which she sends out to investigate the occult underworld, are nothing more than traces of language given animate form. They are speech acts wrested from any actual utterance and turned into spiritual functionaries:

> They did not have to be, could not really be, clever, the faux ghosts; but they had a nasty sort of cunning, and the accrued nous of years' worth of screenwriters' fancy. *little bastard* she heard them say. *look at this shit*, a billowing of ashes of case notes. *bring this little toerag in*, *overtime*, *nonce*, *slag*, *guv*, *sarge*, *proceedin long the eye street* (Miéville *2010:*191)

As noted earlier, specialised communication comes at a risk. But it also raises questions about the status of those who communicate across territorial, species, or spiritual boundaries. At the beginning, the ambassadors in *Embassytown* appear to be an elite cadre of privileged colonists. But as their 'backstory' emerges, it becomes clear that it is Avice Benner Cho, similarly brought up on Arieka, who has the greater liberties. After all, the ambassadors are specially 'bred' to do their work, and whilst this provides them with relative power on Arieka, their skills have no value elsewhere. They are, in fact, doubly imprisoned, inescapably attached to their twin, and unable to leave Embassytown itself. As conflict engulfs the city, and twins come to realise that the delicate balance of exchanges that undergirded their ability to mediate between human language and Ariekene Language has been cancelled. Many commit suicide, realizing that their immense, by highly focused translational skills are no longer of any value. Critical to the novel's resolution is Avice, who regards her own skills as little more than 'floaking' (i.e. 'hustling', 'making do'), but has nevertheless travelled beyond Arieka and also become part of Language. The capacity to manage exchanges between languages is, in the end, less powerful then the experience of being inside and beyond language. The ambassadors are reduced to functions without purpose, whilst Avice becomes sensitive to the shifts that occurring *around* language, and which ultimately lead to a transformation of Ariekene Language itself.

The parallel in *The City and The City* is Breach, which is the ultimate authority and enforcer of the territorial division of Besźel and Ul Qoma. Members of Breach are also able to travel

freely, and they have an overview of the cities which is not available to those who have to 'unsee' the territorial division. But this comes at a terrible cost:

> The breach was nothing. It is nothing. This is a commonplace; this is simple stuff. The breach has no embassies, no army, no sights to see. The breach has no currency. If you commit it it will envelop you. Breach is a void full of angry police (Miéville 2009: 297)

Breach is the real interzone, the space between the space. In other words, it is nowhere: the void. Here, 'enforcement' becomes a pure function, detached from any purpose. Not co-incidentally, to be a part of Breach is not a choice. Neither is it, exactly, a kind of punishment. It is, rather, akin to *press-ganging* (i.e. recruitment against one's liberty):

> 'What do you know about the British Navy?' Ashil said. 'A few centuries ago?' I looked at him. 'I was recruited the same as everyone else in Breach. None of us were born here. We were all once in one place or another. All of us breached once' (Miéville 2009: 371)

Eventually, Borlú discovers that the penalty for transgression is to become perpetually responsible for its prevention. Miéville is here playing on a mythic theme: she or he who discovers great knowledge, or the power of transit, is at that moment enrolled into its secrecy and becomes responsible for its protection[4]. The embassy is not a jail, but once you become part of its inner workings, you cannot ever leave.

We often assume that communication takes place among partners who already share, or are prepared to develop, a sufficient sense of commonality. Of course, communication is always under the sign of *potential* misunderstanding, whether accidental or deliberate. But what Miéville demonstrates is a problem of a different order. Even in the act of communicating, we do not and *cannot* ever know satisfactorily what is happening, either in terms of what is actually exchanged, or in terms of its effects. Since all speech is projected as if into a void, we require communication specialists prepared to navigate in as yet uncharted space. But in doing so, they are bound to ultimately become *captured by* that space. The specialist becomes the embodiment of potential fallible communicative infrastructure, a marker of the absence of commonality and the ever-present potential descent into noise.

Museums, Temples and Sociopaths
Miéville appears reticent to fill out the broader histories of the worlds he creates. The colonisation of Arieka is rarely referred to directly, except for some occasional references to the initial difficulties of communication. The broader galactic landscape into which the story fits is similarly sketched in only broad strokes, with minimal detail provided about the planet-state Bremen, which appears to be the regional centre of power. This may in part be due his particular approach to writing, which strives to avoid internal logical inconsistencies or what he calls 'Get-Out-Of-Plot-Difficulty-Free cards' (Gordon 2003). Careful to avoid cosy 'consolation' and 'trite nostalgic daydreams' of the kind affiliated with J.R.R. Tolkien's grand fantasy worlds, Miéville (2002) insists that "ultimately it's not the size, shape or rigour of your secondary world which is most important - it's what you do with it that counts."

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[4] The reference point here is the myth of the Golden Bough famously discussed by Frazer (2009). In Michel Serres' (1989a) reading, this is the tree of knowledge. The person who seeks the tree is condemned to become its perpetual guardian.

The absence of grand historical backdrop does not mean that the past is unimportant or irrelevant in Miéville's worlds. It may be shrouded in mystic lore, rumour and secrecy, but it is also always the object of a live struggle between interested actors with real stakes in defining historicity through their actions. In *The City and The City*, for example, the search for Orciny is part of the territorial ambitions played out between political parties and their proxies, the reunification activists. Whether or not Orciny actually exists is less important than the search to mobilise potential evidence that might legitimise a coup. Conversely, from the perspective of Breach, Orciny is a convenient myth that serves to distract attention from the lack of a basis for the limitless authority with which they appear to be endowed. Origins remain potent forces for political action in the present just so long as they are, in part, "unknowable."

This is particularly acute in *Kraken*. London is described as a "full of dissident Gods" (Miéville 2010: 96) making it a magnet for cults, and in so doing creates the occult underworld into which Billy Harrow is drawn:

> And where gods live there are knacks, and money, and rackets. Halfway-house devotional murderers, gunfarmers and self-styled reavers. A city of scholars, hustlers, witches, popes and villains. Criminarchs like the Tattoo, those illicit kings (Miéville 2010: 97)

The obscure origins of these dissident Gods create the context where the struggle to control the web of powers and shifting allegiances are played out. History is just a token, a move in this ongoing interplay of forces. The Church of Kraken Almighty (or 'Krakenists) – to whom Dane, Billy's protector, belongs – maintains a dense historical archive of 'squid lore' that grounds their faith. Likewise, the Londonmancers are the guardians of the occult history of London. But they are matched against bizarre groups such as the 'Chaos Nazis' and the 'Gunfarmers,' whose only really interests are in destabilising the present, unsettling established narratives, and playing Gods and Believers against one another to their own advantage (and profit).

The 'ancient Gods', like the Kraken, are then necessarily mysterious. They are not so much lost in mythic history as entirely outside of known history. Because they do not follow the temporal pulses through which the present is structured, they are both un-biddable by any party and cannot be 'played' as part of the game. When the Kraken appears, when The Sea 'speaks,' all play ceases. In this respect, Miéville has spoken of the difference between the precise values which are assigned to moves within fantasy 'dice rolling' games such as *Dungeons and Dragons* and *Call of Cthulhu*, and the immense and unknowable powers, given to creatures in the fantasy novels from which these games are derived (Gordon 2003)[5]. The Kraken-move is the endgame.

The 'useful' moves can then be attributed to characters who are definitely within human time, but who have complex or ambiguous histories. One of the most terrifying creations in *Kraken* is the pair of hired murderers known as Goss and Subby. Goss appears as a dishevelled middle-aged man, smoke perpetually wheezing from his mouth, though no cigarette is in sight. Subby seems to be a small boy, dressed in a suit, "Sunday Best." The pair are ageless, known throughout the criminal history of London, and their appearance can only mean death and destruction:

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[5] The writing of HP Lovecraft has also inspired Donna Haraway's (2016) notion of the 'Chthulucene'.

> The notorious 'Soho Goats' pub crawl with [Aleister] Crowley, that had ended up in quadruple murder … The Dismembering of the Singers, while London struggled from the Great Fire. 1812's Walkers on the Face-Road had been Goss and Subby. Had to have been. Goss, King of the Murderspivs – the designation given him by a Roma intellectual who had, doubtless extremely carefully, resisted identification. Subby, whom the smart money said was the subject of Margaret Cavendish's poem about the 'babe of meat and malevolence'. Goss and fucking Subby. Sliding shifty through Albion's history, disappearing for ten, thirty, a hundred blessed years at a time, to return, *evening all*, wink wink, with a twinkle of a sociopathic eye, to unleash some charnel-degradation-for-hire (Miéville 2010: 103)

Whilst their main purpose in the events of the novel is dispatch a range of other characters through inventively murderous means, the *function* of Goss and Subby is to open and close temporal loops of conflict. They are ageless because they define temporality instead of being defined by it. It is unimportant for them to have any particular 'backstory' – all that matters is that their appearance accelerates a current dispute and bring about its denouement. In this sense, they are all mechanism without any particular character, the introduction of a series of limits on the current length of play. However, unlike the Kraken-move, there is the possibility of the game continuing once their work is done, albeit with a significant shift in the balance of forces.

In a sense, Goss and Subby resemble the ambassadors of *Embassytown*. They have a highly specialized communicative function, which has enormous value when it is enacted at a certain moment in the unfolding of events. Like the ambassadors, Goss and Subby can also operate across boundaries, and open up relations that were not otherwise possible. Whilst they do not appear to represent anyone other than themselves or their current employer, the pair create conduits between worlds. Indeed, it is their first dramatic appearance, 'unfolding' themselves from a package in Billy's apartment, which shocks both the protagonist and the reader into the sudden apprehension that there is a world beyond what we are familiar with.

As a figure of spatial and territorial organization, the embassy is that through which two bodies can communicate in an authorised, governed fashion. Inversely, the destruction of the embassy marks a new order of things. The talking stops, for a time at least. But if Goss and Subby can be said to have an ambassadorial function, then it is as much about communication between temporally distinct bodies as it is about spatial demarcations. New London and Old London are brought together as they move effortlessly from the 'Dismembering of the Singers' to the moment of eating Billy's unfortunate friend Leon. Time is folded in on itself through their murderous acts, and then released, restarted, on their departure. The cycle of conflict begins again.

A different kind of temporal operation occurs through the presence of the Natural History Museum. By definition, a museum is a site for the custodianship of the past. But this museum is defended by one of the "angels of memory," immaterial beings which manifest themselves by assembling a body out of exhibits (such a series of artificial stomachs from an exhibition of dairy farming). As a temporal operator, the angel acts to preserve continuity with the past that can survive the endless cycles of conflict. In this sense, it offers a counterpoint to Benjamin's "angel of history," who bears witness to the endless march of destruction that constitutes human history. The angels seek to ward off the coming of the Kraken-move by watching over Architeuthis, hoping that salvation may arise from contact with the relic –

'angels wait for their Christ' (Miéville 2010: 292). They have indeed come to believe that Billy is this saviour due to his association with the preservation of the giant squid.

The Krakenists also believe in Billy, since he has had direct contact with Architeuthis. But if the angels believe that the preservation of the past is itself a sacred mission, then the Krakenists believe that the squid is a holy relic, a direct point of contact with Kraken Almighty that transcends time. Here are two distinct ways of orienting towards and restructuring the flow of time, corresponding to the distinction between museum and temple. The museum is something like a breakwater. It seeks to hold back the flow of history by accumulating its detritus such that time slows, and things remain as they are for as long as possible, in the hope of ultimate Salvation and Redemption. In contrast, even though the temple may be a space for the preservation of important texts and sacred artefacts, its purpose is to maintain an open, albeit mostly one-way, communication channel with the ancient Gods. It seeks to open up a gate in historical time to the infinite, to maintain the capacity to send a distress signal or to hear 'early warning' of the speaking of the Final Word. In their different ways, museum and temple are both structural devices for organizing the temporal.

Ultimately, all sides in the search for Architeuthis are wrong. Billy, alas, is no saviour. But this does not matter. He acts as the crossing point where all the various temporal operators meet. Angels, cultists and hired murderers alike are drawn to Billy as the mobile piece in the game; the place where their various strategies become unintentionally co-ordinated. That he has no real status, no powers beyond his abilities to prepare and preserve marine specimens, does not become apparent until the end, where the clash between the two temporal logics at play—the historical and the infinite—are resolved. The role of the embassy and of the ambassadors is to manage this temporal as well as spatial complexity.

Miéville's writing is part of, and response to, a genre of fantasy and speculative fiction that is in thrall to its own lore, where the reverent narration of the grand sweep of history is central, and the relationship between then and now is defined within a deep narrative logic of determined events. As a counterpoint, Miéville offers a complex folding and unfolding of time and space. In some cases this is apparent in the textual organization of the work. *Embassytown* employs an ingenious device of alternating between chapters focussing on the events leading towards a key moment, and those describing its aftermath, until the threads 'meet.' It also occurs in the structure of the possible worlds. Specific ambassadorial operators, whether acting as 'basins,' towards which forces are drawn, or as thresholds that stop and restart actions, enact the folding of time and space. But Miéville's greatest achievement is to restore function to a *catastrophic operator* – a 'judgement of God' – that threatens to reboot the entire system. In doing so, Miéville raises the question of what generative role this catastrophe plays in the actions that become ever more frenzied under the shadow of its appearance.

Conclusion
It is common to recruit literature to fill out the imaginative gaps in social science theorising. Far less time has been spent on attempting to 'think with' the invented worlds of fantasy and science fiction. Donna Haraway's (e.g. 1997, 2011) work stands as the most sustained and conceptually dazzling approach, weaving the threads of the literary, the scientific and the political together powerfully over the course of the past four decades. Equally, Michel Serres' (e.g. 1982, 1989b, 1997) work has traversed the space between science and literature to develop a 'philosophy of mixture,' albeit examining these translations in a more canonical corpus of texts (e.g. Jules Verne, Emile Zola, Hergé). In this article, however, I have

followed the lead of Steven Shaviro (2015) by treating science fiction not as an example or a resource to be incorporated, but instead as a direct source of instruction. 'What if' the worlds we studied as social scientists were like those invented by Miéville? How would things stand then?

Here are some brief, speculative proposals. The search for what Jürgen Habermas (e.g. 1998) once lauded as the 'ideal speech situation' was a powerful illusion that had a disproportionate effect on European social science and social policy during the latter part of the twentieth century. The key idea was that *communitas* can be strengthened and renewed by clarifying the means of *communicare*, the fundamental elements through which speech is possible between potentially opposed parties. Despite the now archaic feel of this notion, it continues to inform social programmes, for example those aimed at the so-called 'deradicalisation' of holders of extremist views. If we could only just find a way to speak to one another, then we could find some common ground. Speech appears to provide *sufficient adhesion* to afford the possibility of inclusion (conversely, by this logic, the refusal to allow speech or the 'no platforming' of abhorrent views is corrosive of community).

As I have emphasized, Miéville's work, too, explores the challenges of communication across territorial and cognitive boundaries. But, in contrast to ideal speech situations, it proposes that we do not really know—and cannot really know—what is either given or received in communication. There may indeed be exchanges that have very little to do with 'meaning' in the formal sense. To be sure, what we call communication is complex and subtle. Moreover, the means and the sites *through which* communication may proceed are not neutral but themselves *too* absorbed with processes of connection, exchange, and, sometimes, corrosion. As such, the embassy is more than a place of representation – it is an organic site of pleasure, conflict, danger, and exile.

Bruno Latour's (2017, 2018) recent work has been much concerned with what it might mean to build *communitas* and *communicare* with 'The Earth' or 'Gaia' under the cataclysmic threat of ecological catastrophe. One of his most incisive analyses has demonstrated that the epistemic separation of nature and culture has rendered 'natural law' as an implacable process, with the result that, in the case of climate change, nature can be neither adequately understood nor properly addressed. The situation resembles efforts to parlay with the Embassy of The Sea, or to find a way to listen to Kraken Almighty. Following Miéville, we might say that The Earth has but one Final Word to say to humanity: extinction. Latour argues that it is only through hearing the full force of that utterance, rather than reducing it to status of a mythic narrative to which we already acclimatized, that there is any possibility of a meaningful response. To do otherwise is to invite the kind of contestation around the nature of evidence that has led to climate denial, or its mirror position in fantasy that inevitability of climate change should not disrupt the accumulation of capital.

But Miéville, by contrast suggests that coming of Kraken-move creates a series of semiotic puzzles – Who has summoned the speaking of the word? Through which means will it be spoken? Which community has the right to hear it properly? The attempt to solve these puzzles redirects sufficient energies to potentially defer the utterance. In Miéville's secondary world, this takes the form of an occult game, in which the protagonists are mobilized by range of other actors that they barely anticipate, let alone understand. This is turn unleashes a range of ambassadorial functions, expressed as spatial and temporal operations, that reconstruct the sequence of play. If, for Latour, the challenge is 'facing up' to the transition to the emergence of the Anthropocene as a phase of planetary history, then in Miéville the

question is rather whether it is possible to reconstruct historicity before the gameplay is moved outside of the human temporality altogether (i.e. into the unknowable upside-down of Kraken-time).

In all of Miéville's worlds, communication is the task of the specialist rather than the generalist. Michel Serres, who is in so many ways a 'Miévilleian,' has argued for a return to the notion of a universalist education as a bulwark against the critical moment of "hominescence," where human power exceeds the limits of its own control. His "Common Programme for the First Year of University" is admirable in its intention of unifying the sciences and humanities for the "advancement of peace" (Serres 2018: 233). However, as Miéville demonstrates, to communicate across the nature-culture divide, our ambassadors will need to transform themselves in very particular ways, including corporeal transformation. This is not a job for everyone, nor is it a role that is likely to be entirely enthusiastically embraced, given its likely necrotic effects. Who will make their body into the raw materials of diplomacy? Who will be press-ganged? Who will step into the Breach?

As Miéville puts it, the embassy is situated on the "membrane" of things (Schmeik, 2014: 29), as a porous spatio-temporal site of copulation, where barely understood exchanges occur. It communicates over time as much as space. Perhaps one of the most significant points Miéville makes is that we need embassies not only with other currently existing territorial powers, but also with extra-temporal or extra-dimensional ones. Indeed, given that so much of current politics involves a struggle over the significance of the past, why do we not possess the diplomatic means to seek communication across time? Where is the embassy through which we can parlay with the Cretaceous, or even with the origins of life itself on the Hadean Earth? And perhaps further still. If humanity proves to have been but one measurable span, one round of the game played out with Gaia, then why not find the means to send messages to the infinite, through whatever forms that might take? What is at stake is not merely a better definition of the Anthropocene (see Latour, 2017), but the means to send messages that transcend this epoch altogether. How can we speak with the Chthulucene, the upside down of planetary history? How can we talk to the Kraken itself?

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